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Relationship aggression and substance use among women court-referred to domestic violence intervention programs

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Abstract

Although there is extensive theoretical and empirical evidence linking men's alcohol abuse and marital violence, no previous studies have assessed the substance use characteristics of women arrested for domestic violence. We recruited 35 women who were arrested for domestic violence and court-referred to batterer intervention programs. We administered multiple measures of substance use and abuse and assessed the women's marital aggression, marital satisfaction, depressive symptomatology, use of general violence, and their relationship partners' substance use. We also divided the sample into groups of hazardous drinkers (HD) and nonhazardous drinkers (NHD). Across the entire sample, almost half of the women were classified as HD. Over one-quarter of the women reported symptoms consistent with an alcohol abuse or dependence diagnosis, and approximately one-quarter of the sample reported symptoms consistent with a drug-related diagnosis. Over one-half of the total sample reported that their relationship partners were HD. Relative to the NHD group, the HD group scored higher on measures of drug problems, relationship aggression, general violence, and marital dissatisfaction. The results of the study suggest that substance use and abuse should routinely be assessed as part of batterer interventions and that batterer programs would be improved by offering adjunct or integrated alcohol treatment.

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1. Introduction

Marital violence is an enormous problem in the United States. There is an extensive body of theoretical and empirical evidence linking alcohol use and abuse to marital violence, particularly among men (e.g., Leonard, 2001). Among women, the data are more limited, but they suggest that alcohol use and abuse are related to both perpetration and victimization of intimate partner violence (e.g., Kaufman Kantor & Asdigian, 1997).

There is a paucity of empirical data available regarding the characteristics of women who are arrested for domestic violence and court-referred to batterer intervention programs. The overall aims of the present study are to document the prevalence of alcohol abuse in a sample of women arrested for domestic violence and to examine potential differences between those women who drink hazardously and those who do not. Women arrested and court-referred to violence intervention were recruited and completed multiple measures of substance use and abuse. We also assessed the women's relationship satisfaction, depressive symptomatology, use of general violence (i.e., extramarital violence), and their relationship partners' substance use. As described subsequently, we divided the women into groups of hazardous drinkers (HD) and nonhazardous drinkers (NHD). We hypothesized that HD would differ from NHD on all substance use and abuse variables. Given the theoretical and empirical evidence linking alcohol and violence, we also predicted that HD would evidence greater levels of marital violence perpetration, marital violence victimization, and general violence perpetration than NHD. We further postulated that relationship partners of HD would evidence greater substance use and abuse than the relationship partners of NHD, as research has shown a strong relationship between male and female partners' drinking patterns (Leonard & Eiden, 1999).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 35 women, 18 years of age or older, arrested for domestic violence and court-referred to batterer intervention programs in Rhode Island. One hundred percent of the women approached agreed to participate in the study. Demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1.

2.2. Measures

Relationship aggression was assessed with the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), which contains Psychological Aggression, Physical Assault, Sexual Coercion, and Injury subscales. General violence (i.e., extramarital violence) was assessed with the General Violence Conflict Tactics Scale (GVCTS), a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale. Respondents reported the number of times they have engaged in extramarital aggression since the age of 18 and the number of

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