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Masculine Discrepancy Stress, Teen Dating Violence, and Sexual Violence Perpetration Among Adolescent Boys

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Abstract

Purpose—Addressing gender norms is integral to understanding and ultimately preventing violence in both adolescent and adult intimate relationships. Males are affected by gender role expectations which require them to demonstrate attributes of strength, toughness, and dominance. Discrepancy stress is a form of gender role stress that occurs when boys and men fail to live up to the traditional gender norms set by society. Failure to live up to these gender role expectations may precipitate this experience of psychological distress in some males which, in turn, may increase the risk to engage in physically and sexually violent behaviors as a means of demonstrating masculinity.

Methods—Five-hundred eighty-nine adolescent males from schools in Wayne County, Michigan completed a survey assessing self-perceptions of gender role discrepancy, the experience of discrepancy stress, and history of physical and sexual dating violence.

Results—Logistic regression analyses indicated boys who endorsed gender role discrepancy and associated discrepancy stress were generally at greater risk to engage in acts of sexual violence but not necessarily physical violence.

Conclusions—Boys who experience stress about being perceived as “sub-masculine” may be more likely to engage in sexual violence as a means of demonstrating their masculinity to self and/or others and thwarting potential “threats” to their masculinity by dating partners. Efforts to prevent sexual violence perpetration among male adolescents should perhaps consider the influence of gender socialization in this population and include efforts to reduce distress about masculine socialization in primary prevention strategies.

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Keywords

Gender role stress; Discrepancy stress; Masculinity; Teen dating violence; Intimate partner violence

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the annual rate of physical dating violence victimization among adolescent girls is 9% and the rate of forced sexual intercourse is 12% [1]. Equally alarming, as many as 15% of adolescents endorse using severe forms of violence (e.g., hitting with an object, using a knife or gun) against their dating partner that are likely to result in serious injury [2]. The consequences of these violent acts are pervasive and potentially chronic. For example, students experiencing dating violence in adolescence are likely to suffer anxiety, depression, substance use, low self-esteem, suicidal ideation, and injury [3,4]. In addition, the formative nature of this crucial developmental period puts adolescents at risk for future violent relationships as adults [5,6]. For these reasons, the primary prevention of teen dating violence (TDV) is of significant interest [7].

From the public health perspective, identifying key risk and protective factors and creating awareness of how they may influence long-term health outcomes is a critical step in the process of prevention [8]. A frequently theorized risk factor for men/boys' violence toward women has been gender socialization [9–12]. Gender roles set socially constructed expectations and norms about appropriate male and female behavior, characteristics, roles, and the culturally acceptable dynamics between males and females. Males are often expected to be, among other things, tough, strong, and dominant [13]. The use of violence and aggression serves as both an effective way to demonstrate these qualities and to stifle those who may seek to challenge one's masculine status [14]. Males adhering to masculine norms are more likely to perpetrate acts of violence toward an intimate or dating partner, and acts of violence in general [11,15,16]. However, despite this link between traditional norms of masculinity and aggressive behaviors, there is reason to suspect that males at the opposite end of the continuum of gender role conformity may be as likely or more likely to engage in aggressive and violent behavior in certain contexts. According to Pleck [17], discrepancy stress is a form of gender role stress that occurs when one fails to live up to the ideal manhood derived from societal mandates. Simply put, discrepancy stress arises when a male believes that he is, or believes he is perceived to be, insufficiently masculine. Research suggests that boys learn to expect that violation of masculine norms would result in negative social consequences [18,19]. It follows that boys experiencing a high degree of discrepancy stress would be more likely to act out in stereotypical masculine ways (e.g., aggression, risky sexual behavior) to demonstrate and validate their masculinity to self and/or others [14]. In addition, they may be more likely to interpret interpersonal interactions in intimate relationships as a threat to their masculinity and respond with violence [20,21].

At present, there has been little empirical work examining the influence of discrepancy stress on violence. Reidy et al. [22] demonstrated that discrepancy stress predicted multiple forms of violence toward an intimate partner even while controlling for other gender role relevant variables. However, as the authors note, addressing the association of discrepancy

stress and historical intimate partner violence in adult populations does not allow conclusion about the role of discrepancy stress in the onset of relationship violence. It is pertinent to the development of primary prevention strategies to address the influence of discrepancy stress on relationship violence in adolescent populations. In the present study, we seek to examine whether boys who experience stress because they believe that others perceive them to be less masculine than the "average" male are more likely to engage in TDV. We expected that boys who endorse self-perceptions of gender role discrepancy (i.e., less masculine than the "typical" guy) and experience distress about this discrepancy (i.e., discrepancy stress) would (1) endorse greater likelihood of using physical violence in a hypothetical dating context; (2) report more historical instances of physical dating violence; and (3) report more historical instances of sexual violence within and outside dating relationships.

Methods

Participants and procedure

Participants were 589 adolescent males from 13 middle and high schools across Wayne County, Michigan that completed self-administered questionnaires. Passive consent procedures were used in accordance with recommended ethical guidelines [23,24]. Parents had the opportunity to refuse consent for their child's participation by returning a written form or by calling a toll-free telephone number. Before survey administration, all students provided written assent and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. The institutional review board for the School of Social Work at Wayne State University approved the data collection protocols.

The sample was representative of the participating schools in terms of race: the largest percentage identified as white, the next largest identified as black, and smaller percentages identified as Hispanic, Native American, Asian American, and Arab American. We stratified the sample by grade (one cohort of sixth and one cohort of ninth graders) and community risk-level (i.e., low-, moderate-, and high-risk schools) and then randomly selected students within each stratum. Community risk was assessed using publicly available data to develop an index comprising rates of poverty, unemployment, percent minority, percent rental housing, percent female-headed households, and community violence. Approximately, half of the students were sampled from the sixth grade and half from the ninth grade. Respondents were generally equally distributed by community risk with over-sampling from higher risk communities. See Table 1 for demographic characteristics.

Measures

Gender role discrepancy and discrepancy stress—Respondents answered five Likert-type questions pertaining to the experience of (1) perceived gender role discrepancy (e.g., "I am less masculine than the average guy," "Most girls I know would say that I'm not as masculine as my friends") and five Likert-type questions pertaining to the experience of (2) discrepancy stress: distress stemming from the discrepancy (e.g., "I wish I was more manly," "I worry that people find me less attractive because I'm not as macho as other guys") [22]. Response options were on a five-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Terminology about specific behaviors, attributes, or cognitions related to

masculinity was avoided as this language was deemed too directive and not accurately assessing subjective constructions of masculinity. Thus, this measure uses broad terminology such as “masculine,” “manly,” or “macho.” Both the gender role discrepancy subscale (α = .86) and discrepancy stress subscale (α = .83) demonstrated good internal consistency.

Likelihood of physical teen dating violence—Because of age of the population, we expected low base rates for dating history and consequent dating violence. For this reason, we measured boys’ reported propensity to engage in physical acts of aggression toward a girlfriend during varying hypothetical interpersonal situations. Respondents were asked to rate how likely they were to “physically hurt” a dating partner in 18 different situations (e.g., “If you felt jealous,” “Your girlfriend disrespected you,” “Your girlfriend refused to have sex with you”) on a four-point Likert-scale from very unlikely to very likely.[1] Internal consistency for the scale was excellent, α = .95.

Physical teen dating violence—The Safe Dates Dating Violence perpetration scale [25] was modified to measure physical dating violence perpetration. Adolescents were asked how many times they had committed a number of physical behaviors against a dating partner. Fifteen behaviors were listed including conflict tactics such as having “hit or slapped,” “bit,” “tried to choke,” “beat them up,” “hit them with something besides a fist,” or “assaulted them with a knife or a gun.” Response options ranged from never (0) to 10 or more times (5). Items were summed to create a physical dating violence perpetration score, α = .94.

Sexual violence—Respondents answered questions relevant to two forms of sexual violence: sexual TDV and general sexual violence (not restricted violence in a dating relationship). Boys answered four items modified from the sexual coercion subscale of the Revised Conflict Tactics Scale [26] to indicate how many times they had perpetrated sexual violence against a dating partner. Questions included “made them have sex without a condom,” “insisted on sexual activity when they did not want to (but did not use force),” “Used force (like hitting, holding down, or using a weapon) to make them have any sexual activity,” and “Used threats to make them have any sexual activity.” Response options ranged from never (0) to 10 or more times (5). Items were summed to create a sexual TDV perpetration score, α = .87. In addition, respondents answered one additional question pertaining to general sexual violence perpetration not specific to a dating partner. Boys were asked to report how many times they “had done (or tried) to do something sexual with someone against their will?” Response options ranged from never (0) to 10 or more times (5).

Data Analysis

We began by examining prevalence rates of dating history and dating violence within the sample and across the sixth and ninth grade strata. For outcomes dependent on a history of dating (i.e., physical TDV and sexual TDV), only males with a history of dating were included in analyses. The other two outcomes, likelihood of physical TDV and general

[1]Exploratory factor analysis using the maximum likelihood method of extraction with direct oblimin rotation and Kaiser normalization confirmed the presence of a single factor explaining 51% of the variance. All items loaded at .5 or higher.

sexual violence (outside dating relationship) were not dependent on dating history and all males were therefore included in analyses.

On the first outcome variable, likelihood of physical TDV, we performed a linear regression because of continuous nature of the scale. For the remaining three outcomes, responses were recoded into a dichotomous outcomes (1 = violence; 0 = no violence) to account for low base rates. Binary logistic regressions were performed for these outcomes.

To test the hypotheses that boys endorsing gender role discrepancy and discrepancy stress are at risk for engaging in physical and sexual acts of violence, we computed an interaction term between the two predictors. Both predictor variables were centered to have a mean of zero and standard deviation of one before computing interaction terms. This allows for meaningful interpretation of results at the mean score of other variables in the regression equation and precludes the influence of multicollinearity in the moderation analysis [27]. When interaction terms are nonsignificant, we report main effects of the regression models. When the interaction term proved to be significant, we do not interpret main effects and tests of the simple slopes were conducted using procedures described by Aiken and West [28].

Results

Dating and violence rates in present sample

A majority of the boys, 66.2%, indicated that they were not currently dating, whereas 27.7% reported that they were currently dating or “hanging out” with at least one person. However, 62.8% had dated one or more persons in the past year, whereas 32.8% denied dating anyone in the past year. Additionally, 47.1% reported that they “hooked up” with one or more persons with whom they were not in a relationship during the last year. In total, 71.4% of the sample endorsed the current or past history of dating behavior (“hooked up,” “hanging out,” or dated) in the last year. One hundred forty-eight boys (25.1%) indicated no dating history and 20 (3.4%) did not provide information to determine dating history. See Table 2.

Approximately 31.5% of boys with dating history reported having perpetrated at least one act of physical dating violence; 7.5% of boys with dating history endorsed perpetrating sexual dating violence at least once; and 2% of the sample said that they had done (or tried) to do something sexual with someone against their will. See Table 2. Significance testing indicated that the cohorts (sixth vs. ninth graders) did not differ on rates of variables of interest, all t values <1.0 and p values > .10.

Regression analyses

To test the first hypothesis, likelihood of physical TDV was entered as the outcome variable into the linear regression equation. The full model proved to be significant, $F(3, 464) = 12.29$; $R^2 = .07$; $p < .001$. Although, the interaction term neared significance ($B = .08$; $p = .07$). There, parameter estimates for the main effects of gender role discrepancy were nonsignificant ($B = .11$; $p = .10$). However, there was a significant main effect for discrepancy stress ($B = .16$; $p = .01$) suggesting that boys who endorse discrepancy stress report a greater likelihood of using physical TDV in dating scenarios. See Figure 1.

In the test of the second hypothesis with physical TDV entered as the outcome variable, the omnibus test indicated that the model did not fit the data, $\chi^2(3) = 2.81$; −2LL = 228.49; $p > .10$; $R_N = .01$. Contrary to expectation, parameter estimates for the interaction term were not significant, $B = -.17$; standard error [SE] = .16; $p > .10$; Exp(B) = .84, nor were the estimates for the main effects of gender role discrepancy, $B = -.09$; SE = .24; $p > .10$; Exp(B) = .91 and discrepancy stress, $B = .29$; SE = .24; $p > .10$; Exp(B) = 1.34.

We next tested the third hypothesis pertaining to sexual violence within and independent of dating relationships. When sexual TDV was entered as the outcome variable, the overall model neared significance $\chi^2(3) = 7.39$; −2LL = 162.30; $p = .06$; $R_N = .05$. The interaction term was not significant, $B = -.13$; SE = .18; $p > .10$; Exp(B) = .88, nor was the main effect for discrepancy stress, $B = .01$; SE = .30; $p > .10$; Exp(B) = 1.02. However, there was a significant main effect for gender role discrepancy $B = .61$; SE = .27; $p < .05$; Exp(B) = 1.83 indicating boys endorsing higher levels of perceived gender role discrepancy were more likely to endorse some history of sexual TDV.

In the final regression equation with general sexual violence (not against an intimate partner) as the outcome variable of interest, the omnibus test indicated that the model fit the data, $\chi^2(3) = 10.72$; −2LL = 80.63; $p = .01$; $R_N = .13$ and the interaction term was significant, $B = .48$; SE = .20; $p = .01$; Exp(B) = 1.62. Simple slope analysis indicated that among boys endorsing a high degree of discrepancy stress, perceived gender role discrepancy predicted significantly greater odds of engaging in an act of general sexual violence $B = 1.34$; SE = .62; $p < .05$; Exp(B) = 3.80. However, there was no relationship between gender role discrepancy and general sexual violence for boys denying discrepancy stress $B = -.60$; SE = .74; $p > .10$; Exp(B) = .55. See Figure 2.

Discussion

The study examined the ways in which perceived gender role norms may influence the perpetration of dating and sexual violence among adolescent boys. Specifically, we aimed to identify the influence of gender role discrepancy and discrepancy stress on physical and sexual dating violence and sexual violence against a nondating partner. Results provided partial support for our hypotheses. We expected to find an interaction in which boys who reported gender role discrepancy (i.e., being less masculine than the typical male) and discrepancy stress (i.e., distress about being less masculine) would be more likely to engage in acts of dating violence. However, contrary to expectations, we did not find significant interactions for likelihood of physical TDV or actual history of physical TDV. Instead, we found a lone main effect of discrepancy stress on the reported likelihood of using physical TDV (i.e., how likely they were to “physically hurt” a dating partner in various hypothetical dating situations).

In considering history of sexual TDV, only the main effect of gender role discrepancy was significantly and positively associated with increased risk for sexual violence in a dating relationship. It is not clear why there should be a simple main effect for gender role discrepancy. Undoubtedly, many males would (and do) report being less masculine than the “average guy” without experiencing distress about this discrepancy and thus, by itself,

gender role discrepancy would not reflect a maladaptive state. However, it is possible that the predominant pressures of masculine socialization are far greater in adolescent populations than adult populations. Thus, some adolescent males who do not experience distress about their self-perceived gender role discrepancy may still attempt to demonstrate traditionally masculine behaviors because the pressure of conformity to be accepted generally may be greater.

Although the interactions were not significant for dating violence specific outcomes, the interaction between gender role discrepancy and discrepancy stress for general sexual violence (not specific to a dating partner) was significant. Only when boys endorsed high levels of perceived gender role discrepancy and a high degree of discrepancy stress were they more likely to try to make someone to engage in a sexual act against their will. In fact, the odds ratio indicates that boys high on perceived gender role discrepancy and discrepancy stress were on average 280% more likely to have attempted an act of general sexual violence than low gender role discrepancy males. Thus, boys experiencing an extreme degree of stress about being perceived as “sub-masculine” may be likely to force even an acquaintance or stranger into engaging in sexual activity as an attempt to substantiate their masculine status to themselves. Or alternatively, these boys may be at heightened sensitivity to interpret interactions with others as a threat or intentional assault on their masculinity and respond with acts of sexual violence. It bears mentioning that base rates for such acts were relatively low, and thus, the number of boys at risk to engage in such violence is low. However, these few youth are at risk of perpetrating relatively severe acts of violence and thus still merit attention. This has pertinent implications for primary and secondary prevention strategies. Indeed, the present results may suggest that violence associated with discrepancy stress may suggest a need for more targeted strategies of prevention rather than universal approaches. Interventions aimed at reducing the influence of gender socialization on violence outcomes may not be effective if they use a unilateral approach that attempts to move males from one extreme of the gender role spectrum to the other. Rather, effective approaches may be those that attempt to normalize the gender role experience and increase awareness of gender norms, the role they play in culture and society, and how they might directly influence violence.

In general, the present findings suggest the role of masculine socialization and discrepancy stress in sexual violence. Surprisingly, in the present sample, boys in the sixth grade cohort perpetrated dating and sexual violence at rates equivalent to boys in the ninth grade cohort. These findings point to a need to begin prevention efforts at an early age before adolescence begins. Indeed, prevention efforts that incorporate strategies to reduce gender role discrepancy stress may need to begin well before adolescence as gender socialization begins nearly at birth and the effects of socialization are evident very early in life. Additionally, considering the association of male gender role socialization to a number of deleterious health behaviors [29–36], the present research may have implications for the prevention of a number health outcomes. It follows that boys experiencing discrepancy stress may be at risk to engage in a number of unsafe behaviors (e.g., risky sexual behavior, fighting, binge drinking, risk-taking behavior) and suffer consequent health outcomes (e.g., sexually transmitted disease, depression, substance use disorders, injury) in attempting to demonstrate and equalize their perceived masculinity to that of other males. Moreover, it

will likely be fruitful to investigate how these factors relate to the progression of health related behaviors across the developmental period of adolescence and into adulthood.

The findings of the present study must be interpreted with caution for several reasons. First, the present design of the study does not allow for causal determinations about the role of discrepancy stress in the onset of dating violence. Follow-up data across several years will be important for assessment of temporal associations between gender role socialization, discrepancy stress, and the onset of adolescent dating and sexual violence. Additionally, longitudinal data will preclude a number of the validity problems of retrospective recall data. Second, we have only the adolescents' self-reports regarding behaviors within their relationships. TDV is a dyad dependent characteristic of each relationship, and therefore would be better understood by assessing both partners to explicate any potential reciprocal nature of TDV within specific relationships [37]. It is entirely possible that masculine discrepancy stress may operate differently dependent on the reciprocal or nonreciprocal nature of the violence in a relationship: the potential violence of a partner may moderate the relationship between discrepancy stress and TDV. Unfortunately, it was not feasible to assess at the relationship level with the present population. Finally, self-report measures may not accurately reflect real-world behaviors and their prevalence rates.

Nevertheless, the present research adds to our understanding of the role of gender socialization and acts of physical and sexual violence. In particular, this is the first study, to our knowledge, that has examined masculine discrepancy stress in an adolescent population. The results may offer pertinent implications for understanding and preventing boys' perpetration of TDV and sexual violence. These data suggest that prevention efforts should, in part, focus on the role of gender socialization, acceptance of these norms, and how they may engender distress in adolescent males.

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IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION

The present research indicates that boys who worry about being insufficiently masculine may be more likely to commit acts of sexual violence. The findings suggest that individual-level strategies aimed at alleviating distress about perceptions of masculinity may potentially prevent certain types of sexual violence.

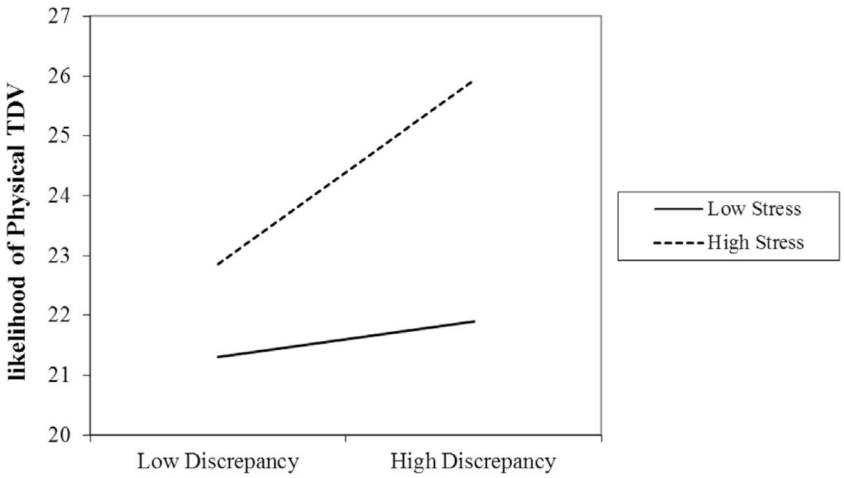

Figure 1.
Interaction of gender role discrepancy and discrepancy stress on likelihood of using physical TDV.

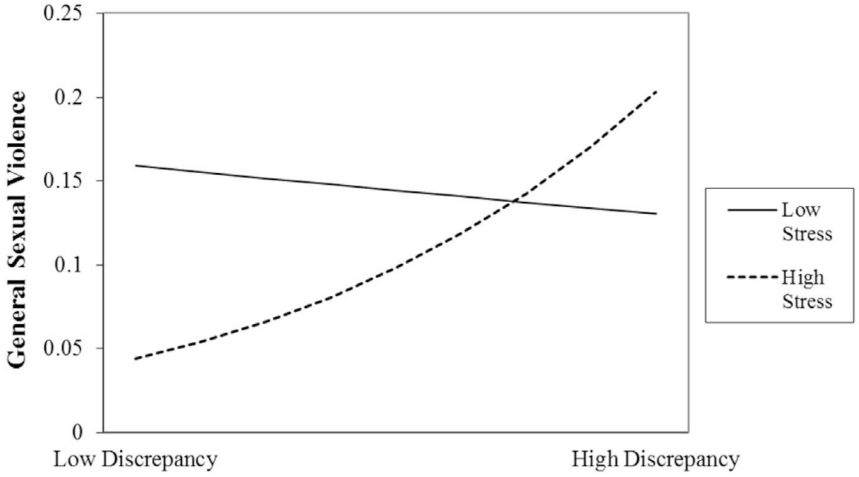

Figure 2.
Interaction of gender role discrepancy and discrepancy stress on general sexual violence against a nondating partner.

Table 1

Demographics

	N	%
Caucasian/white	384	65.2
Black/African-American	124	21.1
Hispanic	40	6.8
Native American	23	3.9
Asian American	8	1.4
Arab American	7	1.2
Sixth grade students	284	47.9
Ninth grade students	305	51.8
Low-risk community students	195	33.1
Moderate-risk community students	169	28.6
High-risk community students	225	38.2

Based on sample of 589 adolescents.

Table 2

Prevalence of dating and dating violence

	No (%)	Yes (%)
Currently dating or “Hanging Out”	390 (66.2)	163 (27.7)
Dated or “Hung Out” in the last year	193 (32.8)	370 (62.8)
“Hooked Up” in the last year	298 (50.5)	278 (47.1)
Any history of dating	148 (25.1)	421 (71.4)
Physical TDV	288 (68.4)	133 (31.5)
Sexual TDV	389 (92.3)	32 (7.5)
General sexual violence	577 (97.9)	12 (2.0)

Percentages for physical TDV and sexual TDV are based on adolescents with a dating history (N = 421). All other percentages are based on the full sample (N = 589).

TDV = teen dating violence.