Examining the Effectiveness of the Mandatory Training on Relationship Violence
Administered by California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

This project intends to examine the effectiveness of California Polytechnic State University’s (“Cal Poly’s”) current student requirements on the subject of intimate partner violence. The existing mandatory training is meant to inform students on the prevalence of intimate partner violence and advise them on prevention and intervention techniques. The research in this project explores a broad contextualization of intimate partner violence from a social and historical perspective, which intends to explore the possibility that students may be more likely to internalize the significance of the information if such context was included in the training model. The research also presents information on the concept of framing and how it is an essential aspect of communicating information effectively. Essentially, this project explores the possibility that students may be completing the sexual violence training as a means to an end, but that reframing the content of the training could bolster student’s dedication to learning the material and therefore better achieve the training’s objectives.

Background of the Problem

Intimate partner violence can be used to describe any kind of abuse that occurs in a romantic relationship, and can be characterized by physical, emotional, sexual, verbal or economic abuse. A 2011 national poll reported that 1 in 3 women in college have been in an abusive relationship (Moscou, 2015, 824). Despite the contemporary prevalence of relationship
violence, legislation designed to protect and support survivors indicates ongoing societal pressure to reduce its existence (Swanson, 2014, 2-4).

Considering this trend within the context of California Polytechnic State University, there have been efforts to educate students on the existence of intimate partner violence, advise them on warning signs of unsafe relationships, and suggest methods for supporting survivors. In compliance with Executive Order 1095 by the California State University Chancellor’s Office, Cal Poly requires all students to complete mandatory online student training that is intended to teach students about prevention of relationship violence. Students are incentivised to complete this mandatory training because failure to comply will result in a registration hold for the following university quarter.

Additionally, Cal Poly offers resources through the SAFER training program. The training is an 8-week course that educates students on all forms of gender-based violence and teaches them to be an ally by trying to prevent instances of intimate partner violence. According to the SAFER page on the Cal Poly website, completing the training provides the following benefits (California Polytechnic State University. “Safer Leadership Training.”):

- Contextualize the movement against violence within broader systems of oppression & history of colonization;
- Have extensive knowledge of topics regarding sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking;
- Understand dynamics of healthy relationships, healthy sexual experiences, boundaries, communication and roots of equity;
- Gain confidence responding to disclosures of gender- & power-based violence;
- Learn the neurobiology and psychology of trauma;
- Demonstrate positive bystander intervention behaviors & pro-social norm setting;
- Articulate public health models and frameworks for violence prevention;
- Differentiate various reporting and justice pathways (law enforcement, Title IX, restorative/transformative justice); and
- Learn from on- & off-campus resources.

The training objectives listed by the SAFER program suggest that the program attempts to educate students on the history of intimate partner violence in order to demonstrate how broader context contributes to the modern existence of the phenomenon. It explores context in order to better explain the movement to reduce the existence of unsafe relationships. However, this training is not mandatory and is an optional program for students who would like to be leaders in this activism. The only mandatory requirement for students to complete on an educational level is the online certification.

Since students are encouraged to complete this training in order to register for classes, it is possible that the significance of the information is implicitly reduced. Rather than feeling a strong emotional and personal responsibility to be an advocate for survivors and engage in prevention practices, students may rush through the online certification as a means to an end in order to register for classes and resume their degree progress. This could contribute to a sense of apathy towards learning about intimate partner violence and therefore be counterproductive in its mission to mobilize students.
Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the extent to which current methods at California Polytechnic State University are effective in communicating the issue of intimate partner violence to students. The mandatory training is intended to inform students of the prominence of intimate partner violence and sexual assault, and provide them with the knowledge and resources required to recognize unsafe relationships in the context of their own lives. This study aims to gather data from students to assess whether or not the training is meaningfully achieving these objectives. The data provides insight into what students gain from the current training model, and the literature review presents research to support a potential recommendation for what could make the training more effective.

Setting for the Study

This study aims to develop an understanding of how students at Cal Poly feel about the current educational methods regarding intimate partner violence by gathering data on their experience with the training. The questions are meant to explore the effectiveness of the mandatory online training as an educational tool. The training is supposed to equip students so that they feel motivated to take prevention of intimate partner violence seriously and they understand available resources for themselves and others. The data will be gathered in the form of an optional and anonymous survey, where students will be free to answer questions honestly. As this survey will not include every student who has taken the mandatory online training, the data will serve as a sample of the population of Cal Poly students who have completed the course.
Research Questions

The following questions were presented via optional online survey to students:

- What gender do you identify as?
  
  ○ Male, Female, Non-binary, Other, or Prefer not to Answer.

- Have you completed the mandatory sexual violence prevention training during your time as a student at Cal Poly?
  
  ○ Yes or No.

- When comparing the resources and media you have consumed on the subject of intimate partner violence (including movies and documentaries, class materials, news articles, first and second-hand experience, etc.), how influential on your worldview do you consider the mandatory training provided by Cal Poly?
  
  ○ **Highly influential** - It has been a leading resource that has largely shaped your worldview regarding intimate partner violence.

  ○ **Moderately influential** - It has shaped your worldview regarding intimate partner violence, but less than other media and/or educational materials.

  ○ **Neutral** - It has not added or detracted from your worldview regarding intimate partner violence.

- Outside of the mandatory training administered by Cal Poly, have you taken any additional courses or training to increase your understanding of intimate partner violence?
  
  ○ Yes or No.

- In your opinion, the sexual violence prevention training provides the most information on which of the following:
○ Data and statistics on sexual violence (relating to frequency, demographics, reported cases, etc.)
○ The historical, social, and legal context of sexual violence.
○ Prevention and intervention techniques for potential scenarios.
○ How to identify characteristics of unsafe relationships.
○ Resources to assist survivors.
○ Emotional repercussions of experiencing intimate partner violence in any capacity.

Definition of Terms

- **Intimate Partner Violence** - Sexual violence, physical violence, psychological aggression, and stalking between intimate partners.
- **Intimate Partners** - Past or present romantic relationships including spouses, individuals who are dating, and sexual partners.

Organization of the Study

Chapter one introduces a statement of the problem, background information, purpose and setting of the study, research questions, and definition of key terms. Chapter two explores existing literature to provide context on the subject of intimate partner violence and how it relates to college communities, as well as how context is a key component of effective communication and education. Chapter three presents the methodology for collecting data via an online anonymous survey. Chapter four analyzes the results of the survey, and chapter five serves as the conclusion.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This literature review provides information on the historical and social background of intimate partner violence in the United States in order to contextualize its contemporary existence. The research establishes how societal attitudes regarding intimate partner violence have shifted over time by analyzing the issue’s trajectory through the lens of legislative efforts. This presents some of the information that California Polytechnic State University’s current domestic violence training is lacking, and which may be helpful to include when educating students. It also discusses the prevalence of sexual violence in college communities, and why it should be addressed in order to support the well-being of students.

Additionally, this literature review explores how contextual inference determines adaptation of behavior, and how the framing of information is an essential component of mass communication.

Contextualizing the Movement to End Relationship Violence

One of the most significant aspects in understanding intimate partner violence is knowing who is affected by it. In its broad definition, domestic violence can affect men, women, and children. However, the overwhelming majority of victims are women who are abused by a spouse or romantic partner (Swanson 2014, 1). The victim profile does not necessarily adhere to racial, gender, or sexual orientational boundaries, but statistics reveal that socioeconomic status is relevant when examining rates and patterns of domestic abuse. When comparing various races, for example, among the same economic status, the rates of domestic violence are about the same
Low socioeconomic status reveals higher rates of domestic abuse, but research indicates a lack of consensus regarding patterns in other demographic classifications. The National Domestic Violence Hotline reports that 12 million men and women in the United States are victims of domestic violence every year (1). Domestic violence is a common characteristic of American households, and in many ways, it has been woven into the foundation of America, as is evident in U.S history dating back to the 1800s.

In America during the 19th century, it was legal for men to punish their wives with physical or emotional harm, which was largely perpetrated by European settlers who believed God afforded them the right to beat their wives (Swanson, 2014, 2). During this time, women completely depended on their husbands or male family members and subsequently had no rights, legal status, or alternative means of protection of their own. Women were not provided protection or support from society, religion, or the law. It was not until the first domestic violence case reached the U.S Supreme Court in Calvin Bradley vs. the State of Mississippi that a court ruled in favor of a woman (Swanson 2014, 2). This case was significant because it set a precedent that defended women against extreme and excessive lengths of punishment.

Calvin Bradley vs. the State of Mississippi opened the door for further legislation that would favor women. In 1920, the 19th amendment was passed to allow women to vote, followed by women being afforded equal rights in 1923 (Swanson, 2014, 3). Women therefore became more invested in their education, pursuing jobs that they previously would have never been able to. This led to a rise in feminism, leading to the pursuance of greater protection for women in society (Swanson, 2014, 3). Yet, for all the women who were able to pursue greater education
and opportunities, there were many who remained trapped in abusive domestic relationships and kept their family affairs private.

In the 1980s, Congress began to pay greater attention to domestic violence. In the 1986 case of Meritor Savings Bank vs. Vinson, it was stated that, “Sexual harassment creating a hostile or abusive work environment, even without economic loss for the person being harassed, is in violation of the Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964” (Swanson, 2014, 4). After this, various laws were passed that sought to offer shelter, resources, programs, protection and support for victims of intimate partner violence. Among the first of these acts were the Violence Against Women Acts, passed in 1994, 2000, 2005, and 2013, respectively (National Domestic Violence Hotline 1).

The first Violence Against Women Act, passed in 1994, concentrated on protection for abused immigrants, support for domestic abuse centers and community organizations committed to ending violence, and federal prosecution of interstate domestic violence (National Domestic Violence Hotline 1). The next VAWA was passed in 2000 and was meant to improve upon the 1994 VAWA. According to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, the 2000 VAWA created legal assistance programs for victims, further protected immigrants experiencing domestic violence, and added stalking and dating violence to the list of domestic violence offenses (1). In 2005, the services of VAWA were broadened to include federal funding systems for rape crisis centers, enhanced programs for disabled victims, and concentration on prevention strategies. In 2013, President Obama signed the Violence Against Women Act into law, which gave greater protection to members of the LGBTQ community and Native Americans, provided universities with more resources to educate students, and equipped law enforcement with more tools to investigate rape and abuse cases (National Domestic Violence Hotline 1). The various programs
that were created as a result of VAWA have been instrumental in raising awareness and punishment regarding intimate partner violence. The acts have led to an increase in reporting of domestic abuse and reduction of non fatal domestic violence (Swanson, 2014, 5).

In addition to VAWA, another significant resource that was developed for victims of domestic abuse was the Family Violence Prevention and Services Act, authorized in 1984 and implemented by the U.S Department of Health and Human Services. According to the National Network to End Domestic Violence, FVPSA is the only federal funding source for crisis shelters and programs designed for victims of at-home abuse. It concentrates on addressing the short term and long term needs of victims by supporting hotlines, shelters, counseling, and relevant programs for people seeking assistance (National Network to End Domestic Violence 1). The program was reauthorized in 2010 to expand on its original intent by emphasizing the significance of preventative efforts. FVPSA has been vastly helpful for millions of victims every year, but not every need can be met due to lack of funding and resources (National Network to End Domestic Violence 1).

Upon its reauthorization in 2010, the FVPSA was renamed the Domestic Violence Prevention Enhancement and Leadership Through Alliances. According to the National Network to End Domestic Violence, the primary goal of this program was to reduce intimate partner violence at a local level (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1). It emphasized the need for prevention, specifically teaching strategies for recognizing patterns and early indications of an abusive relationship (National Network to End Domestic Violence 1).

Another significant piece of legislation that has been made to protect victims of domestic violence is the Domestic Violence Offender Gun Ban. Also known as the Lautenberg Amendment, this law was created in 1996 to restrict domestic abusers from purchasing guns.
This ban was largely pushed by the then New Jersey Sen. Frank Lautenberg, who claimed the law was, “Dedicated to the simple principle that wife-beaters and child abusers should not have guns” (Stolberg, 2017, 1). This legislation was extremely significant for victims of domestic abuse because previously, gun restrictions only applied to felons and the mentally ill. With the Lautenberg amendment, anyone convicted of a domestic violence misdemeanor or anyone with a restraining order relating to domestic abuse can not legally purchase a gun (Harvard Law Review, *Gun Control Act* 2150). This amendment provides greater protection for people experiencing violent home situations by restricting the accessibility of weapons to the abusers, and it aims to establish a federal framework to achieve consistency in how it is applied. This amendment has paved the way for courts to set precedents and further support the violent offender gun ban, such as in District of Columbia v. Heller, 554 U.S. 570 (2008).

In the District of Columbia v. Heller, the court ultimately decided that the Second Amendment allows the possession of firearms in self defense, however the right provided by the second amendment is not unlimited. In this case, the court stated that “[The Second Amendment] elevates above all other interests the right of law abiding, responsible citizens to use arms in defense of hearth and home. The right secured by the second amendment is not unlimited” (Harvard Law Review, *Gun Control Act* 2153). Therefore, the court further supported the notion that violent offenders, including domestic abusers, are not afforded the same rights to firearms as other, nonviolent U.S citizens.

These laws and programs have been instrumental in improving the lives of women, men, and children who experience violent relationships. Central to their success is public participation to denormalize intimate partner violence and reframe how society views and addresses its
existence. In particular, it is important to understand that the way intimate partner violence manifests in contemporary society is a result of broader social and historical context.

**Intimate Partner Violence Within College Communities**

In a particular study, women between the ages of 18-24 experienced the highest rates of sexual assault and rape compared to women in other age groups (Sinovich et. el, 2014, 1). A 2011 national poll indicated that 1 in 3 women in college have experienced an abusive relationship (Moscou, 2015, 824) and the rate of rape and sexual assault is 1.2 times higher for students than non-students, with incidents more likely to go unreported to police (Sinovich et. el, 2014, 1). Sexual harassment on college campuses is a well-documented phenomenon and a persistent issue. While the data in this review heavily discusses women, it is important to note that 1 in 10 men in America have experienced rape, physical violence, and stalking by an intimate partner (Moscou, 2015, 1). Intimate partner violence is not exclusive to women, and does not adhere to gender boundaries, but some studies indicate that women experience higher mean levels of sexual harassment.

Within the context of college campuses, intimate partner violence is especially likely to occur due to a variety of environmental factors. “Emerging adults at this time are actively exploring identity issues related to romantic relationships, religion, professions, and ideologies. While this process can ultimately lead to satisfying outcomes, frustrations stemming from failures or rejections related to identity exploration are stressors that this population may frequently encounter” (McGinley et. al, 2016, 298). These factors contribute to a level of vulnerability amongst students on college campuses, which is why it is especially important to raise awareness on sexual violence prevention and intervention. Additionally, students who
survive intimate partner violence have been shown to experience negative mental health such as psychological distress and substance abuse, particularly alcohol (McGinley et al., 2016, 297). In order to ensure the mental and physical well-being of students, it is important for universities to provide sufficient resources so that students are equipped to advocate for themselves and others in unsafe relationships.

**Contextual Learning and Inference**

“Central to the operation of the brain is the ability to store and maintain multiple memories of the environment and retrieve them as the need arises. The notion of context has emerged as being a key component of how the brain manages this complex task” (Heald, et al. 43). The brain relies on context in order to determine what behavior will be appropriate or useful in a given situation.

The phenomenon of the learning curve in experimental psychology provides insight into how context guides behavior. The learning curve suggests that performance of a task over time is improved with continued training and learning (Heald, et al. 55). Essentially, the more memories that can be recalled as being appropriately associated with a given situation, the more successful the chosen behavior will be. The adaptation of behavior is based on the creation and updating of memories, also known as proper learning (Heald, et. al 43). Considering this within the scope of this literature review, there is reason to believe that recollection of information can be improved if individuals are provided with a broad range of memories that are all associated with the same conclusion.

The sexual violence prevention training’s goal is for students to remember the presented information and be able to identify unsafe relationships in the context of their own lives.
Students being able to successfully fulfill this goal constitutes the desired behavior. If the training is able to show students a broader range of experiences and context that all point to the same conclusion (i.e. activism to end sexual violence), their ability to determine the desired behavior can be bolstered. The trainings current content relies on teaching students about common scenarios where they can safely prevent or intervene on sexual violence within the campus community. However, adding another type of information to the training model would broaden the context that students associate with the issue, which can increase their ability to make contextual inferences and recall information in new scenarios. For example, in addition to showing students specific situations that they may encounter in their own lives, the training could also educate students on how contemporary manifestations of intimate partner are derived from a social and historical normalization of sexual violence.

**The Role of Framing in Communications**

According to Vliegenthart in “Framing in Mass Communication Research - An Overview and Assessment,” some scholars propose that the concept of framing relies on emphasizing the prominence of various aspects of a topic. While Vliegenthart specifically discusses framing in relation to journalism, he also relates it to sociological concepts. “They argue that in order for individuals to participate in a social movement, frame alignment between movement and individual has to take place. In other words: individuals have to adopt the movement frame before they will become active for the movement” (Vliegenthart 937). Therefore, journalistic framing provides a useful lens with which to analyze the content of the mandatory training.

The information that is emphasized in the training has an effect on its utility in mobilizing its audience. Participants must feel a connection with the material in order to take
action. If the training is not serving its purpose in educating and mobilizing students to achieve its intended goal, reframing the training to emphasize different information may bolster its effectiveness.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected through an optional and anonymous Google Form survey. The survey consisted of five multiple choice questions and was distributed to several Facebook groups for various Cal Poly classes from December 2022 through January 2023.

Limitations

Limitations for this study include the small sample size (N=21) and the survey being optional. According to the university’s website, total enrollment at Cal Poly is about 22,287 students. For these reasons, it is unrealistic to assert that the group of respondents is entirely representative of the Cal Poly community’s distribution of opinions. The multiple choice questions are based on respondent’s personal opinions and rely on individual perspective rather than more quantitative factors.

Additionally, the recommendation for how to improve the training is supported by the literature reviewed in this paper. However, there are likely many other ways to interpret the data that would support alternative recommendations for improving the mandatory sexual harassment training.
Chapter 4

Analysis

**Question One** - What gender do you identify as?

- 76.2% of respondents identified as female.
- 23.8% of respondents identified as male.

**Question Two** - Have you completed the mandatory sexual violence prevention training during your time as a student at Cal Poly?

- 100% of respondents completed the mandatory sexual violence prevention training administered by Cal Poly.

**Question Three** - When comparing the resources and media you have consumed on the subject of intimate partner violence (including movies and documentaries, class materials, news articles, first and second-hand experience, etc.), how influential on your worldview do you consider the mandatory training provided by Cal Poly?

- 1 respondent (4.80%) considered the mandatory training to be “Highly Influential.” This choice indicated that “[The training] has been a leading resource that has largely shaped your worldview regarding intimate partner violence.”
- 7 respondents (33.33%) considered the mandatory training to be “Moderately Influential” on his or her worldview. This choice indicated that “[The training] has shaped your worldview regarding intimate partner violence, but less than other media and/or educational materials.”
13 respondents (61.90%) considered the mandatory training to be “Neutral” on his or her worldview. This choice indicated that “[The training] has not added or detracted from your worldview regarding intimate partner violence.”

**Question Four** - Outside of the mandatory training administered by Cal Poly, have you taken any additional courses or training to increase your understanding of intimate partner violence?

- 38.10% of respondents *have* taken additional courses or training to increase their understanding of intimate partner violence.

- 61.9% of respondents *have not* taken additional courses or training to increase their understanding of intimate partner violence.

**Question Five** - In your opinion, the sexual violence prevention training provides the most information on which of the following:

- 13.6% of respondents said: Data and statistics on sexual violence (relating to frequency, demographics, reported cases, etc.)

- 9.1% of respondents said: The historical and social, and legal context of sexual violence.

- 63.6% of respondents said: Prevention and intervention techniques for potential scenarios.

- 9.1% of respondents said: How to identify characteristics of unsafe relationships.

- 0.0% of respondents said: Resources to assist survivors.

- 4.5% of respondents said: Emotional repercussions of experiencing intimate partner violence in any capacity.
Within this sample, the majority of respondents were female and all respondents had taken the mandatory sexual harassment training administered by Cal Poly.

As reflected in Question 3, the overwhelming majority of students in this sample described their experience with the training as “Neutral.” This answer choice meant that students did not feel that the training added or detracted from their worldview regarding intimate partner violence. This could indicate that many students are hardly affected by the training and do not find it to be particularly moving or educational. Based on the cited objectives of the training, this response from students suggests that the training is not very effective in achieving its desired outcomes.

Also, most students in the sample (61.9%) had not taken additional courses or certifications to further their knowledge of intimate partner violence. This suggests that the training is a primary resource for educating Cal Poly students on this issue. The data collected from this question enforces the importance of ensuring that the training effectively educates and mobilizes students.

Most respondents (63.6%) thought that the training provided the most information on prevention and intervention techniques. Three respondents (13.6%) said data and statistics on sexual violence, 2 respondents (9.1%) said how to identify characteristics of unsafe relationships, and 2 respondents (9.1%) said the historical, social, and legal context of relationship violence. One respondent (4.5%) said emotional repercussions of experiencing intimate partner violence and zero respondents said resources to assist survivors.

This data suggests that the training does not leave students with a lasting impression of the material. This disconnect could contribute to a sense of apathy about completing the training, which potentially downplays the importance of the information that the training seeks to convey.
Chapter 5

Conclusion and Recommendation

The majority of students in our data sample indicated that they felt ultimately unaffected by the mandatory sexual violence training. Also, most students agreed that they primarily learned about prevention and intervention techniques. Very few students associated the training with the following: emotional repercussions; resources for survivors; characteristics of unsafe relationships; and the social, historical, and legal context of intimate partner violence. These responses, together with the data that most students do not receive additional courses outside of the mandatory training, suggest that the training is not fully achieving its goal to educate and mobilize students.

Based on the role of contextual inference in learning, and the significance of framing in communication methods, it’s possible that the training could be more effective if it provided students with more expansive knowledge on intimate partner violence. Specifically, contextualizing its contemporary manifestations in relation to a larger system of historical and social oppression. Such context also educates students on available resources and provides insight into how society’s relationship with intimate partner violence continues to evolve over time. The literature review discussed in this study suggests that expanding students' depth of knowledge will increase their ability to retain information and apply it to a broad range of scenarios. As this aligns with the university's intentions for students, it would be prudent for Cal Poly to adopt this strategy when developing future models of the training.


California State University Chancellor’s Office. Executive Order. No. 1095, 2015, pp. 1–24.


