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Age and Gender Differences in Teen Relationship Violence

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Abstract

Research shows that abuse in adolescence can start early and current literature regarding gender differences in Teen Relationship Violence (TRV) is inconsistent. Age and Gender differences in TRV were examined. Measures assessing TRV and its correlates were completed by 231 teens from 7th, 9th, and 11th grade classes. A 2 (gender) by 3 (grade) multivariate analysis of variance revealed significant effects for grade and gender indicating that 7th graders have lower perpetration and victimization of TRV, less anger control, and fewer positive conflict resolution behaviors than 9th and 11th graders. Furthermore, girls perpetrate more physical and emotional abuse while boys perpetrate more sexual abuse. Results have implications for timing and content of prevention programs addressing dating violence in adolescence.

Keywords

adolescent; physical abuse; emotional abuse; offender/perpetrator; victim

Teen relationship violence (TRV) is defined as the physical, sexual, or psychological control of another person in a dating relationship (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999) and is prevalent among adolescents with one out of six students in grades 10–12 reporting victimization of dating violence (Marquart, Nannini, Edwards, Stanley, & Wayman, 2007). TRV is a serious problem as it has been associated with other negative effects such as risky sexual behavior and physical injury (Silverman, Raj, & Clements, 2004). In addition, early experiences with TRV can contribute significantly to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety (Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003); and put one at risk for future abuse/victimization (Halpern, Spriggs, Martin, & Kupper, 2009; Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008).

Although numerous studies have been conducted on the prevalence and consequences of TRV, relatively little research has been conducted on age and gender differences in types of TRV. Furthermore, it is important to investigate dating violence at earlier ages as adolescence is a time when dating relationships first begin, and individuals as young as 12

years old are beginning to date and experience dating violence (Close, 2005). It is widely accepted that adolescence is a critical period of development, especially in regards to personal identity, with ramifications which span the lifetime (e.g., Erickson, 1982). Socialization of gender roles is also escalated during adolescence (Hill & Lynch, 1983); therefore, understanding age differences during this crucial time of development is important.

Research conducted on age differences in TRV indicates that incidence of TRV increases as individuals get older. Silverman et al. (2004) conducted a study investigating adolescent girls between the ages of 14 and 18 and found that younger girls have less risk of experiencing TRV than older girls across the United States. However, it is suggested that the foundations of abuse begin early. Dating violence, including sexual abuse, has been found to begin as early as in the seventh grade (Small & Kerns, 1993; Williams, 2008). Investigating early exposure to dating violence is particularly important as research has found that individuals who experience dating violence in young adolescence are more likely to experience dating violence later on (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003). One explanation for this increase in TRV with age was proposed by Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, and Kupper (2001) who state that consistently among young samples, “the prevalence of partner violence increases with age” (pg. 1679). However, they note these differences “may [only] be partly a function of the greater dating experience that generally accumulates with age” (Halpern et al., 2001, p. 1684). Research findings also highlight other factors that are associated with age, such as increase in the number of relationships (in particular among girls), and increases in relationship duration and commitment levels (Bergman, 1992; Hanley & O’Neill, 1997; Magdol, Moffitt, & Silva, 1998; Thompson, 1991). These findings suggest that age differences in dating violence are likely explained by multiple factors and warrant further exploration.

Unlike research findings on age differences in TRV, studies examining gender differences produce inconsistent results. Much of the literature indicates that girls are victimized by TRV more than boys (Callahan et al., 2003; Marquart et al., 2007). For example, Halpern et al. (2009) found that female gender is associated with increased risk of experiencing dating violence. Further, adolescent boys have been found to be more likely to “report more aggressive behavioral reactions to dating situations” than girls (Prospero, 2007, p. 278). However, another sizable sector of the literature finds conflicting results. Windle and Mrug (2009) found that girls reported significantly more perpetration of violent acts such as pushing or shoving, punching, and kicking than boys while boys reported significantly more victimization of these acts than girls. In addition, girls may also tend to be more jealous of their partners’ involvement in activities and friendships outside of their relationship (Hansen, 1985). Furthermore, a number of studies report mixed findings regarding gender differences in perpetration and victimization of TRV. Some studies indicate that girls both perpetrators and are victims of TRV more than boys (Foshee, 1996). In a study conducted by Makepeace (1986), girls reported being victimized by physical violence twice as often as boys; however, girls indicated their aggressive acts were most often specifically intended to cause physical injury.

One explanation for this discrepancy in the literature has been proposed in a review by Hickman, Jaycox, and Aronoff (2004). They noted both genders could have different ideas of the severity of abuse such as boys reporting that they were not bothered by abusive actions whereas girls were very bothered by the same acts. Another possible explanation is that the studies varied in methods of assessing and operationally defining abuse. Most of the studies reporting that girls are more victimized by TRV, including those stated above, either measure only physical abuse or integrate all types of abuse into one variable (e.g., Makepeace, 1986; Mangold & Koski, 1990). On the other hand, most studies that report boys as being victimized more often or that both partners are mutual perpetrators tend to separate their variables into separate forms of abuse, such as sexual, physical, and emotional abuse (e.g., Foshee, 1996; Hansen, 1985). To date, there is limited research investigating differences between age and gender in the subtypes of TRV. Therefore, the current study seeks to investigate differences between genders in perpetration and victimization of physical, emotional, sexual, and jealous abusive behaviors. In addition, few studies have examined age and gender differences in correlates of TRV, particularly those that may serve as protective factors. One behavioral correlate is anger control, which has been found to have a significant relationship with dating violence.

Research suggests that anger control influences individuals' tendencies towards TRV. For example, studies have identified seemingly non-aggressive forms of managing anger (e.g., use of humor by boys) and anger styles that predict whether individuals will be abusive or not (Dye & Eckhardt, 2000; Weber & Wiedig-Allison, 2007). Past findings also indicate that anger expression styles may be a precursor to dating violence (Buss & Perry, 1992; Wolf & Foshee, 2003). Feldman and Gowen (1998) found that overt anger positively correlates with violence. In a study by Dye and Eckhardt (2000), anger control, not amount of anger, influences risk of perpetration of dating violence. Participants who had consistently perpetrated violence reported angry feelings at similar frequency and intensity as participants who had not. However, violent participants reported, "a greater tendency to direct angry affect toward others and less ability to control angry feelings relative to nonviolent participants" (Dye and Eckhardt, 2000, p. 346). Further, Lundeberg, Stith, Penn, and Ward (2004) found participants who had perpetrated violence toward their dating partners typically reported lower anger management skills than those who were not violent. Research has also suggested that anger control may be influenced by age and gender. For example, Phillips, Henry, Hosie, and Milne (2006) found a significant positive correlation between anger control and age. In addition, boys tend to have more aggressive interpersonal relationships (Black, 2000) and are less likely to use positive coping skills and non-destructive forms of expressing anger than girls (Boman, 2003). Given this link between anger control and dating violence, the current study seeks to investigate age and gender differences in self-efficacy for anger control.

Positive conflict resolution (PCR) is a second correlate that to TRV. PCR is a form of negotiating dating conflict by using positive strategies (e.g. compromise; Wolfe et al., 2001) and it has been described as necessary to maintaining interpersonal relationships while protecting one's self identity (Feldman & Gowen, 1998). Research indicates that positive forms of conflict resolution are negatively associated with aggression and victimization of abuse (Antônio & Hokoda, 2009; Butovskaya, Timentschik, & Burkova, 2007). One study

that takes an extensive look at PCR was conducted by Feldman and Gowen (1998). They found that most adolescents already possess skills to navigate conflict with their parents. In early dating experiences, they employ these same skills in conflict with romantic partners. Feldman and Gowen also found that the form of conflict management one displays is related to violence. For example, their data suggest that overt anger is strongly positively associated with violence whereas compromise is negatively associated.

Feldman and Gowen (1998) also found significant age differences in PCR. That is, younger adolescents tend to resolve conflict mainly using negative strategies such as aggression, but as they age they use more positive styles (e.g., discussion and compromise) to resolve conflict. This finding has been corroborated by other researchers (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001; Wied, Branje, & Meeus, 2007). Past research has also found evidence for gender differences in PCR, although these reports are scant and inconsistent. For example, in the Feldman and Gowen (1998) study, it was reported that girls were more likely to use overt anger than boys, whereas, Wied et al. (2007) found that girls report more empathy (which they note is associated with PCR) and problem solving strategies during relationship conflict.

The research above shows that TRV is prevalent and associated with numerous negative, long-term outcomes. Because adolescence is a critical time when teens begin to date, experience dating violence (Close, 2005), and form identity and gender role beliefs (e.g., Erickson, 1982; Hill & Lynch, 1983), understanding age and gender differences in TRV and its correlates is important. Because dating violence and anger control increase with age, it is important to examine developmental differences across adolescence. Furthermore, because inconsistencies have been found in research on gender differences in TRV, research should examine different subtypes of TRV to determine if this can account for the disagreement reported by researchers. Finally, given that correlates of TRV such as anger control and PCR have significant effects on perpetration of dating violence, this study investigates whether there are age and gender differences in these protective factors as well. To assess these questions, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) will be conducted as all dependent variables are correlated (Roff, 2002).

Method

Participants

Two hundred and four participants (93 boys, 111 girls) from an urban neighborhood were recruited from 7th, 9th, and 11th grade classes in South San Diego County. Students ranged in age from 12 to 17 years old ($M = 14.91$; $SD = 1.57$). Seventh graders consisted of 27 boys and 24 girls (mean age = 12.78; $SD = .55$); 9th graders consisted of 32 boys and 37 girls (mean age = 14.54; $SD = .56$), and; 11th graders consisted of 42 boys and 53 girls (mean age = 16.45; $SD = .50$). The sample was ethnically diverse being composed of: 2.5% Asian, 1% African American, 41% Mexican American, 11% Mexican, 23% Latino, .5% Filipino, 13% White, and 8% Other.

Procedures

Researchers visited classrooms in one middle school and one high school to describe the study to students and hand out assent forms as well as parental consent forms. Researchers returned one week later to administer a pencil and paper survey. Participants completed the survey in 30 minute semi-supervised conditions to ensure privacy. Students were given a debriefing statement that included local counseling resources.

Measures

Measures administered include the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationship Inventory, Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse, and the Anger Expression Scale.

The Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory (CADRI; Wolfe et al., 2001) is a 34-item self response measure using a four-point Likert scale with answers ranging from “(1) never” to “(4) often”. To answer the questions of interest to the current study we only analyzed questions related to perpetration and victimization of four subscales. Physical abuse (4 items each) yielded a reliability alpha of .81; a sample item is “I kicked, hit, or punched my dating partner”. Sexual abuse (3 items) yielded a reliability alpha of .68; a sample item is “I touched dating partner sexually when didn't want it”. Verbal-emotional abuse (10 items) yielded a reliability alpha of .93; a sample item is “I said things just to make my dating partner angry”. Positive conflict resolution behaviors (9 items) yielded a reliability alpha of .94; a sample item is “I agreed that my dating partner was partly right”.

The Multidimensional Measure of Emotional Abuse (Murphy & Hoover, 1999) is a scale (28 items) that assesses perpetration and victimization of verbally and emotionally abusive behaviors using a four-point likert scale ranging from “(0) Never” to “(4) Always”. For the purposes of the current study a subscale of seven items assessing abusive jealous behaviors were analyzed. This Likert scale was modified from its original form to be more easily integrated into the overall survey. A sample item is “How often have you secretly searched through the other person’s belongings?” This subscale yielded a reliability alpha of .90.

The Anger Expression Scale is a subscale (6 items) of the Teen Conflict Survey (Bosworth & Espelage, 1995) which assesses self-efficacy of anger control using a five-point likert scale ranging from “(1) Very Confident” to “(5) Not at all Confident”. This Likert scale was slightly modified from its original form. A sample item is “How confident are you in your ability to stay out of fights?” This scale yielded a reliability alpha of .63.

Results

To examine age and gender differences in TRV and its correlates, a 2 (male, female)×3 (7th grade, 9th grade, 11th grade) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted on 10 dependent variables: Perpetration and victimization of TRV (physical, verbal-emotional, sexual, jealous behaviors), self efficacy for anger control skills, and positive conflict resolution behaviors. Means and standard deviations for each variable are presented in tables 1 and 2. Multivariate F-tests revealed main effects for both gender, $F(10,198) = 4.67, p < .001$ and grade, $F(20, 198) = 3.44, p < .001$. No significant interactions were found.

Univariate analyses examining gender effects revealed significant differences for perpetration of sexual abuse, perpetration of physical abuse, perpetration of verbal-emotional abuse, and victimization of verbal-emotional abuse. Means, standard deviations, and significance tests for gender are presented in Table 1. Results indicate that boys have significantly higher scores for perpetrating sexual abuse than girls; however, girls report higher scores for perpetrating physical and emotional abuse than boys. Interestingly, girls also report significantly higher scores on victimization of verbal-emotional abuse than boys.

Univariate analyses examining age differences revealed significant differences for perpetration of verbal-emotional abuse, victimization of verbal-emotional abuse, perpetration of jealousy, victimization of jealousy, PCR, and self-efficacy for anger control. Means and standard deviations for age are illustrated in Table 2. For all dependent variables, 7th grade students report significantly lower scores than 9th and 11th grade students; however, there were no significant differences between 9th and 11th grade students.

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate age and gender differences on different types of TRV and its correlates. Age differences were found for perpetration and victimization of verbal-emotional abuse, perpetration and victimization of jealous behaviors, anger control, and PCR. The results indicate that substantial changes occur between 7th grade students and 9th / grade, and that rates of TRV in 9th and 11th grade seem to be more stable. That is, 7th grade students report significantly less perpetration and victimization of verbal-emotional abuse (e.g., making their dating partner jealous, accusing their partner of flirting with someone else, insulting and blaming the other, saying things to get each other angry). Furthermore, 7th grade students reported significantly more victimization of jealous abusive behaviors than 9th and 11th grade students. These verbal-emotional and jealous behaviors appear to increase between 7th and 9th grade and remain more stable through high school.

These results have implications for the timing of programs aimed at preventing TRV. Nation et al. (2003) suggest that primary prevention programs should be offered at a time when the topic (e.g., dating) is relevant to youth but before most youth have experienced the problem behavior (e.g. dating violence). Foshee, Reyes and Wyckoff (2009) suggest that this window is around 8th grade or when teens are about 13 years old. The results of this study concur with this timeline as between 7th and 9th grade, dating violence increases.

Similar age differences were found for protective correlates of TRV, specifically self-efficacy for anger control and positive conflict resolution (PCR). That is, 7th grade teens report less efficacy for anger control and less PCR than 9th graders, and there were no differences in these positive correlates between 9th and 11th graders. These behaviors include choosing to engage in calm discussions (e.g., leaving the room to cool down), communicating shared responsibility and blame (e.g., “told partner I was partly to blame”), and engaging in compromise (e.g., offering a solution that would make both partners happy). These results have implications for the focus of curriculum aimed at preventing TRV. Research has found PCR negatively relates to perpetration of verbal-emotional abuse

(Antônio & Hokoda, 2009) and anger control relates to perpetration of dating violence (Clarey, Hokoda, & Ulloa, 2010; Dye & Eckhardt, 2000; Lundeberg et al., 2004). These results suggest that the focus of prevention efforts should be on behavioral precursors that prevent TRV (Foshee et al., 2009), that is, promoting positive behaviors (i.e., anger control and PCR) that are protective of TRV. A review conducted by Hickman and colleagues (2004) found all but one evaluated intervention were "...intended to influence attitudes and increase student's knowledge of dating violence and some of its consequences" (p. 131). Most programs have not focused on teaching adolescents crucial skills, anger control and PCR, needed for healthy dating relationships.

This suggestion to teach anger control skills as a preventive measure against TRV may seem counter to literature proposing that domestic violence perpetrators do not lack anger control skills, but in fact, are choosing to exert dominance and power and control (McMurrin & Gilchrist, 2008). Moreover, research on couples involved in domestic violence suggests there are different sub-types of perpetrators. Johnson (1995) suggests one type, called intimate terrorism or patriarchal terrorism, is unidirectional, repetitive and severe. Intimate terrorism is perpetrated to dominate, control and intimidate their partner. A second type, called common couple violence or situational aggression, is more reciprocal and bi-directional, and usually entails more mild types of violence. Situational violence that is reciprocal may escalate and lead to more serious violence (Temple, Weston, & Marshall, 2005), thus research has suggested that this type of violence may be best addressed with anger management and couples counseling that deescalate the intensity of arguments and verbal conflict (O'Leary & Slep, 2006; Holtzworth-Munroe, Meehan, Herron, Rehman, and Stuart (2003) also describe various sub-types of male perpetrators that include family only, borderline dysphoric, generally violent perpetrators, and low-level antisocial perpetrators. Perpetrators who are violent towards their partners and violent towards others in general (e.g., Boyle, O'Leary, Rosenbaum, & Hassett-Walker, 2008; Panchanadeswaran, Ting, Burke, O'Campo, McDonnell, & Gielen, 2010) may benefit from cognitive-behavioral anger management interventions (Taft, Murphy, King, Musser, & DeDeyn, 2003).

This research on sub-types of adult perpetrators and interventions for batterer intervention programs for domestic violence could inform prevention efforts with adolescents. Perhaps curriculum teaching anger control skills may be effective with only a subset of TRV perpetrators. However, because many studies have found a link between anger control and PCR and TRV, and because youth report that they are not confident in their ability to negotiate conflicts and have healthy dating relationships (Sears, Byers, Whelan, & Saint-Pierre, 2006), school-based prevention programs should increase efforts to teach these skills that may protect youth from TRV. Curriculum that involves role-playing and modeling PCR and anger control skills (e.g., positive communication, compromise, shared responsibility, self-regulation of arousal and ability to de-escalate conflict) may be useful in protecting against TRV (Close, 2005).

In addition to a significant main effect for age, this study found gender differences in subtypes of TRV. Boys reported significantly more perpetration of sexual abuse than girls which is consistent with previous research (Foshee, 1996). In addition, girls reported perpetrating more verbal-emotional and physical abuse which is also consistent with

previous research (Hickman et al., 2004). These findings support the proposition that different types of abuse should be looked at separately instead of as one construct. Each gender perpetrates different types of abuse at different rates and combining them all together could misrepresent prevalence rates and obfuscate gender differences. Further, this challenges the traditional thought of strictly “male batterers” and “female victims”. While perpetration by boys tends to result in more severe physical injuries, perpetration by girls is more frequent and it can result in emotional consequences which are just as adverse (Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001; Sigelman, Berry, & Wiles, 1984). Ignoring these trends could lead to, and continue, erroneous perceptions and stereotypes regarding how dating violence exists in society. Moreover, prevention and treatment efforts could overlook certain types of abuse and ignore female perpetrators and male victims. Another noteworthy finding is that the only gender difference that occurred for victimization of TRV was that girls reported more victimization of verbal-emotional abuse than boys. It is interesting that they reported both greater perpetration and victimization of verbal-emotional abuse than boys. Since these are self-report data and reflect adolescents’ perceptions of the items; one conclusion which may be drawn is that girls perceive their actions, as well as their partner’s actions, to be more emotionally hurtful than boys do. This lends support to the suggestion by Hickman et al. (2004) that both genders may have different ideas of what constitutes emotional abuse.

In considering these results certain limitations of the study should be noted. This was a cross-sectional study which contains data that were gathered at a specific point in time and we cannot know if these trends are stable over time. The study also investigated individuals instead of couples as a whole so it is impossible to determine intra-relationship trends in abuse. Furthermore, this study was conducted within a single school district and consisted of a sample which is predominantly Mexican-American (41%) as well as overall Hispanic (75%), thus further limiting generalizability. However, because these findings are consistent with previous research conducted in other regions of the United States we can expect that our results are not limited to this one area.

This study indicates the importance of addressing age and gender differences in TRV and its correlates. Dating begins early in adolescence and abuse increases with age and dating experience, therefore, violence should be addressed earlier before behaviors are solidified. Further, stereotypical views of predominantly male perpetrators and predominantly female victims, and assumptions that abuse is one homogenous construct should be reconsidered. It is important that prevention programs that address these issues take these differences into account to attain the highest chance of success.

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TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Subtypes of Teen Relationship Violence by Age

Dependent Variables	7th	9th	11th	Univariate Analysis Results
Perpetration				
Verbal-Emotional				
<i>M</i>	14.02 ^a	18.48 ^b	18.86 ^b	$F(1, 198) = 12.67, p < .001$
<i>SD</i>	3.68	6.50	5.59	
Victimization				
Verbal-Emotional				
<i>M</i>	13.94 ^a	19.50 ^b	19.49 ^b	$F(1, 198) = 14.62, p < .001$
<i>SD</i>	3.96	7.35	6.00	
Perpetration sexual				<i>ns</i>
<i>M</i>	3.75	1.09	.75	
<i>SD</i>	1.91			
Victimization sexual				
<i>M</i>	3.65	4.19	3.86	<i>ns</i>
<i>SD</i>	1.39	1.75	1.39	
Perpetration physical				
<i>M</i>	4.71	5.00	4.47	<i>ns</i>
<i>SD</i>	1.38	1.89	1.25	
Victimization physical				
<i>M</i>	4.71	5.23	4.70	<i>ns</i>
<i>SD</i>	1.43	2.47	1.72	
Perpetration jealousy				
<i>M</i>	9.29 ^a	11.16 ^b	10.64 ^b	$F(1, 198) = 3.33, p < .05$
<i>SD</i>	2.42	4.46	3.80	
Victimization jealousy				
<i>M</i>	9.17	12.25	11.21	$F(1, 198) = 6.40, p < .001$
<i>SD</i>	2.59	5.35	4.49	
Positive conflict Resolution				

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Dependent Variables		7th	9th	11th	Univariate Analysis Results
<i>M</i>		20.40 ^a	25.44 ^b	26.54 ^b	<i>F</i> (1, 198) = 12.15, <i>p</i> < .001
<i>SD</i>		7.32	5.35	6.78	
Anger control					
<i>M</i>		17.06 ^a	18.52 ^b	19.05 ^b	<i>F</i> (1, 198) = 4.55, <i>p</i> < .05
<i>SD</i>		5.27	3.21	3.57	

Note: Means with superscripts a are significantly different from means with superscripts b in a row.
PCR = Positive Conflict Resolution

TABLE 2
Means and Standard Deviations for Subtypes of Teen Relationship Violence by Gender

Dependent Variables	Boys	Girls	Univariate Analysis Results
Perpetration verbal-emotional			
<i>M</i>	15.86	19.06	$F(1, 198) = 4.10, p < .05$
<i>SD</i>	4.63	6.37	
Victimization verbal-emotional			
<i>M</i>	16.94	19.23	$F(1, 198) = 4.10, p < .05$
<i>SD</i>	5.69	6.95	
Perpetration sexual			
<i>M</i>	3.80	3.32	$F(1, 198) = 10.56, p = .001$
<i>SD</i>	1.58	.75	
Victimization			
<i>M</i>	3.80	4.01	<i>ns</i>
<i>SD</i>	1.43	1.59	
Perpetration physical			
<i>M</i>	3.80	4.01	$F(1, 198) = 8.18, p < .05$
<i>SD</i>	1.43	1.59	
Victimization physical			
<i>M</i>	4.90	4.87	<i>ns</i>
<i>SD</i>	1.83	2.03	
Perpetration jealousy			
<i>M</i>	9.96	10.93	<i>ns</i>
<i>SD</i>	2.72	4.06	
Victimization jealousy			
<i>M</i>	10.47	11.54	<i>ns</i>
<i>SD</i>	3.69	5.14	
Positive conflict resolution			
<i>M</i>	24.33	25.10	<i>ns</i>
<i>SD</i>	7.18	7.70	
Anger control			

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Dependent Variables		Boys	Girls	Univariate Analysis Results	
	<i>M</i>	18.85	18.05	<i>ns</i>	
	<i>SD</i>	4.19	3.71		