2009

Dating violence: college students' experiences and intervention suggestions

Ashley McNeil Ezell
Troy University

Karena T. Valkyrie
Troy University

Casey Tobin
Troy University

Ashley McNeil
Ezell,
Karena T. Valkyrie
&
Casey Tobin

Troy University

Dating Violence: College Students' Experiences and Intervention Suggestions

The dating violence relationship experiences of students were investigated at a southeast regional university. A third of the 509 participants indicated they were victims of dating violence (n = 173), and almost 25% (n = 124) indicated they had victimized someone they had dated. Weapons included guns, knives, golf clubs, machetes, and tasers. Student participants offered three categories of interventions: Counseling, Improved Campus Security, and Educational Programs. Their experiences and suggestions are discussed.

As few as one out of every ten college students has experienced dating violence on college campuses across North America (Barnes, Greenwood, & Sommer, 1991; Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Cleveland, Herrera, & Stuewig, 2003; Makepeace, 1981). Violence is a behavior that may be a tolerated in many intimate relationships and approved by peers (Sears, Byers, Whelan, & Saint-Pierre, 2006). Often students report violence as an acceptable means of communication used in their intimate relationships to express emotions (Barnes, Greenwood, & Sommer, 1991; Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Cleveland, Herrera, & Stuewig, 2003). Justification for dating violence varies. Instead of talking about emotional experiences, some students may hurt their dating partner to show love or, conversely, to show they do not approve of behaviors that make them jealous (Makepeace, 1981; Sears et al., 2006). Counseling for these relationships is readily available on many college campuses (Whitely, 2004); yet as few as 9% of

victimized young adults seek help from any authorities for their relationships (Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993).

Definition of Dating Violence

Dating violence is defined as any unwanted threats, unwanted physical force, unwanted emotional play, or unwanted sexual assault (James, West, Deters, & Armijo, 2000; Island & Letellier, 1991; Lamier, Lydum, Anderson, & Turner, 1999). This definition includes emotional "abuse (e.g., creating jealousy, verbal put-downs, bringing up hurtful experiences, blaming the victim for the violence); physical assaults that include hitting, biting, kicking, twisting of limbs; and damaging property" (James et al., 2000, pp. 459-460). Many variables can cause violence in dating. Many variables can cause violence in dating. Cleveland, Herrera, and Stuewig (2003) completed research on risk factors for dating violence in a sample of 90,000 adolescents. Their research is particularly valuable for understanding correlations between life influences

and types of violence that occur in date settings. These researchers discovered that relationships that had lasted longer often had higher reported levels of abuse than relationships that were just beginning. This may be due to a perceived pressure to keep a relationship together. Cleveland et al. also discovered that drinking is one of the most common factors involved in violent intimate relationships for college students (2003). Students sometimes disregard the seriousness of their actions because they are "just kidding around," or the aggressor may feel justified in hurting the victim due to stress or worry that the victim caused (Sears et al., 2006). An international study of dating violence found a correlation between corporal punishment and college students who perpetrated violence upon their dating partners (Straus, 2001).

Prevalence of Dating Violence

One of the earlier studies on courtship violence found approximately 21% of all college students had experienced dating violence in their intimate relationships (Makepeace, 1981). This first study also found that 61% of the respondents reported that they knew someone who had personally been affected by courtship violence (Makepeace, 1981). In more recent studies 21 to 49% of students at various sized universities reported being abused and victimized by their lovers during an intimate relationship (Barnes, Greenwood, & Sommer, 1991; Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Charkow & Nelson, 2000; Cleveland, Herrera, & Stuewig, 2003). The number of students reporting violence with their dating partners on campuses both in North America and internationally is alarming and shows the widespread prevalence of young people experiencing victimization at the hands of their lovers (Cleveland, Herrera, & Stuewig, 2003; Straus, 2001).

Both women and men are aggressors in the issue of dating violence. Males often report they commit some form of violence against intimate dating partners (Barnes, Greenwood, & Sommer, 1991; Bryant, & Spencer; 2003). These studies found that male respondents were more likely to admit to committing what these men considered to be more "minor" acts of aggression such as hitting, scratching, or psychological abuse. None of the males admitted

to assaulting his partner with a weapon or to other violent forms of aggression, such as sexual assault and murder (Barnes, Greenwood, & Sommer, 1991). Findings of the International Dating Violence Study (Straus, 2001) found that women and men both demonstrate aggressive behaviors in dating relationships (29% on average for both groups). At some of the 31 universities involved in that study, women were found to assault at higher percentages. Generally, their assaults were considered to be primarily minor. Men as perpetrators in that study were found to inflict more damage at slightly higher rates than the female respondents.

Acceptance of Dating Violence

Students may be more accepting of minor violence if they know their peers are tolerant of dating violence (Barnes, Greenwood, & Sommer, 1991; Bryant & Spencer, 2003). If students are tolerant of dating violence it may be hard for many victims to escape their relationship and easy for new couples to become violent toward each other (James et al., 2000). A high tolerance of dating violence may mean that peers will not report or seek help for a bickering couple. James and colleagues speculated that tolerance from peers lead many couples to think that violence is socially acceptable and may even be seen as a way to express love. Students indicate that hitting in response to jealousy can be abusive in one context but permissible if that response is demonstrating care for the other person (Sears et al., 2006). Students also report that violent reactions are justified such as when a girl slaps her boyfriend, but not justified in situations such as when a boy slaps his girlfriend (Sears et al). The tolerance of these violent actions allows more students to begin using violence to solve problems with their dating partners (Sears et al.). Many other studies found responses which agree that abuse is generally tolerated especially in situations where it seems harmless or funny, such as a girl slapping a boy for offending her or making her jealous (Black & Weisz, 2003; Carlson, 1999; James et al., 2000). Some research has found a cultural acceptance of dating violence (Straus, 2001). Acceptance of violence suggests that students may benefit from relationship counseling while on campus.

Counseling for Dating Violence

Even though many campuses offer counseling services to their students that are included in their student fees (Whitely, 2004) students are often unaware of what types of services are available to help them build healthy relationship skills (Sears et al., 2006). The number of victims who report their victimization to an official such as campus police or a counselor is as low as 9% (Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993). Often victims do not report violence because they are embarrassed and concerned that their experiences will not be confidential (Black & Weisz, 2003; Sears et al., 2006). Students may feel more comfortable confiding in campus authorities if there are active educational programs targeting violence in relationships, or if their university had more rules that addressed dating violence on campus (Bryant & Spencer, 2003). College students may stay in abusive relationships because of the acceptance of abuse as a social practice (Black & Weisz, 2003; Carlson, 1999; Sears et al., 2006). With abuse receiving some acceptance on campuses (Carlson, 1999), dating violence issues should be further explored to help campus administrators and counselors understand the phenomenon of dating violence and how to better assist students in creating healthier relationships.

Research on dating violence suggests that intimate partner violence is occurring on many campuses; not only on campuses found in larger cities (Cleveland, Herrera, & Stuewig, 2003; Straus, 2001). If students are tolerant of violence among their own relationships or the relationships of their friends then administrators and counselors need a greater understanding of the antecedents and consequences associated with dating violence. Thus, the purpose of this explorative study had six goals to explore. First, we wanted to understand the participants' relationship status as well as the health of the relationship. Our second and third goals evaluated how students at a southeast regional university defined dating violence and to explore the acceptance of dating violence on campus. The fourth goal was to determine the respondent dating violence experience both as a victim and as a hurtful partner. The fifth goal was to examine what students knew about counseling services provided on campus

and what programs students desired related to the issues of dating violence. Finally, we explored the overall seriousness of dating violence on campus. To our knowledge a study of this nature has never been conducted on this campus heretofore. Having this information could help campus administrators and counselors to better understand what students want in counseling and educational services and, therefore, may help to modify current programs or to develop new ones.

Method

Participants

As a random sample, originally, 539 students of the 6100 students registered with the university's email system responded; as a result approximately 9% of the campus participated in this study. After removing the 18 year-old respondents (n = 32) as the age of consent in this setting was 19 years old, and after removing the inappropriate responses of one male participant, the number of participants used for analysis purposes was 506. The 506 students surveyed ranged in age from 19 to 60 (M = 21.4; SD 3.64). Seventy-three percent of the participants (n = 370) were female. With the exception that more Euro-Americans responded to the survey than the enrollment ratio for this group (72% of participants versus the 52% enrollment of Euro-American students in 2007; Diversity Program Planning Committee (2008), the ethnic diversity among the participants generally mirrored the campus diversity: 72% (n = 368) Euro-Americans, 31% African-Americans (n = 94), 4% Asian-American (n = 20), 2% described themselves as "multi-racial" (n = 11), 2% were "other" (n = 6). Most of the respondents (n = 333) lived off campus, specifically, in apartment complexes, trailers, or homes. There was an even distribution of students in their first, second, third and fourth year of college.

Instrument & Procedures

Since previously constructed instruments were neither specific nor comprehensive enough to qualitatively assess and explore the required data for this study, a survey was developed for exploratory research. Based on a review of literature, a 33 item, anonymous, electronic survey utilizing a skipping

pattern of responses was created using the SurveyMonkey electronic web-based survey program (http://www.surveymonkey.com). The software allows surveys to be constructed in such a way that prohibits traces back to the local computer of participants, thus assuring anonymity. The survey, qualitative in nature, explored dating relationships, as well as respondents' experience with dating violence. The subsets of responses are delineated by an n when applicable. Researchers sought out initial approval for this study from the institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and it was granted without stipulations.

Results

To address the goals of this exploratory study, data analysis was descriptive in nature. Five hundred six responded to the survey with 314 students indicated they were currently in a relationship; 233 (74%) of the participants in a relationship indicated they were dating one individual exclusively. Relationship lengths ranged from a few days to 40 years. Most people had been in a relationship for one to two years with the average length 23.4 months (SD = 17.89). Of the people in a relationship, over 50% (n = 147) of the respondents described their relationship as normal or average, stating, in general, that "(our relationship quality is) 'good', we have our ups and downs but we've gotten through them." Out of 318 respondents, 76 claimed to have above average relationships with no problems. Only 33 respondents reported that their current relationships needed improvement and 2 respondents reported being in upsetting relationships.

Defining Dating Violence

The participants were asked to define dating violence. Students indicated that dating violence involved physical and psychological abuse (87%; n = 313). One participant's response is representative of the participants' definition, "Pressuring the other person, both physically and mentally. Forcing them to do anything they don't want to do, etc. and of course actually hitting them and such." Most respondents were much more concerned with abuse in the physical form. Yet, some respondents emphasized the psychological abuse by stating, "More than being physically abusive, dating violence can also be emotional abuse, manipulation, and domination over a partner." Ninety-three percent of the students (n = 320) responded "no" to the question indicating if there was an appropriate time to be violent in a relationship.

Respondents' Dating Violence Experience

A third of all the 506 participants indicated they have been the victim of dating violence (n = 173), and almost 25% (n = 124) indicated they had victimized significant, intimate people in their lives. Only 22 of the violent acts occurred before students were in college. The remainder of this section is organized into information provided by the victims first, including weapon and alcohol information, followed by the information provided by those who have hurt loved ones.

Victims.

Of the 275 students specifically responding to an inquiry of victimization, 173 (34% of all the participants) reported being a victim of dating violence. Of these students, 141 were female. Victims reported that guns, knives, golf clubs, and "love" were used as weapons during their victimization, while thirty percent reported alcohol was involved. The vast majority indicated verbal abuse, name-calling and threats of violence, were familiar forms of dating violence.

When asked, just over 60% of victims (n = 167) reported they sought support following the violence. Types of support reported: friend (56%); help from police (7%); help from counseling (7%); help from a religious institution (11%); help from family (28%); help from a professor (1%); and read a book (11%). Of the victims, 30% (n = 50) did not seek help of any type. Campus counseling services were utilized by 5% of victims.

Hurtful Partners.

When respondents were asked if they had ever been hurtful toward a partner, 124 students admitted to being a perpetrator of dating violence. One hundred were females (20% of all participants). The majority of women listed verbal abuse towards an intimate partner as dating violence. Hurtful partners reported using guns knives, golf clubs, machetes, and tasers against their partners. Of these weapons,

50

one male reported using a weapon, one male reported being victimized by a weapon, one female reported both, and seven females reported being victimized by a weapon. Twenty one percent (n = 39) of all the hurtful partners reported that alcohol was a factor in their hurtful actions.

Overwhelmingly, individuals disclosing dating violence sought no help of any kind. A scant ten percent of the self-identified perpetrators reported they sought any support to stop their hurtful actions. Of the ten percent who sought support, they reported multiple solutions, such as talked to a friend (n = 8); sought counseling (n = 3); talked to a pastor (n = 1); talked to God (n = 1); or read a (presumably self-help) book (n = 1).

Two survey questions asked respondents about their perceptions of the seriousness of dating violence on campus and solutions they would like to see implemented. When asked if dating violence was a serious issue on their campus, 83% (n = 216) of respondents who responded "yes" believe it is a serious issue. Some students (n = 17) are concerned that dating violence becomes more serious when alcohol is involved. Their solutions and suggestions are discussed in the next section.

Discussion

This exploratory study was conducted to survey the students' perceptions of dating violence. In this section, we first make general observations relating our findings to other work. The solutions or administrative action/ideas suggested by the participants are grouped into three general categories: Counseling Interventions, Campus Environment and Safety Issues Interventions, and Educational Interventions.

Findings indicate that over 70% of respondents indicated at the time of the study they were dating exclusively; up to 11% of respondents reported their current relationship was upsetting and needed improvement. Unlike other studies that operationally define dating violence a priori, we asked the respondents for their definition. They included the issues of control and psychological, as well as, physical aspects. Also unlike other studies, we saw nothing in the responses indicating students

considered any dating violence acceptable (Black & Weisz, 2003; Carlson, 1999; James et al., 2000; Sears et al., 2006). The mean age of participation was 21 years. This is a concern as other researchers have indicated dating violence may be more prevalent among younger couples (Straus, 2001).

The percent of victims and perpetrators found in this survey is very close to averages reported by other studies, which seems to have held steady over decades (Barnes, Greenwood, & Sommer, 1991; Makepeace, 1981; Straus, 2001; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Similar to Straus (2001) and Sugarman & Hotaling (1989), our findings show more women than men described themselves to be violent with verbal violence as the leading infraction. Results indicated that the relationship between alcohol use and dating violence was also similar to averages reported by others (Barnes, Greenwood, & Sommer, 1991; Makepeace, 1981). Campus counselors should assess all students who seek counseling services for the possibility of dating violence regardless of their presenting problem given or gender.

As identified by other researchers (Mahlstedt & Keeny, 1993), many participants indicated that they did not seek professional counseling following violent events. Over 49% of the respondents in this survey took care of the situation themselves by telling few people and/or by breaking off the relationships. One respondent said, "[I] didn't want people besides the ones I am close to know what happened." repeatedly, responses indicated that the violence was a private matter; they minimized the severity and were reluctant to ask for help. Fear of public stigma along with self-stigma for being in such a situation may increase students' reluctance to seek help (Vogel, Wade, & Haacke, 2006; Vogel, Wade, & Hackler, 2007). Consequently, shame and perceived stigma can prevent victims from seeking help, impede healing and delay necessary behavioral changes. Efforts should be made by universities to counter such stigma.

A small number of our respondents indicated that their assailant used a weapon. Often perpetrators are reluctant to admit they used a weapon against their partner (Barnes, Greenwood, & Sommer, 1991). The weapons listed included guns, knives,

golf clubs, machetes, and tasers. Although the numbers reported are low, these responses indicate that several students have been in violent situations which might have led to their deaths. The prevalence of dating violence and the presence of weapons that had fatality potential suggest that student participants would have experienced a range of stressful reactions to their violence experiences. Given the stress, and sequelae associated with the dating violence, had students sought counseling support they may found counseling beneficial; yet, our findings indicate that there are roadblocks to accessing campus counseling support.

Counseling Interventions.

Three themes associated with their counseling intervention suggestions were identified: Availability, confidentiality, and relationship information. While the Campus Counseling Services staff is ready to be of assistance, results support Sears et al (2006) findings that the students were reluctant. Some indicated they didn't know that counseling was available to them. Respondents suggested that students should be reminded on a regular basis that support is available to them. In addition to not knowing the services were available, some respondents reported they had already used all of the free hours available to them at the time of the event, and they couldn't afford additional time with the counselors. While it was only reported by one student, care should be given to make sure calls are returned. One student wrote following the crisis, "I tried [to contact Counseling Services] but no one returned my call."

The fear that the information will not be kept confidential or would be shared continues to be a repetitive theme for our students (Black & Weisz, 2003; Sears et al., 2006) and is related to the issue of self and public stigma. Over and over respondents indicated dating violence "is a very private matter." Desire for confidentiality, the need to improve current confidentiality procedures, or the desire that students be regularly assured that all information is confidential was a recurrent theme in the responses. Several respondents believed that if the counseling was even more confidential than it is currently perceived to be, more students would use it. One respondent expressed disappointment upon

learning that his private records were viewed by another student due to, what he perceived as, inadequate confidentiality procedures in Campus Counseling Services. The assurance that the university counseling center values and protects students will help to foster a trusting counselor-client relationship and encourage disclosure (Murray & Kardtzke, 2007). The number of participants reporting confidentiality concerns was small. However, fears and concerns of even a few can influence larger numbers from seeking help if confidentiality is not assured. Administrators and counselors should be aware of the students' strong desire for assurance.

Our respondents had many suggestions for campus interventions, which led us to believe that once students feel assured that their confidentiality will be protected, they would be more inclined to work on dating relationship issues. These respondents indicated that they wanted a place to openly talk about the issues surrounding dating violence; they want to understand the warning signs; and they want programs that will help them become better relational communicators in general. Some suggested group discussions for ongoing relationship issues that were open to students who wanted to attend several groups as well as specific topic discussions relating to relationship violence. While many reported that they were very satisfied with their relationships, they seemed to desire ways to improve or build upon their current relationships.

College is an important social development time in students' lives as they have more freedom to explore intimate relationships. These responses suggest students want information on how to become more relationally competent. Establishing a general relationship group discussion that integrates dating violence information may make the subject more approachable and less stigmatizing than having to seek counseling in the midst of a crisis. Intervention at this stage of their relationship development may deter negative relationship patterns that could continue throughout intimate relationships over a lifetime (Schumacher & Leonard, 2005). While these participants did not indicate the need to integrate dating violence assessment in counseling

services, we concur with Murray and Kardatzke (2007) that all who seek services should be assessed for this possibility independent of their presenting problem or gender.

Campus Environment and Safety Issues Interventions.

Other respondents thought that simple environmental changes could help to lower dating violence incidents or protect students who may be in danger. Several respondents wanted a confidential hotline or toll-free number for victims or their friends to report dating violence. Additionally, violent incidents could be reported via campus email. Moreover, installation of emergency call boxes and a visible police force at night, as well as during the day, were also highly requested.

Educational Interventions.

Separate from counseling interventions, a few participants wanted to know that university administrators will not tolerate dating violence and that they recognize it is a serious problem. Further, they want to see that the university takes action to teach all students that dating violence is not tolerated, to educate students about the warning signs that may predict dating violence, and to make sure victims understand their legal rights, in addition to providing counseling support for victims separate from counseling services.

Included in their suggestion for a campus-wide educational approach, participants suggested that the university should offer information and awareness training on dating violence to all incoming freshman classes, and training sessions, including forthright information sharing during the pre-enrollment information session) and required university orientation classes. Another way to reach the incoming freshman would be to provide this to Greek organizations.This education outreach could include warning signs, available program information, and guest speakers from counseling services, and student advocacy and support services.

Limitations

This study has limitations prompting cautious interpretations. This exploratory study was conducted to better understand students' perceptions of dating violence at a southeastern regional university, thus the generalizability of the findings are limited. Given the target audience of 6100, the return rate was low, which means a clear understanding of the problem's magnitude or the exact number of students experiencing dating violence continues to not be clearly known. Further, the participation was skewed in favor of females, thus we do not know how the results would have been different had more males participated. Additionally, information regarding relationship violence in same-sex couples as well as dating violence in non-committed relationships should be furthered explored.

Conclusion

Students indicated dating violence is a problem, wherein psychological and physical trauma is a result. The weapons reported give an indication that some dating violence could have fatal consequences. The fact that both genders report being aggressive reinforces the need for educational interventions and thorough assessments conducted by campus counselors. If offered, college interventions could help students address relationship issues that, without intervention, may continue to be problematic over their life time. Finally, these findings indicate students are looking to university administrators for support and programmatic development as well as additional safety measures in order to further enhance the awareness and education and to address the serious issue of dating violence on college campuses.

References

Barnes, G. E., Greenwood, L., & Sommer, R. (1991). Courtship violence in a Canadian sample of male college students. *Family Relations, 40,* 37-44.

Black, B. M., & Weisz, A. N. (2003). Dating violence help seeking behaviors of African American middle schoolers. *Violence Against Women*, *9*(2), 187-206.

Bryant, S. A., & Spencer, G. A. (2003). University students' attitudes about attributing blame in domestic violence. *Journal of Family Violence,*

18(6), 369-376.

Carlson, B. E. (1999). Student judgments about dating violence: A factorial vignette analysis. *Research in Higher Education, 40*(2), 201-220.

Charkow, W. B., & Nelson, E. S. (2000). Relationship dependency, dating violence, and scripts of female college students. *Journal of College Counseling, 3*, 17-28.

Cleveland, H. H., Herrera, V. M., & Stuewig, J. (2003). Abusive males and abused females in adolescent relationships: risk factor similarity and dissimilarity and the role of relationship seriousness. *Journal of Family Violence, 18*(6), 325-339.

Diversity Program Planning Committee. (2008). *Diversity Program Planning Committee Annual Report.* Troy, AL: Troy University. Retrieved September 21, 2008 from http://www.troy.edu/keydocuments/documents/2007-Annual-Diversity-Report.pdf

Island, D., & Letellier, P. (1991). *Men who beat the men who love them: Battered gay men and domestic violence.* New York: Harrington Park Press.

James, W. H., West, C., Deters, K. E., & Armijo, E. (2000). Youth dating violence. *Adolescence, 35*(139), 455-465.

Lamier, M. E., Lydum, A. R., Anderson, B. K., & Turner, A. P. (1999). Male and female recipients of unwanted sexual contact in a college sample: Prevalence rates, alcohol use, and depression symptoms. *Sex Roles, 40,* 295-308.

Mahlstedt, J.M., & Keeny, L. (1993). Female survivors of dating violence and their social networks. *Feminism and Psychology, 3,* 319-333.

Makepeace, J. M. (1981). Courtship violence among college students. *Family Relations, 30,* 97-102.

Murray, C. E., & Kardtzke, K. N. (2007). Dating violence among college students: Key issues for college counselors. *Journal of College Counseling, 10,* 79-89.

Sears, H. A., Byers, E. S., Whelan, J. J., & Saint-Pierre, M. (2006). If it hurts you then it is not a joke. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 21*(9), 1191-1207.

Schumacher, J. A., & Leonard, K. E. (2005). Husbands and wives marital adjustment, verbal aggression and physical aggression as longitudinal predictors of physical aggression in early marriage. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 73*(1), 28-37.

Straus, M. A. (2001). Prevalence of violence against dating partners by male and female university students worldwide. *Violence Against Women, 10*(7), 790-811.

Sugarman, D. B., & Hotaling, G. T. (1989). Dating violence: Prevalence, context, and risk markers. In M.A. Pirog-Good & J. E. Stets (Eds.), *Violence in dating relationships: Emerging social issues* (pp. 3-32). New York: Praeger.

Vogel, D. L., Wade, N. G., & Haake, S. (2006). Measuring the self-stigma associated with seeking psychological help. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 53*(3), 325-337.

Vogel, D. L., Wade, N. G., & Hackler, A. (2007). Perceived public stigma and the willingness to seek counseling: The mediating roles of self-stigma and attitudes towards counseling. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 54*(1), 40-50.

Whiteley, S. M. (1987). The campus counseling