

A Survey of Self-Reported Relationship Experiences of Perpetrators of Intimate Partner Violence

To the Editor: The extant empirical literature on intimate partner violence understandably focuses on the perceptions and experiences of victims, who are most often women. In this context, the literature emphasizes such aspects as the types of aggressive behaviors exhibited by perpetrators, childhood experiences of victims, predictors of violence, attitudes and screening by health care professionals, psychological sequelae for victims, psychological characteristics of batterers, and models of change. However, a search of the PubMed database conducted in November 2014 using various terms (*perpetrators, batterers, self-awareness, self-disclosure, relationships*) failed to reveal any self-reports of perpetrators' perceptions of their relationships with partners during their lifetimes.

In this study, we examined 4 perceptions of relationships with partners throughout the lifespan among a population of men who were court-ordered to treatment because of the perpetration of intimate partner violence.

Method. Participants in this study were adult US men who were court-referred to a group educational intervention for the perpetration of partner violence in 1 of 4 different treatment facilities. After receiving approval from agency executive directors, the recruiter (K.E.) met with 24 different treatment groups, enrolled 170 male participants, obtained signed consent forms, and provided surveys for completion in-group and onsite. The study was conducted from June 2013 to October 2013.

The survey contained the Self-Harm Inventory¹ (labeled as such), which includes the following 4 items preceded by "Have you ever intentionally, or on purpose": (1) "been promiscuous," (2) "set yourself up in a relationship to be rejected," (3) "engaged in emotionally abusive relationships," and (4) "engaged in sexually abusive relationships." Each item has a yes/no response option. Participants were advised to not identify themselves on the surveys. Completed surveys were placed into sealed envelopes and given to the researcher. The project was approved by an institutional review board.

Results. Because respondents were asked to indicate which of the listed age ranges applied to them, precise ages are indeterminable. However, all respondents checked a range falling between 18 and 65 years of age, with most (71.2%) indicating an age between 21 and 40 years. The most common self-reported race or ethnicity was white (40.6%), followed by black (21.2%), Native American (13.5%), Hispanic (12.4%), other (12.4%), and Asian (0.0%).

Of the 170 respondents, 102 (60.0%) reported intentionally having been promiscuous, 47 (27.6%) reported having set themselves up in a relationship to be rejected, 97 (57.1%) reported having engaged in emotionally abusive relationships, and 18 (10.6%) reported having engaged in sexually abusive relationships. Only 36 participants (21.2%) endorsed none of these behaviors, whereas 45 (26.5%) endorsed 1 behavior, 53 (31.2%) endorsed 2 behaviors, 31 (18.2%) endorsed 3 behaviors, and 5 (2.9%) endorsed all 4 behaviors.

Findings indicate that a substantial proportion of male perpetrators of intimate partner violence acknowledge various self-harming patterns in their relationships with partners (eg, more than 20% reported at least 3 such behaviors), indicating an awareness of these self-victimizing patterns. Potential limitations of this study include the small sample size, the self-report methodology of the study (ie, responses may have been compromised by embarrassment, deceit, repression, suppression), and severity of perpetration (ie, participants were court-ordered, which may limit the ability to generalize findings to less severe populations of perpetrators). Similarly, we lacked data on whether some of the participants may have received psychotherapy treatment (note that the current intervention was educational in nature and in group format, not psychological or individualized).

Overall, the salient point of this study is that a substantial proportion of men disclosed an awareness of a number of self-defeating/self-victimizing relationship patterns with their intimate partners—a finding that to our knowledge is novel to the literature. This awareness may serve as a potential catalyst for therapeutic change.

REFERENCE

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