Early emotional adjustment and psychopathology as predictors of dating violence in young adulthood *

Sarah J. Jerstad, W. Andrew Collins, & Manfred van Dulmen
University of Minnesota

Theoretical Background

- Incidence of violence in dating relationships ranges from 20-40%
- Self-esteem and psychopathology have been associated with dating violence.
- Some theorists (e.g., Bowlby, 1980; Caspi & Roberts, 2001) suggest that such person variables are established at an early age and will have an influence on later experience.

Aim of the Current Study

- The current study used SEM to test a model wherein early supportive care, elementary school and adolescent emotional health, and adolescent self-esteem were prospectively related to involvement in dating violence in young adulthood, with adolescent psychopathology as a mediator.

Method

Participants

- Participants were taken from the Minnesota longitudinal study of parents and children, a cohort of individuals at risk due to poverty.
- Participants were involved in a romantic relationship at age 21 and/or 23 (n=123).
- At age 21, participants and their partners were interviewed; at age 23 only participants were interviewed.

* For a copy of this handout, go to the project website at http://education.umn.edu/ICD/parent-child/
Measures

Latent Predictor Variables

- **Early supportive care**
  composite measure of attachment security at 12 & 18 months using the Strange Situation, child’s experience in joint problem-solving task at 24 months, and mother’s supportive presence at 42 months.

- **Childhood emotional health**
  - Teacher ranking 1st grade ($\lambda=.80$)
  - Teacher ranking 2nd grade ($\lambda=.83$)
  - Teacher ranking 3rd grade ($\lambda=.72$)

- **Adolescent self-esteem:** Harter Global Self-Esteem, age 16.

- **Adolescent Emotional Health/ Competence:**
  - Teacher ranking emotional health, age 16 ($\lambda=.83$)
  - Teacher ranking peer competence, age 16 ($\lambda=.89$)

- **Adolescent psychopathology**
  K-SADS symptoms (age 17.5)
  - affective symptoms ($\lambda=.34$)
  - anxiety symptoms ($\lambda=.42$)
  - behavioral symptoms ($\lambda=.94$)

Criterion Variable

- **Dating violence** was assessed using continuous scores from the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979).
  - Age 21 ($\lambda=.90$)
  - Age 23 ($\lambda=.59$)

- **Specific tactics** ranged from “threw something” to “used gun or knife”
Results
Structural Equation Modeling predicting relationship abuse in young adulthood (N=123).

RMSEA=0.072; GFI=0.91
Results

- Early supportive care is positively associated with childhood emotional health.

- Childhood emotional health was positively associated with adolescent self-esteem and emotional health.

- Poor emotional health in elementary school predicted involvement in dating violence in young adulthood.
  - SE at 16 and teacher reports of emotional health at 16 did not add to the prediction.

- Psychopathology at age 17.5 predicted involvement in dating violence in young adulthood; however it was not a mediator.

Discussion

- The findings imply a developmental trajectory for the prediction of dating violence, lending support to the notion that early experience has an influence on situations in later life.

- Adolescent emotional adjustment (age 16) did not add significantly to the prediction of dating violence
  - Could it be that differences in the quality of teacher ratings affected the results?

- SE at 16 was not a predictor of dating violence when included in the model.
  - Could it be that gender is a moderator?
  - Could it be that elementary school emotional health accounts for most of the variance?

- Psychopathology in adolescence did not moderate the prediction of dating violence.
  - Could it be because behavioral symptoms showed the strongest association with dating violence? These symptoms are conceptually different from emotional adjustment.

- Knowledge of early adaptation increases the strength of prediction. Thus, children can be targeted at a young age for education on personal safety and healthy relationships to prevent later involvement in violent relationships.
Future Directions

What are the next steps?

■ Investigate gender differences.

■ Replicate study with a larger sample size.

■ Include sexual violence in the definition of dating violence.

References
