

Victimization and Relational Aggression in Adolescent Romantic Relationships: The Influence of Parental and Peer Behaviors, and Individual Adjustment

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Abstract

Consistent with the view that adolescent relationships are established in the context of important characteristics of their social networks, we examined the effects of adolescents' experiences of parenting (psychological control and positive monitoring) and of peer aggression and victimization, on their self reports of dating victimization and aggression. We also examined the effects of individual differences in emotional and behavioral problems. We used questionnaire data from a population-based sample of youth 12–18 years old who were in dating relationships ($n = 149$). Parental monitoring emerged as a protective factor in reducing both dating victimization and relational aggression. Our findings also point to a significant transfer of aggression in peer relationships to relational aggression in dating relationships.

Keywords

Peer aggression and victimization; Relational aggression; Adolescent romantic relationships; Parental monitoring

Introduction

Dating during adolescence is a normative experience that can foster interpersonal competence and lay the foundation for intimate adult relationships (Furman et al. 1999). Empirical studies have linked healthy dating experiences to both positive adjustment and elevated self-esteem (Connolly and Konarski 1994), but aggressive dating experiences are also linked to negative outcomes such as internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Davila et

al. 2004; Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2001). Dating aggression in adolescence has been associated with other negative outcomes including low self-esteem, substance use, dropping out of school and teenage pregnancy (Hagan and Foster 2001; Lewis and Fremouw 2001; Silverman et al. 2001). Adolescents are inexperienced with dating and report heightened emotionality when involved in romantic relationships (Feiring 1996), which potentially increases dating conflict and aggression. During early explorations of intimate peer relationships, adolescents may have difficulty determining the difference between flirting and aggression and grapple with distinguishing behaviors that are playful from those that are aggressive (Johnson et al. 2005).

One-quarter to over one-half of dating adolescents report physical or psychological abuse in their relationships (James et al. 2000; Sudermann and Jaffe 1997) and significant numbers continue in these relationships despite the abuse (Bethke and Dejoy 1993). Risk for aggressive dating experiences are influenced by individual adjustment as well as interpersonal contexts, including those created by familial interactions (Ehrensaft et al. 2003; Hagan and Foster 2001) and same-sex peer relationships (Arriaga and Foshee 2004; Foshee et al. 2004; Prospero 2006). It is likely that problems with aggression in parent and peer relationships also co-occur with the youth's own aggressive behaviors.

A better understanding is needed of how parenting behaviors, peer victimization and aggression, and individual externalizing and internalizing problems affect adolescents' experiences of aggression in dating relationships. Given the significance of relational aggression in adolescent peer relationships (see Leadbeater et al. 2006), understanding the influences of both physical and relational types of aggression is also critical for promoting healthy romantic relationships and preventing dating violence.

Recent research has also begun to document the detrimental effects of psychological and verbal assaults in dating relationships (Holt and Espelage 2005). Relational peer aggression overlaps with verbal or psychological assaults (involving insults, accusations, and intimidation), but it also has unique features in dating relationships, such as provoking jealousy and uncertainty in the relationship (Linder et al. 2002). For example, an adolescent may deliberately flirt with opposite sex peers or use silent treatment to induce fear of ending the relationship. In past research, relational aggression with dating partners has been linked to less trust and elevated jealousy (Linder et al. 2002) and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Compian et al. 2004).

The present study is designed to examine adolescents' individual adjustment and experiences with parents and peers as predictors of overt and relational dating victimization and relational aggression. Standard measures of self-reported relationship aggression have been criticized for failing to account for the complexities and heterogeneity of dating aggression that may be evident from youths' own voices and interpretations of their lived experiences (Foshee et al. 2007). In this study, we use a new questionnaire assessing overt and relational victimization and relational aggression that taps into behaviors gleaned from a qualitative study of dating violence in girls at high risk for dating aggression by Banister et al. (2003).

Parental Influences on Dating Violence

Attachment theory suggests that close relationships are internally represented throughout the life course as a relationship schema or map, stemming primarily from early parent–child relationships. Several studies have shown that close parent relationships can protect youth from abusive dating relationships (Cleveland et al. 2003; Ehrensaft et al. 2003; Lavoie and Vézina 2002). For example, adolescent girls who were satisfied with their level of affective closeness to parents were less likely to be victimized and more likely to recognize difficulties in relationships and seek help, compared to girls who had poor affective relationships (Howard et al. 2003).

However, research also shows that parental maltreatment involving physical abuse, lack of parental warmth, trust, and involvement and poor monitoring are associated with difficulty establishing healthy romantic relationships and with overt aggression with dating partners (Bolger et al. 1998; Dodge et al. 1995; Ehrensaft et al. 2003; Herrenkohl et al. 2006; Howard et al. 2003; Wolfe et al. 2001). Prospero (2006) found that children from more conflictual homes reported having friends engaged in higher levels of verbal and physical aggression with their dating partners than did adolescents from less conflictual homes. Research examining parental predictors of dating relational aggression and victimization, suggests that this behavior is linked to parental enmeshment, over involvement, and high psychological control (Linder et al. 2002; Nelson and Crick 2002). However, the specific parenting characteristics associated with overt and relational aggression in adolescents' dating relationships have not been widely studied and past research has not distinguished potentially negative means of controlling adolescents' behaviors through psychological control from more positive monitoring efforts.

Typically, adolescents are seeking and often taking more autonomy in their choice of relationships with peers and in the activities they do with them. They may be particularly concerned with privacy in dating relationships to avoid teasing or to hide sexual expressions in the relationship. Hence, monitoring adolescents' dating relationships is a challenge for any parent. In this study, we focus on parents' efforts to control their adolescents' behaviors through psychological control and behavioral monitoring. Parental psychological control involves the manipulation of adolescents' thoughts and feelings, and restriction of their autonomy and independence through love withdrawal, ignoring, shaming, or guilt induction (Barber 1996; Casas et al. 2006; De Kemp et al. 2006). Parents who employ psychological control may be attempting to protect their youth and retain importance in their youth's life. However, the use of psychological control has been associated with internalizing and externalizing problems in children and adolescents (Casas et al. 2006) and to peer victimization (Ladd and Kochenderfer-Ladd 1998). Children who have been in chaotic/distrusting parenting relationships or have manipulative parents may see relationships as a source of hurt and disappointment and have negative representations about their role in relationships, making them easy targets for dating overt and relational victimization. Alternatively, adolescents may model parents' controlling and dominant behaviors because they appear normative and effective for resolving conflicts in romantic relationships.

Parental behavioral monitoring is conceptually distinct from psychological control in that the former refers to attempts to regulate adolescents' behaviors through firm discipline,

setting limits, and mutual negotiation of conflicts (Borawski et al. 2003; Galambos et al. 2003). Effective parental monitoring relies on trust and open lines of communication between parents and adolescents. It reflects the degree to which parents know where their adolescents are and how they spend their time, and includes attending to, tracking, and structuring contexts for the youth (Borawski et al. 2003). Higher levels of effective monitoring have been linked with lower levels of aggressive behaviors in youth (Galambos et al. 2003; Lavoie et al. 2002; Mills and Rubin 1998). Family divorce and low parental monitoring are also associated with physical and sexual dating violence (Banyard et al. 2006).

Peer Influence on Dating Violence

Attachment systems in close friendships and romantic relationships, in part, also reflect early patterns of parent–child interactions (Furman et al. 2002; Hazan and Shaver 1987). However, close friendships may provide unique influences by fostering social skills in dating relationships and providing information and advice about dating behaviors and norms (Brown 1990; Furman et al. 2002). The emergence of mixed-sex peer groups in adolescence corresponds to the initiation of dating relationships (Connolly et al. 2000), suggesting that dating partners are selected from adolescents' social networks. Close dyadic friendships teach children valuable social lessons about feelings of closeness, intimacy and mutuality that are important for dating relationships (Furman et al. 2002). Positive same-sex friendship quality is also related to autonomy (Taradash et al. 2001), affection (Shulman and Scharf 2000) and quality (Linder and Collins 2005) in romantic relationships.

Conversely, children who have a history of problematic same-sex peer interactions are likely to transfer these maladaptive patterns to their dating relationships (Brendgen et al. 2002). For example, adolescents whose peers approve of or engage in aggressive and violent dating relationships are more likely to follow suit than adolescents whose peers disapprove of aggressive behaviors (Arriaga and Foshee 2004; Foshee et al. 2004; Lavoie et al. 2001; Prospero 2006). Swart et al. (2002) found that adolescents who witnessed physical violence in their friendships were more likely to report violence in their dating relationships. Adolescent peer groups that normalize dating aggression may increase adolescents' belief that dating violence is justified and acceptable (Lavoie et al. 2001). Moreover, some youth fail to recognize violence until the relationship ends (Ismail et al. 2007). Girls may choose to stay in a violent dating relationship rather than not have a boyfriend in peer groups where this is the norm (Banister et al. 2003).

The Influence of Adolescents' Maladjustment on Dating Victimization and Aggression

Both internalizing symptoms (Zimmer-Gembeck et al. 2001) and externalizing behavior (Capaldi et al. 2000) have been linked to problematic romantic relationships in adolescence. Depression is predictive of physical violence with dating partners for both girls (Cleveland et al. 2003) and boys (Howard and Wang 2003) and also may be a consequence of experiencing dating aggression (Hagan and Foster 2001). Although the majority of the research examining adolescent adjustment has considered only physical or overt dating aggression and victimization, there is also evidence that dating relational aggression predicts depression among adolescents (Hagan and Foster 2001). Gender differences are also

possible. In a study of adolescents' peer relationships (Leadbeater et al. 2006), a subgroup of physically aggressive, non-victimized boys experienced little depression, compared to groups of non-aggressive adolescents or victimized adolescents. However, the physically aggressive, non-victimized girls were as likely as victimized girls (who were not aggressive) to experience high levels of depressive symptoms, suggesting that the mental health costs of aggression may be higher for girls than boys.

Research also shows that adolescents who bully others are more likely to have poor quality dating relationships and exhibit physical and social aggression with their dating partners, compared to non-bullies (Connolly et al. 2000). Aggression or victimization in peer friendships may persist in the dating domain due to underlying cognitive and perceptual biases that affect expectations of peers (Ladd 2006). For example, overtly aggressive children often attribute hostile intentions to friends even when the friends' intentions are ambiguous (Steinberg and Dodge 1983) and may overestimate the quality of their friendships (Brendgen et al. 2000). Perceptual biases such as these may be evident in later romantic relationships and lead to frustration and conflict that perpetuate aggressive interchanges.

Hypotheses

We hypothesized that high levels of parental psychological control and lower levels of parental behavioral monitoring will be associated with adolescents' experiences of victimization and aggression in dating relationships. Parental psychological control may interfere with adolescents' assertiveness in relationships and model unhealthy manipulations of partners in an attempt to maintain closeness. Effective behavioral control may provide a supportive context that allows parents to become aware of unhealthy relationships and encourage adolescents to ask for help in dealing with them. Because the quality of romantic relationships is so closely linked to behavior and experiences with peers and because dating relationships often originate within peer networks, we also hypothesized that aggression and victimization in the peer domain would predict similar styles of behaviors with dating partners. Furthermore, we hypothesized that adolescents with higher levels of emotional and behavioral maladjustment would report more aggressive dating relationships and that associations between behavioral problems and dating aggression would be strongest.

We did not make specific predictions relating to gender. A meta-analysis (Archer 2004) suggests that findings of gender differences in indirect or relational aggression with peers are inconsistent and reflect differences in measures used (observations, self, peer or teacher ratings), sample characteristics (school versus community based), and study location (European versus North American). Focusing on dating relationships, adolescent males report greater romantic relational victimization than females in one study (Linder et al. 2002). There is also mixed evidence for gender differences in the use of physical aggression (Foshee et al. 2007). O'Donnell et al. (2006) report that peer-directed aggression declines throughout adolescence; however, it persists in the dating domain. Given these mixed findings, we did not make specific predictions about gender differences, but examined their effects in all analyses.

Methods

Participants in the Healthy Youth Survey

Participants in the present study completed the “Healthy Youth Survey” questionnaire in the spring of 2003. The University of Victoria’s Human Research Ethics Board approved this research. Participants were recruited in a medium-sized Canadian city. From a random sample of 9,500 telephone listings, 1,036 households with an eligible youth between ages 12–19 years were identified. Of these, 187 youth refused participation and 185 parents or guardians refused their youth’s participation. Complete data were available from 664 youth (mean age 15.5 years, $SD = 1.93$ years; 322 boys and 342 girls). The ethnic make-up of participants was 85% European-Canadian, 4% Asian, and 11% other ethnicities.

Participants were asked to indicate whether they were currently in a dating relationship. Dating was defined to participants as, “seeing someone or going out with someone who is more than just a friend (could be a ‘boyfriend,’ ‘girlfriend,’ or ‘partner’).” One hundred and forty-nine of the youth (22%, 51 boys, 98 girls) reported that they were currently dating and only data for these youth were included in the analyses (12–19 years, mean age 16.5, $SD = 1.7$ years). Of these, 9.4% of the participants dated the same person for less than 1 month, 35.6% for 1–3 months, 21.5% for 4–6 months, 13.4% for 6 months to 1 year, and 15.5% for 1 year or more. Seven did not respond to this question. Seventy-nine percent of the dating youth lived in a household with two or more adults. Approximately 87% of fathers and 74% of mothers were employed at a part-time or full-time job. Eighteen percent of the fathers finished high school only, and 50% of fathers completed college/university training. Thirteen percent of the mothers finished high school only, and 48% of mothers completed college/university training. Thirty eight percent reported experiencing one or fewer moves in their lifetime, 39% had two to four moves, and 23% had five or more moves in their lifetime. Fifty percent of the youth reported that they had attended a maximum of three schools in their lifetime.

Independent samples *t*-tests were used to compare youth in dating relationships with those who were not dating on overt and relational dating victimization, relational dating aggression, father and mother psychological control, parental monitoring, overt and relational peer victimization and aggression, and emotional and behavioral problems. Dating youth reported significantly higher levels of father psychological control ($t(644) = 5.48, p < .001; M = 1.49, SD = .47$), mother psychological control ($t(658) = 2.59, p < .05; M = 1.35, SD = .36$), emotional problems ($t(662) = 4.17, p < .001; M = 1.78, SD = .32$), and behavioral problems ($t(662) = 2.45, p < .05; M = 1.57, SD = .29$), compared to non-dating youth ($M = 1.30, SD = .35$ for father psychological control; $M = 1.26, SD = .33$ for mother psychological control; $M = 1.65, SD = .33$ for emotional problems; and $M = 1.51, SD = .24$ for behavioral problems). Youth in dating relationships also reported significantly lower levels of parental monitoring ($t(662) = -3.72, p < .001; M = 2.50, SD = .47$) than non-dating youth ($M = 2.64, SD = .37$). While levels of differences are small in magnitude, the consistency of these effects suggests that dating youth, as a group, were experiencing more emotional, behavioral and parental risk factors than their peers.

Procedure

Youth and their parents or guardians both gave informed and written consent. All interviews were administered in the youth's home or another private place. The "Healthy Youth Survey" questionnaire consisted of two parts. A trained interviewer administered part one to the youth and recorded their answers regarding demographics, bullying, peer victimization, and relationships with parents and peers. The second part included questions about the use of illegal substances and delinquent activities. To ensure confidentiality for the second part, the interviewer read the questions out loud and the youth recorded their own answers. All responses were placed in an envelope and sealed to maintain confidentiality. On average, it took youth 1 h and 15 min to complete the survey. For their participation, youth received a 25 dollar gift certificate for a music or grocery store.

Measures

Relational Dating Victimization—Five items tapped the participants' perception of their partners' ignoring, exclusion, and covert efforts to manipulate the study participant in the dating relationship (i.e., "My dating partner tries to make me feel jealous as a way of getting back at me", "When my dating partner wants something, s/he will ignore me until I give in", "My dating partner has threatened to break up with me in order to get me to do what s/he wants", "My dating partner doesn't pay attention to me when s/he is mad at me", and "When my dating partner is mad at me, s/he won't invite me to do things with our friends"). Overt dating victimization items ($n = 3$) tapped direct pushing and shoving or verbal threats of physical harm (i.e., "My dating partner has threatened to physically harm me in order to control me", "My dating partner has tried to get her/his own way through physical intimidation", and "My dating partner has pushed or shoved me in order to get me to do what s/he wants"). Youth rated on how true each of the statements on relational and overt dating victimization were true on a five-point scale of 1 = not at all true to 5 = very true. Average scores were computed by summing each adolescent's scores for the items within the relational dating victimization scale and the overt dating victimization scale, respectively, and then dividing by the number of items answered (range from 1 to 5 for relational and overt dating victimization). Filler items included three items giving positive statements about the relationship (e.g., "I feel a strong bond with my dating partner"). Chronbach's α s for the relational and overt victimization scales were .57 and .55, respectively. While the internal consistency is somewhat low, the endorsement of specific dating behaviors (e.g., cheating, exclusion) as exemplars of victimization has considerable face validity and not every behavior is expected to occur in a relationship.

Relational Dating Aggression—A five-item scale that tapped the adolescents' attempts to manipulate the dating relationship by jealousy, ignoring, or threatening to end the relationship was used. Items include efforts to create jealousy (i.e., "I have cheated on my dating partner because I was angry at her/him"; "If my dating partner makes me mad I will flirt with another person in front of him/her"; "I try to make my dating partner jealous when I am mad at him/her"), ignore the partner (i.e., "I give my dating partner the silent treatment when he or she hurts my feelings in some way"), and threats to end the relationship (i.e. "I have threatened to break up with my dating partner in order to get her/him to do what I wanted"). Adolescents rated on how true each of the items on relational dating aggression

were true of themselves on a five-point scale of 1 = not at all true to 5 = very true. Average scores were computed by summing each adolescent's scores for the items, and then dividing by the number of items answered (range from 1 to 5). Chronbach's α for this scale was .67.

Parental Psychological Control—Using the Psychological Control Scale—Youth Self-Report, adolescents indicated their experiences of parental psychological control (PCS-YSR; Barber 1996). The youth were instructed to rate how well statements described their father or mother on a 3-point scale of 1 = not like him/her, 2 = somewhat like him/her, or 3 = like him/her. Participants were told to apply the statements to the parent or guardian in their life that they considered to be their “father” or “mother.” Father psychological control was assessed by eight items (e.g., “My father is a person who is always trying to change how I feel or think about things.”) and mother psychological control was assessed by eight items (e.g., “My mother is a person who changes the subject whenever I have something to say.”). Average scores were computed by summing each adolescent's scores for the items, and then dividing by the number of items answered. Separate scores were computed for fathers' and mothers' psychological control (range from 1 to 3). The internal consistencies were good ($\alpha = .79$ for father psychological control, and $\alpha = .75$ for mother psychological control).

Parental Monitoring—Barber et al.'s (1994) parental monitoring measure was used to assess the degree of monitoring of the youth. Youth responded to five items on parental monitoring (i.e., “How much do your parents really know where you go at night?”, “How much do your parents really know where you are most afternoons after school?”, “How much do your parents really know how you spend your money?”, “How much do your parents really know what you do with your free time?”, and “How much do your parents really know who your friends are?”) using a 3-point scale (1 = they don't know, 2 = they know a little, 3 = they know a lot). Average scores were computed by summing each youth's scores for the items within the parental monitoring scale, and then dividing by the number of items answered (range from 1 to 3) The internal consistency of parental monitoring was $\alpha = .65$.

Victimization by Peers—Using two subscales of the Social Experiences Questionnaire, adolescents' experiences of peer victimization were assessed (SEQ; Crick and Grotpeter 1995). Five items on the survey were used to assess adolescents' experiences of relational victimization (e.g., “How often do your peers leave you out on purpose when it is time to do an activity?”) and five items were used to assess experiences of physical victimization (e.g., “How often do you get hit by your peers?”). Youth responded on a 3-point Likert-type scale to indicate how often these experiences happened to them (1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = almost all the time). Average scores were computed by summing each adolescent's scores for the items within the relational victimization scale and the physical victimization scale, respectively, and then dividing by the number of items answered (range from 1 to 3 for both relational and physical victimization). Using Cronbach's α , internal consistencies were found to be $\alpha = .73$ for the relational victimization subscale and $\alpha = .67$ for the physical victimization subscale.

Aggression Against Peers—The involvement of participants in interpersonal aggression was assessed using the Children’s Peer Relations Scale (CPRS; Crick and Grotpeter 1995). A 5-point Likert scale was utilized to determine how often youth were involved in bullying behavior (1 = never, 2 = almost never, 3 = sometimes, 4 = almost all the time, 5 = all the time). Five questions were used to assess relational aggression (e.g., “Some teens tell lies about someone so that the others won’t like them anymore. How often do you do this?”); three items assessed physical aggression (e.g., “Some teens hit each other. How often do you do this?”). Average scores were computed by summing each adolescent’s scores for the items within the relational aggression scale and the physical aggression scale, respectively, and then dividing by the number of items answered (range from 1 to 5 for both relational and physical aggression). Internal consistencies were $\alpha = .64$ for relational aggression and $\alpha = .78$ for physical aggression.

Adjustment Problems—Adolescents’ emotional and behavioral problems were assessed using the adolescent self-report form of the Brief Child and Family Phone Interview (BCFPI; Cunningham et al. 2002). Emotional problems were compiled from three six-item subscales that tapped (1) separation from adults (e.g., “Do you notice that you feel sick before being separated from those you are close to?”), (2) managing anxiety (e.g., “Do you notice that you worry about doing better at things?”), and (3) managing mood (e.g., “Do you notice that you have trouble enjoying yourself?”). Behavioral problems were compiled from three different six-item subscales that tapped (1) regulating attention, impulsivity, and activity level (e.g. “Do you notice that you have difficulty following directions or instructions?”), (2) non-cooperation with others (e.g. “Do you notice that you are easily annoyed with others?”), and (3) conduct (e.g., “How often do you destroy things that belong to others?”). High scores on the non-cooperation with others scale represent noncompliant, defiant and resentful relationships with adults and peers. Adolescents rated how often the experiences described in these 36 items occurred on a 3-point Likert-type scale (1 = never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often). Average scores were computed by summing each adolescent’s scores for the items within the emotional and behavioral problems scales, respectively, and then dividing by the number of items answered (range from 1 to 3). Chronbach’s α s for these two scales were .85 and .79 for emotional and behavioral problems, respectively.

Results

Healthy Youth Survey Findings

Descriptive Statistics—Means, standard deviations, and bivariate Pearson’s correlations between all variables are shown in Table 1. Correlations revealed that overt dating victimization was modestly, but significantly correlated with relational dating victimization ($r = .31$). Relational dating aggression was more strongly correlated with relational ($r = .59$) than overt dating victimization ($r = .14$; $z = 4.59$, $p < .001$). Overt dating victimization was also modestly correlated with relational victimization by peers, with the participants’ overt and relational aggression towards peers, and negatively correlated with parental monitoring. Relational dating victimization was correlated with mothers’ psychological control, and negatively correlated with parental monitoring and with participants’ overt and relational aggression towards their peers as well as their own emotional and behavioral problems.

Being relationally aggressive in a dating relationship was correlated significantly with mothers' and fathers' psychological control, peer relational and overt aggression, with emotional and behavioral problems, and negatively correlated with parental monitoring.

Separate hierarchical regression analyses were used to examine the influences of parent, peer, and individual factors on relational and physical dating victimization and relational dating aggression. While examining these three sources of influence simultaneously would better reveal their independent effects, sample size limitations did not afford adequate power to do this (Cohen and Cohen 1975).

In each model age and gender were entered as control variables. Because overt and relational victimization were moderately correlated, we also controlled for each when predicting the other. All equations were significant overall. Gender was not a significant predictor of any of the dependent variables and age was independently associated with relational dating victimization and aggression, with older youth showing more negative behaviors. Interactions of the parent, peer and individual predictor variables with age and gender were examined, but these were not significant beyond chance so they were not included in the final models.

The findings for influences on relational dating victimization (controlling for age, gender and overt dating victimization) are summarized in Table 2. There were no significant effects for parental psychological control or parental monitoring. For the peer model, participants' relational aggression against peers was independently associated with relational dating victimization. For the individual model, youth behavioral problems were positively related to relational dating victimization. In all three models overt dating victimization explained variance in overt dating victimization beyond family, peer and individual predictions.

The findings for influences on overt dating victimization are summarized in Table 3. Higher levels of parental monitoring were significantly related to less overt dating victimization. None of the peer or individual variables were independently related to overt dating victimization, although peer relational victimization approached significance ($p < .10$). In all three models relational victimization explained variance in overt dating victimization beyond family, peer and individual predictions.

For relational dating aggression, mothers' psychological control was associated with more aggression whereas parental monitoring was negatively related. Youth reports of relational aggression against peers were positively associated with relational dating aggression. Finally, youth behavioral problems were independently related to more relational dating aggression (Table 4).

Discussion

This study extends previous research by examining parent, peer, and individual differences that contribute to relational and physical victimization in adolescent dating relationships. This is also among the first studies to examine parent, peer and individual influences on relational aggression in adolescent dating relationships. Parent, peer and individual differences were all important in explaining variance in relational aggression. The models

were less effective in explaining overt victimization (with only parental monitoring showing an independent relationship) and relational victimization (with only relational aggression against peers and individual behavioral problems contributing significantly to the explained variance in the models).

Validating the new scale used in this study, relational dating aggression was more strongly correlated with relational than overt dating victimization. The moderately high correlation between relational dating aggression and victimization, in part, reflects shared method variance but also suggests that these more subtle forms of relational aggression and victimization may be reciprocal (Crick and Grotpeter 1995), as Banister et al. (2003) found in their study. In that study, girls' described episodes of relational aggression used by boyfriends who "try to control you" or "act as if they own you." For example, one girl explained how her boyfriend put down her friends in a bid for exclusivity saying: "I was going out with this guy and every time I wanted to go hang out with my friends he'd be like, 'All your friends are sluts and everything. You're just going to go get drunk with them and hook up with somebody else!'" Attempts to end controlling relationships also escalated as boyfriends tried to evoke guilt by displaying extreme emotional distress. As one girl said: "I could hear him like screaming on our front yard, 'I fucking love you!' And it was like, oh, [he was] crying even more. It was so sad ... and then he was like 'please take me back!'" This example illustrates how the boyfriend's more subtle form of relational aggression contributed to the girl's distress.

The moderate correlation of relational and overt dating victimization ($r = .31$) also suggests that both types of victimization may co-occur within a relationship. Longitudinal research is needed to better understand their causal sequencing. Given that relational victimization is more covert and less likely to draw sanctions from parents and peers in this age group, escalations from relational to overt victimization may only occur over time. To illustrate, a girl from Banister et al.'s sample describes how "having fun but fighting" evolves into reciprocated physical aggression:

"And he's like 'ah, ah,' and we were just having fun, but fighting at the same time. And then he made me real mad so I kicked him in the shin. So he like slapped me in the arm or whatever. So I slapped him. And then he slapped me back. And I slapped him. And he slapped me back. He got me six times. I got him like three or four. But we were just like half joking around and kind of having an argument but not really. And I lay back down and it was like he had shoved my head onto the ground and slap, slap, slap, slap, slap on my head. Like not soft. Like slap, slap, slap.

As shown in this example, reciprocated physical aggression can lead to untoward consequences.

Influences on Overt and Relational Dating Victimization

Consistent with past research (Lavoie et al. 2002), lack of parental monitoring was associated with overt dating victimization (after controlling for relational dating victimization and parental psychological control). Parents who use positive monitoring strategies know where their adolescents are, typically by relying on firm discipline, setting

limits, open and trusting communication, conflict negotiation, and by providing transportation assistance to out-of-home activities. It is likely that this involvement enhances parents' ability to be aware of and reduce risks for overt victimization by dating partners, who may seek to isolate and have exclusive control of their partner. Behavioral monitoring also increases adolescents' ability to ask for help if needed. Relationships of parental variables to relational victimization were weaker and not significant in the regression equations. It is possible that parental monitoring is less effective against relational than overt victimization. It may be that it is not until overt victimization begins that adolescents are able to actually label the relationship as harmful or unhealthy despite their discomfort with their partners' efforts to induce jealousy or manipulate friends to harm the relationship.

Youth may learn about romantic relationships by observing and reflecting upon the behaviors of others, and in the absence of positive role models lack accurate information about healthy relationships or dating aggression. To illustrate, a young woman from Banister et al.'s (2003) sample said:

And watching that [her mother's repeated abuse by boyfriends], like, that's what I learned. And I was always, like, 'I don't want to be like my mom at all.' So I found a guy and he doesn't physically abuse me, he emotionally abuses me. And, like, it's *so hard*. Like, I know that I should get away from him and I, I can't, because it's too hard.

Negotiating the constraints and choices in their heterosexual romantic relationships without adult participation may be particularly difficult for adolescents (Tolman et al. 2003).

Surprisingly, victimization in peer relationships was not associated with relational and overt victimization in dating relationships (with the exception of a trend between relational victimization in peer relations and overt dating victimization). It would be expected that youth who are victimized by peers would also be vulnerable to abuse in romantic relationships. However, it may be that adolescent victims of peer abuse escape into exclusive romantic relationships. Ample literature on bullying suggests that having a best friend can protect youth against victimization (Hartup 2005). It is possible that romantic relationships can serve a similar purpose in protecting youth from bullying peers. Dating partners may even be drawn together through similar peer experiences. The functions and quality of romantic relationships were not studied in this research but future research could shed light on the potential of dating relationships as protectors against peer bullying.

Relational victimization in dating relationships was associated with relational aggression against peers and with behavior problems, in general. Youth who use relational aggression against peers also experience more relational victimization likely due to retaliation (Leadbeater et al. 2006), and it is likely that youth who are accustomed to using relational aggression with peers also do so in dating relationships. Also consistent with social cognitive theory (Crick and Grotpeter 1995; Yeung and Leadbeater 2007), relationally aggressive youth may attribute more hostility to their dating partners and see themselves as victims of this hostility. It is also likely that norms about the use of aggressive behavior that are established in interactions with peers are used to justify its use in romantic relationships. Youth who use relational aggression to manage their peer friendships also may have higher

expectations for exclusivity and control in dating relationships and be particularly vulnerable to feeling victimized when their partner doesn't pay attention to them, does things with others, or tries to make them feel jealous. Relational aggression also becomes increasingly more accepted and sophisticated at the time when romantic relationships are initiated (Rose et al. 2004). Relational and overt aggression in peer relationships were also moderately correlated in this sample ($r = .50$), indicating that both may be used by some youth. Providing school and family-based opportunities for adults and more conventional peers to challenge the normative use of aggression in peer relationships may be necessary to reducing dating victimization.

Youth behavioral problems add to the explained variance in both relational dating victimization and relational dating aggression. Youth behavioral problems (such as delinquency, destroying property, etc.) are also moderately correlated with aggression against peers, in this study ($r = .50$ and $.51$, for overt and relational aggression, respectively), suggesting aggressive behaviors may be pervasive in these young peoples' relationships. Attachment problems may be particularly pervasive for aggressive and delinquent youth and specific intervention targeting these youth, and their relationships with parents and peers may be needed (Moretti et al. 2004).

While emotional problems (depressive symptoms and anxiety) moderately correlated with behavioral problems in this research, their independent effects on dating victimization and aggression were not significant in this small sample. Past research shows that excessive interpersonal sensitivities to interpersonal stress and losing relationships characterizes the dysphoric styles of some adolescents (particularly girls, see Leadbeater et al. 1999). Excessive fear of losing a relationship may expose some youth to risks for tolerating victimization by their dating partners (Banister et al. 2003). Some youth with dysphonic interpersonal vulnerabilities may also over perceive victimization in dating relationships due to heightened sensitivities to rejection and loss, a lowered threshold for perception of negativity, a propensity for personalizing negative cues, or intense affective reactions (Pietrzak et al. 2005).

Relational Dating Aggression

This is among the first studies to examine parent, peer and individual influences on relational dating aggression that is characterized here as efforts to manipulate romantic relationships by using jealousy, ignoring, and threats to end the relationship. Participants who reported higher levels of mothers' psychological control and lower parental monitoring were more likely to use relational aggression in their dating relationships. These findings concur with previous research showing that parental psychological control that involves restriction of adolescents' autonomy and manipulation of their thoughts and feelings, can compromise their autonomy and assertiveness (Barber 1996; Borawski et al. 2003; Galambos et al. 2003). Parents' use of psychological control may also model manipulation and shaming as a means of controlling close relationships.

Effective behavioral monitoring by parents has been linked with lower levels of aggressive behaviors in youth (Galambos et al. 2003; Lavoie et al. 2002; Mills and Rubin 1998; Stice and Barrera 1995). Our findings suggest that monitoring is a protective factor with respect to

using relational aggression against a dating partner. Addressing the balance in the power dynamics of parent–adolescent relationships may be important to the prevention of relational aggression in adolescents dating relationships. Engendering equity in decision-making and respect for mutuality and autonomy in parent–adolescent relationships may set norms for healthier dating relationships.

Using relational aggression against peers was also associated with using relational aggression in dating relationships. The carry-over from using aggression in peer relations to relational aggression in dating relations is consistent with a growing body of research on physical aggression in adolescent dating relationships (Arriaga and Foshee 2004; Foshee et al. 2004; Lavoie et al. 2001; Prospero 2006). When aggressive behaviors are normalized in peer relationships, they can be called on to resolve conflicts in the emotionally charged conflicts of young dating partners. Provoking jealousy in dating relationships may lead some partners to feel justified in also flirting in the relationships or cheating to try to control the partner—leading to a cycle of negativity (Linder et al. 2002).

Limitations

This study is limited in particular by the small sample size. Only 22% of the 12–18 year old youth in our research reported involvement in dating relationships. Longitudinal data continues to be collected with this sample and will likely yield a larger sample of adolescent daters over time, allowing for prospective analyses of the relationships assessed in this research. Because of the small sample size, we examined parent, peer and individual influences separately and were unable to assess their independent effects. It is also possible that there are gender differences that are untapped by our small sample. Nevertheless, the findings of this study support the hypothesis that the inter-relations among parent, peer, and individual are important for understanding victimization and aggression in adolescent dating relationships. While these relationships appear to be additive in this cross-sectional study, other models should be tested. For example, it may be that the relations between parental psychological control and relational dating aggression are mediated by the youth's behavioral problems.

The direction of effects of parental and peer influences and maladjustment on dating violence need to be further studied. Negative experiences associated with adolescent dating violence can disrupt normal developmental processes, such as the development of a stable self-concept and integrated body image during adolescence (Ackard et al. 2003), and may lead to impairments in behaviors, thoughts, and feelings (Grasley et al. 1999). Problematic romantic relationships can have multiplying negative effects, for example, on adolescents' self-esteem (Ackard et al. 2003), academic achievement (Sadker and Sadker 1994), and emotional health (Compian et al. 2004). Hagan and Foster (2001) argue that the life-course consequences of experiences with violence, especially violence in intimate relationships, can lead to depression and premature exits from adolescence to early adulthood. In addition, the effects of parental psychological control may be less apparent to youth than their own relational victimization by or aggression with peers. Gathering data from parents, peers, and dating partners may be necessary to better understand these concerns.

This study is also limited by its exclusive focus on relational dating aggression. While little work has examined relational aggression, its independent effects compared to overt dating aggression cannot be determined in this study. Moreover, the items for assessing relational aggression were gleaned from qualitative data from girls (Banister et al. 2003) and not that of boys. Although gender differences were not found in levels of relational and overt victimization and relational aggression in this sample, it is possible that boys' experiences of relational victimization could be expressed differently—for example as “put downs” or efforts to humiliate a partner in front of peers rather than as control efforts. Further qualitative data on relational victimization is needed that includes boys.

Conclusions and Practical Implications

The relative importance of peers and parents has been widely debated (Harris 1995). Investigations that simultaneously examine parenting and peer experiences on adolescent behavior often show that peer influence is independent of, or greater than that of parents. For example, high quality friendships can weaken links between negative aspects of parenting and adjustment difficulties (Bolger et al. 1998; Gauze et al. 1996; Lansford et al. 2003). In terms of dating adjustment, experiences with same-sex friends may also outweigh or moderate parental effects. Linder and Collins (2005) found that supportive, high quality friendships were related to positive conflict resolution with dating partners, despite early family violence. However, the current study suggests that different aspects of parental and peer behaviors are important in enhancing or decreasing risks for different types of dating victimization and relational aggression. Moderating relationships may also be important—for example, are the effects of aggression against peers on dating violence limited in the context of high quality parental monitoring? The past failure to make distinctions between more overt and subtle relational forms of aggression and victimization may cloud an understanding of the influences of parents and peers and routes to intervention or prevention of dating relationship violence.

Our use of qualitative data (Banister et al. 2003) for our questionnaire items for assessing relational aggression served to illuminate some of the complexities and heterogeneity of this phenomenon. Further qualitative studies on dating relationship aggression can help locate the meaning of this phenomenon within adolescents' social and cultural contexts.

Results from this study point to the need for dating violence prevention and treatment programs that reach adolescents “where they are.” Parent and peer ecologies need to be considered in the design of dating violence prevention and treatment programs. The inclusion of healthy peers and a supportive adult mentor in prevention programs can offer adolescents positive alternatives for relationships (Banister and Leadbeater 2007). Dating prevention curricula are needed that are developmentally appropriate, culturally and gender sensitive, and geographically relevant (Banister and Begoray 2006). Adolescents have identified that prevention programs should focus less on dating violence information and more on how to identify and maintain healthy relationships (Sears et al. 2006) and on skills in developing healthy relationships (Sears et al. 2007). Many adolescents do not recognize maladaptive relational and emotional behaviors as abuse. Prevention programs can include

materials developed in collaboration with adolescents (see, for example, brochures on teen dating violence and healthy relationships, <http://www.youth.society.uvic.ca>).

It has been reported that adolescents believe that adults would not appreciate the extent of the violence in adolescents' lives, or act as advocates for them (Berman et al. 2002). Prevention approaches require that parents and health practitioners be aware of the prevalence of adolescent dating violence and the potential for associated health risk behaviors. They need to obtain the skills and knowledge to assess and treat aggression in peer romantic relationships. Parents and practitioners need to ask adolescents direct questions about dating aggression to reduce the possibility of further victimization (e.g., "Does your boyfriend get jealous when you spend time with your friends?"). Our research suggests that prevention of adolescent dating aggression can be targeted at multiple levels including early intervention for youth at risk (e.g., those who witness family violence), as well as programs that assist parents in monitoring their adolescents, or help youth to identify and end the use of aggression in their dating and peer relationships.

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Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	Mean (SD)
1. Overt dating victimization														1.06 (.25)
2. Relational dating victimization	.31**													1.35 (.41)
3. Relational dating aggression	.14	.59**												1.40 (.50)
4. Psychological control (F)	.05	.14	.21*											1.49 (.47)
5. Psychological control (M)	.15	.18*	.38**	.30**										1.35 (.36)
6. Parental monitoring	-.25**	-.19*	-.36**	-.21*	-.41**									2.50 (.47)
7. Overt peer victimization	.16	.15	.09	.22**	.23**	-.20*								1.12 (.22)
8. Relational peer victimization	.19*	.07	.10	.26**	.21**	-.11	.62**							1.18 (.32)
9. Overt peer aggression	.19*	.17*	.17*	.10	.29**	-.20*	.61**	.28**						1.38 (.56)
10. Relational peer aggression	.21*	.24**	.26**	.14	.33**	-.32**	.27**	.28**	.50**					1.31 (.35)
11. Emotional problems	.14	.24**	.35**	.43**	.29**	-.27**	.24**	.31**	.11	.19*				1.78 (.32)
12. Behavioral problems	.12	.28**	.40**	.31**	.42**	-.43**	.48**	.38**	.53**	.50**	.50*			1.57 (.29)
13. Gender	-.15	-.03	.15	.26**	.08	.07	-.22**	.02	-.34**	-.23**	.14	-.07		
14. Age	-.09	.14	.21**	.01	.03	-.02	-.19*	-.11	-.20*	-.19*	.12	-.12	.16*	16.5 (1.7)

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

F = Fathers' psychological control. M = Mothers' psychological control

Table 2

Effects of parental, peer, and individual predictors on relational dating victimization (controlling for overt dating victimization)

Variable	Relational dating victimization			
	β^a	R ²	F	df
<i>Parent model</i>				
Age	.15	.15	3.99**	6,142
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	-.02			
Overt dating victimization	.29**			
Fathers' psychological control	.09			
Mothers' psychological control	.07			
Parental monitoring	-.07			
<i>Peer model</i>				
Age	.20*	.19	4.53***	7,145
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	.08	.06		
Overt dating victimization	.30***			
Overt victimization	.18			
Relational victimization	-.13			
Overt aggression	-.00			
Relational aggression	.21*			
<i>Individual model</i>				
Age	.18*	.20	6.81***	5,145
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	-.00	.07		
Overt dating victimization	.30***			
Emotional problems	.06			
Behavioral problems	.24*			

^a β are standardized values at the final step. $p < .10$.* $p < .05$,** $p < .01$,*** $p < .001$

Table 3

Effects of parental, peer, and individual predictors on overt dating victimization (controlling for relational dating victimization)

Variable	Overt dating victimization				
	β^a	R^2	F	df	
<i>Parent model</i>					
Age	-.12	.17	.04	4.66***	6,142
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	-.11				
Relational dating victimization	.28**				
Fathers' psychological control	-.00				
Mothers' psychological control	.05				
Parental monitoring	-.18*				
<i>Peer model</i>					
Age	-.10	.16	.03	3.88**	7,145
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	-.13				
Relational dating victimization	.30***				
Overt victimization	-.09				
Relational victimization	.19				
Overt aggression	.06				
Relational aggression	.04				
<i>Individual model</i>					
Age	-.14	.14	.01	4.70**	5,145
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	-.14				
Relational dating victimization	.31***				
Emotional problems	.13				
Behavioral problems	-.06				

^a β are standardized values at the final step. $p < .10$.* $p < .05$,** $p < .01$,*** $p < .001$

Table 4

Effects of parental, peer, and individual influences on relational dating aggression perpetrated by youth

Variable	Relational dating aggression			
	β^a	R ²	R ²	F
<i>Parent model</i>				
Age	.17*	.26	.20	9.55***
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	.11			
Fathers' psychological control	.05			
Mothers' psychological control	.23*			
Parental monitoring	-.28***			
<i>Peer model</i>				
Age	.25**	.23	.05	5.20***
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	.22*			
Overt victimization	.02			
Relational victimization	-.00			
Overt aggression	.14			
Relational aggression	.27**			
<i>Individual model</i>				
Age	.22*	.25	.19	11.78***
Gender (1 = male, 2 = female)	.12			
Emotional problems	.12			
Behavioral problems	.36***			

^a β are standardized values at the final step. $p < .10$.* $p < .05$,** $p < .01$,*** $p < .001$