

# DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN SAME-GENDER RELATIONSHIPS

Joanna Bunker Rohrbaugh

---

---

Physical violence occurs in 11–12% of same-gender couples, which suggests that domestic violence is an abuse of power that can happen in any type of intimate relationship, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Although incidents of violence occur at the same rate in same-gender couples and cross-gender couples, the violence appears to be milder in same-gender couples and it is unclear what percentage of same-gender violence should be characterized as abuse or intimate terrorism. Same-gender victims also suffer from the additional stress of severe isolation and the abuser's threats to expose the victim's sexual orientation in a hostile manner.

**Keywords:** *domestic violence; intimate terrorism; abuse; lesbian; gay; same-gender; same-sex; homosexual; queer*

---

---

## INTRODUCTION

The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's recent ruling regarding same-gender marriages in *Goodridge v. Dept. of Public Health* (2003) has generated extensive public debate. One benefit of the ensuing controversy is that it has increased public awareness of the approximately 10% of adults who are lesbian or gay and have same-gender romantic and familial relationships (Gonsiorek & Weinrich, 1991). An increasing number of those same-gender families have children. Researchers have estimated that in the United States between three and eight million gay and lesbian parents are raising between six and fourteen million children (Martin, 1993; Patterson, 1994). Professionals who work with the Probate and Family Courts know that all types of families experience conflict, dissolution/divorce, and custody disputes. In order to better serve lesbian and gay families in the family court setting, it is essential to know more about those families.

It is important to note that the overwhelming majority of gay and lesbian families function well, in a manner similar to that of healthy heterosexual families (Kurdek, 1994; Rohrbaugh, 1992). However, there *are* lesbian and gay families in which domestic violence occurs. The purpose of this article is to sensitize divorce professionals to the existence of same-gender domestic violence and to make them aware of the major features and causes of this phenomenon. There are many complex factors that make same-gender domestic violence different from cross-gender domestic violence. These complexities and differences make it essential for attorneys, mental health professionals, and judges to seek expert consultation before undertaking a case involving domestic violence in a same-gender couple.

## RATES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Initial research suggests that violence occurs at the same rate (12–50%) in same-gender couples as it does in cross-gender couples, and the methods of conflict resolution are

---

Some of the information in this article was included in a presentation at The Annual Meeting of the Massachusetts Chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts at Regis College in Weston, MA, on April 8, 2004.

similar in both groups (Gardner, 1989; Elliott, 1996; Renzetti, 1992; Straus, 1978; Straus, Gelles & Steinmetz, 1980). The exact rate of violence reported varies according to: (a) the samples being studied and (b) the definitions and measures of domestic violence utilized.

### SAMPLES STUDIED

Violence in lesbian and gay relationships is a relatively new area of research that is often examined in doctoral dissertations that are not readily available to the public. Many studies use small, nonrandom samples obtained through friendship circles, lesbian and gay organizations, or advertisements in lesbian and gay publications. Descriptive studies are most common, with few examinations of correlations with other variables. The present review focuses on 11 of the most rigorous studies, summarized in Table 1. Because the samples and measures are quite variable, I have applied a *rating of representative sampling* (low, medium, or high) to each study to indicate how adequately that study's sample may reflect the characteristics of the general U.S. lesbian/gay population. The issues raised by the samples are then discussed below.

It is difficult to directly compare same-gender and cross-gender couples because there are fewer external markers of relationship stage or development in lesbian and gay couples. Presumably "dating" couples can be compared, regardless of sexual orientation, while long-term committed lesbian or gay couples are most similar to heterosexual married couples.

The stage of a relationship is important because the rates of domestic violence may be elevated in separating/divorcing couples as opposed to continuing couples, regardless of sexual orientation. For example, Neilson (2004) found that 40–50% of all separating and divorcing couples in Canada report abuse in the relationships they leave. Relationship stage may also be related to differences between same-gender and opposite-gender couples. In an early questionnaire study of 75 heterosexual and 55 lesbian college students, researchers found that whereas in *dating relationships* lesbians had lower rates of both physical abuse and sexual assault (.05%) than did heterosexuals (19–20%), in *committed relationships* lesbians had rates of physical abuse (25%) similar to the rates of heterosexuals (27%) (Brand & Kidd, 1986).<sup>1</sup>

Even when comparable groups of couples are studied, there is still the problem of distinguishing between perpetrators and victims. Burke and Follingstad (1999) point out that if this distinction is not made, studies of same-gender couples may exaggerate the prevalence of violence by potentially including both members of a couple in one sample and then treating the responses of victims and perpetrators in the same couple as two separate incidences of violence.

Burke and Follingstad (1999) also examined the sample sizes used in studies of lesbian partner abuse and found that larger samples (solicited from music festivals or national surveys) have yielded much lower rates than smaller samples (recruited from friendship networks). They suggest that participants in friendship networks may have tried to "help" the researchers by trying to locate lesbians with a history of abuse. On the other hand, in samples from music festivals, which have a political as well as recreational nature, violence may have been underreported because participants were concerned about how lesbians would be viewed if problematic behavior were reported.

The rates of abuse may also be affected by changes in attitudes or methodology because earlier, smaller studies of physical abuse in lesbian/gay relationships have found higher rates than more recent, larger studies. For example, in their early study of 55 lesbian college students Brand and Kidd (1986) used a 24-item questionnaire focusing on relationship

**Table 1**  
*Ratings of Representative Sampling in Empirical Studies of Same-Gender Domestic Violence*

Study	Sample				
	Participants	Selection Method	Response Rate	Selection Bias	Repre. Sampling
Bradford, Ryan & Rothblum, 1994	1,925L	National survey to L/G & MH Organ.	42%	Younger, More Education	High
Brand & Kidd, 1986	75H, 55L	Pubs.	62%	College Students	Medium
Bryant & Demian, 1994	1,749 L&G <sup>a</sup>	National survey to L&G Organ. & pubs.	Unk.	White, Affluent	Med-High
Farley, 1996	119G, 169L	MH	N/A	Severe Abuse	Unk. <sup>b</sup>
Gardner, 1989	248; Cpls: 42H, 43L, 39G	Pub. & Organ.	Unk.	Unk.	Unk. <sup>c</sup>
Kurdek, 1994 <sup>d</sup>	234; Cpls: 39H, 39L, 39G	H: marriage Licenses; L&G: pub.	Unk.	None	Med.-High
Marrujo & Kreger, 1996	62L victims & abusers	MH	N/A	Severe Abuse	Low <sup>e</sup>
Merrill, 1998	52G Victims	MH	N/A	Severe Abuse	Low. <sup>f</sup>
Miller et al., 2001	284L	Music	Unk.	Minimize Abuse	Med.
Poorman & Seelau, 2001	27 (15L abusers, 12L victims)	MH	N/A	Severe Abuse	Low <sup>g</sup>
Renzetti, 1992	100L victims	L Pubs. & Organ.	Unk.	White, Affluent, Young	Med.

*Note:* The participants are labeled as lesbian (L), gay (G), or heterosexual (H), as designated by the study authors. Some participants were studied alone and some in couples (cpls). Selection methods included placing ads in L/G publications (pub.), sending notices to L/G organizations (organ.), distributing questionnaires at women's music festivals (Music), and recruiting clinical samples through mental health service facilities (MH). Unk. = Unknown, insufficient information available. N/A = not applicable.

<sup>a</sup> Bryant and Demian's 1,749 participants represented 706 lesbian couples and 560 gay couples. In 483 instances both members of a couple participated.

<sup>b</sup> Farley's sample was composed of abusers who either chose or were remanded for mental health treatment and therefore may have been involved in more severe cases of abuse than the general pool of batterers in the lesbian and gay communities. Their similarity to the more general population in other ways is unknown.

<sup>c</sup> I was unable to obtain the complete text of Gardner's doctoral dissertation and therefore have inadequate information to apply a representativeness rating.

<sup>d</sup> Kurdek's 1994 study is the fourth in a series of longitudinal studies. The participants in the 1994 study were taken from a previous pool of 1,342 participants (representing 671 couples: 80 gay, 53 lesbian, 538 heterosexual).

<sup>e</sup> Marrujo and Kreger's sample is fairly representative in terms of race (15% lesbians of color) and socioeconomic status (working class as well as middle class and upper middle class included), but the participants were all in treatment as victims or perpetrators of domestic violence so they presumably were involved in severe situations and their similarity to the rest of the lesbian population is unknown.

<sup>f</sup> Merrill's sample is similar to Marrujo and Kreger's except that (a) 71% were men of color and (b) they were all gay male victims of abuse, so the issues of representativeness are similar. Merrill and Wolfe, 2000 reports on the same sample and study as Merrill, 1998.

<sup>g</sup> Poorman and Seelau matched 15 lesbian batterers with 12 lesbian victims and a group of 16 female, non-clinically involved nurses in order to compare their scores on the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behavior Scale (FIRO; Schultz, 1978). The low representativeness rating is due to the small size of the sample and to its clinical source.

abuse and found a 25% rate of physical aggression in committed relationships. This rate is similar to that found in Gardner's (1989) study of 82 lesbian and gay couples recruited through lesbian and gay newspapers and organizations.

In a later study, Bryant and Demian (1994) asked 1,749 lesbians and gay men<sup>2</sup> from 48 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia about the major qualities of their relationships: length, commitment, quality, preferred terms of address for partners, living situation, sexual activities and agreements, support for the relationship, experiences of discrimination, children, legal arrangements, and ways of coping with AIDS. The researchers also asked about "the two greatest challenges to their relationship" and found that 16% of all couples reported "verbal abuse" by a partner and that 7% of the women and 11% of the men reported "physical abuse" by a partner.<sup>3</sup>

Seven years after Bryant and Demian's survey Miller, Greene, Causby, White, and Lockhart (2001) asked lesbians attending a large music festival in the Southeast to complete a survey about the nature of their relationships and their experiences with violence and aggression. While 46% of the 284 respondents indicated that in the past year they or a partner had threatened a mild form of physical aggression, only 14% reported being subjected to physical violence by a partner.

The most compelling report on lesbian domestic violence was compiled as part of the National Lesbian Health Care Survey which used a 10-page questionnaire to ask 1,925 lesbians about: (a) demographic information; (b) participation in community activities and social life; (c) outness; (d) current concerns and worries; (e) depression, anxiety, and general mental health; (f) suicide; (g) physical and sexual abuse; (h) antigay discrimination; (i) impact of AIDS; (j) substance abuse; (k) eating disorders; and (l) counseling (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994). The respondents were predominantly college-educated (69%), with some racial diversity (White 88%, African American 6%, Latina 4%, and small numbers of Native Americans and Asian Americans). When compared with the 1980 U.S. census data, this lesbian sample was younger, better educated, and employed in more professional and managerial occupations than the general female population, even though all but 12% of the sample earned less than \$30,000 per year. The fact that the information about domestic violence was embedded in a questionnaire about other health issues should have minimized the tendency for overreporters of domestic violence to respond to the study. Using this diverse sample and more extensive questionnaire, only 12% reported at least one incident of being "harshly beaten" by a lover, while 2% reported having been sexually victimized by a female partner.

Combining the findings of the more recent and larger studies (Bradford et al., 1994; Bryant & Demian, 1994; Miller et al., 2001) it is reasonable to conclude that the rate of self-reported violence in lesbian couples is about 11–12%.

This still leaves the most obvious sampling problem: the lack of research about gay men. The only large, fairly recent study of gay male domestic violence is Bryant and Demian's (1994) national survey in which 11% of 506 gay male couples reported experiencing violence in their relationships. This suggests that the rate of self-reported violence is probably similar in gay male and lesbian relationships.

## DEFINITIONS OF ABUSE

Although many researchers have failed to do so, it is important to distinguish among physical, sexual, and psychological forms of abuse. These terms are defined by Burke and Follingstad (1999) as follows:

*Physical abuse*: using physical force to control an intimate partner by pushing, shoving, slapping, biting, punching, choking, throwing objects at the partner, or assaulting them with a weapon.

*Sexual abuse*: using words, actions, or threats to force another to engage in sexual activities against their will.

*Psychological abuse*: using words or actions to isolate, humiliate, demean, intimidate, or control an intimate partner. This category often includes property violence such as punching holes in walls, breaking down doors, throwing things, and damaging a partner's possessions. These behaviors are intimidating but do not involve the direct use of physical force against the partner.

## SEVERITY OF ABUSE

It is also important to distinguish among varying levels of severity within each type of abuse. Thus when Miller (2001) and her colleagues administered questionnaires to 284 lesbians at a large regional women's music festival, they found that while 46% of the lesbians reported experiencing some form of *physical aggression* by their partners in the past year (threatening to throw or actually throwing or hitting an object; or pushing, slapping, grabbing, or shoving the partner), only 14% reported some form of *physical violence* by their partners (trying to or actually hitting, biting, or kicking partner; threatening or injuring partner with knife/gun).

Rather than survey the general lesbian population, Renzetti (1992) did a study of 100 lesbians who self-identified as battered women. Renzetti's goal was to ascertain the personal characteristics and types of violence used by lesbian abusers. In Renzetti's sample of victims, 11% reported that they had experienced only psychological abuse, 8% reported that there had been only one or two incidents of physical violence in their relationships, and 87% reported being subjected to both physical and psychological abuse. The forms of physical abuse included pushing and shoving (75% of sample); hitting with fists or open hands (65% of sample); scratching or hitting the face, breast, or genitals (48% of sample); and throwing things (44% of sample). Thus even among lesbians who perceived themselves as battered, the reported forms of physical violence fell at the milder end of the range of acts of domestic violence.

## VIOLENCE VERSUS ABUSE

It is essential to examine the intent or function of the violence in each couple. Thus in discussing the rate of domestic violence in *all* separating and divorcing couples in Canada, Neilson (2004) suggests that:

Violence is behavior or action; abuse is a pattern of demeaning, controlling, intimidating action, including violence, within the context of evolving power and control dynamics of an intimate relationship causing psychological (and often physical) harm. (p. 418)

Domination, intimidation, degradation, and control are the essential elements of abusive violence. (p. 426)

In an early discussion of lesbian battering, Hart (1986) made a similar point in differentiating between individual acts of physical violence and actual battering:<sup>4</sup>

Lesbian battering is that pattern of violent and 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 over her. Individual acts of physical violence, by this definition, do not constitute battering. (p. 173)

The distinction between violence and abuse becomes even clearer if instead of "abuse" one uses the term "intimate terrorism" to refer to physical and psychological violence that is used to dominate, control, intimidate, and degrade a partner. Violence that occurs *without* this intent or function is akin to "common couple violence" that is not abusive but rather due to the partners having poor conflict management skills, so that they respond to conflict with violence which is often mutual (Johnson & Ferraro, 2000).

In looking at the research on same-gender domestic violence, it is unclear how much of this violence is abusive and hence an example of intimate terrorism. Many of the studies of same-gender domestic violence are unpublished papers and doctoral dissertations that appear to use the presence of *any* physical violence as their criterion for domestic violence.<sup>5</sup> After reviewing the research on lesbians, Burke and Follingstad (1999) conclude that although lesbian partner abuse is fairly prevalent, it is more apt to be psychological rather than physical or sexual. There is not enough research on violence in gay male relationships to come to a definite conclusion about the typical nature of that violence. However, certainly *some* of the same-gender violence would qualify as intimate terrorism, which belies the view of domestic violence as something that is perpetrated only by heterosexual men on heterosexual women.<sup>6</sup>

### CAUSES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

In heterosexual relationships intimate violence is related to rigid gender roles because men who beat their wives or girlfriends often "engage in a coherent and disciplined rage to defend what they consider to be their rights," which the men construe to be absolute authority over "their" women (Messerschmidt, 2004, p. 12). The "paradox of masculinity" means that "men as a group have power over women as a group; but, in their subjective experience of the world, men as individuals do not feel powerful" (Capraro, 2004, p. 192). Thus men who feel powerless may attempt to shore up their fragile sense of masculinity by abusing women.

This well-known dynamic has led many people to see domestic violence as a gender issue, a way that men forcefully maintain male dominance (Bograd, 1988; Kurz, 1998). Others have suggested that male psychopathology is the culprit and proposed a variety of typologies of male batterers.<sup>7</sup> A third, integrated approach has considered the psychology of the individual batterer within the social context of male dominance, the norms of masculinity, and homophobia (Messerschmidt, 2004). Regardless of their theoretical approach, however, most researchers have focused on heterosexual relationships and hence reinforced the assumption that domestic violence is something that happens only between men and women. The existence of same-gender domestic violence contradicts this assumption and suggests that domestic violence is an abuse of power that can happen in any type of intimate relationship, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

Yet simply having power is not the key to domestic violence. In gay male relationships, for instance, differences in various sources of power do not predict partner abuse. That is, disparities in physical size and strength, masculine appearance, affluence, education,

race, and ethnicity are not correlated with rates of battering in gay couples. *Using power to subordinate and control one's partner is the key element in partner abuse.* As Gregory Merrill (1998) observed, “. . . although increased power increases the opportunity for a partner to abuse, not every man with more perceived or actual power uses it to abusive ends” (p. 133).

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SAME-GENDER DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The types of abuse in same-gender relationships are the same as for cross-gender relationships, except for two unique features:

- Threat of “outing,” or exposing the partner’s sexual orientation to work colleagues, family, and friends.
- Extreme isolation due to being “in the closet,” lack of civil rights protections, and lack of access to the legal system.

Social isolation and the threat of “outing” are extremely powerful factors. The “outed” battered partner could lose their job, housing, and educational opportunities. Relationships with family and friends could be irretrievably damaged if the partner’s sexual orientation is revealed or announced in a hostile manner.

Even if victims are willing to identify themselves as victims of abuse in a same-gender relationship, there is often nowhere to turn for help. Most battered women’s shelters do not serve gay men or lesbians, and the police and courts are seldom available to them. The laws of nine states, for example, define domestic violence as violence between a man and a woman or between spouses, former spouses, or family members related by consanguinity. In some states unmarried couples may be covered by domestic violence statutes but same-gender sexual acts are criminalized. Other states do have statutes that offer some protection to battered lesbians and gay men, but only allow for arrest in cases of heterosexual violence. And even when the laws do permit same-gender victims to press charges against their abusers, victims may encounter overt homophobic bias in court (Aulivola, 2004; Fray-Witzer, 1999; Renzetti, 1998).

All of these factors become more complicated when same-gender couples have children because the perpetrator may threaten to take the children away. If the perpetrator is the birth or adoptive parent, this threat could easily be carried out. In most states the adoptions laws do not permit same-gender parents to adopt each other’s children, so the nonbiological parent has no legal rights if the couple separates.<sup>8</sup> Although in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Vermont second-parent adoption offers some protection for nonbiological parents in same-gender relationships (Loewy, 2004), there are a number of reasons why a couple may not be able to do a second-parent adoption.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in an abusive relationship the legal parent may refuse to do the second-parent adoption precisely to retain more power and control in the relationship.

When the batterer is the nonbiological parent he or she can threaten to “out” the biological parent. This outing could place the biological parent’s custody at risk, given the history of case law wherein lesbians have lost their children to dysfunctional ex-husbands who have substance abuse problems or even murder convictions, simply on the grounds that the children “should be afforded the opportunity to grow up in a non-lesbian household” (Fray-Witzer, 1999, pp. 21–22).

Even with the changes in custody statutes and case law that recognize lesbian and gay nonbiological parents, many lesbians and gay men remain deeply suspicious of involvement with the courts. In fact, many attorneys have historically advised lesbian and gay couples to stay out of the courts because the legal definition of family and parents differs from the reality of same-gender relationships (Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders, 1999). Some lesbian and gay couples are unaware of recent changes in the law, and of course many lesbian and gay couples live in states where the courts still do not recognize their intimate relationships or status as parents. In most states it is still commonplace for lesbian or gay parents to lose custody of their children after a heterosexual divorce or the breakup of a same-gender relationship that involves children.

The unique possibilities for extortion make it especially difficult for lesbian and gay victims to leave the abusive relationship. Many lesbian and gay victims do not tell anyone about the abuse because they feel that their relationship must appear “perfect” to compensate for the stigma of being homosexual. And if they do seek help they encounter the common misperception that lesbians and gays cannot “really” be battered, and also find that there are few services available to gay and lesbian victims (Renzetti, 1998).

### ROLES IN ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

In recent years there has been considerable debate about whether domestic violence is usually mutual and, hence, men are just as apt to be battered as are women. Richard Gelles (2004) has addressed the misuse of his own data by pointing out that:

To even off the playing field it seems one piece of statistical evidence (that women and men hit one another in roughly equal numbers) is hauled out from my 1985 research—and distorted—to “prove” the position on violence against men . . .

That women are perpetrators of intimate violence there can be no doubt [but] research shows that nearly 90 percent of battering victims are women and only about ten percent are men . . . The most brutal, terrorizing and continuing pattern of harmful intimate violence is carried out primarily by men. (pp. 1–2)

The idea of mutual battering is often mistakenly applied to gay male relationships because “men, unlike women, have been socialized to defend themselves” (Potoczniak, Mourot, Crosbie-Burnett, & Potoczniak, 2003, p. 255). In his study of 52 battered gay and bisexual men, Merrill found that 58% reported physically defending themselves when physically attacked by their partners (Merrill, 1998; Merrill & Wolfe, 2000).

The issue becomes even more confusing when one considers that lesbians are more apt to fight back than are battered heterosexual women (Bethea, Rexrode, Ruffo, & Washington, 2000). Renzetti (1992) found that 78% of her sample of 100 predominantly White, upper-middle-class battered lesbians reported that they either defended themselves or fought back against an abusive partner. Marrujo and Kreger (1996) interviewed a more representative sample of 62 lesbians (76% White, 24% women of color) who were in treatment as either victims or perpetrators, and found that 34% of their respondents reported a pattern of “fighting back.” Marrujo and Kreger then proposed the term “participant” for those victims who develop a repeated pattern of responding to aggression



with aggression, but who intend only to fight back rather than to injure or get even with the abusive partner.

These studies suggest that victims fall on a continuum from those who are physically passive to those who are aggressively self-protective, but do not initiate the violence or use it to control their partner. In order to identify the perpetrator and the victim in any relationship one must consider both the characteristics of the partners and the specific history of abuse in the relationship.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF ABUSERS

Recent research suggests that the severe abusers in same-gender relationships are like the severe abusers in cross-gender relationships in that they often have severe mental illnesses and were themselves abused as children. Farley (1996) collected information from 1986 to 1991 on 119 gay men and 169 lesbians who were referred to him for perpetrator treatment in Seattle. Dr. Farley found that previous psychiatric treatment was common (men 87%, women 94%) and some abusers had experienced psychiatric hospitalization (men 27%, women 38%). Most abusers (men 73%, women 81%) reported some "secondary abusive behavior" such as substance abuse (men 60%, women 55.5%), eating disorders, or compulsive sexual behavior. As children, all of the perpetrators had experienced psychological abuse and most had also experienced physical abuse (men 93%, women 88%) and sexual abuse (men 67%, women 94%). There was also evidence of intergenerational abuse patterns, in that both men (80%) and women (81%) reported that their parents/guardians were abused as children. Finally, almost half of the abusers (men 47%, women 44%) reported that alcohol abuse was present in their family of origin.

Clinical work with gay male batterers also suggests that they are similar to heterosexual male batterers in having a fragile sense of identity and an underlying dependence which is covered by bluster and rigid independence, being emotionally repressed and threatened by intimacy, fearing abandonment, and experiencing life events as beyond their control (Island & Letellier, 1991; Merrill, 1998).

There has been some additional empirical research on lesbian batterers, who tend to be characterized by emotional overdependency, discomfort with physical and emotional intimacy, and extreme jealousy. Like heterosexual male batterers, these lesbian batterers seem to have an intense fear of abandonment and are therefore threatened by their partner's desire to be independent. They use violence to maintain distance in their relationships and to reject or avoid the partner before the partner can reject them. Lesbian batterers are often charming, articulate, and manipulative in public, which may lead professionals to believe the abuser's claim that the victim was the cause of the relationship problems and the battering. These abusive lesbians are people who feel powerless and use violence as a means to achieve power, control, and dominance in their intimate relationships (Miller et al., 2001; Renzetti, 1992; Poorman & Seelau, 2001).

This information about the characteristics of lesbian and gay male batterers again suggests that domestic violence is essentially an abuse of power. Although gender roles are the major source of entitlement and power that the heterosexual male abuser uses to dominate and manipulate his partner, gender is not the only source or basis for such abuse of power in intimate relationships.

## **SCREENING FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

In order to evaluate the issue of domestic violence in any given relationship, one must obtain a detailed history by asking about the specific incidents and acts of abuse, who initiated the violence and how the partner responded, and what percentage of the time the respondent was the first to initiate violence.

In considering the answers given, remember that usually only the victim will assume responsibility. Batterers are assertive about their rights and tend to make excuses such as, "If she hadn't done that . . . I had been drinking . . . My mother abused me." Batterers tend to blame someone or something else for the violence and are often dismissive and deny that the violence was severe, saying things like, "She wasn't bleeding; he didn't have to go to the hospital." Victims, on the other hand, usually express a sense of shame and confusion. Victims often recount details of incidents whereas batterers tend to be vague. Victims readily admit fear while batterers do not because that would decrease the sense of control batterers so desperately seek. And perhaps most importantly, batterers usually initiate the violence while victims do not (Fray-Witzer, 1999).

## **PROFESSIONALS WORKING WITH SAME-GENDER COUPLES**

In order to be effective in working with same-gender couples, professionals must be familiar with the complex issues related to domestic violence in these relationships. It is not sufficient to apply a general professional background in the areas of domestic violence, trauma, couples therapy, or divorce. Before working on cases involving same-gender couples, every divorce professional should be required to participate in a workshop or other training focused on violence in same-gender relationships. Such a workshop could be offered separately or as a module within a broader workshop on domestic violence, and could be organized in the following ways:

- Through the Family and Probate Courts, as part of the training required for all Guardians Ad Litem and other divorce professionals.
- Through professional associations such as the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, state bar associations, or other professional groups serving legal and mental health professionals.

Once a divorce professional has participated in such a training workshop, their first three or four cases should be supervised by a professional experienced in working with same-gender couples. The Family and Probate Courts could maintain lists of such experienced professionals who are willing to offer supervision.

One way to keep track of court professionals' training in same-gender domestic violence would be to create a subspecialty within the existing Domestic Violence certification required by many Family and Probate Courts.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is startling to discover that incidents of violence occur as frequently in lesbian/gay couples as in heterosexual couples. This finding alone refutes the assumption that domestic

violence is perpetrated only by heterosexual men on heterosexual women, and suggests that domestic violence is an abuse of power that can happen in any type of intimate relationship, regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

The types of domestic violence are similar in all couples, except that same-gender victims often suffer from the additional stress of severe isolation and the fear that the abuser will expose the victim's sexual orientation in a hostile manner.

The characteristics of abusers appear to be similar in all types of relationships: they often have a history of major mental illness and were abused as children. Abusers are also emotionally dependent, feel powerless, tend to blame others for their problems, and use violence as a means to achieve power, control, and dominance in their intimate relationships.

On the other hand, while the research suggests that incidents of violence occur at the same rate in same-gender couples as they do in cross-gender couples, the type of violence seems to be milder in same-gender couples. Furthermore, the research has not yet clarified how much of the same-gender violence constitutes abuse or intimate terrorism, wherein the physical and psychological violence is used to dominate, control, intimidate, and degrade the partner.

Because same-gender victims tend to defend themselves more than do cross-gender female victims, it is essential to obtain a detailed history of conflict, aggression, and incidents of violence in every high-conflict relationship where domestic violence is alleged or suspected.

The complexities of same-gender relational violence require all divorce professionals to obtain special training before working with same-gender couples.

## NOTES

1. These percentages are taken from Table 1 of Raw scores and Percents, which differs from the narrative summary of results (Brand & Kidd, 1986, p. 1311). Most previous writers appear to have cited the narrative summary only. The nature of the physical abuse is not defined by the researchers.

2. The 1,749 respondents represented 706 lesbian couples and 560 gay couples. In 483 instances both members of a couple responded.

3. In their report, Bryant and Demian (1994) did not specify the nature of the "verbal abuse" or "physical abuse."

4. Note that one incident of severe physical abuse qualifies as domestic violence under Massachusetts Custodial Presumption Law, Chapter 179 Acts of 1998. Other states may have similar legal definitions of domestic violence. In the current discussion, the distinction between an *isolated act of violence* and a *pattern of violent acts* is intended to highlight the difference between violence and abuse/intimate terrorism.

5. For example, see the summary provided by Elliot (1996).

6. For poignant accounts of what is clearly same-gender intimate terrorism, see Girshick (2002), Island and Letellier (1991), and Lobel (1986).

7. Despite these proposals, research suggests that the characteristics of men who batter are actually highly heterogeneous (Poorman & Seelau, 2001).

8. For a discussion of various legal issues related to same-gender relationships, see the Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders at <http://www.glad.org>.

9. If the biological mother gave birth during a previous heterosexual relationship, the father would be unlikely to relinquish his parental rights. A sperm donor may also have parental rights that he is unwilling to relinquish. Even if there is no identifiable father whose parental rights would be affected, the process of second-parent adoption requires that the lesbian or gay couple "come out" to attorneys, judges, school and community officials, friends, family, church members, and often work colleagues. This is a daunting and even risky process for many gay and lesbian parents.

## REFERENCES

- Aulivola, M. (2004). Outing domestic violence: Affording appropriate protections to gay and lesbian victims. *Family Court Review*, 42, 162–177.
- Bethea, A. R., Rexrode, K. R., Ruffo, A. C., & Washington, S. D. (2000, Fall). Violence in lesbian relationships: A narrative analysis. *Perspectives: Electronic Journal of the American Association of Behavioral and Social Sciences*. Retrieved April 3, 2004 from <http://www.aabss.org/journal2000/f05Bethea.jmm.html>.
- Bograd, M. (1988). Feminist perspectives on wife abuse: An introduction. In K. Yllö & M. Bograd (Eds.), *Feminist perspectives on wife abuse* (pp. 11–26). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Bradford, J., Ryan, C., & Rothblum, E. D. (1994). National lesbian health care survey: Implications for mental health care. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 62, 228–241.
- Brand, P. A., & Kidd, A. H. (1986). Frequency of physical aggression in heterosexual and female homosexual dyads. *Psychological Reports*, 59, 1307–1313.
- Bryant, A. S., & Demian (1994). Relationship characteristics of American gay and lesbian couples: Findings from a national survey. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 1(2), 101–117.
- Burke, L. K., & Follingstad, D. R. (1999). Violence in lesbian and gay relationships: Theory, prevalence, and correlational factors. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 19, 487–512.
- Capraro, R. L. (2004). Why college men drink: Alcohol, adventure, and the paradox of masculinity. In M. S. Kimmel & M. A. Messner (Eds.), *Men's lives* (6th ed., pp. 190–203). Boston: Pearson.
- Elliot, P. (1996). Shattering illusions: Same-sex domestic violence. In C. M. Renzetti & C. H. Miley (Eds.), *Violence in gay and lesbian domestic partnerships* (pp. 1–8). New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Farley, N. (1996). A survey of factors contributing to gay and lesbian domestic violence. In C. M. Renzetti & C. H. Miley (Eds.), *Violence in gay and lesbian domestic partnerships* (pp. 35–42). New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Fray-Witzer, E. (1999). Twice-abused: Same-sex domestic violence and the law. In B. Leventhal & S. E. Lundy (Eds.), *Same-sex domestic violence* (pp. 19–41). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gardner, R. (1989). Method of conflict resolution and characteristics of abuse and victimization in heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male couples. (Doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, 1988). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 50, 746B.
- Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders. (1999). *Protecting families: Standards for child custody in same-sex relationships*. Retrieved September 9, 2004 from <http://www.glad.org/rights/protectingfamilies.pdf>
- Gelles, R. J. (2004). *Domestic violence: Not an even playing field*. Retrieved August 6, 2004 from <http://thesafetyzone.org/everyone/gelles.html>
- Girshick, L. B. (2002). *Woman-to-woman sexual violence*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Gonsiorek, J. C., & Weinrich, J. D. (1991). The definition and scope of sexual orientation. In J. C. Gonsiorek & J. D. Weinrich (Eds.), *Homosexuality: Research implications for public policy* (pp. 1–12). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Goodridge v. Dept. of Public Health, 798 N.E.2d 941 (Mass. 2003).
- Hart, B. (1986). Lesbian battering: An examination. In K. Lobel (Ed.), *Naming the violence: Speaking out about lesbian battering* (pp. 173–189). Seattle, WA: The Seal Press.
- Island, D., & Letellier, P. (1991). *Men who beat the men who love them: Battered gay men and domestic violence*. New York: Haworth.
- Johnson, M. P., & Ferraro, K. J. (2000). Research on domestic violence in the 1990s: Making distinctions. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 948–963.
- Kurdek, L. A. (1994). The nature and correlates of relationship quality in gay, lesbian, and heterosexual cohabiting couples: A test of individual difference, interdependence, and discrepancy models. In B. Greene & G. M. Herek (Eds.), *Lesbian and gay psychology: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 133–155). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kurz, D. (1998). Old problems and new directions in the study of violence against women. In R. K. Bergen (Ed.), *Issues in intimate violence* (pp. 197–208). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lobel, K. (1986). *Naming the violence: Speaking out about lesbian battering*. Seattle, WA: The Seal Press.
- Loewy, K. L. (2004). Recent second parent adoption law in New England. Retrieved September 9, 2004 from the Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders Web site: <http://www.glad.org/rights/SecondParentAdoptionLawNE.pdf>
- Marrujo, B., & Kreger, M. (1996). Definition of roles in abusive lesbian relationships. In C. M. Renzetti & C. H. Miley (Eds.), *Violence in gay and lesbian domestic partnerships* (pp. 23–33). New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Martin, A. (1993). *The lesbian and gay parenting handbook: Creating and raising our families*. New York: Harper Collins.

- Merrill, G. S. (1998). Understanding domestic violence among gay and bisexual men. In R. K. Bergen (Ed.), *Issues in intimate violence* (pp. 129–141). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Merrill, G. S., & Wolfe, V. A. (2000). Battered gay men: An exploration of abuse, help seeking, and why they stay. *Journal of Homosexuality, 39*(2), 1–30.
- Messerschmidt, J. (2004). Varieties of “real men.” In M. S. Kimmel & M. A. Messner (Eds.), *Men's lives* (6th ed., pp. 3–20). Boston: Pearson.
- Miller, D. H., Greene, K., Causby, V., White, B. W., & Lockhart, L. L. (2001). Domestic violence in lesbian relationships. In E. Kaschak (Ed.), *Intimate betrayal: domestic violence in lesbian relationships* (pp. 107–127). New York: Haworth.
- Neilson, L. C. (2004). Assessing mutual partner-abuse claims in child custody and access cases. *Family Court Review, 42*, 411–438.
- Patterson, C. J. (1994). Children of the lesbian baby boom: Behavioral adjustment, self-concepts, and sex role identity. In B. Greene & G. M. Herek, *Lesbian and gay psychology: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 156–175). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Poorman, P. B., & Seelau, S. M. (2001). Lesbians who abuse their partners: Using the FIRO-B to assess interpersonal characteristics. In E. Kaschak (Ed.), *Intimate betrayal: Domestic violence in lesbian relationships* (pp. 87–105). New York: Haworth.
- Potoczniak, M. J., Mourou, J. T., Crosbie-Burnett, M., & Potoczniak, D. J. (2003). Legal and psychological perspectives on same-sex domestic violence: A multisystemic approach. *Journal of Family Psychology, 17*, 252–259.
- Renzetti, C. M. (1992). *Violent betrayal: Partner abuse in lesbian relationships*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Renzetti, C. M. (1998). Violence and abuse in lesbian relationships: Theoretical and empirical issues. In R. K. Bergen (Ed.), *Issues in intimate violence* (pp. 117–127). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rohrbaugh, J. B. (1992). Lesbian families: Clinical issues and theoretical implications. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 23*, 467–473.
- Straus, M. A. (1978). Wife beating: How common and why. *Victimology: An International Journal, 2*, 443–458.
- Straus, M. A., Gelles, R. J., & Steinmetz, S. K. (Eds.). (1980). *Behind closed doors: Violence in the American family*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

*Joanna Bunker Rohrbaugh, Ph.D. is a clinical psychologist specializing in both trauma and gender issues. She has been on the faculty of the Harvard Medical School for over twenty years and is a senior supervisor for the Victims of Violence and other outpatient programs at the Cambridge Hospital. Dr. Rohrbaugh is the author of one of the classic textbooks on the Psychology of Women (Women: Psychology's Puzzle, Basic Books, 1979) and teaches courses on gender and personality at the Harvard University Extension. Dr. Rohrbaugh has a private practice in Cambridge, MA, in which she does child custody evaluations and psychotherapy; she is also a consulting psychologist for the Comprehensive Family Evaluation Center at New England Medical Center in Boston. Dr. Rohrbaugh is a past board member of the Massachusetts Association of Guardians Ad Litem and a present board member of the Massachusetts chapter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts. Dr. Rohrbaugh holds a B.A. from Brown University and a Ph.D. in Personality and Developmental Psychology from Harvard University.*