

SELF-EFFICACY, COMMUNITY VIOLENCE, AND ADOLESCENT DATING VIOLENCE

Christine Schwartz & Marsha Runtz, Department of Psychology, University of Victoria

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Abstract

Researchers have discovered a number of risk factors associated with adolescent dating violence; these include child maltreatment and high levels of conflict in teen dating relationships. This study examined relationships among adolescent dating violence, family violence, community violence, dating history, academic history, and various forms of self-efficacy among 306 high school and university students (age 16 to 19 years). Results showed that psychological, physical, and sexual dating violence were common occurrences among these students, that both males and females admitted perpetrating dating violence, and that dating violence was related to involvement in community violence. Young women in high school who were victims of any form of dating violence demonstrated lower levels of dating self-efficacy (i.e., less confidence in their ability to secure and maintain dating relationships and to protect themselves from dating violence) and those who were victims of sexual dating violence had lower levels of physical self-efficacy. Young men in high school who had perpetrated psychological dating violence had lower academic self-efficacy. Implications for intervention and prevention programs are discussed.

Background

Adolescence is a significant period of development associated with a variety of new experiences and challenges. Within this period of the life span, the formation of intimate dating relationships is important to the continued healthy development of the individual (McCabe, 1984). Not all dating relationships, however, lead to a positive developmental trajectory. A

significant proportion of youths will engage in acts of violence against their dating partners during their adolescence. Although reported prevalence rates of dating violence have varied widely, based in part on factors such as the definition of dating violence used and sample characteristics, rates of between 30% and 40% have been commonly reported in the research literature (e.g., Foshee et al., 1998; O'Keefe, 1997). The vast majority of studies exploring rates of adolescent dating violence, however, have involved teenagers from the United States. Moreover, in the few studies of adolescent dating violence among Canadian youth, all published studies have been limited to teenagers from Central and Eastern Canada (Gagne & Lavoie, 1995; Jaffe, Sudermann, Reitzel, & Killip, 1992; Mercer, 1986; Price, Byers, Sears, Whelan, & Saint-Pierre, 2000; Sudermann & Jaffe, 1993). Thus, additional research which measures rates of dating violence for adolescent samples from other regions of Canada, such as Western Canada, will help provide a clearer picture of the extent of adolescent dating violence.

In addition to examining rates of dating violence, researchers have also discovered a number of risk factors associated with adolescent dating violence; these include child maltreatment, family violence, demographic characteristics, and high levels of conflict in teen dating relationships. As a result, a profile of both the adolescent victim and perpetrator of dating violence has begun to emerge. Given that adolescent dating violence is a significant health and social issue, identifying additional correlates may prove to be an important step in addressing this problem. Thus, given the limited amount of prior research in the area, the role of community violence and self-efficacy was examined in relation to dating violence victimization and perpetration. Additionally, relationships among adolescent dating violence, demographic variables, family violence, dating history, and academic history were also investigated.

Methods

Participants were 306 students (age 16 to 19; Mean = 18 years); 30% were high school students and 70% were introductory psychology students at a Western Canadian university. Most participants were female (73%) and Caucasian (83%). Participants provided information regarding demographic characteristics, academic background (e.g., grades, course failures) and aspirations, dating history (e.g., dating frequency, age at first date, number of dating partners), exposure to family violence, involvement in community violence and dating violence, and a variety of forms of self-efficacy. The Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, 1996) was used to evaluate participants' experiences of victimization and perpetration of psychological, physical, and sexual dating violence. The original Conflict Tactics Scale was modified to provide measures of exposure to parental violence, as well as witnessing, perpetrating, and being a victim of physical violence in the community. The Physical Abuse Questionnaire (Demaré, 1992) was used to assess childhood physical maltreatment by parents. Five aspects of self-efficacy were assessed using: the Self-Efficacy Scale (general and social self-efficacy; Sherer et al., 1982); the Physical Self-Efficacy Scale (Ryckman, Robbins, Thornton, & Cantrell, 1982); the Measure of Academic Self-Efficacy (Lalonde, 1980), and the Dating Self-Efficacy Scale (DSES), which was devised for this study. The DSES assessed two areas of individuals' beliefs in their dating abilities including: Securing and Maintaining Dating Relationships and Protecting Oneself from Dating Violence.

Results

The majority of participants had experienced some form of dating violence (see Table 1). For both high school and university students, psychological aggression was the most prevalent type of dating violence. Some gender differences in rates of dating violence emerged. Significantly more young women in high school reported perpetrating major physical aggression

than young men. In addition, significantly more young men in university reported perpetrating

Table 1

Type of Dating Violence	Young Women In High School	Young Men in High School	Young Women in University	Young Men in University
Psychological Aggression Perpetration	94.1%	91.9%	84.8%	84.8%
Psychological Aggression Victimization	97.1%	86.5%	79.3%	90.9%
Physical Aggression Perpetration	73.5%	50.0%	38.7%	38.2%
Physical Aggression Victimization	70.6%	51.4%	32.7%	39.4%
Sexual Coercion Perpetration	42.4%	50.0%	15.9%	42.4%
Sexual Coercion Victimization	69.7%	55.3%	38.0%	42.4%
Injury: Perpetrator	23.5%	24.3%	7.9%	9.1%
Injury: Victim	44.1%	35.1%	13.4%	9.1%

sexual coercion than young women.

The majority of the variables examined proved to be a significant correlate for at least one form of dating violence. For young women in high school, being a perpetrator of community violence was correlated with physical dating violence perpetration ($r = .59, p < .001$). In regard to self-efficacy, lower dating self-efficacy was related to experiencing all three forms of dating violence victimization (psychological: $r = -.44, p < .01$; physical: $r = -.52, p < .005$; sexual: $-.47, p < .01$), and lower physical self-efficacy was related to sexual victimization for young women in high school ($r = -.47, p < .01$).

For the young men in high school, community violence experiences proved to be very important in understanding their experiences with dating violence. Being a victim of community violence was related to all forms of dating violence for these young men (range of $r = .47$ to $.65, p < .005$). Additionally, being a perpetrator of community violence was related to all forms of dating violence perpetration (psychological: $r = .48, p < .005$; physical: $r = .45, p < .01$; sexual: $r = .58, p < .001$) plus sexual dating violence victimization ($r = .55, p < .001$). Finally, being a witness of community violence was related to psychological perpetration ($r = .47, p < .005$) and sexual perpetration ($r = .42, p < .01$). One form of self-efficacy was related to dating violence in

high school males: lower academic self-efficacy was associated with psychological perpetration ($r = -.44, p < .01$).

Experiencing community violence was related to some forms of dating for young women in university: witnessing community violence was correlated with the perpetration of both psychological ($r = .25, p < .001$) and physical ($r = .23, p < .005$) dating violence, and community violence perpetration was related to physical dating violence victimization ($r = .21, p < .005$). Self-efficacy was not related to dating violence for the university women. In contrast to the findings for the other participants, experiences with community violence and self-efficacy were unrelated to dating violence for young men in university.

In order to ascertain what proportion of the unique variance each of the variables accounted for in dating violence scores, standard multiple regressions were performed for the sample as a whole. Once again, self-efficacy and experience with community violence proved to be important to understanding adolescent dating violence. Academic self-efficacy was a significant predictor of psychological aggression perpetration ($B = -0.08, \beta = -.18$). Community violence perpetration was a significant predictor for physical and sexual aggression perpetration ($B = 0.31, \beta = .25; B = 0.29, \beta = .36$, respectively). Similarly, community violence victimization was a predictor for physical aggression victimization ($B = .39, \beta = .27$).

Conclusions

Higher than expected levels of dating violence were reported by participants in this study. Nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the young women and $\frac{1}{2}$ of the young men in high school along with slightly less than every 4 of out 10 university students were involved in physical dating violence at some point in their dating histories. Thus, occurrences such as a young woman slapping her boyfriend or a young man grabbing his date are happening at an alarming and intolerable rate.

One explanation for the higher than expected rates of physical violence found within the sample of high school students involved their previous experiences with violence. A large portion had experienced at least some form of physical abuse by a parent and many had witnessed parental spousal abuse. Finally, a large majority had experiences with community violence. For these youth, violence may be an all too frequent and regular part of their lives. Thus, with their high exposure to violence outside of dating relationships, it is not surprising that their involvement in dating violence is also high.

This study identified a number of variables that were related to dating violence among adolescents that were previously unexamined. Specifically, experiences with community violence emerged as an important factor in understanding dating violence. Multiple links were found between exposure to violence and the use of violence within dating relationships. These findings fit well within a social learning theory framework which posits that aggression is learned by observing the behaviour of others and its positive consequences. For example, within the community, witnessing violence is thought to influence young people's perceptions of violence as a legitimate method of resolving conflict (Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997). The media is an additional source where adolescents may view portrayals of violence. Barongan and Hall (1995) suggest that through the entertainment media, youth are introduced to powerful examples of coercive and sexist models of relationships. Such media messages may alter adolescents' perception of intimate relationships, sexual involvement, and romance (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Overall, there is solid evidence that exposure to violence, be it as a witness, victim, or perpetrator, is associated with dating violence involvement (e.g., O'Keefe, 1997; Smith & Williams, 1992).

Additionally, academic, dating, and physical self-efficacy also played a role in understanding dating violence. It is not surprising that low academic self-efficacy was a significant predictor of psychological aggression given the number of different negative outcomes of low academic self-efficacy that have been identified by past research including physical and verbal aggression (Bandura, 1995). Adolescents often experience significant pressures related to academic achievement (Elkind, 1984), thus, when they feel they are unable to master demands in this area, they may feel a need to exert control in other areas such as their intimate relationships.

For young women in high school, having low levels of dating self-efficacy and physical self-efficacy were associated with being a victim of dating violence. For these young women, past experiences of dating violence may lead them to question their ability to fend off unwanted sexual advances and physical attacks. These feelings may disproportionately affect young women given their male dating partners' tendency to be physically larger and stronger. These young women may also view themselves as having few or no dating opportunities outside of their current abusive partner. Thus, they may decide that a psychologically and physically aggressive boyfriend is better than no boyfriend at all. Alternatively, these attitudes may exist prior to experiences with dating violence and leave them vulnerable to such situations. That this relationship exists only for young women in high school, may be due to the high level of significance placed on dating relationships during this period of development. Some researchers suggest that young women use relationships to help form an identity (Chodorow, 1990). In other words, how a young woman sees and defines herself may include her relationships to significant others in her life. For example, a young woman may view an important part of her identity as somebody's girlfriend. Thus, to end an abusive relationship may be giving up part of one's own

self definition for these young women. Additionally, her relationship might afford her prestige and social status among her friends. For young women in university and young men, there may be many other additional important sources of self-identity to draw upon.

There are a variety of ways in which interventions can be directed to promote healthy relationships for youth based on the findings regarding the link between community violence and dating violence. First, for mental health professionals who have come into contact with youth due to their experiences with community violence, the possibility of violence in other areas needs to be addressed. For example, if a youth has been convicted of assault, assessing the possibility of violence in his or her intimate relationships would be warranted. Additionally, treatment programs within the forensic system for youth who have perpetrated violence or who are at-risk for doing so, need to address violence within intimate relationships in addition to violence occurring more generally. Second, given the high levels of violence experienced by youth, there is a strong need for community based violence reduction programs. Recently, there have been multiple programs that have targeted school violence. Such programs may also help to reduce violence within intimate relationships for teens. Finally, it may be useful to highlight the relationship between community-based violence and dating violence within intervention programs. The message that violence is unacceptable in resolving any conflict is clearly worth repeating.

The findings regarding self-efficacy may also be used to guide dating violence intervention and prevention programs. Specifically, discussions that promote ways to stay safe while dating could be of great importance. Especially for young women, there needs to be an awareness of resources to turn to if a relationship becomes violent. Additionally, given that most teens turn to friends rather than professional organizations when there is intimate violence,

adolescents need to discuss how they would react to such a disclosure by a friend. Another important area to address would be the choices adolescents have for dating. For young women in particular, there needs to be an emphasis on her strengths, skills, and sense of self independent of her intimate relationships. To this end, programs may even choose to include skill development for young women as a program component.

For adolescents, creating and maintaining intimate dating relationships will be an important part of their development. Unfortunately for a large number of them, these relationships may include verbal abuse, physical aggression, and sexual coercion. Because the majority of adolescents do not have long-standing patterns of interactions within intimate relationships, this period has been seen as a critical window of opportunity to break a potential cycle of violence (Follette & Alexander, 1992). Those working with youth need to make continued efforts to help young people create healthy relationships free from violence.

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