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LGBTQ Intimate Partner Violence: The Invisible Relationship

I have personally experienced LGBTQ Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). My topic is important because those who experience intimate partner violence, and who are LGBT or in queer relationships, are not provided information about IPV as often as heterosexual individuals. I hope readers will learn and realize that individuals in the LGBT community can face IPV, and that this issue needs more discussion. IPV is not something that affects one facet of someone's life; it can affect multiple parts.

Introduction

This essay is about Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) intimate partner violence (IPV). I am writing about this because I have personally experienced LGBTQ IPV. This topic is important because those who experience IPV, and who are LGBTQ or in queer relationships, are not provided information about IPV as often as heterosexual individuals. I hope readers will learn and realize that individuals in the LGBTQ community can face IPV and it is something that needs to be discussed and talked about more. IPV is not something that affects one facet of someone's life; it can affect multiple parts. This paper opens with my story of IPV and continues with information that specifically focuses on LGBTQ IPV because of the relationship that I share with it.

High School "Romance"

Our relationship was not always filled with yelling and violence. The beginning of our

relationship was full of happy times and full of so much passion. But when bad times struck, they struck hard. These happy experiences were enough to keep me thinking that the relationship we were in was healthy and that all same-sex relationships were like this. When I look back, even the times she was screaming in my face or inflicting some kind of force on me, I thought what I was going through was normal. She was the first person to whom I mentioned that I like girls”; the first girl I ever fell for and told, “I love you”. She was my first girl kiss, the first person I held hands with in public, and the first person ever to tell me that I was beautiful. We met each other’s family, went on dates, and made out a lot. The beginning of the relationship was everything that you wanted a relationship to be; it was the most wonderful of times.

Our relationship was one of the few same-sex relationships among students in the high school we both attended. She had been ‘out’ as a lesbian much longer than I had. I wanted to come out slowly and take my time. Instead, she took it upon herself to tell people about my sexual orientation and guilt me into public displays of affection. She was really upset that I was taking it slow when coming out to friends, family, and

my community. She thought that it was unfair that I was not ready to hold her hand in public while walking to class or even kiss her during times we passed by each other in the school.

The first time she cheated on me was three months into our relationship. The second time was two months later. The third time was two more months after that and then again three months after that. Our relationship became more and more strained each time she cheated on me. Most of the time, I would find out about her cheating a few weeks after anything had occurred. I thought that this was what same-sex love was supposed to be like. I thought this was how someone I liked was supposed to treat me. This was how I saw movies and television series portray same-sex relationships, and therefore, that was all I knew.

During my senior year of high school, around the end of October/beginning of November when she was on a long weekend of a college break, she brought the latest girl that she was cheating on me with back to her house. I knew that she was going to be bringing her home, and I tried to argue it, but she told me that she just wanted me to meet her because they were just friends now and that she was so sorry. I really did not

want to meet this girl at all. I was still sick to my stomach that my girlfriend had cheated on me after she promised that she would never do it again. Looking back, I am upset with myself that I stayed with her through this, and for so long. I should have taken off the first time she cheated on me. I was brainwashed; I thought that I deserved it and that it was something that happened in same-sex relationships.

On the Friday of that long weekend when my girlfriend was at home, the three of us just hung out and we got along fine. It was awkward, but I got through it. On that Sunday, I went over to my girlfriend's house, and we were all hanging out in her room, getting along. I believe we wanted to go watch something on television, so we got up and started to leave her room. I mentioned something to her that I had just remembered when we were walking out the door, and my girlfriend did a one-eighty twist and the palm of her hand met my left cheek with a '*smack*.' I was stunned, I had no idea what happened. The girl that she brought home was just standing behind me stunned, jaw dropped. This was the first time that a part of her body made contact in a malicious way with mine, but it sure would not be last time that my body faced some kind of abuse from her.

The summer before my first year in college, my girlfriend had friends over for a birthday celebration. Everyone was laughing and drinking. I was one of the only people who decided not to drink. I can still remember exactly what my girlfriend was drinking, vodka and ice tea, and she was drinking lot of them. We were all out in her screened-in garage and everyone who was drinking was trying to hide the alcohol from her mom. I was not going to be staying the night, and I had already told my girlfriend that my mom was picking me up at 11 pm because I had something to do the next day. When my mom texted me that she was coming to get me, my girlfriend started to get really mad. It seemed like the more time I gave her to process that my mom was coming to get me the more heated she became.

I was trying to stay relaxed. Sometimes, if I was calm she would be calm too. It was a trick I learned while navigating the relationship. This time it did not work. She started to raise her voice and yell about how inconsiderate my mother was. At this moment, I knew that this was going to turn into something big. I was embarrassed that she was doing this in front of our friends, so I asked if we could step into the front yard. This way we would still be close enough but still far enough away

where people could not hear everything she was saying. She humored me on this request, and came outside. But, instead of our talk getting better, it got worse.

Usually, when she would start to get loud and say rude, very hurtful things to me, I would let my mind wander and disassociate. However, this time I could not get myself to do that, and she told me that I was not going to go very far in life. She told me that I would be lucky if I 'just passed' my college classes and that I was a 'bitch' and a terrible person for not caring about her. I could no longer take the yelling, and I was sick of hearing what she was saying, so I looked at my phone. When I did, I saw that my mom told me that I could just have someone at the party drive me home if I wanted to stay a little later. I was trapped there now. Because I thought everyone was drinking; I had no one to drive me home.

I was overwhelmed because she was in my face screaming about how shitty I was and how we just needed to break up because I apparently did not care about her as much as she cared about me. I was getting very worried at this time because she was getting really worked up. She stuck her hand out towards my neck; I thought she was going to choke me. Instead, she yanked the necklace I was wearing off my neck and threw it into the grass. I did not know what to do in

this moment because the necklace chain that she ripped off my neck was pretty thick and the skin on my neck hurt a lot. At that moment, one of my friends came outside and told me that she was not drinking because she had to drive home. She said she could give me a ride to my house. During that car ride, she told me that I was in an abusive relationship, and that I should get out of it.

This was the start of my summer from hell. A summer that I will remember for the rest of my life. A summer where I grew more than I should have at 18 years old, but finally, after two years, became my own person. A summer that I should not have had to go through. If I had known the signs and been educated on intimate partner violence, if I had known that I was a victim of IPV, I may have been able to end the relationship before it got to this point. I may have reached out for help when the small things started happening, the things I could forget and push under the rug, the small fireworks that I could have doused water on before it got to the grand finale.

That summer, I was in a disassociated place, because her abuse was not a once in a while thing anymore. At this point, it was happening on a regular basis. I was becoming numb to the regular verbal beat downs. We had been together for a year and eight months and the verbal

abuse had been going on longer than a year. One evening, it just started to get dark outside and we were arguing in the car. The car was parked on the side of the road in a small neighborhood. I can still smell the rain that had just finished falling about an hour ago. I forget exactly what we were arguing about, but I know it was because I “embarrassed her” while we were at a friend’s house. She was screaming at the top of her lungs telling me how much of a terrible person I was, using degrading words and vulgar language. Why this? Why right now? Why was I to blame for everything?

She pulled a pill bottle that contained medication out of somewhere from inside the car and dumped them all over me; they went *everywhere*, all over my lap, into every crevice of the passenger side of the car, and all over the floor. She did this because she was so mad and yelling was not helping her get the anger out anymore. I felt helpless. Not only was I being berated for “embarrassing her,” but now it was my fault that there were pills dumped all over me. I had had enough, opened up the car door, and told her I was walking home. I shut the door and started walking, I was prepared to walk the mile and a half home, what I was not prepared for was her throwing her car into park and getting out of her car to come towards me. I was scared.

My plan was to get further away from her, not for her to get closer. I backed away and was prepared to yell. What I was not prepared for was for her to apologize and tell me that it was all her fault and that she was so sorry for her behavior. She told me that she would never do this again, and I believed her and got back into the car. “I will never do this again” became a statement that she overused, but never followed.

One night that summer, we were at a concert along the waterfront together. At the concert, I saw a girl who I had gotten very close with while I was in high school and my girlfriend was away at college. I went up to her, said “hello,” and gave her a hug. My girlfriend was a very jealous person; we had many arguments about this girl because my girlfriend thought that I was cheating with her. My girlfriend saw me give her a hug, and because of that, she became very upset. She was cold and rude towards me. When I asked her what was wrong, she grabbed my wrist, would not let go and dragged me out of the concert. I had no choice but to go with her. Her grip was so tight and her nails dug into my skin. No one who saw us walk by did anything while she was doing this; they just watched. All I could think about was staying by people who could see us, so that if she tried to do anything, I would

be safe. When we reached some apartments that were nearby the concert, she finally let go. She told me I was a 'hoe' for cheating on her and started to scream at me. During this episode, people around us stared but they never did anything. I was crying, flinching, and cowering while she screamed at me and towered over me. She was very close many times with her hand movements; I was afraid this would be one of the times that she laid her hands on me. When she was done yelling at me in public, she grabbed my wrist and took me to the car. This is where she told me a few things this night that I will never forget. One was that I was a worthless piece of shit; two, that I was never going to find someone better than her; and three, (after she cut and burned herself in front of me), that she was sorry and it would never happen again.

But it always happened again.

What We Know

IPV happens over and over again in relationships like mine. Many victims are sadly unaware of what is happening to them just like I was. No one should be left in the dark about IPV. When you hear about abusive relationships, you never think it can happen to you. Further, I did not believe it could happen to me, especially because I was

not in a stereotypical heteronormative relationship. The reality is that I am not the only one who has faced this. Many LGBTQ youth, adolescents, and young adults experience the same things at numbers that are estimated to be higher than heterosexual relationships (Messinger, 2017). Messinger also writes that of those who are in a relationship consisting of two men, over half are likely to face a form of IPV and out of all the relationships that consist of two women, about three quarters are estimated to face IPV. I wish that I had known that the reality of me being in an abusive relationship was very high. If I had known, I might have been aware sooner, and once I realized what I was going through, I might not have been as embarrassed to reach out to people to tell them what I was going through.

Without having a survey that takes all sexual orientations into account, a correct representation about IPV may be hard to come by. The idea of sexuality being fluid is a hard concept for some people to grasp. Badenes-Ribera, Frias-Navarro, Bonilla-Campos, Pons-Salvador, & Monverde-i-Bort (2014) discuss the idea of sexuality being fluid and how little to no surveys take the idea of sexual fluidity into account. A point the authors make is that although someone may be in a same-sex

relationship, they may not identify as a member of the LGBTQ community (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2014). This is an important piece of information because many surveys are interested only in LGBTQ members and some individuals may not identify as LGBTQ but have same-sex tendencies (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2014).

Edwards, Littleton, Sylaska, Crossman, and Craig (2016) discuss what groups are usually surveyed when researching information on IPV in the college setting. They found that heterosexual relationships are more frequently looked at and studied whereas LGBTQ relationships are often left out. This can be detrimental to understanding intimate dating practices in the college climate. Edwards et al. (2016) estimate that “up to 18% of college student report having engaged in sexual behavior with someone of the same sex” (p. 17). This is a large number of college students who are in a same-sex relationship and could face IPV. Without studies being done on IPV in LGBTQ relationships, potential student victims may never have knowledge about the abusive relationships they are in. Although individuals who engage in sexual intercourse with the same sex may not identify as LGBTQ, or date one another, they might still be put into a

situation where they face IPV and not know this could happen to them. All of the information that I received in high school about IPV related to heteronormative society and only included heterosexual men and women. I thought that only heterosexual men and women who were together could be in abusive relationships. According to Edwards et al. (2016), there is limited evidence of IPV in LGBTQ relationships, but they go on to note that some of the research indicates that IPV and sexual assault among college students is more prevalent in LGBTQ relationships than in heterosexual relationships. Carvalho, Lewis, Derlega, Winstead and Viggiano (2011) discuss the discrepancies between studies. Older studies often estimated that IPV was lower in LGBTQ relationships than heterosexual relationships. Messinger (2017) suggests that IPV is actually higher in LGBTQ relationships than heterosexual relationships, and also discusses the prevalence of IPV in same-sex relationships. He writes that lesbian women are more likely to face all types of IPV compared to gay men, but there is not a huge difference (Messinger, 2017). Both groups of individuals face IPV and discussions and information on the topic should be held/given on a

more regular basis. Edwards et al. (2016) found that LGBT individuals are more likely to stay in abusive relationships because of the lack of information about such abuse. This same study also found a correlation between the two relationship groups and that they stay in their relationships for some of the same reasons (Edwards et al., 2016). This was true for me. I struggled to come to terms with what I was going through. As I look back on my education, it is because of the lack of general knowledge that I had about IPV that I did not realize it was something that concerned me.

Greene, Fisher, Kuper, Andrews and Mustanski (2014) discuss the importance of supportive peer relationships among LGBTQ individuals. Individuals who are supporting those LGB or someone who is queer or transgender and in a relationship should be informed that intimate partner violence does not just happen to cisgender/heterosexual people. This is something that can happen to anyone no matter who they are or what relationships they claim. Relationship violence does not occur exclusively in heterosexual relationships, where the male in the relationship is beating his female partner. Relationship violence also happens in many different ways, not just as physical abuse. Emotional, mental, financial, neglect,

and sexual abuse are all things that can happen when a person is facing IPV. Not only did I face emotional and mental abuse, but I also experienced physical abuse that I am choosing not to discuss. While I did face physical abuse, I thought that it was okay. I only ever heard of men hitting women in these situations, never two women abusing each other. Had I known that IPV comes in all forms and can be experienced by anyone I may have left the relationship sooner. IPV education needs to be taught, and needs to be taught with all sexualities included. Groups of individuals who are in non-heterosexual relationships should not be invisible.

Invisibility of Same-Sex Relationships

Messinger (2017) discusses the invisibility of the queer relationship within the United States and around the world. In the U.S. queer men were less likely to find an IPV agency that serves that population of individuals compared to queer women. Queer women still struggle to find help, but there is more offered to them than to queer men. This is not surprising since IPV is more commonly reported as a male on female crime in heterosexual relationship, so male victims are often overlooked in

this regard. Men reporting same-sex IPV challenges masculinity and can make men afraid of speaking up. IPV services are aimed towards heterosexual women in the U.S, although queer women can still benefit from services because of that. Even with this, it is important to offer services that are specific to LGBTQ individuals. This is necessary because this group of individuals is underrepresented and not informed about valuable things that heterosexual individuals are privileged to, like sex education. According to Greene, Fisher, Kuper, Andrews and Mustanski (2014), there are no known programs that have published effective studies focused on IPV in LGBTQ adolescent relationships. This is concerning because violence among LGBTQ adolescent intimate partners is very high according to Greene et al. (2014).

Long-held perceptions and beliefs of LGBTQ relationships have affected the way people view and treat those relationships. The heterosexual ideology, and the idea that only men beat women, has created a societal expectation that IPV only happens in heterosexual relationships. Baker, Buick, Kim, Moniz, and Nava (2012), explain that LGBTQ IPV can be a difficult idea to grasp because it shows that men can abuse men and women can abuse women. This

is a difficult idea to process because throughout 1960-1976 IPV was considered 'wife abuse' and always portrayed as men abusing women. Messinger (2017) states that a lot of the stereotypes surrounding IPV only occurring in heterosexual relationships stem from the movement on ending men's violence against women. He also discusses the lack of inclusion of LGBTQ individuals by the United Nations and the World Health Organization when covering topics on IPV. This is detrimental because those who are facing IPV in countries where LGBTQ individuals may not be accepted, or in countries where they are accepted but topics such as IPV in the LGBTQ community are not dealt with, do not have a set of guidelines or information to guide intervention practices. These organizations are supposed to help and support all people; how can they do this if they are not supporting LGBTQ individuals as well?

Edwards et al. (2016) found that LGBT individuals who carried out IPV as the perpetrator were almost all victims of IPV themselves before becoming the perpetrator. If individuals who face IPV are more likely to become the perpetrators, then more resources that are informational should be provided to LGBT individuals. Edwards and Sylaska

(2012) discuss the disempowerment theory, which revolves around the idea that “...individuals who feel inadequate and lack self-efficiency are at increased risk of using non-traditional means of power assertion, such as violence” (p. 1722). Crossman and Craig (2016) also found correlation between internalized homophobia and heterosexist discrimination, which factored into IPV and the perpetrator who is carrying out the abuse. This can have a lot to do with overcompensating the assertion for power because an LGBT individual may feel like they have no power due to being part of a marginalized group.

Not only are LGBT adolescents at a higher risk for IPV, the lack of knowledge and acceptance by their communities of LGBTQ relationships can affect their romantic relationships. Researchers attribute homophobic control behaviors as important and pervasive to IPV in LGBTQ relationships (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2014). Internalized homophobia is something that a lot of LGBTQ members face. Partners who reveal someone's sexual orientation, or reveal an attraction that would be different to the idolized heterosexual attraction of western culture, engage in a form of IPV. This was one of the scariest things that I faced. The pain and suffering that I went

through from the emotional and physical abuse does not compare to how scared I was to be outed. Being outed made me feel like I was slowly drowning in quicksand. I just kept sinking and sinking. I became worried that my family might find out, and I was worried that my best friend's parents who were very conservative would hate me and not let us see each other anymore or have sleepovers.

Social acceptance is another factor that queer individuals have to fight against in order to receive services. Messinger (2017) states, “...the struggle to legitimize LGBTQ IPV as a genuine public-health concern is rooted in the struggle to legitimize LGBTQ human rights” (p.18). Before society accepts that IPV is a public health concern, society as a whole needs to accept queer individuals. If same-sex relationships are not viewed as just another relationship, how can they receive the same services that heterosexual relationships do? Have we strayed from the heteronormative model? Society's binary thinking, black vs. white, girl vs. boy, rich vs. poor, and straight vs. gay can make it difficult for people who do not fit into the dominant identity to have a positive experience in their “other” identification. People who are stuck in the heteronormative mindset of society have difficulty

understanding things that might be outside of the binary. This includes individuals who are transgender or those who are pansexual and attracted to all genders.

Moving Forward

Some people are raised not to consider LGBTQ relationships to be valid ones. People may not even be taught that they exist; therefore, many people may find the idea of IPV in LGBTQ relationships to be preposterous (Messinger, 2017). Societal discrimination is detrimental to the fight for equality for representation when discussing IPV. Discrimination and lack of representation can lead victims of LGBTQ IPV to not recognize and have validation of their IPV situations. We need to educate people in our society on these topics and issues. My goal is to help break the silence. Through continuing my education and studying for a Master's Degree in Social Work, I can advocate and educate the people around me on issues such as this. No one should ever have to experience Intimate Partner Violence.

Currently, I have a GPA that is over 3.65. I am a double major in Social Work and Women and Gender Studies. I am looking at a master's-level school. I purchased my own car, and I have lost love and found new love. All of these

accomplishments and experiences are things that I never could have dreamed of happening without family and friends supporting me with what happened to me. I am grateful to have learned about IPV when I did, but it should have been sooner. The American education system with societal norms of cisgender/heterosexual ideology is failing its youth. IPV education should start at a young age. Children should be encouraged to practice personal bodily autonomy and know the signs of an abusive relationship. Not only should they know the signs, they should be encouraged to talk about it so it becomes a topic widely discussed.

My abusive relationship was difficult to handle on my own. What helped me through it were my friends and family. I do not know what I would do but for my friends standing by my side when I was telling my story or when I needed a shoulder to cry on. They encouraged me to educate those around me on IPV and the disparities that surround LGBTQ issues. My mom and dad give me their continued support and make me feel loved. I am so grateful for them. I thought that I would never find anyone, or that I would never trust anyone ever again. I have found love and lost love since then. I learned so much from that relationship. I learned what real love was

and was not. I learned about my own strength, how to trust others, and how to persevere.

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