

Woman Abuse in Dating Relationships: An Exploratory Study¹

Walter S. DeKeseredy
Carleton University

ABSTRACT

An exploratory survey of premarital woman abuse in a sample of Ontario male university students yielded an incidence rate of 70 percent. Consistent with many U.S. studies, "minor" forms of abuse were more frequently reported. Moreover, cohabitators were more violent than men involved in less serious dating relationships. Suggestions for further research are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

Une enquête préliminaire portant sur les mauvais traitements infligés aux femmes non mariées et limitée à un échantillon d'étudiants universitaires ontariens mâles a révélé un taux de fréquence de 70 pour cent. Des formes "mineures" de mauvais traitements ont été plus souvent signalées, constatation compatible avec plusieurs études américaines. L'enquête a révélé en outre que des hommes cohabitant avec une femme étaient plus violents que ceux qui étaient impliqués dans une relation moins sérieuse. Notre étude se termine par une discussion de quelques suggestions pour des recherches ultérieures.

Introduction

Violence against women is a significant social problem in many U.S. college and university dating relationships (Makepeace, 1981, 1986; Laner and Thompson, 1982; Sigelman et al., 1984; Koss et al., 1987). At present, there are no comparable Canadian inquiries. Researchers have focused mainly on violence against married and cohabiting women in Toronto and Alberta (Kennedy and Dutton, 1988; Brinkerhoff and Lupri, 1988; Smith, 1985, 1986, 1987).² This investigation extends Canadian survey research into the context of university dating relationships. The primary purpose of this study is to present exploratory data on the incidence of premarital woman abuse in a sample of male university students. The secondary objective is to provide suggestions for further research.

Review of the Literature

Researchers do not know how much physical and psychological abuse Canadian men inflict on women in university dating relationships.³ There are no national official statistics on this problem. Moreover, there are no national self-report and victimization surveys. Furthermore, there is a dearth of research in general on this topic in Canada. The U.S., like Canada, lacks national official

statistics, self-report and victimization data on physical and psychological premarital woman abuse.⁴ Nevertheless, sub-national findings are available.

These data were gathered mainly from opportunity samples consisting of both men and women. Between 20 and 65 percent of the respondents reported either sustaining or inflicting some type of abuse (Henton et al., 1983; Makepeace, 1981, 1986; Cate et al., 1982; Sigelman et al., 1984; Stets and Pirog-Good, 1987). Most of these enquiries do not provide incidence data on male assailants. Instead they have done the following.

First, some researchers report the percentage of men and women who indicated that they had "experienced" various types of premarital abuse. They did not report the number of males and females who had inflicted and sustained abuse (Laner and Thompson, 1982; Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985). Second, others, in addition to confounding victimization and aggressor findings, did not compare these data by sex (Makepeace, 1981; Cate et al., 1982).

The few researchers who have compared incidence rates by sex show that the percentage of abusive men ranges from 15 to 53.6 percent (Arias et al., 1987; Bernard and

Bernard, 1983; Makepeace, 1983, 1986; Sigelman et al., 1984). Except for Makepeace's (1983) investigation, these studies used a broad time referent subjects' entire dating histories.⁵

This study addresses the shortage of Canadian premarital woman abuse research. It is the first attempt to develop a survey data base on female victimization in university dating relationships.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 308 male undergraduate sociology, psychology, political science, natural science and administrative studies students. These respondents were enrolled in 1987 summer and fall classes at York University, University of Guelph, University of Toronto and McMaster University. Only single men and those who were married for less than 12 months before the study were examined. Subjects who were involved in cohabiting relationships were also included in the sample.

The sample age ranged from 18 to 65. The mean age was 23, with 59.2 percent being age 22 or younger and 40.8 percent being 23 or older. Three percent of the subjects were parents and two percent were married. Thirty-two percent were Catholic, 16.3 percent Protestant, 12.7 percent Jewish, 16.9 percent belonged to other religious groups (e.g., Greek Orthodox and Mennonite) and 7.8 percent said that they had no religion at all. Four percent of the subjects refused to report their religious affiliation.

Approximately 50 percent of the participants were third and fourth year students. Forty-two percent were freshmen and sophomores. Nearly eight percent belonged to other categories (e.g., special students and visa students). Family income (before taxes) for the year ending December 31, 1986, was between \$30,000 and \$39,000 for 32 percent of the participants, \$40,000 to \$59,000 for 29 percent and \$60,000 and above for 25 percent. Eight percent did not reveal this information.

Although the sample is not representative of a larger student population, the sampling procedure used is consistent with those techniques employed in most earlier dating violence studies conducted in the U.S. Moreover, a judgmental sample is appropriate for the purpose of exploratory research (Sudman, 1983).

Data Collection

A self-administered questionnaire was distributed in classrooms. The reliability and validity of this method is well established (Sheatsley, 1983). The major advantage of this technique is that the researcher's presence can ensure a high completion rate and encourage participants to answer all questions.

Permission to distribute the questionnaire was obtained from course directors and the universities' Human Ethics Committees. Furthermore, participation in this study was strictly voluntary and respondents were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

The instrument was distributed at the start of each class. Participants are less likely to finish a questionnaire if it is given to them after each class because they may be anxious to leave.

Before each administration, I introduced myself to all students as a Ph.D. candidate researching problems in male-female university dating relationships. The real objective of this inquiry was not discussed. Following the preamble, all female and male students who were married for one year or longer were asked to leave the classroom while eligible subjects filled out the questionnaire. Participants were then given brief instructions

Following each administration, male and female students were told the real objectives of this inquiry. They also had the opportunity to ask questions about this research and woman abuse in general. No one appeared offended by the methodology or the research topic.

Definitions and Measurement of Variables

Woman abuse is defined as any intentional physical or psychological assault on a woman by a boyfriend, lover, male cohabitor or casual date. The abuse incidence rate is the percentage of men who reported having been abusive to their girlfriends and/or dating partners one or more times in the 12 months preceding this study.

Most premarital woman abuse studies do not include psychological assaults in their operational definitions of abuse or violence. However, a broad definition is necessary because it more accurately reflects the multidimensional nature of woman abuse (MacLeod, 1987). For example, Russell (1975: 82-83) describes an incident in which a man spent an entire day insulting his girlfriend. Following this, he beat and sodomized her.

Walker (1979) and MacLeod (1987) both provide a strong rationale for including psychological assaults in definitions of woman abuse. Walker found that both physical and psychological abuse exist in many relationships where women are victimized by their husbands and/or male intimates. Based on her data⁶, she argues that psychological and physical abuse cannot be separated.

Most of the women in this project described incidents involving psychological humiliation and verbal harassment as their worst battering experiences, whether or not they had been physically abused ...When using this expanded definition of battering behavior as both physical and psychological, the previously invisible battered woman becomes much more identifiable (1979: xv).

MacLeod's rationale is based on statistics and interviews provided by transition house workers. Eighty percent of the respondents contend that definitions should place more emphasis on the emotional and verbal abuse experienced by women. Workers maintained that by omitting psychological abuse, researchers and the public are excluding a central element of female victimization.

A slightly modified rendition of the 1986 version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (Straus and Gelles, 1986) was used to measure abuse. Variations of this measure have been employed in many studies on dating violence and wife-beating (e.g., Cate et al., 1982; Laner and Thompson, 1982; Henton et al., 1983; Makepeace, 1983, 1986; Sigelman et al., 1984; Smith, 1987; Straus et al., 1981). Only the introduction was revised in this inquiry. For example, the word "dating" is not found in Straus and Gelles' preamble. However, it was included in this investigation.

The CTS was introduced as follows:

No matter how well a dating couple gets along, there are times when they disagree, get annoyed with the other person, or just have spats or fights because they're in a bad mood or tired or for some other reason. They also use many different ways of trying to settle their differences. Below is a list of some things that you might have done when you had an argument. I would like you to note how many times you did it *in the last 12 months*.

The CTS consists of 19 items and measures three different tactics: (1) reasoning, (2) verbal aggression and (3) physical violence. The psychological abuse scale includes the following items: (1) insulted or swore at her, (2) did or

said something to spite her and (3) threatened to hit or throw something at her. An alpha coefficient of .61 for this three item scale indicates that it is internally consistent (Jackson, 1988).⁷

The last nine items, ranging from threw an object at her to using a knife or gun on her constitute the overall violence scale. The last six items, from kicked, bit or hit her with your fist to used a knife or gun on her make up the severe violence scale. Consistent with previous research (Brinkerhoff and Lupri, 1988), alpha coefficients in the 80s show that these violence scales are internally consistent. An overall abuse scale was created by combining the above 12 items.

Dating relationships are associations between unmarried males and females that fulfill functions such as the following: recreation, socialization, status achievement and mate selection (Skipper and Nass, 1966). Some relationships are "serious" (e.g., involve a high degree of commitment and intimacy). Others are "casual" (e.g., "a good time" with no future commitment or obligation on the part of both parties) (Eshleman, 1978).⁸ Furthermore, some people live together. For the purpose of this study, cohabitation is considered a more advanced form of courtship. Eshleman (1978), Fels (1981) and Rosenblatt and Budd (1975) provide empirical support for this contention.

Dating was operationalized by asking subjects to report whether they engaged in casual and serious dating with females in the past 12 months. Moreover, they were asked to report if they lived with a romantic partner in the preceding year.

Findings

Seventy percent (N = 214) of the participants reported engaging in at least one of 11 abusive acts during the 12 months preceding this study. This figure is exceptionally high and is probably due to the inclusion of responses to the three psychological abuse measures (Laner, 1983).

The psychological abuse rate is 69 percent (N = 212). The overall violence rate of 12 percent (N = 36) is considerably lower than the overall abuse and psychological abuse figures. It is also slightly less than the male-to-female violence rate reported by Makepeace (1983). These data are not compared with male aggression statistics presented in other U.S. investigations because those studies examined a broader time period.

Approximately 11 percent (N = 33) indicated that they engaged in relatively minor types of violence (e.g., threw an object at her, pushing and slapping). Six percent (N = 18) reported having used one or more acts of severe violence.

Table 1 shows that except for "used a knife or a gun," every type of abuse was reported by at least one respondent. Consistent with previous studies (Cate et al., 1982; Henton et al., 1983; Makepeace, 1981; Roscoe and Benaske, 1985; Sigleman et al., 1984), "less serious" forms of abuse were reported more often. For example, the most frequently reported behaviours were: (1) insults or swearing, 48.4 percent, (2) spiteful comments, 56.5 percent and (3) pushing, grabbing or shoving, 10 percent.

Table 1

Proportion and Number of Respondents Reporting Types of Abusive Behaviours in Dating Relationships

Type of Abuse	Percentage of Respondents	Number of Respondents
<i>Psychological Abuse</i>		
1. Insults or Swearing	48.4	149
2. Spiteful Comments	56.5	174
3. Threatened to Hit or Throw Something at her	9	27
<i>Minor Violence</i>		
1. Threw Something at her	3	9
2. Pushed, Grabbed or Shoved her	10	31
3. Slapping	5	15
<i>Serious Violence</i>		
1. Kicking, Biting, Hitting with Fists	4	12
2. Hit or Tried to Hit with Something	3	9
3. Beatings	1.3	4
4. Chokings	2	6
5. Threat with Knife or Gun	.65	2
6. Used a Knife or Gun	0	0

Table 2 shows that cohabitators are significantly more likely to have abused women during the survey year than men who were involved in casual relationships. Moreover, cohabitators were slightly more likely to have engaged in woman abuse than men who were involved in serious

dating relationships. Consistent with previous research, this study shows that the more serious the dating relationship, the more likely men are to abuse their dating partners or girlfriends (Cate et al., 1982; Laner and Thompson, 1982; Laner, 1983; Roscoe and Benaske, 1985).

Table 2
Woman Abuse by Dating Status*

Abuse	Dating Status			Totals
	Casual	Serious	Cohabiting	
Yes	57% (61)	76% (108)	78% (45)	(214)
No	43% (46)	24% (34)	22% (13)	(93)
Totals	(107)	(142)	(58)	(307)

*Gamma = .34; $p < .01$

Discussion

Published surveys on the incidence of woman abuse in Canadian university dating relationships do not exist. Therefore, this study is the first attempt to develop a data base. Moreover, the findings show that woman abuse is a serious social problem in southern Ontario universities as well as in various U.S. institutions of higher education.

The research presented here also show that woman abuse varies across dating status categories. The Dependency Availability Deterrence model may help explain this finding (Ellis and DeKeseredy, 1989). The DAD model contends that woman abuse varies with dependency, availability and deterrence. Dating status groups characterized by high dependency, high availability and low deterrence will produce a disproportionate number of woman abusers.

In woman abuse research, dependency has been used almost exclusively to explain why battered women remain in violent relationships (Gelles, 1976; Kalmus and Straus, 1982). More specifically, women who are more economically and emotionally dependent on their spouses or cohabiting partners are more likely to remain in violent relationships, even where abuse is frequent and serious. This use of dependency is relevant to the "why does she stay" problem but does not exhaust the explanatory uses to which the variable may be put. For example, when the focus shifts from female victims to the dependency of male assailants, we may discover that dependency, and therefore, woman abuse, varies with dating status (Ellis and DeKeseredy, 1989).

Again, this study shows that the more serious the dating relationship, the more likely men are to abuse their dating partners. Men in dating relationships which involve a high degree of intimacy may be more emotionally dependent on their partners than males in casual dating relationships. A highly dependent man may abuse a woman in an attempt to establish or maintain the dependence or commitment of the woman on him in a context in which the inter-dependency symbolized by a marriage license is not available.

Without a marriage license, dependent men may be encouraged to abuse their dating partners or girlfriends in order to ensure that they will stay with them. Abuse may be perceived as a way of increasing the level of emotional commitment among female dating partners (Billingham, 1987). There is empirical support for this contention in the dating violence literature.

For example, Makepeace (1981) found that 44.7 percent of the dating relationships which had experienced violence remained intact. Twenty-nine percent became more involved. Of the 53 percent who were still dating abusive partners in Cate et al.'s (1982) study, 37 percent indicated that their relationships had improved. In their study of high school students, Henton et al. (1983) discovered that of the 41 percent who were dating violent partners, 36 percent reported that their relationships had improved. In addition, 30 percent of Roscoe and Benaske's (1985) female subjects eventually married the men who beat them during courtship.

Turning next to the relevance of availability, Cohen et al. (1981) show that the victim who is most available to be hit is the victim who spends the greatest time-at-risk. Men involved in dating relationships which are characterized by a high degree of intimacy, such as cohabitators, may have higher abuse rates than males in casual dating relationships because they spend the greatest time-at-risk (Billingham, 1987; Laner and Thompson, 1982). They participate in a wide range of activities with female intimates. Frequent contact with women provides men with more opportunities to abuse them.

Social control theorists take deviant behaviour for granted and attempt to explain variations in conformity to legal and social norms (Hirschi, 1969). Variations in conformity are a function of a person's bond to society. One important element of the bond to society is investments or stake in conformity (Toby, 1957). Applied to woman abuse, social control theory explains variations in conformity to criminal law and social norms proscribing woman abuse by pointing to the losses that would be

incurred if this behaviour were discovered, publicized and punished. Men with the most to lose, with the greatest stake in conformity, are most likely to be deterred by the threat of legal and/or social punishment. Those with least to lose are least likely to be deterred by formal and informal sanctions.

Cohabiting men may be more violent than men involved in less serious relationships because they have a lower stake in conforming with social and legal norms proscribing woman abuse (Ellis and DeKeseredy, 1989). For example, cohabiting couples are more socially isolated in their communities (Stets and Straus, 1988). Socially isolated men tend to be less concerned with loss of reputation as a sanction. Moreover, police may provide cohabiting women with little assistance because they may be regarded as involved in immoral relationships. Female cohabitators may be viewed as less deserving of legal support (Yllo and Straus, 1981). Thus, male cohabitators are not likely to be deterred by the threat of legal sanctions.

In addition to males with a low stake in conformity, men with a past history of woman abuse, with greater aggressive habit strength, are also likely to be overrepresented among cohabiting couples (Ellis and DeKeseredy, 1989). Some wife abuse researchers and aggression theorists such as Megargee (1982), argue that aggressive habit strength, a function of the individual's past history of violence, is one of the best predictors of future violence (Fagan et al., 1983; Monahan, 1981). Other things being equal, the greater the male's aggressive habit strength, the less likely he is to be deterred by either formal or informal sanctions made contingent upon his violent behaviour (Ellis and DeKeseredy, 1989).

In sum, the DAD model contributes to a plausible explanation of the relationship between dating status and woman abuse reported in this paper. Nevertheless, it is a post-factum interpretation. Other explanations may be equally plausible. Future studies should subject the DAD model to rigorous empirical evaluation.

Furthermore, future inquiries should attempt to obtain more reliable survey data on the incidence of woman abuse in Canadian universities. The statistics presented here underestimate the true extent of psychological and physical premarital woman abuse in Ontario universities. Furthermore, they are not generalizable to a larger male student population. These shortcomings can be addressed by using: (1) supplementary questions on abuse and (2) random sample surveys.

First, male abusers may not report violent acts because of embarrassment, fear of reprisal and memory error (Kennedy and Dutton, 1988; Smith, 1987). Moreover, as was noted previously, abusive acts may be considered too trivial or inconsequential to mention (Straus et al., 1981). Researchers may minimize underreporting by supplementing the CTS with open-ended questions.

For example, Smith's (1987) woman abuse survey shows that some silent or forgetful victims (N = 60) changed their answers when asked again later in the interview. Belated responses increased the abuse prevalence rate⁹ by approximately 10 percent. Furthermore, 21 belated disclosures increased the severe abuse prevalence rate.

Similarly, at the end of their instruments, premarital woman abuse researchers should include the following revised rendition of a supplementary question used in Smith's (1987) inquiry:

I really appreciate the time you've taken to complete this survey. All the information I've gathered will remain strictly confidential. I realize that this topic is very sensitive and that you may be reluctant to reveal your experiences. But I'm also a bit worried that I haven't asked the right questions. So now that you have had a chance to think about the topic, have you had *any (any other)* experiences in which you used physical force to resolve conflicts with your dating partners and/or girlfriends.

Supplementary questions may also provide more accurate information on the severity of abuse. The CTS ignores the fact that some "minor" forms of violence are extremely injurious and should be coded as serious (Smith, 1987).¹⁰ For example, if a subject reports that he slapped his girlfriend, the incident is usually labelled minor violence. However, a slap can draw blood or possibly break teeth.¹¹

Smith (1987) labelled behaviours severe if answers to supplementary questions matched items in the CTS severe violence subscale. Four minor violence disclosures were recorded as severe because of victims' detailed descriptions of events and their consequences.

The CTS also misses various kinds of abuse such as burning, suffocating, squeezing, spanking and scratching (Smith, 1987). Additional open-ended questions may elicit reports of these behaviours and, thus, provide more accurate data on male subjects' abusive conduct in courtship.

Second, attempts to minimize underreporting do not eliminate the limitations of opportunity samples. As was

discussed earlier, they are unrepresentative and incidence rates cannot be generalized to a larger student body. The next step is to conduct random sample surveys of male students so that we can estimate the extent of the problem within specific university populations.

Sigelman et al., (1984) argue that it is now well recognized that physical violence occurs frequently in American college dating relationships. They also assert that what is now required are detailed examinations of factors associated with this problem. Although the first contention is not applicable to Canada since this is the first study to provide Canadian incidence data, future research should identify salient "risk markers" (Hotaling and Sugarman, 1986). A risk marker is any attribute of an abuser that is associated with an increased likelihood of using abuse. It may or may not be a causal factor (Last, 1983).

U.S. studies show that premarital woman abuse may vary by factors such as family income, religion, age, race, social support and stress (Makepeace, 1983, 1986, 1987; Sigelman et al., 1984; Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985; Laner, 1985; Gwartney-Gibbs et al., 1987).¹² Representative sample surveys may reveal similar Canadian findings. This information is important for developing effective control and prevention strategies.

Rigorous attempts at theory testing and construction are also required. Researchers must formulate and test explanations that incorporate the major determinants identified in their inquiries. Only a handful of Canadian studies have addressed this concern. For example, DeKeseredy (1988b) shows that social support theory is useful for understanding how male social networks perpetuate and maintain premarital woman abuse.

Conclusion

Consistent with Canadian research on post-separation woman abuse (Ellis, 1988; Ellis and Wight, 1987; Ellis et al., 1987), this study shows that male violence against female intimates is not restricted to the conjugal home. Further investigations should address the methodological concerns described in this paper. Moreover, risk markers need to be identified and theories should be developed and tested. Taken together, these tasks may help develop policies designed to make dating relationships safer for female university students in Canada.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to the LaMarsh Research Programme on Violence and Conflict Resolution for funding this research. Furthermore, substantial thanks are due to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.
2. Lupri (1988) conducted the first and only nationwide study on woman abuse in marital and cohabiting relationships as part of a larger survey on Canadian social issues.
3. Mercer (1988), however, provides Canadian data on girlfriend abuse in high school dating relationships.
4. Koss et al. (1987), however, provide national survey data on rape and other forms of sexual aggression experienced by female post-secondary students. Approximately 54 percent of the female participants reported some form of sexual victimization and 25.1 percent of the men were found to be perpetrators.
5. This procedure is problematic because it increases the chance of memory error. The longer the time period examined, the greater the chance that respondents will underreport abuse (Bradburn, 1983). For example, participants may forget violent events entirely, especially if they were perceived as trivial or inconsequential. This problem is more acute for those studying men who perceive abuse as a normal part of intimate relationships (Straus et al., 1981).
6. Walker does not present statistical data in her book. Instead, she generalizes from commonalities described by abused women.
7. For a more detailed discussion on reliability and validity assessment, see Carmines and Zeller (1979).
8. For a more detailed discussion on the relationship between premarital woman abuse and emotional commitment, see Billingham (1987).
9. Prevalence is the percentage of women who reported ever having been abused.
10. For a more detailed critique of the CTS, see DeKeseredy (1988a) and Breines and Gordon (1983).
11. One of Smith's (1986) Toronto subjects received a slap that loosened a few of her teeth.
12. For a more thorough discussion on the correlates of dating violence, see Sugarman and Hotaling (1988).

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