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Emotional intimate partner violence experienced by men in same-sex relationships

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Abstract

Intimate partner violence research has focused almost exclusively on physical and sexual intimate partner violence in opposite-sex relationships, paying little attention to the intimate partner violence experienced by men in same-sex relationships. Emerging research focusing on intimate partner violence among male-male couples has focused largely on physical and sexual violence, with little consideration of the unique forms of emotional violence experienced by gay men. Ten focus group discussions with gay and bisexual men (n=64) were conducted to examine perceived typologies, antecedents, and experiences of emotional violence that occur between male partners. Participants described emotional violence as the most threatening form of intimate partner violence, driven largely by factors including power differentials, gender roles, and internalised homophobia. Results indicate that gay and bisexual men perceive emotional intimate partner violence to be commonplace. A better understanding of emotional violence within male-male relationships is vital to inform intimate partner violence prevention efforts and the more accurate measurement of intimate partner violence for gay men.

Keywords

intimate partner violence; emotional violence; gay men; bisexual men

Introduction

Intimate partner violence is recognised as a significant public health problem associated with a wide range of negative physical and mental health outcomes (Beydoun et al. 2012, Coker 2007, Garcia-Moreno et al. 2006, Campbell et al. 2003, Breiding, Black, and Ryan 2008). The most recent US National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) reports lifetime recalls of 35.0 % for physical and sexual violence and 47.5% for psychological violence among heterosexual women in the USA (Walters, J, and Breiding 2013). However, some smaller scale studies suggest even higher rates. Bhandari et al. (2006) report that 43% of their clinic sample of heterosexual women experienced physical violence, 41%

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experienced sexual violence, and 68% experienced psychological violence. While much research has focused on prevalence, the focus has been primarily on male-perpetrated intimate partner violence against women in heterosexual relationships. More recently, research has recognised violence among male same-sex couples, with epidemiological studies demonstrating prevalence rates for gay and bisexual men comparable to or higher than rates observed in heterosexual relationships (Greenwood et al. 2002, Tjaden, Thoennes, and Allison 1999b, Blosnich and Bossarte 2009, Walters, J, and Breiding 2013, Peterman and Dixon 2003, Finneran and Stephenson 2013). The US National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) reported the lifetime prevalence of rape, physical violence and stalking by an intimate partner as 26% for gay men and 37% for bisexual men (Black et al., 2011).

In general, research examining the prevalence and antecedents of intimate partner violence has focused on physical and sexual forms of abuse among heterosexual women (Breiding, Black, and Ryan 2008, Schafer, Caetano, and Clark 1998, Mason et al. 2014, O'Leary 1999, Murphy and Hoover 1999, Straight, Harper, and Arias 2003), with relatively less attention paid to emotional violence (Murphy and Hoover 1999, Shorey, Cornelius, and Bell 2008, Mason et al. 2014, Shortt et al. 2012, Finneran and Stephenson 2013). According to the 2010 US National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), heterosexual women experience emotional partner violence at rates upwards of 48% (Black et al., 2011, Walters, J, and Breiding 2013); however, other US population-level studies report estimates ranging from 12.1% (Coker et al. 2002) to 77.4% (Blosnich and Bossarte 2009). Research explaining the vast range of reported prevalence rates of emotional violence is limited. Some have argued that prevalence estimates vary significantly because of differences in definitions of emotional intimate partner violence used when collecting data (Saltzman et al. 2002, Gunter 2007, Carney and Barner 2012, Mason et al. 2014, Follingstad 2007). Several definitions of emotional partner violence exist in the literature, including the 2010 US National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), which defines emotional intimate partner violence as expressive forms of aggression and coercive control (Black et al. 2011). Follingstad (2007, p3) more broadly defines emotional violence as behaviours engaged in by adult partners that encompass a range of verbal and mental methods designed to emotionally wound, coerce, control, intimidate, psychologically harm, and express anger. Although different, these definitions highlight the central notion that emotional intimate partner violence is a complex construct that involves a variety of emotionally harmful behaviours, spanning verbal threats and controlling behaviours.

It is important to make clear that emotional violence is more than just name-calling. As defined by Stark (2007), emotional violence often entails a pattern of on-going intentional domineering tactics employed with the intent of governing victim's thoughts, beliefs or conduct and/or to punish them for resisting perpetrator regulation. Emotional violence is an enduring pattern of controlling behaviours used to exercise power and control, and often includes: emotional abuse (e.g. victim blaming, undermining the victim's self-esteem and self-worth); verbal abuse (e.g. swearing, humiliation and degradation); social abuse (e.g. systematic social isolation); and spiritual abuse (e.g. misusing religious or spiritual traditions to justify abuse). These behaviours are often reported to occur in unison with physical violence (Lawrence et al. 2009); however several studies report that the effects of emotional

violence are comparable to or even outweigh the effects of physical violence (Follingstad et al. 1990, Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. 2004, Basow et al. 2007, Capezza and Arriaga 2008). In this paper, we adopt a broad view of emotional violence, as suggested by Stark (2007), and conceptualise emotional violence as including emotional, social and psychological abuse.

The definitional limitations to studying emotional violence are not unique to heterosexual populations. A recent systematic review of 28 epidemiological studies of intimate partner violence among same-sex male couples found prevalence rates for receipt of emotional violence ranging from 5-73% (Finneran and Stephenson 2013). Of the 28 studies identified, only 6 measured emotional violence, illustrating the lack of attention to understanding emotional violence among gay and bisexual men. The vast range in prevalence estimates of emotional violence also illustrates the variation in definitions used to measure emotional violence (Pantalone et al. 2011, Craft and Serovich 2005, Greenwood et al. 2002, Feldman et al. 2007, Nieves-Rosa, Carballo-Diequez, and Dolezal 2000, Tjaden, Thoennes, and Allison 1999a). However, some of this variation is also attributed to the use of small convenience samples or small qualitative studies (Craft and Serovich 2005; Pantalone et al. 2011; Feldman et al. 2007). As in the heterosexual literature, there is no agreed upon definition of emotional violence for gay and bisexual men. This lack of definitional agreement has the potential to significantly impact the accuracy of the measurement of emotional violence for gay and bisexual men.

Historically, studies have measured intimate partner violence among heterosexual women using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) and derivatives of the CTS; however these scales have not been validated for use among gay and bisexual men. When measuring violence among gay and bisexual men, many authors have either employed combinations of different measurement tools or have used modified versions of the CTS. In response to this, Stephenson and Finneran (2013) developed a new scale – the intimate partner violence among gay and bisexual men (IPV-GBM) scale. Briefly, Stephenson and Finneran (2013) conducted ten focus group discussions with gay and bisexual men in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, and asked them to list actions and behaviours that they considered violent in relationships. This process produced a list of 33 items, which were then tested on a sample of 1,075 gay and bisexual men recruited via venue-based sampling in the same city. Survey respondents were asked to report their agreement with each of the 33 items as acts of violence. Interestingly, this list of items was not restricted to physical and sexual acts of violence; participants listed items such as name calling, verbal threats and threats of “outing” as violent, which may be broadly considered as emotional violence. Factor analysis of this data produced the IPV-GBM scale, consisting of five domains of intimate partner violence: physical and sexual, monitoring behaviours, controlling behaviours, HIV-related, and emotional violence. The three categories of monitoring behaviours (e.g. checking text messages, repeated posting on social media), controlling behaviours (e.g. stopping victim from seeing families) and emotional (e.g. calling names), would fall under Stark’s (2007) definition of emotional abuse. In developing the scale, Stephenson and Finneran (2013) found that gay and bisexual men placed additional emphasis on non-physical and non-sexual forms of violence, which included emotionally violent acts such as telling the victims to ‘act straight’. Of course, it is possible that these forms of emotional violence are also prevalent in

heterosexual populations. Further work by Finneran and Stephenson (2014) illustrates that there are triggers to violence that are unique to gay and bisexual men, including factors linked to disclosure of sexuality, and conflicts over being the dominant male in the relationship.

It is clear that there gay and bisexual men experience intimate partner violence at rates similar to heterosexual women, and that violence is a significant public health issue for this population. There is further evidence that there are unique triggers to violence among male-male couples, and recent work has also suggested that the typologies of violence experienced by gay and bisexual men may extend beyond those included in traditional measures of violence (e.g. CTS) (Finneran and Stephenson 2013). However, to date, there is a lack of attention to understanding how emotional violence is conceptualised and experienced by gay and bisexual men. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to describe, for the first time in the literature, gay and bisexual men's perceptions of emotional intimate partner violence in male-male relationships, including perceived definitions, antecedents, and experiences. A more intrinsic understanding of these experiences has the potential to significantly improve the accuracy of measurements of emotional intimate partner violence among gay and bisexual men in the USA.

Methods

This study was approved by the Emory University Institutional Review Board. Data were drawn from a qualitative, research study examining gay and bisexual men's perspectives of intimate partner violence within same-sex male relationships. Self-identified gay and bisexual men were systematically recruited over five months in 2011 in Atlanta, using venue-based sampling. 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 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 screener. The survey consisted of questions on age, location, and sexual orientation. Recruitment also included advertisements (e.g. flyers and posters with a project phone number and email address) and respondent-driven efforts at several community organisations throughout the Atlanta area. Interested men who contacted study staff via phone or email were provided the same information on how to complete the same web-based eligibility screener. Men were eligible for study participation if they reported being 18 years of age or older, being male gender, identifying as gay/homosexual or bisexual, and living in the Atlanta metro area. Upon being screened over the phone by study staff, eligible participants were allowed to opt for participating in either in-person or online focus group discussions.

Over a period of one month, ten focus group discussions (n=64) were held in three venues: in-person at a local AIDS service organisation or at Emory University, and online using the real-time web-based meeting client Adobe Connect. In total, eight in-person and two online focus group discussions were held and led by the same trained moderator using an identical

question guide. The question guide provided themes for discussion, focusing on experiences of intimate partner violence among gay and bisexual men. Topics of discussion included types of emotional violence, experiences of violence in peer and social networks, coping, and help-seeking responses to violence, local resources for victims and perpetrators, and gender norms associated with violent experiences. Participants were also asked to respond to three pre-recorded clips of fictional intimate partner violence scenarios, and asked to comment on whether the actions portrayed constituted violence. Rather than share personal experiences of violence, participants were encouraged to discuss their perceptions of how emotional violence impacts relationships, communities, social networks, and the coping behaviours of violence victims.

Focus group discussions were selected to be small in order to create a comfortable setting that encouraged participant interaction (Krueger 1994, Liamputtong 2011). Each focus group consisted of four to ten participants who did not know each other prior to the discussion. Members of couples were not allowed to participate in the same group. Informed consent was obtained from each participant in writing for the in-person groups and electronically for the online groups. At the beginning of each focus group discussion, 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 discussions, 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.

Analysis

The in-person focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, whereas the online discussion threads were automatically downloaded to a readable text file. Qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, version 10, was used to conduct 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 relationships. Thematic analysis involved the coding and classification of the data by reviewing the transcripts for potential conceptual categories, using the focus group guide questions as initial categories. A preliminary codebook was developed based on close readings of several transcripts, incorporating domains from the focus group guide (deductive codes) as well as unanticipated themes and patterns that emerged (inductive codes). Analysis involved line-by-line coding of the transcripts by two analysts who coded one single transcript. The coded transcripts were merged for comparison and code definitions were revised based on an examination of coding disagreement. This was repeated until agreement was obtained.

Demographic characteristics of the sample are summarised in Table 1. A total of 89 men were invited to participate in the focus groups, with intentional over-scheduling of participants in anticipation of participant truancy. Overall, 64 individuals were present and participated in the focus group discussions, 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%), or having multiple partners (3%). The participants also described themselves as educated (51.1% with some post-secondary/higher education) and were employed full- or part-time (78.9%). The focus group discussions 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.

Results

Definitions of Emotional Intimate Partner Violence within Male-Male Relationships

Participants described and referenced specific behaviours that they felt represented emotional partner violence, most commonly in the forms of verbal aggression, dominant, or controlling behaviours and discrimination. More specifically, participants defined this form of violence as overt behaviours such as name-calling, controlling a victim's actions, enforced social isolation, making threats, and deliberately doing something to make the victim feel humiliated, diminished or embarrassed among other coercive acts. Participants also mentioned more subtle behaviours such as lack of communication and passive aggression.

Types of Emotional Violence within Male-Male Relationships

Study participants perceived emotional violence to occur within same-sex relationships most commonly in the forms of name-calling and verbal aggression, although other forms of emotional abuse were frequently reported. 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 patronising to where it just, it hurts like a fist'. Reports of name-calling and verbal aggression that come from their male partners was often described as more degrading and personal. Participants further described that perpetrators of emotional violence most often use derogatory words, specifically targeted at 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 bring you down'.

The exhibition of dominant and controlling behaviours was also commonly defined as a type of emotional violence. These types of behaviours were perceived to stem from the perpetrator's sense of possessiveness, or as several participants noted, a desire to control their partner. Participants believed that these behaviours primarily appeared in the form of stalking, social isolation, and making deliberate threats. Specifically, men described how an abuser's need to be in control often develops into unhealthy behaviours such as stalking, to which victims respond by abandoning their social activities in efforts to appease their partner and reduce tension, further isolating them from friends and family. As one partner noted: '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'.

Antecedents of Emotional violence within Male-Male Relationships

Jealousy, power differentials, lack of compatibility, and homophobia were all cited as direct causes of emotional violence in same-sex male relationships, in addition to substance abuse, which was considered an indirect antecedent. Substance abuse was considered dangerous in most relationships by participants as it tends to exacerbate existing issues within the relationship and heighten the risk of emotional IPV. One participant noted his experience: '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'.

Respondents perceived that emotional partner violence was more likely to occur if the perpetrator was jealous and insecure. More specifically, partners who exhibited feelings of jealousy were also possessive and emotionally abusive, for example, '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 male relationship was mentioned as a case of emotionally harmful behaviours. Respondents reported that these feelings often stem from previous relationships in which cheating and dishonesty betrayed their trust, and as these issues remain unresolved, jealous and insecure behaviours are 'piggy-backed' into new relationships. One participant described his experience in his relationships as follows: 'I have a tendency to think about baggage from past relationships; things that have hurt me and they start cropping up' and '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 cheating'.

Power differentials between male partners were also frequently discussed as an antecedent for emotional violence. For instance, several participants gave the example in which a less educated partner would berate his more educated male partner to compensate for his own self-perceived weaknesses, leading to significant emotional distress in the relationship. As one participant put it, 'Your stance in education has sized you up in your mind above your person. So this person feels that they are here, cos 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 emotionally violent behaviours if they consist of partners who experience significant differences in money and age. Specifically, partners with greater financial resources, who were typically characterised as older men, were perceived by participants to have the power to make their less-affluent partner feel indebted to them and thus obligated to pay their partner back in ways that make them feel controlled and possessed. For example, one participant noted:

'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 it's 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...'

Internalised homophobia was also perceived by participants as an antecedent to emotional IPV in same-sex male relationships. Feelings of self-shame and a partner's denial about same-sex behaviour can cause feelings of tension and anger in relationships and lead to emotional altercations, especially when dealing with a self-accepting partner. As noted by another participant: '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 are often compounded by homophobic attacks that occur outside the relationship.

Experiences of Emotional Violence within Male-Male Relationships

Overall, participants viewed emotional violence as a more subtle form of violence that is often difficult to detect within the relationship. Many participants reported that while a physical attack is immediately apparent as an act of violence, emotional violence can often be more subtle or less apparent as an act of violence at the time it is happening. One participant exclaimed, '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 partner violence as very commonplace in same-sex male relationships that it is often expected to occur when entering into an intimate relationship with another man: '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'.

When asked about the impact of emotional violence compared to other forms of violence, participants strongly insisted that the former is the most harmful as it 'is the one that lasts longer and is more deeply seated'. Particularly, emotional partner violence was often compared to physical violence as equally destructive or more detrimental as the effects of physical partner violence – bruises and scars – heal, whereas the consequences of emotional partner violence were perceived as long-lasting, eternally changing aspects of an individual's identity. As noted by one participant: '...it really changed everything for me...it has a lot to do with who I am now as an individual'. The effects of emotional violence 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 partner 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. Participants expressed belief that emotional violence is the most threatening form because it serves as a gateway to other forms of violence, particularly physical and sexual, stating 'emotional leads to everything'. While some participants 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: 'Only when I began to really appreciate who I was and accept me, did [it] stop'.

Discussion

Although multiple studies have indicated that the prevalence of intimate partner violence among gay and bisexual men is comparable to or higher to that experienced by heterosexual women, the extent to which violence is conceptualised and manifests differently in male-male relationships has received much less attention (Blosnich and Bossarte 2009, Messinger 2011, Finneran and Stephenson 2013, Tjaden, Thoennes, and Allison 1999b, Walters, J, and Breiding 2013). To the author's knowledge, this is the first study to qualitatively describe perceptions of definitions, antecedents, and experiences of emotional violence in male-male relationships. The results presented here demonstrate prevalent emotional violence occurring inside male-male relationships and provides a detailed description of how gay and bisexual men perceive acts that constitute emotional violence.

A primary finding from this study is that the descriptions of emotional violence referenced by participants in this study bear a resemblance to those traditionally reported in male-female violence research. Seminal work conducted by Stark (2007) on redefining intimate partner violence (as experienced by heterosexual women) posits that emotional violence should be considered as a pattern of on-going intentional domineering tactics. In particular, Stark (2007) notes that emotional violence is more than the commonly represented name-calling or verbal threats, and should be expanded to include emotional abuse (e.g. undermining the victim's self-esteem), verbal abuse (e.g. humiliation and degradation) and social abuse (e.g. systematic social isolation). The qualitative results presented here illustrate that gay and bisexual men conceptualise emotional violence in similarly expanded terms as those proposed by Stark (2007). While men in the focus group discussions reported name calling and verbal threats as common forms of emotional violence, many others reported that controlling behaviours (e.g. being isolated from friends) or attempts to degrade or humiliate the victim were also forms of emotional violence. While the results presented here largely corroborate Stark's (2007) view of emotional violence as coercive control, many of the manifestations this took in the examples provided by the participants were specific to being in a same-sex relationship (e.g. threatening to disclose a partner's sexual identity). Collectively, these results highlight that while emotional violence in male-male relationships can be conceptualised as a broad range of coercive actions, within these there is a sub-set of coercive actions that are specific to male-male relationships. This unique context of intimate partner violence in male-male relationships points to the need to tailor prevention and intervention efforts to the specific realities of same-sex relationships.

Many of the forms of emotional violence reported to occur in heterosexual relationships were perceived by study participants to occur just as frequently and are often expected to occur once entering into a same-sex male relationship. Despite the similarities, many of the experiences associated with these forms of emotional violence and the ensuing consequences were reported to be aggravated by instances of internalised homophobia. This finding mirrors a number of quantitative studies that found that both homophobic discrimination and internalised homophobia increased the risk of violence within the relationship (Finneran and Stephenson 2014; Pepper and Sand 2015; Balsam and Szymanski 2005). Thus, as research continues and interventions are developed to mitigate both perpetration and receipt of emotional violence, research and prevention efforts should

consider the role of homophobia both as a cause of violence and has an impediment in the ability to seek care. This result also highlights how a social stressor unique to gay and bisexual men can shape the experiences of violence within a relationship.

The finding that emotional violence is the most common form of partner violence in male-male relationships is also consistent with existing heterosexual and same-sex violence literature (Craft and Serovich 2005, Pantalone et al. 2011, Houston and McKirnan 2007, Toro-Alfonso and Rodriguez-Madera 2004, Mason et al. 2014). This perception is supported by prevalence rates reported in reviews by authors Mason et al. (2014) and Finneran and Stephenson (2013), who report that while emotional violence rates are high, it still remains the least often measured. More refined measures developed using the qualitative results presented here are needed in order to accurately capture the extent to which emotional violence occurs within male-male relationships.

The results also offer new insight into explaining why emotional violence may occur in male-male relationships and what might account for variations in reported prevalence estimates. In particular, many of the antecedents identified by studies of opposite-sex couples also emerged as significant antecedents for study participants. For example, jealousy and insecurity, the most commonly reported antecedent cited by participants are viewed as classic antecedents of violence in the literature (Bell and Naugle 2008, Wilkinson and Hamerschlag 2005). However, additional drivers of emotional violence specific to gay and bisexual men emerged from the data as equally important, for example, one or both partners concealing their sexual identity. Results also pointed to the role of structural factors in shaping the presence of emotional violence in men's relationships. While there is an inconsistent literature on the relationship between homophobia and intimate partner violence (e.g. Balsam & Syzanski 2005), in the results presented here, the experience of homophobia was cited as leading to emotional violence. It is possible that stress associated with sexuality-based discrimination from external sources can unfold itself in the relationship as a precursor to emotional violence. These antecedents of violence can create feelings of self-hatred and can generate conflict among men attempting to build a relationship together. Future measurement work regarding emotional violence among gay and bisexual men should consider including these additional unique domains in order to enhance sensitivity of scales and to develop a more accurate prevalence estimate of emotional violence among male couples.

Study limitations

Despite the strength of the findings, there are some limitations to this study. Most important, while venue based sampling is useful for recruiting hard-to-reach populations, the sample was limited to only gay and bisexual men who could be recruited in the community. Hence, it is possible that the study under-sampled gay and bisexual men who are not active in the community, and more isolated men may have different perceptions or experiences of intimate partner violence. Participants in the focus group discussions were asked not to talk about their own experiences of violence; thus it is not possible to differentiate conceptualisations of emotional violence between those who have and have not experienced it. Men who have experience of violence may be better at defining it. As with any small

qualitative study, results are not transferable beyond the sampled urban population of gay and bisexual men in Atlanta.

Conclusions

Study findings illustrate that emotional violence is prevalent in male same-sex relationships. Participants referenced emotional violence as the most common and most harmful form of violence. The forms of emotional violence referenced by the participants largely mirrored the spectrum of emotional abuse outlined by Stark (2007), although there were some forms of abuse (linked to sexual identity and the experience of homophobia) that may be unique to gay and bisexual men. Continued research is needed to examine this complexity of factors that influence the receipt and perpetration of emotional partner violence in male-male relationships. Researchers who wish to study emotional violence among gay and bisexual men are urged to continue working towards understanding how intimate partner violence is conceptualised and manifested in male-male relationships. This has the potential to improve the accuracy of the measurement of intimate partner violence for male-male couples. Moreover, future work should consider addressing the experiences of violence among men who have sex with men who do not identify as gay or bisexual. This will also allow for the development of more sophisticated measures that represent the lived experiences of male violence survivors who might not identify as gay or bisexual, and ultimately can shape the creation of culturally appropriate intervention and care services.

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Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the sample.

	%	n
<i>Interview Site</i>		
University	37.5	24
HIV Testing Centre	43.83	28
Online	18.8	12
<i>Age</i>		
18-25	21.9	14
26-35	29.7	19
36-45	48.4	31
<i>Race</i>		
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
<i>Education Level</i>		
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
<i>Sexual Identity</i>		
Gay/Homosexual	85.9	55
Bisexual	14.1	9
<i>Relationship Status</i>		
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