

The Paradoxical Safety of Belonging: Exploring the Relationship Between Intimate Partner Violence and Belonging Across Genders

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Study Purpose

Intimate partner violence (IPV) remains a critical public health concern on college campuses, associated with detrimental academic and psychosocial consequences such as social isolation and loneliness. While collegiate environments often cultivate a keen sense of belonging, this very sense of connection may unintentionally diminish students' vigilance to potential harm. In other words, belonging can enhance safety and connection, but might also increase vulnerability. This study explores how a sense of belonging relates to sexual harassment and violence, and how gender identity shapes this relationship.

Data

- Sample: 329,773 undergraduate students
- Source: American College Health Association – NCHA, Wave 3
- Gender Groups:
 - Men: 103,553
 - Women: 213,835
 - Transgender & Gender Expansive (TGE): 12,385
- Analysis: Logistic regression with $\alpha = 0.01$

Measures

- Belonging: Based on four questions (e.g., “I feel like I belong at my College/University”)
- Outcomes: Experiences of sexual harassment or violence (from partners and non-partners) in the past year

Findings

- Higher belonging predicted higher reports of harassment and violence ($p < 0.001$)
- Gender identity was a strong predictor of all forms of sexual harm ($p < 0.001$)

- Interaction effects:
 - Stronger positive link between belonging and harassment/violence for women
 - Weaker or non-significant effects for men and TGE students

Interpretation

- Belonging may lower vigilance, increasing exposure risk, especially among women
- Socialization in women to prioritize belonging could heighten vulnerability
- Range restrictions in belonging among TGE students may conceal more subtle or nuanced risk patterns

Results

Table 1: Non-Intimate Partner Violence

	<i>coeff</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i>
Belonging (BE)	-0.02	0.001	46.99	> 0.001	-0.02 - -0.02
Man					
Woman	0.08	0.01	5.64	>0.001	
Transperson	0.51	0.09	5.91	>0.001	0.11 – 0.15
Gender Expansive (GE)	0.37	0.03	12.46	>0.001	0.31 – 0.42
BE x Man					
BE x Woman	0.01	0.01	2.50	0.12	0.01 – 0.01
BE x Transperson	0.02	0.01	2.84	>0.01	-0.03 - -0.01
BE X GE	0.01	0.01	6.36	>0.001	-0.02 - -0.01

Table 2: Intimate Partner Violence

	<i>coeff</i>	<i>se</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>CI</i>
Belonging (BE)	-0.01	0.001	29.39	> 0.001	-0.01 - -0.01
Man					
Woman	- 0.07	0.01	5.42	>0.001	-0.09 – -0.04
Transperson	0.28	0.08	3.53	>0.001	0.12 – 0.42
Gender Expansive (GE)	0.11	0.03	4.24	>0.001	0.06 – 0.17
BE x Man					
BE x Woman	0.01	0.01	1.52	0.12	-0.01 – 0.01
BE x Transperson	0.01	0.01	2.64	>0.001	-0.02 - -0.01
BE X GE	0.01	0.01	3.81	>0.001	-0.01 - -0.01



Implications & Future Directions

- Belonging, while valuable, may also be a risk factor for IPV on campuses
- Intervention strategies should address both connection and awareness
- Campus prevention and psychoeducation must be gender-informed
- Future directions and research should clarify how belonging can vary across gender identities