THE IMPACT OF OPPRESSION ON LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS

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Jackey Humphrey-Straub
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ABSTRACT

THE IMPACT OF OPPRESSION ON LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS

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The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that overlapping forms of oppression affect lesbians’ intimate relationships. This study utilized feminist and ecological systems theories to explore lesbians’ perceptions of relationship abuse with a specific focus on gender socialization and stereotypes, heterosexism and homophobia, and intersectionality. Upon receiving 25 completed questionnaires and conducting four follow-up interviews, four major themes emerged from the data: perceptions of lesbian relationships; how oppression affects lesbian relationships; how oppression affects intimate partner violence; and perceptions of intimate partner violence (IPV) in lesbian relationships.

Over half of the respondents reported that they have experienced IPV with a female partner. Further, 80 percent of respondents reported that their intimate
relationships have been affected by their experiences with oppression. It is important for communities and IPV services providers to understand the complexities of privilege and oppression, and the infinite ways in which oppression can impact IPV of marginalized groups, such as lesbians. Further, based on the respondents’ input, it appears that it is necessary to do outreach and education to the LGBTQ community and for IPV service providers to think of new, creative ways to offer services to the LGBTQ community. The respondents were able to identify that IPV exists in the lesbian community, but it seems that it is only dealt with from within the community.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A general definition of intimate partner violence (IPV) is a pattern of behaviors where one partner gains power and control over the other partner (Catalyst Domestic Violence Services [Catalyst], 2011). According to Catalyst, an organization serving victims and survivors of IPV in Northern California, abusive behavior can come in a range of forms including, but not limited to, physical abuse, emotional abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse and threats of violence. It can come in forms of hitting, slapping, withholding food or money, put downs, name calling, and more. The terms intimate partner violence is also known as domestic violence and relationship abuse. Women make up about 85 percent of victims of heterosexual intimate partner violence (Rennison, 2003). It is estimated that one in three women in heterosexual and same-sex relationships experiences IPV (De la Cruz & Gomez, 2011). Domestic violence affects all cultures, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, class, sexual identity, or religion. Approximately one in four relationships is abusive (National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs [NCAVP], 2010).

The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) (2010) reports that lesbian, gay and bisexual adults are two times as likely to be abused by an intimate partner as heterosexual adults. Most abusive tactics used by abusers in heterosexual
relationships are also used by abusers in same-sex relationships to gain power and control over the victim (NCAVP, 2010). Chavis and Hill (2009) created the Multicultural Power and Control Wheel to expand on the original Power and Control Wheel of abusive tactics. The original wheel includes male privilege and sexism as ways in which abusers gain power and control over their victims. The Multicultural Power and Control Wheel takes into consideration multiple forms of oppressions. It highlights “the infinite ways in which oppressed identities… and their related oppressions [can] transpose the power and control tactics” (Chavis & Hill, 2009, p. 142). In same-sex relationships, abusers can use additional tactics that are unique to LGBTQ relationships such as threatening to “out” the victim, or putting pressure on the victim to stay in the relationship for fear of facing a homophobic, heterosexist society alone. This contributes to further isolation of the victim from friends, family, support, or society in general.

This study focused on lesbian intimate relationships. Researchers have been studying intimate partner violence in the LGBTQ community for the last 40 years; however, there is little research that has studied lesbians’ perceptions of their own intimate relationships. Kolmar and Bartkowski (2005), have noted the importance for women to speak about their lived experiences and truths, rather than powerful and oppressive others talking about women’s lives. For that reason, an open-ended questionnaire was used to gather information from women who shared stories about their intimate relationships and experiences of oppression.

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that overlapping forms of oppression affect lesbians’ intimate relationships. This study utilized feminist and
ecological systems theories to explore lesbians’ perceptions of relationship abuse with a specific focus on gender socialization and stereotypes, heterosexism and homophobia, and intersectionality. The literature suggests that these subjects have an impact on lesbians’ intimate relationships; therefore these are central themes in this study.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

From 2008 to 2009, NCAVP (2010) found a 15 percent increase in the number of LGBTQ people who reported experiencing IPV (from 3,189 in 2008 to 3,658 in 2009). Of those 3,658 abusive LGBTQ relationships, 26.9 percent identified as a lesbian relationship.

This research used concepts from feminist theory and ecological systems theory. In a patriarchal society, women’s experiences are frequently erased, silenced or minimized (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005). Feminist theory “attempts to describe, explain, and analyze the conditions of women’s lives” (p. 2). It puts women at the center, while taking into account the multiple experiences and identities of all women. Feminists have long recognized the importance and power of women speaking about and naming their experiences and truths. The ecological systems theory is the foundation for social work practice, combining systems theory and ecological theory (Ashford, LeCroy & Lortie, 2006). Systems theory focuses on interactions within and among systems, such as relationships, groups or organizations. Ecological theory focuses on a person’s responses to his or her environment, which can include significant life events, or her or his habitat, or biology. Each person has multiple systems that are constantly interacting. These interactions effect the person’s environment, and vice versa. Feminist and ecological
systems theories are valuable when exploring lesbians’ perceptions of relationship abuse in regards to the following themes: gender socialization and stereotypes, heterosexism and homophobia, and intersectionality.

Gender Socialization and Stereotypes

Gender prescriptions and proscriptions have inaccurately shaped society’s understanding of who can be a victim and who can be a perpetrator of domestic violence (Brown, 2008). Specifically, society has socialized and stereotyped women as being passive, nurturing and non-violent, which erroneously insinuates that women do not perpetrate violence (Brown, 2008). This impacts societal perceptions of lesbian partner abuse. For instance, Little and Terrance (2010) found that a masculine-presenting woman in a lesbian relationship was viewed as more able to protect herself in a physically abusive relationship. Furthermore, the participants in the study viewed a feminine-presenting woman as a more valid victim than a masculine-presenting woman because she was perceived to fit with societal gender role of passive and non-violent. Research shows, however, that in lesbian relationships, masculine-presenting women are not more likely to perpetrate IPV than feminine-presenting women (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005). IPV in lesbian relationships is silenced when all perpetrators are seen as male (Bograd, 2006).

Multiple studies have found that men perceive lesbian intimate partner violence as less dangerous and less serious than male-on-female intimate partner violence, and consistently perceive the violence between two women as mutually
combative (Brown & Groscup, 2008; Brown 2008; Little & Terrance, 2010). Even among IPV advocates, same-sex intimate partner violence is perceived as less serious, while also viewing the violence as less likely to repeat and get worse than in heterosexual IPV (Brown & Groscup, 2008). The advocates interviewed in the study also felt that victims in same-sex violent relationships were in less physical danger. This trivializes the experience of lesbian IPV. Further, these gender stereotypes and views of same-sex IPV create barriers in lesbian victims seeking services for relationship abuse (Brown, 2008).

Even within the lesbian community, Walters (2011) found that lesbians hold the same societal beliefs that same-sex women’s relationships are not abusive because women cannot perpetrate violence. The same study reported that lesbian survivors experienced abuse in equal severity and frequency as heterosexual couples, but did not identify it as abuse. The lesbian participants in the study perceived the violence between the couples as a “cat fight.” When law enforcement responded to their homes, they were told to “act like ladies” (p. 261).

**Heterosexism and Homophobia**

Heterosexism is the conscious or unconscious belief, attitude or behavior that heterosexuality is the normal and superior sexuality (Humm, 1995). Heterosexism can be institutionalized (in policy or legislation), or a social norm (in the media or interactions between people). In the Multicultural Power and Control Wheel, abusive partners can use heterosexism as a tactic to gain power and control over the victim (Chavis & Hill, 2009). Such tactics can be economically abusive by threatening to disclose the victim’s sexual
identity to the employer to prevent her from getting a job; or using the children against the victim by telling her social services will take the children away when they find out she is gay; or isolating the victim from the LGBTQ community or her loved ones; or minimizing the abuse by telling the victim that domestic violence only happens in heterosexual relationships. Heterosexism is an external stress—a stress from outside the relationship—that is a unique factor in lesbian relationship abuse.

Homophobia is the fear or disgust of gay people (Humm, 1995). Homophobic behavior and actions can be physical violence, or hateful or discriminatory language. Lesbians can internalize these harmful messages. Internalized homophobia is a feeling that comes from within an individual, and is a personal inner struggle with one’s identity and with how one perceives they should be. Balsam and Szymanski (2005) found that internalized homophobia is negatively related with the quality of lesbian relationships. The study also found that women who have internalized homophobia are more likely to experience intimate partner violence. The study found no relation between heterosexism and quality of relationship. It is important to note that there might not be a correlation between heterosexism and IPV, but heterosexism can contribute to the victim remaining in an abusive relationship in fear of facing discrimination when seeking outside support.

Because of shared experiences with heterosexism and homophobia, survivors can become closer to or more dependent on the abuser. In abusive lesbian relationships, the abuser can threaten to use societal heterosexist and homophobic biases, in order to instill fear into the survivor leaving the relationship. One example is threatening to “out” the survivor to family or coworkers (NCAVP, 2010). This can further contribute to
isolation of the victim – a key abusive tactic in exerting power and control – by instilling a sense of shaming the entire LGBTQ community by airing its “dirty laundry” (De la Cruz & Gomez, 2011). “Efforts to seek safety in the domestic violence sphere often entail profound social risks beyond retaliation by the batterer” (Bograd, 2006, p. 31). Walters (2011) studied lesbian survivors and found that heterosexist and homophobic family further contributed to isolation. The survivors in the study reported that they were afraid to talk about the abuse because their family would blame the abuse on their sexuality.

Intersectionality

Feminist theorists acknowledge that women’s lives are not influenced only by gender; rather women’s lives are shaped by multiple experiences and identities, such as race, class, sexuality, ability and age (Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005). For instance, in a patriarchal system, women experience sexism. Furthermore, lesbians experience institutionalized heterosexism and internalized homophobia. Women of color experience racism, and women with disabilities experience ableism. Intersectionality paradigm in feminist theory suggests that these multiple identities and forms of oppression interact simultaneously, not separately (De la Cruz & Gomez, 2011; Kolmar & Bartkowski, 2005). These simultaneous interactions further create social inequalities and barriers. Experiencing multiple forms of oppression can affect relationships with intimate partners, by adding stressors to the relationship, known as “minority stress” (Brown, 2008). It can potentially add stress to the relationship, and contribute to dependency on one another; or it can create a deep, trusting connection between two people.
Victims of color, victims with disabilities, and LGBTQ victims of IPV experience discrimination and violence in both the private and public sectors, in the form of hate crimes, workplace discrimination, and denial of basic human rights (Holmes, 2009; NCAVP, 2010). “Abuse within [LGBTQ] intimate relationships is exacerbated and reinforced by larger societal bias, discrimination and even hate violence in a survivor’s family, workplace, neighborhood and the world at large” (NCAVP, 2010, p. 13).

Marginalized people, such as lesbians, experience oppression and violence in the public sector (Bograd, 2006; Holmes, 2009). It appears that these shared experiences of oppression and public violence can create a unique closeness between intimate partners. This closeness can be healthy or potentially make the couple more vulnerable to experiencing relationship abuse. If a couple is close because of external factors to their relationship, such as racism, the abuser can easily gain power of the victim by isolating her. For instance, an abuser can use racism by telling the victim that she is stupid and cannot get help because she does not speak English (Chavis & Hill, 2009). This further isolates her from society, and makes her closer, more dependent on the abuser.

Representation of lesbian culture has mostly been from the perspective of white lesbians (Holmes, 2009; Kanuha, 2006). The combined effects of internalized sexism, racism, and homophobia contribute to silencing and making lesbians of color invisible (Kanuha, 2006). Furthermore, because of the natural community created in response to experiencing and combating racism, lesbians of color are bound to men of color; unlike white lesbians, who are not bound to white men because they do not experience racial oppression. Lesbians of color may struggle with conflicting loyalty to
racial community or lesbian community. The mixture of oppressions also creates an extra layer of barriers to seeking help and to the healing process for lesbian survivors of color. According to Chavis and Hill (2009), abusers can use forms of oppression, such as racism, to gain power and control over the victim, by telling her she is “acting white” and overreacting to the violence; or using classism by threatening to report the victim for working “under the table” if she leaves the relationship.

The Importance of Voice

Lesbians’ voices are missing from the literature. Previous qualitative studies about this topic have concentrated on exploring society’s perceptions about lesbian relationships. This study attempted to fill this gap by exploring lesbians’ perceptions of relationship abuse.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study used qualitative methodology. This was an exploratory study, in order to give a voice to a marginalized group of people and to find deep meaning of the topic (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). It is important to note that a majority of feminist theorists favor qualitative methodology over quantitative methodology (Humm, 1995). In a patriarchal society, women are often times excluded, silenced or not represented in predominant society and in research. Qualitative research gives women a voice (Humm, 1995). It also has the ability to meaningfully explore a topic in which women are placed at the center.

A questionnaire with open-ended questions was administered via Survey Monkey (see Appendix A). Any woman who has been in an intimate relationship with another woman in the last five years, regardless of sexual identity, was eligible to participate in the study. Participation in the study was completely voluntary and all responses and participants’ identities were kept confidential. An informed consent was given to each participant before participating. The questionnaire asked about general relationship dynamics, experiences and perceptions of abuse in lesbian relationships. It took about 30 minutes for the participants to complete the questionnaire. Completed questionnaires were transferred to a Word document for coding and analyzing.
The investigator used nonprobability purposive sampling, where eligible participants were targeted and identified (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). A flier was created and posted throughout Sacramento and Chico with a link to the Survey Monkey questionnaire. Facebook, e-mail and word of mouth were used to find participants for the study. In an attempt to reach a diverse group of people, paper questionnaires were also available at Sacramento Gay and Lesbian Center, and Stonewall Alliance Center of Chico with addressed, stamped envelopes to mail in hand-written completed questionnaires to the investigator. The investigator did not receive any completed, hardcopy questionnaires by mail. All completed questionnaires were submitted via Survey Monkey. Sixty-four people filled out the questionnaire on Survey Monkey; only 25 of these questionnaires were completely filled out. The investigator used the twenty-five completed questionnaires.

Additionally, the investigator conducted four follow-up interviews. It was not required for respondents to provide contact information or to participate in the follow-up interviews. In the follow-up interviews, the investigator used the questionnaire as an interview guide. The purpose of the follow-up interviews was to further explore the responses of some participants. Data from the follow-up interviews was documented by the investigator transcribing the interview in a Word document. All data was stored on a password-protected personal computer. The investigator used self-memos after each interview, which was later transferred to a Word document for coding and analyzing. The in-person interviews were conducted in a private setting chosen by the participant, and lasted about 45 minutes per interview.
After the data was collected, an analysis was conducted using grounded theory to find common themes and patterns amongst the participants (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Grounded theory lets the data guide the concepts. For instance, the investigator did not assume any themes or codes prior to analyzing the data. The data was first put into codes by finding repeated words and phrases. These codes were then grouped to make categories, and related categories became concepts, which enabled the investigator to establish small generalizations. An inductive method was used where the investigator created theories and concepts based on observations from the questionnaires and interviews (Rubin & Babbie, 2008).

In order to improve the trustworthiness of the research findings, the researcher used various methods of triangulation such as member checking and multiple analysts. Member checking is where the researcher confirmed with participants that observations and interpretations were accurate (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). This was done through the follow-up interviews where the investigator further explored the topic with participants. This gave the investigator the opportunity to clarify participant responses and to use the participants in interpreting the data. Additionally, the researcher used the thesis committee members to also analyze the data.

Limitations

The lesbian community is small. Some people may have been hesitant to release too much information or may not have participated in the study at all because of the possibility of the investigator knowing the participant or her partner. Especially if
someone was experiencing intimate partner violence at the time of filling out the questionnaire, she may not have fully disclosed details. Also, because the investigator has a background in working in the field of IPV and educates the community about IPV, people close to the investigator could potentially know more about IPV than the average person. This could have possibly skewed the data, so the investigator excluded friends from participating in the study.

The investigator identifies as white, and the area in which the research was conducted is predominantly white. This limited the study to a predominantly white sample of participants. The investigator sought a diverse range of races and ethnicities, but a majority of the people who participated in the study identified as white/Caucasian.

A limitation of qualitative research is that it is not generalizable (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). The results cannot be applied to the overall lesbian population. Qualitative research is also not objective (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). To make the research more objective, the investigator used quotes from subjects’ questionnaires and interviews to support major themes and subthemes.

Lastly, while collecting data, and conducting analysis, the investigator was aware of personal biases due to her experiences of intimate relationships with female partners, and friends’ relationships being impacted by oppression. This self-awareness was maintained throughout the process of this study with support from thesis committee members, but could have potentially limited the study. The investigator consulted with committee members when a participant’s story triggered her or was similar to her personal experience.
Ethical Considerations

This study asked subjects to talk about personal experiences around discrimination and IPV. Because of the sensitive nature of these topics, participating in the study may have caused minimal emotional harm. It is possible that a participant was emotionally triggered when responding to the questions. The investigator provided contact information for Community United Against Violence (CUAV), which is an LGBTQ anti-violence organization that focuses on IPV in the queer community.

Additionally, the study could have possibly been physically harmful if an abusive partner found out that the subject participated in a study about IPV and disclosed too much about the relationship. For this reason, the investigator advised subjects to be aware of not having any proof of participating in the study, such as having a copy of the informed consent with contact information for CUAV. The investigator also kept all participants’ identifying information and situations confidential.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Of the 25 respondents who filled out the open-ended questionnaire, 21 identified as white/Caucasian, one identified as Lebanese/Caucasian, one identified as Hispanic, one identified as Japanese, and one identified as Black (see Figure 1). Seventeen of the respondents identified as lesbian, four identified as queer, two identified as bisexual, one identified as lesbian/queer, and one identified as unlabeled (see Figure 2). Three respondents were between the ages of 18 to 21 years old, eight respondents were between the ages of 22 to 29 years old, nine respondents were between the ages of 30 to 39 years old, three respondents were between the ages of 40 to 49 years old, and two respondents were older than 50 years old (see Figure 3). All questions, including demographic information, were open-ended so that respondents could self-identify.

Figure 1. Racial/Ethnic Identity of Participants
Figure 2. Sexual Identity of Participants

Figure 3. Age Range of Participants
Major Themes

Upon receiving 25 completed questionnaires and conducting four follow-up interviews, four major themes emerged from the data: perceptions of lesbian relationships; how oppression affects lesbian relationships; how oppression affects intimate partner violence; and perceptions of intimate partner violence in lesbian relationships. Figure 4 provides a graphical representation of these major themes and subthemes. This section will cover these four themes and subthemes broadly, and the next section will cover these themes with an in-depth discussion and what the themes imply.

![Concept Map of Themes and Subthemes](image-url)
Perceptions of Lesbian Relationships

When questionnaire respondents described their intimate relationships and perceptions of a healthy intimate relationship between two women, two subthemes emerged: communication, and power dynamics and roles.

**Communication.** In the open-ended questionnaire, 18 respondents listed communication as a factor in a healthy intimate relationship between two women. Most questionnaire respondents who listed communication, also talked about openness, honesty or an emotional connection when communicating. Specific to their intimate relationships, 12 respondents said their communication was a strength in their relationship, as the following quote illustrates:

... [T]rust is built on a foundation of communication. We talk about everything. Our communication style is based on kindness and sharing our feelings. We stay in ‘I’ statements as much as possible and try never to use ‘shaming’ words such as ‘should have, could have.’ I think our communication and honesty is our biggest strength.

Differing, five respondents identified communication as lacking and needing improvement.

Exploring the meaning of this subtheme of communication more in-depth, in a follow-up interview, TJ described lesbian intimate relationships as the following: “There tends to be a deeper emotional connection; there’s innate trust between two women because we are both women. There is an automatic understanding that she will understand my feelings.” Another participant, Sunshine, said the following in her follow-up interview:

I think a lot of [lesbian relationships] revolve around communication and friendship and what it is like to sympathize with another woman. You might be sensitive or
react to something the same; but when you’re with a man he might not react the same because he has not been socialized the same… In hetero relationships, the romantic relationship has a lot of weight. With lesbians, if you don’t have the romance, you still have the friendship… The romance is not a ‘breaker’ because there is this level and layer of emotional intimacy.

Power Dynamics and Roles. Another subtheme to how lesbians perceive their intimate relationships is around power dynamics and roles. More than half of the questionnaire respondents talked about “equal roles” or “mixed power dynamic” or a “balance” in their intimate relationships. In their questionnaires, 13 of the respondents identified some form of “equality” or “mixed power dynamic” in regards to roles in the relationship, such as decision-making, household chores, finances, child rearing and intimacy. Exploring this subtheme more in-depth, in a follow-up interview, TJ described this:

People fall back on stereotypes, and in lesbian relationships, we don’t really have those stereotypes. My partner is kind of femme, and she likes to jump cars, and I am more butch and I don’t like to do that. Rules are a little more fluid, because we decide them. Straight people can be more choreographed. You can turn on a tv and see a hundred different types of ways to act and be, but we are not bombarded with these images of ways to act.

How Oppression Affects Lesbian Relationships

Twenty-three questionnaire respondents were able to name and talk about an experience with oppression or discrimination. Seventeen of these respondents named a specific experience with homophobia. Two respondents named a specific experience with racism. Eight respondents named a specific experience with sexism or gender presentation discrimination. And one respondent talked about a specific experience where she was a victim of a hate crime. Most of the questionnaire respondents talked about one or two experiences with oppression or discrimination.
Twenty questionnaire respondents—80 percent—said their intimate relationships have been affected by experiences of oppression and discrimination. The association between relationships and oppression is complicated because of the complexity of identities and experiences in lesbian relationships, and the external factors that contribute to their experiences. For instance, more than half of the participants talked about public displays of affection (PDA) with their intimate partners. Most of these respondents reported feeling “cautious” when displaying affection in public, while a few reported wanting to display affection in public to “make a visible statement of love.”

Fourteen of the respondents said that oppression negatively affects their intimate relationships, and the examples given were varied. Words, such as the following, were used to describe this negative impact: hiding, stress, insecure, guilt, shame, questioning, and caution. One respondent said she had to hide from her family that she was dating a woman, and another respondent said, “If the baby is with us we tend not to be intimate in public because we don't want him to be made fun of or have other kids pick on him for something he doesn't control.” These statements demonstrate that oppression from outside the relationship affects people in the relationship. Oppression within the relationship is also an issue. One respondent who identified as a lesbian of color, talked about her partner, who she identified as white/Caucasian, saying racist statements to her.

In contrast, three questionnaire respondents said that experiencing oppression has positively affected their intimate relationships by bringing them closer because they share similar experiences. For instance, one respondent said, “[Experiences of
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oppression] strengthen us. We know we often cannot rely on others so we have to be there for each other. The more people try and discount us the more resilient we vow to be.”

Most overwhelming, all of these 20 respondents named external factors from the relationship when talking about the affect oppression has had on their intimate relationships, such as family not being accepting, wanting to make a statement to the public, being afraid of others’ reactions, or feeling pressure from religious community, to name a few. Internal oppression, such as feeling wrong or ashamed for being in a same-sex relationship, was not described as a factor that affected the relationship.

How Oppression Affects Intimate Partner Violence

Seventeen questionnaire respondents identified as experiencing IPV. One respondent experienced IPV with a past male partner, one indicated her experience with IPV was with her parents, and one participant changed her response in the follow-up interview of experiencing IPV. The fourteen remaining respondents—more than half—experienced intimate partner violence in a lesbian relationship. The participants who identified as experiencing IPV in a lesbian relationship talked about how oppression affected the IPV and contributed to isolation. Sunshine said the following in her follow-up interview:

This was my first open relationship with a woman, so I didn’t want to reach out to my family because I didn’t want them to think negatively of us any further by bringing up my grievances against her. The same was for her with her family. They didn’t want to talk about gay relationships, let alone the negative ‘gory’ details of those relationships.

In her follow-up interview, TJ said:
[She] said she would out me to my family if I left. I finally walked away, and that’s what she did. She called my mother, and my mother told her that she would wait for her daughter to tell her. She called and told my family that I am a liar and living a life they don’t know about.

**Perceptions of Intimate Partner Violence in Lesbian Relationships**

Twenty-one questionnaire respondents said there is no difference in IPV in lesbian relationships and heterosexual relationships; however, four of those respondents said that IPV in lesbian relationships is more hidden and overlooked. Four respondents said there is a difference between heterosexual IPV; they identified this as a *physical* difference (physical in size, and physical abuse), and therefore lesbian relationships are a more “even playing field.” These respondents also said that lesbian relationships are probably more emotionally abusive than physically abusive.

When asked what an abusive relationship between two women looks like, one questionnaire respondent said that there is no difference between an abusive relationship with two women and a heterosexual relationship. One respondent said she did not know how to define or describe abuse. Of the remaining 23 respondents, all described some form of abuse (physical abuse, emotional abuse, financial abuse, sexual abuse, or verbal abuse) that is congruent with the description of IPV in the literature. Furthermore, when physical abuse was named, it was always accompanied with another form of abuse; in other words these 23 respondents do *not* only perceive IPV between two women as physical abuse. Eleven respondents went as far as including *power and control* in their description of IPV between two female partners, which according to literature, is the foundation of IPV.
In the follow-up interviews, the participants were asked if it was surprising that over half the respondents identified as experiencing IPV. Three of the four respondents said they were not surprised by this number; although one of these participants said that she did not know many lesbian couples who have experienced IPV. One of these participants said she would expect the number to be higher because it is happening, and it is vastly underreported and hidden. And the last of these participants offered this as an explanation to the high rates of IPV:

It doesn’t surprise me for a couple of reasons. Women are more likely to ‘receive’ violence statistically speaking; we are already a target of violence. I think because women, in general, are more likely to identify things as abusive—more so than men—they might think something is abusive rather than normal. Abuse rates are vastly underreported or underrepresented anyway. With heterosexual relationships, women might dismiss some forms of abuse coming from a man, because it is seen as ‘typical.’ But with lesbian relationships, where it might be a little more physically and financially equal, it might be easier to notice the emotional abuse.

The other participant said she was surprised by this number and did not think it was accurate because some respondents may not have understood the classification or context of the question when it was asked on the open-ended questionnaire.

Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence in Lesbian Relationships. The 14 questionnaire respondents who identified as experiencing IPV from a female partner also named the type of abuse they experienced. Six respondents said they have experienced verbal abuse; eight respondents said they have experienced physical abuse; five respondents said they have experienced emotional abuse; three respondents said they have experienced financial abuse; one respondent said she experienced sexual abuse; four respondents said they have experienced threats or intimidation. Three people did not name a specific type of abuse, but did identify as experiencing IPV from a female
partner. It is important to note that the questionnaire did not specifically ask respondents to identify what type of abuse they have experienced from a female partner, but 11 of the 14 respondents who identified as being victimized by a female partner listed some type of abuse experienced. Further, these questionnaire respondents may have only listed the most severe or frequent abuse they experienced, and not necessarily every type of abuse that existed in the relationship.

In follow-up interviews, two participants gave detailed description of their experiences being victimized by a female intimate partner. Sunshine described her relationship with her ex-partner as mostly emotionally abusive and unhealthy. She said that she was in graduate school, and her ex-partner was unemployed and struggling with a substance abuse issue. This was her first open relationship with a woman, so she did not want to reach out to her family because she did not want them to think “negatively” of their relationship. Sunshine described the following incident that occurred one night:

[My ex-partner] came home drunk and demanded me to go to the store, give her money. I was in finals and I said no, so she got close to me. She intimidated me, and then she punched me. I don’t think it was intentional. I had enough. I pushed her up against the wall and told her not to lay her hands on me, and she was drunk and lost it. She started throwing things, knives, she was uncoordinated. I grabbed her and dragged her out of the house and called the police. She was hiding in the bushes with a knife and arrested and taken to the psych ward. I felt bad after the incident. I bailed her out of jail even with a restraining order in effect and picked her up from jail and went to court and told them I refused to testify. Things were not good for a while, but this was the breaking point in the relationship. I did feel bad that I did not react appropriately to the situation.

TJ said she was able to recognize that what was happening (the abuse) was not right, and that she felt “afraid” of her partner, but was not able to “stop it” before it got
physically violent. In her follow-up interview, TJ described her experience being abused by her female intimate partner as follows:

[My] community of people was great. Everyone tried to intervene before the explosion happened. Everyone tried to say it wasn’t healthy. I felt like I could handle it. I felt like it was fine. Then she beat the shit out of me. Those same people, who could have said, ‘told ya so,’ rallied a defense around me, providing physical presence. She continued to stalk me, and my friends came to work with me and sat in the parking lot to make sure I was ok. They helped provide a buffer between us when she tried to convince them everything was fine between us and not to worry about it. They intervened and said things are not fine. I think without that type of support, it would have been possible to go back to her. I had a lot of community support to stand up against it. As far as accessing services, there wasn’t anything that was there. I talked to police, but the officer said if I wanted to push forward with this with all my visible injuries for assault charges, he said, ‘You are going to have to sit before a judge and tell your story and what your relationship is.’ He was professional but matter of fact, and said, ‘are you ready to share with the rest of the world the details of your intimate relationship?’ I wasn’t ready so I said I wasn’t and he didn’t file charges.

In these stories of IPV in same-sex relationships, the experience of abuse is similar to that of heterosexual IPV, such as the presence of physical and emotional abuse. The unique factors of same-sex IPV are also present in these two stories.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The literature says that approximately one in four relationships is abusive; however, that was not the case with this study’s exploration of lesbian relationships. The number was two times greater. Consistent with the NCAVP (2010) report that LGBTQ adults are two times as likely to be abused by an intimate partner as heterosexual adults, this study found that more than half the questionnaire respondents identified as being abused by an intimate female partner. This may be because, as NCAVP (2010) reports, societal views have shifted, and more LGBTQ people are feeling supported and accepted.

According to the literature, oppression can add stress to the relationship. Some respondents felt this brought them closer and increased connection with their intimate partners. Some of these respondents felt this was a positive, emotional connection. On the other hand, this unique connection created by the experience of oppression, can contribute to dependency on one another, especially in the instances where IPV was experienced and the respondents were not “out” or were “newly out.” In these cases, there was a sense of wanting to protect the image of the relationship, or the need to completely hide the relationship. Further, as the literature suggests, tactics used by abusers in same-sex relationships contribute to further isolating the victim from support. There were many examples of this being true throughout the entire study.
The literature suggests no association between heterosexism and quality of relationships (Balsam and Szymanski, 2005). This study found the opposite. Eighty percent of questionnaire respondents identified their relationship as being affected by oppression, especially by heterosexism. Fourteen of these respondents said that their relationships have been negatively affected by heterosexism, which clearly implies that this has impacted the quality of their relationship. External factors were consistently named as contributing to negative impacts on the relationship. This suggests that these respondents are dealing with external oppression rather than internalized oppression.

Society has socialized and stereotyped women as being passive, nurturing and non-violent, which erroneously insinuates that women do not perpetrate violence (Brown, 2008). The literature further suggests that lesbian survivors were not able to identify that they were being abused by a female intimate partner and that lesbian survivors held the same societal views that women could not be abusers (Walters, 2011). However, in follow-up interviews for this study, the participants who identified as experiencing IPV said they were able to identify that something was not “right” about the relationship. Further, this study found that more than half of the questionnaire respondents were able to describe IPV between two women in ways that are consistent with the definition of IPV from the literature. The Walters (2011) study reports lesbians believe that same-sex IPV is not as severe or does not happen as frequently as heterosexual IPV. In this study, nearly one in five questionnaire respondents reported that IPV between two women was a “more even playing field” because of the lack of physical difference, which could imply
that these respondents do not view IPV between two women as “severe” as heterosexual IPV.

The ecological systems theory and the feminist theory of intersectionality says each person has multiple systems that are constantly interacting, and these systems affect a person’s environment, and a person’s environment affects these systems and the environment of surrounding people. The relationship between systems and individuals is complex, especially with systems of oppression and individuals who are oppressed, as shown in this study. One partner’s experiences with systems of oppression affects her environment, and can in turn affect her partner’s environment, and vice versa.

Respondents experienced oppression differently and its effect on their environments were varied. The data shows a person’s experience with oppression differentially affected her relationship depending on where she was in the “coming out” process, or how much privilege a respondent held in her relationship and how much privilege her partner held, or what was her cultural background and the cultural background of her partner, or if the respondent had children, and so forth. The possibilities are numerous. For instance, one respondent who identified as white and her partner as a lesbian of color said that she was trying to be aware of having “too much power” in the relationship, and her partner often times felt as if she was being “colonized.” Another respondent who identified as a lesbian of color said that her white partner used racist language. A respondent with a college education talked about her partner who grew up in poverty and had a high school education, and the struggle in their relationship around money, education and class. It seems clear that intersecting identities
influence relationships, the experience of oppression, and they seem to change the experience of IPV.

In regards to how oppression was experienced and how it impacted their relationships—either positively or negatively—the results varied. The one commonality was that of experiencing heterosexism and/or homophobia. This may have been the emphasis for respondents because this study focused on lesbian relationships. But even within describing experiences or perceptions around heterosexism and homophobia, the responses were still diverse. A respondent described outright physical threats from oppressors, and therefore was “cautious” of showing affection with her partner in public. Another respondent described not being able to bring her partner to family gatherings because her family was not accepting. One respondent said she was not invited to her partner’s family gatherings. A respondent’s partner is masculine-presenting, and her partner’s experience with homophobia was more “severe” and “frequent” and this impacted their relationship. Heterosexism and homophobia are common realities for most of these respondents, and the fact that they impact relationships is evident. However, how heterosexism and homophobia impact relationships, and how heterosexism and homophobia are experienced is vast and diverse.
CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the ways in which oppression impacts lesbian relationships, specifically around IPV. Twenty-five people participated and many themes around this topic emerged. One of the most interesting results was that over half the respondents reported that they have experienced IPV with a female partner. Further, 80 percent of respondents reported that their intimate relationships have been affected by experiencing oppression. It is important for communities and IPV service providers to understand the complexities of privilege and oppression, and the infinite ways in which oppression can impact IPV of marginalized groups, such as lesbians. Further, based on the respondents’ input, it appears that it is necessary to do outreach and education to LGBTQ communities. The respondents were able to identify that IPV exists in the lesbian community, but it seems that it is only dealt with from within the community. IPV service providers may want to consider offering or extending services in non-traditional locations, such as local LGBTQ centers.

For future studies, concentrating on rural communities or older adults might contribute needed data. It is clear that different ages and different geographical locations have unique experiences. This study did not focus on a particular age group or
geographical location. There might be a developmental stage after the “coming out” process for an individual that would impact their experiences with IPV with the effects of heterosexism and homophobia. Most of the respondents in this study identified as being “out” and for these respondents internalized homophobia is not currently as big of a struggle as when their sexual identity was developing. Does the experience of being oppressed have a positive impact on self-identity? Future studies should explore this.
REFERENCES
REFERENCES


Lesbians' Perceptions of their Intimate Relationships

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which various forms of oppression can potentially affect lesbian intimate relationships. If you are a woman who has been in an intimate relationship with another woman in the last five years (presently or formerly), you are eligible to take part in this study. All participants who complete the following questionnaire, and provide name and contact information will be entered into a drawing to win a $50 gift card to Amazon.

A. Contact Information:

If you are interested in participating in a follow-up interview with the researcher, please provide your name and contact information. *It is not required to provide your name and contact information.*

Name: ____________________________

Phone number: ____________________

Email: ____________________________

Is it OK for the researcher to contact you for a follow-up interview? [ ] Yes  [ ] No

B. Demographics:

1. What is your age? ______
2. What race/ethnicity do you identify as? __________________
3. What is your annual income? ______
4. What is your religious identity, if any? ______
5. What is your sexual orientation? ______

C. Answer the following questions in regards to your intimate relationship(s) with a woman, if you need more space to answer, use the backside or attach more sheets to this questionnaire:

1. Talk about any experience(s) you have had in regards to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, ableism, ageism, or any other form of oppression or discrimination.

Continued to next page ➔
2. Have these experiences of oppression or discrimination affected your intimate relationship? If so, how?

3. Tell me about your relationship (struggles, strengths, perks, power dynamics, communication style, etc).

4. What challenges do (did) you face in your relationship?
5. What does a healthy intimate relationship between two women look like to you?

6. What does an abusive relationship between two women look like to you?

7. What behaviors, attitudes or actions are not ok in a relationship between two women?
8. What is abuse?

9. What is your experience, if any, with intimate partner abuse?

10. How are your views about same-sex intimate partner violence different than your views about heterosexual intimate partner violence?

11. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you for participating in this study!
APPENDIX B
POST-DATA COLLECTION FORM

HUMAN SUBJECTS IN REVIEW COMMITTEE
Post Data Collection Questionnaire

Under Federal law relating to the protection of Human Subjects, this report is to be completed by each Principal Investigator at the end of data collection.

Please return to: Lisa Bernal-Wood, HSRC Assistant
Office of Graduate Studies
Student Services Center (SSC), Room 460
CSU, Chico
Chico, CA 95929-0875

Or Fax to: Lisa Bernal-Wood, 530-898-5413

Name: Jacky Humphrey Student Chico State Portal ID: COU2353189
Phone(s): 530-351-2107 Email: jhumphrey13@orusbmail.co.chico.ca
Faculty Advisor name (if student): Sue Stremel Phone 
College/Department: School of Social Work
Title of Project: Impact of Depression

Date application was approved (mo/yr.): 9/2011 Date collection complete (mo/yr.): 12/2011

How many subjects were recruited? 25 How many subjects actually completed the project? 25

*HARM—Did subjects have severe reactions or extreme emotional response? No

If yes, please attach a detailed explanation:

Your signature: Date: 3-12-12

*Final clearance will not be granted without a complete answer to this question.

Approved By: John Maloney, Chair

Date: 3-28-12

******************************************************************************

VERY IMPORTANT: If you will or have used this research in your project or thesis you are required to provide a copy of this form (with John Maloney’s signature in place) to your graduate committee.

Do you want a photo copy of this form mailed to you?

If yes, provide address:

******************************************************************************