

College Women and Emotionally Abusive Relationships

Margaret Ann Yates

College of Professional Advancement, Mercer University

Counseling 621: Research and Development

April 13, 2023

College Women and Emotionally Abusive Relationships

Abstract

This review analyzes three main contributors to college females' vulnerability to emotionally abusive romantic relationships: prior victimization, attachment style, and relationship churning. The majority of the previous research on abusive relationships is centered around physical abuse and abuse in married relationships. Emotional abuse is a rampant issue in college relationships, and needs further investigation. There is also a focus in this review on why college campus culture specifically is a high risk place for emotional abuse even for women who may not have the main contributors included here. Emotional abuse for the purpose of this review includes verbal and psychological abuse, as well as tactics such as stalking, manipulation, isolation, and more. Much of the research refers to this type of abuse as Emotional and Verbal Abuse (EVA) which is how it is labeled several times throughout this discourse. This review is limited to heterosexual relationships, as there was not enough available research on emotional abuse in LGBTQ+ relationships to be included in this analysis. That is an area that needs more research. One of the ambitions for this topic is that high schools and colleges create comprehensive education around identifying emotional abuse in order to help women get out of an abusive situation early, or better yet, avoid it entirely.

Introduction

Over the last several decades, there has been a substantial increase in the amount of research and studies conducted on Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), domestic violence, and abusive relationships in general. For the most part, this work has centered around physical violence, with less focus on other classifications of abuse. For this review, I am delving into emotional abuse in college romantic relationships, specifically main features of a female that

may increase her vulnerability. College women are a population with a higher risk of emotional abuse due to a variety of factors (Gormley et al., 2010; Abowitz et al., 2010).

Since the population is college, there can be grey areas in terms of what constitutes a relationship. For the purposes of this study, “relationship” may include “hookups”, “friends with benefits”, and a recurring sexual partner unless specifically noted as a “committed relationship”. It will not include a “one night stand”. I have chosen three main elements to focus on, which I noted reappeared in the research that have shown to increase a woman’s vulnerability to an emotionally abusive relationship. These are: prior victimization (in any form and at any time), attachment style, and relationship churning. Relationship churning means that the relationship is constantly in a cycle of breaking up and getting back together (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013).

The goal with this analysis is to increase awareness and exposure about how young women so often end up in emotionally abusive relationships at some point in their life. My desire as a future counselor is to work with women to help them with relational issues and concerns, so it will be very important to identify which of my clients may be most vulnerable to emotional abuse. Even those who may not seem vulnerable should still receive education on the topic due to the pitfalls women encounter in the college “dating” scene (Gormley et al., 2010). Emotional abuse is very damaging itself, on top of increasing the likelihood that there will eventually be physical abuse if it is not already occurring. In some relationships, the emotional abuse may be a “gateway” to other types of abuse, but as the sole form and creates a lot of long lasting damage on its own (Gormley et al., 2010). This is an incredibly important and underemphasized issue that I am eager to learn and share about.

Prior Victimization

College women who have experienced abuse in their past have a much higher likelihood to experience it in their future (McClure et al., 2020). This has been shown in numerous studies on all different types of abuse, and past abuse should be an immediate flag to a counselor that this individual is at risk.

A survey study conducted at Fairfield University on 395 undergraduate students (93 males and 161 females) found a significant correlation between IPV victimization in college dating relationships and childhood abuse (McClure et al., 2020). The study looked at both perpetrators and victims of college relationship abuse, and for both groups they found a significant correlation with prior physical and emotional abuse and neglect (McClure et al., 2020). Children who experience any form of abuse are far more likely to grow up to either become victims or abusers- and sometimes they may be both at different times in their life (McClure et al., 2020). The researchers of this study also noted that females reported higher levels of childhood emotional abuse (CEA) overall, and CEA was also found to positively correlate with verbal abuse in college dating relationships (McClure et al., 2020). If as a child a female thought that emotional and verbal abuse (EVA) was a normal part of life, she is then likely to be more accepting of it later on in her dating relationships.

Another survey study conducted for the *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* at an undisclosed “large southeastern university” of 1027 students reported that about one third of the female respondents reported either currently or previously being involved in an emotionally abusive relationship (Abowitz et al., 2010). Out of this third, a significant correlation was found between their reported emotional abuse and other and/or prior victimization (Abowitz et al., 2010). The biggest category reported within other/prior victimization was a “yes” answer to the statement “I have been pressured to have sex by the

person I was dating” (Abowitz et al., 2010). This distinction is such an important one to make from physical assault/rape. Women who are coerced or convinced to engage in sexual acts often do not understand that this is abusive behavior on the part of their partner (Abowitz et al., 2010). It is important for women to understand that this falls into the category of abuse.

This study also details that a woman’s chances of experiencing EVA is greatly increased when other forms of abuse are taking place in her relationship- including any type of physical abuse and/or sexual abuse/coercion as stated above (Abowitz et al., 2010 p.122).

Attachment Style

Insecure attachment style may contribute to a woman’s vulnerability to emotionally abusive relationships. The American Psychological Association (APA) defines attachment style as, “The characteristic way people relate to others in the context of intimate relationships, which is heavily influenced by self-worth and interpersonal trust...different attachment styles in infancy are associated with different psychological outcomes in childhood and later life” (American Psychological Association, n.d. para. 1). Attachment style is generally categorized in four different ways: secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized; the last three may also be categorized together as insecure attachment (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

Anxious attachment refers to the tendency to fixate on other’s view rather than your own, with a lot of worry about nonacceptance and a tendency to cling to people (American Psychological Association 2010). It is logical based on this definition that women with anxious attachment will be more unguarded from emotionally abusive relationships, as well as less likely to have the confidence and sense of self to leave permanently (Gormley et al., 2010). A survey study conducted on an undisclosed large state university in the Midwest looked specifically at the correlation between insecure attachment and emotional abuse both for the victim and

perpetrator (Gormley et al., 2010). The results of the study found that stress greatly increased the influence of a woman's insecure attachment (Gormley et al., 2010). If a woman already struggles with anxious attachment, under stress (possibly caused by an abusive partner) this will increase. This means that she could cling and attach all the more to an emotionally abusive partner in a harmful and destructive cycle.

Another point that was an important part of this study included in their review of previous research, is that levels of negative behavior in romantic relationships was positively correlated with the level of attachment a college student had to their parents (Gormley et al., 2010). It can be surmised then, that a college female having a strong attachment to her parents is less likely to be a victim of emotional abuse (Gormley et al., 2010). This also supports why women at college may be more at risk than those living at home; she is further away from her parent's influence and support even if she is securely attached (Gormley et al., 2010).

Relationship Churning

Relationship churning, as explained above, is a common feature of many young adult relationships, specifically those in the college setting (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013). An article for the *Journal of Marriage and Family Therapy* examined (among other things) the correlation between relationship churning and EVA. The researchers proposed that, "...couple violence [including EVA] may, for some couples, be part of a more general inability to manage relationship conflict in a healthy manner" (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013). Looking specifically through the lens of college aged women vulnerable to EVA, this could mean that either they themselves have their inability, and/or they are more likely to choose/stay with partners with this inability. A woman may find herself in a situation of conflict that has happened many times before, but this time it escalates out of control, and she will be less likely to recognize what "out

of control” looks like due to the normalcy of conflict in the relationship (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013).

When a relationship is churning, this almost definitely guarantees the presence of a lot of conflict, which greatly increases a woman’s risk of experiencing abuse (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013). This article reported that women who were relationship churners were much more likely to report emotional abuse than women in stably together or stably broken up relationships (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013). Another important point from this article’s research is that relationship churners are more likely to experience jealousy and verbal conflict which can be warning signs of EVA (Halpern-Meekin et al., 2013). This cycle of breaking up and making up may be mirrored in this cycle of abuse- with the woman finding herself stuck in both and unsure how to get out.

College Dating Culture

This examination of college women and their vulnerability to emotionally abusive relationships would be incomplete without some specific discussion of the college dating culture and how it makes women vulnerable- even those without the other risk factors discussed here. Emotional Abuse among Undergraduates in Romantic Relationships (the previously mentioned article for the *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*) gives the reader background information and previous research about why college creates such a perfect storm for females to end up in emotionally abusive relationships (Abowitz et al., 2010). The authors explain, “Most college women express a strong desire for romantic relationships per se rather than for the random or repeated hook ups or “friends-with benefits preferred by men... but the campus hook up culture limits their opportunity to practice or engage in traditional dating...” (Abowitz et al., 2010).

This means that not only are women having to settle for relationships types they do not prefer, but also they may be so excited when they finally to manage to get into a committed relationship that they are reluctant to end it even when abuse is present (Abowitz et al., 2010). They may feel as though they will not have another chance at a “real” relationship with the prevalence of non-committed sexual relationships on their college campus (Abowitz et al., 2010). The article goes on to claim these women may even be flattered by some of the warning signs of EVA such as jealousy or possessiveness, because they see it as a sign of how much their partner cares about them (Abowitz et al., 2010). This goes back to the importance of academic institutions educating women on the early warning signs of EVA so they are concerned rather than possibly flattered when they see them.

Discussion

As previously stated, the goal of this analysis is to create clarity and provide education around factors which create vulnerability to EVA for college women. The research question for this analysis is: what are the strongest negative influences which cause a college female to engage in an emotionally abuse relationship? This study investigated the most researched components of college women who are/have been in an EVA relationship, hoping to create a clearer profile of women who can be identified as at risk. The often toxic “dating” culture prevalent on many college campuses was also explored as it puts many women in danger, even those not fitting in with the negative influences discussed.

As a future counselor, I am passionate about working with young adult women to personally guide them in making healthy and meaningful relationship choices. It is incredibly important for me to be aware of characteristics they have and choices they make which may be making them more vulnerable to EVA, as well as unhealthy relationships in general. I plan to

continue pursuing knowledge on abusive relationships, with the desire that this can help bring down the far too high percentage of women who have suffered lasting damage from them.

References

Abowitz, D. A., Knox, D., & Zusman, M. (2010). EMOTIONAL ABUSE AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS. *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 36(2), 117–138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260509334404> April 1, 2023

American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *Apa Dictionary of Psychology*. American Psychological Association. Retrieved April 5, 2023, from <https://dictionary.apa.org/attachment-style>

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Feeling insecure in relationships may predispose people to later health problems, says research*. American Psychological Association. Retrieved April 3, 2023, from <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2010/07/insecure-attachment>

Brandt, D.C., Pierce, K.J., & VanVoorhis, C.W. (2004). When is Verbal Abuse Serious ? The Impact of Relationship Variables on Perceptions of Severity.

Gormley, B., & Lopez, F. G. (2010). Psychological Abuse Perpetration in College Dating Relationships: Contributions of Gender, Stress, and Adult Attachment Orientations. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 25(2), 204–218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260509334404>

Halpern-Meekin, S., Manning, W. D., Giordano, P. C., & Longmore, M. A. (2013). Relationship churning, physical violence, and verbal abuse in young adult relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75(1), 2–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2012.01029.x>

Herbert, T. B., Silver, R. C., & Ellard, J. H. (1991). Coping with an Abusive Relationship: I. How and Why Do Women Stay? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 53(2), 311–325.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/352901>

Kasian, M., & Painter, S. L. (1992). Frequency and Severity of Psychological Abuse in a Dating Population. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 7(3), 350–364.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/088626092007003005>

McClure, M. M., & Parmenter, M. (2020). Childhood Trauma, Trait Anxiety, and Anxious Attachment as Predictors of Intimate Partner Violence in College Students. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 35(23–24), 6067–6082. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260517721894>

Ray, A. L., & Gold, S. R. (1996). Gender roles, aggression, and alcohol use in dating relationships. *Journal of Sex Research*, 33(1), 47–55.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499609551813>