

‘Suffering in a silent vacuum’: Woman-to-woman partner abuse as a challenge to the lesbian feminist vision

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Feminism & Psychology
0(0) 1–7

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DOI: 10.1177/0959353510370183

fap.sagepub.com



Abstract

This reflection addresses the challenge which violence and abuse in women’s same-sex relationships pose to lesbian feminist conceptualizations of woman-to-woman relationships as egalitarian and non-violent. Whilst recognizing the value of the ideals which lesbian feminism promoted in terms of presenting an alternative to patriarchal oppression and domination, this reflection draws upon data from the author’s qualitative study of woman-to-woman partner abuse to identify the implications of such ideals for women’s disclosure of and understanding of their experiences of abuse. For some participants, the pervasiveness of expectations of mutuality and non-violence in woman-to-woman relationships contributed to the silence and denial which surrounds woman-to-woman partner abuse. In spite of this, this reflection maintains that there is still scope for lesbian feminism to make a positive contribution towards promoting democratic, egalitarian, and non-abusive relationships. In order for this to be possible however, lesbian feminist thinking must first develop a more inclusive understanding of woman-to-woman relationships which confronts the reality that some women’s experiences of woman-to-woman relationships run contrary to the longed-for lesbian utopia which was central to 1970s lesbian feminist ideals.

Keywords

domestic violence, lesbian feminism, lesbian utopia, woman-to-woman relationships

Lesbian feminism has had a pivotal impact in challenging assumptions of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ (Rich, 1980) and in reconceptualizing sexuality as an arena where women can make choices and experience sexual and political self-realization

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(Stein, 1997). However, as I shall argue, lesbian feminism was founded upon a vision of a 'lesbian utopia' which overlooks the potential for woman-to-woman relationships – sexual or otherwise – to be potentially unequal, exploitative, or even violent. In turn, women who were and are inspired to live by the values and principles of lesbian feminism, but who then experience abuse from a female partner, are faced with a fundamental contradiction: on the one hand, an ideology which promotes woman-to-woman relationships as being key to liberation from oppression (Bunch, 1972; Radicalesbians, 1988[1970]) and the realization of equality and democracy in intimate relationships (Stein, 1997; Taylor and Rupp, 1993) and yet, on the other, the unexpectedness and incomprehensiveness of violence and abuse in this context. It is this contradiction which I shall address in this short reflection.

Using data from my qualitative study of woman-to-woman partner abuse (Barnes, 2007), I examine how women's accounts reflect the silence about violence and abuse in woman-to-woman relationships within lesbian feminist ideology. This, I argue, is problematic for two reasons; firstly because of the isolation which it has engendered amongst women who have been left to negotiate the tensions between their values and experiences, and secondly because it has meant that lesbian feminism, and indeed feminism more generally, has made little contribution towards understanding woman-to-woman partner abuse. The aim of this reflection is not, however, to develop a lesbian feminist conceptualization of woman-to-woman partner abuse, useful as this would be. Rather, I hope to stimulate debate as to whether and how lesbian feminist principles could be reasserted in the 21st century to encourage democratic and non-abusive relationship practices, whilst drawing attention to potentially harmful ones.

As indicated already, the emancipation which lesbian feminism promised arguably fuelled idealistic – indeed utopian – hopes and expectations amongst women who entered woman-identified experiences for either political or sexual reasons. The rejection of heterosexuality was viewed by lesbian feminists as the only means of escaping male domination and female subordination, particularly in domestic and sexual spheres (Bunch, 1972; Radicalesbians, 1988[1970]; Rich, 1980), and as a political strategy, woman-to-woman solidarity was considered fundamental to achieving feminist goals of dismantling patriarchy (Radicalesbians, 1988[1970]; Taylor and Rupp, 1993). Accounts of women who claimed lesbian identities and who were involved in lesbian communities during lesbian feminism's heyday indicate that, for many, lesbian feminism lived up to its promise (Faderman, 1991; Stein, 1997), transforming many women's lives and opening up possibilities which had in previous eras been unthinkable. However, whilst living by the values of lesbian feminism has sometimes been acknowledged as having its challenges (Kitzinger and Perkins, 1993; Stein, 1997), the voices of women whose expectations were not met are seldom heard.

The research which this paper draws upon is based on in-depth interviews with 40 women in the UK who self-identified as having been abused in a previous same-sex relationship (see Barnes, 2007). These women were predominantly white, aged 21–70 years old (with half aged 30–49 years old), and identified mainly as gay or

lesbian but also as bisexual, transsexual, and queer. I shall focus on a small sub-sample who spoke directly about the relationship between lesbian feminism and their experiences of abuse.

The women within this sub-sample had mainly encountered lesbian feminism during the 1970s and early 1980s. This was the case for Andrea, who recounted a three-year abusive relationship in the late 1980s, reflecting,

I'd come through a fairly politicized coming out at the age of whatever it was, twenty, twenty-one, and was heavily into the sort of feminist politics and even for a few years, lesbian separatist feminist politics; it was, you know, pretty, highly politicized stuff, and so to sort of go through that and end up in a relationship where you knew the small political, small political with a 'p' didn't exist and you know, I felt for a few years that I gave myself a really hard time about actually having allowed it [the abuse] to happen to me. (Andrea, 43)¹

Making the personal political was and is an overarching goal of feminism, and much is owed to the efforts of radical and lesbian feminists who politicized men's violence towards women. However, a perhaps unintended consequence of the almost exclusive focus upon male violence is that women who 'bought into' the feminist project but who then experienced abuse from a woman have been left feeling cheated and devoid of an appropriate explanatory framework (Kelly, 1996). Andrea's response was to look inwards for explanations, blaming herself. Self-blame is common amongst abused heterosexual women too (Barnett, Martinez and Keyson, 1996), but in the context of lesbian feminism there are specific issues. Given lesbian feminism's promotion of woman-to-woman relationships as equal and non-violent, women such as Andrea may view the failure of their relationships to reflect lesbian feminist ideology as a personal failure; such perceptions are reinforced by the absence of a conceptual framework for women's violence, and the greater silence surrounding woman-to-woman partner abuse.

Whilst explanatory frameworks for women's violence generally are lacking, the greatest silence surrounds sexual violence by female perpetrators. The so-called 'lesbian sex wars' devoted much attention to critiquing contentious sexual practices such as butch/femme role-playing and sadomasochism in lesbian relationships (Jeffreys, 1993). Ironically, the unambiguous area of forced sexual acts between women scarcely appeared on these agendas. Another participant, Julie, recalled an incident 18 years ago when her partner at the time, having seen her earlier that evening talking to another woman, held Julie down and forcibly penetrated her with her hand. Julie, who was still coming to terms with this incident at the time of the interview, described herself and others as 'suffering in a silent vacuum', explaining that she had felt unable to tell anyone about this incident for years. When asked why, she responded,

Well it was during a period where everyone was just raving about erm how brilliant woman-to-woman relationships were and also I don't think anyone believed that one

woman could do that to another woman – there was just no, no sense of reality around that at all. There was sort of a political euphoria about lesbianism at the time; well not even lesbianism, just woman-to-woman relationships. (Julie, 46)

Julie's account indicates her awareness that what she had experienced fell completely outside of the dominant discourses surrounding woman-to-woman relationships at the time, and for her this led to years of confusion and silence.

Given this uncomfortable juxtaposition between women's values and expectations and their personal experiences, participants commonly spoke of disappointment at the realization of their partner's behaviour, often to the point of devastation and disillusion. This is hardly surprising, under circumstances where someone whom you love abuses you, irrespective of gender or sexuality. For some participants though, this disappointment spurred them to re-evaluate their expectations of woman-to-woman relationships. Bryony, who encountered lesbian feminism more recently, spoke very positively about her experience of living in an American lesbian feminist community during the late 1990s/early 2000s. This had reportedly shaped Bryony's perceptions of woman-to-woman relationships, making her subsequent experiences of abuse difficult to recognize and comprehend:

I just didn't consider that women would do that to each other – it's kind of like that place of solace – you know, blokes do that and there's this male energy causing havoc in the world (laughs lightly), but you know, a woman wouldn't do that to another woman, so I think in that naïveté, even when she started lashing out at me, I kind of thought that it was about what was going on at that time, and that it wasn't an abusive relationship. (Bryony, 26)

On realizing that the relationship was abusive after reading about woman-to-woman partner abuse on the internet, Bryony reported experiencing a sense of sadness, but also doubts over whether abuse had been hidden within the seemingly peaceful and loving lesbian community which she had belonged to. In other cases, a few women reported that the depth of their disappointment led them to question their sexuality, with two women describing ongoing confusion at the time of the interview.

Thus far, I have primarily focused upon participants' own values and lesbian feminist lifestyles, but women's experiences of being abused are also shaped by the assumptions and messages which they are confronted with when they seek support. The egalitarianism and liberation which lesbian feminism promised has contributed to the seeming inexplicability and unexpectedness of violence and abuse in woman-only contexts, but there is a danger that inexplicability can engender disbelief (Merlis and Linville, 2006). One participant was reportedly told by a women's group which she approached for support, 'Women don't do abuse. Don't be daft love, that's what men do, that's why we're here' (Gemma, 21). Such responses were fortunately not widely reported in my sample (although few women sought support from women's or feminist groups), but what is striking

about Gemma's account is that this incident did not occur 20 or 30 years ago, but rather in this millennium.

Responses such as that reported by Gemma, and the shock and disbelief expressed by many participants on realizing that they were being or had been abused by a woman, indicate that assumptions about women's non-violence remain pervasive. Lesbian feminism is, however, not the only factor here, and lesbian feminist constructions of a non-violent and egalitarian lesbianism also reflect radical feminist theoretical frameworks which identify male violence as central to patriarchal dominance over women (Kelly, 1988). The question of why violence and abuse also occur within woman-to-woman relationships has been a vexing one for feminists, who have largely opted to remain silent on this issue, arguably for fear of the complex theoretical and political implications of confronting it (Kelly, 1996). Acknowledgement of woman-to-woman partner abuse, it has been feared, could decentre the feminist focus upon male violence, thus destabilizing the aforementioned gender-based analysis of domestic violence (Kelly, 1996; Ristock, 2003). The implications of this politically include concerns about resources being directed away from women abused by male partners (Kelly, 1996; Morrow and Hawxhurst, 1989). Further, within lesbian communities, there have been fears that, akin to other minority communities (see for example Gill, 2004), disclosures of woman-to-woman abuse could draw attention to community problems and subsequently fuel further prejudice (Morrow and Hawxhurst, 1989; Ristock, 2003).

To conclude, lesbian feminism offered women new ways of being in an intimate relationship which promised the release from subordination and instead relationships characterized by democracy, equality, and non-violence. However, the lesbian feminist vision set high, if not idealistic, expectations for woman-to-woman relationships, which in practice have been 'difficult to live up to' (Stein, 1997: 128). To admit that woman-to-woman relationships may potentially be oppressive and violent is difficult and painful because it shakes the very foundations of the lesbian feminist project. This contradiction is reflected in the gulf between a now somewhat nostalgic lesbian feminist literature and the growing woman-to-woman partner abuse literature; this gulf has significant consequences, not least leaving women who were drawn to the lesbian feminist vision but who subsequently experienced abuse feeling isolated, silenced, bereft of explanations, and questioning what *they* did wrong.

Despite its limitations to date, my conviction is that lesbian feminism can still play a key role in promoting non-oppressive, egalitarian relationships. However, these values need to be reasserted in a far more applied rather than abstract way which engages with *how* they can be achieved in woman-to-woman relationships. Whilst gay men receive numerous opportunities to participate in workshops on 'healthy relationships', such offerings are rare for lesbians and bisexual women; lesbian feminism could play a vital role in educating young lesbians in particular about mutual negotiation and equality in relationships and the warning signs of oppressive behaviours. Yet lesbian feminism cannot become a credible model for

this form of education and intervention unless it confronts the complex and uncomfortable questions of why some woman-to-woman relationships may be far from utopian, and how to respond both to victims/survivors and, critically also, to those whose behaviour presents a direct challenge to the lesbian feminist vision.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Kristin Aune and two anonymous reviewers for their detailed and constructive comments on this paper.

Note

1. All names used are pseudonyms, and the numbers denote the age of the participant at the time of the interview.

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