It's a sensitive issue. You or someone you know may have experienced homo or transphobic violence. Support, insight and access to various community partner resources exist. To find out more, visit us at:

WWW.EGALE.CA
Taking Off the Gender Lens in Women’s Studies

Queering Violence Against Women

JANICE RISTOCK

Les programmes d'études de la femme ont été des lieux où les lesbiennes/queer ont pu théoriser leurs expériences. Il reste que certains points sont encore perçus sous l'angle du genre telle la violence faite aux femmes. L'auteure souhaite que la violence dans les relations entre lesbiennes devienne une question essentielle dans les projets d'études de la femme.

Women’s Studies Programs have generally been important sites within Universities where lesbians/queers have found room to theorize our experiences. In Canada, many universities are claiming severe budgetary restraints and have been reluctant to fund the establishment of autonomous Gay and Lesbian Studies Departments. Therefore, Women’s Studies Programs remain as one of only a few key academic disciplines (Sociology, History and English departments being the other three) where new courses in the burgeoning field of lesbian and gay or queer studies are able to be established (see Ristock and Taylor for more on the development of lesbian/gay/queer studies in Canada). Women’s Studies is enriched by housing developments in Queer Studies; similarly Queer Studies is enriched by the interdisciplinary focus of Women’s Studies, with its emphasis on understanding interrelated systemic conditions (such as racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism) and its many different strains of feminist theorizing (such as postmodernism). That said there are certain areas in Women’s Studies that remain steadfastly understood through an exclusionary and limiting gender-based lens. Violence against women is one such area where the overwhelming focus in the field has remained male violence against women and where topics such as abuse in lesbian/same-sex relationships have been more difficult to bring forward.

In this paper I explore the ways that I have re-designed and developed a course entitled “Feminist Perspectives on Violence Against Women” that I teach within a Women’s Studies program. I discuss some of ways that I have conceptualized the course so that it can and must include an exploration of same-sex domestic violence that cannot be accounted for by an oversimplified (and at times essentialist) gender-based analysis. I was compelled to re-conceptualize my course, in part, because of a large scale research project that I completed on violence in lesbian relationships (see Ristock). I describe the process of doing this project and present some of the research findings that in fact show how our theorizing of violence against women can be furthered if we adopt a queer lens: one trained on the areas where lines are blurred, categories uncertain, boundaries challenged. Queer theory interrupts a focus on binaries such as male/female, straight/gay where we define our understandings against another and instead works to disrupt the establishment of authentic, totalizing, and normative positions. This lens offers a different view from the strong beacon of a gender lens that illuminates its own subject powerfully (for example exposing the workings of patriarchy and male privilege) but makes it difficult to see anything beyond its scope.

How Women’s Studies Currently Talks About Violence Against Women

Violence against women is now more publicly acknowledged as a human rights issue demanding worldwide attention. For example the international lobbying organization, The World March of Women presents a broad definition of violence against women and recognizes its intimate and systemic forms as well as its diverse expressions that include behaviour, imagery, legislation and the media. The various forms and expressions of violence against women are seen as locally different but universally linked because they are identified as “springing from an imposed hierarchy of men over women that is reflected in the politi-
Efforts to understand violence in lesbian relationships that ignore the differing social contexts run the risk of treating all cases of relationship violence as equivalent when that does not seem to be the case.

cent report by Statistics Canada which found in 2001 the largest increase in spousal homicides was wives killed by their husbands-69 wives were killed in 2001, 17 more than in 2000 (Statistics Canada). Given this urgent context it is not surprising that Women's Studies has been a leading force in researching and theorizing about violence. So what then does Women's Studies have to say about violence? How are queer peoples' experiences of violence taken up?

When examining the way Women's Studies talks about same-sex domestic violence there are two predominant streams. One is a gender-based discourse that essentially ignores same-sex relationship violence or sees abusive women as having internalized misogyny in order to present them as male-like and preserve a focus on women being victimized because of their gender in a patriarchal context (see, for example, Radford, Friedberg and Harne). The other is a structural discourse that identifies marginalized women as being more vulnerable to violence because of other aspects of their social location. Within this discourse a space is opened up for the recognition of lesbian domestic violence as well as the violence experienced by other marginalized populations such as disabled women, indigenous women, and visible minority women who are seen as having heightened powerlessness in society which then translates into increased victimization in public and private spheres (Duffy and Cohen). While a gender-based analysis can be criticized for oversimplifying and universalizing women's experiences, a structural analysis can also be criticized for treating marginalized women's experiences as separate, special, homogeneous cases while ultimately keeping the experiences of white, heterosexual western women as the norm and at the forefront. Thus a gender-based analysis is still preserved. There are other discourses on violence that reflect postmodern and postcolonial influences (see, for example work, by Lamb; Razak) but the gender and structural approaches remain as the strongest overarching frameworks within the area of violence against women in Women's Studies because of their politically strategic value of uniting women.

Teaching Violence Against Women: Pedagogical Confessions

As a professor in Women's Studies who teaches a course on violence against women while also engaging in research on violence in lesbian relationships, I have often found myself caught between these two lim-
ience arising from various societal roots and interpersonal dynamics, indicating that not all violence is the same. Efforts to understand violence in lesbian relationships that ignore the differing social contexts run the risk of treating all cases of relationship violence as equivalent and interchangeable when that does not seem to be the case. The blanket homogenizing categories of a structural analysis such as working-class, lesbian, Latina, are not subtle enough to illuminate the local context.

In fact, both the research process and the results confirmed the need to constantly interrogate the language, categories and assumptions that we currently have available to us to talk about and theorize violence against women. I provide a few examples to make this more concrete.

**Language**

One of the first women that I interviewed asked me if she was qualified for the study since she did not identify as lesbian and was in fact married to a man but had been in a relationship with another woman for several years and it was that relationship that was physically abusive. This is a reminder that woman-to-woman abuse itself is a challenge to the feminist focus on male violence against women. Further this example not only caused me to change my own language so that the study more clearly included lesbian, queer, bisexual, transgendered and/or straight women involved in intimate relationships with other women, but it also served as an important example of the limits of our binary categories for defining sexual and gender identities.

Another woman that I interviewed felt the limits of our language categories when she explained to me why she never sought any help for the violence that she was experiencing:

"I feel like I can’t talk about it, I mean how many therapists/social service providers are going to understand queer, s/m, abuse, intersexed, interracial—it's too complicated, there is too much explaining that I’d have to do."

**Categories of Violence**

What also became clear when I was concentrating on relationship violence was the fact that I was just illuminating one aspect of women’s lives when in fact many women had experienced multiple forms of violence. For example one woman spoke to me about her experiences of being sexually abused as a child, of working as a prostitute, being beaten by Johns, using drugs and alcohol, getting involved in an abusive relationship with a woman, and then she herself becoming abusive in another relationship with a woman.

As Aysan Sev’er asserts:

Yet, this binary model of power and control/victim and perpetrator cannot account for an unemployed waitress who is abusing a woman who is a prosperous chartered accountant. Nor can it account for dynamics where power shifts and a victim retaliates with physical violence. And it cannot capture those incidents in which a woman might be both a victim and a perpetrator; for example a victim of emotional abuse while a perpetrator of physical violence in her relationship. These differing power dynamics were all evident in my research.

A feminist service provider that I interviewed acknowledged that certain layered relational power dynamics are often ignored in anti-violence organizations because they do not seem to fit with a dominant feminist understanding of power:

"I think racism is another thing we..."
don't talk about—the ways white women might use power over their partner who is a woman of colour—there is power and control there... how do we talk about that and then also talk about other power complexities in the relationship?

The Image of a Victim

Finally, the example of women of people's experiences of violence rather than seeking to posit all-explanatory grand narratives.

Queer(y)ing Violence Against Women

The differing experiences of women in abusive same-sex relationships serve as powerful examples that concretely show the complexities of our quest for deeper understandings and responses to violence. These questions include: Who benefits from the way we currently talk about relationship violence? What difference does that make? Who is telling the story and from what social location? Who voices are heard and not heard when we tell the story using the category lesbian relationship violence, heterosexual relationship violence, family violence, violence against women etc.? How else can this story be told? What difference would that make? (Ristock). These questions help make us more accountable, not only because they acknowledge our limited and partial perspectives but because they provoke us to imagine what we do not understand. Students are at times resistant to this less seamless and unifying pedagogical approach but for most students it also opens up more spaces in which to see themselves and their experiences. I share some examples of comments from students' writings in the course:

I was at first very defensive of the gender-based system. My initial reaction was to defend centering our analysis on gender and my thoughts were if we open the category up to everything than what does that mean anymore? I questioned whose purposes does it serve that the gender-based analysis stays at the core of our understanding of oppression and also who becomes silenced when we do this. It is quite obvious from the readings that when we work from a gender-based analysis then the voices of lesbians, gays, and transgendered persons become invisible in the dialogue.
As a man in a group of women examining a lesbian's account of lesbians' relationships, I have a special sense of privilege (in the kinder sense) and responsibility to be careful about what I do with this experience. And as a student breaking from the conventions of academia and declaring my learning as a (gasp) personal process, I sense a measure of reciprocating that trust. As you explore in the book, these simultaneous and dissonant power dynamics have too often been oversimplified. Your analysis of exceptions and limitations of the gender-based power analysis made it possible for me to explore more specificity and context to heterosexual relationships as well. Men who use abuse are still typically constructed as an anonymous and uniform group of oppressors. Their identities are typically described in ways that bind them with their maleness, and all of their behaviours are linked back to their oppressive position. In effect, the binary categories have had one polarity expanded upon, but not the other. Intersectional analysis of power can be safely applied to women, but can we also see men as lying within, rather than on top of, power structures?

I am reminded of Take Back the Night which happened this past fall. Women, queer, straight, transgendered people and allies walked together to demonstrate our strength, agency, and support for one another and our struggles. I hope that feminist theory will take the hint and embrace the hardships that are hard to name or figure out, the problems that challenge our own understandings of what it means to be a woman, lesbian or victim of abuse.

My hope is that, despite the difficulties, work on violence against women within Women's Studies, like students in my course, can embrace the ethical challenge of queering violence against women. It is a move that in fact broadens the field of Women's Studies by requiring a more complex, non-binary understanding of violence, gender, and sexuality which can only help to enhance our efforts to end all forms of violence and to keep Women's Studies Programs as important spaces for lesbian/queer work in universities.

Janice Ristock is a Professor in Women's Studies at the University of Manitoba. She has published widely in the areas of violence against women, lesbian/gay/queer studies, and community research and organizing. She brings these interests to her teaching where she stresses the links between theory and action.

References


