The dynamic of dating violence: Role of early exposure to violence and attachment

Natacha Godbout, Ph.D., Université du Québec à Montréal
Yvan Lussier, Ph.D., Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières
Janie Hébert, B.A., Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières

July 9th, 2012
International Family Violence and Child Victimization Research Conference

Dating Violence

- Prevalence
  - Physical: 20–37% of adolescent’s dating relationship (Bell & Naugle, 2007; Sears et al., 2007)
  - Psychological: up to 82–87% (Banyard et al., 2000; Harned, 2002)

- Related to negatives outcomes
  - Relational difficulties, injuries, psychological distress, escalade
  - Highly predictive of adult IPV (Gómez, 2011)

- Dynamic constellation of personal and relational variables
  - Needs for complex integrative models
Victims or Perpetrators?

- Several studies found support for the intergenerational transmission of violence theory
  - Experiencing or witnessing parental violence as a strong and stable predictor of subsequent dating violence victimization and perpetration (Humphrey & White, 2000; Smith et al., 2003)

- Mechanisms
  - Social learning theory
  - Attachment as mediator

The Dynamic of Violence

- Attachment theory
  - Parental violence and insecure attachment
  - IPV and insecure attachment (80% of perpetrators)

- Mechanisms (e.g., Allison et al., 2008)
  - Wife’s withdrawal linked to IPV in preoccupied batterers—“pursuit strategy” to obtain attention and proximity (abandonment fears)
  - Wife’s defensiveness linked to violence in dismissing batterers—“distancing strategy” to push the partner away, maintain distance or escape when the partner was perceived as being too close or intrusive (authority and control)
The Dynamic of Violence

- Mutuality/symmetry
  - Minor or situational violence VS “intimate terrorist”

- “Assortative mating”
  - Preferences for similar aggressive others (Capaldi et al., 2004)
  - Does exposure to parental violence leads to the selection of particular lovers?

Model

- Tested in adults (Godbout et al., 2009)
  - Invariant between men and women
Objectives

- Test an Actor Partner Interaction Model (APIM) of the relation between parental violence, attachment, violence and dyadic adjustment

- Test the impact of changes in attachment on changes in violence and dyadic adjustment
Participants & Procedure

1,305 participants in a relationship, 71% girls, Aged 16-20
- Together for average 14.7 months ($SD = 14.6$)
- 88% did not cohabitate
- 156 individuals formed intact couples (partner data)

Participants were approached in their classrooms (high school or college) and invited to respond to the questionnaires and return them by mail.

3 years later:
- 223 participants responded again to the questionnaires
- 85% girls
- 94% did not cohabitate
Measures

- The 36 Multi-Item Measure of Adult Romantic Attachment (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998)
  - Anxiety over abandonment and Intimacy avoidance

- The Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996)
  - Physical and psychological violence

- The Dyadic Adjustment Scale – Short Version (Spanier, 1976; Sabourin, Valois, & Lussier, 2005)

- Four single-item questions assessed participants’ experiences of parental violence during childhood (Godbout et al., 2006):
  - Witnessing physical violence
  - Witnessing psychological violence
  - Experiencing physical violence
  - Experiencing psychological violence

Results
Prevalence

- 15% reported physical violence by their parents
- 38% reported psychological violence
- 5% had witnessed parental physical violence
- 47% witnessed parental psychological violence.

- 27% reported physical violence toward their partner during the last year
- 68% reported psychological violence toward their partner during the last years

APIM Model of Parental Violence, Attachment, Intimate Violence and Dyadic Adjustment

Girls’ Anxious Attachment → Girls’ Physical Violence
Girls’ Avoidant Attachment → Girls’ Psychological Violence
Girls’ Physical Violence → Girls’ Perpetrating Violence
Girls’ Psychological Violence → Girls’ Perpetrating Violence
Girls’ Perpetrating Violence → Girls’ Dyadic Adjustment
Fit: Chi-square = 61.847, DF = 44, p = .039 (ratio=1.41), CFI=.94, RMSEA=.07 (.03, .10)
Does changes in attachment predict changes in violence?

Model of the Relations between Changes in Attachment, Violence and Dyadic Adjustment

Changes in Anxious Attachment → Changes in Perpetrating Violence
Changes in Avoidant Attachment → Changes in Perpetrating Violence

Changes in Physical Violence ➔ Changes in Dyadic Adjustment
Changes in Psychological Violence ➔ Changes in Dyadic Adjustment

Fits: Chi-Square = 4.030, DF = 3, p = .258,
GFI = .99, CFI = .99, NFI = .98,
RMSEA = .04 (.02-.11)
Discussion

- Results highlight the importance of the dynamic in the relationship
- Changes in attachment predicted changes in violence
- Some personality features (e.g., insecure attachment) may generate "coercion traps" defined as dysfunctional interaction styles and spirals of negative reciprocity that eventuate in violence
- Prevention and early intervention

Limitations and Further Research

- Traditional visions (situational vs. intimate terrorism) are questioned (Straus, 2011)
  - need to replicate this model in clinical samples
  - Situational VS repetitive violence: we need to explore those participants who were less/more violent in a systemic way
- Refined integrative models are needed to examine the pathways leading to patterns of perpetration, victimization and mutuality of violence in teens
  - Longitudinal APIM
- Limited self-reported measures (e.g., parental violence)
Questions

Thank you!
godbout.natacha@uqam.ca