



Autonomic reactivity and romantic relational aggression among female emerging adults: Moderating roles of social and cognitive risk

Dianna Murray-Close*

234 John Dewey Hall, Department of Psychology, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 June 2010

Received in revised form 17 November 2010

Accepted 12 January 2011

Available online 18 January 2011

Keywords:

Aggression

Autonomic arousal

Skin conductance

RSA

Heart rate

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the association between autonomic arousal in response to a relational stressor and the perpetration of relational aggression against romantic partners. In addition, the moderating role of social risk (relational victimization by a romantic partner) and cognitive risk (hostile attribution biases) was explored. Skin conductance, heart rate, and respiratory sinus arrhythmia during an experience of exclusion were assessed in a sample of female emerging adults ($N=131$). Participants provided self-reports of romantic relational aggression, romantic relational victimization, and hostile attribution biases. Results indicated that both heightened and blunted reactivity served as risk factors for the perpetration of romantic relational aggression depending on women's social and contextual risks. Implications for understanding the development of intimate aggression are discussed.

© 2011 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Romantic relationships become an increasingly important context for development during the transition to adulthood (Roisman et al., 2004). However, a substantial percentage of romantic relationships during this developmental period involve aggressive conduct; in fact, physical aggression is present in approximately one third of young couples (Jose and O'Leary, 2009) and research has documented even higher levels of psychological aggression (i.e., 75%–80% of couples; Stets, 1990). These prevalent rates are concerning given research suggesting that both perpetrators and victims suffer from a number of adjustment difficulties, including psychological, behavioral, and relationship problems (e.g., Callahan et al., 2003; Goldstein et al., 2008; Jouriles et al., 2009; Holt and Espelage, 2005; Stuart et al., 2006). Despite a number of advances in this area, the vast majority of studies have focused on male perpetration of physical forms of aggression, neglecting female perpetrators and relational forms of aggression. In addition, few studies have examined the association between physiological stress responses and perpetration of such conduct. Finally, researchers have neglected the potential moderating roles of social and cognitive risk in these associations. The goal of the present study was to address these limitations by examining the association between autonomic reactivity and perpetration of relational aggression against romantic partners in a sample of female emerging adults. In addition, the moderating roles of both social (i.e., relational victimization by romantic partners) and cognitive (i.e., hostile attribution biases) risk were assessed.

In the research literature, a number of terms have been used to describe aggressive conduct against romantic partners. Terms such as *violence*, *battery*, and *abuse* reflect relatively severe levels of harmful acts whereas *aggression* includes less harmful behaviors (see Finkel et al., 2009). In addition, whereas violence and aggression reflect specific behaviors or acts, abuse is characterized by especially high levels of violence (Straus and Gelles, 1986) and battery is a broader term reflecting a syndrome of control and power over one's romantic partner, often including severe violence (Houry et al., 2008). However, despite these theoretical distinctions, many empirical studies do not clearly differentiate between levels of harm defined as aggression, violence, abuse, and battery (see Finkel et al., 2009; Straus and Gelles, 1986). In the present study, the focus is on the use of relational aggression against romantic partners, and, consistent with previous research in this area (e.g., Linder et al., 2002), the term *romantic relational aggression* is used to describe these behaviors. However, study hypotheses are drawn from research focusing on a variety of types of harmful behaviors against romantic partners.

Despite the common view that males are perpetrators and females are victims of aggression against romantic partners, emerging research has highlighted the important role of female aggressors (Capaldi et al., 2004). In fact, a recent meta-analysis demonstrated that females are as or more likely than males to engage in aggression against romantic partners during young adulthood (Archer, 2000; Stets, 1990; Stets and Straus, 1990). Nonetheless, a number of studies have demonstrated distinct processes involved in male- versus female-perpetrated aggression. For example, female victims are more likely to experience aggression in the context of battery (Houry et al., 2008) and severe violence (Archer, 2000), to be injured, and to require involvement of law enforcement (Archer, 2000; Phelan

* Tel.: +1 802 656 4142.

E-mail address: Dianna.Murray-Close@uvm.edu.

et al., 2005). Some research also indicates that females are more likely to perpetrate aggression in response to abuse by partners (Kernsmith, 2005). Finally, during young adulthood, females are less likely to engage in calm discussions and more likely to argue heatedly when encountering a conflict with a romantic partner (Bookwala et al., 2005). Taken together, these findings suggest that distinct processes may be involved in female-perpetrated aggression against romantic partners and highlight the importance of research examining the development of these behaviors among women.

In addition, it is important to examine the development of non-physical forms of aggression against romantic partners. To date, the majority of research has focused on physical forms of aggression (i.e., using physical means to harm a partner; Ellis et al., 2009; Jackson, 1999; Linder et al., 2002) despite emerging research highlighting the importance of examining emotional/psychological (e.g., insults, ridicule), and sexual (e.g., rape) aggression (Houry et al., 2008; Jouriles et al., 2009; Straus et al., 1996). This focus on physical aggression is surprising given research suggesting that other forms of aggression, such as psychological aggression, are more common (Jose and O'Leary, 2009) and sometimes more strongly associated with psychological problems (Jouriles et al., 2009; O'Leary, 1999) than physical forms of such conduct.

Recently, Linder et al. (2002) examined relational aggression in the context of romantic relationships in young adulthood (termed *romantic relational aggression*). Relational aggression is defined as behaviors intended to hurt or harm others through the manipulation of interpersonal relationships (Crick et al., 1999); romantic relational aggression includes interpersonally manipulative behaviors such as giving a partner the "silent treatment" or intentionally excluding a partner from activities with friends (Linder et al., 2002). Although some romantic relational aggression behaviors also fit the definition of psychological aggression (e.g., threatening to break up with a romantic partner to hurt him or her), psychological aggression is much broader and includes additional behaviors such as verbal insults (Jouriles et al., 2009; Linder et al., 2002). Romantic relational aggression differs from other forms of aggression against romantic partners (e.g., physical, psychological) because it specifically focuses on damage to interpersonal relationships (Linder et al., 2002).

An emerging body of research has demonstrated the harmful nature of romantic relational aggression. Perpetrators and victims of these behaviors exhibit a number of adjustment problems, including both internalizing and externalizing problems (e.g., Bagner et al., 2007; Coyne et al., 2010; Murray-Close et al., 2010; Schad et al., 2008) and low-quality romantic relationships (Linder et al., 2002). In addition, research suggests that females exhibit similar (e.g., Bagner et al., 2007; Linder et al., 2002; Schad et al., 2008) or higher (e.g., Coyne et al., 2010; Ellis et al., 2009; Murray-Close et al., 2010; although see Storch et al., 2004) levels of romantic relational aggression compared to males.

One potential risk factor for the development of aggression against romantic partners is autonomic arousal (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2005). The autonomic nervous system (ANS) includes both the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). Activation of the SNS involves the "fight or flight" response and results in increases in physiological arousal (e.g., increases in heart rate and blood pressure). In contrast, the PNS is involved in the body's restorative functions, and activation of the PNS results in reductions of physiological arousal (e.g., decreases in heart rate and blood pressure). Studies have examined a number of indices of ANS activity, including heart rate reactivity (HRR; a measure influenced by both SNS and PSN activity), skin conductance reactivity (SCR; a measure of perspiration influenced by SNS activity), and respiratory sinus arrhythmia reactivity (RSAR; a measure of the ebbing and flowing of heart rate during respiration reflecting parasympathetic arousal) (Van Goozen et al., 2007).

Several researchers have proposed that exaggerated ANS reactivity to stress, reflecting elevated SNS activation and/or elevated PNS

withdrawal, may be associated with aggressive conduct. Exaggerated ANS reactivity reflects a pronounced "fight or flight" response to stress and may be an indicator of high levels of emotional lability which in turn results in aggressive responding (Scarpa and Raine, 1997). Consistent with this perspective, a recent meta-analysis demonstrated that exaggerated SNS reactivity was associated with elevated levels of aggression in adults (Lorber, 2004). In addition, some work suggests that heightened parasympathetic withdrawal is associated with aggression (Beauchaine, 2001). Emerging research also suggests that exaggerated ANS reactivity is associated with relational forms of aggression in girls (Murray-Close and Crick, 2007), highlighting the possibility that these processes may be involved in the development of relational as well as physical forms of aggression.

However, other researchers have argued that blunted reactivity, reflecting a compromised "fight or flight" response to stress, predicts involvement in aggression. Blunted reactivity, indexed by blunted SNS activation and/or blunted RSA withdrawal, may be indicative of fearlessness (Ortiz and Raine, 2004), which may in turn serve as a risk factor for aggressive conduct (Scarpa and Raine, 1997). Consistent with this perspective, there is some evidence that blunted HRR (Ortiz and Raine, 2004) and blunted SCR (Posthumus et al., 2009) are associated with aggression and antisocial behavior. In addition, preliminary research suggests that poor RSA withdrawal (or even RSA augmentation) is associated with aggression (Calkins et al., 2007; Katz, 2007; Obradović et al., 2010; Porges et al., 1996). Poor PNS reactivity in response to stress, indexed by blunted PNS withdrawal or PNS activation, may reflect problems such as impaired emotion regulation capabilities and hypervigilance to threat (Calkins et al., 2007; Katz, 2007).

To date, little research has examined the association between ANS reactivity and aggression against romantic partners. However, preliminary research with male batterers suggests that relatively low levels of aggression may be associated with exaggerated ANS reactivity whereas more severe aggression may be associated with blunted ANS reactivity (Babcock et al., 2005; Gottman et al., 1995). Given that romantic relational aggression involves relatively low levels of aggression and given research suggesting that young women are less likely to engage in calm discussions and more likely to engage in heated discussions when dealing with conflicts in their romantic relationships (Bookwala et al., 2005), a heightened "fight or flight" response to stress may be an important predictor of romantic relational aggression among female perpetrators. In fact, one recent study demonstrated that heightened RSA withdrawal in response to a romantic conflict discussion was associated with romantic relational aggression, particularly in the context of low-quality dating relationships (although effects were observed for males and females; Murray-Close et al., *in press*).

In addition to examining whether ANS arousal predicts involvement in romantic relational aggression, it is important to consider potential moderators of this association. For example, autonomic risk may only translate into romantic relational aggression in the context of high-risk relationships. This perspective is consistent with the developmental systems model of intimate aggression proposed by Capaldi and colleagues (Capaldi et al., 2004). This model emphasizes the interaction of previous predispositions towards aggression with current contextual influences such as partner behavior. One prediction of this model is that partner aggression may elicit or exacerbate aggressive behaviors. Moreover, the moderating role of relationship context may be particularly important in predicting romantic relational aggression among women given findings from one study suggesting that at-risk women only exhibited elevated levels of aggression when their partners were violent whereas at-risk men were aggressive regardless of their partners' levels of aggression (Herrera et al., 2008). In the present study, it was expected that ANS risk would be most strongly associated with romantic relational aggression among women who were frequently the targets of their partners' relational aggression.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/930150>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/930150>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)