ELSEVIER

Understanding change in violence-related attitudes for adolescents in relationship education

Rachel Savasuk-Luxton[a,*], Francesca Adler-Baeder[a], Megan L. Haselschwerdt[b]

[a] *Auburn University, 203 Spidle Hall, Auburn, AL, 36849, United States*
[b] *University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 420 Jesse Harris Building, Knoxville, TN, 37902, United States*

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Relationship education (RE) targets common correlates of adolescent dating violence (ADV), such as gender role beliefs (GRB) and DV acceptance (DVA), yet few studies have evaluated the influence of RE on GRB and DVA and none have considered participants' sociodemographic characteristics. Using a sample of adolescents from the United States (Mage = 15.66 years; 58% female), this study examined pre- and post-test GRB and DVA scores of RE participants (n = 1645) compared to nonparticipants (n = 522) and explored the differential and combined effects of participants' sociodemographic characteristics on change. Black males held the most traditional GRB at pre-test, but became more egalitarian after programming. RE participation also appeared to act as a buffer against an increase in DVA for females, but not males. Study findings provide a more complex picture of the role of RE in shifting beliefs and attitudes associated with ADV and provide implications for programming.

1. Introduction

Romantic relationship violence has been of great concern to researchers and practitioners for many years, but historically, the focus has been on adult and college-aged samples. More recently, however, adolescent dating violence has garnered considerable attention as a significant public health concern (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Adolescence is a particularly pertinent developmental period, as involvement in romantic relationships becomes quite common (Collins & Steinberg, 2006), and early romantic experiences serve as the foundation for future relationship expectations and practices (Kerpelman et al., 2010). Yet, due to inexperience in romantic relationships and an absence of formal education on healthy relationships, adolescents may be especially vulnerable to experiencing dating violence (Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003; Powers & Kerman, 2006). A number of risk factors for experiencing dating violence have been identified, including two key attitudes – traditional gender role beliefs and dating violence acceptance (Center for Disease Control, 2014; O'Keefe, 2005).

As Ajzen and Fishbein (1973) suggested that beliefs and attitudes serve to inform individuals' intentions and behaviors, understanding the roles of gender role beliefs and dating violence acceptance may be crucial for dating violence intervention and prevention. Studies of relationship education (RE) participants have demonstrated the malleability of such beliefs for adults (e.g., Lucier-Greer, Ketring, Adler-Baeder, & Smith, 2012) and youth (e.g., Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011; Whittaker, Adler-Baeder, & Garneau, 2014). Yet, to date, only one youth intervention study has examined both change in gender role beliefs and dating violence acceptance in a sample of RE participants (Whittaker et al., 2014); however, this study did not include a comparison sample nor did they examine potential demographic moderators beyond gender. Race (Foshee et al., 2008) and SES (Kulik, 2002; Marks,

---

Lam, & McHale, 2009) are also associated with gender role beliefs and dating violence acceptance, and thus, should be considered as possible moderators of change following RE participation. Addressing several limitations of current literature, this study examines the impact of RE participation on adolescents' gender role beliefs and dating violence acceptance and explores the differential and combined effects of gender, race, and SES.

1.1. Beliefs and attitudes associated with dating violence

Traditional gender roles operate as scripts for what broader society deems appropriate and acceptable behaviors and roles for men and women in families and romantic relationships (Hill, 2002). According to feminist theory, traditional gender roles stem from the ideology that men are entitled to power, authority, and control over women in public (e.g., work) and private (e.g., family) spheres of life; thus, women are expected to be submissive to men (Hill, 2002). The divergent expectations for men and women as well as the gendered distribution of power can be explained by Wingood and DiClemente's (2002, pp. 313–345) theory of gender and power. The assumption is that imbalances of power in relationships between men and women stem from differing expectations of men and women's roles and place in society. Sexual division of power is reinforced at different societal levels, determining for whom it is acceptable to use forceful or aggressive behaviors, emphasizing the abuse of male authority and control in relationships (Smith, White, & Morocco, 2009; Wingood & DiClemente, 2002, pp. 313–345). These power differentials are reinforced throughout the lifespan and, according to the gender-intensification hypothesis, the societal pressure to adhere to gender-related norms is heightened during adolescence (Hill & Lynch, 1983), cultivating relational power imbalances that place females at risk of experiencing dating violence. Studies suggest that those endorsing traditional gender role beliefs increases the risk of both dating violence perpetration and victimization (Center for Disease Control, 2014; Flood & Pease, 2009; Reyes, Foshee, Niolon, Reidy, & Hall, 2016).

Relatedly, acceptance of the use of aggression or violence in romantic relationships also is a robust predictor of dating violence perpetration and victimization (Ali, Swahn, & Hamburger, 2011; Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997; Nabors & Jasinski, 2009; O'Keefe, 1997; O'Keefe, 2005). Individuals who believe that violent and aggressive behaviors are acceptable, particularly under certain circumstances (e.g., when insulted, disrespected, or when pushed or hit first) are at increased risk of perpetrating and being a victim of violence in their romantic relationships (Foshee, Linder, MacDougall, & Bangdiwala, 2001). Further, a meta-analysis of adult intimate partner violence risk and protective factors reported a moderate effect size (point biserial $r = 0.30$) between acceptance of violence and violence perpetration (Stith, Smith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2004) and is found among adolescents as well (Foshee et al., 2001; O'Keefe, 1997; 2005).

1.2. The roles of gender, race, & socioeconomic status on beliefs and attitudes

Salient sociodemographic characteristics, such as gender, race, and SES, are also associated with traditional gender role beliefs and dating violence acceptance. Gender has been identified as a stable predictor of traditional gender role beliefs and dating violence acceptance attitudes (Flood & Pease, 2009; Kane, Staiger, & Ricciardelli, 2000), with males reporting more traditional gender role beliefs (e.g., Berkel, Vandiver, & Bahner, 2004; Bryant & Spencer, 2003; Whittaker et al., 2014) and greater acceptance of the use of aggression against a romantic partner than females (Cauffman, Feldman, Jensen, & Arnett, 2000).

When considering race and gender role beliefs and dating violence attitudes, studies find that adolescents from racial minority communities, particularly Black youth, are more likely to endorse traditional gender role beliefs (Foshee et al., 2008; Kane et al., 2000) and condone the use of violence towards partners compared to their White peers (Fitzpatrick, Salgado, Suvak, King, & King, 2004; Foshee et al., 2008; Nabors & Jasinski, 2009). Hill (2001, 2002) asserted that the intersection of race and gender should be considered since there are distinctions in the socialization of individuals by both race and gender, such that Black females and White females do not subscribe to the same gendered norms. The diverging socialization process is believed to date back to the period of slavery where Black women, due to their required and enforced roles, were made to adopt a more independent and assertive version of womanhood and femininity within and outside of the home (Carter, Corra, & Carter, 2009; Hill, 2001).

Current research suggests that these differences are contemporarily relevant, too. Research finds that Black males endorse more egalitarian beliefs than their White male counterparts (Blee & Tickamyer, 1995; Hill, 2002; Kane et al., 2000), but this varies depending on context. Specifically, Kane et al. (2000) suggests that Black men tend to be more egalitarian than White men regarding women's workforce participation, but they are more traditional in regards to gendered roles within romantic relationships. It is possible that, due to experiences of racial discrimination and oppression in areas of life outside of the home, Black males may be more likely to assert their power and dominance in their romantic relationships and, in turn, hold more traditional gender role beliefs about couple relationships and family life (Hill, 2001, 2002). Additionally, though females are often less tolerant of relationship violence than males, Black females report higher tolerance of relationship aggression than White females (Nabors & Jasinski, 2009; Nagel, Matsuo, McIntyre, & Morrison, 2005).

Although evidence of within-group differences when examining race and gender exists, SES introduces a different, yet relevant identity that has been overlooked in the relevant literature. Despite the theory of intersectionality's call for attention to the combined effects of these social constructs that constitute individuals' diverse realities (Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 2008), few researchers have examined the role of SES in individuals' gender role beliefs and only one has examined SES and dating violence acceptance. Research suggests that children whose parents are highly educated (i.e., a proxy for SES) are less likely to hold traditional gender role beliefs than children from less educated parents (Antill, Cunningham, & Cotton, 2003; Kulik, 2002; Marks et al., 2009). One study has examined the direct effect of SES on dating violence acceptance and found that adolescents with lower SES (measured by parents' education) are more accepting of dating violence than adolescents with higher SES (Foshee et al., 2008). However, it does not appear