Intimate Partner Violence in College Relationships

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Introduction

In the U.S., 17-39% of couples report interpersonal violence (IPV) annually (Caetano et al., 2008). IPV is broadly defined as the psychological, physical, or sexual victimization of a partner within an intimate relationship (Edwards & Siyaskal, 2015). A third of adolescents report experiencing dating violence within the past year, and retrospectively, 69% of adults reported having experienced dating violence during adolescence (Taylor & Mumford, 2016). Similarly, in colleges, a third of students have reported experiencing either sexual or physical IPV (Scherer et al., 2014). Typically, adults report IPV victimization at a greater rate than adult males, but studies show that one-in-three males also experience IPV in their lifetime (Machado, 2020).

Perpetrators and victims of IPV report significant long-lasting psychological distress, such as depression, powerlessness, and PTSD (Caetano et al., 2008; Overstreet et al., 2017). IPV victimization in women has been associated with greater incidences of contracting sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and cardiovascular disease (Overstreet et al., 2015). This could be due to sexual exploitation experienced by victims of IPV, and engaging in other high-risk behaviors, like poor diet, exercise, and smoking (Campbell et al., 2008; Halpern et al., 2017). Similar results have been found in young college adults. In a longitudinal study, college students who experienced IPV reported greater severity of violence, feeling self-blame, low self-esteem, and anxiety; as well as contribute to the future minimization of violent behaviors and increase commitment to relationships characterized by violence (Pereira et al., 2020). We are also investigating the factors to see how they specifically relate to male victims and their susceptibility to remaining in violent relationships. Males comprise an estimated 35% of IPV victims but remain significantly underreported and insufficiently supported within communities due to stigma and speculation (Machado et al., 2017).

Methodology

Participants were 71 undergraduates recruited from a northeastern university (60.6% female; ages 18-22, 73.2% white, 23.2% black, 2.8% other race, 18.3% African American). Participants needed to indicate currently being in or having been in a romantic relationship to be eligible for participation.

Measures included a demographic questionnaire, the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), the Controllability in Intimate Relationships Scale (Whitaker & Abell, 2014), the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983), the McLean Instrument for Borderline Personality Disorder (Zanarini et al., 2013), and the Attitudes Towards Women Scale (Marshall 1992), the Assertiveness Inventory (Alberti & Emmons, 2017), and the Interpersonal Sensitivity Questionnaire (Spence & Helmreich, 1972).

Procedures involved collecting data via online self-report surveys. Participants received credit for their participation.

Results & Discussion

Violence

Initial analyses of the data indicate that approximately 28.2% of the total sample reported having experienced violence in their intimate relationships. When broken down into females and males, slightly more females (32.6%) than males (21.4%) reported experiencing violence in their intimate relationships, which is consistent with previous research (Figure 1).

As shown in Table 1, experiencing greater violence was associated with being significantly less assertive, more aggressive, being stalked more, having greater mental distress, with increased somatization, hostility, anxiety, depression, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, and psychotism. When looking at personality traits, greater violence was associated with higher scores on borderline personality, dependent personality, and psychopathic traits. Experiencing more violence was also associated with reporting having less resources, such as familial support.

Emotional Abuse

A high percentage of the total sample reported perpetrating (73.2%), as well as being victims (74.6%) of emotional abuse. Females reported higher instances of perpetration (81.4%) and victimization (79.1%) than males (60.7% and 67.9%, respectively) (Figure 2).

Among those reporting emotional abuse, age was negatively correlated with both instances of perpetration and victimization. This indicates that the younger the individual, the more likely they will engage in emotionally abusive behaviors in relationships and be victims of this behavior (Table 1). The results also indicate victims of emotional abuse report greater rates of being stalked. Interestingly, those who perpetrate emotional abuse also report being stalked more too. Lastly, victims of emotional abuse also report higher scores on borderline personality and narcissistic traits.

Limitations & Future Directions

As an ongoing study, our main limitation is our small sample size, which did not allow us to analyze between-sex differences as originally planned at this time. Given the restraint in time as well, we were not able to thoroughly analyze our historical variables to study possible risk factors to becoming involved in relationships characterized by IPV.

We will continue to collect data in order to have a large sample size to make meaningful between-sex comparisons, and also to assess possible risk factors for IPV.