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Love Is a Battlefield: Risk Factors and Gender Disparities for Domestic Violence among Mexican Americans

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Debate continues regarding whether domestic violence is mutual or more often perpetrated by men against women. Results from this study indicate relatively high incidence rates for physical assault victimization (32%–38%) among Mexican Americans. Men and women reported approximately equal levels of domestic violence victimization. A small percentage (8.5%) of young adult males were most prone to weapon use during domestic violence. Physical assault perpetration in relationships is otherwise equal between genders. Being physically abused in childhood was the most consistent risk factor for men, whereas viewing domestic violence in the family of origin was the most consistent risk factor for women. Watching violent television or playing violent video games were not associated with the perpetration of domestic violence.

KEYWORDS *computer games, domestic violence, family violence, Hispanics, mass media, personality, television*

The issue of domestic violence (DV) has been identified as an important public health concern by the U.S. government (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). The U.S. Office of Violence Against Women defines 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,” and can include physical, sexual, psychological, economic, and emotional abuse (U.S. Department of Justice, 2008). Although

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DV occurs among all ethnic groups, to date most DV research has utilized Caucasian populations (Klevens, 2007).

Some researchers have found evidence suggesting that DV is mutual, with men and women engaging in approximately equal levels of DV, often with both partners in the same relationship attacking one another (e.g., Desmarais, Gibas, & Nicholls, 2009; Straus, 2006; Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007). Other researchers have argued either that the data is mistaken, based on faulty measurements, or does not take the context of violence into perspective (e.g., Dobash, Dobash, Wilson, & Daly, 1992; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Debate over the involvement of women as perpetrators of DV appears unlikely to abate anytime soon.

HISPANICS AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Overall lifetime prevalence rates for DV victimization for women are approximately 20% (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Estimates for DV victimization among Hispanic women vary widely, with some figures suggesting both that Hispanics experience more DV and less DV than other groups (Klevens, 2007). It is possible that language and cultural barriers might make adequate prevalence estimates of DV difficult with Hispanic samples. Factors such as income level, use of alcohol, and age might moderate the relationship between DV victimization and Hispanic ethnicity, with similar levels of DV victimization seen as in other groups once these variables are controlled (Kantor, Jasinski, & Aldorondo, 1994; Sorenson & Telles, 1991). Some research has also suggested that Hispanic women might experience greater trauma as a consequence of DV compared to Caucasian women, perhaps due to fewer available community resources (Edelson, Hokoda, & Ramos-Lira, 2007).

Comparatively little research has addressed the issue of mutuality/equality of DV among Hispanics. One study (Field & Caetano, 2005) involved a longitudinal analysis of Caucasian, African American, and Hispanic couples. Results indicated that mutual violence was an issue for all three groups, although both African Americans and Hispanics experienced greater amounts of DV overall than Caucasians. Hispanics were more likely to report unidirectional male against female DV than were other groups. Risk factors for DV perpetration included direct exposure to physical violence in childhood and witnessing DV in the family of origin.

The potential influence of media violence on viewer aggression continues to be a topic that is debated (Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Ferguson & Kilburn, 2009; Huesmann & Taylor, 2003; Savage & Yancey, 2008). Few studies have examined the potential impact of viewing media violence specifically on DV perpetration in romantic relationships. In a rare study that examined this issue, Durant, Champion, and Wolfson (2006) examined

the influence of media violence viewing, particularly wrestling, on the use of DV among teenagers. Results indicated positive but generally weak effects with unclear practical significance (many of the positive correlations were below $r = .10$ in size, due to a large sample used in the study). Further investigation of the influence of media on DV might be worthwhile.

This study seeks to add to the literature on DV among Hispanic populations. In particular, a sample of young-adult Mexican Americans involved in romantic relationships was assessed for their involvement with DV both as victims and perpetrators. This article has several goals, notably: (a) to examine the (12-month) incidence of DV perpetration and victimization among Mexican American young adults; (b) to examine the degree to which DV use is mutual among Mexican American young adults; and (c) to examine the influence of family, personality, and media risk factors for DV perpetration.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in this study were 151 young adults recruited from a Hispanic-serving public university in the South. Of these students, 73 (48.3%) were male and 78 (51.7%) were female. The mean age of the sample was 25.0 ($SD = 5.51$). The mean age for men was 25.7 ($SD = 5.86$) and for women 24.45 ($SD = 5.13$). Median age for women was 22 and for men 23. Most respondents reported being born in the United States ($n = 131$; 86.8%), with 6 (4%) reporting being born in Mexico and 14 (9.2%) reporting being born in other Latin American countries. Mean level of parental education for participants was equivalent to a high school diploma for participants' mothers and fathers, although the range included parents with effectively elementary school education through doctoral degrees. All participants were currently involved in romantic (i.e., dating or marital) relationships. Of these, 28 (18.5%) were currently married, with the remaining participants in dating relationships.

Materials (All Administered in English)

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE PERPETRATION

The Conflict Tactics Scale-2 (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) is one of the most widely used measures of DV perpetration and victimization. Scales regarding perpetration and victimization by physical and psychological abuse were included in the analyses reported here. Coefficient alphas for the included scales in this analysis ranged from .69 to .72. For the physical aggression scale, separate subscales were also computed for minor (i.e., I grabbed my partner; I slapped my partner) and

major (i.e., I used a knife or gun on my partner; I beat up my partner) physical aggression in accordance with the CTS2 manual. Examples of items on the psychological abuse scale included “I called my partner fat or ugly” and “I destroyed something belonging to my partner.”

MEDIA HABITS

A measure of video game playing habits and television habits was adapted from that described in Anderson and Dill (2000). Participants were asked to report the top three video games and television shows that they most regularly played or watched and rated the level of violent content using Likert scale items. Separate composite scores were obtained across the games and television shows. This allowed for a general measure of video game playing and television habits in participants. In this sample, the measure of exposure to violent video games obtained a coefficient alpha of .88. Television violence obtained a coefficient alpha of .77. Previous research has suggested that a small but significant predictive relationship exists between exposure to media violence and DV (Durant et al., 2006); thus this measure was included for the predictive analyses.

FAMILY VIOLENCE EXPOSURE

Family violence was measured using the Family Conflict Scale (Ferguson et al., 2008). This measure is a 49-item forced choice measure designed to assess a variety of issues related to family violence exposure. Ferguson et al. (2008) noted that certain subscales including physical abuse, parental neglect, and witnessing DV were predictive of violent crime commission; as such, these subscales are used in this study. With this sample, reliability coefficients were good for all scales, with physical abuse alpha of .91, witnessing domestic violence alpha of .96, and neglect alpha of .92.

TRAIT AGGRESSION

To measure trait aggressiveness, participants completed the Aggression Questionnaire–Short Form (AQ; Buss & Warren, 2000). The AQ was designed to measure the degree to which respondents endorse statements about their levels of aggression. Within this sample, the AQ obtained an alpha coefficient of .89.

GENERAL PERSONALITY

The NEO–Five Factor Inventory (NEO–FFI; Costa & McCrae, 1992) was employed as a brief 60-item measure of general personality. This instrument

measures personality traits (e.g., agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness, neuroticism, extraversion) consistent with the Big Five model (see Costa & McCrae, 1992) of personality. In our sample, coefficient alphas ranged between .63 and .75. General personality was measured to control adequately for innate personality traits that might contribute to aggression as has been found previously (Lynam & Miller, 2004).

Procedure

Students were approached in class, with prior permission of the instructor, to volunteer for participation in the study in exchange for extra credit. All students were informed verbally and on the consent form of the nature of the questions they would be asked and were assured of the anonymity of their responses. Questionnaires were administered in group format. Total administration time averaged approximately 30 minutes. All procedures were designed to adhere to American Psychological Association standards for the ethical involvement of human participants. Results were analyzed with Mann–Whitney U tests and hierarchical multiple regression using SPSS software (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL).

RESULTS

Among female participants, 46.8% reported using some level of physical assault and 84.6% reported using some level of psychological aggression against their romantic partners. Regarding victimization, 32.1% of women reported being victims of physical assaults in romantic relationships and 79.5% reported being the victim of psychological aggression. A closer analysis of results noted that in most cases, the violence perpetrated or experienced was minor and sporadic (i.e., the risk of serious injury was low, although this should not be taken to imply that such events are not inappropriate or should not be taken seriously). Fifteen women (19.2%) reported engaging in serious physical aggression against relationship partners. Only 1 female respondent reported using a weapon on a partner.

Among male participants, 35.3% reported using some level of physical assault and 72.1% reported using some level of psychological aggression against their romantic partners. Regarding victimization, 38.2% of men reported being victims of physical assaults in romantic relationships and 73.5% reported being the victim of psychological aggression. Eleven men (16.2%) reported using major assaults on a relationship partner, with 6 (8.5%) reporting use of a weapon.

The distribution of violence perpetration and victimization for both men and women was positively skewed, with small numbers of individuals

engaged in the highest severity of DV. Perpetration and victimization were highly correlated ($r = .79$ for physical assault, $r = .80$ for psychological aggression).

Individual Mann–Whitney U analyses were run to examine gender differences in DV perpetration and victimization. Because the distribution in DV perpetration and victimization is nonnormal, the nonparametric alternative to the t test was most appropriate. In these analyses, only perpetration of psychological aggression was significant ($p = .04$; $Z = -2.02$), with women ($M = 13.91$, $SD = 18.29$) engaging in more psychological aggression than men ($M = 8.88$, $SD = 12.31$). A follow-up analysis on the specific item related to the use of guns or weapons revealed that men ($M = 0.46$, $SD = 2.10$) were more likely to report using weapons than women ($M = 0.01$, $SD = 0.11$), $p = .04$; $Z = -2.08$. Married versus single respondents were also compared using Mann–Whitney U analyses, but no differences in the use of psychological or physical aggression were found.

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to examine predictors of DV perpetration. In both analyses, gender was entered on Step 1, trait aggression on Step 2, Big Five personality variables on Step 3, family violence variables on Step 4, and television and video game violence exposure on Step 5. This ordering of variables is consistent with Ferguson et al. (2008) and is based on the catalyst model of violent behavior. Briefly, the catalyst model suggests that genetic and environmental factors interact to cause violence. The catalyst model posits that intrapsychic factors such as personality have greater influence on behavior than family factors and that more distal influences such as media have little influence at all. Table 1 presents the standardized regression coefficients (Beta weights) and p values for the outcomes of both regressions. For the regression predicting physical assaults, a statistically significant model was found: $r = .47$, adjusted $R^2 = .15$, $F(12, 127) = 3.02$, $p = .001$, through to the final step. Among significant predictors of physical assault were male gender ($\beta = -.21$), trait aggression ($\beta = .25$), low openness ($\beta = -.29$), and witnessing domestic violence in the family of origin ($\beta = .21$). Outlying cases of 6 men and 1 woman who had used weapons were then removed and the regression rerun. The gender predictor variable became nonsignificant, but all other predictors remained significant and at approximately the same magnitude. These regression equations were then rerun separately for men and women (removing Step 1 from the preceding equation). When men only were analyzed, trait aggression ($\beta = .31$), low openness ($\beta = -.45$), agreeableness ($\beta = .32$), and exposure to physical abuse in childhood ($\beta = .39$) were significant predictors of physical assaults. With the analyses limited to women, trait aggression ($\beta = .27$), childhood neglect ($\beta = .35$), and exposure to DV in the family or origin ($\beta = .44$) were predictive of physical assaults.

TABLE 1 Predictors of Domestic Violence Perpetration, Beta Weights, and *p* Values

Predictor variable	Physical assaults	Psychological aggression
Gender	-.21 (.02) ^a	.09 (.29)
Trait aggression	.25 (.01) ^a	.12 (.19)
Neuroticism	.08 (.93)	.11 (.20)
Extraversion	.11 (.27)	.03 (.76)
Openness	-.29 (.004) ^a	-.16 (.11)
Agreeableness	.17 (.08)	-.08 (.39)
Conscientiousness	.12 (.18)	-.03 (.74)
Childhood abuse	.07 (.50)	-.09 (.40)
Witnessed domestic violence	.21 (.03) ^a	.41 (.001) ^a
Neglect	-.11 (.27)	-.16 (.10)
Video game violence	-.14 (.14)	.01 (.92)
Television violence	.00 (.99)	.08 (.33)

Note. *p* values are in parentheses.

^aStatistically significant regression coefficient.

For the regression predicting use of psychological aggression, a statistically significant model was found: $r = .47$, adjusted $R^2 = .15$, $F(12, 128) = 3.05$, $p = .001$, through to the final step. Only witnessing DV in the family of origin was a significant predictor of the use of psychological aggression ($\beta = .41$). Media violence exposure was not predictive of either form of aggression. Removing the seven weapon-using outlier cases did not alter these regression results. Results were slightly different when separate regressions were run on men and women only (removing Step 1 from the preceding hierarchy). For men, only physical abuse in childhood predicted psychological aggression toward romantic partners ($\beta = .51$). For women, DV exposure in childhood predicted psychological aggression ($\beta = .56$), although the personality variable openness was also a significant protective factor against psychological aggression ($\beta = -.22$). Collinearity diagnostics were run on both regressions with satisfactory Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) (highest = 1.8) and Tolerance (lowest = .55) scores obtained.

DISCUSSION

Results suggested that Mexican American men and women engage in approximately equal levels of DV, with two important caveats: (a) women engage in more psychological aggression than do men; and (b) a small number of men are most often associated with the most extreme forms of violent behavior, particularly the use of weapons against a partner.

Taken together, these results indicate that gender equality in DV perpetration and victimization appears to hold true for “less injurious” forms of

physical assault (note that use of terms such as less injurious is not intended to imply that any form of DV is trivial; any incident of DV could potentially indicate a situation that might lead to serious harm). Weapon use during DV was reported among a small minority of men. Psychological aggression was more commonly employed by Mexican American women. As such, although it might generally be true that male and female Mexican Americans are equally prone to DV perpetration and victimization, women appear to be at higher risk for serious injury or homicide.

Witnessing DV in the family of origin was the most consistent predictor of DV perpetration, although it was strongest as a predictor of psychological aggression. As such, results reported here are consistent with Field and Caetano (2005). Trait aggression, a "closed" personality (i.e., an individual resistant to new experience or alternate perspectives from his or her own), and male gender were predictive of physical assaults. Male gender's significance in the multiple regression is likely due to the greater power of this analysis in contrast to the Mann–Whitney U, and it is most probable that this finding reflects a small number of men engaged in serious weapon assaults. Media violence exposure variables, including television and video game violence exposure, were not predictive of DV perpetration. Effect sizes for media violence variables were either near zero or negative, lending confidence that null findings were not due to low power. Although these results appear to conflict with those of Durant et al. (2006), it should be noted that the effects seen in their analyses were very small with no effect sizes as large as $r = .2$, and many analyses below $r = .1$. As such, this article is consistent with Durant et al. in that there was little to no relationship between media violence exposure and the use of DV.

This article is not without limitations. In particular, use of a college-educated sample might not generalize to non-college-educated samples that could be at greater risk. Care should be taken in generalizing the results of this study to Mexican Americans broadly. Measures of media violence used here, although popularly used in media violence research (Anderson & Dill, 2000), provide only crude estimates of media use and should be interpreted with some caution. Furthermore, this study does not examine the context in which DV occurs, which could differ between men and women.

Overall results suggested that DV is potentially more common among Mexican American young adults than for figures reported for the general populace (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Violence in relationships does appear to be highly mutual, although women remain at highest risk for serious injury. It is hoped that results from this study will lead to greater understanding of the phenomenon of DV among young Mexican American adults. It is further hoped that increased information about incidence and risk factors will guide the development of future interventions for DV perpetrators and victims.

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