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Theory and teen dating violence victimization: Considering adolescent development



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ABSTRACT

Teen dating violence is an important public health problem, with implications for the future health and well-being of adolescents. However, most work on teen dating violence has developed separately from literature on normative adolescent romantic relationships and development; understanding teen dating violence within the framework of adolescent psychosocial development may provide new areas for research. Thus, the present paper summarizes five theories of adolescent development that are relevant to the study of teen dating violence victimization, as well as empirical literature that demonstrates support for key theoretical tenets in research examining adolescent romantic relationships. We also present questions for future dating violence study that arise from these key theoretical tenets and past empirical research. Researchers interested in dating violence victimization can use the presented theories to guide new directions in research inquiry, so that findings are situated within the broader field of adolescent development.

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Introduction

Adolescent romantic relationships are important experiences in the lives of teenagers (Feiring & Furman, 2000; Furman & Shaffer, 2003), and can positively influence the accomplishment of several developmental tasks, including identity and sexual development. However, a substantial minority

Abbreviations: APIM, actor–partner interdependence models; FNE, fear of negative evaluation; fMRI, functional magnetic resonance imaging; IWM, internal working model; TDV, teen dating violence.

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of these relationships also have the potential for negative impacts (Furman & Shaffer, 2003); one path through which these negative consequences may occur is the experience of physical, sexual and/or psychological aggression in early- and mid-adolescent dating relationships, also referred to as teen dating violence (TDV). Nationally, approximately 9% of U.S. teenagers report that a boyfriend or girlfriend hit, slapped or physically hurt them on purpose in the past 12 months (Centers for Disease Control, 2012), and approximately 30% of adolescent males and females report experiencing psychological aggression (e.g., name-calling, insulting, threatening with violence) from a dating partner in their lifetime (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001). Adolescents who report this victimization are more likely to report a number of adverse outcomes in young adulthood, including binge drinking, depression, suicidal thoughts, substance use and re-victimization, when compared to adolescents in non-violent dating relationships (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013).

Research on violence and aggression between adolescent dating partners has grown substantially over the past three decades (Foshee & Reyes, 2011; Ulloa, Kissee, Castaneda, & Hokoda, 2013). However, this work has mostly developed separately from the literature on normative adolescent romantic relationships, and work on adolescent development more broadly, and is not generally guided by an *a priori* theoretical framework. Although several recent papers have reviewed theoretical frameworks for TDV, they focus primarily on theories more traditionally used in understanding adult interpersonal violence, such as attachment theory, feminist theory and social learning theory (Burton, Halpern-Felsher, Rankin, Rehm, & Humphreys, 2011; Olsen, Parra, & Bennett, 2010; Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008; Smith, White, & Moracco, 2009; Ulloa et al., 2013; White, 2009), with none specifically considering theories of adolescent development that may advance knowledge about the onset, course and etiology of TDV victimization.

Understanding TDV within the framework of adolescent psychosocial development may provide new areas for research inquiry (Wolfe & Feiring, 2000), and would also allow the dating violence literature to contribute to, and benefit from, lifespan perspectives on development (Rutter, 1989). Indeed, current TDV research increasingly recognizes the role of theory. For example, Martsof and colleagues (Draucker, Cook, Martsof, & Stephenson, 2012; Draucker, Martsof, & Stephenson, 2012; Draucker et al., 2010; Draucker et al., 2012; Martsof, Colbert, & Draucker, 2012; Martsof, Draucker, & Brandau, 2013; Martsof, Draucker, Stephenson, Cook, & Heckman, 2012; Stephenson, Martsof, & Draucker, 2013) are conducting a project entitled “Adolescent Dating Violence: Development of a Theoretical Framework,” where they use a grounded theory approach to develop theory that describes, explains and predicts how dating violence develops in adolescence (Draucker et al., 2010, p. 601). Through their research, they have identified types of TDV events (e.g., violating events), types of violent adolescent relationships (e.g., primarily one-directional and turbulent) and patterns of TDV (e.g., one-time, contained; Martsof, Draucker, et al., 2012). This work demonstrates that a theoretical orientation can guide and organize novel TDV research.

In order to encourage the inclusion of developmental theory in the study of TDV victimization, the present paper reviews key tenets of five psychosocial theories of adolescent development (by author and year: Sullivan (1953), Erikson (1963), Selman (1980), Kegan (1980) and Furman and Wehner (1994)), and provides suggestions for how these tenets can be incorporated into work on dating violence. We also consider an opposing view to Erikson’s (1963) theory of adolescent development, self-in-relation theory, and summarize an important new approach for research on adolescent development, the narrative approach (McLean & Pasupathi, 2010). Since several longitudinal studies examining risk for TDV victimization have pointed to the role of the interpersonal environment (e.g., Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Foshee, Benefield, Ennett, Bauman, & Suchindran, 2004; Schad, Szewedo, Antonishak, Hare, & Allen, 2008), and since TDV is an interpersonal experience, a focus on the role of the social environment in development was chosen. Theories were selected in an iterative manner, by (1) reviewing popular textbooks and seminal works on adolescent development (e.g., Greene, 2003; Muuss, 1962; Steinberg, 2008), works that focused on romantic relationship development (e.g., Furman, Brown, & Feiring, 1999) and references cited by those works and (2) through discussion with senior developmentalists, with the goal of identifying theories of adolescent development that most specifically considered, in the opinion of the author, how development may influence, and be influenced by, interactions with social others, and that held the most promise for guiding future TDV research.

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