



VIII WORK WITH PARTNERS

1. Introduction

The dynamics of violence found in intimate relationships between women are complex and multi-faceted. These range from relationships where the abuse is mono-directional to bi-directional patterns of violence. Since both women participate in the process of violence, both must be offered appropriate support while the violent dynamics are being brought to an end. At the moment, neither the victims nor the perpetrators of violence are provided with adequate and comprehensive psychosocial care. In general, very few specialist organisations have confronted the phenomena of violence in lesbian relationships and consequently they cannot offer adequate counselling for victims or appropriate programs for perpetrators. Because services such as women's refuges and other traditional victim support organisations generally perceive themselves as responsible for the female victims of male violence, many do not see the need or consider it necessary to confront the phenomena of Violence in lesbian relationships or to develop appropriate concepts and programs (cf. Ohms, Müller; 2001).

A prominent problem when working in the area of "Violence in lesbian relationships" is the unequivocal identification of the perpetrator and victim. This will be given closer consideration in the following and a summarised description will be provided of the [various dynamics of violence](#) in lesbian relationships.

This differentiation of the various dynamics make it clear that it is necessary to distinguish between a defensive victim and a person who both exerts and experiences violence in her relationship.

Lesbian women who are the victims of violence and lesbian women who resort to violence seek counselling for different reasons. In the latter case, they are either suffering, remorseful and want to change things, or a partner who wants them to deal with their behaviour has sent them. There are also clients who seek counselling because they see themselves as victims although the counsellor has the impression that they are actually the violent offenders. In all cases the client's motives have to be clarified. A clearly structured catalogue of questions, such as that proposed in the following, can be helpful for the [first consultation](#) and the development of an appropriate anamnesis.

It is also important that professionals and specialist services working in this area examine their own [attitudes](#) to violence by women, especially violence in lesbian relationships and possibly also their attitude to lesbianism. Correspondingly, their standard work must be expanded to include lesbian-specific issues.

Knowledge and understanding of the specific life situation of lesbian women is just as necessary as knowledge of the dynamics of violent lesbian relationships.

Regular exchange on work-related issues and networking with other colleagues and institutions and the maintenance of a referral list of addresses for referrals are important prerequisites for the development of an adequate support infrastructure for lesbian women experiencing violence.

The following presents important considerations when working with lesbian women who are [mutually violent](#) and participate in a bi-directional dynamic of violence in their relationship. These are different to the considerations that are important when working with lesbian women who are [victims](#) in a mono-directional violent relationship.

However, the complexity of the subject should not discourage professionals or specialist organisations from offering support for lesbian women in violent relationships.

2 The Various Dynamics of Violence (Mono-directional and bi-directional)

A prominent problem encountered when working in the area of “violence in lesbian relationships” is the unequivocal identification of the perpetrator and the victim. In same-sex relationships there is no gender labelling (in the sense of male = perpetrator, female = victim). This makes the classification of the perpetrator/victim more difficult. ([cf. Chapter V](#))

In addition, the dynamics associated with the use of violence are often accompanied by the use of defence, which can easily give rise to the erroneous picture of mutual abuse. However, there are basic characteristics that provide a basis for identifying and distinguishing between the two different [types of violent dynamics](#).

The use of violence in a perpetrator-victim dynamic is mono-directional while between mutually violent partners the dynamic is bi-directional. The [mono-directional use of violence](#) stems from the objective of gaining and maintaining control over the partner (cf. Allen/Leventhal, 1999). Here, there is a clear distinction between the perpetrator and the victim. It is possible to recognise a repetitive behaviour pattern that constitutes a three-phase cycle beginning with a build-up of tension, followed by violent release and a reconciliation phase, whereby each phase can be of different duration. If the relationship is considered over a longer term, it is evident that the one partner is subject to repetitive violence. These roles cannot be exchanged within the relationship. The behaviour of the partner (the defence) can be described as resistance against attempted control (cf. Hart, 1986). However, active defence decreases with the increasing duration of the relationship; the severity of violence by the perpetrator increases correspondingly.

In a [bi-directional exertion of violence](#), it is not possible to identify a clear victim role, even if the relationship is viewed over a longer term. The partners demonstrate equally aggressive and controlling behaviour; both wish to assert their wishes (sometimes unconscious) and power over the other. The use of violence does not occur simultaneously, i.e. not in the form of a “brawl”, in which they are equally involved. Rather, each is violent at different times and out of different motives.

A further phenomenon also supports this classification of the dynamics of violence: The presence or absence of fear in one of the partners. In the perpetrator-victim dynamic, the victim’s fear is a determining characteristic of the partnership.

The fear that the victim has of the perpetrator is omnipresent. She reckons with assault at any time. In addition, she also attempts to avoid all situations in which the partner might become violent.

In the dynamic of mutual violence, fear may be present in specific situations but is not a dominant characteristic of the relationship. Here, neither of the women experiences constant fear of her partner and neither considers the possibility of avoiding or averting violent abuse.

As described in the chapter titled “[Theoretical Underpinning](#)”, there are also other characteristics that differentiate the mono-directional and bi-directional dynamics of violence. Accordingly, it is possible to identify two further sub-categories, which are described more closely there.

3. The First Consultation

The existence of violence in a relationship, the experience of violence and the use of violence within a relationship are not usually reasons for the first counselling session. Consequently such experiences are not initially mentioned openly. Women usually seek counselling for other reasons, for example; feeling desperate or generally unsteady, everyday relationship problems, fear of the future or identity crises. Very often the client mentions the violent aspect of the relationship incidentally and without connection to the original issue. She is often not even conscious that what she experienced was violent behaviour.

In this situation it is important, that the counsellor is sensitive to any indication of violence within the relationship. It is her task to identify and name the signs in the context of a possible violent relationship.

Lesbian standards and values, for example, lesbian self-perception of a strong, courageous and self-confident woman make it difficult for the client to accept emotions such as fear and the fact that she has experienced violence in a relationship. It is essential to name the violence as such, and to confirm the client's view of the situation.

In the first counselling session, the situation has to be analysed and a case history compiled. It is essential for the continuing process to have a clear picture of the relationship, the kind of violence involved and the circumstance that accompany it. Counselling is also open to clients who, from an objective point of view, behave violently but who sincerely believe they are victims and see themselves as their partner's victims. There are also lesbian women who approach a counsellor knowing that they behave violently, are under a lot of pressure and want to change their behaviour. In order to do justice to all these different women it is essential to have an accurate diagnosis and precisely specified counselling aims.

It is important to find out what the exact situation was and to put a name to what happened. The following questions will help create a picture of the kind of violence involved in the relationship:

- What happened?
- What kind of violent behaviour was used?
- How did each woman react during the situation?
- How threatening is the situation according to the client? Is the client afraid of her partner? How realistic is her assessment? (Very often the intimidation is made light of by both sides) Were there any further threats?
- Is the client / the partner safe?
- Has physical harm been done? Has a doctor been consulted?
- Were the police called? Has a lawsuit been filed?
- Is there any contact between the client and her partner? Do they live together? Are they still in a relationship? Are they about to separate? Are they separated? Are they still in touch with each other?
- Are children involved? If so, where are they?

And furthermore:

- What did the client think during and after the violent situation? How did she feel?
- What had preceded it?
- What are the psychological consequences of the endured violence? Insomnia, loss of appetite, depression, risk of suicide...

- Were drugs involved?
- Have there been comparable situations in the past? When did things start to go wrong? What were the signs?
- How does the client perceive and describe her partner? Does she still see her good and bad sides or does she downgrade everything?
- What kind of emotions does the client show during the counselling process with regard to the violent behaviour? Is she anxious, does she feel guilty, angry or does she feel anything at all?
- Has the client experienced violence in previous relationships? Or during childhood?
- Is she embedded in a social network? Is the violent structure of the relationship known? If it is, what has the reaction been?

When a woman living in a violent relationship decides to talk to a counsellor she is taking the first step towards changing her situation. This is usually preceded by various unsuccessful attempts to find solutions for dealing with difficult situations, e.g. avoiding violent situations, talking to friends, reinterpreting the experienced situation.

For many women, telephone or personal counselling is the first time they have spoken to anyone about the violence in their relationship. For that reason counselling fulfils the important function of lessening the pressure. It is therefore essential to create a confidential atmosphere, not treat the lesbian way of life as the problem and to listen to what the client has to say without judgement.

The aim of counselling has to be to end the violence and find ways out of a damaging relationship. Depending on the individual case, the solution might be immediate separation (the rule in most violent relationships) or working out new ways of relating to each other. Everyone involved is responsible for their own behaviour: The offenders for the violence and the damage they cause and have caused in the past and those who put up with a violent relationship for not undertaking anything to change the situation.

(Source: Frenznick, M./Müller, K. 2002: p.51 ff)

4. Attitude / Standards

An essential requirement for the counsellor working with lesbians who have experienced violence is an attitude based on general standards of psychological counselling. These are exemplary: Partiality for the client, transparency in the counselling process, a holistic approach (integration of the health, economic and social situations of the client into counselling), resource orientation and empowerment (i.e. strengthening self-esteem and encouraging self-determination and the ability to act), integration of the social context (see Frenznick, M./Müller, K: 2002).

When working with lesbian women, it is absolutely essential to apply the named standards to the realities of lesbian lives. Following this, specific standards for counselling lesbian women have been developed, for example empathy for lesbian life-plans. This requires a fundamental knowledge of lesbian-specific circumstances. Apart from knowing about the socialization of lesbian girls and women in a mainly unreflecting heterosexual society, fundamental knowledge of the consequences and dynamics of internalised homophobia is also necessary (ibid. p.64f.).

The counsellor has to make her professional attitude towards violence clear and to address the client's violent behaviour without condemning her as a person or labelling her a criminal. By simply judging she would discourage compliance, an important basis for an effective working

relationship. It is also important to agree upon the precise aims of counselling and to work towards a specific target. It is very tempting for both sides to evade the difficult topic of violence and to discuss other, less risky ones.

Every counsellor and therapist who works with a lesbian client in a violent relationship has to ask herself whether or not she would also be prepared to work with the offender. It is also necessary to redefine the concepts of empathy, concern and partiality. Empathy can be taken to mean understanding but not sharing the same view as the client. Awareness must be created of one's own potential to become a victim or an offender. Partiality, to support the client in trying to change her ways (ibid. p.59).

To ensure that the counselling of lesbian women conforms to these standards it is advisable to seek the regular support of a qualified supervisor as well as taking part in training programs.

5. Work with bi-directional violent dynamic

Experience in counselling work shows that often both partners are actively involved in the violent dynamic. The following exemplary situation is offered in the interests of better understanding: On grounds of a chronic illness, a woman expects the undivided attention of her partner and also demands this with reference to her personal suffering. Sometimes she adds weight to this demand with the threat of an otherwise impending relapse. The partner feels unable to meet or cope with this demand and perhaps also constricted by it.

As a consequence, she increasingly responds with resistance and the denigration of her partner. This phenomenon is characteristic of couples with a [bi-directional violent dynamic](#). A distinction between perpetrator and victim is impossible in many cases since both women exert and are subject to violence. The partner of a woman who uses violence cannot be perceived solely as a victim in all cases, even if she perceives herself as such because of her experience of violence. Partners where the dynamic of violence is bi-directional often deny their own aggression and their own personal responsibility. In addition, when it comes to the exertion of psychological violence, this is seldom recognised and identified as violence (This applies both to the perception from outside and to the partners). In many cases, violence is only recognised on the physical level.

Involvement of the partner is important in the cases where the violent dynamic is bi-directional. This is possible through [couple counselling and couple therapy](#), but also through individual work such as counselling, [therapy](#) or [social training courses](#). In the various types of individual support offered it is important to ensure that the two women are in different settings (i.e. above all have different counsellors/therapists) or training groups.

One of the primary objectives of the work must be the creation of awareness and confrontation with the person's own aggressive side. The perception of themselves as just a "victim" must be expanded to include the role of "perpetrator". The focus is to confront both the experience of violence and the use of violence. It is important to convey to the clients that the problem is not solved simply because they have come to a counselling centre. Admitting the violence and having hurt someone they love and assuming full responsibility involves a lot of hard work.

The main aims of counselling have to be ending the violence, insight into personal behaviour and learning appropriate ways of solving conflicts. The client also has to think about how to apologize to her partner and how to make up for her behaviour, provided, that is, the partner is prepared to maintain contact with her.

There are types of counselling (see Cayouette, 1999) where the partner is integrated in the counselling process. This way the counsellor can check that the client's partner is safe.

6. Work with Victims (Mono-directional dynamic)

A lesbian woman who is affected by violence in her partnership seldom seeks support from a specialist counselling service. In the first instance, she turns to her [circle of friends](#), which however is generally unable to cope with the situation.

It is usually a huge step for a lesbian woman to approach a counselling centre to talk about violence in her relationship. If she goes to a 'normal' family counselling centre she has to trust that she will be accepted as a lesbian and be taken seriously with her problem. After all, she has either been abused by, or she herself has abused, another woman.

Many lesbians who are victims of their partner's violence remain silent about the violence they have experienced, among other reasons, as a response to social stigmatisation but also because they receive [insufficient psychosocial support](#). For example, none of the German organisations that support victims specifically addresses lesbian women as victims of violence.

The lesbian victims of domestic violence continue to meet incomprehension and even repudiation. This carries the danger of revictimisation (Cf. Ohms, Müller; 2001).

Sometimes emergency telephone services (women's hotlines) see the lesbian victims as "special cases" and they are therefore denied access to the usual crisis intervention options (Ohms, 2007).

If a lesbian woman seeks assistance from a specialist counselling service, she appears, at least in the first instance, to be the person threatened by violence. However, experience shows that women who exercise violence often see themselves as victims. As a consequence, they may seek "counselling as victims". Here it must be noted that support that focuses solely on being a victim can strengthen the woman's perception of herself as a "victim" and can contribute to the justification of her own violence.

A distinction must be made here, to a lesbian woman who is the victim of violence in her relationship. In abusive lesbian relationships there is a three-part cycle of: growing strain within the relationship, violent eruption and reconciliation. Aggression escalates more and more. One can also observe an increase in the frequency and intensity of violence. In abusive relationships one can clearly distinguish between the victim and the offender. Whilst the offender is the only one using violence, the victim tries to avoid her partner's aggression through appropriate behaviour.

Different issues take priority depending on the point in time in which the lesbian domestic violence victim seeks support from an anti-violence or specialist counselling organisation.

If the woman is still in the relationship or in the separation phase, the degree of danger must be established, a [risk assessment](#) must be conducted and the first priority is to develop a safety plan. In most cases, the level of violence escalates when the victim decides to leave the relationship. For this reason, she needs special protection and support at this time. However, the violence often continues after the relationship has ended. In this case, the degree of danger must also be assessed, a risk analysis conducted and options for protection initiated.

The woman's social network plays a special role here. However, especially lesbian women in abusive relationships live in isolation and lack an intact environment that is capable of providing them with the protection and support they require.

Often the personal or telephone request for assistance and support is the first time that the woman has spoken to anyone about her experience of violence. The counselling session has a strongly unburdening function for this reason. In addition, it is also helpful for the affected woman to know that she is not the only lesbian woman to experience violence in her relationship and to become the victim of violence.

An explanation of the typical dynamics found in violent relationships can also relieve the burden on the victim, as can the provision of information about the process followed in providing assistance.

It is also important that the victim be made aware of organisations that provide protection for victims and that she can access these. Further, she should be directed to local lesbian counselling services. Should none be known or available, there is always the possibility using the telephone counselling services offered in large cities.

The basic resources of a service should therefore include a referral file that lists the addresses of other institutions, counselling organisations or individual therapeutic practices. In addition to the general organisational information such as address, telephone number and telephone times, this file can also include other information, e.g. methods used, and special experience in working with lesbian women affected by violence.

Literature

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