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The Effects of Relationship Education on Adolescent Traditional Gender Role Attitudes and Dating Violence Acceptance

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This study examined change in adolescents' traditional gender role attitudes and dating violence acceptance following completion of a relationship education program. Using data from a larger study evaluating the effects of relationship education for adolescents, beliefs and attitudes were assessed among a diverse sample of 627 youth. Gender differences in changes from pre- to post-test were also examined. Results of repeated measures MANCOVAs revealed a time X gender interaction effect for change in traditional gender role attitudes following relationship education. A significant decrease in traditional gender role attitudes was found for both boys and girls following relationship education, with a steeper decline in traditional gender role attitudes for boys than girls over time. Although there were no significant changes in dating violence acceptance, change in traditional gender role attitudes was correlated with change in dating violence acceptance, such that moving toward more egalitarian attitudes was associated with a decrease in acceptance of dating aggression/violence. Overall, results suggest that adolescents' attitudes about gender roles and dating violence are open to change when provided relationship education, and changes in these beliefs are linked. Findings from this study have implications for promoting healthy relationships among youth.

Keywords: relationship education, adolescents, gender role attitudes, dating violence acceptance

Introduction

Over the past several decades, researchers have documented a shift in adult gender role attitudes towards more egalitarian views among men and women (e.g., Bryant, 2003; Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2011). Those with more traditional views believe that women's primary responsibilities lie within the home, whereas men work outside the home, care for the family financially, and hold more authority within the home (Stanik & Bryant, 2012). Recent findings

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suggest that less traditional views are associated with better relationship outcomes (McGovern & Meyers, 2002; Stanik & Bryant, 2012), and more egalitarian gender role attitudes are associated with higher educational attainment, delayed transition to parenthood, and increased self-efficacy (Buchanan & Selmon, 2008; Cunningham, Beutel, Barber, & Thornton, 2005). Importantly, gender role attitudes have also been associated with acceptance of violence against women, where more traditional attitudes are associated with greater acceptance of violence and with perceptions of domestic violence situations as being less serious (Berkel, Vandiver, & Bahner, 2004; Hilton, Harris, & Rice, 2003). In the current study, we examine the effects of relationship education on adolescents' traditional gender role attitudes and dating violence acceptance and whether changes in these outcomes are related.

Adolescent dating relationships, and specifically adolescents' experiences in unhealthy and abusive relationships, have been understudied compared to adult romantic relationships. From a developmental perspective, given that initial involvement in romantic relationships typically begins during adolescence (Ashley & Foshee, 2005), it is imperative to study these relationships as they begin to form. Estimates are that violence occurs in as many as 57% of adolescent dating relationships (Herrman, 2009). Importantly, adolescent dating violence is associated with a number of negative health outcomes including dieting, eating disorders, cigarette smoking, alcohol consumption, drug use, suicidal thoughts, depression, and poor self-esteem (Ackard, Eisenberg, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007). The high prevalence of violence in adolescents' romantic relationships, as well as the subsequent associated negative outcomes, highlight the importance of examining these early dating relationships, particularly unhealthy dating interactions and associated factors, such as traditional gender role attitudes, which may provide useful targets for prevention and intervention.

Two key studies suggest strong links between attitudes about traditional gender roles, acceptance of aggression and violence in adolescent dating relationships, and actual dating violence perpetration and victimization. First, Lichter and McCloskey (2004) found that more traditional gender role attitudes, specifically family roles, and greater acceptance of dating violence were associated with more aggressive behavior in dating relationships. Next, in a large, more diverse sample of youth, Ali, Swahn, and Hamburger (2011) also found that more supportive attitudes toward dating violence were associated with the likelihood of both dating violence perpetration and victimization. Given the association between traditional gender role attitudes and dating violence acceptance and the link between dating violence beliefs and behaviors, it is essential to target these adolescent beliefs and attitudes in an attempt to reduce aggressive behavior in dating relationships. There is a clear need to educate youth about healthy conflict management and relationship skills and to assess changes in gender role beliefs and attitudes towards aggression and violence.

Previous findings suggest a number of gender differences in both traditional gender role attitudes and dating violence acceptance. First, young adult men have more traditional gender role attitudes than women (Berkel et al., 2004; Bryant, 2003). Specifically, men are more likely than women to endorse traditional ideas regarding the division of household labor, child care, and decision-making in a family (Gere & Helwig, 2012). Berkel and colleagues (2004) also found that compared to women, men reported less sympathy for battered women, and gender role attitudes were a stronger predictor of sympathy among men, whereas more traditional gender role attitudes decreased men's sympathy. Finally, Price and colleagues (1999) found that adolescent boys were more accepting of dating violence than girls, regardless of the type of violence. Thus, in the current study, we examine gender differences in the effects of relationship education on adolescents' gender role attitudes (used interchangeably with beliefs) and dating violence acceptance.

Research suggests that participating in relationship education (RE) is associated with positive short-term and long-term changes for adolescents. It is expected that the *Relationship Smarts Plus (RS+)*; Pearson, 2007) RE program would be associated with such changes as it is theoretically framed by life course theory. Life course theory assumes early experiences influence later experiences and that a specific experience or event (i.e., participation in a relationship education program) may introduce new information that could alter an individual's trajectory in a positive way (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). Previous RE program evaluation studies found increases in adolescents' conflict management skills and decreases in faulty relationship beliefs and use of verbal aggression following participation (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paulk, 2007; Kerpelman et al., 2010). One evaluation of a brief RE program indicated increases in communication and conflict resolution skills and a decrease in acceptance of dating violence in romantic relationships (Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011). None of these studies, however, have examined how changes in dating violence beliefs vary by gender. Additionally, no previous study has examined whether there are changes in gender role attitudes following RE for youth, and whether change in gender role attitudes is associated with change in dating violence acceptance.

Given the association between gender role attitudes, dating violence acceptance, and actual aggression and violence in romantic relationships, we examine the effectiveness of RE in modifying these beliefs and attitudes. While attitudes towards aggression are addressed in program content explicitly, gender role attitudes are addressed more implicitly. A recent study of changes in gender role attitudes among adults in RE found shifts towards more egalitarian views when the curriculum focused on universal needs for respect, empathy, and value (Lucier-Greer, Ketring, Adler-Baeder, & Smith, 2012). Because there are similar messages in youth RE (i.e., messages about respect for self and other, equality of needs in relationships, explicit information on identifying healthy and unhealthy/abusive relationships), we first hypothesize that adolescents' gender role attitudes will become more egalitarian and attitudes towards dating

violence will become less tolerant following RE participation. Additionally, we explore whether the effects of RE on traditional gender role attitudes and dating violence acceptance vary by gender, given that men's gender role attitudes tend to be more traditional, and men are more accepting of dating violence than women. Thus, our second hypothesis is that there will be a greater decrease in men's traditional gender role attitudes and dating violence acceptance. We also examine the association between changes in dating violence acceptance and traditional gender role attitudes. Thus, the third and final hypothesis is that decreases in tolerance of dating violence will be associated with decreases in traditional gender role attitudes.

Methods

Data for this study came from a larger sample of adolescents in a Southeastern state who participated in RE classes and who completed pre- and post-test surveys. Following an approved IRB protocol, all students were given informed consent letters for parents to sign. Students whose parents approved of their participation in the study were given the pre-program and post-program surveys. Participation averaged 89% in each class. Because traditional gender role attitudes were assessed only during project year 5, the current study uses pre- and post-program data from that project year only (2010-2011). Community educators from family resource centers implemented the *RS+* RE curriculum in high schools. Six core lessons of 50-90 minutes each were delivered to mixed-gender groups in either a Family and Consumer Science (FCS) or Health class. *RS+* contains lessons on attraction and infatuation, breaking up, recognizing abuse, communication skills, and making healthy relationship decisions. Surveys were completed both pre- and post-participation.

The analytic sample included 627 adolescents (59% girls, 41% boys) who were ethnically diverse (55% European American, 36% African American, 9% other). Participants were an average age of 15.6 years. Mother's education level was used to indicate socioeconomic status. Almost half of participants reported living in a nuclear family (48%), 34% in a single-parent family, and 18% in a stepfamily. Controls included adolescent gender, mother's education (i.e., less than high school, high school, and more than high school), race/ethnicity (i.e., White, African American, and Other), and family structure (i.e., nuclear two-parent, single-parent, and stepfamily).

Only those participants who provided responses to at least two of the three traditional gender role attitudes questions and one of the two dating violence acceptance questions, as well as provided information on all control variables were included in the study (10% of participants did not meet this criteria). Mean scores were utilized so missing data were not imputed. Of the original 705 participants, 78 completed pre-tests only (i.e., 11% attrition rate). We tested for differences between the analytic sample and those excluded from the study and found no differences based on race/ethnicity, SES, or on measures of traditional gender role attitudes at baseline. The

attrition group did contain slightly more males ($X^2(1, N = 705) = 4.95, p < .05$) and were slightly older ($t(701) = 4.18, p < .001$) than those in the study sample group. In addition, the study sample had slightly higher levels of acceptance of dating violence at baseline than the attrition group ($t(703) = -2.01, p < .05$).

Traditional gender role attitudes were assessed with three items (Larsen & Long, 1988). Participants answered 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree* to items such as “As head of the household, the father should have the final authority over the children.” Scores were calculated as the mean across the three items, with higher scores indicating more traditional gender role attitudes ($\alpha = .82$). Dating violence acceptance (Jones & Gardner, 2002) was assessed with two items, including “In today’s society, slapping a spouse or dating partner is understandable under some circumstances” and “In today’s society, pushing a spouse or dating partner is understandable under some circumstances.” Scores ranged from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*. Scores were created by taking the mean of responses to the two items, with higher scores indicating greater acceptance of dating violence ($\alpha = .89$).

Results

Using repeated measures Multivariate Analyses of Covariance (MANCOVAs), we examined changes in traditional gender role attitudes and dating violence acceptance following RE and included interaction terms to examine differences by gender. Estimated marginal means, which are adjusted means that account for the inclusion of covariates, and standard errors are reported in Table 1.

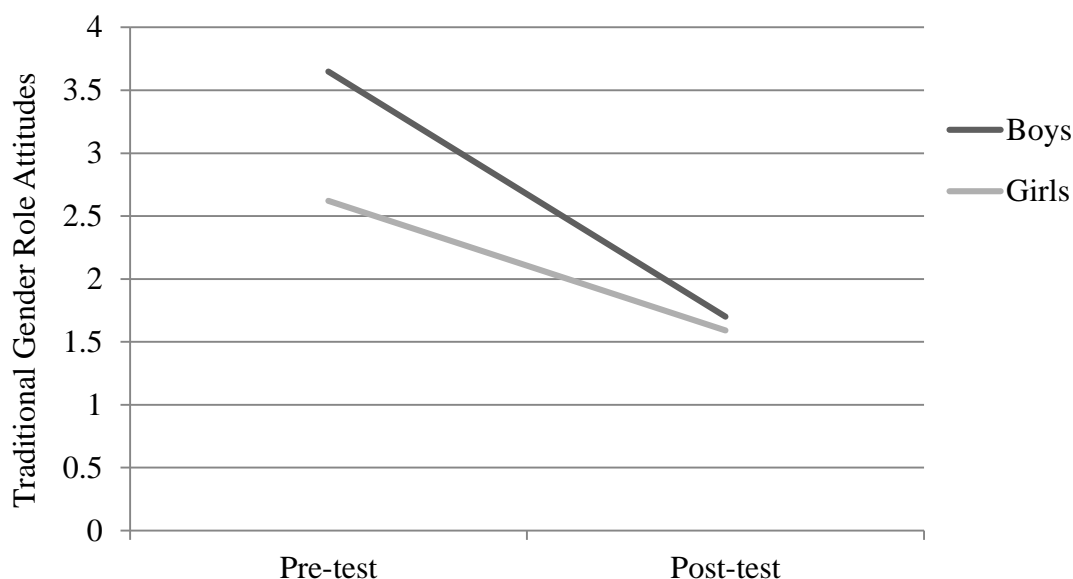
Table 1. Estimated Marginal Means and Standard Errors for Outcomes by Gender

Time	Traditional Gender Role Attitudes			Dating Violence Acceptance		
	N	M	SE	N	M	SE
<i>Pre-test</i>						
Boys	258	3.65	.08	258	2.62	.06
Girls	369	2.62	.06	369	2.11	.04
Total	627	3.14	.05	627	2.37	.04
<i>Post-test</i>						
Boys	258	1.67	.05	258	2.70	.06
Girls	369	1.60	.04	369	2.12	.05
Total	627	1.64	.03	627	2.41	.04

The main effect for change in traditional gender role attitudes was significant, such that adolescents’ gender role attitudes became less traditional following RE (Wilks’ Lambda = 0.846, $F(1.00, 619.00) = 112.28, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$). However, the time X gender interaction was also significant (Wilks’ Lambda = 0.894, $F(1.00, 619.00) = 73.19, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$), indicating a

difference in change patterns between boys and girls. Results indicated a significant decrease in traditional attitudes for both girls and boys, with a steeper decline for boys than girls over time (see Figure 1). In addition, tests of simple effects indicated significant differences in pre- and post-test means for gender role attitudes, such that boys had more traditional gender role attitudes than girls at pre-test ($F(1, 625) = 196.65, p < .01$) and post-test ($F(1, 625) = 61.41, p < .01$). This difference was greater at pre- than at post-test, meaning that a greater decrease in traditional gender role attitudes for boys narrowed the gender divide following RE participation.

Figure 1. Change in Traditional Gender Role Attitudes by Gender



Both the main effect for change in dating violence acceptance following the RE program (Wilks' Lambda = 1.00, $F(1.00, 619.00) = .87, p = .35$) and the time X gender interaction for dating violence acceptance were non-significant (Wilks' Lambda = 1.00, $F(1.00, 619.00) = 0.91, p = .34$). Pre-test reports of dating violence acceptance did not vary by gender ($F(1, 625) = 2.29, p = .13$), yet post-test boys were more accepting of dating violence than girls ($F(1, 625) = 9.23, p < .01$).

We calculated partial correlations and modeled the association between residual change in the two outcomes in order to examine the relationship between change in traditional gender role attitudes and change in dating violence acceptance. The correlation between pre- and post-test differences, after accounting for control variables, was significant, $r = .14, p < .001$. Using Structural Equation Modeling, the residual change in gender role attitudes significantly predicted residual change in dating violence acceptance ($\beta = .26, p < .001$), indicating that as attitudes became more egalitarian, participants' acceptance of dating violence also decreased.

Discussion

This study provides an examination of the effects of RE on adolescent traditional gender role attitudes and dating violence acceptance. Similar to previous findings, we found that boys had more traditional gender role attitudes than girls overall (Berkel et al., 2004; Bryant, 2003), and results indicated changes in gender role attitudes from traditional to more egalitarian following RE. Although both girls and boys reported less traditional gender role attitudes following completion of *RS+* (Pearson, 2007), boys reported slightly greater changes over time. This shift toward more egalitarian gender role attitudes following RE has important implications, as recent literature has linked more traditional beliefs with greater acceptance of dating violence (Berkel et al., 2004; Hilton et al., 2003; Lichter & McCloskey, 2004). These results suggest that implicit aspects of the educational program associated with gender roles (Lucier-Greer et al., 2012) are having some positive, short-term impacts on adolescent beliefs. Additionally, the greater change among males, who had more traditional gender role attitudes both before and after the RE program, suggests that RE may be an effective avenue in which to influence not only those with more traditional gender role beliefs, but also boys in particular, who are more likely to be perpetrators of severe forms of dating violence (Offenhauer & Buchalter, 2011).

Boys and girls did not differ significantly on dating violence acceptance at pre-test and did not become more or less accepting of violence after the program. However, the slight, non-significant increase in acceptance for boys resulted in a significant difference ($p < .05$) between the groups at post-test. It is likely the large sample size that allows this small shift to be detected as a significant difference. We do note that boys tend to be more accepting of dating violence, in general, so this difference has been documented in previous research (Price et al., 1999). However, overall for both groups, the mean scores at baseline were low. On a scale of 1-5, the mean scores are between 2 and 3, which reflect responses of *Disagree* and *Neutral*. A “floor effect” is likely the reason we did not find significant improvements in the average dating violence acceptance scores. The most significant finding is that for those who did reduce their acceptance of dating violence, this shift was associated with a shift towards less traditional gender role attitudes. This supports previous findings on the relationship between traditional gender role attitudes and greater acceptance of dating violence against women (e.g., Berkel et al., 2004).

The current study has several important limitations. First, although changes in traditional gender role attitudes following the RE program were significant, we did not assess the effects of the program compared to a control group. Thus, we are unable to determine whether the observed changes in the current study are simply due to the passing of time or clearly the result of the program. Future research using an experimental or quasi-experimental design may determine more specifically the effects of RE on these outcomes. In addition, we did not examine the number of *RS+* program sessions each participant completed. In future studies, it would be

helpful to assess the impact of dosage on changes in traditional gender role attitudes and dating violence acceptance, particularly because dating violence is explicitly discussed in the curriculum.

Next, most participants had a very low acceptance of dating violence at both time points. Thus, the lack of significant findings for change in this measure is likely the result of reduced power due to low variability. We examined beliefs about physical violence, which is the most severe type but less common than other forms of dating violence. Future studies may provide a more accurate examination of adolescent dating violence beliefs and include more variability by assessing emotional, verbal, and psychological dating violence beliefs.

Finally, because *RS+* was delivered during regularly scheduled FCS and Health classes, bias may be introduced into the data. Health classes are mandatory for high school students in Alabama; however, FCS classes are voluntary. Students who volunteer for the classes may be more motivated to learn about the topic of healthy relationships and may be biased to report greater improvements, while those who attend the program through a Health class may be less motivated to learn and report improvements.

Our findings suggest that adolescents' beliefs and attitudes regarding gender roles are open to change when provided with educational materials such as those offered through *RS+* (Pearson, 2007). This adds to the small but growing literature that indicates gender role attitudes are malleable through RE (Lucier-Greer et al., 2012). Since gender role attitudes appear to be responsive to participation in RE, and these shifts are associated with shifts in dating violence acceptance, implications for practitioners include the provision of program content that addresses both attitudes about aggression and dating violence and beliefs about gender roles. Although messages of universal respect, value, and equity may be implicit ways of developing more egalitarian gender role beliefs, future evaluation research should examine the effects of more explicit program content on gender role beliefs.

Finally, RE aims to address unhealthy and faulty relationship beliefs in an attempt to influence future behaviors. Given that beliefs and behaviors are typically associated (Ali et al., 2011; Lichter & McCloskey, 2004), the next step in this research is to examine whether the shifts in traditional gender role attitudes and associated changes in attitudes towards aggression and dating violence documented in the current study are followed by a reduction in actual dating aggression behaviors among RE participants.

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