



Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

ScienceDirect

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/mhp](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/mhp)



# The dark side of romantic relationships: Aggression in adolescent couples and links to attachment



Inge Seiffge-Krenke<sup>a,\*</sup>, William J. Burk<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Mainz, Department of Psychology, 55122 Mainz, Germany

<sup>b</sup>Radboud University of Nijmegen, Donders Center of Neurology, 6525 Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Received 18 January 2015; received in revised form 5 April 2015; accepted 11 May 2015

Available online 28 May 2015

## KEYWORDS

Romantic relationships dyadic approach; Physical and relational aggression; Attachment; Jealousy

## Abstract

This study focuses on romantic relationships from the perspective of both partners. This dyadic approach was chosen to account for the fact that both partners may differently contribute to the escalation of aggression. In a sample of 194 romantic partner dyads, differences between female and male partners' reports of aggression (relational and physical) and measures of attachment security and jealousy were assessed. A hierarchical cluster analysis identified five distinct subgroups of dyads with mutually aggressive or one-sided aggressive dyad. Of note were dyads with aggressive females and self-silencing males. The mutually aggressive couples showed the least adaptive relationship functioning with a lack of secure, trusting relationship qualities and high jealousy. The discussion focuses on the formative character of aggression in these early romantic relations, and the gender-specific functions of aggression in one-sided aggressive dyads.

© 2015 Elsevier GmbH. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Although many romantic partnerships formed during adolescence dissolve (Sprecher & Fehr, 1998), patterns of interactions in these early couples may have implications for other longer-lasting relationships later in emerging adulthood as well as for later interactions within the same relationship. For example, physical aggression is relatively stable over time within adolescents' romantic relationships

(O'Leary & Slep, 2003) as well as in adults' marital relationships (O'Leary et al., 1989). The present study was designed to shed light on how negative features of romantic relationships such as physical and relational aggression are related to other aspects of relationship functioning, such as attachment and jealousy from the perspectives of both partners.

There is an extensive and informative body of research that has focused on physical aggression and violence within adolescents' romantic relationships (Connolly, Friedlander,

\*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [Seiffge-krenke@uni-mainz.de](mailto:Seiffge-krenke@uni-mainz.de) (I. Seiffge-Krenke).

Pepler, Craig, & Laporte, 2010; Herrera, Wiersma, & Cleveland, 2008). Physical aggression is the intentional use of physical force that could hurt the partner and includes mildly aggressive behavior such as pushing, shoving, or scratching as well as severe violent behaviors such as choking, shaking, slapping, or attacking with weapons. When dating aggression was examined in the context of the same dating relationships, 15% of the girls and 8% of the boys were persistently aggressive with the same partner (O'Leary & Slep, 2003).

Other forms of aggression encompass relational aggression, for example, name calling, verbal attacks, defamatory gossip, exclusion, subtle flirting with another partner in an effort to elicit jealousy, and threatening to end the relationship. Compared to the large body of research on physical aggression, research on relational aggression in romantic relationships has been relatively scant (Williams, Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Laporte, 2008). Relationship aggression seem to be especially salient for females. Females, as compared to males, are more bothered by relational aggression, perceive it to have a greater impact, and spend more time thinking about and discussing it, and, when they are aggressive themselves, tend to use relational aggression (Salmivalli & Kaukiainen, 2004). Both forms of aggression in romantic relationships are associated with psychosocial maladjustment, depression, and lower levels of relationship quality (Goldstein & Tisak, 2004; Landbeater, Bannister, Ellis, & Yeung, 2008; Welsh, Grello, & Harper, 2003). Physical aggression, in particular, is related to externalizing problem behavior, depression, and drug and alcohol use (Jouriles, Garrido, Rosenfield, & McDonald, 2009; van Dulmen, Goncy, Haydon, & Collins 2008) as well as relationship deterioration and break-ups (Sprecher & Fehr, 1998).

Romantic relationships build on earlier relationship experiences; working models of attachment originally developed for parent-child relationships are often applied to romantic partnerships (Furman & Simon, 2006). Accordingly, in romantic relationships, secure individuals are comfortable being intimate and are able to turn to and effectively use partners for support. The preoccupied or ambivalent pattern is characterized by a lack of trust in the availability of the partner and fear of rejection; these individuals were very preoccupied with the relationship. Individuals showing the dismissing pattern are uncomfortable about being close to and dependent upon their partners. Finally, individuals with a fearful pattern have a lack of trust and fear rejection and abandonment. However, unlike preoccupied individuals, they avoid turning to their partners for support and intimacy.

Similarly, an individual's propensity to be jealous in close relationships can put him or her at risk for aggressive behavior. In young adult couples, high scores in jealousy are associated with a variety of types of aggression (Goldstein, Chezir-Teran & McFaul 2008). From a developmental perspective, midadolescent romantic relationships can be characterized as being in the affection phase (Brown, 1999), where exclusivity of the couple, high affection, and idealization are typical. During this phase, jealousy may be particularly high, and the risk for experiencing relational and physical aggression potentially greater than in earlier or later phases of couple formation (Puentes & Cohen, 2003).

Because aggressive interactions unfold in a dyadic context and involve perpetrators as well as victims, our study sets out to examine the links between aggressive interactions and relationship functioning in adolescent couples from the perspectives of both partners. We want to identify distinct subgroups of couples based on dyadic reports of physical and relational aggression and to explore differences in dyadic relationship functioning in these subgroups.

For our study, we selected midadolescent couples, as they are in a formative phase of romantic development where relationships become more enduring and intimate (Brown, 1999). Despite this positive development, romantic preoccupation, and jealousy are high, compared late adolescent couples.

The first aim of our study was to examine the quality of romantic relationships in adolescent couples. We anticipated that males' and females' romantic relationships would be characterized by a beginning attachment. In accordance with other studies (Buunk, 1991), we also expected jealousy to be high, as the relationship is still fragile and break-ups may occur, even in the same relationship (e.g., on-off relationships, Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009).

The second aim of the study was to identify constellations of romantic partner dyads with distinct patterns of relational and physical aggression. We chose a dyadic approach to account for the fact that both partners may differently contribute to the escalation of aggression. We expected to identify a substantial proportion of dyads in which both partners reported low levels of relational and physical aggression. In contrast, we did not expect to find many dyads in which both partners exhibited high levels of relational and physical aggression, as we anticipated that such relationships would be prone to dissolution (Sprecher & Fehr, 1998). As can be found in the literature on battering in adult couples, (O'Leary et al., 1989), we also expect one-sided aggression, with males being the aggressor and female the victim in adolescent romantic relationships.

Finally, we also wanted to know if mutually aggressive or one-sided aggressive dyads differed with respect to relationship functioning. In general, we expected that dyads with both partners reporting low levels of aggression would demonstrate better relationship functioning (e.g., a more secure relationship quality) than would dyads with both partners reporting high levels of physical or relational aggression. In accordance with the literature (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry and Kashy (2005); Knobloch, Solomon, & Cruz, 2001), we anticipated that couples reporting high mutual aggression would be characterized by greater preoccupation with the partner, more jealousy, and more anxious and fearful attachment patterns. Due to the scarcity of research using dyadic reports, it was not possible to put forth clear hypotheses regarding one-sided aggressive dyads.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants and procedure

The sample consisted of 194 heterosexual romantic dyads consisting of adolescent females ( $M_{age}=16.99$  years,  $SD=1.26$ ) and males ( $M_{age}=18.41$  years,  $SD=2.02$ ). Most of the dyads were composed of two German participants

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/328843>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/328843>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)