



Initial Evaluation of Project PEACE: A Dating Violence Prevention Program for College Students

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Introduction

Dating violence is a serious problem among young adults and college students in particular, with nearly 30% of undergraduates reporting physical aggression toward an intimate partner in the past year (Straus, 2004). Victims of dating violence report an array of negative consequences, including depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, and physical injury (Amanor-Boadu et al., 2011). Given the high prevalence and adverse outcomes associated with dating violence in college students, there is a clear need for effective prevention programs. While a number of these programs exist (see Murray & Graybeal, 2007; Whitaker et al., 2006), most interventions focus on modifying attitudes through broad, universal educational workshops delivered to large groups of students. Further, because many studies evaluating these programs lack randomization to conditions and have not included behavioral outcomes or long-term follow-ups, the efficacy of these interventions remains unclear. As such, there is a need for rigorous evaluation of programs to prevent dating violence in college students. To address this need, we developed and implemented a brief preventive intervention called Project PEACE (Partner Enrichment to Address Conflict Effectively).

Project PEACE Description

Project PEACE takes a targeted approach to prevention through the recruitment of individuals reporting risk factors for dating violence, including prior partner violence perpetration, trait anger, alcohol use, and relationship dissatisfaction or conflict (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Renner & Whitney, 2012). Given that college men and women perpetrate dating violence at similar rates (Straus & Ramirez, 2007) and dating violence is frequently bidirectional (Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012), both men and women are eligible to participate. Individual risk factors identified are addressed in mixed-gender groups of 6 to 8 students who attend 4 weekly 90-minute sessions. The manualized intervention draws on aspects of cognitive therapy (e.g., Beck, 1989), dialectical behavioral therapy (Linehan, 1993), and mindfulness-based stress reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) to promote skills in mindfulness, emotion regulation, distress tolerance, cognitive restructuring, and interpersonal communication. Specific topics for each session are detailed to the right.

Project PEACE	
Session 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Psychoeducation on dating violence Mindfulness
Session 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emotion identification and regulation Effective communication
Session 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cognitive restructuring Distress tolerance
Session 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Psychoeducation on the effects of alcohol Review

Pilot Study

Undergraduates potentially at risk for partner violence were identified through the psychology department mass screening, which 696 students completed. From this pool of students, 95 were invited to participate in Project PEACE based on their willingness to be contacted for additional studies, status in a romantic relationship for at least three months, and endorsement of psychological aggression toward their partner or at least two risk factors for partner violence (alcohol use, relationship dissatisfaction, high trait anger). Project PEACE targets individuals at risk of mild to moderate levels of partner aggression; thus, students were excluded if they reported the use of a weapon against their partner.

A final sample of 13 students (84.6% female) participated in the initial pilot study. Participant age ranged from 18 to 22 ($M = 19.1$, $SD = 1.3$). With regard to sexual orientation, one participant identified as bisexual, one participant identified as "other," and the remainder ($n = 11$) identified as heterosexual. Individuals participated in one of two intervention groups, completed simultaneously.

Participants completed a battery of self-report measures pre- and post-intervention, as well as 3-months following completion. All 13 participants completed the pre- and post-intervention surveys, and 7 (53.8%) completed the 3-month follow-up. Although few changes were significant given the small sample size, repeated measures ANOVAs revealed trends toward improved emotion regulation skills, increased self-regulation, increased distress tolerance, and decreased acceptance of abuse and control in relationships. These initial results suggest that Project PEACE may help participants build skills conducive to healthy relationships and reduce violence-supportive attitudes.

Randomized Controlled Trial

A randomized controlled trial (RCT) was completed to further evaluate Project PEACE. In an attempt to facilitate identification of students at higher risk for partner violence, a broader recruitment strategy was used. A total of 3,823 randomly selected undergraduates was emailed a link to a screener survey. Of the 130 students who completed the screener survey, 57 (43.8%) met inclusion criteria, which included being in a romantic relationship for at least three months, and endorsement of physical or psychological aggression toward a partner or at least two risk factors for violence (high alcohol intake, high trait anger, relationship dissatisfaction, relationship conflict). Individuals were excluded if they endorsed severe partner violence, were under 19 years of age, were married, or were not available during scheduled group times. Of 57 individuals invited to participate, 32 completed the baseline assessment and were randomized into either a treatment or waitlist control condition. Of the 32 participants involved in the RCT, 71.9% ($n = 23$) were female. Participant age ranged from 19 to 29 ($M = 20.6$, $SD = 2.1$). With regard to race/ethnicity, 93.75% identified as White, with the other 6.25% identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander.

Measures

Relevant outcomes were assessed at baseline, post-treatment, and one-month follow-up. The primary outcome measures are described below (see Table 1 for additional measures).

Attitudes on violence. The Intimate Partner Violence Attitude Scales-Revised (IPVAS-R; Fincham, Cui, Braithwaite, & Pasley, 2008) consists of 17 items with responses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Seven items were reverse-scored. Mean scores were computed for subscales representing attitudes about Abuse (8 items), Violence (4 items), and Control (5 items) in relationships.

Partner violence. The Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) was used to assess physical (12 items) and psychological (8 items) partner violence within the past month. Both aggression and victimization were assessed. Frequency scores were computed in accordance with Straus (2001).

Data Analysis

General linear mixed models were estimated using SAS PROC MIXED with a maximum likelihood estimator. Univariate models were used to examine each outcome separately. Predictors included in each model included assessment time, condition, and their interaction.

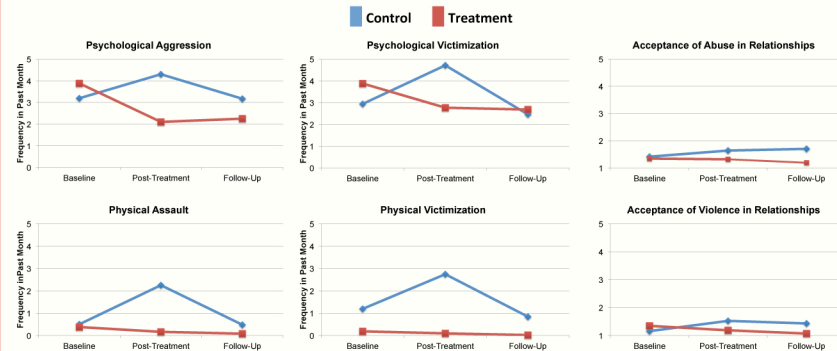
Results

- There were no significant results for **psychological aggression or victimization**, although trends can be seen in Figure 1.
- At post-treatment, participants in the control condition reported significantly more **physical assault perpetration and victimization** in the past month compared to participants in treatment, although differences were no longer significant at the follow-up.
- The interaction between time and condition was marginally significant for **acceptance of abuse** ($p = .07$), with the control condition endorsing significantly more acceptance of abuse at follow-up than baseline. Compared to the control, those in the treatment condition endorsed significantly less acceptance of abuse at follow-up.
- Although the interaction between time and condition was marginally significant for **acceptance of violence** ($p = .06$) there were no significant differences in predicted means. There were also no significant results for **acceptance of control**.

Discussion

Results from the RCT suggest that Project PEACE demonstrates promise for preventing dating violence among college students in at-risk relationships. With regard to physical partner violence, which is the most important outcome to consider, participants in Project PEACE were significantly less likely to report physical assault perpetration or victimization post-treatment than were those in the control group, although these differences did not persist at follow-up. While there were no significant results related to perpetration or victimization of psychological aggression, trends suggest that participants in the treatment group experienced less psychological aggression from pre- to post-treatment, and that those reductions were maintained at the one-month follow-up. Further, individuals who participated in treatment were somewhat less likely to endorse acceptance of abuse at one-month follow-up than those in the control group, providing support for effectiveness of this intervention in reducing risk factors for aggression. Although some results indicate non-significant trends in the expected direction, this likely reflects a small sample size, along with the inclusion of participants whose baseline levels of physical and psychological aggression are low.

RCT Primary Outcomes



Conclusions

While numerous prevention programs designed to address dating violence among college students have been examined, randomized controlled trials are rare (Murray & Graybeal, 2007). Prior reviews of these programs suggest the need for brief, targeted interventions that can be delivered with minimal resources (Shorey et al., 2012). Project PEACE meets these criteria. As a brief, manualized intervention, it focuses on individuals already at risk for physical and psychological aggression. Overall, results suggest that Project PEACE may reduce the presence of physical aggression in relationships, as well as help address skill deficits and modify attitudes that contribute to violence in relationships. Further evaluation of Project PEACE using a larger sample with higher rates of baseline risk factors are needed to further evaluate the efficacy of Project PEACE and tailor session content to the specific needs of college students.

