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Ashanti E. Anderson is a Psychology major with a minor in Business Administration from Mobile, AL. After graduation in May 2016, Anderson plans to earn a Ph.D. in a Psychology field. Anderson's research interests include subjects from historical anthropology to neuropsychology. Within any area, she is interested in how people think and react to various situations. Her research began in an Advanced Research course when she chose to look into students' perceptions of real-world events.

College Students' Perceptions of Various Types of Domestic Violence

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Abstract

Past research revealed that physical domestic violence is typically perceived as much more abusive than non-physical forms of violence. This study explored college students' perceptions of various forms of domestic violence. Thirty Xavier University of Louisiana students defined domestic violence in the subject's own words and then rated perceived abusiveness in vignettes describing physical, social, and emotional abuse perpetrated by both males and females. Results revealed significant differences in perception depending on the type of abuse. Physical abuse was perceived to be significantly more abusive than either non-physical form of domestic violence, and social abuse was perceived to be significantly less abusive than both emotional abuse and physical abuse. There was no significant difference in perception across the perpetrator's sex, and there was no significant interaction between perpetrator sex and abuse type. Furthermore, answers to the open-ended questions corresponded with vignette ratings. Implications for domestic violence awareness are discussed, particularly with regards to existing public health literature .

Key Terms:

- Domestic Violence
- Non-Physical Abuse
- Social Abuse
- Emotional Abuse
- Psychological Abuse

Domestic violence is harm inflicted upon one member of an intimate relationship by the other (Dennison & Thompson, 2011). Although the Merriam-Webster's (n.d.) definition of violence is "an exertion of *physical* force so as to injure or abuse," it should be noted that domestic violence engulfs all types of harm, both physical and non-physical (Carretta, 2008). Perhaps the exclusivity of the definition is a partial explanation for the lack of recognized severity of non-physical forms of intimate partner abuse. However, the term "domestic violence" will be used throughout this article and is intended to include both physical and non-physical forms of abuse.

Non-physical domestic violence, also known as "psychological abuse," is described as a non-physical action that is maliciously used by a perpetrator to inflict harm on a victim (Rogers & Follingstad, 2011). However, the term "psychological abuse" is extremely broad; both males and females experience and execute various forms of non-physical abuse ranging from manipulation tactics to domination techniques (Rogers & Follingstad, 2011). To better understand psychological abuse, researchers investigate the subcategories within psychological abuse: emotional and social abuse. Emotional abuse consists of comments and actions that undermine the victim's sense of worth and self-respect, such as accusations, public embarrassment, or name-calling (Outlaw, 2009). Social abuse generally involves an imposed isolation from friends and/or family, which can be done by persuasion, force, or threat (Outlaw, 2009).

The prevalence, danger, and adverse effects of physical domestic violence are widely recognized. An estimated 45 million men and women have experienced physical intimate partner violence in their lifetime, and approximately one out of every three victims have been physically abused over fifty times (Breiding, Chen, & Black, 2014). In addition to its obvious bodily consequences, physical abuse is linked to several psychiatric disorders. Nearly one-third of women and one-tenth of men report an impact of physical abuse on psychological well-being, particularly an increase in anxiety (Black et al., 2011). In Great Britain, 52% of PTSD symptoms and 32% of psychotic symptoms reported in 2007 are believed to be attributed to domestic violence (as cited in Riecher-Rössler & García-Moreno, 2013). Other psychiatric diagnoses that may occur simultaneously with physical domestic violence include mood disorders, substance abuse, sexual dysfunction, anxiety, and personality disorders (Carretta, 2008). However, literature varies in regards to whether mental disorders are either a result of or simply correlated with physical abuse (Riecher-Rössler & García-Moreno, 2013; Howard et al., 2010; Carretta, 2008; Ehrensaft, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2006).

Non-physical abuse seems to receive little recognition in society compared to its physical counterpart, despite evidence that non-physical abuse is both prevalent and injurious. Three-fourths of college female students report experiencing psychological abuse, and victims were shown to be more likely to consider or attempt suicide (Lamis, Malone, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010). In multiple aspects, psychological abuse is arguably more detrimental than physical abuse. Major depression is over six times more likely after experiencing emotional abuse than physical abuse. Furthermore, psychological abuse may predict future physical abuse, and most women who experienced both types of abuse report that emotional abuse has the more negative impact (as cited in O'Leary, 1999). Due to society's emphasis on physical domestic violence, data regarding the prevalence and impact of psychological abuse inflicted by an intimate partner is limited, and thus direct quantitative comparisons cannot be made of the two types of abuse.

Current literature suggests that the danger of psychological abuse is especially overlooked in minority communities. European American women recognize that abuse can be non-physical in nature, whereas American Indian women typically only label physical harm as abusive (Tehee & Esqueda, 2007). Conversely, African American women may deny the seriousness of domestic violence altogether (Bent-Goodley, 2004). This may be due to a perceived need to protect oneself or the African American community as a whole, though the rate of domestic violence amongst African Americans is not drastically different from other ethnic groups after accounting for sociodemographic factors (as cited in Bent-Goodley, 2004). However, it is also possible that minority women generally have an inaccurate definition of what constitutes abuse, and these perceptions may in turn affect whether the necessary assistance or refuge is sought (Barnes, 2001).

Perhaps the most significant indicator that psychological abuse is not a recognized form of domestic violence is the study conducted by Nabors, Dietz, & Jasinski (2006) in which college students were given a situation and asked whether they agreed that the situation was an act of domestic violence. While 97% agreed that a husband punching his wife was abusive, only 46% considered a man following a woman a form of abuse, and a mere 29% felt that a husband insulting his wife by calling her a "stupid slob" was abusive. In general, physical abuse is seen as the most abusive, followed by social abuse, and emotional abuse is seen as least abusive.

Perceptions of domestic violence are not only skewed in regards to the type of abuse, but also in regards to the perpetrator of the abuse. Though women are just as likely as men to be domestically violent, reactions to male abusers are typically more negative than reactions towards violent females (Dennison & Thompson, 2011; Feather, 1996). However, it should be noted that past research has shown that college students seem to display less gender bias when judging whether acts committed by either sex constitute domestic abuse. While a higher percentage of college students considered the male's offense to be a type of domestic violence, this percentage usually only differed by no greater than five percent (Nabors et al., 2006).

In the current study, emotional, social, and physical abuse were compared in an effort to examine which types of domestic violence college students recognize as being forms of abuse. Additionally, the effect of perpetrator sex was examined. Based on previous data, two hypotheses were made in the current study: (1) acts of physical abuse would be perceived to be significantly more abusive than either form of psychological abuse, and (2) social abuse would be perceived as significantly more abusive than emotional abuse. Because abuse was not found to differ across perpetrator sex previously in college populations, it was expected that abuse ratings would not differ across perpetrator sex in this study.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 30 Xavier University of Louisiana students (8 male, 22 female). This sample was recruited via convenient sampling from advertisements posted in the Department of Psychology, and all participants signed informed consent prior to participating in the study. Participants currently enrolled in a psychology course at the university were eligible for extra credit for his or her participation (decision made by instructor). The average age of the participants was 20.2 years (*sd* = 2.52). The majority of participants identified themselves as African American (76.7%), but Caucasians, Hispanics, Asians, and mixed-race participants were all present in this sample (3.3%, 10%, 6.7%, and 3.3%, respectively).

Materials

Vignettes. A variety of vignettes, brief written descriptions of fictional occasions, were used to depict various types of intimate partner violence. These hypothetical scenarios were collected from previous studies and slightly modified to fit the purpose of this experiment. Vignettes depicting social and emotional abuse, along with their instructions and questions following each vignette, were used previously (DeHart, Follingstad, & Fields, 2010). Likewise, scenarios depicting physical abuse have also been used in a previous study (Dennison & Thompson, 2011; Blasko, Winek, & Bieschke, 2007). Any sentence in a vignette that described perpetrator/victim thought or past abuse history was removed in order to investigate the perception of abuse in individual instances rather than perception of behavioral patterns. The vignettes were presented as follows:

> Tabitha and Bobby are in their early 20s and have been in a relationship for about a year. They have been reasonably happy and spend almost all of their free time together at Tabitha's apartment. Tabitha has always had a group of friends with whom she spent much time and who always felt very comfortable about dropping in on each other. For the past six months, Bobby has told Tabitha that he did not want her socializing with them unless he was present.

> Amanda and Joey are in their early 20s and have been in a relationship for about a year. After dating for 2 months, they decided to date each other exclusively and they see each other frequently. In the last couple of months, Joey has started following Amanda to check and see that she actually went where she said she was going. He has also shown up unexpectedly at her place of work and when she went

out with her female friends "to check on her."

> Katrina and Brian are in their early 20s and have been in a relationship for about a year. They have spent quite a bit of time together over the year and both seem invested in the relationship. While they tend to have the usual conflicts couples have, lately Brian has been calling Katrina a "bitch" and a "whore" almost every time they argue. A few days ago in an argument, he did it again.

> Scott and Marcia are in their early 20s and have been in a relationship for about a year. They have been reasonably happy together. Last week, during a heated argument, Marcia pointed out some small personal flaws of Scott's. He became very angry and said that if she ever did that again, he'd "make her pay." Scott said that he would "punch her lights out" if she ever treated him like that again.

> Robert and Jenny have been married for 1 year. Jenny usually gets home from work around 6 p.m. but this evening, she does not arrive home until 11 p.m. Robert is furious that Jenny didn't call to say that she would be home late and has been wondering where she is. He called her office phone but she did not answer. When Jenny walks in the door at home, Robert tells her how upset he is. Jenny says that she has been in a meeting that ran late and she didn't have a handy phone to call him. He says that she is taking the marriage for granted and not respecting him. With that, he picks up her dinner that he has been keeping warm and throws the plate at Jenny. The plate hits her on the side of the head and cuts her above the ear. The food flies all over her. Blood runs down the side of her head and neck.

Mike and Mary have been married for 1 year. Mary arrived home late from work, turned on the TV, and then made some phone calls. Approximately 10 minutes later, her partner, Mike, arrived home from work and became angry because Mary was on the phone. Mike yelled that he had things to do and that Mary should make sure she gets home on time. Mary then went into the kitchen to prepare dinner. Mike followed her, grabbed her by the arm, slapped her, and knocked her to the floor. Mary gets up and pushes Mike. Mike leaves the house.

To study the effect of gender on domestic violence perception, different versions of the vignettes were created with the same events, but the names of the perpetrator and victim were switched. Responses to the question concerning the vignettes, "How abusive were _____'s actions towards _____?" were measured on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 representing "not abusive at all" and 7 representing "extremely abusive."

Open-Ended Questions. Two open-ended questions used in previous studies (Tehee & Esqueda, 2007) were also used during this study: "What is domestic violence?" and "What actions would you consider a part of domestic violence?"
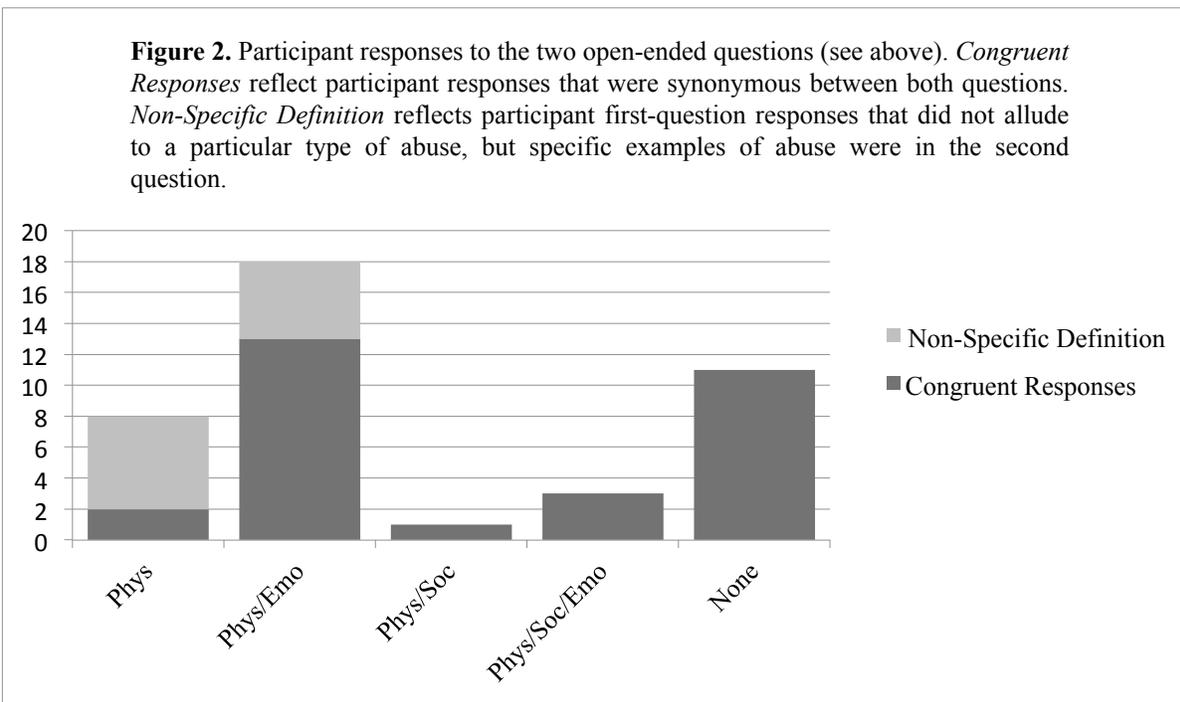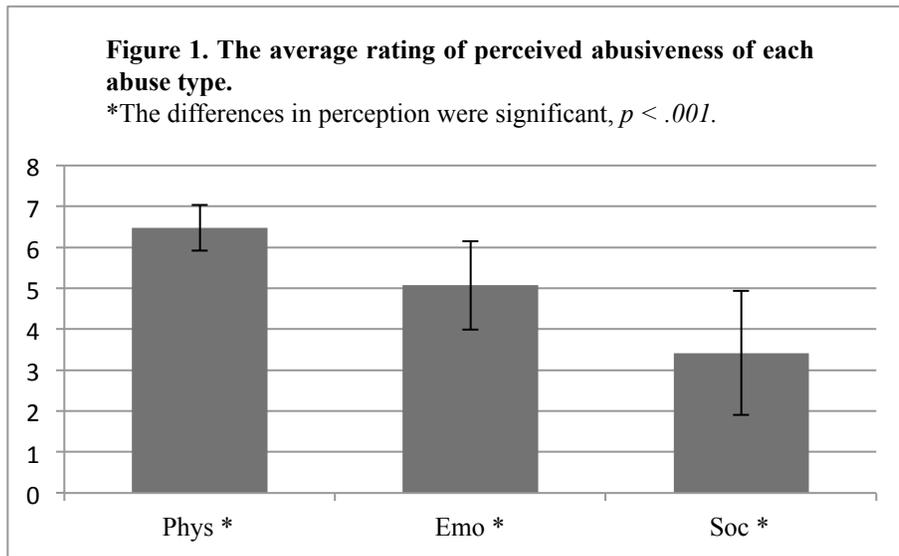
Procedures

Prior to conducting the experiment, participants were briefed on the purpose of the study and informed of their right to cease participation in the study at any time. Once consent had been given, each participant was given a demographics questionnaire, the two open-ended questions, and a packet of six randomly selected and ordered vignettes. All participants read about each type of abuse twice, with one vignette depicting a male perpetrator and the other, a female. Each participant was allowed to complete the study at his or her own pace and

submit the collection of vignettes as soon as he or she was finished. Participants were free to leave the examination room once they concluded the study.

Results

A 3 (abuse type) x 2 (perpetrator sex) repeated measures ANOVA was calculated comparing the perception of social, emotional, and physical abuse with both male and female perpetrators and examining the simple effects and interactions of abuse type and perpetrator sex. The simple effect for perpetrator sex was not significant ($F(1, 20) = 2.21$, $p > .05$), though male-perpetrated violence was perceived as slightly more abusive ($m = 5.11$, $sd = .75$) than female-perpetrated violence ($m = 4.87$, $sd = 1.05$). A significant effect was found for the type of abuse ($F(2, 58) = 73.86$, $p < .001$), and Tukey's HSD revealed that physical abuse was perceived to be the most abusive ($m = 6.48$, $sd = .56$), and significantly greater than perceptions of emotional abuse ($m = 5.07$, $sd = 1.08$, $p < .001$) and social abuse ($m = 3.42$, $sd = 1.52$, $p < .001$). Perceived emotional abuse was also significantly greater than social abuse ($p < .001$). The interaction between abuse type and perpetrator gender was not significant ($F(2, 58) = .710$, $p > .05$).

In response to the open-ended questions asking participants to define domestic violence, 56.6% of participants define domestic violence as both physical and non-physical and 6.7% of participants define domestic violence as purely physical. However, it should be noted that 36.7% of participants did not specify a particular type of domestic violence when defining; when asked what actions constituted domestic violence, it was shown that the previous non-specific participants either viewed domestic violence as physical (20%) or both physical and non-physical (16.7%). Figure 2 displays the distribution of definitions and actions considered abusive across each type of abuse.

Figure 1. The average rating of perceived abusiveness of each abuse type.
The differences in perception were significant, $p < .001$.

Figure 2. Participant responses to the two open-ended questions (see above). *Congruent Responses* reflect participant responses that were synonymous between both questions. *Non-Specific Definition* reflects participant first-question responses that did not allude to a particular type of abuse, but specific examples of abuse were in the second question.

Discussion

The goal of the current study was to examine whether college students' perceptions of domestic violence were skewed in regards to a particular type of abuse or perpetrator sex. In the current study, male-perpetrated abuse was considered more severe than female-perpetrated abuse (though not statistically significantly different). These findings concur with past research concerning college students' perceptions of domestic violence (Nabors et al., 2006). While literature conducted prior to the 21st century reported significant differences in domestic violence perceptions dependent upon perpetrator sex (Feather, 1996), more recent studies show a

minimal influence of sex on perception, including the current data (DeHart et al., 2010; Nabors et al., 2006).

However, past findings also reported that social abuse was perceived by college students to be significantly more abusive than emotional abuse (Nabors, et al., 2006). The current study revealed a significant difference in the opposite direction, with emotional abuse being perceived as more abusive than social abuse. Responses to the open-ended questions in the study corresponded with these findings, as it was common for participants to mention examples of emotional and physical abuse while excluding social abuse from their definitions and examples of domestic abuse.

The current study used a convenient sample rather than a truly representative sample of the national college student demographic and must be cautious about the generalization of results. However, the current study may provide implications for African-American college students, who comprised over three-fourths of the present sample. A possible explanation as to why social abuse is perceived as the least abusive form of domestic violence is African Americans' high regard for privacy and secrecy (Briggs, Briggs, Miller, & Paulson, 2011). In a community where privacy is so highly prioritized, imposing restrictive regulations on an intimate partner may even be considered acceptable, given the circumstances.

The current study provided interesting information regarding the current state of domestic violence perceptions, particularly considering African American college students. College students seem to recognize that abuse is not contingent upon the sex of the perpetrator, and that abuse can be either physical or non-physical. However, there seems to be a lack of knowledge concerning the actual depth of domestic violence and all of the actions that comprise the dangerous circumstance. The perceptions of domestic

violence in this study are strikingly similar to information presented on pamphlets aimed at educating individuals about domestic violence. Domestic violence fact sheets contain prevalent data regarding the victimization of both males and females (Black et al., 2011; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2012). However, these informational materials usually provide inaccurate definitions of domestic violence; for example, a factsheet published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2012 listed that intimate partner violence (domestic violence) consisted of four classes of behavior: physical violence, sexual violence, threats, and emotional abuse (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2012). Though socially abusive behaviors are included under the title "emotional" abuse, the notion that social abuse does not deserve its own classification speaks to the inequality of perceived harmfulness of various types of domestic violence. Placing emotional and social abuse in the same category of domestic violence is similar to placing physical abuse and sexual abuse in the same category; though possibly sufficient, failing to separate the two indicates that the latter is only important due to its relation to the former. Furthermore, placing "emotional abuse" as the header of a category and socially abusive behavior in its description requires individuals to thoroughly read the factsheet, which may not be done if an individual has assumed that he or she already knows the definition of "emotional abuse." Therefore, if the difference in perceived harmfulness of various types of domestic violence is due to insufficient knowledge, which was not the focus of the present study, the sources of this information must be evaluated.

The strength of empirical psychological research in this field is its ability to procure a more thorough description and examination of the multiple facets of non-physical abuse, as well as the relationship between abuse and mental illness. Comparatively, the strength of organizations such as Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and

World Health Organization is the ability to obtain wide-scale epidemiological data. However, such organizations do not typically refer to outside sources for information, thus resulting in a delayed report of findings and theories associated with the actual concept of domestic violence. As such, individuals may receive inaccurate or improperly presented information, which may in turn affect treatment-seeking behavior for oneself and others.

The current study is not without limitations. The first open-ended question, while successfully non-leading, lacked enough specificity to garner an appropriate response from each participant. However, allowing the second open-ended question to serve as a follow-up to the first distributed the initially non-specified responses (see Figure 1). Also, it is important to use caution when interpreting and comparing the findings of this study, as the sample obtained is not generalizable among all college populations.

The goal of any program or material aimed at creating or increasing awareness of an issue is to encourage individuals to share that knowledge and become advocates. However, one cannot expect an increase in the number of individuals who begin to seek an end to their own victimization or encourage others to do so until a more inclusive definition is more widely recognized. This is especially pertinent to the African American community, where social exclusion may be permitted in a relationship and thus not viewed as psychologically detrimental. Domestic violence prevalence is relatively even across ethnic groups after controlling for various factors (as cited in Bent-Goodley, 2004). Therefore, there is no plausible excuse as to why treatment-seeking and perceptions should not be equal as well.

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