

Silence on Same-Sex Partner Abuse

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Notwithstanding the efforts of lesbians and heterosexual women to date, a review of the North American body of literature on lesbian partner abuse from 1983 to 1994 reveals that awareness, analyses, and action have been inhibited by silence¹ at individual, social, and community levels. My research project will contribute evidence on how traditions of silence on lesbian partner abuse are uniquely shaped, and broaden the existing individual-social paradigm of same-sex partner abuse to include the level of lesbian communities. The decision to focus my research on individual, social, and community levels of silence was based on three considerations. First, because most factual and theoretical writing on this subject has focused on personal perceptions and institutional response to lesbian partner abuse, individual and social categories effectively captured that information. Secondly, as a formerly abused lesbian I have prior knowledge of community-based factors of silence and their effects. Preliminary investigations supported my suspicions that the role of lesbian communities' silence had been underestimated, if not ignored, and that explanations for that silence had been largely unexplored. Finally, because existing heterosexually self-referential theories of lesbian partner abuse are inadequate, I was interested in discovering whether community-based data could inform lesbian-specific theories of same-sex partner abuse.

Methodologically, variables of silence were extrapolated from reviews of the literature on heterosexual and lesbian partner abuse. In comparing the results, 'uniquely' lesbian variables emerged, suggesting that silence is 'kept' for different reasons among lesbians. These lesbian-specific variables of silence were explored in semi-structured, confidential interviews with twelve abused lesbians and one interview with a non-abused lesbian. Respondents were either self-selected based on our acquaintance or my previous knowledge of their abuse or interest in the subject, or responded to advertisements distributed to women's bookstores, social service groups, gay/lesbian bars and organizations, or gay and/or lesbian newspapers.

SILENCE AND THE INDIVIDUAL

As far as a framework of analysis is concerned, parallels to my conceptualization of silence at an 'individual' level are found in the social support work of Nan Lin (1986). According to Lin (1986:20) the most intimate of three levels of social support "consists of relations among confiding partners...[where] the relationship tends to be binding in the sense that reciprocal and mutual exchanges are expected, and responsibility for one another's well-being is understood and shared by the partners." While "intimate and confiding relationships" (Lin, 1986:20) are common to abused heterosexual women and lesbians, the social stigma attached to relationships outside the heterosexual 'norm' suggests that the roles of partners, friends, and family in partner abuse cannot be automatically assumed to be the same. Focusing research on silencing factors at an intimate or individual level enables those discoveries.

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At an individual level, lesbian and heterosexual women share many dimensions of silencing about partner abuse. However, at least six key areas in which individual lesbians' reality of partner abuse departs from the heterosexual norm are suggested in the same-sex literature. These include lesbians' particular isolation, shame, denial, love for their abuser, fear of abuser retaliation, and concern for children.

For instance, though abused heterosexual women indicate they feel isolated as a result of their abuse, homophobia and abused lesbians' marginalization from society-at-large may lead to their greater feelings of isolation. Some lesbians may experience more isolation than others: for example, women with particular fears for the effect of abusers' disclosure of their sexual orientation on job security (Burstow, 1992; Chicago Area Lesbian & Gay Domestic Violence Project, 1994; Hamard, 1993; London Battered Women's Advocacy Centre, 1993; Ristock, 1994; Snow, 1992; Task Force on Lesbian Battering of the Massachusetts Coalition of Battered Women Service Groups, 1988). Among interview respondents only one formerly 'closeted' lesbian directly linked her isolation to a "fear that the situation would blow up" in the workplace if her sexual orientation was disclosed by her abuser through "phone calls... around outing" (Interview 4).

Another example of lesbians' differential isolation derives from their fears that disclosure of the abuse will impact negatively on existing relations with their families of origin, or provoke misperceptions that abuse is evidence of the 'sickness' of their sexual orientation (Chicago Area Lesbian & Gay

Domestic Violence Project, 1993; Dopler, 1993; Dupps, 1991; Hammond, 1986; Renzetti, 1992; 1989). Five interview respondents stated that they deliberately did not inform their families of the origin of the abuse. To one abused lesbian "my mother was the last person who could have done anything about it...because she's very judgemental [and] she was sort of judgemental of us as lesbians," (Interview 12). Another abused lesbian commented that her family "don't even come to grips with the fact that I am a lesbian [so] how are they going to come to grips with the fact that I'm a lesbian that was abused on top of it" (Interview 1).

While four other women disclosed the abuse to their families of origin, they tended to do so toward or at the end of the relationships. One recalled speaking with her mother after she had recognized that she was feeling "emotionally abused" (Interview 2). Another disclosed the abuse to her mother at a point of crisis when she "was really at a low ebb" (Interview 8). Still another abused lesbian reported that she waited "until the very end when I had a discussion with my sister" (Interview 9). The potential for safe communication appears to influence whether or not lesbians chose to disclose their abuse to their families of origin. On the one hand, where lesbians perceived their sexual orientation would be or was negatively regarded, they chose not to confide the abuse. On the other hand, where lesbians perceived that news of the abuse would be met critically by some family members, they selectively filtered those people out. Interestingly, mothers and sisters were most often believed accepting and trustworthy.

These examples highlight some of the many ways in which lesbians' individual reality of partner abuse departs from the heterosexual norm.

SILENCE AND SOCIETY

As unique variables underlie lesbians' silence on same-sex partner abuse at an individual level, so too are lesbians particularly silenced at a social level by specific fears of institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism in the criminal justice system, medical health profession, and shelters for abused women. What I have termed the 'social' level of analysis captures those "relationships with the larger community...[which] reflect integration into, or a sense of belongingness in, the larger social structure (Lin, 1986:19). While heterosexual women and lesbians' sense of 'belonging' in the North American social structure is commonly impaired by its woman-hating or misogynist ideology, lesbians' ability to 'belong' is particularly constrained by homophobia

and heterosexism. Research that acknowledges the differential social location of women is generally important because the concept of a 'social structure' relies on the "premise that behaviours or actions are interpretable only in relation to the positions of actors in social structure" (Marsden & Lin, 1982:9). Research that specifically acknowledges the differential social location of lesbians is especially important in illuminating previously generalized and obscured distinctions between abused heterosexual women's and lesbians' silence.

For example, abused lesbians may fear that their sexual orientation, rather than the abuse, will be seen as the problem by police services (Chicago Area Lesbian & Gay Domestic Violence Project, 1993; KALX, n.d.), the courts (Chicago Area Lesbian & Gay Domestic Violence Project, 1993; Robson, 1992), medical (London Battered Women's Advocacy Centre, 1993) and mental health professionals (Breeze, 1986; Chicago Area Lesbian & Gay Domestic Violence Project, 1993; Eaton, 1994; London Battered Women's Advocacy Centre, 1993). One interview respondent generally perceived that "people don't believe us. All we need is a good man and that [abuse] will all come to an end, won't it" (Interview 6). Another woman explained that

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it's a lifestyle that's so different, so marginal, and to have the police involved I feel the need to protect my world and to try to solve it ourselves rather than having somebody else come in trying to clean up the situation. (Interview 2)

The same-sex literature's speculation that lesbians' fear that the abuse will not be taken seriously; that police will classify it as not serious (Cecere, 1986), or as a female 'cat fight' (King, n.d.; Snow, 1992); or that mental health professionals will minimize the abuse because it occurred between women (Renzetti, 1993, 1992, 1989, 1988; Task Force of the Massachusetts Coalition of Battered Women Service Groups, 1988; Waterwoman, 1992) further demonstrates how their social isolation differs from that of heterosexual women. One interview respondent imagined the police "would have just laughed. I think they would have thought it was pretty funny to see two women, lesbians, fighting together" (Interview 6). The two abused lesbians who had sought police assistance, however, reported that "the experience was very good" (Interview 4) and "it was a female officer and she was fine" (Interview 8).

Four women reported being in therapy before and during the abuse, while four others contacted therapists after their relationship with their abuser ended. All of the first group reported positive feelings about their therapeutic treatment and rapport with therapists. One woman described how

through therapy I came to learn how to stand up for myself and to defend myself and to say 'no' to that abuse. So in that sense the therapeutic side of it helped me and was a big, positive change for me. (Interview 2)

An unanticipated danger of support, rather than a lack of awareness was highlighted by one lesbian's comment that "just knowing I had back-up gave me a little more courage to stay when I should have had the courage to leave" (Interview 9). The opinions of abused lesbians who sought therapy after their relationship was ended were more diverse. While one woman felt that her therapist "wasn't the greatest" she also she noted that

the fact that this therapist knew about her...[and] had worked with other lesbians that had been involved with her in a way made me feel good that I wasn't the only one that she treated that way, and in another way it was like...she needs to be stopped. (Interview 5)

Another woman assessed her therapist as "patient" but concluded that because of lack of awareness of lesbian partner abuse, more productive therapy

has happened in [friendship] circles because I find that professionals who I've dealt with...don't even have as good an analysis as I do about the whole thing. (Interview 3)

Despite some similarities between heterosexual women and lesbians' experiences of partner abuse, these examples highlight that knowledge of and sensitivity to lesbian lifestyles are especially important in abused lesbians' healing, therapy, and contact with the criminal justice system.

SILENCE AND THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY

The task of defining 'community' is formidable. Indeed, while 'community' is liberally used in documents pertaining to lesbian partner abuse, I was unable to locate a single definition of that term. Although the network analysis' "psychocultural" (Poplin, 1979:19) model best reflects the gay/lesbian identity formation literature's perception of historical, normative,

lesbian 'communities-as-connection', it fails to take into account particular stresses and strains within those groups. As a result, I have, building on Susan Krieger's (1983) suggestion, defined lesbian communities as diverse spatial, and/or emotional affinities with other lesbians, ideologically grounded in expectations of shared support, security, understanding, political vision, and/or sub-cultural identities 'as a lesbian' in a homophobic social world.

While lay and scholarly contributions provide some support and explanation for silence at individual and social levels, a comparable degree of insight into lesbian communities' silence is blatantly lacking. As a result, the role of lesbian communities in maintaining silence and inhibiting awareness, analyses, and action on lesbian partner abuse has been underestimated, if not ignored. Further, while individual and social rationales for silence are respectively grounded in anecdotal and empirical fact, the reasons for silence in lesbian communities are pure conjecture. Among these speculations, lesbians may have particular concerns for their community's external and internal image, resist challenges to their notion of a 'lesbian utopia' and their gendered analyses of partner abuse, and may be uncertain how to act on the problem of lesbian partner abuse.

100 Concern for the external solidarity of the community, for example, may particularly silence abused lesbians. There are two dimensions to this concern. On the one hand, lesbians may hold their communities responsible for action on ending the silence and stopping same-sex partner abuse. On the other hand, lesbians may feel responsible for protecting these communities from the heterosexual world. My discussion will focus on this second tendency. According to the same-sex literature, lesbian communities may deny or minimize partner abuse for fear of generating "politically destructive" (Chicago Area Lesbian & Gay Domestic Violence Project, 1993:17) heterosexual criticism (Battered Lovers, 1986; Blenham, 1991; Breeze, 1986; Brownworth, 1993; Chicago Area Lesbian & Gay Domestic Violence Project, 1993; Closed Doors, 1987; Eaton, 1994; Edgington, 1989; Hamard, 1993; Hammond, 1986; Irvine, 1984; Kelly & Warsnafsky, 1986; King, n.d.; London Battered Women's Advocacy Centre, 1993; Morrow & Hawxhurst, 1989; Renzetti, 1992, 1993; Ristock, 1991; Task Force of the Massachusetts Coalition of Woman Service Groups, 1988; Zadkine, 1987). This criticism includes the accusation that lesbians are "sick" (Closed Doors, 1987:5; London Battered Women's Advocacy Centre, 1993). The same-sex literature also speculates that some lesbians may fear that knowledge of same-sex

partner abuse will deter women from 'coming out' as lesbians (Edgington, 1989).

All of the interview respondents agreed that public knowledge of same-sex partner abuse could fuel anti-lesbian sentiment. To one lesbian this awareness was clearly "a big reason why people keep quiet about what's going on" (Interview 7). Only one woman felt that disclosure would wait until "heterosexuals are far more willing to be accepting of lesbians and gay men." In her opinion

because of general stereotyping of lesbians by the larger society, [and] the hate that a lot of people feel for lesbians and gay men...you don't want that information in their hands because somehow you feel that it will be used even further against you because you're not really safe in a heterosexual world anyway. (Interview 12)

Perhaps because they had experienced its damaging effects, most respondents opposed silence because "we're setting ourselves up playing ostriches" (Interview 1). Other women felt that disclosure was "a good thing" (Interview 5) because "certainly it will give some of them ammunition but (sic) I think it will also develop a kinship in others - make us more human, less exotic" (Interview 6). Other participants reacted to the suggestion of heterosexual backlash with cynicism. One woman commented that "they already dredge up their own goddamn ammunition," (Interview 8) while another commented that "it doesn't matter what it is, it's always going to give more ammunition so what are we supposed to do, not say anything?" (Interview 1). Still another lesbian felt that "we have our own ammunition too....[because] even in heterosexuals there's women beating up on women" (Interview 10). Lastly, while some women were concerned with heterosexual response to the reality of lesbian partner abuse, they also expressed optimism that these negative impressions could be overcome. As one woman explained

I certainly say that I don't believe we should stay quiet and we have to deal with this. The press and the media would jump on the negative stuff and that's something we'll have to fight and that's something that we'll have to educate and struggle with and make sure that's not the only perception of what a lesbian is. (Interview 7)

These and other community-based examples support the fact that traditions of silence on same-sex partner abuse are, to varying degrees, shaped by uniquely lesbian variables at individual, social, and community levels. Furthermore, they highlight the need to broaden current individual-social paradigms of lesbian partner abuse to include the distinctive features and functions of silence at the level of lesbian communities.

The process of isolating uniquely lesbian factors of silence at individual, social, and community levels represents more than the accumulation of academic 'facts' on lesbian partner abuse in Canada. It also, by naming, telling, and speaking out, begins to recognize the abusive realities of lesbians who have been and continue to be silenced.

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this project, 'silence' is defined as not naming, not telling, and not speaking of same-sex partner abuse at intersecting individual, social, and community levels.

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