

Proposed Research: Sociobiologic Perspective on Dating Violence

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Abstract

Much attention has focused on marital violence. As a logical outgrowth of this research, a new type of interpersonal violence is receiving some attention--dating abuse. Research shows that, although there are some similarities between the two types of violence, theories of marital violence are only partially appropriate for the study of dating violence. Other studies have estimated the proportion of college and high school students who have experienced dating violence. Social scientists have found some support for the belief that violent behaviors in dating relationships are learned through observation and the experience of family violence. Drawing upon these findings, a sociobiologic theory was proposed that gives a new perspective to this phenomenon. The author suggested that reproductive strategies lead to conflicts in dating couples. Implications of dating violence and intervention issues are discussed.

Proposed Research: Sociobiological Perspective on Dating Violence

Traditionally, Americans have viewed the family as a loving refuge from the trials and tribulations of the rest of the world. Today, however, we know this is not necessarily true. Recently, family violence issues including child, sexual, elder, and spouse abuse have come to society's attention. Although it is difficult to obtain an accurate estimate of the extent and seriousness of family violence, researchers now believe it is far more common than most experts imagined. As a result of the concern with these issues, a new type of violence has been identified--dating abuse.

Many authors see dating violence as a logical outgrowth of the study of marital violence. And because of the similarities, in a better attempt to understand dating violence, Carlson(1987) analyzed it in comparison with spouse abuse. For example, much time was spent together, substantial personal information was exchanged between partners, and high levels of emotional investment were common. Women seemed to predominate as victims in both. However, in both cases women were perpetrators as well as recipients of violent behavior despite stereotypes that depict males as the aggressive sex. Although disagreements were the obvious precipitant, the sources of conflict tended to differ between the two types of violence. In spouse abuse conflicts over children, money, sex, housekeeping, and social activities were strong factors. In dating couples jealousy and drinking seemed to be major sources of conflict. Only disagreement over sex was identified as a source of disagreement in both groups.

One of the first studies concerning violence between partners at less committed stages of involvement studied college freshman and sophomores and reported that nearly one-fifth of the respondents had experienced at least one direct personal episode of dating violence (Makepeace, 1981). Burcky, Reuterman, and Kopsky (1988) showed that this phenomenon extended to high school students as well. The authors asked 123 girls from a large public high school in Missouri to fill out a questionnaire concerning their attitudes and opinions regarding dating and dating relationships. Of the 123 subjects, 24% reported that

they had been victims of dating violence on one occasion, and 14.6% reported they had been victims on several occasions. The most widespread form of violence seemed to be physical rather than threatening. Types of violence varied from objects thrown at victims to assault with a gun. Reasons for disagreement ranged from jealousy to money. Also, approximately 14% of the subjects and 27% of their partners had used drugs before the incident, and alcohol was present in about one-third of the incidents.

A similar study designed to estimate the proportion of high school students who had experienced dating violence asked 337 female and male students from suburban, rural, and inner city schools to fill out a questionnaire concerning their beliefs about dating and dating relationships (Bergman, 1992). Results showed that dating violence was a problem-15.7% of females and 4.4% of males reported sexual violence, 15.7% of females and 7.8% of males reported physical violence, and 24% of female subjects and 9% of male subjects reported severe dating violence(a combined category of physical and sexual violence). The results also showed that violence tended to occur within the context of relatively long-term relationships and was not seen as cause to end the relationship.

Examination of the courtship violence literature showed that theory was in short supply. Theories of marital violence were only partially appropriate for the study of dating violence since marital and dating relationships differed in several important respects. In spouse abuse, the participants typically had children together, the couple was often economically bound with the woman generally in the dependent role. In contrast, dating couples were not legally bound, rarely had children together, and were rarely in an economically dependent relationship with each other (Carlson, 1987). One promising approach to the study of dating violence drew on social learning theory where it was suggested that behaviors were learned through the observation and imitation of others (Bandura, 1973). Social learning theory suggested that observing interparental aggression affected boys and girls differently. Tontodonato, Crew, and Keith (1992) investigated possible gender differences as an underlying cause of such violence. The study indicated

that parent-child violence, drug use, and knowledge of the use of dating violence by others predicted the use of courtship violence by females. Belief that violence between partners was justifiable as a means of dealing with conflict, drug use, and parental divorce were related to the use of dating violence by males.

Sociobiologists have looked at human behavior differently than other psychologists. They adopted a viewpoint in which man was like that of other species whose behaviors were subject to the changing environment. They believed that many of the activities of wild animals were adaptive responses to the problems of survival, and that each species developed its own set of strategies which enabled it to survive. However, the theory stated that, in order to be successful, an individual must not only survive, but, must also reproduce and pass its genes on to the next generation. Therefore, it was hypothesized that comparative psychology might shed light on the biological conditions that appeared responsible for the phenomenon of dating violence.

Sociobiologic theory dictated that overall males and females shared a common goal of maximizing their reproductive success in order to pass their traits onto future offspring. However, although their overall aim was the same, during courtship and mating the sexes had different and competing tactics. This process described by Charles Darwin was called sexual selection. According to Trivers(cited in Crook, 1977), the contrasting substrategy of each gender was determined by the relative investment each gender had in producing and rearing young. In the animal kingdom, the primary difference between the sexes was the tremendous biological investment in the egg as opposed to the investment involved in making sperm. Among mammals the female typically spent much more time and energy in bearing and rearing young, and it was characteristically the male that invested least parentally. Therefore, behaviorally females were more concerned with ensuring copulation with a male that had a strong genetic makeup. In humans this might be manifested by gifts, money, food, etc. Males on the other hand adopted strategies of rapid successive mating and other-male exclusion(Crook, 1977). Furthermore, man was unusual among mammals

in forming prolonged mating alliances. This was in part due to the fact that humans mated at all times regardless of whether or not the female was able to conceive. Unlike the females of most other animals, women did not signal their oestrus condition. Since a male could not tell when she was likely to conceive he was forced to be attentive to her at all times mating with her regularly(Halliday, 1980).

The opposing strategies were expected to produce miscommunication and conflict. In human beings it was anticipated that both sexes would use their verbal abilities to coax, persuade, coerce, or threaten their partner in order to obtain the desired result--in the male, sexual access; in the female, money, food, etc. Moreover, when sexual access in an exclusive relationship was threatened, given the physical asymmetry between the sexes, it was anticipated that males would physically attack females in order to obtain this access. The proposed study suggested that these conflicting biological strategies might explain the psychological and physical abuse apparent in many dating couples as a means of conflict resolution.

These opposing strategies would be expected to produce miscommunication and conflict. In human beings one would anticipate that both sexes might use their verbal abilities to coax, persuade, coerce, or even threaten their partner in order to obtain desired results. In the male, sexual access; in the female , money, gifts, food. Moreover, when sexual access in an exclusive relationship is threatened, given the physical and verbal fluency differences between the sexes, it should not be surprising that males might physically attack females in order to obtain sexual access. Therefore, the proposed study was an investigation into such conflicts among dating subjects.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 400 Ball State University students enrolled in an introductory psychology course as partial fulfillment of course requirement. The sample included both

males and females This course fulfilled general university requirements and thus reflected a cross section of students from most academic disciplines.

Materials and Procedure

A survey, as shown in the appendix, was constructed to assess the opinions college students have regarding the use of violence, the motivation for violence, and the acceptance of violence in a long-term exclusive relationship. The materials were administered during designated meetings outside of class time. After participants were given a brief description of the project and informed of their rights, each subject was given the same questionnaire and instructed to read the questions carefully and to answer to the best of their ability.

More specifically, seven of questions in the survey addressed students general dating history in order to determine patterns of behavior. The bulk of the questions dealt with the motivation and frequency of sexual/resource conflicts. Eight of the questions concentrated on the underlying biological strategies to illustrate the sociobiological principle which stated that the sex with the higher parental investment in reproduction was interested obtaining resources such as money, and the sex with the least amount of investment was concerned with obtaining sexual access and excluding others from obtaining access. Seven survey items addressed subject's attempts at resolving the mating conflict. The resolution types included giving in, psychological coercion(such as begging), and physical violence. The final seven items concentrated on the perceived circumstances surrounding the violence and the acceptance of abuse in long term relationships.

Discussion

Violence is a common occurrence in dating relationships, however, we cannot treat the problem of dating violence until we determine the causes. Sociobiologic theory gives us a different perspective into this phenomenon. The proposed study suggested that during mating, the sex with the fewer costs would be under selection pressure to engage in higher frequency of sexual encounters with a variety of partners. On the other hand, the sex with the greater parental investment will be more selective when choosing a mate. In mammals

typically the female exhibits reduced sexual activity. The opposite is true of the male (Crook, 1972). As a result of these opposing strategies, feelings of insecurity, jealousy, and possessiveness which may lead to violent conflict might be the outcome. Because past research has not taken this information into account, the proposed study is a first step in this direction. According to Tontodonato and Crew (1992) future research needs to examine personality and emotion, level of conflict in the relationship, and perceived consequence of the use of violence.

The short and long term implications of dating violence are serious. The research (Smith & Williams, 1992) suggests that for some young couples violence in intimate relationships is becoming an established pattern of behavior that is likely to repeat itself later in more permanent relationships. Because the research (Makepeace, 1981; Burcky, Reuterman, Kopsky, 1988) concerning dating violence has focused on college students and high school students, it is in the best interest of schools, colleges, and universities to take an active stance regarding violence among students. Interpersonal violence has direct implications for students' academic performance, and, as a result, it is important for educational institutions to openly acknowledge that the problem exists. Carlson (1987) suggests educational development in the school and in the community. It is essential to inform residence hall staff, campus security, local police agencies, professional counseling centers, peer counseling services, and mental health personnel to recognize the signs that indicate a student might be experiencing interpersonal violence. For example, such students may appear withdrawn, depressed, or may experience drop in grades. On the other hand, they may also exhibit loss of temper, engage in vandalism, or threaten others with violence (Carlson, 1987). In dealing with this problem counselors need to be fully informed about dating violence and its manifestations. Intervention programs are necessary because conflicts and disagreements in intimate relationships are unavoidable. Much more research is needed to understand why aggression is common among dating couples. But more importantly we need to know how we can reduce it.

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Appendix

For the purposes of this survey, intercourse refers to penile/vaginal insertion and or oral sex.

1. What city and state are you from?
2. What year in school are you?
3. Approximately how many partners have you had intercourse with?
4. Are you in a current relationship?
5. Approximately how long have you been in your current relationship?
less than 3 months; 3 to 6 months; 6months to a year; more than a year
6. Do you engage in intercourse with your current partner?
7. Approximately how often did you see you partner before your first intercourse?
every day; twice a week; once a week; once every two weeks or less
8. Approximately how many dates preceded your first intercourse?
9. How frequently do you and your partner argue about sex?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
10. How frequently does your partner request sex when you are not interested?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
11. How frequently do you request sex when your partner is not interested?
never; seldom; sometimes; often ; very often
12. If you are not interested on sex, how often do you give in to appease him or her?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
13. How frequently does your partner force you to have sex when you are not interested?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
14. If so, is the coercion psychological (i.e., threats, begging, etc.)?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
15. How often does your partner become physical when you're not interested in sex and he or she is (i.e., shoving, hitting, etc.)?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often

16. How often does your partner ridicule you in public?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
17. If so, how often does this make you feel humiliated?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
18. How often does your partner call you names with sexual connotations such as slut, whore, pussy, fag?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
19. How frequently does your partner ask you about real or imagined sexual or romantic incidents?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
20. If so, how does your partner get jealous or abusive?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
21. Do you and your partner disagree on the way in which the two of you spend money?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
22. How frequently do you think your partner rewards you for sexual favors (i.e., dinner)?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
23. Do you ask your partner to take you out or spend money on you in return for sex?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
24. Do you use sex as a bribe?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
25. How frequently does your partner threaten to not spend money on you if you do not comply with his sexual desires?
26. How frequently does your partner compliment you or do favors for you with the expectation of being rewarded with sex?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
27. Do you hope to remain in this relationship for the next six months?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
28. In your opinion does your partner psychologically or physically abuse you?
never; seldom; sometimes; often; very often
29. If you think so, please describe one of the most typical episodes and the events leading up to it. If not, please describe how you think a typical episode might

occur between two other people. Please indicate which episode you are writing about.

30. What do you think led up to the episode you described?

31. What does your partner say led up to the episode? If you described an episode not involving you, what do you think the two people would say led up to the episode?

32. Do you think the abuse was justified?

33. If you are staying in the relationship, what changes need to be made? If you are describing an episode not involving you, what changes need to be made?