A Longitudinal Perspective on Physical and Sexual Intimate Partner Violence Against Women

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There is mounting evidence (Desai et al., 2002; Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski, 1987; Roodman and Clum, 2001) that the onset of serious acquaintance violence begins in early adolescence and tends to persist into adulthood. Physical and sexual assault mark the lives of a significant segment of American teenagers and young adults; early victimization, whether by a family member, other adult, or peer tends to lead to repeated victimization later in life.

Yet little is known about how acquaintance violence begins, how patterns of victimization and perpetration are formed, or what risk and protective factors influence the path of acquaintance violence and its adverse consequences. Although the prevalence of intimate partner violence is well documented, its precipitants are less well understood.

What is known about the precipitants of acquaintance violence is largely derived from cross-sectional analyses. These studies have been more successful in identifying possible risk factors than they have at assessing the predictive power of those factors. Our understanding of violence against women has been hampered by—

- The largely atheoretical nature of prior investigations.
- The inability of cross-sectional designs to discern the relative predictive power of previously identified risk factors for victimization and perpetration.
- A lack of consideration of the changes in risk factors for victimization and perpetration across developmental stages (childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood).
- Inattention to the predictors of multiple victimizations and perpetrations.
- The lack of analysis of the co-occurrence of physical and sexual assault.

The analyses conducted in the present project were designed to address some of these gaps in our knowledge of violence against women.

This study examined experiences with interpersonal violence in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Childhood and adolescent data were retrospective; data collected across the 4 collegiate years were prospective. The investigation focused on physical violence against women among acquaintances, paralleling existing analyses of experiences with sexual coercion (Humphrey and White, 2000). The co-occurrence of sexual and physical assault and the relationship between experiences of sexual and physical violence as a victim were also addressed. Specific goals were to explore whether and how the characteristics of the victim and the environment (situational/contextual effects) individually and in combination affect the risk of physical victimization during adolescence and young adulthood, and to examine how these factors evolve from one developmental stage to the next to predict the onset of victimization and the occurrence of revictimization.

Sample and Methods

In 1990, the National Institute of Mental Health awarded Drs. Jacquelyn White and John Humphrey a grant to conduct a 5-year longitudinal study (1990–1995) of the risk of sexual and physical assault among university students (see White and Humphrey, 1997, for a further discussion of the conceptualization and methods). The study was designed to examine prospectively the relationship among the major risk factors that retrospectively have been identified as the best predictors of sexual victimization and perpetration among university undergraduates. The project involved obtaining permission from the university administration to survey students during the first day of orientation. Orientation leaders were trained to administer the survey, thus making participation in the study an integral part of the student orientation activities. This ensured almost 100 percent compliance (approximately 50 percent of all incoming students attended orientation). Students who did not attend orientation, which was not required, were contacted by phone. The overall participation rate was approximately 83 percent. According to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1987), the chosen university is considered representative of State colleges, which are attended by approximately 80 percent of all college students.

Before the initial survey was administered, its purpose and methods were explained and signed consent was obtained from the students. Students also provided contact information to enable followup by the researchers. To ensure confidentiality and still permit the matching of surveys across time, each survey and corresponding contact sheet was assigned a random code number. Only code numbers appeared on surveys and answer sheets. To further ensure confidentiality of the data and to bolster students' confidence in the researcher's commitment to protecting confidentiality, a Federal Certificate of Confidentiality was obtained.

Toward the end of each spring semester, students were contacted and asked to complete a followup survey during one of several sessions held at various locations around campus (i.e., student center, dormitories, classrooms). Postcards were sent to remind students of the followup survey and to announce times and locations for the sessions. These sessions were conducted by trained undergraduate psychology majors and graduate students. Students who did not attend one of these sessions were contacted by telephone and invited to participate. They were given the option to attend a session being held on campus or to receive the survey in the mail. This was particularly useful for students who had withdrawn from the university and resided out of town. All students who participated in the followup surveys received $15 each time they participated. Students who had withdrawn from the university were also resurveyed. During the first 3 years of the project, 300 students (150 women and 150 men) also participated in one-on-one interviews.

Two incoming classes of women (1990 and 1991) were surveyed regarding a variety of social experiences (see exhibit 1). Approximately 83 percent of the 1990 class (n = 825) and 84 percent of the 1991 class (n = 744) provided usable surveys. Of the women surveyed, 24.3 percent were African-American, 72 percent were white, and 3.6 percent were from other ethnic groups. Successive retention rates for each followup survey for the 1990 sample were, 88.2 percent, 83.2 percent, 83.6 percent, and 78.1 percent (47.9 percent of the original sample participated in the entire project; this number is only slightly lower than the percentage of students who remain in

the university during a 5-year period, which is 55 percent). For the 1991 sample, successive retention rates were 90.2 percent, 83.9 percent, 77.9 percent, and 77.1 percent (45.4 percent of the original sample were retained throughout the entire project).

Exhibit 1. Incoming Women Students

	Cohort 1 (1990)	Cohort 2 (1991)	Total
Sample size	825	744	1569
African-American	24.3%	20.3%	22.3%
White	72.0%	76.6%	74.3%
Other ethnic groups	3.6%	3.2%	3.5%
Year 1 retention % (*n*)	88.2% (728)	90.2% (671)	89.2% (1399)
Year 2 retention % (*n*)	83.2% (605)	83.9% (563)	83.5% (1168)
Year 3 retention % (*n*)	83.6% (506)	77.9% (439)	80.9% (945)
Year 4 retention % (*n*)	78.1% (395)	77.1% (338)	77.6% (733)
Total retention % (*n*)	47.9% (395)	45.4% (338)	46.7% (733)

Three incoming freshmen classes of men (1990, 1991, 1992) were also administered a survey of a range of social experiences (n = 835). Of the total number of incoming men, 65 percent completed the first survey and the yearly retention average was 71 percent. Twenty-two percent of the original sample completed all five phases of the study. Of the original sample, approximately 87.4 percent were white; 9.3 percent were black; and 3.3 percent belonged to other ethnic groups. Data from the male participants are not discussed in this report. (For information on male participants, see White and Smith, 2004.)

A classic longitudinal design was used and replicated over two cohorts (those born in 1972 and 1973), who were each assessed first at 18 years old, and again at 19, 20, 21, and 22 years old. It was assumed that there would be no significant time-of-measurement effects. Each survey covered a non-overlapping year in the student's life. Students were given a fixed reference point that limited the recall interval to the previous year.

Findings

Physical and sexual dating violence are normative—fully 88 percent of the women indicated having experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual victimization between adolescence and their fourth year of college. Only 12 percent of the women indicated no incidents of physical or sexual victimization between age 14 and the end of the fourth year of college. The proportion of women experiencing any physical victimization (77.8 percent) and any sexual victimization (79.2 percent) was nearly identical.

Analyses indicated that young women were at greatest risk for physical dating violence in high school, paralleling Humphrey and White's (2000) finding that sexual assault was also greater during adolescence than during college. Just under half of the women (42.9 percent) were physically victimized in adolescence; this dropped to 27.2 percent the first year of college,

24.3 percent in the second year, 22.7 percent in the third year, and 18.6 percent in the fourth year of college. For young women who were not victimized in high school, the risk of first victimization in college was low.

Analyses further indicated that the co-occurrence of physical and sexual victimization was common and exceeded the rates expected given the base rate of each. By the end of their fourth year in college, 63 percent of the women had experienced both physical and sexual victimization. Covictimization was highest in high school, with 26.1 percent of the women reporting both physical and sexual victimization. For all time periods, women who experienced one form of dating victimization were at much greater risk for experiencing the other form. This risk increased over time so that by the fourth year of college, women who experienced one form of victimization were 4.5 times more likely to experience the other also.

The timecourse of victimization indicates that childhood victimization increases women's risk of high school victimization and that different types of childhood victimization place women at risk for different types of dating violence. For example, being physically abused as a child and witnessing domestic violence in the home were both associated with an increased risk of adolescent physical victimization in a dating relationship, but childhood sexual abuse was not. In contrast, childhood sexual abuse increased young women's risk of sexual victimization in adolescence. Furthermore, high school women who experienced physical victimization alone or physical and sexual victimization together, but not sexual victimization alone, were at increased risk for physical victimization in college. In the absence of dating victimization in high school, young women who experienced or witnessed family violence or who experienced childhood sexual abuse were not at increased risk for dating violence in college. Hence, although young adults who experienced childhood victimization were, in general, at greater risk for dating violence victimization in high school, those who had been victimized as children but were not victimized in high school were no more likely than those not abused as children to experience physical or sexual victimization in college.

Although injury reports declined over time, women who had experienced covictimization during adolescence and the first year of college remained at higher risk for further injury in subsequent college years relative to women who had experienced no victimization or sexual victimization only. Additionally, women who experienced covictimization reported higher levels of psychological distress than other women in the study did. This difference was maintained over time. By the fourth year in college, women who had experienced covictimization in both adolescence and the first year of college or who had been sexually assaulted continued to suffer higher levels of psychological distress than other women. During the fourth year of college, women's ratings of their overall physical health and their reported number of visits to a medical doctor in the past 6 months indicated that the experience of sexual and physical assault during adolescence and the first year of college had a significant effect. Women who experienced covictimization at both points in time reported more visits to the doctor than women who reported no assaults did.

In general, women who had repeatedly experienced physical assault alone rated their overall health lower than other women did. Women who experienced covictimization during adolescence were more likely to report suicidal thoughts during adolescence, but suicidal

thoughts in subsequent years were unrelated. With regard to sexual behaviors, an increased number of sex partners was associated with all types of victimization. Women who had experienced covictimization and those who had been only sexually victimized during adolescence had the greatest number of sex partners during adolescence, followed by those who had been only physically assaulted. These patterns were maintained during the college years.

Also, by the end of the fourth year of college, women who had been victimized in adolescence or during the first year of college were more likely to have engaged in unprotected sex at some time during college; the likelihood was greatest for those who had experienced covictimization.

Finally, covictimization had a significant effect on alcohol use. Alcohol use was highest for women who experienced covictimization in adolescence and the first year of college, while women with no history of victimization reported the lowest rates of alcohol use, and other victimized women reported intermediate use. Although alcohol use declined across time, this same ordering persisted.

Implications for Future Research

There are three key findings from this research:

- Dating violence victimization is normative and affects many women who have no identifiable risk factors (e.g., exposure to violence in the home, risky sexual behavior, etc.).
- Women who experience one type of dating violence victimization (e.g., physical assault by a boyfriend) are at greater risk for victimization of the other type (e.g., sexual assault).
- Prior victimization places women at risk for future victimization.

Women at highest risk for dating violence victimization during adolescence were those who were victimized as children; women at highest risk for victimization in college were those who were victimized in adolescence, independent of their childhood victimization status.

Hence, this study indicates a need for research that addresses the normative nature of dating violence victimization and seeks a better understanding of covictimization and revictimization.

The study recommends further research addressing three specific areas. First, because so many victims are from low-risk populations, research that addresses factors that place all women at risk for victimization is suggested. The integrative contextual model of violence against women (White and Kowalski, 1998) provides a useful conceptual framework for formulating hypotheses about factors (including the sociocultural, social network, dyadic, situational, and intrapersonal) that may increase the risk for victimization. White et al. (2000) recently extended this model to the study of stalking.

Second, research is needed that recognizes how sexual and physical victimization by dating partners co-occur in women’s lives. Such research must link the often-distinct literatures on these two forms of victimization. A better understanding is needed of the factors that place women

who are the victims of one type of violence at greater risk for another type, by different perpetrators, in the same year. Similarly, more research on the co-occurrence of different types of victimization in the same relationship is needed. In addition, these studies should expand their scope to include battering as a distinct type of partner victimization (Smith, Smith, and Earp, 1999; Coker, et al., 2000).

Third, we need to better understand revictimization. Specifically, research that seeks to understand the factors that mediate the relationship between childhood victimization (broadly defined to include sexual abuse, physical abuse, and witnessing domestic violence in the home) and later adolescent victimization is needed, as well as studies that investigate the relationship between women's experiences with adolescence victimization and their revictimization in college.

Implications for Practitioners

Overall, this study supports a multipronged approach to primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention that includes programs that target both the general population and high-risk populations and that seek to change the social environments that support violence and improve social supports for young victims.

Suggestions for primary prevention that emerge from this study include:

- Targeting young men and women in high school and college, as well as others who are in positions to help potential victims (e.g., parents, teachers, churches).
- Working to modify factors at the dyadic, situational, social network, and sociocultural levels that support or condone physical and sexual violence against women.
- Integrating gender-based violence prevention activities into other programs that target adolescent boys and girls, such as substance abuse and pregnancy prevention programs.
- Evaluating the impact that nondating, violence-specific programs for adolescents have on gender-based violence.
- Educating professionals who have contact with adolescents (including those in schools, churches, social groups), as well as parents, about the importance of taking seriously any violence that occurs during adolescence.

The findings that women who were physically or sexually abused or who witnessed domestic violence in childhood are at greater risk for physical and/or sexual victimization in high school and that women who were victimized in high school are at greater risk for physical and/or sexual victimization in college highlight the importance of directing targeted interventions toward these high-risk groups. The limited evaluation literature to date suggests that the interventions currently being implemented to prevent dating violence are, by and large, school-based educational programs targeted to the general population and designed to change norms and attitudes regarding the use of violence in relationships.

Although the literature indicates that these interventions do result in some changes in attitudes and beliefs, at least in the short term, only one study has reported short-term changes in victimization and/or perpetration and even these changes were not sustained. It is not clear how effective education-only approaches are in preventing dating violence in high-risk populations. It is important that interventions with abused children incorporate issues related to gender-based violence perpetration and victimization to help prevent revictimization in young adulthood.

Secondary prevention strategies also need to be developed for young women who have been victimized in adolescence that—

- Encourage them to report the violence;
- Support them when they report the violence;
- Promote better psychological healing and social resolution; and
- Help women reduce their risk for revictimization in college.

Finally, the finding that women who experience one form of victimization are at elevated risk for experiencing another form suggests that better community and school-based services are needed to address the physical and psychological health consequences of cumulative and episodic victimization.

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