



## Predicting aggression in late adolescent romantic relationships: A short-term longitudinal study



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### ABSTRACT

This study sought to prospectively predict aggression in the romantic relationships of 1180 college students from the United States (807 females; 373 males) over the course of two months with a set of intrapersonal risk and protective factors, including personality characteristics that rarely have been examined in this population. After accounting for prior dating aggression, perpetration of verbal aggression was predicted uniquely by aggressive attitudes, emotion regulation, and for females, narcissism. Perpetration of physical aggression was predicted by aggressive attitudes, but only at low levels of emotion regulation, and the interaction of callous-unemotional traits, emotion regulation, and gender: males with low levels of callous-unemotional traits perpetrated less physical aggression when they reported greater emotion regulation. These findings are among the first to show that personality traits and emotion regulation prospectively predict partner aggression in late adolescence and suggest mechanisms for continuity in interpersonal aggression from early adolescence to adulthood.

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For many late adolescents, moving out of the family home is an important signifier of the transition to adulthood. Living independently typically affords greater opportunities for romantic and sexual relationships, particularly for those residing on college campuses among hundreds or thousands of peers. Establishing healthy intimate relationships is a key developmental task during this period (e.g., [Rutter, 1996](#); [Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004](#)). Romantic relationships tend to become more emotionally and sexually intimate in late adolescence, but unfortunately, the rates of verbal, physical, and sexual aggression in these relationships also are high ([Haynie et al., 2013](#); [Whitaker & Savage, 2014](#)). Physical and sexual victimization are associated with serious health risks, including injury, depression, substance use, and suicidality ([Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013](#); [Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001](#)); verbal aggression also is associated with mental health problems (e.g., [Foshee, Reyes, Gottfredson, Chang, & Ennett, 2013](#)), and appears to be a precursor of physical aggression ([Exner-Cortens et al., 2013](#); [Murphy & O'Leary, 1989](#)).

Given the immediate consequences of relationship violence and its potential to set adolescents on a path toward continuing or escalating violence as they enter more committed partnerships in adulthood ([Foshee & Reyes, 2009](#)), it is critical to understand the factors that best predict the perpetration of aggression toward romantic partners. The present study utilized a prospective longitudinal design to test whether a set of intrapersonal characteristics could predict the occurrence of relationship aggression over the course of two months in a large sample of college-aged adolescents. We examined several

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risk and protective factors, including personality traits that are associated with intimate partner violence in adulthood but rarely have been studied in adolescent samples, to identify whether any could uniquely predict new instances of aggression after accounting for prior history of dating aggression.

## 1. Romantic relationship aggression in late adolescence

Among the range of risk factors identified for the perpetration of dating violence (for a review see O'Keefe, 2005), the most consistent are a history of interpersonal aggression and the beliefs that aggression is normative and justifiable (Jouriles, McDonald, Mueller, & Grych, 2012). Although situational and relationship factors also contribute to the occurrence of aggression (e.g., DeWall, Anderson, & Bushman, 2011; Slotter & Finkel, 2011), studies of aggression in childhood and adulthood indicate that there are fairly stable individual characteristics that promote continuity in aggressive behavior over the lifespan (Hines, 2008; Nestor, 2002; Ross & Babcock, 2009). For example, children exhibiting higher levels of callous-unemotional (CU) traits engage in more interpersonal aggression (Frick, Cornell, Barry, Bodin, & Dane, 2003), and narcissism predicts aggression in early adolescence even after accounting for CU traits (Kerig & Stellwagen, 2010). Personality characteristics also are prominent in some conceptual models of adult intimate partner violence and have been shown to correlate with perpetration (e.g., DeWall et al., 2011; Dutton, 1994; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994). For example, Ehrensaft, Cohen, and Johnson (2006) reported that antisocial and narcissistic traits assessed at age 21 predicted intimate partner violence at age 31. Personality characteristics rarely have been examined as predictors of aggression toward romantic partners during adolescence (Reuter, Sharp, Temple, & Babcock, 2015), but may be important for understanding sources of continuity in interpersonal aggression and identifying individuals at high risk for perpetrating aggression.

The transition to adulthood is an important time to identify predictors of intimate partner violence given the salience of romantic relationships at that time and the potential for patterns of relating to intimate partners to become established. It is equally important to identify protective factors that reduce the likelihood of relationship aggression. Developmental transitions represent times of opportunity, when behavioral trajectories may be more open to change (e.g., Masten, Obravodić, & Burt, 2006; Rutter, 1996). However, very little of the research on relationship violence in adolescence has examined characteristics that might inhibit aggression (McCloskey & Lichter, 2003; Schumacher & Slep, 2004). In fact, in their review of longitudinal research on adolescent dating violence, Vagi et al. (2013) found only 2 studies that assessed potential protective factors.

## 2. The present study

The current study aimed to address the complexity of intimate partner violence by assessing risk and protective factors across multiple domains (Bogat, Levendosky, & Eye, 2005). Specifically, it investigated whether college students' beliefs about aggression, personality characteristics, and emotion regulation could predict the occurrence of relationship aggression over the course of two months. Social learning theory suggests that individuals who believe that aggressing toward a partner is justifiable or is common are more likely to act on the aggressive impulses that can arise in romantic relationships (e.g., Jouriles et al., 2012). Although an association between aggressive beliefs and perpetration has been established in both adult and adolescent relationships (Foshee, Bauman, & Linder, 1999; Grych & Kinsfogel, 2010), the few longitudinal studies conducted have produced mixed results. For example, Foshee, Linder, MacDougall, and Bangdiwala (2001) and Connolly, Friedlander, Pepler, Craig, and Laporte (2010) found that accepting attitudes about dating violence predicted relationship aggression assessed 9–12 months later, but Wolfe, Wekerle, Scott, Straatman, and Grasley (2004) did not.

Based on theory and prior research linking personality and aggression with children and adults (e.g., Baumeister, Bushman, & Campbell, 2000; Frick & White, 2008), we assessed two personality characteristics: CU traits and narcissism. CU traits involve a lack of empathy and guilt, and poverty in emotional expression (Frick & White, 2008). Individuals high on CU traits may lack the empathic and emotional connection to their romantic partners that functions to inhibit aggressive behavior and consequently may aggress against their partner if they think it will suit their needs. Research indicates that children with CU traits are a unique subgroup of antisocial youths who exhibit a more violent and chronic pattern of delinquent behavior (Frick, Stickle, Dandreaux, Farrell, & Kimonis, 2005). For example, in comparison to children with conduct problems alone, children with both CU traits and conduct problems are more likely to perpetrate aggression (Frick et al., 2005). Longitudinal research indicates that there is continuity in this trait from childhood into early adulthood. For example, interpersonal callousness in boys ages 7 through 12 predicted impulsive and antisocial behavior in young adulthood (Burke, Loeber, & Lahey, 2007), and Blonigen, Hicks, Krueger, Patrick, and Iacono (2006) found that CU traits remained relatively stable from adolescence to early adulthood. Although research shows that antisocial and psychopathic traits in young adults are associated with partner violence perpetration (Czar, Dahlen, Bullock, & Nicholson, 2011; Woodward, Fergusson, & Horwood, 2002), CU traits have not been investigated as a predictor of intimate partner violence.

Narcissism is characterized by a sense of superiority, importance, and a preoccupation with seeking the admiration of others (e.g., Miller, Lynam, & Campbell, 2014; Ryan, Weikel, & Sprechini, 2008). The grandiose egotism of narcissistic individuals is fragile, however, and they are highly sensitive to threats to their self-image, especially from people they value (Baumeister et al., 2000). Consequently, perceived threats to their sense of superiority from romantic partners may trigger anger and aggressive behavior against them (Baumeister et al., 2000; Brown, 2004; Campbell, 1999). Research has linked narcissism to expressions of anger, hostility, and dominance in adolescents and young adults (Emmons, 1984; Papps &

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