

# The Impact of the Gender Differences Controversy on Female-Specific Physical Dating Violence Prevention Programming

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**Abstract** Clear evidence indicates that college women perpetrate physical dating violence at rates similar to or higher than men. However, programs focused on preventing physical dating violence perpetration by women are scarce. We propose that the misperception that physical perpetration is a male-dominated problem contributes to this lack of emphasis on preventing women's physical violence. We believe that failing to focus on programming that targets women's perpetration further contributes to the misperception that men are the primary perpetrators of violence and limits our prevention efforts. We suggest possible solutions to address this misperception and aid in the implementation of female-inclusive violence programming.

**Keywords** Dating violence · Female · Intimate partner violence

Dating violence among college students represents a serious and prevalent problem. Generally defined as physical, psychological, and sexual aggression, dating violence in college intimate relationships has received increased research attention in recent years, which may be partly due to dozens of studies demonstrating the high prevalence of violence in this population. For instance, physical (20–30 %), psychological (70–80 %), and sexual (10–20 %) aggression all occur at alarming

rates each year (Dardis et al. 2015; Shorey et al. 2008). Moreover, research clearly shows that victims of dating violence endorse heightened mental health problems, such as depression (e.g., Kaura and Lohman 2007), suicidal ideation (e.g., Chan et al. 2008), and substance use (Shorey et al. 2011b). Thus, dating violence is a major issue on college campuses. It should be noted that, for the sake of brevity and to be consistent with the theme of this special issue, only physical dating violence will be considered; thus, in this article “dating violence” will refer strictly to physical violence, and will not include behavior that is sexual in nature. Moreover, our intention is to provide the reader with our opinions as to what we believe are the most salient and pressing issues regarding female-specific dating violence prevention programming, rather than conduct a systematic review of the literature on this important topic.

Perhaps more than any population, gender differences in the prevalence, frequency, and outcomes of physical dating violence among college students have been explored in a large number of empirical studies. The well-cited meta-analysis by Archer (2000), although not specific to dating violence, documented that women perpetrate physical intimate partner violence (IPV) at rates similar to, and often higher than, their male counterparts. A brief review of the literature on dating violence among college students produces dozens of studies with findings consistent with Archer (e.g., Bell and Naugle 2007; Bliton et al. 2016; Hines and Saudino 2003; Shorey et al. 2011a; Straus 2004; Taft et al. 2010). Although it is common to find relationships where both partners perpetrate dating violence (Straus 2008), some studies have demonstrated that college dating relationships where the female is the only person who is physically violent are more prevalent than male-only physically violent relationships among college students (Orcutt et al. 2005; Straus 2008). Similar prevalence rates are found in studies that have examined female-to-female dating violence (Edwards et al. 2015). There are also studies demonstrating that male victims

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of female-perpetrated dating violence report a number of negative mental health problems (e.g., Hines 2007; Prospero 2007; Shorey et al. 2012; Simonelli and Ingram 1998).

As detailed elsewhere in the literature (e.g., Hamby 2009; Johnson 2005; Straus 2007), including this special issue, the above findings have been met with controversy and criticism. That is, there is still the belief among some that physical IPV, including dating violence, is primarily a male-dominated problem. As one example, critics often raise the possibility that female-perpetrated violence is largely, or entirely, used in self-defense, although a number of empirical studies with college women have demonstrated this claim to be false (e.g., Hettrich and O’Leary 2007; Leisring 2013; Shorey et al. 2010). Furthermore, though research has shown that women generally experience more severe consequences in response to physical violence than men (e.g., Archer 2000), this does not mean that the use of physical violence among women in dating relationships is not problematic. Because it is outside the scope of this paper to review the gender debate in detail, we will simply state that we believe that female-perpetrated physical dating violence should not be discounted or viewed as unimportant, and that violent behavior by anyone should be a focus of research and intervention efforts.

Unfortunately, and we believe directly arising from the gender controversy, we are unaware of any dating violence intervention or prevention programs developed specifically to target college women’s dating violence perpetration. This is not to say that programs designed to address men’s dating violence perpetration are not important or should not be investigated; indeed they should. Rather, it is unfortunate that, after more than 20 years of research consistently demonstrating female-perpetrated physical dating violence to be a prevalent and harmful problem, minimal attention has been placed on reducing female-perpetrated dating violence specifically. This failure to investigate ways in which we can reduce female-perpetrated dating violence only fuels, in our opinion, the misperception that female-perpetrated violence is not a prevalent or important topic.

Although it is unlikely that everyone in the field of IPV research will agree with the contention that female-perpetrated dating violence is an important topic worthy of investigation, there are a few steps that can be taken to increase the chances that researchers will focus their attention on female-specific dating violence intervention and prevention programs. First, it is imperative that journals focusing on IPV, and particularly the editors of these journals, recognize female-perpetrated violence as an important topic. Journal editors should make it clear that any research, especially studies of intervention and prevention programs, that is solely focused on female-perpetrated dating violence is welcomed and encouraged. We are pleased that research in this area has expanded in recent years, but studies specifically focused on women still lack in number and scope relative to male-specific dating

violence studies. Moreover, when such papers are received, journal reviewers should be informed that it might not be necessary for studies to have a male comparison group. Indeed, it has been relatively common for journal reviewers to criticize work for failing to include a comparison sample of males, even when studies are designed specifically to examine female-perpetrated violence. This issue will be even more pronounced when female-specific interventions for dating violence are developed, as these programs may need to contain different components than interventions for their male counterparts (see Leisring et al. 2003 for detailed discussion of this point).

A second step toward resolving the lack of research on intervention/prevention programs for female-perpetrated dating violence is to increase the amount of private and public funding for this topic. Well-conducted intervention and prevention studies will require substantial resources and will be difficult to accomplish without research funding support. Although it is outside the control of researchers to determine the funding priorities of private and public organizations, we can influence funding in several ways. First, increased research attention on female-perpetrated dating violence is needed. As research on female-specific dating violence proliferates, the importance of this topic for funding organizations will hopefully also increase. Relatedly, additional studies on male victims of female-perpetrated dating violence are needed. As mentioned earlier, there are studies that have documented the negative impact of female-perpetrated dating violence on men (e.g., Hines 2007; Shorey et al. 2012), although this is a relatively small literature. If future research continues to find negative health impacts of female-perpetrated dating violence on male victims, this will increase the relevance of this public health problem for funding organizations.

Finally, in addition to correcting the misperception that female-perpetrated violence is not an important problem in the eyes of some researchers, it will also be important to correct this misperception in the general population. Indeed, many studies have demonstrated that female-perpetrated violence is not perceived to be as serious as male-perpetrated violence (e.g., Poorman et al. 2003), even though it can be detrimental to the victim and the overall relationship. Specific to college campuses, efforts should be taken to increase awareness of female-perpetrated dating violence (and male victimization) as a serious and prevalent problem. Media campaigns (e.g., posters on campuses) could help in this regard, as statistics on female-perpetrated dating violence, and resources for male victims, could be presented in dormitories, student centers, and in classrooms. This might not only have the benefit of increasing awareness of female-perpetrated dating violence, but may also help men who are victimized by their female partners to be aware of resources that may be available to them (i.e., counseling). Statistics on both male and female perpetrated dating violence and resources for male and female

victims could be presented side-by-side to demonstrate how dating violence is not a gendered issue. We are confident that efforts could be made in these domains that would not detract from the also critical issue of women's victimization.

Male-perpetrated dating violence is a serious and prevalent problem, and clearly intervention and prevention programs need to target this issue. In addition, female-perpetrated dating violence is a serious and prevalent problem that is also worthy of intervention and prevention attention. The gender debate of IPV, in our opinion, has unfortunately led to a relative lack of research on female-perpetrated dating violence and, consequently, a lack of efforts aimed at intervening and reducing this important problem. Although we have offered suggestions to address the misperception that female-perpetrated dating violence is not a critical public health issue, we recognize that it will likely take considerable time for changes to be made in this area. It is our hope that over the next few years we will see our suggestions for solving this issue implemented with an increased emphasis on how we can intervene and prevent this important problem. Long-term, it is our hope that this line of research will help to reduce dating violence perpetration by anyone, regardless of gender.

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