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Associations among Aspects of Interpersonal Power and Relationship Functioning in Adolescent Romantic Couples

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Abstract

This study used a multidimensional assessment of interpersonal power to examine associations between indices of relationship power and relationship functioning in 92 adolescent romantic couples recruited from rural communities in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. Significant differences emerged between girlfriends and boyfriends in their reports of decision making authority, perceptions of humiliating behaviors by the partner, and ratings of themselves giving-in to their partners in a videotaped interaction task. In addition, indices of interpersonal power were associated with dating aggression and relationship satisfaction for both girlfriends and boyfriends, although gender differences emerged in the patterns of association between power and outcomes. Results are discussed in light of current developmental, feminist, and social psychological theories of interpersonal power in romantic relationships.

Keywords

adolescent romantic relationships; interpersonal power; relationship functioning

Introduction

Interpersonal power, while widely studied in the adult romantic relationships literature, has rarely been considered in the context of adolescent dating relationships (e.g., Chung, 2005; Galliher, Rostosky, Welsh, & Kawaguchi, 1999). The well established links between power discrepancies and negative relationship or individual outcomes for adult relationship partners (e.g., Felmlee, 1994; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Halloran, 1998; Steil, 1997; Steil & Turetsky, 1987), have therefore not been widely replicated in younger samples. The current study uses a developmental perspective and a multidimensional approach to assess interpersonal power in adolescent dating couples, and examines links between couple members' perceptions of interpersonal power and their reports of relationship satisfaction and perpetration of aggression. Given the distressingly high prevalence rates of dating aggression in young couples (i.e., 9% to 65%, with the majority of the studies reporting between 21% and 45%; Lewis & Fremouv, 2001), and theoretical accounts that posit adolescent romantic relationships to serve as the foundation for the development of relationship skills and expectations across the adult lifespan (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994), research aimed at identifying factors associated with optimal functioning in adolescent relationships is imperative.

Links between Interpersonal Power and Relationship Functioning

Assessment of power dynamics has been described as essential facet of understanding romantic relationship functioning among adult couples (e.g., Frieze & McHugh, 1992), as well as

adolescent couples (Chung, 2005; Galliher et al., 1999). In Western culture, equity in romantic relationships is conceived as a central characteristic of optimal relationship functioning (e.g., Halloran, 1998; Rampage, 1994; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). Examinations of power in adult romantic relationships have often stemmed from feminist theory, and have served to challenge patterns of male dominance in Western society. Indeed, when adult relationships are characterized by a power imbalance, the male partner has been far more likely to hold the dominant position (Carli, 1999; Felmlee, 1994; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1997). Evidence from the marital and adult dating literature suggests that the experience of inequity or “powerlessness” in one’s relationship is associated with a range of negative psychological and relationship outcomes, such as anger, depression, and frustration (Beach & Tesser, 1993; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983; Steil & Turetsky, 1987; Vanfossen, 1982; Whisman & Jacobson, 1990). Falbo and Peplau (1980) and Aida and Falbo (1991) found that couples who reported greater equity in their relationships were less manipulative towards each other and reported higher marital satisfaction. Interestingly, although feminist theory might argue that, in a traditionally patriarchal culture, women stand to benefit most from a move toward greater egalitarianism, research suggests that both men and women report higher satisfaction in more equitable relationships. However, it may still be true that, given socialized gender roles that ascribe women to more submissive positions, the experience of *powerlessness* in one’s romantic relationship may be a greater threat to relationship satisfaction for men relative to women.

Measures of interpersonal power have also repeatedly been associated with dating and marital violence (e.g., Frieze & McHugh, 1992; Kaura & Allen, 2004; Mahlstedt & Welsh, 2005). Various forms of aggression have long been conceptualized as deliberate and coercive efforts to influence others or exert power over them (e.g., French & Raven, 1959). Johnson (Johnson & Leone, 2005; Johnson, 2006) uses the term “intimate terrorism” in reference to aggression aimed at establishing and maintaining power and control in relationships. In this conceptualization, aggression is characterized as one component of a general pattern of coercive control in intimate relationships that may include other elements such as intimidation, harassment, or disparagement. While other forms of intimate violence have been identified (e.g., situational couple violence), it appears that violence that takes place in the context of coercive control tends to be more frequent, more severe, and linked to more problematic psychosocial outcomes for victims (Johnson & Leone, 2005). Theoretical and empirical accounts of intimate terrorism characterize power and control as more prominent features in predicting relationship aggression perpetrated by men (Johnson, 2006). However, our understanding of intimate violence perpetrated by women continues to evolve (Frieze, 2005) and further consideration of links between perceptions of interpersonal power and aggression perpetration by women is necessary. Additionally, among adolescents, many studies have examined rates and predictors of aggressive behavior in dating relationships, but very few have incorporated consideration of power in their analyses (Chung, 2005).

Interestingly, dissatisfaction with power in adult relationships has also been quite consistently linked with relationship aggression (e.g., Kaura & Allen, 2004; Rogers, Bidwell, & Wilson, 2005; Ronfeldt, Kimerling, & Arias, 1998). Ehrensaft and colleagues (Ehrensaft, Langhinrichsen-Rohling, & Heyman, 1999; Ehrensaft, & Vivian, 1999) found that the perpetration of spousal aggression intensified with increased perceptions of being controlled by a spouse in decision-making or in relationships outside the marriage, and with decreased perceptions of freedom to plan activities and develop autonomy. Others have reported similar findings, but also observed greater rates of abusive behavior when husbands were the individuals reporting lower power (Babcock, Waltz, & Jacobson, 1993; Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 1999). These findings suggest that aggressive behavior may, in certain individuals or on specific occasions, represent efforts to regain or establish a sense of power

(or at least autonomy) in the relationship, leading to a conceptualization of aggression as more reactive and spontaneous.

We hypothesized that, using a multidimensional assessment of interpersonal power, different aspects of power would be linked to perpetration of aggression in different ways. For example, the experience of certain facets of powerlessness, such as emotional dependence or submissiveness, may facilitate reactively aggressive responses as the individual attempts to establish or re-establish a sense of power or autonomy. However, other indices of power, such as exerting control over resources and decisions, may capture part of a broader strategy for creating and maintaining power, which may include the proactive use of aggression to control or exploit one's partner. Furthermore, previous empirical research and feminist analyses of interpersonal power suggest that power and influence are gendered constructs (Rogers et al., 2005; Sagrestano, 1992; Yoder & Kahn, 1992). Teasing apart relationships among gender, status, and power in our contemporary sociocultural context presents a substantial research challenge. Based on gendered expectations for relationships, males and females may interpret power-related interactions differently, use different strategies to influence their partners (Bui, Raven, & Schwartzwald, 1994), and respond differently to experiences of powerlessness (e.g., Galliher et al., 1999; Howard, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1986).

Conceptualizing and Measuring Interpersonal Power in Adolescent Couples

Relationship power has often been defined in terms of the ability to influence a relationship partner to achieve one's own goals (e.g., Balswick & Balswick, 1995). Early, influential theorists advocated for multidimensional approaches to understanding power that incorporate different strategies for achieving power and different functions served by varying types of interpersonal power. Classic theoretical work by French and Raven (1959) resulted in a conceptualization of strategies for influencing others in social contexts. While French and Raven initially focused on efforts to exert social influence in work settings, their typology of influence strategies has been applied to many relationship contexts, including romantic relationships (Bui et al., 1994). Taking a different approach to the assessment of interpersonal power, Cromwell and Olsen (1975) conceptualized three components of power, which allow for the assessment of differences in *levels* of power in the context of relationships. *Power bases* refers to the distribution of resources, such as money, skill, status, or knowledge. Those who possess fewer resources are characterized as disadvantaged in terms of power; the lack of independent resources contributes to greater dependence on the relationship for need fulfillment. Assessing the *processes* of power involves evaluating interaction patterns and interpersonal behaviors associated with assertiveness and control. Power processes are often assessed via observational methodologies, although self-reports of interaction styles have also been examined (e.g., Howard et al., 1986; West & Zimmerman, 1977). Finally, power *outcomes* were described by Cromwell and Olsen as “who makes decisions and who wins” (1975, p. 6), and are often assessed in romantic relationships via measures of decision making authority (e.g., Frieze & McHugh, 1992; Ronfeldt et al., 1998; Van Willigen & Drentea, 2001; Zak, Collins, Harper, & Masher, 1998).

These early multidimensional conceptualizations of interpersonal power (Cromwell & Olsen, 1975; French & Raven, 1959) served as a foundation for the assessment of interpersonal power in adolescent couples, and for hypothesizing links between interpersonal power, relationship satisfaction, and perpetration of aggression. In addition, while relying heavily on previously used measures of interpersonal power in married and adult dating couples, developmental considerations guided our efforts to generate assessments of power that would be sensitive to adolescent social and individual concerns. In one of the few studies to examine power in adolescent couples, Galliher and colleagues (1999) observed that young couples were more egalitarian than would be predicted by the adult literature. This may reflect a developmental

trajectory of power distribution, such that the discrepancies in power that have traditionally been observed do not emerge until couple members begin to take on adult roles. Alternatively, a conceptualization of interpersonal power that takes in to account developmental issues specific to adolescence may be necessary in order to understand the nature and role of power distribution in adolescent couples. The four aspects of interpersonal power examined in the current study were: 1) discrepancy between partners in social status, 2) yielding or “giving in” to the partner in a videotaped interaction task, 3) experiences of the partner as humiliating or shaming, and 4) decision making authority.

Status discrepancy—Traditional measures of resource control, such as economic or educational advantage (Cromwell & Olsen, 1975), or reward power (French & Raven, 1959) are difficult to translate to research on adolescent relationships because adolescents do not experience the same level of autonomy and control over their own resources as adults. Adolescents typically remain dependent on their parents for financial support and do not face the same resource allocation decisions. However, among adolescents, affiliation with attractive or high status peer groups can be conceptualized as a resource. Individuals may tolerate low-power positions when they perceive their partners to possess socially-valued characteristics that provide the lower status individuals access to clique or peer groups with whom they desire contact. Both the adolescent and the adult literatures reference the asymmetry in social status that occurs when one partner is perceived to be more attractive or popular and, therefore, as a more desirable partner. Giordano, Manning, and Longmore (2005) proposed that such status discrepancies prominently influence feelings, behaviors, and outcomes in adolescent romantic relationships. In a sample of adult couples, Howard and colleagues (1986) found that those who perceived their partners to be more attractive used more “weak” influence tactics, such as pleading and acting helpless. Gender differences in status have not been fully examined in previous work; given the complexity of the construct of “social status” and the varying resources available to males and females that contribute to popularity (e.g., physical attractiveness, athletic prowess, material wealth), it is likely that overall gender differences in status may not emerge. However, within individual couples, partners who view their boyfriends or girlfriends to be more desirable than they view themselves are hypothesized to experience more negative relationship outcomes.

Yielding/Giving-in—As a measure of the processes of power (Cromwell & Olsen, 1975), yielding behavior occurs when individuals defer their desired actions to others (Cate, Lloyd, & Henton, 1985). Interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) posits that successful relationship development entails a certain level of negotiation and compromise on each partner's part. Thus, although it is adaptive for couple members to yield to their partners on occasion, some individuals habitually defer to their partners. By doing so, they risk creating a persistent discrepancy in the social exchange of their relationships (Sprecher, 2001). Passivity and submissiveness have been linked to multiple negative outcomes, including sexual coercion, exploitation, and other forms of victimization (Murnen, Perot, & Byrne, 1989; Richards, Rollerson, & Phillips, 1991). Interestingly, Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan (1995) noted that relationship distress and dissolution may also occur as a result of assertiveness in female partners. In this study, it was hypothesized that couple members' perceptions of engaging in higher levels of yielding or “giving-in” to their partners would be linked to negative relationship characteristics, perhaps particularly for male couple members.

Humiliation—As an additional measure of *processes* of power (Cromwell & Olsen, 1975), the humiliating experience is one of “being shamed,” denigrated, or debased by another for reasons of the other's pleasure or desire to exert social power (Gilbert, 1998; Miller, 1996). The use of shaming, humiliating, and disrespectful behaviors toward one's partner has been characterized as a direct strategy for establishing and maintaining control across relationship

types (Mauricio & Gormley, 2001; Riggs, Caulfield, & Street, 2000; Ronfeldt et al., 1998), including those characterized as abusive (Lewis, 1971; Retzinger, 1987). The adolescent literature has not addressed the role of humiliation experiences in understanding romantic relationship processes, yet it has been long known that shame-related emotions are central during this developmental period (e.g., Stapley & Haviland, 1989; von Salisch, 2001).

Individuals who have been humiliated can respond in varied ways. The experience can arouse “shame-rage” or “humiliated fury” in which the person exacts revenge on the other by means of other-directed blame, hostility, rage, and counter-attack (e.g., Lewis, 1971; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Conversely, the humiliated individual can react passively and appear to accept the demeaning treatment and even blame the self for its occurrence (Gilbert, 1998).

Externalizing responses to humiliation have long been purported to be more prevalent in men, while women have been described as more likely to engage in internalizing responses (Lewis, 1971). However, some evidence suggests that the externalizing response of “humiliated fury” can be just as prominent in women (e.g., Ferguson, Eyre, & Ashbaker, 2000), especially in women survivors of childhood family or sexual abuse (cf., Dutton, Starzomski, & Lee, 1996; Negaro, Bonanno, Noll, Putnam, & Trickett, 2005). As a rule, though, in less historically explosive relational contexts, it seems likelier for males to cope with humiliation in their romantic relationships by both greater overt displays of aggressiveness and covert admissions of relational dissatisfaction. Females, in contrast, might be expected to display submissiveness, operationalized as the reduced overt expression of anger or hostility. They, too, however, might express their displeasure with humiliation through covert measures of relational dissatisfaction.

Decision making authority—Although decision making is among the most well-accepted power measures in the adult relationship literature, it has not been widely applied to the study of adolescent couples. Increasing autonomy during adolescence provides young couples with ample opportunities for decision making (e.g., Daddis & Smetana, 2005). Preliminary analyses of decision making in adolescent couples (Galliher et al., 1999) concluded that the majority of young couple members viewed decision making as a mutual, shared responsibility. However, for female adolescents, the perception that their boyfriends dominated in decision making tasks was associated with lower self-esteem. This suggests that discrepancies in decision making capture an important dimension of power in adolescent romantic relationships, at least for female couple members. Findings from the adult literature further suggest that discrepancies in decision making power should be associated with negative relationship outcomes, including conflict, relationship dissatisfaction, and aggression.

Summary and Hypotheses

In summary, using a multidimensional strategy for assessing interpersonal power, we hypothesized that indices of power reported by adolescent couple members would be associated with relationship satisfaction and perpetration of relationship aggression. Specifically, higher reports of decision making authority and resource control (status discrepancy), since they represent a favored position in the relationship, should be associated with greater relationship satisfaction, and reports of giving in or being humiliated should be linked to lower relationship satisfaction. Prediction of aggressive behavior is less clear however; aggressive behavior conceptualized as one strategy for maintaining or establishing control suggests that reports of greater interpersonal power on each index should be linked positively with aggressive behavior. In contrast, conceptualization of aggression as a reactive response to dissatisfaction with interpersonal power might suggest a different pattern. Particularly with the more emotionally volatile measures used in this study, humiliation and giving in, couple members' experiences of higher levels of these behaviors might be expected to predict more frequent perpetration of aggression. Differences between boyfriends and girlfriends in the associations between power

and relationship outcomes were also examined in order to begin to explore unique pathways between power and relationship functioning for males and females.

Method

Participants

Participants were 92 heterosexual dating couples. Couple members were between 14 and 18 years of age and couples were required to have dated exclusively for at least one month to ensure some degree of mutual relationship experience. The average couples' length of relationship was 55 weeks, and ranged from approximately one month to 6 years. Seventy-five percent of the couples had been dating for less than a year and a half. Individuals under the age of 18 were required to have written parental consent in addition to providing written assent. Each participant was compensated with \$30 (\$60 per couple).

Couples were recruited via two strategies. First, target adolescents were randomly selected for telephone recruitment from school directories in two rural high schools in Utah ($n = 74$). Interested and eligible target adolescents were sent letters describing the study and copies of the informed consent form for both couple members via US mail. Follow-up phone calls were made one week after the packet was sent to confirm both partners' eligibility and willingness to participate, and to schedule a data collection session. Second, as part of a larger study assessing the role of race/ethnicity in understanding relationship development, Native American target adolescents and their partners were recruited from a public high school located near the border of a southwestern American Indian reservation ($n = 18$). School personnel assisted in the recruitment and scheduling of couples recruited through the high school.

Partners represented a range of ethnic and racial backgrounds: girlfriends - 61% White, 16% Latino/Hispanic, and 20% Native American, 2% African American, 1% Asian; boyfriends - 57% Non-Hispanic White, 21% Latino/Hispanic, and 21% Native American, 1% African American. The average age of the girlfriends was 16.55 years and of boyfriends was 17.10 years. Of the girlfriends, 60% were affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS), while 59% of boyfriends were LDS. The majority of participants' parents were still married to each other (girlfriends: 63%; boyfriends: 71%). Couple members came from families representing a range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Approximately 50% of both boyfriends' and girlfriends' parents had completed high school or less. Approximately 30% of parents had a college degree or graduate degree; the remainder had completed some college or technical school. Roughly 60% of participants' mothers worked as homemakers, in unskilled labor (e.g., factory work), or in the service industry (e.g., store clerk, housekeeper, daycare), while the rest were in skilled labor or professional positions. About 25% of fathers were business owners or professionals, about 30% were in skilled craftsman positions, and the remainder were in unskilled labor, service industry, or were unemployed.

Measures

Demographic information—Participants completed a demographic information form that assessed age, gender, race, religiosity, educational history and aspirations, employment, parents' marital status, and parents' occupations.

Status discrepancy—Two items were developed specifically for this study to assess couple members' perceptions of their own and their partners' desirability as romantic partners: “To what degree does being involved with your partner increase your contact with people who you desire to be associated with,” and “To what degree does being involved with you increase your partner's contact with people he or she desires to be associated with?” Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = not at all, 3 = somewhat, 5 = a lot). A difference score

was calculated by subtracting participants' ratings of their partners' desirability from their ratings of their own desirability. A positive score indicated the participant viewed him or herself as possessing greater status than the partner, zero indicated the participant rated him or herself as equal in status, and a negative score indicated the participant viewed his or her partner as possessing greater status.

Humiliation—Seven items were adapted for use with adolescent participants from the Others as Shamer Scale (OAS; Goss, Gilbert, & Allan, 1994) to assess perceptions of shaming, disparaging, and humiliating behaviors by the partner. The seven items include 1) “My partner sees me as not measuring up to him/her,” 2) “I think that my partner looks down on me,” 3) “I feel that my partner sees me as not good enough,” 4) “My partner sees me as small and insignificant,” 5) “I feel insecure about my partner's opinion of me”, 6) “My partner sees me as unimportant compared to others,” 7) “My partner sees me as defective as a person.” Items were endorsed on a Likert-type scale from 1-5 (never, seldom, sometimes, frequently, almost always). A total score was created by calculating a mean across items, and Cronbach's alphas were .90 for girls and .93 for boys. Because items were adapted for use from an existing measure, principal components analyses were conducted to assess internal consistency of the new scale. Principal components analyses yielded one factor for both boyfriends and girlfriends. For boyfriends, the one factor accounted for 71.92% of the variance and yielded an eigenvalue of 5.03. For girlfriends, the one factor accounted for 61.18% of the variance and yielded an eigenvalue of 4.56. Item loadings ranged from .63 to .92.

Decision making—Discrepancies in power were also measured using a decision-making questionnaire used in previous research (Galliher et al., 1999). Ten items assessed couple members' perceptions of decision making responsibility in the relationship (e.g., “When you and your partner disagree on something, who usually wins?”; “Who decides how much time you should spend together?”). Subjects responded to the questions using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = my partner always does, 3 = we both do, 5 = I always do). A mean was calculated across all items, such that a score of 1 indicated endorsement of no decision making authority, 3 indicated shared decision making, 5 indicated that the participant claimed total decision making authority. Galliher et al. observed that adolescent female couple members who reported lower decision making authority in their romantic relationships obtained lower scores on a measure of self-esteem. Alpha coefficients for the current sample were .79 for girls and .82 for boys.

Yielding or “giving in”—For the current study, mean ratings of the self “giving in” during a video recall procedure were used as an observational measure of yielding. Couples were digitally recorded having three brief conversations adapted from previous work with adolescent couples (Capaldi & Crosby, 1997). For the first 5-minute warm up conversation, participants were instructed to plan a party, discussing the location of the party, planned activities, who to invite, what to provide their guests, and whether or not adults would be invited. For the remaining two 8-minute conversations, each couple member selected items from a common issues checklist completed prior to recording. The checklist included 21 common dating issues, including such items as “My partner doesn't call or show up when s/he says s/he will” and “Our parents don't want us to be together.” Each participant was instructed to identify 2-3 issues, including alternate selections in case they were not able to converse on the first topic for the entire eight minutes. If there were not enough that applied, or if they did not want to select from the provided topics, individuals could provide their own issues. The participants were instructed to discuss each issue and come up with a solution, or solutions.

Next, a video recall procedure (Galliher, Welsh, Rostosky, & Kawaguchi, 2004; Welsh, Galliher, Kawaguchi, & Rostosky, 1999) was administered in which couple members provided subjective ratings of their own and their partners' behaviors. Each couple member watched the

two issues conversations twice; once to rate his or her own behavior and a second time to rate the partner's behavior. The conversations were divided into 20 20-second segments. The computer automatically played a segment, stopped the video for the couple member to provide ratings, and then resumed the video for the next 20-second segment. Following each segment, participants responded to seven statements on the computer, asking them to rate either their own or their partners' thoughts or behavior on seven dimensions. Behaviors were adapted from previous research using the video recall method (Galliher et al., 1999; Welsh et al., 1999) and were selected to capture both positive and negative aspects of the interactions (i.e., connecting behaviors, conflictual behaviors, frustration), aspects related to the negotiation of interpersonal power (i.e., giving in to the partner, trying to persuade the partner, and putting the partner down), and comfort with problem solving (i.e., feeling uncomfortable). To assess participants' perceptions of their tendencies to "give in", the statement "I am giving in to my partner" would appear on the screen, after which participants would click on the radial button that most closely fit their experience during that segment. Participants rated each segment on a scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 4 (very much) and a mean score was calculated across the 40 segments.

Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory—Psychologically and physically aggressive behavior between couple members was measured using the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory (CADRI) (Wolfe et al., 2001). The CADRI yields 5 different subscales assessing different types of aggressive behavior and one total aggression score. Subscale categories and example questions include: Physical aggression - "I kicked, hit, or punched him or her," Threatening behavior - "I threatened to hurt him or her," sexual aggression - "I kissed him or her when he or she didn't want me to," Relational aggression - "I said things to his or her friends to turn them against him or her," Emotional and verbal aggression - "I insulted him/her with putdowns." Respondents answer on a 4-point Likert scale: 1 = this has never happened; 2 = this has happened only once or twice; 3 = this has happened about 3 – 5 times; 4 = this has happened 6 times or more. Wolfe and colleagues reported moderate agreement between male and female partners' reports on most scales and observed significant correlations between CADRI scores and observed aggression in videotaped interactions for males. Test-retest reliability was acceptable ($r = .68 - .75$). The total aggression score, used in the current study, is calculated as the mean across all items. Separate scores were calculated for males and females, representing each partner's self-report of *perpetration* of aggression. Cronbach's alpha for girlfriends was .88 and for boyfriends was .93.

Levesque Romantic Experiences Questionnaire—Levesque (1993) developed the Levesque Romantic Experience Questionnaire (LREQ) to measure a number of qualities in romantic relationships. This study used the 5-item Relationship Satisfaction scale (e.g., "In general, I am satisfied with our relationship" "Our relationship has met my best expectations"). The original 6-point Likert scale was modified to a 5-point scale for the current study (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Scale scores were calculated as the mean across the five items. Levesque (1993) found the reliability of the instrument to be good ($\alpha = .88$). The alphas calculated for this sample were .70 for girls and .79 for boys.

Procedures

Data collection for this project took place as part of a larger study examining relationship processes in adolescent romantic relationships. The data collection procedure took approximately three hours per couple. Couples were videotaped having problem-solving conversations during the first hour of participation. Each couple member then used a lap top computer to complete the video-recall procedure and a packet of questionnaires, each of which required approximately one hour. Couple members completed the video-recall and questionnaire portions of the study alone in separate rooms, providing privacy from research staff and each other. While one couple member engaged in the video-recall procedure, the other

completed the questionnaires. Order effects were controlled for by counterbalancing whether the video recall procedure or questionnaires were completed first. Participating couples were provided beverages and snacks throughout the session to maintain their concentration and interest.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Table 1 provides a summary of means and standard deviations, as well as paired samples *t*-tests examining differences between couple members in power variable scores, relationship satisfaction, and aggression. Boyfriends reported significantly greater perceptions of their partners humiliating them, higher ratings of themselves “giving in” during the interaction task, and higher overall reports of decision-making authority. No significant differences emerged between boyfriends and girlfriends in their reports of relationship satisfaction or aggression. Bivariate correlations between power indices and relationship satisfaction and aggression for both boyfriends and girlfriends are reported in Table 2. Aggressive behavior and relationship satisfaction were significantly associated with several indices of power for both boyfriends and girlfriends. In addition, as might be expected, several indices of power were significantly correlated. Correlations among boyfriends' and girlfriends' scores on the power dimensions and relationship outcomes are presented in Table 3. Small to moderate correlations between couple members' scores were observed for all indices of power and relationship quality.

Primary Analyses

To predict relationship satisfaction and dating aggression, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted separately for boyfriends and girlfriends. As Table 1 indicates, scores for aggressive behavior, experiences of humiliation, and giving in during the interaction task were generally low for both girlfriends and boyfriends, yielding quite skewed distributions. These three variables were transformed using a log base-10 transformation, which markedly reduced or completely eliminated problems with skewness for each variable. Regression analyses presented here used the transformed variables, although we observed an identical pattern of significant findings when the analyses were calculated with the original data.

For each regression analysis, the four facets of power reported by the partner were entered in the first step of each regression analysis (i.e., in predicting girlfriends' outcomes, boyfriends' perceptions of power were entered in the first step, and vice versa). Then, the four power indices reported by the self were entered in the second step. Consistent with the low to moderate bivariate correlations among boyfriends' and girlfriends' scores on the four power indices, multicollinearity diagnostics for all four regression analyses suggested no reason for concern about high intercorrelations among the predictor variables.

All four regression analyses were statistically significant (Tables 4 and 5). Indices of power reported by both boyfriends and girlfriends were significant predictors of relationship functioning for girlfriends. Interestingly, when boys reported higher decision making authority in the relationship, girlfriends reported higher relationship satisfaction. Controlling for boyfriends' scores, girlfriends' relationship satisfaction was significantly linked to their *own* scores on three of four indices of power (status discrepancy, humiliation, and giving in). Girlfriends' were more satisfied with their relationships when they perceived themselves as less likely to “give in” during the video recall procedure, viewed their partners as less humiliating, and viewed themselves as possessing greater status as a romantic partner, relative to their boyfriends. With regard to perpetration of aggression, overall results suggested that boyfriends' scores on power indices were associated with girlfriends' perpetration of aggressive behavior. However, only one marginally significant beta emerged for boyfriends' experiences

of humiliating behaviors by their girlfriends. In addition, girlfriends' scores on status discrepancy and experiences of humiliation were both positively linked to their aggressiveness toward their boyfriends.

In contrast to the results for girlfriends, Table 5 shows that girlfriends' views of interpersonal power accounted for a negligible proportion of the variance in boyfriends' reports of relationship satisfaction and aggression. Once girlfriends' experiences were controlled for, boyfriends' perceptions of status discrepancy were the most salient in predicting their relationship satisfaction—those who perceived themselves to be of greater status relative to their girlfriends reported lower overall relationship satisfaction. Boyfriends' scores were significantly linked to perpetration of aggression, such that experiences of humiliation and decision making authority were linked to aggressive behavior; boys who saw their girlfriends as more humiliating and who viewed themselves as possessing greater decision making authority reported more aggressive behavior.

Discussion

The current study assessed the associations between measures of interpersonal power and important relationship characteristics for male and female adolescent couple members. Each of the proposed aspects of interpersonal power was associated with relationship quality, lending support to our developmentally conceptualized assessment of power. In addition, there were gender differences in perceptions of power and the patterns of prediction of relationship functioning, suggesting that boyfriends and girlfriends interpret and respond uniquely to the negotiation of relational power.

Gender Differences in Reports of Interpersonal Power

In this sample, measures of the powerlessness in process (Cromwell & Olsen, 1975), giving in and experiencing humiliation, yielded results that favored girlfriends, while measures of power outcomes (i.e., decision making) favored boyfriends. Giordano and colleagues (2005) suggested that the peer contexts in which males and females are socialized prepare them differently for crossover into romantic relationships. Girls' peer relationships are characterized by affection, intimacy, and self-disclosure, while competition and one-upmanship are more salient in early male peer contexts. Giordano and colleagues posited that boys may experience greater levels of awkwardness and anxiety in early romantic relationships, and girls' greater experience in intimate relationship building may place them at an advantage. Our results are consistent with their hypotheses and suggest that girls may perceive themselves as more effective in their problem solving conversations and, when motivated to exert greater influence, may be more skilled at using shaming or humiliating behaviors to control or influence their partners.

In contrast, couples members' self-reports of general decision making authority in their relationships were more consistent with both early and more recent research with adult couples (e.g., Felmlee, 1994; Peplau, 1979). It is especially interesting to note that, while girlfriends may have experienced an advantage with regard to the process of power (influence strategies and interpersonal processes), couple members agreed that final decisions are more likely to be made by males. Discrepancies in decision making authority have often been attributed to the patriarchal structure of US society, in which men enjoy greater authority and influence (e.g., Sagrestano, 1992). Participants in this study were recruited from rural communities in the western United States and were predominantly affiliated with more conservative, patriarchal religions (i.e., Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Catholic, and Baptist). Rural communities have been described as potentially more conservative, espousing more traditional gender roles and patriarchal values (Stamm, 2003). These values may be reflected in couples'

responses and may not reflect the distribution of decision making authority in young couples from urban or more diverse contexts.

These significant findings differ markedly from the one known previous study of power in adolescent couples (Galliher et al., 1999), which suggested that adolescent couples behaved in an egalitarian manner. Differences in geographical location, religious affiliation of the populations from which the samples were drawn, or urbanicity of the communities from which the samples were drawn may explain this discrepancy in part. These inconsistent findings do highlight the need for additional research examining interpersonal power in couples from varying backgrounds in order to clarify the negotiation of power in young couples. Of course, while the gender differences in the processes and outcomes of power were significant and effect sizes were moderate, examination of the means for each facet of interpersonal power suggests that average couple members did not view themselves as particularly “powerless.” Reports of giving in and experiences of humiliation were low for both boyfriends and girlfriends, while the scores for decision making authority suggested that, on average, couples viewed themselves as egalitarian in terms of decision making. Measures of discrepancies in perceptions of social prestige or desirability as a romantic partner also indicated that, on average, couple members viewed themselves similarly in terms of their status as a romantic partner. This information should be kept in mind while interpreting associations among power indices and relationship quality.

Predicting Relationship Satisfaction

Measures of relational power were stronger predictors of relationship satisfaction for girlfriends than for boyfriends and several interesting patterns emerged in the findings. First, when partner perceptions of interpersonal power were entered in to the model in the first step of the analyses, girlfriends' scores accounted for a miniscule portion of the variance in their boyfriends' satisfaction, while boyfriends' perceptions contributed significantly to the prediction of girlfriend relationship satisfaction. Specifically, when boyfriends experienced more decision making authority and felt less humiliated (although this was only marginally significant), girlfriends were more satisfied. This is consistent with other research, based on feminist theories of relationship development (Brown & Gilligan, 1992), suggesting that females may more carefully attend to their romantic partners' experiences and behaviors when they are evaluating their relationships (e.g., Galliher, Enno, & Wright, 2006; Galliher et al., 2004).

Adding girlfriends' scores on the power indices accounted for an additional 21% of the variance in their relationship satisfaction, and three of the four power indices were significant predictors. Negative relationships between experiences of humiliation or perceptions of giving in to their partners and relationship satisfaction are consistent with previous research – girlfriends who see themselves as disadvantaged in the relationships experience poorer overall relationship quality. Girlfriends who viewed themselves as possessing greater prestige or status as a romantic partner, however, were more satisfied with their relationships. In contrast, for boyfriends, only status discrepancy predicted relationship satisfaction, and it was in the *opposite* direction. Boyfriends who viewed themselves as possessing less status than their girlfriends reported greater relationship satisfaction. We wonder if the reward power associated with affiliation with a higher status partner is perceived by boys as a source of pride or if they view a higher status partner as more of a “catch”, which renders them more appreciative of the relationship. In contrast, the girls who see themselves as possessing lower status than their boyfriends may experience greater dissatisfaction as a function of their relatively greater vulnerability.

Predicting Relationship Aggression

Indices of relationship power accounted for a substantial portion of the variance in perpetration of dating aggression for both males and females. Adding the partner's perceptions of relationship power accounted for significant variance in aggression perpetration for girlfriends only (with boyfriends' reports of experiences of humiliation emerging as a marginally significant predictor), but adding self-ratings of power in the third step was equally salient for both genders. Experiences of the partner as humiliating, disparaging, and dismissing were the strongest predictors of aggression perpetration for both boyfriends and girlfriends, attesting to the powerful negative role of this emotional context in relationship functioning. Some theory and research has observed that reactive aggression in response to self-esteem threats may be more salient among males, but we found equally strong associations between humiliation experiences and aggression for boyfriends and girlfriends (e.g., Brengden, Vitaro, Tremblay, & Lavoie, 2004; Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999). Our findings are more consistent with the recent work of Webster (2005), who found some women to be equally prone to reactive aggression in the face of a threatened sense of self worth.

In contrast to the findings regarding experiences of humiliation, possessing greater decision making authority (for boyfriends) and greater subjective status as a relationship partner (for girlfriends) were both associated with higher rates of aggression perpetration. The findings for status discrepancy and decision making are more consistent with a pattern in which aggression is used to support, maintain, or signify a position of greater power. Of course, these data are correlational, so any discussion of causal relations is theoretical and speculative. There is a great deal of complexity to intimate violence that was not captured in this cross-sectional study. For example, aggression may be used purposefully with the aim of procuring and maintaining a position of power or aggression may stem from the disrespect implied by the perception of the partner as "less than." Interpersonal power and aggression likely interact reciprocally over time. Experiences of humiliation or yielding behaviors may be better conceptualized as both predictors of and reactions to aggression, and longitudinal research would be necessary to clarify patterns across time. It also appears that the majority of couples who experience aggression in their relationships report mutual violence (Williams & Frieze, 2005), suggesting that prediction of both perpetration and victimization over time is important. Finally, recall that most couple members in this study reported relatively low rates of aggression and most aggression was in the form of verbal insults, threats, and minor physical aggression. Motivations to engage in such relatively 'minor' verbal and physical coercion may be different from the motivations to engage in severe, frequent, and more dangerous relationship abuse.

Summary and Limitations

The current study suggests that measures of relational power in adolescent couples are important correlates of aggression and relationship satisfaction. Given the theoretical importance of early romantic relationships in shaping later relationship behaviors and attitudes (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1994), the developmental and clinical implications are clear. Acknowledging that relationship power is culture bound and our findings may not apply outside of Westernized cultures that value independence and egalitarianism, the development of interventions aimed at fostering mutual respect, equity in decision making, and solution focused problem solving in young couples appears to be an important research agenda.

Although these findings provide a clear contribution to the literature, several limitations provide directions for future research. First, the rural, relatively conservative nature of the majority of the sample suggests that these findings may not apply broadly to youths from urban or other diverse contexts. Our analyses combined couples representing a range of ethnic backgrounds, and the relationships we observed varied greatly in length and other factors. In

preliminary analyses, we controlled for factors such as age, relationship length, religious affiliation, and ethnicity. Although we did observe some significant relationships between demographic factors and relationship quality, the patterns of association between the power indices and relationship quality were the same as those reported here. Further research will be necessary to delineate how, and under which circumstances, cultural and demographic variables are linked to relationships processes in adolescent couples. In addition, little is known about relationship processes in same-sex couples and research examining relationship development among sexual minority youth is needed. Also, as might be expected with a non-clinical, community sample, couple members reported very low rates of aggressive behavior and generally high levels of relationship satisfaction. Restricted range for the outcome variables may have influenced the patterns of association that were observed, and replication with higher risk samples might provide a different picture of the associations between interpersonal power and relationship functioning. Finally, several of our measures of relationship power were somewhat exploratory and lack solid psychometric support. Our measure of status discrepancy, in particular, should be interpreted cautiously, as this was based on a two item difference score. Our ongoing research aims to address these remaining important issues.

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Table 1
Means, Standard Deviations and Paired Samples *t*-tests for Power and Criterion Variables

Variable	Boyfriend Mean (SD)	Girlfriend Mean (SD)	Possible Range	Observed Range	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Status Discrepancy	-0.06 (0.89)	0.00 (0.85)	-4 - 4	-4 - 3	-0.42	88	.678	-.04
Giving-in	0.94 (0.89)	0.66 (0.72)	0 - 4	0 - 3.98	2.86	86	.005	.31
Humiliation Questionnaire	1.88 (0.98)	1.61 (0.76)	1-5	1 - 5	2.47	88	.016	.26
Decision Making	3.05 (0.54)	2.88 (0.35)	1-5	1.6 - 4.6	2.21	88	.030	.24
Relationship Satisfaction	3.56 (0.80)	3.66 (0.65)	1-5	1 - 5	-1.65	87	.102	-.18
Total Aggression	1.37 (0.53)	1.35 (0.39)	1-4	1 - 4	0.44	87	.663	.05

Table 2
Correlations among Interpersonal Power Indices and Relationship Outcomes

	Relationship Satisfaction	Total Aggression	Humiliation	Status Discrepancy	Giving In	Decision Making
Relationship Sat.	1					
Total Aggression	-.04	1				
Humiliation	-.41**	.44**	1			
Status Discrep.	.18*	.32**	.16	1		
Giving In	-.44**	.06	.30**	.02	1	
Decision Making	-.12	.24*	.09	.22*	.08	1

Note: Correlations for males on top of diagonal; correlations for females on bottom

^
p < .10;
*
p < .05;
**
p < .01

Table 3
Intercorrelations among Boyfriends' and Girlfriends' Interpersonal Power and Relationship Outcome Scores

Boyfriends' Scores	Relationship Satisfaction	Total Aggression	Girlfriends' Scores Humiliation	Status Discrepancy	Giving In	Decision Making
Relationship Sat.	.15					
Total Aggression	-.09	-.02 ^{**}	-.07 [^]	-.09	-.06	-.11
Humiliation	-.27 ^{**}	.34 ^{**}	.20 [*]	.00	.12	.09
Status Discrep.	.01	.27 [*]	.33 ^{**}	.05	.31 ^{**}	.29 ^{**}
Giving In	-.20 [^]	-.17	-.18 [^]	-.08	-.23 [*]	-.08
Decision Making	.15	.15	.22 [*]	.04	.39 ^{**}	.15
		-.08	-.12	-.08	-.09	-.32 ^{**}

[^] p < .10;
^{*} p < .05;
^{**} p < .01

Table 4
Summary of Regression Findings Predicting Girlfriends' Relationship Characteristics from Indices of Relationship Power

Outcome	Block	Predictors	Adj. R^2	R^2 Change	F change	df	p	Beta	t	p
Relationship Satisfaction	Boyfriend Power Indices	Status Disc.	.124	.166	3.98	4, 80	.005	-.04	-0.35	.725
		Humiliation						-.22	-1.98	.052
		Giving In						-.16	-1.39	.169
		Dec. Making						.24	2.24	.028
	Girlfriend Power Indices	Status Disc.	.310	.210	6.39	4, 76	<.001	.25	2.67	.009
		Humiliation						-.28	-2.69	.009
		Giving In						-.30	-2.88	.005
		Dec. Making						-.05	-0.46	.644
Aggression	Boyfriend Power Indices	Status Disc.	.088	.131	3.02	4, 80	.022	-.07	-0.61	.542
		Humiliation						.22	1.95	.055
		Giving In						.13	1.13	.264
		Dec. Making						-.15	-1.40	.166
	Girlfriend Power Indices	Status Disc.	.224	.166	4.49	4, 76	.003	.22	2.20	.031
		Humiliation						.36	3.19	.002
		Giving In						.00	0.04	.972
		Dec. Making						.11	0.97	.333

Table 5
Summary of Regression Findings Predicting Boyfriends' Relationship Characteristics from Indices of Relationship Power

Outcome	Block	Predictors	Adj. R^2	R^2 Change	F change	df	p	Beta	t	p
Relationship Satisfaction	Girlfriend Power Indices	Status Disc.	.001	.049	1.02	4, 80	.402	-.07	-0.59	.555
		Humiliation						-.13	-1.14	.259
		Giving In						-.04	-0.37	.712
		Dec. Making						-.11	-0.98	.329
	Boyfriend Power Indices	Status Disc.	.091	.129	2.99	4, 76	.024	-.26	-2.39	.019
		Humiliation						-.02	-0.12	.908
		Giving In						-.21	-1.77	.080
		Dec. Making						.16	1.34	.184
Aggression	Girlfriend Power Indices	Status Disc.	.027	.073	1.57	4, 80	.189	-.03	-0.30	.766
		Humiliation						.19	1.61	.111
		Giving In						.11	0.97	.337
		Dec. Making						.10	0.88	.384
	Boyfriend Power Indices	Status Disc.	.196	.199	5.20	4, 76	.001	.15	1.46	.150
		Humiliation						.33	2.77	.007
		Giving In						.17	1.53	.130
		Dec. Making						.27	2.36	.021