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Experiential Avoidance and Male Dating Violence Perpetration: An Initial Investigation

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Abstract

Dating violence among college students represents a prevalent and serious problem. An abundance of research has examined risk and protective factors for dating violence, although only recently has research begun to focus on risk and protective factors that could be amenable to change in intervention programs. One potential risk factor for dating violence may be experiential avoidance. Using the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire - II (AAQ-II; Bond et al., 2011), we examined whether experiential avoidance was associated with male perpetrated dating violence after controlling for age, relationship satisfaction, and alcohol use. Within a sample of male college students in a current dating relationship ($N = 109$) results demonstrated that experiential avoidance was positively associated with psychological, physical, and sexual aggression perpetration, and that it remained associated with psychological and sexual aggression after controlling for age, relationship satisfaction, and alcohol use. The implications of these findings for future research and prevention programs are discussed.

Keywords

Dating violence; experiential avoidance; aggression

Dating violence is a prevalent and serious problem among college students. The past twenty years have seen an abundance of research on the prevalence, correlates, and risk factors for dating violence perpetration (Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008). However, despite this growing research base, efforts aimed at preventing dating violence among college students have had little to no success (see Cornelius & Regussie, 2007). Recently researchers have advocated for an examination of risk and protective factors for dating violence that are amenable to change in intervention programs, as prevention programs may be more effective if they can teach participants lasting skills that can lead to reduced aggression (O’Leary, Woodin, & Fritz, 2006; Shorey, Zucosky et al., 2012). Toward this end, experiential

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avoidance, the unwillingness to remain in contact with negative, private experiences (e.g., negative affect) and actions toward avoiding or reducing such aversive experiences, has been proposed to underlie psychopathology and a number of problematic behavioral outcomes (Hayes et al., 2004), including aggressive behavior, although there is scant research on whether experiential avoidance may increase the risk for aggressive behavior, particularly dating violence. Should research find that experiential avoidance increases the risk for dating violence, prevention programs could target this underlying vulnerability, potentially increasing the success of such programs. Thus, within a sample of male college students in a current dating relationship, the current study examined whether experiential avoidance was associated with male perpetrated psychological, physical, and sexual dating violence. Moreover, the current study also examined whether experiential avoidance remained associated with violence perpetration after controlling for age, alcohol use, and relationship satisfaction, known correlates of dating violence.

Male Dating Violence Perpetration

In the present study, dating violence refers to psychological, physical, or sexual aggression against an intimate partner. Psychological aggression includes, but is not limited to, verbal behaviors such as yelling, screaming, calling a partner a derogatory name, threats, and attempts to isolate one's partner (Follingstad, 2007; Lawrence, Yoon, Langer, & Ro, 2009). Physical aggression includes, but is not limited to, pushing, shoving, slapping, kicking, or using a weapon against a partner (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Sexual coercion includes behaviors that are designed to compel a partner to engage in unwanted sexual activity, which can consist of threats and/or physical force (Straus et al., 1996). Research indicates that each year approximately 70% of male college students will perpetrate psychological aggression, 20% will perpetrate physical aggression, and 20–30% will perpetrate sexual coercion (see review by Shorey et al., 2008). Moreover, and as discussed in detail by O'Leary (1999), young adulthood is the time when risk for aggression against an intimate partner peaks, making college a particularly risky time for dating violence.

Research has clearly demonstrated that males are victimized at comparable levels as their female counterparts in dating relationships (Archer, 2000), with the exception of sexual coercion victimization which is higher among females (Shorey et al., 2008). However, male perpetrated violence routinely results in more severe psychological and physical consequences for female victims (Archer, 2000). For instance, female victims of dating violence report increased symptoms of depression (Kaura & Lohman, 2007), posttraumatic stress symptoms (Harned, 2001), somatic complaints (Prospero, 2007), substance use (Shorey, Rhatigan, Fite, & Stuart, 2011), as well as physical injuries (Amar & Gennaro, 2005). Thus, it is clear that male perpetrated dating violence is both a prevalent and serious problem that deserves research attention. Specifically, there is a need for research on potential risk and protective factors for perpetrating dating violence that could be amenable to change in prevention programs for dating violence. One factor associated with dating violence that has received scant empirical attention is experiential avoidance.

Experiential Avoidance

Experiential avoidance has been defined as a “phenomenon that occurs when a person is unwilling to remain in contact with particular private experiences (e.g., bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts, memories, images, behavioral predispositions) and takes steps to alter the form or frequency of these experiences or the contexts that occasion them, even when these forms of avoidance cause behavioral harm” (Hayes et al., 2004, p. 554). As discussed by Kashdan, Barrios, Forsyth, and Steger (2006), experiential avoidance may be adaptable in certain situations, such as when trying to avoid anxiety when on a job interview. However, when applied rigidly and consistently, experiential avoidance becomes problematic, hindering individuals’ movement toward valued goals, contact with the present moment, and functioning. That is, although experiential avoidance may lead to short-term reductions in unwanted private experiences (Hayes et al., 2004), the long-term consequences of this avoidance are severe, with experiential avoidance contributing to the development, maintenance, and exacerbation of a number of mental health disorders, including substance use disorders, depression, and anxiety disorders (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010; Chowla & Ostafin, 2007).

One domain where experiential avoidance has received extensive empirical and theoretical attention, and which also has implications for aggressive behavior, is with negative affect. That is, individuals are often highly motivated to avoid or reduce experiences of negative affect, and experiential avoidance is one approach many individuals may employ when faced with negative affect (Chowla & Ostafin, 2007). For instance, when experiencing negative affect, individuals high in experiential avoidance may turn to a number of maladaptive behaviors in an attempt to avoid this emotion, such as alcohol use, distraction, or leaving a situation. Importantly, negative affect is central to many theories of aggressive behavior (e.g., Bell & Naugle, 2008; Berkowitz, 1990; 1993; Leonard, 1993). Cognitive neoassociation theory (Berkowitz, 1990, 1993) posits that negative affect (e.g., anger, irritation) leads individuals to be motivated to engage in aggressive behavior. Within this framework, negative affect facilitates higher-level cognitions, such as interpretational biases or causal attributions, which increase anger and decrease adaptive problem solving, thus promoting aggression (Berkowitz, 2001). Additionally, Bell & Naugle (2008) hypothesize that state anger is a proximal antecedent to aggression between intimate partners, particularly when other motivating factors and behavioral repertoire deficits are present. In line with this theory, experiential avoidance could be considered a behavioral repertoire deficit in this theory of violence, which may make it more likely that state anger will lead to aggression, for example. Indeed, empirical research has demonstrated negative affect to temporally precede, and increase the risk for, dating violence perpetration (Elkins et al., 2013). In addition, dating violence has been theorized, in certain contexts, as a maladaptive coping skill that may be used by some individuals in an attempt to reduce experiences of negative affect (Jakupcak, Lisak, & Roemer, 2002; Lawrence et al., 2009; Shorey, Cornelius, & Idema, 2011). Thus, it is possible that individuals high in experiential avoidance may be more likely to perpetrate dating violence, as aggression may be one method to cope with or avoid distressing, negative emotions.

Dating Violence and Experiential Avoidance

To date, only one known study has examined whether experiential avoidance is associated with dating violence perpetration (see Fiorillo, Papa, & Follette, 2013 for a study on experiential avoidance and dating violence victimization). In the development study of the original Acceptance and Action Questionnaire (AAQ), Hayes and colleagues (2004) reported a significant correlation between the AAQ and physical aggression perpetration ($r = .18$) within a sample of male and female college students. Unfortunately, this study did not examine males and females separately and the significant correlation may have been due to the large sample size. Further, when examining aggression other than that against an intimate partner, there is also a dearth of research on whether experiential avoidance is associated with aggressive behavior. Kingston, Clarke, and Remington (2010) demonstrated that the first version of the AAQ was associated with increased problem behavior, which included a combined variable of aggression, substance use, and sexual promiscuity, among a sample of individuals who had previously received psychiatric services. Tull, Jakupcak, Paulson, and Gratz (2007) also demonstrated that greater experiential avoidance was associated with greater general aggressive tendencies among a sample of college students, faculty, and staff. Thus, there is a need for research that directly examines whether experiential avoidance is associated with aggression and, in particular, dating violence perpetration, including whether it is associated with different forms of dating violence (i.e., psychological, physical, and sexual).

Although there is limited research in this area, there is a growing body of research demonstrating that dating violence is associated with similar and related constructs to experiential avoidance. For instance, male perpetrators of psychological, physical, or sexual aggression have been shown to have greater difficulties with emotion regulation relative to non-perpetrators (Shorey, Brasfield, Febres, & Stuart, 2011). Research has also shown that low levels of trait mindfulness are associated with increased sexual coercion perpetration by men against a dating partner (Gallagher, Hudepohl, & Parrott, 2010). Other research has shown that poor anger management (Stith & Hamby, 2002) and self-regulation deficits (Finkel, DeWall, Slotter, Oaten, & Foshee, 2009) are all associated with increased male perpetrated dating violence. Importantly, recent research has found that a large percentage of perpetrators of psychological aggression report decreased negative emotions immediately following aggression (Shorey, Temple, et al., 2012), which indicates that aggression may be used by some to regulate, or avoid, unwanted negative emotions, which would be consistent with experiential avoidance.

More specifically, experiential avoidance has been shown to be related to constructs associated with male perpetrated dating violence. For instance, research has shown that experiential avoidance predicts alcohol use problems among college students, even after controlling for psychological distress (Levin et al., 2010), and alcohol use is a robust predictor of male perpetrated dating violence (see review by Shorey, Stuart, & Cornelius, 2011). Moreover, decreased experiential avoidance is associated with increased relationship satisfaction (Pakenham & Samios, 2013), and relationship satisfaction is a known correlate of dating violence perpetration (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001). Thus, there are both theoretical and empirical reasons to suspect that experiential avoidance will be associated with dating

violence perpetration. Should experiential avoidance be associated with dating violence, this could indicate that acceptance and mindfulness-based interventions could be considered for the reduction of dating violence, as these interventions target reduced experiential avoidance.

Current Study

There is a dearth of research on whether experiential avoidance is associated with aggressive behavior in general, and with male perpetrated dating violence specifically. Determining whether there is a relation between experiential avoidance and dating violence could provide important information for future research and for dating violence prevention programs. Thus, the present study examined whether experiential avoidance was associated with male perpetrated dating violence (psychological, physical, and sexual). We also examined whether experiential avoidance was associated with dating violence after controlling for known correlates of dating violence perpetration, including age, alcohol use, and relationship satisfaction. It was hypothesized that experiential avoidance would be positively associated with dating violence. That is, greater experiential avoidance would be related to more frequent dating violence perpetration. It was also hypothesized that experiential avoidance would account for unique variance in dating violence after controlling for age, alcohol use, and relationship satisfaction.

Method

Participants

One hundred and nine undergraduate male students from a large Southeastern university in the United States participated in the current study. We included only men in the current study due to the high prevalence of dating violence among men and the negative health consequences of female dating violence victimization. The mean age of participants was 18.44 ($SD = .75$). The racial and ethnic makeup of the sample was 79.2% non-Hispanic Caucasian, 9.4% African American; 8.3% “other” (e.g., Hispanic; Indian; Multi-Racial), and 3.1% Asian American. The majority of students were freshmen at the time of the study (75.7%), followed by sophomores (18%), juniors (4.5%), and seniors (1.8%).

Procedure

All self-report measures were completed through an online survey website ([surveymonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com)) that uses encryption to protect the confidentiality of responses. Students were recruited from psychology undergraduate courses, as all students in psychology courses at the university where this study was conducted can earn course credit in return for research participation. For the current study, students were eligible to participate if they were 18 years of age or older and in a current dating relationship that had lasted at least 1 month. Students were first provided with an informed consent which they also completed online and then completed all measures of interest to the current study. After the completion of all survey items, students were provided with a referral list for local mental health and domestic violence services, and were provided with partial course credit

in their psychology course for their participation. The current study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the first authors' institution.

Measures

Demographics—A brief demographics questionnaire asked participants to indicate their age, race, relationship status, and academic year.

Dating Violence—We utilized The Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996), a 78-item measure, to assess for psychological (e.g., “threatened to hit or throw something at partner,” “insulted or swore at partner”), physical (e.g., “pushed or shoved my partner,” “slapped my partner”), and sexual (e.g., “insisted on sex when my partner did not want to,” “used force to make my partner have sex”) IPV perpetration in the past 12 months. Participants were instructed to indicate their frequency of psychological, physical, and sexual perpetration using a 7-point scale (0 = never; 6 = more than twenty times). Total scores for each form of violence were obtained by summing the midpoint for each response (e.g., a “4” for the response of “three to five times”), with scores for each item ranging from 0 to 25. This scoring procedure is consistent with the recommended scoring of the CTS2 (Straus, Hamby, & Warren, 2003). The CTS2 has demonstrated good internal consistency ranging from .79 to .95 (Straus et al., 1996), and is the most commonly used measure for assessing IPV (Vega & O’Leary, 2007). Internal consistency estimates for the current study were .75 (psychological perpetration), .92 (physical perpetration), and .75 (sexual coercion).

Experiential Avoidance—The Acceptance and Action Questionnaire, second version (AAQ-II; Bond et al., 2011) was used to measure experiential avoidance. The AAQ-II contains 7 items that assess experiential avoidance. Items examine one’s unwillingness to experience emotions and thoughts (e.g., “I am afraid of my feelings”), and the inability to be in the present moment and engage in valued behavior when unwanted emotions/thoughts are present (e.g., “my painful memories prevent me from having a fulfilling life”). Participants indicate their response to each question using a 7-point scale (1 = never true; 7 = always true). The AAQ-II was scored by summing all items, with higher scores corresponding to greater experiential avoidance. Previous research has demonstrated that the AAQ-II has good psychometric properties (Bond et al., 2011). In the current study, the internal consistency of the AAQ-II was .82.

Alcohol Use—The Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT; Saunders, Asaland, Babor, de la Fuente, & Grant, 1993) was used to examine participants’ alcohol use in the previous year. The AUDIT is comprised of 10-items that measures the frequency and intensity of alcohol use, symptoms that might indicate tolerance or dependence to alcohol, and negative consequences associated with alcohol use. A total score for the AUDIT is obtained by summing all items, with higher scores reflecting greater alcohol use/problems. When compared with other measures of alcohol use, the AUDIT has demonstrated a superior capability of identifying individuals with a likely alcohol use problem (Reinert & Allen, 2002). Previous research has demonstrated that the AUDIT has good reliability and

validity (Babor, Higgins-Biddle, Saunders, & Monteiro, 2001). In the current study, the internal consistency of the AUDIT was .84.

Relationship Satisfaction—The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988) was used to examine relationship satisfaction. The RAS is a brief, seven-item measure that includes items which inquire about how well one's partner meets one's personal needs, how well one's relationship expectations have been met, problems with the relationship, and love for one's partner. Participants were asked to rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores corresponding to greater relationship satisfaction. The RAS has previously demonstrated good internal consistency and reliability (Hendrick, 1988; Hendrick, Dicke, & Hendrick, 1998). Previous research has demonstrated that the RAS is highly correlated with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Hendrick et al., 1998). For the current study the internal consistency of the RAS was .88.

Results

All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 20. Due to minimal missing data (i.e., < 5%) we only included individuals with complete data. We first examined the prevalence of dating violence in the previous year. Results demonstrated that the prevalence of past year aggression was 60.6% for psychological aggression (59% perpetrated minor and 20.6% severe), 40.8% for sexual coercion (40% perpetrated minor and 4.9% severe), and 19.6% for physical aggression (18.6% perpetrated minor and 8.7% severe). Next, bivariate correlations among study variables were examined, which are presented in Table 1. All three forms of aggression were positively, and significantly, associated with experiential avoidance. That is, as experiential avoidance increased, aggression increased. Experiential avoidance was also positively associated with alcohol use and negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. Alcohol use was positively associated with all three forms of aggression. Physical aggression was significantly negatively associated with relationship satisfaction.

Next, we examined differences in experiential avoidance among perpetrators and non-perpetrators of each form of dating violence (psychological, physical, and sexual). Consistent with previous research (e.g., Rhatigan & Street, 2005; Shorey, Brasfield, Febres, & Stuart, 2011), for each type of perpetration, individuals who endorsed at least one act of aggression perpetration were considered perpetrators (see prevalence rates above). Results demonstrated that perpetrators of psychological aggression reported higher levels of experiential avoidance ($M = 21.15$; $SD = 7.99$) than non-perpetrators of psychological aggression ($M = 16.39$; $SD = 5.84$), $t = 3.16$, $p < .01$. Perpetrators of physical aggression did not score higher on experiential avoidance ($M = 22.25$; $SD = 7.56$) than non-perpetrators of physical aggression ($M = 18.81$; $SD = 7.46$), $t = 1.83$, $p > .05$. Finally, perpetrators of sexual aggression reported higher levels of experiential avoidance ($M = 21.92$; $SD = 7.92$) than non-perpetrators of sexual aggression ($M = 17.86$; $SD = 6.85$), $t = 2.69$, $p < .01$.

Finally, we examined whether experiential avoidance predicted unique variance in aggression perpetration after accounting for the effects of alcohol use, relationship satisfaction, and age. Age was controlled for due to previous research demonstrating younger age to be associated with dating violence among college students (e.g., Moore et al.,

2011). To examine this question we employed hierarchical multiple regression analyses, which involved two steps. In the first step we entered alcohol use, relationship satisfaction, and age into the model. In the second step we added experiential avoidance to the model. For psychological aggression (Table 2) results demonstrated that the addition of experiential avoidance accounted for significant unique variance in the prediction of aggression, with experiential avoidance being positively associated with aggression. For physical aggression (Table 2) results demonstrated that experiential avoidance was no longer significantly associated with aggression after accounting for the other predictors. Lastly, experiential avoidance was significantly positively associated with sexual coercion (Table 2) after accounting for the other predictors.

Discussion

Recent research has begun to examine risk and protective factors for dating violence perpetration that may be amenable to change in dating violence prevention programs. Specifically, recent findings have demonstrated that difficulties with emotion regulation and mindfulness deficits are associated with increased frequency of physical, psychological, and sexual dating violence perpetration among males (Gallagher et al., 2010; Shorey, Brasfield, et al., 2011). These findings have led researchers to advocate for prevention programs to consider the implementation of acceptance and mindfulness-based interventions (e.g., Shorey, Zucosky et al., 2012), although continued research is needed in this area. Thus, in an effort to expand our knowledge on acceptance and mindfulness-related constructs that may be associated with dating violence, the current study examined whether experiential avoidance was associated with dating violence perpetration (psychological, physical, and sexual) in a sample of currently dating male college students.

Findings were consistent with our first hypothesis that greater levels of experiential avoidance would be associated with a greater frequency of psychological, physical, and sexual aggression perpetration. Moreover, perpetrators of both psychological and sexual aggression reported higher levels of experiential avoidance than non-perpetrators of these forms of aggression. These findings are consistent with the scant research literature that has demonstrated a relation between experiential avoidance and physical aggression (e.g., Hayes et al., 2004; Kingston et al., 2010), and also extends previous research by demonstrating that this relation holds for three interrelated, although also distinct, forms of aggression perpetration. It is important to note that our findings should be considered preliminary until replicated and extended with larger samples. Still, our findings can be interpreted as consistent with theoretical conceptualizations of experiential avoidance (e.g., Hayes et al., 2004) and aggressive behavior (e.g., Bell & Naugle, 2008; Berkowitz, 1990; 1993) which propose that maladaptive behaviors may be engaged in as an attempt to reduce or eliminate unwanted emotions, and that aggression is often employed as a means to reduce or eliminate negative emotions. Certainly additional research will be needed to clarify the theoretical links between experiential avoidance and dating violence perpetration.

It is also notable that experiential avoidance was associated with psychological and sexual aggression perpetration after controlling for known correlates of dating violence, namely alcohol use, relationship satisfaction, and age. However, controlling for these same

correlates of dating violence did not result in a statistically significant association between experiential avoidance and physical aggression, although this was trending toward significance and may have been significant with a larger sample. These findings speak to the importance of continued research examining experiential avoidance and its relation to dating violence, particularly with psychological and sexual aggression. It is also possible, however, that experiential avoidance is associated with physical aggression, potentially through mediating mechanisms. For instance, psychological aggression is one of the best predictors of physical aggression (Baker & Stith, 2008) and often precedes episodes of physical aggression (Murphy & O'Leary, 1989), thus it is possible that psychological aggression may mediate the relation between experiential avoidance and physical aggression. Longitudinal research will be needed to examine this and further support the relation between experiential avoidance and dating violence perpetration.

Limitations

The findings of the current study should be considered in light of its limitations. The cross-sectional design of the present study precludes the determination of causality among study variables. Although this was the one of the first studies on experiential avoidance and dating violence, longitudinal research is needed to determine whether experiential avoidance predicts aggression perpetration across time. Our sample of primarily non-Hispanic Caucasian, freshmen male college students limits the generalizability of findings. Future research should examine the relation between experiential avoidance and dating violence among racially diverse populations, among women, and with forensic/clinical samples. As with all studies on sensitive topics such as aggression, social desirability may have impacted the disclosure of certain behaviors. Future research should control for social desirability in analyses. Moreover, the use of the CTS2 to examine psychological aggression, while the most commonly employed measure for this type of aggression, captures only a small range of behaviors. Future research should consider employing more comprehensive measures of psychological aggression. An additional limitation is that the CTS2 measured past dating violence and the AAQ-II measured present experiential avoidance. However, there is emerging research suggesting that experiential avoidance may be stable across time without intervention (e.g., Boelen & Reijntjes, 2008), although continued research in this area is needed. To improve upon the limitations of self-report measures it would be useful for future research to conduct multimodal assessments of both dating violence (e.g., self-report, structured interviews) and experiential avoidance. The manipulation of experiential avoidance and aggression in the laboratory may be one such approach. Finally, our sample size was small and future research with larger samples should be employed. Larger samples would also allow for the examination of the relation between experiential avoidance and more severe forms of dating violence and victimization.

Directions for Future Research

Bearing the above limitations in mind, it is clear that there are a number of avenues for future research on the relationship between experiential avoidance and dating violence perpetration. First, we believe that there is a significant need for research that examines how constructs such as experiential avoidance impact proximal risk factors for dating violence. That is, theoretical conceptualizations of intimate partner violence (IPV) have espoused that

to truly understand aggressive incidents, and therefore how to prevent violence, one must understand how distal and proximal risk and protective factors for violence interact (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Leonard, 1993). For instance, recent research has demonstrated that state negative affect increases the odds that psychological and physical dating violence perpetration will occur (Elkins et al., 2013), such that increases in negative affect immediately prior to seeing one's partner increases risk for aggression. Moreover, research shows that acute alcohol use increases the odds of dating violence perpetration, and that acute alcohol use increases these odds to a greater extent for individuals who are also high, relative to low, in antisociality (Moore et al., 2011). It is possible that experiential avoidance may impact proximal risk factors for dating violence, such as serving to moderate these relations. Thus, future research would benefit from examining how experiential avoidance impacts the proximal relationship between risk factors for dating violence.

There is also a need for longitudinal research on the relation between experiential avoidance and dating violence, as well as the relative importance of experiential avoidance in predicting dating violence above and beyond other, related constructs (e.g., emotion regulation; distress tolerance). Knowing whether experiential avoidance predicts risk for dating violence over time would provide researchers and clinicians with additional information regarding the importance of targeting experiential avoidance in prevention programs (discussed in more detail below). Moreover, research that examines experiential avoidance, emotion regulation, and mindfulness simultaneously, constructs that share similar features but are also believed to be distinct (Kashdan et al., 2006; Mitmansgruber, Beck, Hofer, & Schussler, 2009), will be important. As discussed previously, emotion regulation and mindfulness have been shown to be related to male dating violence perpetration (Gallagher et al., 2010; Shorey, Brasfield et al., 2011), and future research should determine whether there are distinct characteristics of each of these constructs that are associated with dating violence or whether it is the shared characteristics that are related to violence. Multimethod approaches that emphasize process level interactions among constructs should also be conducted on the relationship between experiential avoidance and dating violence perpetration.

Another area for future research is to determine whether interventions designed to target experiential avoidance helps to reduce dating violence. To date, dating violence prevention programs for college students have been largely unsuccessful in reducing aggressive behavior (see Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007 for a review of this topic). This is likely due to programs failing to provide participants with specific skills (e.g., coping skills; emotion regulation skills) that are needed for lasting improvement, focusing instead on changing beliefs and attitudes toward dating violence (i.e., reducing acceptance of aggression as a conflict-resolution tactic). Thus, in response to this lack of success in reducing dating violence, researchers have called for prevention programs to shift their focus to increasing adaptive behavioral repertoires that could potentially lead to lasting change in aggressive behavior (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; O'Leary et al., 2006; Shorey, Zucosky et al., 2012). It is possible, then, that a focus on experiential avoidance could help to improve violence outcomes, as research suggests experiential avoidance is amenable to change (e.g., Berking, Neacsiu, Comtois, & Linehan, 2009).

Conclusions

In summary, the current study is one of the first known empirical investigations of the relationship between experiential avoidance and dating violence perpetration. Results demonstrated that experiential avoidance was significantly associated with psychological, physical, and sexual aggression, and that experiential avoidance was still significantly associated with psychological and sexual aggression after controlling for alcohol use, relationship satisfaction, and age. These findings highlight the importance of research continuing to examine risk and protective factors for dating violence, particularly factors that may be amenable to change in prevention and intervention programs. It will be important for future research to replicate and extend our findings with larger samples.

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- There is minimal research on experiential avoidance and aggression
- Findings from this study showed experiential avoidance to be associated with male dating violence perpetration
- New and innovative dating violence prevention programs are needed that include experiential avoidance as a target of intervention

Table 1

Correlations, means, and standard deviations among study variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Psychological Aggression	---	.42***	.63***	.42***	.43***	-.11	.05
2. Physical Aggression		---	.56***	.24*	.19*	-.25*	.01
3. Sexual Coercion			---	.36***	.41***	-.11	-.02
4. Experiential Avoidance				---	.25**	-.20*	.12
5. Alcohol Use					---	.04	.05
6. Relationship Satisfaction						---	.07
7. Age							---
<i>M</i>	9.37	4.48	4.67	19.53	6.64	29.00	18.44
<i>SD</i>	17.25	18.24	11.67	7.49	6.58	5.12	.75
<i>Range</i>	0-81	0-109	0-74	7-40	0-24	11-35	18-22

Note. Means and standard deviations for aggression were calculated using raw data and presented here for clarity.

* $p < .05$,

** $p < .01$,

*** $p < .001$

Table 2
Multiple Regression Analyses Examining Experiential Avoidance as a Predictor of Dating Violence Perpetration

	B	SE	β	R ²	F
Psychological Aggression					
Model 1				.44	7.42***
Age	.05	.17	.03		
AUDIT	.09	.02	.43***		
RAS	-.03	.03	-.11		
Model 2				.54 (R ² = .10)	9.22***
Age	.14	.17	.07		
AUDIT	.07	.02	.34***		
RAS	-.03	.02	-.04		
AAQ-III	-.06	.02	-.33***		
Physical Aggression					
Model 1				.30	3.20*
Age	.05	.13	.04		
AUDIT	.03	.01	.19*		
RAS	-.04	.02	-.23*		
Model 2				.35 (R ² = .05)	3.23*
Age	.08	.13	.06		
AUDIT	.02	.01	.14		
RAS	-.04	.02	-.19*		
AAQ-III	-.02	.01	.18		
Sexual Coercion					
Model 1				.41	6.58***
Age	-.08	.15	-.05		

AUDIT	.07	.02	.41 ^{***}	
RAS	-.02	.02	-.09	
Model 2				.48 (R ² = .07) 7.12 ^{***}
Age	-.03	.14	-.02	
AUDIT	.06	.02	.34 ^{**}	
RAS	-.01	.02	-.04	
AAQ-III	-.04	.01	.26 ^{**}	

Note. AUDIT = Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test; RAS = Relationship Assessment Scale; AAQ-II = Acceptance and Action Questionnaire, second version.

* $p < .05$,

** $p < .01$,

*** $p < .001$