



Conflict resolution patterns and violence perpetration in adolescent couples: A gender-sensitive mixed-methods approach



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ABSTRACT

This study used a sequential two-phase explanatory design. The first phase of this mixed-methods design aimed to explore conflict resolution strategies in adolescent dating couples, and the second phase to document, from both the perspective of the individual and of the couple, dyadic interaction patterns distinguishing youth inflicting dating violence from those who do not. A sample of 39 heterosexual couples (mean age 17.8 years) participated in semi-structured interviews and were observed during a 45 min dyadic interaction. At phase 1, qualitative analysis revealed three main types of conflict resolution strategies: 1) negotiating expectations and individual needs; 2) avoiding conflicts or their resolution; 3) imposing personal needs and rules through the use of violence. At phase 2, we focused on couples with conflictive patterns. Results indicate that couples who inflict violence differ from nonviolent couples by their tendency to experience conflicts when in disagreement and to resort to negative affects as a resolution strategy. In addition, while at an individual level, they show a tendency to withdraw from conflict and to use less positive affect, at a dyadic level they present less symmetry. Results offer important insights for prevention programs.

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Adolescence is considered a pivotal period in human development during which several changes can occur, including the emergence of romantic relationships (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Positive sexual and romantic development is an important component of health and well-being and may be an essential element of other important adolescent developmental tasks, such as self-identity and autonomy (Boislard & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2012). Romantic relationships can be seen as a unique learning opportunity in which adolescents build effective conflict management skills and resolve differences by balancing their own needs with those of their partner and of the relationship (Simon & Furman, 2010). Disagreements can provide an opportunity for partners to define their relationship and differentiate among areas of agreement and disagreement (Darling, Cohan, Burns, & Thompson, 2008). For most adolescents, the voluntary, egalitarian nature of a romantic relationship motivates them to negotiate mutually satisfactory solutions. However, being in a romantic relationship can be very stressful and challenging for some adolescents. The combination of stress and high expectations may lead to the manifestation of behaviors aimed at preserving the relationship at all costs (Harper & Welsh, 2007) even if it means

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experiencing coercion and violence. Indeed, when destructive conflict tactics are used, they can be detrimental to both the relationship and the individuals involved, and may result in coercive and violent dating experiences (Simon & Furman, 2010).

From a harmonious and egalitarian romantic relationships and violence prevention perspective, it is relevant to document sources of conflict and resolution strategies used by adolescents in order to better understand the dynamics of dating violence (DV). Previous research has shown how interaction patterns – be it positive or negative – in early romantic relationships may come to be embedded and repeated in later adult relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1997; Simon, Bouchey, & Furman, 2000). Indeed, a prospective longitudinal study documenting the links between the characteristics of adolescents' dating experiences at ages 15 to 17.5 (e.g., involvement and quality) and quality of their romantic relationships in young adulthood (ages 20–21) revealed that adolescents who experienced better quality dating relationships had more harmonious interactions when resolving conflicts with their romantic partners in young adulthood (e.g., negotiating conflict to mutual satisfaction, effective and timely caregiving/seeking).

Managing conflicts in romantic relationships during adolescence

Adolescent romantic relationships are unique (Welsh & Shulman, 2008) and come with specific developmental challenges which may shape the way adolescents explore and negotiate disagreement, discuss issues and find potential solutions (Darling et al., 2008). Empirical studies suggest that adolescents display a greater tendency to ignore differences in opinions in order to maintain a positive “facade” in their relationship (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). According to Shulman, Mayes, Cohen, Swain, and Leckman (2008), even when disagreements are explored, it is done superficially in order to preserve unity over further discussion. When discussing and negotiating with their romantic partners, the most commonly reported strategies are compromise, distraction and avoidance (Feldman & Gowen, 1998).

During early adolescence relationship goals are primarily focused on relationship preservation, whereas during late adolescence relationships generally involve a deeper emotional commitment to the partner and to the relationship (Simon, Kobielski, & Martin, 2008). These developmental changes in romantic experiences are accompanied by corresponding shifts in knowledge about the meaning of conflict. By late adolescence, conflicts are often viewed as something expected that has somewhat of a more constructive than destructive potential. Adolescents in this age group also tend to privilege relationship-oriented goals rather than self-focused, partner-focused, and revenge goals. As such, negotiation is more frequently used as a resolution strategy than compliance or aggression (Simon et al., 2008). Yet we know little about conflict negotiation, couple dynamics in adolescents.

Despite its relevance to the study couple dynamics, mixed-methods studies are scarce (Dolban-MacNab, Rubén Parra-Cordona & Gale, 2014). In addition, very few studies include observational indicators when examining adolescents and emerging adults' relationships. However, observational methods provide more specific information about temporal sequence and nuanced patterns of interactional processes between partners in an interpersonal context that cannot be solely obtained from global self-report measures (Welsh & Shulman, 2008). In their study of 40 couples in late adolescence, Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, and Anbar (2006) performed a cluster analysis on couples' interaction indicators which yielded three distinctive conflict resolution patterns. The *Downplaying pattern* was characterized by a high tendency to minimize the conflict. Adolescents displaying the *Integrative pattern* demonstrated a good ability to negotiate differences. Finally, adolescents utilizing the *Conflictive pattern* were characterized by a confrontational interaction style.

Conflicts and violence in marital literature

In the marital literature, verbal aggression or expressions of contempt or withdrawal, and negativity or anger are all associated with relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution (Darling et al., 2008). Studies show a link between the ways in which couples communicate and deal with their disagreements and use of violence in their intimate relationships. In fact, the majority of violent behaviors are manifested during a conflict (Cascardi & Vivian, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). As suggested, it is how conflicts are discussed and managed which may be the most salient element, rather than the conflicts themselves (Heyman, 2001; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). Hostility is linked to the use of physical violence both in men and in women (Busby, Holman, & Walker, 2008; Robertson & Murachver, 2007). Withdrawal, which is denying the existence of the problem, avoiding talking about it, or being disengaged from the conflict is also associated with use of physical violence in couple relationships (Katz, Carino, & Hilton, 2002). In adult couples, criticizing, blaming the other, or withdrawing from the conflict are the most frequently reported communication problems (Heyman, 2001). Most couples experience negative emotions including contempt and anger when involved in a conflict-ridden discussion (Pérusse, Boucher & Fernet, 2012). Using Gottman's Marital Communication Conceptualization, a study conducted by Corenelius, Shorey, and Beebe (2010) examined adaptive and maladaptive communication and violent dating aggression in a sample of undergraduate students. Their results indicated that negative communication behaviors were predictors of psychological and physical aggression in dating relationships, suggesting that variables studied in marital relationships manifest themselves in a similar fashion in adolescent dating relationships. In sum, current findings suggest that romantic relationships in adolescence have a significant impact on later relationships. The quality of romantic relationships in adolescence is linked to more harmonious interactions and better conflict negotiation in adulthood. Yet, few studies on dyadic interactions of adolescents and more specifically on interaction patterns of adolescents using violence in situations of conflict have been conducted.

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