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Physical and psychological dating violence in young men and women in Chile: Results from a 2005 survey of university students

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Abstract

Numerous studies have documented high levels of intimate partner violence in Chile. Yet to date, research and prevention/ response programs have focused almost exclusively on cohabiting and married couples. This study presents a comparative analysis of dating violence prevalence in a sample of male and female college students in Chile and describes the contexts in which such violence takes place. Based on a survey of students enrolled in general education courses at a large, public university in Santiago during the Winter 2005 term (n= 484 women, 466 men), we find a high prevalence of physical and psychological dating violence, with patterns resembling those documented for other countries. We also find a high prevalence of having witnessed interparental violence during childhood. Our results present a compelling case for not continuing to neglect dating violence in Chile and other Latin-American countries: further research in this area, and the development and evaluation of prevention programs for youth, could go far in reducing the opportunity for aggression to become an established style of conflict resolution.

Keywords

dating violence; intimate partner violence; aggression

1. Introduction

High levels of intimate partner violence exist in Chile (Larraín 1994, McWhirter 1999, Bacigalupe 2000, Ceballo et al. 2004, Hassan et al. 2004). In a recent national study, 50.3% of women in marital or cohabiting unions reported having ever experienced some form of intimate partner violence (Servicio Nacional de la Mujer 2002), and homicide statistics show that approximately one woman per week is killed by an intimate partner (Donoso 2007). Intimate partner violence has come to be widely recognized in Chile as an important public health concern, contributing to far-reaching problems in the areas of physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health (Aliaga et al. 2003); its adverse repercussions in the economic sphere have also been noted (Morrison and Orlando 1999).

The focus of the research on partner violence in Chile, as well as in the broader Latin American and Caribbean region, has been on couples in marital or cohabiting unions. A review of data sets on gender-based violence shows that virtually all surveys in the region have been addressed to individuals who have ever been or currently are in such unions (Alméras et al. 2002). Yet studies based on samples of youth in the US - mostly high school and college students - show that patterns of physical partner violence often begin during courtship, in adolescence and early adulthood. Such violence is of concern not only per se, because of its adverse effects on victims' health and well-being (Rickert et al. 2002, Rickert et al. 2003), but also because of its role as a precursor to more severe violence after transition to cohabitation or marriage (Makepeace 1981, White and Koss 1991, Kantor and Jasinski 1998).

Contrary to public perceptions, studies on dating violence in North-American and European countries generally find that women initiate as much or more violence as men (Lewis and Fremouw 2001, Foshee et al. 2001, Cáceres and Cáceres 2006). However, this assertion must be interpreted with caution; many surveys do not ask respondents to distinguish between self-initiated violence and violence used in self-defense. There is also evidence that men are more likely to use violence to intimidate or inspire fear, whereas women are more likely to engage in aggression for reasons of self-defense or to get the partner's attention (Saunders 1988, Makepeace 1986). Since men's initiation of violence is generally regarded with less acceptance than women's initiation, study results are likely to be further confounded by selection bias and social desirability bias in reporting; moreover, men's acts of physical violence have a higher probability of resulting in physical injuries and to have serious psychological consequences (Lewis and Fremouw 2001). Most research identifies prevalence of past - year physical dating violence victimization for college men and women in the 20%– 40% range; the estimates vary across studies in part because different definitions and methodologies are employed (White and Koss 1991, Shook et al. 2000, Smith et al. 2003).

In a study of university students that encompassed 31 institutions in 16 countries, 17% to 45% of respondents reported that they had physically assaulted their partner in the previous 12 months. At 68% of the universities, a higher percentage of women than men reported having assaulted their partner. Most of the assaults by men and women involved relatively minor violence, such as slapping and throwing objects at the partner. The percentage of students who reported having inflicted an injury on a dating partner ranged from 1.5% to 20%; the rates for men were higher than those for women in 58% of the sites. While the study did not specify whether violence was self-initiated or in self-defense, the findings suggest that the high levels of dating violence documented among university students in the US also exist in other countries, with similar patterns (Straus 2004).

Psychological abuse can also have serious repercussions for victims, but this form of relationship violence has received less attention in research on youth. US studies of college students report a high prevalence of past-year psychological victimization in men and women, in the 82–87% range (White and Koss 1991, Shook et al. 2000); estimates of over 80% are also reported in studies of college students that use other time frames - the duration

of the relationship (Hines and Saudino 2003), or since entering the university (Harned 2002).

To date, there have been no published quantitative studies on physical or psychological violence in college students in Chile. A report commissioned by Chile's National Women's Bureau reviewed the sparse available evidence on dating violence in Chile, based on unpublished studies, and concluded that high levels of dating violence likely exist among Chilean youth with patterns similar to those described above for other countries (DOMOS 2003). Utilizing the literature for other countries reviewed above as a point of departure, the present study is part of a larger project on gender-based violence with a sample of Chilean college students (Lehrer et al. 2007, Lehrer et al. 2009), aimed at addressing this gap in the literature. In this study we examine the prevalence of physical and psychological victimization in both female and male students, as well as contexts in which physical violence occurs. We also examine the prevalence of witnessing interparental violence during childhood.

2. Methods

2.1 Study design and survey

The 2005 Survey of Student Well-Being was compiled by the first author of this study with the purpose of collecting quantitative data on gender-based violence with a sample of Chilean college students. We administered the survey at a large public university in Santiago. The survey was based on scales validated in the US, with adaptation of some items for the Chilean context based on comments received from faculty at the university with expertise in gender-based violence and a small group of students.

The project was approved by the university's Ethics Committee on Human Subjects Research. All general education courses offered in the Winter 2005 term were surveyed, with the exception of one that had a session cancellation. The survey administrator made a brief presentation to the students regarding the content and significance of the study, and explained that participation was voluntary and responses would be anonymous. Participants signed a consent form.

The sample includes students enrolled in all the educational programs of the university. There were 2,451 students enrolled in the 24 general education courses, with some students enrolled in more than one course. At the time of survey administration, 1,193 students were present in class, consistent with typical attendance at the university; 970 students responded, an 81% participation rate; some of the non-response (the exact percentage is unknown) corresponds to students who had already completed the survey in another class. The final sample consists of 484 women and 466 men. Additional information on the study design and methods is available elsewhere (Lehrer et al. 2007, Lehrer et al. 2009).

2.2 Measures

The survey included 11 items on psychological dating violence victimization in the past 12 months adapted from a scale used by Foshee (1996), and two sets of items on physical violence victimization in the past 12 months and since age 14, adapted from Straus et al.

(2003) and Foshee (1996); 10 items addressed mild, moderate and severe forms of physical assault and 4 items addressed physical injury. All violence items were addressed to respondents who had gone out on a date or had a romantic relationship in the corresponding period. The items on physical assault and injury were accompanied by instructions to omit incidents in which the partner was acting in self-defense.

2.3. Statistical analysis

SAS, Version 9.1 (SAS Institute, Cary, NC) was utilized for data analysis. We generated frequencies to describe the prevalence of incidents of psychological and physical violence and physical injuries; contexts of the most severe incident of physical dating violence; and the prevalence of childhood experiences of witnessing interparental violence. We conducted z- tests to assess the statistical significance of measured differences between women and men in victimization prevalences and contexts.

In the scales of 11, 10, and 4 items regarding psychological violence, physical violence, and physical injuries, respectively, we made imputations when one item had missing data; a few cases with more missing responses were eliminated. If a respondent answered all items on psychological violence except one, it was assumed that the form of violence left blank did not occur. These imputations using the modal category - i.e., that there was no incident of violence - generate conservative measures of prevalence. A similar procedure was employed for the scales on physical violence and injuries. To minimize loss of data, we considered each set of violence outcomes and each context separately; the tables indicate the number of cases in the sample considered, and the number left after cases with missing data were dropped.

3. Results

The subjects ranged in age from 17 to 30 years, with a median age of 20 years in both the female and male samples. Table 1 shows that 67.3% of women and 79.9% of men who had been on a date or in a romantic relationship in the past 12 months reported at least one incident of psychological victimization in this period; the difference is statistically significant ($z=-3.97$, $P<0.01$). For women and men, most reported incidents were in the milder categories: monitoring behaviors, and emotional manipulation and personal insults.

Tables 2A and 2B report frequencies of various forms of physical victimization in the past 12 months and since age 14. The summary variable indicates that 15.1% and 25.4% of women reported some form of physical victimization in the past 12 months and since age 14, respectively; the corresponding percentages for men are 26.6% and 37.9%. For both time periods, the percentage of women who reported physical victimization was lower than that of men; the differences are statistically significant ($z=-3.99$, $P<0.01$ and $z=-3.95$, $P<0.01$, respectively). For both women and men, most reported incidents were in the mild and moderate violence categories. Additional z-tests conducted separately for each category were all statistically significant, for both time frames ($P<0.01$).

Table 3 shows frequencies for physical injury associated with dating violence in the past 12 months and since age 14, based on the subsample of respondents who reported having

experienced any physical violence in the corresponding time period. The summary measure indicates that 15.9% and 19.5% of women in the subsample reported an injury in the past 12 months and since age 14, respectively; the corresponding percentages for men are 6.9% and 13.3%. The female-male difference in the percentages corresponding to the period since age 14 is statistically insignificant ($z=1.37$, $P=0.17$); for the past-year period, the difference attains marginal significance ($z=1.85$, $P=0.06$).

Although the survey generally had a low percentage of items with no responses, items regarding contexts of the incident of physical dating violence since age 14 deemed by the respondent as "most severe" were answered by only 50–53% of women and 34–43% of men who reported some form of physical victimization. In this subsample, the aggressor was identified as a steady dating partner or spouse by 80.8% of women and 72.3% of men (Table 4); this difference was not significant ($z=1.05$, $P=0.29$). One-third of women and 42.7% of men who reported physical victimization in the survey did not tell anyone about the incident; this difference was not statistically significant ($z=-1.08$, $P=0.28$). Among those who did tell someone, 85.0% of women and 87.2% of men told a friend, and no one informed the police (Table 5). Finally, 35.9% of women and 38.6% of men reported having ever witnessed interparental violence before age 14 (Table 6); this difference was not statistically significant ($z=-0.85$, $P=0.40$).

4. Discussion

4.1. Prevalence and contexts of victimization

In this sample of 484 women and 466 men enrolled in a Chilean public university, we found high levels of physical and psychological dating violence. Approximately 15% of women and 26.6% of men who had had a date or romantic relationship in the past 12 months reported some form of physical victimization in this period - a statistically significant difference. Approximately 16% of women and 6.9% of men reported having been physically injured in the past 12 months; this difference was marginally significant, suggesting that while men were more likely to experience some incident of physical victimization in the past 12 months, women were more likely to experience injury. Overall, these patterns, as well as the parallel ones for physical victimization since age 14 and for psychological victimization in the past 12 months, are generally consistent with study findings for other countries discussed above.

Regarding the contexts of the most severe incident of physical violence since age 14, the finding that none of these incidents were reported to the police - not even those involving severe violence - supports the notion that official statistics seriously underestimate the magnitude of the problem. This finding also suggests the importance of educating youth about definitions of dating violence and protections provided by the law. Friends were identified as the most common confidants when respondents did tell someone about the incident, suggesting that prevention and response programs should include education of peers on how to identify signs of risk in their friends, and on how to support survivors and help them locate additional resources when needed.

Most subjects identified a steady dating partner or spouse as the perpetrator of the most severe incident of physical violence since age 14. This result is consistent with U.S. findings that dating violence is more prevalent in more committed relationships (Riggs and O'Leary 1989, Luthra and Gidycz 2006), and that there is a positive association between length of relationship and severity of abuse (Billingham 1987).

Finally, witnessing interparental violence can have serious impacts on child well-being and has also been found to augment risk of future dating violence victimization and perpetration (Lewis and Fremouw 2001, O'Keefe 1998). The large proportion of subjects who reported witnessing such violence indicates a need for further attention in Chile to this public health concern.

4.2. Limitations

The present study has some limitations. Although the sample encompassed students enrolled in all educational programs offered by the university, it was not random and the results cannot be generalized to the whole student body. Our results on dating violence prevalence should be viewed as conservative estimates, as survivors often underreport their experiences (Lewis and Fremouw 2001, Koss et al. 1994). In addition, a considerable number of students were absent from class when the survey was administered; school absenteeism has been linked with a variety of health risk behaviors (Bachman et al. 1981, Kandel 1991, Roebuck et al. 2004), which in turn are associated with a higher incidence of dating violence victimization (Silverman et al. 2001, DuRant et al. 2007). Finally, the survey did not specify criteria for defining the "most severe" incident of dating violence; this ambiguity may account for some of the non-response to the questions pertaining to the contexts of such incident.

4.3. Next steps

The findings of this study suggest that dating violence in Chilean youth is a public health issue that warrants further attention, beginning with the collection of additional quantitative and qualitative data. If the high levels of dating violence indicated by our results are corroborated by additional studies, next steps will include the development and evaluation of theory-based programs for prevention and response in educational institutions and NGOs serving youth. Prevention programs implemented in the US have sought to address factors including gender role stereotypes, conflict-management and communication skills, and attitudes regarding the acceptability of violence in interpersonal relations (Foshee et al. 1996, Avery-Leaf et al. 1997, Macgowan 1997). A recent review of international research on gender-based violence notes that the knowledge base regarding the effectiveness of programs to prevent and respond to physical partner violence and sexual violence against women is limited, because few initiatives have been rigorously evaluated (Bott et al. 2005).

The social climate in Chile provides fertile ground for partner violence, as perceptions that men can demonstrate love through violence are widespread, prevalences of alcoholism are high, and power relations between men and women are often shaped by machismo and marianismo as cultural norms (Larraín 1994, McWhirter 1999, Ceballo et al. 2004, Cianelli et al. 2008). Throughout Latin America there is also substantial economic inequality

between men and women (Chant and Craske 2003); the corresponding unequal distribution of power within households yields an economic environment that is conducive to violence against women. The Chilean legal landscape has both reflected and contributed to these socioeconomic and cultural conditions. For example, divorce was illegal until 2004, even in cases of spousal abuse, and the first law regarding workplace sexual harassment was passed in 2005. Chile's first law mandating equal pay for men and women doing equal work was just passed in 2009.

The high levels of spousal abuse in Chile, with women predominantly as the victims, take place against the backdrop of this environment. It is likely that women lose ground in the power balance in intimate relationships as they become mothers, often assuming primary responsibility for the care of their children and seeing their earnings capacity adversely affected (DOMOS 2003). Assaults against women in marital or cohabiting unions are generally more severe than those that take place in the context of dating, and research and interventions to date in Chile have focused on the former. Yet the case for not continuing to neglect dating violence is compelling: prevention programs in middle school and high school could go far in minimizing the opportunity for violence to become an established relationship pattern.

While the present study was based on data collected in Chile, our results suggest that increased attention to dating violence is also warranted in other Latin American countries where there is currently a similar lack of dating violence data and prevention/ response initiatives, in the midst of similar socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

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Table 1

Psychological violence in the past 12 months^{a,b,c} (%)

	Women (n=407)				Men (n=373)			
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently
Threatening Behaviors								
Damaged something that belonged to me on purpose	90.9	6.6	2.0	0.5	81.8	13.9	3.5	0.8
Acted as if he (she) was going to hit me but stopped	95.6	3.0	1.2	0.3	89.3	7.0	2.1	1.6
Threatened to hurt me	96.3	2.7	0.7	0.3	91.2	7.5	1.1	0.3
Monitoring								
Would not let me do things with other people	68.8	18.4	9.8	3.0	50.9	26.5	16.9	5.6
Told me I could not talk to someone of the opposite sex	91.2	4.7	3.0	1.2	82.6	10.7	5.1	1.6
Made me describe where I had been every minute of the day	79.9	13.0	4.4	2.7	6.2	20.9	9.1	3.8
Monitored my e-mail or telephone calls	85.5	9.3	3.4	1.7	76.1	13.9	6.4	3.5
Emotional Manipulation/ Personal Insults								
Said things to hurt my feelings on purpose	52.6	31.0	13.5	3.0	44.8	32.4	18.8	4.0
Insulted me in front of others	85.5	11.1	3.0	0.5	77.8	15.0	5.4	1.9
Threatened to start dating someone else	87.5	7.9	3.4	1.2	87.7	8.3	3.5	0.5
Blamed me for bad things that he (she) did	69.5	18.2	9.3	3.0	63.0	24.1	8.9	4.0
Cronbach's Alpha		0.83					0.80	
Any Psychological Victimization		67.3				79.9		

^a Categories are not mutually exclusive.

^b Sub-group: 418 women who indicated having gone on a date or having had a romantic relationship in the past 12 months.

^c Subgroup: 388 men who indicated having gone on a date or having had a romantic relationship in the past 12 months.

Table 2A. Physical violence: women $n=445$ (%)

	Panel A: Past 12 months n=416				Panel B: Since Age 14 n=445			
	Never	1-2 times	3-5 times	6+ times	Never	1-2 times	3-5 times	6+ times
Subject indicates that somebody with whom she has gone out with on a date or has had a romantic relationship did any of the following things to her:								
<i>Mild Violence</i>								
Scratched or slapped me	98.1	1.7	0.2	0.0	95.3	3.9	0.7	0.2
Pushed, grabbed, or shoved me	88.7	11.1	0.2	0.0	80.7	18.0	0.9	0.5
<i>Any form of mild violence</i>					11.8			20.9
<i>Moderate Violence</i>								
Slammed me or held me against a wall	96.4	2.9	0.5	0.2	90.8	7.4	1.4	0.5
Kicked or bit me	96.4	3.4	0.2	0.0	95.1	3.6	0.9	0.5
<i>Any form of moderate violence</i>					6.3			11.9
<i>Severe Violence</i>								
Hit me with a fist	99.8	0.2	0.0	0.0	98.4	1.1	0.5	0.0
Hit me with something hard	99.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	98.0	1.6	0.0	0.5
Beat me repeatedly	99.5	0.5	0.0	0.0	98.7	1.1	0.0	0.2
Tried to choke me	98.6	1.5	0.0	0.0	97.1	2.5	0.0	0.5
Burned me	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	99.6	0.2	0.2	0.0
Assaulted me with a knife or gun	99.8	0.2	0.0	0.0	98.9	0.7	0.2	0.2
<i>Any form of severe violence</i>					2.4			5.6
Cronbach's Alpha					0.85			0.86
Any physical victimization					15.1			25.4

Table 2B. Physical violence: men^{a,b} (%)

	Panel A: Past 12 months n=388				Panel B: Since Age 14 n=417			
	Never	1-2 times	3-5 times	6+ times	Never	1-2 times	3-5 times	6+ times
Subject indicates that somebody with whom she has gone out with on a date or has had a romantic relationship did any of the following things to him:								
<i>Mild Violence</i>								
Scratched or slapped me	84.2	12.4	2.1	1.3	73.0	19.0	5.1	2.9
Pushed, grabbed, or shoved me	86.1	10.9	2.3	0.8	79.9	14.2	5.0	1.0
<i>Any form of mild violence</i>					21.6			33.3
<i>Moderate Violence</i>								
Slammed me or held me against a wall	95.4	4.1	0.0	0.5	90.7	8.2	0.7	0.5
Kicked or bit me	88.9	7.5	2.6	1.0	86.5	8.4	4.1	1.0
<i>Any form of moderate violence</i>					13.1			18.7
<i>Severe Violence</i>								
Hit me with a fist	95.6	3.7	0.8	0.0	93.7	4.8	1.2	0.2
Hit me with something hard	96.7	3.1	0.3	0.0	94.2	4.8	0.5	0.5
Beat me repeatedly	95.4	3.4	0.8	0.5	94.7	3.4	1.4	0.5
Tried to choke me	99.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	98.3	1.7	0.0	0.0
Burned me	99.2	0.3	0.5	0.0	98.3	1.0	0.2	0.5
Assaulted me with a knife or gun	99.7	0.0	0.0	0.3	99.3	0.5	0.0	0.2
<i>Any form of severe violence</i>					11.1			15.1
Cronbach's Alpha					0.86			0.84
Any physical victimization					26.6			37.9

^a Categories are not mutually exclusive.

^b Subgroups for Panels A and B: 418 and 447 women who indicated having gone out on a date or having had a romantic relationship in the past 12 months and since age 14, respectively.

^a Categories are not mutually exclusive.

^b Subgroups for Panel A and B: 388 and 417 men who indicated having gone out on a date or having had a romantic relationship in the past 12 months and since age 14, respectively.

Table 3

Injuries ^{a,b} (%)

	Women		Men	
	Panel A: past 12 months n=63	Panel B: since age 14 n=113	Panel A: past 12 months n=102	Panel B: since age 14 n=158
<i>Mild Injury.</i> Subject reports the following happened due to a fight with the partner: "I had a sprain, bruise or small cut because of a fight with a dating partner."	15.9	19.5	6.9	13.3
<i>Severe Injury.</i> Subject reports that at least one of one of the following things happened due to a fight with the partner: "I passed out from being hit on the head by my dating partner in a fight;" "I went to a doctor for an injury from a fight with my partner;" "I needed to see a doctor for an injury from a fight with my partner, but didn't go."	1.6	3.5	0.0	0.6
Any Injury	15.9	19.5	6.9	13.3

^aCategories are not mutually exclusive.

^bSubgroup, Panel A: 63 women and 103 men who indicated having ever experienced physical dating violence victimization in the past 12 months. Subgroup, Panel B: 113 women and 158 men who indicated having ever experienced physical dating violence victimization in the past 12 months.

Table 4

Aggressor in most severe incident of physical dating violence since age 14 ^a (%)

	Women n=57	Men n=54
someone whom student was dating casually	15.8	24.1
steady partner: boyfriend/ ex-boyfriend, or girlfriend/ ex-girlfriend, or fiancee/ ex-fiancee	79.0	66.7
spouse/ ex-spouse	1.8	5.6
Other	3.5	3.7
Steady partner or spouse (current or ex)	80.8	72.3

^a Subgroup: 113 women and 158 men who indicated having ever experienced physical dating violence since age 14.

Table 5

Did victim tell someone about the most severe incident of physical dating violence since age 14? ^{a,b} (%)

	Women	Men
PANEL A		
Did not tell anyone	33.3	42.7
PANEL B		
Told		
mother/ step-mother	30.0	15.4
father/ step-father	12.5	2.6
brother/sister	17.5	7.7
other family members	15.0	0.0
friend	85.0	87.2
psychologist/ social worker	5.0	12.8
doctor	2.5	0.0
a priest, rabbi, or other religious leader	2.5	0.0
teacher/ professor	7.5	2.6
police	0.0	0.0
other/ no specific individual mentioned	17.5	7.7

^a Categories in Panel B are not mutually exclusive.

^b Subgroup, Panel A: 113 women and 158 men who indicated having ever been victims of physical dating violence since age 14. Within this subgroup, 60 women and 68 men responded to the questions on whether they told someone about the incident and if so, to whom.
Subgroup, Panel B: 40 women and 39 men who indicated having told someone about the incident.

Table 6

Did subject ever witness physical violence among parents or individuals who raised her/him, before age 14^a (%)

	Women n=463	Men n=430
Never	64.2	61.4
Rarely	22.7	28.6
Several times	11.2	8.1
Often	1.9	1.9
Ever Witnessed Interparental Violence	35.9	38.6

^a Sample: All subjects.