Experiences of intimate partner violence among same-sex partners in South Africa: what is the role of age-disparity?

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Background and Theoretical Focus:

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and gender-based violence (GBV) are high in South Africa. About 13% of all women have experienced at least one form of violence and 50% of all murders of women are by an intimate partner in the country (Abrahams et al., 2009; Frade & De Wet-Billings, 2019).

There is evidence that shows in same-sex relationships 21.5% of men and 35.4% of women in the USA living with a same-sex partner experienced IPV during their lifetime, which is higher than the reported IPV among cohabiting couples of the opposite sex at 7.1% and 20.4% for men and women, respectively(Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). A recent study on 140 and 300 men who have sex with men from Namibia and KwaZulu Natal, South Africa respectively, found that 7.3% reported IPV from a recent sexual partner (Stephenson, Darbes, Chavanduka, Essack, & van Rooyen, 2020). Further, research suggests that the lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) community are less frequently studied than heterosexual couples with regard to IPV experiences, because of the silence around violence, coupled with the silence, or stigma, against same-sex partnerships (Rollè, Giardina, Caldarera, Gerino, & Brustia, 2018). A study done in South Africa, found that LGB study participants were less likely to disclose their sexual preferences to healthcare workers out of fear of receiving poor care and this study also found that males are less likely to disclose than females (Eliason & Schope, 2001). But no study on the rates of IPV among same-sex couples in South Africa has been found.

Age disparity in relationships is associated with a number of negative consequences. Research has found younger partners to suffer more violence, less ability to negotiate safe-sex and poor mental health outcomes associated with having an older sexual partner (Caldwell & Mathews, 2015; George et al., 2019; Meier, Erickson, & McLaughlin, 2016). Our previous paper found age-disparity as a determinant of non-condom use among same-sex partners in South Africa (De Wet-Billings & Billings, 2020).

In this paper we investigate if age-disparity is also a risk factor for IPV among same-sex couples in the country. With global studies showing varying prevalence of IPV among same-sex couples, this study is needed to better understand and accommodate the specific needs of the LGB community who are experiencing IPV in South Africa, where there is a dearth of literature on the topic. The silence around same-sex partnerships and IPV as autonomous occurrences becomes a double burden for the LGB community, which is not often researched in African countries. This study will contribute to South African policies addressing IPV and gender-based violence.

The study is framed by the social learning theory which suggests that violent ways of settling family or partner conflicts are often learned through parental and peer relationships during childhood (Bandura & McClelland, 1977). Theorists argue that both victims and perpetrators

of IPV have either witnessed or experienced physical abuse during childhood, resulting in their developing acceptance or tolerance of violence within the family (Jin, Eagle, & Yoshioka, 2007; Vung & Krantz, 2009). There are a number of studies to support this which show that witnessing or experiencing abuse during childhood might be associated with future IPV perpetration or victimization in adulthood (Parks, Kim, Day, Garza, & Larkby, 2011; Whitfield, Anda, Dube, & Felitti, 2003).

Data and Research Methods:

Data source and sample size:

South African National HIV Prevalence, Incidence, Behaviour and Communication Survey, 2017 (SABSSM 2017). This nationally representative dataset collected over 39,000 respondent's HIV status, demographic, socioeconomic and behavioural characteristics (Simbayi et al., 2019). For this study, only youth and adults (>=15 years old) are included. Further, only respondents who reported their last sexual partner as the same-sex is used. A weighted sample of 542,694 (52.65% male and 47.35% female) are analysed.

Study Variables:

The outcome of interest in this study is intimate partner violence (IPV). The questionnaire asks 11 questions pertaining to various types of physical, and sexual violence from an intimate partner. Positive (yes) responses are combined into a variable that contains at least 1 type of IPV experienced. Later analysis will look at the types of reported violence by type of same-sex partnership (male-male or female-female).

Age-disparity is the main predictor variable of the study. Using the respondent's age and the reported age of their most recent sexual partner, a variable of 'same', 'partner younger' or 'partner older' is generated. The study also controls for a number of demographic (age group, sex, race/ population group, marital status and religious affiliation) and socioeconomic (highest level of education, employment status, type of place of residence, etc) characteristics of the respondents.

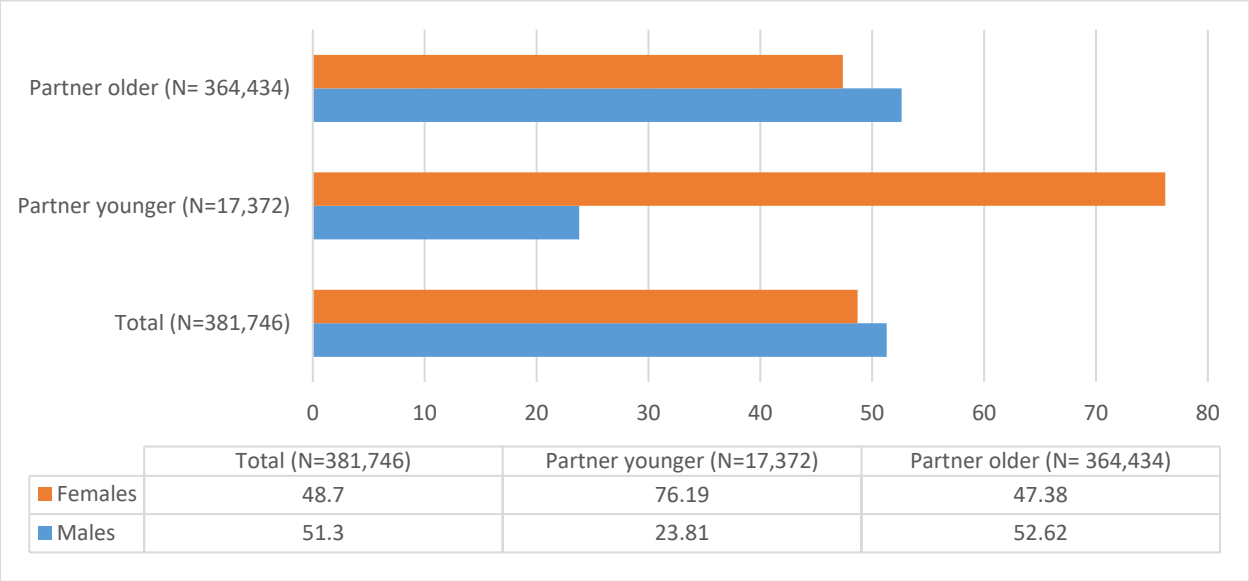
Analysis plan:

Descriptive and inferential analysis are planned for this study. Cross-tabulations showing the frequency and percentage distributions of the independent and outcome variables will be conducted. An unadjusted logistic regression model will be fit to the data to show the probability of IPV by age-disparity and control variables.

Data limitations:

The accuracy of the age-disparity variable might be affected by the respondents estimating, and not knowing the actual age, their most recent partners age. For this reason, we will group age-disparity into five-year intervals and not use the 'actual' age. Second, the survey does not offer an exhaustive list of types of IPV, therefore, respondents who experienced violence outside of this list are not captured.

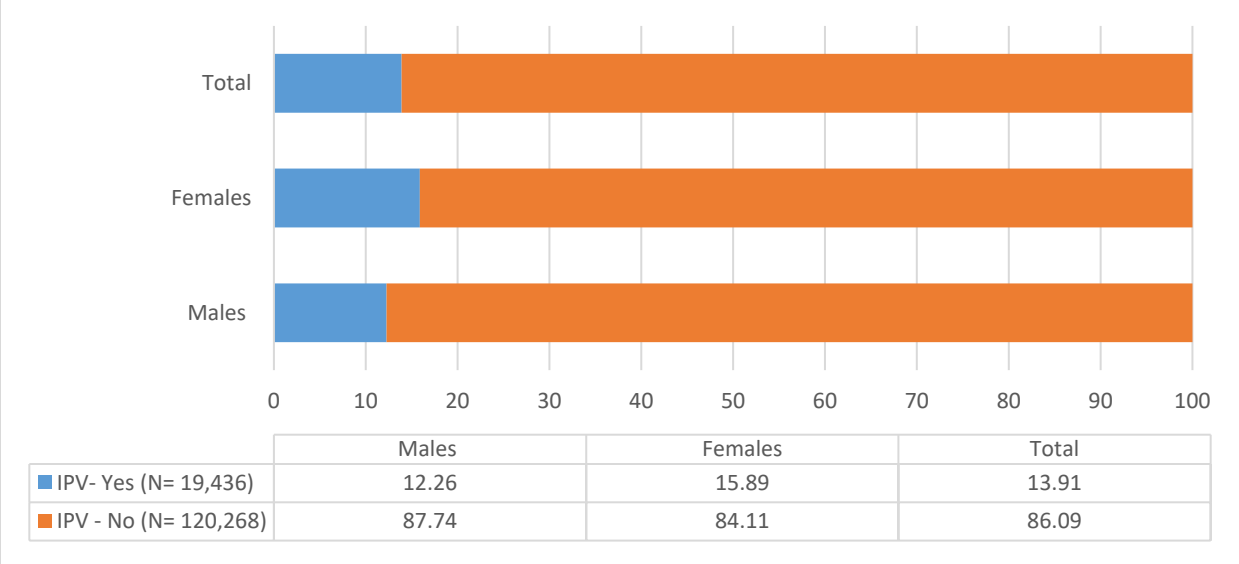
Preliminary Results:



	Total (N=381,746)	Partner younger (N=17,372)	Partner older (N= 364,434)
Females	48.7	76.19	47.38
Males	51.3	23.81	52.62

Figure 1: Partner age-difference by type of same-sex partnership in South Africa

Figure 1 shows that more males (52.62%) had an older same-sex partner than females (47.38%). Conversely, more females (76.19%) had a younger same-sex partner than males (23.81%).



	Males	Females	Total
IPV- Yes (N= 19,436)	12.26	15.89	13.91
IPV - No (N= 120,268)	87.74	84.11	86.09

Figure 2: Same-sex partnership by experience of IPV in South Africa

Figure 2 shows the IPV experience (at least 1 type) by type of same-sex partnership in South Africa. Overall, 13.91% of respondents with same-sex partners had experienced IPV. Among females with female sexual partners, 15.89% had experienced at least one type of IPV by their partner. For males who have male sexual partners, 12.26% had experienced IPV.

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