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Cover Page Footnote

Sophie Register recently graduated from Colorado College with a degree in sociology. This paper was presented at the 2017 Pi Gamma Mu Triennial Convention.

Maybe it's Just Different with Girls: A Social-Ecological Analysis of Intimate Partner Violence in Female-on-Female Relationships

As more light is shed upon the serious social issue of intimate partner violence (IPV) in heterosexual relationships, there continues to be a distinct lack of information surrounding abuse in homosexual relationships, specifically lesbian partnerships. This research paper employs Beth Hart's definition of lesbian IPV as a "pattern of violent or 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."¹ This definition encompasses multiple forms of IPV, including physical, psychological, social, and emotional abuse. Although IPV in lesbian relationships has been the subject of scholarly discourse for over thirty years, there are still major gaps in the knowledge surrounding this topic. This is in part due to society's framing of IPV and sexual assault within "patriarchal and heterosexual assumptions [about gender performances], including the appeal to the laws of nature."² These assumptions focus on men's privileged societal status and view the prototypical large male form as a more *natural* mechanism for violence than the bodies of women. However, by labeling IPV as a gendered power imbalance, past studies have often overlooked and even discounted the occurrence of female-on-female violence.

This research paper seeks to fill this gap in the literature by exploring IPV in same-sex relationships and challenging the myth that female-on-female IPV does not occur because women are not "supposed" to act as sexual perpetrators or batterers.³ Using qualitative interviews and a social-ecology model, this paper examines the interplay between abused individuals, lesbian relationships, gay communities, and the aforementioned societal expectations of lesbian relationships. How these four levels overlap with one another to silence lesbian IPV victims and perpetuate abuse is then explored. Utilizing the social-

ecological perspective allows for a more nuanced view of IPV that explains the phenomenon as more than male attempts to maintain dominance over their female partners.

Statistical and Linguistic Barriers to Study

Although IPV is often thought of solely in terms of a male-female dichotomy, studies suggest that domestic violence within lesbian relationships occurs nearly as often as it does in heterosexual relationships.⁴ Unfortunately, there is currently no consensus on the percentage of lesbians who experience IPV. Studies from the early 1990s report 17 to 52 percent of lesbians experience IPV, and the range of reports has only widened with current data suggesting that 11 to 73 percent of lesbians experience IPV in their lifetimes.⁵ Ineffective data collection, inconsistent definitions of IPV, and societal stigma have all contributed to the inability to gather reliable data on the number of lesbians who experience IPV and why such IPV occurs.

In their article, “Exploring Measurement Error Issues in Reporting of Same-Sex Couples,” U.S. Census Bureau statisticians and researchers describe why it is so difficult to accurately measure not only how many lesbians experience IPV, but even how many lesbians there are in the United States. The U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS) estimates the number of same-sex couples through two questionnaire items: relationship and sex. As same-sex partnership laws varied from state to state until the summer of 2015, even some the most recent ACS reports followed edit rules that changed data values for what was assumed to be contradictory answers. For example, if two women were living together in 2000 and they both marked themselves as women and that they were married, the Census Bureau would fix their seemingly contradictory answers by changing their answers to report that they were both single.⁶ However, in 2010, this coding procedure evolved so that the respondents’ answers remained unaltered and an additional marital status category, *unmarried*

partner, was added. While the inclusion of a category for unmarried partners aids in identifying same-sex couples, societal stigma still prevents some lesbians from self-identifying and thus being included in ACS estimates. Without an accurate count of the lesbian population living in the United States it is impossible to know the percentage of lesbians who experience IPV.

There are also numerous obstacles in studying IPV within the lesbian population. To begin with, identifying individuals who experience IPV is hindered by our society's lack of a single term to describe IPV. When discussing this topic, the phrases "intimate partner violence," "domestic abuse," "partner manipulation," "domestic violence," "physical abuse," "intimate partner intimidation," and "sexual assault" are used seemingly interchangeably but can have very different interpretations. Some of these phrases are meant to focus solely on physical harm, while others are meant to include many types of abuse including physical, psychological, or emotional. The inconsistent use of terminology hinders data collection because research participants may be unsure whether to identify as abused. Without accurate classification and enumeration it is impossible to know how often same-sex IPV occurs and how greatly our country is in need of social services and legal protections for these groups.

Many researchers are also hesitant to explore lesbian IPV for fear of reinforcing negative stereotypes about an already pathologized group of people. They worry that studies that focus on a negative aspect of lesbian relationships will only perpetuate dominant society's heteronormative culture and pervasive homophobia, by confirming that lesbians are part of a deviant subgroup that does not adhere to societal norms.⁷ Similarly, due to the prevalence of studies about male-on-female IPV, which often focus on variables such as family-of-origin violence, power imbalance, and dependency on intimate partners, lesbian IPV studies often focus on these same variables.⁸ While some of these factors have been shown to be important

in both heterosexual and homosexual partnerships, most studies did not find such correlations. Thus, when studying same-sex IPV, scholars must be cautious about relying on heterosexual research models and assuming that they will find the same data that is produced in research on heterosexual IPV.

Hesitancies Lesbians Face to Partaking in Research

The aforementioned obstacles may discourage researchers from embarking in studies about IPV in female-on-female relationships, and lesbians who are invited to participate in these studies, often experience similar hesitancies. These women often express distress about negative reactions from the heteronormative superstructure and from their own social spheres within lesbian communities. Dominant culture may affect a lesbian's willingness to talk about past abuses to service providers, such as counselors, because these women assume that the provider will try to force their experiences into the paradigm of domestic violence within heteronormative relationships.⁹ Most lesbian study participants in North America state that they struggled when seeking resources to help them escape or cope with their abusive relationship. There are few shelters and programs specifically created for the abused in same-sex relationships and in many places LGBTQ shelters are rare or non-existent. This lack of cultural competency and informed support from both therapists and researchers can re-traumatize the victim, encouraging them to stop seeking help and instead to simply stay with their abusive partner.¹⁰ The absence of such services compounded with whether the individual is *out* as queer can make it impossible for lesbians experiencing IPV to find the help they need.

During their study in Canada on the barriers homosexual IPV victims face when leaving their abusers, sociologists Melissa St. Pierre and Charlene Y. Senn found statistically significant evidence that lesbians who were not out about their sexuality were less likely to

seek help or to tell anyone they were being harmed and were more likely to stay in their abusive relationships.¹¹ Pierre and Senn's participants feared being outed as gay in the process of getting legal help or therapy. "Outing may result in being shunned by relatives and friends, the loss of a job, and a range of other discriminatory consequences with little or no legal recourse for victims," and thus even when they want to get help, the fear of being outed silences many LGBTQ individuals.¹² Not only does the fear of being outed create barriers, but "prior psychological or physical trauma, whether in the form of rejection by their families of origin, hate speech or hate crimes in their communities," make lesbians and other LGBTQ individuals hesitant to rely on the dominant culture's institutions.¹³ Thus a partner's threat to out the individual as LGBTQ-identifying may be a tool of abuse and discourage the abused from relying on a dominant culture that labels them as deviant and has failed them in the past. Unable to rely upon institutional forms of help, the abused partner usually remains with their abusive partners within their shared lesbian community.

Internalized Heteronormative Assumptions

Despite the difficulties associated with researching IPV in lesbian relationships and the hesitations lesbians face when asked to participate in such studies, past research demonstrates that types and patterns of IPV are similar across homosexual and heterosexual relationships. As outlined by the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence's Power and Control Wheel, there are eight common forms of IPV in heterosexual relationships.¹⁴ These eight include: 1) coercion and threats, threatening to hurt or kill oneself or their partner; 2) intimidation, making a partner afraid using looks, actions, and gestures; 3) emotional abuse, making a partner feel bad about herself; 4) isolation, controlling where a partner goes and who she sees; 5) minimizing, denying, and blaming, shifting responsibility for abuse onto the abused partner; 6) using children, threatening to harm the children or to take them away; 7)

economic abuse, taking a partner's money and making her financially dependent upon abuser; and 8) male privilege, treating her like a servant and defining male and female roles. An updated version of the Power and Control Wheel created for homosexual couples reveals that seven of the eight most common types of abuse found in heterosexual relationships are also found in homosexual relationships, with the exception of male privilege.

Not only do similar types of abuse occur in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships, with multiple forms often taking place within a single relationship, but the violence also tends to increase in frequency and severity over time in all types of abusive partnerships.¹⁵ This increase in violence overtime, combined with the patterned nature of abuse, conforms to psychologist Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence. Walker's theoretical cycle includes three phases, the tension-building period, the acute battering incident, and finally a period where the abuser apologizes and stops battering for a time.¹⁶ Another commonality that has been found between IPV in heterosexual and homosexual relationships is that abuse usually occurs in one's earliest relationships. For lesbians, most documented abuse occurs during their first lesbian relationship while their partner is introducing them to often-private lesbian communities.¹⁷ During this time the abused party experiences social vulnerability because she is new to the community and thus has no resources when her partner becomes violent.

Furthermore, when IPV occurs, the abused woman often fears that the dominant culture will find her plight inexplicable and unexpected, and that she will be ostracized for betraying the confidence of her new community.¹⁸ These fears are coupled with pervasive assumptions that women are not violent, and societal myths "that lesbian relationships are egalitarian, [that] lesbians do not oppress or beat each other...[that] women only use violence in cases of self-defense, and [that] even if they did [use violence], women are not big enough to really

hurt each other.”¹⁹ Through the lens of such assumptions, it may be difficult for the abused to understand that what is happening to her as abuse or to see herself as a true victim who is in need and deserving of help.

While the assumption that female-on-female violence does not occur can silence the abused partner, one's willingness to come forward is further impeded by many other societal misconceptions and myths. One such misconception is that same-sex IPV is less severe and has fewer physical and mental health consequences for same-sex partners as compared to heterosexual couples. This assumption stems from societal beliefs that “same-gender IPV involves two abusers...who can effectively defend themselves because they are of similar strength and size...purposely trying to hurt one another rather than unidirectional IPV with one abuser and one victim.”²⁰ While members of same-sex relationships are more likely to trade positions of power throughout the relationship than members of heterosexual partnerships, this does not mean that the physical or emotional consequences of IPV are any less severe. In fact studies have found that “female sexual minority IPV victims [are] either just as likely as or more likely than heterosexual female IPV victims to experience fear, concern for safety, and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms as a result of IPV.” Similarly, women who did not identify as straight “were more than twice as likely as heterosexual women to experience intimate partner rape, sexual coercion by a partner, and severe forms of physical IPV, including being hit with something hard, slammed against something, or choked and having a knife or gun used on them.”²¹ These findings suggest that the same types of violence are used in lesbian and heterosexual IPV, and that victims of IPV are traumatized in similar ways, regardless of their abuser's gender.

Based on pervasive assumptions about the male-female IPV dichotomy, society often presumes that when IPV does occur in lesbian relationships, the more masculine member of

the partnership perpetuates the abuse. In both heterosexual and homosexual examples, society expects abusers to adhere to the traditional masculinity norms of being physically larger than their partner and performing acts of aggression and dominance.²² Unfortunately, the well-established feminist discourse portrays perpetrators of IPV as masculine and “may have inadvertently fed into a myth that same-gender IPV perpetrators are similarly more male-looking and masculine-acting than their victims.”²³ Thus if there is a more masculine-looking (i.e. butch) partner in the lesbian partnership, they are seen as the more obvious perpetrator of physical abuse as opposed to their feminine-looking (i.e. femme) partner. While there are fewer assumptions about which partner, the butch or the femme, employs other types of abuse tactics such as emotional abuse or coercion, these forms of IPV are often seen as “less real” than physical violence. Thus in cases of physical or non-physical abuse, the butch partner is less believable as an abused woman compared to the femme. By using these gendered perspectives, society and researchers once again risk trying to force lesbian IPV into a heteronormative dichotomy while perpetuating stereotypes about who can be a victim.

Myths, Fluidity, and Power

These myths about masculinity, severity of abuse, and equality in lesbian relationships can prevent those experiencing abuse from conceptualizing themselves as victims and can stop them from coming forward. Additionally, the normative abuser-victim dichotomy can also work to prevent individuals from recognizing their experience as abuse. As a part of Janice Ristock’s 2003 qualitative study on dynamics of abusive relationships, some of the lesbians interviewed explained that unlike in heterosexual relationships, where the man is almost always in the position of power within society and the relationship, there are shifting and fluid dynamics of power in lesbian relationships.²⁴ These shifting power dynamics allow for one member of the relationship to move between the roles of victim and abuser over time,

resulting in both partners experiencing each role multiple times during different stages of the relationship.

Power in lesbian relationships is not only distinctive due to its fluidity from partner to partner, but also in the role it plays as a predictor for violence. As previously mentioned, society is more readily able to conceptualize men as perpetrators of violence due to their size and the power they hold in both society and their personal relationships. While “indicators of power, such as physical size, physical attractiveness and conventionality, or economic and job status,” are often useful predictors of whether violence will occur and which partner will be the perpetrator in heterosexual relationships, these did not act as significant predictors of IPV for lesbian couples. Rather, studies have found that dependency is a more important predictor of IPV than power in lesbian partnerships.²⁵ Unlike power, dependency has less to do with an individual’s status in society and more to do with their role within the context of the relationship. Dependency can manifest itself in the forms of monetary dependency if one partner is financially dependent upon the other, social dependency if one partner is being introduced to a new lesbian community, or emotional dependency.

Emotional dependency refers to the extent to which one relies on their partner to cope with minority stress, which can be caused by “external stressors, such as hate crimes, discrimination, [and being labeled as deviant], as well as internal stressors, such as internalized homophobia,” or the fear of being outed.²⁶ The level of emotional dependency in a relationship is a good predictor for violence because it reflects the stress the couple faces from both internal and external forces. Although power and dependency work in similar ways as predictors of stress, research geared towards the study of dependency more readily acknowledges the nuanced differences between IPV in homosexual and heterosexual couples,

while not forcing the lived experience of lesbians into the expectations of a male-female dichotomy.

Moving forward with such explorations, researchers must relinquish the traditional lens of gendered power dynamics and conflict theories. While gendered power theories explain IPV as a gendered-power imbalance in which one partner—usually the male—uses abuse as a mechanism to maintain dominance over their partner—usually the female—conflict theories are rooted in similar ideas that society and social groups interact on the basis of conflict rather than consensus. Conflict theory can then be used to explain IPV as a social problem in which the dominant group, men, may also abuse the subordinate group of women to maintain their ruling power.²⁷ For example, according to conflict theory, if a wife begins to make more money than her husband, the husband may feel that his dominant status in the relationship is threatened, and in response may begin to abuse her in an attempt to maintain his power. Thus both gender and conflict theories develop from the idea that IPV stems from male attempts to maintain power over their female partners. Dependence upon gender or conflict models perpetuate institutionalized ideas about masculinity's role in abuse and presumptions that women only use violence in instances of self-defense. The removal of a gender or conflict lens invites researchers to examine structural and cultural factors that may be responsible for IPV in many different relationship forms.

The lack of reliable statistics regarding the percentage of lesbians who experience IPV and the use of confusing language in large surveys make quantitative research of this topic difficult, thus, this research applies qualitative methods. Building upon the methods of previous research, this study utilizes interviews to collect more in-depth responses than those provided by surveys, and uses intentional language that does not re-traumatize or force my participants to relive their experiences of IPV. Finally, instead of relying upon gender or

conflict theories, this paper opts for the less prominent approach of using a social-ecological model to study IPV. This approach recognizes that social and ecological problems are deeply interwoven and that one's ecology, where they are from and the society they live in, work to allow for social problems such as IPV.²⁸ Although this perspective is sometimes used to conceptualize IPV in heterosexual relationships, Mikel L. Walters' study is the only one to apply the social-ecological model specifically to IPV in lesbian relationships.²⁹ The social-ecology model suggests that both social and ecological problems are caused by our social organization, sociocultural factors, and their interactions with the individual. Mirroring Walters's work, this paper seeks to understand how the different levels of each participant's social-ecology, including the individual, their relationship, their involvement in the gay community, and the larger society which surrounds them, all work together to create the possibility for abuse in lesbian relationships.

Methods

To gauge the need for this study, eighteen Colorado College (CC) students and seven CC professors were consulted, most of whom are openly involved in the college's queer community and are personally known by the author. Once it was confirmed that a few individuals were willing to share their experiences, they received the recruitment script via email, which asked them to consider participating if they were victims of lesbian IPV or to encourage their friends, family, or professors who had lesbian IPV experiences to participate in the project. The CC LGBTQ groups EQUAL and QueerCC, as well as Colorado Springs organizations that support queer communities or IPV victims also received the script.

Ultimately, eight participants agreed to interviews, thus these findings cannot be applied to the U.S. lesbian population at large. However, while not representative of larger lesbian populations, small sample sizes are common amongst such research because lesbian survivors

are a difficult population to reach.³⁰ Of the eight participants, six had experienced IPV in female-on-female relationships, while the other two had not. The two interviews that had no experience with IPV acted as examples of healthy lesbian relationships. To protect the participants' identities names were changed and no identifying characteristics were mentioned. The participants identified gender on a spectrum and to avoid misidentifying any of my participants, this paper utilizes plural pronouns. While the participants identified on a spectrum, they all identified their abusers as female and thus female pronouns are utilized when referring to abusers. All eight participants categorized their sexuality as lesbian, butch, or queer. All participants are "out" about their sexuality and identified as non-Hispanic white. Six participants were in their twenties (20, 20, 21, 21, 22, 25) and two were in their fifties (51 and 52). Five participants were in college.

Data Collection

Each participant took part in a 47-93 minute interview either in person in a location of their choosing or over Skype. The interviews were conducted between October 1, 2016 and February 18, 2017. Four interviews took place in person and four were conducted over Skype. Each interview was recorded on two tape recorders, transcribed onto a locked computer, after which the recordings were deleted. No names or demographic information were kept with these transcriptions, so as to make identification impossible. Each interview was coded using inductive and deductive techniques, focusing on what types of abuse were experienced, how the abuse was executed, the participants' responses to abuse, how the participant identified themselves, and how or if they asked others for help while enduring or when leaving their IPV relationship.

Findings

Similarities between Male-on-Female and Female-on-Female IPV

This study's female abusers demonstrated their power over their victims in ways congruent with the behaviors of male perpetrators as outlined by the National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence's original Power and Control Wheel.³¹ These behaviors included coercion, intimidation, emotional abuse, isolation, and the abuser's denial of their behavior or blaming of the abused. All six participants who identified as experiencing IPV or being stuck and unable to leave their partner reported incidents that included these five forms of abuse. For the participants in college, patterns of abuse usually began with isolation in which the abuser controlled what the participant did, who they saw and spoke to, and where they went. One participant mentioned that at the beginning of the relationship, the perpetrator "started texting [them] and following [them] around, and would drop by [their] room with no warning." While the aforementioned participant admitted to finding the attention "flattering" at first, it soon became a major stressor. The participant recalls,

I would get so anxious every single time [my abuser] would like text or call me and like half the time I would just take a nap because my FYE was like really draining and I'd take a thirty minute nap and I would wake up to 15 text messages, three missed call, and like a Facebook message and I was just like I was literally sleeping for thirty minutes but she would be so mad at me and would say I was like ignoring her and didn't care about her and all of this when in reality I was just sleeping for 25 minutes. So that was really hard too because I felt like from the time I woke to the time I went to bed, I was either with her or doing class work, but then even in class, I wasn't like thinking about like my classwork, I was like worrying that she was texting me and I couldn't text her back in time.

Intimidation tactics such as these were usually first employed against participants via electronic means such as persistent texts, Skype requests, Facebook messages, Facetime videos, and phone calls. Similarly, two abusers asked their partners to "link up [their] phones," so that the abusers would be able to know where their partner was at all times.

Another common request was for the victim to leave the perpetrator on Facetime video chat

throughout the day so the perpetrator could observe the victim's daily routine and with whom they interacted. Despite these obsessive attempts to stay in contact with them and know their location at all times, the participants often felt that it was out of "love" that their partner frequently contacted them, and equated the behavior to "a stressor that made [them] more aware of [their] own actions" rather than a type of abuse.

A pattern of control was then usually established in which the abuser would ban or limit the victims' contact with their friends and family members, thus creating emotional dependency on the perpetrator. The abused then had fewer relationships to rely on when the perpetrator shifted from obsessive calling and wanting to know whom the abused interacted with to more socially unacceptable IPV forms, such as emotional and physical abuse. Emotional abuse often began with a shift in the way the perpetrator spoke to the abused. Abusers would become "patronizing, start getting angry, crying or yelling, and [their] language would become super aggressive." One participant recalls their friends telling them that they noticed the "dismissive tone" the abuser used with them and how the abuser would often "mock or invalidate" the participant's viewpoints. Most participants mentioned that this type of abuse would continue with the abuser saying that she hated her partner, that her partner was stupid or a liar, and that the victim was responsible for the abuse.

While two participants eventually left their partners, exhausted by the emotional abuse, the relationships of the four other participants progressed into moments of physical threats and violence. Types of violence varied for each participant with three experiencing long-term physical and sexual abuse, and the other experiencing only a singular instance of being physically threatened and pushed. The three long-term survivors of physical violence recounted how their abuser would "throw and smash things," such as a frying pan or picture frames, and then often use her size to "corner" her partner before "pinning [the partner]

down” or “sitting on” them. Once the victim was unable to move, the abuser would hit, bite, or sexually assault their partner. Early in the relationships, the abuser would often apologize after these events, promising that it would “never happen again” and that she would be better. However, as time went on, the instances of abuse would occur without subsequent apologies. The abused would rationalize that this was the new normal sequence of events for the relationship and simply how they and their partner “worked things out.”

Not only did participants normalize their situations but also in many cases, the abuse occurred during times when the participants were dependent upon their abusers and thus unable to leave. One participant recounts a trip they took overseas with their partner where their partner was able to become increasingly violent because they were alone in another country and the victim was socially dependent on their partner and lacked the financial means to leave.

We were in a bar and she took me outside and was like I hate you. [She was] saying all of these rude things and then she started walking away and I was like okay well I'm in [***]ing Greece, I don't know what to do and I have no way to get a flight home, so I'm gonna follow you because like I don't know. And um, then she took me inside of a bar, I was crying at this point, because she kept saying like it's over, it's over, like I'm breaking up with you, and I was like I don't understand. So she took me inside of a bar, and made me chug a beer, took me back outside, and slapped me right across the face, and said like I hate you and then I kept apologizing like I'm so sorry, I love you, and then she took me downstairs to like the bathroom and just like sexually assaulted me as I was saying like I don't want this or like she just did whatever she wanted. It was also one of those instances when I knew she wanted to do whatever she wanted to do, she was like mad, I was in Greece and I was alone and I was just gonna let her do what she wanted.

Although economic control was less common than other forms of abuse experienced by participants, when mentioned, finances were used as a tactic to isolate the victim, such as in the aforementioned scenario, or to make the victim feel “indebted” to their abuser. Economic control may have been an outlier in this study due to the fact that the majority of participants and their partners were college students in their twenties, who were still financially dependent upon their parents, and thus had little control over their own finances or those of their partner.

Similarly, in part due to the young average age of study participants, only one participant had a child. This participant, Megan, was pregnant when their partner, Samantha attacked them. Samantha “shoved, [Megan] down on the bed...and pulled a fireplace poker out of the holder and came after [them] with it.” Megan “ended up running down the street,” fearful that Samantha would harm them and their unborn baby. This was the only time when Samantha had been physically abusive to Megan, but Megan immediately ended the relationship. During the interview, Megan wondered aloud if she would have left at the first sign of violence if she had not been pregnant and had only been protecting her own life.

Conceptualization of Victimhood and Heteronormative Expectations

Participants often found it difficult to conceptualize themselves as victims and what was happening to them as abuse. Five of the participants reported abuse took place in their first female-on-female relationship, during a time when they had little idea about how lesbian relationships actually worked. Many participants reiterated that it was “the first time [they] had ever been in love with someone, especially a woman” and they didn’t know what to expect, so they rationalized “maybe this is just what love is or maybe it’s just different with girls.”

One participant explained that when their partner hit them for the first time, they thought “this isn’t a problem gay people have... domestic violence is a guy thing, we’re two girls.” They explained that prior to the relationship, they had never heard of IPV episodes that did not involve a man assaulting a woman, and even though it has been two years since they left their abuser, they still find “it hard to label what has happened to [them] as domestic violence or abuse.” These sentiments were mirrored in multiple interviews with five participants saying that they did not realize that they were victims of IPV until close friends labeled their partners’ behaviors as abusive. While some interviewees found it hard to conceptualize

themselves as victims, others feared that outsiders would not understand their experiences as valid or real abuse. Unfortunately, these fears were often confirmed when participants did report their circumstances to authorities.

Experiences Reporting to Formal Authority Figures

Two college-aged participants described the traumatizing process of reporting their partners' behaviors to their schools. The boards that reviewed their cases were ill versed in female-on-female relationships, and asked disrespectful questions about the "number of orgasms [the participant] had had during the relationship" and what "sex meant in terms of a lesbian relationship." Similarly, the participants felt that during these meetings they needed to appear "relatable" and "put the board at ease." Thus one participant misidentified themselves as a female rather than non-binary, while another purposely wore a feminine dress to their hearing, stating "I was already coming in at a disadvantage, being a lesbian, and I had to appear feminine to appear normal, like I had to appear like I was heterosexual." They further explained that they felt their story would be more "believable" if the administration viewed them as the "femme" and their partner as the "butch." In both cases, the abused individuals felt that they would be more likely seen as victims if their situation mirrored the female victim-male abuser dichotomy most readily understood by most institutions of formal control.

However, participants did not only fear the response of formal institutions situated within dominant culture, but also how the gay community would respond to their accusations against another member. As previously mentioned, five of the participants experienced abuse in their first female-on-female relationship or when they had recently moved to a new area, and were thus just becoming involved in a gay community. Multiple participants expressed that it made sense that they experienced IPV when they were a "gayby" (gay-baby; slang for someone who is new to the LGBTQ world) because that is when individuals are usually the most

isolated. Upon first entering the gay community, LGBTQ individuals often do not know many community members and face a multitude of personal struggles, including how to come out to dominant society, the possibility of being rejected by family and friends for coming out, and how they will be involved in gay culture.

Gay Communities' Silencing of IPV

Facing so much uncertainty, participants welcomed the idea of having a partner who was more established and who could act as a gatekeeper to show them the norms of their new community. Throughout the interviews, participants talked about the benefits of being in a relationship with someone who had authority and was able to introduce them to community members, norms, and unspoken, cultural boundaries. Five of the six participants stated that their abuser was older than them, even if only by two or three years.

These individuals, which one participant repeatedly referred to as “established gays,” were usually older than their partner and had authority as an established member of the gay community. While a relationship with an older individual, who was already ingrained in the community, helped the gayby pass as a valid member, the established gays would sometimes take advantage of the gayby’s lack of knowledge of cultural norms. One woman explained that unlike “heterosexual relationships where age differences are looked down upon, they are common or...encouraged by the gay community.” However, they continued that these mentors could easily exploit the fact that they knew what behaviors were permissible and “how to navigate social [dynamics] during parties” when gaybies did not. Furthermore, because larger society views members of “the queer community as an oppressed positionality, [members are]... labeled as less bad than white men, even when they partake in the exact same predatory behaviors,” such as “grabbing people’s butts, making people dance with them who may not want to, following them after parties, and texting them repeatedly.” Most

participants explained that if these behaviors had happened to them with a man or when they were more established within the community, they would have responded differently, but because they saw it as a cultural norm of an oppressed people, they felt they did not have the social power to say no.

Feeling that they were no longer accepted by dominant culture, and fearing that they would be ostracized by their only remaining support system, participants usually did not disclose untoward behaviors of other community members or their eventual abusive relationships to anyone but their closest friends. One participant explained that gay communities are such small networks,

you're not gonna talk about it if you think [your abuser] is gonna hear about it...[because] they have someone who will relay what you're saying, so you just keep your mouth shut. I mean [abusers] will like go to group meetings or bars just so that you'll keep your mouth shut.

This pressure to remain silent can then create a “negative situation [where] people don't really talk about it because like queer assault isn't seen as valid...[so] predators [can] move from person to person, assaulting them because there's no communication.” These participants feared that their abuser would punish them if they told anyone what was happening and that they would be further sanctioned by their community for speaking out.

One participant expressed that when they revealed the IPV they had experienced at the hands of their partner, Laura, the members of their shared lesbian community, actively worked to get the pair back together. The participant remembers that after they left Laura,

For a few weeks everyone in town was trying to get me to forgive her. There was a lot of social pressure, which was really hard because I was only 29 at the time and I was new in town. Like where we live is a really liberal town that supports lesbians so there are a lot of us here, but this [push for us to get back together] was mostly the women in town, who didn't want couples to break up because for some reason when a couple breaks up it's like an assault on the community. Like if a lesbian couple who had been together for a long time broke up, it was like devastating. It was like this sort of earthquake through the community and it would rattle other couples, and it would almost rattle the familial foundation that the lesbians try to put down. Like this was the core of solid relationships, like this was our example, the people

who could make it over time, so when someone broke up and they'd been together for years it was earthshattering for the community.

Following a probe about how this community reaction shaped their experience with leaving, the participant explained that this pressure to stay together, combined with the fact that they “were the new kid on the block,” kept them from openly speaking about the IPV and may have contributed to how long they stayed in the relationship. Thus unable to rely upon either authority figures in dominant society or fellow members of their gay communities, many participants felt that these compounding factors silenced them and made the leaving process more arduous.

Similarities between Male-on-Female and Female-on-Female IPV

Despite differences between normal behaviors ascribed to men and women, there were overwhelming similarities in the types of abuse experienced by the participants of this study at the hands of women and those described by women who are abused by male partners. The Power and Control Wheel labels the eight most prevalent types of abuse used by batterers, “to establish and maintain control over [their] partners.”³² These forms of IPV include, 1) coercion and threats, 2) intimidation, 3) emotional abuse, 4) isolation, 5) minimizing, denying, and blaming, 6) using children, 7) economic abuse, and 8) male privilege.³³ Oftentimes multiple forms of abuse occur within one relationship. Although, these eight forms of IPV refer to how a male abuser “takes control of [a] woman’s life and circumstances,” this study’s participants experienced seven of the aforementioned types of abuse. The only type of abuse not mentioned by participants was abuse caused by or exacerbated by male privilege.

Not only did this research find that similar types of abuse take place in heterosexual and homosexual relationships, but also throughout each interview, similar patterns of IPV among participants became apparent. Following this pattern, an abuser would first court their victim,

begin to control their victim's behavior, isolate the victim from their family and friends, and then begin emotional abuse. These patterns were usually accompanied by instances in which the abuser blamed their behaviors on their victim, and for four interviewees, the pattern ended in forms of physical IPV. These patterns followed the outlined three phases of Lenore Walker's Cycle of Violence. Although IPV is usually studied through a gendered lens, the use of comparable abuse tactics by both male and female perpetrators and the patterned nature of IPV incidents, points to an underlying explanation for abuse other than the perpetrator's gender. Returning to the work of Mikel L. Walters, social-ecology becomes an effective lens through which to analyze lesbian IPV.

A Social-Ecology Perspective

A social-ecological model does not point to a singular cause for IPV, but considers the complex interplay between an individual, their relationship, their community, and extenuating societal factors.³⁴ These four connected levels then combine to create an environment in which IPV is possible and the abused is silenced by multiple forms of social control.

The first level is that of the individual and focuses on the personal history of each participant. While it was surprising that no participants had experienced physical familial abuse, as is common amongst heterosexual IPV victims, other personal traits made the participants more likely victims of IPV.³⁵ For example, many participants reiterated that they were abused while they were still relatively new to the lesbian community and were struggling with internal ideas about who they were. While they were trying to conceptualize themselves as community members and did not know how lesbians behaved, they were easy targets for abuse. Many participants rationalized that while abuse was considered deviant in heterosexual relationships, it might be seen as the norm for lesbian relationships because of societal ideas that women cannot really hurt each other.³⁶ As previously mentioned, one

participant justified their partner's behaviors, thinking, "maybe it's just different with girls."

A participant's individual status as a novice in the lesbian community and their lack of knowledge about community norms made a participant more susceptible to abuse.

Noticing the victim's individual status as a new member of the gay community, established gays sometimes preyed on the newcomers, using their knowledge about the community to convince newcomers to enter into relationships with them. While these relationships began as mutually beneficial with both partners receiving attention and the established gay teaching their partner the norms of the gay community, a power imbalance was soon created in which the established gay became an authoritative figure over their new partner. Victims became dependent upon their abusers to gain access to the group, but then were unable to tell people when the abuse began because they were still considered outsiders by many group members. One participant recalled, "I mean when it started I didn't know what to do, who could I tell? All of our friends had been her friends first." Thus the abused individual's status as a newcomer combined with their partner's status as dominant in the relationship and more established in the couple's social sphere, all worked to silence the abused. However, even when the abused did confide in the gay community, they often experienced another level of silencing.

The next level of the social-ecology model, one's community, also worked to silence abused participants. As one participant mentioned, after they broke up with their partner, Laura, because of Laura's abusive tendencies, the lesbian community encouraged the two to reconcile. The participant continued that the community probably held onto their relationship because the two had been together so long and acted as a model for what new relationships could strive to become. The two partners had made a life together and had disproved societal expectations about the deviant lifestyles of lesbians by adhering to norms valued by dominant

society, such as sexual and emotional monogamy.³⁷ Furthermore, if they broke up because of abuse, the lesbian community feared that this would reinforce society's negative stereotypes about lesbian relationships as a threat to not only heteronormative culture, but to the physical safety of women as well.

The final level of the social-ecological model is that of society. Throughout this project, participants expressed that they had a difficult time conceptualizing themselves as victims and wondered if this was due to the fact that they were being abused by a woman rather than by a man. Some even expressed that although they recognized the similarities between IPV in heterosexual and homosexual relationships, internalized heteronormative expectations about abuse and about lesbian relationships kept them from identifying as a victim. It is in this way that the levels of the individual and society are inextricably linked because societal expectations and myths about lesbians and violence both worked to deny the existence of lesbian IPV. In this way society informed the individual participants' conceptualization of themselves and made them unable to identify their own lived experiences as abuse.

Together, these four levels of social-ecology overlap to create a social world that sometimes encourages IPV and further perpetuates this problem by silencing victims. The individual's status as a newcomer informs their submissive role in their relationship, which leads to a power imbalance that can promote instances of IPV. However, due to the individual's status as a newcomer in the gay community and a deviant in dominant society, they are unable to tell people about their experiences. Furthermore, society's heteronormative ideas "that domestic violence is rooted in gender and power and represents men's active attempts to maintain dominance and control over women," inhibit the victims from conceptualizing themselves as victims simply because their abuser is a female.³⁸ Thus each subsequent level is informed by its predecessors with the largest social-ecological level of

societal expectations informing the smallest, the individual, creating a continuous cycle of abuse and silence.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the claims of this study are limited by its small sample size, this project contributes to the literature on IPV and begins to fill the gap in research on IPV in same-sex relationships, specifically those of lesbians. Furthermore, the fact that abuse takes place in similar ways in both same-sex relationships and heterosexual relationships, points to additional explanations for IPV beyond the singular cause of gender. Working from a social-ecological perspective allows researchers to consider the complex interplay of different social levels in relationships where there is no gendered power imbalance.

A researcher must recognize that their own gender and sexual identity may influence one's interpretations and the participants' levels of trust in them. Thus, future research on this topic would benefit from a team approach in which interviewers identified on a spectrum of genders and sexualities. Collaboration between researchers of varying sexual and gender identities has the potential to make participants more comfortable sharing their experiences and reduce bias in data collection and analysis by increasing the diversity of perspectives approaching the research. While it did not appear that the researcher's race affected the participants' comfort level, as the participants and researcher all identify as white, this project would have benefited from the inclusion of participants of different races. A racially/ethnically diverse participant population would allow for a comparison of experiences between racial/ethnic groups and enable the consideration of the intersectionality, particularly the difficulties faced by women of color who experience IPV in lesbian relationships.

Finally, future research should seek to include more interviews, but as abused lesbians are a doubly marginalized population, finding large numbers of participants will likely remain

difficult. Thus researchers would do well to supplement interviews with contextual analyses of public, online forums. Such forums would provide anonymity for participants while allowing the researcher to access a larger population of participants, presumably with more demographic variation. Having a larger sample of participants would offer a more in-depth look at diverse instances of IPV in lesbian relationships and how different social contexts and personal histories can act as predictors for abuse. By understanding predictors, future research could inform why abuse happens and help victims avoid or cope with lesbian IPV. Above all else, future research would shed light on the prevalence of IPV in lesbian relationships and validate the experiences of victims who are currently silenced and ignored by every level of society.

ENDNOTES

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