The Relationship between Minority Stress and Intimate Partner Violence in Women’s LGBTQ+ Relationships: The Potential Mediating Role of Adult Attachment

by

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Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a well-recognized public health issue with significant consequences for victims, families, communities, and society at large. Although IPV was once thought to be an almost exclusively male-to-female problem, in recent years it has become more widely understood that IPV also occurs in the context of women’s LGBTQ+ relationships. LGBTQ+ individuals experience ongoing stress because they live in a heterosexist society, termed minority stress, which has been associated with many negative sequelae including attachment insecurity and IPV. Thus, it is pertinent to examine how one’s context, specifically minority stress caused by oppression, may uniquely influence IPV in women LGBTQ+ couples. A sample of 64 LGBTQ+ identified women currently in same-gender relationships filled out self-report questionnaires on minority stress, attachment style, and IPV. Contrary to expectations, it was determined that two types of minority stress, internalized homophobia and experiences of discrimination and heterosexism, were not associated with physical or psychological IPV. However, internalized homophobia was significantly associated with attachment avoidance, but not attachment anxiety. Both attachment anxiety and avoidance were significantly associated with psychological, but not physical, IPV. Mediation analysis revealed an inconsistent significant mediation for the effect of internalized homophobia on psychological IPV; this occurs when the mediator acts as a suppressor variable or a variable that masks any direct effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable. In the current study, the overall indirect effect of internalized homophobia on psychological IPV through attachment avoidance and anxiety was significant. The direct effect of internalized homophobia on psychological IPV was significant but the association was negative, such that once
attachment (the suppressor variable) was included in the model, lower internalized homophobia was associated with greater psychological IPV. Overall, internalized homophobia uniquely contributed to attachment insecurity, particularly attachment avoidance, which is a significant risk factor for IPV in women’s same-gender relationships.

The global COVID-19 pandemic onset occurred before data collection commenced, thus questions were added to measure related changes in psychological symptoms, relationship stress, and IPV related to the pandemic. Psychological symptoms including sadness, loneliness, anxiety, and grief increased in the current sample since the pandemic onset. Similarly, selfreported relationship stress due to work, childcare, and health increased since pandemic onset. An increase in relationship stress was significantly positively correlated with an increase in psychological IPV since the pandemic onset. Thus, there was already an impact on participant’s mental health and stress even within the first six months of the pandemic, although most participants did not report an increase in IPV at that time. Overall, the current study highlights the importance of attachment avoidance as a risk factor for IPV in women’s same gender relationships. Additionally, the startlingly high prevalence rates of IPV and discrimination among LGBTQ+ women speaks to the urgent need to continue fighting against oppression and heterosexism to reduce minority stress and to develop IPV resources that better serve the LGBTQ+ population.