

Beyond Ideologies:

By Janice L. Ristock

We all know too well that in our lives as women we live under the threat of male violence. All girls and women are potential targets. Given this larger social context, it makes sense that lesbians have often talked about lesbian relationships as positive alternatives to potentially abusive heterosexual ones. In fact, many lesbian feminist theorists in the mid to late 70s stressed the ideal that lesbian relationships were voluntary, consensual, based on affection and compatibility rather than on the same social factors that bind heterosexual relationships, such as children, economic dependency, and institutionalized heterosexuality (e.g., Brown, R.M., 1971; Daly, M. 1978; Myron and Bunch, 1975). Even Masters and Johnson (1979) wrote positively of lesbian couples that they were more likely to use 'egalitarian principles' in their relationships and to communicate better than heterosexuals about their sex lives. Many lesbian feminists described lesbian identity as being essentially nurturant, cooperative, more spiritual than sexual and focused on connections with other women (Daly, 1978; Faderman, 1981; Ferguson, 1982). This literature, often written in response to the traditionally negative views of lesbianism, was a welcome change from earlier mainstream conceptualizations of lesbians as deviant and sick. Much current lesbian literature continues to celebrate lesbianism, viewing it not only as a sexual orientation but as a political choice made in rebellion against male dominance and oppression (Kreiger, 1982). But the ideologies embedded in these writings often idealize lesbian relationships and lesbian identities. This is a limiting and harmful tendency: limiting because based on reductionist and essentialist thinking about lesbian identities and the nature of lesbian relationships (Phelan, 1989); harmful because negative

aspects of lesbian relationships become difficult to discuss.

As lesbians we have often contributed to maintaining a reductionist vision of our relationships in response to the larger context of our lives which includes homophobia, heterosexism and misogyny. Heterosexism (the assumption that the world must be and is heterosexual) is the system that creates the climate for homophobia (the irrational fear and hatred of homosexuals) (Pharr, 1988). Both are experienced by lesbians daily, at work, in families and in the assumptions and practices of society. Like other women, lesbians also experience misogyny; examples of woman-hating and sexism are pandemic. In response to this context, lesbians may come to view their relationships as alternative, idyllic, loving places that provide shelter. Some lesbians are, however, beginning to speak out about their experiences within abusive relationships.

Violence in lesbian relationships is an issue that has not been much discussed, in part because of the reluctance of the lesbian feminist community to acknowledge that women can be abusive in relationships. The silence is also due to the fear that open discussion will generate even more negative images about the lesbian community than the stereotypes and prejudices that society already holds. The issue of violence in lesbian relationships first began to be publicly discussed in 1983 by the Lesbian Task Force of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence in Washington. In 1986, Kerry Lobel edited a volume entitled *Naming The Violence* which describes lesbians' personal experiences of abuse within their relationships. To date there is only a handful of articles that address this issue. Carol Renzetti (1988) comments that lesbian abuse is a hidden problem much as child abuse and spouse abuse were 20 years ago.

My writings on this issue come from my involvement in a research project with two colleagues — Laurie Chesley and Donna MacAulay¹; this paper draws on some of the information we gained from our research project. After dealing with some of the myths that exist and offering a framework for understanding lesbian abuse, I will review some of the research that has been done in this area and examine the discourse that has arisen within lesbian and feminist communities in our efforts to work for change.

A Definition of Abuse in Lesbian Relationships

Abuse in lesbian relationships can be defined as a pattern of behaviour in which physical and emotional coercion or violence is used to gain or maintain power or control. Abuse may take many forms including physical abuse (hitting, punching, choking), sexual abuse (forcing sexual acts, sexual assaults with objects), psychological/emotional abuse (repetitive and excessive criticizing, humiliation, degradation, threats), economic abuse (controlling finances, creating debt), property destruction (destruction of personal items).

This definition of what constitutes abuse is consistent with the literature defining and describing heterosexual battering (e.g. MacLeod, L. 1987; Ni Garthy, G. 1986; Schecter, S. 1982). An additional component of lesbian abuse is related to one's lesbian identity, a threat made possible by homophobia and misogyny.

In the early stages of understanding heterosexual violence, feminists focused on exposing the many myths surrounding issues such as rape and wife assault. Similarly, many myths exist about lesbian abuse and need to be exposed. Some of the myths reflect the essentialist tendency of

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certain feminist theories which imply that women cannot be perpetrators of violence. Other myths reflect certain homophobic assumptions about the nature of lesbian existence. The following are some of the most common beliefs.

Some Common Myths about Abuse

Myth: Lesbian relationships are never abusive.

Despite an assumption that lesbians are always caring, supportive and gentle, in some relationships, violence does exist. This myth has been disproven by the testimonies of lesbians who are speaking out about the abuse in their relationships (Edington, A. 1989; Simone, 1986).

Myth: Lesbian violence occurs in 'butch and femme' relationships. The 'butch' is the batterer and the 'femme' the victim.

Beyond the fact that most lesbians do not assume explicitly butch-femme roles, the roles themselves do not automatically dictate who has more power in the relationship. When these roles are present in violent relationships, it is sometimes the 'femme' who does the battering (Ni Garthy, 1986).

Myth: Abuse between lesbians is mutual. Both partners contribute equally to the violence.

Despite the belief that lesbian relationships are always equal partnerships, in violent relationships there is generally a perpetrator and a victim. Violence is used by the perpetrator as a means to maintain control within the relationship (Lobel, 1986; Renzetti, 1988).

Myth: Abusive lesbian relationships

involve apolitical lesbians who are part of the lesbian bar culture.

Abuse cuts across the lines of race, class, age and political orientation (Renzetti, 1988).

Myth: Lesbian battering is caused by substance abuse, stress, childhood violence or provocation.

Although these factors may help explain why an abuser acts the way she does, there is not a simple cause and effect relationship between them (MacLeod, 1987; Ni Garthy, 1986). Abusers have choices and are responsible for their violent behaviour. These myths exist as attempts to provide explanations for abuse in lesbian relationships. However, they do not reflect an understanding or analysis of this type of abuse.

How Can We Understand Violence in Lesbian Relationships?

Our feminist analyses of violence against women are applicable to understanding violence in lesbian relationships. Generally, violence against women has been identified by feminists as sexual violence (whether or not it involves rape) as an instrument used by men to oppress women (Kelly, 1988). That men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators of violence against women and children (Schechter, 1982; Kelly, 1988) is understood as stemming from patriarchy which has allowed men to assume power over women including rights of sexual access. Thus power, sexuality and social control have been central factors in the feminist analysis of violence against women (Kelly, 1988).

Violence in lesbian relationships can also be seen as a part of this continuum of

violence against women, the roots of which are in the hierarchical, oppressive structures of our society. For instance, we know that the socialization process teaches us to accept violence as a form of power and control and that this acceptance is deeply ingrained and systematic. Even lesbians, then, learn violence and hatred against women. But despite this common ground with male violence against women, the context of violence in lesbian relationships is slightly different: we will not understand lesbian violence until we broaden the conceptual framework to explore the impact of internalized misogyny and homophobia.

Feminists identify male acts of violence as examples of misogyny. We can similarly understand acts of violence against women by women as a form of internalized misogyny since we are well aware of the examples of woman-hating that exist in our culture. We can also understand lesbian violence as a result of institutionalized and internalized homophobia and heterosexism. Homophobia can significantly impair the self-esteem of some lesbians and can isolate lesbian couples and add stress to their relationship. Research by Bologna, Waterman & Dawson (1987) supports this view. Their survey research on 70 gay and lesbian college students about conflict in relationships found that lesbians receive even less societal and familial support for their relationships and experience greater social isolation than gay men. They go on to suggest that social isolation, as a result of homophobia, is a factor that may contribute to violence in lesbian relationships. Thus the ideologies of misogyny and homophobia reinforce one another well, being both rooted in and perpetuating a society which fears homosexuals and hates women. An understanding of the impact of internalized fear and hatred must be included in our analysis of vio-

lence against women. But we are only at the beginning stages of understanding the extent, dynamics and forms of abuse within lesbian relationships.

Research on Lesbian Assault and Abuse

To date, there are no reliable statistics to show whether abuse is more or less prevalent in the lesbian community than in the heterosexual population. Studies have attempted to identify the incidence of lesbian battering but there has been little consistency in these results. In part, the problem with getting numbers reflects a larger social problem: there are few places that lesbians can turn to for support if they have been battered or for reporting their experiences. As well, studies have to rely on non-random samples and on self-reporting measures. But we do know that in Canada and in the United States many lesbians have been calling battered women's services seeking help (Renzetti, 1989; MacAulay, Chesley & Ristock, 1988). The study by Bologna, Waterman, & Dawson (1987) that surveyed gay and lesbian college students in New York about 'conflict resolution tactics' used in relationships provides one estimate of the prevalence of violence. Of the seventy respondents (all volunteers) 36 were lesbians and 34 were gay men. The participants came from many socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds and ranged in age from 17-37. The results indicate that eighteen percent of the gay men and 40% of the lesbians reported being victims of violence in their current or most recent relationship. Aside from the small sample, this study may have attracted participants who had a higher level of conflict in their relationships because of the focus of the study on conflict resolution tactics. But despite this limitation, the results indicate that violence is a serious problem for some and perhaps many gay and lesbian couples.

Our own research (Chesley, MacAulay & Ristock, 1991) supports their findings. We conducted a survey of women in Toronto attending a lecture on lesbian sex given by Joanne Loulan, a well known lesbian writer. We distributed 550 questionnaires and received 189 responses. The questionnaires were anonymous and a stamped envelope was provided for returning the questionnaires. Sections in the questionnaire included forced-choice

items that were derived from the literature (Renzetti, 1988; Lobel, 1986). The following sections were included: demographic information; estimated prevalence of lesbian violence in relationships; the resources utilized for assistance in dealing with the abuse; and the resources that women feel are lacking to best respond to this issue. The majority of our respondents were white, middle-class lesbians, 87% (164) were between the ages of 26-50, 60% (124) had some college or university education or a college diploma or B.A., 76% (144) earned between \$15,000-\$40,000 annually. This Toronto-based sample is not representative of the diverse lesbian communities across Canada. In particular it does not represent the experiences of many working-class lesbians or lesbians of colour. In this sample, 66% (125) of the 189 respondents indicated that they knew of lesbians who have experienced abuse in their relationships and 73% (139) felt that abuse is a problem in the lesbian community. Further, 20% (37) of the 189 respondents perceived themselves as survivors of some form of psychological, physical and/or sexual violence in their lesbian relationships. Again the results suggest that this is a significant issue for the lesbian community.

One of the most thorough studies completed to date has been the research of Claire Renzetti (1988). Renzetti (1988) looked more specifically at the types of abuse lesbians experienced in their relationship (this research does not focus on prevalence of abuse). She distributed a brochure on lesbian battering to Philadelphia-area women's organizations, bookstores and bars. Each brochure gave information on how to receive a copy of a questionnaire and be part of a research study on violence in lesbian relationships. She also placed ads in local newspapers and sent copies of the questionnaire to over 1000 gay and lesbian organizations throughout the United States and Canada. More than 200 requests for questionnaires were received and 100 were completed and returned by lesbians who identified themselves as victims of battering. Most of the respondents were from the northeastern (34%) and the midwestern (22%) states, were white (96%), 26-35 years old (47%), and lived alone at the time of the study (44%). In the questionnaire she asked lesbians to identify from a 33-item list the types of abuse they experienced. The most common forms of physical abuse that

were experienced frequently or sometimes were pushing and shoving (75%), hitting with fists or open hands (65%), scratching or hitting the face, breasts or genitals. Psychological abuse was more frequent than physical abuse. Verbal threats were the most common form of psychological abuse (70%), followed by demeaning respondents in front of friends, relatives and strangers, (64%), as well as abusers damaging and destroying respondents' property (51%). The least common but still significant forms of violence that were reported were sexual abuse and extreme forms of physical abuse such as stabbing, shooting, cigarette burns and inserting knives or guns in the vagina. Thus as in heterosexual violence all forms of violence exist within lesbian relationships.

The research by Renzetti (1988) is also revealing about the dynamics of abusive relationships. Her results indicate that perpetrators (according to the responses of the victims) were more dependent on their partners and more likely to inflict abuse with greater frequency when their partners desired independence; they made more of the decisions and were less yielding. As in heterosexual relationships, violence is used as the weapon to assure and maintain power and control.

In our survey (Chesley, MacAulay & Ristock, 1991), we asked lesbians who were victims of violence (n=37) to comment on the factors that they felt contributed to the abuse in their relationships. Most respondents attributed the abuse to psychological or individualistic factors. For example, 65% (24) cited the personality traits of their abusive partner, 32% (12) mentioned the dynamics specific to their relationship as a factor contributing to the abuse, 38% (14) mentioned ongoing conflict in the relationship, 51% (19) of the respondents also cited alcohol/drug abuse as well as history of abuse as a child as factors that contributed to their partners' violence. Social factors were also mentioned in the responses. Approximately 30% (11) of the respondents named homophobia and isolation as factors which they felt contributed to the abuse, 27% (10) indicated a lack of social supports as another factor and 22% (8) mentioned secrecy of their lesbian relationship as a contributing factor to abuse. Thus even though lesbians are well aware of the negative effect of the larger context of homophobia and isolation on their relationships, most look within their relation-

ships (specifically at characteristics of the perpetrator) to explain the abuse. Yet Suzanne Pharr (1988) in her book *Homophobia—a weapon of sexism* writes that we have yet to fully understand the effects of homophobia and sexism on lesbians' lives. In my view, these are factors that contribute to lesbian violence and that must be examined in future research if we are to understand the desire

Responses to Lesbian Battering

Many barriers exist when trying to theorize this aspect of lesbian relationships within lesbian feminist communities. These barriers are found in the diverse discourses that have been constructed to explain and respond to the issue. The reactions and explanations that I have most commonly heard about understand-

2. *Abuse Occurs But It Is Different*
common responses:

- Violence between lesbians is mutual
- Lesbian relationships are equal, share power — the reasons for the violence and the effects are different
- The abuser is a woman and is oppressed in the same way as the battered lesbian — we should work with the battered lesbian and her abuser together

AS LESBIANS AND FEMINISTS OUR EFFORTS MUST BE TO PLACE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THIS FORM OF VIOLENCE ON THE CONTINUUM OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.



for power and control in relationships involving two women.

This review of some of the sparse research that exists on lesbian battering suggests that it is important to continue to 'name the violence' in lesbian relationships. The research to date raises more questions than it does provide answers. Two questions, in particular, are important for us to consider within our communities and in our work for social change—how do we theorize abuse in lesbian relationships and what strategies will we employ for responding to this issue?

Louise Armstrong (1990) in a recent article entitled "Making an Issue of Incest" gives her assessment of where we have gone over the last ten years in our responses to incest. She writes about the intentions of the women's movement: "In breaking the silence, we hoped to raise hell.... We hoped to raise a passion for change. Instead what we raised was discourse and a sizable problem-management industry" (p. 43). Her words are provocative. They have caused me to think about where we are going in the lesbian feminist community as researchers, therapists and activists in our efforts to address abuse in lesbian relationships. We too have taken as our starting place breaking the silence, coming out about this issue. But we also need to think about where our discourse on this issue is taking us if we are to mount a political, not just a therapeutic response to this issue.

ing violence in lesbian relationships can be categorized into four main responses: 1. Abuse between lesbians does not occur; 2. Abuse occurs, but lesbians are different; 3. Abuse occurs, but only with certain types of lesbians; 4. Abuse occurs within the context of homophobia and misogyny. The responses within the categories are linked to certain ideological assumptions that are made about the nature of lesbians and lesbian relationships. The ideologies, in turn, may dictate and shape a route of action that will be taken to address the issue. My contention is that we need many strategies for responding to this issue.

The categories, the common responses that are made under each and the implied action embedded within the responses can be summarized as follows:

1. *Abuse in Lesbian Relationships Does Not Happen*

common responses:

- Lesbians are gentle, loving and caring
- Lesbians by nature are non-violent
- Violence among lesbians is rare: Merely the exception that proves the rule

Implied action: don't talk about it, or minimize the abuse.

Implied action: do something different within the lesbian community.

3. *Abuse Occurs But Only Amongst Certain Types of Lesbians*

common responses:

- Abuse occurs in: S/M relationships
- butch/femme relationships
- non-feminist relationships
- abuse occurs amongst lesbians with drinking/drug problems, history of child abuse

Implied action: treat individual lesbians; illness-cure model, pathology model, focus on individuals

4. *Abuse Occurs In The Context Of A Misogynist And Homophobic World*

common responses:

- violence in lesbian relationships is similar to heterosexual battering
- violence must be understood in the larger social context
- there is a perpetrator and a victim in an abusive lesbian relationship
- this form of violence is used to gain power and control in a relationship.

Implied action: follow the responses made to heterosexual battering. Work to eliminate homophobia and heterosexism.

All of these responses have been made within lesbian feminist communities as an attempt to understand and explain this form of violence. All of these responses have some validity. Some can be dis-

missed as myths based on the research that has been done to date, but many of the explanations offer partial truths. For example, abuse may occur amongst lesbians with drinking problems and may also be used as a way for the perpetrator to gain power and control in her relationship. Thus the categories of responses are not in and of themselves sufficient in explaining abuse. We need complex and multilayered responses.

But underlying the categories are specific ideologies that need to be grappled with. They reflect certain views about the nature of lesbians and lesbian relationships. For example, many of the categories (eg, 1, 2 & 3) reflect an adherence to essentialism and/or liberal humanism. A reliance solely on these understandings is limiting for our responses to this issue. If we focus on the different nature of lesbians, as essentialism does, or on certain individual lesbians or types of lesbians, as liberal humanism does, then we may lose sight of the larger social context that gives rise to violence against women in our society. Thus we run the risk of following a similar de-politicized path and perhaps developing a therapeutic specialization, as Armstrong (1990) notes in the case of the responses to incest, but not a social change focus.

As lesbians and feminists our efforts must be to place our understanding of this form of violence on the continuum of violence against women. Our larger goal will then be to work towards social change. However, if we only attend to the larger goal of societal change (as in category 4, the social constructionist position) we may lose sight of the needs of individual lesbians. Our task then is to understand how ideologies operate to affect lesbian identities and shape community responses.

Celia Kitzinger (1989) in an article entitled "Liberal Humanism, an ideology of social control: the regulation of lesbian identities," argues that lesbian communities have been encouraged to construct identities that reaffirm the basic validity of the dominant moral order. She discusses the romantic love and true happiness texts that lesbians may use to explain their relationship and identities. For example, "I fell in love and she happened to be a woman" (true love text to explain one's lesbianism) or "being a lesbian has allowed me to find my true self and get in touch with my inner feelings" (true happiness text to explain lesbianism). Accord-

ing to Kitzinger (1989) these texts support the ideology of the well-adjusted lesbian and have the effect of making lesbianism acceptable within the dominant order. Thus lesbianism becomes depoliticized. The view of lesbianism as a personal issue creates a context that makes it difficult to discuss the political aspects of lesbianism both within the heterosexual community and the 'assimilated' lesbian community (Kitzinger, 1989).

In our research (Chesley, McAulay and Ristock, 1991) respondents gave individualistic and personal attributions to explain the abuse. This is understandable when you are in an abusive situation and dealing with the issue on a personal level. But if we are interested in addressing the larger social factors that give rise to abuse we need to maintain a political focus and not lose sight of the fact that lesbianism challenges existing social institutions and social orders. Thus in our responses to lesbian abuse our strategies for responding to this issue must take into account the larger context of misogyny, homophobia and heterosexism. This different context of lesbian's lives is significant when developing our analysis and our individual and community responses to this issue.

The challenge facing us is to move beyond the limiting and harmful ideologies that exist within the dominant order and that construct and shape lesbian identities and relationships and our understanding of them.

Conclusion

In summary, part of our work for social change is to resist the ideologies that construct limiting, essentialist myths about lesbian existence. We have to create an atmosphere where more women can speak openly and freely about their experiences within abusive lesbian relationships if we are to gain a greater understanding of this issue. It is also clear that we need to work to combat homophobia so that lesbians can feel support for their relationships.

Work to date suggests many directions for future research. We know that lesbian violence exists but we need other studies that examine the incidence of violence and examine it in cities across Canada. Further we need studies that explore the dynamics of abusive lesbian relationships so that we can understand more specifically how issues of power and control

operate and manifest themselves. We also need to explore the effects of the larger context on lesbians' lives. I have suggested that both homophobia and misogyny are components that need to be a part of our framework for understanding violence but we need research to document how these forces interact and are internalized and how they function within relationships between lesbians.

We also need to educate social services and the lesbian and feminist communities about this issue and begin to develop supportive responses. For instance, we need shelters that welcome lesbians who have been abused, we need groups and counsellors who will work with lesbian perpetrators and we need support groups and counsellors who will work with lesbians who have been abused. The literature that exists and the testimonies of many lesbians suggest that the same hierarchies of power, entitlement, ownership and control can exist in lesbian relationships as in heterosexual relationships.

Whatever the incidence and however unsettling the acknowledgement of lesbian violence, together we must continue to work to eradicate all forms of violence against women.

¹Laurie Chesley, Donna MacAulay and I worked together for over two years on our research project. We have recently completed a resource manual entitled *Abuse in Lesbian Relationships: a handbook of information and resources*. Toronto Counselling Centre for Lesbians and Gays. This paper has emerged from some of the work that we did together — I would like to thank Laurie and Donna for their support.

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FLO SICOLI

Memory is Resistance

You and I exist
to serve
Father Consciousness.

History is His Story
of domesticating
our planet, bodies, minds.

The jackboots still rampage
through desert, forest and home,
laying waste life and blood.

The code of Father Consciousness
says blood is just an abstraction,
a computer game
called Desert Storm.

Violence in my planet and home
keeps me dreaming
of what wants remembering.

The old woman on the hill
wants a talk
with my consciousness.

Memory
is the beginning
of resistance.

ANDRINE LEDUC

Mountain Woman

Have you touched them?
The velvet petals of a rose,
too long without water.
Like wounds that never bled.
Almost red.
Have you seen them?
Beautiful smokey crystals,
touched but never felt.
Shining in the dead of night.
Almost White.
Listen to the winds of change,
Mountain Woman.
After a hundred years of slumber,
the spirits are awake,
dancing life's rhythms.
Can't you see the yellow of their eyes?
Dawn breaks.
Your own eyes, careful.
Like pools of liquid black.
Carrying the people forward,
carrying the people back.
Speak Mountain Woman,
and I will Listen.