



Empirical Research

Experiential avoidance and male dating violence perpetration: An initial investigation



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 May 2013

Received in revised form

29 January 2014

Accepted 22 February 2014

Keywords:

Dating violence

Experiential avoidance

Aggression

ABSTRACT

Dating violence among college students represents a prevalent and serious problem. An abundance of research has examined risk and protective factors for dating violence, although only recently has research begun to focus on risk and protective factors that could be amenable to change in intervention programs. One potential risk factor for dating violence may be experiential avoidance. Using the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II; Bond et al., 2011), we examined whether experiential avoidance was associated with male perpetrated dating violence after controlling for age, relationship satisfaction, and alcohol use. Within a sample of male college students in a current dating relationship ($N=109$) results demonstrated that experiential avoidance was positively associated with psychological, physical, and sexual aggression perpetration, and that it remained associated with psychological and sexual aggression after controlling for age, relationship satisfaction, and alcohol use. The implications of these findings for future research and prevention programs are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Dating violence is a prevalent and serious problem among college students. The past 20 years have seen an abundance of research on the prevalence, correlates, and risk factors for dating violence perpetration (Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008). However, despite this growing research base, efforts aimed at preventing dating violence among college students have had little to no success (see Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007). Recently researchers have advocated for an examination of risk and protective factors for dating violence that are amenable to change in intervention programs, as prevention programs may be more effective if they can teach participants lasting skills that can lead to reduced aggression (O'Leary, Woodin, & Fritz, 2006; Shorey et al., 2012). Toward this end, experiential avoidance, the unwillingness to remain in contact with negative, private experiences (e.g., negative affect) and actions toward avoiding or reducing such aversive experiences, has been proposed to underlie psychopathology and a number of problematic behavioral outcomes (Hayes et al., 2004), including aggressive behavior, although there is scant research on whether experiential avoidance may increase the risk for aggressive behavior, particularly dating violence. Should research find

that experiential avoidance increases the risk for dating violence, prevention programs could target this underlying vulnerability, potentially increasing the success of such programs. Thus, within a sample of male college students in a current dating relationship, the current study examined whether experiential avoidance was associated with male perpetrated psychological, physical, and sexual dating violence. Moreover, the current study also examined whether experiential avoidance remained associated with violence perpetration after controlling for age, alcohol use, and relationship satisfaction, known correlates of dating violence.

1.1. Male dating violence perpetration

In the present study, dating violence refers to psychological, physical, or sexual aggression against an intimate partner. Psychological aggression includes, but is not limited to, verbal behaviors such as yelling, screaming, calling a partner a derogatory name, threats, and attempts to isolate one's partner (Follingstad, 2007; Lawrence, Yoon, Langer, & Ro, 2009). Physical aggression includes, but is not limited to, pushing, shoving, slapping, kicking, or using a weapon against a partner (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Sexual coercion includes behaviors that are designed to compel a partner to engage in unwanted sexual activity, which can consist of threats and/or physical force (Straus et al., 1996). Research indicates that each year approximately 70% of male college students will perpetrate psychological aggression, 20% will perpetrate physical aggression, and 20–30%

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will perpetrate sexual coercion (see review by Shorey et al., 2008). Moreover, and as discussed in detail by O'Leary (1999), young adulthood is the time when risk for aggression against an intimate partner peaks, making college a particularly risky time for dating violence.

Research has clearly demonstrated that males are victimized at comparable levels as their female counterparts in dating relationships (Archer, 2000), with the exception of sexual coercion victimization which is higher among females (Shorey et al., 2008). However, male perpetrated violence routinely results in more severe psychological and physical consequences for female victims (Archer, 2000). For instance, female victims of dating violence report increased symptoms of depression (Kaura & Lohman, 2007), posttraumatic stress symptoms (Harned, 2001), somatic complaints (Prospero, 2007), substance use (Shorey, Rhatigan, Fite, & Stuart, 2011), as well as physical injuries (Amar & Gennaro, 2005). Thus, it is clear that male perpetrated dating violence is both a prevalent and serious problem that deserves research attention. Specifically, there is a need for research on potential risk and protective factors for perpetrating dating violence that could be amenable to change in prevention programs for dating violence. One factor associated with dating violence that has received scant empirical attention is experiential avoidance.

1.2. Experiential avoidance

Experiential avoidance has been defined as a “phenomenon that occurs when a person is unwilling to remain in contact with particular private experiences (e.g., bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, memories, images, behavioral predispositions) and takes steps to alter the form or frequency of these experiences or the contexts that occasion them, even when these forms of avoidance cause behavioral harm” (Hayes et al., 2004, p. 554). As discussed by Kashdan, Barrios, Forsyth, and Steger (2006), experiential avoidance may be adaptable in certain situations, such as when trying to avoid anxiety when on a job interview. However, when applied rigidly and consistently, experiential avoidance becomes problematic, hindering individuals' movement toward valued goals, contact with the present moment, and functioning. That is, although experiential avoidance may lead to short-term reductions in unwanted private experiences (Hayes et al., 2004), the long-term consequences of this avoidance are severe, with experiential avoidance contributing to the development, maintenance, and exacerbation of a number of mental health disorders, including substance use disorders, depression, and anxiety disorders (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010; Chowla & Ostafin, 2007).

One domain where experiential avoidance has received extensive empirical and theoretical attention, and which also has implications for aggressive behavior, is with negative affect. That is, individuals are often highly motivated to avoid or reduce experiences of negative affect, and experiential avoidance is one approach many individuals may employ when faced with negative affect (Chowla & Ostafin, 2007). For instance, when experiencing negative affect, individuals high in experiential avoidance may turn to a number of maladaptive behaviors in an attempt to avoid this emotion, such as alcohol use, distraction, or leaving a situation.

Importantly, negative affect is central to many theories of aggressive behavior (e.g., Bell & Naugle, 2008; Berkowitz, 1990, 1993; Leonard, 1993). Cognitive neoassociation theory (Berkowitz, 1990, 1993) posits that negative affect (e.g., anger, irritation) leads individuals to be motivated to engage in aggressive behavior. Within this framework, negative affect facilitates higher-level cognitions, such as interpretational biases or causal attributions, which increase anger and decrease adaptive problem solving, thus

promoting aggression (Berkowitz, 2001). Additionally, Bell and Naugle (2008) hypothesize that state anger is a proximal antecedent to aggression between intimate partners, particularly when other motivating factors and behavioral repertoire deficits are present. In line with this theory, experiential avoidance could be considered a behavioral repertoire deficit in this theory of violence, which may make it more likely that state anger will lead to aggression, for example. Indeed, empirical research has demonstrated negative affect to temporally precede, and increase the risk for, dating violence perpetration (Elkins, Moore, McNulty, Kivisto, & Handzel, 2013). In addition, dating violence has been theorized, in certain contexts, as a maladaptive coping skill that may be used by some individuals in an attempt to reduce experiences of negative affect (Jakupcak, Lisak, & Roemer, 2002; Lawrence et al., 2009; Shorey, Cornelius, & Idema, 2011). Thus, it is possible that individuals high in experiential avoidance may be more likely to perpetrate dating violence, as aggression may be one method to cope with or avoid distressing, negative emotions.

1.3. Dating violence and experiential avoidance

To date, only one known study has examined whether experiential avoidance is associated with dating violence perpetration (see Fiorillo, Papa, & Follette, 2013 for a study on experiential avoidance and dating violence victimization). In the development study of the original Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ), Hayes et al. (2004) reported a significant correlation between the AAQ and physical aggression perpetration ($r = .18$) within a sample of male and female college students. Unfortunately, this study did not examine males and females separately and the significant correlation may have been due to the large sample size. Further, when examining aggression other than that against an intimate partner, there is also a dearth of research on whether experiential avoidance is associated with aggressive behavior. Kingston, Clarke, and Remington (2010) demonstrated that the first version of the AAQ was associated with increased problem behavior, which included a combined variable of aggression, substance use, and sexual promiscuity, among a sample of individuals who had previously received psychiatric services. Tull, Jakupcak, Paulson, and Gratz (2007) also demonstrated that greater experiential avoidance was associated with greater general aggressive tendencies among a sample of college students, faculty, and staff. Thus, there is a need for research that directly examines whether experiential avoidance is associated with aggression and, in particular, dating violence perpetration, including whether it is associated with different forms of dating violence (i.e., psychological, physical, and sexual).

Although there is limited research in this area, there is a growing body of research demonstrating that dating violence is associated with similar and related constructs to experiential avoidance. For instance, male perpetrators of psychological, physical, or sexual aggression have been shown to have greater difficulties with emotion regulation relative to non-perpetrators (Shorey, Brasfield, Febres, & Stuart, 2011). Research has also shown that low levels of trait mindfulness are associated with increased sexual coercion perpetration by men against a dating partner (Gallagher, Huderpohl, & Parrott, 2010). Other research has shown that poor anger management (Stith & Hamby, 2002) and self-regulation deficits (Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009) are all associated with increased male perpetrated dating violence. Importantly, recent research has found that a large percentage of perpetrators of psychological aggression report decreased negative emotions immediately following aggression (Shorey et al., 2012), which indicates that aggression may be used by some to regulate, or avoid, unwanted negative emotions, which would be consistent with experiential avoidance.

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