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Romantic Relationship Characteristics and Adolescent Relationship Abuse in a Nationally Representative Sample

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Abstract

Studies have linked dating relationship quality with adolescent relationship abuse (ARA) in cross-sectional, local, and convenience samples. The purpose of this study is to predict teen dating violence victimization and perpetration at follow-up from earlier adolescent romantic relationship characteristics, using two waves of data from the national Survey of Teen Relationships and Intimate Violence (STRiV 2013-2015). The current study is the first to examine these associations with nationally representative, longitudinal data. Logistic regression results indicate that respondents with partners who exhibit controlling behaviors are at greater risk of later physical or sexual ARA victimization and perpetration as well as psychological ARA victimization and perpetration. Other baseline romantic characteristics found to be predictive of ARA at follow-up include respondent's controlling behavior (predictive of sexual or physical ARA victimization and perpetration), feelings of passionate love (predictive of sexual or physical ARA victimization as well as psychological ARA victimization and perpetration), and communication awkwardness (predictive of psychological ARA victimization). In future modeling work we will assess the viability of controlling for other factors that have been found to be predictive of ARA. Our work will inform prevention efforts aimed at addressing risk factors for ARA and providing greater safety for teen couples.

Introduction

Adolescent relationship abuse (ARA) is a problem affecting most adolescent relationships in the United States. Though national assessments of ARA prevalence vary, the National Survey on Teen Relationships and Intimate Violence (STRiV) estimates that 69% of adolescent daters aged 12 to 18 experience ARA victimization and 63% perpetrate ARA at some point in their current or recent romantic relationship (Taylor & Mumford, 2016). Regional and local studies confirm high rates of ARA victimization between 50 and 60% (V. A. Foshee, 1996; Hickman, Jaycox, & Aranoff, 2004; E.N. Jouriles, Platt, & McDonald, 2009).

Research shows that ARA victimization is associated with negative mental health consequences, including depression and anxiety (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013), as well as unhealthy behaviors such as substance use (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Vangie Ann Foshee, Reyes, Gottfredson, Chang, & Ennett, 2013), antisocial behaviors, and thoughts about suicide (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013). Most adolescents in aggressive relationships report mutual aggression (Capaldi, Kim, & Shortt, 2007; P. Giordano, 2007; PC Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2010; K. Daniel O'Leary, Smith Slep, Avery-Leaf, & Cascardi, 2008). Given the high prevalence and negative impact of ARA victimization and likelihood of mutual aggression in adolescent relationships, it is important to understand the longitudinal trends in ARA victimization and perpetration in order to be able to improve prevention efforts.

Despite the fact that commonly used ARA prevention curricula are geared towards examining the role of romantic characteristics in ARA (V. A. Foshee et al., 1998; Tharp et al., 2011), we understand little about how adolescent relationship characteristics predict later ARA outcomes. Past research has shown that negative (verbal conflict, antagonism, jealousy, coercive control) qualities of a dating relationship are associated with more adolescent relationship abuse (ARA) (P. Giordano et al., 2010). For example, there is evidence that higher levels of problematic relationship dynamics and behaviors such as jealousy and cheating dominate relationships in which physical violence occurs (P. Giordano et al., 2010). This study builds upon that cross-sectional literature by exploring how adolescent romantic relationship characteristics predict later ARA using longitudinal, nationally representative data.

Methods

Sample

Data are from the first two waves of the nationally representative Survey of Adolescent Relationships and Intimate Violence (STRiV), with the baseline conducted October 2013 to January 2014 and the follow-up conducted October 2014 to April 2015. The design and protocols for the STRiV study were approved by the IRB of NORC at the University of Chicago. Adolescents aged 10-18 were recruited from the GfK/Knowledge Panel, a national household probability sample of the U.S. (50,000+ members aged 18 and older). Full details on recruitment and the STRiV study design are available elsewhere (Taylor & Mumford, 2016). Our sample includes 10-19 year-old respondents who, at both the baseline survey (Wave 1) and at the follow-up survey one year later (Wave 2), reported that they were currently in a dating relationship or had been in a dating relationship that lasted at least a week within the past year (n=346). These relationships may have included the same or different romantic partners at baseline and follow-up.

The sample was half female (49.1%; see Table 1) with nearly three-quarters identifying as White, non-Hispanic (72.8%), and a mean age of 14 ($\bar{x}$ =13.96, SD=2.58). One third of the sample was living in a household with an income below the U.S. median household income in 2013 (34.5%). At Wave 2 of the survey, one quarter of adolescents reported physical or sexual ARA victimization (25.7%) and one-fifth of the sample reported physical or sexual ARA perpetration (20.2%). The majority of this sample of adolescent daters reported psychological ARA in their relationships at Wave 2 of the survey (60.5% victimization; 59.3% perpetration).

Table 1. Sample Description, National Survey on Teen Relationships and Intimate Violence (STRiV) (N=330)*

	Total
Baseline Adolescent Romantic Relationship Characteristics (Wave 1)	
Intimate Self-Disclosure	3.62 (0.94)
Controlling Behavior by Partner	2.34 (0.90)
Controlling Behavior by Respondent	2.07 (0.89)
Communication Awkwardness	2.67 (0.84)
Feelings of Passionate Love	3.81 (0.81)
Follow-up Adolescent Relationship Abuse Measures (Wave 2)	
Physical or Sexual Violence Victimization	25.7%
Physical or Sexual Violence Perpetration	20.2%
Psychological Violence Victimization	60.5%
Psychological Violence Perpetration	59.3%
Sociodemographic Characteristics	
Gender, Female	49.1%
Race/Ethnicity, White, Non-Hispanic	72.8%
Age	13.96 (2.58)
Below 2013 Median U.S. Household Income	34.5%

*N ranges from 330 to 346 for each variable in this table.

Measures

ARA perpetration and victimization. Using a modified version of the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory (CADRI) (Wolfe et al., 2001), respondents were asked to self-report on aggressive behaviors that occurred within the past year in their current or most recent dating relationship at Wave 1 and Wave 2. Those who responded in the affirmative to any of 13 measures of overt and covert forms of physical (e.g. kicking, punching and slapping) and sexual abuse (e.g. threatening to have sex, forcing to have sex against will, and touching sexually against will) were coded positive (coded 1) for ARA perpetration (no perpetration coded 0), based on their own behavior within the specified dating relationship. A similar indicator of ARA victimization was calculated by summing positive responses to 13 measures of overt and covert forms of physical and sexual abuse victimization. Psychological ARA perpetration and victimization were measured separately using 18 items (e.g., accusations of flirting, threat to end relationship, and said and things to your friends about victim to turn them against victim).

Romantic relationship characteristics. Responses across the items within each relationship construct were summed and averaged to create composite scores.

Intimate Self-Disclosure. Consistent with Giordano, Soto, Manning & Longmore's study relating adolescent romantic characteristics with ARA (Peggy C Giordano, Soto, Manning, & Longmore, 2010), this romantic relationship characteristic was measured using a revised version of the West and Zingle (1969) self-disclosure scale. This five-item scale asks respondents to indicate how often (with responses coded from never [1] to very often [5]) they talk with their partner about several topics: "something really great that happened," "something really bad that happened," and "your private thoughts and feelings."

Controlling Behavior by Respondent. This concept was measured using a modified four-item version of Halpern-Meekin, Manning, Giordano & Longmore's scale (2013), which asks respondents how much they agree or disagree with statements about their controlling behavior in their present or recent relationship. Responses were coded on a scale from strongly disagree [1] to strongly agree [5]. Prompts include, "You sometimes try/tried to control what [partner's name] does/did," and "You always try/tried to change [partner's name]."

Controlling Behavior by Partner. Controlling behavior exhibited by the partner of the respondent was included in the model by using a modified four-item version of Giordano, Manning & Longmore's measure (2010). Respondents were asked to report how much they agreed or disagreed with the statements when reflecting on their current or most recent dating relationships: ("[Partner's name] sometimes wants/wanted)] to control what you do/did." "[Partner's name] always tries/tried to change you." "[Partner's name] tells/told you what to wear or not wear." "[Partner's name] expects/expected you to respond immediately to texts or phone calls.") Responses were coded on a scale from strongly disagree [1] to strongly agree [5].

Communication Awkwardness. Adolescent respondents reported on the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with four items about communication awkwardness in their romantic relationships (P. C. Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006): [1] Sometimes you don't/didn't know quite what to say with [partner's name]; [2] You are/would be/ were uncomfortable having intimate conversations with [partner's name]; [3] You find/found it hard to talk about your feelings with [partner's name]; [4] Sometimes you feel/felt you need/needed to watch what you say/said) to [partner's name]. Responses were coded from strongly disagree [1] to strongly agree [5].

Feelings of Passionate Love. As was used in Giordano's study relating adolescent relationship characteristics to ARA outcomes (P. Giordano et al., 2010), Hatfield and Sprecher's (1986) passionate love scale was employed to measure feelings of passionate love. Respondents rate how strongly they agree or disagree, with responses coded from strongly agree [1] to strongly disagree [5], including the

following prompts: “You would rather be/have been with [partner’s name] than anyone else.” “You are/were very attracted to [partner’s name].” “[Partner’s name] always seems/seemed to be on your mind.” “The sight of [partner’s name] turns/turned you on.”

Table 2. Sexual or Physical and Psychological ARA Victimization and Perpetration at Wave 2 by Baseline Characteristics, Adolescent Current and Recent Daters, STRiV

	Sexual or Physical ARA				Psychological ARA			
	Victimization		Perpetration		Victimization		Perpetration	
	Exp(B)	(LL-UL)	Exp(B)	(LL-UL)	Exp(B)	(LL-UL)	Exp(B)	(LL-UL)
Intimate Self- Disclosure	1.13	(0.78-1.65)	1.21	(0.80-1.83)	0.98	(0.70-1.36)	1.13	(0.82-1.56)
Controlling Behavior by Partner	1.87**	(1.28-2.74)	1.96**	(1.31-2.95)	1.81**	(1.26-2.60)	1.59*	(1.12-2.26)
Controlling Behavior by Respondent	1.46*	(1.02-2.10)	1.48*	(1.01-2.18)	1.31	(0.92-1.87)	1.37	(0.97-1.95)
Communication Awkwardness	1.40	(0.94-2.08)	1.22	(0.79-1.87)	1.61*	(1.13-2.30)	1.26	(0.89-1.79)
Feelings of Passionate Love	1.64*	(1.05-2.56)	1.42	(0.88-2.30)	1.54*	(1.06-2.23)	1.71*	(1.19-2.48)

**p < .01; *p < .05. β: Beta coefficient . Exp(B): Exponentiated B. LL, UL: Lower and upper limits of 95% confidence intervals.

Analyses

Using SPSS software (version 23.0), we ran preliminary logistic regression models to determine how baseline romantic relationship characteristics predicted follow-up ARA victimization and perpetration. Four separate models were fitted to the data to predict sexual or physical ARA victimization, sexual or physical ARA perpetration, psychological ARA victimization, and psychological ARA perpetration. In future analyses, additional covariates will be added to the model to control for other factors that have been shown to predict ARA outcomes.

Results

Sexual or Physical ARA Victimization. Three romantic relationship characteristics were found to be significantly predictive of sexual or physical violence victimization. More controlling behavior exhibited by the respondent or the respondent's partner was associated with a significantly higher likelihood of victimization. When respondents reported having more feelings of passionate love at Wave 1, they were also at higher risk of experiencing sexual or physical ARA victimization at Wave 2.

Sexual or Physical ARA Perpetration. Consistent with the results for sexual or physical ARA victimization, controlling behavior by the respondent and controlling behavior by the respondent's partner at Wave 1 were also found to be significantly predictive of sexual or physical ARA perpetration at Wave 2.

Psychological ARA Victimization. More controlling behavior on the part of the respondent's partner was associated with a significantly higher likelihood of psychological ARA victimization of the respondent. Additionally, adolescents reporting more communication awkwardness and feelings of passionate love at Wave 1 were significantly more likely to experience psychological ARA victimization at Wave 2.

Psychological ARA Perpetration. Controlling behavior by the respondent's partner was also found to be significantly predictive of later psychological ARA perpetration and victimization of the respondent. Adolescents reporting more feelings of passionate love at Wave 1 were found to be at higher risk of psychological ARA perpetration at Wave 2.

Discussion

This study is the first to examine the connection between adolescent romantic relationship characteristics and ARA with nationally representative, longitudinal data. Consistent with cross-sectional adult IPV findings (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2008) and adolescent ARA findings (K Daniel O'Leary & Smith Slep, 2003), this study found controlling behavior exhibited by the respondent's partner to be a key predictor of all four ARA outcomes in this study. This stands in contrast to the variable of Intimate Self- Disclosure, which was the only relationship characteristic variable included in this study that was not found to be predictive of any of the four ARA outcomes in this study. Respondents who reported having a partner with controlling behavior during the baseline survey were 87% more likely to experience sexual or physical ARA victimization, 96% more likely to engage in sexual or physical ARA perpetration, 81% more likely to experience psychological ARA victimization, and 59% more likely to engage in psychological ARA perpetration at Wave 2. Similarly, controlling behavior exhibited by the respondent at baseline was associated with a 46% higher probability of sexual or physical ARA victimization and a 48% higher probability of sexual or physical ARA perpetration at follow-up. These results tend to mirror the findings with adult romantic partners on the destructive nature of controlling behavior (Jenkins, 2000; Jewkes, 2002; Johnson, 1995).

Controlling behavior by either partner in adolescent relationships can be an indicator of later violence and should not be ignored by parents or friends. Programming geared towards ARA prevention, such as *Families for Safe Dates* (V. Foshee & Langwick, 2010) and others, needs to emphasize how to identify risky controlling behavior in young adolescent relationships. Additionally, such programs should teach strategies for clear, comfortable communication between adolescent partners and healthy alternatives to controlling behavior. The Department of Health and Human Services report that reviews healthy social skills and relationships shows that adolescents who lack conflict resolution skills can learn those skills through training programs (Hair, Jager, & Garrett, 2002). These results may also have implications for adult intimate partner violence (IPV) given that IPV among young adults has often had its origins in adolescent relationships (Cui, Ueno, Gordon, & Fincham, 2013; Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Smith, White, & Holland, 2003).

In another key finding, adolescents reporting more feelings of passionate love were associated with higher likelihoods of sexual or physical ARA victimization as well as psychological ARA victimization and perpetration. Giordano had explored the cross-sectional association between feelings of passionate love and physical ARA perpetration and found there to be no statistically significant relationship (P. C.

Giordano et al., 2010). In addition to being the first longitudinal study to examine the predictive relationship of adolescent romantic characteristics and ARA, to our knowledge, no other study has measured the relationship between feelings of passionate love and physical, sexual or psychological ARA victimization and perpetration. Although one might expect that higher levels of caring and love would serve as protective factors, passionate love (as measured with a validated scale) within adolescent relationships may differ from such sentiments in adult relationship. Higher levels of passionate love were associated with more ARA in this sample, potentially indicating some developmental differences in the impact of feelings of passion. Our research suggests that relationships characterized by high levels of passionate love may show a lack of balance at this developmental juncture for the youth. This absence or breaking down of healthy boundaries may (as in our data) be associated with negative outcomes. While we do not have the data to test this, it is possible that these high levels of passionate love may border on obsessive-like behavior, especially if the other partner does not share the same levels of passionate love. Also Giordano and colleagues (P. Giordano et al., 2010) found that passionate love is associated with increased odds of having sexual intercourse and for relationships getting more complicated, which can also relate to violent behavior.

Respondents reporting more communication awkwardness in their relationships were at higher risk for later psychological ARA victimization only. This finding highlights the importance of strong communication in adolescent relationships. The importance of communication is a key component of Protection Motivation Theory (PMT), which has been used to explain cognitive functions that mediate fear arousal and an individual's motivation to activate protection in the face of a threat (Floyd, Prentice-Dunn, & Rogers, 2000; Rogers, 1975), such as violence. Programs like *Families for Safe Dates* (V. Foshee & Langwick, 2010), designed to prevent ARA, are based on PMT and work on communication skills for teen couples, and have been found to be effective in reducing violence (V. A. Foshee et al., 2004).

It is important to understand the limitations of this study. First, it was not possible to determine whether respondents were in the same romantic relationship during both waves of the study. If we had such data, we would have included a covariate on relationship status across the waves that might have moderated the relationships we found. Next, we relied on self-reported data, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. However, confidential self-report surveys have become an accepted modality for collective youth violence data (V. A. Foshee, 1996; Ernest N Jouriles, Mueller, Rosenfield, McDonald, & Dodson, 2012; Wolfe et al., 2001). This study measured ARA by asking about specific acts and did not capture ARA intensity, motivations or context. Further research is needed to investigate the relationship between adolescent relationship characteristics and these other ARA measures. Also, our estimates of

sexual abuse for 10-12 year-olds were conservative because we were not permitted to ask the sexual abuse items with this group due to the sensitive nature of the items for such a young sample.

This study demonstrates the feasibility of collecting nationally representative longitudinal data on the nature of violent adolescent relationships. Though results demonstrate the predictive relationship between adolescent romantic characteristics and later ARA, more work is needed to develop these models further. Now that we have established the role of relationship characteristics, future analyses will explore whether these findings remain stable across various sub-groups (e.g., boys and girls, different age groups, different ethnic groups). We will also assess the viability (in terms of statistical power and precision) of including additional covariates to these models to control for other factors that have been shown to be predictive of later ARA outcomes.

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