Journal of Adolescence 68 (2018) 221–231

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Adolescence

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/adolescence

Dating violence perpetration and perceived parental support for fighting and nonviolent responses to conflict: An autoregressive cross-lagged model

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Dating violence
Parental support for fighting
Parental support for nonviolent responses
Parent
Adolescence
Violence

ABSTRACT

Introduction: The current study examined longitudinal and bidirectional relationships between adolescent perceptions of parental support for fighting and nonviolent responses to conflict and dating violence perpetration. These relationships were examined among a sample of predominately African American youth from an economically disadvantaged urban neighborhood in the United States, a group of adolescents who may be at a high risk for dating violence and for receiving a mixture of parental support for how to respond in conflict situations.

Method: Participants were 1014 early adolescents (51% female, 91% African American) who were currently dating or had been recently dating. Adolescents completed measures on their perceptions of parental support for fighting and nonviolent responses to conflict, as well as dating violence perpetration.

Results: Using an autoregressive cross-lagged path analysis across four time points, perceptions of parental support for fighting were inversely associated with changes in perceived parental support for nonviolent responses to conflict, but not with changes in dating violence over time. However, perceived parental support for nonviolent responses to conflict were inversely associated with changes in dating violence perpetration over time.

Conclusions: Although parents in high-burden communities may give a mixture of messages about how to handle conflict, encouraging parents to provide messages supporting nonviolent responses to conflict may protect youth from perpetrating violence within their dating relationships. These findings inform future research directions and dating violence prevention programs.

Many adolescents in the United States are in dating relationships: one-fourth of 12-year olds, one-half of 15-year olds, and more than two-thirds of 18-year old youth reported having a romantic relationship in the previous 18 months (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Studies of adolescents in North American and European countries have shown similar prevalence rates (Barter, McCarry, Berridge, & Evans, 2009; Leen et al., 2013), suggesting that dating is a central aspect of social life for many adolescents. Beginning in early adolescence, youth develop increasing romantic preoccupations, such as meeting potential partners, negotiating new dating situations, and learning the norms and expectations of dating (Brown, 1999). Early adolescence is also a time when initial romantic relationships and associated adaptive (e.g., intimacy, emotional engagement, empathy) and maladaptive (e.g., conflict, aggression) behavior patterns are formed (Brown, 1999; Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Peplar, 2004). These behavior patterns may guide actions

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2018.08.006
Received 5 June 2017; Received in revised form 18 August 2018; Accepted 20 August 2018
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in future romantic relationships, and violence within dating relationships can persist throughout adolescence and into adulthood (Capaldi & Gorman-Smith, 2003).

Among early adolescents, dating violence includes physical and/or psychological forms of violence within current or former dating relationships (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, 2016). Physical dating violence includes behaviors such as scratching, slapping, pushing, or choking, and psychological violence encompasses insults, criticisms, threats, or emotional manipulation. Dating violence within adolescent relationships is an international public health concern with surveys finding that 15–56% of youth in North American and European countries reported perpetrating dating violence (Alleyne-Green, Coleman-Cowger, & Henry, 2012; Lavoie et al., 2002; Reed, Silverman, Raj, Decker, & Miller, 2011). A few studies to date have examined prevalence rates of dating violence perpetration among early adolescents (i.e., youth between the ages of 10 and 14) in the United States, finding that rates range from 20 to 41% (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Garthe, Sullivan, & Behrhorst, 2018; Goncy, Sullivan, Farrell, Mehari, & Garthe, 2017; Simon, Miller, Gorman-Smith, Orpinas, & Sullivan, 2010). Experiencing or perpetrating violence within dating relationships impedes mental and physical health, and can result in physical injury, depressive symptoms, suicidal intentions, substance use/abuse, interpersonal violence, and/or abuse in future relationships and contexts (CDC, 2016; Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2012; Foshee et al., 2016). The negative consequences and high prevalence rates of adolescent dating violence underscore the importance of identifying factors related to dating violence perpetration. The current study examined longitudinal relationships between adolescent perceptions of parental support for fighting and nonviolent responses to conflict and dating violence perpetration.

1. Perceptions of parental support for fighting and nonviolent responses to conflict

During early adolescence, youth are developing the cognitive skills necessary to navigate the social world, gaining perspective about their decisions and the resulting consequences from these decisions (Granic, Dishion, & Hollenstein, 2006). For example, youth are figuring out what responses and behaviors help to mitigate conflicts (Crick & Dodge, 1994), while also deciding which behaviors to display or inhibit based on perceived norms (Berkowitz, 2003). Social norms theory suggests that an adolescent's behavior can be heavily influenced by significant social references, like perceptions of their parents' attitudes and norms (Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenbach, & Stark, 2003). Research has demonstrated that perceptions of parental attitudes and norms are more influential on adolescent behavior than the actual parental report of their attitudes and norms (Prentice, 2008; Rimal & Real, 2003). For example, Copeland-Linder et al. (2007) found that parent-reported attitudes supporting violence were not related to an adolescent's retaliatory attitudes; however, youth perceptions of higher levels of parent attitudes supporting violence were related to their retaliatory attitudes. Therefore, within this framework, adolescent perceptions of parental support for fighting or nonviolent responses to conflict may be important factors to consider in relation to adolescent dating violence perpetration.

Adolescents may perceive a variety of messages from people about how to handle or respond to conflict. These messages can be verbal (e.g., verbal advice) and/or behavioral (e.g., modeling responses). Parents remain powerful socialization agents during early adolescence, such that youth may rely on the strategies and responses suggested by a parent about how to handle a conflict (Grusec & Hastings, 2015). For example, parents may instill values regarding the circumstances under which they feel fighting or an aggressive response is justified (e.g., “it's okay to fight if someone else starts it” or “if someone does something mean to you, it's okay to get even with them”). Adolescents may also perceive parental support for nonviolent responses to conflict (e.g., “if someone wants to fight you, walk away” or “stay calm and don't let it bother you when someone says something disrespectful to you”). During an actual conflict, adolescents may rely on these perceptions of parental support for fighting or nonviolent responses to inform how they then respond.

Developmental-contextual theories suggest that adolescents' behavior also impacts their perceptions of future social interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elliott & Tolan, 1999). In response to a social situation or conflict, adolescents maintain, re-evaluate, or refine their perceptions of what worked or did not work (Crick & Dodge, 1994). For instance, an adolescent who engages in violence in response to an argument may perceive more parental support for fighting so that their perceptions are consistent with their behaviors, or they may become more aware of alternative responses. The perpetration of dating violence behaviors may thus be both influenced by *and* influence how adolescents perceive parental support for fighting and nonviolent responses to conflict.

A few studies conducted in the United States found that perceived parental support for fighting and nonviolent responses to conflict are associated with adolescents' general aggressive behavior. Two longitudinal studies showed that perceived parental support for fighting was related to higher levels of aggressive behavior, and higher levels of parental support for nonviolent responses to conflict was related to lower frequencies of aggressive behavior (Farrell et al., 2012; Kliewer et al., 2006). General aggressive behaviors also have been associated with higher levels of perceived parental expectations for aggressive solutions among early adolescents (Murray, Haynie, Howard, Cheng, & Simons-Morton, 2013). Finally, Garthe, Sullivan, and Larsen (2015) found longitudinal and bidirectional relations between perceived parental support for fighting and nonviolent responses and adolescent aggressive and effective nonviolent behaviors (i.e., responses to problematic situations that are not only nonviolent, but that also minimize negative consequences; Goldfried & D'Zurilla, 1969), respectively. Their study also highlighted that adolescents perceive a mixture of support from parents for violent and nonviolent responses to conflict (Garthe et al., 2015).

Although the link between perceived parental support for fighting and nonviolent responses to conflict and general aggressive behavior has been established, only one cross-sectional study to date has examined associations between perceived parental support for fighting and nonviolent responses to conflict and dating violence perpetration (Miller, Gorman-Smith, Sullivan, Orpinas, & Simon, 2009). Adolescent perceptions of parental support for fighting were positively associated with the perpetration of physical dating violence for female and male adolescents. For females only, perceived parental support for nonviolent responses to conflict was negatively associated with the perpetration of physical dating violence. Longitudinal research is needed to determine the direction

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