# UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING ADOLESCENT DATING VIOLENCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPMENTAL, SOCIOCULTURAL, AND GENDERED PERSPECTIVES

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The three articles in this special section on the development of adolescent dating violence provide important insights that can help shape future research and theory. Several common themes emerged. The roots of adolescent dating violence are broad and deep; thus, developmental and sociocultural perspectives are necessary to adequately understand this phenomenon. Adolescent dating violence is deeply gendered and requires that researchers make gender a centerpiece of their theorizing. These two insights lead to the conclusion that prevention efforts must start early, be broad based, and include gender in a fundamental way. In addition, longitudinal and ecological approaches hold the most promise for future research.

Adolescent dating violence is a widespread and serious problem. The three articles in this special section provide important insights that can help shape research and prevention efforts. Although the contributors each have a unique theoretical perspective and focus on different aspects of the problem, overlapping themes and shared aims are present.

## ROOTS OF ADOLESCENT DATING VIOLENCE ARE DEEP AND BROAD

Adolescent dating violence does not occur in a vacuum, nor is it disconnected from past experience. To fully understand the causes of dating violence and other forms of gendered aggression we must therefore look to earlier developmental periods to see the roots of these behaviors and we must acknowledge that they are embedded within broader cultural frameworks that support and socialize aggression and violence.

Two of the articles in this special section specifically articulate a developmental perspective. Wolfe, Crooks,

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Chiodo, and Jaffe (this issue) summarize findings from several of their large longitudinal studies highlighting the role of childhood and early adolescent experiences in understanding dating violence perpetration and victimization in later adolescence. Childhood maltreatment was a risk factor for boys in committing physical aggression against their dating partners, but this effect was mediated by the boys' attitudes and emotional distress (e.g., depression, posttraumatic stress disorder). Consistent with literature on revictimization (Hosser, Raddatz, & Windzio, 2007; Humphrey & White, 2000; Siegel & Williams, 2003), Wolfe et al. also found that sexual harassment victimization in 9th grade was predictive of several types of victimization in 11th grade.

Underwood and Rosen (this issue) theorize in a deeply developmental way, urging researchers interested in adolescent intimate relationships (and violence within those relationships) to think carefully about gender differences that may have been created by cultural practices enacted during earlier developmental periods. In an application of the two cultures theory (Maccoby, 1998), they suggest that lessons learned early, in the context of sex-segregated friendships, may be critically important in understanding later cross-sex relationship problems, including dating violence.

All of the authors in this special section agree that an informed understanding of adolescent dating violence must include a rich analysis of the broader socio-cultural structures and practices in which adolescent relationships are embedded. The gender segregation that is the centerpiece of two cultures theory is a cultural practice; different

choices are possible. Wolfe et al. (this issue) remind us of the importance of the media in shaping and constraining attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. But Smith, White, and Moracco (this issue) go the furthest in stressing the importance and pervasiveness of broader cultural practices. Their social ecological approach includes a close analysis of factors that act on the community and societal levels; their approach to prevention similarly stresses the importance of intervening at these levels rather than only at the level of the individual.

## THEORIZING GENDER IS CRITICAL FOR UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENT DATING VIOLENCE

We live in a deeply gendered culture (Bem, 1993) and heterosexual dating violence is a deeply gendered phenomenon. In all three of the articles in this special section, the authors make gender a centerpiece of their theorizing. In the two cultures theory espoused by Underwood and Rosen (this issue), it is gender (more specifically, segregation on the basis of gender) that leads to the development of two separate subcultures. Wolfe et al. (this issue) describe how important it is for adolescents to meet gender-role expectations (perhaps especially so for youth who were maltreated as children). They note that gender rigidity is a self-protective strategy, but one that can lead to victimizing others through bullying and harassment. Smith et al. (this issue) describe gender as a central organizing principle, one that is so deeply ingrained in our culture as to be nearly invisible. Citing sociologists Risman (1998) and Connell (1987), they articulately summarize several specific mechanisms whereby gender organizes behavior, beliefs, and resources. Taking these insights together, it is clear that if we want to understand and prevent dating violence we must look at adolescents in the context of their gendered environments. In addition, we need to think about gender in complex and nuanced ways, analyzing its intersection with myriad other identities.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR EFFECTIVE PREVENTION EFFORTS: START EARLY, BE BROAD BASED, AND THEORIZE GENDER

If the roots of dating violence are found in earlier developmental periods, it makes sense that the most successful intervention efforts will include a focus on those earlier periods. Wolfe et al. (this issue) make the comparison to how academic subjects such as literature and mathematics are taught: They are introduced at a very early age, in a developmentally appropriate way. Children then increase their knowledge and skills through continued exposure. Information about relationships and violence could be introduced in the same way, with children given the opportunity to practice the skills that they are developing. Underwood and Rosen's analysis suggests that these efforts should start

at least in middle childhood, when children are at the brink of moving away from their gender-segregated play groups, and perhaps as early as age 3–4, when this gender segregation begins.

Prevention efforts must also be broad based in nature. It does not make sense to only target specific violent behaviors or at-risk youth. Wolfe et al. (this issue) argue for a public health perspective: Provide education to all adolescents, both male and female, whether or not they are at risk for dating violence perpetration. Such education will be broadly useful to teens in addition to reducing the incidence of dating violence. Smith et al. (this issue p. 26) are especially clear about the importance of providing education to all adolescents when they write "...the development of structures and practices that affirm the worth and dignity of all young people is the preferred approach to reducing aggressive and coercive force by adolescents." In addition, they advocate prevention efforts that target a range of structures and processes at all levels of their social ecology model, including cognitions, beliefs, and values (individual level), dyadic behaviors (interpersonal level), social network and educational practices (community level), and the allocation of resources (societal level).

In all three articles, the authors either argue or imply that gender must be a centerpiece in prevention programs. Underwood and Rosen (this issue) summarize Rose and Rudolph's (2006) emotional trade-offs perspective and describe the benefits as well as the drawbacks of both feminine and masculine culture. The implication is that prevention efforts should legitimate the feminine as well as affirm the positive qualities of the masculine. Findings described by Wolfe et al. (this issue) suggest that reducing gender rigidity could be quite helpful in minimizing dating violence (as well as other gendered aggression such as homophobic bullying and sexual harassment). However, it is important to acknowledge the positive benefits of peer acceptance that gender rigidity provides and to help find other ways for teens to fit in and be part of a social group. Smith et al. (this issue) are perhaps the most direct about the importance of theorizing gender. They call for us to abolish gender inequality and to allow greater gender flexibility for all.

One additional common theme that emerges concerns the importance of a relational perspective. Helping youth develop relationship skills is a crucial component of Wolfe et al.'s (this issue) educational efforts. And Underwood and Rosen (this issue) point out that heterosexual romantic relationships can be a site where both young men and young women learn new relational skills, skills not gained in the earlier gender-segregated friendships.

### POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

Finally, all three articles fit well within the burgeoning positive youth development movement (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). This movement stresses the importance of focusing

on the strengths, resilience, and competencies that youth possess rather than highlighting only the risks, problems, and crises that they face.

All of the contributors acknowledge the possibility that even the most destructive or maladaptive behavioral strategies have some current advantages or provided some benefits in the developmental past. For example, Wolfe et al. (this issue) describe the phenomenon of emotional vigilance as a strategy that was adaptive in childhood but that leads to problems when used in adolescent dating relationships. Underwood and Rosen (this issue) summarize Rose and Rudolph's (2006) emotional trade-offs perspectives, which explicitly articulates that both masculine and feminine have benefits as well as drawbacks. And Smith et al. (this issue) remind us that the broader cultural framework constrains options for all of us. In that context, there can be benefits to aggressive behavior even though it is ultimately destructive to both perpetrator and victim.

Moreover, a focus on positive growth and development is seen even in the brief outlines presented here of the authors' education and prevention programs. In Smith et al.'s (this issue) program, teamwork, leadership, and respect for self and others are stressed; an equitable distribution of resources and opportunities is seen as essential; and the fundamental importance of providing parents with the tools they need to ensure the healthy development of their children is recognized. Similarly, Wolfe et al. (this issue) focus on positive messages, resilience, and the development of healthy relationships.

Of course, there are some limits to applying this framework to the study of youth violence. Violence is harmful to both perpetrators and victims and can secondarily impact many others embedded in the same social networks. There will always be a need to understand the negative consequences of violence and to theorize its causes. Still, even when focusing on these negative aspects, attention to positive youth development might be illuminating. For example, childhood physical and sexual abuse is a known risk factor for perpetration in adolescence and beyond (Graves, Sechrist, White, & Paradise, 2005; White & Smith, 2004; Widom, 2000) yet only a minority of survivors go on to perpetrate. Studying those individuals who did not repeat the cycle of violence is likely to reveal important protective mechanisms and resiliencies possessed by these individuals or inherent in their larger social context.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

Scholars devoted to the task of understanding and preventing adolescent dating violence can learn much from the research findings and broader concepts presented in this special section. If one takes to heart the notion that a deep understanding of this phenomenon will require that we take a developmental, sociocultural, and gendered perspective, certain implications (both theoretical and methodological) emerge.

First, the necessity of obtaining data from multiple time points is immediately apparent. If the roots of adolescent dating violence begin in middle or even early childhood, it is vital to have information about these earlier periods. Ideally, programs of research will include a prospective, longitudinal component so that growth, change, and development can truly be assessed (rather than inferred). But even in cases where a cross-sectional design is necessary (e.g., because of resource limitations), researchers should carefully consider collecting at least some retrospective data about earlier developmental periods. Moreover, theoretical consideration to these earlier periods might prove quite profitable to researchers who do not currently take such a long view when constructing their conceptual models.

Second, we are reminded yet again that predicting aggression perpetration with any degree of accuracy requires not only taking a multivariate approach (rather than focusing on one or two predictors of particular interest) but taking an ecological approach that attends to predictors from multiple levels of influence (e.g., intrapsychic, interpersonal, familial, societal). Although individual studies will not be able to assess every variable at every level, researchers should heed the advice of White (this issue) who encourages us to always keep in mind the larger meta-theoretical framework even when "zooming in" on a particular level or set of variables. We can do this both in study design and implementation (where we should strive to measure as broadly and deeply as our resources allow) and in interpretation of data (where we must consider what complexities might have been revealed if additional sociocultural levels could have been included in our design). Moreover, the ecological framework can lead naturally to the use of valuable new methodologies such as youth participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

One could argue that theorizing gender might be important in studying virtually any social psychological phenomenon (Bem, 1993), but the work presented here, as well as the theoretical arguments made so eloquently by White (this issue), provide a compelling case for the fundamental necessity of including gender quite centrally in any investigation (theoretical or empirical) of adolescent dating violence. In addition, the implication is that we would be well served by broadening our thinking about how to measure gender. If gender is something that we do rather than a fixed attribute of a person (as argued by White, this issue, and others, including Bordo, 1993 and Butler, 1990), we need much richer data about exactly what it is that is being done in this flexible construction of gender and how it relates to both violence perpetration and victimization. Moreover, gender is only one component of identity and an intersectional approach that focuses more broadly (e.g., on class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation) is likely to yield large rewards.

We are at an exciting moment in the study of adolescent dating violence. The articles in this special section, as well as White's (this issue) Carolyn Wood Sherif Award Address, offer us many insights to draw from as we continue the

important work of understanding and preventing dating violence.

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