

Dating violence and substance use: victimization, aggression and gender

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Abstract

Research has revealed an association between substance abuse and dating violence. However, the role that substance use/dependence has in patterns of aggression and victimization has generated some controversy. In this theoretical work, we will review the literature on the link between substance abuse and this kind of violent behavior in order to examine the extent to which substance use may relate to violence in intimate juvenile relationships. We will also analyze the theoretical models about this connection and the factors that might mediate it. In conclusion, we will try to delineate some interventional principles and some suggestions for future research in this area.

Keywords: dating violence, gender, substance abuse

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Dating violence is a widely proven social problem. An extensive analysis (Caridade, 2011) of national and international scientific findings on the subject revealed an increase in studies especially in the last two decades. The pioneering study regarding the prevalence of this phenomenon was conducted by Makepeace in 1981, in the U.S. and revealed that one in five college students were affected by this type of abuse. In this study, 61% of the sample said that knew someone with abusive intimate experiences. Since then, the study of dating violence gradually assumed a prominent place in the international scientific literature, particularly in the U.S. - geographical context where there is a substantial part of the research in this scientific domain. However, some authors argue, that the scientific community of Canada and UK also had an important contribution in the development of studies about this problem (cf. Jackson, 1999).

One of the largest international studies in this area - International Dating Violence Study - coordinated by Straus (2004) which involved 31 universities from 16 countries found that indicators of physical violence in juvenile intimate relationships may be between 17% and 45% in the last 12 months.

The studies developed in Portugal (e.g., Machado, Caridade, & Martins, 2010; Machado, Matos, & Moreira, 2003; Paiva & Figueiredo, 2004) also confirmed the data from international research (e.g., Cleveland, Herrera, & Stuewig, 2003; Straus, 2004). This research showed the occurrence of this type of violence among the younger age groups and different educational contexts. The results suggested the existence of significant indicators of victimization (25%) and assault (30%; Machado et al., 2010) as well as the legitimating discourses for this kind of violence (Caridade, 2011).

Although the first studies in this area (e.g., Makepeace, 1981) resulted in high indicators of female victimization and male aggression, subsequent studies (in the

1990's; e.g., Perry & Mary Fromuth, 2005; Straus, 2004) supported similar levels of victimization among males and females. These studies also indicated that males and females may suffer intimate abuse and this extended to homosexual relationships (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2004). Recent studies developed in Portugal (Caridade, 2011) and internationally (e.g., Windle & Mrug, 2009) found more ambiguous results regarding gender compared to previous research. For example, males may experience higher levels of victimization and there are studies (e.g., Machado et al., 2010) where females admitted to the use of violence.

Research in this field has revealed robust associations between the consumption of certain substances, such as alcohol, and the dating violence phenomenon (e.g., Rothman, Reyes, Johnson, & LaValley, 2012). Substance use increased the risks for externalizing dangerous and violent behaviors and can also lead to traumatic consequences (Bender, Thompson, Ferguson, Komlo, Taylor, & Yoder, 2012). As we know, those addicted to drugs tended to externalize violent behaviors and even commit criminal actions (Monagham, 2012; Nunes, 2011). Therefore, research must begin to look at the person addicted to drugs not only as a possible offender but also as a victim. Similarly, if substance consumption affects the violent dating behavior, the reverse has also been suggested. So, victimization and/or aggression within a relational context may lead to substance abuse as a way to deal with the negative emotions associated with violence and relational problems (Stappenbeck & Fromme, 2010).

Thus, this article aims to review the scientific evidence regarding the link between substance abuse and the dating violence phenomenon. We will try to examine the extent to which drug use may determine the occurrence of dating violence; we will also analyze the theoretical models that explain this link, as well as the factors that may

mediate the problem of drug abuse and dating violence. Finally, we will outline some interventional strategies, as well as some suggestions for future research in this area.

Dating violence and substance abuse link: scientific evidence

The link between dating violence and substance use (e.g., alcohol, drugs) has been widely demonstrated in research (e.g., Buzy, Jouriles, Swank, Rosenfield, Shimek, & Corbitt-Shindler, 2004; O'Keefe, 1997; Shorey, Stuart, & Cornelius, 2011).

In fact, and although there are studies (e.g., O'Keefe, Brockopp, & Chew, 1986) that showed the association between the consumption of alcohol/illegal drugs and intimate abuse, the results of those researches did not seem very consistent when considering gender. Thus, there appeared to be some controversy about the role that could be played in the consumption patterns of aggression and victimization, both male and female, that can reveal different results: i) studies have begun to highlighted the association between substance use and male aggression (e.g., Foo & Margolin, 1995; Luthra & Gidycz, 2006; Testa, Livingston, & Leonard, 2003; Tontodonato & Crew, 1992); ii) in turn, other studies (e.g., Baker & Stith, 2008; Busy et al., 2004; Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997) argue that substance use by females predicted a greater vulnerability to victimization; iii) others (e.g., Hines & Straus, 2007; Shorey et al., 2011) argue that substance use may predict aggression and victimization, both male and female; iv) finally, there are studies showing that the consumption of substances are also associated with male victimization (e.g., Foshee, Benefield, Ennett, Bauman, & Schindran, 2004). Therefore, to illustrate this diversity of results, we highlight the longitudinal study developed by Roberts and Klein, (2003). That scientific analysis found that the use of substances was more strongly associated with female victimization. In turn, Foshee and colleagues (2004) found that substance use was often associated with male victimization, but not for female. Another longitudinal study

developed by Foshee and colleagues (2001) demonstrated that excessive alcohol consumption by adolescents at an early age (18 years) carried the risk of adopting violent behavior in intimacy.

Despite the general difference on the results obtained by the research in this field, empirical studies suggest that alcohol is a major risk factor for experiencing of intimate violence, especially for women (cf. Buzy et al., 2004). For this reason we analyzed some of these studies, in order to know better how the influence of alcohol in the victim's behavior has been explained. Thus, Malik and colleagues (1997) attributed the greater vulnerability of females to the fact that the use of substances was able to promote less self-protective behaviors and thus to be less engaged in situations leading to the risk of victimization. Other authors focused on the physical and cognitive consequences associated with alcohol consumption. At the top of the explanations (e.g., Norris, Nurius, & Dimeff, 1996), the consumption of alcohol adversely affected the trials, the risk perception and motor skills of people. In this sense, the typically smaller female was less able to provide physical resistance in potentially threatening situations making her more vulnerable to victimization (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987). In fact, this last idea converged with the previous three supporting the psychopharmacological effects of the substances. Other researchers (e.g., Testa et al., 2003) further argued that the use of substances, for both genders, can trigger an increase in irritability and volatility in social interactions which makes it difficult to adaptively resolve conflicts thus triggering violence. Most of the studies mentioned so far address the issue of consumption from the perspective of aggression or victimization which occurred under the influence of intoxication. However, other authors have studied the more general role of drinking patterns on intimate aggression, beyond the period of intoxication. Buzy et al. (2004) developed a longitudinal study that found alcohol consumption in general

(and not specifically intoxication at the time of the assault) by adolescents increased their risk of victimization, greater than the risk from the effects of situational alcohol use, relational and demographic variables, and drug use. These results allowed us not only to corroborate the influence of alcohol consumption on dating violence, but also suggested that the mechanisms by which alcohol increases the risk of victimization exceed those suggested by theories that support the argument of victimization-intoxication. The authors also considered that females who consume more alcohol are more likely to engage in risky situations, to be associated with aggressive boys, or have partners who also consume.

Furthermore, the way the society is structured may also contribute to the greater vulnerability of women, face to a social order that is founded and simultaneously reinforces the "domination" male (Bourdieu, 2001), which is also present in drug dependent people. Social factors are not missing in the population of those who are addicted to drugs. Indeed, this may even be one of the factors that lead to the under-representation of women in treatment programs for drug addiction. This discrepancy between the number of women (much lower) and men attending treatment centers occurs in Portugal and in other European countries (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2006). This situation is not only due to the large number of male consumers. In fact, the drug can lead to the practice of prostitution (Silveira & Pádua, 2008), which happens with the population of predominantly females addicted to drugs. This not only exposes females to more victimization situations, but also leads to remaining in the streets longer without resorting to treatment institutions. On the other hand, it is very common that certain females addicted to drugs prostitute themselves to buy drugs for them and for their mate.

In addition to what was said previously, according to Oliveira and Manita (2002), the risk of victimization and violence exposure rises dramatically among women in both situations: drug addiction and prostitution. On the other hand, according to the same authors, the stigma associated with those addicted to drugs, in the case of women, is strongly related to the prostitution practice. Now, we can deduce that, somehow, there is a double stigma which weakens, furthermore, the female addicted to drugs to victimization, particularly in the context of an intimate relationship.

More specifically, research has also shown that alcohol consumption is associated with more severe sexual assaults and it is more likely that these aggressions result in violation (e.g., Abbey, Clinton-Sherrod, McAuslan, Zawacki, Clinton, & Buck, 2003; Abbey, Ross, McDuffie, & McAuslan, 1996). The studies developed from reports for both males (Ullman, Karabatsos, & Koss, 1999a) and females (Ullman, Karabatsos, & Koss, 1999b) demonstrated that the use of alcohol has a direct and indirect role in the consequences of sexual assault. Thus, in a study conducted with a sample of males (Ullman et al., 1999a), alcohol consumption by the victim before the incident of abuse contributed directly and indirectly to the severity of sexual assault, and alcohol use by males also contributed to the consequences of the assault (sexual assault harsher). In the study with females (Ullman et al., 1999b), the consumption of alcohol by the victim and the offender, before the abuse experience, contributed directly and indirectly to the severity of sexual victimization, while alcoholic behavior by females also influenced, but on a smaller scale, the consequences of sexual assault. However, the consumption of alcohol by both victim and offender before the abuse differed in predicting the outcome of victimization: the alcohol used by the offender became associated with more aggression and more severe sexual victimization; in turn, offenders became less aggressive towards victims who consumed alcohol, as in these cases, the strength was

not required for the practice of sexual offence. Moreover, the victims in these circumstances tended to blame themselves for what happened and there was less accountability for the perpetrator's behavior (Ullman et al., 1999a).

The relationship between alcohol and sexual assault has been understood in a multifaceted way in that the alcohol can be both a precipitant such as an inhibitor of human sexual aggressive behavior. In order to clarify the relationship between alcohol-violence, researchers have developed a set of theories, specifically the model "disinhibitor" social control. There are different ways in which the effects of alcohol may determine sexual assault, specifically by developing beliefs about the effects of alcohol disinhibition; alcohol consumption can be associated with more lenient regulations in social behavior and, lastly, when alcohol consumption is difficult, information processing is inhibited, what gives clues about distress and non-consent by females (cf. Gross, Bennett, Sloan, Marx, & Juergens, 2001). The relationship between alcohol and sexual violence may result from several factors, especially expectations about their effects, distorted perceptions about the intent/sexual desire, the legitimacy of inappropriate behavior and stereotypes associated with female consumption (Abbey, 1991).

The construction of different studies has been used to explain the phenomenon of the relationship between substance use and violent practices specifically in intimate relationships.

Theoretical models about the link between substance abuse and violence in intimate relationships

The link between substance abuse and violence in intimate relationships has peculiarities that require looking at the aggressor and at the victim. However the explanations have focused on the pattern of aggression, rather than on the pattern of

victimization, although it is known that drug consumption increases the occurrence of these situations (e.g., Howard & Wang, 2003a, 2003b). However, it is important to say that it is also known that the use/abuse of drugs may potentiate victimization experiences (Harrison, Fulkerson, & Beebe, 1997; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Yoder, 2001). In addition to this association between consumption of substances and victimization, it should be referred that the link between problematic consumption of drugs and criminal behavior has been studied, but the possible association between those drugs consumption and victimization situations has not been so explored (Harrison, Fulkerson, & Beebe, 1997; Whitbeck, Hoyt, & Yoder, 2001).

According Chalub and Miguel Telles Lisieux (2006), there are criminal occurrences in which we can identify the drug consumption in the victim and/or in the offender. According to Larry Bennett and Patricia Bland (2008), there are those (e.g., Hines, Armstrong, Reed, & Cameron, 2012) who believe that drug abuse is the factor primarily involved in violence in an intimate relational context. Thus, we should pay attention to the different theoretical models that seek to explain the link between drug use and dating violence. These models are: i) the chronic effects model; ii) the indirect effects model; iii) the false effects model; iv) and the proximal effects model (Shorey et al., 2011).

Some models were emerging from different studies and perspectives (Bembo et al., 1987) concerning the effect of drugs on human behavior. Although these models cannot be attributed to a single author contribution, the truth is that they are conceptualizations that help to clarify the phenomenon. The chronic effects model suggests that the person addicted to drugs has a pattern of drug consumption that has become chronic. So, he or she eventually changes his or her neuropsychological

functioning and develops pathological problems, sleep disorders and nutritional deficiencies that can contribute to the adoption of violent actions (Rothman et al. 2012).

Another perspective, the indirect effects model, does not follow the thought based on the psychopharmacological effects of drugs but, as explained by Shorey and colleagues (2011), argues that substance use/abuse is a behavior that produces a "corrosive" and highly damaging relationship, with consequent wear on the quality of those relations, and over time, drug use eventually leads to a climate of conflict between the couple that may even lead to aggression. In fact, drug use has other effects, more directly, on the phenomenon of violence in an intimate relational context. In truth, drug addiction triggers a degradation of the relationship, but also leads to other problems between couples. That is precisely why the model of indirect effects is insufficient for explaining the aggressive practices in this type of relationship.

The model of false effects points to the action of drug consumption on aggressive behavior in intimate relationships as mediated by other variables that turn out to be related to both behaviors: substance use and violence. Among these variables or dimensions, we can give a few examples including certain personality traits (e.g., impulsivity, hostility), distorted beliefs about the management of close relationships (e.g., asymmetry of power), and even the socio-economic situation. Nevertheless, and according to authors like Klosterman and Fals-Stewart (2006), substance abuse has the power to affect intimate relationships even after having carefully controlled for these other variables that will underpin both kinds of behaviors. Therefore, and similarly to the model of indirect effects, this explanatory model is insufficient (Shorey et al., 2011).

Regarding the proximal effects model, also called the acute effects model (Rothman et al. 2012), the main argument is also related to the psychopharmacological effects of substances. According to this perspective, there is a cognitive functioning

reduction in the person who uses drugs, as well as an increased impulsivity which mediates the aggressive behaviors (Shorey et al., 2011). Thus, under the influence of substances such as alcohol, for example, the consumer suffers a clear degradation in their capacity for judgment, adequate response and sustained attention to various situations (Bennett & Bland, 2008), and the individual may act aggressively more easily. Nevertheless, when considering this model, it is assumed that the consumer who abuses drugs just acts violently when he or she is intoxicated.

Of course, and still following the model previously presented, it is important to examine what the literature says about the link between the intoxication state and violent behaviors. Regarding heroin, for example, the association with violent actions is not consistent. As for cocaine, there seems to be discrepancies about its association with violent behavior (Parker & Auerhahn, 1998). Although the complexity of the problem implies consideration of other factors, what is certain is that the literature in general, confirms the existence of a link between the consumption of alcohol and other drugs, and violent behaviors in intimate relationships (Cunradi, 2009). According Raghanan and colleagues (2006), community belonging, with social disorganization and some characteristics like purchase, sale and consumption of drugs, seems to increase violence and increases the vulnerability to victimization. In this respect, it seems pertinent to note that when there is victimization of individuals who are drug users, usually, the victim do not complains to the authorities. In truth, that victim is involved in the activity that has potentiated their own victimization (Lyman, 2014).

Conclusions: suggestions for intervention and future research

Although alcohol is a major risk factor for the occurrence of dating violence, the role it plays in victimization and/or perpetration is not consistent and has been the subject of some controversy, especially with regard to its influence on women's

victimization. Most studies that attempt to analyze the relationship between these two variables focus on physical and cognitive implications that come from the consumption of alcohol (e.g., Norris et al., 1996). However, community studies (Molidor & Tolman, 1998) show that most women who have experienced intimate abuse had not ingested any alcohol. Furthermore, it has been argued that excessive alcohol as a main focus for the violence may result, on the one hand, in a reduction of the responsibility of the perpetrator, and on the other hand, the accountability of the victim (Jasinski, 2001). Thus, the situational character associated with this variable has been questioned, considering that in a patriarchal culture, the absence of a structural analysis that includes the consumption of alcohol and drugs can lead to the assignment of responsibility to the victim for the abuse, if he or she is under the influence of alcohol (Mahlstedt & Welsh, 2005).

It is also important to point out that a causal relationship cannot be determined but it can refer to a close association between substance dependence and patterns of aggression and victimization, as became clear through authors such as Hines and colleagues (2012). This idea is reinforced by the fact that one cannot reduce this association only to states of intoxication. This association does not have to prove only that state, because there is a clear change in the overall functioning of the consumer, intoxicated or abstaining, particularly in terms of their personality characteristics and, consequently, in relational terms. Although alcohol has been widely studied as a substance often present in the victim, it must be noted that illegal substances have not been the subject of much attention when it comes to addressing situations of victimization. Thus, it is a serious gap, because if the state of the victim was not known during the occurrence, we will have fewer elements to help understand and, above all, to prevent the phenomenon. Stated another way, we just can prevent/intervene

appropriately in the phenomenon, through the deep understanding of all the variables involved in it. So, the issue of drug use by the victim must be carefully reviewed and considered in all levels of the prevention programs. This is not about blaming the victim, but to know the circumstances that make them more vulnerable to be able to provide help.

Despite all this, this work of literature review has showed that there is an important relationship, especially between alcohol abuse and dating violence, both at the level of victimization, and in aggression so that prevention programs for this kind of violence should seek to work with this evidence. Thus, it is important that prevention programs integrate educational modules that seek to analyze the following aspects: i) integrate the effects of alcohol and other drugs on aggressive behavior and that consumption cannot be used to excuse the use of aggression; ii) analyze the proximal model explanations; iii) identify other risk factors that interact with the consumption of drugs (e.g., early experiences of victimization in childhood; anger and hostility); iv) recognize the risks of consumption when there is a greater predisposition to aggression; v) analyze the implications of consumption in reducing the perception of risk and increasing the risk of victimization (e.g., Shorey et al., 2011).

As suggestions for future research in this area, there is the need to analyze separately both male and female consumption to better understand the relationships between substance use and data violence and analyze patterns of victimization and aggression associated with consumption seeking to understand the differences associated with consumption as well as the effects of alcohol and drugs in dating violence (Shorey et al., 2011). Since substance use alone does not explain the use of violence, it is necessary to conduct more research on the moderators/mediators of this relationship (substance abuse and dating violence). For example, the influence of early

victimization experiences, attitudes legitimizing abuse, emotional regulation, personal characteristics (depression, anxiety), among others can be explored.

On the other hand, it becomes necessary to develop research that does not focus on the search for explanations but, from a point of view of the social sciences to focus on understanding the phenomenon and the factors underlying the relationship between drugs and victimization.

We also urge continued investment in the development of theoretical conceptualizations that allow for a better understanding of the empirical evidence, and that can best support and inform interventional efforts made in this field. The longitudinal studies in this area would also be an advantage in clarifying the relationship between substance use and dating violence.

Finally, it is important to consider not only the victim but also the surrounding community and rethink this issue in order to understand to what extent the drug may contribute to the behavior of the offender and the vulnerability of the victim. This should not be done through a record of (un)accountability, but rather under the perspective to deeply understand all the elements involved in this phenomenon.

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