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Original article

## Masculine Discrepancy Stress, Teen Dating Violence, and Sexual Violence Perpetration Among Adolescent Boys


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 A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** Addressing gender norms is integral to understanding and ultimately preventing violence in both adolescent and adult intimate relationships. Males are affected by gender role expectations which require them to demonstrate attributes of strength, toughness, and dominance. Discrepancy stress is a form of gender role stress that occurs when boys and men fail to live up to the traditional gender norms set by society. Failure to live up to these gender role expectations may precipitate this experience of psychological distress in some males which, in turn, may increase the risk to engage in physically and sexually violent behaviors as a means of demonstrating masculinity.

**Methods:** Five-hundred eighty-nine adolescent males from schools in Wayne County, Michigan completed a survey assessing self-perceptions of gender role discrepancy, the experience of discrepancy stress, and history of physical and sexual dating violence.

**Results:** Logistic regression analyses indicated boys who endorsed gender role discrepancy and associated discrepancy stress were generally at greater risk to engage in acts of sexual violence but not necessarily physical violence.

**Conclusions:** Boys who experience stress about being perceived as “sub-masculine” may be more likely to engage in sexual violence as a means of demonstrating their masculinity to self and/or others and thwarting potential “threats” to their masculinity by dating partners. Efforts to prevent sexual violence perpetration among male adolescents should perhaps consider the influence of gender socialization in this population and include efforts to reduce distress about masculine socialization in primary prevention strategies.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND  
 CONTRIBUTION

The present research indicates that boys who worry about being insufficiently masculine may be more likely to commit acts of sexual violence. The findings suggest that individual-level strategies aimed at alleviating distress about perceptions of masculinity may potentially prevent certain types of sexual violence.

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**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors report no conflict of interest.

**Disclaimer:** The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the annual rate of physical dating violence victimization among adolescent girls is 9% and the rate of forced sexual intercourse is 12% [1]. Equally alarming, as many as 15% of adolescents endorse using severe forms of violence (e.g., hitting with an object, using a knife or gun) against their dating partner that are likely to result in serious injury [2]. The consequences of these violent acts are pervasive and potentially chronic. For example, students

experiencing dating violence in adolescence are likely to suffer anxiety, depression, substance use, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, and injury [3,4]. In addition, the formative nature of this crucial developmental period puts adolescents at risk for future violent relationships as adults [5,6]. For these reasons, the primary prevention of teen dating violence (TDV) is of significant interest [7].

From the public health perspective, identifying key risk and protective factors and creating awareness of how they may influence long-term health outcomes is a critical step in the process of prevention [8]. A frequently theorized risk factor for men/boys' violence toward women has been gender socialization [9–12]. Gender roles set socially constructed expectations and norms about appropriate male and female behavior, characteristics, roles, and the culturally acceptable dynamics between males and females. Males are often expected to be, among other things, tough, strong, and dominant [13]. The use of violence and aggression serves as both an effective way to demonstrate these qualities and to stifle those who may seek to challenge one's masculine status [14]. Males adhering to masculine norms are more likely to perpetrate acts of violence toward an intimate or dating partner, and acts of violence in general [11,15,16]. However, despite this link between traditional norms of masculinity and aggressive behaviors, there is reason to suspect that males at the opposite end of the continuum of gender role conformity may be as likely or more likely to engage in aggressive and violent behavior in certain contexts. According to Pleck [17], discrepancy stress is a form of gender role stress that occurs when one fails to live up to the ideal manhood derived from societal mandates. Simply put, discrepancy stress arises when a male believes that he is, or believes he is perceived to be, insufficiently masculine. Research suggests that boys learn to expect that violation of masculine norms would result in negative social consequences [18,19]. It follows that boys experiencing a high degree of discrepancy stress would be more likely to act out in stereotypical masculine ways (e.g., aggression, risky sexual behavior) to demonstrate and validate their masculinity to self and/or others [14]. In addition, they may be more likely to interpret interpersonal interactions in intimate relationships as a threat to their masculinity and respond with violence [20,21].

At present, there has been little empirical work examining the influence of discrepancy stress on violence. Reidy et al. [22] demonstrated that discrepancy stress predicted multiple forms of violence toward an intimate partner even while controlling for other gender role relevant variables. However, as the authors note, addressing the association of discrepancy stress and historical intimate partner violence in adult populations does not allow conclusion about the role of discrepancy stress in the onset of relationship violence. It is pertinent to the development of primary prevention strategies to address the influence of discrepancy stress on relationship violence in adolescent populations. In the present study, we seek to examine whether boys who experience stress because they believe that others perceive them to be less masculine than the "average" male are more likely to engage in TDV. We expected that boys who endorse self-perceptions of gender role discrepancy (i.e., less masculine than the "typical" guy) and experience distress about this discrepancy (i.e., discrepancy stress) would (1) endorse greater likelihood of using physical violence in a hypothetical dating context; (2) report more historical instances of physical dating violence; and (3) report more historical instances of sexual violence within and outside dating relationships.

## Methods

### Participants and procedure

Participants were 589 adolescent males from 13 middle and high schools across Wayne County, Michigan that completed self-administered questionnaires. Passive consent procedures were used in accordance with recommended ethical guidelines [23,24]. Parents had the opportunity to refuse consent for their child's participation by returning a written form or by calling a toll-free telephone number. Before survey administration, all students provided written assent and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The institutional review board for the School of Social Work at Wayne State University approved the data collection protocols.

The sample was representative of the participating schools in terms of race: the largest percentage identified as white, the next largest identified as black, and smaller percentages identified as Hispanic, Native American, Asian American, and Arab American. We stratified the sample by grade (one cohort of sixth and one cohort of ninth graders) and community risk-level (i.e., low-, moderate-, and high-risk schools) and then randomly selected students within each stratum. Community risk was assessed using publicly available data to develop an index comprising rates of poverty, unemployment, percent minority, percent rental housing, percent female-headed households, and community violence. Approximately, half of the students were sampled from the sixth grade and half from the ninth grade. Respondents were generally equally distributed by community risk with over-sampling from higher risk communities. See Table 1 for demographic characteristics.

### Measures

**Gender role discrepancy and discrepancy stress.** Respondents answered five Likert-type questions pertaining to the experience of (1) perceived gender role discrepancy (e.g., "I am less masculine than the average guy," "Most girls I know would say that I'm not as masculine as my friends") and five Likert-type questions pertaining to the experience of (2) discrepancy stress: distress stemming from the discrepancy (e.g., "I wish I was more manly," "I worry that people find me less attractive because I'm not as macho as other guys") [22]. Response options were on a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Terminology about specific behaviors, attributes, or cognitions related to masculinity was avoided as this language

**Table 1**  
Demographics

	N	%
Caucasian/white	384	65.2
Black/African-American	124	21.1
Hispanic	40	6.8
Native American	23	3.9
Asian American	8	1.4
Arab American	7	1.2
Sixth grade students	284	47.9
Ninth grade students	305	51.8
Low-risk community students	195	33.1
Moderate-risk community students	169	28.6
High-risk community students	225	38.2

Based on sample of 589 adolescents.

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