

GAY MALE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE & REASONS VICTIMS STAY

J. Michael Cruz (*Journal of Men's Studies*), March, 2003, No. 3, Vol. 11, p. 309)

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In this article, J. Michael Cruz examines the reasons that gay men stay in relationships in which they are being abused. He bases his exploration on the feminist research that has examined why women stay and as such, offers a feminist analysis of domestic violence applied to gay male relationships.

Literature Review

The basic estimation is that one in five gay men experience domestic violence or abuse. However, actual prevalence is still largely unknown. Further research needs to be done in this area to determine how extensive abuse in gay male relationships is, as well as more clearly defining what violence within gay male relationships looks like.

The limited research that has examined the dynamics of gay male domestic violence (see for example, Merrill and Wolfe, 2000) has found that most experience pushing, shoving or grabbing, with other forms of violence occurring with decreasing prevalence – restraining, punching or hitting, and slapping. The reasons, in previous research, that gay men have given for staying in relationships in which they are being abused include: hope for change, love, fear, lack of assistance, loneliness, loyalty and lack of knowledge regarding domestic violence. Gay men have been found to define domestic violence in similar ways to heterosexual women with an emphasis on power and control (see Cruz and Firestone, 1998); with some additional factors such as control, jealousy and internalized homophobia. Gay men's constructions of masculinity have also been found to have an impact on gay male domestic violence as well as some of the reasons that gay men stay (Cruz, 2000).

Cruz then provides an overview of domestic violence in heterosexual relationships and the factors that keep women stuck in those relationships. Cruz examines not only the inter and intra personal reasons that women stay, but also the social factors. For example, Cruz argues that economic factors out of the woman's control keep women financially dependent on husbands and thus vulnerable to his violence. These same economic factors also contribute to women's lack of opportunities to escape the violence.

Cruz interviewed 25 self-identified gay or bisexual men in the Dallas, TX, area who self-reported having been abused in a same-sex relationship. The average age of the men was 32 years, and although most of the men were out of the relationship at the time of the interviews, the average length of relationship was 3 years, 9 months.

Cruz used grounded theory and content analysis to interpret the findings, and grouped the specific reasons that men stayed into 14 categories (in order of frequency given by the men in the study):

Financial dependence, naïveté/inexperience, love, hope for change, loneliness, commitment, emotional dependence, being enabled by the cycle of violence, fear, guilt, low self-esteem, physical attraction, physical dependence, and feeling trapped.

Reasons for Staying (N = 43)	%
Financial Dependence	18.6
Naïveté/Inexperience	16.3
Love	14.0
Hope for Change	9.3
Loneliness	7.0
Commitment	7.0
Emotional Dependence	7.0
Cycle of Violence	4.6
Fear	4.6
Guilt	2.3
Low Self-Esteem	2.3
Physical Attraction	2.3
Physical Dependence	2.3
Trapped	2.3

In his article, Cruz then explores each of these reasons in more detail, referring to the language of the men he surveyed to emphasize the main points. For example, under the naïveté/inexperience reason, some gay and bisexual men reported that the lack of public models and widespread support for gay male relationships means that there aren't visible models of gay men in successful dating relationships. Thus some of the gay men in this survey indicated that they felt more vulnerable to being abused.

Gay male domestic violence apparently occurs at an alarmingly high rate and warrants further exploration to better understand its dynamics and the impact on gay men who are victimized. The research to date suggests that there are some similarities between gay male and heterosexual domestic violence. As Cruz states, because “gay men are socialized based on gender, rather than sexual orientation,” we should understand that gay male domestic violence is based on power and control, and it not merely mutual violence or abuse between equals.

References

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