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## The determination of gender roles and power dynamics within female same-sex couples

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THE DETERMINATION OF GENDER ROLES AND POWER DYNAMICS WITHIN  
FEMALE SAME-SEX COUPLES

A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors with Distinction

Sydney Faith Atwood  
University of Northern Iowa  
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This Study by: Sydney Atwood

Entitled: The Determination of Gender Roles and Power Dynamics Within Female Same-Sex  
Couples

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirement for the Designation University Honors with  
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Date

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this project was to explore the power dynamics between monogamous female same-sex couples, where traditional gender roles in relationships were not in play. In this study, I conducted a focus group of women who had been in lesbian relationships in the past or at the time of the study, and gathered insight into the dynamics of their relationships. I determined that same-sex couples do experience intimate partner violence, or IPV, but that their levels of masculinity and femininity were unrelated to the extent of power that they had. With this project, I hope to fill in some of the gaps in the literature on this subject through exploration of whether or not these females have more balanced power dynamics than their heterosexual counterparts. Because gender roles are so pervasive, this research may help to dispel misconceptions about how dominance and subordination are seen as traditionally male and female traits, and assist women's shelters in dealing with issues of abuse in same-sex couples.

## **Introduction**

There has been much research devoted to heterosexual relationships, but not as much attention applied to non-traditional monogamous ones. The majority of the former research has tended to associate men with dominance, and women with submissiveness. However, there is evidence that domination occurs in monogamous lesbian relationships. Domination falls on a continuum from minor, everyday forms of exploitation, such as who does the housework, to emotional or physical abuse. Asking ordinary people who have been in lesbian relationships to talk about their experiences of power, control, exploitation, and domination in their relationships may shed light on the gendered nature of power, and add much needed new queer theories to the existing literature. Throughout this study, I will use different terms to refer to the participants, such as gay, lesbian, queer, or WLW (“women who love women”). These are intended to be umbrella terms, and do not imply that all of the participants identify a certain way, but only to denote that they were or are in a relationship with another female. The same is true for the terms straight and heterosexual; they are only meant to denote that those are couples in which the two members identify as a man and a woman.

With this study, I have developed new theories on relationship dynamics and power that can be applied to female same-sex couples. According to existing literature, there is the same potential for violence in lesbian relationships that there is in heterosexual relationships. Power and domination are currently associated heavily with masculinity, but my research will attempt to prove that women have more of an opportunity to become dominant when their romantic or sexual partner is another woman. With this information, domestic violence shelters will have a better understanding of how to help female victims of abuse at the hands of another woman. With the information gathered from this study and others, we should educate women who are

new to the WLW community about signs of abuse, especially in their first relationship with another woman, which is when they will most likely be preyed upon (Ristock 2003, 339). In addition, either existing women's organizations or new organizations should be allowed to offer help to female victims *and* abusers, without risking anyone's safety (Ristock 2003, 339).

After gathering prior research on lesbian couples, I posed two questions: What can we learn about the connections between gender and power by looking at monogamous female same-sex relationships, and does a masculine-feminine dichotomy have to be present in order for there to be intimate partner violence? In order to answer these questions, I designed a simple methodology wherein I invited participants to discuss their past relationships with others in a focus group. The results largely confirmed what was already known, and it is even clearer now that women's shelters must be as inclusive as possible.

Before shelters can design programs to help sexual minority women, more research is needed in order to prove the prevalence and nuances of lesbian intimate partner violence. The rehabilitation of abusers is especially important in same-sex relationships because abusers can become victims, and victims can become abusers. Even though, according to Rich, "woman-to-woman violence is a minute grain in the universe of male-against-female violence" (658), women can be violent and abusive toward other women, and this problem should be addressed and remedied. I hope to shed more light on the phenomenon of women being powerful to both change perceptions about powerful women, and to aid women who have been victimized when those women become abusive.

## **Literature Review**

- Gender Roles

One of the reasons people do the work they think they are supposed to do is that society expects people to behave a certain way from the moment they are born. Power structures produce “subjects,” and good subjects will do what is expected of them, based on their skin color, sex, class, etc. We are all subjects as soon as we are born, and we spontaneously answer the call from society to exist and behave a certain way. Parents want their children to be good subjects, and act in accordance with their biological sex, but not out of ill will. Even feminists are submissive at times and self-blame when they are victims of misogyny (Kogl 2019, 2-6). In my study, I intend to find out if women sometimes still act according to their sex when their partner is a woman, rather than a man.

In heterosexual relationships, men are just as affected by societal expectations as women, and some are dominant against their nature, because they are expected to be the powerful one (Kogl 2019, 11). Domination often occurs in a seemingly benign relationship between two people, in which the man and the woman are both simply behaving the way they are expected to behave (Kogl 2019, 3). Nevertheless, this does not imply that domination can only be performed by a man.

Besides just assigning roles, society even associates certain adjectives with certain sexes. There are many words that are societally associated with one gender more than another, or words that have different meanings, depending on whether a man or a woman is being described. For instance, “honor, integrity, [and] respect” are associated with men, when they are actually just positive human traits (Gardiner 2012, 612). Also, masculinity in men is often described as toxic and limiting, whereas masculinity in women is considered to be empowering and uplifting (Gardiner 2012, 610). Men try to be more masculine to disassociate themselves

from femininity, but women are masculine because they are strong (Gardiner 2012, 611). My study will attempt to show that masculinity in women can be toxic as well.

- Discrepancies in Power and Levels of Control

There are many similarities between gay and straight couples, such as the levels of relationship satisfaction that they experience. Although same-sex couples are similar to opposite-sex couples in many ways, there are differences in how they go about completing day to day tasks. For instance, whereas housework duties tend to fall onto the female in heterosexual relationships, gay couples tend to divide the chores more evenly (Kurdek 2005, 251). Couples with a man and a woman divide housework based on sex and the skills that they associate with a certain gender, regardless of whether those skills actually hold true. In couples with two men or two women, the division is based more upon actual skills and schedules, in order to get chores done efficiently (Kurdek 2005, 252). In this way, same-sex couples share more equality than do heterosexual couples.

In their book, *Same Sex Intimacies*, Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan also back up the claim that cohabitating gay couples have a greater possibility of developing an egalitarian relationship, and dividing tasks by value and skill (Weeks et al. 2001, 99). They are forced to communicate and come to decisions about who does what, because there is no “rule book” like there is for heterosexual relationships (Weeks et al. 2001, 110). However, in same-sex relationships, there is still a difference in power, whether it is between two women or two men. Often, one is the breadwinner and the other is more in charge of the home, so there are still “gendered” arguments (Weeks et al. 2001, 100). Weeks et al. also point out that if gender roles are agreed upon, then the relationship is fair, even when the power is not distributed equally. Some couples prefer that



one is the breadwinner and the other is the homemaker (116). As long as there is no dispute about which is which, the relationship can be healthy.

In same-sex couples, the partner with better social connections often has the upper hand, and this leads researchers to the idea that the more out and connected woman will have power over the other. This potential abuse of power can remain one-sided, or it can become bidirectional. Regardless, lesbians do not report abuse often, in order to maintain the progress they have made as a community (Weeks et al. 2001, 118). This makes it even more difficult to identify the problem of abuse against women by other women.

Discrimination against women, whether by a man or another woman, is likened by Sandra Bartky to discrimination against people of color. Women are designated as inferior because of their sexual organs, as people of color are because of their skin (Bartky 1990, 26). Both are seen as deficient; people of color because they are not white, and women because they are born without makeup, jewelry, and styled hair: the exterior trappings that contribute to the societal ideas of how women should look (Bartky 1990, 29). Bartky also makes comparisons between sexism and capitalism. Just as women are separated from their personalities by their physical appearance, so are workers separated from their own labor (32). Because women have always been oppressed, it seems natural that they are powerless, and when something seems natural, it seems unalterable (Bartky 1990, 25). Women have always been presented as the inferior gender, and despite progress, women as a group still show some learned helplessness.

- Compulsory Heterosexuality

Because women have historically been less powerful than men in the United States, they have often passed as straight for various reasons. Adrienne Rich writes about compulsory heterosexuality for women, due to capitalism and the very roots of the patriarchy. Because of

reasons that are often economic, women are compelled to marry men (Rich 1980, 633, 635). Those in the past who did not suppress their lesbian identities were either punished for it, forced into marriage with a man, or simply written out of history (Rich 1980, 635).

Heterosexuality is seen as the norm, or the default in a person's identity. When it is discovered that a woman prefers to be coupled with another woman rather than a man, scholars feel the need to explain why, since it is viewed as a deviance from the natural sexual preference. Few people are compelled to ask why heterosexuality exists and is so prevalent. Since it is "natural," no explanation is needed (Rich 1980, 637).

Although viewed as unnatural, lesbians have existed just as long as heterosexuals, but they are often erased from historical records, and their experiences are unique and not to be grouped in with male homosexuals (Rich 1980, 649, 650). Even heterosexual women are part of the "lesbian continuum," which describes the understanding that women have with each other, such as "knowing glances" when men are talking (Rich 1980, 650). Women have sex with men, and then run to their female friends to be comforted, without fearing violence or force (Rich 1980, 656). This does not mean that all women hate all men; the bond that women have with one another does not involve men at all, and that is the whole point (Rich 1980, 658). Rich argues that since women and men are both often raised by their mothers, they should both *naturally* be drawn to women anyway (Rich 1980, 636). By being compulsively heterosexual, women are straying further from their instincts to be close to other women.

Men need to control women sexually in order to maintain power over them in all aspects of life. Women are even expected to be sexual objects for men in the workplace (Rich 1980, 642). Even lesbian pornography is made for men to enjoy- not women- and violence is employed in porn so often that it is normalized. When women who are interested romantically

or sexually in other women watch pornography, and see women being victimized as a part of sexual acts, they also begin to think that violence toward women during sexual intercourse is normal, which could have negative consequences (Rich 1980, 641). This can lead to women becoming dominant over their partner, especially when it is another woman.

- Cycles of Abuse

When people become too dominant in a relationship, their partner becomes oppressed. It takes on many different forms, but an often overlooked kind of oppression is psychological. Bartky asserts that the “psychologically oppressed become their own oppressors” (22). This type of oppression is what allows other types of oppression to continue, such as physical exploitation, legal exploitation, and economic exploitation (Bartky 1990, 22). When oppression is psychological, it prevents the oppressed from understanding their oppression, and it keeps them from rebelling (Bartky 1990, 23).

Psychological abuse is, in fact, the most prevalent form of abuse among lesbians, and this includes gaslighting, manipulation, and even homophobia (Badenes-Ribera et al. 2016, 284). Data, however, is limited due to the assumption that women are only abused by men. In cases of physical abuse, medical staffers often do not ask about the gender of their abuser, and it is often assumed that women can only be abused by men (Badenes-Ribera et al. 2016, 285). In order to isolate specific causes of intimate partner violence, or IPV, a distinction must be made in the sexual orientations and gender identities of the victims and abusers (Badenes-Ribera et al. 2016, 293). Nearly half of lesbians in the United States have been victims of rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by a romantic partner, yet most of them do not know to what extent there is help available to them. The first step in remedying this problem is better training for

social workers, doctors, and police officers (Badenes-Ribera et al. 2016, 292). The marginalization of queer women has prevented them from seeking help as often as they need it.

When a group of people is marginalized, they experience fragmentation, which is when a person is split between their true self and their false self (Bartky 1990, 23). The contradiction that women are forced to believe is that they are equal, according to society. However, they simultaneously realize that they are not, thus forcing them to self-blame if they feel unfulfilled (Bartky 1990, 30). If women want to be independent, powerful, and in control, they must deny their femininity (Bartky 1990, 24). In my study, I found evidence to support the claim that women who deny their femininity and become dominant often treat their female partner in a similar way to straight men. The difference is that men receive their dominant status at birth, whereas women come into it, as they define their identities and sexualities (Rich 1980, 647).

Abuse against women has become so normalized that when male power turns into abuse in heterosexual relationships, it is often seen as merely being part of a normal marriage (Phillips 2000, 2). Lynn M. Phillips writes about straight women, and how they play around the fine line between catcalls being complimentary and dangerous (3). Women are quick to defend other women who experience abuse, but slow to defend themselves, asserting they are not “real” victims because their partner is not a “real” abuser (Phillips 2000, 4-7). When women are abused, they often blame themselves, since society blames them as well (Phillips 2000, 8). Phillips concludes by asserting that the current accusations from conservative voices on the right that women today have embraced the “victim status” are not supported by her study (195-6). In fact, heterosexual women *deny* the victim status, and barely recognize their own victimization.

However, domination does not always equal abuse, and thus sexual domination does not always take the form of sexual assault. Women consent to doing things with men for many

reasons: sometimes out of genuine interest, sometimes out of fear, and sometimes they do not want to hurt men's feelings (Kogl 2019, 12). Women know that they really do not have a choice in whether or not a sexual act will take place, but they *can* choose to verbally consent (Kogl 2019, 11). This type of unwilling "consent" and self-blame can also hold true for submissive women who are in a relationship with another woman.

- Masculinity versus Femininity

In the past, masculine women were taboo, but now they are inspirational. People think that now, women can be just like men and have power (Gardiner 2012, 620). Aside from men and women, there are many other genders recognized today, and they are often overlooked in favor of a binary system comprised of opposite genders (Gardiner 2012, 619). Judith Kegan Gardiner's primary argument is that masculinity does not have to denote dominance and power, and by calling women masculine, we are reinforcing the power that men *already* hold just because of their genitalia (Gardiner 2012, 617). This negates Butler's entire argument.

Queer theorists have many different ideas about what it means to be masculine and feminine, and many struggle to avoid playing directly into gendered stereotypes. Judith Butler argues that "phallus" is a term for power and tries to disassociate it with male genitalia. However, Gardiner argues that by positing that lesbians are manly and phallic, Butler proves that she believes masculinity to be associated with penises (Gardiner 2012, 604). As Gardiner puts it, the idea of female masculinity "still rests on binary conceptions of power that connote maleness and also on psychoanalytic assumptions" (598). By calling powerful women masculine or manly, it proves that we associate masculinity with power. In this study, I hope to prove that women can be dominant and powerful without displaying "manly" traits.

Judith Butler has argued that gender is merely a performance, and that a strict definition of gender does not allow for growth (278, 281, 285). She goes so far as to say that if gender is independent of sex, it is possible that “*man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (280). In other words, a woman can be both female and feminine while still having masculine attributes (Butler 1990, 284).

While Butler has contributed greatly to the study of gender and sexuality, she has also been criticized by other scholars for implying that gender is a choice. Although she was right in saying that gender is a performance, it is not easy to simply switch back and forth and choose which one we are going to perform. We are all victims of gender norms, and that includes lesbians. They cannot simply switch to the role of a man, even though they can have as many masculine traits as a man.

- Setbacks to the Prevention of Queer Abuse

When women do become abusive toward other women, there is little information on how to address it. Theories on dealing with abuse have historically been modeled on the assumption that only men are violent toward women (Ristock 2003, 329). When members of a couple are of the same gender, these models do not apply. Domestic violence in lesbian couples in particular is thought to be of the same frequency, or even a higher one than heterosexual couples. Reports range from 17% to 52% of lesbian couples experiencing domestic violence, but it is difficult to pin down, as gay couples are less likely to report abuse (Ristock 2003, 329-330). Then again, women are *more* likely to report violence than men, so the data is questionable (Ristock 2003, 330).

Reactions from outsiders differ largely. On one hand, United States citizens are less likely to believe in same-sex IPV, but on the other hand, people are also more sympathetic toward female victims than male victims. Overall, women are more sympathetic to all types of victims of abuse. While people are sympathetic toward women, that sympathy lessens when it is revealed that their abuser was also a woman (Sorenson and Thomas 2009, 339). Neighbors are less likely to call the police if they suspect abuse in a gay couple, but *more* likely to want police intervention if there is a child involved. Either way, people are less focused on the well-being of their LGBT+ neighbors.

There are many reasons that women choose not to report sexual assault to law enforcement, many of them social, and therefore it is one of the most underreported crimes. The more shame a woman feels, the less likely she will report; this is also deeply tied to the reactions she receives from friends and family (DePrince et al. 2019, 1-2). Compared to the 60% of straight women who report sexual assault, only 45% of LGBT+ women do- that we know of. Women make their decisions to report or keep quiet based on how they feel others will react, which would assumedly be more negative if their assailants were women, and whether or not they believe that they will receive legal and social aid (DePrince et al. 2019, 9-12). Sexual minority women cannot be as sure as heterosexual women that they will be treated with fairness.

Part of the reason that lesbian IPV goes undetected is that clinicians who screen for abuse do not ask what the gender of their abuser was. Straight women are more often screened for IPV, even though sexual minority women may be just as likely to experience it. This is related to the overwhelming misconception that men are primarily abusers against women, but again, this can only be disproven by asking more questions to victims of IPV (Ard and Makadon 2011).

In addition to social workers, police officers are also uninformed on how to deal with domestic violence in gay couples. In fact, police often struggle in cases of heterosexual domestic violence (Baker et al. 2013, 183). They tend to assume that the larger person is the abuser, and especially with lesbian couples, that is not always the case (Baker et al. 2013, 189). By studying same-sex IPV, researchers are forced to look at factors other than gender, and this will ultimately help heterosexual victims of IPV as well.

Finally, even feminism has not been very helpful when it comes to the issue of lesbian abuse. Janice L. Ristock proposes that one reason feminism has neglected to tackle the problem of abuse in lesbian relationships is that feminists are afraid of drawing attention to it, lest it should roll back years of progress in the feminist community (329). Her study was conducted by interviewing women one-on-one who were involved in an abusive relationship with another woman. She also held focus groups with couples' counselors who had dealt with woman-to-woman abuse in relationships (Ristock 2003, 332). In the focus groups, the women were given the chance to discuss how they, as feminists, handle lesbian abuse in the context of gender-based theories of violence against women that do not account for female perpetrators, and their answers were not always clear cut (Ristock 2003, 333).

- **Shifting Power Dynamics in Same-Sex Couples**

The two themes that emerged from Ristock's interviews were the shifting power dynamics between two people in a relationship who are on the same level gender-wise, and the high likelihood of abuse in a woman's first homosexual relationship with a more experienced queer woman. The women in the focus groups relayed their difficulties in assessing who was the victim and who was the abuser, and the constraints of organizational mandates (Ristock 2003, 334). When both partners are female, it is easy for the victim to flip and become abusive, and



vice versa. Victims can fight back and reclaim power, but this can still lead to domination; just the other way around (Ristock 2003, 336). Abuse against the abuser is *still* abuse.

A class analysis conducted by Sutter, Rabinovitch, Trujillo, Perrin, Goldberg, Coston, and Calton reiterated several points made by others already. First of all, the perpetrators and victims of violence are more likely to switch roles in same-sex couples. The fact that they will probably use the same forms of violence against one another may make it appear as though they are just a dysfunctional couple, and that there is no need for intervention (Sutter et al. 2019, 575). Furthermore, they again assert that the most common form of abuse between lesbians is psychological, and less likely to leave any physical evidence (Sutter et al. 2019, 579). According to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey in 2010, 44% of lesbians and 61% of bisexual women reported rape, physical violence, or stalking by a romantic partner, compared to 35% of heterosexual women (Sutter et al. 2019, 573). The numbers clearly indicate a problem and lack of intervention for lesbian couples, but it was not specified whether bisexual women received abuse more often from men or women.

This analysis also solidified the theory that the level of “outness” may predict probability of victimization (Sutter et al. 2019, 574). In a woman’s first lesbian relationship, she may fall prey to an older woman who already has connections in the gay community, and who may take advantage of her. From the other point of view, sexual minority women who perpetrate high rates of IPV may be experiencing stressors of homophobia and heterosexism from others. In addition to this, women in general experience misogyny, racism, depending on their skin color, and gender identity discrimination if they fall outside of the binary (Sutter et al. 2019, 573-574). All of these stressors combined have been shown to lead to unhealthy relationships. The study found a positive correlation between levels of heterosexism/homophobia experienced at

work and by family, and IPV perpetration (Sutter et al. 2019, 583). Some women who lose power at work attempt to gain power in their relationships, and others who are stigmatized at work feel that they deserve the abuse they receive at home (Sutter et al. 2019, 586). Thus, the perfect storm is formed for an abusive relationship.

People in relationships are in a constant struggle for power, and in straight couples, men almost always have more, due to traditional gender roles. However, the wider the power gap, the less satisfactory the relationship. In heterosexual partnerships, studies have shown that the less committed partner often has more power over the other, which points back to the theory about abuse in first relationships for lesbian women. The one who is more “out” and connected with others is likely to have less commitment than the one who is solely reliant on her partner to show her the “ropes” of being a queer woman (Traeder and Zeigler-Hill 2019).

A study conducted by Longares, Escartín, Barrientos, and Rodríguez-Carballeira revealed that trends found within lesbian couples in the United States were not geographically unique. This study was conducted throughout several Spanish speaking countries, and it affirmed the idea that different levels of “outness” can be stressors in a female same-sex couple that lead to abuse from one or both women.

In an even more global context, a study was conducted surrounding domestic violence in Asian and Pacific Islander lesbian couples. The investigators found that control and intimidation were the starting points of domestic violence, and that a common threat was “outing” their partner to family, friends, or coworkers (Kanuha 2013, 1180). Since lesbian relationships are felt so “deeply,” with the combination of romantic love, the understanding felt between women, and the unreliability of society, there is a higher risk of psychological abuse, manipulation, and jealousy (Kanuha 2013, 1182-1184). Extreme jealousy can lead to stalking, and this is

perpetuated by the fact that gay people may have more limited social networks, and experience internal shame and homophobia (Kanuha 2013, 1185-1190).

This study also discovered, as was previously noted, that in a woman's first lesbian relationship, she was more likely to be abused. She has had little to no experience, and does not know exactly what a healthy lesbian relationship should look like (Kanuha 2013, 1183). Additionally, when a lesbian couple is comprised of a femme and butch, the femme is more likely to be the abuser. This goes against the theories of masculine attributes being related to abuse. Butch women are more likely to be recognized as being gay by society, and a femme can hit on those insecurities that they feel about themselves and their lack of femininity. Butch women will likely also feel less comfortable reporting that they have been abused by their partner (Kanuha 2013, 1188). They are more deviant from femininity than their femme counterparts, and this makes them more of a target for discrimination.

- Faults in Women's Shelters

A major fault with women's organizations, such as battered women's shelters, are the mandates that require them to work only with victims of abuse. In other words, when both women have taken on the roles of victim and abuser, the organization can only assist one of them. They are prevented from labeling both partners victims or abusers (Ristock 2003, 338). Some organizations only offer help to women who have never used violence against their partner, so this rules out many women who have ever acted in self-defense (Ristock 2003, 338).

Women's shelters are even more limiting for lesbians specifically. Firstly, when they show up looking for help, they are forced to prove in some way that they are the victim, instead of their partner, and this is if they even attempt to show up at all. Many LGBT+ women feel that admitting to being battered by another woman is admitting that lesbians have problems too. This

could again infringe on the progress that the gay community has been trying to make for years. There is also a stigma against gay couples having children, and there are less options for dealing with distressed lesbian families (Hardman 1997, 560). Social workers lack training to deal with female same-sex couples, and this completely disregards their unique experiences (Hardman 1997, 545). Many of these problems simply stem from a lack of knowledge and research.

Most of the existing literature surrounding female same-sex couples is qualitative and driven by small studies that build off of one another, or theoretical essays. In order to stimulate further, more large-scale studies, I designed a qualitative study to confirm and build upon the themes present within many lesbian relationships. With the contribution of my findings into the pool of existing knowledge about power dynamics in female same-sex relationships, it may become more possible to take specific actions to help sexual minority victims of abuse, and design future studies.

## **Methods**

- Research Questions

What can we learn about the connections between gender and power by looking at monogamous female same-sex relationships?

Does a masculine-feminine dichotomy have to be present in order for there to be intimate partner violence?

- Participants

There were seven participants in my focus group, not including me: the primary investigator. All attended the University of Northern Iowa, either as an undergraduate student or a graduate student. All were white and presumably middle class, and most were quite young, as

well as more feminine than butch. For confidentiality purposes, I assigned each participant a pseudonym. Erin is approximately twenty years old, and she describes herself and her current girlfriend as femme. Kate is approximately nineteen, and she is currently in a relationship with another woman. She is what I would describe as a Chapstick lesbian; that is, she is not a “girly-girl” or lipstick lesbian, but she is also not butch. Grace is also around nineteen years old, and could be Chapstick or femme, depending on the situation. Megan is of a similar age, and appears to be a Chapstick lesbian as well.

The remaining three participants provided more variety to my data. Lindsay and Rachel are in their mid-twenties, and are also married to each other. I would not identify one as more feminine or masculine than the other, although Rachel tended to speak up more. Finally, Toni is around 47 years old, and has been married twice; both times to a woman. She described herself and her partners as fairly gender-fluid, and she presented physically as more butch. She is currently getting her master’s degree in social justice.

- Methodology

The existing literature suggested that qualitative interviews or focus groups would prompt better responses than quantitative interviews in studies involving homosexual couples, since the theory is so lacking that it is difficult to know what questions to ask in the first place. Current theories suggest that in lesbian relationships, the woman who was out longer- and who has dated/been with women before- will be the dominant one. She holds power because she is more “in” with the community, and the partner is vulnerable because she relies on the dominant one to introduce her to WLW culture (Ristock 2003).

Qualitative interviewing, or focus groups in my case, allowed me to gather data that was not necessarily on my radar. Rubin and Rubin suggested calling interviewees “conversational

partners,” in order to build rapport, and it helped me to make the participants feel comfortable speaking up. I utilized two types of questioning during my focus group: the main questions that I had already prepared, and probes to elicit further detail during the focus group. With qualitative focus group questions, I was better able to understand different perspectives by gaining insight into how other people perceive their world and interpret their experiences. This is more important in qualitative interviewing than it is to gather averages (Rubin 2012, 2-4). I sought to find the “why” answers rather than the “what” answers. I asked deep questions that could not be answered in one word, and I prompted them to go into detail with their responses (Rubin 2012, 5-6).

I held one focus group to which I invited students to come and share their experiences of power and control in their relationships. It was held on UNI’s campus, in a reserved seminar room in Sabin Hall. The subjects fit these specific criteria: They were adults, they were *not* pregnant or nursing mothers, they did not have severe mental disabilities, and were either currently or were in the past in a self-determined long-term relationship with another female. The subjects or their partners may have since come out as a different gender identity or sexual orientation, but they were eligible as long as they were once in a “lesbian relationship.”

Before I began the conversation, I provided a trigger warning, in case any members were to bring up instances of abuse, and also disclosed that the discussion was going to be audio-recorded. Then, I read the following questions, and allowed for tangential conversation as well: “Did anyone ever ask you who the ‘man’ and ‘woman’ was in your relationship? If so, what did you respond? Did you consider one of you to be more masculine, and what traits led you to this conclusion? Think back to your first lesbian relationship. Of the two of you, was there a more dominant or ‘in charge’ type personality? Whenever the two of you were faced with a task,

whether it be a household chore or any activity that required cooperation, do you feel that you divided the work equally? Why or why not? If your relationship *wasn't* always equal in terms of power, did you find that one person always had the upper hand, or did your roles switch?"

I was not able to ask specifically about abuse, but my questions aimed at precursors of abuse in a relationship, such as inequality and microaggressions. At the conclusion of the focus group, I provided each subject with information about counseling centers available to them, in case any of the conversations were triggering. I formed this methodology using tips from *Qualitative Interviewing*, by Rubin and Rubin, and Janice L. Ristock's study from 2003.

After the focus group, I transcribed the dialogue, and read it to identify any themes. I began my analysis by determining what the subjects were telling me, then I considered how societal conventions have determined how they view their lives (Ristock 2003, 334). I pulled out prominent themes in a method similar to the one used by Phillips in her study, by looking for patterns in the dialogue (222). I ended by compiling all demographic information, identifying flaws in my sample, and making concessions about my study. I also made connections between my study and other similar studies, to see if any themes recurred or changed.

## **Results**

The focus group I conducted lasted approximately an hour and a half, and all seven participants contributed insight into their past relationships. Several themes emerged, six of which were relevant to my study. The participants concluded that same-sex relationships are more equal than heterosexual relationships, and there is no "man" in a lesbian relationship. However, there are struggles for power, and roles can switch, depending on the situation. They also agreed that society tries to label them as a "man" and "woman" based on

how they act in public, and that people in general are still fairly naive when it comes to gay couples.

- Theme 1: Lesbian relationships are largely egalitarian.

The first theme that emerged was that same-sex relationships are more equal than heterosexual relationships when it comes to dividing tasks. Same-sex couples tend to divide chores based on skill and time, rather than gender roles. Rachel said, “For me, I really feel like it was just completely equal. I don’t feel like there was any difference in any kind of power dynamic or anything like that, or dominance in any way.” Toni expressed that compared to male partners she had in the past, relationships with women were far more equal. Kate agreed that women are on the same level, with the same amount of political rights and the same understandings.

Others expressed that division of labor “depended on the situation.” This was a phrase that came up many times throughout the discussion. People are naturally inclined to prefer certain chores over others, and often, one member of the relationship simply has more free time. Toni, who has been married twice, made deals with her partners that if they cooked, she would clean. In her first marriage, she noted that she did far more work, since cleaning was a more encompassing task than cooking dinner, but in her second marriage, they were able to divide the chores more equally.

The younger participants mostly did chores in their own residences, since they had not lived with a romantic partner yet. It was more about entertaining a guest rather than splitting work with a domestic partner. Many of the participants emphasized that where they failed in skills, their partner picked up the slack, and vice versa. Kate said, “It’s just like, it’s easier to understand another woman than- compared to a man...”



- Theme 2: A masculine-feminine dichotomy is not necessary in a relationship.

A second theme that emerged was that there is no “man” in a lesbian relationship, and that one or both lesbians does not have to be “butch.” In fact, the majority of my subjects came across as moderately effeminate, and described their partners the same way. Many of them recall being asked about specific gender roles by others, and Grace responded to one such person: “Well, we’re both women, so I don’t know what to tell you, dude...” Kate said that one of her relationships flipped back and forth, but one was not more masculine than the other. Even the most “butch” participant reported that she and her partners were all slightly gender-fluid, and that neither was more masculine than the other.

Erin talked at length about her realization that lesbians do not have to be butch to present as a lesbian. She and her current girlfriend are very feminine, and she said that the way they present themselves outwardly has no effect on their relationship. They do, however, joke about who is the “big strong man,” but only to make fun of the patriarchy. She reports that watching videos of lesbian YouTubers helped her to see that she did not have to be butch, as she initially thought she did. She said, “I started dressing more, like, masculine and athletic because, like, I thought that’s what I had to do, but then I was like, ‘oh no wait, I can still like the things that I do; I can still like painting my nails and doing my makeup and whatever.’”

- Theme 3: A woman is more likely to experience abuse in her first lesbian relationship.

A third theme that emerged was that there is often a dominant personality in lesbian relationships, and it is unrelated to butch or femme characteristics. This is especially common in a woman’s first same-sex relationship, when her partner is more “out.” Lesbian relationships *can* be abusive, and butch lesbians may be even more of a minority than femme lesbians. While women do not have to be older to be more dominant, they typically have been out longer, and are

more confident in their sexuality. Kate's first girlfriend was 19 and she was 17, and she recalls that she was still not comfortable with the whole situation. Her girlfriend was "more out; she was more comfortable with her sexuality..."

Many of the participants said that they relied on their first girlfriend to help them navigate being a lesbian. The partner would have more of a say when it came to decision making, and their confidence would blindside the more submissive partner. Erin said that she had low standards for herself in the beginning, and settled for someone in order to have a first kiss, a first relationship, and other firsts. Her girlfriend was older, out and proud, confident, and even intimidating. She said that she was envious of that in a way, and came out even though she was not ready to come out. Grace also reports coming out prematurely because of pressure from her first girlfriend, who allegedly told her "You should just come out." Forcing someone to come out before they are ready is an attempt at domination. The powerful partner often views the relationship as invalid unless their partner is openly attracted to the same sex. This is a form of emotional abuse.

I asked the participants whether it was always a good thing that their partner knew how their minds worked, better than a man would, and they dissented. One woman noted that because she and her partner were both girls, she would know what was going on in the other one's head and take advantage of it. Another said that both would be very jealous of each other at times. Sometimes, being equal was a good thing, but at other times, it could cause problems.

- Theme 4: Abusers and victims can swap roles.

Another theme that came up in the discussion was the idea that the person who has the upper hand in the relationship can switch roles with the submissive person. Toni reported that, in her first marriage, her wife would occasionally try to take control, but that "I didn't totally let

her.” Megan said that it depended on who was more comfortable in a public situation. If one was anxious, the other would automatically take charge, and vice versa. She said, “I like things done a certain way, so it’s easier if I just do stuff.”

- Theme 5: Gender roles are presented differently in public than they are in private.

Another theme that was brought up is the notion that the expression of gender is a public performance, but in private, two women are more likely to be equal toward one another, whereas heterosexual couples may continue to follow their gender roles. Several participants mentioned that whoever was more confident took charge in public, and that random onlookers could pick out a “masculine” and “feminine” person, but that their assumptions were usually wrong. In public, they admitted to presenting as more polarized in terms of gender expression, but at home, they became equal. This is possibly true for heterosexual couples as well.

- Theme 6: Lesbian relationships are still viewed as abnormal.

Finally, an obvious theme of the focus group is that society still ignores what makes it uncomfortable, such as same-sex relationships. Or, conversely, people pay far too much attention to same-sex couples, making them feel unsafe. One woman said that people either whisper about the existence of gay people, or ignore it all together and hope it will go away. According to Rachel, “no one talks about it or everyone talks about it.” She and Lindsay considered getting married without a ceremony due to the fear of backlash, but they ended up having one anyway.

On a darker note, Kate talked about how she was afraid to show affection to her girlfriend in public, because homophobes “could kill me if they wanted to.” She lamented that she only felt that she could be herself behind closed doors. Toni had a scary experience at one of her old jobs when her coworkers banded together to try to get her fired. She and her wife even received

death threats. After hearing about a lesbian couple in their area that was beaten nearly to death, they decided to quit their jobs and relocate halfway across the country. Toni said, “it was just, just so stressful every day.”

Other themes emerged that were less related to my study, but interesting nonetheless, and could be used to create future studies. The group of participants bonded strongly in the first ten minutes alone, and this led me to believe that gay people band together to form their own political consciousness. Several people noted that as soon as they came out, other people who they did not know very well would come out to them. Also, several jabs were made at straight white men due to the fact that they simply have “too many privileges!”

About half of the participants paid extra attention to Lindsay and Rachel, as they had not been in the same room as a same-sex married couple before that night. Kate even said, “I might need to leave soon... but this group is fun, and it makes me so happy...” It was also discussed that lesbians are not so-called “man-haters.” Toni noted that one can hate the patriarchy without hating men; “you hate the sexism, not the gender.”

## **Discussion**

The results of my focus group largely matched the literature I reviewed on the subject of lesbian IPV. Some of the theories in the existing research were not well supported, due to small sample sizes and research that was modeled off of heterosexual research structures. One theory that I discovered to be extremely relevant was the theory of abuse of power in a woman’s first same-sex relationship. Nearly every participant in my focus group recalled their experiences of dating a woman, shortly before or after coming out, who was more confident and well-connected with the gay community already. However, none of them implied or stated that their partner was

more masculine than they were. This led me to believe that masculinity is *not* required of an abuser.

My subjects confirmed the more equal division of chores that they experienced in same-sex relationships compared to straight relationships, and none of them picked out a “man” or “woman” in their relationship. They relayed that bystanders could pick out which one was more masculine and which was more feminine, but that they would have seen something completely different in their private lives. My participants’ relationships, as I suspected, were, by definition, completely free of men. This equality, however, had the potential to lead to struggles for power. My participants also confirmed that the person with the upper hand could switch roles with the partner; it all depended on the situation.

The conclusions of sex and gender theorists, such as Judith Butler, did not always align with empirical evidence from other sources, but there is a lack of research in general. Butler emphasizes the fluidity and choice that people have in their gender identities, but it almost negates the unique lesbian experience (Butler 1990). Furthermore, Butler’s ideas are often criticized for being too centered around affluent white women. As a well-off white woman who lived in a queer-friendly bubble for most of her life, it was easier for her to assume that the lesbian experience is one and the same, regardless of race and class. She also ends up negating the transgender experience by likening it to drag (Butler 1990). Her lens is too small, and this makes her theories somewhat problematic.

Kanuha’s study revealed that abuse often comes from a femme lesbian and is directed toward a butch lesbian, which is not in accordance with Butler’s theory of gender as a choice. If butch lesbians are at a disadvantage in a relationship because they express themselves in a certain way, they could simply choose to be more effeminate according to Butler; but, they do

not. Kanuha concluded that sexual jealousy is one of the biggest contributors to violence against women, and this kind of jealousy could occur in any type of relationship. Bartky specifies that the purpose of the oppression of women is solely to keep men in power, but this also does not allow for oppression of women by other women (Bartky 1990). Jealousy can lead to oppression, and it can come from women just as easily as it can come from men (Kanuha 2013). Therefore, Bartky may have been partially inaccurate in stating that oppression of women is for men alone.

Gardiner, who is also a theorist, was more in line with empirical findings, as she states that masculinity is not directly related to the abuse of power. Traeder and Zeigler-Hill agreed, with empirical evidence, that the desire for power was associated with perceptions of the romantic relationship, and not necessarily related to gender identity. This claim of genderless abuse is further supported by studies conducted by Sutter et al., and Badenes-Ribera et al.

Phillips theorizes solely about heterosexual abuse, and why women are slow to report abusive male partners. She points to the women who refuse to call out their abusers, and how by doing so, they are contributing to the reinforcement of dominant hetero-relational power asymmetries (192). Part of her conclusion almost sounds like victim-blaming. She asks why women do not report, instead of asking why women do not feel safe or comfortable enough with law enforcement and social agencies to report. Additionally, it is difficult to pin down which women are protecting an abuser, and which are truly not victims. Her conclusions rely heavily on the assumptions that all of the women she studied were victims of abuse, and while this may be true, it is possible she was projecting onto some of them. Phillips argues that we need to educate our girls to recognize abuse, but in the context of her study, I would argue that we need to educate our boys much more on how to not be abusive (197). In the end, we need spaces for

men and women to come together and share their stories, in order to normalize the idea that IPV is possible in any relationship (Phillips 2000, 201).

Adrienne Rich conceded in her writing that while lesbian abuse is prominent and problematic, it is a “minute grain in the universe” compared to the abuse that heterosexual men dole out to women on a daily basis (Rich 1980, 658). However, if looked at proportionally, she may have been wrong about the magnitude of difference. As this study has shown, sexual minority women are extremely likely to be dominated by another woman at some point, so it is not necessarily a lesser problem than abuse in heterosexual relationships. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize and attempt to prevent all forms of abuse.

I began this study by asking what can be determined regarding possible connections between gender and power by looking at lesbian relationships, and whether or not a masculine-feminine dichotomy must be present in order for there to be intimate partner violence. The results of my focus group have led me to the conclusion that power is not gendered. Women have the potential to become dominant in a relationship, but societal norms often stifle that potential, and give it to men. However, when a woman is in a relationship with another woman, her potential to be dominant over her partner rises; but, so does the potential of her partner. This is why lesbian abuse can easily flip back and forth and become bidirectional.

The answer to the latter question is not as clear. It has already been determined that there does not have to be a man and a woman in order for there to be IPV, but masculinity and femininity are more fluid terms. Masculinity implies strength and aggression, but these are words that can be used to describe anyone, no matter what gender they identify with. Similarly, femininity denotes delicacy and submissiveness, but these traits are also genderless. Furthermore, my initial literature review revealed that masculine women are not

more likely to abuse feminine women; it is the other way around. A woman who encompasses femininity in her gender expression is actually more likely to hold power over a masculine presenting woman. This is still a masculine-feminine dichotomy, but it is not the one I originally assumed. On the other hand, according to my focus group, even women who present the same amount of femininity and masculinity have the potential to abuse their partner, be abused by their partner, or both. Therefore, intimate partner violence is still very possible without a masculine-feminine dichotomy.

While conducting this study and reading queer theorists, I noticed a societal flaw that I had not specifically been looking for. While feminism is becoming more intersectional, it still does not serve LGBT+ women as well as it should. The pressures of being accepted into the feminist community have led queer women to hide problems in the LGBT+ community. By not acknowledging abuse and domination in lesbian relationships, women are protecting the already fragile status of queer people and women in general. While heterosexual relationships are allowed to experience problems and toxicity without the existence and integrity of all heterosexual people being questioned, queer relationships are not. This denial of relationship problems in queer relationships is only perpetuating the problem, and it does not serve women, as feminism should.

One of the most difficult parts of analyzing these results was determining what factors had the biggest effect on lesbian relationships. Since WLW are minorities based on their gender, their sexuality, and sometimes their race and class, it is difficult to pin down what microaggressions and discrimination they may experience on a daily basis, and if that is what leads to instability in their relationships. Not only should we aim to help women who have been



in abusive relationships, but we should try to prevent the abuse from happening, by amending the very foundations of our homophobic society.

Moving forward, I propose that a few actions should be taken, based on my findings stated in the literature review, and the results of my own study. First of all, we need to form campaigns intended to educate specific populations. Social workers need a better understanding about how to help LGBT+ families that are in distress and experiencing abuse. Law enforcement officers need trainings that dispel stereotypes about what victims and abusers look like. Perhaps most importantly, sexual minority women need to know that there are resources available to them, in terms of what to expect from a first relationship, and what to do if a romantic partner becomes violent.

Second, women's shelters need to revamp the guidelines of their programs in order to accommodate lesbian couples, in which both partners need assistance. This is the most difficult problem to solve, and it is possible that an entirely new non-profit organization is needed in order to help sexual minority women specifically.

Finally, scholars need to rethink the way that they study the LGBT+ community. In order to study same-sex IPV further, scholars need to abandon methods of study that were built around heterosexual IPV. While it can be the basis of a research structure for same-sex studies, there are underlying assumptions built into heterosexual methods that will skew the data. By first deconstructing stereotypes about gender and traits associated with masculinity and femininity, researchers will be better able to ask the right questions of subjects in future studies.

### **Limitations**

My study used a small sample size, and it was limited to students who are currently attending the University of Northern Iowa. Because of the homogeneity of my participants, I

was unable to study factors such as race, class, gender identity, geographical location, or major generational variations. Furthermore, when it came to discussing domestic life, some of my participants were too young to have cohabitated with a romantic partner before. In general, I concede that my study used a specific sample of people in a project that was trying to aim at a larger population.

Much of the empirical research that I read in preparation for this project conceded the same things; that there were simply not enough responses or participants, and there is also little existing data to go off of. Where my project succeeds greatly is that it is unique and original. A small sample is better than no sample, and it could lead to future research. I attempted to take theoretical research involving lesbian couples and test it empirically. With small studies like my own, scholars can now have a better idea of how to proceed with further research.

### **Future Research**

As Phillips points out, any research exposing same-sex domestic violence could be problematic and fuel the existing stigmas surrounding the LGBT+ community (205). Therefore, future research should be designed carefully, so that it may help rather than harm queer people. Several articles connected the perpetration of abuse to the stressor of being a minority, or a woman who experiences additional discrimination due to race, sexual orientation, or gender identity. In other words, if someone is berated at work for being gay, they may be more likely to berate their partner in turn, once they get home. I propose further research in order to determine the different stressors that minorities face, the effects that they have, and how to remedy them.

Future studies must also include better sampling, with less of a focus on affluent white people, because this skews results to exclude the unique experiences of the economically disadvantaged, people with disabilities, and people of color, as was seen in Kurdek's study

(254). Furthermore, we cannot create studies centered around theories and methods derived from studies revolving around heterosexual relationships, because these theories assume a male abuser.

In my study, I could not ask my subjects about abuse specifically, but I did gather from my focus group that first relationships tended to be more unequal in terms of power. If possible, we should gather more definitive intel on lesbian abuse. In order to do this, we need additional qualitative studies with open-ended answers to determine power dynamics and distinguish the forms and contexts of abuse within WLW relationships. From there, we can conduct larger studies that are more survey-based.

I compiled several more ideas that I am interested in researching further. My study aimed at lesbian relationships specifically, but it would be helpful to know how domination and power affect gay male relationships. I predict that there is a potential for even more of a power struggle, or a consensual power difference, since men are socialized to have the upper hand. In addition, in fields that study minorities, we should always be expanding our studies to be more intersectional. For example, in future studies, I would like to add in race as a factor, and inquire more about the partners of the subjects in my focus group. A feminine white woman who tells me that she has the upper hand in her relationship with another feminine white woman should be analyzed far differently than if she were in a relationship with an African American butch woman.

I would also like to analyze the differences in feminine or masculine attributes for women, depending on the age that they came out. Women who come out later in life are also more likely to have been in prior relationships with men; does this affect the way that they behave in lesbian relationships? Are they already socialized to be submissive to their partners, or

does the sudden switch from men to women prompt them to take control? In my focus group, several subjects said, “It depends on the situation,” in response to multiple questions. The only way to get to the root of what they meant is to hold more focus groups and ask participants to be specific and give examples.

## **Conclusion**

More research is needed to determine problems and solutions in the LGBT+ community. Specifically, queer women need safe places to go, resources to help them get out of abusive situations, and assurance that they can report without being judged by law enforcement, social workers, and medical clinicians. Women who are new to the LGBT+ community are especially vulnerable to psychological abuse by a romantic partner, and first responders need to know this information, as well as the fact that abusers and victims can easily swap roles when they are both women.

My study overwhelmingly concluded that lesbian IPV is very possible and is an often-overlooked problem. In addition, masculinity is not always a character trait of an abuser, and this should be considered in future dealings with lesbian victims of domestic abuse. It is not possible to correctly assume which partner is the abuser in all cases, and this is why law enforcement officers and social workers must be sensitive to this issue.

This study is significant in that it delves into an underreported issue. Queer theorists are far outnumbered by heterosexual relationship scholars, but smaller qualitative studies like this one are slowly helping to advance the field of queer studies. Women all over the world will benefit from the gathering of data, because before we had sufficient evidence that lesbian abuse was a problem, there was no reason to form ideas to combat it. My study has taken us one step

closer to understanding the problems surrounding domination and power in female same-sex relationships.

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