



Intimate Partner Abuse in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Transgender and Two-Spirit (LGBQ/T and TS) Communities

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and two-spirit individuals are disproportionately impacted by multiple forms of violence and abuse, including intimate partner abuse. This section discusses the prevalence, severity, and types of abuse experienced by LGBQ/T and Two-Spirit individuals in the context of abusive partnerships. In particular, this section examines the dynamics of partner abuse in LGBQ/T and Two-Spirit communities, the partner-generated and structural barriers to safety, and the ways in which oppression, including ongoing forms of structural violence and discrimination, can compound abuse dynamics. In addition, the authors discuss the ways in which human service systems can, however unwittingly, inflict “sanctuary harm.” Finally, this section outlines a culturally responsive, trauma-informed set of principles to better serve survivors inclusive of all genders and all sexual orientations.

Keywords

LGBT · Lesbian · Gay · Bisexual · Transgender · Two-spirit · Intimate partner abuse · Domestic violence

Introduction

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Transgender (LGBQ/T) and Two-Spirit (TS) individuals are disproportionately affected by multiple forms of violence and abuse, including intimate partner abuse. This chapter discusses the prevalence, severity, and types of abuse that LGBQ/T and TS individuals experience in the context of abusive partnerships. Following a note on language, this chapter begins with a discussion of the prevalence and dynamics of partner abuse in LGBQ/T and TS communities; the partner-generated and structural barriers to safety; and the ways in which oppression, including ongoing forms of structural violence and discrimination, can compound abuse dynamics. Next, this section discusses the ways in which human service systems can, however unwittingly or unintentionally, inflict “sanctuary harm” even while seeking to serve LGBQ/T and TS survivors of abuse. Finally, this section describes culturally responsive, trauma-informed practices for approaching survivors that are inclusive of all genders and sexual orientations.

A Note on Language

As a point of practice, the authors wish to acknowledge at the outset both the power and the deep limitations of language. There are an extraordinary number of terms that individuals who self-identify as being part of sexual and gender minority communities use to refer to themselves, and many different, affirming versions of “the alphabet,” all intended to foreground the strengths, needs and priorities of what are not one, but in reality many different communities. In truth, all the acronyms and identifiers used for queer and transgender communities are at best compromises, born of the need to simplify grammar and ensure understanding.

Take, as but one example, the 2016 *Report of the U.S. Transgender Survey*. In their report, James and colleagues acknowledge their choice to collapse the more than 500 different terms used by survey participants – including crossdresser, non-binary, genderqueer, Two-Spirit, third gender, gender fluid, and intersex – into a single category. Struggling to convey the strengths, needs, and challenges faced by these communities, James and colleagues chose the path that perhaps best conveyed common experiences of violence, harassment, and discrimination.

Similarly, words such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual may themselves be increasingly limiting as younger people are leaving behind binary conceptions of gay, straight, and bisexual for more expansive conceptions of sexual orientation that acknowledge a fluid spectrum of gender identity. Hence the emergence and embrace of terms such as “pansexual” and “queer.” Language evolves as quickly as human experience. In this respect, research and the language of research, has often lagged woefully behind the frontlines of practice in LGBTQ/T communities.

Language creates and recreates history. It is worth noting that many of the words used to describe sexual and gender minority communities originated in white, Western, academic contexts and as such carries with them very specific histories of racial exclusion, nativist thought, colonialism, genocide, and forced assimilation. But language can also be a form of resistance. Many African Americans, and Black men in particular, who engage in same-gender relationships may utilize the language of “same-gender loving” precisely as a form of racialized resistance to the white-dominated LGBTQ/T movements from which they have been excluded or in which they have been fetishized. Some First Nations peoples in the United States may identify not solely as “gay Indian” but more specifically as “Two-Spirit,” a pan Indigenous term, adopted from the Northern Algonquin, which is meant to signify the embodiment of both masculine and feminine in one person. Connoting both diverse gender expressions and sexual orientations, Two-Spirit speaks to the unique sacred and ceremonial roles that TS people held (and may still hold) within their own communities. The phrase Two-Spirit speaks not simply to a third gender, or to same-gender attraction, but more broadly to the history of compulsory Christianization that sought to erase Two-Spirit peoples within their own nations.

These are but two examples among many. Indeed, even this limited discussion addresses only those words used in English and not the numerous words used by queer

and transgender people emigrating from outside the United States or growing up in second- and third-generation immigrant households. In many cultures and communities outside of the United States, words such as lesbian, gay, and bisexual, for example, have often failed to apply. There are seldom translations into other languages that carry the same understanding of LGBTQ/T identity as being an identity, rather than a set of behaviors. Literal translations, into Spanish or Haitian Creole, for example, have historically carried few if any of the presumptions that are inherent in English.

Suffice it to say that much care and thought was put into how, as Audre Lorde once wrote, to “define and empower.” The authors have engaged in ongoing conversations with our communities and with one another, about race, immigration, and disability in queer and transgender communities. We have discussed whether the word “queer” is elder-competent; whether or not to include “questioning,” precisely to surface the concerns and needs of young adults; whether to distinguish LGB from transgender identities, to acknowledge the profound strengths and structural challenges that transgender communities experience compared to their LGB counterparts; whether or not to place an asterisk after the “T” to denote the depth and diversity of transgender communities; and how to ensure that all of this was intelligible without, as Margaret Robinson says, “overwriting culturally-specific identities” such as Two-Spirit and same-gender loving (Robinson and Ross 2013). Precisely because the authors likely did not succeed in that endeavor despite enormous effort, we wanted to acknowledge here the profound power of language and the intent in this chapter to hear, honor, and be inclusive.

Experiences of Multiple Traumas in the Lives of LGBTQ/T and Two-Spirit Individuals and Communities

Violence against LGBTQ/T and TS individuals rarely happens in isolation from other forms of violence, abuse, and oppression. This understanding, often referred to in the research literature as “polyvictimization,” is simply the recognition that experiences of violence and abuse, particularly those that occur in childhood and elderhood, often have a cascading effect, opening the door to other forms of abuse by additional people at subsequent times (Miller et al. 2016). Indeed, it is now widely understood at the practice level that experiences of multiple traumas are the norm rather than the exception for LGBTQ/T and especially TS survivors of violence and abuse (Sterzing et al. 2017).

As but one example, in a study that looked at child maltreatment, familial abuse, sexual violence, bullying, community violence, and exposure to the victimization of others, Sterzing, et al. found that sexual and gender minority youth were significantly more likely to experience multiple traumas than their cisgender/heterosexual peers in the general population. Specifically, they found that genderqueer adolescents (in particular those assigned male at birth), transgender young women, and transgender young men were at distinct structural risk compared to their cisgender male counterparts (Sterzing, et al. 2017, p. 9). Transgender males were more than twice as likely than their cisgender counterparts to report *20 or more* types of

victimization (Sterzing, et al. 2017, p. 9). Rates of any type of sexual assault against transgender and genderqueer adolescents in the study ranged from 72.2% to 87.5%, compared to 4.7% in the general population (Sterzing et al. p. 6, 9). They also found that poverty aggravated these structural risks, as did living in a rural environment. Emerging studies such as this highlight the desperate importance of research that “break[s] down the silos of victimization,” especially where it concerns historically marginalized and oppressed communities (Sterzing et al. 2017).

While we have been tasked with discussing partner abuse, we are hopeful that readers will keep in mind the larger context of child sexual abuse, family abuse and rejection, commercial sexual exploitation, police misconduct, stalking, sexual violence, and hate crimes that disproportionately impact sexual and gender minority (SGM) communities and especially SGM individuals at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression, such as transgender individuals of color or gender non-conforming homeless youth.

Prevalence Data

Historically, domestic or intimate partner violence (IPV) has been primarily seen as an issue of cisgender, heterosexual men’s violence against cisgender women. The extant research, while growing, is constrained by a number of factors, including but not limited to inconsistent definitions of IPV, lack of attention to non-physical forms of partner abuse, lack of studies utilizing random sampling, and a lack of studies specifically focusing on transgender and gender non-conforming individuals (Finneran and Stephenson 2012; Brown and Herman 2015). In addition, it is worth asking if the sampling methods that have frequently been used replicate disparities, overproducing studies with heavily white samples that in turn fail to reflect the needs of queer and transgender identified individuals who are multiply oppressed (Robinson and Ross 2013). To compound this, many studies of transgender individuals seek to know if the individual has experienced “transphobic violence” without inquiring whether the person inflicting the harm was a family member, a partner, a helping provider, or a stranger, conflating different kinds of violence and abuse, and often rendering invisible the chronic nature of abuse dynamics at the hands of people the transgender individual should be able to trust, such as intimate partners. Needless to say, there has been far too little study about the rates of partner abuse against LGBTQ/T and Two-Spirit people at the intersections and in particular about queer and transgender people who experience homelessness, who are disabled, or who are part of immigrant and refugee communities.

Rates of Intimate Partner Violence in LGBTQ/T Communities

The best evidence indicates that LGBTQ/T individuals in general are at disproportionate risk of partner abuse, with bisexual women and transgender and gender non-conforming individuals being acutely vulnerable compared to their cisgender

and heterosexual counterparts (Walters et al. 2013; Brown and Herman 2015; Langenderfer-Magruder et al. 2016). According to the National Intimate Partner Violence Survey (NISVS), bisexual women are 1.8 times more likely to report having experienced IPV and 2.6 times more likely to disclose having experienced intimate partner sexual assault than their heterosexual counterparts (Walters et al. 2013). Also of note, the report of the US Transgender Survey states that transgender and gender non-conforming (T/GNC) respondents were also at significant risk, in particular T/GNC respondents who were engaged in the sex trade, who had experiences of homelessness, who were undocumented, or who were disabled, so too their counterparts who self-identified as First Nations, Multiracial, and/or Middle Eastern (James et al. 2016). The most recent paper on IPV in LGBQ/T and HIV-affected communities authored by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs similarly reports persistent patterns that “highlight the disproportionate risk associated with structural and systemic racism as it intersects with anti-LGBQ/T bias” (Waters 2017, p. 22).

Prevalence of Partner Abuse in LGBQ/T Immigrant and Refugee Communities

According to the Williams Institute, there were some 637,000 documented and 247,000 undocumented LGBQ/T adult immigrants in the United States as of 2013 (Gates 2013). The experiences of queer and trans-identified immigrant and refugee survivors of IPV are largely invisible in the academic literature. Research on cisgender heterosexual immigrant partnerships is complicated, indicating both that immigrant survivors may experience lesser rates of partner abuse but that they may perhaps experience greater rates of intimate partner sexual violence, intimate partner stalking, and intimate partner homicide (Runner et al. 2009; API Institute on GBV 2017). Given the disproportionate rates of IPV faced by US-born LGBQ/T survivors, and the unique challenges faced by straight, cisgender immigrant survivors (documentation, language access, social isolation), one might reasonably ask if the rates of IPV in LGBQ/T immigrant and refugee communities are commensurate with those of their multiple counterparts. Clearly more research is required in this area. Of note in the absence of more substantive research is the National Center for Transgender Equity’s 2015 survey, which found that undocumented immigrants experienced intimate partner violence at rates significantly greater (68%) even than their transgender permanent resident and US citizen counterparts (James et al. 2016, p. 206).

Prevalence of Partner Abuse in Black LGBQ/T and Same-Gender Loving Communities

Extant data suggests that African American LGBQ/T and same-gender loving individuals experience the same if not disproportionate rates of intimate partner abuse as their white counterparts (Hill et al. 2012; Frierson 2014; Wu et al. 2015).

Hill et al. theorize that for African American lesbians, a combination of elevated rates of childhood sexual abuse, family violence, and community violence, often compounded by poverty, may exacerbate the likelihood of mental health and substance use challenges, creating points of both interpersonal and structural vulnerability that may leave Black lesbians less protected from IPV in adulthood (Hill et al., p. 405). As in other marginalized communities, historically grounded fear of the police, fear of being outed to family and other community members, and especially for Black gay and bisexual men, fear of failing to conform to traditional gender norms and expectations may all result in rates of underreporting (Frierson 2014).

Prevalence of Partner Abuse in Two-Spirit Communities

There is little research on the prevalence of IPV against Two-Spirit individuals. What exists indicates that Two-Spirit women in particular experience elevated rates of violence and abuse, including IPV (Lehavot et al. 2009; Ristock et al. 2017). The US Transgender Equity Report, which includes transgender individuals of all genders as well as gender non-conforming individuals and people who specifically identify as Two-Spirit, found that nearly three-quarters (73%) of American Indian/Alaskan Native survey respondents experienced IPV, compared to 54% of the survey as whole. Notably, respondents who self-identified as Two-Spirit were more likely to report experiences of physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner. In addition, Two-Spirit people who were disabled or who had worked in the “underground economy,” i.e., who had engaged in work that is currently criminalized, were at increased risk.

Dynamics of Partner Abuse in LGBQ/T Communities

The Network/La Red, an LGBQ/T-specific program, defines partner abuse as “a systematic pattern of behaviors where one person tries to control the thoughts, beliefs, and/or actions of their partner, someone they are dating, or someone [with whom] they had an intimate relationship” (Quinn 2010, p.25). Explicit if still unspoken in this definition is the reality that abuse can never be mutual. Mutual abuse is a myth (Quinn 2010). While bidirectional violence may occur in a relationship alongside partner abuse, in most cases, one partner is using violence in self-defense, or as a means or resisting abuse.

Loree Cook-Daniels of FORGE has often pointed out the dynamics of partner abuse are remarkably consistent across cultures and communities, regardless of the genders and sexual orientations of the parties involved. Many of the same tactics of abuse that are used by straight cisgender men against straight cisgender women, tactics such as isolation, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, economic abuse, and physical violence, are also used by those abusing LGBQ/T survivors. However, what is different for queer and transgender survivors is the perception that these things cannot, or do not, happen in LGBQ/T communities (Baker et al. 2013;

Messinger 2017). This is, in part, a result of the historical narrative that partner abuse is about cisgender men's violence against cisgender women. Rippling out from this gendered narrative is the common misconception that cisgender women cannot be violent or abusive and that cisgender men cannot be victimized (Baker et al. 2013). Additional misconceptions, and even harm, can occur when service providers rely on stereotypes about gender in their efforts to identify who is the aggressor in a same-gender relationship (Baker et al. 2013). For example, law enforcement, judges, and community members may incorrectly assume that the abusive partner is the person in the relationship who is bigger, more masculine, or stronger (Quinn 2010). These misconceptions, combined with stigma, also lead to a reticence on the part of LGBTQ/T communities to acknowledge that IPV exists in their midst (Baker et al. 2013). Indeed, abusive LGBTQ/T abusive may minimize their own behaviors by dismissing the possibility that abuse even occurs in LGBTQ/T relationships. For example, same-gender abusive partners may manipulate myths that women cannot rape and that men cannot be victims of sexual violence as a way to invalidate the survivor experiences of intimate partner sexual violence (Quinn 2010).

The larger cultural backdrop of transphobia, biphobia, and heterosexism shapes the context of IPV in sexual and gender minority communities in very specific ways, often in direct attacks on the survivor's stigmatized identities. For example, people who use abusive behaviors against their LGBTQ/T partners may seek to deny or question the survivor's identity. Similar tactics of identity abuse may be intentionally misgendering a partner or coercing a partner to conform to certain gender expectations around dress, work, and habits of being. Other examples of identity abuse include threatening to out a survivor's sexual orientation, gender identity, or HIV status, or alternatively forcing a partner to hide such information (Messinger 2017). For survivors who are not out, or are not out only in certain areas of their life, outing can mean the potential loss of family support or a job or can jeopardize the custody of their children. On the other end of the spectrum, an abusive partner may not let the survivor be out, denying them access to the support of LGBTQ/T community and the ability to participate in LGBTQ/T events.

A more subtle manifestation of identity abuse centers on using "authenticity" as a method of control, making survivors feel that they are not "queer enough" or do not understand how LGBTQ/T relationships work (Miller et al. 2016). In the context of a survivor's first same-gender relationship, an abusive partner may use their elevated "expert" status in the community to define the roles of the partnership, to control the survivor's access to the community, and to affirm or deny various aspects of the survivor's sexual identity (Brown 2007). One survivor shared "I had never been in a relationship with another woman before, and since she was more experienced, I just thought, *this is how lesbian relationships are supposed to be*" (Messinger 2017, p. 115). Bisexual survivors may also experience efforts to negate their identity by abusive partners who state that they are "really straight" or "really gay" (Messinger 2017).

Identity abuse can also involve outright attacks on the survivor's stigmatized identities. For example, bisexual and pansexual survivors may be told that they are "promiscuous" as a justification for isolating them from people of all genders (Baker

et al. 2013). Similarly, abusive partners may use anti-transgender slurs and stereotypes as part of the abuse (Messinger 2017). Transgender individuals who are abusive may use “cisgender” as a slur against their cisgender partners or claim that transgender people are superior (Cook-Daniels 2015).

In addition to the above examples of manipulating or exploiting the survivor’s experience of internalized oppression, abusive partners may also attack a survivor’s other identities around race, class, ability, immigration status (which may be particularly precarious for LGBTQ/T individuals), and/or the tenets of their faith. The use of a survivor’s faith practice as a weapon may be particularly pointed in historically marginalized communities such as Black and Latinx communities, where religious services are simultaneously a reflection of conservative views on gender and sexuality, on the one hand, and a source of both spiritual sustenance and communal resistance to oppression on the other (Battle and DeFreece 2014; Lassiter and Parsons 2016). Layered on top of these tactics may be efforts to control the survivor’s interactions with other members of LGBTQ/T or TS communities. While not an unusual tactic in and of itself, this effort may be particularly painful for SGM individuals as they may have already faced rejection by biological family and by the larger community and therefore consider their SGM community their “family of choice.” Indeed, in the context of multiple layers of oppression, relationships may feel particularly important and difficult to leave. Since LGBTQ/T and TS people may experience multiple forms of marginalization, intimate relationships may feel precious and rare. As one survivor writes, “It was difficult because I kept looking at her as this person that had rescued me from my family” (Walters 2011, p. 262). If these relationships occur in the context of racial or ethnic marginalization, this effect may be even stronger. A survivor in a relationship with someone from her own ethnic community explains, “The hurt felt deeper. It’s like being rejected from your own” (Kanuha 2013, p. 1182).

Dynamics of Partner Abuse Specific to Transgender Communities

While the tactics discussed above can apply to transgender and gender non-conforming individuals of all sexual orientations, it is important to explore experiences that are unique to partner abuse involving transgender individuals, as both survivors and abusers.

Those who abuse their transgender partners often specifically target their partner’s gender. For example, an abusive partner might burn or rip a transgender woman’s clothing or wigs (Cook-Daniels 2015). Similarly devastating to a transgender survivor’s sense of gender identity, abusive partners may knowingly use the wrong name or incorrect pronoun for the survivor or the wrong language to describe the survivor’s body parts (Quinn 2010, Cook-Daniels 2015). In order to stall or prevent transition, an abusive partner may deny the survivor access to hormones or interfere with recovery from transition-related surgeries (Quinn 2010). An abuser may cite cases of transgender people losing custody of their children as a means of threatening their partner and attempting to keep them from either leaving or coming

out (Greenburg 2012). When using physical violence, abusive partners often intentionally target areas of the body such as the chest and genitals, knowing the additional emotional impact of focusing on unwanted body parts (Yerke and DeFeo 2016). In the context of sexual abuse, the person using abusive behaviors may coerce or demand that the transgender survivor engage in sexual activities that go against their understanding of their gender or insist that if they really wanted to be affirmed in their gender, they would take on specific roles during sexual activity (Quinn 2010).

When transgender people engage in abusive behavior, they may use their vulnerabilities as a transgender person to negate the possibility of being abusive, to excuse abuse, or to manipulate their partner. Transgender individuals who abuse their partner may use transition-related stress or hormone fluctuations to excuse or dismiss abusive behavior (Cook-Daniels 2015; Brown 2007). They may demand that their partner pay for their transition-related expenses (Cook-Daniels 2015). In order to manipulate their partner, they may also threaten suicide and may even reference high rates of suicide in transgender communities to intensify the threat (Cook-Daniels 2015). When both partners are transgender, the abusive partner may insist that they make a better woman or man than the survivor does (Cook-Daniels 2015).

Cultural Context of Partner Abuse in LGBTQ/T Immigrant and Refugee Communities

While LGBTQ/T immigrant survivors of partner abuse face a number of challenges specific to their numerous and diverse communities (including issues of linguistic and cultural access to sanctuary systems, historically grounded fear of law enforcement, possible social isolation, and fear of airing the community's "dirty laundry"), they also face a number of issues specific to being LGBTQ/T-identified. United We Dream's 2016 survey found that only 25% of SGM immigrants were fully out to their families, possibly rendering threats to out a survivor to family members a more potent tactic in immigrant communities (Perez et al. 2016, p. 11). Choudhury points out that, in some immigrant communities, threats to out a partner to family may be particularly chilling as LGBTQ/T individuals, especially lesbian and bisexual women, may face a "preexisting pattern of family violence" that may escalate or start anew in response to learning of a family member's sexual orientation (Choudhury 2007). This threat may be of unusual concern for youth who may have fewer rights or who may be expected to pay deference to their elders (Choudhury 2007). Choudhury points out that family rejection, forced return to the family's country of origin, and forced marriage are not uncommon responses in some immigrant communities (Choudhury 2007, p. 132–133). These kinds of dynamics may disproportionately impact undocumented transgender/gender non-conforming (T/GNC) individuals who, according to James and colleagues, are more likely even than lesbian and bisexual cisgender women to face family rejection and family violence (James et al., p. 72) In addition, undocumented T/GNC individuals are more likely to be

unemployed, to live in poverty, to face housing discrimination, and to have experienced homelessness, all of which would make leaving an abusive dynamic substantively more difficult (James et al. 2016; Perez et al. 2016).

Cultural Context of Abuse in Two-Spirit Communities

The dearth of research on IPV against Two-Spirit people extends to the dynamics of such abuse. Indeed, much of what has been discussed in the research literature has been discerned only incidentally, as a result of research focused on mental health, substance use, transactional sex, and other HIV-related risk behaviors among TS individuals (see Lehavot et al. 2009, as but one example). One of the few existing studies (Ristock et al. 2017) sought to focus on LGBTQ/T and TS Canadians experiences of migration. However, in the process of collaborating with TS participants, the researchers heard nearly universal stories of violence and abuse, including prevalent partner abuse, and realized only through that collaboration how inseparable the participants' experiences of historical traumas were from their current or recent experiences of partner abuse.

Common to all the participants was an inherited, and in some cases primary, experience of dislocation: foster and adoptive care and in some cases boarding schools. These experiences carry deep historical resonance in Native communities in both Canada and the United States, as boarding schools, and subsequently the foster care system, have been used not only to separate Native children from their families and communities but also to enforce white, Christian conceptions of family, gender, and sexuality. As such, boarding schools and the foster care/adoption systems have been weaponized by settler cultures and represent not simply the loss of Two-Spirit identities but more broadly the loss of Indigenous family structures, faith practices, languages, value systems, and Native traditions within which such identities find meaning. Perhaps not surprisingly, forcible dislocations resulted in structural vulnerability to physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in foster and adoptive "care" and in residential school settings. Such histories not only rendered participants more vulnerable to partner abuse in adulthood but notably ensured that they were often without cultural and Indigenous community support during periods of abuse. Facing racism, settlerism, and other forms of discrimination in mainstream sanctuary systems, TS people also found that they faced significant homo/bi/transphobia in their own families and communities as a result of Christian education in boarding schools (James et al. 2016, p. 70). It is perhaps notable here that some Native researchers have been careful to articulate the disproportionate impact of homo/bi/transphobia within the community on Two-Spirit survivors. As Frazer et al., note, "[F]or those who were on reservations or had close ties to Native communities, homophobia ... had a disproportionate effect on gay and two-spirit members, because they rely on the cultural support" (Frazer et al. 2010, p. 9). Having experienced racism and a lack of cultural competence in mainstream health services, many Two-Spirit peoples found lack of Two-Spirit acceptance within their own communities to be particularly wounding (Frazer et al. 2010).

It is also perhaps worth noting here that most of the survey participants stated that they never sought out domestic violence services. As one TS man put it, “If I had a magic wand, I’d have a centre for Two-Spirits, to focus on their health, their problems. What we face is definitely different from gay people because we’re coming from a position of power that was taken. This is completely different” (Ristock et al., p. 10). This problem may be compounded in many parts of the United States where partner abuse services simply aren’t available for Native people, regardless of TS status (Rosay 2016).

Cultural Context of Partner Abuse in Black LGBTQ/T and Same-Gender Loving Communities

IPV among Black LGBTQ/T individuals is similarly understudied. The few studies that exist echo common themes for same-gender loving individuals of being caught in the borderlands between Black cisgender, heterosexual communities, and more often white, more often affluent LGBTQ/T communities. As Simpson and Helfrich (2014) wrote on their study of Black lesbian survivors, “Already isolated by race and income from the larger American society,” the women in their study shared how homophobia, both “acceptable and visible” within their own financially oppressed Black community, was itself a safety issue, isolating them from their own families (Simpson and Helfrich 2014, p. 452–453). Many in the study discussed how their isolation from church, at once a source of strength and a place of danger for Black lesbians, was a particular point of pain (Simpson and Helfrich 2014, p. 454). Almost all noted the impact of misogynoir and the intersection of misogyny and homophobia on their ability to help-seek. As one survivor in the study stated, Black women who are being abused are viewed as “crackheads, drug addicts, alcoholics. [IPV] doesn’t happen to the girl that goes to church. It doesn’t happen to the good girls. If you were a good girl, it wouldn’t be goin’ on.” She said that this stereotype is even worse when both the victim and the perpetrator are women, noting that society thinks that the violence is acceptable because “women are emotional, crazy people” (Simpson and Helfrich 2014, p. 454).

Similarly, Frierson cites the challenges of navigating the racially affirming and yet rigidly hypermasculine expectations of Black males in many African American communities.

Citing Collins, he writes, “because so many African American men lack access to the forms of political and economic power that are available to elite white men, use of their bodies, physicality, and a form of masculine aggressiveness becomes more important” (Frierson 2014, p. 26). The view that masculinity entails being powerful creates an inherent contradiction in the idea that a man can be raped or abused by another person. “To do so would potentially call into question his masculinity” (Frierson 2014, p. 26–27). As Frierson writes, distilling a quote from a study participant, “You are Black and gay. Everything about you is wrong”

(Frierson 2014, p. 66). Frierson also writes of Black gay and bisexual men's experiences of internalizing those messages of "wrongness" and of fearing that, much like the participants in Hill et al.'s study, they will be judged. As one study participant stated, "It would have been certainly an out of body experience because it was certainly something I couldn't have imagined for myself. Again, especially as a man. A gay man. So, I probably would have felt a little awkward about it all" (Frierson 2014, p. 94).

Barriers for LGBTQ/T Survivors Seeking Help

There are many things that prevent any survivor from leaving: hope that their partner will change, lack of resources, fear of the repercussions of leaving, and self-doubt that what is happening is abuse. However, one barrier unique to LGBTQ/T survivors is the role that anticipated homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia play in creating barriers to help-seeking. Many abusive partners use the anticipation of discrimination to their advantage, asserting that no one will believe the survivor or that no one will want to help them because of their LGBTQ/T identity. This threat can be even more effective when the survivor holds multiple marginalized identities.

Transgender survivors and gay and bisexual men in particular may be hesitant to seek services from domestic violence programs that have been traditionally designed for straight, cisgender women (Messinger 2017). In many cases this fear is justified, as many domestic violence shelters have historically turned away transgender survivors and cisgender men (Messinger 2017). People with deep voices calling hotlines are often met with skepticism or hostility, and when services for cisgender men or transgender survivors exist in mainstream programs, they are often not as comprehensive as services for cisgender women (Quinn 2010). For example, some shelters provide 3–6 months of shelter for cisgender women but offer cisgender men and transgender survivors two to three nights in a hotel. While this practice has been recently banned by funders under the Violence Against Women Act, the actual practice has been slow to change in many communities.

Similarly, because of years of police misconduct against LGBTQ/T communities, many LGBTQ/T people are fearful of police. When the police are called, they are often dismissive in cases of partner abuse between two partners of the same gender. One survivor recalls, "The police came out three or four times. It was always a neighbor who called. They would just tell us to behave and that, you know, that we needed to act like ladies" (Messinger 2017, p 176). When arrests are made, research has shown that police are *ten times* more likely to arrest both partners in cases of same-gender IPV than in cases of male-to-female IPV (Messinger 2017). Court cases can have similar outcomes, with judges relying on gender stereotypes to either dismiss cases or assign "mutual" restraining orders (Messinger 2017).

The Lack of Refuge in Sanctuary Systems for Transgender and Gender Non-conforming Individuals

Transgender and gender non-conforming (T/GNC) survivors may face unique interpersonal and structural risks for IPV, in addition to unique barriers to service. Indeed, Avanti et al. recently found that gender non-conforming young males were more likely to experience partner abuse, independent of sexual orientation, than their cisgender peers (Avanti et al. 2018). Layered on top of this are experiences of disrespect and even violence in “helping” systems such as health care, the police, and domestic violence programs.

Gender minority individuals are far more likely to experience disrespect, denial of service, and even violence at the hands of healthcare providers and institutions. In the National Center for Transgender Equality’s (NCTE) 2011 survey, almost a fifth of participants reported experiencing denial of services or harassment in a medical setting. Two percent reported experiencing violence in such settings. At particular risk were transgender people of color (Black, Native, Asian), those engaged in the underground economy, and those who were undocumented (Grant et al. 2011, p. 73–74).

Similarly, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals have good reason to fear interactions with the police. In NCTE’s transgender survey, participants reported frequent misgendering by officers (49%), voyeuristic questions (19%), and verbal harassment (20%) (James et al. 2015). By far the majority of Black and Native T/GNC individuals reported “never or only sometimes being treated with respect” by officers. Six percent reported being physically attacked or sexually assaulted by officers. T/GNC individuals who were Black, Latinx, or Native, who worked in the underground economy, who were disabled, and/or who were homeless appeared to be at particularly high risk of assault. Obviously, involvement with the police can lead to time in detention (jail, prison, immigration detention), where LGBQ/T and Two-Spirit people face disproportionate rates of physical and sexual violence. This may be a distinct reason not to seek police assistance in overpoliced subpopulations of LGBQ/T communities or communities facing criminalization as a result of their survival strategies.

Layered on top of all this are the continuing challenges T/GNC individuals face in housing and in the homeless and domestic violence shelter systems across the country. Leaving an abusive dynamic may be particularly difficult for T/GNC individuals, nearly one-third of whom report being homeless in the last year, and nearly a quarter of whom report experiencing housing discrimination (eviction, denial of an apartment due to gender identity, etc.). In this context, the continuing challenges in the homeless and domestic violence shelter systems in the United States are of particular note. Homeless and domestic violence shelters are not always welcoming of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, may place inappropriate and transphobic expectations on shelter guests, and may have staff who are ignorant of or inexperienced with the needs of T/GNC clients. In addition, many shelter environments are sex-segregated. Given all this, many shelters are not safe places for T/GNC survivors (Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition Policy Committee 2013; Munson and Cooke-Daniels 2017).

The lack of refuge in “sanctuary systems” in perhaps of particular note for sexual and gender minority youth experiencing teen dating violence. As a result of a toxic mix of child abuse, family rejection, foster care, a notable subsection of LGBQ, and transgender/gender non-conforming youth are more likely to be homeless, more likely to be targeted for commercially sexual exploitation, and/or more likely to be engaged in transactional sex or similar survival strategies. This is particularly true for a portion of SGM youth of color and SGM youth with disabilities. Notably this may also apply to T/GNC undocumented youth, who are three times more likely than citizens T/GNC youth to run away from home, presumably as a result of disproportionate rates of child abuse (James et al. 2016, p. 74). As a result of histories of developmental and chronic traumas, they are also more likely to be using substances or engaged in other acts of creative coping that are currently criminalized. These youth, as a result of age, survival strategies, and gender identity, are often unwelcome in the shelter system, policed for their survival strategies in foster care, and too often criminalized even in public spaces by law enforcement.

Culturally Specific Practices and Innovations in LGBQ/T and Two-Spirit Programs and Communities

Culturally specific domestic abuse programs and communities have long been a source of innovative practices.

At the direct service level, LGBQ/T survivors and advocates have cultivated and continue to use foundational tools and strategies for discerning who is the survivor and who is the abusive party in an abuse dynamic. Two complementary resources exist that outline these tools and strategies: *The Intimate Partner Screening Tool for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Relationships*, designed by the GLBT Domestic Violence Coalition of Massachusetts, and *The Assessment Tool*, developed by The NW Network.

Understanding that these assessment skills should be used across all partner abuse programs, and not simply in cases involving same-gender partners, LGBQ/T-specific programs have created community assessments, trainings, and other capacity building tools to enable mainstream providers to become more inclusive and affirming of queer and transgender survivors. This information comes through toolkits, manuals, webinars, and videos created by the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, The NW Network, the LGBTQIA Domestic Violence Coalition, and The Network/La Red. Among the innovative approaches crafted by these LGBQ/T-specific programs have been efforts to equip friends and families to be supporters and providing healthy relationship skills classes (both notably out of The NW Network).

Finally, and perhaps most saliently, LGBQ/T people and communities long ago saw the connections between interpersonal violence and state violence and sought to create alternatives to mainstream criminal-legal processes, state systems, and non-profit services. Queer and transgender survivors have also collaborated with other historically marginalized and oppressed communities at the intersections, cultivating family of choice, mobilizing community engagement and leadership initiatives,

fighting efforts to criminalize LGBTQ/T peoples, and breathing life into restorative and transformative justice processes (Incite! 2006; Ching-In et al. 2011; Creative Interventions 2018). The authors are particularly inspired by the work of Black and Pink, BreakOUT!, Creative Interventions, Incite!, The National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, and the TGI Justice Project, among innumerable other organizations, community groups, and activists who are raising up the inevitable parallels between oppression, the continuing structural support for such oppression, and the growing complicity even of traditional anti-violence movements, such as the mainstream movements against sexual and domestic violence.

Holistic, Trauma-Responsive Practices for Responding to LGBTQ/T Survivors of IPV

As the prevalence of violence, abuse, and continuing oppression in the lives of LGBTQ/T survivors of partner abuse should indicate, holistic, anti-oppression-based, trauma-responsive approaches and practices are foundational to any truly empowering response. Indeed, we believe that the lessons learned in serving LGBTQ/T survivors, in particular queer and transgender survivors at the intersections, hold learning lessons for our larger movements. We suggest some principles for trauma-responsive practices here while acknowledging that these suggestions are hardly our own and build on the wisdom of many other people and communities (some of whom are mentioned above):

Assume that everyone you serve experienced multiple forms of violence, abuse, and oppression in their lives. Practice in ways that treat multiple experiences of trauma and oppression as the norm for LGBTQ/T people and communities, rather than as the exception.

As the nature of helping systems has changed over time and become more inclusive, and as the continuum of care has improved for some people (particularly those who already held privilege in some form), the individuals most likely seen in public systems and non-profit institutions are those most likely to have experienced multiple forms of trauma and oppression in their lives.

Build policies, partnerships, and/or practices that recognize this reality. Build consensus among your staff, your leadership team, and your community that embraces this understanding. Act accordingly.

Recognize that LGBTQ/T people and communities may carry significant historical traumas, in ways that their straight, cisgender counterparts may not. Recognize that those experiences of historical trauma are naturally reactivated by experiences (real or perceived) of betrayal, harm, and disrespect from "helping" professionals and systems. Act accordingly.

Remember that many systems (medical providers, mental health providers, criminal-legal systems, child protective services, the foster care system, education, public assistance, and sexual and domestic violence organizations) have been historically weaponized against LGBTQ/T people and communities, too often defining queer and transgender individuals pathological, diseased, and dangerous. Remember

that this is especially the case for LGBQ/T communities of color, immigrants and refugees, Two-Spirit communities, and disabled LGBQ/T people.

As a corollary, the authors would urge leaders in advocacy organizations, even if you are outside the systems discussed above, and even if you agitate to change the systems listed above, to understand that the roots of these same historical traumas still run deep in DNA of your organization. This is true even if you are in an LGBQ/T-specific organization. Act accordingly.

Understand that multiple layers of trauma are often wellsprings of strength in LGBQ/T communities, inspiring astonishing creativity, unique strategies for survival and resistance, and deep communal bonds. Act accordingly.

As many of us have built our organizations or community responses around solving social “problems,” this may literally mean re-examining who we understand ourselves to be, how we structure our organizations, how we enter our work, and how we practice.

If you are institutionally based, build a response that is integrated into and learns from the historically marginalized communities it serves (or should be serving) and centers the knowledge and experiences of those communities. Historically marginalized and oppressed communities, including LGBQ/T communities, are at the leading edge of anti-violence work, not a set of “minority communities” requiring extraordinary responses. What you and your organization learn from historically oppressed communities should serve as the foundation of your work.

Understand that oppression is not past tense but an ongoing and continuing reality for too many LGBQ/T people, particularly LGBQ/T people of color, Two-Spirit peoples, disabled LGBQ/T people, and queer-identified immigrants and refugees, among others. Act accordingly.

Embrace social justice and anti-oppression frameworks as the cornerstone and defining principle of your work. Craft policies and ensure practices that reflect this framework.

Practice in a way that embodies radical empowerment.

Create policies and affirm practices that work to maximize the control and choice that survivors have, and honor their/her/his choices, even (if not especially) when you disagree with them. Ensure policies and practices that embrace the principle that safety is to be defined by the survivor and their community, not by the provider and not by the organization. If you run an organization that is not culturally specific, recognize that “safety” may mean very different things to LGBQ/T peoples than it does to cisgender, heterosexual people. As but one example, safety planning that includes law enforcement, the local hospital, and/or the local domestic violence shelter may not be truly safe referrals for transgender and gender non-conforming survivors.

Build at every level a practice that understands that these principles stated above apply equally to individual survivors, staff members (including the managers and leaders), and the organization itself, as well as to the communities the organization serves. Act accordingly.

Ensure organizational policies, structures, and leadership that understand and embody these principles at every level. Invite the community and staff to hold

organizational leadership accountable when it does not live out these principles. Embrace humility; make yourself accountable to people and communities who do embrace these principles. Ask yourself if an organization is truly the best way to realize the change you wish to see in the world.

Practice exceptional self-care. Be exquisitely mindful of your own trauma history, if you have one, if your organization has one, if your communities have one. Be aware of how it influences your decision-making and your approach to the work. Be cautious to ensure that you practice self-care diligently, so that you can make decisions based on the needs of the community, not on your own needs.

Key Points

- LGBQ/T individuals are often subject to multiple forms of violence, abuse, and trauma, including child sexual abuse, family abuse and rejection, commercial sexual exploitation, police misconduct, stalking, sexual violence, and hate crimes. LGBQ/T experiences of intimate partner abuse must therefore be viewed in the larger light of these multiple traumas.
- LGBQ/T communities are distinct from one another, and individuals in these communities experience differences rates of abuse. Bisexual, transgender, and gender non-conforming individuals are at particular structural risk. This risk is compounded for bisexual, transgender, and gender non-conforming individuals at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression and marginalization.
- The cultural context in which partner abuse is experienced may be particularly meaningful for LGBQ/T individuals of color, immigrant and refugee individuals, and Two-Spirit individuals. Culture is both a source of strength and a point of pain under circumstances of partner abuse.
- Sanctuary systems are fraught with barriers for LGBQ/T survivors, especially transgender and gender non-conforming survivors who may also be experiencing other compounding forms of oppression.
- The authors suggest that a willingness to take leadership from LGBQ/T communities, especially LGBQ/T communities on the margins, is (or should be) a core tenet of trauma-responsive practice, and urge sanctuary systems and helping organizations to embrace this understanding.

Conclusion

LGBT/Q individuals and communities, particularly LGBT/Q individuals at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression, are too often subject to compounding forms of violence and abuse at the hands of multiple actors, including partners, family members, community members, gatekeepers in sanctuary systems, and state actors. Research increasingly indicates that multiple experiences of violence, abuse, and trauma are more typical than not for LGBQ/T people, especially transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. Such cascading experiences of violence and

abuse, including partner abuse, emphasize the urgency of embracing trauma-responsive approaches to clinical care, program building, policy, and community organizing in all organizations and institutions serving traumatized people. Such trauma-responsive approaches would do well to take leadership from the creativity, survival strategies, and collective organizing of LGBTQ/T survivors and LGBTQ/T communities. The authors suggest that this may literally mean re-examining who we understand ourselves to be as trauma workers, how we structure our organizations, how we enter our work, and how we practice.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Hate Crimes: A Special Category of Victimization](#)
- ▶ [Human Trafficking and Intimate Partner Violence](#)
- ▶ [Intimate Partner Violence in Tribal Communities: Sovereignty, Self-Determination, and Framing](#)
- ▶ [Microaggressions and Implicit Biases: Rooted in Structural Racism and Systemic Oppression](#)
- ▶ [Unsafe Sanctuary: Immigrants of Color Victims of Sexual Abuse](#)

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