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POSITIVE PARENTING AND DATING VIOLENCE

The Relationship between Positive Parenting Experiences in Childhood and Perpetration of  
Violence in Adult Dating Relationships

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April, 2015

### Abstract

Dating Violence is the perpetration of violence within a dating relationship. Negative experiences in childhood have been linked to dating violence through much research. This is often explained by Socialization theory (Bandura, 1971) which posits that observing and experiencing a pattern of behavior during childhood can lead to the adoption of that pattern of behavior as adults. Drawing from this theory, individuals who experience positive parenting in childhood learn and develop a supportive relationship style and, therefore, should commit violence against a dating partner as adults with less frequency. This project examines the relationship between positive parenting during childhood and dating violence among university students using data from the International Dating Violence Study (IDVS). The IDVS collected information from a sample of over 14,000 university students in 32 countries. Data will be analyzed using the SPSS statistical package. The results and their implications for future social work research, practice, and program development will be presented.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would first like to thank Professor Blanca Ramos and Mr. Young Do for the large part that they played in this thesis. Thanks to Professor Ramos as my academic advisor throughout my time in the Baccalaureate program at the School of Social Welfare. A special thank you to Young Do for his mentoring and advisement throughout the research process and for pushing me even when I doubted myself. Without his help this thesis would likely never have even been started. Thank you to Professor Jeffrey Haugaard, Director of the Honors College. The Honors College has provided me with great experiences including this research and has opened up many opportunities. I would also like to thank my mother, Tilly Huizinga, for her support of my going to college and all of the emotional support she offers me. I would like to thank my aunt Marcy Canary for being an extraordinary role model and second mother to me. Lastly, I would like to thank my sister Robyn Vernon for all of her emotional support and the comic relief that she adds to my life.

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## Introduction

The first study of dating violence among college students was published in 1981 by Makepeace in the article entitled “Courtship Violence among College Student.” It examined actual and threatened violence using surveys for data collection. The study found the majority of respondents (61.5%) had known someone who had faced this type of violence and one fifth of respondents had had personal experience with dating violence (Makepeace, 1981).

In a subsequent review of similar studies, Lewis and Fremouw (2000) noted a wide variance in prevalence rates. Differences in sampling, methodology, and data analyses were cited as factors in this variance as well as differences in the operant definition of dating violence. Some research showed that physical abuse in dating relationships was often mutual and that rates were similar between male and females who admitted to committing an act of violence in a dating relationship. (Sigelman, Jordan-Berry, & Wiles, 1984)

In 1987 Makepeace included social factors, for both victims and offenders, in a study of courtship violence. These included factors related to parents such as closeness to father and mother, discipline style of father and mother, and whether or not parents were usually home when the participants were growing up. The results indicated that offenders and victims of violence had similar and problematic profiles. Both were also less likely to have a close relationship with a parent and were more likely to have experienced a “lenient” discipline style.

More recently, the impact of social factors, such as parenting and disciplinary styles during childhood , on current dating relationships has been studied widely. These studies usually indicate that negative childhood experiences related to parenting and disciplinary styles are associated with perpetration and victimization of violence in dating relationships. Lewis and Fremouw (2000) cite several studies that have documented a significant relationship between

experience of child abuse and perpetration of dating violence. They also found some support for a relationship between parental divorce and the perpetration of dating violence. Related to this finding, Makepeace (1983) found a relationship between undesirable life changes and courtship violence. He also found that desirable life change was inversely related with involvement in courtship violence among males.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Socialization theory (Bandura, 1971) underlies many studies that examine violence and its relation to parenting during childhood, specifically child neglect and abuse. This theory contends that someone can develop a pattern of behavior by observing or experiencing it (Bandura, 1971). Thus, a child who observes or experiences abuse may learn that physical aggression this is an acceptable pattern of behavior. According to Tremblay (2003), physical aggression is present from infancy, and children must learn alternative ways of expressing anger. Those who do not learn alternative strategies are more likely to become more aggressive (Tremblay, 2003).

Straus and Savage (2005) examined neglectful parental behavior as it relates to violence against dating partners. They found that respondents who had experienced more parental neglectful behavior during childhood were more likely to physically assault their dating partner. Drawing from both Bandura's (1971) socialization theory and Tremblay's (2003) notion of learning alternatives to aggression, the opposite relationship to that reported by Straus and Savage could hold. That is, respondents who had experienced little or no parental neglect were less likely to physically assault their dating partner. Furthermore, children who are raised in a supportive environment and learn to use alternative strategies for releasing anger would be less likely to commit aggressive acts later in dating relationships.

In this study it was hypothesized that there is an associated between positive parenting in childhood and the perpetration of violence in adult dating relationships.

### **Methods**

This study analyzed data from the International Dating Violence Study (IDVS). The IDVS was conducted during the period of 2001-2006 primarily by Murray Straus of the Family Research Laboratory of the University of New Hampshire. It involved a consortium of researchers in 32 different countries. Data were obtained through questionnaires in which participants reported on the behaviors of both themselves and their partners as these relate to both victimization and perpetration of dating violence. Members of the consortium administered questionnaires in classes they taught at their respective universities. A core questionnaire was translated by consortium members into their own language and then back-translated into English to maintain “conceptual equivalence” across participating universities (Straus, 2004).

IDVS defined the term “violence” as maltreatment by a partner which may include acts of physical and psychological aggression, injury as a result of physical aggression, and sexual coercion. The term “dating” is defined as “a dyadic relationship involving meeting for social interaction and joint activities with an explicit or implicit intention to continue the relationship until one or the other party terminates or until some other more committed relationship is established” (Straus, 2004, p792).

Two scales, the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS2) and the Personal and Relationships Profile (PRP), were included in the questionnaire (Straus et al 2010; Newton et al 2001). The CTS2 looks at the methods and tactics used to resolve conflict in a relationship. The CTS2 assigns an operational definition to a range of tactics that range from passive to forceful



and then uses this to measure these tactics of those in a marital, cohabitating, or dating relationship (Newton et al., 2001).

In order to test how positive parenting relates to perpetration of dating violence, the *assault* and *injury* subscales of the CTS2 were used. For both subscales the frequencies over a year was examined. For assault, *assault by self* will be considered and for injury, *injury to partner* will be considered. Those for whom a response is not available and those with a frequency of zero were not included in the analysis.

The PRP can be used in family violence research as well as for clinical screening. It contains multiple scales and subscales (Straus et al, 2010). The IDVS used the PRP because it can be administered in a shorter period of time compared to similar available measures and follows a standard format that includes the same response categories for each subscale.

Positive Parenting, one of the subscales on the PRP, is defined as “the degree to which parents were loving and supportive and properly supervised” (Straus et al., 2010, p15). This subscale has six items related to helping, supervising, and nurturing. In order to analyze the positive parenting scale’s relationship to the other variable, the positive parenting scale results were rounded in SPSS to create a new variable. Results for this scale are found by adding the score for the six questions in the scale and dividing by six to get the mean. Each question is answered with a scale from 1 to 4: 1 being disagree and 4 being agree. This scoring method gives each respondent a score somewhere between 1 and 4 for the scale. Rounding the results for this scale allowed respondents to be categorized. The categories were the scorings of one, two, three, and four. Respondents who scored closest to a one experienced the least positive parenting during childhood. Respondents who scored closest to a four experienced the highest levels of positive parenting during childhood.

An ANOVA was conducted on the positive parenting scale with both assault from the CTS2 as well as injury from the CTS2.

### **Results**

The ANOVA test for positive parenting and assault to a partner resulted in an F score of 6.515 ( $p < .0001$ ). The test for positive parenting and injury to a partner resulted in an F score of 5.866 ( $p < .001$ ).

In order to compare the mean frequency of injury to a partner and assault to a partner between groups for positive parenting, a post hoc tukey test was completed. No significant results were found for the test of assault to a partner. The test using injury to a partner found that the group with the lowest scores on positive parenting had a significantly higher frequency of injury to a partner than the other three groups all having a higher score for positive parenting.

No correlation can be assumed through the found results because there is no significant difference between all groups. The results found show that those with the lowest level of positive parenting cause injury to partner with more frequency than those who experienced any higher level of positive parenting.

### **Discussion**

The results show a relationship between positive parenting and violence in a dating relationship. However, no causation can be assumed. Those with the lowest level of positive parenting injured a partner with the highest frequency. This suggests that experiencing positive parenting is likely to be a protective factor, but it cannot be assumed that experiencing positive parenting will lead someone to not commit violent acts or commit them with less frequency in a dating relationship.

There are several limitations to the data and results. There was no significant relationship found between frequency of assault and level of positive parenting. This may cause us to question what is considered violence in a dating relationship. Although a significant result was found between injury and positive parenting, it only includes instances in which the dating partner was injured. This may leave out a significant portion of violent acts that are not considered assault or injury. More research must be done to come up with a more accurate relationship between violent acts in dating relationships and positive parenting.

Something else must be considered when analyzing the results. Those for whom a response was not available for assault by self and/or injury to a partner were not included in the respective analysis. This group was not included because it cannot be assumed that because there was not response available these acts were not committed. Since this group was not included, these results cannot be generalized. The definition of violence we used must also be considered in this discussion. For our purposes only acts of violence that were categorized as assault and those that caused injury to a partner were included. This analysis failed to include more minor instances of violence in dating relationships.

Another major limitation to the findings is that the responses to the surveys were self-reported. With self-reported responses on such a topic, there is always a chance that individuals are not reporting correctly. This is especially important to consider when the topic is sensitive as is the case with of dating violence. Also, it is likely that some questions are not answered or are answered incorrectly due to the subject matter itself. Lastly, the IDVS collected data using a convenience sample. The questionnaires were usually administered by consortium members in classes that they taught. Thus, the sample is not be representative of university students in general since consortium members were all from the social sciences (Straus, 2004).

The analysis of the data collected from the International Dating Violence Study does show a relationship between positive parenting and injuring a dating partner for college age students. Further research that includes individuals that have not perpetrated violence in a dating relationship is needed. Future studies could also include cases with less severe forms of violence than those included in this analysis. The experiences of dating violence victims who experienced positive parenting during childhood could also be examined. Given the nature of self-reported responses, obtaining accurate data may be difficult and would require creative data collection methods.

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