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Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma

ISSN: 1092-6771 (Print) 1545-083X (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wamt20

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To cite this article: Walter S. DeKeseredy, James Nolan, Amanda Hall-Sanchez & Adam M. Messinger (2018): Intimate Partner Violence Victimization among Heterosexual, Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual College Students: The Role of Pro-Abuse Peer Support, Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, DOI: 10.1080/10926771.2018.1551820

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2018.1551820

Published online: 07 Dec 2018.

JOURNAL OF AGGRESSION, MALTREATMENT & TRAUMA
https://doi.org/10.1080/10926771.2018.1551820

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Intimate Partner Violence Victimization among Heterosexual, Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual College Students: The Role of Pro-Abuse Peer Support

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ABSTRACT

Most studies of peer support for intimate partner violence (IPV) at U.S. institutions of higher learning focused solely on male assaults on heterosexual women. As well, the bulk of this work only examined how all-male social networks perpetuate and legitimate this behavior. Using recent data from a survey administered at a large U.S. residential university, the main objective of this paper is to help fill a research gap by presenting findings on (1) how having peers who have perpetrated dating abuse and (2) peers' encouragement to be abusive to dates contributes to IPV victimization in a campus lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) community. The results show that LGB students report a higher rate of such victimization than heterosexual students and the two aforementioned types of pro-abuse peer support significantly predict victimization among both sexual orientation groups.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 22 August 2018
Revised 5 November 2018
Accepted 9 November 2018

KEYWORDS
Intimate partner violence; peer support; college; lesbian sexuality issues; gay sexuality issues; bisexual sexuality issues

Recently, only a few fields have moved as far and fast as the study of violence against women on U.S. college campuses. Theoretical and empirical advances have been even greater than the major leaps in some of the physical sciences. Indeed, prior to the 1980s, an exhaustive bibliography of North American publications on male-to-female intimate violence and sexual assault in institutions of higher learning would probably fit on a single index card, and the bulk of the relevant empirical contributions were made by Kirkpatrick and Kanin (1957) and Kanin (1967a, 1967b)). Today, aside from hundreds of recent journal articles, what Schwartz and DeKeseredy (1988) said about the general violence against women literature years ago is applicable to the current state of social scientific knowledge about various types of violence against

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women at institutions of higher learning: "We are about ready for an annotated bibliography of bibliographies" (p. 213).

We now know that at least 25% of female undergraduates are sexually assaulted during their college career and that estimates of intimate partner non-sexual violence against college women (e.g., slapping and punching) range from 10% to 50% due, in some part, to variability in definitions and measurement (Lindquist & Krebs, 2017; Powers & Kaukinen, 2017). Recent college campus research, too, finds that as compared to their heterosexual counterparts, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students are at a higher risk of being victimized by sexual assault and stalking (DeKeseredy, Hall-Sanchez, Nolan, & Schwartz, 2017; Ford & Soco-Marquez, 2016). Following this broader trend, an emerging body of research points to LGB college students being at a similarly elevated risk for psychological, sexual, and physical partner violence (Cantor, Fisher, & Chibnall et al., 2015; Edwards et al., 2015; Messinger, 2017; Porter & Williams, 2011).

Why does student LGB partner violence happen? One largely unexamined contributing factor is pro-abuse peer support. There are various definitions of this determinant, but here we employ a revised version of DeKeseredy's (1988a) conceptualization of *male peer support*: attachments to peers who abuse intimate partners and the resources peers provide that encourage and justify various types of violence against college students. *Male peer support theory* contends that when some men seek the guidance of their male friends, they are given both encouragement and advice on how to abuse women who refuse to do what they tell them to do, such as provide them with sex on demand. Not only do these men verbally and publicly state that sexual assault and other types of abuse are legitimate means of patriarchal authority and domination, but they also serve as role models because many of them physically, sexually, and psychologically harm their own intimate partners (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013).

Outside of the LGB partner violence literature, a small body of quantitative research shows that (1) having peers who physically, sexually, and psychologically abuse their dating partners (frequently referred to in the literature as *attachments to abusive peers*) and (2) having peers who verbally encourage these three behaviors are strong correlates of heterosexual female assault victimization (DeKeseredy, Hall-Sanchez, & Nolan, 2018). Also, DeKeseredy et al. (2017) recently found that these two types of peer support play key roles in the sexual assault and stalking victimization of LGB students. More specifically, DeKeseredy et al. (2017) found that LGB survivors reported higher rates of these two forms of peer support than did their heterosexual counterparts. Yet, thus far, only indirect evidence has hinted at the degree to which the same variants of peer support are associated with LGB intimate partner physical violence victimization (IPPVV). Hence, using data generated by the Campus Quality of Life Survey (CQLS) administered at a large college in the South Atlantic part of the United States, the main objective of the study reported here is to examine

whether the two types of peer support measured by DeKeseredy and his colleagues (2018, p. 2018) predict such victimization. Based on DeKeseredy et al.'s (2017) CQLS LGB findings, we hypothesize that LGB survivors of IPPVV are more likely to have peers who verbally encourage them to abuse intimate partners and are more likely to have attachments to abusive peers than are heterosexual survivors.

Methods

Sample and data collection

The CQLS is a Web survey of 30,470 students, ages 18 or older – predominantly undergraduate, as well as graduate and professional students – attending the aforementioned college in spring 2016. Developed and administered by DeKeseredy, Hall-Sanchez, and Nolan (2016), the CQLS was only administered once and it is a response from the research site's senior administration to a call from the White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault (2014) for colleges across the United States to assess the extent of sexual assault on their campuses. This survey, however, measured more than just the prevalence of sexual assault. The CQLS also collected data on the following: perceptions of safety; student demographics; perceptions of campus atmosphere for non-traditional students; peer norms; hate- and bias-motivated assaults; stalking; sexual harassment; intimate partner violence (IPV); student involvement in campus violence prevention programs; student bystander intervention; perceptions of institutional responses to sexual misconduct; and knowledge of campus sexual misconduct resources.

Nearly 6,000 students (n = 5,718) participated in this study, which is close to 20% of the entire student body. Table 1 shows that the sample is, except for sex, representative of the entire student population. Table 2 presents data on the numbers and percentages of students' sexual orientations. Ninety-two percent (n = 4,966) of the participants stated that they are heterosexual/straight. One percent (n = 48) reported belonging to a sexual orientation not listed in the questionnaire or in Table 2 and students were asked to report if this was the case. Nonetheless, we cannot identify those other sexual orientations. It should be noted that 4.1% of adults in the United States identify as either LGB or transgender (Gates, 2017).

Very few students identified as transwomen (0.12%, n = 7), as transmen (0.10%, n = 3), or asexual (1%, n = 38) and thus they are not included in our data analyses. Due to small cell sizes on several items resulting in underpowered analyses, the small number of students who identified as LGB were all combined into the category we refer to as the LGB community. For similar reasons due to low statistical power, we were unable to examine differences among sexual minorities by gender identity. Therefore, we cannot discern

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the campus population and the CQLS sample.

	POPULATION (n = 30,470)	SAMPLE (n = 5,718)
Status		
Undergraduate	77.3	78.9
Professional	4.6	5.1
Graduate	18.2	15.9
Sex		
Female	48.6	57.2
Male	51.4	37.1
Other	Not recorded	1.1
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	6.7	4.4
White	86.5	83.8
Asian	6.4	6.0
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.5	0.2
Native American	1.4	0.4
Hispanic*	3.8	3.1
Other (including mixed race)	Not recorded	2.0
Age		
Average age	23.3	22.1

NOTE: The ethnic category "Hispanic" was considered separate from race in the population column and so the total exceeds 100%.

Table 2. CQLS respondents' sexual orientations.

Sexual Orientations	*N*	%
Gay	92	2
Lesbian	55	1
Bisexual	194	4
Asexual	38	1
Heterosexual/Straight	4,966	92.1
A Sexual Orientation Not Listed Here	48	1

whether certain groups of LGB people have higher or lower rates of partner violence. That said, we can identify male and female members of the LGB community and women were 13.2% more likely to report being LGB than males, which is inconsistent with data generated by other large-scale surveys, such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) (2017). NSFG 2011–2015 data reveal that 1.6% of females aged 18–44 identified as lesbian vs. 1.8% of men in the same age cohort who reported being gay. Moreover, 5.6% of the female NSFG respondents reported being bisexual, while 1.8% of the men identified as such.

Recruiting participants involved a campus-wide effort and involved using multiple methods, including posters, flyers, direct email communication, and in-class announcements. Another integral component of the recruitment strategy was the inclusion of incentives. Every form of publicity informed students of the opportunity to be randomly selected to receive one of 20 $50.00 VISA gift cards (also noted within the survey). Lotteries are commonly used in Web

surveys and are often more effective than are other incentives (Couper & Bosnjak, 2010; Pedersen & Nielsen, 2016).

Starting on March 28, 2016, students were sent four weekly email invitations to answer the survey. Each invitation included a link to the survey, which was administered using Qualtrics software. After clicking the link to the survey in the email invitation and then clicking a button to participate, respondents were taken to a screen containing a consent form. Those who indicated that they did not want to participate were removed from the email reminder list.

Measures

Intimate partner violence victimization

The eight items in Table 3 are derived from the University of Kentucky's 2014 Campus Attitudes Toward Safety (C.A.T.S.) Survey administered by this school's Center for Research on Violence Against Women (2014) (Cronbach's alpha = .83). The Center used a modified version of Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy and Sugarman's (1996) revised Conflict Tactics Scales and the items in Table 3 were introduced with the following slightly revised C.A.T.S. preamble. The response categories are "never, "once," "2–5 times," "6 or more times," and "choose not to answer".

> We are particularly interested in learning about your intimate or romantic relationships. Since you started at [UNIVERSITY NAME REDACTED], how many times has someone you were dating or a spouse/partner done the following things to you **that were NOT done in a joking or playful manner**?

Table 3. LGB and heterosexual partner violence victimization.

	LGB Respondents				Heterosexual Respondents			
	YES		NO		YES		NO	
Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) Victimization	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Shoved, pinched or scratched you or pulled your hair	63	15.6	340	84.4	529	11.4	4124	88.6
Slapped you	41	10.1	363	89.9	383	8.2	4261	91.8
Threw something at you that could hurt you	35	8.7	366	91.3	367	7.9	4269	92.1
Bent your fingers or twisted your arms	26	6.4	378	93.6	247	5.3	4400	94.7
Hit, punched, kicked or bit you	40	9.9	364	90.1	341	7.4	4297	92.6
Dragged you by your hair, threw you down stairs or out of a car, or threw you around	12	3.0	393	97.0	87	1.9	4560	98.1
Burned you, choked you, or tried to strangle or suffocate you	21	5.2	382	94.8	110	2.4	4536	97.6
Used, or threatened to use, a weapon against you	13	3.2	390	96.8	121	2.6	4525	97.4
IPV composite (Did any of the above occur?)	89	22.3	310	77.7	843	18.3	3761	81.7

Peers' pro-abuse informational support

This is one of two pro-abuse peer support variables included in the instrument and used in the Canadian National Survey of Woman Abuse in University and College Dating (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998). It refers to guidance and advice that influences people to sexually, physically, and psychologically abuse their dating partners. To measure it, we created an index by adding male and female respondents' scores on seven slightly modified items developed by DeKeseredy (1988b) and presented in Table 4 (Cronbach's alpha = .80). The original items were specifically designed to gather data only about men's male friends, but the CQLS renditions are gender-neutral because the survey was administered to students with different gender identities and sexual orientations. As well, we made this a dichotomous variable and used the same procedure for the pro-abuse informational support variable. The items were introduced as follows using a preamble that includes a statement included in the Administrator-Researcher Campus Climate Collaborative's (ARC3) (2015) Survey's introduction to peer norms measures, and the participants were asked to answer either "yes" or "no".

Table 4. Differences in pro-abuse informational support and attachments to abusive peers.

	LGB Respondents				Heterosexual Respondents			
	YES		NO		YES		NO	
Pro-Abuse Informational Support	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
You should respond to your date's challenges to your authority by using physical force such as hitting or slapping	19	4.7**	383	95.3	100	2.2	4,495	97.8
It is alright for someone to hit a date in certain situations	35	8.8*	365	91.3	237	5.2	4,357	94.8
Your dates should have sex with you whenever you want	26	6.5**	375	93.5	147	3.2	4,446	96.8
When you spend money on a date, the person should have sex with you in return	32	8.0**	370	92.0	213	4.6	4,378	95.4
You should respond to your date's challenges to your authority by insulting them or putting them down	18	4.5*	383	95.5	107	2.3	4,481	97.7
You should respond to your date's sexual rejections by using physical force to have sex	5	1.2	396	98.8	46	1.0	4,539	99.0
It is alright to physically force a person to have sex under certain conditions	10	2.5	393	97.5	59	1.3	4,528	98.7
Attachment to Abusive Peers								
Your friends have made physically forceful attempts at sexual activity with dates which were disagreeable and offensive enough that the dates responded in an offended manner (e.g., crying, fighting, screaming or pleading)	86	22.5**	296	77.5	708	15.7	3,796	84.3
Your friends have used physical force such as hitting or beating to resolve conflicts with their dates	91	23.5**	296	76.5	775	17.0	3,782	83.0
Your friends insult their dates, swear at them, or withhold affection	170	43.5	221	56.5	1810	39.9	2,725	60.1

NOTE: *$p < .01$. **$p < .05$

The next questions are about the information your current friends may have given you concerning how to deal with problems in intimate or romantic relationships. When the word date is used, please think of anyone with whom you have or have had a romantic or sexual relationship – short or long term. Please click the bubble which best represents your answer.

To the best of your knowledge, did any of your friends tell you that …

Attachments to abusive peers

To measure this variable and also used in the above Canadian national survey, we used a gender-neutral version of an index developed by DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998), which was also used in the above Canadian survey. Again, the original versions were crafted to gather data about only male respondents' male friends. The response categories were none, 1 or 2, 3 to 5, 6 to 10, more than 10, and don't know (Cronbach's alpha = .81). Participants were asked, "To the best of your knowledge, how many of your friends (1) have ever made physically forceful attempts at sexual activity with dates which were disagreeable and offensive enough that the dates responded in an offended manner such as crying, fighting, screaming or pleading; (2) have ever used physical force, such as hitting or beating, to resolve conflicts with their dates; and (3) insult their dates, swear at them, and/or withhold affection?"

Data analysis

We first generated descriptive statistics on the demographics of the sample and the prevalence of partner violence. Binomial logistic regression analysis was then used to measure the effects of pro-abuse informational support and attachment to abusive peers on physical IPV victimization. Separate analyses were conducted for both heterosexual and LGB students.

Results

The rate of partner violence victimization among LGB students (22.3%, n = 89) is higher than that for heterosexual students (18.3%, n = 843). Table 3 shows that compared to heterosexual participants, LGB respondents reported higher rates of all eight types of partner violence. Most of the victims in both groups reported experiencing these behaviors: shoving, pinching or scratching or hair pulling; slapping; something was thrown at them that could hurt; and hitting, punching, kicking, or biting. Within the LGB community, gay men (31%, n = 27) reported the highest overall rate of violence, followed by bisexual respondents (23%, n = 41), and lesbian participants (15%, n = 8).

Table 5. Relationship between pro-abuse informational support, attachments to abusive peers, and partner violence victimization.

	β	S.E.	Wald	Df	Sig.	Exp (β)
LGB Victims						
Pro-Abuse Informational Support	1.104	.289	14.588	1	.000	3.016
Constant	−1.472	.144	103.906	1	.000	.230
Attachments to Abusive Peers	1.614	.291	30.784	1	.000	5.023
Constant	−.2.222	.248	80.149	1	.000	.108
Heterosexual Victims						
Pro-Abuse Informational Support	1.055	.105	100.346	1	.000	2.873
Constant	−1.665	.044	1449.585	1	.000	.189
Attachments to Abusive Peers	1.246	0.84	218.757	1	.000	3.476
Constant	−2.175	.068	1028.449	1	.000	.114

Tables 4 and 5 help fill a major gap in the empirical literature on peer support for IPV on campus because, as stated earlier, the clear majority of the studies on this topic focus exclusively on all-male peer support for the victimization of heterosexual female college students (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2013). For most of the peer support items listed in Table 4, LGB students report statistically significant higher rates than heterosexual students. Significance was determined by independent t-tests, equal variance not assumed. In total, 16.5% (n = 66) of LGB respondents started receiving pro-abuse informational support compared to 10.9% (n = 497) of heterosexual ones. Consider, too, that a higher rate of LGB students reported attachments to abusive peers (50.6% vs 45.4%). The last item in Table 4 (Your friends insult their dates, swear at them, or withhold affection) elicited the highest percentage of positive responses, but an unknown number of researchers may contend that such behaviors are not always abusive. This point is well taken, and thus future research should ask participants if their friends did these things specifically for the purpose of abusing their dating partners.

Furthermore, to the best of our knowledge, the regression data in Table 5 are the first to show that pro-abuse peer support predicts both LGB and heterosexual students' partner violence experiences. In a confirmatory regression, where LGB and heterosexual participants were included together, along with both peer support measures, there was no statistical difference in predicting IPV victimization by sexual orientation (p < .161). Perhaps this is not surprising because, using the same data set, DeKeseredy et al. (2017) found that such peer support predicts both groups of students' sexual assault and stalking victimization.

Table 5 also shows that, among LGB respondents, the odds of reporting being victimized by IPV were three times higher for those who received pro-abuse informational support. Similarly, among LGB participants, the odds of experiencing such victimization were five times higher for those with attachments to abusive peers compared to those without these attachments. Comparable findings are observed for heterosexual respondents. The odds

increase by 2.9 times for those who received pro-abuse informational support and 3.5 times for those with attachments to abusive peers. Hence, also considering DeKeseredy et al.'s (2017) LGB study, it seems that what could be deemed a "non-LGBTQ-specific predictor" (Messinger, 2017) – that is, a factor that predicts partner violence regardless of sexual orientation – helps explain three major types of assaults on LGBQ students at the research site: sexual assault, stalking, and partner violence. It should be noted that sex (e.g., male and female) is not statistically significant in these models and this is why this variable is not included in Table 5.

Discussion

Our analyses of CQLS data support earlier studies showing that student members of the LGB campus community are at greater risk of being victimized by partner violence than are their heterosexual counterparts. Further, the LGB figure is comparable to that (22.8%) uncovered from transgender, gender-queer, gender non-conforming or gender questioning undergraduate students who completed the Association of American Universities (AAU) Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct (Cantor et al., 2015). Nonetheless, some caution is warranted when comparing the two studies' findings because the AAU survey included different measures and gathered data from 27 different campuses.

Still, this study, like many other campus surveys of LGB people could not overcome the problem of needing to group all LGB participants into one broad analytic category due to sexual orientation-specific sample size issues. This also inhibited our ability to examine gender difference across sexual orientation subgroups. What is more, offenders' sexual orientations and genders, as well as the factors that motivated them to physically assault the people in our sample, are unknown. Thus, future studies should administer self-report surveys to potential offenders.

Like DeKeseredy et al.'s (2017) study, this one shows that it is time to move peer support research beyond studying only the association between pro-abuse male peer groups and male-to-female violence against heterosexual women in institutions of higher learning. Of course, there is a need for multiple studies using a variety of methods to adequately confirm the relationship between pro-abuse peer support and LGB IPV victimization. Moreover, the results presented here do not reveal a direct causal relationship between pro-abuse peer support and IPV. Cause and effect are difficult to untangle without longitudinal studies.

Some more limitations warrant attention. First, we used two gender-neutral peer support measures and therefore cannot identify the gender and sexual orientation identities of CQLS respondents' peers. Future research needs to overcome this problem to discern if LGB pro-abuse subcultures are as common

on college campuses as are all-male heterosexual ones. In addition, due to being a cross-sectional study, it is unclear whether negative peer support laid the groundwork for future victimization or if, instead, victimization led to help-seeking and the discovery of pro-abuse peer support. Longitudinal research is needed to examine the time order of the association discovered in this study, and future studies should also explore whether negative peer support exacerbates outcomes for victims, such as remaining with an abuser longer. Crafting and testing theories of pro-abuse peer support and violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students would also advance the field.

More importantly for survivors of the types of violence examined in the study, better prevention and awareness programs are necessary. Many of those currently in place are not multifaceted and do not acknowledge the diversity of the students who experience IPV, stalking, sexual assault, cyberbullying, and other forms of abuse (DeKeseredy et al., 2017; Ford & Soco-Marquez, 2016). Partially in response to this problem, many schools have created, or are now creating, LGBTQ centers where sexual minority students can go to share their campus experiences, receive social support, and develop friendships, among other benefits. However, simply relying only on this approach is, in the view of many LGBTQ students and service providers, tantamount to simply "checking another box" in a climate characterized by pressure to comply with legislation (e.g., Title IX) aimed at curbing various types of intimate violence and promoting gender equity (Moylan, 2017; Oliveria, 2018). Thus, a multi-pronged effort is required, one that includes the creation of LGBTQ spaces, as well as the "facilitation of community connectedness," widespread education and awareness initiatives, and "LGBT-adapted relationship programs" (Quirk, Newcomb, & Mustanki, 2018). Data in the present study and in others show that campus violence victimization remains very high, suggesting that additional approaches are needed to change campus cultures that legitimate and perpetuate the abuse of a diverse range of college students.

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