

The Dating Violence Literature Today: Where's the Context?

Aims/Goals

Dating violence (DV) is defined as physical violence – used by one dating partner with the intent to inflict physical harm on another – that is accompanied by psychological, verbal, and/or sexual abuse (Anderson & Danis, 2007; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Estimates of DV suggests that one in every three dating relationships (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001) and 53% of females in their first year of college report experiencing dating violence (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). However, in comparison to the adult or marital intimate partner violence (IPV) literature, the dating violence (DV) literature is lacking nuance and methodological sophistication that we argue is leading to conflicting and outdated findings that are incompatible with what we know about adult or marital IPV. Johnson (1995, 2008) advanced the adult IPV literature by making a theoretical and empirical case for distinguishing between types of IPV based on the presence or absence of coercive control in violent couple dynamics; two main types of IPV have been identified (intimate terrorism [IT] and situational couple violence [SCV]).

IT is distinguished by an abusers' use of coercive control – the desire to exert general, long term control over one's partner through the combined use of coercion involving a demand or threat, the abuser's ability and willingness to follow through on the demand or threat, surveillance or monitoring of the victim's activities, and wearing down of the victim's resolve to resist his control (Dutton & Goodman, 2005; Johnson, 2008). In contrast, SCV entails physical violence that erupts from a conflictual situation (in the absence of coercive control). Compared to SCV, IT is more likely to be perpetrated by men against women, more likely to escalate over time, less likely to be mutual, more likely to involve serious injury, induce more fear for one's life, and entail more per-couple incidences of violence (Ansara & Hindin, 2010; Frye, Manganello, Campbell, Walton-Moss, & Wilt, 2006; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2003a, 2003b; Johnson, 2008; Johnson & Leone, 2005; Johnson, Leone, & Yu, 2014; Leone, Johnson, & Cohan, 2005; Rosen et al., 2005; Stith et al., 2011). To the best of our knowledge, there is no research to date that has examined DV in the context of the presence or absence of coercive control in college age samples.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to systematically review the existing DV literature through the lens of Johnson's (2008) typology of IPV to provide theoretically driven recommendations for future exposure research. This review will be accomplished by examining specific components of the methods section, including sampling (e.g., agency versus community), measurement (e.g., validated measure, dichotomous variable), and dimensions and characteristics of physical DV (e.g., severity, frequency, non-violent abuse tactics). Our aim is to make recommendations for future research that explores the complexity of DV as has been done in the adult IPV research.

Methods

The purpose of this review will be to examine the methodology of the DV studies published since 2000. General searches in PsychINFO and Google Scholar will be conducted as well as searches in IPV specific journals using keywords such as "dating violence," "domestic violence" + "college students," "emerging adult(hood)" + "dating violence/IPV." To accomplish our literature review, we will conduct a deductive qualitative content analysis process to analyze each individual study and the studies as a whole (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) to summarize the methodological decisions that have been made in the DV literature, but also to provide recommendations for future research based on what is unknown.

Preliminary Results

Based on our preliminary analyses, there are three major limitations in the current DV literature: 1) unsophisticated measurement of DV and 2) a lack of clarity regarding the definition of psychological abuse and its' application to DV. Research has documented that merely measuring IPV with a dichotomous “yes/no” variable or solely measuring acts of physical violence does not capture context or relational dynamics in which IPV occurs (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Lewis & Fremouw, 2003; Johnson, 2008); however, based on our preliminary review, these are the two most prevalent approaches to measuring DV in college age samples. Aside from the use of dichotomous variables, the majority of studies have relied on the Conflict Tactic Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979) or Conflict Tactics Scale – Revised (CTS2, Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Although the creation and validation of the CTS2 enhanced researchers' ability examine IPV (e.g., addition of minor/severity, injury, and sexual coercion scales; Straus et al., 1996), the CTS2 has received continued criticism for several reasons. Neither version allows researchers to measure the context in which the violence occurs (e.g., coercive control versus conflict), the motives behind the violence, or the meaning behind the violence, which leads to concerns that neither scale provides an accurate representation of the victim's experience of abuse (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998; Lewis & Fremouw, 2003). For example, Kaukinen, Gover, and Hartman (2012) found that college age women were most likely to be involved in mutually violent relationships with very low levels of violence, but the authors did not assess additional variables that might highlight differences, including the frequency, overall patterns of abusive behaviors, or injury. Further, we don't know the context in which the violence occurred (e.g., conflict, coercive control, and/or self-defense).

Although psychological abuse (often referred to as psychological aggression, verbal or emotional abuse) is commonly assessed in the IPV literature (rarely assessed in the DV literature), this type of abuse is only one component of coercive control, and in isolation, does not represent IT. Yet, due to the wide range of conceptualizations of psychological abuse, it is occasionally equated to coercive control (Dutton & Goodman, 2005). For example, the only study to date that sought to apply Johnson's (2008) typology to a large sample of university students (Strauss and Gozjolko, 2014) found that men and women are equally likely to be ITs, but the authors made the consistently criticized methodological decisions that limited their ability to truly discern IT from SCV. The authors measured coercive control through the use of the Psychological Aggression Subscale of the CTS2, which has been criticized for its inclusion of items more accurately defined as emotional/verbal abuse (e.g., insulting or swearing) or conflict tactics (e.g., stomping out of a room during an argument) and not coercive control, yet often is used to make arguments regarding coercive control (Dutton & Goodman, 2005). Further, IT cannot be captured in isolated acts of violence because the pattern of coercive control occurs over an extended period of time, and the nature of the violence may change over the course of the relationship (Johnson, 2008).

Implications and Future Directions

Without understanding the patterns of violence and abuse and the context and motives behind the DV, we are unable to make meaningful recommendations for advocates, professionals, and policy makers working to provide DV preventions and interventions. Our future analyses will remain focused on the methods sections of the DV literature, but our paper and presentation will examine additional variable domains, such as relational (e.g., length of relationship, commitment level) and familial domains (e.g., exposure to IPV and/or child abuse and maltreatment in the family of origin).

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