Aggression During Conflict with Parents, Romantic Partners, and Close Friends

Preliminary Findings from the Continuity of Close Relationship Project

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The Continuity of Close Relationships Project

- How similar are adolescents’ relationships with romantic partners to other relationships in their lives?
- How similar are adolescents’ romantic relationships to their parents’ marriages?
- How do relationships with romantic partners affect emotional regulatory processes?
Data Collection Strategy:

- Friend
- Teen 1
  - Mother
  - Father
- Teen 2
  - Mother
  - Father
- Friend

Data Source:
- Self Report
- Self & Other Report
- Observations
Questions:

- How commonly is aggression used as a conflict resolution strategy in adolescents’ romantic relationships?
- To what extent are these strategies similar to those used in relationships with parents and same-sex friends?
- To what extent do self-reports, partner-reports, and observed interactions lead to similar conclusions about the use of aggression?
Method: Sample

- 31 currently dating couples
  - Dating at least 4 weeks
  - At least one adolescent currently a high school junior or senior
  - At least one adolescent’s parents currently married to each other
- Recruited via advertisement and direct phone recruitment
Sample Characteristics:

- Dating 1-30 months, median=7 months
- Known each other 1-120 months, median=18 months
- Boys slightly older than girls:
  - Boys 17.6   Girls: 16.9
- Ethnicity reflects area
  - 81% European-American, 7% Asian-American, 3% Latino, 8% Ethnically mixed
- 79% from intact families living with both parents
Protocol

- **Questionnaires:**
  - **Conflict in Relationships Scale**¹
    - Adolescents reported on Self and Partner use of 36 different tactics
    - Target: Relationships with Mother, Father, Romantic Partner, Same-sex peer
  
- **Videotaped Social Interactions**
  - Two Social Support (10 minutes each)
  - Two Conflict Resolution (7 minutes each)

Measures of Aggression

- **Verbal aggression:**
  - Spoke in a mean or hostile tone of voice
  - Insulted this person with put downs
  - I ridiculed or made fun of this person

- **Direct or implied physical threats:**
  - I threatened to hurt this person
  - I threatened to hit this person or throw something at him/her
  - I hit, kicked, or punched something, like a wall
  - I destroyed or threatened to destroy something this person valued
  - I deliberately tried to frighten this person

- **Physical aggression**
  - I kicked, hit, or punched this person
  - I slapped this person or pulled his/her hair
  - I threw something at this person
  - I pushed, shoved, or shook this person
Verbal aggression used in 80% of relationships

*self report*

**Boys:**
- No significant difference across roles
- less likely to report in relations with girlfriends than friends

**Girls:**
- Differential use of aggression across roles
- least likely with same-sex best friends (p<.01)
Physical threats used in 49% of relationships

**self report**

**Boys:**

- Less likely to use in relations with girlfriends than with peers

**Girls:**

- Less likely to use with friends than others
- Twice as likely to use with boyfriend than with friend
Physical aggression used in 29% of relationships

*Self report*

**Boys**
- More likely to use than girls overall
- Least likely to use with girlfriends - 23% v. 48% with friends

**Girls**
- Most likely to use with boyfriends - 35% v. 19% with friends
Type of Physical Aggression: Self-Report in Romantic Relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>threw something</td>
<td>9.68%</td>
<td>25.81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slapped or pulled hair</td>
<td>12.90%</td>
<td>19.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pushed or shook</td>
<td>19.35%</td>
<td>22.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kicked, hit, or punched</td>
<td>12.90%</td>
<td>16.13%</td>
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Type of Physical Aggression: Partner-Report in Romantic Relationship

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<tr>
<td>pushed or shook</td>
<td>16.13%</td>
<td>22.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kicked, hit, or punched</td>
<td>6.45%</td>
<td>22.58%</td>
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Most individuals report that couple violence is symmetrical
When asymmetrical, it is most often female only
Conclusions

- All forms of aggression are fairly common in adolescent relationships
  - Threatened or actual use of physical aggression is present in a sizeable minority of relationships
- Distinctive patterns of aggression are reported by males and females:
  - Males:
    - Conflict highest in relationships with same-sex friends
    - Least likely to be expressed in relationships with girlfriends
  - Females:
    - Conflict lowest in relationships with same-sex best friend
    - Most likely to be expressed in threatened or actual violence in relationships with boyfriends
Why do boys behave better than expected? Why do girls behave worse?

- Girls bring strong conflict resolution skills from same-sex friendships to romantic relationships
- Boys bring relatively weak conflict resolution skills from same-sex friendships to romantic relationships
- From this, we might have predicted that boys would be more physical in romantic relationships and girls less so
- Data from multiple sources in this data, consistent with prior work (see Archer, 2002 for a meta-analysis), suggests that this is not true.
- We’re left with a puzzle. Why?