

Examining Gender Differences in the Relationship Between Dating Violence Victimization and Anger in College Students

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It has been well established that dating violence victimization is associated with various mental health problems. Relatively, little is known about similarities and differences between mental health correlates of dating violence victimization for males and females. We examined the associations between physical and psychological victimization experiences and measures of anger in a sample of 200 male and female undergraduates. Results suggest that men's victimization was more strongly associated with different forms of anger than women's victimization.

Keywords: couples; mental health; anger; gender differences; university; dating violence

Studies suggest that between 20% and 47% of men and women are victims of physical dating violence in their relationships (Harned, 2002; Katz, Kuffel, & Coblenz, 2002; Kaura & Lohman, 2007). Psychological victimization is even more prevalent than physical victimization, with one study finding that 90% of college women reported psychological victimization at some point in their relationships (Katz, Arias, & Beach, 2000). Several studies have demonstrated negative mental and physical health consequences of dating violence among women (Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002; Coker et al., 2002; Golding, 1999; Kaura & Lohman, 2007; Lown & Vega, 2001), and a smaller literature has shown that men also suffer from negative mental health effects of dating violence (Dye & Eckhardt, 2000; McFarlane, Willson, Malecha, & Lemmey, 2000). This study focused on one specific correlate of dating violence victimization—anger—and examined potential differences in anger profiles across male and female undergraduates.

Some prior work suggests possible differential adaptation to violence and trauma across genders. For example, Katz et al. (2002) found that dating violence victimization was

associated with lower relationship satisfaction and greater emotional distress in female undergraduates relative to males. Miller and Resick (2007) examined broader mental health responses to a wider range of trauma. Specifically, these researchers examined patterns of responses that can be categorized as “internalizing,” defined by high negative emotionality and low positive emotionality; and “externalizing,” defined by impulsivity, high negative emotionality, and aggression. Building on previous research showing that male combat veterans with histories of trauma exposure revealed an externalizing and an internalizing subtype (Miller, Greif, & Smith, 2003; Miller, Kaloupek, Dillon, & Keane, 2004), these researchers examined these subtypes in female sexual assault survivors. As they discussed, a slightly greater proportion of women in this sample were classified as internalizers (45%) than externalizers (21%), relative to their prior work among men (42% internalizers; 27% externalizers). Miller and Resick argued that women may be more likely than men to evidence internalizing disorders resulting from trauma, and men more likely to evidence externalizing disorders (Kessler et al., 1997).

In this study, we examined gender differences in associations between dating violence victimization and anger. We predicted that relationships between dating violence victimization and externalizing forms of anger expression (Anger-Out) would be relatively stronger for men than for women, consistent with prior findings suggesting that men are more likely to exhibit an externalizing response to trauma. We expected that women’s victimization would be more strongly associated with internalizing forms of anger expression (Anger-In). We also explored differential associations between other forms of anger (i.e., State Anger and Trait Anger) and dating violence victimization by gender.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred twenty-five women and 75 men from an introductory psychology course participated for course credit ($N = 200$). Informed consent was obtained. The average age was 19 years ($SD = 1.1$ years, range: 18–23 years old). More than half of the study participants identified themselves as White or non-Hispanic White (59.8%), 17.1% as Asian American, 6.5% as Hispanic or Latino, 2.0% as African American, and 14.6% as of other racial or ethnic groups. The average relationship length was 12.3 months ($SD = 11.3$ months, range: 1 month to 4 years and 6 months). Most participants (82.4%) had daily contact with their partner. Most (93.5%) were dating and not living together, whereas the remaining 6.5% were cohabitating with their romantic partner.

Measures

State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory (STAXI; Spielberger, 1988). The STAXI is a 44-item self-report measure designed to evaluate anger. Items are measured on a 4-point scale, with responses ranging from 0 (*almost never*) to 4 (*almost always*). We used four subscales of the STAXI: State Anger, Trait Anger, Anger-In, and Anger-Out. State Anger refers to the intensity of present anger at the time the participant is filling out the questionnaire (e.g., “I feel like yelling at somebody”). Trait Anger refers to the disposition to experience anger across situations (e.g., “I am a hotheaded person”). Anger-In refers to how anger is suppressed (e.g., “I keep things in”), whereas Anger-Out measures how anger is expressed toward other people or objects (e.g., “I strike out at whatever

infuriates me"). The measure demonstrates adequate internal consistency reliability and good construct validity (Spielberger, Sydeman, Owen, & Marsh, 1999), and a series of factor analyses has supported the subscale structure of the instrument (Fuqua, Leonard, Masters, & Smith, 1991; Spielberger, 1988; Van der Ploeg, 1988). For the present sample, coefficient alphas were as follows: State Anger = .88, Trait Anger = .83, Anger-In = .79, and Anger-Out = .75.

Conflict Tactics Scale-Revised (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). The CTS2 is a self-report measure used to assess relationship aggression and victimization. Physical victimization was measured via reports on the 12-item Physical Assault subscale of the CTS2, whereas psychological victimization was measured via reports on the 8-item Psychological Aggression subscale. Participants were asked how often they and their partner had engaged in a series of relationship tactics in the past year, with item responses ranging from 0 (*this has never happened*) to 6 (*more than 20 times*). CTS2 "variety scores," consisting of the sum of the number of positively endorsed items for each scale, were used in this study. This scoring method places equal weight on all acts of aggression rather than placing greater importance on less severe, more frequent acts, which results in less skewed subscale scores and does not require participants to reliably count how many events have occurred (Moffitt et al., 1997). Variety scores were log-transformed to further reduce skewness. Coefficient alpha for this sample was .87.

Analyses

SPSS 17.0 was used to conduct the analyses. Bivariate correlations were calculated to examine the relationships among all of the study variables. Cohen's (1988) guidelines were used to interpret effect sizes. Hierarchical multiple regressions were used to test the hypothesis that gender would moderate the relationship between victimization and anger.

RESULTS

Item Descriptives

Item descriptives for study variables are presented in Table 1, by gender. Almost one quarter of the women (23%) and a slightly smaller percentage of men (21%) reported experiencing physical victimization at the hands of a romantic partner. Most of the sample, almost three-quarters of both men and women, reported that they had experienced psychological victimization by a romantic partner.

Bivariate Analyses

Bivariate correlations for study variables are presented in Table 1, by gender. As expected, Anger-In was significantly correlated with physical victimization for women but not for men, showing a small effect size. However, Anger-Out was not significantly correlated with physical victimization for either gender, and both Anger-In and Anger-Out were associated with psychological victimization for men (with small to medium effect sizes) but not for women. Regarding other associations, for men, both physical and psychological victimization were significantly associated with State Anger, whereas only psychological victimization was associated with Trait Anger; effect sizes for these associations were in

TABLE 1. Bivariate Correlations and Descriptives for Men and Women

Variable	Men (<i>n</i> = 75)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Physical victimization						
2. Psychological victimization	.45**					
3. State Anger	.39**	.36**				
4. Trait Anger	.08	.36**	.33**			
5. Anger-In	.16	.23*	.26*	.43*		
6. Anger-Out	.14	.31**	.15	.59*	.08	
Mean	0.68	2.59	12.43	17.18	16.97	14.89
Standard deviation	1.78	2.28	3.70	4.37	4.77	3.04
Range in sample	0–10	0–8	10–26	10–27	9–29	8–24
Number endorsing any victimization	17 (23%)	58 (77%)				
	Women (<i>n</i> = 125)					
1. Physical victimization						
2. Psychological victimization	.45**					
3. State Anger	2.03	2.02				
4. Trait Anger	.06	.21*	.13			
5. Anger-In	.18*	.09	.15	.41**		
6. Anger-Out	.00	.09	.08	.66*	.15	
Mean ^a	0.59	2.26	11.57	16.99	16.51	15.00
Standard deviation	1.72	2.09	3.08	4.64	4.37	3.80
Range in sample	0–10	0–8	9–28	10–37	9–28	8–30
Number endorsing any victimization	26 (21%)	90 (72%)				

^aCorrelations here were calculated using the log transformed victimization scores; means and standard deviations were calculated using the untransformed scores so the values can be meaningfully interpreted.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

the medium range. For women, State Anger was not significantly associated with either physical or psychological victimization, and Trait Anger was correlated with psychological but not physical victimization, showing a small effect size.

Moderation Analyses

Linear regression was used to test for significant gender differences in the association between victimization and the various types of anger. Results did not support our hypotheses for Anger-In and Anger-Out. No significant interactions were found between gender and either physical ($B = -.17, t = -.145, p = .89$) or psychological victimization ($B = 1.00, t = 1.06, p = .29$) for Anger-In, nor was there a significant gender interaction for Anger-Out and either physical ($B = .76, t = .82, p = .41$) or psychological victimization ($B = .86, t = 1.17, p = .24$).

Regarding other tests of moderation, gender interactions were observed only for State Anger. When physical victimization, gender, and the interaction term were entered together into a regression predicting State Anger, the interaction term was significant ($B = -2.69, t = -3.19, p < .01$), showing a significant association between anger and victimization for men ($B = 2.53, t = 3.19, p < .01$) but not for women ($B = -.16, t = -.29, p = .77$), with 9% of the variance explained by the interaction model (see Figure 1). Similarly, when psychological victimization, gender, and the interaction term were entered together into a regression predicting State Anger, the interaction term was significant ($B = -1.96, t = -2.88, p < .01$), showing a significant association between anger and victimization for men ($B = 1.88, t = 3.50, p < .01$) but not for women ($B = -.08, t = -.18, p = .85$; see Figure 2). This model accounted for 8% of the variance. There was no significant interaction between gender and physical victimization for Trait Anger ($B = -.09, t = -.08,$

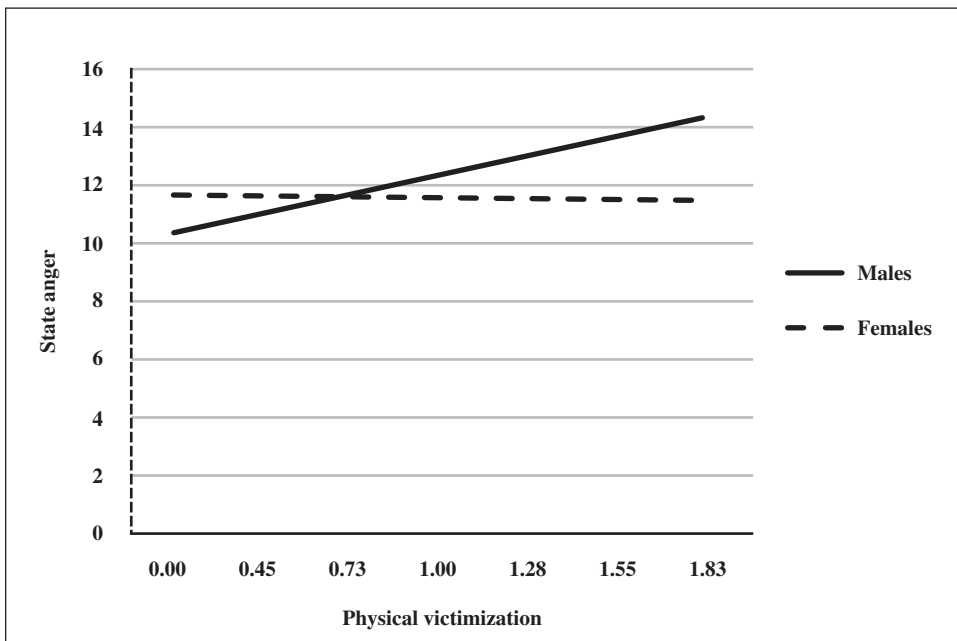


Figure 1. Interaction between physical victimization and gender on state anger.

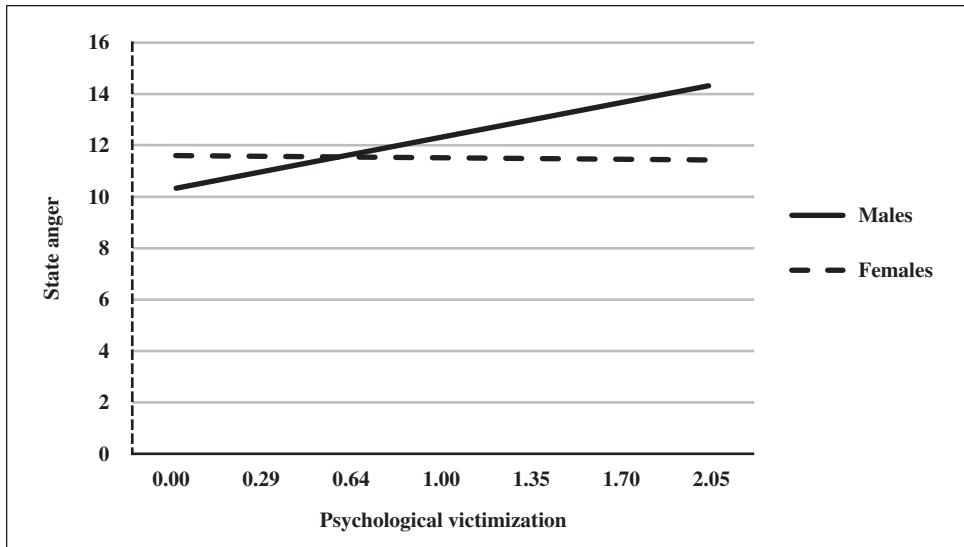


Figure 2. Interaction between psychological victimization and gender on state anger.

$p = .94$). This was also the case for psychological victimization and Trait Anger, with the interaction term showing no significant effect ($B = -.77$, $t = -.84$, $p = .40$).

DISCUSSION

Physical and psychological victimization were generally more consistently and strongly associated with anger variables for men than for women. At the bivariate level, the pattern partially supported our hypotheses that men would show more externalized anger (Anger-Out), and women would show more internalized anger (Anger-In). However, when moderation was tested in linear regressions, the interactions of interest were not significant. Moderator analyses demonstrated that the physical victimization–State Anger and psychological victimization–State Anger associations were relatively higher for men. Although bivariate correlations showed a trend for higher associations between victimization and Trait Anger for men, these differences were not statistically significant in moderator analyses.

Our findings are somewhat consistent with prior research among adolescents (Kessler et al., 1997) in that men’s stressor exposure (dating violence) was more strongly associated with externalizing problems than women’s stressor exposure. Our differential findings between State Anger and Trait Anger add support to the concept of the complexity of anger as outlined by Maiuro and Eberle (2008), and suggest that these should be studied separately in research. Results build on the relatively sparse literature examining differential mental health consequences of dating violence for males and females (Afifi et al., 2009), and support the notion that dating violence victimization may manifest in different mental health symptoms across genders. One explanation for gender differences in the relationship between anger and victimization involves potential socialization processes in which boys and men learn that anger is an appropriate masculine expression of distress

(Verona & Kilmer, 2007). Men may learn to direct their anger outward, whereas women are less likely to do so (Sadeh, Javdani, Finy, & Verona, 2011). These results should be interpreted cautiously, however, considering the pattern of results was evident at the bivariate level, but interactions were not significant.

This study is not without its limitations. Our sample consisted of undergraduate psychology students at one university, and thus findings may not generalize to other groups. Additionally, we relied on self-report measures of dating violence victimization and anger, which may inflate the associations between variables. Reports of dating violence victimization were retrospective, which may introduce recall bias. Although the sample was relatively large, the size of male and female subgroups did not allow for comparisons between victimization-only, perpetration-only, and mutually violent relationships. Further, our outcome was limited and future research should examine a wider range of internalizing and externalizing problems and components of the anger response. Future research should also take sexual victimization into account and examine associations of interest among same-sex couples.

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