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Conflict resolution patterns and violence perpetration in adolescent couples: A gender-sensitive mixed-methods approach

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Abstract

This study used a sequential two-phase explanatory design. The first phase of this mixed methods design aimed to explore conflict resolution strategies in adolescent dating couples, and the second phase to document, from both the perspective of the individual and of the couple, dyadic interaction patterns distinguishing youth inflicting dating violence from those who do not. A sample of 39 heterosexual couples (mean age 17.8 years) participated in semi-structured interviews and were observed during a 45 min dyadic interaction. At phase 1, qualitative analysis revealed three main types of conflict resolution strategies: 1) negotiating expectations and individual needs; 2) avoiding conflicts or their resolution; 3) imposing personal needs and rules through the use of violence. At phase 2, we focused on couples with conflictive patterns. Results indicate that couples who inflict violence differ from nonviolent couples by their tendency to experience conflicts when in disagreement and to resort to negative affects as a resolution strategy. In addition, while at an individual level, they show a tendency to withdraw from conflict and to use less positive affect, at a dyadic level they present less symmetry. Results offer important insights for prevention programs.

Keywords

Conflict resolution tactics; Dyadic interaction patterns; Adolescence; Dating violence

Adolescence is considered a pivotal period in human development during which several changes can occur, including the emergence of romantic relationships (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Positive sexual and romantic development is an important component of health and well-being and may be an essential element of other important adolescent developmental tasks, such as self-identity and autonomy (Boislard & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2012). Romantic relationships can be seen as a unique learning opportunity in which

adolescents build effective conflict management skills and resolve differences by balancing their own needs with those of their partner and of the relationship (Simon & Furman, 2010). Disagreements can provide an opportunity for partners to define their relationship and differentiate among areas of agreement and disagreement (Darling, Cohan, Burns, & Thompson, 2008). For most adolescents, the voluntary, egalitarian nature of a romantic relationship motivates them to negotiate mutually satisfactory solutions. However, being in a romantic relationship can be very stressful and challenging for some adolescents. The combination of stress and high expectations may lead to the manifestation of behaviors aimed at preserving the relationship at all costs (Harper & Welsh, 2007) even if it means experiencing coercion and violence. Indeed, when destructive conflict tactics are used, they can be detrimental to both the relationship and the individuals involved, and may result in coercive and violent dating experiences (Simon & Furman, 2010).

From a harmonious and egalitarian romantic relationships and violence prevention perspective, it is relevant to document sources of conflict and resolution strategies used by adolescents in order to better understand the dynamics of dating violence (DV). Previous research has shown how interaction patterns - be it positive or negative - in early romantic relationships may come to be embedded and repeated in later adult relationships (Furman & Wehner, 1997; Simon, Bouchey, & Furman, 2000). Indeed, a prospective longitudinal study documenting the links between the characteristics of adolescents' dating experiences at ages 15 to 17.5 (e.g., involvement and quality) and quality of their romantic relationships in young adulthood (ages 20–21) revealed that adolescents who experienced better quality dating relationships had more harmonious interactions when resolving conflicts with their romantic partners in young adulthood (e.g., negotiating conflict to mutual satisfaction, effective and timely caregiving/seeking).

Managing conflicts in romantic relationships during adolescence

Adolescent romantic relationships are unique (Welsh & Furman, 2008) and come with specific developmental challenges which may shape the way adolescents explore and negotiate disagreement, discuss issues and find potential solutions (Darling et al., 2008). Empirical studies suggest that adolescents display a greater tendency to ignore differences in opinions in order to maintain a positive “facade” in their relationship (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). According to Shulman, Mayes, Cohen, Swain, and Leckman (2008), even when disagreements are explored, it is done superficially in order to preserve unity over further discussion. When discussing and negotiating with their romantic partners, the most commonly reported strategies are compromise, distraction and avoidance (Feldman & Gowen, 1998).

During early adolescence relationship goals are primarily focused on relationship preservation, whereas during late adolescence relationships generally involve a deeper emotional commitment to the partner and to the relationship (Simon, Kobielski, & Martin, 2008). These developmental changes in romantic experiences are accompanied by corresponding shifts in knowledge about the meaning of conflict. By late adolescence, conflicts are often viewed as something expected that has somewhat of a more constructive than destructive potential. Adolescents in this age group also tend to privilege relationship-

oriented goals rather than self-focused, partner-focused, and revenge goals. As such, negotiation is more frequently used as a resolution strategy than compliance or aggression (Simon et al., 2008). Yet we know little about conflict negotiation, couple dynamics in adolescents.

Despite the relevance to study couple dynamics, mixed-methods studies are scarce (Dolbin-MacNab, Rubén Parra-Cardona & Gale, 2014). In addition, very few studies include observational indicators when examining adolescents and emerging adults' relationships. However, observational methods provide more specific information about temporal sequence and nuanced patterns of interactional processes between partners in an interpersonal context that cannot be solely obtained from global self-report measures (Welsh & Shulman, 2008). In their study of 40 couples in late adolescence, Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levran, and Anbar (2006) performed a cluster analysis on couples' interaction indicators which yielded three distinctive conflict resolution patterns. The *Downplaying pattern* was characterized by a high tendency to minimize the conflict. Adolescents displaying the *Integrative pattern* demonstrated a good ability to negotiate differences. Finally, adolescents utilizing the *Conflictive pattern* were characterized by a confrontational interaction style.

Conflicts and violence in marital literature

In the marital literature, verbal aggression or expressions of contempt or withdrawal, and negativity or anger are all associated with relationship dissatisfaction and dissolution (Darling et al., 2008). Studies show a link between the ways in which couples communicate and deal with their disagreements and use of violence in their intimate relationships. In fact, the majority of violent behaviors are manifested during a conflict (Cascardi & Vivian, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). As suggested, it is how conflicts are discussed and managed which may be the most salient element, rather than the conflicts themselves (Heyman, 2001; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). Hostility is linked to the use of physical violence both in men and in women (Busby, Holman, & Walker, 2008; Robertson & Murachver, 2007). Withdrawal, which is denying the existence of the problem, avoiding talking about it, or being disengaged from the conflict is also associated with use of physical violence in couple relationships (Katz, Carino, & Hilton, 2002). In adult couples, criticizing, blaming the other, or withdrawing from the conflict are the most frequently reported communication problems (Heyman, 2001). Most couples experience negative emotions including contempt and anger when involved in a conflict-ridden discussion (Pérusse, Boucher & Fernet, 2012). Using Gottman's Marital Communication Conceptualization, a study conducted by Corenelius, Shorey, and Beebe (2010) examined adaptive and maladaptive communication and violent dating aggression in a sample of undergraduate students. Their results indicated that negative communication behaviors were predictors of psychological and physical aggression in dating relationships, suggesting that variables studied in marital relationships manifest themselves in a similar fashion in adolescent dating relationships. In sum, current findings suggest that romantic relationships in adolescence have a significant impact on later relationships. The quality of romantic relationships in adolescence is linked to more harmonious interactions and better conflict negotiation in adulthood. Yet, few studies on dyadic interactions of adolescents and more specifically on interaction patterns of adolescents using violence in situations of conflict have been conducted.

Methods

The present study relied on a mixed-methods design to obtain distinct yet also complementary points of view on the phenomenon under study. We relied on a sequential two-phase explanatory design (QUAL → Quan) (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) with a preponderance given to qualitative analysis. The first phase aimed to explore conflict resolution strategies in adolescent dating couples, and the second phase to document, from both the perspective of the individual and couple, dyadic interaction patterns distinguishing youth inflicting DV from those who do not.

Participants

Participants consisted of 39 young heterosexual couples aged 15–20 years (Mean age: 17.6). Eligible subjects had to have a French-Canadian background and been in a heterosexual dating relationship for more than two months. In this study, the term dating relationship excluded partners who were cohabitating or who were a responsible caretaker of a dependent child. Most of the respondents reported attending college (69.2%), high school (12.8%), University (3.8%), while 14.1% were not in school at the time of the study. Most adolescents had been dating their partner more than a year (average length 15.3 months; ranging between 3 and 41 months). A total of 15% of participants were involved in their first romantic relationship and 62.5% of adolescents reported their first sexual relation with the current partner.

Procedure

Young couples were recruited through youth organizations from the Greater Montreal (Quebec, Canada) area by soliciting youth workers who were susceptible to being in contact with adolescents and from their living environments (e.g., schools, community organizations, parks, and libraries) by direct solicitation, flyer distribution, information booths and through word of mouth. Potential participants were first screened for eligibility by telephone. Eligible couples came to our laboratory for a 2-hr session. After being greeted by two experimenters, the study protocol was presented in detail to ensure adequate comprehension of study goals, procedure, risks and benefits. Ethical considerations were also discussed (e.g., voluntary and confidential participation, mandatory reporting to authorities when the safety of the participant is believed to be compromised). Upon consent, each member of the couple individually completed a set of questionnaires (average of 41 minutes), followed by an individual semi-structured interview (average of 48 minutes). The couple was then reunited to participate in a videotaped interaction session consisting of a 3-min warm-up activity followed by two 7-min discussions (average of 17 min). The warm-up activity (i.e., plan an activity to do together with a limited budget) was used to allow the couples to familiarize themselves with their surroundings and the testing situation. The couples then discussed a topic of disagreement which was previously selected independently by each partner from the *Adolescent Couples' Issues Checklist* (ACIC; Welsh, Grello, Dickson, & Harper, 2001). A counter-balanced approach was used to ensure that an equal number of dyads discussed the male or female partner's issue first. No observer was present during the videotaped discussions. Following the interaction, individual debriefing was provided and a list of psychosocial resources was handed out to all participants. Each

member of the couple was also given a \$20 compensation for their time. This study received the approval of the University's institutional research ethics board.

Measures

Qualitative measures—Semi-directive individual interviews addressed the following themes: 1) story of their romantic relationship; 2) romantic feelings, attachment and intimacy; 3) general communication strategies; 4) conflict resolution strategies; 5) coping strategies when confronted with problems. Individual interviews present several advantages, such as offering each partner the possibility to disclose and discuss issues related to conflict and violence freely and in all security (Stith, Penn, Ward, & Tritt, 2003; Wittenborn, Dolbin-MacNab & Keiley, 2013). Interviews were video recorded and transcribed verbatim. Content analysis (Sabourin, 2008) was then performed. This type of analysis involves three steps: 1) coding, which consists of dividing the material using a coding grid based on dimensions drawn from the scientific literature, the theoretical framework and the empirical material; 2) categorising, during which all the codified extracts are summarized and attributed themes in order to make sense of the testimonies and to then create conceptual categories, and 3) linking, which consists of identifying links between the conceptual categories. This schematization process allows analysis to transition from a description to an explanation of the studied phenomenon. The software Atlas.ti 5.0 was used for these operations.

Self-report measures. Perpetration of Dating Violence—DV was assessed using the 80-item VIFFA questionnaire (“Violence faite aux filles dans les fréquentations à l’adolescence”) (Lavoie & Vézina, 2001). The measure assesses the number of times respondent and their current partner have been the victim and/or the perpetrator of 40 specific DV acts, including psychological, sexual and/or physical. In the current study, we focused specifically on perpetration of DV reported by the respondent against their current dating partner. Examples of items include “I used physical force to make him/her have sexual contact with me” and “I pushed or shook him/her in a moment of anger or frustration.” Items are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (more than 10 times). Internal consistency for the perpetration subscale was satisfactory with an alpha score of .85. DV perpetration was treated as a dichotomous score (1 = yes and 0 = no), indicating if participants had endorsed perpetrating at least one act of physical DV, one act of sexual DV, or two or more acts of psychological DV.

Disagreement Topics—In order to identify two topics of disagreement for the interactions, both partners were individually instructed to rate, on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (very often), the extent to which each topic of disagreement from the *Adolescent Couples' Issues Checklist* (ACIC; Welsh et al., 2001) was a problem in their relationship. This checklist includes 17 common issues of disagreement between adolescent romantic partners, as well as an option to write issues not on the list (e.g., “My partner and I disagree about how much time we should spend with our friends”; “My partner gets jealous when I talk to other boys/girls”; “My partner and I disagree about sex, sexual behaviors, or contraception”). Researchers selected the most highly rated issue indicated by both partners to discuss during the interaction.

Observational Measures and Coding—The Interactional Dimension Coding System (IDCS; Julien, Chartrand, Markman, & Lindahl, 1991; Julien, Markman, & Lindahl, 1989) was used to code key dimensions of the couples' two videotaped discussions of problem areas in their relationship. This global coding system was developed to better assess the quality of problem-solving behaviors. It provides seven individual dimensions (e.g., each partner receives a separate code by dimension) and four dyadic dimensions (e.g., the couple is rated as a whole). Table 1 provides a brief overview of the definitions of all observed variables. Individual dimensions are rated from 1 to 9 while dyadic dimensions range from 1 to 17, with higher scores indicating greater intensity of the behavior. Each discussion was used as a unit of observation for the seven individual dimensions. For the purpose of this study, Positive interaction and Negative interaction composite scores were created. The Positive interaction subscale averaged positive affect, problem-solving skills, support/validation, and communication skills dimensions (α for boys' was .80, for girls' it was .73). The Negative interaction composite score averaged the negative affect, withdrawal, and conflict dimensions (α for boys' = .64; α for girls' = .76). Two graduate students, who received more than 80 h of training, coded the interactions. Several studies have demonstrated the satisfactory reliability, concurrent validity with microscopic coding and predictive validity of dyadic outcomes of the IDCS (for a review, see Kline et al., 2008). Inter-coder agreement was assessed by independent coding of a randomly selected set of 30% of interactions and used intra-class correlation (ICC, absolute agreement option). Reliability scores were calculated for each of the individual and dyadic dimensions. In the event of a divergence between coders (+1 point on the scale), the affect and content elements in dispute were discussed until consensus was reached. Inter-rater agreement coefficient ranged from .88 to .95. Preliminary analyses (correlations, t tests) did not support the need to use the observed variables from both discussions in the analyses, as scores of the first and second 7-min discussions were highly correlated and no significant differences were identified between scores. On the basis of these results, for matters of parsimony and considering the greater acclimation to being video-taped which may have led to more natural behavior, only the scores from the second videotaped problem-solving discussion were used.

Results

Conflict resolution strategies within the couple

At phase 1, we qualitatively explored conflict resolution strategies used by couples. Data analysis revealed three main types of conflict resolution strategies: 1) negotiating expectations and individual needs; 2) avoiding conflicts or their resolution; 3) imposing personal needs and rules through the use of violence. These strategies are summarized in Table 2.

Negotiating expectations and individual needs—Most participants (52) believe that the negotiation of expectations and needs is realized through self-expression and the search for solutions. To resolve a conflict, some couples prefer to take a step back and choose a more suitable time to start the discussion. "Instead of getting all worked up and calling him right away and saying: "What the hell is this?", I think about it by myself at first and can get

worked up alone in my room... I really try and visualize what it is I want to tell him.” (Karine, 20 years old, dating Philippe).

Other participants reported immediately raising the issue and steering the discussion towards a satisfactory compromise that suits both partners. “Let’s say that she wants to go the movies, and I want to go out; we’ll make arrangements to go to the movies and then go out, or something that will suit both of us” (Adam, 19 years old, dating Xéna).

To prevent the situation from escalating, the importance of addressing the problem quietly without taking their frustrations out on each other seemed to be, from the participants’ perspective, a key element in the resolution process. “I’ll talk about the same problem, but I’ll try not to get frustrated. In any case, if I’m angry, she’ll get angry again and it’ll never end. It’s better to talk about it normally, to talk about it in a neutral tone. It’ll get resolved much more easily than if the plates were flying” (Matéo, 18 years old, dating Jacinthe).

Avoiding conflicts or their resolution—Cited by a majority of participants (43), avoiding strategies aimed to maintain a relative harmony within the couple and to prevent the relationship from deteriorating. They are not necessarily perceived negatively by those who employ them and are favoured in situations likely to generate tensions in the couple. Such strategies consist of not addressing certain issues deemed sensitive, trivializing problems and ignoring a partner or sulking to express dissatisfaction or anger. “Some things pass under silence, and fade away after time. If not, it piles up onto the next time and she’ll tell me about it” (Nathan, 19 years old, dating Laurie).

In conflict situations, some participants reported simply fleeing from any discussion “Sometimes I want to talk to him about it [old relationships], but I feel like it would cause me so much pain that I dissuade myself each time, even though I feel like it” (Jacinthe, 19 years old, dating Matéo).

Others mentioned hiding their dissatisfaction or acquiescing because they did not want to displease their partner or in fear of being left. “When I’m angry, I don’t talk. I don’t look at him, I don’t talk to him. He takes my hand, but I don’t do anything. I just look straight in front of me” (Hannah, 17 years old, dating Étienne).

Imposing personal needs and rules through the use of violence—The third type of strategy reported by 51 participants involves acts of violence during a conflict to control or denigrate a partner. “I got really pissed. I told her: “ You can’t do that, what would you do if I was seeing the cashier at work”. She said, “Oh, yeah, I would’ve been angry as well”. Then, she says that I don’t allow her to see her friends that I lock her up. I tell her “No, it’s that guy that I don’t want you to see” (Mikaël, 19 years old, dating Dalianne).

“He knows that he can’t really hurt me physically, so emotionally stays an option. He’ll try to attack me, try to hurt me by telling me that I’m a slut” (Christine, 16 years old, dating Edward).

In such cases, many participants felt the need to justify, during the interview, the contexts in which they resorted to violence to resolve a conflict. Many of them emphasized the

unintentional and involuntary nature of these acts, stating that they were not directed at their partner, but rather a response to a particular situation. “At first, I was pissed, I told her: “Go get fucked by him!”. She was sad that that’s what I thought about her, but I don’t think that of her” (François, 16 years old, dating Joanie). Many of them emphasized personality traits or having witnessed such a method of conflict resolution in their family of origin to explain their use of violence.

Tensions between trust and distrust: insecurities related to relationship rules

At phase 2, we focused on the testimonials of couples with conflictive patterns, in particular those where one partner reported imposing personal needs and rules by using violence during conflicts. A descriptive vignette illustrating two typical cases are presented in Table 3. These couples seem to grant a significant importance to transparency and to exclusivity. “Everything is said. I can tell everything about my life, it doesn’t bother me and I want her to tell me everything. If something happens, I want her to tell me. And I’ll ask her what she did: “So, how was your night?”; “Oh, there were cute guys”; “Oh, there were hot chicks”, at the end, that’s what it is.” (François, 16 years old, dating Joanie).

Couples who reported frequent use of violence emphasized how the trust between them and their partner is unstable and easily disrupted during conflicts. They’re constantly preoccupied by their fear of losing their partner and the eventuality that their partner will cheat on them. “Her confidence in me isn’t as good as it used to be... jealousy [...] Yeah well, I have a little more confidence in her, although sometimes I ask myself where she is, what she’s doing, but not at the point of becoming crazy or anything, but...” (Edward, 16 years old, dating Christine).

Though, in reality, these relationship rules were oftentimes implicit, that is, they were not discussed or negotiated according to the needs of both partners, but rather imposed by one of the partners. The transgression of these rules, or the perception that the rules were transgressed, gives rise to situations that degenerate into conflicts. “We had a lot of arguments because he’s a charmer. I was his first stable girlfriend, but he was always really close with everyone... It was often part of our arguments because at parties, he had a little alcohol and he would quickly become touchy-feely, like putting his arms around other girls’ necks for example. And I’d be like, no that’s not gonna happen. So it took him like a year for him to understand that he couldn’t do that with me, or it would be over [...] We’d get really angry and every night when we’d get back we’d argue” (Julie, 20 years old, dating Mathieu).

To explore possible interaction specificities in couples reporting use of dating violence, we also performed quantitative analyses on interactions. Out of a total of 39 couples, 23 boys (59.0%) and 22 girls (56.4%) indicated having inflicted at least one form of violence against their dating partner. Using McNemar’s chi-square tests for related samples (Siegel, 1956), we found that the boyfriends (30.8%) had significantly higher rates of self-reported sexual aggression than their girlfriends (0%), $\chi^2(1, N=39) = 12.00, p < .001$. No such difference was found for psychological (38.5% vs. 48.7%; $\chi^2 = 1.00, p = .317$) or physical violence (28.2% vs. 30.8.7%; $\chi^2 = .08, p = .782$). For 55.2% of the 29 couples reporting DV, acts of

perpetrated violence were self-reported by both partners and could be categorized as bidirectional.

In order to explore the differences between the observed communication behaviors of adolescents who inflicted violence against their dating partner and those who did not, a series of *t*-tests were conducted. Table 4 summarizes the results of these analyses for both boyfriends and girlfriends. Overall, when looking at positive and negative subscale scores, both boys and girls who reported having perpetrated DV exhibited more negative interactions during the videotaped problem-solving discussion than non-perpetrators. No such differences were found for positive interactions. In regards to dyadic dimensions, negative escalation was observed more in couples where the boyfriend ($p = .002$) or the girlfriend ($p = .012$) had reported inflicting DV, while less interactional synchrony was observed only for boys perpetrators ($p = .020$).

Discussion

Dating violence is a serious social problem and scholarly reports aiming to identify correlates of inflicted violence in romantic contexts may offer possible cues for the elaboration of prevention efforts. This study provides relevant data in this regard using a mixed-method approach that allows, firstly, to improve our understanding of sources of conflict in adolescent relationships and strategies used to deal with them and, secondly, an exploration of possible interaction specificities in couples reporting use of violence.

According to the systems theory, conflict resolution strategies refer to stabilizing expectation strategies, since the couple must redefine or reestablish its expectations, boundaries and rules (Joly, 1986). This study attests to the tensions between trust and distrust that are experienced by adolescents and emerging adults in the context of their romantic relationships. Jealousy, an indicator of lack of trust within a relationship, was named by most participants during interviews and was reported as a source of recurring conflict. Conflicts related to issues of distrust and jealousy can be much greater in these young couples where partners learn together to establish the boundaries of their relationship, such as the place that can be occupied by ex-lovers, peers and friends of the opposite sex. In such relationships, partners are confronted by the necessity to identify, express and question their expectations and needs and, in turn, learn to consider the other.

The more a couple adopts flexible rules, the more it will be capable to adapt and face conflicts accordingly. However, if a couple is inflexible and establishes rules that are too restrictive, it will more likely experience difficulties in resolving the conflict and finding a balance with separation becoming more probable (Joly, 1986). When balance is broken due to a transgression of the established rules, in this case rules on transparency and exclusivity, control mechanisms (anti-deviation) are put into place in order to bring back the deviating partner within the established boundaries (Joly, 1986). These control mechanisms can be positive (clarifications, open discussions, outside resources) or negative (hitting, humiliating and manipulation) as demonstrated by the strategies reported in this study. These strategies used in conflictual situations in the context of romantic relationships that echo the conflict resolution patterns identified by Shulman et al. (2006) with a sample of late adolescents. The

first type of strategy observed in the present study consists of negotiating respective needs and expectations by emphasizing self-affirmation and problem-solving. This strategy appears closely related to the *Integrative pattern* characterized by a good ability to negotiate differences. The second type, conflict avoidance or avoidance of resolution, shares some resemblance to the *Downplaying pattern* characterized by a high tendency to minimize the conflict. The third type of strategy, which consists of imposing rules and needs to the partner by resorting to acts of violence, is similar to the *Conflictive pattern*.

Findings from the quantitative phase of this study suggest that communication skills for both genders and positive affects for boys were the individual dimensions most frequently observed during interactions. On a dyadic level, both positive and negative communication skills were equally exhibited during partner interactions. Compared to non-perpetrators, adolescent boys and girls who inflicting at least one type of DV showed, less positive affects when interacting with their partner and more negative interactions. Marital literature suggests that the majority of violent behaviors are manifested during conflicts (Cascardi & Vivian, 1995; Johnson & Ferraro, 2000). Literature on dating relationships among emerging adults indicates that DV perpetration is associated with fewer instances of repair attempts (e.g., tendency of partners to minimize negative statements, use of humor, and taking breaks during conflicts) and influence acceptance (e.g., partner's perception of shared influence on their partner) (Cornelius, Shorey, & Beebe, 2010).

In regards to dyadic dimensions, in this study negative escalation was more often observed in couples where the boyfriend or the girlfriend had reported inflicting DV, while less interactional synchrony was observed only for boy perpetrators. Cornelius et al. (2010) found that, among a sample of undergraduates, those who reported perpetrating DV in the context of their romantic relationships tended to exhibit communication patterns that escalated from neutral to negative affect in the initial broaching of a topic (*harsh start up*) and used iterative, cascading response sequences with their partners (*Four Horsemen*).

The present study has limitations that can provide possible insights for future studies. The sample is heterogeneous in terms of participants' age (15–20 years old) as well as in the duration of relationships (spanning from 3 months to nearly four years). Relationship goals and how conflicts are perceived would be expected to vary significantly among early adolescents and late adolescents (Simon et al., 2008). Thus, further studies should include larger samples that could consider specificities linked to developmental periods.

The rather small sample size did not allow for more detailed analyses in relation to the severity of violence inflicted. Future studies should recruit larger samples in order to possibly identify dyadic interaction specificities in different subgroups. Indeed, studies conducted with adult samples have found that those who inflict more severe violence are different from those who inflict less severe or less chronic violence (Cunha & Gonçalves, 2013; Thijssen & De Ruiter, 2011). A typological approach may offer an insightful mean to identify such profiles in adolescents. In addition such an analysis could identify specificities in interaction patterns of adolescents vulnerable to DV (exposed to interparental violence, having been sexually victimized in childhood, etc.).

A clear strength of the present study is the fact that both partners' perspectives were considered in the analyses. However, interactions were observed in a research setting; a situation that may give rise to social desirability issues. For example, it is possible that social desirability may have influenced the choice of conflict discussed by participants. Indeed, while some participants' answers suggested that sexuality was a central source of conflict in their relationship during the individual interviews, they chose different topics of disagreement to be discussed during the videotaped interactions; possibly reflecting adolescents' tendency to maintain a positive appearance and resorting to avoidance strategies when confronted with situations of disagreement. During recruitment, participants were informed that the study would address "communication and conflict resolution". This may have introduced a selection bias as, for example, youth experiencing more severe violence could have been less favorable to participate in a study on conflict resolution.

In future studies relying on larger samples, APIM analyses should be considered to better delineate both actor and partner effects and, therefore, simultaneously take into account individual and dyadic factors (Campbell & Stanton, 2015). In addition, a longitudinal design that could explore whether interactions patterns are stable over time, accentuate as the relationship continues or repeat in subsequent relationships, would be of great value to this field of study.

Our data suggest that a significant number of adolescents use violence tactics in their romantic relationships, attesting to the need to implement efficient prevention strategies. In terms of practical implications, our study highlights the relevance of going beyond individual intervention to prevent DV by promoting healthy relationship skills (e.g., communication, conflict resolution) (Tharp et al., 2011). The present study also underscores the relevance of helping adolescents in the identification of their needs and expectations as well as the rules governing their relationships. In addition, strategies aiming to help adolescents develop a critical outlook on their relational models and their conflict resolution strategies may contribute to healthier romantic relationships.

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Table 1Definition of the observed variables^a

Construct	Definition
<i>Individual dimensions</i>	
<i>Positive interactions</i>	
Communication skill	Refers to an individual's ability to convey thoughts and feelings in a clear, constructive manner (e.g., self-disclose emotions; expressing emotions clearly).
Support/validation	Refers to positive listening and speaking skills that an individual uses to demonstrate support and understanding to his or her partner (e.g., being attentive when the partner is talking; expression of concern and sympathy for the partner).
Problem solving	Refers to an individual's ability to define a problem and work toward a mutually satisfactory solution for the problem. It is based on the individual's ability to try to solve the problem, not on whether the problem was actually solved (e.g. recognizing the existence of the problem; negotiating compromises).
Positive affect	Refers to positivity expressed through facial expressions, body positioning, and tone of voice (e.g., relaxed posture; smiling).
<i>Negative interactions</i>	
Conflict	Refers to behaviors that encourage arguing. For example, the level of tension, hostility, oppositionality, antagonism, and negative affect displayed (e.g., tension in the body; negative comments toward the partner).
Withdrawal	Refers to attempting to avoid an interaction or discussion through body language or stating a desire not to discuss a topic. It is actively rejecting the existence of the disagreement or denying personal responsibility for the problem (e.g., avoiding visual contact; changing the topic).
Negative affect	Refers to negativity expressed through facial expressions, body positioning, and tone of voice (e.g., frowning; angry voice).
<i>Dyadic dimensions</i>	
Interactional synchrony	Refers to a pattern in which the partners' behaviors are synchronized or coordinated. It is viewed as the organization of the content according to the rhythm or pace of the conversation.
Negative escalation	Refers to a pattern in which a negative behavior of one partner is followed by a negative behavior of the other and so forth, creating a snowball effect. To be rated very highly on Negative Escalation, both partners must give the impression of triggering each other's negative verbal and nonverbal behaviors.
Dominance	Refers to a pattern in which one partner is able to control or influence his or her partner. To be rated highly on the Dominance dimension, there has to be an asymmetry in terms of who directs the content and the flow of the conversation (e.g., one partner interrupts the other more often; one talks more than the other).
Editing	Refers to a pattern in which one of the two partners responds positively or neutrally to the other partner's negative behavior. This pattern of behavior is considered as a mechanism which prevents negative escalation during couple discussions.

^aSource: Julien et al., 1991; Kline et al., 2004, p. 116–117.

Table 2

Conflict resolution strategies within the couple.

1	Negotiating expectations and individual needs: self-expression and search for solutions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Taking a step back and continuing the discussion at a more opportune time (52) b. Raising the issue and searching for a compromise that suits both partners (51) c. Approaching the issue calmly while avoiding getting angry (37) d. Crying to vent emotions and to express discomfort (27) e. Communicating through writing to weigh words and identify reactions (8)
2	Avoiding conflicts or their resolution: trivializing problems, ignoring the other or sulking, self-censorship or acquiescing to demands, fleeing
	discussions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Not addressing certain confrontational subjects or trivializing problems (43) b. Ignoring the other or sulking to express dissatisfaction or anger (28) c. Expressing anger alone or canalising it into other activities (20) d. Self-censorship or acquiescing to avoid displeasing the other or in fear of being left (17) e. Fleeing discussions about the conflict (16)
3	Imposing personal needs and rules by using violence: hurting, controlling, dominating, blaming or provoking the other
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Raising one's voice to be heard or saying hurtful things (51) b. Dictating terms to control the other (27) c. Inflicting physical harm during an argument that degenerates (24) d. Venting frustration and anger in front of the other (19) e. Making the other suffer to get revenge (16) f. Dominating the discussion in order to have the last word (11) g. Provoking the other to obtain a reaction (7) h. Making the other carry the blame (7)

Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of participants who reported having used each strategy and are not mutually exclusive.

Table 3

Descriptive vignette.

Vignette 1. François, 16 years old and Joanie, 17 years old

François and Joanie have been seeing each other for six months. They met on the internet. It was François' humor that charmed Joanie and they decided to contact each other by phone. When they are having conflicts, they tend not to look for a solution. Instead, they'll insult and belittle one another, argue loudly and sometimes become physically aggressive. Their words suggest that their communication isn't axed on a search for solutions, but rather on the domination of the other. François says he has difficulties managing his physical force and self-control. He mentions that he's already been afraid of harming his girlfriend and that he has a tendency to justify his acts by exterior motives. Sexuality, faithfulness and relationships with peers of the opposite sex are the main sources of conflicts cited by François. Joanie, for her part, is very shy during the interview. She's not very talkative and stays discrete on the problems her couple faces. She mentions that her boyfriend likes to assert his superiority and usually dominates all discussions.

Vignette 2. Edward and Christine, 16 years old

Christine and Edward have been in a relationship for seven months. They met at their high school. Both report that they were charmed by the other's humor and physique. Christine mentions that communication isn't always easy, Edward gets angry very quickly, is impulsive and has trouble managing his frustrations. She also specifies that her boyfriend has been in therapy since he was a young boy because he has trouble feeling his emotions. Christine explains that Edward is very jealous and forbids her to see and talk to her friends. Her friends don't like Edward and neither does he like them, which disappoints Christine a lot. She also recalls situations when there was the presence of control and physical violence. Edward describes himself as a jealous person, and says little about the violent incidents when the question is raised. He has a tendency to trivialize his violent behaviors. Though he mentions the fact that he loves his girlfriend and sees himself with her in the future.

Table 4

Observed variables by history of violence against a dating partner and gender.

	Boysfriends			Girlsfriends				
	No DV (n - 16) M(SD)	At least one type of DV (n - 23) M(SD)	t	p	No DV (n - 17) M(SD)	At least one type of DV (n - 22) M(SD)	t	p
Individual dimensions								
<i>Positive interaction</i>	4.7 (1.0)	4.2 (1.6)	1.245	<i>ns</i>	4.6 (.8)	4.3 (1.4)	.728	<i>ns</i>
<i>Negative interaction</i>	3.1 (1.4)	4.1 (1.6)	-2.090	.044 *	3.2 (1.0)	4.1 (1.8)	-1.946	<i>ns</i>
Dyadic dimensions								
Interactional synchrony	5.9 (2.0)	4.5 (1.8)	2.423	.020 *	5.6 (1.6)	4.7 (2.2)	1.449	<i>ns</i>
Negative escalation	1.1 (.3)	2.7 (2.1)	3.378	.002 *	1.2 (.6)	2.6 (2.2)	2.647	.012 *
Dominance	9.5 (2.7)	8.9 (2.4)	.717	<i>ns</i>	8.9 (2.4)	9.3 (2.6)	.463	<i>ns</i>
Editing	8.8 (.6)	8.7 (1.7)	.347	<i>ns</i>	8.8 (.8)	8.6 (1.7)	.745	<i>ns</i>

Note: DV - Dating Violence;

* $p < .01$.