

Relationships among Anger, Revenge, and Impulsivity in College-Aged Romantic Relationships

Di Blasi T* and Kassinove H

Hofstra University, USA

*Corresponding author: Thomas Di Blasi, Hofstra University, 1000 Hempstead Turnpike Hempstead, NY, 11549, USA, Tel: 718-309-0324; Email: thomas.a.dibiasi@gmail.com

Research Article

Volume 3 Issue 9

Received Date: November 27, 2018

Published Date: December 14, 2018

DOI: 10.23880/pprij-16000191

Abstract

Romantic relationships are one of the most important college student human interactions. During the emerging adult years, reports indicate that up to 75 percent of students report at least one romantic relationship. While many young adults feel satisfied in their romantic relationships, many others feel dissatisfied, often seeking student counseling services for relationship problems. A common reason for their dissatisfaction is interpersonal conflict. When handled poorly it can lead to physical aggression and violence against romantic partners. This is especially common during the college student years, with frequencies showing that as many as 61% have been physically aggressed upon by their romantic partner. It is believed that intimate partner aggression is often precipitated by the romantic partner feeling angry. However, there is not much evidence to support this claim. In this survey study of 117 enrolled college students, higher trait anger was related to increased thoughts about revenge, increased frequency of vengeful behaviors, and increased verbal impulsivity towards their romantic partner. Similar to previous findings, women were more likely to be physically and verbally aggressive than men. This study provides evidence for the claim that anger precipitates intimate partner aggression.

Keywords: Anger; Intimate partner violence; Aggression; Revenge; Impulsivity

Introduction

Relationships among Anger, Revenge, and Impulsivity in College-Aged Romantic Relationships Romantic relationships are one of the most important and enduring interactions formed in young adulthood. They offer comfort and security, and contribute to happiness and life satisfaction [1-10]. Satisfying romantic relationships are related to decreased depression, anxiety, mood disorders, adjustment problems, and alcohol intake [11-13]. In addition, there are physical benefits of romantic

relationships, such as decreased rates of morbidity and mortality [14].

Romantic relationships typically begin to form in young adulthood, as between college students [15,16]. Indeed, most students report at least one romantic relationship during their college years. In a study of 197 female college students, 147 (75% of the sample) reported having been, or were currently in, a romantic relationship [1]. In fact, 30 percent of romantic relationships that began in college blossom into marriages within the next five years. This highlights the

importance of healthy romantic relationships in college-aged students [17].

Romantic relationships, as described by college students, focus on exclusivity, trust, and commitment which, if successful, promote emotional attachment between the partners [18]. While many young adults report feeling satisfied in their relationships, a considerable portion are dissatisfied [19]. In fact, relational issues are one of the most common reasons that lead undergraduates to seek student counseling services [2,20]. In a systematic review of 64 articles, it was found that relational issues can lead to physical and mental illness, including depression, insomnia, cardiovascular disease, and increased reporting of physical pain [21].

A common reason for difficulties in romantic relationships is interpersonal conflict. A conflict is an enduring interaction that arises when one or more persons in the relationship have their needs unmet, have a difference of beliefs, ideas, values, or goals, or difficulty coping with life stressors [22]. Such conflicts occur to varying degrees in all romantic relationships [23,24]. When handled well, they can provide constructive feedback for the partners and can promote unity. However, when handled poorly, conflicts can have negative effects on the romantic partners and can lead to the dissolution of the relationship [3,25].

A common negative consequence of conflict is aggression. Interpersonal aggression and violence are especially common in young adults [26,28]. In a review of the literature, Carlson found 13 to 61 percent of college students have been the victim of assault, with the most common aggressor being their romantic partner. Studies that specifically focus on intimate partner aggression have found rates as high as 35 percent [29,30]. Physical aggression may be premeditated and can take the form of revenge, or can be an immediate reaction, such as acting impulsively [31-33].

A possible factor that may lead individuals to aggress against their romantic partners is trait anger. Hettrich and O'Leary asked 127 women for the most common reasons for aggressing upon their significant other. The responses indicated that 91 percent did so out of anger [29]. Anger is a negative, psychobiological state that includes physiological arousal, irrational and distorted cognitions, and an increased tendency toward motor and verbal aggression [34,35]. Anger has been shown to be most commonly triggered by someone who is well-known and liked or loved [36-38]. Unfortunately, there is limited research examining anger in romantic relationships.

Specifically, there is a dearth of research examining how anger relates to aggressive behavior in romantic relationships of college students, an at-risk group for intimate partner aggression [6]. The first step in preventing intimate partner aggression is to examine what relates to it, such as trait anger.

In the present study, the relationships among trait anger and thoughts about revenge, vengeful behavior, physical impulsivity, and verbal impulsivity were examined. Sex differences were also explored. It was hypothesized that:

- There would be a positive relationship between trait anger and thoughts about revenge.
- There would be a positive relationship between trait anger and reportedly engaging in vengeful behavior.
- There would be a positive relationship between trait anger and physical impulsivity.
- There would be a positive relationship between trait anger and verbal impulsivity.

Method

Participants

A total of 229 participants from three colleges chose to participate as part of a psychology class experiment. Participants consisted of 49 males and 179 females, and they ranged in age from 18 to 52. The sample was racially diverse as 43% identified as White, 24% as Black, 18% as Hispanic, and 11% as Asian. Of the 229 participants, 119 reported being in a romantic relationship of at least three months. The average length of the participants' romantic relationships was 1.5 years. They did not receive compensation for their participation. There were no exclusion criteria, and no ethical issues. A power analysis was conducted, with the expected correlations equaling .3 or higher, requiring 85 participants.

Measures

Data were collected during class-time by a nine-page questionnaire (*Anger and Romantic Experiences Survey*) that was adapted from Kassinove, et al. (1997) and Tafra, et al. (2002) [37,38]. The *Anger and Romantic Experiences Survey* contained questions that focused on a single anger episode in a romantic relationship for each participant. Participants were asked demographic questions, as well as about their relationships status. Participants ($N = 119$) who reported being in a romantic relationship for at least three months went on to complete the *Anger and Romantic Experiences Survey* in full. All other participants ($N = 229$) skipped ahead and answered general questions about their anger (e.g., being in a

physical conflict in a romantic relationship; having been the physical aggressor). The participants who reported being in a romantic relationship for at least three months answered questions about the frequency in which they were verbally and physically impulsive towards their current romantic partner using a five-point Likert scale, with one representing “never” and five representing “always.” In addition, they answered questions about the frequency of their thoughts about revenge and engaging in vengeful behavior towards their current romantic partner, also using the same five-point Likert scale. Lastly, participants were asked to describe a time when they felt angry towards their romantic partner (e.g., when their romantic partner lied to them, were invalidating, cheated on them). To avoid confusion, definitions of romantic partner, revenge, and impulses were provided to the participants. A romantic partner was defined as, “a person for whom you experience strong positive feelings, are attracted to, want to be with, and with whom you can fantasize having a long-term relationship.” Revenge was defined as, “a planned action, with the intention of getting even with your romantic partner.” Impulsive were defined as, “acting immediately and without much forethought.”

The Trait Anger Scale (TAS), from the STAXI-2 (Appendix D; Spielberger, 1999), was used to measure participants' anger. The TAS is a 10-item questionnaire that assesses the tendency to become angry across a variety of situations, using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = almost never) to 4 (almost always). In a sample of 1,900 participants, Spielberger reported the internal consistency of the measure to range from acceptable to good ($\alpha = .75$ to $\alpha = .82$). In this study, the internal consistency was good, $\alpha = .81$ [39].

Procedure

Participants were invited to partake in the study as part of a class experiment to reflect on anger in their romantic relationships. They signed the informed consent and then completed the demographics questionnaire, *Anger and Romantic Experiences Survey*, and the TAS.

Results

Of the 117 total participants, 61 (52%) reported thinking about revenge towards their romantic partner. Thirty-nine (33%) participants reported engaging in vengeful acts against their romantic partner. In addition, 39 (33%) reported being physically impulsive and 106 (91%) reported being verbally impulsive towards their romantic partner.

Revenge

When asked to respond to the item, “When you become angry at your romantic partner, how often do you think about revenge?” the relationship of responses to that question and trait anger was significant, $r(117) = .36$, $p < .01$, (Table 1). Those who reported higher levels of trait anger were more likely to think about revenge against their romantic partner. When asked to respond to the item, “When you become angry at your current romantic partner, how often do you actually act in a vengeful manner” the relationship of responses to that question and trait anger was also significant, $r(116) = .22$, $p < .01$. Participants who reported higher levels of trait anger were more likely to report acting in a vengeful manner against their romantic partner.

Trait Anger		
Thoughts about revenge	<i>r</i>	.36**
	df	117
Engaging in vengeful behavior	<i>r</i>	.22**
	df	116
Verbally impulsive	<i>r</i>	.56**
	df	115
Physically impulsive	<i>r</i>	-.31
	df	39

Note: The data represent the relationships between trait anger, revenge, and impulsivity.

** = $p < .01$

Table 1: Relationships between Trait Anger, Revenge, and Impulsivity

Impulsivity

When asked to respond to the item, “When you feel angry with your current romantic partner, how often are you physically impulsive (e.g., shove, push, hit)?” the relationship of responses to that question and trait anger was not significant, $r(39) = -.31$, $p = .06$. Those who reported higher levels of trait anger were not more likely to report being physically impulsive against their romantic partner. When asked to respond to the item, “When you feel angry with your current romantic partner, how often are you verbally impulsive (e.g., snapping, yelling)” the relationship to the responses to that question and trait anger was significant, $r(115) = .56$, $p < .01$. This means that those who reported higher levels of trait anger were more likely to report being verbally impulsive against their romantic partner.

Sex Differences

Several sex differences were observed, see Table 2. In terms of thinking about revenge, females ($M = 2.01$, $SD =$

1.07) were more likely to admit to thinking about revenge against their romantic partner than were males ($M = 1.33$, $SD = .56$), $t(84.46) = -4.40$, $p < .01$. Importantly, females ($M = 1.51$, $SD = .72$) were also more likely to admit to engaging in vengeful acts against their romantic partner than were males ($M = 1.15$, $SD = .36$), $t(87.48) = -3.55$, $p < .01$.

Females ($M = 3.00$, $SD = .94$) were more likely to admit to being verbally impulsive against their romantic partner than were males ($M = 2.30$, $SD = .95$), $t(116) = -3.40$, $p < .01$. In addition, females ($M = 3.73$, $SD = .67$) were more likely to admit to being physically impulsive against their romantic partner than males were ($M = 4.00$, $SD = .00$), $t(32) = 2.32$, $p = .03$.

	<i>M</i>		<i>SD</i>		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>
	Females	Males	Females	Males		
Thoughts about revenge	2.01	1.33	1.07	0.56	84.46 ^a	-4.40**
Engaging in vengeful behavior	1.51	1.15	0.72	0.36	87.48 ^a	-3.55**
Verbally impulsive	3	2.3	0.94	0.95	116	-3.40**
Physically impulsive	3.73	4	0.67	0	32	2.32*

Note: The data represent the sex differences between females and males.

* = $p < .05$

** = $p < .01$

^a = Separate variance t-tests were undertaken because they were unequal group sizes in conjunction with heterogeneity of variance.

Table 2: Sex Differences.

Discussion

The goal of the current study was to examine the role of anger in intimate partner aggression in college-aged participants. The findings are consonant with previous research that indicated college-aged romantic partners are frequent victims of verbal and physical aggression by their significant other [4,28,40-42]. Although it was believed that anger was related to intimate partner aggression, this is one of the first studies that support this claim. As hypothesized, trait anger was moderately associated with increased thoughts about revenge, engaging in vengeful behavior, and being verbally impulsive towards their romantic partner. Although nearly significant, trait anger was not associated with being physically impulsive towards their romantic partner. It was noted that many participants left this question blank, with only 39 participants answering it compared to a minimum of 115 participants who answered the other questions, possibly because of the sensitive nature of the question. Considering the power analysis called for 85 participants, this relationship would likely be significant if there were more participants.

Sex differences were also examined. Females were more likely to admit to thinking about revenge, engaging in vengeful actions, being verbally impulsive, and being physically impulsive against their romantic partner. These data should be interpreted with caution given the sample is overwhelmingly females. Despite this, these results are consistent with previous research that found

females are more likely to be physically aggressive toward their romantic partner than are males [43-44].

There are several limitations to this study. Due to the correlational nature of the design, it is difficult to determine if trait anger leads to increased verbal and physical aggression, if verbal and physical aggression lead to increased levels of anger, or if a third variable (e.g., genetics) may account for higher rates of trait anger and verbal and physical aggression. In addition, most of the questions on the survey were phrased in the same direction. This makes it difficult to detect the presence of an acquiescence bias. Lastly, it is unclear if all the participants understood the language used (e.g., seeking revenge). Anecdotally, we have seen clients in anger management therapy who deny seeking revenge on their significant other, but then refuse to engage sexually with their romantic partner as a way of getting even. They do not see this reaction as seeking revenge upon their romantic partner.

Despite these limitations, this study provides support for increased trait anger being associated with intimate partner aggression in college-aged romantic relationships; specifically, trait anger is related to thinking about revenge, engaging in vengeful behavior, and verbal impulsivity in a romantic relationship. This is important as aggression and violence are common in college-aged romantic relationships, and often committed by romantic partners [4]. In a review of the literature, Carlson found that 13 to 61 percent of college students

have been aggressed upon, with their romantic partner being the most common aggressor. Specifically, several researchers found that approximately 30 percent of college students were involved in at least one violent incident in their romantic relationships over the course of their college career. As noted above, surveying 200 undergraduate students, (100 males and 100 females), Luthra and Gidycz found 25% of women admitted to using violence against their significant other, whereas only 10% of men reported using violence against their romantic partner. Similarly, Desmarais and colleagues found 28% of college women have physically abused their partners, while 21% of college men have done the same. This makes college students an at-risk group [28,40-45]. Now that increased trait anger has been associated with increased intimate partner aggression, future research would benefit from examining the predictive ability of trait anger on intimate partner aggression with the hope of being able to identify potential aggressors and intervening before they aggress.

In addition, in this study sex differences were observed. Females were more likely to admit to thinking about revenge, engaging in vengeful behaviors, being verbally and physically impulsive against their romantic partner. While research has found that revenge between romantic partners leads to relationship dissatisfaction, and potentially dissolution of the relationship, more research can help to explore how females are engaging in revenge (e.g., giving the cold shoulder, withholding sex, physically aggressing) and, thus, how to prevent it [31].

In conclusion, these findings are a necessary first step to preventing intimate partner aggression. Identifying trait anger to be related to intimate partner aggression allows for future research to examine the predictive ability of trait anger and the effect it has on intimate partner aggression.

References

1. Siebenbruner J (2013) Are college students replacing dating and romantic relationships with hooking up? *Journal of College Student Development* 54(4): 433-438.
2. Creasey G, Kershaw K, Boston A (1999) Conflict management with friends and romantic partners: The role of attachment and negative mood regulation expectancies. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 28(5): 523-543.
3. Gottman JM (1994) What predicts divorce? The relationship between marital processes and marital outcomes. NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp: 521.
4. Carlson BE (1987) Dating violence: A research review and comparison with spouse abuse. *Social Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work* 68: 16-23.
5. Hettrich EL, O'Leary KD (2007) Females' reasons for their physical aggression in dating relationships. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 22(9): 1131-1143.
6. Kocur JL, Deffenbacher JL (2014) Anger and anger's expression generally and in romantic relationships. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal* 36(1): 120-134.
7. Shaver PR, Mikulincer M (2006) Attachment theory, individual psychodynamics, and relationship functioning. In Vangelisti AL & Perlman D (Eds.), *The Cambridge handbook of personal relationships* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, pp: 251-271.
8. Lucas RE, Dyrenforth PS (2006) Does the existence of social relationships matter for subjective well-being. In Vohs KD & Finkel EJ (Eds.), *Self and relationships: Connecting intrapersonal and interpersonal processes* New York, NY: Guilford Press, pp: 254-273.
9. Myers DG (2000) The funds, friends, and faith of happy people. *Am Psychol* 55(1): 56-67.
10. Myers DG, Deiner E (1995) Who is happy? *Psychological Science* 6(1): 10-19.
11. Coombs, Robert H (1991) Marital status and personal wellbeing: A literature review. *Family Relations* 40(1): 97-102.
12. Cotten S (1999) Marital status and mental health revisited: Examining the importance of risk factors and resources. *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studie* 48(3): 225-233.
13. Simon RW (2002) Revisiting the relationships among gender, marital status, and mental health. *American Journal of Sociology* 107(4): 1065-1096.
14. Lillard LA, Waite LJ (1995) Til death do us part: Marital disruption and mortality. *American Journal of Sociology* 100(5): 1131-1156.
15. Arnett JJ (2000) Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist* 55(5): 469-480.

16. Schulenberg JE, Bryant AL, O Malley PM (2004) Taking hold of some kind of life: How developmental tasks relate to trajectories of well-being during the transition to adulthood. *Development and Psychopathology* 16(4): 1119-1140.
17. Sprecher S (1999) "I love you more today than yesterday": Romantic partners' perceptions of changes in love and related affect over time. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 76(1): 46-53.
18. Banker JE, Kaestle CE, Allen KR (2010) Dating is hard work: A narrative approach to understanding sexual and romantic relationships in young adulthood. *Contemporary Family Therapy* 32: 173-191.
19. Cramer D (2004) Satisfaction with a romantic relationship, depression, support and conflict. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, and Practice* 77 (4): 449-461.
20. Pinsker H, Nepps P, Redfield J, Winston A (1985) Applicants for short-term dynamic psychotherapy. In A. Winston (Ed.), *Clinical and research issues in short term dynamic psychotherapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, pp: 104-116.
21. Kiecolt-Glaser JK, Newton TL (2001) Marriage and health: His and hers. *Psychological Bulletin* 127(4): 472-503.
22. Cahn DD (1992) *Conflict in intimate relationships*. New York: Guilford, pp: 148.
23. Fincham FD (2000) The kiss of the porcupines: From attributing responsibility to forgiving. *Personal Relationships* 7(1): 1-23.
24. Murray SL, Holmes JG (2011) *Interdependent minds: The dynamics of close relationships*. New York, NY: Guilford Press, pp: 402.
25. Siegert JR, Stamp GH (1994) Our first big fight as a milestone in the development of close relationships. *Communication Monographs* 61(4): 345-360.
26. Halpern CT, Spriggs AL, Martin SL, Kupper LL (2009) Patterns of intimate partner violence victimization from adolescence to young adulthood in a nationally representative sample. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 45(5): 508-516.
27. Henton J, Cate R, Koval J, Lloyd S, Christopher S (1983) Romance and violence in dating relationships. *Journal of Family Issues* 4(3): 467-482.
28. Luthra R, Gidycz CA (2006) Dating violence among college men and women: Evaluation of a theoretical model. *J Interpers Violence* 21(6): 717-731.
29. O'Leary KD (1999) Developmental and affective issues in assessing and treating partner aggression. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 6(4): 400-414.
30. Straus MA (2011) Gender symmetry and mutuality in perpetration of clinical-level partner violence: Empirical evidence and implications for prevention and treatment. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 16: 279-288.
31. Boon SD, Alibhai AM, Deveau V (2011) Reflections on the costs and benefits of exacting revenge in romantic relationships. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science* 43(2): 128-137.
32. Boon SD, De Veau V, Alibhai AM (2009) Payback: The parameters of revenge in romantic relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 26(6-7): 747-768.
33. Sheppard KE, Boon SD (2012) Predicting appraisals of romantic revenge: The roles of honesty-humility, agreeableness, and vengefulness. *Personality and Individual Differences* 52(2): 128-132.
34. Kassinove H, DiBlasi T (2017) Anger Management Training. In Amy Wenzel (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Abnormal and Clinical Psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 7: 181-184.
35. Kassinove H, Tafrate RC (2002) *Anger management: The complete treatment guidebook for practitioners*. Atascadero, CA, US: Impact Publishers.
36. Averill JR (1982) *Anger and aggression: An essay on emotion*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
37. Kassinove H, Sukhodolsky DG, Tsytarev SV, Solovyova S (1997) Self-reported anger episodes in Russia and America. *Journal of Social Behavior & Personality* 12(2): 301-324.
38. Tafrate RC, Kassinove H, Dundin L (2002) Anger episodes in high and low trait anger community adults. *J Clin Psychol* 58(12): 1573-1590.
39. Spielberger CD (1999) *STAXI-2: State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory-2: Professional manual* (Rev. ed.). Lutz, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
40. Desmarais SL, Reeves KA, Nicholls TL, Telford RP, Fiebert MS (2012) Prevalence of physical violence in

- intimate relationships, Part 2: Rates of male and female perpetration. *Partner Abuse* 3(2): 170-198.
41. Lewis SF, Fremouw W (2001) Dating violence: A critical review of the literature. *Clin Psychol Rev* 21(1): 105-127.
 42. Sugarman DB, Hotaling GT (1989) Dating violence: Prevalence, context, and risk markers. In Pirog Good MA, Stets JE (Eds.), *Violence in dating relationships: Emerging social issues*. New York: Praeger, pp: 3-32.
 43. Archer J (2000) Sex differences in aggression between heterosexual partners: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin* 126(5): 651-680.
 44. Fischer AH, Evers C (2011) The social costs and benefits of anger as a function of gender and relationship context. *Sex Roles* 65: 23-34.
 45. Maldonado RC, DiLillo D, Hoffman L (2015) Can college students use emotion regulation strategies to alter intimate partner aggression-risk behaviors? An examination using I³ theory. *Psychology of Violence* 5(1): 46-55.

