Courtship Violence: Incidence in a National Sample of Higher Education Students

By: Jacquelyn W White Mary P Koss

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Abstract:

An approximately representative national sample of 2,602 women and 2,105 men was surveyed regarding their frequency of inflicting and sustaining verbal and physical aggression in a heterosexual relationship. Results revealed that approximately 81% of the men inflicted, as well as received, some form of verbal aggression at least once, while the comparable figure for women was 87-88%. The percentage experiencing some form of physical aggression was lower; about 37% of the men and 35% of the women inflicted some form of physical aggression and about 39% of the men and 32% of the women sustained some physical aggression. No differences were found as a function of ethnicity, family income, and institutional characteristics. Regional differences in the use of verbal and physical aggression, and in the receipt of physical aggression, were found for men.

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Heterosexual violence, dating violence, courtship violence: All diese phrases have been used to describe aggressive encounters that occur in premarital relationships. As evidence mounts regarding the high levels of aggression in these relationships, researchers are attempting to understand the phenomenon. Some argue that courtship violence is similar to marital violence (Flynn, 1987; Laner & Thompson, 1982), while others point to critical differences between the two (Carlson, 1987; Riggs & O'Leary, 1989). All agree that premarital experiences with relationship violence have serious implications for marital violence.

Courtship has been called the "founding of the family system" (Broderick & Smith, 1979). Dating frequently provides a context for establishing meaningful relationships with members of the opposite sex (Conger & Peterson, 1984; Rice, 1984). Premarital relationships provide the context in which individuals are socialized into later marital roles (Flynn, 1987; Makepeace, 1981; Roscoe & Benaske, 1985). These socialization experiences may be positive or negative. It has been recognized for some time that dating and courtship relationships hold competitive and exploitative potential (Waller, 1937; Kanin, 1969). However, until Makepeace's germinal study, violence during courtship had not received serious attention.

The Incidence and Prevalence of Courtship Violence

Makepeace (1981) found that the majority of college students surveyed (61.5%) personally knew of someone involved in courtship violence, and 21 .2% of those surveyed had at least one direct personal experience. Pushing and slapping were the most frequent forms of violence experienced. Incidents of being threatened, punched, struck with an object, or assaulted with a weapon were also reported. Jealousy was the most frequently cited reason for the violence (27.2%), with sexual denial and disputes over drinking the next most frequent reasons. A similar pattern has been observed in high school students (Roscoe & Kelsey, 1986). Other researchers more recently have confirmed the existence and high frequency of dating violence (Arias, Samios, & O'Leary, 1987; Bernard, Bernard, & Bernard, 1985; Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982; Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983; Laner & Thompson, 1982; Matthews, 1984; Roscoe & Callahan, 1985).

In a recent review of the dating violence literature Sugarman and Hotaling (1989) identified over 20 data sets estimating the amount of dating violence among young people. However, conceptual and procedural variations make comparisons across these data sets problematic. For example, lifetime dating violence prevalence rates range from a low of 9% (Roscoe & Callahan, 1985) to a high of 66.2% (McKinney, 1986). Variations in regional characteristics of samples, sampling procedure (random versus convenience) and sample characteristics (sex, race, age) contribute to these discrepancies. Variations in the operational definition of courtship violence appear to affect incidence and prevalence estimates. Definitions of violence are frequently restricted to the threat of and/ or use of physical force. Investigations using such definitions yield lower estimates of courtship violence than studies that include various forms of psychological, or verbal, forms of aggression (O'Keefe, Brockopp, & Chew, 1986). Finally, estimates of courtship violence also depend on the definition of courtship. Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs (1985) stated that "If violent encounters only in recent 'steady' dating relationships have been reported, and if the potentially violent encounters of more casual relationships ... have been excluded, the full extent of courtship violence may be substantially underestimated" (p. 46). Hence, there is an obvious need for a systematic investigation of dating violence in order to get a clear sense of its frequency.

Thus, the purpose of the present study was to provide national incidence data based on a representative sample of college students from across the United States. Demographic characteristics that might affect incidence were also measured, including sex, ethnicity, family income, geographic locale, and type of school.

Though no national data on courtship violence are currently available, previous research offers several hypotheses regarding the relationship between various demographic factors and courtship

violence. Sugarman and Hotaling (1989) concluded on the basis of all available evidence that southern states exhibited a significantly higher prevalence rate than midwestern or western states, supporting a culture-of-violence effect (Wolfgang & Ferracuti, 1967). Also supporting this notion has been the finding that a low family income is a risk marker (Makepeace, 1987), at least for males (Sigelman, Berry, & Wiles, 1984). It has also been found that persons from urban environments are more likely to be involved in courtship violence (Lane & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985; Makepeace, 1987). Evidence supporting a culture-of-violence theory is contradictory regarding ethnicity and gender (see Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989, for a review). For ethnicity, the evidence is too scant to make a definite conclusion, whereas for gender, most studies suggest that courtship violence is mutual, involving women and men equally. Neither religious affiliation (Makepeace, 1987) nor religious incompatibility (Stets & PirogGood, 1987) appear related to rate of courtship violence. Thus, based on previous findings, it was hypothesized that geographic region, family income and locale (urbanrural) would be significantly related to levels of courtship violence, but that ethnicity, gender and religious affiliation would not be related for a college sample.

In the present study measures of verbal aggression were included along with physical aggression to give greater insight into the scope and manner of aggressive expression. Scores on the symbolic aggression and violence subscales of the Straus Conflict Tactics Scale (1979) were used to assess the extent of courtship violence perpetrated and sustained during the past year. This measure of violence has been the most frequently used in past research and its use in the present study enables comparison with the past research. Finally, in the present study, the use of, and receipt of, violence in heterosexual relationships in general was examined. The nature of the relationship was not restricted to a dating situation. The goal was to include a wide range of heterosexual social relationships, since all types presumably contribute to socialization into heterosexual roles and hold the potential for verbal and/or physical aggression.

METHOD

Sampling

Data were collected as part of a national survey of 6, 1 59 college students enrolled in 32 institutions of higher education across the continental United States. Criteria for selection of institutions insured a representative sample, and included regional location, size of standard metropolitan statistical area, enrollment size, type of institutional authority (private secular, private religious or public), type of institution (university, 4-year college, 2-year college, technical/vocational), and percentage enrollment of minority students. Within each selected institution, a random sample of classes was chosen (see Koss, Gidycz, & Wisniewski, 1987, for additional details).

Procedure

Once target institutions were selected and permission to administer the survey obtained, one of eight postmaster's-level psychologists (six females and two males) administered the survey during regularly scheduled class times. The questionnaire was anonymous. Informed consent was obtained prior to survey administration, and debriefing, both orally and written, immediately followed completion of the survey.

The survey included an assessment of demographic information: sex, age, ethnicity, family income, marital status, religious affiliation. The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus, 1979) was responded to twice, with the following instructions: "Here is a list of things you might have done when you had a conflict or disagreement with someone of the opposite sex. We would like you to try to remember what went on during the last school year (September to September). Please place an 'X' for each of the things listed below to show how often you did it and how often it was done to you last school year." Scoring ranged from 0 = never to 5 = more than once a month, and reflected the use of verbal and physical aggression, as well as the receipt of verbal and physical aggression.

RESULTS

A number of respondents who participated in the study did not complete the survey (24 %) . Because the CTS was the last instrument administered, data for the present analyses were available on 2,602 women and 2,105 men. The resultant sample was comparable to the larger sample with regard to age, ethnicity, family income, marital status, and type of institution (i.e., no statistically significant differences). In turn, the larger sample was approximately representative of national enrollment data. The only discrepancy was that students enrolled at institutions in the Northeast and Southeast were overrepresented, and those in the West were underrepresented (see Koss et al., 1987). In the total sample, for women, the mean age was 21.4 years; 85% were single, 11% married, and 4% divorced; 86% were White, 7% were Black, 3% were Hispanic, 3% were Asian, and 1% Native American; and 39% were Catholic, 38% Protestant, 4% Jewish, and 20% had another or no religious affiliation. For men the mean age was 21.0 years; 91% were single, 9% married, and 1% divorced; 86% were White, 6% were Black, 3% were Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 1 % Native American; and 40% were Catholic, 34% Protestant, 5% Jewish, and 22% had another or no religious affiliation (see Koss et al., 1987, for additional details).

A series of comparisons between those who responded to the CTS and those who did not was conducted to assess the comparability of CTS responders and nonresponders. Because of the large sample size it was possible for very small mean differences to be statistically significant. To account for this, alpha was set at .01. In addition, for all preliminary analyses effect sizes, in standard deviation units, were calculated. Cohen's (1969) recommendations for evaluating these were followed: large > .50, medium > .30, and small > .10. In the present study only effect sizes greater than .15 were considered important. Using these criteria, results indicated that for both women (2,602 out of 3 , 1 87) and men (2,105 out of 2,972) there were no significant differences between CTS responders and nonresponders on a number of behavioral and psychological variables assessed in the survey but not included in the present analyses (see Koss & Dinero, 1988, 1989, for a discussion of these variables).

The incidence of each type of courtship violence was determined, and tests comparing types of courtship violence across each demographic factor were conducted. Table 1 presents the percentage of respondents indicating they had never experienced any form of courtship violence during the past year, those experiencing each type only once, and those experiencing each type more than once.1 Chi-square analyses revealed no significant differences in the percentage of men and women who reported inflicting and sustaining each form of courtship violence. Table 2 shows the percentage of women and men reporting inflicting and sustaining at least one type of

symbolic aggression at least once during the past year, and at least one type of violence at least once during the past year. Approximately 8 1 % of the men inflicted, as well as received, some form of symbolic aggression at least once, while the comparable figure for women was 87-88%. The percentage experiencing some form of physical aggression was lower; about 37% of the men and 35% of the women inflicted some form of physical aggression and about 39% of the men and 32% of the women sustained some physical aggression. Returning to Table 1, it can be seen that physical aggression was most likely to take the form of pushing/ shoving/grabbing or threats to hit or throw something. In no instance was there a significant gender difference. The percentage of women and men who reported neither inflicting nor sustaining either symbolic aggression or physical aggression was quite low (6.6% for women; 13.8% for men). Conversely, 16.1% of the women and 29.4% of the men reported inflicting and sustaining both forms of courtship violence.

Straus (1979) suggested that mean symbolic scores be computed for parametric analyses (this cannot be done for physical aggression frequencies because of their skewed distribution). Thus, we also computed mean symbolic aggression scores for each respondent, following Straus' (1979) scoring procedure. G-tests on the mean symbolic scores revealed that men reported inflicting significantly less symbolic aggression (M = 24.6) than women (M= 28.69), though each reported comparable levels sustained (M for men = 28 . 1 ; M for women = 29 .0). The pattern of data in Table 1 suggests that part of the gender difference in infliction of symbolic aggression may be due to women 's greater use of sulking/refusing to talk and stomping.

The relationship between the use and receipt of symbolic aggression and physical aggression as a function of various demographic factors (i.e., ethnicity, family income, region, type of institution, institutional control, city size and institution size) was examined via a series of chi-square analyses for women and men separately. Analyses of variance were also performed on the mean symbolic aggression scores. Withp < .01 and effect size >. 1 5 , no significant differences were found for men or women for institutional characteristics (size, type of authority, type, or percentage minority enrollment), size of the standard metropolitan area, edinicity, or family income. For women, regional differences were also nonsignificant. However, for men region was significandy related to the mean use of symbolic aggression, F (7, 1752)= 16.5, p< .001, eta= .25, but not to the receipt of symbolic aggression. Region was also related to the use of physical aggression, χ^sup 2^(7)= 121.24, p < 0001, eta = .26, and the receipt of physical aggression, χ^sup 2^(7)= 90.74, p < .0001, eta = .23. The means for symbolic aggression and percentages for physical aggression are given in Table 3.

The Great Lakes area and the Southeast consistently showed the highest levels and the Rocky Mountains area, Plain States, andFar West had the lowest. For inflicting symbolic aggression a Tukey's HSD test revealed that the means for the Great Lakes region and Southeast were significantly greater than the means for the Plains States and Far West. The difference between the Great Lakes region and Rocky Mountain area was also significant. Chi-square tests suggested that for inflicting and sustaining physical aggression, the Great Lakes' percentage was higher than expected and the Plain States' and Far West's percentages were lower than expected.

To assist in interpreting the regional results for men, a weighted mean symbolic score was assigned to each state (weighted by sample size) based on its region as defined by the

Department of Education (Office of Civil Rights, 1980). States were then clustered into geographical regions as defined by Linsky and Straus (1986), and a mean symboHc aggression score for each of these regions was calculated. These means were then correlated with a social stress index that Linsky and Straus determined for each region. The social stress index was based on indices of economic stressors in the state (business failures, unemployment, workers on strike, bankruptcies, mortgage foreclosures), family stressors (divorces, abortions, illegitimate births, infant deaths, fetal deaths, disaster assistance), and other stressors (mobility, new households, new welfare cases, high school dropouts). Because of the very low N, and hence underrepresentation of the Rocky Mountain region and the Far West, these were omitted from the correlational analysis. The resultant correlation between the social stress index and use of symbolic aggression for men was .765 (p =.076, n = 6), while the correlation for sustaining symbolic aggression was .700 (p = .25, n = 6). Comparable correlations for females were . 1 19 (p = .83) and -. 14 (p =.78).

Finally, there were significant correlations (allps < .0001) between the inflicting and sustaining of symbolic aggression for women (r = .79, N = 2063) and men (r = .84, N = 1761). Correlations between inflicting and sustaining physical aggression were significant for women (r = .60, N = 2012) and for men (r = .69, N = 1761).

DISCUSSION.

Verbal aggression is a common experience among college women and men, most often taking the form of arguing heatedly, yelling and/or insulting and sulking/refusing to talk. Whereas over 80% of young women and men appear to engage in verbal aggression, the data indicate that less than 40% engage in physical forms of aggression, these most often taking the form of threats to hit, pushing, grabbing and shoving. Furthermore, the significant correlations between the inflicting and sustaining of both verbal and physical forms of aggression indicate the reciprocal nature of heterosexual violence. GwartneyGibbs, Stockard, and Brohmer (1987), noting the reciprocal relationship, argued "that aggressive behavior may be learned, at least in part, in intimate interaction with partners" (p. 280). The adage, "violence begets violence" is supported.

There is no doubt, based on the present findings and those of others, that courtship violence is ubiquitous. Given that marriage roles are typically learned in premarital heterosexual relationships, as well as at home observing parents, these high levels of verbal and physical aggression suggest mat the future American family will continue to be plagued by violence. The finding of comparable rates of courtship violence across gender, race, family income, type of institution, and religion suggests that all families are potentially at risk. The finding of regional differences for men offers some tentative evidence for a culture-of-violence effect, suggesting that sociocultural factors may exacerbate an already serious problem. However, the fact that women did not show the same region-related rates of courtship violence indicates that the role of region needs further exploration. Regional differences may be blurred because in the present study region was defined by the institution the student was attending, not the region of rearing. Some students reared in one region attend college in another region. However, the pattern of results for region do confirm other studies which have found higher reported rates of courtship violence in southern states. The finding of a high rate in me Great Lakes region is new. However, previous research has not used such narrowly defined regions as were used in the present study.

The absence of gender-related differences deserves specific explanation. Feminists long have been concerned mat research which fails to examine who initiates violence and the extent of resultant injury does a great disservice to women (see Pleck, Pleck, Grossman, & Bart, 1977). Clearly, it would be foolhardy to jump to the conclusion that women are just as aggressive as men based on me present data. Issues of motives, the offensive-defensive nature of the aggressive action, me extent of injury, and the partner's perceptions of the act were not addressed in the present study. Other research documents that women report more often than men engaging in aggression for self-defense reasons (Saunders, 1988), whereas men report more often engaging in aggression to instill fear and to intimidate. Furthermore, women are far more likely than men to react to courtship violence with surprise and fear (Matthews, 1984), and to sustain serious injury from intimate violence (Makepeace, 1984, 1986; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Finally, possible gender differences in definition of terms such as arguing, sulking, insulting, could obscure actual differences in the experience of courtship violence. Other research suggests that women and men hold different beliefs and expectations about what constitutes aggression (White, 1983).

The present study had several advantages. First, a large, approximately representative national sample of college students was used, thus providing a broader basis for estimates of frequency of premarital heterosexual violence experiences than previous research. Accuracy was enhanced by providing frequencies for each type of response constituting verbal and physical aggression. This breakdown helped clarify discrepancies noted in earlier research because the consequences of different operational definitions become more obvious. One should expect when courtship violence is limited to acts of physical aggression, frequencies will be lower than when verbal aggression is included. Second, the present study broadly conceptualized a heterosexual relationship. By doing so, the frequencies obtained probably reflect the maximum levels of interpersonal violence experienced in heterosexual relationships.

Several caveats should be noted regarding the frequency data. First, the data provide evidence of only the amount of courtship violence experienced in a one-year time frame rather than total lifetime experiences. One cannot determine the lifetime prevalence of courtship violence. Second, the sample included only college students. Thus, these data can neither comment on the incidence of courtship violence among younger adolescents nor among noncollege young people. However, there is some evidence that response rates for research participation are a function of intelligence and education (Sonne-Holm, Sorensen, Jensen, & Schnohr, 1989), suggesting that a college sample may be more accessible for study. Thus, students' self-reports may be a highly appropriate starting point for generating hypotheses that may be more difficult to examine using other populations.

Third, the reliability and validity of self-report data must be considered. Straus (1987) has provided recent data on the reliability and validity of the Conflict Tactics Scale. His data indicate that in spite of possible memory errors and/or deliberate response distortion (usually underreporting), a one-year referent period is reasonable. He cited numerous studies documenting the internal consistency (alpha coefficient of the CTS). With regard to concurrent validity, on the other hand, he noted that underreporting by perpetrators (male and female) was not unusual. This suggests that the estimates of perpetration in the present study should be considered conservative. Finally, Straus reviewed numerous studies that support the construct

validity of the CTS .Thus, though future research should focus on more direct behavioral measures of courtship violence, the self -report remains the most viable tool in large-scale attempts to assess incidence and prevalence.

Finally, data were based on individual reports of personal experiences; dyads were not studied. Hence, the process of an aggressive episode could not be revealed in the present study. Future research should attempt to study ongoing relationships in order to identify dyadic characteristics predictive of premarital heterosexual violence. Such research could also clarify distinctions between instigation and self-defense as motives for violence , for example by revising the CTS to ask respondents to indicate motives for their behavior.

NOTE

1 The grouping of tactics into the Symbolic Aggression and Physical Aggression categories was based on Straus (1979), which was confirmed by a factor analysis performed on the present data.

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