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CONFLICT, CONNECTION, AND AGGRESSION
IN ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Sharon C. Risch

August 2007

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Mary Ellen Risch,

whose sacrifice, love, and inspiration

provided the foundation for my pursuit of higher education.

She taught me that persistence and diligence only work with integrity and humility.

And to the Risch family,

who taught me that nothing is possible or meaningful

without the love and support of others.

I share this accomplishment with all of you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I gratefully acknowledge the contributions of all who helped on this project. To my lab mates, Joseph Dickson, Rebecca Furr, Catherine Grello, Melinda Harper, Peter Haugen, Karen Wetzel, Laura Widman, and our numerous research assistants, I thank you for your time, dedication, collaboration, and camaraderie that made STARR an enjoyable and enriching experience. I would also like to thank the 422 adolescents who shared themselves and their relationships in order to teach us about the nature of adolescent romantic relationships.

I would especially like to thank Dr. Deborah Welsh for her mentorship on this project, as well as for serving as chair of my dissertation committee. Without her efforts, I would not even have had this experience as a graduate student at the University of Tennessee. I am appreciative of her sage advice as a mentor, researcher, and friend throughout this sometimes strenuous and perplexing process. I would also like to thank Drs. Brian Barber, Kristina Coop Gordon, and John Lounsbury for serving on my committee. Their astute input greatly improved this project. In addition, I would like to acknowledge Dr. Lowell Gaertner, who always had an open door for statistical consults. I am grateful for his assistance with the analytic strategy for this dissertation.

To my clinical supervisors and educators, especially Drs. Jack Barlow, Lance Laurence, Jeff Slavin, and Kathryn White, who introduced me to the world of psychoanalytic theory and practice. They taught a very young student how to sit with ambiguity in the therapy room, while they nurtured an evolving professional identity as an “expert.” I thank them for their tireless dedication to my development as a clinician and their open-ended invitation to consultation whenever it was needed, day or night.

Most of all, I thank them for sharing their own passion for clinical work with me. I am convinced that without them I would not have discovered my own passion for working with patients.

I would also like to thank my co-explorers, the entering “superstar” class of 2001, Elizabeth Hardaway, Peter Haugen, David Kemmerer, Samantha Litzinger, Meredith Schwartzman, and also Elisabeth Scherpenisse (honorary class member) with whom I’ve traveled this arduous and challenging journey. I have grown in countless ways both personally and professionally in the context of their intellectual and emotional support. They taught me through companionship what no book or lecture could have. I feel truly honored to have traversed this path with such talented and caring people. They have left an indelible mark on my life and my worldview.

Finally, to Matthew Basch, my loving companion and partner, who was my undying source of encouragement and comfort. The depth of his understanding and patience was unfathomable. He was always reaching for empathy, even when his reach exceeded his grasp for knowing the trials and tribulations of this experience. I am forever indebted to him for his unrelenting love and support. It is ridiculous to think only one of us receives a Ph.D. when all is said and done.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation describes two projects aimed at understanding the role of conflict, connection, and aggression in adolescent romantic relationships. The first project is an empirical investigation that seeks to understand how the developmental task of separation-individuation is negotiated in adolescents' romantic relationships via their communication processes. We hypothesize that participants who exhibit higher levels of connection and lower levels of conflict will be less physically aggressive and feel more satisfied in their relationships. We also hypothesize a moderation model whereby participants who exhibit conflict in the context of higher levels of connection will have better relational outcomes than participants who exhibit conflict in the context of lower levels of connection. To explore these associations, we use observational and survey data collected from 98 middle adolescent and 105 late adolescent dating couples. Results suggest that participants who exhibited higher levels of connection and lower levels of conflict were more likely to report being satisfied with their relationships. Similarly, participants who demonstrated higher levels of conflict were more likely to report using and were observed using more physical aggression. Females were significantly more likely to report using and were observed using more physical aggression than males as well.

The second paper, a comprehensive and integrative review of the literature, provides a context for understanding this significant gender finding that females were more aggressive than males. Much controversy and debate exist about the differential incidence of dating aggression perpetration by males and females in adolescence and early adulthood. Some studies have failed to find any significant gender differences, and

others have found that females are more likely to perpetrate dating aggression than males. The goal of this paper is to review the literature in adolescence and early adulthood regarding gender differences in dating aggression, to discuss individual and contextual factors that may contribute to the emergence of dating aggression differentially for males and females, and to discuss methodological concerns and future directions for research in this area. The conclusion that can be drawn most confidently from research to date is that in normative samples, the proportion of males and females who engage in mild psychological and physical aggression (not sexual aggression) is about equal or higher in females than males in adolescent and young adult samples.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PART I

OVERVIEW

PART II

DOES CONTEXT MATTER? PATTERNS OF CONFLICT AND CONNECTION IN ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Chapter	Page
1	Introduction.....5
	Developmental Perspective of Adolescence8
	Adolescent Romantic Relationships10
	Marital Relationships16
	The Present Study18
2	Method21
	Participants.....21
	Procedure23
	Measures23
3	Results.....27
	Analytic Strategy27
	Descriptive Statistics.....29
	Relationship Satisfaction29
	Reported Aggression.....30
	Observed Aggression.....31
4	Discussion32
	Relationship Satisfaction33
	Dating Aggression34
	Limitations39
	Conclusion and Implications.....40
	List of References41
	Appendices.....53

PART III

DATING AGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENCE AND EARLY ADULTHOOD:

WHEN “MACHO MAN” MEETS “BIKER CHICK”

Chapter	Page
1 Introduction.....	62
Conceptual Concerns	64
2 Gender Differences in Dating Aggression.....	65
3 Precipitants of Dating Aggression	73
Individual Context	73
Dyadic Context	75
Interaction of Individual-Dyadic Factors.....	78
4 Meaning of Dating Aggression: Different for Males and Females?.....	80
5 Methodological Concerns	83
Definition	83
Measures	84
Sampling	85
Procedure	86
Generalizability	87
6 Conclusion	89
List of References	91

PART IV

CONCLUSIONS

Vita	104
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PART I
OVERVIEW

Overview

This dissertation describes two projects aimed at understanding the role of conflict, connection, and aggression in adolescent romantic relationships. The first project is an empirical investigation and the second is a comprehensive and integrative review of the literature.

The first study in this dissertation seeks to understand how the developmental task of separation-individuation is negotiated in adolescents' romantic relationships via their communication processes. More specifically, this study examines the ways in which adolescents use conflict and connection in their relationships as a way of navigating separateness and connection in their romantic relationships. Relational outcomes including relationship satisfaction and dating aggression are assessed as indicators of how communication processes within this developmental time period contribute to successful relational development. We hypothesize that participants who exhibit higher levels of connection and lower levels of conflict will be less physically aggressive and feel more satisfied in their relationships. We also hypothesize a moderation model whereby participants who exhibit conflict in the context of higher levels of connection will have better relational outcomes than participants who exhibit conflict in the context of lower levels of connection.

To explore these associations, we use data collected from 98 middle adolescent and 105 late adolescent dating couples. We use observational coded data gathered from recorded conversations whereby couples discuss an issue of disagreement in their relationship as well as survey data. Results suggest partial support for our hypotheses. Participants who demonstrated higher levels of connection and lower levels of conflict

were more likely to report being satisfied in their relationship. Similarly, participants who demonstrated higher levels of conflict were more likely to use more severe physical aggression in their relationship, and they were observed hitting their partners more frequently during the recorded conversation. A significant gender effect emerged as well for females such that they were more likely than males to use severe physical aggression as reported by them and their partners, and they were observed being aggressive with their partners more often than males.

The second paper provides a context for understanding the significant gender finding. We were curious as to whether this finding of females using more aggression than males would be supported in the dating aggression literature, especially since it was confirmed by both self-reported and observational data in our study. This finding appeared to be somewhat contradictory to findings in the adult literature as well whereby aggression is more likely to be perpetrated by men against women (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Therefore, for the second paper, we conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on gender differences in dating aggression in adolescent dating relationships as part of an investigation of our findings. The goal of this paper is to review studies representative of the literature in adolescence and early adulthood regarding gender differences in dating aggression, to discuss individual and contextual factors that may contribute to the emergence of dating aggression differentially for males and females, and to discuss methodological concerns and future directions for research in this area.

PART II

DOES CONTEXT MATTER? PATTERNS OF CONFLICT AND CONNECTION IN ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Chapter 1

Introduction

Research on adolescent romantic relationships is a burgeoning field. Currently, researchers are investigating the ways in which adolescent romantic relationships take on a developmentally significant purpose. These relationships are unique to adolescent development because they provide one of the first interpersonal frameworks for exploring romance and sexuality (Miller & Benson, 1999). Furthermore, they are hypothesized to be a major vehicle for working through issues concerned with the developmental task of separation-individuation (Blos, 1967; Erickson, 1968; Gray & Steinberg, 1999). One way adolescents navigate this latter task in adolescent romantic relationships may be through their communication processes – specifically the way they negotiate conflict and connectedness. Conflict may enable adolescents to meet their needs for individuation in romantic relationships. However, adolescents must also learn ways to maintain connection with their romantic partners in the context of individuation (Laursen, 1993). Otherwise, their needs for relatedness and intimacy may go unfulfilled.

Conflict and connection are processes that have been studied extensively in adolescents' relationships, but conceptually these constructs are not entirely clear. Interpersonal conflict has been defined as behavior of one member of a dyad that is incongruent with the expectations, goals, or desires of the other member, resulting in disagreement or behavioral opposition (Shantz, 1987). Connection involves processes that link the self to others. It has been defined by two identifying characteristics. One is permeability, which is “expressing responsiveness to the views of others;” the other is mutuality, which is “expressing sensitivity and respect for others' views, especially

taking into account the other's viewpoint when expressing one's own" (Grotevant & Cooper, 1998, p. 4). Another component of connection is affective, not behavioral. It is characterized by feeling linked to others or feeling supported by others.

While these conceptual definitions of conflict and connection offer some insight into these constructs, there appears to be multiple ways researchers define them, some without acknowledgement of these variations. For example, there appears to be a general consensus that behavioral opposition is a central feature of conflict (Shantz & Hartup, 1992). However, there is an ensuing debate surrounding the structure of conflict that remains to be resolved (Laursen & Collins, 1994). Such debate is reflected in researchers' tendency to conflate anger, aggression, fighting, opposition, and negative affect (Hill, 1988; Madsen & Collins, 2004; Shantz, 1987; Shulman, 2003). Similarly, some researchers have used connection interchangeably with intimacy, emotional closeness, trust, and caring (Collins & Repinski, 1994; Youniss & Ketterlinus, 1987).

While the purpose of this paper does not seek to differentiate these constructs, it is significant to note that there is not complete agreement in the field as to the definitions of both conflict and connection in adolescents' relationships. For our purposes, a successful individuation process occurs when adolescents are able to develop the capacity for separateness, defined as an ability to express differences in views between self and others, while also maintaining connection, defined as an ability to express responsiveness and openness to others' ideas, showing sensitivity and respect in relating to others, and feeling linked to others or supported by them (Cooper, Grotevant, & Condon, 1983).

To date, there is little research examining how adolescents negotiate conflict and connection in their romantic relationships. Some studies have found conflict to be

negatively correlated and support (a behavioral component of connection) to be positively correlated with relational outcomes such as relationship satisfaction and intimacy (Galliher, Welsh, Rostosky, & Kawaguchi, 2004; Rostosky, Galliher, Welsh, & Kawaguchi, 2000). However, the manner in which both conflict and connection operate in conjunction with one another in these types of relationships has yet to be examined.

Gottman and his colleagues (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998) posited that specific behaviors carry different meanings in different relational contexts. Allen (2004) has also argued that communication processes, specifically within adolescent romantic relationships, should be examined within their context. That is, researchers should consider patterns of multiple behaviors that occur in conversations rather than examining behaviors in isolation. For instance, conflict and connection are traditionally studied independently. However, conflict or connection may have different implications for relational outcomes depending on the context of other behaviors present during the interaction in which either behavior occurs. Thus, isolating one behavior may ignore the complexity of the interaction.

A major aim of this study is to examine conflict and connection in adolescent romantic relationships. Specifically, we propose to examine the ways in which conflict and connection are associated with the quality of adolescents' romantic relationships. We also propose to examine how connection moderates the potential negative effects of conflict in adolescent romantic relationships. To our knowledge, this study is the first in the adolescent romantic relationship literature to explore conflict and connection in the context of one another using microanalytic data. Learning about the role of conflict and connection will help us understand the developmental significance of romantic

relationships in adolescence, particularly the ways in which these relationships facilitate the developmental task of separation-individuation. It will also contribute to our knowledge of both normative and problematic processes within adolescent romantic relationships, illuminating the consequences of such communication processes in terms of social and relational competence. Such knowledge is important because adolescents may be learning relational patterns that influence the course of subsequent relationships, perhaps even marriages (Furman & Flanagan, 1997).

Developmental Perspective of Adolescence

Theorists from both developmental and clinical perspectives have posited that the main developmental task of adolescence is separation-individuation (Blos, 1967; Erickson, 1968). During this time, adolescents struggle to gain independence from their parents and strive to form their own identity. What is difficult about this endeavor is that adolescents must negotiate a way to also maintain a connection with their parents while simultaneously garnering distance. From a developmental perspective, the theoretical impetus for negotiating separateness and connection originates in parent-adolescent relationships (Blos, 1979; Steinberg, 1981). A body of research in the parent-adolescent literature has examined these links empirically as well. Thus, reviewing these findings will provide a foundation for understanding the process of negotiating separateness and connection in adolescent romantic relationships.

Empirical studies in the adolescent family literature have articulated the way in which adolescents negotiate separateness and connection with their parents. Grotevant and Cooper (Cooper, Grotevant, & Condon, 1983; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985) conducted

a series of studies examining these processes in family interactions and found that the capacity to express views that are different from parents in the context of connection is related to positive adjustment in adolescents. They also found that individuated family relationships, characterized by separateness in the context of connection, allow adolescents the space to develop their own views and the support to explore their identity in a larger world outside the family. To illustrate, in an individuated family relationship, the family would make a decision by first allowing each member to think about the decision on their own and then come together later to reconcile everyone's viewpoint. All family members would be active and involved in this discussion, and humor, candor, and vulnerability would be displayed. Similarly, Hauser and his colleagues have found that sharing different perspectives and challenging others' perspectives in a context of support within families is positively associated with adolescent ego development and negatively associated with depressive affect and externalizing behaviors (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Allen, Hauser, Eickholt, & Bell, 1994; Hauser, Powers, Noam, Jacobson, Weiss, & Follansbee, 1984; Powers, Hauser, Schwartz, Noam, & Jacobson, 1983).

The process of negotiating separation and connection may occur in other close relationships in adolescence. Erikson (1968) theorized that identity formation evolved from the definition of a sense of self as distinctive from others. Much like differentiating from parents, adolescents must find a way to differentiate themselves from peers in order to develop a stable sense of self. A supportive context acts as scaffolding in helping adolescents discern and develop their sense of self, unique from others. Empirical studies have demonstrated that adolescents who are able to successfully balance separateness and

connection in their relationships with peers in non-romantic relationships are able to successfully cooperate on tasks as well as adapt individual ideas to the benefit of the dyad (Shulman 1993, 1995; Shulman, Kedem, & Alon, 1996; Shulman & Laursen, 2002; Shulman, Laursen, Kalman, & Karpovsky, 1997; Shulman & Levy-Shiff, 1995). While theory and empirical studies provide an understanding for separateness and connection in adolescent peer relationships, we know relatively little about how such processes occur in adolescent romantic relationships (Collins, Laursen, Mortensen, Luebker, & Ferreira, 1997; Laursen, 1993).

Theory suggests that adolescents need to separate themselves in their romantic relationships for reasons different from the reasons they need to separate-individuate from their parents. Erickson (1968) argued that adolescent love is characterized by an overidentification with the other that results in complete loss of their sense of self. This happens in order to alleviate some of the tension related to adolescents' struggle to find their own identity. Thus, it is developmentally appropriate for adolescents to lose themselves in relation to their partner. Eventually, however, it becomes important to find one's own identity in relation to the other.

Adolescent Romantic Relationships

Romantic relationships are normative and salient in adolescence. Over 70 % of adolescents report having been involved in a romantic relationship in the past 18 months by the age of 18 (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Moreover, adolescents regard romantic relationships as one of their most significant and influential relationships (Adams, Laursen, & Wilder, 2001). Adolescent romantic relationships play an important role in

the development of adolescents' identity. Sullivan (1953) has argued that there is a shift in heterosexual adolescents from seeking someone quite like the self to seeking someone quite different from the self –someone of the opposite sex. Adolescent romantic relationships also play important roles in the development of sexuality (Welsh, Rostosky, & Kawaguchi, 2000) and the transformation of family relationships (Gray & Steinberg, 1999). Thus, romantic relationships play a unique and important role in facilitating individual and relational maturity in adolescence.

Adolescent romantic relationships resemble other peer relationships in that they are relationships of equality and reciprocity. Similarly, adolescents are not constrained to stay in peer or romantic relationships. However, one difference between peer and romantic relationships in adolescence is that romantic relationships have a sexual component. Additionally, adolescents ascribed passion and commitment to romantic relationships but not friendships (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999). Romantic relationships, particularly when they endure longer than a couple of months, are also characterized by more intimacy than friendships (Connolly & Johnson, 1996; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). Thus, adolescent romantic relationships are similar to, but different than peer relationship. The same may be said for adolescents' relationships with their parents.

Adolescent romantic relationships are similar to their relationships with their parents in that they are major sources of support for adolescents, eventually becoming primary attachment relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1994). However, they are different from parental relationships in terms of power and choice. Parental relationships are predicated on a vertical relationship, where adolescents' submission and compliance are

integral components. Parental relationships are also governed by social norms and laws, making them robust and stable over time. Romantic relationships, however, are horizontal relationships where partners theoretically have the potential for equal power and the freedom to leave the relationship. Thus, adolescent romantic relationships are quite different from their relationships with their parents.

While we can extrapolate from the parent and peer literature to understand the negotiation of separateness and connection in adolescent romantic relationships, we know little about these same processes in adolescent romantic relationships. Further, evidence suggests that patterns of interdependence in romantic relationships differ from those in parent-adolescent and peer relationships in that the amount of social interaction and the number of different activities increases in romantic relationships, surpassing that with parents or peers in late adolescence (Laursen & Williams, 1997). Negotiating separateness and connection may be different from these other adolescent relationships in that the integration of sexuality and commitment inherently produces a relationship with a different type of complexity. Adolescents may express connection through a firm commitment to their partners or through sexual behaviors among other mechanisms. They may also express separateness by terminating their relationship or not participating in sexual behaviors.

Another way that adolescents may strive to negotiate the developmental task of separateness and connection in their adolescent romantic relationships is through communication. Communication is the foundation of all close relationships, particularly romantic relationships (Noller, 1980). Communication processes are important for adolescents' romantic relationships because they pave the foundation for these

relationships. Communication fosters intimacy and connection. It also allows partners to contend with differences. Partners can express different perspectives in hopes of working through conflicts to consensus or at least shared understandings of experiences.

Observing interactions of adolescent romantic relationships may illuminate the ways adolescents attempt to differentiate themselves from others while at the same time maintaining connection. We know from theories and empirical data in the parent-adolescent arena that conflict is a way that adolescents distance themselves from their parents (Blos, 1979; Laursen & Collins, 1994). Further, conflict has been one of the ways that researchers have operationalized the process of individuation (Grotevant & Cooper, 1998). Thus, conflict in adolescent romantic relationships may also be the way that adolescents attempt to gain separateness in their romantic relationships. Further, connection may be the way that adolescents promote intimacy in their relationships.

The ways in which adolescents negotiate connection and separateness in their romantic relationships are important because these are relationships that are novel and unfamiliar, and they are relationships that adolescents eventually come to rely on as a major source of support. These relationships present the opportunity for adolescents to experience for themselves how to meet their needs for autonomy and closeness simultaneously in a different type of relationship than they have experienced before, a type of relationship that will eventually become primary in their lives in late adolescence and across adulthood. As such, examining how adolescents develop the capacity to negotiate conflict and connection will be important for understanding their individual and relational functioning in adolescence, and may provide a significant marker for understanding these processes in adulthood as well.

To date, there has been little research on such communication processes in adolescent romantic relationships. A few studies in the adolescent romantic literature have examined micro-level communication patterns in conflict and support as linked to relational outcomes. In dating couples, Galliher and colleagues (2004) found that girls who perceived that their partners exhibited fewer conflictual behaviors and more supportive behaviors reported higher relationship satisfaction. In the same study, boys who perceived themselves to be more supportive and more accepting of influence from their partner reported higher relationship satisfaction. In another study, Rostosky and colleagues (2000) found that perceptions of higher levels of conflict and frustration were associated with higher incidences of sexual intercourse in adolescent dating couples for both males and females. Sexual intercourse, in this instance, was not associated with positive relational qualities. Thus, there appears to be evidence suggesting that conflictual behaviors are predictive of negative relational outcomes and supportive behaviors are predictive of positive relational outcomes. More research needs to be conducted in this area to replicate these findings as well as expand them to other domains in adolescents' romantic relationships.

Moreover, not much is known about how conflict and connection together influence relational outcomes in adolescent romantic relationships. Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, & Anbar (in press) conducted a cluster analysis of adolescent couples' conflict resolution style and found that couples who stayed together the longest showed sincere efforts to understand and clarify the nature of their disagreement, and in turn exhibited a good ability to negotiate honestly their disagreement within an atmosphere of positive affect. This is the only study of this nature to our knowledge. While this study

emphasizes the nature of positive communication and affect for conflict resolution, it does not directly examine connection as potentially moderating the relationship between conflict and adolescents' relationship quality. Both behaviors have usually been studied in isolation from each other, thereby ignoring the complexity of couples' interactions. This issue is of great import because one of the most significant challenges for developing a successful romantic relationship in adolescence is managing the disagreements that inevitably arise (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004). Disagreements are not only inevitable in romantic relationships, but also a way for individuals to meet their needs in the relationship (Shulman, 2003). Understanding how conflict is managed or buffered by the use of connection would elaborate developmental models of adolescents' communication processes, especially in their dating relationships.

Some research on parent-adolescent conflict indicates that conflict can promote healthy outcomes when it co-occurs in the context of closeness and trust (Cooper, Grotevant, & Ayers-Lopez, 1987). Yet, romantic relationships differ from parental relationships because they involve equality and the potential to leave the relationship at any time. For adolescent romantic relationships, the marital literature may provide a framework for examining the process of conflict and connection using micro-analytic data from couples' conversations. While adolescent romantic relationships may differ from marital relationships, namely in commitment and developmental maturity of couple members, it seems likely that some of the processes that occur in dating relationships parallel marital relationships because theoretically both are relationships between individuals of equal status that involve both emotional and sexual intimacy (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004). Nonetheless, caution should be heeded when applying conclusions from

the marital literature and applying it to dating relationships. Although some theorists argue that negotiating separateness and connection in relationships is the primary task of humans throughout the lifespan (Kegan, 1982), the relational processes involved in how this task is negotiated may differ for adolescents compared to adults because this is the primary developmental task in adolescence (Blos, 1967; Erickson, 1968).

Marital Relationships

Data in the marital literature as well as premises of some marital therapies suggest that positive affect and supportive behaviors, particularly when they are present in the context of conflict, offset some of the negative impact of conflict (Cartensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Gonzaga, Keltner, Londahl, & Smith, 2001; Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998) and predicts relationship satisfaction both cross-sectionally and longitudinally (Fruzzetti, & Rubio-Kuhnert, 1998; Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila, 1997). Positive affect demonstrates the capacity to de-escalate arguments. For instance, some couples may use humor in verbal and nonverbal ways to deliver criticisms or conflictual statements or to ease the tension during an argument (Gonzaga et al., 2001). Positive affect provides self-soothing for both partners during arguments, which may be important for males in particular, for whom high levels of negative emotional arousal has been previously associated with withdrawing/stonewalling (Gottman, 1990; Levenson, Cartensen, & Gottman, 1994). Additionally, positive affect facilitates understanding and empathy for one's partner.

Gottman and his colleagues (Driver, Tabares, Shapiro, Nahm, & Gottman, 2003; Gottman, 1993) have empirically identified a group of married couples they named

“validators” who are successful at discussing problems when they occur in a respectful manner. These couple members are able to validate their partners’ emotions and opinions adequately. Their arguments can become highly conflictual, but couple members typically wait to persuade their partner and ask questions during disagreements. These couples are likely to have stable, happy marriages, perhaps because they are able to incorporate connection in the midst of conflict. They are able to negotiate conflicts in a way that demonstrates care and concern for their partner.

The “validation” or “active listening” model of conflict resolution in marital relationships stresses the importance of validation and empathy during conflict (Gottman, Notarius, Gonso, & Markman, 1978; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994; Notarius & Markman, 1993). For example, one communication skill that is outlined in some marital therapies (see Baucom & Epstein, 2002) is for one partner to express his or her feelings or viewpoint and then the other partner is to summarize and reflect back what their partner has just said to them in a way that demonstrates understanding and empathy. The underlying assumption of this approach is that validation or empathy or connection must be present during conflict in order for successful communication to occur and dyadic distress to be relieved. Thus, the marital research suggests that validation and empathy are predictors of positive marital outcomes, particularly when they occur in the presence or context of conflict.

Taken together, the existing literature on adolescent romantic relationships and marital relationships provide support for the prediction that conflict and connection will be related to the quality of adolescents’ dating relationships. They also provide support for the hypothesis that connection may buffer the impact of conflict on relational

outcomes in adolescent romantic relationships. Given the adolescent development literature, we also would predict this outcome based on the knowledge that adolescents who are able to incorporate both separateness (achieved many ways—one being conflict) and connection in their relationships with parents and peers are better adjusted individually and socially.

The Present Study

The goal of the present study is to test whether conflict and connection are associated with the quality of adolescents' romantic relationships, and to test whether connection moderates the influence of conflict on these relational outcomes. We assess two indicators of relationship quality, relationship satisfaction and dating aggression. The prevalence of dating aggression in adolescence is relatively high, with approximately one-third of adolescents reporting some sort of dating aggression in their romantic relationships (Arias, Samios, & O'Leary, 1987; O'Keefe, Brockopp, & Chew, 1986). Conflict is often the background from which aggression emerges. Negative interactions may lead to aggressive behaviors for many reasons. A lack of emotion regulation skills, a low sense of emotional security, and sado-masochistic personality styles are all predispositions to instigating and mismanaging negative interaction behaviors (Cummings & Davies, 1996) as well as relational qualities. Capaldi, Shortt, & Crosby, (2003) have data suggesting that qualities specific to the dyad in adolescent romantic relationships determine the stability of aggression, rather than individual qualities. Negative interactions provide the fuel for aggressive behavior. Seldom does dating aggression occur divorced from the context of conflict (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Thus,

individuals who incorporate both connection and conflict in their interactions with their dating partners may have fewer instances of dating aggression than individuals who are not able to do so, perhaps because they feel more soothed by their partners. Further, individuals who incorporate both connection and conflict in their interactions with their dating partners are likely to report being more satisfied in their relationships.

Besides conflict and connection, gender, age, and the length of dating relationship may be significantly associated with dating aggression and relationship satisfaction. Many studies have found significant gender differences in the perpetration rates of physical aggression in adolescent dating couples (see Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999 for a review). These findings suggest that females are more likely than males to be physically aggressive with their partners. In addition, the incidence of intimate partner aggression increases markedly between the ages of 15 and 25 (O'Leary & Slep, 2003). Older adolescents may have tendencies towards being more aggressive than younger adolescents. Age may also play a role in relationship satisfaction as theorists have argued that romantic partners take on a primary attachment role in late adolescence and early adulthood (Furman & Wehner, 1994). Older adolescents may have more satisfying relationships because they look to their partners for more emotional support. Finally, the length of the couple's dating relationship at the time of participation could influence relationship satisfaction and dating aggression. A couple who has only been dating for one month may not be as likely to report as high relationship satisfaction as a couple who has been dating one year because the relationship has not had time to develop. Similarly, a newer dating relationship may not be as likely to be rife with conflict or aggression than one that has lasted longer. Couples who have not dated as long may still be in a

“honeymoon” phase where idealization of the other potentially minimizes conflict or aggression.

We hypothesize that conflict and connection will be significantly associated with adolescent couples’ relational quality such that higher levels of connection and lower levels of conflict will be associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction and lower levels of dating aggression. We also hypothesize that connection will moderate the relation between conflict and the relational outcome variables. Specifically, we predict that individuals who have conflict in the context of higher levels of connection will report higher levels of relationship satisfaction and lower levels of dating aggression compared to individuals who have conflict in the context of lower levels of connection. The effects for gender, age, and length of dating relationship will be controlled for in the analyses.

Chapter 2

Method

Participants

The data for this project came from the Study of Tennessee Adolescent Romantic Relationships (STARR; Welsh, 1999), an NICHD funded project (Grant No. RO1 HD39931). Couples were recruited to reflect two different age groups: middle and late adolescence, with each partner falling into those age ranges. The final sample included 102 middle adolescent couples (14-17) and 109 late adolescent couples (17-21). All couples were mixed sex and were recruited from a previous study on adolescents dating behaviors of over 2200 students attending seventeen East Tennessee High Schools. These schools were chosen to represent rural, suburban, and urban communities and to reflect the socioeconomic diversity of the area. Individuals from the high school study who indicated interest in participating in future research (86% of the participants were from the high school sample) were contacted by telephone and provided information regarding the purpose and procedures of the couple study. Adolescents meeting the age criteria (target adolescent aged 15 or 16 and dating partner between 14-17 or target adolescent aged 18 or 19 and dating partner between 17-21) and who reported dating their current partner for at least four weeks were mailed consent forms describing the procedure and contact one week later regarding their willingness to participate. Similar-aged partners were recruited for this study so that questions about couples at different developmental stages could be examined.

Of the target adolescents, 52% (n = 109) were female and 48% (n = 102) were male. Reasons for non-participation in the current study included the following: 27% (n =

603) were currently not dating, 26% (n = 595) were either too busy or not interested in participating in the study, 17% (n = 375) were not able to be reached, 7% (n = 169) were dating but did not meet the length of the relationship criteria, 6% (n = 142) were dating but did not meet the age criteria, and 3% (n = 73) had parents who refused to allow them to participate.

The sample for this study included 203 dating couples, 98 middle adolescent couples (14-17) and 105 late adolescent couples (17-21). Several couples were excluded from the analyses because of missing data. The median age of the participants in the study at the time of data collection was 17 years of age. The majority of the sample identified themselves as Caucasian (90.6%), with the remainder of the sample identifying as African-American (6.2%), Asian (1.2%), Hispanic (0.7%), Native American (0.5%), and “Other” (0.7%). Approximately half of the sample identified their neighborhoods as suburban (47.1%), followed by rural (31.9%), and urban (21%). Parental education level (the highest level of education completed by either parent) was used as a proxy measure for socioeconomic status. Slightly more than half (55%) of the participants reported that neither parent had a college degree, while almost half (45%) of the sample reported having a parent with a college degree or higher. Specifically, the highest education level completed by either parent was: some high school (4.3%), high school graduate (24.9%), technical school or some college (26.2%), college (30%), or graduate school (14.6%). The median length of time couples had been dating was 31.3 weeks (approximately 8 months) with a range of 4 weeks to 260 weeks (approximately 5 years).

Procedure

Couples came to our laboratory for a total of three hours of data collection. Data collection was scheduled at the couple's convenience and was completed in one session. Couples were told that the purpose of the project was to learn more about couple processes and adolescents' functioning in their romantic relationships. Our facility was comprised of three separate rooms within a suite so that couple members had sufficient privacy from our staff while completing the video-recording task and from each other during the questionnaire portions of the study. Couple members were offered food and beverages during the session to facilitate alertness and cooperation. Couples completed the video recall procedure described below and a series of questionnaires during their session. Couple members were paid \$30 each (\$60 per couple) for their participation.

Measures

Demographic Questionnaire. A demographic questionnaire was used to obtain background information about residence, age, race, employment, relationship length, (measured in weeks), and parental education level. See Appendix B-1 for the items on this questionnaire.

Control Variables. Gender, age, and length of dating relationship at the time of participation were used as control variables for the current analyses.

Conflict and Connection. In the interaction task (Welsh & Dickson, 2005), couples were recorded for approximately twenty-three minutes having three conversations about issues designed to elicit engaging conversation from adolescent couples (Capaldi & Crosby, 1997). In the first conversation, couples were asked to plan a

party together. This topic was designed as a preparation task to allow adolescents to become comfortable talking together in front of a camera. For the second and third conversations, couples were asked to discuss one of the issues selected by each couple member from the Adolescent Couples' Issues Checklist (Welsh, Grello, Dickson, & Harper, 2001). This list provides several different areas of disagreement in the couples' relationship (e.g., "my partner and I disagree over how much time we should spend together"). The second and third conversations were counterbalanced for whether the couple discussed the male or female issue first. For each discussion, a computer program provided couples with automated instructions regarding the order in which each couple member's issue was to be discussed and the length of time for each conversation. Each of the two issues was discussed for eight minutes and forty seconds.

Two female (aged 22 and 25) and one male (aged 27) graduate student coders rated the videotapes using a coding system created for the STARR project. The coders spent 12 months (at 3 hours per week) learning the coding system and obtained adequate levels of inter-rater reliability. Each segment was coded to assess the extent to which each couple member was feeling connected to their partner and the extent to which each couple member was being conflictual using a 5-point rating scale, where 0 = Not At All and 4 = Very Much. Connection was measured by the extent to which partners communicated affirmation, encouragement, acknowledgement, facilitation, and engagement. Conflict was assessed by the extent to which couple members communicated disagreement or challenged their partner. Thus, the coders rated both the males and females for a total of 80, twenty-second segments (40 for the first conversation and 40 for the second conversation). For males, intra-class correlation coefficients for the

aggregated mean ratings of behavior were .71 for connection and .85 for conflict. For females, intra-class correlation coefficients for the aggregated mean ratings of behavior were .80 for connection and .87 for conflict. See Appendix B-2 for the coding manual used by the trained observers.

Relationship Satisfaction. Levesque's (1993) 5-item Relationship Satisfaction Scale was used to assess relationship satisfaction in the context of adolescents' romantic relationships. It was developed by modifying Spanier's (1976) widely used Dyadic Adjustment Scale and is similar to Hendrick & Hendricks' (1988) measure of relationship satisfaction. Example items include, "compared to other people's relationships, ours is pretty good" and "our relationship has met my best expectations." Participants responded to the five items using a six-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 6 = strongly agree). The sum of the five items from this scale was calculated to yield a total relationship satisfaction score, allowing scores to range from values of 5 to 30. The internal reliability for the relationship satisfaction scale was acceptable (males: $\alpha = .85$; females: $\alpha = .84$). A copy of these items for the relationship satisfaction dimension is included in Appendix B-3.

Aggression. Self-Reported Aggression. Self-Reported aggression was assessed using a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979). This scale was modified for use with adolescent couples for the STARR Project. This 13-item instrument assesses the amount of aggression in romantic relationships across several dimensions, including the use of verbal aggression, psychological aggression, and physical aggression during conflict. For this paper, only physical aggression was examined. Respondents were asked to indicate what types of conflict resolution occurred

in their relationship (e.g. “pushed, grabbed, or shoved”). Respondents were instructed to indicate who participated in the indicated conflict resolution strategies (1 = Neither; 2 = You; 3 = Your partner; 4 = Both you and your partner). First, dichotomous variables were created for the presence of aggression or the absence of aggression on each of the items. These behaviors were considered to be present if either the couple members indicated they had participated in these behaviors or their partners indicated they had participated in these behaviors. Second, informed by these dichotomous scores, an aggression score was created along a continuum: (0 = no physical aggression), (1 = minor physical aggression as defined by endorsement of the item “pushed, grabbed, or shoved”), and (2 = severe physical aggression as defined by endorsement of either “hit the other partner with a fist” or “hit or tried to hit the other partner with something hard”). For this paper, this continuous measure was used to assess self-reported aggression. The selection of items for minor and severe aggression were guided by discriminations made by Straus & Gelles (1986). Because there was a great deal of overlap in minor and severe aggression, we created mutually exclusive categories such that couple members were considered to be in the category with the highest level of aggression they had perpetrated. A copy of these items is included in Appendix B-4.

Observed Aggression. After viewing the couples’ recorded conversations, the coders rated whether the female hit the male and whether the male hit the female during the conversation. Behaviors measured included hitting, slapping, and/or kicking. Neither context nor intent was considered. This categorical variable was then used to indicate the presence or absence of aggression as observed by the trained coders. Cohen’s kappa for males hitting females was 1. For females, Cohen’s kappa was .97.

Chapter 3

Results

Analytic Strategy

In data collected from couples, the responses of each partner are not independent of one another (e.g., it is expected that the relationship satisfaction of partners are correlated). In this case, the relationship satisfaction reported by each individual is dependent upon both which couple the individual is part of as well as on their own characteristics. This lack of independence violates the assumptions of techniques such as multiple regression, and thus artificially inflates error terms. Multi-level modeling is a technique specifically designed to address this problem (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In analyses for this paper, Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) was used to parse variance in relationship characteristics into an individual component and a couple component. HLM analyses provide two types of information: (a) an estimate of the component of variance in the outcome measures (relationship qualities) that can be attributed to individual level differences and to couple level differences, and (b) information about the extent to which each variance component can be predicted by factors at that level. All individual and couple factors were centered around the grand mean. The continuous scores for both conflict and connection were averaged across the 80 segments in the conversations. All predictor variables were standardized using z-scores to in order to reduce multicollinearity among these factors. Relationship length was used as a control variable for all analyses.

A series of three nested hierarchical linear model (HLM) analyses were performed to examine the association between individual and relationship predictors of

relationship quality. First, a base model was estimated to calculate the proportion of variance in relationship quality (i.e., relationship satisfaction) that is attributable to differences between couples and to individuals within couples. This model includes only the dependent variable. Therefore, the variance attributed to individual and couple components derived from the base model is not dependent on the specific individual and couple predictor variables included in the study. Because random error cannot be a shared couple characteristic, it is allocated to the individual component.

Next, differences in the relationship satisfaction and aggression of each partner within the couple were predicted from individual factors (i.e., connection, conflict, gender, age) and couple level factors (i.e., length of relationship). It is important to note here that the term “individual” refers to the way the constructs were operationally defined. The communication variables, conflict and connection, were recorded separately for each individual. However, they actually measured couple level communication processes. In other words, how conflictual I am with my partner partially depends on my partner’s behavior. All of the variables included in the models measured couple level processes with the exception of age and gender.

Finally, one interaction term was entered into the equation: connection by conflict. No statistically significant interactions were found between connection and conflict, and these variables were removed from the final models. Age and gender were not significant predictors of relationship satisfaction or dating aggression with one exception of gender being related to observed aggression. These variables were removed from the final models, except for gender in the observed aggression model. Results are reported in Appendix E. HLM parameter estimates are interpreted similarly to regression

coefficients (B's), with between and within couple's factors predicting each relationship characteristic at that level.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive analyses revealed that the mean connection score was 1.32 with scores ranging from 0 – 3.43. The mean conflict score was 1.43 with scores ranging from 0 – 3.70. In addition, couple members were largely satisfied with their relationships (range of satisfaction scores = 8 - 28, mean score = 24.2). For reported dating aggression, 14% of individuals (n = 61) have used severe physical aggression, 9% of individuals (n = 36) have used only moderate physical aggression, and 77% of individuals (n = 323) have not used any physical aggression in their relationship. Broken down by gender, 11% of males (n = 24) and 18% of females (n = 37) have used severe physical aggression, 8% of males (n = 17) and 9% of females (n = 19) have used moderate physical aggression, and 81% of males (n = 169) and 73% of females (n = 154) have not used any physical aggression in their relationship. For observed dating aggression, 15% of individuals (n = 63), 7% of males (n = 14) and 24% of females (n = 49), actually hit their partners during the recorded conversation.

Relationship Satisfaction

Base model estimates revealed that 42% of the variance in couple members' relationship satisfaction was attributable to differences between couples and 58% of the variance was attributable to individual differences within the couple plus error. At the individual level, participants who exhibited more connection were higher on relationship

satisfaction, $t(402) = 3.21, p < .01$. Participants who exhibited less conflict were also higher on relationship satisfaction, $t(402) = -3.80, p < .001$. Neither age nor gender predicted relationship satisfaction ($p > .05$). The individual level factors examined in this study accounted for 4.4% of the 58% of total variance in relationship satisfaction attributable to individual level differences. No statistically significant association was found between weeks dating and relationship satisfaction. Weeks dating explained 18% of the 58% of variance in relationship satisfaction attributable to couple level differences.

Reported Aggression

Base model estimates revealed that 77% of the variance in couple members' reported dating aggression was attributable to differences between couples and 23% of the variance was attributable to individual differences within the couple plus error. At the individual level, participants who exhibited more conflict were reportedly more likely to use more severe levels of aggression in their relationship $t(401) = 2.31, p < .05$. Females were more likely than males to use more severe levels of aggression in their relationship, $t(401) = 3.41, p < .01$. Participants who had been dating for longer periods of time were more likely to use more severe levels of aggression as well $t(401) = 2.98, p < .01$. Age was not a significant predictor of reported aggression. Analyses were conducted to investigate a potential gender by conflict interaction, but they were not significant and were removed from the final model. Weeks dating explained 80% of the 77% of variance in reported dating aggression attributable to couple level differences.

Observed Aggression

At the individual level, participants who exhibited more conflict were more likely to hit each other during the recorded conversation, $t(401) = 3.31, p = .001$. Females were more likely to hit during the recorded conversation than males, $t(401) = 4.42, p < .001$. Age was not a significant predictor of hitting during the recorded conversation. Analyses were conducted to investigate a potential gender by conflict interaction, but they were not significant and were removed from the final model. Weeks dating was not found to be associated with hitting during the recorded conversation.

Chapter 4

Discussion

In this study, we examined the association between conflict and connection in adolescents' romantic relationships and the quality of their relational functioning. We hypothesized that conflict and connection would be linked with couples' relational functioning. We also hypothesized that connection would moderate the relation between conflict and relational outcome variables. Specifically, we predicted that individuals who demonstrated conflict in the context of higher levels of connection would report higher levels of relationship satisfaction and lower levels of dating aggression. We found important links between conflict and connection and relationship quality. Specifically, the findings emphasize the importance of higher levels of connection and lower levels of conflict for better relationship satisfaction, and lower levels of conflict for less aggression. Connection was not associated with aggression. Gender was a significant predictor of both reported and observed aggression and length of dating relationship was a significant predictor of reported aggression. Connection did not moderate the relation between conflict and relationship quality as we had predicted.

Analyses from this study revealed substantial couple level differences in relationship quality. Specifically, between couple differences accounted for nearly 42% of the variance in relationship satisfaction and 77% of the variance in reported aggression. This is an important observation, as the majority of research and theory about adolescent romantic relationships has focused on individual constructs (e.g., gender, psychological risk factors, attachment styles, qualities of parental marital relationships; Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1997; Rappaport & Thomas, 2004). Future

research on adolescent romantic relationships should continue to explore couple level characteristics as they appear to be playing a significant role in explaining couples' relational quality, perhaps more so than individual level factors. This will hopefully improve our models to provide the most comprehensive picture of processes in adolescent romantic relationships.

Relationship Satisfaction

Little research has been conducted examining the ways in which adolescent couples' communication processes impact their relationship functioning. We found that couple members who demonstrated higher levels of connection and lower levels of conflict in their conversation were more likely to report feeling more satisfied in their romantic relationships. These results support previous studies of couples' interactions, which found conflictual behaviors to be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction and intimacy and supportive behaviors to be positively associated with these outcome variables (Galliher et al., 2004; Rostosky et al., 2000). Couples who act in more connected ways and experience lower levels of conflict in their relationship are likely to have more engaging, satisfying relationships. These results point to the importance of communication, and how dyadic processes impact relational functioning. Future research should continue to explore other factors that are related to the dyad and how these factors play a role in the quality of adolescents' romantic relationships.

Dating Aggression

This study contributes to the literature on dating aggression by investigating the relation between conflict and connection and dating aggression. Rarely have couple level processes been examined as predictors of dating aggression. Conflict was a significant predictor of both reported and observed aggression. Couple members who exhibited more conflict were more likely to use more severe physical aggression as reported by themselves and their partners, and they were more likely to hit their partners during the recorded conversation. This is an important finding because it links communication processes to physical aggression in adolescent couples.

Physical aggression may be one way that adolescents try to resolve conflict in their relationship. Given that adolescents are still developing emotionally and psychologically, they may not have developed effective coping methods for managing conflict in their romantic relationships, which are for the most part, new and unfamiliar. This may especially true when other methods fail to assuage the situation. In many conversations where hitting occurred, it appeared as though the individuals who were hitting were feeling very angry and frustrated. Physical aggression may have felt like a last attempt to either persuade their partners or make them understand their point of view when verbal expression failed. Future research should use qualitative interview methods to examine the underlying meaning of these behaviors when they occur in adolescents' romantic relationships so that we can better understand why adolescent couples resort to violent behaviors.

It is also interesting that 77% of the variance in reported aggression was explained by couple level differences. When compared to only 23% of the variance in reported

aggression being explained by individual level differences, it is obvious that the presence or absence of aggression in dating relationships has more to do with who you are dating rather than who you are as a person. This supports findings from previous research that has found dating aggression to be more likely to persist for couple members who stay with their partner over time when compared to couple members who develop new dating relationships with new partners (Capaldi, Shortt, & Crosby, 2003). Together, these data suggest that qualities about the couple and their interaction with one another may be more predictive of aggression than individual traits. These findings need to be replicated in other studies of adolescent dating couples. Still, they have important implications for prevention and intervention efforts for dating aggression in adolescent romantic relationships such that more emphasis should be placed on the couple as a unit rather than the individual partners as separate units. More work needs to be done to examine how adolescent couples' communication and interaction processes contribute to dynamics that promote aggression. For example, investigations as to how power dynamics or demand-withdrawal patterns play a role in aggression are warranted.

We also found a significant finding for gender such that girls were reportedly more likely to use more severe physical aggression in their relationships than boys, and significantly more girls were observed to hit their partners during the recorded conversation than boys. Recent studies have suggested that the prevalence of perpetration of physical aggression in adolescent dating relationships is at least equal for both genders and sometimes higher for girls than boys (for a review see Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Both reported and observational data from this study support recent findings that girls are just as likely if not more likely to perpetrate physical aggression in adolescent dating couples.

Girls may be more likely to perpetrate dating aggression because cultural standards for female aggression against males have been for the most part, absent. The cultural communication to boys is that physical aggression towards girls is not acceptable. Boys are taught from a very young age, “it is not nice to hit a girl.” However, girls, who have been socially constructed as the less physically aggressive of the sexes, have never been socially constrained in this way. With the lack of social norms prohibiting girls from becoming physically aggressive with girls, girls may feel that physical aggression is one way to exert power in their dating relationships, especially during times of conflict when their words have lost impact. Alternatively, these gender findings may be misleading because the measures utilized did not capture the motivations, intentions, or consequences of the physical acts. Dobash and Dobash (2004) have argued that in adults, the perpetration rates for aggression tend to be more asymmetrical with men being more aggressive towards women than vice versa when you consider the context in which the behaviors occur. We posit these potential interpretations and hypotheses with caution, as these meanings were untested in our study. Again, future research should utilize interview methods to assess the meaning and motivation of these behaviors.

Of significance is that we did not find support for our hypothesis that connection would moderate the influence of conflict on relationship satisfaction or dating aggression. We have a few hypotheses as to why we did not find the interaction to be significant. Perhaps we did not find connection to moderate the effects of conflict on couples’ relational functioning because connection was behaviorally defined. We do not really know how the adolescent couple members were really feeling during the interaction;

instead, we were only able to measure the behavior they demonstrated. While we thought that our measure of connection would be a proxy for how the couples felt, it might be the case that their behaviors were not consistent with their feelings.

Another possibility is that we may not have captured a significant moment in the scope of the couples' relationships. Sue Johnson (2005) has argued that in adult couples, not all moments are equal. She argues that some moments, such as significant life events or life stressors, may carry more importance or more attachment significance for couples in terms of how they are able to work through their problems than other times in the relationship. Perhaps with our adolescent couples, we did not have access to significant or meaningful interactions in the couples' relationships in which we might have found connection to be important as a buffer for whatever conflict was created by the circumstance. For instance, perhaps conversations about the future of the relationship or moving away from each other to attend college might have been conversations that would have had more meaning for the couples' relationship than one about not having enough money to do things together.

One more possibility is simply that the context of conflict regarding connection does not matter. It may be the quality or intensity of conflict that plays a significant role by itself. Not all conflict is the same. Some adolescents are more respectful to their partners during conflict than others. Future research should examine different types of conflict and assess couples' affect levels especially as they are related to connection. This strategy may provide a better understanding of the way in which conflict and connection influence the quality of adolescents' dating relationships. Future research should also seek to assess what meaning or significance couples' ascribe to their interactions in the

laboratory. Perhaps increasing the real world significance of these conversations would make connection all together more important in the context of conflict.

We also did not find a relation between connection and dating aggression. Given the likelihood that aggression emerges in the context of conflict, conflict is probably a better predictor of aggression than connection. In fact, Riggs and O'Leary (1996) have found that dating aggression is more likely to occur in relationships that have higher levels of conflict. High levels of connection in couples' relationships may not influence the presence of aggression, even though couples may be quite connected outside disagreements. It may be the quality and intensity of the conflict that really influences whether physical aggression will be present. As evident in our analyses, connection did not moderate the influence of conflict on dating aggression.

This study has several strengths. A major strength of this study is that it utilizes adolescent dating couples from mid to late adolescence to understand processes in adolescent romantic relationships. Few studies have been conducted on adolescent dating couples, and fewer have examined adolescent romantic relationships in younger adolescent dating couples. Another strength is that this study employs a multimethod approach using both qualitative and quantitative data from multiple informants (i.e. couple members' reports and observer ratings). Further, this study illuminates the ways in which communication processes in adolescent couples are associated with aggressive behaviors using behavioral data, which to date has not been examined. Future research should incorporate qualitative data to continue to elaborate the complexity of couples' communication and relational processes.

In this study, multi-level modeling allowed us to integrate what have historically been two distinct phenomena in the study of adolescent relationships: the individual and the dyad. The empirical data generated by this study include estimates of individual and couple level phenomena and the interactions between the two. Additional work with couples-based samples and multi-level modeling techniques will be very useful for the development and expansion of existing theories.

Limitations

While this study assists in our understanding of communication and relational processes in adolescent romantic relationships, the generalizability of our findings is limited in several ways. First, participants were predominately Caucasian adolescents in heterosexual romantic relationships that lived in regions surrounding a mid-sized southeastern city. Results, therefore, may not generalize to racial or sexual minority adolescents or to adolescents in other regions. In addition, couples that participated in this study self-identified themselves as being in a relationship lasting at least one month and were willing to be involved in a study focused on romantic relationships. This sample may differ in important ways from a general sample of individual adolescents or a sample of less committed dating partners. Our sample was also cross-sectional in design. Longitudinal designs are needed to better understand the developmental trajectory of communication and relational processes in adolescent romantic relationships.

Conclusion and Implications

In the current study, conflict and connection in adolescent romantic relationships were examined as predictors of couples members' relationship satisfaction and dating aggression. While our hypothesis about moderation was not supported, our hypothesis that conflict and connection would be significantly associated with relationship quality in adolescent couples was confirmed. The presence of higher levels of connection and lower levels of conflict were associated with higher levels of relationship satisfaction, and lower levels of conflict were associated with less severe physical aggression. These findings suggest that communication processes play a significant role in the quality of adolescents' dating relationships such that more positive communication is linked with better relational outcomes. They also emphasize that processes related to the dyad, not just the individual (e.g., attachment style, psychopathology), are important to couples' relationship functioning, as evidenced in couple members' relationship satisfaction and perpetration of dating aggression in these relationships. Future research should continue to assess both adolescents' relationship and individual functioning through investigating constructs related to the couple and the individual.

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APPENDICES

TABLE A-1
Predicting Outcomes from Connection, Conflict, and Genders

Predictor Variables	Relationship Satisfaction coefficient (SE)	Self-Reported Aggression coefficient (SE)	Observed Aggression coefficient (SE)
Model 2			
<i>Between Couples</i>			
Intercept	24.24 (.22)***	.37 (.05)***	-1.97 (.17)***
Weeks dating	-.07 (.22)	.14 (.05)**	-.28 (.17)
<i>Within Couples</i>			
Conflict	-.89 (.23)***	.09 (.04)***	.53 (.16)**
Connection	.76 (.24)**	-.04 (.04)	.24 (.16)
Gender		.11 (.03)**	1.38 (.31)***

* = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

APPENDIX B-1

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Gender: _____
2. Age: _____
3. Date of Birth: (MM/DD/YY) _____
4. Which one category best describes your racial background?
5. Religious Affiliation:
6. How important is religion to you?
7. In the past 12 months, how often did you attend religious services?
8. My faith involves all of my life.
9. My faith sometimes restricts my actions.
10. Are you currently enrolled in school?
11. What grade are you currently in?
12. Which high school do/did you attend?
13. Are you currently employed?
14. How many hours per week do you work during the school year?
15. How far in school do you plan to go?
16. How would you describe where you live?
17. How long have you lived at your current residence?
18. What is your parents' marital status with each other?
19. If divorced or separated, how long have they been separated?
20. If divorced or separated, with whom do you live?
21. If divorced, has your father remarried?
22. How long ago did he remarry?
23. If divorced, has your mother remarried?
24. How long ago did she remarry?
25. How far in school did your father go?
26. How far in school did your mother go?
27. Your grade point average (GPA) is approximately:
28. How old were you when you went out on your first date?
29. How long have you been dating your CURRENT PARTNER?
(please indicate the number of weeks) _____
30. How much longer do you think your relationship with your CURRENT PARTNER will last?
31. Do your friends like your CURRENT PARTNER?
32. Do your parents like your CURRENT PARTNER?
33. In the LAST YEAR, how many dating relationships, including your current one, have you had?
34. How long ago did your most PREVIOUS dating relationship end?
(please indicate the number of weeks) _____
35. Have you ever taken a public or written pledge to remain a virgin until marriage?
If yes, when did you pledge most recently? (month/year) _____
If yes, where did you make the pledge?
36. Do you consider yourself a virgin?
37. How old were you when you first started shaving?

APPENDIX B-2

CODING ELEMENTS

DEMONSTRATING POSITIVE CONNECTED/CLOSENESS

*** Score based on quality of verbalizations, voice tone, and behavioral indicators (e.g., gestures, facial expressions).

QUALITIES MEASURED: Encouraging, acknowledging, facilitating, supportive, engaged

SCORE

- 0 Code 0 if no closeness is demonstrated during the segment.
- 1
 - a) **tone:** mild/neutral **content:** negotiating or inquiring
Partner asking the other for his/her preference, opinion, or guidance in a connecting manner and giving/getting a positive response. Content can even be superficial.
e.g., *What do you think? How many kids are we going to have? Compromise?*
 - b) **tone:** mild/subtle **content:** indirect acknowledgment or encouragement
Mild encouragement with a mild tone. Allowing response from partner. Behavioral example: some eye contact with instances of glancing away, smiling.
- 2
 - a) **tone:** interested **content:** facilitating, agreement
Encouraging in a more positive, genuine tone.
e.g., *That's a good question; You're right, mm hm.*
Behavioral example: nodding head in agreement, moving closer/leaning toward, holding hands.
 - a) **tone:** enthusiastic **content:** expanding, elaborating
Continuing the partner's story line, adding to the partner's thought and maintaining eye contact. Light touching
- 3
 - a) **tone:** positive **content:** direct praise/affirmation
Kind praise of other's specific action or quality.
e.g., *You're good at sports so our kids will probably be athletes.*
Behavioral example: touching in a positive manner (stroking leg, playing with toes),
Intimate whispering that is playful or positive.
 - b) **tone:** positive/excited **content:** reciprocal positive escalation
Back and forth enthusiastic exchange to create and build an idea.

e.g., Female: *We want to have a fun relationship.* Male: *Yeah-we'll go on dates.*

Female: *We'll go dancing.* Male: *Yeah-ballroom dancing.* (All said with happy and exited voices and laughter).

- 4 a) **tone:** positive **content:** direct, affirming
Direct affirmation of other as a whole person (not just praise of action or deed) or praise of the couple as a unit.
e.g., *I love you; You're going to make a great mom/dad. I think we'll be great parents.*
Behavioral examples: big gestures of physical affection (e.g., moving very close and grabbing and holding both hands)
- b) **tone:** positive **content:** self-disclosing, crying
Encouraging acknowledgment of other through self revelation with positive tone.
e.g., *Using an example from one's own relationship that shows closeness.*
- c) Willing to change for partner or willing to do something positive for partner
giving gifts,
Or apologizing

CONFLICT

*** Score based on quality of verbalizations, and behavioral indicators (e.g. gestures, facial expressions).

QUALITIES MEASURED: disagreeing, challenging

SCORE

0 Code 0 if no conflict is demonstrated during the segment.

- 1 a) **tone:** mild **content:** disagreement
Disagreement over the truth value of a statement or disagreement with the other's stated opinion or position without negative affect.
e.g., *I don't agree with that; That is not the way my mom is.*
Behavioral examples: shaking head, frowning
- 2 a) **tone:** invested **content:** disagreement
Backing up a disagreement with additional evidence, elaboration, or support.
e.g., *We should too have a curfew for our kids. They need to have some rules. I don't want my kids to end up like (a friend of the couple).*
- 3 a) **tone:** medium/high **content:** argument
Active back and forth arguing. The disagreement escalates quickly with both members actively promoting their sides.
e.g., *You're wrong, no you're wrong.*

b) **tone:** medium **content:** provocative/demanding
Statement or gesture whose intention is to irritate or provoke the other. Do not code any criticism or negative comment that devalues the other.
e.g., *Tell me who.*
Behavioral examples: raising eyebrows, finger pointing
- c) **tone:** medium **content:** reaction
Reaction to 2b.
e.g., *Don't say things like that.*
Behavioral example: crossing arms and leaning away, challenging stare
- 4 a) **tone:** high **content:** insulting, devaluing
Mean direct affront to the other in a high, harsh tone; devaluing of the other as a whole person includes name-calling.
e.g., *You are stupid sometimes.*

b) **tone:** yelling, screaming **content:** opposition, anger
Opposing or arguing with a raised voice; mimicking in a teasing tone; making sexist comments or comments about the other's family
Behavioral example: pushing

APPENDIX B-3

RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION SCALE

On a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) please rate the following statements as they relate to your current romantic partner.

Relationship Satisfaction

1. In general, I am satisfied with our relationship.
2. Compared to other people's relationships ours is pretty good.
3. I often wish I hadn't gotten into this relationship.*
4. Our relationship has met my best expectations.
5. Our relationship is just about the best relationship I could have hoped to have with any body.

* reverse coded

APPENDIX B-4

MODIFIED CONFLICT TACTICS (CT) SCALE

No matter how well a couple gets along, there are times when they disagree, get annoyed about something the other person does, or just have spats or fights because they're in a bad mood or tired for some other reason. They also use many different ways of trying to settle their differences. This is a list of some things that you or your partner might have done when you have a fight. Please fill in the box that indicates if you, your current partner, or both of you have done any of these things when you had a fight.

1. tried to discuss the issue relatively calmly.
2. argued heatedly but did not yell.
3. sulked and/or refused to talk about it.
4. stomped out the room.
5. pretended that nothing was wrong.
6. insulted or swore.
7. accused the other partner of being a lousy lover.
8. threw something (but not at the other partner) or smashed something.
9. threatened to hit or throw something at the other partner.
10. pushed, grabbed, or shoved.
11. insisted on sex when not wanted by the other partner.
12. hit the other partner with a fist.
13. hit or tried to hit the other partner with something hard.

PART III

DATING AGGRESSION IN ADOLESCENCE AND EARLY ADULTHOOD:

WHEN “MACHO MAN” MEETS “BIKER CHICK”

Chapter 1

Introduction

Much controversy and debate exist about the differential incidence of dating aggression perpetration by males and females in adolescence and early adulthood. Some studies have failed to find any significant gender differences, and others have found that females are more likely to perpetrate dating aggression than males. These findings have stimulated much debate. Because past research has suggested that male perpetration is preemptive and female perpetration is self-defensive, many people are hesitant to label females as more aggressive than males if their actions are responses to male aggression. Most experts agree that caution is needed when drawing conclusions about gender differences in dating aggression during these developmental time periods for a number reasons—including theoretical, methodological, and policy concerns. Multiple factors, especially in research design, need to be considered before clear determinations can be made. Moreover, understanding factors that contribute to the emergence of gender differences will be important for broadening developmental theory and for informing public policy. The goal of this paper is to review studies representative of the literature in adolescence and early adulthood regarding gender differences in dating aggression, to discuss individual and contextual factors that may contribute to the emergence of dating aggression differentially for males and females, and to discuss methodological concerns and future directions for research in this area.

The high levels of dating aggression currently reported are shocking and disturbing. Many studies estimate that approximately 30% of adolescents will experience some type of aggression in their dating relationships (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin,

Kupper, 2001; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). These rates vary depending on the definition of aggression and the methodology used. It is also estimated that about 50% of college students report knowing someone in an abusive relationship (Alzenman & Kelley, 1988). Intimate partner aggression tends to begin early in adolescence and statistically reaches its peak sometime in early adulthood. The incidence of aggression in intimate partner relationships increases markedly between the ages of 15 and 25 and decreases thereafter, continually decreasing across the lifespan (O'Leary & Slep, 2003; Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). Thus, aggression is a major concern during adolescence and early adulthood. What is perhaps most disturbing about these rates is that aggression in adolescent romantic relationships appears to be predictive of aggression in future romantic relationships (Capaldi & Gorman-Smith, 2003; Capaldi, Shortt, & Crosby, 2003). Patterns of aggression and victimization that develop in adolescent romantic relationships may be influential in subsequent relationships, perhaps even marriage. Little is understood about the developmental trajectory of dating aggression into marriage.

Gender differences in dating aggression in adolescence and early adulthood are important for several reasons. First, dating aggression has become an important public health concern. The effects of dating aggression include physical injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, lowered self-esteem, depression, and disruptions in school performance (O'Leary & Cascardi, 1998; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). It is important to know whether dating aggression is likely to be perpetrated by both males and females and to understand more fully the context of dating aggression for males and females in order to better inform public policy for prevention and intervention strategies for dating aggression. Many prevention and intervention strategies have been developed on the

assumption that males are perpetrators and females are victims. These strategies may not be effective for couples that do not meet this assumption. As we will see, one-sided violent profiles fit only a minority of cases of dating violence. Second, research suggests a developmental trajectory of aggression whereby aggression in early romantic relationships predicts aggression in future romantic relationships (Capaldi & Gorman-Smith, 2003; Capaldi et al., 2003). A more complex understanding of aggressive processes in dating relationships may have implications for curbing aggression in adult romantic relationships such as marital relationships, which is a serious political, social, and public health concern. Third, it is theoretically important to understand gender differences or the lack thereof in aggression in dating relationships in order to better understand adolescent and young adult romantic relationships. The dating literature, particularly in adolescence, is a burgeoning, but new field. It is important to understand the context and meaning of dating aggression in romantic relationships, particularly as they are similar and different for males and females in order to inform theory about relational process in pre-marital romantic relationships.

Conceptual Concerns

Conceptually, researchers have often used the terms violence and aggression interchangeably without much attention. Archer (1994) proposed a distinction between violence and aggression such that aggression comprises the act, but violence incorporates the consequences of the aggressive act, such as injury. Archer's distinction is consistent with Wolfe & Feiring's (2000) definition of dating violence, "broadly defined, it [violence] encompasses any attempt to control or dominate another person physically,

sexually, or psychologically, resulting in harm” (p. 363), and White and Kowalski’s (1994) definition of aggression, “Any behavior directed toward another person (or a person’s property) with the intent to do harm, even if the aggressor was unsuccessful” (p. 488). Based upon these definitions, violence incorporates the intention, the act, and the injurious effects of the act while aggression incorporates only the former of the two. Much of the literature in dating violence is actually about aggression, not violence. This is problematic because researchers rarely provide a clear definition for their research, resulting in the conflation of violence and aggression. Findings for these two constructs are likely to be interpreted very differently. For the purposes of this paper, we will attempt to maintain the integrity of these two constructs, using aggression to indicate ill-intended actions regardless of outcomes and violence to indicate ill-intended actions that have injurious or harmful consequences.

Also noteworthy is the conceptual difference between physical and psychological aggression. Gelles and Straus (1988) defined physical aggression as “an act carried out with the intention, or perceived intention, of causing physical pain or injury to another person” (p. 54). Psychological aggression, on the other hand, involves acts that do not attack one’s body physically. Murphy and O’Leary (1989) defined psychological aggression as coercive verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are not physically directed toward the person’s body. Psychological aggression includes acts that intend to control, belittle, criticize, or induce fear in one’s partner or acts that undermine a partner’s self-esteem or sense of control or safety, which may be communicated through verbal or nonverbal lines. With these definitions in mind, we now turn toward a deeper

investigation into the different types of aggression and how they are associated with gender.

Chapter 2

Gender Differences in Dating Aggression

In normative samples, researchers have found more similarities than differences between male and female participation in dating aggression. Studies report that females are just as aggressive as males if not more so in dating relationships (Bookwala, Frieze, Smith, & Ryan, 1992; Gray & Foshee, 1997; O’Keefe, 1997; Riggs, O’Leary & Breslin, 1990; White & Koss, 1991). Females are just as likely, if not more likely, to perpetrate physical (Archer, 2002; Bookwala, 2002; Makepeace, 1986; Swart, Stevens, & Ricardo, 2002), psychological (Halpern et al., 2001; Kasian & Painter, 1992), and relational aggression (Linder, Crick, & Collins, 2002).

Archer (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of physical aggression in dating relationships. Following Straus (1977 – 1978), Archer (2002) distinguished minor and severe acts of aggression. Minor acts include items such as “slapped,” and “pushed, grabbed, or shoved,” and severe acts include items such as “hit with a fist” to “used a knife or gun” or “choke or strangle.” The differentiation appears to be based upon the probability of causing an injury, with severe acts having a much higher probability of causing injury than minor acts. From the meta-analysis, Archer found higher effects sizes for females in younger, dating samples than older, cohabitating or married samples for mild levels of physical aggression. He also found an effect for source of information such that higher effects for males occurred for studies that used partner reports than self-reports for mild levels of aggression, suggesting that perhaps men underreport their own aggressive behaviors. This may confound some of the findings such that females appear to be just as aggressive or more aggressive than males simply because males underreport

their behavior. Regardless of the differences for mild levels of aggression, Archer (2002) did not find gender differences for severe acts like “choke” or “use a weapon” such that males and females were equally likely to commit severe acts. Severe incidents such as these are for the most part undeniable and salient, so reports may be more accurate than milder forms of physical aggression.

Like physical aggression, females may be just as likely or more likely to perpetrate psychological aggression compared to males. Kasian and Painter (1992) found that males reported being the victim of psychological aggression more often than females in a normative college sample. This finding has been replicated in a nationally representative sample of adolescents from the National Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) (Halpern et al., 2001). While the rates of reported victimization are not always consistent with rates of reported perpetration in adolescent couples (Moffitt, Caspi, Krueger, & Magdol, 1997), other studies have suggested that females perpetrate psychological aggression more frequently than males. For instance, Capaldi & Crosby (1997) found that females reported using psychological aggression significantly more often than males. Additionally, the females in this study were observed to use higher frequencies of psychological aggression that appeared in the context of positive affect (i.e. being playful) during an interaction task than males. These data stem from an at-risk sample of late adolescents and need replication in a normative sample. Nonetheless, the pattern of psychological aggression appears to be consistent with a model whereby females are equally, if not more likely to be, perpetrators of psychological aggression.

The findings for psychological aggression are important because rates of psychological aggression and physical aggression are very highly correlated and

psychological aggression appears to increase with the length of the relationships much like physical aggression (Capaldi & Crosby, 1997). Psychological aggression may be a predictor of physical aggression in dating relationships (O’Leary & Slep, 2003). Thus, examining psychological aggression may be important for preventing the emergence of physical aggression in dating relationships.

The findings for physical and psychological aggression are consistent with Crick and colleagues’ (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995) relational aggression construct. Relational aggression occurs when one party threatens the relationship or damages feelings of acceptance or love by making a partner jealous, threatening to terminate or leave the relationship, or giving the partner silent treatment when he or she is angry. This construct overlaps with psychological and physical aggression, but it has been shown to be its own unique construct (Crick, Werner, Casas, O’Brien, Nelson, Grotpeter, & Markon, 1999). Linder, Crick, and Collins (2002) found that young women tend to be perpetrators of relational aggression just as often as young men, and young men report higher levels of victimization than young women in dating relationships. Rates of perpetration and victimization both indicate that women participate in relational aggression just as frequently as men, if not more often.

The high prevalence of male and female aggression has been replicated in same-sex romantic relationships in adolescence. Aggression among females in same-sex romantic relationships was comparable to heterosexual rates for mild levels of aggression using data from Add Health; for males, same-sex aggression was half as common as male to female aggression in heterosexual relationships using the nationally representative Add Health sample (Halpern, Young, Waller, Martin, & Kupper, 2004). While this study did

not examine severe levels of aggression, the occurrence of mild aggression in homosexual relationships resembles that which occurs in heterosexual dating relationships for females, but may differ for males.

The high prevalence of male and female aggression has also been replicated in at-risk samples. For instance, Capaldi and Crosby (1997) investigated an at-risk sample of boys followed from fourth grade through adulthood. These boys were recruited from schools in neighborhoods with a higher than average incidence of delinquency for a medium-sized metropolitan area. Seventy-five percent of the boys' parents were lower and working class. In emerging adulthood, these boys and their current romantic partners were invited to participate in the study. The investigators found that 31% of males and 36% of females in dating couples reported engaging in an act of physical aggression with their partner. They also found that females were more likely to use physical aggression than males during an interaction task. In fact, 44% of females perpetrated at least one physically aggressive act during this task compared to 19% of males. This is the first study to our knowledge that has found higher rates of physical aggression among females compared with males using behavioral, observational data.

Sexual aggression is the one form of dating aggression in which males are the more aggressive partner (O'Keefe, 1997). Makepeace (1986) found that females were 8 times more likely to be victims of sexual aggression than males. A developmental pattern may contribute to some of these gender differences. Sexual victimization is likely to appear in the form of being a victim of verbal coercion in early adolescence and forcible rape in college suggesting that verbal sexual coercion may contribute to rape later on (Smith et al., 2003). There is also evidence from this study that indicates females who are

sexually victimized as adolescents have a higher risk of being sexually victimized later in adolescence (Smith et al., 2003). Clearly, more research needs to be conducted to provide a richer understanding of these stark gender differences in sexual aggression. Essentially, men have been socially constructed as being perpetually interested in sexual encounters. Perhaps men are less likely to experience unwanted sexual advances as bothersome or problematic. Alternatively, they may be less likely to report sexual victimization because doing so would not be consistent with gender stereotypes.

Notwithstanding the consistent findings for gender similarity in rates for perpetrating aggression, the findings for rates of victimization are slightly less clear. In studying victimization among normative college samples, some research suggests that victims of dating aggression are more likely to be female than male (Alzenman & Kelley, 1988); other studies suggest that males are more likely to report victimization than females (Linder et al., 2002). One study examining an at-risk sample of adolescents did not find any significant gender differences (Capaldi & Gorman-Smith, 2003). It is possible that interpretations of aggression differ among individuals such that some people do not consider aggressive behaviors as aggressive because they do not interpret them as stemming from harmful intentions. If true, interpretation of the behavior may create a great deal of discrepancy in reports of victimization.

Nonetheless, females appear to be affected by forms of dating aggression more severely than males. Jackson, Cram, and Seymour (2000) studied a senior high school sample of adolescents in focus group format. The measures included forced choice items regarding emotionally (defined as behavior that was emotionally hurtful), physically, and sexually aggressive behavior and open-ended questions about emotional responses to

these behaviors. They found that significantly more adolescent males than females reported “not being bothered” by emotional, sexual, or physical aggression while females were more likely to report feeling “dirty (as a result of sexual aggression),” “angry,” or “fear.” These findings are somewhat more pronounced in college samples. Females report more serious violent acts committed against them and being the principal victim in aggressive situations more often than males (Makepeace, 1986). Female victims of dating aggression are also likely to sustain more physical injuries, and to some extent emotional injuries, than male victims of dating aggression (Makepeace, 1986). Noteworthy is the finding that young women in an at-risk sample who more frequently perpetrated aggression in their relationships had a greater likelihood of receiving more frequent and severe injuries (Capaldi, & Gorman-Smith, 2003), making the high incidence of female perpetration a major concern because it is closely linked with increased risk for victimization. Clearly, these findings need to be replicated in a normative sample before generalizations can be made. Regardless, a trend exists whereby females report being more negatively influenced than males by dating aggression in both high school and college samples.

The high incidence of female aggression and victimization raises the issues of females’ use of aggression for purposes of self-defense. Several studies have found that a high percentage of female perpetration is the result of self-defense subsequent to their boyfriends’ initiation of aggression. Makepeace (1986) found that 70% of physically aggressive young women in college gave self-defense as a reason for their aggression. While it is the case that many females do become physically aggressive with their boyfriends to defend themselves, recent research has suggested that in some cases,

females initiate aggression and, indeed, are sometimes the sole perpetrators in the relationship. Capaldi & Crosby (1997) found only the female was aggressive in 17% of young adult couples in an at-risk sample, and that only the male was aggressive in 4% of these couples. In a normative early adolescent sample, Foshee, Linder, MacDougall, & Bangdiwala (2001) found that 16% of females reported initiating mild forms of aggression and 9% reported initiating severe forms of aggression compared to 10% and 4% for males, respectively. These two studies raise the possibility that females also use aggression for reasons other than self-defense for both adolescents and young adults.

The most common pattern of dating aggression appears to be mutual and reciprocal, which emphasizes the importance of examining dating *couples*. Gray and Foshee (1997) found among both male and female adolescents in their normative sample, 66% reported being both victims and perpetrators of aggression, 14% reported being victims only, and 20% reported being perpetrators only. Similarly, Capaldi & Crosby (1997) found in their at-risk young adult sample that only the male was aggressive in 4% of couples, only the female in 17% of the couples, both males and females in 30% of couples, and neither in 49% of the couples. These results suggest that the majority of aggressive adolescents are both perpetrating and being victimized in their dating relationships—a one-sided violent profile seems to fit only a minority of cases (and those tended to be female).

Taken together, the current literature suggests that females are just as likely as males to perpetrate physical, psychological, and relational aggression in dating relationships in both normative and at-risk samples from mid adolescence to early adulthood. Sexual aggression is the exception such that females are much more likely to

be victims of sexual aggression. Dating aggression appears to be perpetrated by both males and females in a mutual, reciprocal type pattern. Despite the reciprocal nature of dating aggression, females tend to experience the effects of physical, psychological, and sexual aggression more significantly than males. However, we do not yet know the context in which aggression emerges: Is it that one partner initiates aggression and the other responds with aggression? If so, who is more likely to *initiate* the aggression and for what reasons? We still need to know how and under what circumstances the aggression is occurring.

Chapter 3

Precipitants of Dating Aggression

Individual Context

Numerous studies have examined the role of individual factors in the emergence of dating aggression. Witnessing interparental aggression has been associated with adolescent dating aggression as part of the intergenerational transmission of violence theory (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004). Social learning theory has been used to explain this link, positing that adolescents learn to use aggression in romantic relationships from observing their parents' own aggressive behaviors. However, it is unlikely that all people who witness interparental aggression are aggressive in their own romantic relationships. Further, the literature has suggested the link between witnessing interparental aggression and dating aggression is stronger for males than females (Foo & Margolin, 1995; Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004; Swart et al., 2002) with all but one exception (Riggs, & O'Leary, 1996). Mediating variables have been presented to account for these differences. In a sample of adolescents who had witnessed high levels of interparental aggression, O'Keefe (1998) found that low socioeconomic status, exposure to community and school violence, acceptance of dating aggression in relationships, and low self-esteem differentiated boys who were aggressive in their dating relationships from boys who were not. For girls, exposure to community and school violence, poor school performance, and experiencing child abuse differentiated girls who were aggressive in their dating relationships from those who were not. More research is needed to explicate how males and females are differentially influenced by witnessing and experiencing parental aggression. Perhaps the family of origin is more influential for boys who do not

have as many models of intimate relationships outside of the family compared to girls for whom models of intimate relationships abound outside the family, especially in the media (Risch, Jodl, & Eccles, 2004).

Child maltreatment and attachment style have also been associated with dating aggression. In a high school sample, Wekerle & Wolfe (1998) found that for males, child maltreatment history was a strong predictor of physical, sexual, and verbal perpetration in close relationships. The same held true for females, but to a much lower degree than for males. These findings corroborate the literature on witnessing interparental aggression, which suggests that aggression in the family of origin may be more important for adolescent males than females.

Attachment theorists posit that children of abuse develop internal working models centered on domination-subordination and victim-victimizer power dynamics. Victimizers feel a sense of entitlement and use aggression to wield power, and victims feel a sense of deprivation and take a passive stance to responding to aggressive behavior (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). It is also hypothesized that children of abuse do not feel secure in close relationships, causing them to become more anxious and demanding when they feel that their relationship has been threatened (Johnson, 2004). In fact, preoccupied and avoidant attachment styles have been associated with the highest levels of perpetration of physical aggression (Bookwala et al., 1992; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1998). Thus, an insecure attachment style may predispose children of abuse to aggressive tendencies.

Research has also suggested that the effects of child maltreatment on dating aggression may be mediated by trauma related symptoms. Wolfe, Wekerle, Scott, Straatman, and Grasley (2004) found that adolescents who experience trauma symptoms

as a result of child abuse are more likely to be aggressive with dating partners one year later. The authors suggest that adolescents who experience trauma related symptoms are not as effective at regulating their emotions and are more likely to use aggression as a way to resolve conflict, thereby assuaging their experienced distress. Research is needed to further delineate these pathways.

Individual psychopathology has also been examined as a factor contributing to dating aggression in adolescence. In a college-aged at-risk sample, Kim & Capaldi (2004) found that demonstrating antisocial behavior and depressive symptoms had little influence on young men's physical aggression, but a significant influence on young women's own psychological and physical aggression concurrently and longitudinally. Moreover, they found that young women's depressive symptomatology was the strongest predictor for young men's concurrent physical and psychological aggression. However, young men's antisocial behavior or depressive symptoms did not predict young women's aggression. This suggests that young women's depressive and antisocial behaviors may have more influence over their own and their partners' aggressive behaviors, at least in a college-aged clinical sample. More research is needed to examine these differences in a normative sample.

Dyadic Context

The literature on dating aggression has been heavily focused on individual characteristics as pathways to dating aggression. However, most cases of dating aggression are reported to occur in the context of a steady dating relationship (Alzenman & Kelley, 1988). Few studies have examined dating aggression in the context of such

steady dating relationships, and even fewer have been conducted on samples of younger adolescents.

The studies that have examined dating aggression in its dyadic context have provided a richer, more complex understanding of these aggressive relationships. Deborah Capaldi and her colleagues (Capaldi, Shortt, & Crosby, 2003) have followed a group of at-risk antisocial boys from childhood into early adulthood, studying aspects of their individual development, parent and peer relationships, and eventually their romantic relationships in early adulthood. In a seminal longitudinal study using observational measures, Capaldi et al. (2003) found that of the males who continued to date the same partner, 60% of males and 68% of females continued to be aggressive with each other two years after the initial assessment. For the males who were dating a different partner two years after the initial assessment, only 42% continued to be aggressive with their new partner (data were not provided for females dating different partners). Males who exhibited more physical aggression toward their partner at the initial assessment were significantly likely to continue exhibiting more physical aggression two years later, but this was not true for males in the different partner group. What is more, for both the same-partner and different-partner groups, males and females within couples tended to change in the same direction in their mean level of aggression. In other words, the concordance rates for mean levels of aggression for both partners were significantly related. These results provide a more nuanced perspective of dating aggression. They suggest that characteristics of the *relationship* may be important in understanding the persistence and desistance of dating aggression over time for young adults. Immediate situational factors may have a significant impact not previously studied on the emergence

of dating aggression. These data certainly underscore the need for research examining the role of individual and dyadic factors in the development and maintenance of dating aggression, especially in adolescents and young adults.

Examining dyadic data is necessary to illuminate pathways to aggression. Dating aggression is positively associated with the length of the dating relationship (Alzenman & Kelley, 1988; Capaldi et al, 2003). O'Leary and Slep (2003) found in a longitudinal study of high school dating couples that there was a greater likelihood of being aggressive at three-month follow-up for both males and females if they were aggressive at the initial assessment. Interestingly, they also found a cross-dyad influence whereby early aggression in one partner predicted later aggression in the other partner for both males and females. Dating aggression also appears to follow a trajectory of increasing intensity from verbal to physical aggression. The occurrence of verbal aggression in dating relationships in adolescence and early adulthood appears to be a precursor to psychological and physical aggression (Andrews, Foster, Capaldi, & Hops, 2000; Riggs & O'Leary, 1989; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; White & Humphrey, 1994), and psychological aggression appears to be predictive of physical aggression concurrently and over time (O'Leary & Slep, 2003). Additionally, dating aggression is more likely to occur in relationships that have higher levels of conflict (Riggs & O'Leary, 1996). We know relatively little about how the capacity for conflict negotiation influences the likelihood of dating aggression in dating couples. However, it would be beneficial to understand how conflict and conflict management skills contribute to the use of aggression in romantic relationships. Perhaps couples that are more competent at resolving conflict are less likely to use aggression in their relationships. Other

relationship factors that may also contribute to the emergence of aggression are relationship satisfaction, substance use, and power dynamics. Future research is needed to address these issues.

Interaction of Individual-Dyadic Factors

While it is important to examine both individual and dyadic factors in considering dating aggression, it is the unique interaction of these variables that may paint the most comprehensive picture. It is possible that individual factors predispose adolescents to become aggressive in dating relationships, but it is the dyadic context (e.g., communication skills) with particular partners that triggers aggressive behavior. Diathesis stress models of dating aggression in college samples have suggested that distal factors such as experiencing abuse as a child, witnessing parent aggression, and experiencing aggression in a past romantic relationship predispose people to become aggressive in current and future romantic relationships (Riggs & O’Leary, 1989; Riggs & O’Leary, 1996). A similar model has been presented for understanding aggression in marital relationships (DeMaris, Benson, Fox, Hill, & Van-Wyk, 2003). It is this predisposition coupled with proximally related factors such as length of the relationship and conflict negotiation skills that create an immediate context in which psychological, relational, or physical aggression emerges.

Some research postulates gender differences in this model and further delineates it according to distal and proximal elements. This model argues that the likelihood of male aggression is more influenced by distal factors—specifically interparental aggression, a belief that male to female violence is acceptable, and alcohol/drug use, and the likelihood

of female aggression is more influenced by proximal factors—greater conflict in the relationship, involvement in a more serious relationship, and being a recipient of dating aggression (O’Keefe, 1997). This is consistent with other findings suggesting that for males past aggression in a dating relationship is associated with current aggression in a dating relationship, but it is not partner specific; whereas, for females aggression is partner specific and not associated with past aggression (Chase, Treboux, O’Leary, & Strassberg, 1998). Given the extensive studies of individuals reporting on relationships, researchers should begin to study couples in their dyadic context to explicate the complex individual-dyadic interaction that contributes to dating aggression. Halpern et al. (2001) offered that “theory-driven examination of the characteristics of both partners in a couple, and how the qualities and developmental histories of each person combine to produce violent behavior, will be necessary to advance our understanding of this important public health problem [dating violence]” (p. 1685).

Chapter 4

Meaning of Dating Aggression: Different for Males and Females?

Understanding the individual and contextual factors that provide the foundation for dating aggression is important. However, it is also important to understand the meaning behind aggressive behaviors. Tolman, Spencer, Rosen-Reynoso, & Porche (2003) conducted two qualitative studies with high school students focused on compulsory heterosexuality, which they defined as norms of heterosexual relationships that produce dynamics and require male dominance and female subordination. They applied this model of compulsory heterosexuality to explain the meaning of dating aggression. Participants in this study indicated that male dominance and aggression were readily accepted norms of heterosexual relationships by both boys and girls. Boys felt peer pressure to be sexually aggressive with girls in front of their peers in order to demonstrate their heterosexuality. Girls felt that boys were sexual predators and that they demanded control in their relationships. They also felt that boys were exploitative and disrespectful of girls. Nonetheless, girls were willing to sustain such dynamics and behavior in order to participate in heterosexual relationships; additionally, they felt that negative attention was better than no attention. This study suggests that boys use sexual aggression to some extent to declare their heterosexuality. It also suggests that girls are willing to withstand both sexual and verbal or psychological aggression in order to participate in romantic relationships. Thus, patriarchal views are adopted early on as adolescents navigate their identity in romantic relationships, permitting the use of aggression in these relationships. Some of the findings from this study may not generalize to normative populations as they were collected from adolescents from impoverished

backgrounds. While this study offers a hypothesis regarding the use of aggression by adolescent males, it does not account for the use of aggression by females. Moreover, it does not fully account for other reasons adolescents may resort to aggression.

It has been hypothesized that adolescent males and females use aggression for different reasons. It is thought that girls often resort to aggression when frustrated or angry, especially if humiliated by a partner, and boys use aggression as a way to be playful (Foo & Margolin, 1995; Scott, Wekerle, & Wolfe, 1997). In this way, girls use aggression to display disapproval and boys use aggression to connect with their partner in adolescence. Observational studies of young adults have suggested that physical aggression is a pattern of sexual intimacy whereby females employ aggression as an attention getting device to arouse her male partners' interest and engage him physically. Some of these behaviors may appear to be playful on the surface. This suggestion is consistent with observations that males allow females to strike them without becoming angry (Capaldi & Crosby, 1997). Such findings would be consistent with rough and tumble play between boys and also between fathers and children, whereby physical contact is a way of connecting with others in a safer, more socially acceptable way. Perhaps this is one way adolescent dating partners connect with one another. The risk associated with this style of relating, however, is that physical aggression may escalate quickly.

Little is known of the developmental pathway of the use of aggression. Some studies of young adults have found that females perceive males' aggression as instrumental, perhaps as a means of reasserting control over a situation; whereas males perceive females' aggression as expressive in nature (Campbell, Muncer, Guy, & Banim,

1996). Thus, males use aggression with the purpose of achieving a particular outcome, whereas females use aggression in order to communicate. Yet, we know little about how individuals use aggression at different points in time from adolescence through adulthood, and whether gender differences fluctuate in the reasons for using aggression across this time period. DeMaris (1992) posited that females can be more physically aggressive in dating relationships because they are much freer to leave their relationships than women in marital relationships. Perhaps this is true, but it could also be that there is a cohort effect whereby females feel that they have more power in their relationships than previously in the past (Galliher, Rostosky, Welsh, & Kawaguchi, 1999). There may be a developmental trajectory such that adolescents use aggressive behaviors as a way of resolving conflict, expressing feelings, or connecting, which later is replaced with the use of verbal communication skills with increased maturity and relationship experience. This theory may help explain the sharp increase in aggression from 15 to 25 years of age and the subsequent decrease across the lifespan (O'Leary & Slep, 2003; Smith et al., 2003). More qualitative longitudinal research is needed to fully understand the meaning of aggression for males and females in this developmental time period from adolescents to young adulthood.

Chapter 5

Methodological Concerns

Definition

To reiterate the opening comments of this paper, it is necessary for researchers to conceptually identify and delineate the construct they are measuring in their studies. Only a few of the studies above mentioned any type of conceptual definition in their paper. Most employed the term “violence,” when really they were measuring aggression. Some even utilized the words violence and aggression interchangeably. While some researchers have differentiated aggression from violence, it seems necessary to arrive at some consensus as to the definitions of these constructs and to articulate which construct is being used in a given work. This articulation of terms will resolve some of the confusion in this area.

Of significance is the fact that aggressive behaviors may not always have an “intent to harm” as has been suggested by previous definitions of aggression. Especially in adolescent dating relationships, aggression may have several different meanings and purposes. Aggression could take the form of “roughhousing” or play fighting where aggression is a way of connecting with one’s partner physically. Certainly fathers who tickle or wrestle with their children would not report having an intention to hurt their children. As offered by Capaldi & Crosby’s observations, aggression could also be physical contact that invites sexual intimacy in accordance with some type of sexual script present in the relationship. Finally, aggression could also be a mode of expression and communication of frustration or anger that does not necessarily incorporate the intent to harm. Given these possibilities, it may be important to distinguish different types of

aggression, specifically for adolescents who may use aggression for purposes other than trying to harm their partners.

Additionally, researchers should be clear in how they define “dating.” Studies differ in the way they conceptualize dating from simply having social activities with another person to a romantic relationship that involves some type of commitment (Sugarman & Hotelling, 1991). Clearly, great variation exists in adolescent dating relationships. Some adolescents have casual dating relationships, other exclusive dating relationships, and others have relationships that are sexual in nature only without any type of commitment. Aggression in each of these types of relationships may differ in quality and intensity. Greater specificity is needed in defining what is considered to be a dating relationship so that comparisons can be made across studies that examine the same type of relationship.

Measures

Perhaps the most perplexing problem in drawing accurate conclusions about gender differences in adolescent dating aggression is measurement error. The majority of the literature has measured dating aggression using the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) or a modified version of this scale (Straus, 1979). Several problems exist with this scale. First, some types of dating aggression utilized by adolescents have been excluded using this scale. Interviews have suggested that adolescents utilize other types of aggression not captured by the CTS such as bending a partner’s fingers back or slamming the partner against the wall and holding them there (Foshee et al., 2001). Second, the CTS is biased toward male-oriented types of aggression. Third, the CTS fails to capture other types of

aggression such as relational aggression. Fourth, the CTS fails to discern intent, consequences, and the context in which the aggression occurs. For instance, it does not differentiate self-defensive behavior from initiated behavior, and it does not provide any situational context for aggressive behavior thereby limiting the meaning of the findings. The shortcomings of the CTS have been acknowledged for some time now, but researchers continue to use this measure. Future research should seek to first understand different types of dating aggression and their meaning using qualitative methods, and then alter surveys to reflect this information. Moreover, researchers need to begin relying on multi-method approaches such as observation or physiological measures to investigate dating aggression. Physiological measures might offer a glimpse of internal processes that underlie aggression. In essence, observational research offers a rich and complex picture of relational processes—a picture not afforded by survey data.

Sampling

Multiple limitations also exist with regards to the samples that have been used to collect data on dating aggression. First and foremost, most of the samples that have been investigated have been heterosexual samples. More research needs to be done with homosexual couples because we cannot assume that models for heterosexual dating couples apply to homosexual dating couples; the nature of these relationships, and thus the process may differ greatly. Most of the literature in this area has been conducted with college-aged samples. Fewer studies have been conducted using early or middle adolescents. Dating aggression may begin as early as 12 or 13 years of age (Foshee et al, 2001). Thus, we are certainly missing the early beginnings of dating aggression, perhaps

critical time periods for prevention and intervention efforts. Younger adolescents may also not consider their aggressive acts to be as serious as older adults (Archer, 2002), emphasizing the importance of examining younger samples who may perceive aggression to be normative in healthy relationships. Moreover, researchers should discontinue examining individuals devoid of the context of their dating relationships. Dating aggression is a dyadic, not individual occurrence; it transpires *between* two people. Studying individuals will only encumber our ability to make meaning of the reasons, factors, and dynamics that contribute to aggression in the couple context. It would also be to our benefit to have dyadic models of aggression that explain how and under what circumstances aggression occurs. Demand-withdrawal patterns have been explored in the marital literature as precipitants to marital aggression (e.g., Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 1999) and should be studied in dating relationships as well. Future research should explore such patterns in adolescent dating samples. It would also be of benefit to examine how couples' conflict negotiation influences dating aggression, and what differentiates aggression that emerges in the context of conflict and that which emerges outside of the context of conflict. Other dynamics worthy of exploration are power, communication patterns, and stress (White, Smith, Koss, & Figueredo, 2000).

Procedure

Retrospective studies should not be used to assess dating aggression because of the inherent error involved in recalling and reporting on past experience. Prospective, longitudinal data are needed to discern patterns of aggression across adolescence into adulthood. Adolescents should be followed up at frequent intervals, as dating

relationships change and dissolve quickly over time. Furthermore, adolescence is a time period where biological, cognitive, and emotional changes transpire rapidly. Aggression may vary with these rapid developmental changes. For example, it may be that aggression develops as a result of adolescents' limited social skills in early adolescence. Aggression may be a way for adolescents to connect with one another or to resolve disagreement. With maturation, enhanced social skills may supplant aggressive tendencies whereby adolescents relate to one another in more sophisticated ways. Capturing snapshots of adolescents as they grow and change in the context of their dating relationships will help us understand why aggression peaks in adolescence and then dissipates over time. We should also assess the biological, cognitive, and emotional channels as part of this enterprise to assist our understanding and elaborate our models. To date, there are no studies that attempt to account for the developmental trajectory of dating aggression.

Generalizability

The findings for gender differences in adolescent dating aggression vary by sample and by type of aggression studied. We have learned about the prevalence of dating aggression within the context of adolescent romantic relationships largely from at-risk samples. The processes of aggression are likely to be different from those in normative samples. Aggression in at-risk samples may be informed by an intent to harm, whereas aggression in normative samples may be informed by a need for physical connection or sexual intimacy. Similarly, aggression at age 15 is likely to differ from

aggression at age 25. We must take great care not to generalize our findings from one group to the next until findings have been validated in other samples.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

It is clear that more work needs to be conducted in this area before any large scale conclusions can be drawn with regards to gender differences in dating aggression. The conclusion that can be drawn most confidently from research to date is that in normative samples, the proportion of males and females who engage in mild psychological and physical aggression (not sexual aggression) is about equal or higher in females than males in adolescent and young adult samples.

Fewer constraints around female aggression appear to exist compared to those for male aggression. At very young ages, boys are often socialized to “not hit girls” but the same norm does not exist for girls. This may contribute to the emergence of high levels of female physical aggression. However, we do not yet understand the meaning of aggression and how it used by males and females in adolescence and early adulthood. What is also lacking in our understanding of the developmental trajectory of aggression in these relationships are studies that investigate both individual and dyadic factors by examining couples, studies that utilize multi-method approaches, and studies that investigate different types of dating relationships such as same-sex relationships. All of these gaps encumber our ability to discern what contributes to aggression in dating couples’ relationships.

The incidence of aggression in romantic relationships during adolescence and early adulthood is high, even higher than has been found in older adult samples (O’Leary & Slep, 2003). The high prevalence of dating aggression is disconcerting because of its potential impact, both concurrently and subsequently. Dating aggression has been

associated with physical and psychological effects as well as more pervasive disruptions in functioning (O'Leary & Cascardi, 1998; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989). It has also been linked with aggression in adulthood. Adolescents who experience aggression in their relationships are at risk for incorporating and accepting violence as a quintessential way of relating to others. A major threat is that this way of being may be recapitulated in other relationships well into adulthood. More research needs to be conducted in order to more fully understand the nature and complexity of this ubiquitous phenomenon. It must be evaluated in order to inform prevention and intervention efforts for dating aggression. Such programs will hopefully assuage the incidence of aggression in dating relationships, and by extension, these programs might have a broader impact for the quality of adolescents' relationships in the present and beyond.

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PART IV
CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions

The two papers presented in this dissertation examine the nature of adolescents' romantic relationships. The first paper examined how communication processes, specifically conflict and connection, are linked with relational outcomes in dating couples. We found that couple members who demonstrate less conflict and more connection are more likely to report feeling more satisfied in their relationships. We also found that couple members who demonstrate less conflict engage in physical aggression less often and less severely than couple members who demonstrate more conflict. These findings suggest that communication processes play a significant role in the quality of adolescents' dating relationships such that more positive communication is linked with better relational outcomes. They also emphasize that processes related to the dyad, not just the individual (e.g., attachment style, psychopathology), are important to couples' relationship functioning, as evidenced in couple members' relationship satisfaction and perpetration of dating aggression in these relationships.

We also found a significant effect for gender such that females were more likely to be physically aggressive with their partners than males and to demonstrate more severe levels of physical aggression than males. The review conducted in the second paper helped clarify these findings. In the review, we found several studies that corroborated our finding that females tend to be more physically aggressive than males in samples of both adolescents and young adults. This holds true not only for physical aggression in mixed sex couples, but for physical aggression in same-sex couples, and in both normative and at-risk samples. It also holds true for different types of aggression such as psychological and relational, with the exception of sexual aggression.

We found that while individual traits play a role in the emergence of aggression in dating relationships, qualities about the couple appear to be more important in accounting for this phenomenon. This was both supported by our data and our review of the literature. Surprisingly, few studies have analyzed dating aggression in the context of the couple. More work needs to be done in this area with couples so that we can better understand how dyadic processes and dynamics between the couple contribute to this important public health concern.

From the review, it is obvious that research methodology also need to be improved in this area before gains can be made. Better measures should be implemented when studying aggression, especially so that we can make more meaning out of the behaviors of interest than has been afforded by previous work. Significant progress in this area may be accomplished through observational data and qualitative data. In particular, interview data with dating couples are likely to provide the most comprehensively rich picture.

Hopefully, with more empirical work developmental theory can be refined to account for aggression in adolescents' romantic relationships. Once a fuller understanding is achieved, theory can inform the development intervention and prevention programs for curbing the incidence of dating aggression. Applying adult programs based on adult models of aggression will not suffice in this regard. Adolescent dating aggression is likely a similar, but different, entity than adult martial aggression. There may be developmental processes inherent in adolescent dating aggression that simply are not involved in how and why adult aggression develops. Future research

should examine developmental factors to illuminate the interworkings of this complex and deleterious process.

VITA

Sharon Catherine Risch was born in Washington, D. C. on July 28, 1979. She was raised in Allen Park, Michigan and went to grade school at St. Mary Magdalen School in Melvindale, Michigan. In 1997, she graduated from Gabriel Richard High School in Riverview, Michigan. From there, she attended the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor where she conducted her undergraduate honors thesis with Dr. Jacquelynn S. Eccles and Dr. Kathleen M. Jodl. She graduated in 2001 with a B.A. in psychology. After graduation, she was accepted to the doctoral program in clinical psychology at the University of Tennessee. During her career there, she helped conduct the Study of Tennessee Adolescent Romantic Relationships (STARR) with Dr. Deborah Welsh and her colleagues.

Sharon will be beginning her clinical psychology internship at The Cambridge Hospital/Harvard Medical School in Cambridge, Massachusetts in July 2006. Here, she will complete her doctoral training. The doctoral degree will be conferred in August of 2007 after the completion of the one-year internship.