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International Dating Violence Study: A Look Between Parental Status and Psychological  
Aggression

An honors thesis presented to the School of Social Welfare  
University at Albany, State University of New York  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from The Honors College

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**Abstract**

Dating Violence occurs in many forms and can be committed by anyone (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention there are four core types of intimate partner violence: physical violence, sexual violence, threats of physical or sexual violence, and psychological/emotional violence. This study examines the relationship between current parental status and psychological aggression toward a partner. Data are drawn from the International Dating Violence Study collected from more than 14,000 students in 68 universities in over 30 countries worldwide (Straus, International Dating Violence Study, 2001-2006, 2011). Data were collected using two different scales the Personal and Relationship Profile (PRP) and the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale 2 (CTS2). The data will be analyzed using the SPSS statistical package. The results and their implications for social work research, practice, and program development will be presented.

### **Acknowledgements**

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## **Introduction**

In the United States, 25 million women and 7 million men experience partner violence during their lifetime (Jain, Buka, Subramanian, & Molnar, 2010). It is well known that intimate partner violence is a problem, however it is alarming to hear that dating couples are more likely to be violent than married couples which is supported by over 50 studies (Straus, 2004). An issue that generally surrounds the research on dating violence is the lack of a universal definition. While the Center for Disease Control has established definitions for the four main types of interpersonal violence, due to the wide variety of ways in which it can be committed it is difficult to develop a specific definition for dating violence. A concern related to prevalence rates is that some research shows similar rates of violence for both genders. However, there is also a high number of unreported cases in these studies, particularly among men respondents. (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001).

## **Theoretical Framework**

There are several theories that help explain why people engage in interpersonal violence. According to Wekerle and Wolfe (1999), the three main perspectives are Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Dobash & Dobash's Feminist Theory. Bandura's theory argues that children learn social skills through observing and reenacting adult behaviors. Attachment Theory proposes that a child attaches to a main caregiver in his/her formative years. The different attachment styles may result in specific personality traits. An insecure attachment style tends to correlate with interpersonal violence (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Feminist Theory contends that gender plays a primary role in interpersonal violence where men are the perpetrators and women are the victims. In situations where women are the

perpetrators, it is argued that this violence is a form of self-defense (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). These theories not only help explain why people engage in interpersonal violence but can also inform research findings and prevention strategies. For example, the Social Learning Theory helps us understand some of the findings in a study where 57% of students who were spanked or hit by parents felt that it was more acceptable to hit a dating partner (Straus, 2004).

### **Research Methods**

This study analyzed data from the International Dating Violence Study (IDVS). The data were collected through an on-site questionnaire and web-based survey. The IDVS was conducted in 68 universities in 32 nations over five years. The initial sample was 17,404, but 18% had not been in a relationship for at least a month. Therefore, the final sample was 14,252. The response rates ranged from 42%-100%; the lower response rates had a direct correlation to the site that distributed the questionnaires after class. Approximately 70% of respondents were female which reflected the gender distribution of the classes that the data was collected in. An important feature of this study is that its sample was cross-cultural. According to another study that used IDVS data, cultural norms may play a role in the acceptance of certain acts of violence (Strauss, 2004). There were no questions regarding race/ethnicity in the questionnaire.

The Conflict Tactics Scale 2, also known as the CTS2, can be used to measure three main frameworks of dating violence: Negotiation, Psychological Aggression, and Physical Aggression (Newton, Donaldson Connelly, & Landsverk, 2001). In a cross-cultural study, the reliability of the CTS2 showed alpha coefficients ranging from .73 to .87 depending on the subscale being used. Also, the construct validity of the CTS2 was found to be an appropriate scale to measure violence in partner relationships cross-culturally.



The Personal Relationships Profile (PRP) is more convenient to use compared to other measures because it uses a uniform scale which reduces testing time. This also allows scores to be comparable among subscales (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 2010). The PRP alpha coefficients for reliability among subscales range from .60 to .80. As a result, the PRP subscales are consistent and reliable. In addition, the PRP can be scored with a Limited Disclosure Scale to address the threat to validity that could arise due to the nature of the questions and participants' unwillingness to report socially undesirable behaviors.

When used together, these two scales can identify couples experiencing physical violence, and the PRP can identify factors that could be explored as possible areas for intervention (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 2010). Also, subscales imbedded within the CTS2 and PRP measure items such as gender hostility towards men and gender hostility towards women. Although these subscales have a lower reliability, they can still provide important data. Gender hostility has been examined in previous research, and a correlation was found between violence and gender hostility in men against women (Straus & Yodanis, 1996).

The present study will use IDVS data from the CTS2 psychological aggression subscale and parental status information collected as part of the participants' demographics. The CTS2 measures psychological aggression assessing how often a person makes psychological attacks against the partner. Psychological aggression is hard to measure because it often goes unnoticed. It can be verbal and often causes emotional and mental distress to the victim.

It is hypothesized that there is a relationship between parental status and psychological aggression towards a partner. To analyze the variables the statistical package of SPSS was used. The independent variable was the parental status of the participants' parents. The categories for

parental status were *married, separated, divorced, not married, not together, not married together*, and *one or both parents have died*. Separate analyses combined married and not married but together categories to represent dual parent households. Then by combining the response items *divorced, separated, not married, not together*, and *one or both had died*, the data was created to represent single-parent households.

Data gathered with the CTS2 psychological aggression subscale was used to determine the frequency of acts of psychological aggression in dating relationships which is the dependent variable. The variable used was the chronicity or number of times a psychologically aggressive act was committed in the previous year by the respondent to the significant other. It is important to note that this may be severely underreported due to the sensitive nature of the questions. The range of scores for times an act of psychological aggression was committed ranged from zero to two-hundred times in the previous year.

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was run to compare the means of the different parent groups and how often a participant committed a psychological act of aggression towards the partner. A t-test was conducted, which is a comparison of means through only two groups, to compare the single parent and dual parent households.

## **Results**

This study included 7,246 participants who had parents who were *married*; 369 participants who had parents who were *separated*; 1,619 participants with *divorced* parents; 270 participants with parents who were *not married, not together*; 96 participants with parents who were *not married together*, and 757 participants in which *one or both had died*.

Descriptives			
PSYCH TOT by self - chrn			
	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	Minimum	Maximum
	Upper Bound		
Married	16.1532	1.00	157.00
Separated	23.2718	1.00	133.00
Divorced	19.7166	1.00	190.00
not married, not together	26.0651	1.00	200.00
not married together	17.3336	1.00	119.00
one or both have died	18.6480	1.00	150.00
Total	17.0043	1.00	200.00

Figure 1

From the above chart it can be seen that those whose parents were separated or divorced committed more acts of psychological aggression than those who came from married or dual parent households.

The result of the ANOVA showed that there was a statistically significant F-ratio of 14.027. This result was significant at the  $p < .001$  level, this means that there is a less than 1% chance that the results are coincidental.

When the groups were combined to *Single Parent* and *Dual Parent*, a t-test was performed to support the results from the ANOVA. The average mean of psychological acts committed by participants from a single parent household was 18.8, while the average mean for participants in the dual parent household was only 15.7. The results of the performed t-test were significant and supported the results from the ANOVA.

The results of the t-test were significant at the  $p < .001$  level. The ANOVA and t-tests both supported the proposed hypothesis that there is an association between parental status and committing acts of psychological aggression.

### **Discussion**

These results show that having dual parents in the household at the time of this study had a relationship with the amount a respondent committed acts of psychological aggression towards their dating partner in the previous year.

This result could be attributed to social learning theory. Children imitate relationships by what they witness in the household, if the parents were divorced or separated or simply not together than the child may not have had a solid influence during their developmental periods. Also, parents who are divorced or separated often communicate in psychologically aggressive ways in front of the children, and while this may go unnoticed by the parents, having a child witness this communication pattern through their parents they may learn to communicate to their future partners in similar ways. Psychologically aggressive behavior is harder to track because it causes emotional and mental damage which is much harder to measure than physical damage. These results lead to more research in the area of both psychological aggression and parental status because the two have a strong connection but it is unclear how that connection is created.

The results confirmed the hypothesis. At the same time, it is important to note there are several limitations to the findings. First, these results were found using self-reported data for a socially undesirable behavior. Therefore, psychological aggression may be severely underreported. Second, the data were collected using a convenience sample and should not be generalized. Third, parental status was a current demographic not a demographic of the parents during the participants' childhood. This could imply that the parents changed their status after the

participant was no longer a child and could have no effect on the likelihood that he/she will commit an act of psychological aggression.

Despite its limitations, the results of this study could make a small contribution to the field of social work. They can lead to more research on the role of parental status on children and their future dating relationships. Addressing variables that may lead to intimate partner violence through social work interventions can help reduce the likelihood that it will occur in the future. Understanding what negatively impacts people during childhood and how to prevent it can inform program development and contribute to healthier and more successful interpersonal relationships in a child's future. Psychological aggression can have serious adverse consequences for victims of interpersonal violence. Unfortunately, it often goes unnoticed and it is difficult to measure and quantify.

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