

2022

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Recommended Citation

Olday, David; Legg, Jennifer; and Wesley, Beverly (2022) "Why Do Females Remain in Violent Dating Relationships?," *Great Plains Sociologist*. Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/greatplainssociologist/vol1/iss1/9>

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WHY DO FEMALES REMAIN IN
VIOLENT DATING RELATIONSHIPS?

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INTRODUCTION

Recent interest in the study of physical aggression/coercion in dating violence follows more than a decade of research on marital violence and violence against children. In the 1980's, studies have shown the frequency of violence in dating relationships to be approximately as high as in marriage (Makepeace, 1981, 1983; Laner and Thompson, 1982; Cate, et. al. 1982 and others).¹ These studies revealed 20% or more of those sampled reported at least one incident of dating violence. Consistent with studies of marital violence, incidents are usually perceived as being relatively mild, involving slapping, pushing, and shoving (Henton, et. al., 1983; Makepeace 1981; Cate, et. al., 1982; Straus, et al., 1980). Violence patterns in relationships are evidently established early; Henton et. al (1983) reported a 12.1% violence rate among high school couples, and researchers studying college students have noted that violence frequently begins prior to high school graduation (e.g. Olday and Wesley, 1987).

Although available dating violence research clearly underscores the importance of the phenomenon as an area of study, relatively little attention has been directed toward the effects of violence on these relationships: e.g. their stability, and likelihood of resulting in marriage.

In many intimate relationships partners appear to endure violence for considerable periods of time. In Stacey and Shupe's (1983) study of residents of a shelter for battered wives, 28% indicated that they had tolerated physical abuse for one to two years and 26% reported being victims of abuse for more than five years. In O'Brien's (1971) study of divorce applicants, 48% of those involved in violent marriages reported violence to be an integral part of their marital interaction. In premarital relationships, Makepeace (1983) found that 30% of those experiencing violence in a dating relationship experienced it more than once. Cate et. al. (1982) found that those who said the dating relationship worsened because of the violence also said that they had experienced multiple violent acts.

In studies of marital and premarital relationships, women have more frequently reported the occurrence of violence (Bernard and Bernard, 1983; Henton, et. al., 1983; Gelles, 1976; Makepeace, 1983). Although females have been found to initiate violence about as frequently as males in some studies of dating abuse (Cate, et. al., 1982, Makepeace, 1986), and marital violence (Straus, et. al., 1980), women have much more frequently reported physical injury (Stark and Flitcraft, 1985) and trauma (Olday and Wesley, 1984) resulting from violent episodes.

Since violent relationships are often maintained for considerable periods of time, and since females suffer more negative consequences than males, the present study focused on factors that may affect a female's decision to remain in a violent dating relationship.

HYPOTHESES

A woman may choose to remain in a violent marital relationship because children are involved, because she is economically dependent or because, for religious or social reasons, she does not view divorce as an appropriate solution to the problem (Ferraro and Johnson, 1983). The structure of a dating relationship is different from a marital relationship, however. Yet, many violent dating relationships do not break up. Of the respondents in Henton et. al.'s (1983) and Cate et. al.'s (1982) studies, 41% and 53% respectively continued the relationship after violence had occurred. Makepeace, (1983) reported that 62% of the couples in their sample maintained their relationship in the immediate aftermath of the worst incident of violence. Thirty days later, almost one-third were still continuing.

Even given the rather obvious structural differences between dating and marriage, women may remain in violent dating relationships for reasons similar to those of wives who remain in violent marriages. These reasons may make the violence more bearable and allow the relationship to continue. For example, if a female experienced violence in her family of origin, she may consider physical aggression an acceptable means of dealing with anger and frustration or believe that force is a justifiable way of gaining compliance (Straus, et. al., 1980). Of the physically abused women in Stacy and Shupe's (1983) study, 35% reported observing violence between their parents and 26% reported being abused as children. Olday and Wesley (1984) found that among college students, women who experienced family of origin violence, especially severe corporal punishment, were more likely to be involved in a violent dating relationship as victim, perpetrator, or both. Bernard and Bernard (1983) found similar results in their study of dating violence among high school students. One can infer from these findings that a female experiencing violence as a child is more likely to experience and tolerate violence in a courtship relationship and, later, in marriage. Women punished as children may learn the "victim" role and those who observe parental violence may identify with their mother's involvement in a violent male/female relationship, and thus be more accepting of violence as a way of dealing with frustration and anger. Therefore, Hypothesis One is:

HYPOTHESIS 1: Women victimized by dating violence who have been abused by their parents and/or have observed parental violence are more likely than men to remain in a violent dating relationship.

A woman may be more accepting of violence in a relationship if the violence is not perceived as severe. As indicated above, studies show that most of the violence occurring in marital and premarital relationships is perceived by respondents as being relatively mild, involving slapping, pushing, and shoving (Henton, et. al., 1983; Makepeace, 1981; Cate, et. al., 1982; Straus, et. al., 1980; Stacey & Shupe, 1983; Makepeace, 1983). Gelles (1976) found that the more severe the violence in marital relationships, the more likely the wife was to seek outside assistance, and in 5 of 8 cases victims of severe violence, (e.g., having been choked, beat up, or shot) obtained divorces. In contrast, 7 of 9 women who had been pushed or shoved sought no assistance at all. O'Brien (1971) found that 52% of the divorce applicants who admitted being abused by their husbands stated that the violence was a severe, one-time event. Stacey & Shupe (1983) indicated that most of those seeking outside help from abuse shelters had been severely abused. These findings suggest that a woman who experiences mild forms of violence may feel, despite these incidents, that the rewards of the relationship outweigh the costs. Ours is such a couple-oriented society that the female may view remaining in the relationship as more rewarding than the loneliness and loss of status that is typically attributed to being single. Moreover, it may be easier for a woman to be more tolerant of violence if she is not visibly injured. Therefore Hypothesis Two is:

HYPOTHESIS 2: Women who are victims of mild forms of violence are more likely to remain in premarital dating relationships than victims of severe violence.

Perhaps it is not only the severity of the violence, but also the frequency of the violence that may affect the woman's decision to remain with or leave a violent partner. Of the respondents in Stacey & Shupe's (1983) study of abuse shelter residents each month. As mentioned earlier, 48% of those involved in marital violence in O'Brien's (1971) study also reported that the violence was "indicative of a lifestyle". Gelles (1976) found that 42% of the female victims of marital abuse who had been struck once sought outside intervention or separation compared to 100% who had been struck at least once a month and 83% who had been struck at least once a week. Cate, et. al., (1982) found that those who said the relationship had worsened because of dating violence also had experienced a large number of violent incidents. A woman may be more likely to leave a relationship in which she is a victim of frequent violence because she perceives the situation as threatening and is fearful that she will be harmed in the future. If a violent incident occurs infrequently

she may be more likely to excuse it by rationalizing that, for example, her partner was drunk or that she deserved it by somehow provoking the incident (Steinmetz, 1982). Also, a woman may be confused by the violence, not really understanding why it occurred, and if infrequent, may prefer not to acknowledge the incident(s) to avoid finding a flaw in the relationship (Johnson and Ferraro, 1983). Therefore Hypothesis Three is:

HYPOTHESIS 3: The more frequent the violence, the more likely a female is to leave a violent dating relationship in which she is the victim.

Violence may be more tolerated in dating if it occurs after the relationship has gone beyond the casual dating stage. Research has indicated that most violence in premarital relationships occurs in "steady" or long-term relationships (Cate et. al., 1982; Henton, et. al., 1983; Makepeace, 1981, 1983). Much time and emotion have typically been invested in a serious relationship. Stacey and Shupe (1983) found that 15% of the abused women in their sample stayed with their husbands or dating partners because of emotional involvement. A woman may perceive that she has more to lose - for example, the love and commitment of her partner - if she breaks off a serious relationship, and will not receive an adequate return on her investment. Therefore a fourth hypothesis is:

HYPOTHESIS 4: The longer a couple has been dating the less likely the female victim of violence will terminate the relationship.

A woman may be more accepting of violence if she holds traditional attitudes regarding male/female roles in intimate relationships. Walker (1978) has suggested that physically abused women and the men who abused them have traditional views regarding gender roles - for example, that the men are expected to hold the position of authority in the relationship. Bernard and Bernard (1983), however, did not find a link between holding traditional views of gender roles and being either the aggressor or the victim in an abusive dating relationship. Perhaps, though, women who are victims of abuse may be more accepting of the violence if they hold the traditional view that the man "ought" to be the aggressor and the woman "ought" to play a more submissive role. These women may feel that it is not their right (within limits) to question the actions of their partners. The final hypothesis is:

HYPOTHESIS 5: The more traditional the beliefs a woman holds concerning dating roles, the more likely she is to remain in a violent dating relationship in which she is victimized.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This research is a secondary analysis of a dating violence survey of students at four college campuses conducted during the

spring of 1983 (Olday and Wesley, 1984). The colleges included a university in North Dakota, a private college in Minnesota, and two primarily undergraduate state institutions, one in Utah and one in Minnesota.

A forced-choice item questionnaire, a modification of the one used in the Seven School Survey (Makepeace, 1987), was employed. Initial sections recorded information on a variety of factors: demographic data, dating and courtship experience, and respondents' experience with violent behavior in their family of origin. The remaining section dealt with dating violence experiences using a modification of Straus' Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979) to measure the severity of violent acts done by and to the respondent. The following CTS scale items were trichotomized as follows: "kicked", "slapped", or "spanked": mild violence; "biten", "punched", "struck with object": moderate violence; "beaten up", "threatened with a knife or gun": severe violence. This section also elicited information on the social context of dating violence, length of relationship, precipitating factors, and the consequences of violence for the relationship. A respondent who indicated involvement in at least one incident of violence was asked questions dealing with both the "first" and "worst" acts.

The sample population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in selected classes during the spring of 1983. Although random sampling was not employed, the researchers attempted to chose classes representative of undergraduate students at each institution. The questionnaire was administered in 47 classes with a total enrollment of 2,049 students (8% of the total enrollment); 1,465 students completed the questionnaire, a response rate of 71.5%. Less than 5% refused to participate. Most of those who did not fill out the questionnaire were absent from class on the day of the survey's administration. It is unlikely that those absences represented a source of bias, since most instructors did not notify the students of the survey in advance.

Of the total sample, 51.6% (756) of the respondents were female, 48.4% (709) male. The sample was homogeneous: 96.5% of the respondents were white, 90.6% were aged 25 or under, and 71.4% were either Protestant or Catholic. This homogeneity suggests that the sample was reasonably representative of college students in the Upper Midwest and Intermountain regions.

Indicators of the dependent variable (relationship stability) were questions concerning the maintenance of the relationship immediately after the worst incident of violence and thirty days later. The independent variables (Table 3) were measured by questions concerning violence in the respondent's family of origin which utilized the CTS, the worst incident of violence experienced by the respondent, and an attitude scale (Makepeace, 1987) concerning male/female dating roles.

RESULTS

The results indicate that 13.4% (196) of the 1,465 respondents were involved in at least one violent act in a dating relationship. Of those who reported violence, 36.2% (71) were male and 63.8% (125) were female. These results are consistent with previous findings that a female is more likely to report violence

(Makepeace, 1981, 1983; Henton, et. al., 1983; Bernard and Bernard, 1983). With respect to the worst incident of violence, 55.4% (103) perceived themselves to be victims. Since few males (21) so indicated, this paper examines only the 82 female victims (Table 1). Concerning relationship stability, 54.7% (41) of the females who perceived themselves to be victims indicated that they were still dating their violent partner immediately following the worst incident. Thirty days later, 35.2% (25) were still in the relationship. These results are consistent with previous research (e.g. Makepeace, 1983).

Table 1. Role of Respondent in the Worst Incident of Violence, by Gender (N = 186)

Role of respondent	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Victim	30.9% (21)	69.5% (82)	55.4% (103)
Aggressor	27.9% (10)	9.3% (11)	16.1% (30)
Violence was Mutual	41.2% (28)	21.2% (25)	28.5% (53)
TOTAL	100.0% (68)	100.0% (118)	100.0% (186)

Hypothesis 1, which states that a woman who grew up in a violent home is more likely to remain in a violent relationship, was not supported. In accord with previous investigations, the results show that these women were significantly more likely to be victims of dating violence, especially if they had been severely punished as children (Table 2). However, witnessing parental violence or experiencing severe punishment as a child appeared to have no significant effect on the decision of the female to leave the relationship immediately after the worst incident of violence, or thirty days later (Table 3).

Table 2. Correlations, Family of Origin Violence with Dating Violence (female respondents who perceived themselves as victims; N = 82)

Family of Origin Violence	Number of Violent Partners	Number of Violent Acts
Mild Punishment	.077	.252
Severe Punishment	.30	.28*
Marital Violence Witnessed	.16	.258*

*P < .05

Table 3. Correlates of the Stability of the Violent Dating Relationship (female respondents who perceived themselves as victims; N = 82)

Independent Variables	<u>Stability of Relationship Following Worst Incident of Violence</u>	
	Immediately Following Worst Incident	Thirty Days After Worst Incident
Mild Parental Punishment	.07	-.07
Severe Parental Punishment	-.0003	.156
Marital Violence, Family of Origin	.074	.03
Both Parental Punishment and Marital Violence	.067	.054
Respondent's Degree of Injury	-.227	-.371*
Mild Violence by Partner	-.023	.044
Moderate Violence by Partner	-.075	.048
Severe Violence by Partner	.077	-.137
Previous Violence in Relationship	-.065	-.021
Stage of Relationship	.35*	.068
Number of years involved with Partner	.274*	.187
Date Attitudes	-.169	-.052

*P < .05

Hypothesis 2, that the more severe the violence done to the woman by her dating partner the more likely she is to break off the relationship, received no direct support (Table 3); the degree of severity was not significantly associated with relationship stability. However, the degree of injury she received was correlated with her decision to remain with or leave her

partner - the more severe the injury, the greater the likelihood that she would terminate the relationship (Table 3).

Whether or not violence occurred earlier in the relationship was not found to significantly affect the woman's decision to remain with or leave her partner either soon after the worst incident of violence or thirty days later (Hypothesis 3). However, it should be noted that the frequency of previous violence could not be assessed; the questionnaire item was unspecific.

Hypothesis 4, concerning length of time the woman had been involved with her partner when the violence occurred, was partially supported (Table 3). The longer the couple had been involved and presumably the more committed the relationship, the more likely the couple was to remain together immediately following the "worst" incident; however the correlations were not significant when examining the relationship thirty days later.

Finally, Hypothesis 5 was not supported; the extent to which a female exhibited traditional attitudes regarding dating roles had no significant effect on the termination of violent relationships (Table 3).

In sum, a woman appears to be less likely to terminate a dating relationship in the aftermath of the "worst" violent incident the longer she has been involved with her partner and presumably the more committed the relationship. She is also more likely to end the relationship if she received some degree of physical injury.

DISCUSSION

The intergenerational transmission ("cycle of violence") thesis was partially supported: consistent with previous research, (e.g., Makepeace, 1983; Olday and Wesley, 1983), women who were either severely physically punished as children or who observed their parents being violent towards each other were more likely to be victims of dating violence. A woman who is punished as a child, especially severely, may learn the role of the victim, and that it is acceptable to use aggression and violence as a means of dealing with anger and frustration (Goode, 1971; Straus, et. al., 1980). A woman observing her mother as a victim in a violent marriage may identify with the mother's role and be more accepting of a partner being violent towards her in a dating relationship.

The results indicate that the occurrence of violence per se between dating partners does not necessarily have a negative effect on the relationship's duration. Women - often the victims of dating violence - are, for a variety of reasons, often tolerant of the aggressiveness of their partners, even though they may not believe that the use of force is justified. Only limited exploration of reasons for tolerance was possible given the nature of the data available.

Experiencing family of origin violence (witnessing parental violence or being victimized by parents) did not appear to affect the woman's decision to break off a violent relationship. However, it was not possible to determine the frequency of family of origin violence - e.g., if she was punished daily, weekly, or monthly. A relationship may be found if one were able to categorize family of origin violence by frequency of violence. The

results suggest that although a woman may not perceive dating violence as deviant as the result of experiencing family of origin violence (and may indeed equate violence with "love": Henton, et. al., 1983), other factors apparently have a greater impact on her decision to remain in the relationship.

The data suggest that it is not the type of violence done to the woman by her partner, but the degree of injury she perceives that affects her decision to remain in the relationship. This result is consistent with research on marital violence (Gelles, 1976; Stacey & Shupe, 1983). Perhaps a woman can more easily justify a violent incident if she is not visibly injured. She may view her partner's violence as an acceptable male means of coping with anger or may feel that she "deserved" his being violent towards her if she violated a relationship norm (e.g., the norm of exclusivity) (Steinmetz, 1982). She may also perceive relatively "mild" forms of physical aggression or coercion as not constituting violence, i.e., the illegitimate use of force, or as "an inevitable part of the dating game" (Berger, et., al., 1986: 20). Future research should address the circumstances in which mild or moderate force is rationalized by the victim and therefore not likely to jeopardize relationship stability.

A word of caution: As Rouse and Breen (1987) have noted, studies of dating or "courtship" violence have uncovered little battering; few respondents have reported being repeatedly, severely physically abused by a partner. Since the degree of physical injury was associated with relationship stability in the present research, the common sense implication is that battering in the dating context quickly results in breakup, since the structural supports of marriage are absent. A task for future research will be to determine if there are circumstances in which this hypothesis doesn't hold. Do some women remain in violent dating relationships due to the fear of retaliation if they leave, and/or because of dependence?

The hypothesis that a woman is more likely to leave the relationship if the violence is frequent was not supported, seemingly in contrast to Gelles' (1976) suggestion based on marital violence research that the more frequent the violence, the more likely a woman is to leave the relationship. Some relationships in which violence has occurred before may remain stable because a conflict tactics pattern involving violence has been established, or for reasons mentioned above. Interpretation is clouded because, as mentioned above, the questionnaire did not provide data on how often any type of violence had occurred in the relationship; only that it occurred at least once. A woman may react differently to the "worst" incident of violence if her partner had been violent towards her on just one or two other occasions over a substantial period of time than if he had been frequently violent. Cate, et. al. (1982), for example, found that those dating couples who indicated that abuse had a negative effect on their relationship also indicated having experienced a large number of violent incidents. A woman who is a victim of infrequent violence may remain in the relationship because the rewards of the relationship such as love or simply the status or social acceptance which accrue from being part of a couple outweigh the costs of infrequent violent episodes. She may rationalize the

occasional incidents as simple outbursts of uncontrollable anger (Henton, et. al, 1983). One who experiences repeated episodes of violence, however, may end the relationship after the "worst" incident because she fears for her safety.

Further complicating interpretation is the possibility that those for whom the "first" incident of violence was also the "worst" were more likely to view the incident as deviant and too costly, and therefore break off the relationship. Very small numbers precluded statistical analysis.

It should be noted that in questionnaire-based survey research a discrepancy between subjects' reports of violence and the actual extent of violence may exist. If female victims are prone to rationalize infrequent violence or severe violence not resulting in physical injury as suggested above, then an implication is that these women underreport the extent of violence inflicted on them. Women may be much more likely than men to be victimized in dating relationships, but only somewhat more likely to report abuse. There may be, in other words, a gender-specific response bias built into this type of survey research which importantly underestimates the frequency of violence experienced by female victims.

Lengthy and "steady" dating relationships were associated with remaining immediately after the worst incident of violence, but not thirty days later. Of those who were victims of violence in either first date or casual date situations, 86.7% left the relationship after the incident. Only 34.1% of those in steady relationships broke up immediately after the violence, suggesting that the more committed the relationship and the more the female feels she has invested in the relationship the more likely she is to remain with her partner despite the violence (Olday and Wesley, 1987). Given considerable investment, alternatives to the present relationship may not be perceived as attractive, or viable. Henton, et. al., (1983) found that respondents currently in an abusive relationship perceived fewer dating alternatives than those who had terminated the relationship after experiencing violence.

The substantial relationship attrition reported within thirty days of the "worst" incident suggests that violence was symptomatic of increasing stress which was ultimately responsible for breakup. That is, the violence may often have been a consequence of increasing perceived relationship costs, which, in exchange theory terms, eventually depressed the relationship below the "comparison level for alternatives" (Scanzoni and Scanzoni, 1981).

The degree of traditionalism that the respondent exhibited toward gender roles did not appear to affect whether or not the woman remained with her violent partner, consistent with Bernard and Bernard's (1983) findings. The assumption that a woman having traditional views on dating (believing the man should be older, take the initiative for physical intimacy, and pay the bills, etc.) is likely to believe that the use of force by males is a justifiable method of dealing with anger and stress may not be warranted. However, it should be noted that only 13.6% of the women in the present sample were considered to have traditional views of dating roles. In other words not much variance was found

in the dating attitudes scale, perhaps because of the homogeneity of the sample. This is another area in need of further research; as Bernard et. al. (1985) have suggested, perhaps abuse is more likely when the most traditionally "masculine" men date the least traditionally "feminine" women due to gender role conflict and the threat to the male's perceived status.

The issue of the effect of violence BY females on relationship stability could not be explored here, but should be investigated. Most marital and dating violence studies have found approximately equal involvement by the genders in perpetrating violence, but interpretations of violence differ by the gender of the victims: husbands, for example, have been more likely to see their wives' violence as ineffective and nonthreatening (Pagelow, 1984). If differential interpretations of violence are common in dating relationships, is violence by female partners less likely to jeopardize stability than violence by males?

Another issue in need of research is the relationship between toleration of physical aggression in dating and toleration in marriage. Do violent behaviors which occur in dating relationships "establish expectations and patterns of behavior which continue in later marriage" (Roscoe and Benaske, 1985:423) and thereby increase the likelihood of marital violence and the stability of at least some violent marriages?

NOTE

1. Verbal abuse in intimate relationships, whether or not accompanied by physical aggression or coercion, was not included in this analysis.

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