

# Learning Courtship Aggression: The Influence of Parents, Peers, and Personal Experiences\*

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*Using a differential association/social learning framework and sex role theory, we examine four research questions concerning the zero-order and relative influences of parents, peers, and individuals' personal experiences on courtship aggression. We examine data separately for aggressors and victims as well as females and males, and we distinguish among three types of courtship aggression: abuse, violence, and sexual aggression. The results, from a random sample of college students, indicate that influences most proximate in time and place affect courtship aggression most strongly; that is, individuals' own experiences as victims and perpetrators are stronger influences than parents and peers in predicting courtship aggression. Patterns of results vary by type of aggressive behavior and sex of respondent.*

How is aggression in intimate relationships learned? Answers to this question are of interest and importance to family sociologists and family practitioners alike. A differential association/social learning framework suggests that aggression is learned in interaction with intimate personal groups, just as conforming behavior is learned (Sutherland & Cressey, 1960). Individuals are more likely to accept or engage in aggressive behavior when they have frequent and close contact with others who accept or engage in such behavior.

Applying this theoretical perspective to courtship aggression, we expect that people who grow up in families in which parental interactions involve aggressive or violent acts learn these behavior patterns and later imitate them in their adult relationships. Similarly, individuals who have frequent and close associations with peers who engage in, and thus seemingly endorse, aggressive or violent behavior may be more likely to tolerate such actions. Learning of these behavior patterns also takes place with partners in couple relationships. Individuals who have experience with abusive or aggressive partners might eventually accept these behaviors and begin to inflict courtship aggression themselves (cf. Pagelow, 1981, on marital aggression).

Previous research in family and courtship aggression supports this theoretical framework. Regarding the influence of parents, several studies note a positive relationship between sustaining or observing aggression as a child within the family of origin and later sustaining or inflicting it in the family of procreation (Forsstrom-Cohen & Rosenbaum, 1985; Kalmuss,

1984; Rosenbaum & O'Leary, 1981a, 1981b; Straus, Gelles, & Steinmetz, 1980; Walker, 1983). Many emphasize, however, that these observed relationships are far from perfect (Berger, 1980; Gelles, 1980; Gil, 1970; Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Toedter, 1983; Herzberger, 1983; Kalmuss, 1984). Makepeace (1981) posits that courtship violence may be an intervening link between experiences with violence in the family of origin and those in the family of procreation. Supporting this thesis, studies of courtship violence also note a positive relationship between aggression in the family of origin and aggression sustained or inflicted in courtship (Bernard & Bernard, 1983; Laner & Thompson, 1982; Roscoe & Benaske, 1985).

Much less is known about the influence of peers on courtship aggression. Although Makepeace (1981) notes that 62% of his respondents reported that friends had been in situations involving courtship violence, the association of this with respondents' own experiences was not reported. All empirical studies that we have found regarding peers focus on sexually-oriented aggression committed by males and sustained by females. These indicate that males who have sexually aggressive male friends are more likely to be involved in such aggression themselves (Ageton, 1983; Alder, 1982; Kanin, 1957, 1985; Polk et al., 1981). As with studies of the influence of parents, however, Alder (1982) finds that having friends who sexually aggress appears to be a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to prompt men to sexually aggress. While the notion that women's actions provoke sexual aggression (Kanin, 1985) has been criticized (Brownmiller, 1975), Ageton's

(1983) evidence suggests that adolescent women's peer associations and past behavior affect the likelihood of their victimization, both sexually and in other ways.

Little is known about the effect of individuals' previous or current dating experiences on the incidence of courtship aggression. Giles-Sims (1983) and Straus (1973) theorize that biographical histories of couples and situational interactions influence marital aggression. Applied to courtship, these notions gain support from findings that: (a) aggression correlates positively with the degree of partners' involvement (Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983; Kanin, 1957; Kirkpatrick & Kanin, 1957); (b) many women who experience marital aggression earlier experienced courtship aggression (Roscoe & Benaske, 1985); and (c) some persons who experience aggression respond by being aggressive themselves (Laner, 1983; Laner & Thompson, 1982; Sack, Keller, & Howard, 1982).

Thus, prior literature suggests the importance of partners' previous en-

\*This research was a collaborative endeavor, and each author made significant contributions. It was conducted in part with grants from the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon. The authors are grateful to M. R. Laner for comments, K. E. Lane for an early survey of literature, and L. Kelm, M. Freer (Oregon), G. Van Buerden, and M. Everitt (University of Auckland, New Zealand) for clerical assistance.

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Key Words: aggression, courtship, parents, peers, violence.

(Family Relations, 1987, 36, 276-282.)



counters with courtship aggression and the interactive context in which it occurs, as well as the importance of parents' and peers' influences, on the likelihood of experiencing courtship aggression. To our knowledge, however, no previous research has sought to disentangle the relative or joint influences of each with the exception of Ageton (1983) who studied adolescent boys. These issues are the focus of the present research.

Not only can social learning take place in the contexts of parents, peers, and personal interactions, it may also differ for females and males, even when they are in the same social groups (family, peers, neighborhoods), due to sex differences in social positions (Hoffman-Bustamante, 1973; Leonard, 1982). In particular, physical and sexual aggression is less often associated with women's social roles than with men's. Thus, the influence of parents, peers, and individuals' own experiences on courtship aggression might differ for the sexes, such that males more readily imitate the aggressive patterns they have witnessed (Bandura, 1973; Pagelow, 1981).

## Research Questions

Drawing upon this theoretical framework, our study addresses four research questions concerning courtship aggression. We examine our data separately for victims and aggressors as well as for females and males. Within each group, we assess both the zero-order and relative influences of parents, peers, and individuals' own experiences on courtship aggression. Since aggressive acts vary in their motives, techniques, and rationalizations, as well as in their severity and consequences (some inflict emotional pain, others also involve physical pain), we distinguish in the analysis between abusive, violent, and sexually aggressive behaviors. Throughout the rest of this paper, the terms, "abuse," "violence," and "sexual aggression" are not used generically, but denote the definitions of the dependent variables described in the next section and Appendix. When summarizing all three, we use the term "courtship aggression."

In the first research question we ask, what are the zero-order, or bivariate, influences of the three independent variables—parents, peers, and personal experiences—on inflicting courtship aggression? We hypothesize that both males and females are more likely to aggress against their dating partners when they have had contact with aggressive

parents, peers, or partners. We also expect that the relationship between each independent variable and courtship aggression will be stronger for males than females, particularly for those who inflict violence and sexual aggression.

In the second research question we ask, what are the relative, or net, influences of the three independent variables on inflicting courtship aggression? Assuming that individuals' own dating experiences are more proximate influences on their behavior than the experiences of parents or peers, we hypothesize that the former will exert the greatest relative influence on courtship aggression. Similarly, we hypothesize a greater relative impact of peer than parent behavior on courtship aggression, since peer influences are generally more proximate in time and place, particularly for a college-age group. Again, we expect stronger associations for males than for females.

Third, we ask, what are the zero-order influences of parents, peers, and individuals' experiences on sustaining (i.e., being a victim of) courtship aggression? Witnessing parental and peer aggression may provide a learning environment not only for inflicting but also for sustaining aggressive behaviors. Since we expect that frequent contact with aggression raises individuals' tolerance for such behaviors, we hypothesize that those with aggressive parents and peers are more likely to sustain aggression than those without such contacts. With regard to personal experiences, we hypothesize that those who inflict aggression are likely to become targets of aggression themselves. That is, inflicting aggression on a partner provides a learning environment for that partner and may occasion self-defense or retaliation. We therefore postulate a reciprocal influence of inflicting and sustaining aggression.

Finally, we ask, what are the relative influences of the three dependent variables on sustaining courtship aggression? Again, we hypothesize that personal experiences with aggression will have the strongest net influence on sustaining courtship aggression, followed by peers, and then parents, paralleling the relative proximity of these influences.

## Methods

**Data:** The data used in this investigation come from self-administered mail-out/mail-back questionnaires sent to a random sample of undergraduates at a large public

university on the West Coast in fall 1982. The response rate was 55.5% with 289 students (55% females and 67% upper division) returning questionnaires with complete data on the variables of interest. For a more detailed description of the data, sample, and measures see Lane and Gwartney-Gibbs (1985).

**Variables:** Six dependent variables are used in the analysis: Inflicted Abuse, Violence, and Sexual Aggression; and Sustained Abuse, Violence, and Sexual Aggression. Each of these is a dummy variable summarizing whether a respondent ever experienced courtship aggression of a particular type and intensity. The independent variables in the analysis describe parents', peers', and respondents' personal experiences with aggression in relationships. Their categories range from never observing parental aggression, knowing about peers' aggression, or being involved with courtship aggression oneself, to witnessing, knowing about, and being involved in the most severe forms of aggression in relationships. The creation of these variables is detailed in the Appendix.

**Analysis:** To assess the zero-order influences of parents, peers, and respondents' personal experiences on inflicting and sustaining courtship abuse, violence, and sexual aggression, we use simple measures of association. To assess the relative, or net, influences of the independent variables on the dependent variables, logit analysis is used (Goodman, 1984).

The logit procedure involves developing several models of the influence of the independent variables on a dependent variable. The simplest models include only independent effects; more complex models include interactive effects. To assess the fit of each model, a maximum-likelihood (MLE) chi-square ratio measures the degree to which the observed configuration of data deviates from that expected from the model. Saturated logit models, which include all interaction terms among the dependent and independent variables, fit the data perfectly (chi-square = 0,  $p = 1.0$ ). The most parsimonious models exclude interaction terms, yet still approximate the data well (i.e., low chi-square values and high  $p$ -values).

For the logit models estimated here, the saturated models are not necessary to fit the data; the main effects of the independent variables are sufficient. This indicates that the influences of parents, peers, and personal experiences are independent with

regard to the dependent variables. This is the case, however, only when the models are estimated separately for males and females. When the models are estimated with sex of respondent included as an independent variable, only the saturated models fit. This implies that the independent variables' effects differ substantially for males and females. To assess these differences, models are presented separately by sex.

The parameters of the estimated logit models refer to the relative probability of inflicting (or sustaining) courtship abuse, violence, and sexual aggression. Positive parameters indicate a tendency to inflict (or sustain)

courtship aggression, while negative parameters indicate the opposite. The statistical significance of the parameters is assessed with z-scores.

## Findings

### Inflicting Courtship Aggression

The first research question concerns the zero-order influence of parents', peers', and individuals' personal experiences with aggressive relationships on inflicting courtship aggression. As the upper panel of Table 1 indicates, the likelihood of male students inflicting courtship aggression

is positively and significantly related to having witnessed parents engage in aggressive interaction. Moreover, having witnessed more severe forms of parental aggression is related to males inflicting successively more severe forms of aggression themselves. For example, of males who had abusive parental role models, 69% inflicted abuse themselves, 32% inflicted violence, and 26% inflicted sexual aggression; but of those with both violent and abusive parents, 87% inflicted abuse, 54% violence, and 40% sexual aggression. Even males who had apparently peaceful parental role models inflicted courtship aggression: 51% inflicted abuse, 21%

Table 1. Percentage of Males and Females Who Inflicted and Who Sustained Courtship Abuse, Violence, and Sexual Aggression, by Parents, Peers, and Personal Experiences

Independent Variables	Inflicted					
	% of Males Who Inflicted . . .			% of Females Who Inflicted . . .		
	Abuse (n = 97)	Violence (n = 48)	Sex (n = 39)	Abuse (n = 103)	Violence (n = 68)	Sex (n = 13)
A. Witnessed parents engage in:						
1. No abuse or violence	51 <sup>a</sup>	21	19	54	35	6
2. Abuse only	69	32	26	73	44	8
3. Both abuse and violence	87	54	40	65	47	10
$\chi^2$ (df = 2)	16.6**	12.7**	6.2*	4.5	2.0	0.7
gamma	.57	.48	.37	.21	.18	.19
B. Peers' sexual activity included:						
1. No males aggressed or females victimized	63	30	20	53	29	2
2. Female peers victimized only	75	31	21	55	34	3
3. Both males aggressed and females victimized	72	42	37	76	53	15
$\chi^2$ (df = 2)	1.5	1.6	4.4	8.3*	7.6*	8.9*
gamma	.14	.18	.33	.36	.35	.72
C. Personal experiences included sustaining: <sup>b</sup>						
1. No courtship aggression	21	6	18	12	8	2
2. Abuse only	74	8	18	82	20	5
3. Both abuse and violence	85	62	22	81	76	5
4. Both sexual aggression and violence	83	90	52	84	70	16
$\chi^2$ (df = 3)	39.2**	76.0**	12.7**	72.0*	58.4**	7.4
gamma	.66	.89	.40	.75	.75	.58
Independent Variables	Sustained					
	% of Males Who Sustained . . .			% of Females Who Sustained . . .		
	Abuse (n = 106)	Violence (n = 57)	Sex (n = 58)	Abuse (n = 111)	Violence (n = 78)	Sex (n = 96)
A. Witnessed parents engage in:						
1. No abuse or violence	67	24	36	63	39	49
2. Abuse only	66	36	36	72	55	64
3. Both abuse and violence	89	64	48	68	51	69
$\chi^2$ (df = 2)	8.4*	18.8**	1.8	1.0	3.2	5.9
gamma	.38	.55	.16	.10	.19	.31
B. Peers' sexual activity included:						
1. No males aggressed or females victimized	74	42	38	60	38	39
2. Female peers victimized only	66	42	9	59	38	70
3. Both males aggressed and females victimized	80	40	59	80	60	66
$\chi^2$ (df = 2)	2.3	0.1	21.7**	7.9*	7.6*	12.1*
gamma	.12	-.03	.37	.34	.32	.36
C. Personal experiences included inflicting: <sup>b</sup>						
1. No courtship aggression	42	10	28	20	16	40
2. Abuse only	86	18	34	93	31	59
3. Both abuse and violence	83	79	43	89	82	67
4. Both sexual aggression and violence	94	100	79	92	83	92
$\chi^2$ (df = 3)	30.3**	74.6**	15.4**	81.6**	58.8**	14.6**
gamma	.65	.88	.43	.83	.78	.45

<sup>a</sup>Example interpretation of figures: Of those males who did not witness their parents engage in abuse or violence, 51% inflicted abuse themselves on one or more occasion during courtship.

<sup>b</sup>In the text referred to as the "reciprocal" influence of sustaining courtship aggression on inflicting it, and vice versa.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .



violence, and 19% sexual aggression. For female students, inflicting courtship aggression also tends to be positively associated with parental aggression, but the relationships are not statistically significant.

Peers' sexual aggression also associates positively with students' tendency to inflict courtship aggression; but contrary to expectations, the associations are stronger for females than for males. For example, of females who have sexually aggressive friends, 53% inflicted courtship violence, compared to 42% of males. Overall, however, three times more males than females inflicted sexual aggression (39 of 130 males, compared to 13 of 159 females).

The strongest zero-order relationships have to do with personal experiences (i.e., the reciprocal nature of courtship aggression). As the severity of sustained courtship aggression increases, respondents are significantly and substantially more likely to inflict courtship aggression, especially more severe aggression. For example, of those males who never sustained courtship aggression and of those who were victims of abuse only, less than 10% inflicted violence. In contrast, 62% of those who were victims of both abuse and violence and 90% of those who sustained both sexual aggression and violence, inflicted violence in courtship. Similar patterns are found among females. (Since only 13 females

inflicted sexual aggression, however, this group was dropped from further analysis).

Turning to the second research question, the relative influence of parents, peers, and personal experiences on inflicting courtship aggression, Table 2 shows that parent and peer influences are overwhelmed by personal experiences. In just one of five models does parental influence have a net, significant impact upon inflicting courtship aggression: For males, nonviolent, nonabusive parents reduce the probability of inflicting courtship abuse, while violent, abusive parents increase it. The signs of the same parameters in the other four models indicate a similar, although weaker, tendency. Peer influence does not have a net, significant impact in any model of inflicting courtship aggression.

Only students' personal experiences as victims have consistent net significant effects on inflicting courtship aggression, as hypothesized. Having never sustained any form of courtship aggression strongly decreases the probability of inflicting any form of aggression. Having sustained abuse only increases the probability of inflicting abuse, but not violence or sexual aggression. Having sustained both violence and abuse increases the probability of inflicting violence and abuse. And having sustained both sexual aggression and violence increases the probability of inflicting all forms of

courtship aggression. These net effects are not consistently stronger for males, contrary to expectations.

## Sustaining Courtship Aggression

The third research question concerns the zero-order impact of parents, peers, and personal experiences on sustaining courtship aggression. The bottom panel of Table 1 shows similar patterns to those found for inflicting aggression. That is, each of the independent variables is positively associated with sustaining courtship aggression; but parental influences are of great import for males, peer influences are stronger for females, and personal experiences are most strongly related.

For parental influences, males who have reported witnessing successively more severe parental aggression report sustaining more courtship aggression. For example, 64% of males who observed violent and abusive parents sustained courtship violence, compared to 36% of those who observed abuse only and 24% of those who witnessed no parental aggression. Patterns of parental influence for females are not statistically significant.

For peer influence, females with a sexually aggressive peer group show rates of sustaining abuse and violence that are about 20 percentage points greater than those without such a peer group. In addition, 70% of females with

Table 2.  
Parameters Representing the Relative Effects of Parents, Peers, and Personal Experiences on the (Log) Odds of Students Inflicting Courtship Abuse, Violence, and Sexual Aggression, for Males and Females<sup>a</sup>

Logit Model	Males Inflict			Females Inflict		
	Abuse	Violence	Sex	Abuse	Violence	Sex
A. Witnessed parents engage in:						
1. No abuse or violence	-.30*	-.07	-.13	-.17	-.08	b
2. Abuse only	-.07	-.04	-.11	.16	-.05	
3. Both abuse and violence	.37*	.11	.24	.01	.13	
B. Peers' sexual activity included:						
1. No males aggressed or females victimized	-.08	-.25	-.16	-.10	-.17	
2. Female peers victimized only	.15	-.03	-.01	-.15	.00	
3. Both males aggressed and females victimized	-.07	.28	.17	.25	.17	
C. Personal experiences included sustaining:						
1. No courtship aggression	-.84**	-.85**	-.09	-1.21**	-.90**	
2. Abuse only	.26	-.94**	-.20	.41*	-.43**	
3. Both abuse and violence	.23	.55*	-.18	.44*	.84**	
4. Both sexual aggression and violence	.35	1.25**	.47*	.36*	.49**	
Intercept	.49**	-.25	-.48**	-.32*	-.19	
MLE $\chi^2$ (df = 28) <sup>c</sup>	9.69	8.11	9.43	6.99	7.07	
$p$ entropy concentration	.999	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	
	.12	.34	-.02	.25	.15	
	.22	.55	.03	.42	.31	

<sup>a</sup>Positive parameters indicate a tendency to inflict courtship aggression.

<sup>b</sup>Model excluded because only 13 of 159 females inflicted sexual aggression.

<sup>c</sup>A comparison of each model's  $\chi^2$  with the  $\chi^2$  of the saturated models ( $\chi^2 = 0.0$ ,  $p = 1.0$ ,  $df = 1$ ) indicated no significant differences. This means that the saturated models would not provide a significantly better fit than the models reported above.

\* $2.575 \leq Z \leq 1.960$ ;  $.01 < p < .05$ .

\*\* $Z \geq 2.576$ ;  $p < .01$ .

female friends who were sexually victimized also sustained sexual aggression. For males, the influence of peers is only significantly associated with sustaining sexual aggression, not abuse or violence. As with females, a sexually aggressive peer group increases males' chances of sustaining sexual aggression; but, not surprisingly, having sexually-victimized female friends has less to do with males' victimization.

Again, personal experiences (i.e., the reciprocal influences of inflicting and sustaining courtship aggression) have the strongest bivariate associations. Individuals who reported inflicting successively more severe forms of courtship aggression also reported sustaining increasingly severe aggression. For example, just 10% of males who inflicted no courtship aggression and 18% of those who inflicted abuse, sustained courtship violence; but 79% of those who inflicted both violence and abuse, and all of those who inflicted both violence and sexual aggression, did so. Similar patterns are found for females, although more females than males reported sustaining violence and sexual aggression across almost all categories.

Table 3 presents answers to the fourth research question, concerning the relative effects of parents, peers, and personal experiences on sustaining courtship aggression. Personal experiences again dominate the models. But here peers' influences also have a significant net impact on the probability of sustaining sexual aggression.

Females whose female peers have been sexually victimized are significantly more likely to be so victimized themselves; females without such friends decrease their probability of being victimized. Males who have a sexually aggressive peer group are significantly more likely to sustain sexual aggression. But having female peers who have been victimized and a nonaggressive male peer group significantly decreases males' likelihood of being so victimized. Parental role models have no significant net effect on sustaining any form of courtship aggression for females or males. This ordering of the importance of effects is as predicted.

The net effects of personal, reciprocal influences follow a fairly consistent pattern. The greater the severity of courtship aggression inflicted, the greater the likelihood of sustaining that level of severity. Having inflicted no courtship aggression has a strong net negative effect on the probability of sustaining all forms of courtship aggression. Having inflicted abuse only has a net positive effect on the probability of sustaining abuse and is negatively related to other forms of aggression. Having inflicted violence and abuse contributes significantly to sustaining violence and abuse for females only, while inflicting sexual aggression and violence contributes to sustaining sexual aggression for males only. The generally positive parameters on inflicting the most severe combinations of courtship aggression indicate

their tendency to increase the probability of sustaining all forms of courtship aggression, particularly for females.

## Summary and Discussion

Using a differential association/social learning theoretical framework, this analysis has addressed the bivariate and net effects of parents' interactions, peers' experiences, and individuals' own dating experiences on courtship aggression. With few exceptions, the findings support our hypotheses for four research questions.

Students who witnessed parental abuse and violence, those with sexually aggressive friends, and those who have been victimized by courtship aggression are more likely to inflict courtship aggression themselves. Personal experiences with partners, however, have a greater net impact upon the probability of inflicting courtship aggression than the less proximate influences of parents or peers. That is, students who sustained no courtship aggression are not likely to inflict it; those who sustained abuse only are likely to inflict abuse only; but those who sustained the more extreme combinations of courtship aggression are more likely to inflict all forms of it. These results not only suggest a reciprocal relationship between sustaining and inflicting courtship aggression, they also indicate that aggressive behavior may be learned, at least in part, in intimate interaction with partners.

Table 3.  
Parameters Representing the Relative Effects of Parents, Peers, and Personal Experiences on the (Log) Odds of Students Sustaining Courtship Abuse, Violence, and Sexual Aggression, for Males and Females<sup>a</sup>

Logit Model	Males Sustain			Females Sustain		
	Abuse	Violence	Sex	Abuse	Violence	Sex
A. Witnessed parents engage in:						
1. No abuse or violence	-.01	-.18	-.01	.02	-.14	-.21
2. Abuse only	-.25	-.14	.17	-.05	.16	.05
3. Both abuse and violence	.26	.32	-.16	.03	-.02	.17
B. Peers' sexual activity included:						
1. No males aggressed or females victimized	.13	-.24	.12	-.01	-.11	-.35**
2. Female peers victimized only	-.21	-.20	-.65**	-.22	-.11	.27*
3. Both males aggressed and females victimized	.07	.44	.52**	.23	.22	.08
C. Personal experiences included inflicting:						
1. No courtship aggression	-.63**	-2.07	-.42*	-.123**	-.78**	-.36**
2. Abuse only	.27	-2.06	-.19	.54*	-.44**	-.02
3. Both abuse and violence	-.01	-.49	.02	.43*	.72**	.09
4. Both sexual aggression and violence	.37	4.61	.59**	.27	.50	.29
Intercept	.49**	1.20	-.21	.55**	.05	.22*
MLE $\chi^2$ (df = 28) <sup>b</sup>	10.20	5.40	7.62	6.28	7.35	7.48
$p$	.999	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
entropy	-.22	.39	-.03	.32	.22	-.03
concentration	-.30	.56	.10	.49	.36	.05

<sup>a</sup>Positive parameters indicate a tendency to sustain courtship aggression.

<sup>b</sup>A comparison of each model's  $\chi^2$  with the  $\chi^2$  of the saturated models ( $\chi^2 = 0.0$ ,  $p = 1.0$ ,  $df = 1$ ) indicated no significant differences. This means that the saturated models would not provide a significantly better fit than the models reported in the table.

\* $2.575 \leq Z \leq 1.960$ ;  $.01 < p < .05$ .

\*\* $Z \geq 2.576$ ;  $p < .01$ .

Regarding victimization, we find that witnessing increasingly severe forms of parental aggression is associated with sustaining increasingly severe forms of courtship aggression, and that having a sexually aggressive peer group also is positively associated with victimization. Again, both the bivariate and net effects of personal, reciprocal experiences are strongest: Students who inflict the most extreme forms of courtship aggression also sustain them. The weak net effects of peers and parents parallel their lesser proximity to students' lives. However, both the reciprocal influences and the nature of peer groups vary in their effects for females and males.

Overall, these results support our hypotheses that contact with aggressive parents, peers, and partners provides learning environments not only for inflicting but also for sustaining courtship aggression. Answers to the first and third research questions, which utilize only bivariate relationships, suggest that social learning of aggressive behavior takes place in a variety of learning environments. However, answers to the second and fourth research questions, which utilize multivariate analysis, indicate that the proximity of these environments is reflected in their net impact upon courtship aggression. Specifically, only individuals' personal experiences with partners have both consistently significant zero-order and net associations with inflicting and sustaining courtship aggression. This proximal ordering of effects has not been reported in the literature before; and this is due, at least in part, to the paucity of research on multiple influences on courtship aggression.

In some ways our results are not surprising. Dating experiences, and couple relationships in general, are private in our culture. What little is observed or learned of parents' and peers' behavior in relationships may be dismissed as exceptional or as a small "slice" of their interactions. Furthermore, memories of parental interactions may grow cloudy with time. Thus, intimate interaction with partners may be the "best," or most conducive, learning environment for courtship aggression and perhaps other kinds of relationship aggression as well.

Not only does social learning take place in a variety of environments with varying impacts; we also find that the influences of parents, peers, and personal experiences on courtship aggression

differ for the two sexes, reminding us that females and males may learn different lessons from exposure to similar situations. While personal experiences have the greatest impact for both sexes, parental interactions appear to be more influential for males and peer interactions more important for females, contrary to our expectation. Again, these results may not have been reported before simply because no prior studies have included measures related to both parents and peers or have looked at the experiences of both males and females. To the extent that our results are replicated in later work, we suggest that the direct influence of parental violence on experiences with courtship aggression may have been overstated and the influence of involvement in sexually aggressive mixed-sex peer groups may have been underestimated, especially for females.

## Implications for Research and Practice

The research reported above offers several suggestions for researchers and practitioners. Our results underscore the importance of examining the experiences of females and males separately and of distinguishing between inflicting and sustaining aggression. Our finding of a relationship between exposure to different forms of aggression (abuse, violence, sexual aggression) and the forms of aggression experienced in courtship indicates the importance of distinguishing between different levels of severity of behaviors. Our patterns of bivariate and multivariate results suggest a proximal or temporal ordering of influences for social learning of courtship aggression, such that nearer influences are more important. These patterns simultaneously emphasize the multivariate nature of courtship aggression and call for replication.

What we have termed the "reciprocal" relationship between inflicting and sustaining courtship aggression is at once empirically strong and conceptually underdeveloped. Our crude measures (see Appendix) do not allow us to explain the strong associations we find with reference to the dynamics within relationships (such that behavior by one partner provokes response by the other) or with reference to experience in previous courtship situations (such that earlier experiences carry over into later relationships). Either explanation, however, suggests that future research focus upon the interactive aspects of

relationships, using couples as the unit of analysis and taking into account features of pair relationships (such as status differentials between partners, length and commitment of relationships, and the relative physical size of partners), as well as the context in which courtship aggression occurs (such as partners' interpretations of aggressive encounters, and the presence of others). For family therapists and educators, our findings suggest focusing upon couples rather than individuals and encouraging clients to examine not only peer influences, but also characteristics of their courtship interactions.

Finally, while our results discount the relative influence of parents' and peers' experiences on courtship aggression, complex, causal patterns of relationship may exist between the independent variables in our study. Future research could also examine the extent to which experiences with parental aggression influence choice of peer groups and courtship partners and thus, at least indirectly, influence experiences with courtship aggression. Family practitioners should be aware of the possibility of these complex relationships and caution clients about the potential long-range effects of family and peer group aggression.

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Appendix		How Variables Are Defined <sup>a</sup>	Percent
Variable Name and Definition			(n = 289)
<b>Dependent Variables:</b>			
1. Inflicted Abuse			
1 = Respondent insulted or swore, did something spiteful, or threatened to hit or throw something at some point during courtship.			69
0 = Otherwise			31
2. Sustained Abuse			
1 = One or more of the abusive acts defined in 1 above was done to the respondent.			75
0 = Otherwise			25
3. Inflicted Violence			
1 = Respondent threw something, hit or tried to hit with something, pushed, grabbed, shoved, slapped, kicked, bit, punched, beat up, or threatened with or actually used a knife or gun.			40
0 = Otherwise			60
4. Sustained Violence			
1 = One or more violent acts defined in 3 above was done to the respondent.			47
0 = Otherwise			53
5. Inflicted Sexual Aggression			
1 = Respondent obtained sexual intercourse through threats, pressure, lying; getting someone drunk or stoned; using or threatening to use physical force, a knife, or a gun; or raping.			18 <sup>b</sup>
0 = Otherwise			82
6. Sustained Sexual Aggression			
1 = Respondent had sexual intercourse under any of the circumstances described in 5 above.			54 <sup>b</sup>
0 = Otherwise			46
<b>Independent Variables:<sup>c</sup></b>			
1. Witnessed Parents—Categories reflect the extent to which respondents observed parents (or parent substitutes) engage in abuse or violence, as defined in 1 and 3 above.			
1 = No abuse or violence			45
2 = Abuse only			25
3 = Both violence and abuse			31
2. Peers' Sexual Aggression—Categories reflect the extensiveness of sexual aggression and victimization in respondents' peer groups. They reported how many of their male friends had made "physically forceful attempts at sexual activity which [were] disagreeable and forceful enough that the woman responded in an offended manner, such as crying, fighting, screaming, pleading, etc." and how many of their female friends had been so victimized. <sup>d</sup>			
1 = No male peers aggressed or female peers victimized			32
2 = One or more female peers victimized, but no male peers aggressed			25
3 = Both male peers aggressed and female peers victimized			43
3. Personal Experiences Sustained—Categories reflect combinations of three "sustained" dependent variables (2, 4, and 6 above). They are used as independent variables with the three "inflicted" dependent variables (1, 3, and 5 above) to assess the hypothesized reciprocal nature of inflicting and sustaining courtship aggression.			
1 = Did not sustain any form of courtship aggression			26 <sup>b</sup>
2 = Sustained abuse only			29
3 = Sustained abuse and violence			16
4 = Sustained violence and sexual aggression			28
4. Personal Experiences Inflicted—Categories reflect combinations of the three "inflicted" dependent variables (1, 3, and 5 above) which are used as independent variables with the three "sustained" dependent variables (2, 4, and 6 above) to assess the hypothesized reciprocal nature of inflicting and sustaining courtship aggression.			
1 = Did not inflict any form of courtship aggression			32 <sup>b</sup>
2 = Inflicted abuse only			30
3 = Inflicted abuse and violence			29
4 = Inflicted violence and sexual aggression			10

<sup>a</sup>The first four dependent variables are derived from a modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979). Independent variable 1, for parents, comes from asking respondents which of the Conflict Tactics they observed their parents (or parent substitutes) use when growing up. The fifth and sixth dependent variables are derived from responses to a modified version of Koss and Oros' (1982) Sexual Experiences Survey. Independent variable 2, for peers, is adapted from survey questions used by Alder (1982; see also Polk et al., 1981).

<sup>b</sup>Cross tabulations of each variable by sex of respondent revealed significant differences for those marked. In each instance the direction of difference was for females to be more likely to sustain and for males to be more likely to inflict sexual aggression.

<sup>c</sup>Some cases did not fit perfectly into the categories of the scaled and indexed independent variables. Details on how divergent cases were allocated to categories are available upon request.

<sup>d</sup>The measure of peer influence is limited since it refers only to sexual aggression and victimization, not a spectrum of courtship aggression. However, sexual aggression includes elements of abuse and violence. Further, a sexually aggressive peer group, acting out an extreme form of courtship aggression, is likely to exert the strongest impact upon peers' behaviors. While it would be ideal to have parallel measures of abuse, violence, and sexual aggression for parents, peers, and respondents, doubts about the validity of certain of those measures can be raised a priori. Parental sexual aggression, for example, is unlikely to be witnessed by children even though it may occur.

