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Sexual and Physical Abuse: A Comparison Between Lesbians and Their Heterosexual Sisters

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The purpose of this study was to investigate similarities and differences in the incidence and patterns of abuse experienced by lesbians and their heterosexual sisters. In a matched sample of 324 lesbian/heterosexual sister pairs, the lesbians reported a greater incidence than their sisters of childhood physical and sexual abuse, as well as adult sexual abuse. Both groups identified male relatives as the most common perpetrator of both childhood physical and sexual abuse. Male relatives were most commonly identified as perpetrators of adult physical abuse and male strangers were most commonly identified as adult sexual abusers. Our results demonstrate that both sexual and physical abuse are common experiences for lesbian and heterosexual women; however, since the context of these experiences is different, each group will have special needs for services and treatment.

KEYWORDS lesbian, sexual abuse, physical abuse, perpetrators, clinical practice

INTRODUCTION

The high incidence in the United States of physical and sexual violence against women and girls is well documented (Bachman & Saltzman, 1995; Hedin, 2000; Straus & Gelles, 1990). According to the National Violence Against Women Survey, 52% of 8,000 women surveyed reported that they had been physically assaulted during their lifetime, and 18% reported having been raped (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Although some survey research also documents the incidence of lifetime physical and sexual violence in lesbian samples (e.g., Morris & Balsam, 2003), few studies examine and compare matched samples of lesbians and heterosexual women from the same family. The absence of controlled, comparative studies of the incidence of violence against lesbians is a salient limitation of this literature.

The research literature that details the incidence and patterns of childhood and adult abuse described by heterosexual women and lesbians often report disparate findings, which make synthesis of this literature and analysis of between-group differences difficult. Explanations for these disparities mostly rest upon methodology and include: (a) differences in the ways in which abuse is defined in the research; (b) differences in the ways in which respondents interpret these definitions; (c) differences in the age ranges and characteristics of the samples surveyed; (d) cohort differences in respondents' willingness to divulge abuse; and (e) small sample sizes. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate similarities and differences in the incidence and patterns of abuse experienced by lesbians and their heterosexual sisters using a methodologically sound design.

Incidence and Patterns of Childhood Physical and Sexual Abuse

The reported incidence by women of childhood sexual abuse has ranged widely from about 15% (Finkelhor, 1984) to 62% (Wyatt, 1985). In an effort to resolve these discrepant findings, a recent summary of the data suggests that 20% of women report a history of childhood sexual abuse (Leventhal, 1998). Among lesbian samples, reports of childhood sexual abuse also vary widely, ranging from about 11.5% (Gundlach, 1977) to 39% (Roberts & Sorensen, 1999). Among a national sample of lesbians attending lectures at women's centers, 38% reported a history of sexual abuse (Loulan, 1987), and in a national sample of 1,925 lesbians, Bradford, Ryan, and Rothblum (1994) reported that 21% had a childhood history of "rape or sexual attack" (p. 233).

Inconsistent findings regarding the incidence of sexual abuse during childhood between heterosexual women and lesbians makes it difficult to compare the rates of victimization among them. Some research suggests that the incidence of childhood sexual abuse reported by lesbians and heterosexual women is roughly equivalent. Brannock and Chapman (1990), for example, reported the same rate of reported childhood sexual abuse among

50 matched pairs of lesbians and heterosexual women. However, the women in this study were not from the same family. In many other studies, the rate of childhood sexual abuse is reported to be significantly higher among lesbians than heterosexual women (Garofolo, Wolf, Kessel, Palfrey, & DuRant, 1998; Hughes, Johnson, & Wilsnack, 2001; Saewyc, Bearinger, Blum, & Resnick, 1999; Tomeo, Templer, Anderson, & Kotler, 2001). But again, none of these comparisons were between women from the same family.

Physical abuse in childhood is also prevalent among lesbians. Morris and Balsam (2003) reported that among a large national survey of 2,431 lesbians, almost 31% had been physically abused. However, another investigation using a population-based survey reported no significant differences between lesbian and heterosexual women in regards to parental physical maltreatment (Corliss, Cochran, & Mays, 2002). Unfortunately, despite surveying 1644 women, this study yielded only 37 who self-identified as lesbian or bisexual.

Incidence and Patterns of Adult Physical and Sexual Abuse

Previous research of the occurrence of physical and sexual abuse among lesbians has reported prevalence rates of about 20%. Morris and Balsam (2003), in a large national survey of 2,431 lesbians, found that 21% reported adult physical abuse. Similarly, Bradford et al. (1994), reporting data from the National Lesbian Health Care Study, found that 20% of respondents reported a history of "rape or sexual attack" during adulthood. Rates of adult abuse among lesbians and heterosexual women are reported to be similar (Hughes et al., 2001).

A good deal of research about violence against adult lesbians and heterosexual women has been framed as issues of intimate partner violence and hate crimes. Similar incidence rates of physical and sexual violence against heterosexual and lesbian populations are reported of between 20% and 30% (Brand & Kidd, 1986). However, contrary reports are common: Research suggests that the incidence rate of partner violence in lesbian relationships is both significantly more and significantly less than that of heterosexual women (e.g., Tjaden, Thoennes, & Allison, 1999; West, 2002).

Anti-lesbian hate crimes are even more difficult to study. Accurate assessment of the incidence of hate crimes is difficult because these crimes are underreported. Still, one large academic survey of self-identified lesbians reports that about 20% of lesbians report at least one physical assault as a result of their sexual orientation (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999).

In summary, the literature on lifetime sexual and physical abuse experienced by lesbians is rife with disparate reports of prevalence, particularly in

key areas such as partner violence and experience of childhood abuse. Most likely these issues are due to methodological problems discussed above. In this study, we address these issues by surveying a large sample self-identified lesbians and their matched self-identified heterosexual sisters. Our goals are to understand whether lesbians experience abuse differently from heterosexual women. Positive or negative results will inform hypotheses of lesbian development incorporating abuse and our understanding of lesbianism as a risk factor for abuse.

METHODS

Design

Lesbians as a minority population are notoriously difficult to study (Rothblum & Factor, 2001). Population-based studies of lesbians typically have had small sample sizes, which limit the generalizability of their results. Moreover, population-based studies of lesbians do not guarantee a representative sample of lesbians because they depend on participants' willingness to disclose their sexual orientation to the researcher. To remedy these problems, Dibble, Roberts, and Nussey (2004) employed an unusual sampling protocol pioneered by Rothblum and Factor, which uses a convenience sample of lesbians with their heterosexual sisters as a control group. This report is a secondary analysis of that data.

Procedures

The procedures and instrument have been described previously (Dibble et al., 2004; Roberts, Dibble, Nussey, & Casey, 2003). This study was reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Committee. We distributed surveys to English-speaking women throughout the state of California, aged 40 and older, who identified themselves as lesbians. The age limit was imposed by initial studies' requirements for this data set. Questionnaire packets were mailed to interested individuals and were handed out at venues where lesbians gather. Survey completion indicated consent. The surveys were self-administered and anonymous. Each lesbian participant was asked to give a survey to her sister, who could reside outside of California, closest in age. In addition to the survey, packets included three postage-paid envelopes for returning the survey, distributing to the sister, and the sister's returning the survey. Nothing on the survey "outed" the lesbian to her sister. A total of 370 sister pairs returned their survey ($n = 740$). Sisters that identified themselves as lesbians or bisexual were eliminated from the analyses, leaving a total of 324 sister pairs ($n = 648$) in the sample. The number of distributed packets is unknown; therefore response rate cannot be calculated.

Measures

The 90-item survey form was created, pilot tested, and revised before being used for this study. Many of these items had been used successfully in other studies (e.g., Roberts et al., 2003). Twenty-five items queried demographic factors. To assess sexual orientation, subjects were asked to classify themselves as bisexual, heterosexual, lesbian, or other. Subjects were asked about their sexual activity and the gender of their partners during the prior year and over their lifetimes.

Four items pertained to history of sexual or physical abuse asked as permutations of the following phrase: "Were you ever sexually/physically abused or assaulted as an adult/child (16 or older/ less than 16 years old)?" (See Silverman, Reinherz, and Giaconia (1996) for a discussion of the validity of similar single question abuse measures for adolescents.) We chose age 16 as the marker between childhood and adulthood. When respondents answered "yes" to a question about abuse, they were asked to specify their relationship to the abuser. Choices consisted of: "male relative," "female relative," "male stranger," "female stranger," "male neighbor," "female neighbor," or "other." If respondents answered "other," they were asked to provide an original response. We sorted their responses into the following categories: "family friend," "non-parental caretaker," "acquaintance," "date rape," "partner," "miscellaneous," and "unknown." The survey took between 45 and 60 minutes to complete.

Data Management and Analyses

We used the SPSS statistical software package (SPSS, Version 12, 2003) for data management and analyses. Data were double entered into SPSS, and discrepancies resolved. Comparisons between the sisters were generated using paired *t* tests, the Bowker's statistic, and McNemars' chi square as appropriate for the type of data. When comparing traits within populations with mixed matched and unmatched pairs, for example, all lesbian victims of sexual abuse vs. all heterosexual victims of sexual abuse, frequencies and Chi Square statistics are reported. Significance was set at $p \leq 0.05$.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Lesbians in the sample differed significantly from their heterosexual sisters with regard to age, education, employment status, personal income, living arrangements, and residence area (Table 1). Also as expected, sexual behavior over the past year and lifetime differed between the two groups. While heterosexual sisters overwhelmingly reported lifetime sexual experiences with only men (94.7%), the majority of lesbians (78.8%) reported having sexual

TABLE 1 Demographic Comparison of Lesbians and Their Heterosexual Sisters

Variable	Lesbians (n = 324) Mean (SD)	Sisters (n = 324) Mean (SD)	Statistic paired <i>t</i>	Significance <i>p</i>
Age (years)	49.7 (7.8)	48.9 (8.4)	2.59	.01
Education (years)	17.5 (2.9)	15.4 (2.7)	11.12	<.001
Menarche (years)	12.8 (1.8)	12.7 (1.4)	0.57	.571
	n (%)	n (%)	McNemar's χ^2	<i>p</i>
Ethnicity				
White	282 (87.0)	280 (86.4)	.33	.56
Other	42 (13.0)	44 (13.6)		
Employment status				
Employed full-time	226 (69.8)	182 (56.4)	16.00	<.001
Other	96 (29.7)	141 (43.7)		
Disability status				
Disabled	10 (3.1)	11 (3.4)	Undefined	1.00
Other	314 (96.9)	312 (96.6)		
Retired				
Yes	39 (12.1)	32 (9.9)	1.19	.27
No	284 (71.5)	291 (90.1)		
Living Alone				
Yes	92 (28.5)	57 (17.6)	11.5	<.001
No	231 (71.5)	266 (82.4)		
Relationship Status				
Married/Partnered	189 (58.7)	238 (73.5)	1.68	<.001
Other	133 (41.3)	85 (26.2)		
	n (%)	n (%)	Bowker's	<i>p</i>
Menopausal status				
Pre	90 (30.9)	96 (33.0)	.71	.87
Peri	81 (27.8)	79 (27.2)		
Post	120 (41.2)	116 (39.9)		
Area lived				
Urban	160 (50.6)	82 (26.0)	52.6	<.0001
Suburban	91 (28.8)	120 (39.0)		
Other	65 (20.6)	108 (34.2)		
Personal income				
<30,000	67 (21.8)	122 (39.6)	51.59	<.0001
30,000–59,999	108 (35.1)	120 (39.0)		
60,000–89,999	86 (27.9)	46 (14.9)		
90,000+	47 (15.3)	20 (6.5)		

experiences with both men and women. The great majority of the lesbians in our sample had “come out” to some family members. Almost all (98.8%) of the lesbians reported that at least someone in their family of origin knew they were gay, and 78.8% reported that everyone in their family of origin knew their sexual orientation. We believe our sample represents self-identified lesbians who are open about their sexual orientation.

TABLE 2 Comparison of Physical and Sexual Abuse

	Lesbians n (%)	Sisters n (%)	Statistic McNemar's χ^2	Significance <i>p</i>
Physical Abuse				
Lifetime ^a				
Yes	106 (32.7)	61 (18.8)	19.56	<.001
No	218 (67.3)	263 (81.2)		
In Childhood				
Yes	65 (20.4)	32 (10.0)	16.25	<.001
No	254 (79.6)	287 (90.0)		
As an Adult				
Yes	63 (19.8)	47 (14.8)	2.45	.118
No	255 (80.2)	271 (85.2)		
Sexual Abuse				
Lifetime ^a				
Yes	113 (34.9)	67 (20.7)	18.75	<.001
No	211 (65.1)	257 (79.3)		
In Childhood				
Yes	85 (26.6)	50 (15.7)	12.99	<.001
No	234 (73.4)	269 (84.3)		
As an Adult				
Yes	55 (17.2)	34 (10.7)	5.63	.018
No	264 (82.8)	285 (89.3)		

^aLifetime physical or sexual abuse represents at least one positive response to either of the items assessing the presence of physical or sexual abuse before or after age 16.

Incidence of Abuse

Lesbians reported significantly higher lifetime rates of both types of measured abuse than their matched sisters (48.1% versus 29.9%, $p < 0.001$). See Table 2 for more details. Briefly, more lesbians than heterosexual sisters reported a history of physical and sexual abuse sometime during their lifetime. During childhood, significantly more lesbians than their sisters reported physical and sexual abuse. As an adult, more significantly more lesbians than their sisters reported sexual but not physical abuse.

Perpetrators of Childhood Physical Abuse

The most commonly reported perpetrator of childhood physical abuse among both lesbians and the sisters was a male relative. (See Table 3 for the profiles of perpetrators of physical abuse.) The next major perpetrator was a female relative for both groups. Differences were not statistically significant between groups.

Perpetrators of Childhood Sexual Abuse

The most commonly reported perpetrator of childhood sexual abuse among both lesbians (68.6%) and the sisters (46.9%) was a male relative. (See Table 4

TABLE 3 Profile of Perpetrators: Physical Abuse

	Childhood		Adult	
	Lesbian	Sister	Lesbian	Sister
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Total abused	68 (21%)	31 (10%)	64 (20%)	47 (15%)
Perpetrators				
Male relative	47 (69%)	18 (58%)	15 (23%)	22 (47%)
Female relative	28 (41%)	16 (52%)	4 (6%)	4 (8%)
Male neighbor	5 (7%)	0	2 (3%)	0
Female stranger	3 (4%)	0	2 (3%)	1 (2%)
Male stranger	2 (3%)	0	17 (27%)	7 (15%)
Male acquaintance	1 (1%)	0	3 (5%)	1 (2%)
Partner	0	0	17 (27%)	13 (28%)
Other	0	0	5 (8%)	3 (6%)

TABLE 4 Profile of Perpetrators: Sexual Abuse

	Childhood		Adult	
	Lesbian	Sisters	Lesbian	Sisters
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Total abused	86 (27%)	49 (15%)	55 (17%)	34 (11%)
Perpetrators				
Male relative	59 (69%)	23 (47%)	8 (14%)	4 (12%)
Male neighbor	17 (20%)	16 (33%)	2 (4%)	1 (3%)
Male stranger	11 (13%)	4 (8%)	30 (54%)	12 (35%)
Family friend	6 (7%)	4 (8%)	0	0
Male acquaintance	1 (1%)	3 (6%)	8 (14%)	6 (18%)
Female relative	3 (3%)	1 (2%)	0	0
Date rape	0	0	6 (11%)	8 (24%)
Male partner	0	0	2 (4%)	4 (12%)
Other	6 (7%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)	1 (3%)

for the profiles of perpetrators of sexual abuse.) The difference was statistically significantly between the two groups ($\chi^2 = 5.27$, $p = 0.017$). Male neighbors were the next most common perpetrators for both groups followed by male strangers. Females were rarely identified as perpetrators of childhood sexual abuse.

Perpetrators of Adult Physical Abuse

Male relatives were again the most common perpetrators of physical abuse for lesbians (23.4%) and the sisters (46.6%) in their adulthood. While there was a significant difference between groups ($\chi^2 = 5.65$, $p = 0.017$), it is unclear from the data whether heterosexual women categorized their

spouses as male relatives. Partners were also reported as perpetrators of physical abuse for both lesbians (26.6%) and the sisters (27.7%) with no between group difference ($\chi^2 = 0$, $p = 1.000$). Male strangers were also reported as a common perpetrator of physical abuse for both groups.

Perpetrators of Adult Sexual Abuse

The most commonly reported perpetrator of adult sexual abuse among both lesbians and the sisters was a male stranger. Date rape by a male was the next largest group of perpetrators for the sisters and less so for the lesbians. There were no statistical differences between groups.

Patterns of Physical and Sexual Abuse among Lesbians and Sisters

Lesbians reported similar rates of physical abuse throughout their lives before and after age 16 (20.3% and 19.4%, respectively). In contrast, their heterosexual sisters reported a greater rate of physical abuse after age 16 than before (14.8% and 10.0%, respectively). Both lesbians and their sisters reported higher rates of sexual abuse before age 16 than after it (lesbians = 26.6% versus 17.2%; sisters = 15.7% versus 10.7%).

A pattern of revictimization was common among both the lesbians and heterosexual sisters we surveyed. About half of lesbians (51.9%) and heterosexual sisters (46.4%) reported more than one type of abuse. Furthermore, 25.8% of lesbians and 25.4% of sisters reported both childhood and adult sexual abuse. 24.5% of lesbians and 29.5% sisters reported both childhood and adult physical abuse. Thus revictimization appears to be independent of sexual orientation.

DISCUSSION

Comparison with Earlier Scholarship

In general, our findings add case-controlled validation to and offer insight to questions posed by earlier scholarship. Our findings demonstrate that lesbians are significantly more likely than their heterosexual sisters to report histories of sexual abuse during childhood. In contrast with the report of Tomeo et al. (2001), we found no evidence that a large minority of lesbians were molested as children by females. By far, male relatives were the most common sexual abusers of both groups of women in our sample. In fact, only 1.8% of the lesbians queried and 0.3% of their sisters reported incidence of childhood molestation by women. The differences between our findings and those of Tomeo et al. may be explained by differences in the questions asked on each survey. They queried respondents about "sexual contact" with a woman or girl 5 or more years older and at least 16 years of age, our questionnaire queried for the

presence of “sexual abuse or assault,” terms that imply nonconsensual sexual activity. This difference is, of course, critical. D’Augelli (2003) has reported that self-identified adolescent lesbians, a group that is likely to be sexually active, generally become sexually active at around the age of 16, often with older girls or young women. Thus, what has been interpreted as abuse by Tomeo et al. may be consensual same-sex sexual contact and part of the normal development of lesbian sexual identity.

In addition, our findings demonstrate that lesbians are significantly more likely than their heterosexual sisters to report histories of physical abuse during childhood. These findings concur with those of prior reports (Corliss et al., 2002; Saewyc et al., 1999). Future research should examine the reasons for this from the perspectives of both the lesbian and her abuser. This challenging task would be best understood through qualitative research techniques.

Lesbians in our study were significantly more likely than their heterosexual sisters to be victims of sexual abuse as adults, which confirms previous reports (Duncan, 1990; Tjaden et al., 1999). One prominent study (Hughes et al., 2001) has reported no difference in the incidence of adult sexual abuse among samples of heterosexual women and lesbians; however their study did not control for the familial influence. No studies have determined that lesbians are more likely than heterosexual women to report rape or sexual abuse. There is no empirical evidence to support the view that lesbians may be protected from sexual abuse because they have limited exposure to men.

Our results regarding the incidence of reported physical abuse during adulthood are similar to those reported in two other large surveys of self-identified lesbians that use self-defined measures of physical abuse (Bradford et al., 1994; Morris & Balsam, 2003) and do not differ between the groups. These findings contradict those of Tjaden et al. (1999), who reported that female same-sex cohabitants (presumed lesbian, $n = 79$) are significantly more likely than heterosexual women to report adult physical abuse by intimate partners. We found no significant difference between our study groups. Furthermore, an earlier study using samples of self-identified lesbians showed comparable risk of intimate violence among lesbian and heterosexual couples (West, 2002). Lesbians reported equivalent rates of physical abuse by male relatives, male strangers, and intimate partners. Both same-sex and opposite-sex couples reported similar rates of intimate partner violence in our study; however, it is unclear if heterosexual spouses were classified as male relatives by the heterosexual women. If this were true, then intimate partner violence would be higher for this group rather than the lesbians. More study is needed to answer this question.

Limitations of Study

An inherent bias of this study pertains to our use of self-defined reports of past sexual and physical abuse. The use of self-reports is a subject of much

debate among researchers, particularly among researchers of child maltreatment (e.g., Brier, 1992). Nonetheless, self-reports are accepted as valid, and are frequently used in surveys that assess for abuse. Silvern, Waelde, Baughan, Karyl, and Kaersvang (2000), for example, in their study of child and adolescent abuse, established that single-question assessments of abuse were positively correlated with data from in-depth interviews. However, the gender of the perpetrators of the various types of abuse was not always clear from the items we used. We assumed that the intimate partner violence for the lesbians was with women; however, this may not have been true as many lesbians in our sample had intimate relationships with men.

As some lesbians may be wary of researchers' intent, they may not disclose information that is potentially stigmatizing. Morris and Balsam (2003), for example, reported that some of their subjects, in a preemptive effort to deflect anticipated, unwanted researcher conclusions, specifically advised the researchers that childhood sexual abuse did not cause them to be lesbian. Given these considerations, which would tend to reduce reports of abuse among lesbians, our finding that lesbians reported a higher rate of childhood sexual and physical abuse than their heterosexual sisters is all the more salient.

A final caution: This study did not assess for verbal assault or discrimination, which comprise the two largest sources of anti-lesbian victimization (Morris & Balsam, 2003). Further, because we did not ask questions about our sample's perceptions about the causes of violence, we cannot assess the impact of anti-lesbian attitudes on the incidence and patterns of physical and sexual abuse or if the abuse was in retaliation for gender atypical behavior.

Implications for Clinical Practice and Future Research

At this stage of study of lesbian victimization, there are more questions than answers. First, are lesbians indeed more physically and sexually abused as children than their heterosexual sisters, or do they merely perceive that they are? If they perceive that they are abused more than their sisters, what factors underlie their perceptions of greater risk and abuse? Lesbians are more likely than heterosexuals to be highly educated, mobile, and urban, while heterosexual women are more likely to be married, have children, identify with a formal religion, and be homemakers (Rothblum & Factor, 2001; Tjaden et al., 1999). Do these factors effect lesbians' perceptions of risk and abuse in self-reports? Does the urban life of adult lesbians result in more risk of sexual and physical abuse? Moreover, how do unidentified subgroups of lesbians, for example self-identified femme, butch, or transgender women, within this sample skew the results?

Furthermore, this study begs the question: If lesbians actually suffer greater abuse than their heterosexual sisters, why is this so? The literature

offers a number of possible explanations, but this question currently eludes definitive explication. Does development of a lesbian identity in childhood confer greater risk of abuse on these children? Corliss et al. (2002) suggested that lesbian identity development may indeed increase risk of abuse by increasing adolescent and parental stigma and increasing problem behaviors such as substance abuse. For example, gender atypia may result in persecution and tormenting by others resulting in violence toward both lesbian and heterosexual women.

In any event, whether or not increased abuse of lesbians is real or an artifact of lesbians' perceptions, it has important implications for clinical practice. Psychologists, service providers, and policy makers need to be aware of the increased risk of violence against lesbians. Physical and sexual abuse has a wide range of adverse sequelae including symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychological trauma, physical injury, and economic hardship. Thus, all women including lesbians must be screened for all forms of violence when presenting themselves for physical or psychological assistance from health care providers.

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