



Out of the Double Closet: A Review of Violence in Gay and Lesbian Domestic Partnerships
 edited by Claire M. Renzetti and Charles Harvey Miley

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Out of the Double Closet: A Review of Violence in Gay and Lesbian Domestic Partnerships

Claire M. Renzetti and Charles Harvey Miley, Editors. Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 1996.

A few years back, a group of students on campus planned and offered a series of programs regarding battering and other forms of domestic violence. The organizers sought to be inclusive of all kinds of couples and hence called me to ask if I could suggest someone to do a session on abuse in lesbian and gay relationships. On the one hand, I admired their doing the program and their goal for it to be multicultural, but my immediate (silent) reaction was to wish they had not chosen to include same-sex couples. Upon reflection, I realized that this reaction was motivated by protectiveness of the gay community and fear that the pride and acceptance our community had worked so hard to develop would be diminished by talking openly (especially to a largely heterosexual audience) about domestic violence in gay and lesbian couples. I resisted the impulse to protest, "But such things don't happen in our community!" and offered to consult with a lesbian colleague at our counseling service and get back to them. Partly as a result of that consultation, I understood that my apprehension was also based on ignorance. Although I had read in newspapers about some incidents which ended tragically and hence got a lot of public attention, I really did not know much about domestic violence in same-sex relationships—how often it occurred, under what circumstances, and to what extent it was similar to or different from domestic violence in heterosexual couples. The issue had certainly never been addressed in my years of course work and in-service training. My colleague offered to do the presentation based on her clinical work with couples and her knowledge of some inclusive community resources. However, in the course of the planning, it became clear to both of

us that there was not a lot in the professional literature and no sourcebooks which addressed the topic directly and comprehensively.

Violence in Gay and Lesbian Domestic Partnerships, published simultaneously as a special issue of *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* (Volume 4, Number 1), contributes to filling that void. In the introduction to the volume, Pam Elliott asserts that violence occurs in same-sex couples with about the same frequency as in heterosexual couples, that the nature of the violence (emotional, physical, and sexual) is similar in many ways, and that the dynamics of same-sex violence (such as the reasons why some people behave abusively—a matter expanded upon in a later chapter by Ned Farley reporting on a qualitative study of perpetrators—and why victims may remain in abusive relationships) are also similar. Key differences are related to the fact that understanding of domestic abuse has traditionally been linked to sexism, a perspective that has much less utility in same-sex situations, and, most compellingly, to the homophobia in our society. It has taken longer for both community members and helping professionals to recognize and acknowledge the existence of abuse in same-sex couples. There have been fewer resources available for the victims. Both the lower level of community awareness and the limited resources have contributed to victims being more reluctant to report their experiences and hence to their remaining isolated.

This slender volume is divided into three sections, the first on theoretical perspectives. In "Ruling the Exceptions: Same-Sex Battering and Domestic Violence Theory," Gregory Merrill

reviews the relevant literature and convincingly makes the case that domestic violence theory needs to be comprehensive and "account for both sociopolitical and psychological dynamics, and their complex, often intertwined relationship" (p.19) if it is to enhance our understanding and treatment of same-sex abuse. He focuses on a couple of theoretical perspectives which he endorses as useful starting points. In their chapter, "Definition of Roles in Abusive Lesbian Relationships," Becky Marrujo and Mary Kreger use extensive clinical data as the basis for postulating the existence of a role in abusive lesbian relationships other than the traditional ones of "perpetrator" and "victim": that of "participant"—those who engage in "a repeated pattern of physical and/or emotional aggression in response to the partner's aggressive act."

If domestic violence in same-sex couples can be seen involving a double-closet of sorts, abuse in relationships between lesbian and gay people of color might reasonably be construed as a triple closet. The chapters by Charlene Waldron and by Juan M. Èndez, which comprise the second section of the book, address the relatedness and destructive effects of homophobia and racism, concentrating on their impact on victims of domestic violence and on workers striving to help them. A later article by Patrick Letellier focuses on similar dynamics with different specifics—the "twin epidemics" of domestic violence and HIV infection among gay and bisexual men.

The final section of the book is made up of five articles which (including the one by Letellier) discuss service provision. Unfortunately, more is promised than is delivered, at least in significant depth. The first brief article, by the editor Claire Renzetti, uses a survey of practitioners to make clear how scarce are services related to lesbian battering. The suggestions she makes for improving services are disappointingly limited in both number and scope. Somewhat better suggestions are pro-

vided by Kevin Hamberger in his discussion of violence in gay relationships, although they are not discussed in detail. Key among his suggestions is the need for greater education of mental health professionals regarding the subject. The final two articles present treatment models in more satisfying and useful depth. Arlene Istar discusses the confluence of family systems theory, gay-affirmative therapy, and feminist analysis of domestic violence in working with abusive lesbian couples. She stresses the importance of a sensitive and comprehensive initial assessment as foundational to successful outcomes. Dan Byrne, after recapitulating a fair amount of the theoretical material presented in earlier chapters, presents interesting models for both individual and group treatment.

In the end, one is left wishing for more, especially specific suggestions for increasing community and professional awareness and more detailed discussions of approaches to treatment. Although each chapter contains extensive lists of other references, the editors missed the obvious opportunity to include a list of general community resources. It might have been difficult to assemble such a list indexed by locale, especially since such information is obsolete quickly, but relevant national hotlines and Internet resources could certainly have been highlighted. Even taking these concerns into account, the volume can be seen as making a contribution toward expanding professional understanding and intervention in this previously deeply-closeted realm.

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