

Perceptions of Intimate Partner Violence among University Students: Situational and Gender Variables

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Abstract

Fear of stigmatization and shame drives many women to stay silent and refrain from reporting intimate partner violence (IPV). 'Normalization' of violence in contemporary culture often results in inability to recognize behaviors as violent or controlling, and women may internalize the idea that they are responsible for victimization because they behaved inappropriately or did not anticipate and maneuver men's aggressive behavior. This research assessed university students' recognition of intimate partner violence and analyzed their attitudes toward this behavior. Subjects were surveyed on their attitudes toward IPV and abilities to accurately identify scenarios of intimate partner violence. Their ability to identify resources for victims of IPV on campus was also examined. Of 381 male (n=151) and female (n=230) university students 97% were able to accurately identify the scenario that did not depict intimate partner violence. Recognition rates were as high as 90% for scenarios that described physically violent IPV. However, only 51% were able to identify IPV behaviors involving control, coercion, and threats that did not involve physical violence. Female participants were statistically more likely than males to accurately identify IPV. Over 55% believed that IPV was a problem on their campus and 75% of participants disagreed with all statements that depicted abusive and violent behaviors as acceptable. Results indicate that though women may be more capable of identifying IPV than men, identification of IPV becomes more complex when physical violence is absent. Results have implications for understanding and addressing high rates of gendered violence, and may help to explain why many cannot recognize what is identified by law as harassment, coercion, violence, and abuse in many aspects of life.

Intimate Partner Violence, including and often overlapping with stalking, sexual violence, and trafficking, is a major public health issue in the United States, costing over 8 billion dollars a year and resulting in serious emotional and social costs for victims. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) indicate that nearly 3 in 10 women and 1 in 10 men in the United States have experienced rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner. Impacts from these experiences include symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), fear, concern for safety, injury, need for legal services, need for advocacy services, need for housing services, need for health care, and absence from work or school. All victims reporting to the CDC had experienced at least one of these impacts. Mental health consequences include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation or completion, and substance abuse. Children growing up in homes where intimate partner violence occurs also experience negative, often long-term consequences.

Public awareness of these issues has grown but prevention has proven challenging because of myriad social, cultural, and geographic variables and the complex dynamic of violence in intimate relationships. Past research on intimate partner violence indicates that dating couples are more likely than married couples to become violent with one another (Narbors and Jasinski, 2009, 58). College students in particular are at increased risk of experiencing intimate partner violence (Narbors and Jasinski, 2009, 60) with reported rates ranging from 20% (Arias and Johnson, 1989, 200; Makepeace, 1981, 386) to 50% (Bethke and DeJoy, 1993, 40). Additional research indicates that approximately 30% of college students will at some point be physically assaulted by a partner (Bryant and Spencer, 2003, 372). Physical abuse

occurs in over 20 percent of the undergraduate dating population and an even greater percentage are psychologically abused” (Iconis, 2013, 112).

In 1985, a survey of students at a large university in the Midwestern United States revealed that 24% of survey respondents reported being involved in incidents of intimate partner violence in the previous year (Olday, Keating, Wesley, and Bowman, 1985). In 2007, an identical survey at the same university found that nearly one third (32.8 percent) of 536 respondents reported involvement with intimate partner violence in the previous 12 months ranging from slapping to violent sexual acts—indicating a nine percent increase in the incidence in 22 years among students attending the same university. These studies illustrate a need for interventions because violence among college students is likely to continue if the behaviors are not addressed (Pirog-Good and Stets, 1989).

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research was to assess university students’ perception of intimate partner violence and assess their ability to recognize situations of intimate partner violence.

Research questions

1. What portion of sampled university students are able to recognize scenarios of intimate partner violence?
2. Do sampled male and female university students differ in their ability to recognize intimate partner violence?
3. What are sampled university students’ attitudes toward intimate partner violence?
4. Do sampled university students believe intimate partner violence is a concern on their campus?

Instrumentation

A 25-item survey, Intimate Partner Violence Recognition and Attitude Survey, related to intimate partner violence was developed for use in this study. Five scenarios were created by the researcher and 11 questions were taken from the Intimate Partner Violence Attitude Scale (IPVAS) (Smith, Thompson, Tomaka, & Buchanan, 2005). The first section of the survey assessed the participants’ ability to recognize situations of Intimate Partner Violence. Five scenarios were given and participants were asked to indicate whether IPV had occurred. The second section of the survey consisted of questions relating to the participants’ attitudes toward intimate partner violence. This section consisted of 11 questions from the IPVAS. The students were asked to answer the questions using a four-point Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree). The survey also included demographic data about participants, including gender, age, year in school, ethnicity and current relationship status.

Surveys were administered in 11 classes of a state university in the Midwest region of the United States.

Data Analysis

Results were analyzed quantitatively using a cross-sectional analysis of the survey. Data was entered into an SPSS spreadsheet for analysis. An independent sample T-test was used to compare genders in their ability to recognize whether intimate partner violence occurred in each scenario. Cronbach alpha was used to determine internal consistency and reliability for the modified version of the IPVAS that was used for the final survey instrument.

Demographic Results

Of the 382 students surveyed, 39.6 % (n=151) were male, and 60.4% (n=230) were female. Eighty percent (n=230) of participants were Caucasian. Seventy four percent (n=280) of participants were between the ages of eighteen and twenty. Seventy two percent (n=271) of participants were either freshman or sophomores in college. Relationship status was fairly even, 48% (n=179) reported being single, while 48% (n=181) reported being in a relationship.

Table 1

Demographic Data of Participants'

Variable	%	n
Race		
Caucasian	80.4	304
African American	7.9	30
Hispanic	1.6	6
Asian/Pacific Islander	5.0	19
Native American/American Indian/Alaskan Native	.3	1
Biracial/Multicultural	2.1	8
Other	2.6	10
Gender		
Male	39.6	151
Female	60.4	230
Age		
18	19.9	76
19	30.2	115
20	23.4	89
21	10.0	38
22	7.9	30
23+	8.7	33
Variable	%	n
Student Status		
Freshman	41.5	156
Sophomore	30.6	115
Junior	17.6	66
Senior	10.1	38
Graduate Student	0.3	1
Relationship Status		
Single	47.6	179
In a Relationship	48.1	181
Married	1.9	7
Divorced	0	0
Widowed	0	0
Other	2.4	9
N=382		

Survey Results

Participants were asked to read five scenarios and indicate, by selecting yes or no, which scenarios depicted intimate partner violence.

Question 1: What portion of sampled university students are able to recognize scenarios of intimate partner violence?

Scenario One: Jeffery and Stacy have been dating for one year. Stacy has a tendency to be very jealous and possessive. If Stacy is at work Jeffery is not supposed to have friends at their apartment. Jeffery has to ask Stacy if he can go out with friends. If he goes out without asking her, she often ignores his texts and phone calls.

Scenario Two: Tammy and Ben have been dating one another for 4 months. Tammy often worries what Ben's reaction will be to the clothing she chooses to wear. Ben has told Tammy to change before they go out on several occasions.

Scenario Three: Steven and John have had an off/on relationship for the past 2 years. When they are together they believe that they should have equal input in the decisions they make. Often they will not agree, but will come to a compromise.

Scenario Four: James and Stephanie have been married for 3 months. James has a history of fighting, losing his temper quickly and often brags about how many fights he has "won". While dating he had never hit Stephanie or been physically violent towards her. After a friend's birthday party, where drinks were consumed, James becomes angry at Stephanie for "flirting" with his friend. When they arrive home James raises his hand to Stephanie and says she deserves to be slapped. However, he never actually slaps her.

Frequency statistics were calculated for questions one through five from the Intimate Partner Violence Recognition and Attitude Survey. Of the three hundred and eighty one participants who responded to these five questions the mean score was 3.66 (SD=1.19). For scenario one 65.4% (n=250) accurately identified that IPV took place. For scenario two 51% (n=195) accurately identified that IPV took place. For scenario three 97.1% (n=371) accurately identified that IPV did not take place. For scenario four 89.8% (n=343) accurately identified that IPV took place. For the final scenario, scenario five, 62.2% (n=237) accurately identified that IPV took place (Table 2).

Table 2

Sampled University Students Responses to Intimate Partner Violence Scenario Questions

Item		Males %(n)	Females %(n)	All %(n)
Scenario 1	*Yes	62.9(95)	67.4(155)	65.4(250)
	No	37.1(56)	32.6(75)	34.6(132)
Scenario 2	*Yes	41.1(62)	57.8(133)	51.0(195)
	No	58.9(89)	42.2(97)	49.0(187)
Scenario 3	Yes	2.6(4)	2.6(6)	2.6(10)
	*No	97.3(146)	97.4(224)	97.1(371)
Scenario 4	*Yes	84.8(128)	93.0(214)	89.8(343)
	No	15.2(23)	7.0(16)	10.2(39)
Scenario 5	*Yes	53.0(80)	68.1(156)	62.0(237)
	No	47.0(71)	31.9(73)	37.7(144)

*Correct answer

Question 2: Do male and female university students differ in their ability to recognize intimate partner violence?

An independent t-test was calculated for questions one through five on the Intimate Partner Violence Recognition and Attitude Survey. There was a significant difference in male participants' abilities to accurately identify scenarios of IPV compared to female participants. $t(301.45)=-3.42, p<.05$ (Table 3).

Table 3

Sampled University Students Responses to Intimate Partner Violence Scenario Questions

Item		Males %(n)	Females %(n)	All %(n)
Scenario 1	*Yes	62.9(95)	67.4(155)	65.4(250)
	No	37.1(56)	32.6(75)	34.6(132)
Scenario 2	*Yes	41.1(62)	57.8(133)	51.0(195)
	No	58.9(89)	42.2(97)	49.0(187)
Scenario 3	Yes	2.6(4)	2.6(6)	2.6(10)
	*No	97.3(146)	97.4(224)	97.1(371)
Scenario 4	*Yes	84.8(128)	93.0(214)	89.8(343)
	No	15.2(23)	7.0(16)	10.2(39)
Scenario 5	*Yes	53.0(80)	68.1(156)	62.0(237)
	No	47.0(71)	31.9(73)	37.7(144)

*Correct answer

Question 3. What are sampled university students' attitudes toward intimate partner violence?

Frequency data were calculated for questions one through eleven in section two of the Intimate Partner Violence Recognition and Attitude Survey. Participants were asked to respond on a four item Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree, for each question. The average answer was disagree for all questions. All had a range of 1 to 4, meaning someone answered strongly agree to strongly disagree for all questions except question 4; no one strongly agreed with the statement “During a heated argument it is okay for me to say something that will hurt my partner on purpose” (Table 4).

Table 4

Sampled University Students Attitudes toward Intimate Partner Violence

Item	*SA %(n)	A %(n)	D %(n)	SD %(n)	Missing %(n)
Threatening a partner is okay as long as I don't hurt him or her:	0.5(2)	0.8(3)	33.0(126)	65.7(251)	0.0(0)
During a heated argument, it is okay for me to bring up something from my partner's past to hurt him or her:	0.3(1)	4.5(17)	52.9(202)	41.9(160)	0.5(2)
As long as my partner doesn't hurt me, threats are excused:	0.3(1)	3.4(13)	45.0(172)	51.0(195)	0.3(1)
During a heated argument, it is okay for me to say something to hurt my partner on purpose:	0.0(0)	5.2(20)	51.6(197)	42.9(164)	0.3(1)
I don't mind my partner doing something just to make me jealous:	0.8(3)	8.1(31)	44.8(171)	46.3(177)	0.0(0)
It is no big deal if my partner insults me in front of others:	0.3(1)	4.7(18)	29.3(112)	65.7(251)	0.0(0)
I would be flattered if my partner told me not to talk to someone of the opposite sex:	0.3(1)	13.4(51)	55.0(210)	31.2(119)	0.3(1)

Note:

*SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly Disagree

Question 4. Do sampled university students believe intimate partner violence is a concern on their campus?

Participants were asked to identify whether they believed intimate partner violence was a problem on their campus (using a Likert scale, strongly agree to strongly disagree). Of the 379 participants who responded to this question, 8.7% (n=33) strongly agreed, 49.9% (n=189) agreed, 38% (n=144) disagreed,

3.4% (n=13) strongly disagreed. Participants were also asked to identify what they believed the rate of intimate partner violence was on their campus.

Summary

A statistically significant difference was found between male and female participants' ability to accurately identify scenarios of intimate partner violence. Females were able to identify intimate partner violence in the scenarios more accurately than male participants. However, males and females were almost identical in their ability to accurately identify the scenario in which IPV did not take place. Ninety-seven percent of both male and female participants answered this question correctly in stating that IPV did not take place.

Participants of this research had relatively negative attitudes toward intimate partner violence. All means for survey items in Table 4 demonstrated that the majority of participants disagreed with the statements. Fifty percent of participants believed that intimate partner violence was an issue on their campus.

Discussion and Conclusion

Nearly all (97%) of participants were able to identify the scenario where intimate partner violence had not taken place, but many had difficulty identifying the scenario where intimate partner violence was depicted. Students were uncertain about intimate partner violence when control, rather than a threat or actual act of physical violence, was presented as the main form of abuse. This may indicate that control in relationships has become somewhat normalized. Three participants wrote comments on the surveys near the scenario questions stating "...it's a bad relationship but not abusive". These comments may indicate a "disconnect" between abuse, a pattern of controlling behaviors, and perceptions of a healthy relationship.

The scenario that generated the most conflicted answers involved a man telling his female partner what she could and could not wear. For this scenario 51% of participants accurately identified this as intimate partner violence, but more male participants (58%) incorrectly answered this question. This may indicate the unconscious perception of male privilege, dictating that male partners are entitled to exercise control over some behaviors of their intimate partners.

The normalization of control within intimate relationships is indicated in perceptions of the scenarios as well as some of the attitude questions. On the attitude scale participants most commonly agreed that: "I think my partner should give me a detailed account of what he or she did during the day" (18.6%) and "It is okay for me to tell my partner not to talk to someone of the opposite sex" (22%). Both situations illustrated control over a partner. Some participants agreed or strongly agreed to almost all the statements, indicating positive attitudes toward behaviors that considered abusive or violent.

Female participants were statistically more likely than males to accurately identify IPV. Over 55% of all participants believed that IPV was a problem on their campus and 75% of participants disagreed with all statements that depicted abusive and violent behaviors as acceptable. Results indicate that though women may be more capable of identifying IPV than men, identification of IPV becomes more complex when physical violence is absent. Results have implications for understanding and addressing high rates of gendered violence, and may help to explain why many cannot recognize what is identified by law as harassment, coercion, violence, and abuse in many aspects of life.

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