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Black College Students' Perceptions and Conceptualizations of Intimate Partner Violence

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ABSTRACT

Although Black college students are believed to be at greater risk for intimate partner violence (IPV), there is a gap in the available literature that explores this social problem in comparison to the experiences of their non-minority counterparts. This qualitative study explored Black college students' conceptualizations of IPV, and the psychological, social, and cultural influences of IPV perpetration and victimization. Students (N = 49; 40.8% males), aged 18–24 years, on two campuses, one Historically Black College/University (N = 31; 45.2% males) and one predominantly White institution (N = 18; 33.3% males) in the Southeastern part of the United States participated in 15 focus groups. Results indicate an agreement among students that the term “violence is violence” best describes their conceptualization of IPV. Four additional themes emerged as prominent influences of perpetration and victimization among students: power and dominance, social media, structural impact of oppression, and silence and minimization. The findings undergird the importance of taking a multi-faceted, culturally responsive approach to investigating IPV among Black college students. Implications support college campuses investing resources in ensuring that prevention and intervention programming normalizes inclusivity for diverse groups of students, and incorporates important social, cultural, and environmental realities of the students they serve.

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Intimate partner violence (IPV) is one of many social justice concerns that subsequently affects the health and wellness of individuals and communities. IPV is defined as physical, psychological, or sexual harm by a current or former partner or spouse and does not require sexual intimacy (CDC, 2015; Breiding et al., 2015). Enacting or experiencing IPV can lead to deleterious outcomes such as physical injuries, depression, anxiety, PTSD symptoms, low self-esteem, and suicide (Barrick et al., 2013; Breiding et al., 2015; Gill et al., 2020). Although there is a general definition of what constitutes IPV, it is often inconsistently understood, and the beliefs and perceptions about interpersonal

aggression and violence may be situated differently based on factors such as race, gender, and sexual orientation (see, Barrick et al., 2013; Russell et al., 2015). Further, there is limited research that focuses on what is considered aggression, violence, and abuse among college students (Dardis et al., 2017). This is certainly of concern, as estimates show that between 10% and 50% of college students report experiencing IPV, and many of these experiences have been found to be bidirectional (Gill et al., 2020; Littleton, 2014; Munro-Kramer et al., 2021).

The high prevalence of interpersonal aggression, specifically IPV, among college students is thought to be a result of a variety of factors including underdeveloped negotiation, conflict resolution, and communication skills (Littleton, 2014), substance use and abuse (Curtis-Boles & Jenkins-Monroe, 2000), and early experiences of violence (Raiford et al., 2012). High school students who experience IPV often become college students who are more accepting of violence, and in turn are more likely to engage in violent behavior, perceive violence within a relationship as more acceptable, and believe that reactive violence is justifiable (Cauffman et al., 2000). Considering the high incidence of IPV among college students, a deeper understanding of their definitions and perceptions is necessary. This study explores conceptualizations of IPV, and perceptions of the psychological, social, and cultural influences of IPV perpetration and victimization among Black college students. Throughout the paper, the terms “African American” and “Black” are interchanged based on how information was reported in the original source.

Black college students and IPV

The research and literature on IPV among college students typically focuses on predominantly White, middle-class populations (Bremond et al., 2013; Walley-Jean, 2019). Within the few studies including Black college students, Black women and men have been found to be at greater risk of experiencing IPV than their White counterparts (Walley-Jean & Sean, 2009; West, 2004). For example, when utilizing the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) database of 88,975 college students, Whitfield et al. (2021) found that Black students reported experiencing more emotional IPV than Whites and had more experiences with physical IPV than their non-Black counterparts. Nevertheless, it is rare to find IPV research in this population, and especially among those who attend Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). This is troubling, as existing research estimates that nearly two-thirds of Black HBCU students have reported experiencing some form of IPV (see, Barrick et al., 2013; Bremond et al., 2013).

Although the research examining IPV among HBCU students is limited, available data exemplifies the need for additional understanding of the experiences with IPV in this population. Field et al. (2015) explored IPV perpetration

in 1,174 students (364 HBCU, 809 predominately White institution [PWI]) and found that those at HBCUs reported perpetrating a severe assault against an intimate partner almost twice the percentage of those surveyed at PWIs (Field et al., 2015). Barrick et al. (2013) found that 64.7% of the Black female participants surveyed as part of the HBCU Campus Sexual Assault (HBCU-CSA) Study experienced IPV at least once in the past year. The majority (63.7%) of these incidents were categorized as verbal or controlling, followed by physical (17.8%), and the smallest percent (1.4%) were sexual (Barrick et al., 2013). Conceptualizing IPV as just physical or sexual excludes many experiences that students may have and elucidates the need to explore how students define and perceive IPV. Not only is this important for operationalization, but also for accurate measurement and analysis. The limited data, increased risk, and varied experiences highlight the importance of understanding how IPV is comprehended by students, and which factors underlie engagement in IPV.

Despite the high rates and different types of IPV experienced, Black college students often have dissimilar perceptions and understanding of what constitutes IPV. For example, in a study exploring 53 African American women college students' perceptions of IPV, most students perceived aggressive behaviors with their partners as verbal, physical, or emotional IPV. However, one-third of the sample only perceived their partners' behaviors as IPV when the aggression was physical (Walley-Jean, 2019). Both Bremond et al. (2014) and Walley-Jean (2019) demonstrated the influence and diversity of psychological and sociocultural elements that could shape the IPV perceptions and behaviors among Black students. One element that is often neglected as an important factor in discussing IPV is the context or environment where the perceptions about what is acceptable and tolerable are created and demonstrated. This study includes Black college students from two different college contexts, an HBCU and a PWI, as a way of exploring the potential influence of it on IPV experiences.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is adapted from the social ecological model of violence prevention used by the CDC (Dahlberg & Krug, 2002). This model uses four-levels to better understand violence, and considers the complex interplay between individual (e.g., age, gender, attitudes and beliefs, history of violence), relationship (e.g., communication with peers, partners, and family members), community (e.g., social environment, norms), and societal factors (e.g., education and social policies). Each level is believed to be shaped by its dynamic interaction with the other levels, similar to Bandura's concept of 'reciprocal determinism' (Bandura, 1978). The development of beliefs, attitudes, and subsequent behavior is shaped by an ongoing interface between personal factors, relationships, environment, and the governing social

structures. The model posits that appropriate, and effective, prevention requires action across multiple levels simultaneously.

Additionally, an intersectionality framework was used to design the focus groups and analyze the findings. Intersectionality focuses on the interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989) and reflects on meanings and experiences of holding several social identities simultaneously. These overlapping identities (e.g., race, gender, and sexual orientation) may be distinct socially constructed groupings (Cardenas, 2020); however, they are not independent experiences (Cole, 2009).

Current study

Our limited understanding of IPV among Black college students, especially those attending HBCUs, coupled with the increasing rates of perpetration and victimization make this a population in need of exploration. The authors utilized a qualitative methodology to ascertain a more in-depth and critical analysis of the students' thoughts and experiences with IPV. As noted by Valandra et al. (2019), qualitative research helps to enhance our understanding of the complexities of IPV within Black communities and how structural inequities influence the conceptualization and experience with IPV. The researchers utilized focus groups to elicit information from participants relating to these three questions: 1) How do Black college students conceptualize IPV? 2) What psychological, social, and cultural factors do Black college students think contribute to someone inflicting violence on another person? and 3) What psychological, social, and cultural factors do Black college students think contribute to someone accepting violence from another person?

Materials and methods

Participants

Participants included 49 Black undergraduate college students. In the sample, 31 students attended a mid-sized HBCU (63.3%), and 18 students attended a large PWI (36.7%), both in the Southeast region of the United States. The sample included 20 men (40.8%), 28 women (57.1%), and one student who identified as gender non-conforming (2.0%). All students were pre-screened to ensure eligibility. Having experienced violence was the only sociodemographic variable that differed by campus, $X^2(1, N = 49) = 7.66$, $p = .006$. Students at the PWI reported more experiences with violence than those students at the HBCU. Please see, [Table 1](#) for sociodemographic information.

Table 1. Sociodemographic data.

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Entire Sample (n = 49)</i>	<i>HBCU (n = 31)</i>	<i>PWI (n = 18)</i>	<i>χ² (n = 49)</i>
<i>Age Range</i>	18–24	18–24	18–24	
<i>Gender</i>				1.42
Male	40.8%	45.2%	27.8%	
Female	57.1%	51.6%	72.2%	
Non-conforming	2.0%	3.2%		
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>				
Heterosexual	57.1%	54.8%	61.1%	0.18
LGBTQ+	42.9%	45.2%	38.9%	
<i>Education</i>				3.41
Freshman/Sophomore	26.5%	35.5%	16.7%	
Junior/Senior	72.5%	64.5%	83.3%	
<i>Relationship Status</i>				3.85
In a committed relationship	22.4%	19.4%	16.7%	
In a casual relationship	14.3%	9.7%	22.2%	
In multiple casual relationships	8.2%	9.7%	5.6%	
No relationship	55.1%	61.3%	55.6%	
<i>Experienced Violence in Relationships</i>	27.1%	13.3%	50.0%	7.66**
Victim	92.3%	100.0%	88.9%	
Perpetrator	7.7%		11.1%	

Note. ** $p < .01$ All categories do not add up to 100% as some small categories were not included in the table.

Recruitment and procedure

Participants were recruited on two campuses via Institutional Review Board-approved fliers posted in common areas. The researchers also utilized e-mail blasts and social media to disperse the approved fliers. Interested students contacted the researchers to participate in the study. Eligibility criteria included: 1) self-identification as Black or African American; and 2) between the ages of 18 and 24 years, inclusive. Additional inclusion criteria included full-time student status at the HBCU or PWI.

Students participated in focus groups either in-person or online via the Zoom platform due to COVID-19 restrictions. A total of 15 focus groups were completed, each comprised of two to six students with an average of three students per group. Before participating in a focus group, students completed an informed consent and sociodemographic form. For online focus groups, each student was screened and completed the informed consent and sociodemographic form via SurveyMonkey. Each focus group had a lead moderator and a co-moderator taking field notes and completing reflexivity memos. Reflexivity memos are self-reflective writings done by researchers to think critically and couple their personal experiences with what was observed (Dodgson, 2019). Following the focus groups, the research team discussed reflexivity through a dialogue about their own biases, beliefs, and personal experiences as a way to remain objective while analyzing the data (see, Dodgson, 2019). Through this process, researchers could consider how they possibly affected the research to ensure participant accounts were fully accounted for, analyzed, and not influenced by biases. Focus groups lasted between 70 and 90 minutes and were audiotaped with a digital recorder or via

the Zoom recording platform. To ensure a diverse representation of students, focus groups were stratified based on campus, gender, and self-identified sexual orientation. This permitted each group to speak freely without the influence of gender or sexual orientation differences that may impact group dynamics. A professional transcription service helped to ensure accuracy in focus group data by transcribing the audio files verbatim. Any personal identifiers were excluded from the transcripts. After completion, students were provided a financial incentive worth \$25 for their participation.

Measures

Sociodemographic information

Participants identified their campus, gender, classification, and sexual orientation. Additional questions probed for relationship status and their history of intimate partner violence (see, [Table 1](#)).

Focus group guide

The focus group guide was developed by the research team with the intent to solicit Black college students' views and experiences with interpersonal aggression, abuse, and violence. The guide also aimed to document the psychological, social, and cultural influences of IPV and to understand each campus's specific social and cultural context (HBCU or PWI). In addition to the research questions used to develop this manuscript, the guide focused on types of IPV, contextual factors, and justifications for IPV. Sample questions from the focus group guide include: 1) What is your definition of intimate partner violence (IPV)? 2) What are some types of IPV? What behaviors constitute each of these types of IPV? and 3) What are some justifications people have for staying in relationships after experiencing IPV?

Data analysis

The authors adopted a constructivist worldview to understand the participants' interpretation and operationalization of IPV. Constructivism assumes that people build subjective understanding and meaning in the world through experiencing and building interpretations from where they live and work (Creswell, 2014). However, each person's meaning varies based on their context and the multiple ways they understand certain phenomena. As a result of this approach, the researcher can best gather information and understand a given phenomenon through the participants' current context and personal accounts (Creswell, 2014). The authors did not have a preexisting framework but focused on emerging themes and understanding phenomena. The Principal Investigator worked closely with the research team to establish a replicable research design (see, Leung, 2015; Merriam, 2009). The team

members were faculty members from each institution, a postdoctoral research associate, a graduate student, and an undergraduate student research assistant. This variety in the team created what is referred to as an “interpretive community” due to the diversity of each member’s life experience and social position (see, Syed & Nelson, 2015, p. 383). Each team member received data collection and analytic techniques training to ensure familiarity with the topic and data. Further, each team member facilitated at least one focus group, except for the undergraduate student. The undergraduate student was included in data analysis to establish ecological validity and analytic subjectivity by incorporating the thoughts, opinions, and perspectives of a Black college student aged 18–24 (see, Merriam, 2009).

The listening guide method was utilized to ensure rigor and interrater reliability. To establish the listening guide, the research team analyzed the data in three phases (see, Gilligan & Eddy, 2017). The first phase required each team member to read transcripts independently (Syed & Nelson, 2015) and to identify exemplar quotes and operationalize the perceptions and experiences of violence discussed. Secondly, the team met to discuss each member’s perspective within their interpretive community. Multiple discussions were done to ensure a consensus on the independent analysis and establish triangulation (see, Merriam, 2009). The third phase involved independent thematic analysis (see, Clarke & Braun, 2013) in identifying significant themes that were then collectively discussed and interpreted with consideration of the variables found in the literature on IPV among Black college students. Each phase permitted the discovery of broad and subtle themes through the critiques and analyses of each team member (see, Fontaine et al., 2020; Leung, 2015).

Results

An analysis of the focus group data revealed five overarching themes: 1) Violence is Violence; 2) Power and Dominance; 3) Social Media; 4) Structural Impact of Oppression; and 5) Silence and Minimization. The following explains the results that describe these themes.

Conceptualizations of IPV: “Violence is violence”

Students were asked to conceptualize IPV, as we were interested in their definition, and also their understanding of IPV and the language used to describe these interactions. Curiously, the phrase “violence is violence” consistently emerged regarding the enactment and experience with IPV, and the various types of IPV. In one of the HBCU focus groups with heterosexual Black women, a participant said, “violence is violence no matter . . .” Another student from the same focus groups said, “you’re putting your hands and forcing somebody to do something, it’s wrong, no matter.”

To further explore their conceptualizations of IPV, the facilitators explored whether violence among same-sex or same-gender-loving (SGL) individuals was perceived differently. A heterosexual female participant from the PWI shared, “I think that, like she said, abuse is abuse, violence is violence. It shouldn’t matter whether it is a same-sex couple or not. Because they are still experiencing the abuse and violence.” The facilitators probed students to reflect more on the construct of sexual orientation, especially in proximity to how IPV may be conceptualized, inflicted, and/or accepted among Black college students. This same participant further added that, “It’s almost just like with – it doesn’t matter the gender . . . because they still are being mistreated and disrespected.” A male from the GBTQ HBCU focus group also felt this way and said,

Regardless of gender or sex, it’s still abuse. If it’s two people hitting, or verbally, physically, emotionally, mentally, all of that, then it’s abuse. Now it might not be taken the same way as opposed to opposite sex, but abuse is abuse.

Study participants, irrespective of their sexual orientation, gender, campus affiliation, or behavioral description (e.g., physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, or psychological) agreed that their understanding of IPV was that all acts were considered violence. However, students overwhelmingly conceptualized and identified physical violence as the exemplar for IPV. A heterosexual male from the HBCU said, “I think it’s physical, and whenever I hear ‘violence,’ I think of it as physical. So, hitting, beating, striking, pushing.” Participants understand that various types of IPV exist, but physical IPV appears to be the first thing that comes to mind among Black college students.

Psychological factors contributing to inflicting and accepting violence

Power and dominance

Power and dominance emerged as primary psychological contributors to inflicting and/or accepting violence among participants. Power and dominance were discussed separately in some focus groups, and as a combination in others. However, almost all participants related these factors to socialization (the process of learning to behave in a way acceptable to society) and historical trauma. Respondents discussed being socialized to discipline or punish someone when they exhibited behavior that was deemed disrespectful, unacceptable, or inappropriate. Some participants discussed the psychological and behavioral impact of spankings or ‘whuppings’ as a child. Respondents talked about how “whipping your child or beating your child has always been a way of African-American parents to suppress their child, keep them in place.” Even though spanking is the most used form of physical punishment for children (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2018), participants made the connection between the exertion of power and dominance over

children to the perpetuation and acceptance of violence as Black youth transitioned into young adulthood. Some participants also mentioned that normalizing physical aggression as a way of dealing with conflict was not appropriate; however, it was still a common practice they saw within families and interpersonal relationships. This finding aligns well with the social-ecological model of violence in that engagement in violence is an interplay between individual beliefs, history of violence, and familial and community norms around violence.

The topic of *interracial relationships* emerged as a sub-theme under the overarching theme of power and dominance. Participants felt strongly that undertones of historical oppression influenced relationship dynamics when IPV was present. This was discussed with a focus on individuals using intersecting privileged identities (e.g., White men) as a source of power and dominance in relationships. Interestingly, all these specific responses and opinions emerged from participants who were enrolled at the PWI study site. The qualitative analysis revealed that participants consistently used the focus group space as a vehicle to express their opinions related to oppression and perceived inferiority due to race/racial tenets and socialized racial hierarchies. To this degree, one male participant from the PWI shared the following statement in connection to interracial relationships, power, and dominance,

... but from other interracial couples that I've seen, I've seen where it's either a Black man and a White woman or a White man and a Black woman, and it's kind of like, well, I'm a little bit higher than you, so I can treat you any way I want to,

referring to the role of the White person in both examples. In all discussions, the only two racial groups discussed were people who identified as White or Black. Students saw these two groups as the most distinct from each other, especially because of the socio-historical and sociopolitical stereotypes that portray Black men as aggressive and predators, and Black women as angry and aggressive.

Social factors contributing to inflicting and accepting violence

Social media

Beyond behavioral descriptions of IPV experiences among participants, *social media* use was described as a factor that contributed to someone inflicting violence ("leaking nudes") or accepting violence (obliging requests/tolerating physical abuse in exchange for avoiding nude pictures being exposed) from their intimate partners. Our data revealed physical (e.g., hitting), psychological (e.g., manipulation), and verbal (e.g., yelling) forms of violence were evoked by, conducted through, or distributed on social media platforms. One respondent, a heterosexual male from the PWI shared the following, "Twitter, that's

the main one, honestly. I see it every day. You see somebody getting harassed. If I go into it right now, there's probably about ten people you can see in a relationship going through it." Although social media platforms have been powerful for social justice transformation efforts and advocacy, they can also serve as a method to manipulate, shame, and perpetuate aggression and violence within relationships through stalking and non-consensual photo sharing, among others. Participants described how partners use social media and technology to monitor accounts and stalk them by finding out their location. According to the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, young Black people use social media such as Snapchat, Tumblr, Instagram, and several messaging applications more actively than their White peers (NORC, 2017). The perceived normalization of these types of maladaptive behaviors within the context of intimate relationships among Black college students is problematic and an area of socialization that must be addressed.

Structural impact of oppression

Students identified broad social factors such as perceived inferiority, historical oppression, structural injustices, and childhood trauma due to adverse childhood experiences (ACES) as critical in understanding why violence is inflicted or accepted among Black college students. One participant who identified as a heterosexual female at the PWI shared the following:

I think there's a lot of reasons. But I think one reason I think that is the issue is because Black people in general, we are an oppressed group. And so, I feel like with oppression and a lot of systematic issues that we are facing, there is this level of just – I don't know how to describe it. It's more this level of feeling inferior.

Likewise, another participant who identified as a heterosexual female at the HBCU agreed that oppression – historic and internalized – was a contributing factor to IPV experiences. She also linked IPV to social acceptance: "I feel like the African-American community, it's a shame when we promote things that we should not promote, and we make it seem like it's okay." Her definition of "shame" related to normalizing instances of IPV by Black college students. Both participants, despite being students at the separate campuses, congruently reflected on people blindly accepting or even promoting acts of violence upon their own loved ones. The participants realized that these attitudes operate as a function of historical trauma and oppression.

Students also centered part of this discussion around the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (intersectionality). Some participants acknowledged that someone who identifies as a Black bisexual male, or a Black lesbian female may be more likely to accept IPV and not report the incident(s) than a person with one or no marginalized identities. Each of these interdependent identities (race, gender, sexual orientation) have varying levels of power and influence in certain contexts (social position) and help shape

experiences and behaviors of individuals (Bowleg et al., 2017; Cardenas, 2020). Protecting their complex and intersecting identities may be more important than disclosing the IPV experience. In other words, the cost of silence outweighs the cost of reporting and potentially being “outed” and publicly scrutinized. This may be especially true for students on smaller campuses, like the HBCU students, where it is potentially easier for multiple people to know about one’s intimate relationships and experiences.

Cultural factors contributing to inflicting and accepting violence

Silence and minimization

Many of the references to Black culture discussed “unwritten rules” and values that reflect family privacy. For example, a heterosexual male from the HBCU stated, “Black people are just . . . mind your business,” to which another quickly agreed, “yeah, that’s always the story, mind your business. Don’t even worry about it.” A student at the PWI who identified as an LBT female also shared, “In the Black community, what happens at home, stays at home,” and went on to share that regardless of the type of violence that occurred, it was often minimized, accepted, and not to be discussed. This participant also described witnessing her father physically abuse her mother and knowing other friends who witnessed the same types of IPV within their homes, yet knew and understood that these experiences were not to be discussed outside of the home.

In addition to a culture of silence and minimization in the home, participants also communicated a culture of minimization among peers. A male student from a LGBTQ focus group at the HBCU shared experiences of witnessing intimate partners engaged in physical IPV but ultimately dismissed it as, “we just saw them fighting all the time, and we used to tell them, like maybe you all are just not meant for each other.” Decisions to minimize instances of IPV may also relate to the fact that additional attention to the issue may cause undue hardship on both partners. In particular, students cited distrust between young Black men and women and the judicial system – which included university staff and officials – as a primary reason that many incidents of IPV among Black college students go unreported. The intersection of race, gender, and social position (which includes historical mistreatment experiences) greatly influenced their decision to engage with the systems that are supposed to be available and supportive to them.

Discussion

IPV is a severe issue affecting individuals’ health and overall well-being and is prevalent among college students. Not enough attention is paid to IPV among college students, especially those who are deemed to be at higher risk of

engagement. Healthy relationships and positive social interactions are especially important considerations among college students, given that this developmental stage emphasizes identity and intimacy. The current study sought to understand conceptualizations of IPV, and factors (psychological, social, and cultural) that Black students identify as contributing to someone *inflicting* and *accepting* IPV. Unlike previous studies that utilized primarily quantitative research methods (Barrick et al., 2013; Walley-Jean, 2019), the current study utilized focus groups to explore the research questions, which allowed participants to conceptualize and describe their perceptions of IPV in greater, unrestricted detail. A higher percentage of students at the PWI report experiencing violence in relationships than those at the HBCU. Half (50%) of PWI student participants experienced violence, with the majority identifying as the 'victim.' This was counter to those who participated in the Field et al. (2015) study. Five themes emerged, and some of our findings are consistent with the limited prior research exploring IPV among Black college students (Barrick et al., 2013; Krebs et al., 2009; Valandra et al., 2019).

The first research question explored conceptualizations of IPV, and participant responses revealed that Black college students identify any instances of intentional acts that cause harm as "violence." However, most participants associated IPV primarily with physical violence. This finding is in line with studies that have shown that young Black men and women perceive physical violence as IPV, without as much consideration to other types (e.g., psychological, emotional, verbal; Bremond et al., 2013; Love & Richards, 2013; Walley-Jean, 2019). Interestingly, many of the students who experienced IPV also indicated struggling with their emotional and mental health as a result. Although they primarily talked about physical violence, their experiences were indicative of other types of IPV. This provides additional and important evidence and reiterates the need for college campus administrators to offer services that intentionally address a variety of types of IPV on campuses for survivors *and* perpetrators.

Many of the themes around inflicting and accepting violence (our second and third research questions) were steeped in the contexts of socialization and Black family dynamics across participants who were enrolled at the HBCU and the PWI. The role of racial socialization was highlighted and explicitly expressed in the ways in which the PWI students almost always responded to questions by centering race or using descriptive examples that focused on historical oppression. Al'Uqdah et al. (2016) described IPV in the African American community as a complex issue wherein internalizing and believing negative stereotypes about African Americans, along with stressful experiences (e.g., trauma, community violence, discrimination, and racial microaggressions), are contributors to aggression and violence. In addition, the environmental and individual risk factors that contribute to perceptions of themselves and to IPV are further mediated by the social, historical, and political

oppression in the African American community. This is another advantage of using an intersectional framework, as it can help guide researchers to investigate macro- and micro-level influences of IPV (Barrios et al., 2021). The toll of oppression was shown in another qualitative study examining eight Black/African American college students' (age 18–27) understanding of violence (Zounlome et al., 2019). These students described the historical legacy of racialized trauma against Black people, which included stereotyped depictions (e.g., Strong Black Woman) and the expectation of silence as it relates to traumatic experiences. These results further support the importance of investigating the range of factors and their influences and relationship to one another. Future research is needed to further explore the impact of socialization, historical traumas, and the influence of “unwritten rules” and the minimization and acceptability of IPV among Black college students, and the larger Black community. This study is a solid step forward in this exploration and filling these gaps in the literature.

The role of social media in accepting and inflicting IPV also emerged as a main theme and communicates the importance of contexts and the continued exploration of novel spaces, such as digital worlds in which college students are deeply embedded. Our findings were similar to those in the study by Munro-Kramer et al. (2021) where many participants talked about the use of social media to perpetrate abuse. Posting pictures or videos on social media, monitoring accounts for ‘likes’ and ‘retweets,’ and new connections were seen as abusive tactics used to control other individuals. Technology as a method of exerting dominance, control and power are becoming more common, especially among youth and young adults (Munro-Kramer et al., 2020). Therefore, it is imperative to recognize the role of these factors regarding IPV in Black college students’ experiences, conceptualizations, and definitions that go unrecognized empirically. The reliance upon, and engagement with, technology intersects with every aspect of the lives of young people that it must be integrated into any prevention and/or intervention strategy.

A topic that permeated through the focus groups, especially with heterosexual women on both campuses, was navigating societal pressures of being in a relationship for the purposes (and expectations) of leaving the college environment with a life partner. This was stated as a reason for accepting violence and staying in a relationship where IPV was occurring. Thus, an essential issue on college campuses must be considered is the gender ratio imbalance (GRI). On most college campuses, especially HBCUs, African American females outnumber their male counterparts, and the perception of available mates may be limited (Hall et al., 2014; Stackman et al., 2016). Feeling the pressure of staying in a relationship, coupled with perhaps a limited pool of available mates, supports Guttentag and Secord’s (1983) assertion that a shortage of available mates leads to uneven power distribution and, in many cases, poor decision-making. Studies show that those who feel as if

they have limited options for mates will make more concessions to appease and keep their partners, accept high-risk behaviors and, in some cases psychological, emotional, and physical abuse (see, Littleton, 2014).

Strengths and limitations

The exact phrase “violence is violence” that appeared across all focus groups in this study demonstrates a major strength of this research: consensus among participants. There was congruence that “any” type of violence or act that was perpetuated to cause harm should be considered violence, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, or campus type. This suggests that our data collection procedures were consistent on both campuses, and the unanimity bolsters the validity of our results. This study also fills an important gap regarding how Black College students within different campus cultural contexts *conceptualize* IPV (Walley-Jean, 2019) and *extends* the extant literature by qualitatively examining their conceptualization and perceived influences of IPV experiences. However, we also faced some limitations, and the findings must be interpreted with this in mind. First, the postsecondary institutions from which the sample was drawn are in the Southeastern part of the United States – an area that is known for being highly conservative and locally defined as “the Bible Belt.” Second, although both campuses are public and part of a larger university system, there are differences in students’ lived experiences and socialization. As such, our findings cannot be generalized to the larger populations of Black college students at HBCUs and PWIs. Thirdly, we had one focus group where only two students were present. Although this is not technically seen as a ‘group,’ the decision was made to conduct the group as to respect the students’ time. Another limitation of this study may be the social desirability of student responses. It is important to keep in mind that there are students who were genuinely honest in their statements and those who may have expressed views that were not also reflective of their thoughts, given the open environment of a focus group and sharing sensitive topics around their peers. Despite these limitations, the study provides powerful insights regarding the perceptions of intimate partner violence among Black college students and offers a unique comparison of responses by gender (male and female), sexual orientation (heterosexual and LGBT+), and campus type (HBCU and PWI).

Implications for practice

The impact of IPV is not relegated to only certain neighborhoods, universities, or populations. It is an indicator of a larger societal issue that needs multi-pronged, tailored prevention and intervention approaches to be properly addressed. Perpetrating and accepting violence are learned behaviors. The psychological, social, and cultural realities, such as internalized oppression,

historical trauma, and the gender-ratio imbalance, play a significant role in attitude development and maintenance, decision-making, and subsequent behavior of Black individuals (see, Johnson, 2017). From this study, there are two overarching suggestions for creating culturally responsive campus environments for students. First, normalize inclusivity and support for students experiencing IPV. A topic discussed in the focus groups was the gender and sexual orientation biases on many campuses. Many male participants noted that they did not feel as if they would be taken seriously if they reported being a victim of IPV. Although participants overwhelmingly noted that “violence is violence,” there are heteronormative perspectives of IPV that do not create space or empathy for these experiences in same-sex relationships. Both situations create, and sustain, toxic and abusive environments where IPV may go unreported. If the antiquated belief that IPV is only an act perpetrated by men on women continues, it erases the experiences of men who are survivors and relegates same-sex IPV as non-existent (Baker et al., 2013). In this study there were five men (10%) who reported experiencing violence in a relationship. Of those who experienced violence, only one identified as the ‘perpetrator.’ Second, reevaluate the programmatic efforts on campus to ensure that individual, social, and cultural factors are incorporated. Students on both campuses made statements related to limited awareness of campus resources and programming events to address IPV. It is important for college staff, faculty, and administrators to engage in meaningful and intentional conversations with students, and to create programs that are inclusive, informative, and culturally responsive to their needs.

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Ethical standards and informed consent

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation [institutional and national] and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all patients for being included in the study.

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