Stuck in Transition: The Difficulties Young Women Face in Exiting Abusive Relationships

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This thesis titled
Stuck in Transition: The Difficulties Young Women Face in Exiting Abusive Relationships

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ABSTRACT

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Stuck in Transition: The Difficulties Young Women Face in Exiting Abusive Relationships

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Previous research has found that relationship violence among college dating partners is a widespread and prevalent problem. Research has also uncovered the constraints that women face when attempting to leave their abusive partners and the harmful myths that surround intimate partner violence. However, these identified constraints are not typical of dating relationships, such as living together or financial dependence. Using a mixed-methods approach, the current study surveyed undergraduate students at Ohio University to assess their attitudes and beliefs regarding intimate partner violence and conducted interviews with ten undergraduate women who self-reported having experienced abuse within an intimate relationship. Survey results revealed that college students are not likely to hold victim-blaming attitudes, though their beliefs in myths did not show an overwhelming consensus. Interviews demonstrated the multidimensional experiences of women in emotionally abusive relationships and the difficulties that young women face in leaving their partners. Taking an intersectional approach, the young women’s experiences were compared to other samples in previous research findings. The present study discusses the unique experiences and constraints faced by young women who are victimized within abusive dating relationships, including
influences of parents, the role of technology, and the effects of long distance relationships.
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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of violence against women has become a topic of discussion among the American public. Though for the past several decades social researchers have been investigating the types of violence women often face at the hands of men, concerns such as sexual assault and domestic violence have been brought to light in popular culture due to current events involving high-profile celebrities and professional and collegiate athletes. While these incidents have stirred some important dialogue outside the realm of academia, they have also revealed the persistence of victim-blaming attitudes and beliefs in myths surrounding violence against women.

Relationship violence among college dating partners is a widespread problem that has been found in the United States and globally. Following concerns about why women don’t just leave their abusive partners that mostly centered on victim-blaming, researchers have also explored the multiple barriers women face while exiting abusive relationships. However, these barriers found in previous studies typically do not apply to college dating relationships, though college women continue to find themselves feeling stuck in abusive dating relationships.

Using a mixed-methods approach, this research investigates college students’ perceptions of intimate partner violence and the experiences of college women who have been victims of relationship abuse. Specifically, this study uses a survey to measure and assess college students’ attitudes towards abusive relationships and beliefs in myths surrounding intimate partner violence. The survey process also included the opportunity to recruit college women who reported prior experience in a violent dating relationship.
for a follow-up face-to-face interview in order to obtain a more in-depth understanding of their experiences and the constraints college women in abusive relationships face that may differ from the constraints found in previous research.
LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Intimate Partner Violence?

Beginning in the late 1960’s, the issue of violence against women started to draw increasing attention from the criminal justice system and researchers in public policy, social sciences, and health. In the following decades, feminists have made advances in these fields to better understand and explain the experiences of women in male-dominated societies. Defining what constitutes violence against women and the types of violence women experience is a difficult task. The term “violence against women” itself includes a broad variety of behaviors, including emotional, sexual, and physical assault, murder, genital mutilation, stalking, sexual harassment, and prostitution (Crowell and Burgess 1996; Jasinski 2001). While violence against women does not specify the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, the term “intimate partner violence refers to any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to those in the relationship” (Heise and Garcia-Moreno 2002:89).

Intimate partner violence (IPV) occurs in a much different context than that of violence perpetrated by strangers or acquaintances. IPV occurs under the circumstances that the victim and perpetrator have an ongoing relationship with one another, in which the violence is typically not only ongoing but also multidimensional and involving a variety of behaviors (Mahoney, Williams, and West 2001). IPV both encompasses and is broader in scope than domestic violence and dating violence, which only account for violence between couples residing together and those whose relationship is characterized by a lack of more established commitment (cohabitation, engagement, or marriage),
respectively. It is this type of violence between all types of intimate partners that is the focus of this study.

This approach to intimate partner violence includes physical aggression, psychological abuse, sexual abuse and coercion, and controlling behaviors. Many researchers in the field of violence against women make the distinction between minor and severe physical violence: minor physical violence includes behaviors such as shoving or slapping, while severe physical violence includes behaviors that have higher potential to cause physical injury, such as choking, punching, or assault with a deadly weapon. Sexual abuse is typically defined and measured separately from physical abuse. “Sexual abuse can take the form of any sexual act that a woman submits to against her will due to force, threat of force, or coercion”, though broader definitions have been called for by researchers (Mahoney et al. 2001:150).

While physical and sexual abuse have been widely documented and studied, less attention has been paid to what constitutes psychological or emotional abuse. This type of violence is typically more difficult to recognize, define, and measure and has been frequently underestimated by researchers who believe physical violence to be far more harmful (Dekeseredy and Schwartz 1998; McCloskey 2007). Studies have found that psychological abuse can have severe consequences and that battered women’s lives are more impacted by psychological abuse than physical abuse. Additionally, most women who experience physical and sexual abuse also experience psychological abuse, which can include a wide variety of behaviors such as belittling, denigration, or hostile withdrawal (Mahoney et al. 2001; Heise and Garcia-Moreno 2002). The manner,
frequency, and severity of these three types of violence employed by abusers varies from relationship to relationship, and therefore the violence does not always impact victims in the same way. It is necessary for researchers to take into account all kinds of violent behavior in order to understand the experiences of women in abusive relationships.

Prevalence of Dating Violence

Previous studies have documented the prevalence and extent of dating violence among college partners in the United States, Canada, and around the world. Globally, 29% of students reported that they had physically assaulted a dating partner in the previous 12 months, with rates varying by country. Ten percent of these incidents involved severe violence, such as punching, choking, or the use of weapons (Straus 2004). Other studies have found that women age 18-24, the age range of traditional college students, are at the highest risk of being a victim of abuse by an intimate partner. The women at highest risk of being a victim of abuse within a dating relationship are those that have experienced abuse in both childhood and adolescence (Smith, White, and Holland 2003). In Canada, Dekeseredy and Kelly (1993) measured the incidence rates of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse suffered by female college students. Almost 28% of females reported having been a victim of sexual abuse in a dating relationship. Though less lethal forms of physical violence were reported more often, 22.3% of female participants reported having been a victim of physical abuse. The most common form of relationship abuse is psychological, with an almost 80% incidence rate for college females. Many of Dekeseredy and Kelly’s (1993) findings were in line with previous studies of American college students. While this previous research has documented the
prevalence of victimization among female college students within dating relationships, violence against women researchers have largely neglected to determine if there are unique difficulties college women face in exiting these abusive relationships.

The culture of drinking alcohol on college campuses may also play a role in the prevalence of dating violence in young dating relationships. Heavy drinking, binge drinking, and illicit drug use are several risk factors of victimization that have been identified by previous research (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, and Hathway 2001; DuRant et al. 2007; Barrick, Krebs and Lindquist 2013). Further, studies on the portraits of abusive men have identified alcohol use as a consistent characteristic (Jasinski 2001). These types of health behaviors are prominent on college campuses, where young women are already at increased risk of relationship violence. The college drinking culture may affect how women respond to their partner’s violence and in situations in which alcohol has been consumed. Additionally, focusing on alcohol as a causal factor for violence can influence both the victim and others to reduce their perceptions of abusers’ responsibility by blaming the effects on the consumption of alcohol (Jasinski 2001). These responses may decrease social support for victims, make it harder for victims to recognize the abuse, and therefore lead victims to stay in abusive relationships.

Myths Surrounding Intimate Partner Violence

Though there is a growing amount of research on the study of intimate partner violence, myths remain that undermine the experiences of victims and survivors. Two persistent myths are the idea that IPV is gender-neutral and that men who abuse women
suffer from mental illness. These widespread misconceptions can have detrimental effects on how IPV, and victims of IPV, are publicly perceived and treated.

The belief that relationship violence is gender-neutral in that women perpetrate violence against male partners equally as much as and for the same reasons that men perpetrate violence against female partners stems from research data collected using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) and Conflict Tactics Scale II (CTS2) (Bancroft 2002). These instruments count only the sheer number of violent acts without taking into account any situational measures. Dekeseredy (2011:47) argues “As demonstrated by studies that added context, meaning, and motive measures to the CTS, a common cause of women’s violence in intimate relationships is self-defence, while men typically use violence to control their partners.” By labelling self-defense as husband abuse, focus is removed from the relationship between male power and female victimization (Saunders 1988). A related critique of these scales is that they limit the context of psychological abuse as used in settling conflicts and disputes (Dekeseredy and Schwartz 1998). Other studies on IPV have demonstrated that abusers use verbal aggression and psychological abuse in a variety of contexts. With such a large number of college-aged women reporting having experienced psychological abuse, it merits more attention and better measurements. Adding these situational factors to the issue of dating violence provides a helpful perspective in understanding the situations faced by victims.

Another common myth surrounding the issue of IPV is the idea that men who commit violent acts against women have a psychological defect. Recent research has demonstrated that the majority of abusers are psychologically normal, showing a low rate
of mental illness (Jasinski 2001; Bancroft 2002; Dekeseredy 2011). In addition to being a very limited explanation, this myth also serves to take the issue of IPV out of context. If abusers are psychologically defective, how are they able to control their violent behavior outside of the home and against individuals other than their partners? Furthermore, by concentrating attention on the perpetrators’ mental state, focus is taken away from the unequal amounts of power held by men and women in both the home and wider society (Bograd 1988; Dekeseredy 2011). Along with the general public, it is dangerous for victims themselves to believe this myth. If they believe that their abuser can be treated with therapy or medication, they may be more likely to excuse his behavior, act as a caregiver to their abuser, or continue being victimized without seeking a safe way out.

Those who believe in domestic violence myths are more likely to blame victims for their situations, which leads to less available social support for those in need (Yamawaki, Ochoa-Shipp, Pulsipher, Harlos, and Swindler 2012). The persistence of these two falsities and many other IPV-related misconceptions inhibit victims and their potential sources of social support from recognizing abusers’ motives and therefore convince women to stay with their abusers. In order to fully understand the experiences of women in abusive relationships and ensure that victims receive adequate assistance, it is imperative that violence against women researchers work to address and dispel these myths.

*What Keeps Women from Exiting Abusive Relationships?*

Though the myth that women who stay in abusive relationships are not only accepting of the abuse but also enjoy it is persistent among victim-blamers, researchers
have worked to unveil the larger environmental factors that convince women to stay with their abusive partners. These structural difficulties can include financial dependence, lack of shelter, religious ideologies, and negative police responses. Anderson et al. (2003) identified several environmental barriers faced by women seeking help from victims’ advocates, including lack of money and lack of places to go. These findings are corroborated by Kim and Gray (2008), who found that victims who lived with the perpetrators at the time of violence were less likely to leave and victims who were more financially independent from the perpetrators were more likely to leave. While college women are less likely to reside with their partner, some are required to live on campus in dormitories, where their abuser has knowledge of and access to their location. Additionally, college students are often financially dependent on other sources of income, such as help from parents or student loans. This dependency may also inhibit young women from exiting an abusive relationship and points to the importance of understanding the specific challenges they face.

Other studies have discovered additional barriers to leaving such as perceptions of negative police responses. When victims who have suffered severe ongoing physical violence contact the police, they do not always receive support (Anderson et al. 2003). For victims who have been isolated from friends and family, the police may be the only available source of support or assistance. Thus, when these women do not receive assistance from first responders, they may feel as though they have viable no way out of the relationship. This is especially problematic for African American victims of IPV, who often mistrust law enforcement, are given little sympathy for victimization, and are more
likely to be arrested themselves following a domestic violence incident (Lichtenstein and Johnson 2009). As more attention is called to racial inequalities within the criminal justice system, women dating young black men may also be hesitant in contacting the police for help in fear of their partner himself being beaten or even killed by responding officers. Though younger women may be less likely to contact the police for help because severe physical violence is not as common in college dating relationships as other forms of abuse, these women continue to find themselves stuck in abusive relationships due to other limitations.

Previous research has also taken into account women’s gender role expectations as reasons for staying with abusers (Anderson and Saunders 2003; Anderson et al. 2003; Lichtenstein and Johnson 2009). Both men and women are subjected to socialization practices that teach culturally and/or religiously appropriate gender-specific behaviors and attitudes. These often include ideals of women being obedient homemakers to their dominant male partners. Individual and societal values often encourage women to love their abusers, especially if they are married or have children together. Because of these values, spiritual women who seek advice from religious leaders may be encouraged to stay in the relationship. From a feminist perspective, these traditions not only have the potential to influence men to engage in violence against women, but also to persuade women to take care of their abusers.

In combination with these structural constraints, women exiting abusive intimate relationships face social psychological barriers. Recent research conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Health (NAMI) has found an increasingly high prevalence
of mental illness among a sample of college students, of which 82% of respondents identified as female (2012). The presence of psychological distress among college-aged women may make them even more vulnerable to becoming victims of relationship abuse and inhibit them from seeking help.

Both mentally ill victims and those who have not experienced psychological distress prior to the abuse potentially face other social psychological challenges. Women in Anderson et. al.’s (2003) sample commonly identified abusers’ promises to change and apologetic behavior as barriers to leaving. Additionally, Kim and Gray (2008) found that victims with lower levels of fear were more likely to leave the perpetrators. Adolescents’ violent romantic relationships on average tend to have a longer duration, more frequent contact, and sexual intimacy, though there is no significant difference in levels of love, intimate self-disclosure, or perceived partner caring between violent and non-violent relationships (Giordano, Soto, Manning, and Longmore 2010). Being more committed to these relationships in terms of length and effort, as well as feeling intimacy or love for a partner may convince victims to stay with their abusers. These psychological barriers, in combination with environmental constraints, reveal the complexity of difficulties women in abusive relationships face when trying to separate from the perpetrator of violence.

The Importance of Social Support

Making a final break up even more difficult, female victims of IPV are often isolated from their family, friends, and other sources of social support. A common strategy that perpetrators of IPV employ is isolating their victims through force, while some victims purposely isolate themselves in order to hide the abuse (Bancroft 2002;
Anderson et al. 2003). This use of power and control on part of the perpetrator is especially damaging because research has demonstrated that victims often turn to sources of social support for help. A study of thirty-one women in an urban American city found that the women did not consistently identify family members as sources of support, and instead were more likely to reach out to female friends (Rose, Campbell, and Kub 2000). Further, Coker et al. (2002:473) found that “social support reduces by almost one-half the risk of adverse mental health outcomes among women.” These findings reveal the need for accessible and effective social support resources, both formal and informal.

Many researchers in this area of study have called for more research on IPV among college students (Smith et al. 2003; Barrick et al. 2013). As rates of college enrollment increase, even more so among women (U.S. Department of Education), it is imperative to identify and understand the experiences of collegiate female victims of relationship abuse and the constraints these women must overcome when leaving an abusive partner. Domestic violence can cause mental illness and psychological issues that have the potential to interfere with academic performance and well-being, in addition to the mental health challenges that so many college women already face.

Because women are the primary victims of relationship abuse, and tend to experience more negative outcomes from these relationships, universities should be well informed to develop programs and aid in order to address the unique difficulties faced by college women. College students themselves should also be educated on matters of IPV, so that they are better able to identify relationship violence and provide social support to victims in need. Investigating the unique experiences of college women in abusive
relationships that are both similar to and different from experiences of women in previous samples can help dispel the myths and misperceptions of intimate partner violence.

*Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality*

The present study is guided by an intersectional theoretical framework. Introduced in the late 1980’s, intersectionality seeks to draw attention to the consequences of sameness and difference according to the multiple social positions an individual holds, especially in relation to gender, race, and social class. Feminist researchers and activists sought to draw attention to and better understand the experiences of African American women by examining their lives as being both subordinate to men and to white women. Using this multidimensional approach, intersectional researchers take into account the similar experiences shared by women, but also how these experiences vary due to racial and class inequality. By considering individuals’ dynamic social statuses and their positions of power or lack thereof, an intersectional framework is able to examine the fluidity and penetrability of social categories (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013). One function of intersectionality is to include the voices of multiply-marginalized individuals (Choo and Ferree 2010). In regards to this, my research seeks to utilize the voices of young women who have been victimized within a dating relationship. While recognizing that college women are subjected to the same types of intimate partner violence that many other women face, I also take into account that these women may experience unique differences due to their age and being in a state of transition and self-development.
Much previous research on why women stay in abusive relationships draws data from samples of help-seeking victims, such as women who have contacted advocates or sought refuge in shelters (Anderson and Saunders 2003; Anderson et al. 2003; Kim and Gray 2008). These women tend to be of lower-socioeconomic status, unlike women attending college who are more likely to be of mid or high socioeconomic status. Using an intersectional approach, I consider that college women do hold relative positions of power in comparison to women who are less likely to attend higher education. In regards to race, the majority of women enrolled in higher education are white, and therefore less likely to experience difficulties related to racial inequality. Thus, the reasons that these women stay with their abusive partners are likely to differ from those of women identified in previous samples, while some similarities are likely to exist due to the shared experience of being a female victim of men’s use of power and control. Utilizing the women’s narratives, this research attempts to dispel the myths of relationship abuse and uncover the difficulties college women face in exiting abusive relationships due to their distinct social positions.

The women’s voices are situated against the existing research on female IPV victims in order to ascertain whether they experience unique or additional uses of violence and challenges to exiting these relationships in comparison. Additionally, this study measures college students’ attitudes and perceptions of IPV and beliefs in myths surrounding abusive relationships. This information can be useful in creating educational programs to teach young people about the prevalent issue of IPV as well as how to
provide effective social support to friends who have been victimized by better understanding their situations.
METHODS

Methodological Framework

The present research design employs a feminist methodological framework in order to make women’s lives more visible as members of a marginalized group in relation to men. As described by Bograd, (1988:14) “Although there are many ways that men as a group maintain women in oppressed social positions, violence is the most overt and effective means of social control.” Participants’ descriptions of their abusers’ uses of violence are not viewed as arbitrary situations, but instead as a means of maintaining systematic male power and control through accomplishing the subordination of women at a personal level. While it cannot be denied that some women do commit acts of violence to control their partners and some men with mental illnesses are abusive, feminist ideology seeks to understand IPV through socially constructed contexts of gender inequality. Though this study is focused on the constraints of women as victims, and not on the cultural implications of men as perpetrators of violence, it seeks to better understand the situations in which abused women find themselves, dispel victim-blaming mythologies of IPV and provide recommendations for preventing IPV and assisting victims.

Violence against women researchers have called for the use of mixed-methods approaches to inquiry to increase understanding of both the scope and nature of the problem (Testa, Livingston, and VanZile-Tamsen 2011; Beckman 2014). In keeping with the feminist ideological tenet that women are the experts of their own lives, victim’s experiences were collected and shared qualitatively through interviews. Additionally,
quantitative analysis is utilized in order to supplement women’s experiences by adding social context relating to the beliefs of college-aged students and IPV.

The commitment to studying a sensitive topic resulted in making conscious decisions in several steps during the research process, including recruiting and protecting participants. Using a broad definition of what constitutes a “sensitive topic”, researchers have identified any research that delves deeply into the personal lives of participants, or is threatening in some way to the sample being studied. The interview participants in the present study not only identified themselves as victims of relationship abuse, but also shared their personal experiences of being in these partnerships. Taking part in research on sensitive topics often involves psychological costs, such as guilt, shame, or embarrassment (Lee and Renzetti 1990). For these reasons, extra caution was taken to ensure the women’s confidentiality and to reduce the potential of harm. Participants were reminded that their participation was completely voluntary, and that they could stop at any time during the interview process. All study participants were also given information on nearby confidential resources for mental health and victims’ advocacy, as is recommended when studying victims of IPV.

*Research Methods*

This study uses a two-part mixed-methods approach to both gauge college students’ attitudes towards intimate partner violence and investigate the experiences of young women in abusive intimate relationships. Participants were recruited using a convenience sample from three upper-level sociology courses and one mid-level sociology course. Mid- to upper-level courses were chosen in order to recruit students
who have had more years of experience in college and thus were more likely to have had a dating relationship while in college. The class sizes ranged from medium to large, between approximately 35 to 75 enrolled students. First, I collected quantitative data using a Likert-scale survey to measure college students’ attitudes and beliefs regarding intimate partner violence. The survey was administered to students during their regularly scheduled class time and completed anonymously. The data derived from the surveys was analyzed using descriptive statistics. In addition to consent forms and surveys, participants were provided with a separate contact information sheet with the intention of recruiting interview participants for the second (qualitative) portion of the study.

The contact information sheet asked participants if they were currently or had ever been in an intimate relationship in which they felt that they experienced abuse, including psychological, physical, and/or sexual abuse. The form also asked if they identified as female and provided a space for them to give their name and contact information, including the preferred method and time of correspondence, if they consented to being contacted for an interview. To protect subjects’ privacy, consent forms, surveys, and contact information sheets were collected separately in large envelopes. To help minimize any harm that may have been caused by the survey content, I distributed informational brochures for campus psychological services and for the campus survivor advocacy program after surveys were completed. ¹

¹ Due to changes in the campus survivor advocacy program during this time, the last group of participants only received a brochure for campus psychological services.
Next, I contacted female participants who self-reported experience within an abusive intimate relationship and consented to a follow-up interview via the information that they provided, either through cell phone text messaging or email. All potential interview participants were contacted within two weeks of completing the first portion of the study, and interviews took place within one week of being contacted. I conducted and audio-recorded the open-ended interviews in several private locations on campus: in my office, in a small conference room, or a small research room. Before the face-to-face interviews, participants were asked to complete a short survey to obtain information about their age, class level, race, ethnicity, and social class. During the interviews, I first asked participants to describe relationships in which they experienced abuse generally, including how old they were when the relationship began, how they met their partner, and how long the relationship lasted. Next, I asked participants about the onset and nature of the abuse: whether it was psychological, sexual, or physical. Participants were not given any definitions of the types of abuse, and therefore were able to define their own experiences. After determining if the participants were still in the relationship or not, the women were asked if they faced any difficulties in exiting the relationship or what circumstances convinced them to stay. When necessary, I used prompts that asked specifically about previously-identified constraints women face in leaving their abusive partners. Lastly, the participants were asked if they had any suggestions on how to prevent intimate partner violence or to help victims of relationship abuse. The interviews lasted an average of thirty-three minutes.
I then transcribed the recordings and began the coding process using open coding. After identifying several common themes within the transcripts, each interview transcript was coded for three over-arching themes: relationship experiences, constraints, and recommendations. Within each of these broad themes, more narrow subthemes were established and coded for. Relationship experiences included the school climate, the process of ending the relationship, the final break-up, and post break-up. I also coded for the perceptions women had of their abuser’s motivations, the types of abuse, and the following dating experiences, or lack thereof, experienced by the women.

After quickly discovering the most common type of abuse experienced was emotional, I identified and coded for seven specific types of emotional abuse that are often employed by abusive partners: isolation, controlling behaviors, threatening suicide, cheating, guilting, stalking, and distancing. Common barriers to exiting the relationship were also identified and coded for, including gender role expectations, abusers’ signs of change, commitment to the relationship, opinions of parents/family, lack of social support, peer pressure, and menacing behavior on behalf of the partners. Using the coded transcripts, quote logs were created for each theme and subtheme and analyzed for similarities and comparisons. Finally, the results of both the surveys and interviews were compared to previous research findings on IPV to determine whether or not uniqueness exists among college students’ beliefs and experiences.
RESULTS

Surveys

Surveys were completed by 139 undergraduate students, the majority of which were female (N=99). The sample was also overwhelmingly white (85%), with four of those who identified as white also identifying as Hispanic. Of those did not identify as white or Hispanic, 14 identified as Black, two as Asian, one as American Indian or Alaskan Native, one as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and two identified as “other”. Participants were of higher socioeconomic backgrounds than the general population: 39 self-reported as upper-middle class, 63 middle-class, 34 lower-middle class, and only three reported as lower class. These results were expected due to the demographics of Ohio University in general and the gender disparities among students who enroll in and attend sociology courses.

Due to the purposive sampling of students in middle- to upper-level sociology courses, the survey participants were older and in higher class levels than the general student population. Ninety participants were college-level seniors, 24 juniors, and 25 sophomores. Participants ranged in age from nineteen to thirty-three years old, though the large majority (96.4%) were between the ages of nineteen and twenty-two. Fifty-one percent of the sample was age twenty-one, which was also the average age of the sample.

In general, the majority of participants agreed on their attitudes regarding IPV among college students, beliefs in myths surrounding IPV, and their personal willingness or ability to help victims. Interestingly, while 62% of respondents agreed that relationship abuse is a prevalent problem among college dating relationships, 68% disagreed with the
statement “There is a lot of awareness regarding relationship abuse among college dating relationships.” In regards to the frequency of relationship abuse among specific populations, 70.5% of respondents disagreed that it most frequently occurs between couples that are older and married, and 55% disagreed that it most frequently occurs between couples of lower social status.

The majority of participants reported believing that abuse involves more than just physical violence. Almost all participants, 99% and 98% respectively, disagreed with the statements “Relationship abuse involves only physical violence” and “If a man has not physically hurt his partner, then abuse has not occurred.” The respondents who did not disagree with these two statements held a neutral stance.

While respondents were not likely to hold victim-blaming attitudes, their beliefs regarding IPV myths did not reveal an overwhelming consensus. Nine out of ten respondents disagreed with the statement “It is easy to exit a relationship in which abuse occurs”, and slightly more (93.5%) respondents agreed that there are many constraints that cause women to stay with their abusive partners. Similarly, 98% of respondents disagreed that women who do not leave their abusive partners are okay with the abuse.

However, 62.5% of respondents disagreed that the severity of relationship abuse perpetrated by men and women is equal. Females (65%) were slightly more likely to disagree with this myth than males (57.5%). Respondents were more likely (68%) to disagree with the statement “The amount of relationship abuse perpetrated by men and women is equal.” Females (69%) were slightly more likely to disagree with this myth than males (65%), as well. Interestingly, males (27.5%) were more likely to take neutral
positions on both of these myths than females (22% and 21%, respectively). However, the survey results cannot answer whether students believe that it is women or men who perpetrate more severe or frequent abuse. The majority of students also believed in condemning cultural attitudes towards violence; only 4.3% of respondents agreed that violence against women is acceptable in certain cultures, and those cultural attitudes should not be condemned.

The only myth measured in the survey that did not result in an overwhelming agreement or disagreement among respondents was the statement “Men who abuse their partners have a psychological defect.” Forty-two percent of respondents disagreed with this statement, compared to 34.5% who agreed. The remaining thirty-three respondents reported a neutral position. The difference in the opinions of males and females regarding this myth was very small. It appears that this belief is persistent even among a sample of students enrolled in middle- to upper-level college sociology courses.

When it comes to willingness to intervene, the majority of respondents (87%) agreed that they would feel comfortable saying something if they discovered that a friend was in an abusive relationship. However, only half of all respondents agreed with the statement “If a friend confided in me that they were experiencing relationship abuse, I would know how to help them.” This disconnect between willingness to help and perceived ability to help warrants further attention, as outside intervention into an abusive relationship can have negative outcomes for the victim if not done properly. Further, of those who reported knowing how to help, it is not possible to ascertain whether or not they actually do know the best way to help a victim of relationship abuse.
Interviews

Of the completed contact information sheets (N=139), twenty-one respondents self-reported having experienced abuse in an intimate relationship. Two of these respondents did not identify as female, and thus did not meet the criteria to be interviewed. Three of the respondents who did fit the criteria did not consent to be contacted for a follow-up interview. The remaining sixteen respondents were contacted via the information they provided. Six of those that were contacted either did not respond or withdrew consent, and the remaining ten completed a face-to-face interview.

Unexpectedly, interview participants were younger and of lower college class levels than the survey participants. The average age of the interview participants was 20.4, with four sophomores, two juniors, and four seniors. All participants identified as non-Hispanic; one participant identified as Asian, one “other” and eight identified as white. As expected, participants were more likely to be of higher socio-economic status: three participants self-identified as upper-middle class, five as middle class, and only two identified as lower-middle class. Though there was nothing in the contact information sheet to exclude women who experienced IPV at the hands of other women, all women who completed the interviews described heterosexual relationships.

The characteristics of the relationships in which the participants experienced abuse varied in a multitude of ways. Eight of the women’s abusive relationships began in high school. Five of these relationships carried on into their college careers, while the other three ended while the women were still in high school. Two of the relationships that took place in both high school and college had progressed from dating relationships into
engagements; one of these relationships was still ongoing at the time of the interview. The other two women’s relationships both started and ended while the women were in college. The length of the relationships, including the one relationship that was ongoing, ranged from two months to four years, with an average length of 2.38 years. Of the nine women who were no longer in an abusive relationship, five of them reported having initiated the break-up. The other four women reported that their abuser had initiated the break-up.

The women reported the onset of abuse occurring from the start of the relationship to over one year into the relationship, with an average onset of abusive behaviors at 5.65 months. All ten of the women reported having been victims of psychological or emotional abuse; two women reported single instances of minor physical violence and one woman reported sexual abuse. All interviewees reported experiencing at least three of the emotionally abusive tactics that were coded for, with one woman having experienced all seven. This finding reveals the complex and multidimensional nature of intimate partner violence.

Psychological abuse

All ten of the women reported having experienced isolation. This variable, in and of itself, was also multidimensional in that the women reported having become isolated in a number of ways. Olivia, who was a victim of sexual abuse during her freshmen year of college, reported that her abuser, who lived in her dorm building, would wait until she was alone in her dorm room to assault her. Following the abuse, she describes physically isolating herself for several weeks. More common experiences of isolation, however,
included those of several of the women who stopped spending time with or talking to their friends because their partner demanded too much of their time or became angry when they would spend time with their friends, while others drifted away from their friends after their abusers expressed dislike for them.

While isolation tactics used by abusers can be categorized as a type of control, nine of the ten women interviewed also spoke of other types of control. These included making decisions about where the couple would go, who they could speak to or spend time with, who they could connect with on social media, what they wore or how they did their hair and makeup. Two of the partners had even tried to convince their girlfriends to go to certain colleges or choose different college majors, though they were unsuccessful. For two of the women, one of the most consequential types of control they experienced was their abusers’ threats of suicide. These behaviors utilized by the women’s abusive partners sometimes went unrecognized as abuse at the time, while also making exiting the relationship increasingly difficult.

For half of the women, while their abusers attempted to control their lives, their abusers were simultaneously having relationships with other women. Several of these five women described their partners’ infidelity, which ranged from inappropriate communications to ongoing relationships, as more serious than the other types of emotional abuse. The cheating was often cited as the women’s major motivation for ending the relationship; of the five women who reported that they initiated the break up with their partner, four of them also reported that their partner cheated on them.
Another common type of emotional abuse was guilting. Seven of the women reported that their abusers made them feel bad, blamed them, or made them feel guilty about things that were out of their control or that they did not do, such as another man looking at them or causing undue stress to their abuser. Several of the women reported that this behavior led them to feel sorry for their abusers or hesitant to question their behaviors.

For the purposes of this study, I have categorized stalking or menacing behavior as a form of emotional abuse. Five of the ten women reported that their partners exhibited stalking behaviors, such as showing up to the location they were at without notice, keeping surveillance of their social media accounts, and checking their cellphone messages. Interestingly, three of the women who reported stalking victimization and three other women also reported that their partners used distancing as an abuse tactic. In these cases, partners would purposely ignore the women, or refuse to speak with or be in physical proximity with the women. Though these behaviors appear to be quite opposite, they were both tactics employed by the abusers.

Sexual abuse

One of the interview participants reported being a victim of sexual abuse in addition to psychological abuse. Olivia, whose abusive relationship with a male residing in her dorm began her freshmen year of college, describes her experiences:

One day when it was like, the worst time that it happened, where he like basically had me pinned in bed, between him and the wall, and I just couldn’t get past and then I was like stuck there for like, two hours. And, he just kept touching me and like, kissing me, and like, all these weird things, and like telling me about our future children.
Though Olivia’s relationship was not defined as a dating relationship, she reported ongoing abuse over the course of two to three months with many similar psychological abuse experiences as those of the nine women who were in intimate partnerships. Because sexual abuse is frequently underreported and the women were not explicitly asked if they experienced specific forms of sexual abuse, such as coercion, it is likely that this type of abuse was underreported in the interviews.

**Physical abuse**

While nine of the ten women quickly stated in the interview that their relationship did not include physical abuse, one women reported that she experienced minor physical violence in the form of being pushed by her boyfriend. Nora explains:

I can’t even remember what we were arguing about, honestly. But, we were down in my room and he like, shoved me like on my bed, and it made me mad, and he started going up my stairs, because my room is in a basement. And I can’t remember what we were arguing about, it bothers me. But, he made me mad so I grabbed his leg as he was going up the stairs and he tripped up the stairs, ‘cause he made me mad and he pushed me. But that was like the only time that he like, got physical I guess.

Though the other nine women had said their relationship never involved physical violence, one woman, Nicole, revealed at the end of the interview that she had also been pushed one time by her partner, to whom she was at one point engaged to. Again, because the interview participants were not explicitly asked if they experienced specific forms of physical abuse, it is possible that this type of abuse was underreported as well.

**Barriers to leaving**

The most commonly reported reasons why the interview participants stayed with their partners were the abusers’ promises to change or showing signs of change, lack of
social support, influences of parents or family, and fear. Nine of the ten women reported that their abuser would say he was going to discontinue his abusive behavior or he would show signs of becoming less or non-abusive, which led the women to stay with their partners. Eight of the ten women reported that they had a lack of social support or experienced isolation which kept them from exiting the relationship, and seven of the women reported that parents’ or family’s opinions influenced them to stay in the relationship. Though seven of the women reported that they felt fear in leaving the relationship, none of them reported being fearful for their own lives or safety.

Less commonly reported constraints the women faced in leaving the relationships were perceived obligations to nurturing or caregiving roles, peer pressure, abusers’ menacing behaviors, commitment to the relationship, need of shelter, or financial worries. Four of the ten participants described feeling as if they needed to continue carrying out a caregiving or nurturing role for their partner. Three of the women described feeling pressure from peers at school about being in a dating relationship. Three women also reported that their abusers’ menacing behaviors, including continuing to communicate with them or showing up at their location, was a barrier to fully exiting the relationship. Two of the women reported that their commitment to the relationship influenced their decision to stay. Of the two women who identified the need of or worries regarding shelter as a barrier to exiting the relationship, one’s abuser lived in her dorm building and the other, Nicole, was living with her partner. Nicole was the only participant who identified financial worries as a barrier to exiting the relationship. None
of the participants reported negative perceptions of police or other authorities, such as school administration, as a constraint.
DISCUSSION

As these young women’s relationships took place in high school, college, or both, there are characteristics that may be unique to young dating relationships as opposed to relationships between older individuals or those not in college. Though they reported the same types of emotional abuse prevalent among other populations, the context of these abuse strategies experienced by the young women in the sample does have distinctive features. This age group is marked as being in a state of transition from adolescence to adulthood, as they move from high school to university. As is common among college students, five of the women reported that their relationship involved long distance at some point, and that the imminence or presence of this physical separation often precipitated more frequent or severe emotional abuse.

Hilary, who was engaged and living with her abusive partner at the time of the interview, explained that the distance changed her relationship.

Um, we started dating, um, my junior year of high school, his senior year of high school, and um, we only had like three months together before he had to move down here, and so it was long distance and then that’s when it got, like, emotionally abusive…

On the other hand, several of the women reported that the transition into long distance relationships made it easier for them to gain new sources of social support and to successfully leave their abusive partners. Samantha, whose relationship lasted nine months in high school, said:

I think that was another reason why it was like easy for me to break up with him because I knew that he was leaving and that like, I don’t know, that he would be far away, that I really didn’t have control over the situation anymore, so I think that kind of helped the situation in the end, and um, it was easier to like, after we
broke up, for me not to get back together with him because he wasn’t around to try and like talk me into it.

Similarly, Marissa, whose relationship lasted four years between high school and college, explained how the distance allowed her more freedom.

He’s about two and a half hours away, so I kind of like was able to go out and do my own thing and be by myself and go out with my friends and not have to, like, be yelled at for going out with my friends. And like, he would text me and like, yell at me, I would just turn my phone off and just ignore him, so it kind of was like a breather.

Based on these responses, it seems as though the common experience of long distance relationships among young couples can serve as both a precursor to increased emotional abuse or as a means to exiting an abusive relationship.

This age group is also distinguished from others due to their strong connections with technology and social media, which were frequently used to keep in contact with their long distance partners. All but three of the interviewees reported that their abusive relationships were influenced or affected by social media or communication technologies via cellphones. These forms of technology were used by both the victims and their abusers in a number of ways that played a role in their relationships and in the abuse. For example, several of the women described text messages as concrete evidence that their partners were cheating. For abusers, technology served as a means to inflict forms of emotional abuse, such as stalking, menacing, isolation, and control. The use of cell phones enabled abusers to keep constant communication with the women, keep track of their social media accounts, or read their text messages with others. Brittany, who was in an abusive relationship for three years, stated:
It was a lot of like, reading my messages and stuff like that, which I hated. And like if I put a lock on my like, phone so you couldn’t get in, like that was terrible and he did not like that, and he had to know my password.

Two of the women reported that their partners asked them to send pictures in order to prove their location or so that their partner could approve of their outfit choice.

Technology also played a role following the break ups, which often involved blocking former partners on social media to ensure that their activities could no longer be monitored. These usages of technology and social media point to the unique challenges faced by young dating partners in a world increasingly dominated by face-to-screen communication.

*Why Do Men Abuse Their Partners?*

Another distinctive facet of this age group is their peculiar position between childhood and adulthood, which is often marked by taking on more responsibilities while simultaneously remaining under the control of parents. These stressors of daily life were described by the women as motivations for the abusers’ behaviors. Five of the women reported that at least some of their partners’ abusive behavior was caused by stressors such as parents, school, work, or a combination of these. These events, which ranged from arguments with parents to college exams, were used by the women to partly explain the patterns of abusive behavior they experienced.

In four of the interviews, family backgrounds were used both by the women to explain their partners’ abusive behavior or by the abusers to explain their own abusive behavior to the women. Hilary, the only interview participant who was still in a relationship with her abusive partner at the time of the interview explained how her
fiancé’s family background influenced her perceptions of the emotional abuse he inflicted on her.

So he grew up in a really abusive home. Like, he has a very bad history. So, um, I don’t blame him for what he did.

While this reasoning may be used by abusers to explain their behaviors and/or victims may assume that their partners’ parents are actually responsible for their partners’ behavior, research has shown that the link between survivors of childhood abuse and men who abuse women is a weak one (Bancroft 2002). This justification can also serve to benefit the abuser by removing the responsibility from himself, as it seemed to have worked for Hilary’s fiancé. For victims of abuse, explaining a partners’ abusive behavior using his family background can cause them to feel sorry, and thus feel guilty for attempting to stop the abuse.

Because this myth was not measured in the survey portion of the study, it is unknown if it is a pervasive belief among the current sample of college students.

The majority of the women’s experiences, however, did not show support for the myth that abusive men are mentally ill. Many of them described their partners as generally well-liked by others and capable of controlling their abusive behaviors in front of others. Samantha explained how her high school boyfriend’s behavior changed after an argument.

But then afterwards, like the next day, he would act like everything was perfectly fine, and just go back to like, being normal. He would never do it in front of other people, either, like at school or anything like that.

Brittany echoed this sentiment in describing her boyfriend’s public appearances.
They all liked him. He was a smart kid. He was a good guy outside of our relationship, and he tricked everyone into knowing that. I mean, he was a good guy, but it was just inside our relationship. So how he was in public was way different than how he was with me.

This about-face of personality can serve as detrimental for the victims while benefitting abusers (Bancroft 2002). Under these circumstances, victims of abuse may ask what’s wrong with themselves that causes their abuser to only be violent towards them. When others, such as friends or family, have positive perceptions about their abusers, victims may feel hesitant to reach out for support. If they do confide in others that their partner is abusive, they are likely to be met with responses that their partner seems so nice and doesn’t seem like a man who would be abusive, leading to doubts of the women’s experiences or even victim-blaming. Further, the positive opinions of others help abusers feel good about themselves and pinpoint their partners as the problem instead of themselves.

Though the experiences described by many of the women did not support the idea that their abusers had psychological defects, three of the women did appear to believe that their abusers were mentally ill. Kayla, who said her high school boyfriend of four to five months was well-liked by others, also reported that he has received counseling since their relationship. Madison, who dated her partner for a year in college, confided in him that she was struggling with depression, to which he responded angrily and stated that he himself had been diagnosed years before with depression. Samantha, whose relationship lasted nine months in high school, believed her abusive partner had “serious issues” because he was cheating on her the whole time with several other women. Of the two women whose boyfriends threatened suicide, neither described mental illness as the cause
of their partners’ abusive behavior. Instead, the suicidal threats were described as types of
abuse. One reported that after a while she no longer believed her boyfriend’s threats of
suicide were a serious thing. While it is not possible to know whether or not the women’s
abusers are in fact mentally ill or not, most of the behaviors described point to the men’s
use of power and control in the relationship. Because many of the women interviewed
subscribed to these ideas as motivations for their abusers’ behaviors, these findings reveal
the need to educate young people on why men commit violence against women and the
cultural gendered power structures that are reinforced through IPV.

*Why Do Young Women Stay in Abusive Relationships?*

Several of these psychologically abusive tactics employed by the women’s
partners acted as barriers to successfully exiting the relationships for the women. Though
many previous studies that investigate the factors that cause women to stay with their
abusers typically use samples from women in help-seeking populations who have
experienced severe physical violence, this study reveals that there are constraints present
among exclusively psychological abusive relationships. Among the ten women
interviewed, the most common of these were the abusers’ promises to change or signs of
change, lack of social support or isolation, influences of parents and family, and fear.
While abusers’ promises to change or showing signs of change were very similar to what
has been recorded in previous research, the other reported constraints among the current
sample revealed distinctive contexts within young dating relationships.

Having a lack of social support or feeling isolated was reported by eight of the
women, but the ways in which these women experienced these constraints were not all
the same. The transition from high school to college again affected these women in different ways when it came to having social support. For Maggie, going away to college and being on an athletic team helped her gain new sources of social support after she lost friends in high school because of her abusive relationship. When asked if she experienced any constraints regarding isolation or lack of a strong social network, she replied:

Towards the end, no, because I was making more of like, social, like advances, since like I didn’t have to like, worry about making him mad or anything. But, the beginning, yeah, but I didn’t realize it was happening.

On the other hand, Hilary’s departure from high school and first year of attending college classes as a commuter student functioned in a way that isolated her further.

So I didn’t have any friends. I didn’t even really see my family because when I would come home they would be in bed. Um, and so I remember, um, feeling very alone in my freshmen year, ‘cause it was a commute, so I didn’t have really, like classmates. You go in the classroom. You don’t talk to your classmates. You just sit in lecture and then you leave.

Before this transition into taking college classes, Hilary reported that she had a good support system from fellow members of a high school extracurricular group and also from teachers. For Nicole, the transition to college meant that her close friends were away at college and thus not as available to her. Even though these women were unlikely to live with their partners and were all attending school, whether high school or college, at the time of their relationships, many of them still found themselves to be isolated at some point in the relationship.

Similar to previous findings, sources of social support provided aid in various forms to the women interviewed: advice and information, practical assistance, companionship, and emotional support (Anderson and Saunders 2003). Whereas research
on sources of social support has found that battered women’s main source of support most often comes from female friends (Rose et al. 2000), the current sample described receiving support from a number of other sources, sometimes in addition to female friends. These sources included mothers, fathers, new boyfriends, teachers, coworkers, teammates, roommates, and fellow dorm residents. These findings warrant further attention among college-aged women, many of whom are already struggling with mental health issues, as social support has been found to protect against the negative mental effects of IPV (Coker et al. 2002).

While parents and family members can serve as resources of social support, they were also regarded as another reason to stay in abusive relationships by the current sample. Nine of the women stated that parents or family members of their own or their partner’s influenced the relationship in some way, and six of these women described them as a form of motivation to stay with their abuser. Though Samantha did not inform her mother of her boyfriend’s abusive behavior, but she still relied on her mother’s perceptions of him.

I trust my mom’s judgment and even though I knew she didn’t know everything that was was going on, it was like ‘well if my parents really like him’.

For Marissa, her father’s positive opinion of her boyfriend seemed to influence her decision to stay more than her mother’s requests for her to end the relationship.

When we started dating, my dad really liked him because he was protective and like took care of me, ‘cause that’s kind of like a father thing, I think, but um, my mom liked him until she realized that he was controlling me, and then she was like ‘you need to get rid of him’.
When asked if her father’s relationship with her boyfriend had any bearing on her staying with him, she replied:

Yeah, I think it did, because my dad really liked him. And like my dad—I’m like a daddy’s girl, like I’m the first born, I’m the athletic one, so it’s like—he like really cared about me and so I was like ‘well it makes him happy, maybe it’ll change’.

Though Samantha and Marissa both described having good relationships with their parents, Nicole’s experience shed light on how her mother’s opinion influenced her decision, even though they did not have a close mother-daughter bond.

Um, we broke up a couple times and every time we would she would ask like ‘are you sure? Like I’ve never seen you so happy.’ And it’s my boyfriend, like a boy likes me, of course I’m gonna act happy. And like it was just like overwhelming how much I felt like he turned my own mother against me…I figured ‘oh, maybe she knows more’, I don’t know. Okay, not really, but maybe like she knows best, or maybe she sees something in us that I can’t yet. Ya know, ‘cause she’s been through multiple relationships and I have not. Um, and it’s always easier if they get along with your parents, too. So I was like, yeah, she definitely encouraged us to stay together, until like the very end, though. She was like ‘yeah this is getting ridiculous, like you don’t need that’ kind of.

Similar to how Nicole’s mother eventually supported her in exiting the relationship, Madison’s father, who lived close to her college campus, at first really liked her boyfriend, then later encouraged her to leave her abusive partner. Madison also reported that the first time she recognized her relationship as abusive was when her father sat her down and told her that was she was experiencing was emotional abuse. The physical proximity of Olivia’s parents, however, functioned as a barrier in reaching out for formal support after experiencing sexual abuse. She described how she did not contact police or resources at the university because she thought that her parents would find out.

I’m from here, and like my parents are from here, and work here, and I was like, that’s not the kind of thing that you can like end up hiding…I think I probably
would’ve felt differently had I like gone away for school and I was like, away from family or whatever.

In this case, parents being close by was not seen as a beneficial resource, perhaps due to the specific type of abuse that Olivia experienced.

During this unique period of self-development into becoming adults, the interviews revealed that many of these women’s decisions to leave or stay were influenced by their parents’ opinions and advice. Unlike other forms of violence against women in which perpetrators are strangers or acquaintances, this dynamic reveals the long term relationships that perpetrators of IPV have not only with their victims, but also with their families. This finding seems highly relevant to young women in high school and college, and may hold less significance for older women in abusive relationships, who may be more removed from their parents, both physically and emotionally. This motivating factor to stay in an abusive relationship is important for advocates to consider when working with young women victimized within intimate relationships.

Victims’ feelings of fear have been previously noted as a significant factor in whether or not women exit abusive relationships, including fear of mate and fear of not being able survive alone (Anderson et al. 2003; Kim and Gray 2008). While seven of the women in the current study reported that fear was a barrier to exiting the relationship, none of them reported fearing for their own safety. Instead, the types of fear they described were diverse: fear of abuser being harmful to himself, having peers know about the breakup, being unsure about abuser’s reaction to break up, being alone, having to “throw away” time and effort, and giving up on a potential opportunity of a good relationship. The most common of these varied responses was the fear of abuser being
harmful to himself. In addition to the two women whose boyfriends threatened suicide, one other interview participant described this type of fear. She was afraid her partner would go through the same mental pain following the break up that she had experienced while within the relationship. This type of fear is correlated with expectations of women’s nurturing and caregiving roles, which have also been identified as reasons women stay with their abusive partners (Anderson et al. 2003).

It also raises questions about the increased danger to women who have recently exited abusive relationships and whether or not this troublesome reality is fully applicable to young women in exclusively emotionally abusive relationships. Researchers have found that violence is likely to escalate following a separation, and thus, the assumption that leaving an abuser will stop the violence is misguided (Anderson 2003; Johnson and Hotton 2003). Though the women in the present study did not report any escalations of violence following their break ups, several of them did report that their ex-partners showed up at their dorm residence or parent’s house, contacted them via cellphone, or approached them publicly in school and were verbally abusive following the break up. For these women, although the end of the relationship did not signify the end of the abuse, it also fortunately did not lead to an escalation of abuse.

Several barriers to exiting abusive relationships and motivations to stay in abusive relationships that have been identified in previous research were not commonly reported by the women interviewed. Commitment to the relationship, need of shelter, and financial worries were not cited by the majority of the women interviewed. Only two of the women described their commitment to their partner as motivation to stay in the relationship.
Perhaps because these women are younger, less likely to live with, be married, or have children with their partners, they do not feel as much commitment as other groups of women.

However, two of the women did cite worries regarding shelter as barriers to leaving. One of these women was living with her partner, and the other, Olivia, was residing in the same dorm building as her abuser. Also, though Maggie did not describe worries regarding housing as a factor in her decision to leave her partner, she did report that because her partner’s dorm building was in close proximity to hers, he was able to easily keep track of her whereabouts and show up at her dorm room unannounced. These problematic housing situations again reveal the need for advocates to take special consideration of the specific context of the problem when working with young women in college.

Another context of the women’s experiences that is unique to their age group is the issue of peer pressure and school climate. Though only three women reported that peer pressure acted as a barrier to leaving their partner, six of the women reported that the school climate influenced their relationship in some way. Samantha explained how breaking up with her boyfriend would cause her to feel left out of the high school experience.

It was just a normal thing for people to be dating other people and I just like, I don’t know, it was like dumb, but I would feel almost like left out if I wasn’t like with someone. I mean I guess that’s how I like thought of it if like I broke up with him.
In addition to the pressure of fitting in with peers, the size of the school population also worked against several of the women in varied ways. Marissa’s experience in high school caused her to also feel pressure to maintain her role in her relationship.

It was such a small town I grew up in. It was like, everyone knew me as his girlfriend. So it was like when we break up, no one in our class is going to want to like date me ‘cause we’re all friends. So it was like, they all knew me as his girlfriend.

This is supported by three of the other women who also described how the small size of their high schools caused problems within their relationship, as rumors and gossip spread quickly from student to student. On the other hand, Samantha explained that the large size of her high school made it easier for her boyfriend to cheat on her with fellow students without her finding out. Though these difficulties may be more relevant to high school dating relationships than those in college, more research is needed to investigate the influences of peers on abusive relationships, as they have the potential to act as both agents of social control, whether good or bad, as well as sources of social support.

More attention should be paid to the experiences of young women who are victimized by IPV and also to individuals of all ages who are victims of emotional abuse, without the presence of sexual or physical abuse. The findings from the current sample demonstrate that women who are victimized psychologically by their intimate partners do face constraints in exiting abusive relationships. The multidimensional experiences of emotional abuse have been described as a “web” which traps women in abusive relationships (Kirkwood 1993; Dekeseredy 2011). Using this approach, one must take into account how all strands of the web work together to keep women from leaving. These women’s situations cannot be fully understood by looking only at a single strand of
the web, which can include the types of emotional abuse inflicted upon the women by individual men as well as the larger cultural factors, such as the idea that women are expected to hold a submissive position in relation to men.

When explaining how she had tried to exit her relationship several times, Nicole described how her partner was able to convince her to return.

I mean like, we would break up several times. Like we stood the first year straight, and then like I broke up with him because like he felt suffocating and he was like flirting with other girls and then like we got back together, and then like right before I started college, we broke up again because we were fighting. He was flirting with girls. Then we got back together, so like I did try but he always like spun me back into that web.

Unlike women who are victimized sexually or physically, these women’s experiences do not appear visible to others in the form of bruises or injuries. Additionally, these women are not likely to seek help through police, shelters, or hotlines, and thus have been hidden from researchers who collect data from help-seeking samples. Though they are subjected to the same forms of power and control utilized by abusive men as other groups of women are, the current study reveals the unique experiences and difficulties that high school and college women face today.

Without looking through the lens of intersectionality, these women’s unique voices could not be understood in comparison to the experiences collected from other groups of survivors of IPV. While all women are situated in a subordinate social position beneath men, women simultaneously hold differing amounts of access to power and resources relative to other groups of women. As Bograd explains, (2013:33) “models and practices must be anchored in descriptions of the contexts in which they were developed and the populations they are intended to serve.” In doing so, the current study takes into
account the multiple social positions that women in college hold. These differential characteristics reveal that younger women may hold less power or access to resources as they are still largely under the control of their parents, making them highly susceptible to their parents’ influence. On the other hand, women who experienced long distance in their abusive relationship as an opportunity to gain new sources of social support are in a position of privilege not just of going to college, but also of having a new means of leaving their abuser.

These findings are not universally applicable, and do exclude a number of women as a result of this intersectional approach. Younger women, typically of lower socioeconomic status, who do not have the opportunity to enroll in higher education may have increased difficulty in counteracting the isolation they face due to the abuse and in exiting the relationship. Both younger women and women of all ages who are women of color, lesbian, living in poverty, or any combination of these and other social positions may face additional, other, or more difficult challenges in abusive relationships and in successfully separating from their abusive partners.
RECOMMENDATIONS

The prevalence of psychological, sexual, and physical violence among young dating partners points to a need for effective and accessible prevention and response strategies. When asked if there was anything that could be done to prevent relationship abuse or to help victims of abuse, the women suggested that schools implement educational programs, work towards increased awareness, and make advocates available such as guidance counselors, social workers, or therapists. These recommendations are supported by the survey findings, in which the majority of participants reported that they did not believe that there is a lot of awareness regarding relationship abuse among college dating relationships, though they did agree that it is a prevalent problem.

The survey results also reveal the need for educational programs to address the myths that remain persistent among young people, including that abuse most commonly occurs among couples of a lower social status and that men who have commit relationship abuse have a psychological defect. It would also be beneficial add context and meaning to abuse used by men, including the larger structural motivations for committing violence against women. Lastly, the survey results point to the need of educating students on how to safely and effectively assist a victim of relationship abuse, as only half of the students reported that they knew how. Two of the interview participants voiced concerns regarding the usefulness of bystanders, adding that teaching others how to help a friend in need would be advantageous.

Many of the women suggested teaching young students specifically about emotional abuse because they themselves were unaware at the time that what they were
experiencing was abuse. Samantha proposed teaching both males and females the warning signs of abuse and typical behaviors of abusive partners.

We never really learned that in high school but then I came here and I was taking classes and I just thought like, it was like a bad relationship, and he was like not a cool person, but I didn’t realize that it was actually like mentally abusive and that what he was doing was actually like a really pointed thing and it wasn’t just him being like, unstable. Like it was like, he was like actually doing this and manipulating me sort of thing. So I think just educating people more about it would be helpful.

Marissa believed that having more knowledge of abusive behaviors would have helped her exit her relationship sooner.

If I would have known that what I was going through was technically like abusive then I would’ve probably ended it a lot sooner, ‘cause like I had no idea.

Though the survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed that relationship abuse involves more than just physical violence, it is unclear whether or not they would be able to identify psychological abuse. While most of the women said that these educational and awareness-raising programs should be taught at the high school level, several of them suggested that the programs should be geared towards middle school students who are just beginning to date.

School programs that have been implemented in the past several decades have highlighted the need for multi-dimensional approaches to violence-prevention (O’Brien 2001). “Multifactor violence-prevention strategies should include classroom sessions that explore knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behavioral intentions. Program components that involve teacher, staff, and parent training, students groups, and schoolwide environmental changes should also be considered.” (412) At an early age, these programs discuss violence in general, and progress to teaching more specifically about dating violence as
the students reach more appropriate ages. Though several of these programs have shown positive results in short-term evaluations, there are limited findings for long-term changes in behaviors and attitudes, warranting more attention.

At the current research site, administrators have implemented a mandatory online sexual violence harm-reduction course to incoming first-year students, along with an alcohol education course. Additionally, the campus has a confidential survivor advocacy program aimed at assisting victims of gendered violence. However, students typically understand this program as being a resource specifically for victims of sexual assault. Further, women who experience only psychological abuse may not feel as though they are “true victims” in comparison to victims who are physically or sexually abused, and thus may not use these resources even if they understood the wide-range of assistance they offer. These programs, along with the increasing number of critiques in the mainstream media of colleges and universities across the country, are drawing more attention to the also prevalent issue of sexual assault on campuses. While this form of violence against women has recently been put under the spotlight, relationship violence, especially psychological abuse, has been largely ignored among the mainstream public and also on college campuses.
LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to the current study. First, the survey sample may not be generalizable to all college students due to the convenience sampling of students enrolled in mid- to upper-level sociology courses. Both the survey and interview samples were also small given time and resource constraints. Similarly, the findings may not generalizable because both samples were overwhelmingly white. Previous studies have noted that racial and ethnic minority populations face additional or unique experiences within abusive intimate relationships. There is also a potential for the presence of social desirability bias among the survey findings. As precautions were taken to maintain confidentiality for participants, there was not a system in the research design to connect the beliefs and attitudes measured in the survey portion of those who identified as having been a victim of IPV for comparison to non-victimized students. Implementing a way to connect the survey portion to those who identified as having experienced abuse would have also made it possible to relate the interview participants’ survey responses to the experiences they shared during the interviews. Because the interviews were retrospective in nature, there is potential for the presence of recall bias, as some participants described relationships that ended several years prior to being interviewed.

In addition to the potential for underreporting of sexual and physical violence among the interview sample, it is likely that having experienced IPV was also underreported by survey participants. Many of the women interviewed reported that they had only recognized their situations as abusive after learning about emotional abuse in college courses or following intervention from friends, later boyfriends, or family
members. Thus, it is highly probable that more survey participants have experienced IPV, especially psychological abuse, than those that reported on the contact information sheet. Also, as nine of the women who did report having been a victim of psychological, sexual, or physical abuse within an intimate relationship either did not consent to be contacted for an interview or did not complete an interview, it is unknown if these women have experienced more severe abuse, are still with their abusive partners, or are significantly different from the interview sample in other ways.
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