

Summary

Equality, Safety, Autonomy in Relationships: Testing the Effectiveness of a Dating Violence Prevention Program for College Students

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Dating violence is a serious psychological and social issue influencing the lives of many adolescents and young adults (Murray & Kardatzke, 2007). Research shows that young people report high rates of dating violence perpetration and victimization across many countries (WHO, 2010) and in Turkey (Aba, 2008; Arslan, 2002; Besni, 2011), and that experiences of abuse are associated with academic, psychological and physical health risks (Dikmen, Özyayın, & Yılmaz, 2018; Eshelman & Levendosky, 2012; Foshee et al., 2013; Oswalt, Wyatt, & Ochoa, 2018; Teten et al., 2009). A review of the literature shows that dating violence prevention programs targeting middle school, high school and college students can be effective in decreasing violence perpetration (Foshee et al., 1998, 2004, 2005; Wolfe et al., 2003, 2009), in improving an array of emotional and interpersonal skills such as anger control and conflict resolution (Ball et al., 2012; Foshee et al., 1998, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2004) and in challenging violence-supportive and sexist attitudes (Antle et al., 2011; Avery-Leaf et al., 1997; Foshee et al., 1998, 2000, 2005; Krajewski et al., 1996; Kuffel & Katz, 2002; Schwartz et al., 2004). Although questions have been raised about whether such positive outcomes could be retained in the long run (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007) and whether the programs have unitary effects on young men and women (Elias-Lambert, Black, & Sharma, 2010), prevention programs seem to be a promising strategy to eliminate violence from dating and intimate relationships (Violence Prevention Alliance, 2012).

In Turkey, studies conducted with college students reveal that dating violence is a common problem (Hüsni & Mertan, 2017; Sakallı-Uğurlu & Ulu, 2003; Toplu-Demirtaş, Hatipoğlu-Sümer & White, 2013) and that

interventions which aim to raise awareness about dating violence are needed (Aslan et al., 2008; Kılınçer & Tuzgöl-Dost, 2014; Selçuk et al., 2018; Yıldırım, 2016). However, research on this topic is surprisingly scarce. The present study aims to fill this gap by designing a dating violence prevention program for college students attending a university in Istanbul and testing its effectiveness. Towards this goal, the following hypotheses were tested: Participants in the prevention group would report a) more constructive conflict resolution skills in relationships, b) less support for ambivalent sexism and c) less supportive attitudes for dating violence after the program. The effect of sex was examined for each hypothesis in order to explore whether the program influenced young men and women differently.

Method

Program Development

An early version of a dating violence prevention program was developed with the aim of enhancing the students' knowledge of various forms of violence and control, providing guidance for establishing safe and equal relationships, and improving their relational skills. In the designing phase, individual interviews with 19 college students were conducted and available prevention programs (Koberlein et al., 2010; Ntinapogias et al., 2011; Tsirigoti et al., 2011; Wolfe et al., 1996) were reviewed. Informed by feminist clinical approaches (Aranson & Buchholz, 2001; Enns, 1992; Goldner, 1998, 1999, 2004; Knudson-Martin, 2013; Lyness & Lyness, 2007), the initial program involved 8 sessions with awareness-raising, psycho-education and skill-development components.

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Pilot Study

After obtaining ethical approval for the study, a pilot study was conducted to test whether the program worked efficiently. Two pilot groups were organized and the following revisions were made based on the participants' feedback and the author's observations: 1) Decreasing the number of activities per session, 2) Exploring personal experiences through role plays, 3) Adding weekly assignments, 4) Preparing and sharing informative brochures.

Main Study

Procedure

The program was advertised via e-mails and posters to recruit participants for the main study. For the prevention group, 4 mixed-sex groups were formed and the students were invited to a meeting session in order to provide information. Those who agreed to participate completed the pre-test assessment and attended the 8-session program. The post-test assessment was carried out at the last session. The control group did not receive any intervention. They were invited to the pre-test and post-test assessments via e-mail. Both groups gained extra course credits for their participation.

Participants

The final sample consisted of 41 participants (24 women, 17 men) who completed the program in the prevention group and 49 participants (25 women, 24 men) who completed both assessments in the control group. The age range of the overall sample was 18-22.

Instruments

A series of data collection instruments were used in the present study. These instruments included 1) the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2), developed by Straus and colleagues (Straus, 1979; Straus et al., 1996) and adapted for Turkish use by Aba (2008); 2) Responses to Dissatisfaction Scale (RDS), developed by Rusbult and colleagues (Rusbult et al., 1991; Kilpatrick, Bissonette, & Rusbult, 2002) and adapted for Turkish use by Taluy (2013); 3) Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI), developed by Glick and Fiske (1996) and adapted for Turkish use by Sakalli-Ugurlu (2002); 4) Attitudes towards Dating Violence Scales (ADVS), developed by Price and colleagues (1999) and adapted for Turkish use (Yumusak, 2013); 5) A socio-demographic information form developed by the author.

Results

Preliminary analyses revealed no significant differences between the prevention and control group with

regards to dating history, experiences of dating violence and pre-test scores. A series of 2 (Time: pre-test, post-test) x 2 (Group: prevention, control) x 2 (Sex: women, men) mixed factorial ANOVAs were carried out to test the hypotheses.

The Effect of the Program on Conflict Resolution

With regards to RDS scores, the analysis showed that two and three-way interaction effects were non-significant.

The Effect of the Program on Sexist Attitudes

With regards to ASI-hostility scores, the analysis revealed a significant Time x Group interaction, $F_{1,86} = 5.81, p = .02, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .06$. The results showed that the ASI scores of the prevention group was higher at pre-test ($M = 2.48, SD = 1.10$) than post-test ($M = 2.19, SD = 1.02$), while for the control group there was no difference between pre-test ($M = 2.72, SD = 1.08$) and post-test ASI scores ($M = 2.69, SD = 1.07$). Other interaction effects were found to be non-significant.

The analysis on ASI-benevolence scores showed that two and three-way interaction effects were statistically non-significant.

The Effect of the Program on Attitudes towards Dating Violence

With regards to ADVS-male physical violence scores, the analysis revealed non-significant two and three-way interaction effects.

The analysis on ADVS-female physical violence scores showed a significant Time x Group interaction, $F_{1,85} = 5.94, p = .02, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .06$. The ADVS-female physical violence scores in the prevention group was higher at pre-test ($M = 1.69, SD = 0.69$) than post-test ($M = 1.35, SD = 0.47$), while for the control group there was no difference between pre-test ($M = 1.57, SD = 0.58$) and post-test scores ($M = 1.47, SD = 0.52$). Other interaction effects were found to be non-significant.

With regards to ADVS-male psychological violence scores, the analysis revealed a significant Time x Group interaction, $F_{1,85} = 5.09, p = .03, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .06$. The ADVS-male psychological violence scores in the prevention group was higher at pre-test ($M = 1.81, SD = 0.50$) than post-test ($M = 1.62, SD = 0.46$), while for the control group there was no difference between pre-test ($M = 1.69, SD = 0.48$) and post-test scores ($M = 1.64, SD = 0.48$). Other interaction effects were found to be non-significant.

The analysis on ADVS-female psychological violence scores showed that two and three-way interaction effects were statistically non-significant.

Discussion

The present study aimed to test the effectiveness of a dating violence prevention program in a sample of college students in Istanbul, Turkey. The first hypothesis which posited that the program would improve constructive conflict resolution skills was not supported. This finding contradicts with prior research reporting positive changes in interpersonal skills after participating in a dating violence prevention program (Ball et al., 2012; Foshee et al., 1998, 2000). One reason for this contradiction could be the insufficiency of the present program in terms of its length, content and activities. As suggested by previous researchers (Ball et al., 2012; Foshee et al., 1998, 2000; Nation et al., 2003), a more intensive approach with longer sessions and multi-level intervention components could be more effective in producing the desired behavioral changes. Another reason could be related to the methodological limitations of the present study. Detecting changes in conflict resolution skills proved to be difficult because some participants did not experience any significant conflicts with their partners or friends between the pre-test and post-test assessments. In future work, designing longitudinal studies with longer follow-up periods and utilizing multiple sources of information might help to overcome these limitations (O'Leary et al., 2006; Wekerle & Tanaka, 2010).

The hypothesis that the present program would decrease sexist attitudes found partial support. Consistent with previous studies (Foshee et al., 1998, 2000; Schwartz et al., 2004, 2006), the results showed a decrease in hostile sexism in the prevention group. Most participants in the present study reported that working in a mixed-sex setting contributed to this change by preventing polarization and providing a new socialization context. This finding is parallel to the studies which report that young people tend to prefer mixed-sex settings (Elias-Lambert, Black & Sharma, 2010) and enjoy learning each other's viewpoints (Kerig et al., 2010). On the other hand, no significant change was observed in benevolent sexism after the program. One explanation is that benevolent sexism is interpreted as positive since it incorporates men's possessive and protective attitudes (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Glick et al., 2000) which are idealized and romanticized in the name of love (Jackson, 2001; Johnson et al., 2005). Increasing awareness about the power inequality inherent in these attitudes and challenging them might require a more intensive intervention.

The last hypothesis that the present program would decrease accepting attitudes towards dating violence found partial support. Firstly, the results showed a significant decrease only in the acceptance of female-perpetrated physical violence, paralleling Jaycox and col-

leagues' findings (2006). The lack of change in attitudes towards men's use of physical violence might indicate a floor effect, because some participants reacted very negatively to relevant items of the scale and expressed that the items were not suitable to the college context. Secondly, the results revealed a significant decrease only in the acceptance of male-perpetrated psychological violence. This change is consistent with the decrease found in hostile beliefs about women, because both normalize and justify men's dominance and control over women. The lack of change in attitudes towards women's use of psychological violence might indicate that more time needs to be devoted to this topic since recognizing psychologically abusive behavior is more difficult as compared to other forms of violence (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). In addition, women may resort to psychological violence for various reasons such as anger, jealousy and self-defense (Leisring, 2013). Capturing the diversity in these experiences and addressing them might increase the effectiveness of the program in future work.

The present study had some limitations. Firstly, the participants could not be randomly assigned to the prevention and control group because of the high drop out rate and the time restraint during recruitment. Secondly, a follow-up study could not be carried out to learn about the participants' experiences in the long run. Thirdly, the program was implemented at a single university and a majority of the group members were women. These factors limited the generalizability of the results. Fourthly, some participants reported that they were motivated by external rewards such as course credits rather than a willingness to learn about the group topics. Their presence influenced and changed group dynamics. Lastly, potential biases in self-report measures (i.e. experimenter expectancy bias), should be taken into account when interpreting the results. Future dating violence prevention efforts will hopefully overcome these limitations and incorporate more effective practices to ensure safety and equality in dating relations.