Experiences of Internal and External Emotional Violence in Male-Male Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

Recent studies have demonstrated that IPV among gay and bisexual men is a serious social problem and a public health concern. With prevalence rates similar to those documented in heterosexual women (Blosnich and Bossarte 2009; Finneran and Stephenson 2013; Messinger 2011; Peterman and Dixon 2003; Tjaden, et al. 1999b; Walters, et al. 2013), gay and bisexual men have been reported to have IPV estimates that range from 25-50% for physical IPV, 12-30% for sexual IPV, 5-73% for psychological IPV, and 21 to 28% for other forms of violence (e.g., verbal, financial) (Finneran and Stephenson 2013). With links to increased morbidity and mortality, IPV has also been reported to contribute to other ill-health effects, including, sexually transmitted infections and HIV, chronic pain, physical trauma, and poor mental health outcomes (Coker 2007; Garcia-Moreno, et al. 2006; Relf 2001; Tjaden and Thoennes 2000). Despite this evidence, explanatory models and definitions of IPV focus nearly exclusively on physical and sexual abuse in heterosexual populations, not necessarily congruent with the reality of IPV among gay and bisexual men (Bell and Naugle 2008; Finneran and Stephenson 2013; Letellier 1994).

Indeed, an understanding of the experiences and typologies of emotional violence within male-male relationships remains unexplored, despite it being documented as the most commonly reported form of IPV (Finneran and Stephenson 2013; Houston and McKirnan 2007; Merrill and Wolfe 2000; Toro-Alfonso and RodrÍGuez-Madera 2004). As a result, several of the typologies of emotional violence are categorized with those of other forms of violence (i.e. verbal) and are improperly measured. Furthermore, varying definitions of emotional violence exist non-specific to gay and bisexual men. The most recent empirically derived definition of emotional violence among men who have sex with men (MSM) is by Stephenson and Finneran (2013), who found that MSM placed additional emphasis on non-physical and non-sexual IPV forms. This included emotionally violent acts such as telling the victims to "act straight", highlighting previously unrecognized forms of IPV unique to MSM. However, fundamental conceptual concerns still exist in the research. This includes a lack of consensus on the specific behaviors that constitute emotional violence, the antecedents of emotional violence, and the frequency and severity of emotional violence among gay and bisexual men, particularly within context of their dyadic/intimate relationships and their communities.

This paper describes the results from an empirical study examining gay and bisexual men's perceptions and experiences of emotional violence within their intimate/dyadic and external relationships (e.g., family, community). A more intrinsic

understanding of the definitions, antecedents, and experiences of MSM has the potential to significantly improve the accuracy of the measurement of emotional IPV among gay and bisexual men in the U.S., allowing a more accurate understanding of the internal and external factors that affect the perpetuation of violence experienced by gay and bisexual men.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: *Minority Stress Theory*

Some theoretical work has been done examining the link between sexual minority stress and IPV, with much of the emphasis placed on same-sex female relationships (Balsam and Szymanski 2005; Frost and Meyer 2009; Lewis, et al. 2012), with little examining this link among same-sex male couples. The concept of minority stress as defined by Meyer (1995) suggests that gay, lesbian, and bisexual men and women are at a greater risk for health problems than their heterosexual counterparts because they are exposed to excess stress related to various stigma-related experiences (Brown 2008; Conron, et al. 2010; Meyer 2003). In their empirical study on the effect of minority stress on IPV among lesbian couples, Balsam and Szymanski (2005) illustrate that minority stress among sexual minorities can originate from external influences (e.g., experiences of homophobic discrimination) and internal factors (e.g., hiding one's identity and internalized homophobia). These complex experiences brought on from these obstacles have been reported to contribute to and often compound other ill-health effects such as depression, substance abuse, and suicide (Balsam and Szymanski 2005; Díaz, et al. 2001; Frost and Meyer 2009; Meyer 1995; Meyer 2003). These interacting factors may impact IPV both directly and indirectly (Brown 2008; Toro-Alfonso and RodrÍGuez-Madera 2004). Despite such observations, previous research on the effect of minority stressors on emotional violence has yet to be empirically examined in a sample of gay and bisexual men.

BACKGROUND: *Antecedents of IPV among MSM*

Similar to overall research on IPV, much of the literature regarding the triggers of IPV is couched in assumptions of a male IPV perpetrator and a female IPV victim. Little to no research exists examining the antecedents of IPV, particularly emotional violence, among gay and bisexual men. A recent study by Finneran and Stephenson ([in press]) examined antecedents among gay and bisexual men and identified 24 antecedents of IPV in male-male relationships. The findings were categorized into four domains: power and negotiation, threats to masculinity, relationship characteristics, and life stressors (Finneran and Stephenson [in press]). These novel findings show that antecedents of IPV among gay and bisexual men are unique to same-sex male relationships, however further examination is necessary to order to understand the situational factors that might increase or decrease one's risk of perpetrating or experiencing emotional IPV.

METHODS

This study was approved by the _____ University Institutional Review Board.

The data were drawn from projectLUST Speaks, a qualitative, research study examining gay and bisexual men's perspectives of IPV within both their community and same-sex male relationships. Self-identified gay and bisexual men were systematically recruited over five months in 2011 in Atlanta, GA using venue-based sampling (VBS). As a method to access hard-to-reach populations, venue-based recruitment is a process in which a sampling frame of venue-time units is created through formative research with key informants and community members (Muhib, et al. 2001). This recruitment method has been shown to be effective for reaching men who have sex with men (MSM) and other hard-to-reach populations (MacKellar, et al. 2007).

Potential participants were recruited by study staff outside of gay-friendly bars, clubs, and coffee houses and were provided information on how to complete a web-based eligibility survey. The survey consisted of questions on age, location, and sexual orientation. Recruitment also included advertisements and respondent-driven efforts at several community organizations throughout the Atlanta area. Advertisements included flyers and posters (with a phone number and email address) and asked for gay or bisexual men aged 18 to 45, who lived in metropolitan Atlanta to participate in a discussion on issues impacting same-sex male relationships. Upon being screened over the phone by study staff, eligible participants were allowed to opt for participating in either the in-person FGDs or online FGDs.

Over a period of one month, ten FGDs were held in three venues: in-person at a local AIDS service organization or at _____ University, and online using the real-time web-based meeting client Adobe Connect. In total, eight in-person and two online FGDs were held and led by the same experienced moderator using an identical question guide. The question guide provided themes for discussion, focusing on experiences of IPV among gay and bisexual men. Topics of discussion included typologies of emotional violence, experiences of IPV in peer and social networks, coping, and help-seeking responses to IPV, local resources for violence victims and perpetrators, and gender norms associated with IPV experiences. Participants were also asked to respond to three pre-recorded clips of fictional IPV scenarios. Instead of sharing personal experiences involving IPV, participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of how emotional violence impacts relationships, communities, social networks, and the coping behaviors of violence victims.

FGDs were selected to be small in order to create a comfortable setting that encouraged participation interaction (Krueger 1994; Liamputtong 2011). Each focus group consisted of four to ten participants who did not know each other prior to the discussion. Focus groups were used because of their value in providing a mechanism to reach marginalized or vulnerable populations, such as men who have sex with men (MSM); an emphasis on interaction among group members allows participants to explore beliefs, attitudes, and personal feelings among the group (Kitzinger 1994; Powell and Single 1996).

Informed consent was obtained from each participant in writing for the in-person FGDs and electronically for the online FGDs. At the beginning of each FGD, the moderator stressed the confidential nature of the discussion to the participants, who were also provided with explicit ways to withdraw from the discussion. To ensure confidentiality in the online FGDs, a unique user name was assigned to each participant in advance to log into the "chat-room" with the moderator and a technical assistant controlling access. The platform, Adobe Connect, in particular provides a "withdraw" (log-off) button, which allowed participants to exit at any time.

The FGDs lasted from 90 minutes to 130 minutes, depending on the size of the focus group and participant experiences. Following each FGD, participants were compensated for their time and given locally relevant mental health resource guides.

Participants

A total of 89 men were invited to participate in the FGDs, with intentional over-scheduling of participants in anticipation of participant truancy. Overall, 64 individuals were present and participated in the FGDs, 52 (81.2%) of whom participated in-person and 12 (18.8%) of whom participated online. The overall mean age was 34.5 (+/- 10.6 years), with the majority reporting a gay/homosexual sexual orientation (90%). More than half (52%) of the participants reported being single, whereas the remainder reported having one main partner (exclusive) (33%), having one main partner (open) (12%) and having multiple partners (3%). The participants also described themselves as educated (51.1% with some post-secondary education) and were employed full- or part-time (78.9%). The FGDs were also racially and ethnically diverse, consisting of 68.8% Black/African-American men, 23.4% White/Caucasian men, 3.1% Asian/Pacific Islander men, and 3.1% men of other races. See **Table 1** for demographic characteristics of the sample.

Analysis

The in-person FGDs were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim, whereas the online discussion threads were automatically downloaded to a readable text file. We used qualitative data analysis software MAXqda, version 10 to facilitate the analysis. Analysis focused on three domains: definitions of emotional violence, antecedents of emotional violence, and experiences of emotional violence, all within the context of intimate male-male and external relationships (e.g., family, community). To ground explanation and to provide a more intrinsic and informed exploration of the data, analysis incorporated the Minority Stress Theory.

Analysis was conducted using principles of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) and involved line-by-line coding of the transcripts and classification of all recordings using the guideline questions and conceptual frameworks as initial categories in order to detect emerging themes and divergent attitudes among the participants (Patton 2002). Coding of the qualitative data employed the use of inductive codes based on expected influences, followed by deductive codes as they emerged

organically from the data representing the unexpected themes and patterns. This dual mechanism allowed for identification of main themes, attitudes, and perceptions concerning emotional abuse as they varied among the participants.

RESULTS

Definition of Emotional Violence: Of all other forms of violence, including physical, sexual, and financial, participants cited emotional violence as the most common form. Participants described and referenced specific behaviors that they felt represented emotional violence, most commonly in the forms of verbal aggression, dominant or controlling behaviors and discrimination. More specifically, participants defined emotional violence as overt behaviors such as name-calling, stalking, controlling a victim's actions, social isolation, making threats, and deliberately doing something to make the victim feel humiliated, diminished, or embarrassed among other coercive acts. More subtle behaviors such as lack of communication and passive aggression were also mentioned by participants when asked how they perceived the concept of emotional violence.

By far, name-calling and verbal aggression were the most common forms of emotional violence perceived by participants. These behaviors were considered very impactful as many men viewed name-calling as more damaging than physical harm, stating that *"[people] can say some stuff that's worse than a punch"* and that *"[it] can be condescending or patronizing to where it just, it hurts like a fist"*. Within the context of dyadic/intimate relationships, these behaviors were described as hurtful and degrading, as perpetrators of violence most often use derogatory words, specifically a victim's personal appearance to cause insult: *"If they make a comment on your looks or they say "Oh, you're getting fat" or, you know, "you need a haircut", or whatever, you know. Those things kind of bring you down".* In external settings, however, participants described that perpetrators of emotional violence often target an individual's sexuality when name-calling, which was often reported to stem from religious beliefs and heteronormative views on masculinity and sexuality. For example, perpetrators from both within and outside of the gay community use slurs, such as *"fag"* or *"faggot,"* and other non-verbal remarks, such as *"dirty looks"* and laughter to cause emotional distress.

"He's degrading me a lot telling me I was fat and I was 190 at the time but I believed it. Called me all kinds of names and stuff."

"As far as being told you're nothing without someone.....or you're worthless.....like for example my ex would tell me no one else would want me besides him and that my body is the only thing guys will want from me because I was just average with a fat ass"

"They sit in the background and I walk past and they say, hey look at that faggot"

"When I moved here, I went to a candlelight vigil for the gay suicides last October, and some people just stared and some laughed at "the fags"

"I've been called faggot and called people faggot before…That's abuse! You, what, depending on how you use it. You know, if you just like, you know, if you just using like the word, like a lot of times if you use like the word like 'fag' and we're joking around that's one thing, right, yeah I'm a faggot! You know and that's, its one thing when you got, when you're saying it, but when, there have been times when I've really been like, in a relationship or with friends, you know, we get out and, you fucking faggot! And yeah, I mean like, you know, I'm using it as a slur! You know, you know, but of course I've used it on myself, and used it to describe other people, so it's just like, it's like um, you know, how you play it out."

The exhibition of dominant and controlling behaviors was also commonly defined as a type of emotional violence by respondents. In intimate relationships, these types of behaviors were believed to stem from the abuser's sense of possessiveness, or the desire to "*control their [partner's] every behavior…where are you, what's going on, what's happening, why didn't you call me at this time, where have you been, who have you been with, you know it's just that nature of I have to be in every aspect of your life*." According to the participants, these behaviors appear in the form of stalking, social isolation and making threats. Specifically, respondents described how an abuser's need to be in constant control often develops into unhealthy behaviors such as stalking, to which victims respond by abandoning their social activities in efforts to appease their partner and reduce tension, thereby isolating them from friends and family and creating emotional distress.

"The first thing first, number one, warning sign, red light, Goodyear blimp is the isolation. It's when they try to isolate me from my friends, family...that is the first sign, tell-tale sign right there."

"you know, you get involved in the other person, and the other friends start to go away. I mean that's kinda a natural occurrence, to some degree, because you know, people get so entangled with each other that they don't' pay as much attention to friends and some of them go, but you know, there is, but there is, a point between that and somebody actually chasing off friends"

"It was almost demonstrating the possessiveness that comes with the, the jealousy, the you know, where are you at, what's goin on, why are you, who are you with, and all those things which I think can kinda create that social isolation"

In external settings, respondents reported family members with dominant and controlling behaviors most often, saying that families use manipulation or threats to pressure gay or bisexual relatives into suppressing or hiding their sexuality. For example, some men discussed the use of religion by family members to discourage homosexuality while others mentioned the use of threats of isolation, rejection and removal of support systems, both of which were defined as examples of emotional abuse.

"My family used their biblical belief system to manipulate all of us as kids, to believe what they said was the gospel was right. And if you went against the grain, you were wrong. And if you are wrong, we don't want to have too much to do with you."

"'Cause when you're living at home with your parents you have a lot of different rules and…and it's either you gonna be, abide by their rules or you're gonna be out on the streets…"

Participants also referenced discriminatory behaviors based on perceived homosexuality in community settings as a type of emotional violence. Several participants described discrimination from within their own gay or bisexual community stating, *"Sometimes I feel like its way more discrimination within our own community than, you know, the outside community."* Respondents indicated that often within their communities, men are type casted as being overtly sexual, and it is often assumed that their primary interest is sexual activity. In this context, feelings of emotional distress were described as a result of a constant battle against these perpetuated stereotypes.

"I may just want your friendship and because we're gay you assume automatically I want to have sex. And that's not always the case. Sometimes I just want somebody in my network so I can learn about some of these social activities that are going on because, um, because club scenes, I mean, I have done those…But, you know, my experience has been I just feel kind of like, misunderstood even in some of the gay functions that I did attend. And I am like, you know, that is the last place I expect to go and be judged."

"Um, in a lot of ways I think gay people are our own worst enemy because we have already had to defend ourselves so much and we are constantly on the defense"

Unwelcomed stereotypes and feelings of emotional harm were described as a result of discrimination from outside communities as well. Participants expressed extreme frustration with the fact that some community members lack progressive mindsets and with the perception that *"certain societies are always going to be homophobic no matter what*," as they "*treat it like [being gay or bisexual is] some type of contagious condition or something*," leading to significant emotional distress among gay and bisexual men. For example, instances of people intentionally avoiding one-on-one interactions with men because of perceived homosexuality were cited, stating that *"people try not to get too close to you."* Further, participants believed that outside communities operate based on societal expectations of masculinity and sexuality, and failure to meet those heteronormative expectations leads to discrimination and resulting emotional harm.

"Because some people sort of "oh why you wanna be gay, why you wanna choose this?" And, even though it's the 21st century, some people still got it ingrained in their heads that you can turn, change your sexuality like a damn light bulb"

"You know, that uh, that mainstream society has that you know, if you're of, you know, if you're gay or whatnot that, you know, they expect you to automatically be flaming or flamboyant, or you know, or whatnot."

"She kind of like avoided me. She didn't really help me …because I "look gay", or what people say "look gay"

"So if a man is walking down the street he's supposed to, I don't know, I guess a more stronger kinda like a little, not a bounce, but kind of a more of a stronger fierce looking walk to him. Look like a lion, I guess you can say. A lion kind of out in the field. Look strong and masculine from far away. Then from up close, people should be able to tell what you are from afar. Instead of them turning around and you're sashaying and switching and you got this kind of a, I've heard a glide, to your walk. Then they would say well he's a little fancy. And they would know who you are before they even come up to you. So it's like they judge you already. Just by the way you walk or sometimes by how you even dress."

Triggers for Emotional Violence: Jealousy, power differentials, lack of compatibility and homophobia were all cited as direct causes of emotional violence in both dyadic partner relationships and community settings, in addition to substance abuse, which was considered an indirect trigger. Substance abuse was considered dangerous in most intimate relationships by participants, as it tends to exacerbate existing issues within the relationship, especially those related to emotional violence.

"…whether it's drugs or alcohol, you know. It might start off nice and cute and fun the more the addiction progresses, um, the more paranoid you become, likely there's more infidelity being more promiscuous and that just doesn't work in a relationship, you know. Um, I haven't seen one healthy relationship that involved either drugs or alcohol…"

"He was an alcoholic and we were doing drugs at the time and that didn't help the situation…It aggravated the situation. And he was very abusive…he didn't want my friends around. I told my friends to stop coming around"

Jealousy and insecurity were most commonly cited as triggers for emotional abuse within the context of same-sex male relationships. More specifically, partners who exhibited feelings of jealousy were described as possessive and therefore emotionally abusive. *"if a person is jealous of a person's friends who are established, if they're jealous of family members, if they're jealous of you know, every time they're going to work, or they're someplace or whatever…they're following him…those signs are unhealthy."* Similarly, ongoing insecurity, described as *"just a lack of self-worth and… [the] need to measure up to someone else*" within a same-sex relationship was mentioned as a cause of emotionally abusive behaviors. Respondents reported that these feelings often stem from past relationships in which cheating and dishonesty betrayed their trust, and as these issues often remain unresolved, jealous and insecure behaviors are

carried into new relationships leading to further emotional harm: *"I have a tendency to think about baggage from past relationships; things that have hurt me and they start cropping up."* Additionally, the lifestyle of gay and bisexual men was reportedly linked to partner jealousy and insecurity and resulting emotional violence, as cheating and dishonesty are perceived as widespread behaviors throughout the community.

"And you know I think too, when it comes to two men being in a relationship whether it's having sexual or you know, men itself, you you gotta realize too that a lot of that low self-esteem and type thing comes from past issues that they just roll right over into the present. You know, they keep carryin', see the thing is you know, even right the other day I still carry some baggage some but I tries not to bring it in to the relationship. But sometimes that male will trigger something that will make it come out, you know."

"But the only thing that bring that violence on the man thing is only if it ever gets to that point I believe in our, in our lifestyle is because of you can't trust men. They always think that everybody out there always think everybody's cheatin"

"…in relationships where one is lying about like your situation. I think that's where a lot of problems are. And a lot of guys will do that to you. They lie. You know, they're married or they have a girlfriend…"

Power differentials between partners were also frequently discussed as a trigger for emotional violence in dyadic relationships. For instance, a less educated partner would berate his more educated male partner to compensate for his own self-perceived weakness, leading to significant emotional distress in the relationship. *"Your stance in education has sized you up in your mind above your person. So this person feels that they are here, cause they're not college educated, so now they have to get physical and aggressive up here... I think the aggression is almost compensation."* Further, respondents felt that relationships are more likely to yield emotional violence if they consist of partners who experience significant differences in money and age. Specifically, partners with greater financial resources, who were typically characterized as older men, were perceived by participants to have the power to make their less endowed partner feel in debt and obligated to pay them back in ways that make them feel controlled and possessed.

"But the thing is that when somebody's advanced in their career, and they've got money, and the other person's a student, it becomes, it can almost become more of a possessive relationship as a person that holds the money has more of the power …so whenever I'm with somebody and they're making money its like if they start to pay for stuff, for a part of my, not, I, I hate to say this, a part of me feels that there's some sense of ownership that comes in that. Like you paid for dinner, you paid for the drinks you paid for this that and the other, now I'm supposed to do something in return…"

"And they, they willin' to pay the bills, they willin' to give me an allowance or whatever it is and take good care of me and and and, you know, um, you know, that that I'm gonna have to pay a price"

Another main cause of emotional abuse according to participants was the perceived dichotomy between sexual and social roles within an intimate relationship. Certain sexual roles, referred to as "*top*" or "*bottom*," are associated with power and masculinity, depending on the partners and the relationship at hand. Participants believed that since "*the roles in the bedroom [don't] necessarily translate to roles in the relationship as a whole*," conflict often arises and contributes to the various aforementioned types of emotional violence. This clear power differential in combination with overall lack of compatibility between partners reportedly leads to a lot of emotional abuse.

"I think that just violence is part of, becomes part of a relationship when two people are just fed up with each other or just too…different…You know, they just resort to the violence to get over it."

"Because the idea of havin' it and you bein' with it but it's really not a match for you and I think in the gay relationships, a lot of people who hookup are really not matched for each other. They just matched on the physical part of it. Like okay, I like you and I see you - you're what I see myself with but in all, this person don't match your skills... don't match your interests and that's where the conflict of interest comes in and that could be quickly lead to insecurities on both ends… and it could cause arguments and different things… so I think that's where a lot of issues come out especially in the gay relationships."

Participants also perceived that internalized and externalized homophobia trigger emotional violence in intimate relationships and community settings. Feelings of self-shame and a partner's denial about same-sex behavior cause feelings of tension and anger in relationships and lead to significant emotional abuse, especially when dealing with a self-accepting partner. *"I've seen people that actually hate who they are, you know…to me, someone that's as open as me that can tend to cause problems."* Participants frequently stated that these feelings of tension were often compounded by homophobic attacks that occur outside of the male-male relationship and often within the gay community.

Internalized homophobia also triggers emotional harm in gay and bisexual community settings: *"I think within the community…people, they're not totally comfortable with who they are."* For instance, men who appear to be extremely masculine and men who appear to be extremely feminine might not necessarily associate with one another due to internalized homophobia: *"you got all the butch people like I don't wanna be around the femmy people and you got the femmy people I don't wanna be around the butch."* In outside communities, homophobia leads directly to discriminatory behavior and resulting emotional harm, as respondents perceived society to be uncomfortable with gay and bisexual men displaying their sexuality and same-sex behavior—the idea of "*flamboyant*" men and two men engaging in public displays of affection, especially kissing and holding hands.

"the shame, well obviously the one guy has a lot of shame of his homosexuality or being on the, or if he is completely homosexual versus bisexual…You know, obviously there is some anger with that as well that is harbored. Because of the shame."

"Yes, yes that can be definitely a thing because of self-loathing. You know, so you, again, it just, it, it gets into the individuals. And I've seen people that actually hate who they are, you know, and for, to me, someone that's, that's as open as me that can tend to, to cause problems."

"Because sometimes they're not comfortable and acceptable with theirselves, so they lash out. You see what I'm sayin'? They may lash out at you or they may lash out at some other dude that's walkin' down the street that may be flamboyant or whatever.It's that whole self-hatred thing. It's that whole self-hatred thing because you're not comfortable with yourself and I am okay with me. You have to act or look a certain way, you know I guess to be accepted and I'm free"

"Um, but I've noticed like a difference in those two is um, you know, but also when I'm, when I'm out in public with my boyfriend like, the way that I have to behave has got to be a little bit different. Um, depending on where I'm at…somewhere in an area that feels safe then you kinda gotta like walk a distance from each other and be a little separate from each other, you know, and you gotta kinda like watch you manners just a little bit. You know as far as how you're interacting with each other, cause you know, normally we touchy feely kissy all that kinda stuff you just can't do that kinda stuff if you're not in a safe area."

"I have slipped sometimes too. One time I did kiss him in public and forgot where I was…And so I had a gentleman, some man, kind of, his eyes opened up really big like, "Ahh Oh my god" and then I realized where I was so I said, "Okay cool it."

"Like when I'm in, you know, holding my partner's hand somewhere in public, people like shield their kids' eyes"

"I try and exercise caution, ok, so it's not like we can walk down the streets holdin hands and stuff of that nature, you just have to be aware,"

"you wouldn't be able to have like the small public displays of affection that regular couples get like holding somebody's hand or like a small peck on the cheek or whatever. You don't, you, you wouldn't be able to do that cause you would be harassed or you would be fear for your safety then"

Experiences of Emotional Violence: Overall, among participants emotional violence was viewed as a more subtle form of violence that is difficult to detect and therefore hard to prevent, yet easy to identify in hindsight and from an outside perspective, stating that *"it's always a kind of baffling thing and when you look back on it you can always see it but in the moment it never makes sense, it just kinda comes out of nowhere*

sometimes." Surprisingly, respondents described emotional abuse as very commonplace among gay and bisexual men that it is often expected to occur when entering into an intimate relationship with another man. Similarly, experiences of emotional violence were described as equally common occurrences in community settings, and particularly just as prevalent within the gay community as outside the community, if not more.

"I'm tired of relationships being struggles, and I feel like that's what happens when two men get together, more often than not it's struggle. It's jealousy, it's violence, and it's passive aggression, and insecurity."

"Sometimes I feel like its way more discrimination within our own community than you know the outside community."

Participants found difficulty in describing who is more likely to perpetrate and who is more likely to become a victim of emotional violence in an intimate same-sex relationship: while some men described perpetrators of violence to be more driven by aforementioned power differentials and self-perceived weaknesses, others described the experience as "*mutual*." Overall, respondents agreed that the experience simply varies by relationship and the partners involved. In community settings, however, the experience of emotional violence was more clearly defined. The threat of emotional violence was perceived as greater for gay or bisexual men who appear in public alone, meaning that men often find comfort and reduced risk of victimization of emotional violence when among groups of gay or bisexual male friends, referred to as *"safety in numbers."* Similarly, men reported higher risks of experiencing emotional violence in communities that are non-accepting to gay and bisexual men and therefore try to avoid them.

"When I'm by myself, you know, you can actually, you know, the, the um, the threat of possible you know, something happening is a little bit higher…but when you're with somebody else, you know, people are less likely to want to say anything because there's two people"

"When normally whenever I would go out with somebody it would be in a place where we would feel comfortable so, I wouldn't necessarily feel like I would, uh, be discriminated against because it would probably be majority gay"

When asked about the impact of emotional violence compared to other forms of abuse, participants strongly insisted that it is the most harmful as it *"is the one that lasts longer and is more deeply seeded."* Particularly, emotional violence was often compared to physical violence as equally destructive or more detrimental as the effects of physical violence—bruises and scars—heal, whereas the consequences of emotional violence were perceived as being long-lasting, eternally changing aspects of an individual's identity. *"…it really changed everything for me…it has a lot to do with who I am now as an individual."* The effects of emotional abuse were believed to linger and *"continue on past [the] relationship even [after] you get out of it,"* and often *"create*

a problem for both people because you carry those same feelings into your other relationships whether it's romantic, professional…you carry the scars." More specifically, emotional violence was discussed in relation to resulting feelings of fear, distrust, trauma, mental illness, insecurity, isolation, emotional withdrawal, defeat, self-blame, and lack of self-esteem. Compounded, participants expressed belief that emotional violence is the most threatening form because it serves as a platform for other forms of violence, particularly physical and sexual abuse, stating *"emotional leads to everything."* While some believed that emotional violence results in damage from which victims cannot fully recover, others believed that victims can move on once they reach a point of self-acceptance.

"I think it's emotional. I think that's probably the worst, just because I think that if you can get into someone's head you know, and make them think that they need you then they'll just stay, you know and they'll just put up with it"

"…the emotional, like to me is more scarring to me than you know like you getting beat up because a bruise and some sloshes…it'll heal. But that emotional part that stops you from dealing with other people that can stop you from um being as spiritual as you wanna be, it can stop you from just living your life cause now you walking around like oh well, nobody loves me I can't do this or whatever."

"I am very weakened emotionally and psychological state because of all the manipulation and all of the game playing"

"Only when I began to really appreciate who I was and accept me, did [it] stop"

"I had to start looking at it from within me. And I think as time went on I began to accept me a little more, that ok, I didn't have to be butch. I didn't have to be this. I could be whatever I chose to be at that moment"

DISCUSSION

Intimate partner violence among gay and bisexual men is a significantly understudied issue. Although multiple studies have indicated that experiences of violence among gay and bisexual men are comparable or higher than their heterosexual peers (Blosnich and Bossarte 2009; Finneran and Stephenson 2013; Messinger 2011; Tjaden, et al. 1999a; Walters, et al. 2013), the experiences and types of emotional IPV within male-male relationships has received much less attention. The results presented here add significantly to the very small body of literature on IPV among gay and bisexual men and the authors find no other studies that have specifically explored emotional violence among gay and bisexual men. The results show prevalent emotional violence occurring within both intimate male same-sex and external relationships. The results of this study provide a mechanism by which experiences of emotional violence in intimate relationships (and other forms of IPV) may be linked to negative outcomes (e.g., health) associated with internal and external homophobia and discrimination.

A primary finding is the descriptions of emotional violence referenced by participates, bearing a resemblance to those reported in male-female relationships. However, while many of the forms of emotional IPV, such as name-calling and verbal aggression were reported as common forms of emotional violence in both groups, many of the experiences, and sequelae of emotional violence among gay and bisexual men are exacerbated by an additional layover of stigma and discrimination associated with being a sexual minority (Balsam and Szymanski 2005). Similarly, while name-calling is naturally situational, participants reported that it takes on two forms male-male relationships and in their community settings: In dyadic/intimate relationships, insults were directed towards the individual's physical appearance, whereas in community settings, insulted targeted an individual's sexuality.

The results also suggest novel findings that may provide new insights into explaining why emotional violence occurs in male-male relationships. In particular, many of the antecedents identified by studies of opposite-sex couples also emerged as significant antecedents for gay and bisexual men. For example, jealousy and insecurity, the most commonly reported trigger cited by participants are both viewed as classic IPV antecedents in the literature (Bell and Naugle 2008; Wilkinson and Hamerschlag 2005). Despite this similarity, antecedents that are generally specific to gay and bisexual men emerged from the data as equally important antecedents: one or both partners being in the closet and deciding who tops (is the insertive partner) and bottoms (is the receptive partner) during anal sex. These triggers of violence can generate conflict among men attempting to build a relationship together. This is consistent with minority stress theory that indicates that stress of being a sexual minority within a heteronormative culture can lead an individual to violence or aggression (Frost and Meyer 2009; Meyer 1995; Meyer 2003). The results here point to the need to include these additional domains of unique to gay and bisexual men's relationships and perhaps unique to other same-sex relationships that are absent from current literature.

Nevertheless, participants largely conceptualized emotional violence as a platform for the beginning of other forms of violence, thus supporting theories on the Cycle of Violence (Walker 2006). These findings are consistent with other IPV studies that found that emotional violence is the first phase of violence that occurs prior to other forms. This may be due to the fact that many of the reported typologies of Stage 1 (tension building) of the Cycle of Violence fall into traditional definitions of emotional and verbal violence (i.e. name-calling).

The fact that participants described emotional violence as the most common form of IPV in male-male relationships is also consistent with existing same-sex IPV literature (Craft and Serovich 2005; Houston and McKirnan 2007; Pantalone, et al. 2011; Toro-Alfonso and RodrÍGuez-Madera 2004). In their systematic review of the literature examining IPV among MSM, Finneran and Stephenson (2013) report that sexual violence is less reported than physical violence, which in turn is less reported than emotional and other forms of violence. This is consistent with participants views, who

also reported that emotional violence precedes other forms, e.g., sexual, physical, financial. This suggests a clear need to develop measures that adequately address the effects of emotional violence. Similarly, participants described emotional violence just as commonplace within interactions outside of the intimate relationship, notably with the gay community. Stemming from hegemonic mindsets on normative masculinity, these experiences of emotional violence from within the gay community compounded with the general lack of societal acceptance can further produce poorer mental health outcomes, and the possibility of the receipt or perpetration of violence (Brown 2008). Thus, mental health programs and interventions should be aware of the culmination of factors that play a role in the receipt and perpetration in emotional violence, and perhaps the other forms of violence that may result from emotional violence.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this study. Most important, while VBS is useful for recruiting hard-to-reach populations, the sample was limited to only gay and bisexual men, but not other MSM who may not identify as gay or bisexual. Similarly, gay and bisexual men who did not access gay-themed or gay-friendly locations during the sample time frame would necessarily have been excluded from the sample. Thus the results cannot be generalized to all gay and bisexual men living in Atlanta. Experiences of IPV among MSM who do not identify as gay or bisexual is an important area of future research, however this study was still able to examine the unique experiences specific to men who identify as gay or bisexual.

CONCLUSION

Our results provide empirical support for a theory of minority stress to understand emotional violence among a diverse urban sample of gay and bisexual men, with examples relating to both internal and external experiences of varied minority stressors. Participants described how multiple forms of minority stressors work together to increase risk of emotional violence and consequently other forms of IPV within a relationship, for example the stress of being in a relationship with a closeted gay man combined with the stress of living in a heteronormative society. This stress was reported to also be compounded by the additional layer of discrimination that often gets perpetuated from within the gay community, resulting in a "inter-community" form of violence; a finding absent from the majority of male same-sex IPV literature (Merrill and Wolfe 2000). Consequently, gay and bisexual men may struggle in recovering or "reaching a point of self-acceptance" because they cannot access support from the community in which they would expect to find support. This lack of support alongside fears of discrimination from family and other relationships may begin to manifest itself as deeper forms of self-hatred and internalized homophobia. Thus, as research continues and interventions are developed to mitigate both perpetration and receipt of IPV, researchers and interventionists should take into account the unique position of gay/bisexual male survivors of IPV, considering

both the heteronormative environment in which he may life and the mental health consequences of emotional violence survivorship.

TABLES

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Characteristic	%	n
Interview Site		
University	37.5	24
HIV Testing Center	43.83	28
Online	18.8	12
Age		
18-25	21.9	14
26-35	29.7	19
36-45	48.4	31
Race		
Black/African-American	68.8	44
Caucasian/White	23.4	15
Hispanic/Latino	1.6	1
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.1	2
Other	3.1	2
Education Level		
College or more	31.3	20
Some college or 2-year degree	46.9	30
High School Diploma or GED	18.8	12
No High School Diploma	3.1	2
Sexual Identity		
Gay/Homosexual	85.9	55
Bisexual	14.1	9
Relationship Status		
Single (not dating)	51.6	33
One main partner (exclusive)	32.8	21
One main partner (open)	12.5	8
Multiple Partners	3.1	2
TOTAL	**100**	**64**

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