

# The gender symmetry problem in physical teen dating violence: A commentary and suggestions for a research agenda

Manuel Eisner<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

<sup>2</sup> Jacobs Centre for Productive Youth Development, University of Zurich, Zürich, Switzerland

## Correspondence

Manuel Eisner, Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK.  
Email: [mpe23@cam.ac.uk](mailto:mpe23@cam.ac.uk)

## Abstract

Dating violence is a serious manifestation of harmful behaviour during adolescence. During the past decades, considerable research has shed light on patterns, causes, and consequences of dating violence. One of the most notable findings emerging from widely used survey instruments is that female adolescents report perpetrating physical dating violence more or equally frequently as male adolescents. Similarly, male youth appear to equally frequently report that they have been victims of physical dating violence as female adolescents. This commentary reviews issues emerging from the debate on gender symmetry in dating violence and proposes directions for future research. It suggests that future research needs to consider three interrelated issues to advance the field, namely: to improve the understanding of differences in harm, advance the knowledge of gender differences in the short-term dynamics involved in conflict and aggression, and strengthen the evidence base on shared and gender-specific developmental aetiologies of dating violence.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen the rapid growth of research on the epidemiology, causes, and consequences of teen dating violence—the coercive and physically, verbally or sexually harmful behaviour experienced by young people aged 10–19 within a romantic

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relationship (for recent reviews see Dardis et al., 2015; Taquette & Monteiro, 2019). One of the more contentious findings emerging from this research is the gender pattern in victimization and perpetration of dating violence, especially with respect to physical violence.

In one of the first reviews of dating violence research, Lewis and Fremouw (2001, p. 107) already concluded that adolescent females seemed to initiate physical violence more often than males, while both genders report similar rates of sustaining violence. Subsequent research reached similar conclusions. The recent meta-analysis of 101 studies found that female adolescents are significantly more likely to report physical dating violence perpetration than males (25% vs. 13%) and that victimization rates are similar for both genders (21%) (Wincentak et al., 2017). For sexual dating violence, in contrast, girls reported significantly lower rates of perpetration than boys (3% vs. 10%) and higher rates of victimization (14% vs. 8%).

The findings by Wincentak et al. (2017) were highly influenced by samples from the United States and Canada, where most research on dating violence has been conducted. This special issue adds important knowledge about results obtained in European samples. It comprises five new primary studies and a systematic review of 25 studies that reported prevalence estimates in Europe. The results found in these studies corroborate patterns of gender differences found previously: Among heterosexual romantic partners, sexual violence is far more likely to be perpetrated by males, irrespective of the informant (Oyarzún et al., 2021; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021). In contrast, prevalence estimates based on self-reported physical violence perpetration tend to show higher rates for female than for male adolescents (Baier et al., 2021; Bertok et al., 2021; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021; Toplu-Demirtaş & Aracı-İyiaydın, 2021). Self-reported physical victimization rates were found to be broadly similar for both genders.

The fact that surveys often return the result that the prevalence of physical dating violence perpetration by females is similarly high or even higher than the rate by males has been called 'provocative' (Lewis & Fremouw, 2001), 'disconcerting' (Shorey et al., 2008) and 'troubling' (Dobash & Dobash, 2004). It mirrors similar findings on physical intimate partner violence (IPV) among adults in heterosexual relationships (Archer, 2000; Chan, 2011; Desmarais et al., 2012).

However, ever since these findings emerged there has been a controversy about how they should be interpreted and whether they are an artifact of methodological, definitional, and conceptual biases. In the field of intimate partner violence, this controversy came to be known as the 'gender symmetry' versus 'gender asymmetry' debate in the early 1990s (Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Dobash et al., 1992; Johnson, 2006; Kimmel, 2002; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010; Straus, 2008, 2011).

Building on this debate, I propose that research on the gender symmetry in teen dating violence needs to consider three interrelated substantive and methodological issues to advance the field beyond the comparison of prevalence rates. These issues relate to (a) advancing the understanding of gender differences in threat and harm, and the mechanisms responsible for them; (b) clarifying the extent to which the dyadic situational dynamics associated with dating violence are gendered, and (c) enhancing the knowledge about gender differences in the developmental aetiology of adolescent dating violence perpetration.

## 1.1 | The gender symmetry debate

There are two main contrasting perspectives on the gender-symmetry puzzle. The theoretical framework of gender-based violence assumes that violence in intimate or romantic partnerships is largely asymmetrical, mostly perpetrated by males against

females, and motivated primarily by patriarchal power and control (Dobash et al., 1992; Russo & Pirlott, 2006). Within this framework, adolescence is seen as a formative developmental stage, where boys acquire patriarchal gender role attitudes that emphasise male power. This includes cultural scripts that men should be tough, emotionally disengaged, and have entitlement to sex in romantic relationships, all of which justify one-sided violence within dating relationships (Reyes et al., 2016). Therefore, the seeming symmetry in physical violence is mainly interpreted as resulting from problematic item wording with poor content validity, a lack of attention to experiences with severe consequences, and a tendency to obscure differences in motivation such as female violent resistance to male intimate terrorism (Hamby, 2015; Johnson, 2011). Proponents of the gender-based framework therefore maintain that including incidents of mutual aggression and female violence under the umbrella of intimate partner violence as a public health issue is not supported by the evidence (Reed et al., 2010).

Proponents of the gender symmetry hypothesis, in contrast, assert that male and female intimate partners, including adolescent dating partners, perpetrate acts of physical aggression at approximately equal rates (Straus, 2011). The possible reason is that both partners in a romantic relationship may similarly experience conflicts of interest associated with infidelity, unequal investment in time and emotional resources, and mutual recognition that can escalate to physical aggression (Archer, 2000). Additionally, this perspective holds that much physical intimate partner violence is reciprocal. It is prompted by similar motives and situational triggers that equally result in negative emotions and bi-directional aggressive behaviour among male and female youth. Finally, the gender symmetry hypothesis tends to imply that the developmental aetiology associated with perpetrating physical violence is mostly similar for male and female adolescents and young adults (Lantagne & Furman, 2020; Winstok, 2007).

## 1.2 | Differences in harm

Probably the most contested methodological issue in the gender symmetry debate refers to the question of what is measured in widely used dating violence questionnaires, and whether these instruments provide unbiased estimates of true gender differences in physical dating violence. Research that shows gender symmetry commonly relies on instruments such as the Conflict Tactics Scale-Revised (CTS-2, see Straus et al., 1996) or the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory (CADRI, see Wolfe et al., 2001). These instruments present a number of items designed to capture different types of physical aggression such as pushing, hitting, punching, biting, threatening someone with physical harm, etc., with a Likert-Scale response format. Then a dichotomous measure is generated that captures whether a young person had perpetrated or experienced any of the behaviours within a given time horizon (Exner-Cortens et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2015; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021).

Scholars have raised doubts whether these instruments are informative with respect to capturing gender differences in actual 'violence' in the sense of the intentional use of physical force or power that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, or psychological harm (Krug et al., 2002). Specific concerns relate to the possible inclusion of playful behaviours, an overreliance on rather minor non-injurious acts of aggression, a lack of information about the contexts of individual acts, and disregard for gender differences in the fear, injury, and psychological harm caused by the seemingly identical stimuli presented to respondents (Chan, 2011; Fernández-González et al., 2013; Hamby, 2015; Hamby & Turner, 2013; Vagi et al., 2015). These concerns raise conceptual issues that remain unresolved. In particular, it is impossible to determine whether gender symmetry

in dating violence exists if, as is often the case, concepts such as conflict, aggression, violence, and abuse remain used interchangeably.

The extent to which the wording of questions affects gender differences was put into sharp relief by the 2013 US National Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (Vagi et al., 2015). After extensive expert consultation, the question on physical dating violence victimisation was worded as follows: 'During the past 12 months, how many times did someone you were dating or going out with physically hurt you on purpose?' Contrary to the patterns suggested by CTS-based surveys, the responses to this question showed a victimisation prevalence rate of 13% for females in comparison to 7.6% for males. The developers argue that the wording is more likely to capture true gender differences in experiences that entail actual physical harm than other instruments, which are overly influenced by low-level aggression. In a similar vein, Hamby (2016) showed that increasing content validity by using item wordings that exclude playful behaviours and that focus on coercive violence (e.g., beating up, threaten to hurt) resulted in prevalence rates with substantially higher victimization of females than of males.

Further insight on the impact of different ways of operationalising physical dating violence was gained in the US National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence (Hamby & Turner, 2013). In that study, follow-up questions asked about whether the adolescent had been physically hurt in the incident, and how afraid they felt at the time of the victimization. Considering these follow-up questions on the severity of the event reversed the gender ratio. Males were slightly more likely to report victimization overall, but females were twice as likely to report incidents that resulted in injury or entailed fear-inducing force (Hamby & Turner, 2013).

In Europe, emerging evidence similarly suggests large differences between females and males with respect to the physical and emotional impact of physical violence. For example, in a large UK sample of adolescents aged 13–18, Barter et al. (2009) found little gender difference in the prevalence of less serious violent victimization. However, almost three times more girls than boys reported to have experienced severe physical force such as punching, strangling, or hitting with an object (Barter et al., 2009: 45). Furthermore, 76% of female but only 14% of male UK adolescents felt scared, angry, humiliated or upset following victimization. The finding that female youth reported a far greater negative emotional impact than males was subsequently replicated in a comparative survey in five European countries (Barter et al., 2017). In Spain, Fernández-González et al. (2014) showed that females aged 18–20 years were four times more likely to experience injury due to physical dating aggression (also see Oyarzún et al., 2021). These findings are consistent with the limited evidence from hospital data, which shows that female adolescents are far more likely to visit emergency departments for injuries due to intimate partner violence (Epstein-Ngo et al., 2013; Ranney & Mello, 2011).

The evidence shows that seemingly identical items of widely used behaviour checklists capture different experiences of male and female youth. But why? Possibly, dating violence by males is more fear-inducing because males more often also perpetrate serious crime outside the partnership, meaning that their behaviour comes with a greater threat of serious consequences (Zych et al., 2021). Also, physical aggression likely takes on a more harmful meaning if it is part of a syndrome of related behaviours in a relationship such as sexual violence, stalking, threats and intimidation, all of which are more commonly perpetrated by male adolescents (Hamby, 2016; Smith-Darden et al., 2016). Finally, the capability to inflict serious injury due to gender differences in height, weight and physical strength must be considered (also see Dobash & Dobash, 2004; Hamby & Koss, 2003).

Table 1 illustrates the issue. It shows gender-specific means of biceps circumference, height, and weight at age 17 among participants of the Zurich Study on Social

**TABLE 1** Biceps circumference, height, and weight of boys and girls, age 17, z-proso study

	Biceps circumference (mm)	Height (cm)	Weight (kg)
Males	315.9 (33.8)	178.5 (7.1)	72.0 (12.1)
Females	278.4 (32.6)	165.1 (6.3)	59.2 (10.3)
F-value	388.9, $p < .001$	1257.0, $p < .001$	417.1, $p < .001$
Effect size	$d = .64$	$d = 1.95$	$d = .65$

Note.  $N = 623$ – $653$  males,  $596$ – $643$  females.

Development from Childhood to Adulthood (z-proso), and associated Cohen's  $d$  effect sizes (Eisner & Ribeaud, 2007). These effect sizes can be translated into the probability that a male is taller, heavier, and physically stronger than a female of the same age (Magnusson, 2021). Results show that 90% of male adolescents are taller, and 70% are heavier and stronger than an average female at the same age (Archer & Thanzami, 2007). These differences are further accentuated by an average age gap in dating relationships, with males often being somewhat older (Volpe et al., 2013).

Overall, a better understanding of the prevalence rates of physical violence found in many European dating violence studies requires that we more firmly establish gender differences in the quantity of harm, threat, injury, and fear captured by the items included in standard scales of physical dating violence (Hamby & Koss, 2003). This may need to include a reconsideration of the ways in which the notion of 'violence' is used in current dating violence research. The strategy implied in many current studies is that every incident of antagonistic and conflictive behaviour in romantic relationships is understood to constitute physical, verbal, or sexual 'violence'. It is doubtful that this is a meaningful research strategy. Both Dobash and Dobash (2004) and Archer (2000) argued, from either side of the gender symmetry debate, that more clarity about constructs such as conflict, violence, aggression and abuse is essential to advance the gender symmetry debate.

It is important to develop and use more valid measurements (Hamby, 2015, 2016). These include, for example, incident-based information about injuries, mental harm, threat, and danger associated with physical dating violence (Hamby, 2015, 2016). Also, studies based on larger and at-risk samples are important to reliably measure high severity violence including, for example, physical injury requiring medical intervention and the use or threat of use of weapons. This may help to bridge the gap between the gender symmetry found in behaviour inventories and the strong gender differences found in police records or hospital data. More efforts should be made to link self-report survey data to administrative data on injuries that require medical intervention or psychological trauma that necessitates specialist psychological support. Also, it may be useful to develop a dating violence's harm index, broadly inspired by similar initiatives for crime more generally, which provides a more accurate picture in the risk of suffering serious injuries and fear (Sherman et al., 2016). Finally, it may be useful to better understand the factors that influence variation in the extent to which acts of dating violence trigger fear and terror, and the extent to which these factors are gendered.

### 1.3 | Bidirectionality

A second core aspect of the gender symmetry debate revolves around the bidirectionality of dating violence. Growing empirical evidence shows that victimization and perpetration have a high tendency to co-occur within the same relationship (Bates, 2016; Park & Kim,

2019). In a recent meta-analysis of U.S. studies, the mean association between dating violence perpetration and victimization was  $r = .66$  (Spencer et al., 2021).

A few studies in Europe have reported findings on the extent of overlap between dating victimization and perpetration. Viejo et al (2016), for example, found that the majority of affected young people in Spain and the United Kingdom were reciprocally involved (i.e., as both perpetrators and victims). Similar results based on large samples were found in the French and German speaking parts of Switzerland, with a bivariate correlation between victimization and perpetration of  $r = .69$  (Ribeaud, 2015). These findings are consistent with the broader criminological literature on perpetrator-victim overlap, and with the bidirectional patterns found for intimate partner violence in adult couples (Berg & Mulford, 2020; Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al., 2012).

What these regularities mean remains contested. Researchers who adopt a gender-based violence perspective have argued that the notion of bi-directional dating violence is often misleading (Reed et al., 2010). Rather, female violence perpetration is primarily defensive against male attacks, while male violence is predatory and motivated by gender-power abuses including dominance and threat. In this vein, Johnson et al (2011) have argued that intimate terrorism, that is, partner violence that includes a strong element of one-sided control and coercion—is almost exclusively perpetrated by males (Stark, 2006). As a result, research that highlights female aggression risks ‘victim blaming’ and a reproduction of patriarchal stereotypes (Dutton & Corvo, 2007).

In contrast, researchers who adopt a gender symmetry perspective tend to emphasise the importance of relationship dynamics. These researchers note that a substantial proportion of verbal and physical dating aggression is better understood as a manifestation of dyadic dysregulation, whereby both partners contribute to the breakdown of co-operative interaction patterns and conflicts escalate to aggressive behaviours that can entail varying levels of physical violence (Capaldi et al., 2018; Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2010).

Further progress could be made by more dating violence research that is more strongly informed by general dynamic relationship models. A prominent example is the Actor-Partner Interdependence model, a powerful model for examining bi-directional dynamics in two-person relationships (Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kenny, 2018). It entails a conceptual model and statistical methods for situations where one actor’s emotions, cognitions, mental health, or behaviour affects the emotion, cognition, mental states or behaviours of a partner. To examine such dynamics, information is needed from both partners in a dyadic relationship.

Also, dynamic models could help to disentangle different components of the notion of bidirectionality (Holmes et al., 2019). In particular, bidirectionality can refer to mutual aggression within the same incident, reciprocal patterns of delayed aggression in response to prior victimization, or cascading patterns whereby, for example, bidirectional verbal conflict may trigger maladaptive cascades of behaviours, possibly on both sides, that eventually escalate into physical and sexual abuse. Also, work on bullying suggests that adolescents change their perpetrator and victim roles over time (Zych et al., 2020). In adolescent dating violence research, it would be similarly important to better understand transitions between periods of bidirectional conflict and unidirectional coercive ‘terrorism’.

Unfortunately, very few studies on dating violence have collected longitudinal data from both partners, although such studies have the potential to significantly advance our understanding of the gender balance paradox. For example, a study on physical dating aggression among a sample of 137 heterosexual young adult couples examined actor and partner effects (Lantagne & Furman, 2020). Results showed that characteristics of one actor had effects on both actor and partner aggression, and that aggression was highest when both partners scored high on characteristics such as jealousy or an anxious relationship style.

Similarly, Paradis (2017) used the Actor-Partner Interdependence model to demonstrate that negative communication behaviour of the actor was associated with increased dating violence of the partner, and that this process operated in both directions, that is, from male to female and from female to male partners. Both studies found limited evidence for asymmetric dynamics, but further evidence is needed on adolescents specifically.

It is also important to better understand whether motives for physical dating violence are gender-specific. In a systematic review, Langhinrichsen-Rohling et al. (2012) reviewed the evidence for violence motives for adult male and female perpetrators of IPV. They found few gender-specific motives. However, they caution that many methodological and practical challenges persist in the field. Moreover, few studies have examined motivations amongst adolescents specifically. An exception is a study found of college students by Elmquist et al. (2016) on motives for physical dating violence. It found that motives related to communication difficulties and self-defence were most common, and that there were few gender differences in the motives overall. However, some isolated findings are also suggestive of some gender differences. For example, Follingstad et al. (1991) found that female adolescents were more likely than males to initiate physical aggression in retaliation for emotional hurt.

The lack of more fined-grained data limits our ability to understand how processes over hours, days or weeks influence the occurrence of dating violence episodes. Such data are needed to better understand how cognitions, motivating negative emotions, routine activities and adverse life-events affect change and stability in coercive and aggressive episodes among dating partners (Krauss et al., 2020). Ecological momentary assessments may help to address this limitation (Shiffman et al., 2008). These are studies where participants are prompted repeatedly over short time intervals to reports on activities, emotional states, and behaviours. Such research has been shown to shed new light on the short-term dynamics of aggressive behaviour in adolescent and early adult samples (Murray et al., 2020). For example, Shorey et al. (2014) demonstrated in daily assessment of female college students for up to 90 days that alcohol use was associated with a higher probability of perpetrating physical dating aggression when angry affect was also high (also see Moore et al., 2011). Ortiz et al. (2015) found that poor emotion regulation predicts dating violence perpetration among females.

Studies on short-term momentary dynamics that link dating violence perpetration and victimization are still rare. Such studies would be especially useful to shed more light, for example, on whether power and control motives are more likely to trigger conflict and violent episodes perpetrated by men, or whether females are more likely to initiate physical violence in situations of threat.

## 1.4 | Gender differences in developmental mechanisms

A third aspect of the gender symmetry problem relates to the developmental dynamics that predict adolescent physical dating violence. The core question here is whether female and male involvement in dating violence is predicted by qualitatively different or similar risk factors. Researchers who adopt a gender-based violence perspective tend to assume that male and female aggression in relationships 'likely has differing aetiologies' (Reed et al., 2010: 350). For males, developmental predictors may include socialisation into patriarchal behaviour patterns, privileged social and economic status of males, and gender norms that support male dominance and control (Decker et al., 2013; Reed et al., 2010). For females, aggressive behaviour is more likely expected as a response to male violence, and potentially linked to a cycle of violence rooted in a history of childhood adversity and abuse

(Heise et al., 2002). On the other hand, researchers that adopt a gender symmetry perspective argue that the developmental aetiologies of perpetrating of enduring dating violence are mostly similar for males and females. A related question is whether developmental mechanisms associated with dating violence are also predictive of aggressive and non-aggressive externalising behaviour problems outside a dating relationship.

Research on developmental risk factors for adolescent violent behaviour has grown substantially over the past two decades. Evidence based on prospective longitudinal studies suggests that many childhood and early adolescence risk factors equally predict male and female crime and violence more generally (Moffitt et al., 2001). This finding also appears to hold for dating violence. For example, Vagi et al. (2013) summarised findings from 20 studies conducted in the United States and Canada that used prospective data to predict dating violence perpetration. The authors found that many major developmental risk factors such as mental health issues, generalised antisocial tendencies including bullying, delinquency and substance use, having delinquent peers, and an aversive family environment with exposure to parental violence, tend to be similarly relevant for male and female adolescents (also see Spencer et al., 2021). However, few studies have specifically examined the extent to which childhood socialisation into male and female gender roles differentially affects aggression in dating relationships.

Emerging evidence also suggests some gender specific mechanisms for some prospective factors. For example, several studies find that depressive symptoms are more strongly predictive of dating violence perpetration in female than in male youth (Foshee et al., 2010; McCloskey & Lichter, 2003; Spencer et al., 2021). However, findings are partly contradictory. One large longitudinal study found that depression was more predictive for dating violence perpetration in males than in females (Walters & Espelage, 2018), while others found that depressive symptoms were not predictive for either males or females (Foshee et al., 2001; Grest et al., 2018).

In Europe, most research on dating violence is based on cross-sectional rather than longitudinal research. This seriously limits the extent to which conclusions can be drawn on whether developmental risk factors and mechanisms associated with perpetrating dating violence are similar or different for males and females. In a longitudinal study of 646 adolescents in Switzerland, Schuster et al. (2021, in this volume) found that moral neutralisation of violence (i.e., cognitive process that justify aggressive behaviours) at age 15 equally predicts physical dating violence perpetration by male and female adolescents at age 17. In contrast, the endorsement of norms that justify violence against women was only predictive of dating violence by men, while females who endorsed justifications of violence against women were less likely to perpetrate dating violence, possibly because they internalised a patriarchal model of female subordination.

Toplu-Demirtaş and Aracı-İyiyaydın (2021, in this volume) find some evidence for gender-specific mechanisms. In that study, male and female university students reported similar levels of perpetration of teen dating violence. However, the link between witnessing mother-to-father and father-to-mother violence, positive attitudes towards partner violence, and own perpetration of dating violence only held for males but not for females. This might possibly suggest that males model their behaviour more on their experiences with their parents.

## 2 | CONCLUSIONS

In a review of evidence that supports the gender symmetry perspective, Straus (2008) argued that 'prevention and treatment of PV (i.e., partner violence) could become more

effective if the programs recognize that most PV is bidirectional and act on the high rate of perpetration by women and the fact that dominance by the female partner is as strongly related to PV as dominance by the male partner.' (p. 252). In contrast, Reed et al. (2010) argued that unless dating violence is framed as gender-based and rooted in gender-based inequalities and norms, 'we will, without doubt, fail in attempts to develop programs, policies, and educational campaigns to address this highly prevalent and debilitating public health threat.' (p. 351).

Both arguments cannot be equally true. However, researchers increasingly recognize that dating violence likely entails processes that operate bi-directionally and are similar in both genders, as well as processes linked to gender-related power differences. In this commentary, I have argued, largely based on earlier contributions to the debate, that it may be useful to advance knowledge along three analytic dimensions of the gender symmetry question: The issue of differences in harm and the mechanisms that cause them; the question of relationship dynamics and the short-term bi-directional and one-directional processes linked to conflict and control; and the problem of possible gender differences in the developmental roots of adolescent dating violence.

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