



Research article

Witnessing intimate partner violence as a child: How boys and girls model their parents' behaviors in adolescence

Christine M. Forke^{a,b,c,*}, Rachel K. Myers^{b,c}, Joel A. Fein^{b,c,d}, Marina Catalozzi^{e,f,g},
A. Russell Localio^a, Douglas J. Wiebe^a, Jeane Ann Grisso^h

^a Dept. of Biostatistics, Epidemiology and Informatics, Perelman School of Medicine, Univ. of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, United States

^b Violence Prevention Initiative, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA, United States

^c Center for Injury Research and Prevention, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA, United States

^d Div. of Emergency Medicine, Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Philadelphia, PA, United States

^e Dept. of Pediatrics, Columbia Univ. Medical Center – College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York, NY, United States

^f Heilbrunn Dept. of Population & Family Health, Columbia Univ. Medical Center, New York, NY, United States

^g Mailman School of Public Health, New York, NY, United States

^h Depts. of Public Health, Nursing, & Medicine, Univ. of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, United States

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ABSTRACT

Childhood witnesses of adult violence at home are at risk for future violence. It is unclear how gender of the child and adult perpetrator are related to adolescent relationship violence. We explore how childhood witnessing of same-gender, opposite-gender, and bidirectional violence perpetrated by adults is associated with adolescent relationship violence victimization only, perpetration only, and combined victimization/perpetration for male and female undergraduates. We gathered cross-sectional data from 907 undergraduates attending 67 randomly-selected classes at three distinct East-Coast colleges using pencil-and-paper surveys administered at the end of class time. Multiple imputation with chained equations was used to impute missing data. Multinomial regression models controlling for gender, age, race, school, and community violence predicted adolescent outcomes for each witnessing exposure; relative risk ratios and average adjusted probabilities with 95% confidence intervals are presented. Adolescent relationship violence outcomes vary based on gender of the child witness and adult perpetrator. Witnessing adult males perpetrate is associated with higher perpetration for boys and higher combined victimization/perpetration for girls. Witnessing adult females perpetrate – either as the sole perpetrator or in a mutually violent relationship with an adult male – increases risk for combined victimization/perpetration for boys and girls during adolescence.

1. Introduction

Domestic violence occurs in approximately 13 million homes in the United States (McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & Green, 2006), with one in four women and one in six men experiencing domestic violence at some point in their lives (Breiding, Black, & Ryan, 2008). Children reside in 59% of homes where partner violence occurs, exposing approximately 15 million

* Corresponding author at: Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, Center for Injury Research and Prevention, Roberts Center for Pediatric Research, 2716 South Street, 13th Floor, Philadelphia, PA, 19146, United States.

E-mail address: forkeyoung@email.chop.edu (C.M. Forke).

¹ Dr. Forke is no longer at the University of Pennsylvania.

children to domestic violence annually (McDonald et al., 2006). Child witnesses of adult domestic violence are at risk for a variety of negative health outcomes throughout childhood and adulthood (Appel & Holden, 1998; Bair-Merritt, Blackstone, & Feudtner, 2006; Bensley, Van Eenwyk, & Wynkoop Simmons, 2003; Dube, Anda, Felitti, Edwards, & Croft, 2002; Ireland & Smith, 2009; Martin, 2002; Thompson et al., 2006).

Childhood witnesses of domestic violence also are at increased risk of violence exposure later in life (Bensley et al., 2003; Breslin, Riggs, O'Leary, & Arias, 1990; Carr & VanDeusen, 2002; Ernst, Weiss, & Enright-Smith, 2006; Gover, Kaukinen, & Fox, 2008; Gwartney-Gibbs, Stockard, & Bohmer, 1987; Jankowski, Leitenberg, Henning, & Coffey, 1999; Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997; McKinney, Caetano, Ramisetty-Mikler, & Nelson, 2009; O'Keefe, 1997; Sousa et al., 2011; Straus, 1992; Thompson et al., 2006; Whitfield, Anda, Dube, & Felitti, 2003). Social Learning Theory is commonly applied to explain the cycle of intergenerational violence, suggesting that children typically model the aggressive behaviors of same-gender role models (Bandura, 1973; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961; Bussey & Bandura, 1984). Thus, one would expect a girl who witnessed her father perpetrating violence against her mother to be predisposed to future victimization, while a girl who witnessed her mother perpetrating violence would be predisposed to future perpetration. Similarly, we anticipate boys would model behaviors of their fathers in their future relationships, and if children are witnessing caregivers of both genders being violent toward one another (bidirectional perpetration), we would anticipate higher rates of combined victimization/perpetration during adolescence and/or adulthood.

Few studies have explored the associations between the gender of the witness, the directionality of the adult violence that was witnessed, and the role of the witness as a victim or perpetrator in subsequent adolescent relationship violence. Prior studies suggest that the direction of violence witnessed does not consistently influence subsequent involvement with violence, and that witnessing affects males and females differently (Gover et al., 2008; Heyman & Slep, 2002; Howells & Rosenbaum, 2008; Jankowski et al., 1999; Kalmuss, 1984; Malik et al., 1997; Marshall & Rose, 1988; Milletich, Kelley, Doane, & Pearson, 2010; Moretti, Obsuth, Odgers, & Reebye, 2006; Straus, 1992; Whitfield et al., 2003). However, most studies have focused on whether children have witnessed males perpetrating against females or females perpetrating against males (Gover et al., 2008; Kalmuss, 1984; Malik et al., 1997; Milletich et al., 2010; Moretti et al., 2006), neglecting to examine bidirectional perpetration. Furthermore, few studies have examined the association between witnessing and having combined victimization/perpetration during adolescence. Therefore, it is possible that there is an association between witnessing bidirectional perpetration as a child and experiencing combined victimization/perpetration during adolescence, and that these unmeasured factors may explain some of the inconsistency in the literature.

In this study, we explored associations between childhood witnessing of adult violence at home and subsequent adolescent relationship violence outcomes. Specifically, we examined how childhood witnessing of same-gender, opposite-gender and bidirectional violence perpetration by adults is associated with subsequent relationship violence victimization, perpetration, and combined victimization/perpetration during adolescence.

2. Methods

2.1. Rationale for study sample and method

2.1.1. Sample

The highest rates of relationship violence are experienced between 16–24 years of age (Rennison, 2001; Thompson et al., 2006). To minimize temporal reporting bias, it is important to study these phenomena closer to the time of both the exposure and outcome. From a developmental perspective, moving away to college may present a time of vulnerability. It may be the first time many teens are making decisions independently without parental supervision and guidance; combined with the strong desire for peer acceptance during adolescence, there may be higher risk for relationship violence during this time. We were specifically interested in experiences of traditional full-time college students and restricted participation to day classes, as students attending evening classes are often older, studying part-time, working full-time, and married with children, and are different than traditional undergraduates.

2.1.2. Method

We administered in-class, pencil-and-paper surveys introduced by a team member to increase participation rates and minimize self-selection bias associated with the higher rates of non-response commonly found in web-based surveys (Nulty, 2008). By showing up in class and providing a personal introduction to the survey, we brought the survey to students' immediate attention and also were able to ensure that every student experienced the survey instructions and definitions in a uniform way. In contrast, with electronic surveys, the invitation and the survey itself need to first clear SPAM filters before even being seen by the recipient, and when surveys do reach the recipient's inbox, they need to compete with a number of other messages, which can decrease the potential for response. Notably, studies have shown similar rates of reporting for pencil-and-paper and web based surveys when examining sensitive issues (Braekman et al., 2018; van de Looij-Jansen & de Wilde, 2008).

2.2. Data collection

Three urban college campuses were intentionally chosen to increase the demographic heterogeneity of participants for this cross-sectional study. Participating Institutional Review Boards approved the study and waived written consent requirements. We randomly selected day classes within each school and area of study (i.e., life sciences (n = 98), social sciences (n = 76), humanities (n = 93), business (n = 31), and we contacted professors for permission to survey students at the end of the class period.

A ten-minute paper-and-pencil survey was distributed to all students attending class during survey administration. During a brief

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