Brief report

Brief report: Associations between adolescent girls' social–emotional intelligence and violence perpetration

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A B S T R A C T

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This study examined associations between social–emotional intelligence (SEI) and two measures of violence perpetration (relational aggression and physical violence) in a cross-sectional sample of high-risk adolescent girls ($N = 253$). We evaluated three aspects of SEI: stress management, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills. Results of a multiple linear regression model accounting for participants' age, race/ethnicity, and experiences of relational aggression victimization indicated that girls with better stress management skills were less likely to perpetrate relational aggression. A parallel model for perpetration of physical violence showed a similar pattern of results. Study findings suggest that SEI, and stress management skills in particular, may protect adolescent girls – including those who have been victims of violence – from perpetrating relational aggression and physical violence. Interventions that build adolescent girls' social and emotional skills may be an effective strategy for reducing their perpetration of violence.

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Background

In the last decade, adolescent girls have increasingly engaged in violent behavior (Zahn, Hawkins, Chiancone, & Whitworth, 2008). Violence perpetration and victimization have important consequences for girls' physical and mental health, with physical violence involvement being linked to depression, emotional distress, externalizing behaviors, pregnancy and childbearing during adolescence (Buka, Stichick, Birdthistle, & Earls, 2001; Kirby & Lepore, 2007). Similarly, involvement in relational aggression has been linked to greater internalizing problems, binge drinking, and tobacco use, and may be particularly relevant for girls (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & Little, 2008; Herrenkohl, Catalano, Hemphill, & Toumbourou, 2009). Despite these trends and growing concerns voiced by scholars, practitioners, and policymakers (Zahn et al., 2008), relatively few studies have examined what protects adolescent girls from engaging in relational aggression and physical violence and what puts them at risk, particularly girls experiencing multiple environmental risks for violence involvement.

Biases in social cognition, especially with regard to reading others' emotions and intent in ambiguous situations, consistently emerge as risk factors for violence involvement (de Castro, Eerman, Koops, Bosch, & Monshouwer, 2002; Mathieson et al., 2011). Social–emotional intelligence (SEI), an aspect of social cognition, includes the ability to recognize and manage one's own and others' emotions (Bar-On & Parker, 2000). These skills may be important during situations that can lead to aggression and violence, such as peer conflict, personal slights, and victimization (Adamshick, 2010). Furthermore, SEI is associated with mental and physical health (Schutte, Malouff, Thorsteinsson, Bhullar, & Rooke, 2007; Trinidad & Johnson, 2002). Thus, SEI skills may both influence adolescents' choice of non-violent actions and counter the effects of risk factors for violence perpetration, such as previous violence victimization (Adamshick, 2010).

Several studies have documented negative associations between bullying perpetration and emotional intelligence (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012; Lomas, Stough, Hansen, & Downey, 2012); however, the definition of bullying used combined both physical and relational bullying. Because SEI involves multiple components, including stress management, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills, determining which aspects of SEI are related to violence perpetration can inform intervention and prevention efforts. The present study sought to examine associations between specific aspects of girls' SEI, violence victimization, and involvement in relational aggression and physical violence. Given associations between perpetration and victimization (Adamshick, 2010), we controlled for victimization to assess independent associations between SEI and perpetration.

Methods

Participants

This study utilized baseline data from *Prime Time*, a randomized trial of a youth development intervention for adolescent girls at high risk for pregnancy. *Prime Time* study design, procedures, and participants are described elsewhere (Sieving et al., 2011). A total of 253 girls (ages 13–17 years) provided written informed consent and completed baseline data collection between April 2007 and October 2008. All study protocols were approved by university and clinics' institutional review boards.

Measures

Social–emotional intelligence (SEI)

SEI was assessed using three scales from the Bar-On and Parker (2000) Emotional Quotient Inventory: Youth Version. Response options for all items ranged from *never/seldom* (0) to *very often* (3), and responses were averaged; higher scores indicated better skills. Intrapersonal skills (6 items, $\alpha = .79$) assessed participants' abilities to recognize, express, and regulate their own emotions (e.g., *I can easily describe my feelings*). Interpersonal skills (7 items, $\alpha = .81$) assessed participants' abilities to recognize and affect others' emotions, and to empathize with others' feelings (e.g., *I care what happens to other people*). Stress management skills (8 items, $\alpha = .86$) assessed participants' abilities to cope positively with stress and control their emotions (e.g., *I can stay calm when I'm upset*).

Violence victimization

A 6-item scale ($\alpha = .86$) from the Multisite Violence Prevention Project victimization scale (Miller-Johnson, Sullivan, & Simon, 2004) assessed relational aggression victimization in the past 30 days (e.g., *In the last 30 days, how many times has someone told lies about you?*). A 4-item scale ($\alpha = .74$) from a National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth) measure (Resnick, Ireland, & Borowsky, 2004) assessed physical violence victimization in the past 6 months (e.g., *In the last 6 months, how often has someone hit you or beat you up?*). Responses to individual items included *never* (0), *once or twice* (1), *3–5 times* (2), and *6 or more times* (3). For each scale, responses were summed for a final scale score.

Violence perpetration

A 6-item scale ($\alpha = .77$) from the Multisite Violence Prevention Project victimization scale (Miller-Johnson et al., 2004) asked about relational aggression perpetration (e.g., *In the last 30 days, how many times have you told lies about someone?*). Adapted from an AddHealth measure (Resnick et al., 2004), a 5-item scale ($\alpha = .79$) assessed perpetration of physical violence in the past 6 months (e.g., *In the last 6 months, how often have you hit or beat up another person?*). Responses to individual items paralleled the victimization measure and were summed for final scale scores.

Analysis plan

Both perpetration measures were positively skewed; to address this, these scales were natural log transformed prior to analyses. Multiple linear regression models evaluated the effects of SEI and violence victimization on natural log transformed violence perpetration outcomes. SEI variables with significant bivariate correlations with perpetration ($p < .05$) were entered as predictors, controlling for violence victimization, age, race/ethnicity, and clustering of participants within clinics. Models were estimated using generalized estimating equations, adjusting for intercorrelations between girls recruited from the same clinic. Analyses were conducted in STATA version 11.0.