



Experiences of psychological and physical aggression in adolescent romantic relationships: Links to psychological distress[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This research examined links between adolescents' experiences of psychological and physical relationship aggression and their psychological distress. Experiences of psychological and physical aggression were expected to correlate positively with symptoms of psychological distress, but experiences of psychological aggression were expected to partially account for the association between experiences of physical aggression and psychological distress. In addition, psychological aggression was hypothesized to be perceived as more unpleasant and less playful than physical aggression.

Method: Participants were 125 high school students. Relationship aggression was assessed over an 8-week period using two methods: (1) a retrospective method based on a single assessment at the end of the 8-week period, and (2) a cumulative method based on multiple assessments conducted during the 8-week period. Adolescents' appraisals of the aggression were also measured, as were their reports of symptoms of psychological distress.

Results: Adolescents' experiences of psychological and physical relationship aggression correlated positively, but inconsistently, with their symptoms of psychological distress. In analyses considering both forms of aggression simultaneously, psychological aggression was related to adolescents' distress, but physical aggression was not. This finding emerged across both methods of assessing for relationship aggression. Psychological aggression was more likely than physical aggression to be rated as unpleasant, and less likely to be attributed to the partner "playing around."

Conclusions: The study of adolescent relationship aggression will benefit by expanding the focus of aggression to include psychological aggression as well as physical aggression, and by examining adolescents' appraisals of the aggression they experience.

Practice implications: The findings highlight the importance of a broad view of aggression in adolescent relationships. Psychological aggression appears to be at least as important to adolescent well-being as physical aggression in dating relationships. In addition, it may be useful to consider how adolescents' interpret the intent of the aggression that they experience.

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Experiencing aggression in the context of a romantic relationship can have considerable consequences for adolescents' psychological adjustment. In addition to physical injury, symptoms of anxiety, trauma, and depression have all been linked to adolescents' experiences of aggression from a romantic partner (e.g., Bookwala, Frieze, Smith, & Ryan, 1992; Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003; Holt & Espelage, 2005; Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000; Molitor & Tolman, 1998). These psychological

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symptoms can be debilitating in their own right (Rudolph, Hammen, & Daley, 2006; Wolfe, Rawana, & Chiodo, 2006). They may also prompt substance abuse (Lipschitz et al., 2003), conflict within interpersonal relationships (Rudolph et al., 2000), and the perpetration of aggression and violence (Harper, Austin, Cercone, & Arias, 2005). In short, the potentially debilitating psychological consequences of adolescents' experiences of relationship aggression call for a better understanding of this form of interpersonal violence.

Research on aggression in adolescent romantic relationships often focuses on acts of physical aggression, such as pushes, slaps, and hits. Such acts warrant the attention they receive; however, they seldom occur in the absence of concomitant psychological aggression (James, West, Deters, & Armijo, 2000; O'Leary & Slep, 2003), exemplified by verbal and emotional abuse (e.g., insults, ridicule in front of others). As with physical aggression, experiencing psychological aggression in a romantic relationship correlates positively with adolescents' psychological distress (Holt & Espelage, 2005; Jezl, Molitor, & Wright, 1996; Katz & Arias, 1999). However, psychological aggression tends to be much more prevalent than physical aggression in adolescent romantic relationships (Holt & Espelage, 2005; Jackson et al., 2000; Wolfe et al., 2001), and frequent unpleasant events, even seemingly minor ones, can damage psychological health (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981). As a result, adolescents' experiences of psychological aggression may be as important as experiences of physical aggression in predicting psychological distress.

In the adult battering literature, women view their partners' psychological aggression as more negative than their physical aggression (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, & Polek, 1990; Vitanza, Vogel, & Marshall, 1995). In addition, women's psychological distress is more strongly related to the frequency of experiencing psychological aggression than physical aggression (Arias & Pape, 1999; Sackett & Saunders, 1999; Taft, Murphy, King, Dedeys, & Musser, 2005). It is not known whether these findings on psychological aggression generalize to adolescent romantic relationships. However, it seems plausible to hypothesize that psychological aggression may help explain the anxiety, trauma, and depressive symptoms among adolescents who experience physical relationship aggression.

Examining adolescents' appraisals of aggression may enhance the understanding of how experiences of psychological and physical aggression affect youth adjustment. In other literatures, appraisals have proven extremely valuable in understanding the impact of aggression on children and adolescents (e.g., Grych, Fincham, Jouriles, & McDonald, 2000). The literature evaluating appraisals of intent and consequences of adolescent relationship aggression suggests that adolescents attribute some of the physical aggression that occurs in their romantic relationships to their partner's "joking" or "playing around" (Arriaga, 2002). Such interpretations are more common among male than female adolescents (Jackson et al., 2000; Molitor & Tolman, 1998). At present, there are no data systematically comparing adolescents' appraisals of acts of psychological aggression relative to acts of physical aggression (e.g., whether the acts were appraised as playfully intended). At least some of the psychological aggression in adolescent romantic relationships is likely to be appraised as playfully intended, but items on most measures of psychological aggression conflate aggressive acts with appraisals of the acts (e.g., "insulted me with putdowns"). Such descriptions may result in adolescents being less likely to include in their reports of psychological aggression those acts they judge to have been intended as playful.

It is also not clear if including acts of aggression, delivered playfully, dilutes relations between adolescents' experiences of relationship aggression and psychological distress. This is not to say that physical or psychological aggression, delivered playfully, does not lead to psychological distress. On the contrary, it could potentially cause considerable harm, but this issue has not been researched, as most studies of adolescent relationship aggression simply assess for the occurrence of discrete acts of aggression (e.g., push, kick). It has been suggested that frequency counts of acts of violence "can be very misleading, because the psychological significance and the context of abusive actions are key aspects in defining relationship violence" (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999, p. 438). Although there has been some attention given to context and appraisals of aggressive acts in research on aggression in adolescent romantic relationships (e.g., Foo & Margolin, 1995; Jackson et al., 2000; Molitor & Tolman, 1998), there have not been systematic attempts to compare aggression data, refined by adolescent appraisals of the aggression, to counts of the occurrence of aggressive acts.

In an earlier study focusing on the assessment of aggression in adolescent romantic relationships (Jouriles, McDonald, Garrido, Rosenfield, & Brown, 2005), experiences of relationship aggression were assessed over an 8-week period using two methods: a *retrospective method* based on a single assessment conducted at the end of the 8-week period, asking about specific acts of aggression during the previous 8 weeks, and a *cumulative method* based on four assessments conducted over consecutive 2-week intervals, asking about specific acts of aggression during the 2-week period prior to each assessment. For the cumulative method, data from the four assessments were aggregated. Each method covered the same 8-week period and measured aggression with the same questionnaire items. The original study compared the data yielded by these two methods. Results indicated that the cumulative method yielded higher prevalence rates for physical relationship aggression and threatening behavior, as well as stronger associations between adolescents' experiences of relationship aggression and symptoms of psychological distress. Adolescents' experiences of psychological aggression (verbal and emotional abuse) were not examined in that study.

In the present research, hypotheses about adolescents' experiences of psychological and physical aggression and their relation to symptoms of psychological distress are examined using data from the Jouriles et al. (2005) study. Experiences of psychological and physical aggression were hypothesized to correlate positively with symptoms of psychological distress. However, associations between experiences of physical aggression and psychological distress were expected to be accounted for, at least in part, by the experiences of psychological aggression. In prior research, associations have emerged between experiences of psychological and physical relationship aggression and many different symptoms of psychological

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