Homophobia Revised: rethinking same sex domestic violence

Introduction

My paper today looks to the thinking of how gay male violence can be a manifestation of internalised homophobia. What I am particularly keen to challenge is the rigid psychological models of same sex domestic violence which often conceives of it as an exercise of control or dominance. What I find limiting in such an approach is that it obscures the relations between the heterosexist and homophobic qualities of such violence. In responding to this, the aim of my paper is to suggest that domestic violence in gay male relationships is not solely symptomatic of a personal desire for control or dominance over another partner. Rather, I argue that some forms of domestic violence can be considered a manifestation of internalised homophobia and anxiety over negotiating intimacy in a marginalised non-heterosexual living situation. I would like to clarify that I do not reject these models nor does my argument account for all the disparate forms of this violence. Instead I focus on specific accounts of domestic violence in order to consider how the threats (both symbolic and real) of 'outing', or being culturally labeled as 'deviant' or 'disordered', shape and regulate the identities and experiences of individuals who perpetrate same sex domestic violence. That is, both victims and batterers of this violence are in a position of vulnerability to homophobia and/or heterosexism. Whilst I am not justifying this, it is important to note how this becomes a 'double bind' which suggests combating violence requires a broader conceptual focus than simply identifying same sex domestic violence as a loss of control or a desire to dominate by one partner over another.

Defining homophobic violence

Before beginning to discuss the limits to theorising same sex domestic violence, it is necessary to offer a definition of 'violence' and 'homophobia'. Much of my conceptual framework comes from the work of Australian criminologist Gail Mason who defines interpersonal violence as the exercise of physical force over another, without consent, which produces emotional or psychological damage (2002: 5). In terms of 'homophobia', Mason notes that it is a problematic term, but summarises that it is a fear of sexuality based difference structured by a heterosexual system which stigmatises and marginalises all acts which do not conform to a gendered reproductive imaginary (2002: 7). In connecting the ideological dimensions of homophobia and violence, homophobic violence operates on a symbolic as well as physical level. Physical acts have a symbolic character. Individuals who are assaulted for allegedly 'flaunting' same sex affection, for instance, do not simply have physical scars. Often they are forced to manage their bodies, refusing to hold hands or kiss in public for fear of further violence. This is a form of symbolic violence or internalised homophobia, as the fear or risk of physical danger for being 'visibly' gay requires the subject to 'manage' their bodies (Mason 2002: 80). That is, in order to render their sexuality based difference(s) 'invisible' to a public gaze they conceal themselves, coerced within a heterosexist system to return to the 'safety' of the closet. Yet, such 'safety management' is not directly imposed but negotiated by individuals themselves: it is a form of homophobic violence produced by the complicity of gay individuals to regulate their own sexual subjectivity. It is this complicity and coercion within the discourses of heterosexuality and homophobia that I am concerned with unpacking.

Contextualising domestic violence in gay relationships

In thinking of how to understand same sex domestic violence, my paper does not deal with empirical data or quantitative psychological analysis of individual experiences. Rather, approaching this issue from a cultural studies perspective, I am focused on broader theoretical tools in unpacking the cultural and material specificity of male same sex domestic violence which is not reducible to a statistic. Whilst the research in this area is limited, most sociological and psychological research, such as the work of Claire Renzetti and Charles Miley, conceptualises same sex domestic violence as a ‘power issue’. That is, it is an exercise of control over those who are insecure (Elliott 1996: 3). ACON’s own *Another Closet* emphasises that domestic violence is about ‘power and control’ (ACON 2000: 5). Problematising this a little further, I argue that for gay men, domestic violence proliferates due to homophobia within society. The politics of victimisation and perpetration are particularly troubling in gay situations because the violence is often bidirectional. That is, it is rarely experienced as an exchange between one violent partner and one passive partner (Bartholomew et al. 2008: 622). Additionally, many victims feel that subjection to domestic violence is preferable to the subjection and ridicule they encounter in public spaces where their desires and relationships are rendered suspect because they do not conform to the typical heterosexual reproductive imaginary of sex (Elliott 1998: 5). In rethinking the notion of ‘power’ and ‘control’ as hegemonic ideas, I opt for an analysis of ‘coercion’, similar to feminist revisions of domestic violence, which locates the operation of this violence through both a discursive and physical ‘lens’. In doing so, I demonstrate the ways in which the experience of violence is connected to how gay men negotiate their identities.

However, what I find useful in these sociological models, is they structure same sex domestic violence in terms of the precarious position gay men have to negotiate within society. In heterosexual and patriarchal legal and social discourses, the male body is seen as an instrument rather than object of violence (Christie 1996: 181). George Appleby and Jeane Anastas argue that for gay men this cultural assumption fosters misrepresentations. That is, most service providers and even legal bodies consider violence between two men as a form of assault or sadomasochist sex practices irrespective of the domestic situation (Appleby and Anastas 1998: 327). Moreover, as Christopher Kendall notes, gay men who batter often have 'specific ideas about what it means to be "male"' (2006: 125). That is, in a heterosexist cultural environment there tends to be a repudiation of gay identities as they are divorced from (heterosexual) masculinity. There is a need to recuperate this (heterosexual) masculinity which is often aligned with violence, control and aggression. Manifestations of domestic violence, therefore, reflect an anxiety over one's masculinity or failed attempt to mimic what is perceived to be the heterosexual norm. This homophobic 'double bind' positions the gay male body in a particularly vulnerable location as they are figured within a heterosexist imaginary as violent perpetrators or confused sexual deviants.

Thinking through homophobia

So how does this theoretical framework operate? In turning towards interviews conducted by Sven Ohah on gay men in the United States who have experienced intimate partner violence, these homophobic anxieties become more apparent.

The first interview is of a gay identified man, Jesse, who subjected his partner to repeated physical assaults during their relationship:

> *'I wanted to him to know that I was in charge of the whole house…he needs to be put in his place…he's a wo- basically he's a woman I'm the guy'* (Ohah 2002: 382).

Jesse's account is interesting because it 'heterosexualises' and genders the domestic partnership, he is the active man and his partner is the subservient female. By connecting his partner's body to that of a female subject, Jesse asserts a kind of heterosexist violence in order to demonstrate his 'control'. Jesse conflates his position as the 'man' to the dominant partner of the household. However, it is important to query why there is a need to frame his understanding of this intimacy in heterosexual terms?

This question is partly reconsidered by Bob, who recounts his reasons for perpetrating violence by smacking his partner. He claims, striking out was a result of the eroded trust in his twenty-year relationship, having discovered his partner was stealing from him:

> *'And if you could be even more rough and powerful, for lack of a better word, then you got respect, even from your heterosexual friends, and, well I say friends, I say associates, okay…'* (Ohah 2002: 195-6).

What resonates with Bob's account is the tendency to conflate terms of respect with a form of aggression, 'even from your heterosexual friends'. Implied in the use of 'even', is the idea that being gay requires a particular over assertion of masculinity in

order to avoid being 'feminised' by heterosexual gazes. His subsequent distancing of 'friends' to 'associates' also signifies a sense of how his own sexuality based 'difference' is being made peripheral.

Moreover, Bob notes that:

> *'It's just that, you're physically delivering a message that it's self-preservation kind of thing…'* (Ohah 2002: 213).

This account exemplifies that violence serves a discursive as well as physical function. It is a way of 'marking' one's identity by negotiating a particular anxiety over his masculinity, which is mentioned earlier. It is a form of 'self preservation' through repudiating fears over one's (heterosexual) masculinity by asserting physical violence.

Bob then moves to a retrospective account of his family, identifying himself as the only male with female siblings, 'who looked up to him' (Ohah 2002: 222):

> *'I don't want to campaign and go out and say everybody should have this lifestyle or that, but you should be strong enough to, whatever choice you make, I think, that you should be able to be successful in what you've chosen…'* (Ohah 2002: 222).

Bob concludes his recount with a consideration of his family. Positioning himself as the idealised elder brother, he gestures to the importance of strength in determining the quality of people's choices. It is ambiguous as to what Bob precisely means, but connecting this to earlier accounts, the recurring notion of strength does not simply

reflect a need to control, but an anxiety over masculinity. Being gay is marked as a 'lifestyle', which is not automatically 'successful'. In traversing this anxiety, heterosexual masculinity, which is aligned to strength, is recuperated in Bob's act of violence. He attempts to live up to the heterosexual expectations of the dominant masculine male in the family.

Bob's discussion of intimate partner assault is similarly echoed by another interviewee Jeff. Jeff articulates that attacking his partner manifested from his understandings of masculinity and family structures:

> *'My beliefs um, told me that I'm responsible for the family unit and what it represents to me, and to my partner, and to the rest of the world, and my belief system tells me that, because I'm in charge, and smarter, faster and stronger, more insightful, with greater vision, that's it's my responsibility to control the partnership…'* (Ohah 2002: 327).

Unlike earlier accounts, the discourse of responsibility is brought to bear on the manifestation of violence. Connecting 'responsibility' with 'family', these discourses echo a heterosexist belief that the worth of a relationship is determined by the capacity of a particular individual to assume charge of decision-making. Nigel Christie notes that unlike heterosexual encounters, same sex domestic violence operates through more than a fear or threat of 'outing' (1996: 184). It also embodies a 'way of looking' where the 'victim' needs to negotiate identities marked by 'disorder' or 'deviance'. As Jeff's account illustrates, there is a connection between how others 'look' at him and how he wishes to represent his relationship. His belief in the

'system' echoes an anxiety to avoid being looked at by a heterosexual system as 'deviant', and hence assumes a 'responsibility' to regulate his intimacy.

Conclusion

Ultimately, my paper has merely touched upon the potential for rethinking gay domestic violence as forms of internalised homophobia. This is not to say that the violence is fully accountable to this understanding. Rather, my emphasis has been to trace the connection between homophobic or heterosexual anxieties around masculinity, family and relationships as they manifest in particular situations of physical and psychological violence. These situations of violence are particularly troubling for gay men, who are marginalised as either incapable of intimacy or being male reduces the violence to physical assault rather than domestic violence. In advocating for a different theoretical position which traces these connections, I feel there is possibility in thinking through homophobia. Doing so will assist in developing services, groups and legal reform to engage with the highly pressing issue of gay domestic violence.

References

ACON. 'Another Closet'. 2000.

Appleby, G. A and Anastas, J.W. *Not Just a Passing Phase: Social Work with Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual People*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Bartholomew, K., Regan, K., White, M. and Oram, D. 'Patterns of Abuse in Male Same Sex Relationships'. *Violence and Victims*. 23.5. 2008: 617-635.

Burke, T. 'Male-to-Male Gay Domestic Violence: The Dark Closet'. In Jackson, N.A and Oates, G. C (eds). *Violence in Intimate Relationships: Examining Sociological and Psychological Issues*. Woburn: Butterworth- Heinemann, 1998.

Chan, C. 'Domestic Violence in Gay and Lesbian Relationships'. *Australian Domestic and Family Violence Clearinghouse*. 2005: 1-15.

Christie, N. 'Thinking about domestic violence in gay male relationships'. *Waikato Law Review*. 4.1. 1996: 180-188.

Elliott, P. 'Shattering Illusions: Same-Sex Domestic Violence'. In Renzetti, C.M and Miley, C.H (eds). *Violence in Gay and Lesbian Domestic Partnerships.* New York and London: Harrington Park Press.

Island, D. and Letellier, P. *Men Who Beat the Men Who Love Them: Battered Gay Men and Domestic Violence*. New York, London and Sydney: Harrington Park Press, 1991.

Kendall, C. 'Pornography, Hypermasculinity, and Gay Male Identity: Implications for Male Rape and Gay Male Domestic Violence'. In Kendall, C. and Martino, W. (ed). *Gendered Outcasts and Sexual Outlaws: Sexual Oppression and Gender Hierarchies in Queer Men's Lives*. New York, London and Oxford: Harrington Park Press, 2006.

Mason, G. *Spectacles of Violence: Homophobia, gender and knowledge*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Ohah, K. *How Do Gay Men Talk About Violence Against A Romantic Partner: A Phenomenological Study*. Proquest, 2002.

Rogers, C. 'Personal Story'. In Leventhal, B. and Luncy, S. E (eds). *Same Sex Domestic Violence: Strategies for Change*. London and New Delhi: Sage, 1996.