

Commitment and Acceptance of Relationship Violence

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ABSTRACT: Dating violence is often thought of as a precursor for spousal abuse and that understanding is beneficial. However, according to Makepeace (1981), the reasons that married individuals give for remaining in violent relationships do not apply to courtship relationships, thus inspiring the question as to why do individuals in dating relationships remain in abusive relationships. Emotional commitment has been a prominent response and has been found to play a powerful role in the individual's acceptance of violence and the outcome of the relationship (Arriaga, 2002). For this reason, it is believed that individuals in committed relationships will be more accepting of violence in a relationship than those who are not in committed relationships. This study is particularly applicable to college students because the potential impact of these findings could provide greater prevention of violence as well as increased knowledge about domestic violence. Data collection was done by means of distributing 300 group-administered surveys to students in classes at the University of Central Florida (UCF) main campus. UCF Victim Services information was given as a resource on the consent form to protect human subjects, that is, those who were 18 years or older. Modified versions of established scales were used to add to the reliability of the measures. Findings indicated that as the level of commitment increases, the acceptability of violence decreases.

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INTRODUCTION

Although there is a developing body of literature in the area of domestic violence, there remains a void in research focused on premarital violence. Until the pioneering research of Makepeace (1981), the prevalence of violence in dating relationships was relatively unknown. Increased interest in this gap occurred because of the obvious benefits such research could provide to the topic of relationship-oriented violence. According to Makepeace (1981), the reasons that married individuals give for remaining in violent relationships do not always apply to courtship relationships, thus inspiring the question, "Why do individuals in dating relationships remain in abusive relationships?" Emotional commitment has been a prominent response to this question (Arriaga, 2002; Billingham, 1987; Carlson, 1999; Mills & Malley-Morrison, 1998; Strube & Barbour, 1983). In Sternberg's (1988) triangular theory of love, he suggests that love is comprised of three components: (a) intimacy (i.e., mutual understanding and high regard), (b) passion (i.e., physical attraction, drive for affiliation), and (c) commitment (i.e., decision to initiate and maintain the relationship). When all three aspects are present and in balanced proportion, the result is what Sternberg referred to as consummate love. The existing research literature finds that emotional commitment plays a very powerful role in the acceptance of the violence as well as the outcome of the relationship (Arriaga, 2002). The current study addresses the issue of the relationship between emotional commitment and attitudes toward violence in courtship relationships, specifically romantic relationships, in students at the University of Central Florida.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Estimates of violence in relationships vary depending on involvement in violence and the type of violence used. According to Makepeace (1981), 61.5% of respondents knew of someone involved in courtship violence, while the percent that had experienced violence themselves ranged from 16.7% to 32% (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001; Makepeace, 1986; Makepeace, 1981). Nearly 93% of men and 97% of women reported engaging in verbal aggression against their current dating partner, whereas 30% of men and 34% of women reported physically aggressing against their partner (Riggs & O'Leary, 1996). A later study found that among college students, 82% had engaged in verbally aggressive behavior with a dating partner, whereas 21% had behaved in a physically aggressive manner toward their partner (Shook, Gerrity, Jurich, & Segrist, 2000). Sexual abuse by a dating partner or spouse was evidenced by 39.58% of women (Beyers, Leonard, Mays, & Rosen, 2000).

Although prevalence estimates are relatively stable, research is inconsistent with the findings of when violence actually occurs. Roscoe and Benaske (1985) reported that 86% of physical violence occurred in seriously committed relationships while the other 14% occurred in dating or casual relationships. In contrast, Strube and Barbour (1983) found that in 60% of relationships abuse started at the beginning of the relationship. These contradicting results may vary depending on what theory is used to explain them. Billingham (1987) suggested that, when violence is present in the early stages of a relationship, it is accepted as a conflict tactic and will therefore persist throughout the course of the relationship. However, violence may also serve as a test before a greater emotional level can be reached, serving as a catalyst for commitment (Billingham, 1987).

The issue of when violence occurs may also shape the effect of violence on the relationship. With the introduction of violence, Makepeace (1981) found that 55.3% of respondents broke off the relationship, 15.8% reported no change in the relationship, and 28.9% reported deeper involvement. However, a later study by Roscoe and Benaske (1985) found that 41% ended the relationship, 32% said the relationship became worse, 22% reported no change, and 5% said an abusive incident led to improvement in relationship. Another study focused on the victim's and perpetrator's perceptions of the effects of teen dating violence revealed that when violence entered into the relationship, 30% of victims and 37% of perpetrators felt it had no effect on the relationship, 33% of victims and 26% of perpetrators thought it hurt the relationship, 21% of victims and 17% of perpetrators believed the violence improved the relationship, and 12% of victims and 14% of perpetrators felt it ended the relationship (O'Keeffe, Brockopp, & Chew, 1986).

The interpretation of the violent act greatly affects the acceptability of violence. Acceptability is influenced by several factors. Dibble and Straus (1980) found that peer violence was more acceptable than dating violence because the reasons for engaging in violence, self-defense and provocation, were viewed as more acceptable. This is interpreted to mean that normative assessments of violence may vary with contextual conditions. Further research supports that the victim/aggressor relationship and the social context have been found to influence the meaning given to the violence (Makepeace, 1981). The type of violence used also influences the acceptability of

the violent act, with emotional/psychological abuse viewed as more typical and acceptable than sexual or physical violence (Beyers, Leonard, Mays & Rosen, 2000; Mills & Malley-Morrison, 1998). However, females have been found to believe that physical force cannot be justified in any situation, while men hold that it can be justified in certain situations (Follingstad, Wright, Lloyd, & Sebastian, 1991). But it is not only the type of violence that makes an act more or less acceptable: the perceived seriousness of the violence can alter viewpoints (Miller & Bukva, 2001).

Research also reveals that certain factors may make an individual more susceptible to becoming a victim of abuse. One study reported that an association exists between relationship dependency and both dating violence and immature relationship scripts (Charkow & Nelson, 2000). The same study found that female college students who are in dependent relationships are more likely to be in an abusive relationship and that relationship dependency was related to being both a perpetrator and a victim of abuse. Another study found that individuals who had witnessed both parents engaging in marital aggression were the most likely to be the victim of dating aggression (Jankowski, Leitenberg, Henning, & Coffey, 1999). This study also showed that those who witnessed their same-sex parent perpetrate marital violence increased their likelihood of committing physical aggression against a dating partner. These findings support the theory of intergenerational transmission of violence, suggesting that violence is learned through observed behavior.

When violence enters into a relationship, those individuals in the abusive relationship must make a single decision, i.e., continue or end the relationship. However, reaching that decision is not always a clear-cut path because the violent act may not always fit with past experiences and may be seen as an exception and not the beginning of a continuing trend. This theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) provides a rationale for the individual to make the inconsistent facts mesh with their beliefs to provide peace of mind once again. Reinterpreting and attribution are two ways in which the committed individual in the relationship can accept the violence. Mills and Malley-Morrison (1998) found that moderately committed individuals attribute abuse to more of the abuser's internal characteristics while highly committed individuals attribute the cause of the violent act to themselves or the situation. Reinterpretation occurs when violence is re-evaluated to be less serious, for

example, joking as a means to avoid negative reactions from others (Arriaga, 2002). The insider-outsider perspective is founded on the reinterpretation of violence as less serious than what it actually is (Carlson, 1999).

Until now, research has been very limited with regard to levels of emotional commitment and the relationship to attitudes about violence in relationships. One study by Mills and Malley-Morrison (1998), addressed the issues of commitment, acceptability, and explanations for violent behavior, but their results found no support between highly committed individuals and increased acceptability of abusive behavior. The proposed research aims to examine the relationship between commitment and acceptability of relationship violence. It is hypothesized that those individuals in committed relationships will be more accepting of violence than those who are not in committed relationships.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection was done by means of group-administered quantitative surveys to classes at the University of Central Florida main campus. Permission to administer a research survey during class time was asked of several professors. Those professors who accepted the proposal determined which classes would serve as the research group. Due to time constraints imposed upon the researcher, this study will be cross sectional and the classes chosen were for convenience purposes.

A sample of 332 questionnaires was distributed to the classes to obtain a convenience sample of college students at the University of Central Florida. A usable sample of 312 surveys was collected, giving this study a 94% response rate. The results are only generalizable to the UCF population since the units of analysis were students in classes at UCF. The only restriction placed on the sample is that respondents had to be at least 18 years old to participate in the study of attitudes toward dating/courtship violence. This restriction was set to keep with previous research, which adds to the reliability of the findings and protects minors.

To protect the human subjects, an informed consent form was attached to every survey to be read and detached by each respondent to be eligible for participation in the survey. Having the respondents detach the signed consent form from the survey instrument ensured respondent anonymity. In addition, the survey instrument did not have questions that required the respondents to identify themselves by name or identification code. The

participants were told that the study was researching relationship behavior. Since the subject matter of the survey deals with relationship violence, which could be upsetting to some of the respondents, contact information for the UCF Victim Services was provided as a resource.

The current study aims to find a relationship between commitment, the independent variable, and attitudes toward relationship violence, the dependent variable. The idea of commitment is defined as the level of emotional commitment, which ranges from casual dating with little emotional commitment to engagement. This concept was measured using a modified version of Billingham's (1987) 7-level scale. Mills and Malley-Morrison (1998) added an additional item of "no emotional commitment" to make it an 8-level scale. For those individuals taking the survey who were married, there was an added category for "someone with whom you are married." This modified 9-level scale is a more effective indicator of commitment than the length of the relationship because numerous couples are together for years and are not committed to the relationship, while others may be emotionally attached and only together for a short period of time.

Dating/courting is defined as romantic relationships prior to marriage and can be determined by the respondent's indication of marital status. Relationship violence is defined as behavior directed toward a partner that is abusive in a psychological/emotional, physical, and/or sexual manner. Abusive behavior was measured using Shepard and Campbell's (1992) Abusive Behavior Inventory in a modified form, similar to the recommendations used by Mills and Malley-Morrison (1998). The characteristics that did not apply to dating couples were removed from the index while characteristics were added to make sexual abuse its own category. Two of the four added characteristics were obtained from Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs (1985). For each of the items in the inventory, respondents were asked about frequency on a Likert-type scale from 1-never to 5-very frequently and about normalcy of behavior in a relationship on a scale from 1-highly unacceptable to 4-highly acceptable. The use of established measures added to the reliability of the measures themselves and created a standard for the body of literature dealing with this topic.

The items in this inventory were grouped by sexual, physical, or psychological violence to create computed variables. Seven items made up the sexual frequency variable with a possible range of 7-35 (actual range 7-18), seven items composed the physical frequency variable

with a possible range of 7-35 (actual range 7-18), and sixteen items made up the psychological frequency variable with a possible range of 16-80 (actual range 16-52). Again, seven items composed the sexual violence acceptance variable producing a range of 7-28 (actual range 7-19), seven items made up the physical violence acceptance variable with a possible range of 7-28 (actual range 7-15), and sixteen items made up the psychological violence acceptance variable with a possible range of 16-64 (actual range 16-37). Those participants who indicated they were not involved in a relationship (48%) were asked to respond only to the questions concerning acceptability items. Those individuals in relationships were asked to complete both frequency and acceptability components.

The variable length of relationship in months had to be recoded so that the standard deviation would not be skewed because a few respondents had been married, thus affecting the results (i.e., outlier data). The resulting standard deviation was then recalculated to be 30.03 with a mean of 24.77 months.

HYPOTHESIS AND RESULTS

Hypothesis

It was postulated that individuals in committed relationships will be more accepting of violence in a relationship than those who are not in committed relationships. To test the hypothesis, correlations were run to test the relationship between commitment and physical, sexual, and psychological violence acceptance. Additional correlations were run to test relationships between commitment and physical, sexual, and psychological frequency of violence. In each of these instances, the test was run once with all respondent responses, and then again with responses split by gender to see if males or females answered differently.

Results

To get an overall view of responses and to examine for errors in data entry, frequencies of certain variables were calculated. The age of respondents in this sample ranged from 18-53 years, with the mean age of 21 years and a standard deviation of 3.9. Forty percent of the sample was male, which is representative of the University of Central Florida student population. Approximately 48% percent of respondents were not in a relationship, 45% were in dating relationships, and close to 6% were married (refer to Figure 1). Respondents were also asked about their current living arrangements, revealing that the vast majority of students lived with roommates (refer to Figure 2). There was a fairly equal distribution of students

who were in their first, second, third, and fourth year of college, with a good portion of respondents indicating they were in their fifth year (refer to Figure 3). Length of relationship was also asked of respondents to see if there was a relationship between length of relationship and acceptability of violence. Respondents were asked to self rate their commitment level to their current relationship, indicating that 44.2% of respondents were not in a relationship and that over a quarter of respondents revealed they were in “love” with their partner and had talked about marriage, but had made no plans (refer to Figure 4).

By combining several variables into one computed variable, reliability tests were run to ensure that the newly created variables were adequately reliable. Reliability analysis showed that the new variables for sexual, physical, and psychological violence frequency were found to be reliable based on their alpha coefficients. The computed variables for sexual, physical, and psychological violence acceptability were also found to be reliable based on their alpha coefficients. Refer to Table 1 for the reliability scores. Frequencies were calculated on these new variables to determine if the ranges were appropriate for the variable. All ranges were found to be within the possible variances for the computed variables. Refer to Table 2 for the classification of items for the newly computed variables.

To test the hypothesis that individuals in more committed relationships were more accepting of violence, correlations between level of commitment and each type of violence were calculated. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between commitment and physical violence acceptance. A significant weak negative correlation was found ($r = -0.194, p < .01$), indicating a linear relationship between the two variables. Individuals who are more committed to a relationship are less accepting of physical violence in a relationship. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between commitment and psychological violence acceptance. A weak negative correlation was found ($r = -0.235, p < .01$), indicating a significant linear relationship between the two variables. Those individuals who are less committed to a relationship are more accepting of psychological violence in the relationship. A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between commitment and sexual violence acceptance. A weak negative correlation was found ($r = -0.172, p < .01$), indicating a significant relationship between the variables. Individuals who are more committed to a relationship

were less accepting of sexual violence in a relationship (refer to Table 3).

Additional correlations were run to test the relationship between commitment and frequency of each type of violence (refer to Table 4). Only the relationship between commitment and sexual violence frequency was found to have a weak negative correlation ($r = -0.106, p < .05$), indicating a significant relationship between the two variables. As commitment increased, frequency of sexual violence decreased. When gender was incorporated into the equation, a significant but weak negative correlation was found between commitment and physical violence frequency of female respondents ($r = -0.178, p < .05$), indicating that for female respondents, as commitment increased the frequency of physical violence decreased. Again when the correlation between commitment and psychological violence acceptance was split by gender, a weak negative correlation was found ($r = -0.205, p < .05$), indicating a significant relationship between the two variables. For male respondents, as commitment increased the acceptance of psychological violence decreased.

Correlations between other variables and frequency and acceptance of violence were also calculated. A correlation coefficient was calculated for the relationship between age and acceptance of psychological violence. A weak negative correlation was found ($r = -0.183, p < .01$), indicating a significant relationship between the two variables. As age increased, acceptance of psychological violence decreased. When gender became a factor in the correlation between age and psychological violence acceptance, a weak negative correlation was found ($r = -0.271, p < .01$) for male respondents, indicating a significant relationship between the two variables. As the age of male respondents increased, the acceptance of psychological violence also decreased. The correlation between age and sexual violence acceptance of male respondents was found to be significant with a weak positive coefficient ($r = 0.187, p < .05$), indicating that as the age of male respondents increased, the acceptance of sexual violence increased. All other correlations were found to be non-significant (refer to Table 4).

CONCLUSIONS

The hypothesis that those individuals in committed relationships will be more accepting of violence in a relationship than those who are not in committed relationships was not supported. The correlation coefficients calculated revealed a significant but weak negative relationship between physical, psychological,

and sexual violence and commitment, indicating that as levels of commitment increased, acceptance of violence in any form decreased.

Previous literature does not adequately focus on the relationship between emotional commitment and attitudes toward violence in relationships. One study by Mills and Malley-Morrison (1998) dealt with the issues of commitment, acceptability, and explanations for violent behavior, which found no significant relationship between the variables. However, they found that moderately committed individuals attributed abuse to more of the abuser's internal characteristics while highly committed individuals attributed the cause of the violent act to themselves or the situation. The current study found that as the level of commitment increased, the acceptability of violence decreased. As the previous literature suggested, attribution and reinterpretation are mechanisms in which committed individuals can accept violence and remain in an abusive relationship. It can then be assumed that attributing the cause of the violent act to the situation or even to oneself is one way to justify the act. This fits Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, which allows for inconsistent facts to coincide with an individual's beliefs or past experiences.

One of the limitations of this study was the inability to determine a causal relationship between the two variables, although a significant linear relationship was revealed. Another limitation was that the findings of this study are only generalizable to the UCF population. One of the strengths of this study was the use of established scales, adding to the internal validity of the study's findings.

The lack of consistent research findings on this subject leaves room for additional research to help fill in the gaps. The current study adds to the existing body of literature on the relationship between commitment and relationship violence. Continued research in this area may help to provide a better explanation for why individuals may remain in violent courtship relationships.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Relationship Status of Respondents

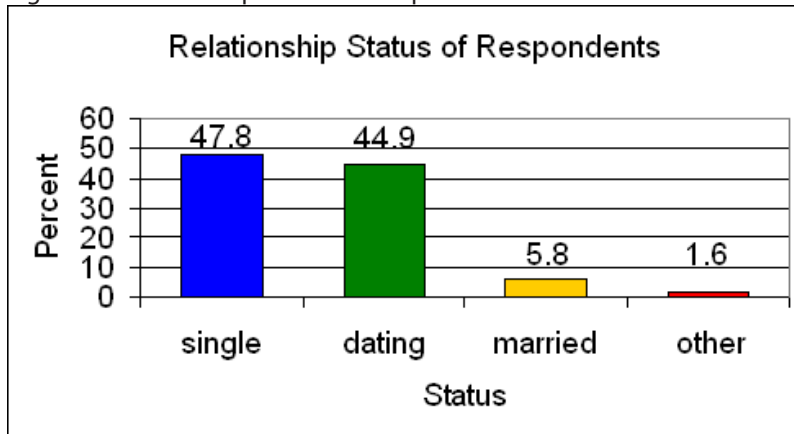


Figure 2: Respondents' Current Living Arrangements

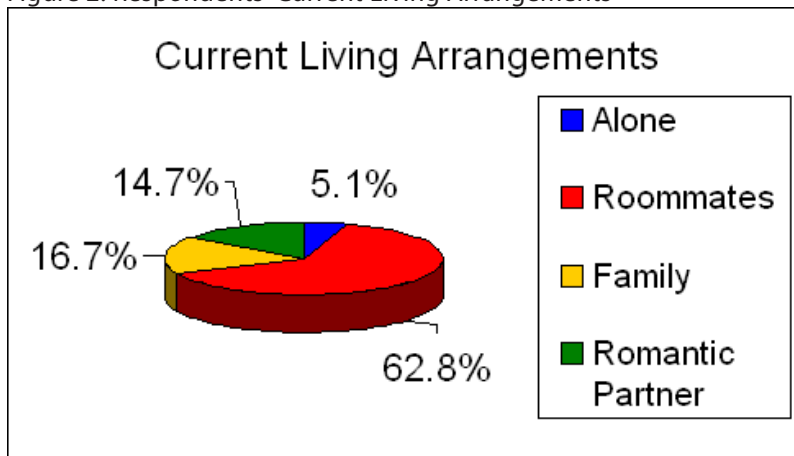


Figure 3: Years Spent in College of Respondents

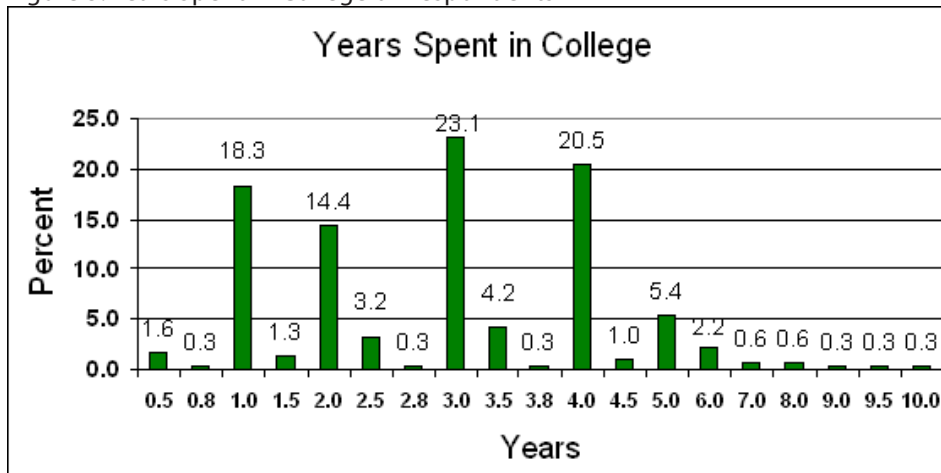


Figure 4: Levels of Relationship Commitment of Respondents

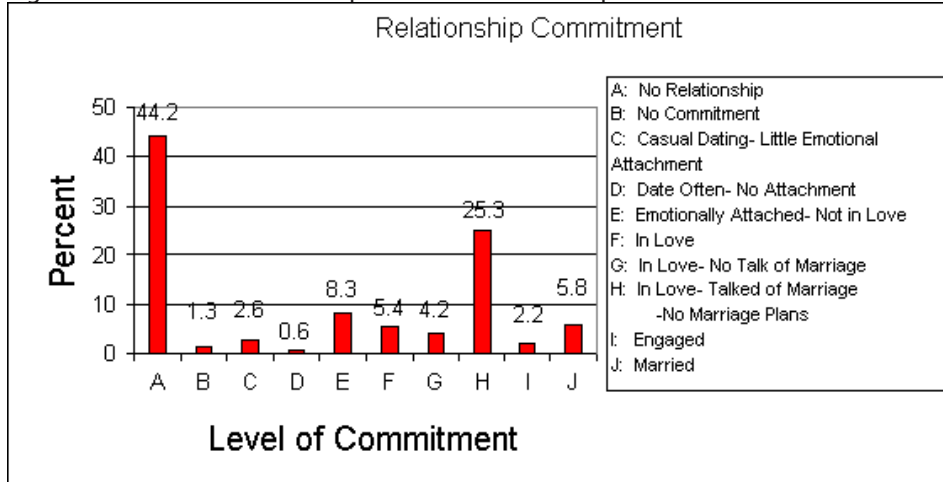


Table 1: Reliability of Computed Variables

Computed Variables	Alpha level
Physical Violence Frequency	.6372
Psychological Violence Frequency	.8079
Sexual Violence Frequency	.7528
Physical Violence Acceptance	.5144
Psychological Violence Acceptance	.8123
Sexual Violence Acceptance	.7484

Table 2: Item Classifications (continued on next page)

Item	Psychological Violence	Physical Violence	Sexual Violence
Criticized you	X		
Kept you from doing something	X		
Gave you angry stares/ looks	X		
Kept you from having money	X		
Ended discussion	X		
Threatened to hit you	X		
Pushed or grabbed you		X	
Put down family/ friends	X		
Accused you of paying too much attention to another	X		
Put you on allowance	X		
Threatened to end relationship if didn't have sex			X
Got you drunk to have sex			X
Said things to scare you	X		
Slapped, hit, or punched you		X	

Made you do something humiliating/ degrading	X		
Checked up on you	X		
Drove recklessly while you were in car	X		
Pressured you to have sex in a way you didn't like/ want			X
Criticized your sexual parts			X
Threatened you with weapon	X		
Spanked you		X	
Talked about sex to embarrass you			X
Stopped you from going to work/school	X		
Threw or hit something	X		
Kicked you		X	
Physically forced you to have sex			X
Threw you around		X	
Attacked your sexual body parts			X
Choked or strangled you		X	
Used weapon against you		X	

Table 3: Hypothesis Correlation Coefficients

Correlation	Coefficient
Commitment and Physical Violence Acceptance	-0.194**
Commitment and Psychological Violence Acceptance	-0.235**
Commitment and Sexual Violence Acceptance	-0.172**

** Indicates significance at the .01 level.

Table 4: Additional Correlation Coefficients

Correlation	Coefficient
Commitment and Physical Violence Frequency of Female Respondents	-0.178*
Commitment and Psychological Violence Acceptance of Male Respondents	-0.205*
Commitment and Sexual Violence Frequency	-0.106*
Age and Psychological Violence Acceptance	-0.183**
Age and Psychological Violence Acceptance of Male Respondents	-0.271**
Age and Sexual Violence Acceptance of Male Respondents	0.187*

* Indicates significance at the .05 level.

** Indicates significance at the .01 level.