An Empirical study of adolescent dating aggression in the U.K.

Myra J. Hird

The present study provides one of the first empirical investigations of adolescent dating aggression (ADA) in Britain. The survey found almost half of sampled boys, and more than half of sampled girls, experienced psychological, physical and/or sexual aggression. The study found no significant association between religious affiliation, household composition, age, social class or the use of alcohol and ADA. The study also combined quantitative and qualitative methods to investigate the "symmetry of violence" theory, concluding that when the meaning and context of aggression are considered, male physical and sexual aggression is a significant problem in adolescent heterosexual relationships.

Introduction

Marital aggression is an established field of scholarly investigation. Whilst initially extended to include university student populations, adolescent dating aggression (ADA) has most recently become a legitimate subject of investigation. Mainly emanating from North America, research suggests that aggression in late adolescence is at least as prevalent as wife assault (cf. DeKeseredy, 1988; Follingstad et al. 1991; Lloyd, 1991; Mercer, 1986; Muehlenhard and Linton, 1987; Stets and Pirog-Good, 1987). An early study of American university students found that one in five heterosexual dating relationships featured physical aggression (Makepeace, 1981). Similar studies found that between one-third (Stets and Henderson, 1991) and one-half of adolescent girls had experienced dating aggression (Barnes et al., 1991). The most common forms of physical aggression included pushing, grabbing or shoving, slapping, kicking, biting and hitting with a fist (Henton et al., 1983).

Studies of ADA most often explore concerns identified by the marital and family violence literature, such as “risk factors” including ethnicity, race, social class, alcohol and/or drug use. To date, no studies have found a significant association between the social class, ethnicity or race of either perpetrator or victim and ADA (O’Keeffe et al., 1986). In a detailed American study, Burcky et al. (1988) found that one-third of the males in their sample had ingested alcohol before a violent incident, whilst 14% had taken drugs. In contrast, Stets and Henderson (1991) found no significant association between alcohol and/or drug use and the presence of ADA.

Research on ADA and aggression against women more generally has been greatly influenced by feminist theory. Investigations in this area include Brownmiller (1975); MacKinnon (1987); Yllo and Bograd (1988); Dobash et al. (1992); Campbell and Muncer (1995).

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1The terms “aggression” and “violence” are often loosely interchanged within the literature in this area. The use of the term “aggression” in this study allows greater inclusion of a range of psychological, physical and sexual acts considered harmful by respondents.
These analyses have centred on gendered power relations in discussions of aggression within intimate relationships. ADA research has more recently been concerned with the “symmetry of violence” theory, initiating a debate as to whether ADA is “a problem of male violence against women within a patriarchal structure, or whether it should be viewed as a problem of violent spouses” (Nazroo, 1995:475). Some research suggests females are as aggressive as males (Straus, 1993) or that the rate of female aggression is increasing (Calhoun et al., 1993). Other research maintains that when the context and meaning of the aggressive acts are taken into account, males are more aggressive (Dobash et al., 1992).

This debate focuses on methodology as a key factor in determining the mutuality of intimate aggression. Positivist approaches to research would argue that large-scale questionnaires provide more valid, reliable and generalizing measures. But feminists argue that statistical significance is gained at the expense of understanding the context and meaning of aggression which can only be garnered from smaller-scale qualitative measures (c.f. Dobash et al., 1992, for a critique of quantitative survey approaches to intimate aggression). More recent analyses have employed multiple measures of aggression (Smith, 1994; DeKeseredy, 1995).

Since the majority of data emanate from North America, little is known about the extent of ADA in the U.K. Indeed, the only U.K. study reported to date employed a college-student sample and found significant levels of aggression, with females being more aggressive than males (Archer and Ray, 1989). This dearth of empirical data prompted the present measurement of ADA as well as the relationship between ADA and various indicators such as social class and use of alcohol. It has been argued that higher rates of female aggression have been found as a consequence of using the CTS. For this reason, the CTS was employed in this study along with more in-depth qualitative techniques in order to assess the validity of claims concerning the mutuality of male and female aggression.

Study 1: questionnaire

Methodology

A structured questionnaire was administered to a sample of secondary school students from two comprehensive, mixed-sex schools, hereafter referred to as Schools A and B, in the south Midlands in England. Permission was obtained to conduct the survey through both schools’ administrations. Students completed the survey in home-room classes at School A and during assembly at School B. Students were told their responses would remain anonymous.

The Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) measures the use of aggressive “tactics” to resolve conflicts with their partners in the past 12 months (Table 1), including: the use of “rational” discussion; the use of psychological aggression (for example, refusing to talk); and the use of physical force (for example, hitting someone). Respondents self-reported both their own

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2More recently, feminist research has focused on non-defensive, non-retaliatory female aggression. (c.f. Naffin, 1985; Lobel, 1986; Renzetti, 1992; Smart, 1995).

3Aggression within gay and lesbian adult relationships has been the subject of recent theoretical and empirical investigation (cf. Lobel, 1986 and Renzetti, 1992). By far the most attention in the ADA literature has been focused on heterosexual adult relationships.

4For a full discussion of the CTS, including the instrument itself, see Straus (1979).
behaviours and those of their opposite-sex partners. Respondents were also asked how many
times they had experienced attempted, or forced, sexual intercourse.

The data were collapsed by combining all individual responses in each of the three
categories to obtain a single set of responses for each category, which were then further
collapsed from eight categories to two categories: 0 = never and 1 = ever having used the
tactic. The independent variables predicted to correlate with aggression were sex, age, social
class, ethnicity, religious affiliation and use of alcohol/drugs.

Participants. The total population of both schools was 1041 students and questionnaires
were completed by a sample of 487 students. Of 505 students at School A, a sample of 389
students completed questionnaires. Of 167 students in the sixth form at School B, 98
students completed questionnaires. In total there were 245 female and 242 male
respondents, aged from 13 to 19 years. Since the collected data were based on the school
year of the respondent, the findings are reported referring to the school year of the
respondents (Table 2).

Results

Psychological, physical and sexual aggression. The survey found that 330 males
(49%) and 401 females (54%) reported that they had experienced psychological aggression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Responses to aggression</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-aggressive responses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Discussed an issue calmly</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>b. Got information to back up your side of things</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>c. Brought in or tried to bring in someone to help settle things</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Cried</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Psychologically aggressive responses</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>e. Insulted him/her or swore at him/her</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>f. Sulked or refused to talk about the issue</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>g. Stomped out of the room or house</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>h. Did or said something to spite him/her</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Physically aggressive responses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i. Threatened to hit him/her or throw something at him/her</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>j. Threw or smashed or hit or kicked something</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k. Threw something at him/her</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>l. Pushed, grabbed, or shoved him/her</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. Slapped him/her</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n. Kicked, bit or hit him/her with a fist</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>o. Hit or tried to hit him/her with something</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p. Beat him/her up</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q. Choked him/her</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>r. Threatened him/her with a knife</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s. Used a knife</td>
<td></td>
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5By collapsing the 19 tactics into three categories, a clear picture of the relationship between the independent
variables such as sex and the three dependent variables of non-aggression, physical aggression and psychological
aggression was obtained. However, collapsing the data into three general categories meant that the severity of the
physical aggression was lost.

6Goldthorpe’s (1987) social class schema was modified to measure the employment status of both father and
mother.
from their dating partner within the previous 12 months. Approximately 279 males (15%) and 269 females (14%) had experienced one or more forms of physical aggression from their dating partner within the previous 12 months. Finally, 21 female respondents (17.9%) reported that their boyfriends had either attempted to force, or had forced, sexual intercourse within the past year.

Since the primary concern of this study was to evaluate the significance of gender on reported psychological, physical and sexual aggression in heterosexual dating relationships, the main indicator of aggression measured was gender. For each of the three categories of conflict resolution, gender proved significant. Girls were significantly more likely to report more non-aggressive responses ($\chi^2 = 4.995, p < 0.025$), psychologically aggressive responses ($\chi^2 = 20.48, p < 0.00001$) and physically aggressive responses ($\chi^2 = 30.30, p < 0.000$) than boys. Girls were significantly more likely to report that their boyfriends employed non-aggressive tactics ($\chi^2 = 8.208, p < 0.004$) and physically aggressive tactics ($\chi^2 = 4.61, p < 0.032$). The majority of girls and boys reported never having been threatened or forced to have sex.

**Indicators of aggression.** (1) Use of alcohol, religious affiliation, household composition and age: no significant differences were found. (2) Social class: for both respondents' responses to their own conflict resolution tactics and those of their girl/boyfriends, only physically aggressive responses were significantly associated with social class. The social class of the father was significantly related to frequency of the use of physical aggression ($\chi^2 = 14.02, p < 0.03$). Working-class students reported greater use of physical aggression than middle- or upper-class students.

**Reliability of the questionnaire.** Two questions included at the end of the questionnaire tested the reliability of responses, referring to respondents having hit their girl/boyfriends or having been hit by their girl/boyfriends. Comparing the responses for hitting ("slapped" and "kicked, bit or hit with a fist") with the later question asking whether the respondent has ever hit their partner, the Phi test showed that the reliability of responses was not high (Phi = 0.631)$^7$. With regard to being hit by their partner, the Phi test revealed an

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$^7$Cronbach's alpha was considered for testing the reliability of the questionnaire. However, this test requires that the test items must "pull" in the same way. There was no prima facie reason why the items would match in the same way. For instance, it would be possible for a respondent to have discussed an issue calmly with their partner more than 10 times in the past year and also to have threatened their partner with a knife. There were no items, in other words, that negated other items. The items on the CTS in fact include a wide repertoire of responses and therefore this type of reliability testing can not be achieved.
even lower level of reliability ($\Phi = 0.480$). Low reliability suggested the value of comparing the results of the questionnaire with data garnered from focus groups and interviews.

**Study 2: focus groups and interviews**

**Methodology**
The use of a semi-structured, open-ended approach to the focus groups and individual interviews enabled the exploration of the meaning and context of ADA. Initial discussions with adolescents at both schools suggested that they felt most comfortable discussing their experiences of ADA within a group setting. Group discussions were supplemented, at any respondent’s request, with individual interviews. There were 17 single-sex focus groups at the two schools: two mixed-sex, four female and two male groups at School A; four female and five male groups at School B. Groups were formed through a “snow-ball” sampling technique. Group membership was self-selected and closed. Each group met approximately once per week for 1 year, although several groups continued for more than 1 year. Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

**Results**

*Psychological aggression.* Although difficult to assess, research indicates that psychological aggression is experienced as highly stressful and damaging (Pagelow, 1981). The most frequent form of psychological aggression reported was name-calling. As Lees (1993) noted, girls are subjected to name-calling more often than boys. Girls are also more likely to be called names by other girls than by boys. The most frequently used words were “slag”, “tart” and “bit” which referred to “promiscuous” or “frigid” sexual behaviour:

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Int. Do you call guys names?
Elicia Bastards. That’s about it. There isn’t a male version of slag. I mean you just say whatever describes him.
Int. Why is that?
Elicia It is easier for blokes to put girls into boxes.
Emma Into boxes.
Int. Why?
Elicia Because of the stereotypes there are? If she’s clever then she’s ‘square’ and if she’s friendly she’s a ‘flirt’ and she’s a ‘slag’.
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Reference to boys’ sexuality was usually an affirmation of prowess. Negative references were only made towards boys thought to display homosexual behaviours. More boys reported being name-called by other boys than by girls. Verbal put-downs other than name-calling and controlling behaviour were also reported.

*Physical aggression.* Physical acts such as slapping, hitting and punching were described as a “normal” part of adolescent relationships. Most girls reported being hit, held down, slapped, kicked or punched by their boyfriends. Fewer boys talked about girls’ physical aggression. In a typical incident of ADA, Sarah described “play-fighting” with her boyfriend.

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8In order to address ethical issues raised by this topic, the researcher provided both free counselling services (the researcher is a professionally trained and qualified counsellor) as well as referral to relevant counselling agencies.

9All names of participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.
Jim who sat on top of Sarah on her bed and held both of Sarah’s arms above her head. When she realised that she could not move him off her, Sarah told Jim to release her. Jim continued to hold Sarah for several minutes against her protestations. This incident resulted in bruises on Sarah’s wrists and a pulled shoulder muscle.

**Sexual aggression.** The majority of girls reported being either pressured, coerced or forced to engage in some form of sexual activity by at least one male adolescent; most often by a friend, acquaintance or boyfriend. The most common experience was unwanted sexual touching. Sexual aggression most often took place on dates or at social events such as parties.

Kelly’s (1988) informative work suggests an understanding of heterosexual sexual relations in terms of a “continuum” from consensual to non-consensual sex. Feminist research suggests that most women have experienced some form of sexual aggression in their lives, and women define these experiences in a variety of ways. Kelly (1984) suggests how women are asked about their experiences of sexual aggression impacts on women’s responses; only a minority will report that they have been raped or sexually abused whereas far more women report having had sex without their consent. Moreover, women often differentially define these experiences differently at different times and in different contexts (Kelly, 1984; Stanko, 1985).

The relative lack of experience and younger ages of adolescents suggests that girls may experience even more difficulty in identifying sexually aggressive experiences. Krista’s account is exemplary in this respect. Krista was 15 and had been dating her first boyfriend, Ned, for several months. When Krista and Ned were walking in an ill-lit, deserted park one evening, Ned attempted to have sex with Krista, who refused:

Krista: It was really, really dark and he took my top off and he said that if I didn’t have sex with him he would finish with me. And I thought “what do I do, what do I do? I don’t want to finish with him but I really, really don’t want to have sex”. And he started having sex with me and I started feeling sick and scared. And there had been loads of times when we had just spent the whole night getting off and kissing and he had always stopped and said “I had better go because you are really turning me on and I know you don’t want to”.

Int.: Why did you feel scared?

Krista: Just because that was the one thing that I really did not want to do. I was totally out of control. And he started shouting at me and he was angry it was like he had flipped . . .and he just sort of got on top of me and it was over before I knew it. I was so scared.

The data support the findings of Holland et al. (1996) which suggest that young women and men share an expectation that men initiate sexual activity which women are then supposed to regulate. These expectations produce a process of negotiation between boys who “always” want sex and girls who “never” want sex. This, in turn, has an impact on the definition of sexual coercion. Whilst every group member stated that non-consent to sexual intercourse constituted rape, what “saying no” meant proved controversial. For the girls’ groups, verbal expressions of non-consent were sufficient. Most boys however, demanded that girls make it physically as well as verbally “clear” through the use of body movements:

Joal: All they have to do is push your hand away.

Int.: So it doesn’t have to be verbal then?

Tim: Actually, you are more likely to do what they say if they actually push you away than if they say “no let’s not” because you think “if I just try a little more maybe I’ll get her into it”. But if she pushes you away . . .
Joal Yeah. If they push you off then you feel stupid. If they tell you “no” then you just think “well, I can persuade them and get around it”.

Arnold It depends on how well you know them. The first time you would give up. But then if you go out with them for a while and at first they say no and then they will have sex occasionally.

Int. How do you think it sometimes comes about that guys sometimes rape women that they know or that they live with?

Mike I can only see it as some sort of misunderstanding. Where the guy has been led on and he just thinks “oh you’ve taken it this far and now you are just going to shut me out” and he feels annoyed.

Comparing these narratives suggests that girls interpreted the salience of non-verbal signals differently:

Rose I think if they take the pressure off you it allows you to feel what you feel for them at your own pace. It often makes you want to have sex with them because you feel confident. Rather than like forcing you all the time.

Int. Well is it true then that when girls say no they really mean yes?

Jane No. They don't mean yes.

Int. Then why do you end up having sex?

Rose To shut them up...And sometimes I am doing it and I think “Jesus Christ he is raping me because I don't want to” and he is kissing me and I am kissing him back but I don't really want to and I am trying to say no and he is saying come on and I'll kind of give in and he'll take over.

Discussion

The results suggest that approximately half of adolescents in this study reported experiencing aggression in heterosexual dating relationships. The use of alcohol, religious affiliation, household composition and age were not significantly correlated with reported aggression. Social class was only positively correlated with males’ reported use of physical aggression. Girls and boys reported an approximately equal number of experiences of psychological and physical aggression. Only sexual aggression revealed a gender asymmetry in that girls were more likely to report having experienced sexual aggression from their boyfriends.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods rely on reports of aggression and, as such, neither are able to measure actual or “true” levels of aggression. Relying on the questionnaire results alone tends to confirm the “symmetry of violence” theory for psychological and physical aggression. However, there are a number of limitations in using a questionnaire method in studies of ADA and with adolescent populations (cf. Dobash et al., 1992; DeKeseredy, 1995). As Smith points out, “the CTS is not flawed simply because it is a unidimensional measure; rather studies employing the CTS are flawed if they use the CTS as the sole measure of violence, without any attempt to explore the multidimensionality of the violence through other measures” (Smith, 1994:114). The qualitative data offered further insights into this multidimensionality, particularly with regards to the meanings and context of ADA.

Meaning of aggression

The qualitative results strongly suggest that much of girls’ reported physical aggression was actually self-defence against their boyfriends’ use of physical and/or sexual aggression. Gillian explained:
someone I know got pushed against this wall by this bloke at a party and he was like pushing himself against her kind of thing and she hit him and I think that’s exactly what she should have done...even if he hadn’t gone any further he was still doing something that she didn’t want and she made it clear that she didn’t want it. And he didn’t take any notice so she hit him. And I think that’s what I would have done really. I hope I would have done that.

The importance of recognizing the meaning of aggressive acts was further provided in accounts of the physical consequences of aggressive actions. Girls and boys agreed that a boy hitting a girl was “worse” than a girl punching a boy because the boy’s greater strength would do greater harm.

Context of aggressive acts

The qualitative data offered insights into perceptions of relations of power between girls and boys. Krista’s earlier narrative makes sense only in the context of gendered power relations. Krista reported that she often felt disempowered in her relationship with her father and brother, performing more household chores and receiving far greater pressure to leave school than her brother. Although Krista excelled at maths, she was strongly encouraged by her family and boyfriend to marry, produce children and work in the service industry. This strong emphasis on traditional femininity operated concomitantly with a social group expectation and valorization of maintaining dating relationships with boys (Lees, 1993). Krista also described a constant struggle to “please” her boyfriend in order to maintain the relationship. Other group discussions suggested both girls’ and boys’ acceptance of males' use of aggression to maintain relationships. Indeed, male physical aggression towards girlfriends was most often described in positive, instrumental terms as a “means to an end”. The “end” was sustaining the relationship. As Mike said:

...if the stress is that sometimes he doesn’t know how to get through to her then I think then yes like this is the way to get through to her.

In the context of such gendered power relations, it may not have been necessary for her boyfriend to actually use physical aggression. The nearest Krista’s vocabulary came to describing this context is that her boyfriend “had a mental hold on me”. These results concur with those of Holland et al. (1996) who argue that young men are under pressure to prove sexual prowess, whilst young women are pressured to defend their sexual reputations. This double-standard and young women’s responsibility to construct their sexuality in response to male sexuality can lead to situations in which male sexual needs are preferred.

Conclusion

This study examined three issues related to ADA. First, the results of the survey suggest that over half of girls and almost half of boys reported one or more forms of aggression in their dating relationships. This finding was supported by detailed discussions with these adolescents over several months which suggested that the questionnaire’s estimation of aggression was conservative. The results of this project invite further empirical study of ADA, using a representative sample. Risk factors, including social class, religious affiliation, household composition, age and the use of alcohol and/or drugs were not found to be
significantly associated with the reported incidence of ADA, with the exception of the use of physical aggression by boys and the social class of their fathers. The main aim of this study was to examine the symmetry of violence theory using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The data suggest some gender symmetry, especially psychological and physical aggression. Sexual aggression, on the other hand, was reported to be perpetrated much more often by boys. The results also strongly suggest, however, that meaning and context are crucial to understanding the multi-dimensionality of ADA. Straus’s (1993) conclusion that all aggression is “equally wrong” fails to acknowledge gendered power relations and the different relations male and female adolescents have to sexual responsibility (Holland et al., 1996; Lees, 1997). The qualitative results suggest that a large proportion of females' reported aggression was seen by the young women as acts of self-defence or a response to male-initiated aggression. Moreover, male aggression was interpreted as more threatening and much more likely to cause harm than female aggression. This was especially true of physical and sexual forms of aggression. With regard to psychological aggression, the most frequent form reported was name-calling. Given that our vocabulary continues to contain a much greater number of negative words referring to girls than boys, it is not surprising that both boys and girls reported that girls were more frequent victims of psychological aggression. Many feminists (c.f. Yllo and Bograd, 1988) would concur that the legacy of patriarchy continues to maintain a context of unequal gendered social relations. Holland et al. (1996:240) argue that heterosexual individuals “reproduce male power through regulation” by affirming male normative codes of acceptable male and female behaviour within heterosexual dating relationships. The meaning that the adolescents in this study attributed to aggressive behaviour and the context of heterosexual dating relationships within which this aggression takes place suggest that it is male-defined normative behaviour which governs relations of unequal power.

References


