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Assessment of college students with the revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2): Sociodemographic characteristics and relationship

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents prevalence data gathered from the fast-growing metropolitan southeast in the United States college campus representative sample through an on-line 28-question survey on the sexual, physical, and psychological harm in university/college dating and domestic violence relationships. The study questions were 1) what is the prevalence of dating and domestic violence on college campus? and 2) what are the characteristics of those affected by it? The results, derived from the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2) and the dating experiences survey, reveal that college students’ gender identity, sexual orientation, grade point average (GPA), number of missing classes, current relationship status that they were associated with dating and domestic violence among college students. Statistically significant relationships were found between sexual violence and participants’ sexual orientation and the length of their romantic relationship as well as physical violence, including hitting and shoving, and participants’ sexual orientation and their class attendance. Institutional responses to prevent campus violence through prevention training, education, and intervention services could lower the prevalence of dating and help alleviate the adverse effects that it could have on college students.

KEYWORDS

Assessment; college campus; revised conflict tactics scale; sociodemographic characteristics; social work

Introduction

Dating violence is a serious and prevalent problem among college students. Dating and domestic violence, including physical violence in intimate relationships is a public health problem affecting hundreds of thousands of individuals and families worldwide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017; 2015; Chan, Straus, Brownridge, Tiwari, & Leung, 2008; Amar & Gennaro, 2005). According to the U.S. Department of Justice’s findings on student victims of sexual assault, one in five students has experienced domestic violence (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). In many States, domestic violence refers to violence within a marriage and does not include violence between unmarried couples. Violence between unmarried couples is often referred to as dating violence in
these instances. Despite these differences, most definitions of domestic or dating violence encompass physical, sexual, psychological and emotional abuse within a relationship. Frequently, the relationship that is referred to in the definition is romantic in nature, but this also varies from definition to definition.

The U.S. Department of Justice provides an overarching definition of domestic violence. They define domestic violence as a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone (U.S. Department of Justice, 2014). Under this definition, domestic violence refers to any intimate partner and does not exclude unmarried couples. For this reason, this study will use the U.S. Department of Justice’s definition as its operational definition of the violence being studied.

Generally, domestic/dating violence involves physical harm or the threat of physical harm between current or former spouses or intimate partners; parents, children, and siblings; people residing together; a man and woman if the man is alleged to be the father of a child; and/or people involved in a significant romantic relationship. In the case of intimate partners or significant romantic relationships, the existence of the relationship is based on the length of the relationship; the type of relationship; and the frequency of interaction between the people in the relationship (Hamby, 2014). Domestic/Dating violence often involves a pattern of coercive behavior by one partner aimed at gaining power or control over the other partner in the relationship. While violence is a component, it may also include psychological and emotional abuse. Domestic/dating violence is not limited to opposite-sex couples. It can occur in any relationship and any party can be the aggressor or victim regardless of sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, or gender expression (Ollen, Ameral, Palm Reed, & Hines, 2017; Rohrbaugh, 2006; & Lewis, Mason, Winstead, & Kelley, 2017; Karakurt, Keiley, & Posada, 2013).

**Literature review**

Domestic violence is a pervasive social issue that affects millions of people each year. A recent report by the U.S. Department of Justice estimates that domestic violence (in this case, violent crimes such as rape, assault, robbery, that are perpetrated by intimate partners, immediate family members or relatives) accounted for 21% of all violent victimizations between 2003 and 2012 (Truman & Morgan, 2014). Of these victimizations, 15% were perpetrated by an intimate partner. The same report found that approximately 1,411,330 people experience domestic violence each year. These are direct victims of domestic violence, and do not take into account children, family members and friends that are effected as well. As noted earlier, current or former boyfriends/girlfriends or spouses are the most common perpetrators of domestic violence (Afifi et al., 2009). A majority of domestic violence cases occur in or near the home of the victim and in rural areas. Experiencing or witnessing domestic violence has been shown to have many negative ramifications on victims, immediate or collateral (family members, children, etc.). Domestic violence increases one’s risk of physical illnesses including cardiovascular disease, gastrointestinal disease, and pregnancy complications. It has also been shown to
increase one’s risk of developing a myriad of mental health issues such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and depression. Domestic violence causes relationship strain within the violent relationship and with collateral friends and family members. A report by National Institute of Justice (2007) had similar findings as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015) but also noted that physical injury, or death in severe cases, is common in cases of domestic violence. The National Institute of Justice also found that domestic violence impacts one’s employment—many victims and perpetrators of domestic violence have unstable employment or are unemployed.

**Domestic and dating violence on college campuses**

Rates of domestic and dating violence on college campuses are not well-researched. Many college campuses focus their attention and services on sexual assault rather than domestic or dating violence (Amar & Gennaro, 2005). A recent survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention sheds some light on domestic and dating violence in the United States (McMahon et al., 2014). The survey was conducted via random phone surveys for people age 18+. There were a total of 18,049 adults, 9,970 women, and 8,079 men that, responded to the survey in full or partial interviews (Black et al., 2011, p. 9). Of those affected by this violence, “[Most] female and male victims of rape, physical violence, and/or stalking by an intimate partner (69% of female victims; 53% of male victims) experienced some form of intimate partner violence for the first time before 25 years of age” (Black et al., 2011, p. 2). Considering that most college students are 25 years of age or younger, this information has some interesting implications for future research and services on and off college campuses Baker & Stith, 2008; Kaukinen, 2014).

According to the most recent study, the majority of research on dating violence and sexual violence in college students has focused on heterosexual students, victimization rates among sexual minority students are the same or higher than that of their heterosexual counterparts (Ollen, et al., 2017). Also, minority stress, anger, alcohol use, and alcohol-related problems play an important role in the perpetration of psychological aggression and physical violence in self-identified lesbian women’s intimate partner relationships (Lewis et al., 2017). A growing challenge noted in most research has suggested that incidences of dating violence and domestic violence during youth and young adulthood (Noonan & Charles, 2009). Actions that are highly correlated with sexual intimate partner violence events are risky behaviors such as engaging in high risk sexual behaviors, tobacco and illicit drug use, drinking and alcohol abuse (Roberts, Auinger, & Klein, 2005), ineffective social skills, and inability to manage anger (Foshee et al., 2008). Furthermore, family violence research has suggested that experiencing violence is associated with dating relationships that put young individuals at risk for continuous dating behavior within and across relationships (Noonan & Charles, 2009). Thompson, Basile, Hertz, & Sitterle (2006) defined intimate personal violence as actual or threatened physical or sexual violence or psychological/emotional abuse. It includes threatened physical or sexual violence when the threat is used to control a person’s actions. Various types of violence, whether physical, emotional, sexual, or even witnessing violence, may influence the growing child to believe that the violence is normal (Fagan, 2005; Palazzolo, Roberto, & Babin, 2010).
Gender in dating violence and domestic violence. The issue of gender in dating violence and domestic violence is controversial. According to CDC (2017), intimate partner violence is a serious, preventable public health problem that affects millions of Americans. Each year, women experience about 4.8 million intimate partner-related physical assaults and rapes. Men are the victims of about 2.9 million intimate partner-related physical assaults. Domestic violence was first brought to public attention by feminists and feminist theory and claims that the issues arise from patriarchal social structures that socialize males and females into rigid, hierarchical gender-specific roles (Prospero, 2008). Violence is seen as stemming from men’s exercise of the power to control women.

Little data is known about the exact effects that domestic and dating violence has on college students. However, the current body of research suggests that the effects are similar to the effects mentioned earlier. Experiencing domestic or dating violence increases one’s risk of developing health complications such as cardiovascular and gastrointestinal diseases, developing mental illness including PTSD, depression and anxiety, experiencing relationship strain, and engaging in high-risk behaviors such as drug or alcohol abuse.

There are three main entities that provide prevention and intervention services for victims and/or perpetrators of dating or domestic violence through most colleges: Health, Counseling and Student Wellness, The Violence Prevention Center, and University Police. Health, Counseling and Student Wellness offers students and faculty a comprehensive list of local resources, counseling services, presentations on health and counseling related topics, and basic health screenings and treatment. The University Police provides prevention and investigation services, a free escort service, and on-campus emergency phones. The Norse Violence Prevention Center offers support and advocacy services for victims, connections to local agencies and resources as well as a variety of prevention services such as presentations and trainings. The Violence Prevention Center’s main aim is against sexual assault, rather than dating or domestic violence, but they do offer support and other services to victims of any type of violence (Cerulli et al., 2012). The Violence Prevention Center at the institution in which the study was ducted is part of the national initiative to combat violence called the Green Dot. The Violence Prevention Center describes their involvement with Green Dot. Green Dot is a movement, a program, and an action. The aim of Green Dot is to prevent and reduce power-based violence on university campuses by engaging the campus community to be active bystanders who step in and speak out against power-based personal violence on college campuses.

In summary, a review of the literature has revealed two gaps in the current body of research. There is also little research on the prevalence of dating and/or domestic violence on college campuses across the globe. Further, there is even less literature on the impact that domestic and/or dating violence has on academic outcomes and performance. This study seeks to contribute to the literature and fill those gaps. This study aims to answer the following questions: What is the prevalence of dating and domestic violence on the college campus and what are the characteristics of those affected by it.

**Methods**

Study exploring the associations between sociodemographic characteristics and relationship dating violence and domestic violence among college students consider gender,
sexual orientation, level of education, grade point average, the number of classes that the participant missed the previous semester, relationship status, and the length of the most current relationship of each participant. Additionally, the study included a short-form Revised Conflict Tactic Scales (CTS2).

Research questions
What is the prevalence of dating and domestic violence on the college campus? What are the characteristics of those affected by it?

Research hypotheses
The present study builds on existing research by analyzing the correlations between sociodemographic characteristics, dating violence, domestic violence, and relationship short-form Revised Conflict Tactic Scales (CTS2) score among college students. Based on prior research and theoretical foundations, it is hypothesized that students’ sociodemographic characteristics will be associated with dating violence and domestic violence and relationship violence CTS2 score (Straus, Hamby, Boney-Mccoy & Sugarmanv, & Sugarman, 1996).

- Models for male and female students will demonstrate gender differences similar to those evidenced in prior research and accounted for theoretically.
- Students who score higher CTS2 on the dating violence and domestic violence will be more likely to commit abusive behaviors within their intimate relationships than those who score lower on the scale.
- Students who have lower GPA at the College will be more likely to have risk behavior relationship violence than those who have higher GPA at the College.
- Students who missed the more number of classes, the more likely they will be to have violent experiences.
- Students in a romantic relationship and experiencing dating violence/domestic violence and a longer relationship will be more likely to be expose to dating violence and domestic violence.

Research design
This study utilized a cross-sectional, quantitative design that sought to gather data on the prevalence of dating and domestic violence on university’s campus and some characteristics of those experiencing it. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) in a fast-growing metropolitan university in the southeast United States. All data were collected through an online, email survey via the Qualtrics survey platform. Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous. The researchers utilized a convenience sample of current students at the University.

Participants and procedures
The sample for this study consisted of 197 randomly selected, current, undergraduate and graduate students at the metropolitan university (98 graduate students, 99 undergraduate
students). These potential participants were selected from the general email lists of current undergraduate and graduate students; roughly equal amounts of students from each educational level were invited to participate in this study. The email addresses of the selected potential participants were placed onto an email list with a general listserv address so that participants could not be identified by the researchers. Each participant provided informed consent to collect and use their responses.

Potential participants were recruited for the study via email and asked to complete a 28 question, email survey if they wished to participate in this study. Before completing the survey, participants were asked to read an informed consent and acknowledge that they were giving the researchers permission to use their data. No identifying information was collected; email and IP addresses as well as participants’ names were not collected. The survey comprised of an 8-question demographic questionnaire and the 20-question short-form Revised Conflict Tactic Scales (CTS2). Permission to adapt and utilize the CTS2 was acquired from Western Psychological Services (WPS) before being reproduced or distributed. The researchers utilized Qualtrics, an online survey platform, to develop and distribute the email survey in late February 2016 and early March 2016.

**Measures and analysis**

As stated above, this study utilized a 28-question survey to collect data on the prevalence of dating and domestic violence on this metropolitan campus. The demographic data collected for this study was limited due to the nature of this study and the potential risks to its participants. The 8-question demographic questionnaire collected data on the gender, sexual orientation, level of education, grade point average, the number of classes that the participant missed the previous semester, relationship status, and the length of the most current relationship of each participant. Participants were asked to choose the option that best described them out of a list of 2–8 items.

The second portion of the survey consisted of the 20-question short-form Revised Conflict Tactic Scales (CTS2) (Straus & Douglas, 2004). The CTS2 collected data on participant’s experience and/or perpetration of physical, sexual and psychological violence as well as the prevalence of negotiation within participants’ most recent or current romantic relationship. The constructs that were measured by the CTS2 were minor and severe sexual coercion, minor and severe physical assault, minor and severe psychological aggression, and emotional and psychological negotiation. Physical violence was measured by the frequency at which participants experienced or perpetrated physical assault (e.g., pushing, slapping, kicking, beating-up) or bodily injury (e.g., sprains, bruises, severe injury causing an individual to seek medical attention) in the relationship. Psychological aggression was measured by the occurrence of yelling, arguing, threatening harm and destroying belongings. Sexual coercion was measured by the occurrence of the use of physical force or insisting on sexual intercourse against the will of the other person. Negotiation was measured by the occurrence of compromising and healthy communication (e.g., discussion of issues or disagreements). For each construct, participants were asked to identify how frequently the violence or negotiation occurred in the last year from the options: once, twice, 3–5 times, 6–10 times, 11–20 times, more than 20 times, not in the past year, but it did happen before, or this has never happened. The researchers obtained permission
to adapt and use the CTS2 from Western Psychological Services (WPS) before being reproduced or distributed.

Analytic strategy

Analyses of respondents’ sociodemographic characteristics, domestic and dating violence experience and relationship are conducted at univariate, bivariate, and multivariate levels. Due to the differences between men and women’s relationship violence experiences and CTS2 score illustrated in previous findings and theory, separate analyses are conducted for male and female students. Frequency distributions are provided for: (1) Participants’ sociodemographic characteristics, including educational status, marital status, sexual orientation and (2) their relationship dating violence and domestic violence, containing incidence and prevalence scores for total, emotional, and cognitive, and psychological aggression, physical assault, and sexual coercion. Two-way contingency table analyses using cross-tabulations and independent-samples t-tests are employed where appropriate to explore the association between college students’ sociodemographic characteristics and relationship violence perpetration. Independent-samples t-tests are used to assess the correlations between participants’ dating violence and domestic violence and relationship violence experience. One-way analyses of variance (one-way ANOVA), independent-sample t-tests, and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients are conducted where fitting to evaluate the relationships between students’ sociodemographic characteristics and domestic violence. The Chi-Square test was conducted to determine any significant association with level of victimization. To assess the relationship between the level of victimization (interval level variables) and gender, frequency scores of levels of interpersonal violence victimization were computed from the responses to CTS2 questions according to the CTS 2 scoring guidelines by Straus & Douglas (2004). Level of victimization was assessed by creating dichotomous variables following the prevalence method in the scoring guideline, where a score of 1 indicates one or more experiences of violence, and a score of 0 indicates there were no experiences of violence.

Also, SPSS Statistics was utilized to analyze the data after collection. Basic descriptive frequencies, including means, standard deviations, and percentages, were conducted to describe the participants in this study. Bivariate analyses were used to examine the relationships between the demographic variables and CTS2 constructs. Pearson Chi-Square tests and correlation tests were conducted on the data that was collected to determine if any statistically significant relationships existed.

Findings

Of the 100 surveys that were distributed, 49 surveys were partially completed. There were 10 responses missing one or more questions in the demographic questionnaire and 14 responses missing from one or more of the questions in CTS2. Of the participants that completed the demographic questionnaire (n = 39), a majority identified as female (60%) rather than male (40%). Most of the participants identified as heterosexual (81%). Almost all (98%) of the participants missed less than 4 classes the previous semester. A little over half (64%) of participants reported currently being in a romantic relationship and did not
live with their significant other (62%) at the time of the survey. Many of the participants (62%) reported having been in their relationship for five years or less.

Pearson Chi-square tests on the collected data and utilized an alpha value of .005 for all statistical tests. A statistically significant relationship was found between the sexual orientation of the participant and their perpetration of minor physical assault, such as pushing, shoving or slapping their significant other. Participants that identified as bisexual or heterosexual were more likely to push, slap or shove their partners. Sexual orientation was also significantly related to the use severe sexual coercion (e.g., using physical force to make someone have sex) and minor sexual coercion (e.g., insisting on sex or sex without a condom, without the use of physical force). Participants that identified as gay reported experiencing severe sexual coercion, whereas participants that identified as another sexual orientation did not report experiencing severe sexual coercion. Analysis also found a significant relationship between the number of classes a participant missed the previous semester and how often they engaged in minor physical assault. Participants that missed 5 or more classes the previous semester reported were more likely to push, shove, or slap their partners. Participants that were in a romantic relationship at the time that they completed the survey reported experiencing minor sexual coercion. A statistically significant relationship was also found between the length of the romantic relationship and the occurrence of minor sexual coercion. Participants that reported being in a relationship for 3 years or less also reported higher instances of experiencing and/or engaging in minor sexual coercion.

There was a significant relationship found between 2 of the Chi-square comparisons. A moderately significant relationship was found between sexual orientation and experiencing minor sexual coercion. Participants that identified as bisexual or gay were more likely to experience minor sexual coercion than other participants. Another moderately significant relationship was found between the number of classes a participant missed and experiencing minor sexual coercion. Participants that missed 3 or more classes were more likely to experience minor sexual coercion. The remaining comparisons did not show any significant relationships between other variables.

**Discussion**

This study had several limitations. Firstly, the sample for this study was small and not fully randomized, as it was a convenience sample. Future studies should utilize a larger and more diverse sample size to test the statistical significance and generalizability of the results of this study. Due to the low number of responses, this study could benefit from being repeated, in order to gain additional responses. If repeated, it would be advised that the researcher seek a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health to better minimize the risk to participants and enable the researcher(s) to collect additional demographic data.

The data collected in this study sought to contribute to the literature regarding the prevalence of dating and domestic violence among college students and to gain insight into the characteristics of this population. The results of this study found that students on the college campus do experience violence in their relationships, and that this violence is often minor in nature. Not surprisingly, sexual violence, measured by the occurrence of minor and severe sexual coercion (e.g., insisting on sex or using physical force), was the most commonly reported type of violence in this study. Much of the research surrounding relationship violence among college
students and many of the resources available on campuses seek to address this type of violence. Minor physical assault, such as pushing, slapping and minor psychological aggression (e.g., yelling, shouting) were also reported, but not as frequently as sexual violence. It is interesting to note that injury, minor or severe, severe psychological aggression and severe physical assault were not reported by any participants in this study. It should be noted that the subject of this study and the risk involved for participants could have skewed the results of this study; participants may have been uncomfortable and/or unwilling to disclose experiencing or engaging in more severe forms of violence.

Several significant relationships were found between the use if minor sexual coercion (e.g., insisting on sex or sex without a condom) and the demographic variables collected during this study. Both male and female participants reported experiencing and/or engaging in minor sexual coercion. Male participants reported higher instances of coercing their significant others. Both genders reported experiencing sexual coercion at a similar frequency. Participants that identified their sexual orientation as gay, bisexual, or other reported engaging in or experiencing minor sexual coercion more often than other participants. Surprisingly, participants with higher grade point averages, 3.0–4.0, reported experiencing or perpetrating minor sexual coercion more often than participants that reported having lower grade point averages. Class attendance was also found to increase a person’s likelihood of experiencing or engaging in sexual violence; the more classes participants reported missing, the more likely they were to experience sexual violence. Undergraduate participants also reported higher instances of experiencing or engaging in sexual violence within a relationship.

Implications

The results of this study found that current college students report experiencing minor psychological and/or physical assault. More female participants reported instances of minor psychological aggression (e.g., swearing, shouting or yelling) than male participants. Participants that reported living with their significant other or identified as heterosexual also reported higher instances of minor psychological aggression than other participants. Participants that missed 3 or more classes the previous semester and undergraduate students reported experiencing and perpetrating minor physical assault (e.g., pushing, slapping). Female participants were also more likely to experience and perpetrate minor physical assault than male participants.

The data collected during this study can help better target prevention and intervention strategies by on- and off-campus service providers by providing a better idea of where to implement these strategies such as undergraduates and students that miss several classes. Implementation of prevention, education, and intervention services could lower the prevalence of dating and help alleviate the adverse effects that it could have on college students.

Conclusion

The results of this study found that college students report experiencing physical, psychological, and sexual violence. It is important to note that there are other forms of violence that warrant attention on college campuses, such as physical or psychological aggression. These types of violence have been shown to have just as many, if not more,
adverse effects on the physical and psychological health of an individual as sexual violence; yet they are not usually addressed on college campuses.

Despite these limitations, the results are sufficiently promising to make it appropriate to follow-up the study. This project contributes to the body of literature on relationship violence among college students by analyzing the correlations between sociodemographic characteristics, dating violence, and domestic violence experiences, producing an overview of the interactions between these variables than current research provides. With the knowledge provided by this research, college programs and administrations can more effectively direct prevention programs toward the subpopulations of students who are more likely to perpetrate relationship violence as identified in this study. Further research should attempt to address the weakness of this project. For example, it is recommended that future studies draw samples from other geographic regions.

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**References**


