

The (Un)Acceptability of Violence against Peers and Dates

Elizabeth Cauffman, S. Shirley Feldman, Lene Arnett Jensen and Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

Journal of Adolescent Research 2000 15: 652

DOI: 10.1177/0743558400156003

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jar.sagepub.com/content/15/6/652>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journal of Adolescent Research* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://jar.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://jar.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://jar.sagepub.com/content/15/6/652.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Nov 1, 2000

[What is This?](#)

The (Un)Acceptability of Violence Against Peers and Dates

Elizabeth Cauffman

University of Pittsburgh

S. Shirley Feldman

Stanford University

Lene Arnett Jensen

Catholic University of America

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett

University of Maryland

Although violence has become an increasing concern, the motivations and justifications for such egregious behavior remain poorly understood. Two hundred and sixty-one college students completed questionnaires concerning acceptance of and participation in two kinds of violence—violence against peers and dating violence. Results indicate that although violence may be commonplace, it is still deemed unacceptable, especially when the violence is motivated by peers, personal disposition, or avoiding accountability. In contrast, violence is viewed as more acceptable when in response to provocation or in defense of oneself or another. Violence type affected acceptability, with date violence less acceptable than peer violence. A modest relation between violence and behavior was observed; those more accepting of violence were more likely to engage in violent behavior. The sex of the respondent and the sex of the aggressor influenced all the findings, suggesting that gender may moderate acceptance of violence and its relation to violent behavior.

A high incidence of violence has become an increasingly familiar part of our social landscape. Consequently, researchers and policy makers alike are driven to understand the motivations and justifications for such egregious behavior. Although juvenile crime has decreased over the past few years, the rate of violent offending in the 1990s was 98% higher than it was in the

Preparation of this article was supported by the Stanford Center on Adolescence. We are especially grateful to Lexy Kleeman-Keller for her assistance in the collection and coding of the data. This was presented as a paper at the 1999 biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development. Please address correspondence to Elizabeth Cauffman, University of Pittsburgh, Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, 3811 O'Hara Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15213; e-mail: cauffman@msx.upmc.edu.



Journal of Adolescent Research, Vol. 15 No. 6, November 2000 652-673

© 2000 Sage Publications, Inc.

652

1980s, and teenagers committed a disproportionate fraction of this violence (Stahl, 1998). In fact, criminal behavior tends to peak between ages 16 and 18 (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983), whereas the adult years are marked by a steady decrease in rates of violent offending. It is therefore of paramount importance to improve our understanding of the factors that lead to violent behavior.

It is generally believed that the high rates of violent behavior committed by youths are related to changes in attitudes regarding the acceptability of violence, although the specific nature of this relation is the subject of considerable debate. Some argue that the depiction of violence in the media has desensitized people to the actual perpetration of violent behavior, resulting in higher levels of real-life violence (Linz, Wilson, & Donnerstein, 1992). Others argue that acceptance of violence is the result, not the cause, of an increasingly violent environment that includes such threats as armed gangs and trauma-plagued neighborhoods (DuRant, Cadenhead, Pendergrast, Slavens, & Linder, 1994). Finally, there is a growing consensus that the link between attitudes and behaviors may point in both directions: Exposure to violence may lead to increased acceptance of such behavior, which in turn may increase the likelihood of an individual engaging in violent or aggressive activity (Widom, 1989).

Given that exposure to violence, either in real life or via the media, is almost unavoidable, how do attitudes toward violence vary as a function of the circumstances surrounding such behavior, and how do these variations in attitudes relate to an individual's propensity for violence in his or her own actions? Preliminary studies have shown that opinions regarding the acceptability of violent behavior are influenced by the context in which the violence occurs. A study by Keltikangas-Jarvinen and Lindeman (1997) found that among adolescents between the ages of 11 and 17, engaging in immoral behavior (lying, theft, fighting) was most acceptable when such behavior was provoked or performed under duress. Moore and Cockerton (1996) found that college undergraduates were less accepting of violence when it was unjustified than when a violent event was seen as an act of self-defense. To date, however, the relations between attitudes toward violence in different situations and the perpetration of such behavior remain unexplored.

This study considers two specific forms of aggression: violence against peers and dating violence. Studies have shown that aggressiveness among peers is highest during adolescence (Coie & Dodge, 1998). Not only does susceptibility to peer pressure peak during early adolescence (Berndt, 1979; Brown, 1990), but this is also the age at which many youths begin to engage in risky and delinquent behavior (Arnett, 1992). Dating violence, meanwhile, has been identified as an emerging social trend that warrants further examina-

tion so that we may better understand its causes (Makepeace, 1981). One study found that of 123 female adolescents questioned, approximately 40% of those in dating relationships had experienced some form of dating violence, with physical violence more common than psychological abuse (Burcky, Reuterman, & Kopsky, 1988). Reasons for such violence include jealousy, rejection, intoxication, miscommunication, and power struggles (Burcky et al., 1988; Cook, 1995). Gagne and Lavoie (1993) found that among adolescents between the ages of 14 and 17, jealousy was the main cause of emotional and physical violence in romantic relationships. In addition, attitudes regarding responsibility for dating violence vary with gender, with males more likely to blame females for provoking the situation (Cook, 1995).

The contexts in which violence occurs, or the aggressor's motivations, are not the only factors that influence the acceptability of such behavior in the eyes of others. In particular, the gender of the aggressor and the victim may affect the acceptability of violence. In a study of college students, Harris (1992) found that same-sex aggression was more common than opposite-sex aggression. In addition, men were more likely not only to engage in physically aggressive acts but also to be the recipients of it. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to report being victims of sexually aggressive acts but were also more likely to state that they would be aggressive with men rather than with women. Finally, both genders mentioned that they were more likely to threaten a man than a woman. This may suggest that the notion of a fair fight is important in determining the acceptability of violence. That is, two men fighting, two women fighting, or a woman being physically aggressive toward a man may be more acceptable than a man being aggressive toward a woman, because the man is perceived as being physically stronger than the woman and therefore having an unfair advantage in a physical confrontation. In this study, we propose to examine both same-sex and opposite-sex violence in order to examine how attitudes toward violence differ in these contexts.

In addition, male and female respondents may report different levels of acceptability of violence under identical circumstances. For example, Feldman and Cauffman (1999) found that males and females both report that it is more acceptable for males than it is for females to engage in sexual betrayal of romantic partners. At the same time, males are more accepting than females of betrayal when it is motivated by emotional infidelity, whereas females are more accepting of betrayal that arises from sexual infidelity (Glass & Wright, 1992). In a study conducted by Falchikov (1996), adolescents between the ages of 11 and 16 were asked their attitudes regarding wife abuse. The results indicated that the boys were more tolerant of domestic violence than the girls were; however, girls mentioned a greater likelihood of

using physical violence in their future relationships than boys did. Analogous studies of the acceptability of violence have not yet received research attention, however. Do males and females view aggressive behavior differently? Does the sex of the aggressor influence the acceptability of violent behavior? Statistics on the rates of aggressive and violent behavior among males and females suggest that the differences are staggering. Males are more likely than females to engage in both physically and verbally aggressive acts throughout the adolescent years and beyond (Coie & Dodge, 1998). Juvenile court appearances are four times as likely among boys than among girls (Snyder et al., 1987), and self-reported rates of delinquent behavior are three times higher among boys than among girls (Elliott, Ageton, Huizinga, Knowles, & Canter, 1983). Despite this imbalance, however, violence among adolescent girls is a growing concern. For example, between 1989 and 1993, violent crimes such as murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault rose an astonishing 55% among female adolescents ("Crime," 1996; Poe-Yamagata & Butts, 1996).

The goal of this article is to examine the acceptability of violence under various circumstances as well as self-reported engagement in violent behavior. First, we explore how acceptance of violence against peers varies with motivation. We hypothesize that some justifications or motives for violent behavior will be more acceptable than others and that this acceptability will vary by sex (with females being less accepting than males). In addition, we hypothesize that the sex of the perpetrator will influence the level of acceptability, with it being less acceptable for females to engage in violent behavior. Furthermore, we hypothesize that a person's acceptance of violence will be correlated with his or her self-reported engagement in aggressive behavior. Specifically, we hypothesize that those respondents who are more accepting of violence will be more likely to engage in violent behavior than those who are less accepting of violence. Second, we will perform analogous explorations of the conditions under which youths find dating violence acceptable. We hypothesize that females will be less accepting of such behavior than males are and that the sex of the perpetrator will also influence the level of acceptability, with it being less acceptable for males to engage in dating violence than females. We will examine the relations between acceptance of dating violence and actual behavior, again hypothesizing that higher levels of acceptability will be associated with higher levels of aggressive behavior. Finally, we will examine the relation between the acceptability of violence against peers and the acceptability of dating violence, hypothesizing that those who are more accepting of violence against peers will also be more accepting of dating violence.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure

The data for the present study come from self-report questionnaires administered to college students ($N = 261$) attending a popular introductory psychology class (attended by many nonmajors) from a large midwestern university. The sample was restricted to unmarried young adults under the age of 24. The predominantly White sample (83% White, 8% Asian, 8% African American, 1% other) ranged in age from 18 to 23 years (mean age = 20.4) and had more females (65%) than males (35%). Approximately 20% of the sample came from homes where their parents had not attended school beyond the 12th grade.

All of the eligible students were informed about the purpose of the study and asked to complete the questionnaire in exchange for extra credit. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The anonymous self-report questionnaires were administered during scheduled class times and took approximately 40 minutes to complete. Informed consent was obtained on the day of the survey administration after inviting students to participate in the study. The Institutional Review Board of Stanford University approved the consent procedures described above.

Measures

The questionnaire contained a wide array of items concerning functioning and other forms of moral violations. Of particular interest for the present analyses are the following measures:

Demographic information. Participants were asked to report their age, sex, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status was based on parents' level of education, as research has indicated that parental education may be the most stable component of a family's social class (Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991).

Acceptability of violence. To assess the acceptability of violence, each participant read two vignettes—one on violence against peers, the other on date violence. Each vignette appeared in two forms—one with a male perpetrator, the other with a female perpetrator. Respondents were randomly assigned to receive vignettes with either male or female perpetrators, with the

requirement that the perpetrator in the two vignettes was always the same. That is, those who received the male version of violence against peers also received the male version of violence against dates.

Acceptance of violence against peers. Respondents were presented with one of the following two vignettes (see Appendix A for a complete description):

After school, Dave, age 16, got into a fistfight with his classmate Alan and gave him a black eye. For each item, rate how acceptable this behavior is. How acceptable is it if Dave . . .

After school, Ellen, age 16, got into a fistfight with her classmate Sharon and gave her a black eye. For each item, rate how acceptable this behavior is. How acceptable is it if Ellen . . .

Acceptance of violence against date. Respondents were presented with one of the following two vignettes (see Appendix B for a complete description):

Paul, age 17, has been going out with his girlfriend for 4 months. One evening while hanging out together, Paul hit her and gave her a bloody nose. For each item, rate how acceptable this behavior is. How acceptable is it if Paul . . .

Sharon, age 17, has been going out with her boyfriend for 4 months. One evening while hanging out together, Sharon hit him and gave him a bloody nose. For each item, rate how acceptable this behavior is. How acceptable is it if Sharon . . .

Following each vignette, respondents were presented with 19 different justifications and were asked to rate the acceptability of the behavior in each of the 19 situations on 4-point scales (1 = *totally unacceptable*, 4 = *totally acceptable*).

To generate the justifications for violence against peers and dating violence, we first reviewed the relevant psychological literature and constructed a large number of plausible justifications. We then conducted three focus groups with college students to help narrow the list. Finally, we sought to have parallel justifications hold across different forms of violent situations. This procedure resulted in 12 different categories of justifications. We also permitted in each set of justifications any justification that was salient for one (but not both) form of violence. We then pilot tested these justifications with 45 students and made final editorial corrections to the wording of the justifications. The resulting justifications for the two types of violence were comparable although not identical. For example, for each type of violence, there were justifications related to self-gain, redressing perceived inequity, conformity to peers, the ability to escape detection, and self-defense, among others.

Although we conducted principal components analysis (PCA) with varimax rotations for each form of violence, the resulting solutions yielded factors that were not parallel across the two forms of violence. Attempts to create a priori clusters resulted in highly intercorrelated composites (e.g., correlation coefficients greater than .60 for several of the subscales). Thus, we elected not to use the factor or a priori scores but to use the overall acceptance scores in which we summed the ratings across the 19 justifications or motives for each form of violence. The resulting composite scores had highly satisfactory alpha coefficients (.91 for the scores for violence against peer and for violence against date).

Aggressive behavior with peers. To assess the participants' actual engagement in aggressive behavior with their peers, respondents were asked, "In the *past year*, when you had a conflict with a peer, how often did you . . ." Respondents were asked to self-report on a scale ranging from "never," "once," "2-5 times," "6-9 times," to "10+ times" of how often they engaged in the following four aggressive acts: "yell loudly at the person," "push and shove them around," "hit them," and "pull out a weapon." As these behaviors increased in violence, a weighted composite was created (with more aggressive acts, e.g., pulling out a weapon, having more weight). Participants who received high scores on this scale were considered to be more aggressive than participants who scored low.

Aggressive behavior with date or romantic partner. To assess participants' actual engagement in aggressive behavior with a date or romantic partner, respondents were asked, "In the *past year*, when you had a conflict with a date or romantic partner, how often did you . . ." Respondents were asked to self-report on a scale ranging from "never," "once," "2-5 times," "6-9 times," to "10+ times" of how often they engaged in the following five aggressive acts: "yell loudly at the person," "push and shove them around," "hit them," "pull out a weapon," and "force them to have sex." As these behaviors increased in violence, a weighted composite was created (with more aggressive acts, e.g., pulling out a weapon, having more weight). Participants who received high scores on this scale were considered to be more aggressive with their dates than participants who scored low.

RESULTS

The results are reported in three major sections. In the first, we examine the acceptability of violence against peers and the factors that influence it. In

the second, we conduct parallel analyses on the acceptability of date violence. In the third section, we compare the findings for violence against peers and date violence. In each of these sections, we conduct parallel analyses and use MANOVAs, ANOVAs, and correlations to assess the effects of aggressors' and respondents' characteristics on the acceptability of violence. In all analyses, we set the alpha at .01 (although we report in the tables results that are at the $p < .05$ level). Because violence was typically rated as highly unacceptable, responses were often not normally distributed. While nonparametric statistical techniques are the most appropriate for such situations, their results are also difficult to interpret. Because the results of parametric analyses were in nearly complete agreement with those of nonparametric analyses, we report only the parametric statistics because they lend themselves more easily to clear interpretation.

Acceptance of Violence Against Peers

Acceptability of violence against peers. To explore the effects of justification on the acceptability of violence against peers, we first conducted a repeated measures ANOVA with justification as a within-subject factor. Although violence against peers was generally rated as unacceptable (mean overall acceptance = 1.54, $SD = .41$), the various justifications for violence against peers was nonetheless strongly significant, $F(18, 231) = 113.3, p < .0001$. Table 1 shows that the most acceptable justifications were acting in self-defense, protecting someone else, and being provoked. The least acceptable justifications were wanting something that belongs to someone else (e.g., someone else's sneakers), having gotten away with the behavior before, and wanting to ruin someone's reputation.

Characteristics of the respondent and the aggressor. We had predicted that males would be more accepting of violence against peers than females would and that violence against peers by male aggressors would be judged as more acceptable than violence by female aggressors. To assess these hypotheses, we conducted two-way ANOVAs on the total score of acceptability of violence against peers. As predicted, sex of respondent was significant, $F(1, 254) = 29.0, p < .0001$, with males ($M = 1.71$) markedly more accepting than females ($M = 1.44$) of violence against peers. This result held not only for the total acceptance score but for each of the 19 justifications as well. The sex of the aggressor, however, did not influence the acceptability of violence, $F(1, 254) = 2.81, ns$. That is, whether the aggressor was male or female did not influence judgments of acceptability of violence against peers.

TABLE 1: The Most and Least Acceptable Justifications for Violence Against Peers

	<i>Mean Scores</i>		
	<i>Total Sample</i> (N = 261)	<i>Males</i> (n = 92)	<i>Females</i> (n = 169)
Most acceptable justifications			
Was acting in self-defense	3.46	3.58	3.39
Was protecting someone else	2.91	3.12	2.79
Was provoked by Alan (Alan was "asking for it")	1.91	2.30	1.68
Didn't want to be seen as a wimp in front of his friends	1.69	2.02	1.49
Felt that Alan was being disrespectful toward him	1.66	1.81	1.57
Least acceptable justifications			
Wanted Alan's new sneakers	1.09	1.18	1.02
Had been in fights before and gotten away with it	1.16	1.24	1.11
Wanted to ruin Alan's reputation	1.20	1.34	1.13
Knew police wouldn't catch him	1.22	1.42	1.10
Was ordered by his gang members to attack Alan	1.25	1.34	1.19

NOTE: We present here items for male aggressors, but there were comparable items for female aggressors. The response scale was 1 = *totally unacceptable*, 2 = *somewhat unacceptable*, 3 = *somewhat acceptable*, and 4 = *totally acceptable*. Standard deviations: total sample = 0.40-0.79; males = 0.50-1.08; females = 0.15-0.83.

Attitudes Toward Violence Against Peers and Violent Behavior

We also examined the relation between acceptance of violence against a peer and self-reports of aggression against peers. Self-reported aggressive behavior against peers was significantly correlated with acceptance of violence against peers ($r = .32, p < .001$); however, when examined separately by sex, this association only held for males ($r = .37, p < .001$) and not for females ($r = .08, ns$).

Acceptance of Date Violence

Acceptability of date violence. To explore the effects of justification on the acceptability of date violence, we conducted a repeated measures ANOVA with justification as a within-subject factor. Although date violence was gen-

TABLE 2: The Most and Least Acceptable Justifications for Date Violence

	<i>Mean Scores</i>		
	<i>Total Sample</i> (N = 261)	<i>Males</i> (n = 92)	<i>Females</i> (n = 169)
Most acceptable justifications			
Was acting in self-defense	2.74	2.81	2.69
Was just being playful and it went too far	1.98	1.95	1.99
Was paying her back because she had hit him in the past	1.51	1.56	1.46
Was from a different culture where men are expected to deal forcefully with their women	1.48	1.52	1.34
Knew that she had been flirting with someone else	1.41	1.42	1.38
Least acceptable justifications			
Was certain that no one would find out	1.07	1.11	1.05
Felt he had the right to decide for himself how to treat his girlfriend	1.08	1.10	1.05
Knew his friends treated their girlfriends the same way	1.09	1.10	1.07
Wanted his friends to know that he was in charge of this relationship	1.12	1.14	1.09
Had a bad day and was in a rotten mood	1.12	1.11	1.13

NOTE: We present here items for male aggressors, but there were comparable items for female aggressors. The response scale was 1 = *totally unacceptable*, 2 = *somewhat unacceptable*, 3 = *somewhat acceptable*, and 4 = *totally acceptable*. Standard deviations: total sample = 0.35-1.18; males = 0.35-0.95; females = 0.31-1.19.

erally rated as unacceptable (mean overall acceptance = 1.34, $SD = .40$), the various justifications for date violence were nonetheless strongly significant, $F(18, 231) = 48.3, p < .0001$. Table 2 shows that the most acceptable justifications were acting in self-defense, just being playful, and seeking revenge. The least acceptable justifications were avoiding detection, feeling entitled, and imitating friends' behavior.

Characteristics of the respondent and the aggressor. We had predicted that females would be less accepting of date violence than males were and that date violence by male aggressors would be judged as less acceptable than date violence by female aggressors. To assess these hypotheses, we conducted two-way ANOVAs on the total score of acceptability of date violence.

As predicted, sex of respondent was significant, $F(1, 255) = 5.63, p < .05$, with females ($M = 1.32$) less accepting than males ($M = 1.43$) of date violence. This result held not only for the total acceptance score but for 15 out of the 19 justifications as well. Moreover, the sex of the aggressor was significantly and strongly related to the acceptability of date violence, $F(1, 255) = 73.6, p < .0001$. In accord with our hypothesis, date violence was more acceptable when females ($M = 1.57$) were the aggressors than when males ($M = 1.19$) were the aggressors—a finding that held for male as well as for female respondents.

Attitudes Toward Date Violence Versus Date Violence Behavior

The self-report measure of aggression against dates was uncorrelated with acceptance of date violence, as a whole ($r = .11, ns$). However, when this relation is examined separately among males and females, one finds that although there is no relation between acceptance of date violence and reported aggression toward dates among males ($r = .14, ns$), there is a positive correlation between acceptance of date violence and self-reported date-related aggression for females ($r = .28, p < .001$).

A Comparison of Acceptance of Violence Against Peers Versus Acceptance of Date Violence

To compare the acceptance of violence against peers versus date violence, we carried out a repeated measures ANOVA on total acceptance scores with violence type (date vs. peer) as a within-subject factor, and sex of respondent and sex of aggressor as between-subject factors.

Acceptance of violence was a function of violence type, $F(1, 254) = 63.6, p < .0001$, with violence against peers more acceptable than date violence ($M = 1.34$ and 1.54 , respectively). There were two effects of gender. On one hand, the acceptance of violence was influenced by the sex of the respondent, $F(1, 254) = 23.8, p < .0001$, with males more accepting of violence than females were. On the other hand, there was also an effect of sex of aggressor, $F(1, 254) = 14.1, p < .001$, with date violence perpetrated by females more acceptable than date violence perpetrated by males ($M = 1.55$ vs. 1.16 , respectively). However, these effects are qualified by two statistically significant interaction terms. An interaction of sex of respondent by violence type, $F(1, 254) = 8.9, p < .01$, is depicted in Figure 1. In this interaction, the effect of sex was absent for date violence, $t(257) = 1.45, p = ns$, but present for violence against peers, $t(257) = 5.8, p < .001$, and the effect of violence type was

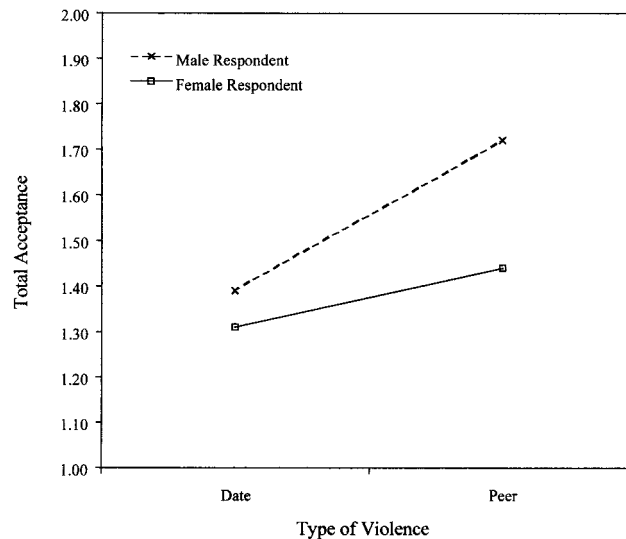


Figure 1. The effect of the interaction on the acceptance of violence between the type of violence and the sex of the respondent.

more marked for males than for females. A second interaction term (Sex of Aggressor \times Violence Type) was also significant, $F(1, 254) = 80.5, p < .0001$, as shown in Figure 2. The acceptability of violence committed by female aggressors was similar in both violence against dates and violence against peers. In contrast, the acceptability of violence committed by male aggressors was influenced by the violence type, with male aggression more acceptable against same-sex peers than against dates.

DISCUSSION

Despite the general consensus that violence has become an increasingly familiar part of our social landscape, this study finds that youths strongly disapprove of such behavior. Although participants' ratings of the acceptability of violent behavior were consistently very low, the ratings nevertheless exhibited significant associations with a number of factors. There were several findings of note. First, the acceptability of violence was strongly affected by justification, with violence arising out of defense or provocation the most acceptable and violence resulting from peer influences, personal disposition,

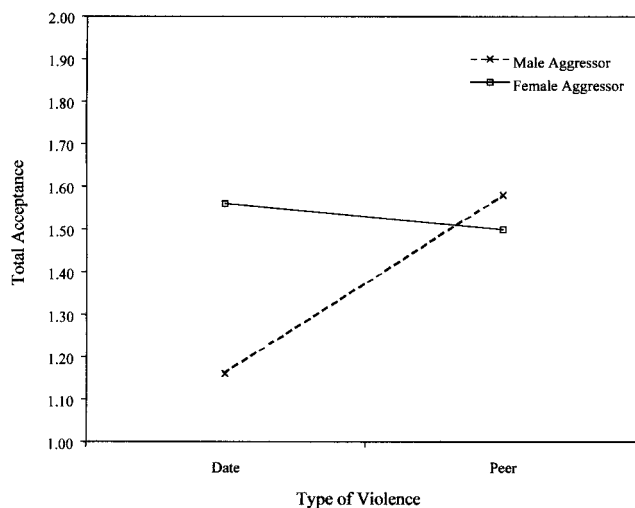


Figure 2. The effect of the interaction on the acceptance of violence between the type of violence and the sex of the aggressor.

or the ability to avoid accountability the least acceptable. Second, the type of violence—that is, whether against same-sex peers or opposite-sex dates—affected not only the acceptability of such behavior but also the ways in which other factors influenced acceptability. Third, there were two types of sex effects. The effect of the sex of the respondent was such that males accepted violence more readily than females did, although this depended on the type of violence being judged. The effect of the sex of the aggressor on acceptability also depended on the type of violence, with significant effects for date violence but not for violence against peers. Finally, self-reported aggressive behavior toward peers was associated with acceptance of peer violence among males, whereas acceptability of date violence was associated with self-reported date violence among females only.

Before discussing the implications of these observations, we acknowledge several limitations of this study. First, the sample does not permit generalization to broader populations. Non-college youths are omitted from the sample, and it includes very few participants with experience with gang activity. Although the observed effects were strong enough that we would not expect the inclusion of non-college youths to significantly alter the study's findings, it is unlikely that these findings can be applied reliably to highly violent adolescent populations such as juvenile offenders or gang members.

Second, although we considered two types of violence (violence against peers and date violence), we examined acceptance of only one form of violence (giving someone a bloody nose or a black eye). The use of more or less violent incidents might yield somewhat different results. In particular, if extreme violence is strongly disapproved of, it may be difficult to identify significant correlations with other variables due to a “floor” effect. Finally, because disapproval of violence is widespread, respondents are likely to underreport their own acceptance of violence, yielding a social desirability bias. Nevertheless, this bias will not affect the observed correlations unless it varies significantly among the different subgroups examined.

As an additional caveat, we note that although we endeavored to employ parallel justifications for both the peer and date violence scenarios, there were necessarily some differences between particular justifications in the two contexts. Several justifications, for example, had no direct parallel in each scenario. Gang-related motivations did not apply to the date violence scenario, whereas accidental harm was not applicable to the peer scenario. More subtly, some justifications were operationalized in slightly different ways in the different situations. For example, in the peer scenario, defense included both self-defense and protecting another, but the date violence context included only self-defense. Provocation in the date violence scenario included such items as the partner treating the aggressor badly, the partner flirting with someone else, paying the partner back, and being angry because the partner withheld sex, whereas provocation in the violence-against-peers scenario included the victim disrespecting or provoking the aggressor. These differences in justification precluded a direct comparison across the two types of aggression.

Subject to these limitations, the goal of this study was to explore attitudes toward prevalent forms of violence likely to be encountered by most adolescents. Accordingly, we chose to consider violence against peers and dates rather than less commonplace events such as the use of weapons or assault by a stranger. Dating violence has been estimated to occur in 9% to 41% of adolescent romantic relationships (Bergman, 1992; O’Keefe, Brockopp, & Chew, 1986; Reuterman & Burcky, 1989), and violence in schools has become increasingly commonplace, with one out of every four adolescents reporting being a victim of violence in or around school (Everett & Price, 1995). Not only are peer and date violence less removed from most adolescents’ lives than other violent acts, but they may also be driven by a wider range of motivations. In contrast to the hypothetical dilemmas used by Kohlberg (1976), we elected to consider moral violations where youths may have some actual experience. Our focus on familiar types of violence was chosen, in part, to yield a stronger test of the hypothesis that because violence

has become so prevalent, it may desensitize youth and they will therefore exhibit little moral outrage in response to such events. Our findings indicate, however, that despite the familiarity of violence, youths nevertheless are highly disapproving of such violence, regardless of whether it is against peers or dates.

Justification for Violence

The motivation for a given act of violence was a major determinant of its acceptability. Although violence, in general, was decidedly unacceptable, exactly how unacceptable depended on the circumstances or justification for the violence. In particular, those justifications that can be classified as *reactive* (including defense and response to provocation) were more acceptable than those involving *planfulness* (such as ability to avoid detection, efforts to impress peers) or a *lack of self-control* (including such justifications as disposition or environment). In many ways, these distinctions are similar to those drawn in legal settings, where intent is a key element in distinguishing, for example, between manslaughter and homicide. Interestingly, however, although respondents disapproved of violence due to peer pressure or gang influence, they were less disapproving of violence provoked by the victim. Thus, whereas violence is more acceptable in self-defense (or the defense of others) than in other circumstances, it is also more acceptable as a response to nonviolent conflicts initiated by another person (by “being disrespectful,” “flirting with someone else,” or “asking for it”). The notion of honor or protecting oneself as a justification for violence has been used to explain the difference in homicide rates between northern and southern states. According to their study (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994), even though Southerners are not more accepting of violence in general, after structural and demographic factors are taken into account, the primary reason the South has higher homicide rates than the North is that Southerners tend to be more accepting of violence when it is used for self-protection, in defense of one’s honor, and in the socialization of children.

The Type of Violence

Although both violence against peers and date violence involve causing physical harm to an age-mate, these types of violence differ in several ways, and the acceptability of violence in these circumstances was found to differ accordingly. In date violence, there is a clearly defined romantic relationship between the parties involved, and the violence carried out is against a mem-

ber of the opposite sex. Violence against peers, however, involves violence carried out against a member of the same sex, but the relationship between the aggressor and the victim is not clearly defined.

Although violence in both contexts was generally deemed unacceptable, date violence was significantly less acceptable than violence against peers. This finding is consistent with the fact that violence is at odds with most people's conception of romantic relationships, whereas peer relations are not assumed implicitly to be amicable. The finding that date violence is less acceptable than violence against peers is, however, not straightforward but depends on several different factors. One such factor is whether the judgment of acceptability is being made by a male or a female. In our study, only males judged date violence as less acceptable than violence against peers, whereas females judged both forms of violence equally unacceptable. This finding is consistent with sex differences in socialization and with gender roles. Females are socialized to avoid physical aggression of all kinds and hence their very low levels of acceptance of both types of violence; males are socialized to strive for dominance, to be competitive and assertive, and to be able to defend themselves. These masculine traits may call for physical aggression in appropriate contexts. In fact, many parents actively encourage their sons to defend themselves and to fight back when they are threatened by others; a young male who refuses to fight risks being labeled as a wimp and is often victimized in school (Olweus, 1978). However, socialization of males does not sanction all forms or contexts for physical aggression, and one key factor may be whether the fight is "fair"—that is, whether opponents are matched in size, sex, and strength. Fights with same-sex, same-age peers are likely to be viewed as fair given that peers are likely to be similar in size and strength, whereas fighting with a date is likely to be viewed as unfair, as it may be between physically unequal individuals. It may be this sense of unfairness that makes males judge fighting with a date as less acceptable than fighting with a same-sex peer.

The finding that violence against peers is more acceptable than date violence is also influenced by the sex of the aggressor. The least acceptable type of violence is date violence when the male is the aggressor. However, when the female is the aggressor, violence against peers and dates is equally unacceptable. These findings are consistent with our fairness-in-fighting argument. Although aggression by males is more common than aggression by females (Coie & Dodge, 1998), it is not more approved of in the situations examined in this research. Interestingly, as seen in recent research (Avery-Leaf, Cascardi, O'Leary, & Cano, 1997; Falchikov, 1996) and as our results indicate, aggression by a female in a dating relationship is more acceptable

than male aggression against dates. This approval of female aggression in dating relationships, although pervasive across all justifications, was especially marked under the condition of provocation, when it was accidental, and especially in the service of self-defense. There is a variety of possible interpretations for this finding. People may condemn date violence by males more strongly because such violence reflects the offensive and outdated notion that males are entitled to use violence to preserve control of romantic relationships. Conversely, it may be considered more acceptable when a female is the perpetrator of violence because females are typically less powerful and therefore considered to be at a disadvantage. However, a higher acceptance for females to engage in dating violence does not mean that such violence by females is condoned by either sex; dating violence is still deemed highly unacceptable overall.

Attitudes Toward Violence and Violent Behavior

Despite the fact that the participants in this sample were disapproving of violence against peers, there is nevertheless a significant correlation between attitudes toward violence and violent behaviors. Due to the cross-sectional nature of this study, it is unclear whether such a correlation indicates that acceptance of violence against peers leads to an increased likelihood of actual violent behavior, a view consistent with the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen, 1985, 1987), or whether attitudes are brought into line with existing behavior, as the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) would predict. In virtually every domain investigated to date, there is a significant, albeit modest, relationship between attitudes and behavior, especially if they are matched in specificity (Kraus, 1995).

Adolescent attitudes toward violence have generally been studied on a dimension of acceptance/rejection, with little attention devoted to the conditions under which the behavior occurs. The literature, however, suggests that there may be different reasons for engaging in violent behavior, including being provoked or self-defense (see, e.g., Keltikangas-Jarviva & Lindeman, 1997; Moore & Cockerton, 1996). The present study's finding that a significant number of young people have engaged in acts of violence against peers, despite disapproving of such behavior, is consistent with the results of previous research on violence and other rule-breaking behaviors. For example, in a study of 2,000 high school students, even though many of the students had themselves engaged in aggressive behavior, one half to two thirds of the students stated that it was never acceptable to push, slap, or punch a date during

an argument (Avery-Leaf et al., 1997). Similarly, in a study of sexual betrayal, a significant number of respondents reported having cheated on their partners, despite very low levels of approval for such behavior (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999). Such findings support the existence of a double standard: one for others (as reflected in measures tapping general acceptability), and one for the self (as reflected by actual behavior).

Interestingly, however, the correlation between acceptance of date violence and actual date violence behavior did not yield as clear an association. Although females who engaged in date violence were more accepting of such behavior, there was no association between date violence attitudes and behavior for males. This observation is particularly interesting in light of the study's finding that male respondents drew a much larger distinction between date violence and peer violence than did female respondents. The fact that date violence by males was more strongly disapproved of than date violence by females or peer violence by either sex suggests that date violence by males is highly taboo. Awareness of this taboo is reflected in the fact that males disapprove more strongly of date violence than of peer violence. Despite this, however, self-reported violent behavior toward dates is, for male respondents, not associated with attitudes toward either peer or dating violence.

Summary

Although this study found that violence against peers and dates is unacceptable, such behavior was more acceptable in some conditions than in others. In particular, the most acceptable reason to engage in either form of violence was in defense of oneself or another. Although violence against peers was more acceptable than violence against dates, the fact that this finding was influenced by the sex of the respondent and the sex of the aggressor suggests that future research should examine the associations between sex and violence in greater detail. Finally, the fact that attitudes toward violence and violent behavior were correlated for both sexes when the violence was against peers but only for females when against dates suggests that there is a need for further exploration of how the correlates of dating violence differ between males and females. We believe this study provides a new vantage point for understanding the factors that influence the acceptability of violence and hope that these results prompt more focused study of the relations between gender, attitudes, and violence.

APPENDIX A

After school Dave, age 16, got into a fistfight with his classmate Alan and gave him a black eye. For each item, rate how acceptable this behavior is.

How acceptable is it if Dave . . .

1. wanted Alan's new sneakers
2. wasn't going to get into trouble for hitting him
3. was protecting someone else
4. didn't want to be seen as a wimp in front of his friends
5. knew that his friends got into fights all the time
6. was an aggressive person in general
7. knew the police wouldn't catch him
8. wanted to prove how tough he was
9. was acting in self-defense
10. wanted to ruin Alan's reputation
11. wasn't using a weapon
12. was under the influence of drugs/alcohol
13. was initiating Alan into his gang
14. had been in fights before and gotten away with it
15. was ordered by his gang members to attack Alan
16. was provoked by Alan (Alan was "asking for it")
17. was doing it for Alan's own good
18. had a bad day and lost his temper
19. felt that Alan was being disrespectful

1 = *totally unacceptable*; 2 = *somewhat unacceptable*; 3 = *somewhat acceptable*; 4 = *totally acceptable*.

NOTE: We present only the male version here; an analogous female version is available, with a female as both aggressor and victim.

APPENDIX B

Paul, age 17, has been going out with his girlfriend for 4 months. One evening while hanging out together, Paul hit her and gave her a bloody nose. For each item, rate how acceptable this behavior is.

How acceptable is it if Paul . . .

1. was an aggressive person
2. was just being playful and it went too far

3. wanted to show her that he was the boss of this relationship
4. was angry because she had refused to have sex with him
5. had behaved the same way with her before and gotten away with it
6. felt he had the right to decide for himself how to treat his girlfriend
7. was certain that no one would find out
8. felt she was treating him badly
9. was acting in self-defense
10. thought that nothing bad would happen if people found out
11. thought she wanted to be treated that way
12. wanted his friends to know that he was in charge of this relationship
13. knew that she had been flirting with someone else
14. witnessed his parents fighting and thought this behavior was okay
15. was under the influence of alcohol/drugs
16. had a bad day and was in a rotten mood
17. knew his friends treated their girlfriends the same way
18. was from a different culture where men are expected to deal forcefully with their women
19. was paying her back because she had hit him in the past

1 = *totally unacceptable*; 2 = *somewhat unacceptable*; 3 = *somewhat acceptable*; 4 = *totally acceptable*.

NOTE: We present only the male version here; an analogous female version is available, with a female as the aggressor and a male as the victim.

REFERENCES

- Ajzen, I. (1985). From intentions to actions: A theory of planned behavior. In J. Kuhl & J. Beckman (Eds.), *Action control: From cognition to behavior* (pp. 11-39). Heidelberg, Germany: Springer.
- Ajzen, I. (1987). Attitudes, traits, and actions: Dispositional prediction of behavior. In L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* (Vol. 20, pp. 1-63). New York: Academic Press.
- Arnett, J. (1992). Reckless behavior in adolescence: A developmental perspective. *Developmental Review, 12*, 391-409.
- Avery-Leaf, S., Cascardi, M., O'Leary, K., & Cano, A. (1997). Efficacy of a dating violence prevention program on attitudes justifying aggression. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 21*, 11-17.
- Bergman, L. (1992). Dating violence among high school students. *Social Work, 37*, 21-27.
- Berndt, T. (1979). Developmental changes in conformity to peers and parents. *Developmental Psychology, 15*, 608-616.
- Brown, B. (1990). Peer groups. In S. Feldman & G. Elliott (Eds.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent* (pp. 171-196). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Burcky, W., Reuterman, N., & Kopsky, S. (1988). Dating violence among high school students. *School Counselor, 35*, 353-358.

- Cohen, D., & Nisbett, R. (1994). Self-protection and the culture of honor: Explaining southern violence. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *20*, 551-567.
- Coie, J., & Dodge, K. (1998). Aggression and antisocial behavior. In W. Damon & N. Eisenberg (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology* (pp. 779-862). New York: John Wiley.
- Cook, S. (1995). Acceptance and expectation of sexual aggression in college students. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *19*, 181-194.
- "Crime: Violent and irrational—And that's just the policy" (1996, June 8). *The Economist*, pp. 23-25.
- DuRant, R., Cadenhead, C., Pendergrast, R., Slavens, G., & Linder, C. (1994). Factors associated with the use of violence among urban Black adolescents. *American Journal of Public Health*, *84*, 612-617.
- Elliott, D., Ageton, S., Huizinga, D., Knowles, B., & Canter, R. (1983). *The prevalence and incidence of delinquent behavior: 1976-1980*. Boulder, CO: Behavioral Research Institute.
- Everett, S., & Price, J. (1995). Students' perceptions of violence in the public schools: The MetLife survey. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, *17*, 345-352.
- Falchikov, N. (1996). Adolescent attitudes to abuse of women: Are wives and nonmarital partners viewed differently? *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *11*, 391-409.
- Feldman, S., & Cauffman, E. (1999). Your cheatin' heart: Attitudes, behaviors, and correlates of sexual betrayal in late adolescents. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *9*, 227-252.
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gagne, M., & Lavoie, F. (1993). Young people's views on the causes of violence in adolescents' romantic relationships. *Canada's Mental Health*, *41*, 11-15.
- Glass, S., & Wright, T. (1992). Justifications for extramarital relationships: The association between attitudes, behaviors, and gender. *Journal of Sex Research*, *29*, 357-361.
- Harris, M. (1992). Sex and ethnic differences in past aggressive behaviors. *Journal of Family Violence*, *7*, 85-102.
- Hirschi, T., & Gottfredson, G. (1983). Age and the explanation of crime. *American Journal of Sociology*, *89*, 552-584.
- Keltikangas-Jarvinen, L., & Lindeman, M. (1997). Evaluation of theft, lying, and fighting in adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *26*, 467-483.
- Kohlberg, L. (1976). Moral stages and moralization: The cognitive-development approach. In T. Lickona (Ed.), *Moral development and behavior*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- Kraus, S. (1995). Attitudes and the prediction of behavior: A meta-analysis of the empirical literature. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *21*, 58-75.
- Linz, D., Wilson, B., & Donnerstein, E. (1992). Sexual violence in the mass media: Legal solutions, warnings, and mitigation through education. *Journal of Social Issues*, *48*, 145-171.
- Makepeace, J. (1981). Courting violence among college students. *Family Relations*, *30*, 97-102.
- Moore, S., & Cockerton, T. (1996). Viewers' ratings of violence presented in justified and unjustified contexts. *Psychological Reports*, *79*, 931-935.
- O'Keefe, N., Brockopp, K., & Chew, E. (1986). Teen dating violence. *Social Work*, *31*, 463-468.
- Olweus, D. (1978). *Aggression in the schools: Bullies and whipping boys*. Washington, DC: Hemisphere.
- Poe-Yamagata, E., & Butts, J. (1996). *Female offenders in the juvenile justice system*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Reuterman, N., & Burcky, W. (1989). Dating violence in high school: A profile of victims. *Psychology*, *26*, 1-9.
- Snyder, H., Finnegan, T., Nimick, E., Sickmund, D., Sullivan, D., & Tierney, N. (1987). *Juvenile court statistics, 1984*. Pittsburgh, PA: National Center for Juvenile Justice.

- Stahl, A. (1998). *Person offenses in juvenile court, 1986-1995* (FS-9877). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
- Steinberg, L., Mounts, N., Lamborn, S., & Dornbusch, S. (1991). Authoritative parenting and adolescent adjustment across various ecological niches. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 1*, 19-36.
- Widom, C. (1989). The cycle of violence. *Science, 244*, 160-166.

Elizabeth Cauffman, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of psychiatry in the Law and Psychiatry Division of Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine. Her current research efforts involve the assessment of mental health and psychosocial maturity among juvenile offenders, the exploration of factors associated with female delinquency, and the study of maturity of judgment as it develops during the course of adolescence.

*S. Shirley Feldman, Ph.D., is a senior research scientist in the Division of Child Psychiatry and associate director in the Program in Human Biology at Stanford University. She has edited several books (including *At the Threshold: The Developing Adolescent*) and has written numerous articles on child and adolescent development. Her recent work focuses on adolescent intimacy, romantic relations, and sexuality.*

Lene Arnett Jensen is currently an assistant professor at the Catholic University of America. She studies moral reasoning, behavior, and development in their cultural context. She has conducted research on morality among diverse communities in Denmark, India, and the United States.

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett is a visiting associate professor in the Department of Human Development at the University of Maryland. His main research interests are various topics in emerging adulthood (ages 18 to 25), risk behavior in adolescence and emerging adulthood, and media use in adolescence.