

A Descriptive Analysis of Same-Sex Relationship Violence for a Diverse Sample

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This study contributed to the data about same-sex relationship violence with a large sample (n = 499) of ethnically diverse gay men, lesbians, and bisexual and transgendered people. Physical violence was reported in 9% of current and 32% of past relationships. One percent of participants had experienced forced sex in their current relationship. Nine percent reported this experience in past relationships. Emotional abuse was reported by 83% of the participants. Women reported higher frequencies than men for physical abuse, coercion, shame, threats, and use of children for control. Across types of abuse, ethnic differences emerged regarding physical abuse and coercion. Differences across age groups were found regarding coercion, shame, and use of children as tools. Higher income was correlated with increased threats, stalking, sexual, physical, and financial abuses. Preliminary patterns of same-sex relationship abuses were examined for bisexual and transgendered people.

KEY WORDS: family violence; lesbian; gay men; sexual assault; abuse.

The words *battering* and *domestic* and *family violence* conjure images of men beating women. However, same-sex relationship violence is receiving more documentation. A few research studies have examined violence in lesbian relationships; even fewer exist regarding those of gay men. Even with documentation, the antifamily violence movement largely ignores service provision to victims of same-sex relationship violence; conversely, the gay and lesbian community ignores the violence. Both of these phenomena result in a silence about gay/lesbian battering, much like that of heterosexual relationship violence of decades past.

The purpose of this study was to ascertain an estimated prevalence

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rate of same-sex relationship violence in southeast Texas for lesbians, gay men, and bisexual and transgendered people for both current and past relationships in an ethnically diverse sample. Due to the hidden nature of many gay men and lesbians, a true random sample is impossible. Studies of this population can utilize only those participants who self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. Therefore, results should be interpreted cautiously, and may not be indicative of the entire gay/lesbian population.

LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE

Across different samples and methodologies, most of the studies have been surveys of well-educated white lesbian women and have found a wide range of reported frequencies of physical relationship violence. In increasing frequencies, these are Wood (1987), 8%; Loulan (1987), 17%; Brand and Kidd (1986), 25%; Lockhart *et al.* (1994), 31%; Lie *et al.* (1991), 45%; Waldner-Haugrud *et al.* (1997), 48%; Lie and Gentlewarrier (1991), 52%; and Bologna *et al.* (1987), 60%. The variability of these percentages may be due to the different operationalizations of physical violence and/or aggression across studies. (For a more complete description of this frequency research for lesbian couples, please refer to Renzetti [1997]).

Other studies surveyed lesbians about their perpetration of violence. When asked about their own violent behavior, a mostly white lesbian sample endorsed 12–68% of specific items (Fenoglio, 1987). Using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), Gardner (1988) indicated that 48% of the women surveyed had scores high enough to be considered violent. In one of the few studies that is ethnically diverse, Coleman (1990) found that 47% of couples surveyed exhibited violent behavior. Kelly and Warshafsky (1987) also found a 47% admitted perpetration rate for a mixed sample of lesbians and gay men. Because perpetrators may abuse several partners over a lifetime, this percentage may be measuring a different prevalence rate than that of other studies, which measure victimization rates.

Physical violence is just one type of abuse in relationships. Estimates of sexual violence in lesbian relationships vary. Loulan (1987) found that 5% of lesbians surveyed had been forced sexually by their partners. A 7% frequency of date rape was reported by Brand and Kidd (1986). In committed relationships, Lie *et al.* (1991) indicated that 9% of lesbians were experiencing sexual violence in current relationships, and 57% had experienced some form of sexual abuse in the past. Their definition of sexual abuse was very broad, and may not yield a true picture of the phenomenon. Midrange frequencies were reported by Bologna *et al.* (1987), 26%; Waterman *et al.* (1989), 31%; and Waldner-Haugrud and Gratch (1997), 50%.

Emotional abuse is often present in conjunction with physical and sexual abuses in relationships, including those of lesbians. Lie *et al.* (1991) reported 65% of lesbian women had experienced emotional abuse. Lie and Gentlewarrier (1991) found that 81% of their sample encountered emotional abuse, as did Bologna *et al.* (1987). Lockhart *et al.* (1994) reported an astonishing 90% of their sample had experienced emotional abuse in relationships.

GAY MEN RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE

Far fewer research studies have been conducted with gay men regarding relationship violence. Island and Letellier (1991) extrapolated from rates of relationship violence and numbers of gay men to arrive at an estimate of 11–20%. Other studies have surveyed gay men directly, and found higher rates of physical violence: Waldner-Haugrud *et al.* (1997), 30%; Wood (1987), 31%; Gardner (1988), 38%; and Bologna *et al.* (1987), 44%. Kelly and Warshafsky (1987) found that a mixed sample of gay men and lesbians reported perpetration behavior of 47%.

A few studies have examined sexual violence in gay men's relationships. Waterman *et al.* (1989) found that 12% of their participants had experienced sexual violence, as did 13% of Wood's (1987) study. Waldner-Haugrud and Gratch (1997) reported a much higher frequency of 55% for gay men in relationships. No research has been published regarding emotional abuse in gay male relationships.

METHOD

Participants

The survey was returned by 501 people, two of whom did not live in the Houston area. Of the 499 usable surveys from participants, 227 (46%) were from men, 265 (53%) were from women, and 7 (1%) were from people who identified as male to female transgendered. Asked to self-identify their current sexual orientation, 39% indicated they were lesbian, 11% identified as gay women, 43% as gay men, 5% as bisexual, and 2% heterosexual. Women were given two choices, as the labels "lesbian" and "gay woman" have different political meanings for many. This ethnically diverse sample included 375 (75%) white, 45 (9%) African-Americans, 40 (8%) Latinos, 18 (4%) multi- or bi-ethnic people, 13 (3%) Native Americans, and 3 (1%) Asian people. The participants ranged in age from 16–74 years, with a

mean of 38.1 years ($SD = 10.5$) and a median age of 37.5 years. Yearly income ranged from \$0–\$850,000 in the past year. The median income level reported was \$30,000, with a mean of \$39,500 ($SD = 48,500$ due to outlier value).

Instrument

Fifteen hundred surveys were distributed across the Houston area over several months (Table I). This survey was developed by the author based on non-normed behavioral checklists of several local shelters for battered women. In addition to demographic information, items included behaviors that characterized emotional, physical, and sexual abuses. Each item could be endorsed about present and past same-sex relationships. Input regarding the survey was provided by staff members of local women's centers, as well as social service providers to the gay and lesbian community. Each survey was placed in a stamped envelope addressed to the investigator for easy return, resulting in a response rate of 33%.

Procedure

The principal investigator, with several research assistants, attempted to contact every social, political, religious, and community group with gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered membership in the Houston area. As a first choice methodologically, someone from the research team attended the groups' meetings, giving a brief explanation of the research, emphasizing power and control dynamics, but not mentioning violence specifically. Participants then self-selected to complete the survey. Some groups preferred to distribute the surveys themselves without a presentation. Because an ethnically diverse sample was important, permission and mailing lists were obtained to send surveys by mail to the membership for several groups composed of people of color. Also, several local medical and mental health professionals agreed to distribute surveys to their patients/clients. Finally, surveys were displayed at local bookstores, community centers, and women's centers.

RESULTS

For each item of abusive behavior, percentages were obtained for both current and past relationships (see Table I). Items covered a range of

Table I. Survey with Percentages of Abusive Behaviors Experienced ($n = 499$)

Has Your Lover/Partner Ever	Current Relationship (%)	Past Relationship (%)
7. used your credit card without permission	2	13
8. not worked and required you to support him/her	6	27
9. limited your access to money	5	14
10. treated you like a servant	7	20
11. made all the big decisions without asking you	5	17
12. decided all the duties in the relationship	4	14
13. used your age/race/class/religion/sexual orientation against you	4	20
14. blamed her/him problems on alcohol/drugs	6	27
15. blamed her/his problems on an abusive childhood	8	32
16. blamed you for her/his suicidal/self-abusive behavior	5	22
17. controlled what you do, who you see or talk to	10	33
18. made you account for your whereabouts	15	40
19. played mind games with you	15	57
20. blamed you for problems in the relationship	18	52
21. falsely accused you of having an affair	9	29
22. ridiculed you, humiliated you, or called you hurtful names	12	39
23. screamed at you	21	45
24. accused you of not being a real lesbian or gay man	3	9
25. withheld sex as a way to humiliate or punish you	6	21
26. abused a pet	2	8
27. displayed weapons	2	12
28. threatened you with a weapon	1	10
29. threatened that she/he will tell your employer/family/others that you are lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered	2	12
30. threw, broke, burned, or destroyed your things	6	27
31. withheld your medications	0.4	1
32. threatened to leave	13	33
33. threatened to commit suicide	6	22
34. stalked you	2	17
35. called you and hung up repeatedly	3	21
36. hurt you in anger or in play	10	32
37. slapped, hit, kicked, pushed, or shoved you	9	32
38. burned you	0	1
39. restrained you/tied you up (against your will)	1	6
40. forced you into sexual activity (against your will)	1	9
41. hurt you during sex (against your will)	1	5
42. bit you	2	6
43. choked you	2	9
44. forced you into public sex	0.4	2
If you have children		
45. made you feel guilty about the children	2	7
46. threatened to/hurt the children	1	1
47. threatened to take the children or persuaded your ex-spouse to try to take the children	0.4	1

abusive behaviors, including emotionally abusive behaviors (items 7–27, 29, 32–33, 45, and 47), physically threatening behaviors (items 28, 30–31, 34–39, 42–43, and 46) and sexually abusive behaviors (items 40–41 and 44). Of particular note was item 37 “. . . slapped, hit, kicked, pushed or shoved you,” which is typically thought of as battering. Nine percent reported this in current relationships, while 32% reported it in the past. In addition, item 40 (“forced you into sexual activity against your will”), indicative of mate rape, was endorsed by 1% in current relationships and 9% in past relationships. All items were endorsed with greater frequency for past relationships than for current ones.

Items were also examined by clusters of types of abuse for both current and past relationships. Emotional abuses could be further divided into several subcategories. At least one of the monetary abuse items (items 7–9) was endorsed by 40% of the sample. Coercive emotional abuse (items 31–33) happened to 51%, while shaming emotional abuse (items 21–24) was experienced by 70%. Threatening behavior (items 25–30) occurred to 52% of the sample, and 20% have been stalked (items 34–35). At least one item of emotional abuse (items 10–20) was experienced by 83% of the participants.

Of the physical abuse items for past relationships, at least one was endorsed by 50% of the sample. In addition, 12% indicated they had experienced at least one sexually abusive behavior on the part of their partner. Children were used as tools of manipulation for 9% of the participants. Unfortunately, there was no way to assess what percentage of the sample were parents.

Some gender differences emerged regarding experiences of relationship violence (Table II). Comparing across genders, women reported significantly higher percentages in the following abuse types: physical, coercion, threat, shame, and using children as tools.

Sorting type of abuse by sexual orientation yielded some additional information (Table III). Although consistent overall with the frequencies based on gender, women who self-identified as lesbian generally experienced equal or greater abuse than those who identified as gay women. People who self-identified as bisexual reported less abuse than gay men, lesbians, or gay women. Types of abuse that produced significant differences were coercion, shame, and use of children. Physical abuse produced differences close to significance. Because they are more likely to have children, not surprisingly the use of children to gain control was reported more often by heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian people.

Differences across ethnicities emerged also (Table IV). Statistically significant differences between ethnic groups were found regarding physical abuse and coercive techniques. No significant differences were found be-

Table II. Percent within Group by Gender Reporting Abuse with χ^2 Analysis of Abuse Type by Gender

Abuse type	Gender			χ^2	df
	Male (<i>n</i> = 227) (%)	Female (<i>n</i> = 265) (%)	Transgendered (<i>n</i> = 7) (%)		
Sexual	12	12	28	1.73	2
Physical	44	55	43	6.57*	2
Coercion	42	59	28	14.83***	2
Threatened	45	57	57	7.18*	2
Stalked	17	23	28	3.28	2
Shamed	62	77	57	12.70***	2
Financial	37	43	57	2.45	2
Emotional	83	83	57	3.18	2
Children	5	12	28	11.08**	2

Two-tailed significance: **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

tween groups regarding the remainder of the categories, although financial abuse was close to significance.

Age may relate to type or amount of abuse experienced (Table V). Comparing participants by their age decade, statistically significant differences were found in coercion, shaming, and use of children as tools. Physical abuse was close to statistical significance.

A final analysis correlated income with abuse type (Table VI). Although not particularly strong, several positive correlations between income

Table III. Percent within Group by Sexual Orientation Reporting Abuse with χ^2 Analysis of Abuse Type by Sexual Orientation

Abuse type	Sexual Orientation					χ^2	df
	Lesbian (<i>n</i> = 193) (%)	Gay Woman (<i>n</i> = 57) (%)	Gay Man (<i>n</i> = 213) (%)	Bisexual (<i>n</i> = 27) (%)	Hetero- sexual (<i>n</i> = 8) (%)		
Sexual	14	11	13	7	12	1.02	4
Physical	55	58	44	44	25	8.95 ^a	4
Coercion	61	51	41	59	37	17.22**	4
Threatened	59	51	45	52	62	7.75	4
Stalked	25	19	17	19	12	4.40	4
Shamed	78	89	63	74	50	12.71*	4
Financial	46	33	37	41	50	5.36	4
Emotional	84	77	83	81	87	1.59	4
Children	13	5	5	11	37	18.48***	4

Two-tailed significance: **p* < .05; ***p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

^an.s.—*p* < .06.

Table IV. Percent within Group by Ethnicity Reporting Abuse with χ^2 Analysis of Abuse Type by Ethnicity

Abuse type	Ethnicity						χ^2	df
	African-American (n = 45) (%)	Native-American (n = 13) (%)	Caucasian (n = 375) (%)	Latino (n = 40) (%)	Asian-American (n = 3) (%)	Bi/Multi-Ethnic (n = 18) (%)		
Sexual	7	15	13	18	0	11	2.89	5
Physical	44	92	50	50	33	39	11.06*	5
Coercion	53	92	51	25	33	67	21.89**	5
Threatened	58	77	52	35	33	56	8.94	5
Stalked	27	23	19	18	67	28	6.22	5
Shamed	80	85	69	67	67	83	5.67	5
Financial	49	77	38	45	67	39	10.71 ^a	5
Emotional	93	92	81	82	67	95	7.63	5
Children	7	31	9	5	0	11	8.88	5

Two-tailed significance: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

^an.s.— $p < .06$.

and sexual abuse, physical abuse, threats, stalking, and financial abuses were found to be statistically significant.

Over half (53%) of the participants who had experienced abuse did so in two or more relationships. Also, 55% of the abusive relationships lasted more than 2 years, and 25% were of a duration of 5 years or more. These findings are similar to those of Stahly and Lie (1995), who reported 65% of battering relationships were 1–5 years in length, and 14% of these relationships were of 5 years duration or longer.

DISCUSSION

This study confirmed that same-sex relationship violence is a significant problem for a sizable part of the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered (g/l/b/t) community within the limitations of the sampling methods. It further indicates that g/l/b/t people experience physical and sexual violence at similar frequencies to heterosexual people. Rates of heterosexual relationship physical violence have been well documented at approximately 33% (Koss, 1990; Straus & Gelles, 1990), as has marital rape (14%, Russell, 1990). Among lesbians, the frequencies of physical abuse (55%), sexual violence (14%), and emotional abuse (84%) were consistent with past research findings. The physical violence reported by gay men in this study (44%) was consistent with rates reported by Bologna *et al.* (1987), and falls at the higher end of the reported research. The 13% frequency of gay male sexual violence was consistent with both Waterman *et al.* (1989) and Wood (1987).

Table V. Percent Within Group by Age Decade Reporting Abuse with χ^2 Analysis of Abuse Type by Age Decade

Abuse Type	Age by Decade							χ^2	df
	Teens (n = 19) (%)	20s (n = 85) (%)	30s (n = 181) (%)	40s (n = 145) (%)	50s (n = 48) (%)	60s (n = 12) (%)	70s (n = 4) (%)		
Sexual	26	18	11	12	6	0	25	1.02	4
Physical	47	58	53	48	40	25	25	8.95 ^a	4
Coercion	37	52	50	56	48	33	25	17.22 ^{**}	4
Threatened	37	60	51	52	44	42	25	7.75	4
Stalked	21	35	15	21	17	0	25	4.40	4
Shamed	42	75	75	71	65	42	25	12.71 [*]	4
Financial	21	45	42	42	37	17	25	5.36	4
Emotional	68	87	86	81	79	58	25	1.59	4
Children	0	5	7	14	12	17	0	18.48 ^{***}	4

Two-tailed significance: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.^an.s.— $p < .06$.

Table VI. Point-Biserial Correlation of Abuse Type with Income ($n = 464$)

Abuse Type	Correlation Coefficient
	Abuse with Income
Sexual	.14***
Physical	.08*
Coercion	.01
Threatened	.08*
Stalked	.08*
Shamed	.05
Financial	.10**
Emotional	.06
Children	.03

Two-tailed significance: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$;
*** $p < .001$.

Of considerable interest are the within-group patterns that emerged regarding gender, ethnicity, age, and income. Lesbians reported significantly higher frequencies than gay men of physical abuse (55% vs. 44%), coercion (59% vs. 42%), threats (57% vs. 45%), shaming (77% vs. 62%), and children used as tools of control (12% vs. 5%) (see Table II).

These higher frequencies of violence/abuse by lesbians are consistent with those found by Waldner-Haugrud *et al.* (1997). Is this difference due to actual higher frequency or is it an artifact of the reporting process? Waldner-Haugrud *et al.* (1997) addressed these issues, and suggested that a higher frequency of these abuses in lesbian relationships may be caused by lesbian fusion and isolation. However, gender role socialization may make it easier for women to report themselves in the "victim" role, thus resulting in an underreporting by gay men. This study asked participants to check off partners' behaviors; one must wonder if this task would suggest a "victim" role. Hopefully, this methodology reduced any disproportionate underreporting by gay men and yielded an accurate prevalence rate. And if these frequencies represent accurate reporting, future research will need to examine the question of why lesbians are more physically and emotionally abusive in relationships than gay men.

Transgendered people were also included in the gender analysis. Only seven participants self-identified as transgendered (all male to female), so these frequencies must be interpreted with caution. Patterns from this study indicated that they were more likely than either gay men or lesbians to experience their children used for control, equally likely to the lesbian group to be threatened, and less likely than both groups to experience coercion and shame. They were equally likely to experience physical abuse compared to gay men. These trends require elaboration as more research

related to the transgendered people's experiences of same-sex violence is needed.

This study included bisexual people, and heterosexual people who had previous same-sex relationships. Coercion, shame, and using children were all abuse categories with significant differences across sexual orientations. Interestingly, the bisexual participants reported lower frequencies of abuse in most categories. Results from the heterosexual group should be interpreted with caution given the small number ($n = 8$). All these patterns warrant further research.

Statistically significant differences were found between ethnic groups for both physical abuse and coercion. Financial abuse percentages were close to statistical significance. Small subsamples for Native Americans ($n = 13$) and Asian-Americans ($n = 3$) mandate caution with interpretation of the results. Native Americans reported the highest frequencies for all three of these categories. Caucasians and Latinos reported equal frequencies for physical abuse (50%), followed by African-Americans (44%). Future research could determine if these differences are replicable. However, few consistent patterns emerge overall. The important finding may be that, as with heterosexual relationships (Koss *et al.*, 1995), same-sex relationship violence may be more similar than different across ethnicities.

Significant statistical differences were found for coercion, shame and use of children for control across age groups (Table V). Differences in physical abuse were close to significance. Older age was associated with more use of children; this is probably due to the decreased likelihood of younger gay men and lesbians being parents. Differences in coercive and shaming behavior need further examination. The pattern that emerges across age decades seem to indicate a peak in most types of abuse in one's 20s, 30s, and 40s, with the exceptions of sexual abuse and use of children. Sexual abuse appears to be more prevalent before the age of 30, and decreases further after the age of 50. Future research should examine these developmental patterns regarding frequencies and types of abuses.

As seen in Table VI higher income is significantly associated with increased frequency of sexual and physical abuses, threats, stalking, and financial abuse. The relation to financial abuse may be due to the opportunity afforded by higher income. All of these findings regarding income contradict Renzetti (1997), who found no predictive relationship between relationship violence and income level. The relation of greater income to increased frequency of the other abuses remains to be explored further.

Frequencies of all items were consistently greater for past relationships than current ones. These results are consistent with past research by Lie *et al.* (1991). Several possibilities may explain these differences. First, participants may have learned from their past relationship mistakes, making

better choices in current partners. Another more chilling possibility relates to the self-selection process of participants: due to the isolation often imposed in abusive relationships, currently abused people may not have been available to receive the survey. Additionally, it may not have been safe to complete a survey if one's abusive partner might find it. Given the potential for underreporting of current experiences, frequency rates for past relationships are probably more accurate reflection of the prevalence of this problem.

This study is valuable in its inclusion of an ethnically diverse and large sample, encompassing bisexual and transgendered people, and in its examination of patterns of abuses across gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, and income. This diversity of participants should result in a greater generalizability of results.

Questions about measurement issues are raised by this study. Reported frequencies vary greatly depending on the operationalization of the abuse variables. This study used a survey of specific behaviors to measure the frequency of a variety of abuses. Hopefully, this specificity of these results will clarify the frequencies of distinctive behaviors. These items can also be combined to examine broader patterns of abuse. Both seem to yield useful, if different, measures by which to explore this phenomenon.

A clearer picture is emerging regarding the amount and types of abuse within same-sex relationships. Future research should continue to examine the patterns that emerged from this study. Differences and similarities about relationship violence within the gay and lesbian community across gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age, and income should be studied further. We need this knowledge to help understand these phenomena, and to provide services needed to help survivors and ultimately, to stop the violence.

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