

Contextualizing Domestic Violence from a LGBTQ Perspective

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We've all read the news articles; we've all seen the television movies; we've all heard the story from our sisters, aunts, mothers, daughters, and friends. He was charming and sweet, and then he was not. But what happens when the domestic violence survivor is someone who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ)? Even as the body of knowledge about domestic violence in heterosexual relationships continues to grow through research and practice, lack of research and practice knowledge about same-sex domestic violence remains (Rohrbaugh, 2006; Seelau & Seelau, 2005). The sparse research that does exist focuses mainly on lesbian and gay relationships, with next to nothing on how domestic violence affects people who identify as bisexual, transgender, queer, or genderqueer. Only a limited amount of the critical knowledge and experience gained by organizations working with LGBTQ survivors has trickled into mainstream agencies.

While research results vary, domestic violence happens in same-sex relationships at about the same rate as in heterosexual relationships (12% - 50%) (Brown & Groscup, 2009; Rohrbaugh, 2006; Seelau & Seelau, 2005). Many of the tactics used to exert a pattern of power and control are similar in LGBTQ relationships and in heterosexual relationships. While domestic violence dynamics and experiences are comparable regardless of sexual orientation, reflecting on helpful responses to LGBTQ people's experiences with domestic violence can highlight issues that are important to *all* domestic violence survivors. For example, in the LGBTQ context of domestic violence, it becomes very clear that, in addition to using their privileges and places in which they have power, people who batter their partners also use their vulnerabilities and places in which they experience oppression or less power. Abusive partners who have experienced violence in the past may use their experiences as an excuse for their current abusive and controlling behaviors (Burk, 1999). Homophobia, heterosexism, transphobia, and biphobia create a context that impacts survivors' experiences with their abusive

partners, access to resources, and responses from support systems, for example (Burk, 1999). It also affects what people have access to or can use to wield abusive power and control over their partners.

In assessing what the best resources may be for LGBTQ-identified people, it is important to determine who is surviving, and who is exerting, an abusive pattern of power and control. The unimaginable scenario of domestic violence survivors ending up in interventions designed for batterers and abusive partners ending up in shelters and community advocacy programs their partners then cannot access is a reality for some LGBTQ survivors. In heterosexual relationships in which abuse occurs, the male partner is exerting the abusive pattern power and control over the female partner approximately 90% of the time, regardless of whether either or both parties have been physically violent with the other (Kimmel, 2002; Rohrbaugh, 2006; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

Abuse within a heterosexual relationship historically has been illustrated using the "Power and Control Wheel" developed by the

Domestic Abuse Intervention Program in Duluth, Minnesota, in the late 1980s (also referred to as the "Duluth Model"). The Power and Control Wheel is the result of the universally shared experiences of survivors who participated in a number of focus groups. It still is used by many domestic violence advocates to educate survivors; batterers; and those working in domestic violence, child welfare, criminal justice, school systems, medical settings, and communities about the power dynamics occurring in domestic violence relationships. Over the years the wheel has been adapted to illustrate a variety of cultural experiences worldwide (National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence).

In relationships involving LGBTQ-identified people, there are no externally or immediately visible factors, such as gender presentation and height, that indicate who is surviving and who is battering. Simply identifying categorical areas in which partners hold privilege and power, such as physical size and strength, socioeconomic status, education, and race, and assessing who has more power and privilege is *insufficient* to determine who is the

survivor and who is the perpetrator in LGBTQ relationships (Rohrbaugh, 2006).



Over the course of a 23-year history of working with LGBTQ-identified people, the Northwest (NW) Network developed an assessment tool for use as a

more culturally appropriate response to ensure that people were directed to the support most beneficial for them. This assessment tool is used to determine who is surviving domestic violence and who is battering their partners, regardless of the type of abuse involved (e.g., physical, emotional, verbal, or sexual). Nationally recognized as a lead agency in this subject area, the NW Network offers an annual “Q&A for Advocates National Training Institute” to support and educate domestic violence organizations, advocates, social service programs, mental health providers, attorneys, other organizations, and individual providers about contextual assessment and domestic violence in LGBTQ communities. During the two-and-a-half day institute, participants also learn effective strategies for advocating and organizing a response to domestic violence in the LGBTQ community.

There are many issues that affect LGBTQ survivors of domestic violence. Lack of access to social services (especially LGBTQ competent programs) and negative responses by crisis line workers and other social service providers in the legal system and by the police are factors that impact LGBTQ domestic violence survivors (Brown & Groscup, 2009; Donovan & Hester, 2008; Potoczniak, Mourot, Crosbie-Burnett, & Potoczniak, 2003). Due to homophobia and heterosexism, there is a scarcity of safe spaces in

which LGBTQ people can gather or access LGBTQ competent resources. LGBTQ-identified domestic violence survivors may be more likely to run into the person who battered them at community events and shared community spaces, including social service agencies, social outlets, and medical providers. Survivors also may have concerns about interfering with their partner’s ability to go to events if they spoke about the abuse or left the relationship. Abusive partners more easily may have access to information from other community members or put forth the appearance of connection to a larger portion of the LGBTQ community than is actual.

Traditional domestic violence safety planning responses that rely on taking survivors completely out of their communities, away from any space connected to their abusive partners, and sometimes moving them into confidential shelters, can be less effective for LGBTQ survivors. While the experiences of LGBTQ domestic violence survivors clearly highlights the less helpful aspects of this response, removing domestic violence survivors from the community and all connections to their lives with an abusive partner may serve to further isolate and negatively impact survivors of any sexual orientation.

Limitations of working in a small, and sometimes interconnected, community has made it necessary to rethink traditional safety planning around contact between survivors and batterers. Telling survivors not to go to community events or other shared community spaces at which they may run into their abusive partners may make it more difficult for LGBTQ survivors to establish new connections, rebuild their lives, and heal from the abuse. When there are few gay-friendly neighborhoods and/or few gay-specific or gay-friendly bars, social activities, and resources, for example, telling LGBTQ survivors not to go to places where they used to spend time with the person who was battering them may

not be an option. Safety plans that involve avoiding any possibility of survivors running into their ex-partners, or avoiding other community members who may know their abusive partners, may lead to isolating survivors further, rather than decreasing their isolation, rebuilding their support systems, and accessing resources. For many LGBTQ survivors, staying connected to their communities and becoming less isolated may mean continuing to have contact with the person who was or is abusive to them.

In order to connect LGBTQ-identified people with the best resources and in order to move past heterosexual, homophobic, transphobic, and biphobic assumptions, intensive educational training is necessary when working with domestic violence in an LGBTQ context, as shown by research. Potoczniak et al. (2003) state that “to overcome the myths and assist a victim of SSDV (same-sex domestic violence) appropriately, it is necessary to examine the violence within the context of the relationship to gain insight into the power structure (i.e., which member of the relationship has established a physical or psychological power over the other member)” (p. 255). In a study by Brown and Groscup (2009), crisis line workers “tended to rate same-sex abuse as less serious, less likely to recur, and less likely to get worse over time than opposite-sex abuse. They also believed that it was easier for victims in same-sex relationships to leave their partners” (p. 91). Service providers and domestic violence organizations may be more likely to believe both partners in an LGBTQ relationship are equally involved in the violence and are not in a relationship that involves abusive power and control than both partners in a non-transgender male-female relationship (Brown & Groscup, 2009; Potoczniak et al., 2003). This misperception impedes the legal system, domestic violence organizations, and other service providers in responding

appropriately. In addition, many service providers need support in working on their homophobic and heterosexist assumptions, and they often need more experience and training on working with LGBTQ-identified people (Brown & Groscup, 2009). Service providers need intensive educational interventions involving role play and other activities, rather than information sessions, to facilitate a shift in attitude and help them work better with LGBTQ people (Brown & Groscup, 2009).

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Resources

Northwest Network (www.nwnetwork.org). The Northwest Network educates human service providers, domestic violence programs, and policymakers within local and national government on domestic violence in LGBTQ communities, LGBTQ cultural competency, and culturally appropriate service delivery through public speaking, training, and technical assistance at the national and local levels. The NW Network's Q&A for Advocates National Training Institute offers critical engagement, skill-building, and interactive exercises to engage participants in facilitating exploration of personal and societal attitudes, assumptions, and myths regarding LGBTQ-identified persons and issues related to LGBTQ domestic violence.

LGBTQ Definitions

Common terms used to identify the characteristics and attributes of people and communities can have multiple meanings. When working with LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) persons, it is imperative to encourage people to identify themselves and their communities by choosing the terms they feel most comfortable and connected with. To avoid offending, misunderstandings, misidentifying, or simply missing important information, practitioners should listen to, respect, and reflect the terminology presented by the clients, groups, or communities they are serving.

Biphobic - The systematic oppression of bisexual people specifically because they

are not gay or heterosexual. For example, many bisexual people feel that they are forced to "choose" between two identities that do not fit them.

Bisexual - A person whose sexual and romantic feelings may be for people of either gender, male or female.

Gay - A man or boy whose primary sexual and romantic feelings are for people of the same gender. While many people use this term to refer to gay men only, others use it as a general term to include both men and women, for example, "the gay community."

Heterosexism - The belief that heterosexual (straight) relationships and people are the ideal and that they are better or more "normal" than queer relationships and people. Heterosexism also includes the denial that queer people even exist, and the assumption that everyone is straight unless they tell you otherwise.

Homophobia - The systematic oppression of gay men, lesbians, and bisexual people because of their sexuality. Many people define homophobia to include all queer people.

Lesbian - A woman or girl whose primary sexual and romantic feelings are for people of the same gender

LGBTQ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer

Queer - An inclusive term that refers collectively to bisexuals, lesbians, gay men, and transgender and transsexual persons and others who may not identify with any of these categories but identify as queer. While "queer" often has been used as a hurtful, oppressive term, many people have reclaimed it as an expression of power and pride. It also is preferred by many because of its inclusiveness.

Transgender - A person who chooses ways of presenting himself or herself that are different from what is expected of the gender he or she has been assigned at birth. For example, a person who is assigned the gender role of "boy" by a doctor at birth but experiences himself as a woman is transgender. This term also may include people who identify as transsexual ("trans" for short).

Transphobia - The systematic oppression of transgendered people because they do not fit society's expectations of what men and women are supposed to act like and look like.

Transsexual - A person who chooses to change his or her physical body to match the gender he or she wants to express.