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## Intimate Partner Violence within same sex couples: a qualitative review of the literature from a psychodynamic perspective

Giulia Penone<sup>1</sup>, Cinzia Guarnaccia<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV), particularly within same-sex couples, is assuming the size of a serious and hardly negligible issue that afflicts current society. The main objective of the present review of the literature was to analyze the studies and theoretical perspectives on this issue, adopting a psychodynamic point of view that allows for underlining the extent of the problem. PsychInfo and PsychARTICLES databases were searched, using the keywords “same-sex domestic violence”, “same-sex intimate partner violence”, “homosexual domestic violence” and “homosexual intimate partner violence” in order to identify literature published between 2000 and 2018. The extracted documents were then assessed for their qualitative relevance.

The results concerning violence within lesbian couples underlined a gap in the literature, along with the influence of feminist movements, heterosexist theories, stereotypes, and homophobia. Regarding the violence within gay couples, the “novelty” of the issue emerged, along with the interest in the peculiarity of the victims and the harassers, the minority stress, and the controversial relationship with the legal system. Finally, a comparison between IPV in lesbian and gay couples makes it clear that, beyond similarities and differences, every situation deserves highly specific and targeted treatment.

**Key words:** *Same-sex intimate partner violence; Same-sex domestic violence; Intimate partner violence; LGBT.*

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## Introduction

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) identifies acts or threats involving physical, sexual, psychological violence or stalking, carried out or received during a present or past intimate relationship (American Psychological Association [APA], 1996; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015). This term helps to distinguish IPV from other types of domestic abuse (such as child abuse) and emphasizes that violence can be perpetrated by men as well as women without restriction to marital, heterosexual, or homosexual relationships (Anderson, 2002; Archer, 2000, 2002; Brown, 2004; Capaldi, Kim, & Shortt, 2007; Capaldi & Owen, 2001; Hamberger & Potente 1994).

One of the challenges that modern psychology has to face is to define and specify the characteristics of homosexual IPV: a reality with some very defined boundaries and afflicting millions of people every year (Carroll and Stiles-Shields, 2015). A recent literature review (Ali, Dhingra & McGarry, 2016) on numerous typologies of IPV have been suggested a classification based on the characteristics of the violence (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2016; Abbott, Johnson, Koziol-McLain, & Lowenstein, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000; Johnston & Campbell, 1993) or on the individual characteristics of the perpetrator (Hamberger, Lohr, Bonge, & Tolin, 1996; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Miller & Meloy, 2006; Swan, Gambone, Caldwell, Sullivan, & Snow, 2008; Swan & Snow, 2006).

International literature has also identified an association between various types of traumatic childhood experiences and IPV (McMahon et al., 2015; Renner & Whitney, 2012; Whitfield, Anda, Dube, & Felitti, 2003; Widom, Czaja, & Dutton, 2014, Lo Cascio et al., 2017) and the role of environmental risk factors in predicting childhood maltreatment and IPV (Bates, Archer e Graham-Kevan, 2016; Briere &

Jordan, 2009; Hecht & Hansen, 2001; Dube et al, 2003; Infurna et al., 2015).

The researchers agree in stating that perpetrators and their victims (or survivors) represent heterogeneous groups with a multitude of influence factors that need to be deepened in order to define different etiologies and, therefore, differentially appropriate treatment approaches (Boxall, Rosevear, & Payne, 2015; Capaldi & Kim, 2007; Cavanaugh & Gelles, 2005; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994; Johnston & Campbell, 1993), empirical assessment and preventive approaches (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Huss, & Ramsey, 2000).

In the last decades awareness and concerns about the incidence of the issue regarding LGBT people are significantly growth but, in spite of this, the majority of literature about IPV does not include the homosexual one, that in the United States of America is defined as “one of the major social and public well-being issues that afflict families and contemporary and future society” (Woodyatt e Stephenson, 2016; Peterman and Dixon, 2003).

According to the *National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey* conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in 2010, lifetime prevalence of rape, physical or stalking violence by a partner is 35% for heterosexual women, 43.8% for lesbian and 61.1% for bisexual ones. Concerning men, the prevalence is 29% for heterosexual, 26% for gay and 37.3% for bisexual ones (CDC, 2010; Goldberg and Meyer, 2012; Stahly 2008). Again, as regards to homosexual communities, other studies show very worrying prevalence rates: Bowen and Nowinski (2012) point out that gay men are highly at risk of experiencing domestic violence, with a prevalence rates ranging from 15 % to 51%<sup>1</sup>. As it regards instead the

<sup>1</sup> In particular, men under the age of 40 are considerably more at risk for physically violent attacks than the over 60 ones (Greenwood et al., 2002).

lesbian communities, as declared by W.O.M.E.N. Inc, a San Francisco organization serving women victims of abuse, in one couple out of four is possible to assist to cases of IPV.

Carvalho and colleagues (2011) in a study with 581 homosexual respondents explained that within gay and lesbian communities there are no major differences in prevalence rates: around 25% of each sample, in fact, reports cases of domestic abuse. Some interesting data derive from Messinger's research conducted in this same year on a large sample of LGB people: it revealed that is that in lesbian couples physical and sexual abuses are more frequent than in their male counterparts that experiences more frequently the other forms of abuse (Messinger, 2011). The prevalence of IPV in homosexual couples is at least the same, if not even higher, than in heterosexual relationships (Freeland, Goldenberg and Stephenson, 2018; Bolam, 2016), furthermore, many evidences demonstrate that the issue of IPV is disregarded not only by lesbian communities but also by the majority of state governments and legislation: is enough to think that the first scientific publication about the theme appeared in 1980 and that just nowadays some specific organisations both for victims and for perpetrators are beginning to be composed (Bolam, 2016).

The aim of this review is to analyze researches and theoretical perspectives on this issue from a psychodynamic point of view in order to highlighting the results of the existing studies and starting the reflection on the themes still to be explored in future research.

### Methods

With the aim of reviewing the main theoretical and research results on the topic of IPV between same-sex couples we have researched PsychInfo and PsychARTICLES databases using as search string the key words: "same-sex domestic violence", "same-sex intimate partner violence", "same-sex domestic violence", "homosexual

domestic violence" e "homosexual intimate partner violence".

We have selected the articles related to the thematic area of psychology published in the time interval from 2000 to 2018.

This search allowed us to find n° 179 abstracts/titles but only 100 of which drew attention to the conceptualization of IPV within same sex couples in a psychodynamic perspective. The other papers were excluded from the analysis because, despite associated to the keywords, they were not related to the review theme.

### Results

This analysis allowed us to identify major and recurring themes, such as the specificity of IPV within lesbian or gay couples, the consequences of stereotypes, homophobia and heterosexism and the impact of the law and the legal system on same-sex unions, which will be developed in the following paragraphs.

#### *Intimate Partner Violence within lesbian couples*

Despite of some similarities, IPV in homosexual couples is significantly different from the heterosexual one for many aspects, in which homophobia and the social stigma of being stereotypically recognised, labelled and treated as lesbians by the still highly heterosexual society we live in, can be included (Ristock, 2010). Setting a specific focus on lesbian relationships, in fact, many women are reluctant to tell anybody about the episodes of domestic violence they lived because of the fear of homophobic assaults that can occur in the community they live in; as a consequence, the only alternative is a silence that blocks them in the belief of being alone in addressing this issue. Regarding literature, in spite of the variety of the sources on this topic, the scientific literary production is lacking: this issue received media and specialist attention only in the early Seventies of the Twentieth Century, and even when scientific studies began to address questions about domestic violence, the homosexual one was not included (Rausch, 2016; Irwin, 2008). As can be noticed, the tendency of society to

look at domestic violence exclusively as a man's act toward a woman, has had devastating effects on literature, along with the beliefs that homosexual couples currently are a small number and with the few State funds for research (not) consequently obtained: the number of studies on this subject remain derisory when faced with its heterosexual counterpart (Baker, Buick, Kim, Moniz and Nava, 2012). Not even the experts' recognition that domestic violence in homosexual couples is a serious and real problem has led to significant changes in this scenario (Duke and Davidson, 2009; Eaton et al., 2008).

A further complication that researchers have to deal with when facing homosexual domestic violence, concerns the recruitment of adequate samples for studies: the majority of them have very small size, is not randomized and is obtained through friendship contacts, lesbian/gay organizations or advertisements in magazines for lesbian/gay people. The use of such samples, obviously, has not proved as adequate solutions: they are likely to increase the probability of biases because even those who are reluctant to believe in the problem and those who do not trust the results of researches, nor in the work of authorities or professionals, can be included in the sample (Longobardi and Badenes-Ribera, 2017; Badenes-Ribera et al., 2016; Rohrbaugh, 2006; Morandi et al., 2009). An additional difficulty for researches is that a high number of studies, for recruiting a sufficiently large sample, included in it both victims and abusers and have not been able to explain the dual response rate when respondents were asked to talk about the presence of abuse in their relationship<sup>2</sup>.

As previously declared, researches in this field of study initiated relatively late: there are many reasons for this, and among them the most disquieting is that this phenomenon

is wrapped up in silence even within the same lesbian community (Donovan and Hester, 2015).

For many lesbians, in fact, the idea that a woman can exert violence on her partners is absurd: the majority still relies on the widespread myth that women are neither violent nor aggressive, and this belief has thus contributed to the creation of the silence spiral that surrounds lesbian domestic violence, oppressing women with a condition of "imprisonment within heavy walls" (Bornstein, Fawcett, Sullivan, Senturia and Shiu-Thornton, 2006). This situation of minimum awareness of the issue has finally had a breakthrough in the seventies of the Twentieth Century thanks to the feminist movement: the fundamental belief of this group of activists, also known as Battered Women Movement, was that patriarchy and sexism were the principal causes of male violence against women in intimate relationships; therefore women were uniquely identified as victims of male violence (Poorman, Seelau and Seelau, 2003). It is interesting to note that, despite the feminist movement has been heavily involved in facing domestic violence, the movement itself is one of the biggest obstacles to the development of research: admitting that the problem exists in lesbian communities, in fact, would mean to jeopardize this common conviction. Within this movement it was possible to face two forms of resistance against the examination of lesbian domestic violence: the former derives from the desire to keep the focus on male violence, and thus trivialize women's involvement; the latter comes as result of the fear that this may lead to negative feelings about female homosexuality (Carroll and Stiles-Shields, 2015).

The principal criticisms against this paradigm have been summarized by the fact that through an inquiry lens based solely on gender and patriarchy, the vast range of gender identity expressions and sexual orientations present in homosexual relationships cannot be understood; moreover, this dichotomous man/woman - perpetrator/victim does not allow a thorough and complete explanation of

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<sup>2</sup> Many studies, in fact, with the aim of recruiting sufficiently large samples tend to include both victims and perpetrators in them: as a result, they are unable to explain the double rate of response when respondents were asked to talk about the presence of abuse in their relationship (Carroll and Stiles-Shields, 2015).

the use and the reasons of the violence. Therefore, there is a strong evidence of the need to develop appropriate theoretical models and intervention in the context of a relationship between two women: if men were the only abusers and women the only victims, in fact, domestic violence between lesbian couples would not have the conditions to exist (Baker, Buick, Kim, Moniz and Nava, 2012).

An interesting feminist perspective developed in recent times (first half of last century) that seems to have entered a new direction is that of the so-called "postmodern feminism", which inaugurates a series of new reflections derived from the analysis of a social, cultural and economic context renovated by the advent of postmodernity. Postmodern feminists are therefore approaching violence in lesbian couples by trying to divert attention from the dominant explanation of the fact: they doubt the victim/abusive binary construction and dismantle a big part of the disagreements on power and heterosexist control (Ristock, 2010).

Another well-known perspective regarding this issue is the disempowerment theory, of which the basic premise is that those who perceive themselves as inadequate or inefficient in their everyday context are at risk of using unconventional means to confirm their power, even perpetrating violence: these people have such an insecure and hesitant self-concept that they tend to compensate it by controlling individuals who might pose a threat or that might further expose their weaknesses. This theory explain that domestic violence is characterized by the use of three cluster of factors: individual, proper of the origin-family and of the love affair. Personal characteristics are those that expose the person to the risk of resorting to violence referring to his/her personality factors; the origin family ones are specific conditions that develop during childhood and by which the child creates models for the resolution of conflicted situations; features of the love affair, finally, consist of the qualities of the relationship that increase or decrease the chances that a partner uses violence on the

other (McKenry, Serovich, Mason and Mosaack, 2006). Focusing specifically on the family factors, a very interesting bound has been found between attachment, caregiving style and intimate partner violence. About this, Gabbay and Lafontaine (2017) examined a sample of 310 adult individuals involved in a same sex relationship for a minimum of six months. Thanks to a series of measurement scales specifically included in the study for estimating the existence of the relation mentioned above (Revised Conflict Tactics Scales, Experiences in Close Relationships and Caregiving Questionnaire), they found both a positive association between avoidance of intimacy and presence of physical violence, and a negative association between responsive caregiving and any kind of violence or violence behaviors. Thanks to this collected data and through a very careful analysis, it was possible for the authors to conclude that attachment insecurity (with anxious traits and/or avoidance of intimacy) and dysfunctional caregiving (with controlling and/or compulsive tendencies) are both related to a future history of same-sex intimate partner violence, whereas responsive caregiving (with an high level of proximity and/or sensitivity) is linked with a general decreased report of intimate partner violence in the adult life of the subjects.

In addition to the disempowerment theory, other models generally applied for domestic heterosexual violence are also used to explain the homosexual one: this is the case of the deterrence theory, which sustains that there are less probabilities that people commit criminal acts when they perceive an high level of fear of the penalties for these behaviors (Jackson, 2007).

*Intimate partner violence within gay couples*  
IPV in gay couples is not a "new problem" but a topic acknowledged by such a short time that seems to have never existed before: just in America, it is estimated to be a serious problem for 9.5 million adult gay men, of whom at least 500,000 are victims and an equal number are perpetrators (Ristock, 2002). Despite of the increasing number of

studies regarding this issue, homosexual domestic violence has not been adequately documented, especially the one between gay couples: the silence surrounding this argument increases day by day the victims' feeling of isolation and inability to seek help (Goldenberg et al. 2016). The main reason for this silence is an inadequate level of agencies for signals: if a man victim of domestic violence decides not to go to the police, he cannot count on any other authority; moreover, the number of homosexual victims who call the police is seriously very small. Still, as happens in the lesbian community, even in the gay one this problem is often avoided; finally, almost all abusers refuses to admit the fact and don't seek help voluntarily. A central question is, thus, seeking help: gay victims tend not to talk about the abuse suffered in order to avoid further social stigmatization (Kaschak, 2001). This fervent denial of the event has the result to increase people's isolation, making them more vulnerable to subsequent abuses and not making them enjoy adequate structures for intervention; it is also important to remember that most of time seeking help is trivialized by authorities, skeptical about the fact that domestic violence can happen between two men (Freeland, Goldenberg and Stephenson, 2018). Concluding, it has to be reminded that also researches on domestic violence in gay couples are subject to severe limitations due to the sampling method: samples are usually recruited by convenience criteria and composed of volunteers (Rohrbaugh, 2006).

Although many researcher that deal with domestic violence argue that characteristics of victims and abusers vary from person to person, over time it has been recognized that there are many common traits: in recent years, more in-depth research has allowed to determine what does it means to be victims or perpetrators within a male homosexual framework (Stiles-Shields and Carroll, 2015). In literature, violence is considered as a problem regarding only the perpetrator, who is entirely responsible for the event, while victims are always naive and innocent

people, without blame for the episode. Even if a psychological profile for this category of people has not been outlined yet, once that an abuse occurred, victims tend to experience some common traits: it is typical to experience feelings of shame, discomfort, embarrassment, isolation and repression of feelings. In addition to personal characteristics, in literature exist several studies that affirm that a recurring trait in victims is a low rate of self-esteem. Although many authors assert that low self-esteem is primarily a result of the experienced violence, others believe that, if previously present, it is also a strong contributing factor: gay men with low self-esteem are more prone to be victims of an intimate abuse (Ristock, 2010). Finally, two other very important factors are the denial of the fact and the learned helplessness<sup>3</sup>. Regarding the first, it is widely documented that gay victims belittle or deny violence in almost all cases, primarily because of the stigma attached to being a victim and for the social construction that does not allow men to be the injured party in the relationship; about the latter, it is verified that victims often act without hope and feeling unable to escape from violence.

On the other side of the relationship, instead, abusers can be find. In the literature about gay couples it is commonly reported that perpetrators use violence to control their partner: they have problems of power and domination<sup>4</sup>, and use to be violent with those who they perceive to be superior than themselves. For this reason, abusers are often identified as the ones who hold all the power in the relationship: they perceive a lack of

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<sup>3</sup> Expression coined by Leonore Walker in 1984, the learned helplessness includes feelings of guilt, fear, anger, shame and weakness, typically used to describe the victims of violence (Walker, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> A particular form by which power is often exercised into the context of a gay relationship is through dominant and controlling behaviors. In Woodyatt and Stephenson's opinion (2016) this type of emotional violence is very common between men homosexual couples and it derives from the perpetrator's need to strengthen his sense of possessiveness or his desire to control and manipulate the partner/victim.

control over their lives and, to compensate for it, they seek to dominate their partner. Domestic violence is therefore, essentially, an abuse of power: most of the time, however, it is not only given by biological motives that push the abuser to behave as such, but is an intentional and desired act (Jin, 2017; Rohrbaugh, 2006). Another important factor that has to be considered in the analysis of abusers, is a previous history of family violence: people who have been victims or was present at any violence episode in childhood, tend to be more likely to be violent with their partners or children: violence, indeed, is a learned behavior. As suggested by McRae, Daire, Abel and Lambie (2017), one of the most serious risk factors consists precisely in the early adverse experiences of which the subject has suffered in his/her childhood. In their study they examined a sample of 266 LGB college students to explore how a previous history of traumas could affect the presence of intimate partner violence and intimate partner violence acceptance during their adult life and, as previously hypothesized basing on the social learning theory<sup>5</sup>, results indicated that in the majority of cases people with a childhood history of violence/trauma are more likely to report higher rates of intimate partner violence if compared with the not traumatized ones.

To complete the characterization of abusers, it is important to mention homophobia and subject's mental disorders (Ristock, 2010). Because homophobia and heterosexism, gay perpetrators are often confused about their masculinity and as result they tend to internalize many homophobic and hateful feelings towards their sexuality: in order to resolve this situation, these men try to com-

pensate with violence, reinforcing their negative image by dominating the partner.

Finally, the mental health of the subject: formerly Island and Letellier in 1991 argued that psychopathology is a strong predictor of domestic violence among gay couples and that the severity of the violent episode is largely determined by the severity of the abuser's psychopathology: the more serious will be the first, the more severe will be the second.

#### *Specificity of homosexual couples and consequences of stereotypes, homophobia and heterosexism*

The victims of homosexual domestic violence are, most of times, the ones that are most affected by the influence of myths and stereotypes surrounding the subject, which often do not allow to recognize various aspects of the problem, prevent people to feel responsible for offering their own help and impede victims to abandon their violent relationship. Nowadays, the rejection of domestic violence in the homosexual community is thought to be due to many factors, including the presence of gender stereotypes that support heterosexual theses about it (Jackson, 2007; Wasarhaley, Lynch, Golding and Renzetti, 2015; Franklin and Jin, 2016). Such gender stereotypes serve to substantiate the "proper" expectations that society has about the behaviors and positions that men and women should deal with in a social context: in such a framework, it is precisely the nature of women to be dependent and passive, while men are usually described as assertive, strong, and autonomous. An important and serious consequence of these perspectives is that they tend to reinforce stereotypes about domestic violence victims, as male and female roles are outlined in an adhering manner to the figure of the executioner and the abuser, ending thus to recognize women as the "legitimate" recipients of male aggression (Cannon and Buttell, 2015). Therefore, gender stereotypes play an important role in homosexual couples' lives: many people, in fact, may not have a direct knowledge of the subject and, relying on these heterosexist be-

<sup>5</sup> Introduced by Bandura (1977), this theory affirms that the human process of learning does not require uniquely a direct contact with objects/experiences, but can also take place through indirect experiences like the observation of other living beings, most of all if they are human conspecific. Moreover, in Bandura's opinion the tendency to imitate others is present in individuals from an early age, and for this reason it could be defined as a pervasive and characterizing element of human activity.



liefs, might get a wrong idea about domestic violence among these people (Terrance and Parisien, 2006; Little and Terrance, 2010). As a result, homosexuals victims of domestic violence are more likely to be blamed<sup>6</sup> for the incident and less likely to be credited as a result of their failure to comply with traditional gender roles and with the stereotypical profile of a "true" and "legitimate" victim (Franklin & Jin, 2016). Perhaps the most widespread among these believes is the so-called "mutual battering", identifiable with the idea that each of the two partners can be at the same time victim and abusive: as is apparent, this myth has the consequence of minimizing and legitimizing the severity of violence in homosexual relationships. It is important to notice that the role of these stereotypes and myths is strongly important not only from a theoretical point of view, but also and most of all from a real and concrete one. For example, Wasarhaley, Lynch, Golding and Renzetti (2017) showed that stereotypes are deeply able to affect the perception that both "common people" and jurors may have of an episode of violence: hence, not only daily life consequences, but also legal and justice system implication. Since the participants of this study were required to observe a violent scene between a lesbian couple and then to give a verdict about that, it was easy to see how the feminine/masculine appearance of both victims and perpetrators affected participants' judgments: male individuals considered the violence as more serious when the perpetrator was masculine and

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<sup>6</sup> As regarding the victim blaming issue, Weintgarten (2016) claims that it is a common and serious phenomenon in the largest part of the world's cultures. Thus, it causes a wide series of problems, not only for the bystanders but also for the victims themselves: by internalizing this tendency, in fact, survivors will tend to blame themselves for the suffered violence and, consequently, they will believe that they do not deserve assistance/help because they did something wrong to let the teasing happen. Moreover, this could also causes a heavy hindrance to the recovery process: negative disclosure experiences are often strongly connected with an increase frequency of several mental health problems such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and risk of suicidality (Weintgarten, 2016).

the victim feminine versus a feminine perpetrator and a masculine victim; furthermore, when a counter-stereotypical perpetrator (feminine) was accused to have harassed a stereotypical victim (feminine), only a low percentage of participants mentioned some external features (eg. the perpetrator's history of previous violent behaviors) as a reason for their guilty verdict and the punishment they will assign. Thus, this study can help to underline how gender role stereotypes can influence bystanders' and jurors' perception of a violence in a lesbian relationship: victim and perpetrator's appearance is sufficient to twist the opinion that one may have about an harassment episode between two human being (Wasarhaley, Lynch, Golding and Renzetti, 2017). Still, a common tendency is to believe that perpetrators under the influence of drugs or alcohol are not responsible for violence<sup>7</sup>. As stressed by many authors, substance abuse is just a justification for violence, and this myth has the only function of expelling perpetrators by shifting their guilt to external factors (Fish, 2012; Murray et al., 2007; Riggs, Caulfield and Street, 2000).

An important role in homosexual domestic violence is played by homophobia and heterosexism (Longobardi and Badenes-Ribera, 2017). Concerning the former, defined as a feeling of fear and disgust at individuals as a result of stereotyped beliefs and prejudices about their sexual orientation (Herek, 2004), an interesting theory explaining its correlation with domestic violence in couples gay is the so-called "minority stress" one. According to this elaboration, homosexuals and, in particular, perpetrators are highly susceptible to the consequences of outbreaked homophobia and heterosexism, so as to get them internalized and to take on a particularly controversial role that leads them to confront these perceived threats by maltreating their partner (Stephenson and Finneran, 2017; Balsam and Szymanski, 2005; Bartholomew

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<sup>7</sup> Research has find that alcohol or drug use by one or both the partners is a factor that can strongly contribute to increase the levels of physical violence in the relationship, working as "a catalyst to conflict and escalating conflict" (Goldenberg et al., 2016, p.9).

et al., 2008; Carvalho et al., 2011; McCabe, West, Hughes and Boyd, 2013). In this regard, Calton and colleagues (2015) have shown that being part of a "sexual" or gender "minority" increases the risk of domestic violence throughout the life span since, following their sexual orientation, people in this condition report an extremely fragile sense of identity, high rates of fear of losing control of their lives and abandoning anguish (Calton et al., 2015; Jin, 2017; Longobardi and Badenes-Ribera, 2017). Edwards and Sylaska (2013), additionally, found an important link between the stress caused by belonging to a minority and the sense of inadequacy and ineffectiveness pervading these people and leading them to seek control in ways that are also not socially acceptable, just as violence (see before the disempowerment theory). Minority stress in homosexual couples is, in fact, driven by peculiar experiences of being a part of a minority and, as it is a tension that tends to accumulate, scholars have suggested that it could be one of the main reasons why members of these couples are more likely to experience domestic violence both as victims and perpetrators (Edwards and Sylaska, 2013).

In addition to stereotypes, one of the most controversial aspects of domestic violence is the reason why the victim decides not to leave the abusive relationship. Despite various discussion about this topic, it's not possible to outline a unique and generalizable cause because of which victims decide to stay: every individual has their own reasons, but certainly an analysis of the dynamics in which this situation takes place could help to clarify (Halket et al., 2013). A first step in this direction was made by Lenore Walker who, in his book "The Battered Woman Syndrome" (1984), outlines the theory of the cycle of violence. Walker thus describes the various moods and behaviors typically experienced in a violent relationship, which re-emerge according to a three-stage cyclic pattern: the one of building tension, the one of explosion and finally the one of the honeymoon. In these phases, respectively, there are cases of minor abuse; violence is committed

to physical and psychological damage; the abuser begins to exploit the victim's guilty feelings to persuade her not to abandon the relationship, ensuring that the episode will never be repeated anymore. Obviously, the cycle has the tendency to be repeated several times, in each of which the victim hope that the relationship will improve and he/she will not abandon it, and will try to find a remedy for the situation.

Other aspects that can be mentioned are learned helplessness, fear of an even more violent reaction of the partners, feeling to have no safe place to go and not enough resources for living on their own. Because of these reasons, for most of homosexuals victims of domestic violence leaving the partner is not easy, indeed: it can be even harder than staying in the relationship. In this context, the data about female gender are particularly and worryingly relevant: a woman has 75% chance of being killed by her former partner after attempting to interrupt the relationship; moreover, on the average from five to seven attempts are necessary before that the victim can reach her intent (Clark County Prosecuting Attorney, 2010). As many scholars suggests, while the only responsible for the violence is the perpetrator, is a victim's responsibility to leave him/her and not be implicated in a such a dangerous relationship anymore.

In addition to the consequences that stereotypes, homophobia and heterosexism can have on LGBT people, Gehring and Vaske (2017) pointed out that these subjects can also be affected by an amount of "concrete" outcomes such as an high presence of depressive symptoms and a great involvement in violent delinquency acts if compared to the opposite-sex counterpart. Furthermore, it is possible to argue that LGBT people could reveal overall more psychological and behavioral problems as a consequence of the unique aspects of same-sex intimate partner violence that, taken together, could represent a great barrier to the general wellbeing of these people (Gehring and Vaske, 2017).

*Homosexual intimate partner violence and its connection with the legal system*

A further delicate topic regarding homosexual domestic violence, is its connection with the legal system. Before the Seventies of the Twentieth Century, the term "sexual and domestic violence" was totally out of the legislative lexicon: the first advances were noted only in the early Nineties with the emergence of the Violence Against Women Movement, which has warranted victims the first institutional mean to address the problem. Fortunately, nowadays the number of states which includes homosexual relationships in laws against domestic violence is continuously growing, and studies are investigating how the *LGBT* community is aware of its legal straight (National Coalition of Antiviolence Programs, 2010; Knight and Wilson, 2016).

Consequently, the legal system should be more active in this struggle: the first steps in this direction were made in America, where the Justice Department expanded the Violence Against Women Act<sup>8</sup> in order to include also same-sex domestic violence. Thanks to this extension, "prosecutors undertake to strengthen the body of VAWA in case of domestic violence includes gay or lesbian people" (Savage, 2010). Concerning researches, while those on the perception of laws about domestic violence are very few, the ones about how homosexuals perceive the criminal justice system are growing and in most of these it is represented as inaccessible, highly ineffective and still based on theoretical heterosexist and heteronormative assumptions.

Homosexual people, therefore, do not feel properly involved in public services because of different reasons: they do not believe that they are really interested in the subject, they have no confidence in the system, they do not recognize and are not recognized in the

"common" vision of IPV and, finally, they are afraid of having to reveal their sexual orientation to access the services (Bolam, 2016). These impressions have been validated in several studies and have demonstrated strong levels of homophobia in courts, law enforcement protocols and in the code language itself: it is therefore evident that while legal recognition of heterosexual IPV is reaching considerable goals, the one between the homosexual community is still not adequately represented by existing laws (Stapel, 2008).

In a recent study of 2013 Guadalupe-Diaz and Yglesias have shown that within homosexual communities there are many differences in how laws about IPV are perceived and in how much people feel protected and included in such regulations. A first evidence is that, if compared with people not of color, the color ones have a more negative perception of these laws referred to same-sex relationships. As result there is a wide gap in help seeking behaviors since those who perceive formal resources as inefficient and inaccessible are less inclined to address them to resolve the situation (Tesch, Bekerian, English and Harrington, 2010).

### Conclusions

In spite of common features between IPV among gay and lesbian couples, the examples given in literature tend to emphasize mainly their differences (Jin, 2017; Stiles-Shields and Carroll, 2014). First of all, much more researches were conducted into lesbian communities than in gay ones, and from these emerged that homosexual women victims of violence are more likely to side with the feminist paradigm. In this sense, gay victims have many difficulties to overcome stereotypes and prejudices which result from such a model, and they often treat the issue without due care (Murray and Mobley, 2009). Regarding gay relationships it is often cited the myth of mutual battering (Bartholomew et al, 2008), while in lesbian couples a popular myth is the fusion one, which represents the tendency of such women to be completely isolated from society and to identify them-

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<sup>8</sup> The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) is a federal American law of 1994 that provided a substantial basis for research and the fight against violence against women, guaranteed automatic and mandatory conviction for the perpetrators and authorized civil compensation. VAWA also established the Office for Violence against Women within the Department of Justice (Savage, 2010).

selves uniquely in their relationship frame (Haugrud-Waldner, Gratch, and Magruder, 2007); another specific characteristic of lesbian relationships is the search for help by women with children, which tend to care for the well-being of their children even before thinking about themselves, thus causing very serious damages (Hardesty, Oswald, Khaw and Fonseca, 2011).

Regarding prevalence rates, accurate data cannot be provided because of the recruitment procedure of samples, but in general the frequency of violent episodes in homosexual relationships is nearly the same than in heterosexual couples, if not even higher (Longobardi and Badenes-Ribera, 2017;

Mayer and McHugh, 2016; Graham, Jensen, Givens, Bowen and Rizo, 2016; Edwards et al., 2015).

As suggested by Ristock (2002), talking about IPV "*we cannot consider the default schemas x or y to describe the phenomenon, but we need a more versatile and sensitive analysis in order to realize what is going on*" (p. 11). Although this perspective challenges many of the existing paradigms in research, it has to be considered as the only efficient solution for accurately identifying the problem and responding to it with equal thoroughness and accuracy.

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