

## Specificity of Dating Aggression and Its Justification Among High-Risk Adolescents

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Ninety-five high-risk adolescents were studied to determine whether their dating aggression and its justification as a response to interpersonal problems were specific to the current partner, general to dating relationships, or part of a global age-mate (same-sex peers and opposite-sex dating partners) aggression problem. Approximately one-third of males and two-thirds of females reported physical aggression against their current dating partner. Males' aggression (and its justification) toward their current dating partner was part of a generalized pattern of dating aggression, whereas for females, physical aggression against a current dating partner (and its justification) was partner-specific and unrelated to aggression in other relationships. Findings are discussed with regard to intervention and future research on adolescent dating aggression.

**KEY WORDS:** Aggression; specificity; generality; high risk; adolescents; dating; friendships; peers.

Romantic relationships begin to emerge during early to middle adolescence (Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983; Roscoe & Kelsey, 1986). Aggression in adolescent romantic relationships is an important psychological and social problem because of its prevalence (affecting 25% to 50% of adolescents; see O'Leary & Cascardi, 1998) and related deleterious psychological and physical sequelae (Henton et al., 1983; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). Further, physical aggression in adolescent romantic relationships may be associated with the learning of maladaptive conflict resolution techniques that will be used in future romantic relationships (Makepeace, 1986; Roscoe & Benaske, 1985). However, researchers of interpartner aggression have largely neglected studying adolescents and have focused predominantly on married couples and college students (O'Leary & Cascardi, 1998; Straus & Gelles, 1992).

A central issue emerging from the limited study of adolescent dating aggression is whether this ag-

gression is specific to that partner, that type of relationship, or is instead, "simply" a component of a larger, generalized age-mate aggression problem (Treboux & O'Leary, 1996). Addressing issues of specificity versus generalizability of aggression is important for directing the study of causal factors and the design of intervention strategies for dating aggression.

Aggression in dating relationships has often been viewed narrowly, as being rooted in problems specific to where the violence is occurring (i.e., dating aggression occurs against specific individuals because of partner-specific problems with, for example, "chemistry," communication, jealousy, etc.; see Lloyd, Koval, & Cate, 1989; O'Leary & Cascardi, 1998). However, there is evidence, particularly concerning males, that partner aggressors commonly agrees against more than one romantic partner (Makepeace, 1986; Mihalic, Elliot, & Menard, 1994; Roscoe & Benaske, 1985). For example, Mihalic et al. found that 58% of young men who had been physically aggressive with a previous partner were physically aggressive with a new, current partner. The prospective nature of the Mihalic et al. study provides clear evidence that there is a relation between

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males' past and subsequent partner aggression. It has been hypothesized from a social learning perspective that repeated use of aggression against dating partners may occur because (1) there is often great similarity in the types of interactions that an individual has with different dating partners (because they are both intimate relationships) (cf. Bandura, 1973) and relatedly, (2) that earlier dating relationships may serve as "training grounds" for later romantic relationships (Makepeace, 1986). Furthermore, Connolly (in press) and Hartup (1992) have proposed that past and current interpersonal experiences with same-sex peers serve as exemplars for all age-mate interactions, including those with dating partners as well as with same-sex peers. Evidence for the "spillover" of one's peer aggression to partner aggression is provided by O'Leary, Malone, and Tyree (1994), who found that females' peer aggression (i.e., aggression against same-sex age-mates) during adolescence directly predicted their later marital violence. The aim of this study was to extend previous research on adolescent dating aggression by simultaneously testing the interrelations among aggression that is partner-specific, relationship-type-specific, and that which is aimed toward same-sex peers.

An issue implicit in the study of specific-versus-generalized aggression among adolescents was that of underlying mechanisms. According to social cognitive theory, cognition (i.e., beliefs and evaluations regarding aggression as a strategy) is believed to "drive" behavioral responses to social stimuli (Dodge, 1986). For example, an individual's justification of aggression is believed to be causatively associated with their use of aggression. And, in fact, associations between justification for and use of aggression have been found in several dating aggression (Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982; Foo & Margolin, 1995; Henton et al., 1983; Schwartz, O'Leary, & Kendziora, 1997; Tontodonato & Crew, 1992) and peer aggression studies (Slaby & Guerra, 1988), particularly for males. However, it has never been established whether beliefs about a specific partner, or more general beliefs about dating partners or age-mates—as some researchers have recently postulated (Connolly, in press; Holtzworth-Munroe & Stuart, 1994)—account for the repeatedly found association between justification for and use of dating aggression (see O'Leary & Cascardi, 1998). Therefore, the specificity of the relation between dating aggression and justification of age-mate aggression was also examined in this study.

High-risk adolescents served as participants in the current study for two reasons. First, for efficiency in addressing the specificity of adolescent dating aggression—if dating aggression is not found to be part of a generalized aggression problem among these adolescents, it is highly unlikely that this pattern would be found in their less aggressive, normative high school counterparts. Second, high-risk adolescents have been neglected by dating aggression researchers. In addition, both males and females were included in this study, as recent research indicates that normative and high-risk males and females are similar in frequency and severity of aggression (Caspi & Moffitt, 1991; O'Leary & Cascardi, 1998).

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Ninety-five adolescents (96% of students over 2 years) attending a drop-out prevention program for behavior problem adolescents participated in the study (61 male, 34 female). Participants were referred to the alternative setting due to their problem behaviors in their home schools with aggression, other behavior/delinquency-related problems, the truancy. Sample means on both the self-report Externalizing (male:  $T: M = 70.86, SD = 9.33$ ; female:  $T: M = 76.52, SD = 7.81$ ) and Internalizing scales (male:  $T: M = 75.44, SD = 10.08$ ; female:  $T: M = 76.19, SD = 9.97$ ) of the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach, 1991) were in the clinical range (at or above the 98th percentile).

Participants ranged in age from 14 to 19 years (male:  $M = 17.32, SD = 1.31$ ; female:  $M = 16.78, SD = 13.1$ ) and the majority of the sample was Caucasian (65%; African-American: 14%; Hispanic: 9%; other or mixed ethnic background: 12%). All respondents reported that they had at least one same-sex peer whom they considered a friend and one whom they considered a nonfriend or enemy. They also reported that they had two or more opposite-sexed dating partners. For both males and females, dating relationships with the current or most recent dating partner (CDP) and the prior dating partner (PDP) had lasted an average of 7 months, with no difference in duration between the two relationships. There were no significant gender differences on any demographic factors.

### Measures

**Physical Aggression.** The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979) measures modes of conflict resolution, including verbal reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression. Participants were asked to endorse how often they used each tactic against current and past dating partners, and same-sex liked and disliked peers (one of each type) for a total of four age-mates in the past year<sup>3</sup>: *never* (1), *once or twice* (2), *3 to 5 times* (3), *6 to 10 times* (4), *11 times or more* (5). In the present study, only the six physical aggression items were utilized in creating a dichotomous (i.e., presence or absence of any physical aggression) scale.<sup>4</sup>

**Justification.** Justification for aggression was assessed via the Thoughts About Relationships Questionnaire (TARQ). In response to recent critiques and findings with instruments assessing justification of aggression (see Foo & Margolin, 1995), the TARQ was developed for use in this study to be an ecologically valid measure for justification of age-mate aggression. Pilot data collection identified three themes/situations as being particularly socially problematic and leading to conflict across the four types of age-mate relationships: perceived betrayal, nonsupport (i.e., did not "back me up" in a difficult situation), and public embarrassment. Each subject was presented with 12 hypothetical vignettes designed to assess justification of aggression (the three situations presented across each of the four types of target age-mates). The Flesch-Kincaid reading level of the vignettes was 6.0, where 6 to 10 is considered most effective for a general audience. An example of a vignette follows:

You walk into a party and see *partner's name* talking to his/her ex-partner, and *partner's name* has his/her arm on his/her ex's shoulder. It appears that *part-*

*ner's name* is having a good time. It just happens that *partner's name* looks over at you, smiles, and turns back to his/her ex, at which point they walk away from the group to a corner and continue speaking.

Respondents endorsed a value on a 4-point scale indicating the extent to which they believed mild and severe physical aggression were justified ("OK") in the vignette situations (0 = *Definitely Not OK*, 1 = *Maybe OK*, 2 = *Probably OK*, 3 = *Definitely OK*). CTS mild and severe aggression items served as exemplars of possible aggressive acts to consider for justification. Scale scores were computed by averaging scores (i.e., the sum of the mild and severe items) across the three vignettes for each of the four relationships of interest. The internal consistency for the TARQ was good; Cronbach's alpha across age-mate relationships ranged from .74 to .89 for males and from .80 to .96 for females.

### Procedure

The Conflict Tactics Scales were completed as part of a larger assessment battery. The Thoughts About Relationships Questionnaire was administered separately in small groups, in which research staff read aloud the first few vignettes to assure understanding and then remained in the testing room to ensure privacy and to answer any questions. Completion of the justification instrument took approximately 40 min. Twenty dollars was paid to each participant.

## RESULTS

### Prevalence

Thirty-three percent of males and 68% of females reported using physical aggression against their CDP in the past year. In addition, aggression against the ex-partner, friend, and nonfriend was self-reported by 38%, 59%, and 93% of males, respectively, and 79%, 44%, and 68% of females, respectively.

Cochran *Q* tests were performed to test whether prevalence rates of physical aggression were significantly different across the four relationships.<sup>5</sup> For

<sup>3</sup>To ensure comparability in the measurement of aggression across relationships, participants were instructed to respond to the Conflict Tactics Scale questions concerning the past dating partner while considering the last year of the relationship with this person, even if that was prior to the last 12 months. In addition, we chose same-sex peers because of the clear concordance between same-sexed status and adolescent friendships (Hartup, 1992).

<sup>4</sup>The physical aggression score was computed, consistent with recent dating aggression research, by using the two extreme mild physical aggression items and the four severe physical aggression items (see Caulfield & Riggs, 1992; Pan, Neidig, & O'Leary, 1994). The authors decided on this more conservative scoring in response to the debate concerning what constitutes physical aggression among adolescents (Bethke & DeJoy, 1993), which had to be considered in the present study because of the relative deviance of the sample.

<sup>5</sup>Results are reported on only total scores (mild and severe summed into one score) for both the aggression (CTS) and justification (TARQ) measures because results using these scores parallel those found when using mild and severe scores separately.

males, there was a significant difference in prevalence of aggression across relationships [ $Q(df = 3) = 59.80, p < .001$ ]. Planned contrasts indicated that prevalence of physical aggression against the CDP was not different from prevalence of aggression against the PDP [ $Q(df = 1) = 1.29, p = n.s.$ ]; however, it occurred as a significantly lower rate than that against the friend [ $Q(df = 1) = 9.00, p < .005$ ] and the nonfriend [ $Q(df = 1) = 33.11, p < .001$ ].

In contrast to males, prevalence rates of females' physical aggression were not significantly different across the four relationships [ $Q(df = 3) = 4.33, p = n.s.$ ]. Planned contrasts were then conducted both to ensure comparability with the analysis on males' data, and to locate important cell differences that might have been missed in the omnibus analysis. Females' prevalence rate of aggression against the CDP was not different from that against the PDP and the nonfriend; however, it did occur at a marginally higher rate of prevalence than that against the friend [ $Q(df = 1) = 3.27, p < .10$ ].

#### Specificity of Dating Aggression

Phi coefficients were computed to test whether the occurrence of aggression against the CDP was associated with aggression against the three other age-mates (see Table I). For males, there was a strong positive correlation between CDP-directed aggression and aggression against the PDP. All remaining correlations concerning males were nonsignificant. For females, all correlations with aggression against the CDP were nonsignificant. Thus, results indicate quite dramatically that, for males, aggression against the CDP was associated with aggression against a past partner but not against same-sex peers. Further, females' CDP-directed aggression was not related to aggression against other age-mates.

**Table I.** Phi Correlations Between Use of Physical Aggression in Current/Most Recent Dating Relationship and the Three Other Age-Mate Relationships

	Aggression in current/most recent dating relationship	
	Males	Females
Age-mate aggression		
Ex-partner	.73 <sup>a</sup>	-.03
Friend	.20	.07
Nonfriend	.00	-.15

<sup>a</sup> $p < .001$ .

**Table II.** Point-Biserial Correlations Between Use and Justification of Aggression Within the Four Age-Mate Relationships<sup>a</sup>

Justification of aggression	Physical aggression (CTS)			
	CDP	PDP	FR	NF
Males	.28 <sup>c</sup>	.35 <sup>d</sup>	.26 <sup>c</sup>	.44 <sup>e</sup>
Females	.28 <sup>b</sup>	.26	.38 <sup>c</sup>	.50 <sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>CDP = current/most recent dating partner; PDP = past dating partner; FR = friend; NF = nonfriend. CTS = Conflict Tactics Scale.

<sup>b</sup> $p < .10$ .

<sup>c</sup> $p < .05$ .

<sup>d</sup> $p < .01$ .

<sup>e</sup> $p < .001$ .

**Table III.** Point-Biserial Correlations Between Physical Aggression in Current/Most Recent Dating Relationship and Justification of Aggression in the Three Other Age-Mate Relationships

Justification of aggression	Aggression in current/most recent dating relationship	
	Males	Females
Ex-partner	.35 <sup>a</sup>	.07
Friend	.14	.07
Nonfriend	.11	-.09

<sup>a</sup> $p < .01$ .

#### Within-Relationship Correlations Between Use of and Justification for Aggression

Point-biserial correlations between justification for and use of physical aggression within each of the four relationships were computed (see Table II). Justification scores were square-root-transformed because of mild skewness problems, in accordance with Tabachnick and Fidell (1989). In general, aggression against an age-mate and justification for aggression against that age-mate was associated for males and females. For instance, males' and females' justification of aggression against their nonfriend was correlated with their use of aggression against that person. In addition, the association between use of and justification for aggression against the friend and two dating partners was significant. For females, there was a moderate association between justification for and use of aggression against the friend and a marginal correlation between justification for and use of aggression against the CDP. The correlation between females' justification for and use of aggression against the PDP was not significant.

*Relationship Specificity Between Current Dating Partner Aggression and Justification of Age-Mate Aggression.* Point-biserial correlations were then computed to test the specificity between aggression against the CDP and justification of aggression against the three other age-mates (see Table III). Males' use of aggression against the CDP was significantly associated with their justification of aggression against the PDP. No additional significant associations between aggression against the CDP and justification of other age-mate-aggression were found for males or females. Thus, the pattern of findings between aggression against the CDP and justification of age-mate aggression parallel those found in the aggressive behavior analyses.

The next set of analyses assessed the potential independence/dependence of justifications across males' current and past dating relationships for predicting aggression toward the current partner. We conducted a two-step hierarchical regression predicting aggression toward the CDP from justification of dating aggression toward (a) the PDP, and (b) the CDP. Justification of physical aggression toward the PDP significantly predicted dating aggression against the CDP,  $F(1, 59) = 7.32, p < .01, R = .33$ . Next, justification of physical aggression toward the CDP was entered, and was not found to yield a significant predictive increment,  $F\text{-change}(1, 59) < 1.0$ . Thus, justification of physical aggression toward the CDP failed to predict dating aggression against that specific dating partner beyond justification of dating aggression against a previous dating partner. For the total equation, the combination of the two justification scores significantly predicted males' aggression against the CDP,  $F(2, 58) = 3.85, p < .05, R = .34$ . These analyses suggest that the bivariate correlation found earlier between males' justification for and use of aggression against the CDP was a function of beliefs that were applied across dating relationships, rather than being specific to *that* dating partner.

## DISCUSSION

This study represents the first investigation into the specificity of adolescent dating aggression, as well as the first study to examine dating aggression in highly aggressive male and female adolescents. The use of a high-risk sample, and their remarkably high prevalence of aggression across relationships, could have slanted findings toward generalized aggression patterns. However, findings suggest that dating ag-

gression was not part of a global age-mate aggression problem. While prevalence rates of aggression against all age-mates were high, perpetration of dating aggression against the current partner occurred largely at different rates from aggression against same-sex peers and was not associated with aggression against same-sex friends and nonfriends. Dating aggression rather was found to be relationship-specific for males (i.e., an aggression problem globally tied to dating relationships) and partner-specific for females. Correlation and regression results concerning age-mate aggression justification and CDP-directed aggression paralleled those for aggressive behavior, suggesting that such beliefs act as a relationships- or partner-specific (rather than global) mechanism in dating aggression for males and females, respectively. This finding provides incremental validity to the distinction between specific-versus-generalized aggression.

The training ground hypothesis (Makepeace, 1986), that use of aggression against a dating partner is predictive of an individual's use of aggression against a subsequent dating partner, was supported for males but not for females. Indeed, males' but not females' dating aggression displayed continuity across different dating partners. These findings suggest that males and females may be aggressive against intimate partners for different reasons (Mason & Blankenship, 1987). Certainly, future research needs to focus on the function and meaning of aggression for male and female adolescents. Females' dating aggression may occur in response to situational or proximal factors, whereas males' aggression may be more consistently proactive or instrumentally based for reasons for control (Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987). For instance, self-defense aggression is known to be more common for females than it is for males (Bookwala, Frieze, Smith, & Ryn, 1992; Foo & Margolin, 1992), as is females' reactive aggression to emotionally evocative situations involving jealousy (see O'Leary & Cascardi, 1998).

Clinical implications from these findings are twofold. First, it is possible that one can reduce partner aggression by focusing specifically on that type of aggression rather than trying to change partner aggression through broad band approaches designed to change aggression across diverse age-mate relationships. Second, such interventions might be most efficacious if they emphasize different factors to males and females. For example, treatment for males may center on more global intimate relationship issues and aggressogenic beliefs, while treatment for females

may stress situational factors which elicit their violence (e.g., male evocative behaviors).

The limitations in this study highlight additional directions for future research. Although findings in this study suggest that the TARQ has utility in measuring justification of aggression against various age-mates, the TARQ must be validated with independent measures and used in research with other samples of adolescents to assess the measure's generalizability. Further, though laboratory findings (Bethke & DeJoy, 1993) and social learning theory suggest that proaggression attitudes recede the use of aggression (Riggs & O'Leary, 1989), future research in this area should be conducted within a prospective design to rule-out that participants' justification of aggression was somehow formed on the basis of their behaviors, in the form of *post hoc* rationalizations for their aggression or deviance disavowal (Bem, 1967; Makepeace, 1986). last, despite the beneficial aspects of research on deviant adolescents, such as more easily observing trends that can inform research and intervention with normative adolescents (Compas, Hinden, & Gerhardt, 1995), research with high-risk individuals may be specific to such samples.

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