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# The Social Construction of Roles in Intimate Partner Violence: Is the Victim/Perpetrator Model the only Viable one?

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**Abstract** This article addresses controversies in the field over LGBTQ intimate partner violence by describing the scope of the problem, employing both the traditional feminist paradigm and poststructuralist feminist theoretical approach to frame the problem, and, lastly, provide suggestions for advancing the field using interdisciplinary theories and methods. Implications for the field, policy, and treatment of victims and perpetrators of LGBTQ intimate partner violence are discussed.

**Keywords** LGBTQ · Physical violence · Feminist paradigm · Post-structuralist feminist theory · Heteronormativity

Intimate partner violence (IPV) scholarship has primarily focused on heterosexual male offenders and heterosexual female victims (White and Dutton 2013; Storey and Strand 2012; Hamby 2009). The feminist paradigm—that men abuse women as extension of patriarchy in order to assert power and control—has proved invaluable in unveiling the patriarchy present in domestic relationships and de-normalizing men assaulting their wives. This paradigm, which has proven very useful in explaining why men abuse women in opposite-sex relationships, influenced a number of policies (e.g. the Violence Against Women Act) to outlaw such forms of IPV. However, in the wake of these policy advances, recent research has uncovered that in the U.S. most IPV is bidirectional, meaning both partners participate in violent

behavior (for a comprehensive review, see Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. 2012). Moreover, scholars have found that women can initiate physical violence almost as often as men in heterosexual relationships (e.g. Archer 2002; Swan et al. 2008; Langhinrichsen-Rohling 2010). Even less scholarship has focused on IPV in LGBTQ relationships, but the little empirical work that exists has found that IPV occurs at rates similar to or greater than heterosexual couples (Walters et al. 2013; Mason et al. 2014; Hellemans et al. 2015). A persistent controversy in the study of IPV is why violence is used to mediate conflict in such relationships. For instance, the traditional feminist paradigm has convincingly argued that men use violence as an extension of patriarchal society to express power and control over their female partners (see Dobash et al. 1992). As LGBTQ people have become more accepted in mainstream American society, due in no small part to the gay and lesbian liberation movement's fight for rights and recognition from the state and society (e.g., the U.S. Supreme Court decision upholding same-sex marriage in 2015), scholars have adapted this traditional feminist framework to argue that lesbians and gays also use violence as a form of power and control over their partners (see Johnson 2008). However, increasingly, scholars have begun to challenge this paradigm by critiquing its limitations and offering alternative frameworks (see, for example, Cannon and Buttell 2015; Cannon et al. 2015), such as post-structuralist feminist and queer perspectives, for conceptualizing and subsequently developing more informed models of interventions and more effective policies concerning the problem of IPV in LGBTQ relationships.

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## The Problem of IPV in LGBTQ Relationships

IPV, defined as emotional, physical, sexual, psychological, and/or economical abuse in an intimate relationship (see Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and

Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence 2014), is a pernicious social problem with wide-ranging causes and consequences for individuals, families, and communities. Although comparatively little scholarship has focused on IPV in same-sex relationships, relative to heterosexual couples, the studies cited above make clear that IPV in LGBTQ relationships occurs at comparable or greater rates than opposite sex relationships. For instance, Walters et al. (2013) using the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) found that 43.8 % of self-identified lesbians reported having been physically victimized, stalked, or raped by an intimate partner in their lifetime, compared to 35.0 % of heterosexual women, 29.0 % of heterosexual men, and 26.0 % of gay men. Bisexual women experienced the highest rates of IPV with 61.1 % (Hamel 2014). (For a more in-depth analysis of the breakdown in types of IPV perpetration by sexual orientation see Walters et al. (2013) and Hamel (2014)). It is important to note that the question of sexual orientation did not include trans\* identified people, leaving information on this population uncollected and the depth of the problem undefined. Recent studies have attempted to identify what resources if any are available for the treatment of LGBTQ perpetrators (see for instance Cannon et al. 2016).

Given the pervasiveness of this problem and the lack of study it receives, there is controversy in the field over how to frame the problem of IPV occurring in LGBTQ relationships. This frame is critical because it establishes the kinds of policies created to alleviate the problem and informs the ways treatment interventions are generated and implemented. Many scholars have argued that the traditional feminist model, (known as the Duluth model in treatment), in which men access patriarchal structures to act violently towards their typically female partners in order to exert power and control also explains violence in LGBTQ relationships (see Cannon et al. 2016; Johnson 2008). For instance, a lesbian may also access patriarchal forms of power and control to act violently towards her female partner. In this frame, the use of violence as a form of power and control is always understood to be “masculine” and emanating from the societal level as an expression of patriarchy, which always privileges men over women (see Frye 1983). Using this frame results in policies that legislate IPV in the same ways as instances of heterosexual IPV and treats LGBTQ people in the same groups as heterosexual perpetrators and victims using the same curriculum developed with a male batterer and female victim in mind (e.g. Maiuro and Eberle 2008; Eckhardt et al. 2013). This approach, then, does not recognize differences (e.g. the differences that LGBTQ people face in terms of their identity, family of origin, discrimination they may face at workplaces and housing, etc.) experienced by LGBTQ people. Or, more precisely, this approach does not view such differences as being pivotal in the perpetration, experience, or treatment of IPV. In order to

identify the use and impact of such privilege, we offer treatment and policy recommendations that attempt to reveal how privilege (specifically heteronormative privilege) might operate in treatment groups and how to develop treatment interventions that leverage LGBTQ experiences of marginalization to provide care tailored to LGBTQ people to reduce instances of IPV.

### How can IPV Occurring in LGBTQ Relationships successfully Be Targeted and Addressed?

Recently, scholars have argued that this traditional feminist model is inadequate at explaining LGBTQ IPV and thus limits the kinds of innovative policies and treatments necessary to alleviate the problem (see, for example, Cannon and Buttell 2015; Cannon et al. 2015; Baker et al. 2013). For instance, some scholars have begun to apply insights garnered from post-structuralist feminist theory to the problem of IPV in LGBTQ relationships in order to understand how these relationships may function differently from heterosexual relationships. These scholars take *difference* to be important and necessary for not only conceptualizing but also treating IPV. Furthermore, these approaches undermine the current societal assumption of heteronormativity—the normalizing and privileging of heterosexual relationships over other kinds of relationships—implicit in applying a model based on heterosexual relationships to LGBTQ ones as the traditional feminist paradigm does. In using a poststructuralist feminist theoretical approach to IPV in LGBTQ relationships, we seek to re-conceptualize an understanding of power as accessed through the patriarchy and instead understand power within a field of relations (see Foucault 1978).<sup>1</sup> To do this, we deconstruct the heteronormative binary that men use violence to exert power, control, and authority over women. This binary assumes men always already exert such power over women. Post-structuralist feminist theorists argue that substituting a male-male coupling for instance changes the power and control dynamic. Deconstruction is a method that: (1) identifies ways in which binaries are operating; and, (2) investigates the effects of how these binaries operate. Such an analysis is important in understanding that power is neither static nor binary. Deconstruction reveals that those who access societal patriarchal structures act violently in order to gain power and control and that those they abuse are innocent victims (Cannon

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that there are various strands of poststructuralist feminist theory that attend to multiple facets of social life, identity, and subjectivity (e.g. Seidman 1996; Butler 1990; Mohanty 1988). However, we do not engage in these theorizations, consequences, or critiques (see Friedman 1991; Beste 2006; Coleman 2009) due to the limited focus of this article. Rather we apply a poststructuralist feminist theoretical approach to understanding and framing systemic arrangements of power in society in extending the power and control model of traditional feminist paradigm in the field of IPV.

et al. 2015), but that is just one way in which power operates in relationships.

For instance, Cannon et al. (2015) apply a post-structural feminist approach to occurrences of IPV, to show that women cannot be understood as powerless and men cannot be depicted as having all the power as assumed in a U.S. traditional feminist paradigm. Women can and do exercise power; sometimes in forms similar to how men use power (such as to perpetrate IPV). However, because we live in a society that privileges men and heterosexual people, how we understand the use of this power is different. Therefore, scholars have begun to argue that policy proscriptions and treatment interventions should reflect these differences in order to better account for the various experiences, motivations, meanings, and contexts of perpetrators and victims (see Cannon et al. 2015; Ferreira and Buttell 2016; Cannon and Buttell 2015; Baker et al. 2013). As Cannon and Buttell (2015) argued, IPV policy in the U.S. perpetuates an “illusion of inclusion” through inclusive language that pays lip service to non-heterosexual relationships (e.g. the use of the term “partner”) but has the unintended consequence of serving to obfuscate key dynamics of IPV. In terms of treatment of IPV in the U.S., scholars applying a poststructuralist feminist framework to IPV add to the growing chorus of scholars that argue that a one-size-fits-all treatment model for IPV perpetrators (e.g. the Duluth Model) should be replaced by culturally relevant and specific treatment options for different categories of perpetrators (e.g., heterosexual women, LGBTQ people) (see Maiuro and Eberle 2008; Ferreira and Buttell 2016; Cannon et al. 2016). These scholars go further in arguing all treatment interventions should address issues of sexism, homophobia, racism, and classism in order to address not only the personal motivations of perpetrators but also the ways society materially disadvantages some while privileging others (e.g. Cannon et al. 2015).

Below are several key recommendations for developing acute treatment interventions for LGBTQ perpetrators of IPV. First, having LGBTQ identified facilitators of not only LGBTQ perpetrator groups but of other IPV perpetrator groups most likely will help generate the above outcomes. Having a LGBTQ identified facilitator will help LGBTQ perpetrators feel more safe in a group therapy setting, the chief modality for treatment interventions and major concern of LGBTQ folks (see Cannon et al. 2016). A LGBTQ facilitator, through their own experiences and training, can more effectively link client’s thinking to oppression by discussing their collective experiences as LGBTQ and then applying that framework to understanding the power dynamic in intimate relationships. In other words, members of the group will have felt marginalized and put down at some point in their lives due to their sexual orientation and that can be used to make the argument about how their partner may feel in their intimate relationship. Secondly, having LGBTQ identified facilitators

may help address instances of homophobia and sexism specifically, and perhaps other forms of domination and marginalization in other IPV intervention settings due to their own experiences of marginalization. In this way, we can adopt structures already in place from the legal system (e.g. mandatory group therapy in batterer intervention programs) to target the particular needs and experiences of this already marginalized population. Some programs in the U.S., such as GLBT Domestic Violence Coalition of Boston, MA; Impact; the Network la Red, are already implementing some of these recommendations to treat LGBTQ IPV perpetrators.

Another key advancement in perpetrator treatment would be training in dealing specifically with the LGBTQ population but also training that deals more generally with how sexism, white supremacy, homophobia, and xenophobia occur in micro spaces (see for instance training offered by the Network la Red). Such training would not only broaden facilitators’ understanding of the context in which their clients exist but also provide specific understanding and language for effectively communicating with clients that come from various backgrounds. Using a post-structuralist framework that takes difference as a starting place allows for such treatment interventions because it focuses on the ways differences can be understood to maximize effective treatment outcomes. A third development in treatment would be to provide a LGBTQ specific curriculum. Instead of adapting the Duluth model, which assumes a male perpetrator and female victim (see Cannon and Buttell 2015), and which is the prevailing method for batterer intervention programs to LGBTQ offenders (see Cannon et al. 2016), LGBTQ practitioners and scholars can develop a curriculum designed with LGBTQ offenders in mind.

In order to implement such contextually specific, culturally relevant curriculum elaborated above, policymakers must do three things. First, they must engage the latest evidence-based scholarship (e.g. West 2012; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. 2012; Cannon et al. 2016; Cannon et al. 2015; etc.) in order to understand the varied and diverse needs of those affected by IPV. Second, policymakers must apply this intellectual and cultural understanding to develop policy that goes further than pay lip service to the real and lived differences that people experience and how these differences shape their perpetration of IPV. To do this, policymakers must grasp the ways society benefits some at the expense of others. In demonstrating this understanding of power and inequality, policymakers will be well situated to develop regulations that include the LGBTQ community and to provide guidelines and resources for treatments like the one discussed here targeted for and towards LGBTQ people. Doing so goes further than the illusion of inclusion and offers real movement towards inclusion. Such policy development would provide more resources and focus for programs discussed above and for the implementation of more like them.

## How will Creating Specific Programming for IPV Occurring in LGBTQ Relationships Affect the Field in the Future?

Controversy over theoretical framing of IPV has widespread implications for policy and treatment. A traditional feminist approach, with its attendant focus on utilizing patriarchal structures to exert violence as an expression of power and to control, has advanced the cultural and legal shift that exerting violence in intimate relationships is not only unacceptable but also illegal. However, this approach reaches its own limits when attempting to explain, for instance, bi-directional violence between lesbian identified partners. Are these women accessing the patriarchy in order to abuse one another? Or, as some scholars, using a post-structuralist feminist perspective (e.g. Cannon et al. 2015), argue, do these women express violence differently? This latter framework allows greater room for understanding and interpreting various motivations and experiences of instances of IPV. For example, perhaps these lesbians do use violence as a form of power and control, yet how we understand these women in the context of their social location matters. They do not have the same rights and privileges in our sexist and homophobic society as the archetypal heterosexual man, for whom the traditional feminist paradigm originated to explain. How can we understand their use of violence in the same way?

This controversy has important implications for how we legislate policy and develop treatment interventions. As some scholars have argued, using a post-structuralist feminist framework leads to policies that dictate culturally relevant curricula that conceptualize and treat people where they are socially located (e.g. along axes of race, class, and gender) (see Cannon et al. 2015; Cannon et al. 2016; Smooth 2013). Expanding our ideas about how and why different groups of people initiate IPV in their relationships allows us to treat abusers and victims as whole people and takes seriously the notion that our society is rife with inequalities and power differentials. Using both quantitative methods to identify general trends of who and why LGBTQ perpetrators engage violence in their intimate relationships, as well as qualitative methods to further explore why and how perpetrators use violence and what kinds of treatments they think would be helpful are good first steps to researching the specific mechanisms of LGBTQ IPV. Such studies would aid in identifying the particular motivations and context as understood by LGBTQ people providing a window into the best ways to further develop treatment interventions for them. Any effort to right such inequalities begins by acknowledging they exist and that they create *differences* that matter; that need to be addressed in policies that affect both perpetrators and victims. Treatment options, then, must be available that deal with different people's social contexts and opportunities (or lack thereof) as well as their identities, since both these macro and micro issues

affect *how* and *why* people use violence to mediate their intimate relationships.

Applying alternative frameworks (such as a post-structuralist feminist framework), in addition to the traditional feminist paradigm, to the problem of IPV moves us towards greater equality by recognizing and valuing differences instead of asking everyone to be the same. Current policy is limiting in that it is simply privileging a certain kind of relationship over others (e.g. heteronormativity). Broadening our thinking about who is violent in intimate relationships and why helps us to better understand the complexities of IPV itself (see Baker et al. 2013). In using these multiple frameworks, we push the field into the future using interdisciplinary approaches as we move towards equality in researching LGBTQ issues and social problems (see Cannon and Buttell 2015). Finally, by implementing these frameworks, we aim for the research in our field to lead to the development of more complete policies and treatment options that are informed by people's experiences of difference.

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