



Psychological aggression in lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals' intimate relationships: A review of prevalence, correlates, and measurement issues



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ABSTRACT

Psychological Aggression (PA) is a common and serious problem in the relationships of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. It includes a range of behaviors that are used to hurt, coerce, control, and intimidate intimate partners. This paper reviewed the conceptualizations of PA, summarized the extant literature on PA among LGB women and men, and offered recommendations to improve the investigation of PA among LGB individuals. The conceptualization, definition, measurement, and prevalence of PA perpetration and victimization vary widely across studies. Different definitions and methods of assessing PA, a lack of consistency in examining and reporting psychometric information on measures used to assess PA among LGB samples, and varying sample characteristics make it difficult to compare results across studies. As a result, we know relatively little about the antecedents and consequences of PA among LGB individuals. In order to advance research in this area and increase understanding of this serious public health problem, it is necessary to: (1) clarify what constitutes PA; (2) specify the psychometric aspects of measures used to assess PA; (3) report details about sexual minority participants' sexual orientation/identity; (4) examine LGB-specific variables; and (5) utilize advanced methodological and statistical approaches to studying PA.

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1. Introduction

A growing body of research suggests that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB)¹ individuals experience intimate partner violence (IPV) at rates that are equal to or higher than those among heterosexuals (Goldberg & Meyer, 2013; Nowinski & Bowen, 2012; Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013). In fact, the recent Institute of Medicine (IOM, 2011) report on LGB health emphasized the need for additional study of IPV among LGB individuals. IPV is characterized by physical, sexual, and/or psychological aggression by a current or former partner (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Despite the prevalence of IPV and recent calls for research, our understanding of IPV among LGB individuals is limited. Moreover, we know much less about psychological aggression (PA) than physical and sexual aggression. The lack of information regarding PA is unexpected as PA is more common than other forms of violence. For instance, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Victimization Survey reported that 48.4% of women and 48.8% of men in the U.S. have experienced PA by an intimate partner in their lifetime (Black et al., 2011). When PA is examined among LGB individuals in the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Victimization Survey, 63% of lesbian women and 76.2% of bisexual women reported any lifetime victimization of PA and 59% of gay men and 53% of bisexual men reported any lifetime victimization of PA (Walters et al., 2013).

Among heterosexual individuals PA often co-occurs with physical aggression (Follingstad, 2009) or is a precursor to physical aggression (Schumacher & Leonard, 2005), and PA perpetration also predicts sexual aggression perpetration (Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & McGrath, 2007). Even after controlling for physical aggression victimization, PA victimization has also been associated with a host of mental and physical health outcomes in heterosexual individuals such as anxiety, depression, psychological distress, physical health symptoms, post-traumatic stress, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Lawrence, Yoon, Langer, & Ro, 2009; Pico-Alfonso et al., 2006; Taft et al., 2006). Among heterosexual individuals PA perpetration has also been associated with alcohol consumption, trait anger, and poor relationship adjustment (Kachadourian, Taft, O'Farrell, Doron-Lamarca, & Murphy, 2012; Taft et al., 2006). Since PA is associated with physical violence and, in fact, may be similarly or more damaging than physical violence (Finneran & Stephenson, 2013; Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990; Lawrence et al., 2009), it is especially important to study PA.

Unfortunately, the literature examining PA among LGB individuals has been hampered by a lack of systematic investigation, inconsistent definitions of both PA and sexual orientation, and a failure to validate measures of PA with LGB populations until very recently (for notable exceptions see Matte & Lafontaine, 2011; Milletich, Kelley, Lewis, & Gumienny, 2012). Therefore, the goals of this paper are to (1) review common conceptualizations of PA, (2) summarize the extant literature on PA among LGB men and women, and (3) offer recommendations to improve the investigation of PA among LGB individuals.

¹ Transgendered represents a gender identity and not a sexual orientation/sexual identity. Thus, transgendered individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual may be represented in this review. Although transgendered individuals may also experience relationship violence, we did not find research in which data from transgendered individuals were reported separately. Therefore, we use the term "LGB" as opposed to "LGBT" as this review may not reflect the experiences of transgendered individuals.

2. Conceptualizing and assessing intimate partner psychological aggression

Several researchers (e.g., Follingstad, 2007; Follingstad & Rogers, 2013; Ro & Lawrence, 2007) have argued that due to the complexity of defining PA, PA is more difficult to define than physical and sexual abuse. Conceptualization problems arise from: (1) a lack of consensus regarding what specific behaviors comprise PA; (2) whether there are distinct subcategories of PA (e.g., control, emotional abuse, verbal abuse); (3) whether different types of PA may have different outcomes; (4) researchers' assumption that the reported occurrence of a PA was actually perceived as harmful; and (5) the validity and implications of current methods of assessing the frequency and severity of a list of negative interpersonal behaviors (Follingstad, 2009). The definitional and measurement challenges that result from these conceptual problems serve to complicate our understanding of PA among LGB individuals.

2.1. Defining PA

There are a number of working definitions in the literature to conceptualize PA that occurs between intimate partners. Murphy and Cascardi (1993) define psychological abuse as "... coercive or aversive acts intended to produce emotional harm or threat of harm" (p. 105). Although this definition is widely used, Follingstad (2007) notes that the label "psychological abuse" is used loosely across studies. According to the CDC, PA is a construct that "involves trauma to a victim caused by acts, threats of acts, or coercive tactics" (CDC, 2010, p. 1). Yet, more generally, Follingstad (2007) defines PA as behaviors engaged in by "intimate adult partners which encompass the range of verbal and mental methods designed to emotionally wound, coerce, control, intimidate, psychologically harm, and express anger" (p. 443). Similar to Follingstad's definition, the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) defined PA as "expressive forms of aggression and coercive control" (Black et al., 2011, p. 8). Importantly, unique to these commonly used definitions is the central idea that PA is a construct that includes different types of psychologically aggressive behaviors that range along a continuum of severity (Follingstad, 2007; Murphy & Hoover, 1999). Thus, for the purposes of this paper, we chose to use the term PA because it covers behaviors that range in severity from those that are more common behaviors (e.g., yelling) to those that are more severe (e.g., threats or property damage).

2.2. Measuring PA

Recent reviews that were not specifically focused on sexual minority individuals (i.e., sexual orientation was not assessed/described/specified) highlight numerous measurement concerns associated with PA (see Follingstad, 2007, 2009; Jordan, Campbell, & Follingstad, 2010). These include: (1) a lack of normative data on what relationship behaviors are considered harmful; (2) the limitations of self-report data in the absence of important contextual information (e.g., the recipient's perspective, the perpetrator's intent, and the outcome, duration, and frequency of the conflict); and (3) the lack of psychometrically sound, sensitive, and sophisticated measures that adequately capture and describe the spectrum of behaviors and experiences involved in PA perpetration and victimization

Measurement problems may be exacerbated when existing instruments are used with different minority groups (e.g., LGB individuals).

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