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Journal of College Student Development, Volume 65, Number 1, January/February 2024, pp. 1-17 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2024.a919347

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Words Matter: How College Students Use and Understand Terms Related to Dating and Sexual Violence

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Dating and sexual violence (DSV) impact significant numbers of students on college and university campuses across the US (Cantor et al., 2019). Unfortunately, college students may not identify their experiences with DSV as such because the language they use to describe their experiences may differ from that used by university administrators in educational and policy materials. Utilizing case study methodology, we conducted 21 focus groups with 53 students and learned that students tend to describe their experiences through specific behaviors (e.g., manipulation and control) rather than terminology encompassing those behaviors (e.g., domestic violence). We provide an overview of the language students use to describe DSV and recommendations for improving policy and education as it relates to addressing DSV among college students.

College students experience dating and sexual violence (DSV) at alarming rates (Cantor et al., 2019), which have not shifted since the 1950s (Kirkpatrick & Kanin, 1957). In recent years, attention to addressing DSV among college students has increased dramatically and has focused primarily on institutional response to DSV (Collins, 2016; Tani, 2017). Unfortunately, college administrators, policymakers, and some student activists may unintentionally contribute to confusion around issues of DSV by using convoluted and overly legalistic language to describe such violence. In this study, we seek to understand how college students make sense of and describe language related to DSV.

Perceptions of DSV vary widely, as sociocultural issues shape individuals' definitions of DSV and the labeling of certain behaviors as "abusive" or "violent" (Nordin, 2021, p. 2). A disconnect in the ways that people discuss DSV may contribute to confusion about the issue, including minimization and misidentification of violence, resulting in more significant harm to victims (Hlvaka, 2014; Sabina & Ho, 2014; Sylaska & Edwards, 2015). Students in minoritized communities (e.g., queer and trans students, students of color, students with disabilities) likely also have different conceptualizations than students in dominant communities. Surveys have yielded differing rates of violence for LGBTQ and Native populations, depending on how the questions were asked. For example, the American College Health Association questions elicited fewer assaults for Native students than did the Arizona Institute for Higher Education Survey. Researchers concluded, "It is possible that the AZIHE tapped into a particular phrasing of sexual touching that resonated with the Native population" (deHeer & Jones, 2017, p. 217).

How university administrators discuss DSV may not correspond to students' understanding of various terms and experiences. This

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disconnect may result in students not recognizing some harmful behaviors as dangerous (Edwards et al., 2011). For example, many traditionally aged college students (aged 18–25) associate the term *domestic violence* with married couples (Dardis et al., 2017) and do not see themselves as someone who may be experiencing domestic violence. The disconnect between terminology and understanding has far-reaching implications for research on DSV and university responses to it. Increased attention and attempts to educate students are encouraging; however, when educators and students employ different language to talk about a shared problem, the problem will persist. To contribute to an understanding of how students make sense of and talk about DSV, we conducted a case study. Such research may inform more effective efforts to reduce or prevent DSV.

Although researchers, educators, and policymakers use different terms when discussing issues of DSV, in this manuscript, we chose to continue to use the phrase *dating and sexual violence* to set up our study as this language resonated the most among students. We use DSV as an umbrella term to encompass a number of experiences: dating or domestic violence (including emotional, financial, mental, cyber, and physical abuse), rape, sexual assault, stalking, and digital abuse. In the findings section, we use the language that study participants used to describe their understanding of behaviors associated with DSV.

Similarly, while the terms *male* and *female* are binary and refer to biological sex, most researchers (and journals) continue to use these terms as stand-ins for gender when they really mean men or women. Further, research related to interpersonal violence continues to be overly gendered and relies on heterosexist, cisgenderist terminology, ignoring or intentionally removing nonbinary participants from samples (Linder et al., 2020). Despite our desire to engage in more intentional and accurate research, we choose to use the researchers' language in our review of the literature and language that aligns with our philosophy in the findings section.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To situate our study, we explored scholarship related to communication and discourse about DSV among college students. Specifically, we organized the literature we reviewed into two major categories: (a) college students' perceptions and conceptualizations of DSV and (b) university communication with students about DSV.

College Students' Perceptions and Conceptualizations of DSV

College students typically do not consider domestic violence something that impacts them and their peers, but they do consider dating violence and relationship aggression something that they may navigate. That is, many students recognize the prevalence of harmful dating behaviors among their demographic and understand that they or their peers may encounter such situations; however, they do not often self-identify as having experienced those behaviors (Dardis et al., 2017; Nordin, 2021). Further, some students may not even identify dating or relationship violence as something that applies to them, even when they can identify harmful behaviors (Cusano et al., 2022; Munro-Kramer et al., 2022). Additionally, when college students hear the phrase *domestic violence*, they are likely to associate it with police intervention while believing dating violence requires a personal rather than a police intervention (Nordin, 2021).

Gender also influences college students' understanding of dating or domestic violence, both as the person interpreting the situation and the people engaged in DSV. College students typically considered violence perpetrated by men toward women and violence involving

physical harm as more significant than other kinds of DSV (Dardis et al., 2017; Sylaska & Walters, 2014), such as economic harm, sexual coercion or manipulation, emotional harm or manipulation, stalking, and digital tracking (Munro-Kramer et al., 2022). Students also reported taking "female-perpetrated violence" (Nordin, 2021, p. 18) less seriously than violence perpetrated by men. Further, both men and women overestimated how many of their peers perpetrate violence: Male participants believed that 39% of their peers perpetrated violence, while only 22% actually described engaging in harmful dating behaviors. Similarly, female participants believed that 46% of their female peers engaged in violence, while only 13% actually did (Witte et al., 2017). Finally, men were more likely to "view victims as responsible" for their own victimization (Sylaska & Walters, 2014, p. 142).

College students frequently misidentify issues of harm because abusive and controlling behaviors may be normalized in their relationships (Cusano et al., 2022; Emelianchik-Key et al., 2022). For example, students accurately identified behaviors as violent when asked in the abstract about the relationship between behaviors and terminology (i.e., "Would you consider X behavior violent?"). They were also more likely to identify as having experienced DSV when asked about specific behaviors (82%) as opposed to experiencing violent behavior in general (35%; Emelianchik-Key et al., 2022). The discrepancy between understanding a behavior as violent in general and not seeing that behavior as violent when directed at themselves highlights the importance of understanding how college students conceptualize and make sense of DSV.

Technology has contributed to some students' normalization of abuse (Munro-Kramer et al., 2022), including noting that excessive calling or texting or controlling a partner's friend group or whereabouts is just a regular part of relationships (Emelianchik-Key et al., 2022). Further, students explained that controlling behaviors were also normalized through media representations and observing harmful behaviors, such as name-calling and controlling behaviors between their friends and even parents (Emelianchik-Key et al., 2022).

College and University Communication About DSV

University communications about DSV are often confusing and inconsistent because they attempt to "communicate to different constituents for different purposes, and thus use different terms to mean the same or similar things" (Musselman et al., 2020, p. 148). Additionally, university communications are often confusing because there is so much ambiguity and overlap in who is responsible for addressing DSV (Lund & Thomas, 2015; Musselman et al., 2020). Specific institutional agents (e.g., Title IX officers or Equal Opportunity offices) provide information on policies related to DSV, while others (e.g., deans of students, residence life professionals, or health center staff) might provide educational resources. Other campus units, typically campus safety offices or departments of public safety, provide information on how to report incidents of violence (Hayes-Smith & Hayes-Smith, 2009; Lund & Thomas, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2015). While having information in more than one place makes sense, allowing students to access information through different avenues, having it in too many places runs the risk of providing conflicting or confusing information, both about reporting processes and educational resources (Lund & Thomas, 2015).

Generally, information about DSV is housed on university safety or police department websites, with some information also housed within sexual violence prevention or resource centers on campus (Hayes-Smith & Hayes-Smith, 2009; Lund & Thomas, 2015; Schwartz et al., 2015). Many campuses appear

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to include only information required by law, focusing heavily on policy and responses to addressing DSV (Schwartz et al., 2015). In one study, researchers evaluated the DSV content of more than 60 websites, rating them *poor*, *basic*, *adequate*, or *excellent*. About one third (35%) fell into the poor category, which included schools with no or little literature about DSV or literature that was harmful and contributed to rape myths. A similar number (32%) fell into the basic category, which included information required by law. Only 17% fell into the adequate category, which also included educational and programming information in addition to policy and response. Finally, 15% were rated excellent for including information that was "extensive and victim friendly" (Hayes-Smith & Hayes-Smith, 2009, p. 119). Similarly, authors of a study of 102 institutional websites highlighted that 88% of websites contained some information about sexual assault, with 66% having it in more than one place (Lund & Thomas, 2015).

Unfortunately, most information about DSV on university websites focuses on policies and processes for responding to violence after it occurs and directs prevention tips toward people who have the potential to be harmed, mostly women. For example, one analysis of over 40 websites highlighted that 80% of "safety tips" were directed toward women and included four themes related to safety: "There are no safe places for women, women can't trust anyone, women should never be alone, and women are vulnerable" (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2015, p. 533). Similarly, another analysis indicated that most websites dedicated to safety focus on "target hardening strategies," including strategies for walking safely (94%), emergency phones (63%), and self-defense (77%; Franklin et al., 2016, p. 371).

Most students report receiving information about sexual assault at some point during the academic year; however, they frequently do not remember what information they received and from where (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010). While most students do not remember where or what they learned, 39% reported knowing where to find information if they needed it. Universities are required to share sexual misconduct policies and statistics with students on an annual basis, yet students usually cannot recall the policy (Hayes-Smith & Levett, 2010).

While the studies mentioned in this section illuminate the strides researchers have made in attempting to understand communication, dissemination, and utilization of DSV educational programs and resources, language and knowledge gaps persist within this field of study. It is within these gaps that we situate our study about the ways college students conceptualize DSV. Specifically, the research question for our study: "What language do college students use to describe experiences of dating and sexual violence?" is meant to get at the heart of the communication barriers that persist across higher education between those who administer DSV programs and resources and those who use them. The purpose of this study was to illuminate the ways college students think about DSV to provide insight for college and university administrators striving to educate and serve students as it relates to this issue.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

A case study methodology (Stake, 1995) supported by a constructivist research paradigm (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) guided this study. We chose a case study to understand "the particularity and complexity of a single case" in a particular context (Stake 1995, p. xi). As with all campuses, the University of Utah has a particular culture around issues of DSV. In case study methodology, context is significant in understanding a phenomenon and includes "political, economic, social, cultural, historical and/or organizational factors" (Harrison

et al., 2017, Table 1). The constructivist paradigm led us to understand our topic from the perspectives of multiple truths. In particular, we understood that people's social locations and previous experiences influenced how they made sense of the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using a constructivist paradigm led us to describe our findings from the perspective of the participants, highlighting their voices wherever possible.

Research Context

We conducted this study at the University of Utah during the 2020–2021 academic year, two years after the highly publicized murder of Lauren McCluskey. McCluskey, from Pullman, Washington, ran track at the university. Someone she dated briefly fatally shot and killed her on October 18, 2018, outside of her dorm room after McCluskey had reached out to the police for help on multiple occasions (Tanner & Means, 2018). National and local media covered the murder widely, and students at the University of Utah continued to report distrust of campus police. McCluskey's parents filed a lawsuit in June 2019 (Tanner, 2020) and settled the lawsuit in October 2021, with the university acknowledging some responsibility for mishandling the case.

Additionally, we conducted this study during a global pandemic, which affected our research processes. We chose to move forward with the study and conducted focus groups via Zoom. The fact that we could not go to students where they were to observe and engage with them in their usual campus environments impacted the ability to reach students beyond cisgender white heterosexual women who typically volunteer to participate in studies like this one (Harris et al., 2020; Linder et al., 2020). We intended to visit campus cultural centers, the LGBT resource center, and other spaces where historically minoritized students congregate to introduce ourselves and invite participation in the study. Because we could not do that, our recruitment efforts suffered tremendously, resulting in a relatively homogenous group of participants.

Research Team

Three faculty members organized a research team of five undergraduate and three graduate students to assist in data collection. Our research team represented six different disciplines or departments. The three PIs have previous experience examining issues of DSV, and our combined expertise on campus climates, criminology, communication and marketing, and management resulted in an interdisciplinary approach.

We trained student members of the research team to conduct focus groups. Students practiced conducting focus groups and recorded the sessions to receive feedback from the PIs prior to starting the study. The practice focus groups were not included in the data for this study. Undergraduate and graduate student members of the research team paired up to conduct the focus groups, and we engaged in bi-weekly research team meetings throughout the process to understand how the focus groups were going and provide ongoing training and professional development for the researchers. Additionally, as part of the research team meetings, each member of the research team reflected on what they were learning from the process and how they were thinking about the data collected.

In particular, members of the research team noted the ways that students conflated issues of campus safety with violence prevention, resulting in rich discussions among the research team members about our own perceptions of safety and violence. Additionally, several members of the research team, especially undergraduate students, explored how their identities as survivors of violence influenced how they heard what student participants shared in the focus groups. We processed this in research team meetings

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and encouraged researchers to journal about their own experiences so that they could relate to student participants whose experiences were similar to and different from their own.

Data Collection Methods and Analysis

Case study methodology requires that researchers employ a variety of data collection strategies to ensure triangulation of the data (Stake, 1995). In the larger study, we conducted focus groups, completed an inventory of educational programs and resources, and engaged in an analysis of policy related to DSV. We detail the findings of the inventories elsewhere(Linder et al., 2022). In this paper, we examine the findings from the focus groups about the language students use to discuss DSV, so we describe the data collection and analysis for the focus groups.

Focus groups. We recruited students to participate in focus groups by advertising in a variety of online campus forums, including the campus-wide student organization listserv, college-specific listservs, and personal invitations from members of the research team. Further, one of the PIs was teaching a criminology course during the data collection period and offered it as an opportunity for a class assignment. We offered the opportunity to win a $50 Amazon gift card as an incentive to participate in the study, and we awarded one gift card in each focus group.

We conducted 21 focus groups with 53 students on Zoom over the course of five months (October 2020 through February 2021). The focus group questions primarily focused on understanding students' associations with particular words or phrases related to DSV. Our protocol included the following:

> We use a lot of different terms to talk about the issue of unhealthy relationships or violence in relationships. We're going to list some of the common ones in the chat box and ask that you share with us your thoughts and reactions to the different phrases. (Note to researcher: Put them in the chat box). There are no right or wrong answers. We just want to get a sense of what the different words mean to different people. What do you think about when you hear these phrases? Are there similarities and differences?

- intimate partner violence
- relationship violence
- domestic violence
- dating violence
- sexual violence

Researchers then followed up on the information shared by participants and explored additional language they might use. Specifically, we asked each focus group, "Any other terms or language you might use to describe related issues?" and "Are there particular words or phrases that you feel like people who work on campus should be using to talk about these issues with students?"

Data analysis. We held biweekly research team meetings to begin processing the data throughout the data collection process. Members of the research team reflected on what we learned and kept researcher memos throughout the process. We had the audio recordings from the focus groups professionally transcribed, and then a member of the research team reviewed each transcript to fill in the sections that the transcriptionist could not decipher.

Using case study methodology, we sought to understand our research questions (how do college students make sense of language related to DSV?) by talking with college students about their understanding. Consistent with qualitative research, including case study methodology, we engaged in a cyclical coding process (Saldaña, 2009) that included an initial reading, collective development of codes, and then a close reading of each transcript to identify the themes in the data. To begin, each of the three PIs reviewed

three transcripts and made notes about the ideas emerging from the data. Next, the three PIs met to develop a codebook based on our collective notes. The codebook consisted of 16 primary themes and 35 subthemes. We also included a code called "hot spot" so that we could capture anything that seemed significant yet did not fit into one of the codes. The three PIs served as primary coders, each coding seven transcripts. Student researchers served as secondary coders to ensure that each transcript had at least two researchers looking at it. The entire research team then met to discuss the codes and highlighted data to organize the codes into themes.

Demographics. Forty-six undergraduate students and seven graduate students participated in our focus groups. The average age of participants was 22 years old, and participants' ages ranged from 19 to 63. Additional demographics of participants are included in Table 1. Additionally, to provide context for the students' quotes used below, we include demographic profiles of participants quoted in the paper (Table 2).

Table 1.
Participant Demographics

	n	%
College Level		
Undergraduate	46	86.8
Graduate	7	13.2
Racial/Ethnic Identity		
White	38	71.7
Asian	9	17.0
Latinx	3	5.6
Multi-racial	2	3.8
Middle Eastern	1	1.9
Gender		
Cis Women	39	73.6
Cis Men	8	15.1
Non-binary	1	1.9%
No Answer	5	9.4
Sexual Orientation		
Straight	38	71.7
Bisexual	9	17.0
Gay, lesbian	2	3.8
Queer/Questioning	4	7.5
Religious Affiliation		
Atheist/Agnostic	25	47.2
Christian (Non-LDS)	9	17.0
LDS	6	11.3
Buddhist	4	7.5
Muslin	3	5.6
Spiritual	4	7.5
No Answer	2	3.8
Major		
Business	7	13.2
Social science	10	18.9
Sociology	13	24.5
Psychology	10	18.9
Science & engineering	8	15.1
Communication	3	5.6
Fine arts	1	1.9
Undecided	1	1.9

FINDINGS

In the following sections, we highlight the ways college students at this institution described and discussed specific terms related to DSV, including intimate partner violence, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual violence, relationship violence, and sexual misconduct. We highlight our findings in a visual representation in Figure 1.

Intimate Partner Violence

Students indicated that the term *intimate partner violence* was something used by academics that rarely held any specific meaning for them outside an academic space. Some students like Adrienne identified intimate partner violence as a research term: "I feel like intimate partner violence is a very academic term, and that's what

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Table 2.
Participant Demographics of Those Quoted

Pseudonym	Age	Year in school	Race/ethnicity	Gender	Sexuality
Airah	30	1st-year undergraduate	Asian	Cis woman	Straight/heterosexual
Hannah	20	3rd-year undergraduate	White	Cis woman	Bisexual
Sarah	23	3rd-year undergraduate	White	Cis woman	Bisexual
Mae	19	2nd-year undergraduate	White	Cis woman	Straight/heterosexual
Victoria	20	3rd-year undergraduate	Latinx	Cis woman	Questioning
G	23	3rd-year undergraduate	Asian	Cis woman	Straight/heterosexual
Laura	19	2nd-year undergraduate	White	Cis woman	Straight/heterosexual
Hailey	Prefer not to answer	Prefer not to answer	Prefer not to answer	Prefer not to answer	Prefer not to answer
Marie	20	2nd-year undergraduate	White	Cis woman	Straight/heterosexual
Mavis	20	3rd-year undergraduate	Middle Eastern	Cis woman	Bisexual/pansexual
Gray	20	3rd-year undergraduate	White/Iraqi	Cis man	Straight/heterosexual
Emma	21	4th-year undergraduate	White	Cis woman	Bisexual
Anna	19	2nd-year undergraduate	White	Cis woman	Straight/heterosexual
Roger	20	3rd-year undergraduate	White	Cis man	Straight/heterosexual
Beagles	22	Graduate student	White	Cis woman	Straight/heterosexual
Nicole	23	5th-year undergraduate	White	Cis woman	Straight/heterosexual

you would use in research the majority of the time." Other students connected the term with coursework, as Rose shared, "I've only heard this type of phrase when I started my criminology courses." Finally, some students described the term as "clinical" or "maybe like a diagnosis."

Domestic Violence

Students in this study associated the term *domestic violence* with physical abuse, legal issues, and police. They specifically related it to heterosexual married couples. As Airah noted, it seemed to have little relevance to students' lives:

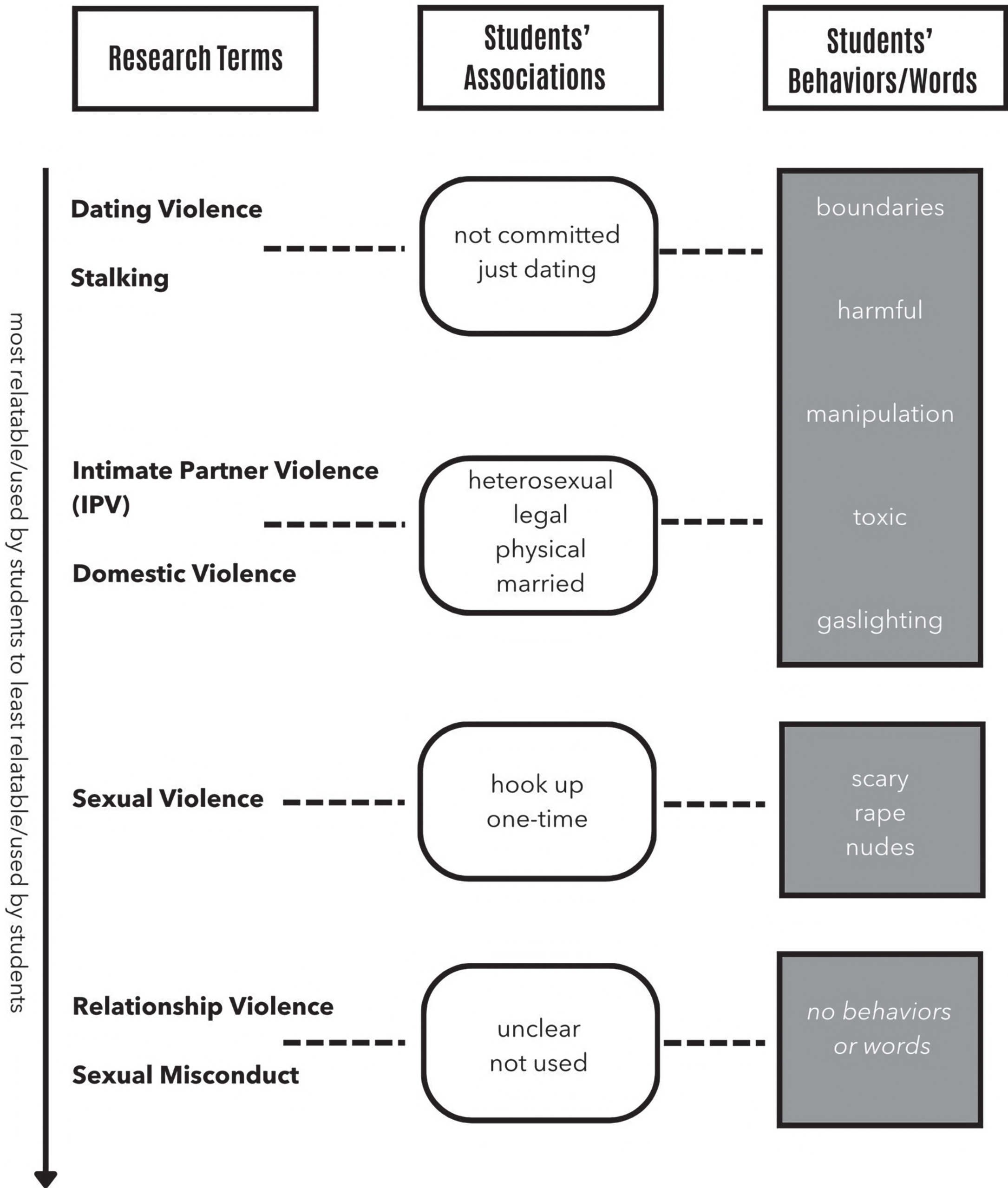

FIGURE 1. Dating Violence Terms and Associations

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> I think when I hear domestic violence, I have this image of this old married couple. I think that that's a term that was used a lot more historically, and now I feel like it's shifted. However, I don't know because I feel like domestic violence people still bring up that concept a lot.

This student's reference to "domestic violence people" likely refers to academics, advocates, and others who work directly in the field of prevention and response. This reference calls attention to the fact that "domestic violence people" and students likely use different terms and associations when discussing DSV.

Students also associated domestic violence with physical abuse, which is also closely associated with the police and legal proceedings, as highlighted by Hannah,

> I guess when I hear the police responded to a domestic violence case or something like that, I automatically assume more physical violence rather than emotional . . . so when you hear domestic violence, you kind of automatically know it's a very bad situation.

Hannah's reference to physical violence as a "very bad situation" illustrates how physical abuse is often considered "worse" than other kinds of abuse. As a result, people may think their situation is not "that bad" if it does not include physical abuse. Sarah made this point as well:

> Domestic violence is like a real charge you can get, like, I don't think like you can be charged for like relationship violence. I think it falls under, and I also feel like it just is physical assault . . . I also tend to think of domestic violence more with heterosexual couples. Cause I've seen it more with a husband and wife, and there's more stories about it.

As Sarah noted here, domestic violence is something one can be "charged" with; it is against the law because it includes physical abuse. This perspective illustrates how students conflate and muddle legal consequences with physical violence, assuming that for something to be harmful, it must be illegal, when in reality, many behaviors are harmful, even if they do not fall under an "illegal" category.

Sarah and Airah's perspectives also illuminated another connotation of the term domestic violence: heterosexuality. Many students explicitly said that they think of heterosexual couples when they hear domestic violence and that they imagine the abuser as a man and the victim as a woman. Mae commented,

> In general, I associate men with the abuser and women with victim, just because stereotypically and statistically, more men will hit a woman than a woman will hit a man. Or at least it will be classified as abuse. Usually, when women hit men, it's seen as teasing; it's not necessarily taken as seriously.

Overall, students associated the term domestic violence with legal issues, heterosexual married couples, and physical abuse or assault. The term did not resonate with them or seem to have relevance to their lives or their peers' lives.

Dating Violence

The term *dating violence* resonated the most with students out of the terms we explored in the study, and students described very specific behaviors falling under this umbrella. In particular, students noted that dating violence included manipulation, controlling behaviors, and cyber-abuse.

Manipulative behavior. Students thoroughly described many experiences related to manipulation they had personally observed among their siblings and peers. They highlighted experiences that involved violation of boundaries, gaslighting, emotional manipulation, and threats as examples of manipulation. Participants used each of these words and phrases and then provided specific examples of the behaviors. For

example, Victoria described abusers' violation of boundaries as a form of manipulation,

> I think a lot of times in new relationships, especially when you start the dating period, there's a lot of things left unsaid . . . So, I think a lot of times, abusers will kind of push their boundaries as far as they can. They'll see how you react to name-calling or how you react to being pressured into things like going out or having sex, just trying to see how far they can take it.

Several students shared experiences of a dating partner engaging in emotional manipulation to remain connected to someone who no longer wanted to be in the relationship, as described by Emma,

> It's like they scare you into thinking that if you leave them, they're going to kill themselves. Or if you leave them, something bad is going to happen. And that just takes such a mental toll on yourself that you forget everything that the reasons why you want to break up and the bad things they've done to where it's just like, 'Oh, I need to stay with this person to make sure they're safe regardless of what they've done.'

As alluded to in Emma's example of manipulation, students also experienced threats as a significant part of dating violence patterns. Students in focus groups discussed many different kinds of threats, including threats to cause physical harm, demonstrating dominance, and calling the police. For example, G shared,

> My ex would just do these threats that were very aggressive . . . that were kind of scary. I remember my ex would break stuff next to me to show dominance, but it was in a threatening way. I feel like it was a message to show dominance to show what could happen if I messed up or something.

Atlas noted how a friend of his experienced a threat related to his immigration status, which is a common tactic of abuse,

> I think another one that comes to mind with my friend I previously mentioned: after their fight had broken out, the one thing that was said was, since he is an illegal immigrant, she said, 'Well, I'm just going to tell them to ship you out. I don't care anymore.' And that's extremely dangerous in that sense, that it could just ruin his life completely.

Controlling or obsessive behaviors. Abusers commonly use threats to cause harm to themselves, their partners, or partners' family members as a strategy to control a significant other. Students described several other controlling or obsessive behaviors that partners used to maintain power in the relationship. For example, Laura described witnessing "obsessiveness" in romantic relationships:

> From just what I've personally seen, it's a lot of times like kind of almost seen as romantic at first where it's like if someone gets jealous over you, that's seen as really sweet, and they like me so much, and then that leads to an unhealthy place.

Patty chimed in, agreeing,

> Another thing that could also be the controlling aspect is, obviously, they want to know who you're with, where you're going . . . Then also, there could be a thing where they have to constantly check your phone to see who you're texting, what you're doing on your phone, or they're constantly asking you what you're doing.

Marie described this as micromanagement in the relationship,

> I know that I've had a past relationship where I was being micromanaged. Essentially, that was really invading both my personal space and just boundaries by being, 'Where are you? Who are you with? Don't text this person. You need to be home this time. This is what you're going to wear today.'

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She continued, describing ways a boyfriend controlled her roommate's physical appearance by removing food from their refrigerator that was not "healthy."

> And he thought that it was in his power to take things from her to keep her fit. So, things that she had bought at the grocery store would go missing from the fridge if it wasn't healthy. Snacks from her room would go missing and be found in the garbage can a couple of days later. And to me, that starts to affect your physical body . . . that's physical violence. You're starving her to death, or you're starving her because you don't think she should gain more weight.

Cyber abuse. Students clearly identified and described "obsessive," "controlling," or "micromanaging" behavior as harmful behaviors that fell into the category of dating violence. Further, many students tied obsessive, controlling behavior to social media and technology abuse, as described by Mavis,

> Another thing I would add to that is cyberstalking . . . he would create a lot of different social media accounts to talk to me and text me from different numbers, leave me voicemails from different numbers, and send me a bunch of emails from emails that he created. And it made me feel very unsafe and especially paranoid online, knowing that anybody that messaged me or friended me could have been him.

Gray, a student in a different focus group, shared,

> I think for me, the bouncing back on the whole social media thing that I've noticed is this interaction of managing or maintaining each other's online followers or friendships. A lot of people will ask their partner to block someone or unfriend someone because they may have left a nice comment or a like . . . And I think it's just a really messy and abusive system where one person tries to control the other out of jealousy.

Students clearly described technology as a tool for partners to engage in controlling or abusive behaviors.

College students in our study resonated most clearly with the term dating violence when it came to discussing dangerous or harmful behaviors in dating relationships. They identified and described a number of behaviors associated with dating violence, including manipulation, control, gaslighting, and technology abuse.

Sexual Violence

Students in our study also understood the term *sexual violence*. While it resonated with them, participants distinguished it from dating violence. They considered dating violence to be behaviors that happened in ongoing relationships, while sexual violence was more likely to occur in one-time situations, like a date or a hookup. Students primarily associated sexual violence with rape and sexual assault, and a few students discussed technology-related sexual abuse like revenge porn or sharing "nudes" without the consent of the person in the photo.

Contrary to the discussion about the term dating violence, participants did not name many specific behaviors to describe sexual violence. Instead, they referred to rape and sexual assault, implicitly assuming a shared understanding of those terms and behaviors. Participants also frequently associated consent/non-consent with sexual violence throughout the discussions, as described by Gretchen, "The first thing I think of is consent talking about sexual violence. I think that's, I mean, that was one of the very first terms that was said, and I think that's like the basis of sexual violence is not having consent."

The most commonly used example of a specific behavior included "forcing" someone to engage in sexual behavior, as described by Emma,

> When I hear sexual violence, I immediately think of rape and unwanted touching, kissing anything, and also being like forced to. So, rape or being forced to kiss someone or someone pressuring you into it to the point where you feel like you can't say no or else you might be hurt or be forced to. So, you just kind of give in . . . I think it is the scariest and is always uncomfortable situations.

Throughout the focus groups, students referred to sexual violence as "dangerous" or "scary," as highlighted by Emma above and G below,

> I think [sexual violence] like the scariest [term] to me, but I don't know if, like maybe, it's because I'm a woman and I think like at such a young age that was just drilled in my head is like one of the most awful things that could happen to someone.

Anna explained that when she thinks of sexual violence, she thinks of "dangerous situations in college." Although most students described sexual violence happening in one-time, hookup, or dating situations, a few students acknowledged that sexual violence could happen in longer-term relationships, as described by Roger,

> I think if you use the word sexual violence, most people are going to imagine someone forcing themselves on somebody else. Whereas I think sexual violence, I think of coercing someone in a relationship essentially being, 'Oh, if you don't sleep with me, I won't love you.' . . . It's more of the manipulation or abuse of the relationship.

Overall, the term sexual violence resonated with students, and they connected it to rape and sexual assault, saw it as something "scary" or "dangerous," and associated it with force and non-consent. Further, students highlighted sexual violence as a term that applied mostly to non-committed relationships, though a few acknowledged that rape and sexual assault could be a pattern in domestic and dating violence situations.

Sexual Misconduct

Students' response to the term *sexual misconduct* was straightforward: confusion and vagueness. Sexual misconduct is used throughout university policies and educational programming, yet students do not understand what the term means, and it does not resonate with them in any way, as highlighted by Beagles,

> There is still so much gray area, especially with sexual misconduct. It is such a broad term that you think, 'Did I experience sexual misconduct?' You might not relate to that word because it holds so many different meanings and such a broad word that you might think, 'I don't know if I experienced sexual misconduct,' but you definitely feel uncomfortable. You definitely did not consent to whatever happened to you, and you probably did experience sexual misconduct.

In addition to the term being vague and creating doubt about whether experiences constituted sexual misconduct, some students indicated that the term minimized what actually happened to people. Nicole explained this,

> I think conversations where we chalk everything up to sexual misconduct or inappropriate conduct, instead of actually calling it what it ends up being, is something that comes to mind as a minimizing activity around this.

Since students already minimize their experiences with violence (Nordin, 2021), using language that contributes to this minimization may not be the most effective strategy for engaging students in conversations about the seriousness of DSV.

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DISCUSSION

We sought to understand the language students at the University of Utah used to discuss issues of DSV so that we could make recommendations to university personnel about how to communicate with students more effectively. Given the current context of this institution, students had a heightened awareness of DSV, especially homicide, in the context of dating relationships. To begin, we explored the ways college students in our study discussed a variety of terms and behaviors and the relationships between those terms and behaviors.

Students generally categorized intimate partner violence and domestic violence together and noted that such phenomena typically included physical assaults, though some students also acknowledged the emotional and mental aspects of intimate partner violence and domestic violence. Consistent with previous research, students indicated that the terms did not resonate with them (Dardis et al., 2017; Nordin, 2021) because they considered them to be things that happened to "old, married couples," not them. Of note, both heterosexual and queer students associated with these terms with heterosexual relationships.

The term dating violence seemed to hold the most relevance to students' lives, and they associated stalking and emotional and mental abuse with this term. Students held complex understandings of specific behaviors associated with dating violence, including gaslighting, emotional manipulation, obsessive and controlling behaviors, stalking, and degrading a partner's physical appearance or intelligence. Given the recent attention the University of Utah has garnered related to DSV, students at this institution may be more attuned to specific behaviors that constitute violence. While the examples provided by students were generally consistent, one note is that a participant who identified as an immigrant to the US noted the ways that immigration status could be used by an abusive partner as a form of manipulation and control. Unfortunately, many participants also minimized controlling behaviors as a form of "miscommunication" or "micromanaging" rather than abuse or control. Consistent with previous research, this minimization of behaviors illustrates how some types of abuse have become normalized as a part of regular dating relationships (Cusano et al., 2022; Munro-Kramer et al., 2022; Rich et al., 2022).

Generally, students thought of sexual violence as separate from intimate partner violence, domestic violence, and dating violence, and they noted that it included sexual assault and rape. Additionally, students associated issues of technological abuse, including revenge porn and sharing "nudes" without permission, with sexual violence. Students associated sexual violence with one-time engagements (e.g., one date or hookup), while dating violence happened in long-term or ongoing relationships. Students reported that the term sexual misconduct, frequently used by university administrators, was vague and held little meaning for them.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students' perspectives about terminology related to DSV indicate that there is no easy answer for communicating with them about these important issues. Their perspectives on DSV are as diverse as the students on our campuses. In exploring various terminology related to DSV among college students, we learned that many students understand specific problematic behaviors associated with dating violence, though the terms intimate partner violence and domestic violence do not resonate with them. Additionally, we learned that while many students can identify the problematic behaviors associated with dating violence, including violating boundaries, emotional manipulation,

controlling behaviors, and stalking, they also frequently minimized these behaviors as "miscommunication" or "micromanaging." Students also did not understand the term sexual misconduct, as it is too vague and confusing.

To this end, we recommend that administrators and educators identify specific behaviors when discussing DSV among college students rather than relying on broad terms (e.g., Has a partner tried to control your behavior with technology or other mechanisms? vs. Have you experienced dating violence?) While researchers have worked to ask students about behaviors rather than terminology (Nordin, 2021), this is more difficult to do in educational programming. Advertising for a workshop about dating violence by listing specific behaviors would be cumbersome compared to using one overarching term. Still, as educational programming moves to online spaces, educators may consider engaging in longer or ongoing campaigns about specific behaviors rather than focusing on general terminology. Using students' words like "miscommunication" and "micromanaging" may help them identify abusive behaviors earlier in a relationship and seek help.

Further, discussing specific behaviors, rather than terminology, may also help people who are engaging in harmful behavior see the behavior as problematic. Terminology, like domestic violence or even dating violence, may make people engaged in harmful behavior feel defensive. They may not consider their behavior violent, but if they understood that tracking their partner's whereabouts via social media or telling their partner what to wear or eat were harmful behaviors, they might be more likely to consider changing their behavior.

Finally, we recommend that college and university administrators and educators stop using the term sexual misconduct in educational materials and programs for students. The term emerges from a legal context yet means very little outside that context. It is an all-encompassing term that makes writing policy easier, but students do not see themselves or their experiences in this terminology. Students report that the term sexual misconduct is vague and confusing and, worse, may minimize their experiences with harm.

CONCLUSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Unfortunately, as with most research on this topic, our participants identified as overwhelmingly white, cisgender, and women. We are further contributing to the problem of centering white cisgender women in the work of addressing DSV among college students. In future research, rather than recruiting participants generally, we recommend intentionally conducting research focused on minoritized students' experiences and perceptions of language and terminology related to DSV.

Engaging college students around issues of harm and violence as they seek to develop dating or romantic relationships remains of profound importance. Having a common language to do so requires diligence on the part of educators and administrators through continual interaction with students and flexibility in discussions. Our contribution to the discussion includes challenging educators, researchers, and administrators to focus more intentionally on specific problematic behaviors associated with dating violence, stop using the term sexual misconduct in educational programming, and correct misperceptions of campus safety and stranger danger among college students.

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