

Motives for same-sex partner abuse: It isn't always pretty under the rainbow

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INTRODUCTION

Despite the overwhelming amount of research on relationship abuse, justifications for the abuse are understudied. Instead, the bulk of the research in the relationship abuse field has traditionally focused its attention on how often abuse occurred, who used it, how severe it was, and the outcomes associated with it rather than *why* the abuse was enacted in the first place. In addition, most of the relationship abuse research has focused on abuse among heterosexual couples as opposed to same-sex couples. As a result, motivations for relationship abuse among both groups are understudied and misunderstood. The predominant belief has been that heterosexual males use violence to gain control over their female partners, suggesting that the only motive for abuse is control. Alternately, females using violence against a male partner has been attributed to self-defense. Typically the same motives that have been applied to heterosexual couple abuse have been applied to same-sex couples, ignoring the gendered aspect of the control motive and the contextual factors associated with sexual orientation. Evidence from the few empirical studies on justifications for relationship abuse that show that men and women in heterosexual relationships use abuse for reasons besides self-defense, such as, to express emotion, to cause harm to their partner, or to establish a balance of control in the relationship (Emery & Lloyd, 1994; Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000; Taylor, 2002). Thus, it stands to reason that the justifications for partner abuse extend beyond control and self-defense in same-sex couples.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Determining justifications for same-sex partner abuse is important because of the implications for theory, education, and intervention. For instance, current public policy (Violence Against Women Act [VAWA]; 1994, 2000, 2005, 2013) regarding relationship abuse has been beneficial in reducing severe and fatal violence against women (Office on Women's Health, 2013; Stark, 2004) but it treats perpetrators as a homogenous group. Treating all relationship abuse the same paints an inaccurate picture about the issue, undermines policy efforts aimed at reducing violence against intimate partners, and can result in unintended consequences.



POWER AND CONTROL

In heterosexual relationships power and control is embedded in the male gender ideology (Boonzaier, 2008). The male assumes that the female must obey his every command, because he is the male. In an abusive relationship, this power and privilege is used to exert control over the female partner. According to Wood (2004), abusive males have indicated that they used physical violence because their female partner disrespected their authority and that they had the "right" to "discipline" their female partner.

In same-sex relationships, the power and control dynamic mirrors heterosexual relationships in many ways. However, homophobia can interfere with victims' ability to seek help for abusive relationships. For example, in nine states domestic violence is defined "...as violence between a man and a woman or between spouses, former spouses, or family members related by consanguinity" (Rohrbaugh, 2008, p. 293). Even in states that allow same-sex partners to press charges against an abusive partner, there is a risk of facing homophobic discrimination in the court system. Fear of "outing" (having someone reveal one's sexual orientation against their will) is a form of control unique to same-sex couples. Individuals in heterosexual relationships do not have to worry about their parents, coworkers, friends, neighbors, etc. finding out that they are in a "straight" relationship. Thus, this gives the abuser in a same-sex relationship where the victim has not "come out" (revealed their sexual orientation) yet a way to control their victim (Eaton, Kaufman, Fuhrel, Cain, Cherry, Pope, & Kalichman, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

Determining justifications for same-sex partner abuse is important because of the implications for theory, education, and intervention. Current public policy (Violence Against Women Act [VAWA]; 1994, 2000, 2005, 2013) regarding relationship abuse has been beneficial in reducing severe and fatal violence against women (Office on Women's Health, 2013; Stark, 2004) but it treats perpetrators as a homogenous group. Furthermore, while professionals often receive training and education about partner abuse, most of the training, if not all of it, is targeted towards heterosexual relationships. This can be devastating for the individual in an abusive same-sex partner relationship that seeks help (Fray-Witzer, 1999; Renzetti, 1992).