

Dating Violence: Prevalence and Perceptions Among College Freshmen

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The prevalence and perceptions of dating violence were investigated in this study. Participants were traditional-aged college students, and each completed a survey about verbal, physical, or sexual violence experienced while on a date or in a dating relationship. The survey explores whether the respondent continued the relationship after the first incidence of violence, whether he or she perceived the act as abusive, and if either the respondent or the aggressor was using alcohol directly before or during the violent act. Respondents were also asked if they divulged the incidents to anyone and, if so, to whom. The findings indicated that dating violence is a severe problem among young daters and significant differences may exist between genders regarding perceptions of acceptable behavior. The research offers credence for orientation programming and ongoing education on this important developmental issue.

Although dating violence is considered one of the most serious social problems on college campuses today, it was not until the early 1980s that it was investigated apart from domestic violence or violence between married couples. In 1981 a groundbreaking study by Makepeace (as cited in Bethke & DeJoy, 1993) found that “one-fifth of college students had experienced dating violence and 70% knew someone who had experienced dating violence” (p. 36). Since then, the research on the prevalence of dating violence has proliferated. Studies have been conducted which link incidents of dating violence to alcohol use, improper conflict resolution tactics, the intergenerational transmission of aggression, and general societal acceptance of violence.

As expected, research has supported that both minor and severe violence is more common among younger than older daters (Henderson & Stets, 1991). Therefore, studies focusing on college students, especially traditional-aged freshmen, can be beneficial in understanding what factors influence the increased reporting of dating violence among that population.

Because there are so many theorized correlates to dating violence, the literature on the subject is very broad. The number of young people who report having experienced some form of dating violence is disturbing. Bergman (1992) reported in a study of high school students that 10.5% had experienced sexual dating violence, 12% had experienced physical dating violence, and 17.7% had experienced a combination of physical and sexual violence. Another study found that “34% of women respondents had experienced unwanted sexual contact, 20% had experienced unwanted attempted intercourse, and 10% had experienced unwanted completed intercourse” (Ward, Chapman, Cohn, White, & Williams, 1991, p. 67).

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While the instances of violence against women have been well documented, the role of females as aggressors and males as victims is becoming more widely acknowledged. According to a study by Follete and LeJune (1994), 42.4% of their female respondents said that they were usually the initiators of violence in their relationships, while nearly 40% of the females said the males typically initiated the violence. However, only 14.3% of the male respondents said they most often initiated violence in their dating relationships while 52.4% said the females were most often the aggressors. In another study, Riggs (1993) found that 36% of female respondents initiated violence in their relationships while 22% of the males were the aggressors.

Some researchers believe that the discrepancy in these numbers can be attributed to the tolerance among young people when females are the aggressors in a dating relationship. According to Bethke and DeJoy (1993), "The college students in this study, although clearly not approving of violent tactics, were more tolerant of such behavior when it occurred in a serious relationship and when it was perpetrated by a female" (p. 146).

The role of alcohol in dating violence also has been well documented. According to Henderson and Stets (1991), consumption of alcohol during a date increases the chances of dating violence. Ward et al. (1991) found that most instances of dating violence among college students occurred at parties and were alcohol-related. Among the respondents of Follette and LeJune's study (1994), 32.1 % said "they or their partner are usually using alcohol or drugs when violence occurs" (p. 137).

Follette and LeJune (1994) found that 46.3% of the respondents who had experienced dating violence had not told anyone about the violence. Of those who did disclose the incident, 89.6% told a same-sex peer, 72.4% told an opposite-sex peer, 34.4% told their mothers, 31% told a sibling, 3.4% told their fathers, 6.8% spoke to a counselor, 3.4% told residence hall staff, and none reported their experiences to the police. Bergman (1992) found that "only 22% disclosed the violence to someone and all of them told a peer about it" (p.23). Clearly, underreporting is an issue when it comes to dating violence among young people. This may be in part because incidents of violence in dating relationships do not necessarily lead to termination of the relationships. In the same study by Bergman, 79.2% of the females and 69.6% of the males reported that they continued to date the perpetrators of the violence. According to Stets (1992), the violence at times becomes part of the relationship and the aggressor learns that violence against his or her partner will not end the relationship.

Yet another possible reason for the underreporting of dating violence is that the daters do not routinely believe that physical abuse necessarily produces a victim. According to Follingstad, Lloyd, Sebastian, and Wright (1991), males most often misinterpret the definition of a "victim." For example, one subject in the study denied he was a victim of physical abuse, but went on to answer "yes" to questions asking if he had been subjected to physical force. Boeringer, Shehan, and Akers (1991) concluded in their study of dating violence among college students that "...ambiguity exists about what acts are morally and legally considered unacceptable" (p. 63).

Method and Procedure

Participants

Three-hundred-thirty-one students were identified through a stratified random cluster sample of college freshmen enrolled in a required college orientation course at a small public college in the Midwest. Classes with all athletes and honors students were included. However, non-traditional students, defined as those older than 24 years of age, were excluded from the study in order to focus on the traditional-aged entering college student.

Instrument and Design

The researcher designed a twelve-item questionnaire (Appendix A). Respondents identified their ages and genders and, using a yes/no format, identified whether they had ever been victims of verbal, physical, or sexual violence; when the violence first occurred; and whether they stayed in the dating relationships after the first incidents of violence. The questionnaire also asked respondents whether alcohol played a role in their experiences with dating violence and to whom they disclosed the incidents of violence. In the first half of the survey, respondents were asked to identify their experiences with specific examples of violence such as cursing, slapping, forced intercourse, without the questionnaire labeling or defining these acts as examples of abuse. In the second half of the survey, the respondents were asked if they had ever been victims of verbal, physical, or sexual abuse. The survey was designed to identify perceptions and prevalence of abusive behavior.

Results

This study addressed the following questions:

1. What was the percentage of first semester college freshmen between the ages of 18 and 24 who had experienced verbal, physical, or sexual violence while on a date or in a dating relationship?
2. What was the incidence of dating violence for female victims and for male victims?
3. At what stages of a dating relationship did violent acts initially occur?
4. What was the percentage of victims who continued the dating relationship after the initial act of violence?
5. What percentage of victims disclosed the violence to another person?
6. To whom did the victims disclose the violence?
7. To what extent did alcohol play a role in the incidents of dating violence?
8. Did the victims equate acts of violence with abuse?

The mean age of the participants was 18. Of the 331 subjects, 40% were male and 60% were female. The first and third research questions addressed the prevalence of respondents who had experienced dating violence. Results showed that 33% of the

respondents reported that they had been victims of verbal abuse, 16% had been victims of physical abuse, 10% had been victims of sexual abuse, and 5% marked the column reserved for additional abuses or comments. Thus, 64% of the participants reported some form of violence, findings, which are consistent with current literature, particularly the Bergman (1992) study.

The second research question addressed potential differences between men and women. Several chi-square analyses performed on the data showed striking differences between the genders. The analysis of gender found that fewer males (5%) answered that they had experienced physical violence in a dating situation than did females (27.8%). Fewer males (25%) answered they had been verbally abused than did females (62.5%).

The third research question was concerned with the occurrence of violent acts in a dating relationship and whether or not the relationship continued after the initial act. Six percent said the initial act of violence occurred on the first date, 18% within three months into the relationship, 10% between four to seven months into the relationship, 5% between eight to eleven months into the relationship and 10% reported their first incident at a year or more into the relationship. The remaining 51% of the participants marked the question as nonapplicable to them.

Nearly 31% of the respondents who had been victims of dating violence said that they continued the relationship after the first violent act. The chi-square analysis of gender by question 5 (whether the subject continued seeing the person after the initial act of violence) showed another gender-based contrast in regards to whether or not the relationship continued after the violence began. Fewer males (28%) than females (64%) continued the relationship after the first incident.

The fifth and sixth research questions addressed whether or not the victims of dating violence disclosed the violence to anyone, and if so, to whom. Of those respondents who said they were victims of one of the categories of dating violence, 61% said they divulged the incident - 92% to a friend, 2% to a parent, 1% to a counselor, and 5% marked "other." The majority of respondents who marked "other" indicated that they told a relative—usually a same-sex sibling. None of the respondents reported telling a teacher or a clergyman.

The seventh research question addressed alcohol usage and the role it played in dating violence. Twenty-three percent of the respondents who said they were victims of one of the categories of dating violence reported that either they or their dating partners, or both, were consuming alcohol directly before or at the time of the violent act. The chi-square analysis of question 3-C (sexual violence) by question 9 (alcohol consumption) showed that alcohol was often involved in sexual violence incidents. No significant results were found for physical and verbal abuse. However, the research by Henderson and Stets (1991) and Ward et al. (1991) concluded that acts of dating violence tended to rise when alcohol was introduced.

The results of the chi-square analysis performed on the data in this study are reported in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Chi-Square Results Between Factors Q3C (sexual violence) and Q9 (alcohol consumption)

Variable			Q3C	
Q9	O	1	12	19
	E		7.2	23.8
	O	2	21	91
	E		25.8	86.2

X² (1,N=143)=5.44,p<.019

Chi-Square Results Between Factors Q5 (continuing relationship after violence) and gender

Variable			Gender	
Q5	O	1	28	7
	E		35.4	13.1
	O	2	64	27
	E		56.6	20.9

X²(2,N=304)= 11.44,p<.005 (note: The additional comparison was for subjects who reported that the questions were non-applicable to them.)

Chi-Square Results Between Factors Q6 (verbal abuse) and Gender

Variable			Gender	
Q6	O	1	25	99
	E		39.5	84.5
	O	2	77	119
	E		62.5	133.5

X (1,N=320)=12.79,p<.005

Chi-Square Results Between Factors Q7 (physical abuse) and Gender

Variable			Gender	
Q7	O	1	5	118
	E		17.2	105.8
	O	2	40	158
	E		27.8	170.2

X² (1,N=321)=16.39,p<.001

Conclusions and Discussion

This study suggests that while the prevalence of dating violence is consistent with previous studies, interesting gender differences are noted. Fewer males than females reported verbal and physical violence. It is unclear if this is because men do experience less physical and verbal violence than women do in dating relationships, because they are less likely to admit or report it, or because there is a lack of understanding of what it means to be a victim.

This study also found that fewer males than females continued the relationship after the first incident of violence. The fact that more females tended to stay in violent relationships is consistent with Bergman's 1992 study.

Recommendations

The results of this research show a need for improving dating violence awareness to this population and points to the importance of future research with students involved in ongoing violent relationships. In addition, an interesting revision to this study would be to examine how long women stay in these relationships if the violence is ongoing. Because 92% of the respondents who disclosed violent dating incidents told their friends, it suggests an importance to educate young people on how to advocate for friends who are victimized in addition to ways to protect themselves.

This study further indicates that respondents perceived the violence they experienced as abuse. The percentages on questions 3-A through 3-D and questions 6, 7, and 8 suggest that the respondents understand that the categories of dating violence introduced in the questionnaire were examples of abusive behavior.

These results seem to suggest that dating violence education needs to begin early—well before college-age. Orientation professionals may want to provide dating violence prevention programming as well as information about counseling services available for students who may have already been victimized. Programs targeting men and the stereotypes and social attitudes they face concerning what is acceptable behavior are strongly suggested, and programs targeting women as aggressors, focusing on proper conflict resolution tactics, would also be appropriate. Peer education or peer counseling programs also seem warranted because of the high percentage of victims who divulge the violence to friends and siblings. Awareness education concerning alcohol and the role it plays in dating violence is also necessary. More research which explores other factors related to dating violence such as personality, education, ethnicity, and family dysfunction would give more attention to this important topic.

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APPENDIX A

The following is a survey about dating violence. Your participation in this study is **strictly voluntary**. If you do not wish to answer the items, please turn in your blank form with the others. Please use the back for additional comments.

1. What is your age? _____
2. What is your gender (M or F)? _____
3. While on a date or in a dating relationship, has any of the following ever happened to you? (Please check all those that apply.)
 - _____ been cursed at, verbally threatened, or degraded by your date or boyfriend/girlfriend?
 - _____ been shoved, slapped, pushed, punched, kicked, or held down by your date or boyfriend/girlfriend?
 - _____ been forced to kiss, hug, pet, or have intercourse against your will by your date or boyfriend/girlfriend?
 - _____ anything else that was uncomfortable to you? (please explain)
 - _____
 - _____
 - _____
4. If you checked one or more of the items in question 3, at what point in the dating relationship did the incidents first occur?
 - _____ not applicable to me
 - _____ first date

_____ 1-3 months into the relationship

_____ 4-7 months into the relationship

_____ 8-11 months into the relationship

_____ a year or more into the relationship

5. Did you continue seeing that person after the initial incident occurred?

_____ yes _____no _____not applicable to me

6. Have you ever experienced verbal **abuse** on a date or in a dating relationship?

_____ yes _____ no

7. Have you ever experienced physical **abuse** on a date or in a dating relationship?

_____ yes _____ no

8. Have you ever experienced sexual **abuse** in a dating relationship?

_____ yes _____ no

9. If you marked any items in question 3 or answered 'yes' to items 6, 7, or 8, were either or both of you consuming alcohol directly before or at the time the incident occurred?

_____yes _____ no

10. If you marked any items in question 3 or answered "yes" to items 6, 7, or 8, do both of your parents live in the home?

_____yes _____ no

11. If you marked any items in question 3 or answered "yes" to items 6, 7, or 8 did you disclose the incident to anyone?

_____yes _____ no

12. If you checked "yes" in question 9, whom did you tell?

_____friend _____teacher _____counselor _____parent

_____clergyperson _____other (please specify)_____