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## Dating Violence Prevention Programming: Directions for Future Interventions

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### Abstract

Dating violence among college students is a widespread and destructive problem. The field of dating violence has seen a substantial rise in research over the past several years, which has improved our understanding of factors that increase risk for perpetration. Unfortunately, there has been less attention paid to dating violence prevention programming, and existing programs have been marred with methodological weaknesses and a lack of demonstrated effectiveness in reducing aggression. In hopes of sparking new research on dating violence prevention programs, the current review examines possible new avenues for dating violence prevention programming among college students. We discuss clinical interventions that have shown to be effective in reducing a number of problematic behaviors, including motivational interventions, dialectical behavior therapy, mindfulness, and bystander interventions, and how they could be applied to dating violence prevention. We also discuss methodological issues to consider when implementing dating violence prevention programs.

### Keywords

Dating violence; aggression; perpetration; prevention; intervention

Dating violence is being increasingly recognized as a prevalent and devastating problem among college students (Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008a). Although there has been an increased research focus on dating violence in the past 25 years, little work has been conducted on preventing the perpetration of dating violence in college student's dating relationships. Unfortunately, the prevention work that has been conducted to date has failed to show lasting behavior change (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Murray & Graybeal, 2007; Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008b), indicating that different prevention programs are needed. The purpose of the present review is to suggest new avenues of investigation for dating violence perpetration prevention programs among college students. We chose to focus on dating violence that occurs among college students due to the prevalence of aggression and the ease of research access to this population to test new prevention programs. We first present a brief overview of the prevalence and negative consequences of dating violence.

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Next, we discuss previous attempts at preventing dating violence and their limitations. Finally, we discuss possible new avenues for dating violence prevention programs based on the empirical literature.

## Dating Violence: A Brief Overview

Since other researchers have reviewed the literature on dating violence at length (see Jackson, 1999; Lewis & Fremouw, 2001; Shorey et al., 2008a) we present only a brief overview of the major findings regarding dating violence among college students. Dating violence includes psychological, physical, and sexual aggression. It is estimated that psychological aggression occurs in approximately 80% of college student dating relationships; physical aggression in 20-30%; and sexual aggression in 15-25% (Bell & Naugle, 2007; Shorey et al., 2008a). Males and females generally perpetrate similar levels of psychological and physical aggression, with males often being more likely to perpetrate sexual aggression (Cornelius, Shorey, & Beebe, 2010; Hines & Saudino, 2003). The majority of dating violence perpetrated could likely be classified into a “common couple violence” (Johnson, 1995) typology, although a substantial number of college students (i.e., 20-26%) do report perpetrating severe forms of aggression against their partners, similar to an “intimate terrorism” (Johnson, 1995) typology (Straus & Gozjolko, in press). Thus, it is clear that the perpetration of dating violence among college students is a prevalent problem.

A number of studies have investigated risk factors for perpetrating dating violence. These risk factors are generally consistent with those found in the broader intimate partner violence (IPV) literature. For example, substance use, particularly alcohol use (Shorey, Stuart, & Cornelius, 2011), trait anger (Harper, Austin, Cercone, & Arias, 2005; Shorey, Cornelius, & Idema, 2011), difficulties regulating emotions and poor anger management (Baker & Stith, 2008; Gratz, Paulson, Jakupcak, & Tull, 2009; Shorey, Cornelius, et al., 2011), borderline personality traits (Hines, 2008), childhood abuse (Baker & Stith, 2008; Gratz et al., 2009), and having accepting attitudes toward violence (Riggs & O’Leary, 1996) are among the risk factors shown to increase one’s risk for perpetration of psychological, physical, and sexual dating violence. Additionally, researchers have demonstrated that psychological aggression is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of physical aggression perpetration (Baker & Stith, 2008; O’Leary, 1999).

Researchers have also demonstrated that male and female victims of dating violence are at an increased risk for experiencing a range of mental health problems. For example, victims of dating violence report increased symptoms of depression (Shorey, Sherman, et al., 2011; Simonelli & Ingram, 1998), anxiety (Kaura & Lohman, 2007; Shorey, Sherman, et al., 2011), posttraumatic stress (Harned, 2001; Hines, 2007), substance use (Shorey, Rhatigan, Fite, & Stuart, 2011; Straight, Harper, & Arias, 2003), and somatic complaints (Kaura & Lohman, 2007; Prospero, 2007). Thus, it is clear from the empirical literature that dating violence is a destructive problem and results in a number of devastating outcomes for victims of all forms of aggression.

## Dating Violence Prevention: Past Efforts

Previous reviews have examined the efficacy of dating violence prevention programs (see Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; O’Leary, Woodin, & Fritz, 2006; Whitaker et al., 2006). As detailed in these reviews, there is scant evidence that these programs have been effective at reducing dating violence. Although Foshee’s (1996) Safe Dates program for adolescent dating violence perpetration has demonstrated an ability to reduce some aggression across time (Foshee et al., 2004), this finding is an exception among dating violence prevention programs. Further, given that Safe Dates was developed specifically for high school

adolescents, and has only had outcomes examined with a Southern, rural sample, it is unknown whether extrapolating this program to college students would be effective.

As detailed by Murray and Graybeal (2007), the field of IPV prevention research, including dating violence prevention research, has been plagued by methodological limitations, including a lack of long-term follow-ups, varying definitions of constructs, measurement issues, and validity issues. Their review of nine IPV prevention programs, including six high school adolescent dating violence programs, found no studies to have randomly assigned participants to groups and only four that included follow-up assessments. Indeed, one of the major limitations of previous prevention efforts has been a lack of longitudinal data examining whether the intervention resulted in reduced aggression over time (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Whitaker et al., 2006). Whitaker et al. (2006) reviewed 11 high school dating violence prevention programs, stating that “the overall quality of the reviewed studies was low...The lack of behavioral measures, short follow-up periods, low or unreported retention rates, and the lack of attention to fidelity are particularly worrisome” (pp 160-161). Thus, it is clear that dating violence prevention programs, and research examining these programs, have room for improvement.

A further limitation of existing dating violence prevention programming has been their almost sole focus on modifying attitudinal variables (e.g., beliefs regarding the acceptability of violence) thought to be associated with the perpetration of aggression (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Whitaker et al., 2006). While the majority of these programs have shown an ability to change attitudes supporting aggression, this does not necessarily equate to reduced aggressive behavior. Changing attitudes and/or knowledge of dating violence may be easier than reducing specific aggressive behaviors (Whitaker et al., 2006). It is not known whether changes in aggressive behavior can be achieved without participants learning additional behavioral skills that may be needed to refrain from aggression (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Shorey et al., 2008b).

## **New Avenues for Dating Violence Prevention Programs**

Because existing interventions for dating violence, and IPV broadly, have been largely ineffective, we present a number of intervention approaches that could be examined with college students. In particular, due to the lack of data documenting the efficacy of previous programs, as well as a lack of research on prevention programs among college students specifically, it is our hope that this review will help to stimulate research on preventing dating violence. Because these approaches are not new to the field of clinical intervention, and some have been implemented with aggressive behavior other than dating violence (i.e., sexual aggression), the specific therapeutic skills involved in each intervention will not be discussed in detail, and will only be discussed when modifications may be needed that are specific to dating violence.

## **Brief Motivational Interventions**

There is a large body of literature on the effectiveness of brief motivational interventions in reducing problematic alcohol use among college students (Carey, Carey, Maisto, & Henson, 2006). Motivational interventions are based on motivational interviewing (Miller, 1983; Miller & Rollnick, 2002), which is a non-confrontational, empathic approach that is intended to reduce ambivalence for changing behavior(s) while increasing one's self-efficacy for change. These interventions generally consist of one or two 45 minute, individual sessions, where personalized feedback on alcohol use and alcohol-related consequences are provided in a motivational format (Borsari & Carey, 2005). Similar to dating violence prevention programs, research with college students has demonstrated that simply targeting knowledge and changing attitudes about problematic alcohol use does not

result in sustained, reduced drinking (Wechsler et al., 2002). In the alcohol field, researchers have proposed that one reason why individuals do not change despite knowledge of the dangers of problematic alcohol use is that they lack motivation (Borsari & Carey, 2005). Thus, brief motivational interventions that are designed to decrease ambivalence for change, while supporting self-efficacy, have been implemented with broad success among college drinkers (Borsari & Carey, 2005; Carey et al., 2006).

Researchers have recently discussed the relevance of motivational interventions to IPV populations, particularly with men who are considered batterers (Kistenmacher & Weiss, 2008; Musser & Murphy, 2009). Designed specifically for dating violence, Woodin and O'Leary (2010) implemented a brief motivational intervention for dating college couples who had experienced male-to-female physical aggression in their relationship. Students received a 45-minute, individual motivational feedback session where they were provided a 2-page personalized feedback sheet on their aggression, risk factors for physical aggression (i.e., alcohol use, psychological aggression), as well as negative consequences associated with aggression (i.e., depression). After each member of the dating dyad received their individualized feedback, the couple completed a 15 minute discussion of their "hopes and concerns for their relationship" (Woodin & O'Leary, p. 374). Therapists were instructed to reinforce, in a motivational fashion, statements concerning changing problematic behaviors within their relationship. Results showed that the motivational intervention group, when compared with a non-motivational, minimal feedback intervention group, reported less physical aggression and harmful alcohol use 9 months post-intervention, and that reduction in psychological aggression predicted reductions in physical aggression 9 months post-intervention.

The findings of Woodin and O'Leary (2010) provide preliminary evidence that brief motivational interventions have potential for reducing rates of physical aggression among dating college students. While additional research is needed to replicate and extend these findings, this study is an important step toward increasing the effectiveness of dating violence prevention programs. Future programs could build on the Woodin and O'Leary (2010) intervention in several ways. Their intervention primarily focused on physical aggression, and future motivational interventions could also place more emphasis on psychological and sexual aggression. These interventions could also provide students with feedback on their emotion regulation/anger management skills, in addition to aggression and alcohol use, since these have been linked as important predictors of aggression (e.g., Gratz et al., 2009). This may help make students aware of additional risk factors for aggression, and may motivate them to seek help for these problems. Researchers could supplement brief motivational interventions with skills training for identified risk-factors for aggression (i.e., emotion regulation), as students will likely be more receptive to this information after receiving a supportive intervention. Brief interventions could also be implemented for substance use and dating violence separately, such that one 45 minute session is spent on substance use and one 45 minute session on aggression. This approach may prove more efficacious in reducing both substance use and aggression due to an increased focus on both, although longer interventions may be necessary. Because substance use, and particularly alcohol use, is a consistent risk factor for dating violence (Shorey, Stuart, et al., 2011), and researchers have advocated for dating violence prevention to target alcohol use (Roudsari, Leahy, & Walters, 2008; Shorey, Rhatigan, et al., 2011), reductions in alcohol use may be associated with concomitant reductions in aggression.

## Dialectical Behavior Therapy

Although originally developed to treat individuals with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD; Linehan, 1993), dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) has been applied to a range of

clinical problems with successful outcomes (Linehan et al., 2006; Lynch, Morse, Mendelson, & Robins, 2003; McMain, Korman, & Dimeff, 2001; Safer, Telch, & Agras, 2001). While most individuals who perpetrate violence against their intimate partners are not diagnosed with BPD, perpetrators of IPV, including dating violence, often share some characteristics of individuals with BPD (Fruzzetti & Levensky, 2000; Waltz, 2003). For instance, intense anger and emotional dysregulation, features of individuals with BPD (Linehan, 1993), are also common in individuals who perpetrate dating violence and IPV in general (Gratz et al., 2009; Shorey, Cornelius, et al., 2011; Waltz, 2003). Fruzzetti and Levensky (2000) and Waltz (2003) discuss in detail the similarities between individuals who perpetrate violence against an intimate partner and individuals with BPD, and thus these similarities will not be repeated here.

Given the effectiveness of DBT in treating difficult clinical presentations including BPD and the similarities between individuals who perpetrate violence and BPD, we believe that dating violence prevention programs may benefit from examining whether a modified DBT protocol could result in improved dating violence outcomes. Linehan (1993) has outlined specific skill sets that comprise DBT, all of which appear applicable to treating and reducing dating violence behaviors. These skill sets include “core skills,” which include mindfulness; emotion regulation skills; distress tolerance skills; and interpersonal skills (e.g., assertiveness). Fruzzetti and Levensky (2000) have discussed how DBT for violence should include “validation skills,” which are designed to increase one’s level of empathy toward oneself and others. Waltz (2003) believes that DBT interventions for aggression should also include an education component on aggression, which will help orient participants to the problem being addressed. Although DBT includes a number of components in addition to skill acquisition (Linehan, 1993), researchers have advocated for dating violence prevention programs to build adaptive skill sets that could result in reduced violence (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; O’Leary et al., 2006; Shorey, Cornelius et al., 2011; Shorey et al., 2008b). In addition, because dating violence is often experienced as low in severity and more “common couple violence” in nature, a focus on DBT skills may be sufficient for most individuals who perpetrate dating violence.

As discussed in more detail below, one issue for dating violence prevention programs is whether programming should be individually-focused or provided in group formats. Regardless of the format of intervention, DBT principles may be applicable. Linehan’s (1993) DBT approach calls for both individual and group therapy, with the group format being the primary format where skills are taught. Group DBT prevention programs would allow researchers to teach a large group of participants the necessary skills to refrain from violence perpetration, and easily allow for rehearsal, role-playing, and modeling of skills learned. When applied in individual formats, and to individuals who have previously perpetrated dating violence, a behavioral analysis of aggressive behavior could be performed (Linehan, 1993; Waltz, 2003), which would allow interventionists to determine the antecedents and consequences of aggression. Because aggression can be maintained by reinforcing consequences (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Waltz, 2003), a behavioral analysis would allow one to determine whether contingency management interventions are needed, and/or inform interventionists on the antecedent conditions (e.g., anger; deficiencies in emotion regulation) that should be targeted. This approach is consistent with DBT principles.

## Mindfulness Interventions

Mindfulness has been described as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). When being “mindful,” individuals are more open to experience the present moment, including their thoughts and feelings, non-judgmentally and non-defensively (Heppner et al., 2008). That is, mindful



individuals are less likely to view negative feelings and/or events as unpleasant or scary (Thompson & Waltz, 2008) and are more likely to redirect their attention from past experiences, particularly bad or painful experiences, to the present moment (Baer, 2003), promoting effective emotion regulation (Davis & Hayes, 2011). While mindfulness skills are now a common component of many clinical interventions (Baer, 2003), including DBT (discussed above), mindfulness has also been shown to be effective as a standalone intervention. For instance, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is an 8-week, intensive program specifically designed to teach and increase mindfulness in daily life (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). The MBSR program has been widely implemented throughout the United States and other countries (Samuelson, Carmody, Kabat-Zinn, & Bratt, 2007), and has been shown to be effective in reducing a range of clinical problems (e.g., pain, anxiety, substance use, depression) up to four years after completing the MBSR program (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, Burney, & Sellers, 1987; Samuelson et al., 2007).

Recent research has begun to investigate the relationship between mindfulness and aggressive behavior. Using a sample of college students, Heppner and colleagues (2008) found that higher dispositional mindfulness was negatively associated with the perpetration of physical and psychological aggression. It should be noted that this study examined aggression perpetration without regard to whom the aggression was against (e.g., partner, stranger). Borders, Earleywine, and Jajodia (2010), also using a sample of college students, found results that were consistent with Heppner and colleagues. Gallagher, Hudepohl, and Parrott (2010) employed a sample of college men and found that mindfulness moderated the relation between alcohol use and sexual aggression against an intimate partner. That is, greater alcohol use was associated with more sexual aggression for men who reported low, but not high, levels of dispositional mindfulness. These findings are consistent with the assumption of Giancola, Josephs, DeWall, and Gunn (2009), who argued that interventions designed to increase mindfulness skills may reduce alcohol-related aggression, as intoxicated individuals may be more likely to shift their attention away from negative, aggressive cues, and toward nonjudgmental, inhibitory cues.

Given the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions in reducing difficult clinical problems, and preliminary research showing associations between increased mindfulness and reduced aggression, the investigation of mindfulness-based interventions aimed at reducing dating violence seems warranted. The full 8-week MBSR program developed by Kabat-Zinn could be implemented with undergraduate students, potentially in dormitories where a large group of students will be available for an eight week period. The MBSR protocol involves 8 weekly, 2.5 hour classes, with one all-day intensive retreat. Participants are also encouraged to formally practice mindfulness for 45 minutes each day during the 8-week period. Although the full protocol could be implemented, researchers have modified this protocol with shorter sessions and no one-day intensive session (e.g., Samuelson et al., 2007). The MBSR program has been used successfully with college students (Oman, Shapiro, Thoresen, Plante, & Flinders, 2008). Because mindfulness interventions have led to improvements across a range of mental health problems, including domains known to be associated with dating violence (e.g., substance use, depression, emotion regulation), it is likely that mindfulness prevention programming would have the added benefit of reducing concurrent problems in addition to aggression. Researchers could implement mindfulness interventions and not necessarily discuss directly how increased mindfulness may reduce dating violence behaviors, discussing the program as a means of reducing stress and improving one's quality of life. Alternatively, researchers could discuss with participants how the skills learned could help to reduce conflict with intimate partners, such as by becoming more aware and mindful before reacting, lessening the risk that psychological and physical aggression may occur.

## Bystander Interventions

The sexual assault field has developed a number of effective interventions aimed at reducing sexual perpetration among college students. The large majority of these programs have been termed “bystander” interventions (Banyard, 2011), which attempt to train individuals who witness sexual assaults, or situations that may lead to sexual assaults, to intervene safely to help prevent aggression (Banyard, Moynihan, & Plante, 2007; Berkowitz, 2009). These programs are largely predicated on the assumption that peer influences are an important factor in promoting behavior change and reducing beliefs supportive of sexual aggression may help to reduce assaults (Gidycz, Orchowski, & Berkowitz, 2011). That is, these programs often attempt to increase empathy for victims and reduce rape supportive myths as well as increase adaptive behavioral responses in the presence of cues that indicate sexual assault is likely (Schewe, 2007). For instance, Banyard’s “Bringing in the Bystander” program (Banyard, Moynihan, et al., 2007; Moynihan & Banyard, 2008) attempts to reduce sexual aggression by showing how all community members have a role in preventing aggression, and by challenging common attitudes, myths, knowledge, and behaviors supportive of sexual aggression. This program involves having two peer facilitators lead either a 90-minute single group session, or three 90-minute group sessions, depending on the specific program being implemented. This is just one of many bystander-based programs developed for sexual assault among college students. Since these programs have been discussed and reviewed in detail elsewhere (e.g., Anderson & Whiston, 2005; Banyard, 2011; Foubert, 2000) a complete review will not be provided here.

While bystander programs have been developed specifically for sexual assault, their extension to dating violence, including physical and psychological aggression, seems natural. Dating violence does not always occur while a couple is alone (Shorey, Febres, Brasfield, & Stuart, 2011), suggesting it may occur during social situations, and bystander programs could help to foster friends’ ability to perceive risky situations and warning signs for potential violence. These programs could also help to reduce beliefs in attitudes supportive of dating violence, increase knowledge on dating violence and situational factors that may increase one’s risk for relationship aggression (i.e., alcohol intoxication), and increase belief in one’s ability to help others experiencing violence. For instance, bystander programs often engage participants in a discussion of how sexual assault impacts the lives of women and reducing rape supportive myths (Gidycz et al., 2011). These discussions could be modified and extended to include the role of physical and psychological aggression in dating relationships, as myths supportive of these behaviors have been related to actual aggressive behavior. Because bystander intervention programs for sexual assault largely focus on males as the primary perpetrators, adaptations of these programs for dating violence should recognize that males and females are equally likely to perpetrate physical and psychological aggression. This acknowledgment may help to build empathy for male and female victims alike, and help to debunk beliefs held by some that female aggression does not have detrimental consequences.

Although we are unaware of any published research that has modified bystander intervention programs to target dating violence broadly, these interventions are a fruitful area that deserve research attention. In fact, researchers are beginning to modify this approach to target dating violence, with results of their effectiveness pending examination (Hines, personal communication). Bystander programs do not necessarily target one’s personal risk for aggression directly; rather, they attempt to reduce aggression through a focus on beliefs and empathy building and also intervention by bystanders in potentially risky situations. Bystander programs have been shown to reduce sexual aggression perpetration. For instance, Gidycz et al. (2011) found that men receiving a bystander-based intervention reported perpetrating less sexual aggression over the 4-months following the

intervention when compared with men who did not receive the intervention. One would hope that similar outcomes would occur for physical and psychological aggression. Because there are a number of protocols for bystander interventions for college students that are readily available, researchers could easily modify these programs to broadly target dating violence behaviors.

## Interventions for Psychological Aggression

While not an intervention approach per se, we believe that prevention programs should consider targeting psychological aggression specifically. Indeed, previous researchers have advocated for dating violence and IPV prevention programs to focus resources on reducing psychological aggression (Lawrence, Yoon, Langer, & Ro, 2009; O'Leary, 1999; Shorey, Cornelius, et al., 2011). As mentioned previously, psychological aggression is one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of physical aggression in dating relationships. Furthermore, psychological aggression has been shown to predict the onset of physical aggression perpetration in marital relationships (Murphy & O'Leary, 1989). Victims of IPV often report psychological aggression to be more devastating than physical aggression (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990) and the detrimental mental health effects of psychological aggression remain after controlling for physical aggression (O'Leary, 1999). Indeed, Cornelius and Resseguie (2007) stated that dating violence prevention programs would be remiss if they did not attempt to target psychological aggression in their programs, as this would be limiting the conceptualization of dating violence.

Unfortunately, we are unaware of any published research that has examined intervention techniques designed specifically to reduce psychological aggression in dating relationships, as the main focus of programs has been on reducing physical aggression. While reducing physical aggression is extremely important and previous programs have been justified in focusing on this type of aggression, reducing psychological aggression may lead to concurrent reductions in physical aggression. One of the first components of any intervention approach targeting psychological aggression would likely involve a psychoeducational component, where this type of aggression is defined and participants are educated on the negative consequences of this behavior. The intervention approaches described above (e.g., DBT, mindfulness) could also be modified to target psychological aggression alone or in conjunction with physical aggression. In addition, communication skills training could be implemented to increase adaptive, non-combative approaches when speaking with one's partner. Psychological aggression and negative communication patterns share some overlap (Cornelius et al., 2010; Ro & Lawrence, 2007), and reducing coercive communication patterns (e.g., demand/withdraw) may reduce psychological aggression. As an example, communication skills training, such as techniques drawn from Behavioral Couples Therapy (BCT; O'Farrell & Fals-Stewart, 2006) could be implemented.

## Factors to Consider When Implementing Programs

### Gender

Research demonstrates that males and females perpetrate similar levels of physical and psychological aggression, and that the risk factors for perpetrating dating violence are generally consistent across gender. Based on this research, it seems logical that males and females should receive similar prevention initiatives (e.g., similar information, skill-building components). However, the field of sexual assault has developed separate programs for males and females (Gidycz et al., 2011), which is often due to the difficulty for males to disclose sensitive information (i.e., sexual behavior) in the presence of their female peers (Berkowitz, 1992). Moreover, since dating violence prevention programs would likely focus



more on sexual assault perpetrated by males, it seems reasonable that these prevention programs could have single gendered components. Given the dearth of research on dating violence prevention research, and gender considerations in particular, research is clearly needed to determine whether both males and females respond similarly to prevention programs and whether single or mixed gender programs result in similar outcomes.

## Couples

While controversial, research with adult couples has shown that couple-level interventions can be effective in reducing IPV (Stith, Rosen, McCollum, & Thomson, 2004). This research has largely focused on BCT, with evidence demonstrating reduced physical aggression among couples who receive this intervention (Stuart, O'Farrell, & Temple, 2009; O'Farrell & Fals-Stewart, 2006). Additionally, researchers have argued that IPV, including dating violence, is an interactional process whereby understanding and treating the causes of violence must be considered within the context of the dyad's interactions (Capaldi & Kim, 2007). Consistent with this notion, research demonstrates that IPV generally declines when individuals switch partners, but remains relatively consistent when a relationship persists (Shortt et al., in press). Moreover, because dating violence is largely bidirectional in nature (Cornelius et al., 2010), such that both partners perpetrate and are victimized by aggression, it is likely that the majority of aggressive dating couples could benefit from intervention. Indeed, O'Leary and Stith (in press) have argued that dyadic dating violence prevention programs may be beneficial for couples who have been in a long-term relationship and/or are cohabitating.

Woodin and O'Leary (2010), in their motivational intervention discussed above, targeted both members of the dating dyad, although each individual received the intervention individually with only a minimal couple component. Thus, it remains unknown whether couple-level interventions would reduce dating violence similar to research conducted with adults and BCT. The intervention approaches described above could easily be modified into couple-level interventions, as many of these approaches have already been adapted for this purpose (e.g., DBT; Kirby & Baucom, 2007; Mindfulness; Carson, Carson, Gill, & Baucom, 2004). Additionally, researchers could examine whether BCT, which has been shown to be effective for reducing IPV (Schumm, O'Farrell, Murphy, & Fals-Stewart, 2009), reduces aggression among dating couples. When conducting couple-level dating violence prevention, though, there are a number of factors that should be taken into consideration. First, couples-level interventions are generally contraindicated when there is severe violence occurring in the relationship or when one partner fears the other (Schacht, Dimidjian, George, & Berns, 2009). Others have argued that couples intervention for IPV may appear to blame victims, as it indicates there is a mutual problem to be solved (see Stith & McCollum, 2011 for a review of couples treatment and IPV). In addition, college students often have many dating relationships throughout their collegiate time, which may make it difficult to determine whether couples-level intervention reduces aggression within a specific relationship, as couples may break-up during the course of the study, making it difficult to examine reductions in aggression over time. Still, one would hope that the skills learned during a couples intervention would be carried into future relationships, reducing the chances that aggression would continue into new relationships.

## Individual vs. Group

When couple-level interventions are not considered, a separate issue is to determine whether the intervention should be individually focused or group based. It is clear that group-based prevention programs would likely be most cost effective and reach more students than individually-based interventions. However, researchers have also advocated for individually tailored, or one-on-one counseling, prevention efforts (Murphy & Meis, 2008; Shorey et al.,

2008b), as these approaches could be focused on the specific risk factors of each perpetrator (e.g., substance use, anger management). Individually based prevention efforts will be time consuming, although brief motivational interventions (discussed above) can be implemented in a short period of time and would allow for a number of students to be reached. Individual prevention efforts could also allow researchers and clinicians to perform a functional analysis of perpetrator's aggressive behavior (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Shorey et al., 2008b), which would inform interventionists on the most relevant variables for aggressive behavior within that individual and, thus, the areas in most need of change.

Still, group interventions, due to their ability to reach large groups of students, are likely to continue to be implemented. Murphy and Meis (2008) discussed the potential limitations of conducting group-based IPV prevention efforts. It should be noted that these researchers were largely concerned with the treatment of *batterers*, or individuals who perpetrated more severe forms of IPV. Still, their discussion could have important implications for dating violence prevention efforts. When conducting group-based interventions clinicians and researchers should be aware that (1) group members will likely vary in their readiness to change their behavior; (2) there is likely considerable heterogeneity in presenting problems and areas of needed intervention; (3) not all perpetrators will need to be taught the same skill sets, as some may need communication skills training and others may need to reduce their alcohol use, for example; and (4) there is potential for negative peer influences and reinforcement for negative relationship behavior (Murphy & Meis, 2008). While these potential problems associated with group-based efforts should not preclude group interventions from being developed, being aware of these potential issues will allow researchers to evaluate the necessary characteristics that may impact outcomes.

### Primary, Secondary, or Universal Prevention

Another factor to consider when implementing dating violence prevention programs is whether the targets of intervention are individuals who have never perpetrated aggression (primary prevention) or individuals who have previously perpetrated aggression or have manifested serious risk factors for aggression (secondary prevention). Primary prevention programs target individuals who have never perpetrated violence, hoping to reduce the chances of aggression ever occurring (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Foshee et al., 1996). Secondary prevention programs target individuals who have already perpetrated aggression, hoping to reduce the chances of aggression continuing to occur (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Foshee et al., 1996). While we believe that all of the intervention approaches outlined above could be implemented in either a primary or secondary prevention program, knowing the purpose of the intervention (primary or secondary) will help to guide methodologically sound research.

Prevention programs, for instance, could screen individuals on known risk factors for aggression (e.g., problematic alcohol use, poor emotion regulation skills) and target these individuals in an attempt to target individuals at greatest risk for aggression (Shorey, Cornelius, et al., 2011). Secondary prevention programs will need to determine which type(s) of aggression (psychological, physical, and/or sexual) needs to be present in order for individuals to qualify for these programs. Since psychological aggression occurs at alarming rates among college students (Shorey et al., 2008a), targeting individuals who have already perpetrated physical and/or sexual aggression may be the best approach for secondary prevention programs, as they would be targeting the individuals whose aggression has likely already escalated in severity. An alternative approach would be to target every individual regardless of aggression history (i.e., universal intervention). Entire dormitories, fraternities, or sororities, for example, could be used for these purposes (e.g., Gidycz et al., 2011). While the ultimate goal of dating violence prevention programs would be to target

the most individuals possible, it remains unknown which type of intervention, primary, secondary, or universal, would be most effective at reducing aggression.

## Summary

The current review attempted to suggest new avenues for dating violence prevention programming, as existing efforts at reducing dating violence have largely failed to prevent aggression. We highlighted intervention approaches that have shown promise in reducing different types of aggression (e.g., sexual assault) or in modifying difficult clinical problems that may be associated with aggressive behavior (e.g., BPD; substance use). A number of factors to consider when implementing dating violence prevention programs were also identified (i.e., individual vs. group format, couples vs. individual). It is our hope that this review will provide new directions for prevention programming and lead to research on the effectiveness of such programs, as dating violence is a serious problem that needs more attention directed toward prevention.

When implementing dating violence prevention programs, regardless of the type of intervention, (e.g., mindfulness, MI) there are factors that need to be taken into consideration in addition to those mentioned above. One of the most important methodological considerations when implementing programs, and one that has been surprisingly ignored in previous research, is longitudinal data on the efficacy of the program. As mentioned previously, research is lacking on whether programs resulted in long-term behavioral change, which is one of the single biggest hindrances in being able to accurately evaluate the effectiveness of dating violence prevention programs. Researchers should use longitudinal designs to examine whether psychological, physical, and sexual aggression reduced as a result of prevention efforts, and follow-up assessment of aggressive behavior should occur at least one year post intervention. This will help to determine the long-term effectiveness of prevention programs. From our perspective, it is important that researchers examine all types of dating violence and not limit their conceptualization and assessment to just one form of aggression, since all three types of aggression are prevalent and often co-occur. Control groups of students who do not receive the intervention are also needed to determine whether the intervention had an effect on aggressive behavior above and beyond the effects of time and/or an increase in age.

Another important assessment consideration in prevention programming is examination of the mechanisms of change (Fruzzetti & Levensky, 2000; Whitaker et al., 2006). That is, if mindfulness interventions are implemented, for example, one would hypothesize that increased mindfulness would be one of the possible mediators or mechanisms for reducing aggression. For MI based interventions, reduced substance use may be one of the possible mechanisms. Thus, researchers should repeatedly assess changes in the skills or attitudes they intend to target through their interventions. As stated by Whitaker et al. (2006), "It is crucial that programs measure the skills that intervention strategies intend to change in order to understand whether changes in specific skills are ultimately responsible for behavior change" (p. 164). Using standardized assessment instruments for these purposes, and examining the proposed-mediators both immediately and long-term post intervention is extremely important.

While we recognize the difficulty in implementing empirically and methodologically sound dating violence prevention programming, as this is a time-consuming and financially difficult task, this is a critical direction for the field of dating violence. Research examining dating violence has increased substantially in recent years, and there is a solid body of research on correlates and risk-factors for aggressive behavior. It is now time for the field of dating violence to focus heavily on developing theoretically and methodologically sound

means to prevent aggression in dating relationships. Because no single approach to prevention will be effective with every population, the investigation of multiple intervention programs is needed to determine for whom each program may be most effective. It is our hope that the next decade in dating violence research will provide important insights into the effectiveness of new and innovative dating violence prevention programs.

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**Highlights**

- There is a need for continued research on dating violence prevention
- Prevention programs have had minimal success at reducing dating violence
- New and innovative dating violence prevention programs are needed