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Coercive Control in Intimate Relationships: Legal Gaps and Public Perceptions

Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV) has been a consistently prevalent, yet nuanced issue within the context of American society (Meyer & Frost, 2019; Stark, 2007). It has been found that almost half of all U.S. women (47.3%) and over 40% of U.S. men (44.2%) have experienced intimate partner violence in the form of sexual violence, physical violence, or stalking within their lifetimes (Leemis et al., 2022). These alarmingly high rates of victimization sufficiently demonstrate the prevalence of intimate partner violence on their own, but the scope of the issue does not end there. Coercive control within intimate relationships is just as pervasive as physical violence, sexual violence, and stalking, with it affecting 46.2% of U.S. women and 42.8% of U.S. men (Leemis et al., 2022). It is here, when looking at coercive control, that a nuanced cloud casts over the general understanding of intimate partner violence in American society.

Coercive control is a term that has only been around for a short time. It was coined and popularized by Evan Stark (2007) in his seminal book *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, which provided a new understanding of intimate partner violence that

numerous governments and justice systems, including those of England and Wales, have since adopted in their responses to the issue (Renzetti, 2024). While both men and women can be subjected to coercive control, Stark (2009) argues that there is a critical difference in the experiences of coercive control between men and women, emphasizing that men use the degradation of women as a means for reinforcing oppressive gender stereotypes and maintaining both personal and societal domination over women. Coercive control is difficult to define simply; it is multi-faceted, can take many forms, and is often used in combination with physical or sexual violence. However, Stark (2007) points to three fundamental tactics men utilize to maintain power and domination over individual women: intimidation, isolation, and control. This argument places coercive control into a gendered framework, which is essential to remember when attempting to understand why intimate partner violence has remained a persistent issue and how it might be solved.

One potential solution, as proposed by Stark (2007), is to criminalize all acts of coercive control. However, coercive control and relationship violence are still largely misunderstood and minimized, especially by those who have not experienced or witnessed it themselves, with a common misconception being that victims “could leave the abusive relationship if they really wanted to” (Meyer & Frost, 2019, p. 62). Misconceptions like these significantly disrupt the process of gaining support for the criminalization of coercive control, as they place the blame on victims for choosing not to leave, instead of the abuser for simply being abusive. This lack of widespread understanding regarding relationship violence could likely be due to the “invisible” nature of some common abuse tactics, such as those of coercive control, which violate an individual's liberty and autonomy (Meyer & Frost, 2019). Cassandra Wiener (2022), a coercive

control expert, encapsulates this idea by explicitly referring to the recognition of coercive control as “seeing what is ‘invisible in plain sight’” (p. 18). This paints the essence of coercive control as somewhat paradoxical; how is it that if someone is abused in plain sight, it can go unnoticed? Furthermore, if it is so easily unnoticed, is it really abuse? Questions like these create ambiguity around the general population's understanding of coercive control, making the exact support level for its criminalization unclear.

This research investigates the extent of support for the criminalization of coercive control among college students, with a specific focus on whether there is a difference in perspectives between those who have experienced or witnessed intimate partner violence and those who have not. Considering the ambiguity in the general population's understanding of coercive control, it is hypothesized that individuals who have experienced or witnessed it are more likely to support its criminalization than those who have not. If, through this proposed research, supporting evidence is found for this hypothesis, it might be clearer that gaining further support for the criminalization of coercive control would require widespread education, with emphatic attention drawn to the testimonies and experiences of those who have survived it themselves. Before delving deeper into the role of coercive control within intimate relationships, its societal implications, and all other proposed approaches to combating it, one must first understand the American history and social context of responses to intimate partner violence, which predates the recognition of coercive control, and contextualizes the gendered nature of its framework.

History and Social Context of American Intimate Partner and Domestic Violence Law

Legal recognition of domestic and intimate partner violence in the U.S. has been a long and slow process, one that is yet to finish unraveling. For much of American history, leading into the 19th century, the right for men to chastise and discipline their wives was reserved and

protected, arguing that the man of the house had a right to keep his wife in line, using physical violence as a means to do so (Suk, 2009). The right of husbands to chastise their wives was abolished in the 19th century as a result of feminist activism; however, the issue of violence against women did not see major progress from there. The legal protection of spousal chastisement was replaced with a judicial normalization of marital privacy, which allowed the physical abuse of women at the hands of their husbands to be viewed and handled as a private family matter rather than a criminal matter. It was not until 1920 that it became formally illegal for a man to beat his wife in all 50 states, and even after this, physical abuse by husbands was still widely tolerated (Suk, 2009). Husbands beating their wives remained a private matter with no formal criminalization for roughly 50 years. Within those years, American society took the unsaid position of “if it happens behind closed doors, it is none of our business.”

The Women's Movement of the 1970s forced America to reach a turning point in its response to intimate partner violence, or what was still referred to at the time as “wife-beating” (Meyer & Frost, 2019, p. 9). The Women's Movement recognized the persisting normalization of intimate partner violence and called for a shift from handling it as a private family matter to handling it as a criminal matter. The need for appropriate crisis response and accommodation was highlighted by the Women's Movement, which also emphasized the need for an adequate criminal justice response to situations of intimate partner violence. Women's persistent activism in the 1970s did create some positive changes in the response to intimate partner violence, including the opening of the first domestic violence shelters for battered women and the establishment of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (Stark, 2007). However, intimate partner violence was still discussed and treated as a private and personal issue, which is

why there was still very minimal reform regarding criminal justice response to intimate partner violence at this time.

Despite the Women's Movement successfully bringing awareness to the issue of intimate partner violence, it became clear that the Women's Movement was more effective in influencing the minds of young women than young men, specifically regarding attitudes toward gender equity, women's rights, and reform (York, 2011). In a study conducted by Boxley, Lawrance, and Gruchow (1995), over 200 middle schoolers were surveyed about gender attitudes, and the results concluded that most boys believed they were superior to girls, while the girls thought they were equal to boys. This study demonstrates how deeply embedded gender bias and oppression are within American society. It also indicates that even several years post-Women's Movement, men and boys still had yet to acknowledge the impact of societal sexism and gender bias on the prevalence, extent, and severity of intimate partner violence against women. Moreover, since the vast majority of the American government was and still is comprised of men, the issue of intimate partner violence was still not perceived as real or valid enough to elicit any legal reform to help combat the problem.

Numerous factors were impeding the societal recognition of intimate partner violence as a gendered issue in the 1970s, one of which was the National Family Violence Survey of 1975 (Straus & Gelles, 1986). The intentions behind this study were to uncover a representative estimate of the incidence rates of family violence in the U.S., specifically looking at the various family dynamics in which violence could occur, such as parent-to-child violence, sibling violence, as well as husband-to-wife and wife-to-husband violence (Straus & Gelles, 1986). Use of violence was measured with the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), which included two categories

of violence: minor violence, which were violent acts with a low probability of inflicting injury, such as spanking or shoving, and severe violence, which were violent acts that carry a higher likelihood of inflicting injury than acts of minor violence, such as punching or kicking. The results of this study found that the overall use of violence by a husband to his wife existed in 121 per 1,000 couples, and the overall use of violence by a wife to her husband existed in 116 per 1,000 couples. It must be noted, as was stated by Straus and Gelles (1986), that the context of women using violence against their husbands can be easily misconstrued and must be closely examined when interpreting the results of this survey. The measures used in this study did not account for two of the significant contextualizing aspects of women using violence against their husbands: one being that much of women's violence is used in self-defense or retaliation against their husbands, and the second being that women's use of severe violence against their husband is far less likely to cause as severe of injury as would a man's use of severe violence against their wife (DeKeseredy, 2011). In simpler terms, men are far more likely to injure their wives severely than women are to injure their husbands, and the context in which severe violence is used extensively differs between men and women. Many people failed to keep this in mind when interpreting the results of this study.

The lack of inherent contextualization in the findings of the National Family Violence Survey (Straus & Gelles, 1986) served as a significant roadblock for the Women's Movement in the 1970s, as it ignited the argument of gender symmetry within the experiences of intimate partner violence (Brown, 2012). Following the publication of the National Family Violence Survey in 1975, numerous researchers, such as Steinmetz (1977), distorted the context of its findings by using it as evidence to support the idea that men, too, could experience "battered

husband syndrome” as a result of their wives’ violence (Brush, 1990, p. 57). Anti-feminist men’s groups took the flawed conclusions of Steinmetz (1977) and ran with them; countless researchers then used these claims as an attempt to support the gender symmetry argument of intimate partner violence, and support for this argument was reinforced when Straus and Gelles replicated the findings of the National Family Violence Survey in 1985. The gender symmetry argument derives from the family conflict theoretical framework for intimate partner violence, which argues that men are victimized equally compared to women and completely dismisses the role of patriarchy in the prevalence of intimate partner violence (Meyer & Frost, 2019). The opposing feminist framework argues that intimate partner violence is a gendered issue disproportionately affecting women, with societal patriarchy as one of the most significant influences in male violence toward women (Brown, 2012; York, 2011). This feminist claim has been repeatedly supported by the vast body of international research highlighting the dramatic overrepresentation of women as victims of intimate partner violence (Meyer & Frost, 2019).

As the U.S. entered the 1980s, intimate partner violence was still not regarded with the level of seriousness it required, nor was its seriousness reflected in the U.S. criminal justice system. Unfortunately, it was not until after countless, devastating instances of intimate partner violence that any significant legal or criminal justice reform was put in motion. The U.S. did not listen to women or prioritize their safety until it was entirely too late for some, such as Tracey Thurman (Barner & Carney, 2011). On June 10th, 1983, in Torrington, Connecticut, Tracey Thurman frantically called the police to report that her estranged husband, whom she had a restraining order against, had called and threatened that he was on his way to kill her. The dispatched police officer took his time arriving at the scene, even stopping at the department to

relieve himself on his way there (Eppler, 1986). By the time the officer arrived, 25 minutes after Tracey Thurman's 911 call, her husband, Buck Thurman, had already stabbed her in the face, throat, and chest 13 times (Eppler, 1986; Saccuzzo, 1999; Republican American, 2008). The police officer then watched as Buck Thurman stomped on Tracey's head, breaking her neck, as she lay on the ground, helpless and bleeding. Tracey Thurman was left permanently disfigured and partially paralyzed at the age of 22.

The events of June 10th, 1983, were just one of the countless instances of police negligence in their responses to intimate partner violence. Within the year leading up to the brutal attack, Tracey Thurman had reported her husband's violent behavior to Torrington police numerous times. Still, of course, Tracey's reports and cries for help were repeatedly dismissed, with no action taken to help or protect her from her husband, whose history of violence and threats had now been documented (Saccuzzo, 1999). In 1984, Tracey Thurman sued the city of Torrington for negligence, claiming the city had violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment by repeatedly failing to protect her (Eppler, 1986). She won the case, which led to Connecticut's Legislature enacting a mandatory arrest law requiring all police officers to make arrests in response to intimate partner violence, regardless of the victim's wishes (Barner & Carney, 2011). Many states followed suit after Connecticut's legislation.

The case of *Thurman vs. Torrington* (1984) was critical in the fight for adequate criminal justice responses to intimate partner violence. The U.S. District Court for Downstate Connecticut required that the gender-stereotypic police policies and beliefs surrounding intimate partner violence be corrected. It declared their failure to protect women in these situations unconstitutional (Eppler, 1986). The outcome of this case helped facilitate the shift in response to

intimate partner violence that the 1970s Women's Movement had been fighting for; numerous state and federal laws enacted after this case embodied the needed shift from the private family ideology to an offender-focused criminal justice framework in response to intimate partner violence (Barner & Carney, 2011). This case catalyzed the growing legal recognition of intimate partner violence against women.

The 1990s were a time of considerable advancement, with one of the most significant accomplishments occurring on July 5th, 1993: on this day, marital rape became a crime in all 50 states (Martin et al., 2007). While this news was liberating for many victims of intimate partner sexual violence, there is still some nuance and variability among the states regarding marital rape laws. Before 1993, and for most of documented history, there have been marital exemptions from the prosecution of men who rape their wives, with the first U.S. prosecution of marital rape not occurring until 1978. Before then, the U.S. followed the “Hale Doctrine,” derived from 17th-century English Common law, which stated that marriage is a contract of mutual consent between husband and wife that cannot be retracted. Therefore, a husband cannot “rape” his wife, as it is expected and required of married women to submit to their husbands thoroughly and regularly. As of 1993, there are no longer complete marital exemption laws in any state. However, some states still have partial exemption laws for specific circumstances, meaning some states simply do not perceive marital rape to be as severe or legitimate as other forms of rape.

Shortly after the criminalization of marital rape came the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994, which put 1.6 billion dollars toward increasing penalties for perpetrators of violence against women, and enhancing resources for responders, such as victims’ services, police departments, and prosecutors (Clark et al., 2002). The VAWA, too, was a critical

accomplishment of the 1990s. However, even after its successful implementation and consistent reauthorization, there is still much room for legal and criminal justice reform regarding responses to intimate partner violence. For example, when examining the current state of intimate partner violence laws in the U.S., the acknowledgment of coercive control within intimate relationships has yet to be included. Laws tend to take a while before catching up with increased awareness of societal issues that must be addressed, and given that coercive control is now known to be both a cause and consequence of societal patriarchy, the law has some catching up to do.

Literature Review

After analyzing the American history and social context of intimate partner violence, it becomes clear that legal and societal recognition of the issue has been a trying endeavor, one that was and still is not without challenges. Every advancement that has been made to enhance the acknowledgment of and response to intimate partner violence was fought for, and the pattern of having to demand positive change will not yet cease. Given that coercive control was not recognized as a framework for intimate partner violence or even given a name until 2007, the process of obtaining legal and societal recognition has barely begun. Before conducting research on perceptions toward coercive control and whether or not it should be criminalized in the U.S., it is essential first to understand the existing literature and laws on coercive control as well as its integral components, including feminist perspectives on the patriarchal context in which it exists. It is also worth noting that coercive control is only one of the prominent concepts related to intimate partner violence. Thus, it is helpful to review and compare the two other prevailing approaches to intimate partner violence alongside coercive control: the dualistic approach,

differentiating between situated couple violence and intimate terrorism, and the domestic violent crime approach.

Untangling the concept of coercive control: Theorizing domestic violent crime

Walby and Towers (2018) provide a critical analysis of coercive control and compare its use as a framework with other prominent approaches to intimate partner violence. As discussed in the earlier section of this paper, attention is frequently drawn to the question of whether intimate partner violence is a gendered issue that universally derives from patriarchal motivations, as argued by the coercive control approach (Stark, 2007), or if it is a gender symmetric phenomenon, as contended by Straus (1979). This question leaves two possible answers, or two potential ‘types’ of intimate partner violence according to Stark (2007): the gender asymmetrical type, which is more severe, more frequent, includes coercive control, and is maintained and reinforced by patriarchal structures, while the gender symmetrical type is much less severe, less frequent, does not include coercive control, and exists outside the context of patriarchal motivation. These two typologies of intimate partner violence comprise Johnson’s (1995, 2008) dualistic approach, where he refers to the gender asymmetrical type as “intimate terrorism,” which disproportionately affects women, and the symmetrical type as “situated couple violence,” which affects men and women equally and has less of a patterned nature. However, there is also the domestic violent crime approach, for which Walby and Towers (2018) argue that the typologies of intimate partner violence are not so simple and static. Within this approach, they deem all acts of violence as inherently coercive and controlling and assert that violence has the potential to escalate over time rather than remaining stable. These ideas directly contradict the claims of Stark (2007) regarding coercive control, which holds that coercive

control can exist without acts of violence and that not all acts of violence are acts of coercive control.

These three approaches are distinct in their position on several issues of intimate partner violence; one commonality among them, however, is their disdain for blind followers of the gender symmetry argument (Walby & Towers, 2018). A distinction from the gender symmetry argument made by the domestic violent crime approach is that it uses a legal definition of violence, meaning it includes both the act and the harm caused by it in the definition and measurement of violence (Walby & Towers, 2018). When this definition is used in research in combination with measuring all types of violence across all levels of severity and repetition, the gender asymmetry of intimate partner violence is made blatantly apparent in the findings. This distinction makes it easy to rule out Straus's (1979) position of stable gender symmetry across all instances of intimate partner violence as a valid approach to the conceptualization of intimate partner violence. Like the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Victimization Survey (NISVS) cited in the first paragraph of this paper (Leemis et al., 2022), the National Family Violence Survey conducted by Straus and Gelles (1986) did not measure the harm that resulted from each act of violence or the extent of the repetition of each act, which is why the data appears to support the argument for gender symmetry in both overall levels of violence and severe levels of violence. Stark (2007) and Walby and Towers (2018) find common ground in their approaches by recognizing that this type of measurement error is the reason why looking only at the incidence rates of intimate partner violence can be quite deceiving. It gives a false impression of gender symmetry, meaning the measurements used require correction to include

the full context in order to display an appropriate representation of gender differences in intimate partner violence victimization.

The most significant factor that differentiates the domestic violent crime approach from others is that it groups violent crimes committed by an intimate partner into the same category as those committed by family members. This view characterizes domestic violent crime simply as a subset of violent crime rather than its own distinct type of violent crime (Walby & Towers, 2018). The domestic violent crime approach also focuses on how intimate partner and domestic violence are affected by changes in the broader societal context, emphasizing that such changes in things like the economy and political climate are the cause of changes in intimate partner and domestic violence trends. They point expressly to the availability of economic resources as a critical indicator of victims' resilience, which, in turn, will predict whether or not relationship violence will escalate. Therefore, a lack of economic resources for a victim diminishes their resilience and leads to accelerated levels of violence. Walby and Towers (2018) argue that the focus of their approach differs from both Johnson's (2005, 1998) dualistic approach and Stark's (2007) coercive control approach in that the latter focuses more intently on the gendered ideas and motivation of intimate partner violence rather than the societal context. This is one instance where the overgeneralization of the domestic violent crime approach becomes evident, which can be demonstrated by taking a closer look at the coercive control approach.

Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life

According to Stark (2007), there is a relationship between intimate partner violence against women and societal context, with its vital distinction from the domestic violent crime approach being that all changes in societal context exist within and are driven by the patriarchal

structures that underlie American society. Within this framework, coercive control is both a cause and effect of the slowly increasing degree of women's liberation as time goes on, meaning men's use of coercive control over women in their personal lives is a counteracting tool for their decreasing ability to dominate women societally. That said, Walby and Towers (2018) are correct in their assertion that the coercive control approach puts much focus on the gendered ideas and motivations behind intimate partner violence; however, it must be acknowledged that these ideas and motivations would have no basis if not for the patriarchal structures and ideologies that exist in nearly all facets of American society. Stark (2007) maintains that female subordination has been a consistent theme across all male-dominated institutions; however, as female representation increases and societal acceptability of physical violence against women decreases, the use of coercive control against women in their personal lives increases.

One of Walby and Tower's (2018) most extensive critiques of coercive control is the perceived lack of clarity in its definition and its relationship with physical violence. This critique can be addressed and clarified using Stark's (2007) words: "Coercive control typically complements frequent, but often minor, assaults with tactics to intimidate, isolate, humiliate, exploit, regulate, and micromanage women's enactment of everyday life" (p. 171). Central to Stark's argument is the idea that the degree of coercive control that is exercised over women is contingent on the level and type of sexual inequality that exists within society. Within this argument, he posits that sexist ideology has historically supported the abuse of women in several ways: one is that it set a standard of qualities deemed inherent to and necessary for femininity, and if women fell short of this standard, they were subject to criticism and perceived rectification by men. A second facet is the created belief that women's political and societal subordination

was a result of their biology, which facilitates the idea that it is most natural for women to remain submissive and domestic. These fallacious beliefs created justification for depriving women of resources that men's entitlement to was never questioned. Because of this, Stark (2007) declares the use of coercive control over women to be a violation of personal liberty, which requires a distinct response. His proposed response entails three facets: criminalizing coercive control, revising interventions to emphasize women's rights to freedom, independence, and safety, and revitalizing a political movement that demands an alignment of genuine equality and formal rights.

Coercive Control: Update and Review of New Criminal Offenses of Coercive Control in the UK.

In the years following the publication of Stark's (2007) work on coercive control, the framework has been acknowledged and included in the UK Home Office's laws and definitions of intimate partner violence (Stark & Hester, 2019). In 2012, the UK Home Office held a public meeting to address issues within its existing framework for intimate partner violence, which included an emphasis on discrete assaults. By the end of the meeting, they concluded that the coercive control framework was the most beneficial option for a new and improved governmental response to intimate partner violence. Their working definition of coercive control was "Any incident or *pattern of incidents* of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality" with coercion being said to encompass "psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional abuse" and controlling behavior being defined as "making a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of

support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday lives.” (Stark, 2018, para. 11)

When the new working definition of coercive control was announced and said to be now included in the legal definition of domestic violence, calls to police regarding domestic abuse increased by 31% between the time of the announcement in 2012 and 2015 (Stark & Hester, 2019). This increase in reporting could be seen as a positive, considering domestic violence-related crimes tend to go unreported. However, the police response to the rise in domestic abuse calls was far from satisfactory. Reports from HMIC (2014, 2015) stated that police had yet to improve their responses to domestic abuse calls following the revisions to the domestic violence laws; their behavior was said to include a pattern of victim-blaming, invalidation, dismissal, and punitive treatment of the victims. This pattern of police behavior is unacceptable, yet sadly unsurprising; there is still a long way to go before victims of intimate partner violence receive the treatment and responses they deserve. Despite the disappointing enforcement and response to the newly included revisions, the implementation of coercive control as a facet of the legal definition of domestic violence should not yet be deemed a failure. With the correct systems in place, including improved police training in response to domestic abuse calls, sufficient victim services, enhanced gender equality, and effective prosecution of perpetrators, the coercive control framework has the potential to benefit countless victims of intimate partner violence in the U.S. But first, it is crucial to evaluate public perception of coercive control as it relates to intimate partner violence as a whole.

Methods

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of college students' views toward intimate partner violence, specifically focusing on their opinions of coercive control and whether it should be criminalized. The central research question asked whether college students recognize coercive control in intimate relationships as abusive, and if so, would they support its criminalization? It was hypothesized that participants who had been victims of intimate partner violence or who had known someone who had experienced it would show higher levels of support for the criminalization of coercive control than those who had not. This study employed a descriptive cross-sectional online survey design, administered to a convenience sample of college students aged 18 and older at a large Southeastern university in the United States. A total of 127 participants completed the survey; however, sample sizes vary slightly across variables due to missing responses.

Procedure

The online survey link was distributed to several volunteer faculty members of the university, who then shared it with students through their Canvas course pages. The sample of participants was self-selected, and the survey was self-administered using the Qualtrics platform. Inclusion criteria required that participants be currently enrolled at the university and aged 18 or older. Individuals under the age of 18 or not enrolled at the university were excluded. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained electronically before beginning the survey. All survey questions and response scales were designed by the primary investigator specifically for this study, and the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the research protocol.

Independent Variables

The first section of the survey collected information on demographic variables, including participant gender, race, age, and whether the participant had been, or had known someone to be, a victim of intimate partner violence within their lifetime. These were then used as independent variables in the analyses.

When participants were asked to report their gender identity, 57.1% identified as female ($n = 72$), 39.7% as male ($n = 50$), 1.6% as nonbinary ($n = 2$), and 1.6% as another gender or “other” ($n = 2$). Due to the small number of participants identifying as nonbinary ($n = 2$) or “other” ($n = 2$), these groups are described here but were not included in group comparisons requiring a sufficient sample size. In other words, “gender” was a dichotomous variable that just included female and male.

In terms of racial identity, 0.8% of participants identified as American Indian or Alaska Native ($n = 1$), 12.7% as Asian or Asian American ($n = 16$), 13.5% as Hispanic or Latinx ($n = 17$), 15.9% as Black or African American ($n = 20$), 1.6% as Middle Eastern or North African ($n = 2$), 50% as White or European ($n = 63$), and 5.6% as “Other/Multiple” ($n = 7$). To facilitate statistical comparisons, race was later recoded into a dichotomous variable (White vs. Non-White). Thus, the variable *White* showed that the sample was 50% White ($n = 63$) and 50% Non-White ($n = 63$).

The average age among participants was 20.84 years ($SD = 4.88$). The age distribution was not normal (skewness = 3.85), indicating that while most participants were traditional college-age students, a small number of participants were not and were considered outliers (i.e., 10 respondents were variable ages from 25 to 50). Rather than deleting these cases, they were

combined into a final “category” in a recoded age variable. It was still slightly skewed, albeit much less than the original, showing the average age of 20.06 ($SD = 2.02$, skewness = 1.19).

Lastly, I asked participants about their history and familiarity with intimate partner violence. In response to asking participants if they had ever been a victim of intimate partner violence (IPV), 18.3% answered yes ($n = 23$), while 81.7% answered no ($n = 103$). This variable, measuring personal history of IPV victimization, was called *IPVvictim*. I then asked participants if they knew anyone who had been a victim of intimate partner violence within their lifetime: 65.9% of participants answered yes ($n = 83$), while 34.1% answered no ($n = 43$). This variable, measuring if the participant knows someone who has been a victim of IPV, was called *IPVknow*. The specific measure used to assess intimate partner violence victimization history is described in the following subsection.

Before introducing the questions about personal experiences with intimate partner violence, participants were first provided with a definition of intimate partner violence to ensure consistent understanding of the concept. The definition stated:

Intimate partner violence is any kind of abuse or aggression that takes place within a past or current romantic relationship. Intimate partner violence includes but is not limited to physical violence, sexual violence, stalking, emotional abuse, psychological abuse, and economic/financial abuse.

After reading the definition, participants were asked: “*Have you ever been a victim of intimate partner violence in your lifetime?*” Responses were coded dichotomously for analysis (1 = Yes, 2 = No). Participants were then asked: “*Do you personally know anyone who has been a victim of intimate partner violence in their lifetime?*” Responses to this item were also coded dichotomously (1 = Yes, 2 = No). To reiterate, these items were collected as part of the

demographic section, along with gender, race, and age, to serve as independent variables in the analysis.

Dependent Variables

Once demographic data were collected, the remainder of the survey measured participants' level of support for the criminalization of coercive control, which is the dependent variable in this study. Two sets of survey items, comprising seventeen survey items total, were used to assess participants' attitudes toward coercive control and other comparable abusive behaviors. Each survey item stated a hypothetical scenario of coercive control, written in the third person using gender-neutral language to maintain neutrality (see Appendix A).

The first five items measured participants' moral judgements of coercive control (hereafter referred to as the *Wrongness Scale*). At the top of the section, participants were given the following instructions: "*For the following statements, please indicate how wrong or acceptable you think the following behaviors are.*" Example items included: "*A person repeatedly gaslights their romantic partner,*" and "*A person tracks their romantic partner's location at all hours of the day.*" Responses were recorded using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1- Completely Wrong to 5- Completely Acceptable. The scale was designed to capture a range of judgments regarding moral acceptability. Internal consistency for the *Wrongness Scale* was low (Cronbach's $\alpha = .56$), suggesting limited reliability. As a result, there was no usable measure capturing participants' overall feelings on the morality of coercively controlling tactics.

The second set of twelve items measured participants' support for the criminalization of coercive control (referred to as the *Criminality Scale*). Four items involving physical violence were included to compare participants' attitudes toward coercive control with a more widely

recognized form of abuse. Participants were given the following instructions: *“For this section, please indicate the extent to which you think the following behaviors should be considered criminal.”* Example items included: *“A person tells their romantic partner that they will harm themselves if their romantic partner ever tries to leave them,”* and *“A person forbids their romantic partner from leaving their house without permission.”* Responses were recorded on a 3-point Likert-type scale with options of 1- Should NEVER be against the law, 2- Should SOMETIMES be against the law, and 3- Should ALWAYS be against the law. Internal consistency for the *Criminality Scale* was high (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$), indicating high internal reliability, or consistency across the 12 items in the scale. Total scores on the scale ranged from 12 to 36, with higher scores reflecting more support for the criminalization of coercive control.

Analytic Strategy

All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28. Descriptive statistics were calculated for all variables. Frequencies and percentages were reported for categorical independent variables, including gender, race, and intimate partner violence victimization history. At the same time, age was treated as a continuous variable and analyzed using the mean, standard deviation, and skewness.

The primary analytic strategy was to conduct independent samples t-tests to examine whether support for the criminalization of coercive control varied by demographic variables. Dichotomous variables were used to compare the average level of coercive control support among a variety of controls: *Gender* (Female = 1, Male = 0), *White* (White = 1, Non-White = 0), *IPVvictim* (1 = Yes, 2 = No), and *IPVknow* (1 = Yes, 2 = No). It was hypothesized that participants who had experienced intimate partner violence or had known someone who had would express higher levels of support for criminalizing coercive control. While these

comparisons were planned, it was anticipated that small group sizes, particularly for participants who had personally experienced intimate partner violence, might limit statistical significance and prevent formal hypothesis testing. The *Criminality Scale*, which demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .88$), was used as a composite dependent variable.

Results

Total scores on the *Criminality Scale* ranged from 12 to 36 ($M = 30.35$, $SD = 4.75$), with higher scores reflecting more substantial support for the criminalization of coercive control. The distribution of scores was negatively skewed (skewness = -1.13 , $SE = 0.22$), indicating that most participants tended to favor criminalization. This level of skewness is just slightly outside of the acceptable range for normality and is consistent with the population of college students who tend to favor more egalitarian views (Li, Sun, & Button, 2017).

The first independent samples t-test compared males and females in their levels of support for the criminalization of coercive control. The mean level of support for the criminalization of coercive control for females was 31.13 ($SD = 4.70$, $n = 69$), and the mean level for males was 29.08 ($SD = 4.73$, $n = 48$). The difference in means was statistically significant ($t = 2.31$, $df = 115$, $p < 0.05$). This tells us that females were more supportive of criminalizing coercive control than males.

The second independent samples t-test compared Whites and Non-Whites in their levels of support for the criminalization of coercive control. For Whites, the mean level of support for the criminalization of coercive control was 30.95 ($SD = 3.99$, $n = 61$), and for Non-Whites, the mean level of support was 29.73 ($SD = 5.38$, $n = 61$). The difference in means was not statistically significant ($t = -1.42$, $df = 119$, $p = 0.16$). This test shows that there were no

differences between whites and non-whites in their level of support for criminalizing coercive control.

The third independent samples t-test compared victims of IPV and their levels of support for the criminalization of coercive control in comparison to those who were not victims. The mean level of support for those who have been victims of IPV was 32.55 ($SD = 4.44$, $n = 20$), and the mean level of support for those who have not been victims was 29.91 ($SD = 4.71$, $n = 101$). The difference in means was statistically significant ($t = 2.31$, $df = 119$, $p < 0.05$). This test shows that victims of IPV are more supportive of criminalizing coercive control than non-victims of IPV.

The fourth independent samples t-test compared participants who knew someone who was a victim of IPV and their levels of support for the criminalization of coercive control in comparison to those who did not know someone who was a victim. The mean level of support for participants who know an IPV victim was 30.91 ($SD = 4.21$, $n = 80$), and the mean level of support for those who do not know an IPV victim was 29.24 ($SD = 5.54$, $n = 41$). The difference in means was not statistically significant ($t = 1.85$, $df = 119$, $p = 0.07$). This test shows that knowing a victim of IPV does not result in having higher levels of support for criminalizing coercive control in comparison to those who do not.

Lastly, a Pearson's r correlation test was conducted to assess the linear relationship between age and criminalizing coercive control. The correlation between these two variables was moderate in strength and negative, $r = -0.26$, $n = 117$, $p < 0.01$. This means that as respondents age, their level of support for criminalizing coercive control decreases.

Discussion

The average score for the support of Criminalizing Coercive Control Scale suggests a strong general endorsement of the criminalization of coercive control among the sampled college students. The negatively skewed distribution further indicates that most respondents consistently selected higher levels of agreement with criminalization across the survey items. This pattern may signal an emerging shift in awareness among younger, educated populations, though broader generalizations should be made cautiously. Previous research has shown that college students, particularly in the United States, tend to demonstrate relatively low tolerance for relationship violence and related forms of abuse (Li, Sun, & Button, 2017). These findings may indicate an increased awareness in how younger populations understand and evaluate non-physical forms of abuse, including greater openness to legal responses to coercive control.

The finding that women were more supportive of criminalizing coercive control than men is consistent with feminist criminological theory. Radical feminist perspectives argue that coercive control functions as a form of social entrapment, allowing men to maintain dominance over women both interpersonally and structurally (Stark, 2007). Feminist criminologists have long pointed out that the legal system has historically overlooked or minimized non-physical forms of violence, especially those that occur in the private sphere (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2011). In this study, all survey scenarios were written in gender-neutral language; this was intended to assess whether participants would project gendered assumptions onto the described behaviors. The purpose was to allow participants' internal frameworks to shape how they interpreted the seriousness or criminality of each scenario. Feminist theory supports this approach by recognizing that people are often significantly influenced by cultural narratives

about gender, even when those narratives are not explicitly stated (Fivush & Gryzman, 2022). This demonstrates that socialization, power dynamics, and lived experience shape how people recognize and respond to abuse regardless of whether gender is explicitly mentioned.

These gender differences are also supported by recent research on attitudes toward IPV among college students. Çelik and Tanrıverdi (2023) found that male college students were generally more likely to endorse traditional gender roles and were less likely to reject attitudes supportive of IPV than women. Even though all survey scenarios presented in this study used gender-neutral language, women were still more likely to support criminalization. This suggests that gendered socialization may influence how students perceive and respond to more “subtle” forms of partner abuse; women may be more likely to detect coercive control as abusive, while men, particularly those with more traditional gender views, may be less likely to perceive these behaviors as problematic.

There were no significant differences in the level of support for the criminalization of coercive control based on race. While this might indicate some consistency across racial groups in this college sample, cultural norms, socialization, and differing legal experiences can all shape attitudes toward relationship violence in complex ways, and these dynamics may not be fully captured in a single college campus-based study. The support levels for criminalizing coercive control had never been measured before this study, and there is no previous literature suggesting that white people would be more supportive than non-whites. A larger, more nationally representative sample might reveal patterns not detected here.

Participants who had personally experienced intimate partner violence also showed higher levels of support for criminalizing coercive control than those who had not experienced it.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern aligns well with social learning theory, which suggests that people's attitudes and beliefs are shaped through personal experiences and observations (Akers, 2009). Firsthand experiences with abuse may lead individuals to recognize patterns of control that others might overlook. This heightened awareness, characteristic of survivors of IPV, is referred to as hypervigilance and can also be linked to social learning (Smith et al., 2019). It also makes sense that survivors would be more likely to advocate for stronger legal responses, having seen or felt the harm caused by behaviors that fall outside of traditional definitions of violence. In this way, social learning theory provides a direct explanation for why those who had been victimized were more supportive of criminalization.

Interestingly, knowing someone who had experienced IPV did not make a significant difference in participants' responses. Although the result was not statistically significant, participants who knew someone who had experienced IPV showed slightly more support for criminalization than those who did not. While this trend matched the expected direction, the difference was not large enough to confirm a strong, meaningful relationship. It may be that secondhand exposure doesn't always generate the same emotional or cognitive impact as direct experience. Some participants may not have been fully aware of the extent of the abuse their friend or loved one experienced, or they may not have associated it with coercive control. This finding suggests that education efforts could benefit from including personal stories and examples to help people better understand how coercive control operates, even when they're not directly involved.

Younger participants were more likely to support the criminalization of coercive control than the older participants, demonstrating that as the age of participants increased, the level of

support decreased. This may reflect young people's heightened awareness of intimate partner violence (IPV) as a pressing social issue. National data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Breiding et al., 2014) indicate that over 70% of women who experience IPV have their first encounter with it before the age of 25. Because of this early exposure, whether directly or through peers, young people may be more attuned to the seriousness of relationship abuse, like coercive control. This increased familiarity with IPV may foster more substantial support for legal intervention and prevention efforts. However, patterns that did not emerge in the current sample may become apparent with a more demographically diverse population.

Another possible explanation for the negative correlation between age and support for criminalizing coercive control is the diminished influence of early IPV prevention education programs. Many high school students receive training focused on recognizing and responding to IPV, but such programs are often less emphasized or even discontinued once students enter college (Payne & Triplett, 2009). As Payne and Triplett (2009) point out, IPV/domestic violence coursework is rare in many colleges' curricula, particularly for non-social science majors, which may reduce students' long-term awareness of IPV-related issues. Without ongoing reinforcement of these ideas and lessons, students may become less aware or even desensitized to the seriousness of relationship abuse, like coercive control, as they age. These findings suggest that IPV education programs shouldn't *only* exist in high schools; they should be sustained throughout colleges, especially given the prevalence of coercive control in young adult relationships. Incorporating IPV and coercive control training into general education programs could help maintain awareness of the issue and increase support for policies that criminalize these behaviors.

Despite its limitations, this study contributes to the growing recognition that coercive control is a severe and often overlooked form of intimate partner violence. These findings also lend support to theoretical perspectives that highlight the role of gendered power dynamics and personal experience in shaping perceptions of abuse. As discourse around legal responses to coercive control continues to evolve, it is crucial that public attitudes, especially those of younger, more socially engaged populations, are taken into account. Expanding research in this area can inform both educational initiatives and policy decisions aimed at more effectively addressing all forms of intimate partner violence.

Limitations

While the findings offer valuable insights, several limitations should be considered. This study used a convenience sample drawn from a single university, which limits the generalizability of the results to broader populations. Participants were recruited from courses that were self-selected by the researcher and distributed via class Canvas pages, which may have introduced sampling bias. Additionally, the racial and gender composition of the sample may not reflect the broader population, and the small sample size of IPV survivors further limited the statistical power of group comparisons. Given that intimate partner violence affects individuals across all demographics, a more nationally representative sample would be better suited to capture the full range of perspectives on coercive control. Although the representativeness of the current sample is limited, the findings remain meaningful, especially given the scarcity of research on public perceptions of coercive control in intimate relationships.

Conclusion

This study explored how college students perceive the criminalization of coercive control, adding to the growing recognition that psychological and emotional abuse are severe forms of intimate partner violence. Overall, the findings showed strong support for criminalization, especially among women, younger participants, and those with personal experiences of IPV. These patterns reflect the influence of gendered socialization and lived experience, which may help explain why some individuals are more likely to identify coercive control as abusive or deserving of legal consequences.

Although the study was limited by a small and non-representative sample, the results still offer meaningful insights into how younger populations think about this issue. The lack of significant racial differences in this sample may suggest that generational shifts or shared educational environments are shaping more consistent attitudes across different groups. However, broader and more diverse samples are needed to better understand how cultural background, personal values, and systemic inequalities shape people's views on coercive control.

Future research should investigate how people define and interpret coercive control in their own words, primarily through in-depth or qualitative methods. Studies with more diverse participants (nationally representative) and more refined demographic measures could also help identify which groups may still be underserved or overlooked in current legal and educational efforts. As conversations about coercive control continue to enter public and policy spaces, it will be essential to ensure that these discussions are informed by research and grounded in the realities of those most affected by this form of abuse.

While this study is only a starting point, it highlights the need for further work on how coercive control is understood and responded to. A deeper understanding of public attitudes can

inform prevention efforts, support services, and future legal reforms aimed at recognizing and addressing the full scope of intimate partner violence.

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Appendix A

Background Questions:

1.) What is your gender identity?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Nonbinary
- ☐ Other: _____

2.) What racial group do you most identify with?

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Asian or Asian American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latinx
- ☐ Middle Eastern or North African
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ White or European
- ☐ Other/multiple: _____

3.) What is your class standing?

- ☐ Freshman
- ☐ Sophomore
- ☐ Junior
- ☐ Senior
- ☐ Graduate Student

4.) Indicate how old you are: _____.

5.) Which academic college are you in? (If you are a pre-major, still select the college of the major you are trying to declare) Select all that apply.

- ☐ Belk College of Business
- ☐ College of Arts + Architecture
- ☐ CATO College of Education

- College of Computing and Informatics
- College of Health and Human Services (CHHS)
- College of Science
- College of Humanities and Earth and Social Sciences (CHESS)
- The William States Lee College of Engineering
- Interdisciplinary Studies
- Undeclared/Undecided

Questions on Familiarity with IPV:

- Intimate partner violence is any kind of abuse or aggression that takes place within a past or current romantic relationship. Intimate partner violence includes but is not limited to:
 - Physical violence
 - Sexual violence
 - Stalking
 - Emotional abuse
 - Psychological abuse
 - Economic/financial abuse

6.) Have you ever been a victim of intimate partner violence within your lifetime?

- Yes
- No

7.) Do you personally know anyone who has been a victim of Intimate Partner Violence within their lifetime?

- Yes
- No

8.) If you do know anyone who has been a victim of Intimate Partner Violence, what is your relationship to them? Select all that apply.

- Friend
- Sibling
- Parent
- Romantic partner
- Non-immediate family member

- ☐ Acquaintance
- ☐ N/A
- ☐ Other: _____

Wrongness of Coercive Control:

For the following statements, indicate how wrong or acceptable you think the following behaviors are.

1.) A person repeatedly gaslights their romantic partner. This is:

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1.....	2.....	3.....	4.....	5.....
Completely Wrong	Wrong	Neither Wrong Nor Acceptable	Acceptable	Completely Acceptable

2.) A person tracks their romantic partner's location at all hours of the day. This is:

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1.....	2.....	3.....	4.....	5.....
Completely Wrong	Wrong	Neither Wrong Nor Acceptable	Acceptable	Completely Acceptable

3.) A person calls their romantic partner fat when they eat. This is:

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1.....	2.....	3.....	4.....	5.....
Completely Wrong	Wrong	Neither Wrong Nor Acceptable	Acceptable	Completely Acceptable

4.) A person tells their romantic partner that they might harm them if they ever try to leave the relationship. This is:

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
1.....	2.....	3.....	4.....	5.....
Completely Wrong	Wrong	Neither Wrong Nor Acceptable	Acceptable	Completely Acceptable

Physical Violence:

For the following, indicate the extent to which you think the following behavior should be considered criminal.

1.) A person slaps their romantic partner in the face because they did not have dinner ready on time.

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Should NEVER | Should SOMETIMES | Should ALWAYS |
| Be against the law | Be against the law | Be against the law |

2.) A person pushes their romantic partner because they “had an attitude.”

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Should NEVER | Should SOMETIMES | Should ALWAYS |
| Be against the law | Be against the law | Be against the law |

3.) A person grabs their romantic partner by the hair because they tried to turn their back and walk away during a conversation.

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Should NEVER | Should SOMETIMES | Should ALWAYS |
| Be against the law | Be against the law | Be against the law |

4.) A person burns their romantic partner's arm with an iron because they did not get all of the wrinkles out of their shirt.

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Should NEVER | Should SOMETIMES | Should ALWAYS |
| Be against the law | Be against the law | Be against the law |

Sexual Violence:

For the following statement, indicate how wrong or acceptable you think the following behaviors are.

1.) A person does not use a condom during intercourse even though their romantic partner says they refuse to have intercourse without one.

- | | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| 1..... | 2..... | 3..... | 4..... | 5..... |
| Completely | Wrong | Neither Wrong | Acceptable | Completely |
| Wrong | | Nor Acceptable | | Acceptable |

Coercive control: power and control wheel questions:

1.) A person tells their romantic partner that they will harm themselves if their romantic partner tries to leave them:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Should NEVER | Should SOMETIMES | Should ALWAYS |
| Be against the law | Be against the law | Be against the law |

2.) A person runs over their romantic partner's phone because they believe their partner spends too much time on it:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Should NEVER | Should SOMETIMES | Should ALWAYS |
| Be against the law | Be against the law | Be against the law |

3.) A person tells their romantic partner on more than one occasion that they are worthless:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Should NEVER | Should SOMETIMES | Should ALWAYS |
| Be against the law | Be against the law | Be against the law |

4.) A person forbids their romantic partner from leaving their house without permission:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Should NEVER | Should SOMETIMES | Should ALWAYS |
| Be against the law | Be against the law | Be against the law |

5.) A person convinces their romantic partner that their frequent outbursts of anger are their partner's fault:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Should NEVER | Should SOMETIMES | Should ALWAYS |
| Be against the law | Be against the law | Be against the law |

6.) A person tells their romantic partner that their only role in life is to serve them:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Should NEVER | Should SOMETIMES | Should ALWAYS |
| Be against the law | Be against the law | Be against the law |

7.) A person tells their romantic partner (with whom they share children) that they will take the children away from their other parent if they do not do what they ask:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Should NEVER | Should SOMETIMES | Should ALWAYS |
| Be against the law | Be against the law | Be against the law |

8.) A person limits their romantic partner from ever accessing any money:

- | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Should NEVER | Should SOMETIMES | Should ALWAYS |
| Be against the law | Be against the law | Be against the law |

If your participation in this survey caused or begins to cause you any psychological harm or emotional distress, please refer to the following campus resources:

The Center for Counseling and Psychological Services

704-687-0311

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

9526 Poplar Terrace Drive

Charlotte, NC 28223-0001

Office of Civil Rights and Title IX

704-687-6130

Cato Hall, Suite 132

If you have any further questions about this survey or your participation, please contact either the Primary Investigator or Faculty Advisor:

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