

Becoming Who We Are: A Theoretical Explanation of Gendered Social Structures and Social Networks that Shape Adolescent Interpersonal Aggression

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Abstract:

A conceptualization of gendered interpersonal aggression that is grounded in the social ecological framework is presented to explicate factors in adolescents' gendered environments that give rise to aggression and victimization. The focus is on gendered social structures and social networks. Our framework for prevention suggests that violence prevention requires that we move our culture from one that continually recreates gendered structures that reinforce power and authority as masculine and that confer opportunities and constraints in ways that favor men over women. It will require deliberate action to legitimize the feminine in our culture and develop laws and practices that abolish gender inequities.

Keywords: psychology | women's health | social networks | interpersonal aggression | gender studies | social structures | adolescent behavior | victimization | violence prevention

Article:

The high rates of interpersonal aggression by adolescents in dating relationships, and the resulting negative health and social consequences, point to the critical need to better understand this phenomenon. Numerous studies reveal deleterious physical, psychological, and sexual health outcomes for both the young women and men who are involved ([Wingood, DiClemente, McCree, Harrington, & Davies, 2000](#); [Silverman, Raj, Mucci, Lorelei, Hathaway, 2001](#)). Adolescent dating aggression is also a major risk factor for subsequent, possibly more severe, young adult intimate partner violence (IPV; [O'Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994](#)).

We use the phrase *gendered adolescent interpersonal aggression* (GAIA), rather than the more common term “dating violence,” for four reasons. First, it eliminates the term “dating,” which is problematic because many adolescents themselves reject the term and engage in a range of heterosexual dyadic interactions that do not necessarily constitute “dating,” including such activities as: “seeing someone,” “hanging out,” “chillin’,” “hooking up,” and having “friends with benefits.” [Bruce and Sanders \(2001\)](#) report that adolescents have frequent, short-term romantic episodes, averaging between 1 and 45 per year. Second, the word “violence” obscures the range and nature of the aggressive behaviors used by adolescents in their interpersonal relationships. As used here, the term GAIA includes the full array of such behaviors that have been observed to occur in adolescent relationships, including psychological, physical, and sexual aggression, as well as coercive control, battering, and stalking ([Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007](#)). Most studies of adolescent dating violence have focused on physical and sexual assault and secondarily on psychological abuse, and few have studied the most coercive pattern of aggression, battering, in adolescent and young adult relationships ([Lischick, 2005](#)). Hence, our knowledge is skewed toward assaultive acts rather than toward underlying patterns of coercion and control. Third, the term GAIA places emphasis on the importance of gender in shaping the behavior of both young women and young men, and finally, it acknowledges adolescence as a distinct stage of human development.

GAIA begins in preadolescence, peaks in prevalence in late high school or early college, and then drops ([White & Smith, 2004](#); [Smith, White, & Holland, 2003](#)). By the time they reach young adulthood, upwards of 80% of both female and male adolescents have inflicted and/or received various forms of GAIA. Although most studies find that both young women and young men use aggression, they appear to do so for different reasons. The epidemiology would suggest that most GAIA occurs within casual dyadic relationships, only to be rejected by the majority of young adults as they age. However, as the centrality and permanence of adolescent dyadic relationships increase with age and development, GAIA tends to become more severe, chronic, and consequential for those who continue to engage in it ([Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982](#)). Examining this trajectory, three critical questions emerge: (1) Why is GAIA so prevalent? (2) How does gender influence young women's and young men's experiences and GAIA? and (3) What are potential strategies to prevent GAIA?

THE PERSON-CENTERED MODEL OF GAIA

Our model builds on the social ecological approach that is well established within public health ([McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988](#)) and has been applied to violence, including violence against women ([Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellesberg, Heise, & Watts, 2005](#); [Krug,](#)

[Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lorenzo, 2002](#); [White, 2009](#); [White & Kowalski, 1998](#)). Such frameworks recognize health and social phenomena as arising from reciprocal influences among different levels of the social ecology. In its *World Report on Violence and Health* ([Krug et al., 2002](#)), the World Health Organization (WHO) conceptualized four levels of the social ecology as existing within nested circles representing the individual, interpersonal/relationship, community (institutions/social structures), and the social environment, including social and cultural norms. At each of these levels, there are factors that increase or decrease the risk of violence perpetration and/or victimization.

Our goal with this article is to explicate factors at the societal and community levels that increase the likelihood of gendered adolescent aggression and to propose a framework for prevention that emerges from our model. In addition to being grounded in a social ecological framework, our model for GAIA places adolescents within the context of their gendered environments at its core so we can better understand how young women and men come to have their early socio-emotional, sexual, or intimate heterosexual relations shaped by power, inequity, and aggression. Our model is also based on the following assumptions: GAIA is normative rather than deviant; socially constructed rather than natural; GAIA is not desirable and is harmful to all involved; and the development of structures and practices that affirm the worth and dignity of all young people is the preferred approach to reducing aggressive and coercive force by adolescents. Although factors at these two ecological levels will influence those at the relationship and individual levels (see [White, 2009](#) for a discussion of these levels), our model presented here does not explicitly address factors or prevention strategies at the individual and interpersonal levels.

Theory of Gender

While the social ecological framework advocates for a multilevel approach, it does not detail the processes whereby factors at each level of the social ecology affect individual behavior, nor does it specifically address the role of gender. The centrality of gender in the dynamics of IPV has been stressed continuously for decades ([Yllo, 1993](#); [Johnson, 1995](#); [Smith, Smith, & Earp, 1999](#); [Anderson, 2005](#)). The starting point of the GAIA model are the writings of sociologists [Connell \(1987\)](#) and [Risman \(1998\)](#), who outline theories of how gender operates as a social structure that organizes our world and is so deeply embedded in our culture that we often do not even see it. Within this theoretical tradition, gender exists outside the mind of the individual, and gendered structures operate to differentiate opportunities, resources, and constraints. Ultimately, these differentiations affect the development of our gendered selves and personal choices ([Risman, 1998](#)). Risman writes that even if “men and women don't want to live gendered lives or support male dominance they often find themselves compelled to do so by the

logic of gendered choices” (p. 29). Hence, gendered structures permeate the community, relationship, and individual levels of the social ecology.

Societal level [Connell's \(1987\)](#) Theory of Gender and Power, recognized as emerging theory in public health ([Wingood & DiClemente, 2002](#)), outlines three structures at the societal level that give rise to gendered social relationships: (1) the sexual division of labor; (2) sexual division of power; and (3) cathexis, the sexualization of social relationships. These structures shape gendered behavior across the life span ([Basow, 2006](#)), as well as the environment that influences both young women's and young men's use of aggression and victimization in their relationships. The *sexual division of labor* refers to the social rules governing a gendered social organization of labor, broadly conceptualized to include the multiple roles, paid and unpaid, that are available to males and females over the course of our lives (e.g., worker, domestic, partner, parent, child, sibling, community member, family member) and the production, consumption, and distribution of resources and opportunities across these roles. The consequences of this structure are twofold: Economic benefits accrue disproportionately to males and masculinity itself becomes an economic resource. The *sexual division of power* refers to the gendered imbalance of advantages and resources in a workplace, community, household, or relationship. The consequence of this structure is an association of authority with men and masculinity. The third structure, what Connell calls “cathexis” or what we term here the *sexualization of social relationships*, refers to the social norms governing sexuality and emotion in social relationships. The consequences of this structure are a prohibition of certain types of relationships (e.g., incestuous, homosexual) while romanticizing and inciting others (e.g., heterosexual marriage), the establishment of an unequal dichotomy of the masculine and feminine, and the sexualization of women as objects of male desire ([Connell, 1987](#)).

These structures are vulnerable to change across time and place as individuals and groups resist them, and they are variable across a population ([Connell, 1987](#); [Risman, 1998](#)). Not all males are able or allowed to achieve the status and power accorded some idealized heterosexual male, and females in many arenas and circumstances are able to accrue or access more power and wealth than their male counterparts. Indeed, gendered ideologies restrict young men's behavior and options as much as they do young women's ([Connell, 1995](#); [Eckes & Trautner, 2000](#)). Other aspects of the sociocultural system are important for their unique and interactive contribution to GAIA, including: racial/ethnic discrimination, political ideology, religious/spiritual traditions and values, normative standards of success, and the social value of children ([Richie, 1994](#)). However, discussion of these is beyond the scope of this article; thus, we hope others will continue to address their contributions to this model.

Community level This level is defined by WHO as the level at which societal relationships are embedded, such as schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Our model, consistent with social

development paradigms, suggests that the sexualized structures of labor, power, and social relationships are transmitted through these societal institutions and networks ([McLeroy et al., 1988](#); [Eckes & Trautner, 2000](#)). Our model, based on [Connell's \(1987\)](#) theory, suggests that there are particular mechanisms at the community level that shape and express gender inequality. At the community level, a sexual division of labor is reinforced by social rules governing: how adolescents are allocated to certain and limited roles based on sex; the design and organization of roles, work, skills, and training; and the inequitable distribution of societal benefits and wealth. In terms of adolescents, we need to assess the extent to which families, communities, churches, and other organizations offer boys and girls differential access to jobs (such as babysitting and mowing lawns), chores (such as washing dishes and taking out the trash), and other opportunities (such as access to computers), and whether the opportunities available to them expose them to different expectations, resources, knowledge, and skills. Ultimately, we would want to assess the extent to which the opportunities and benefits that accrue from these differential experiences help adolescents to realize different current or future benefits (e.g., jobs, education, scholarships) and/or enhance the current or future economic value of masculinity. For example, by the sixth grade considerably more boys (93%) than girls (30%) have traditionally gender-specific occupational aspirations ([Helwig, 1998](#)).

The sexual division of power is reinforced at the community level by social rules governing who is allowed to use force, aggression, or authority to enforce a definition on a situation and/or set the terms within which events are discussed and understood and by practices that promote gender solidarity. In terms of adolescents, we need to ask whether the customs or norms in a community reinforce the notion that masculinity or men are more powerful or authoritative or whether the benefits that accrue to boys are more powerful than those that accrue to girls. For example, boys are given more freedoms or independence at an earlier age, whereas girls are more protected; thus, parents, as well as the community, reinforce the idea that girls are vulnerable ([Mitchell, Obradovich, Herring, Tromborg, & Burns, 1992](#)). We recognize through sex-segregated play that boys learn more about hierarchy and aggression and authority, and girls learn more about relationships, sharing, and being sensitive to the feeling of others ([Reese, Haden, & Fivush, 1993](#)). The critical question, however, is whether the lessons, values, and skills that boys learn carry more authority during and beyond adolescence than those learned by girls and, if they do, how we instill in our culture the same appreciation for feminine values and skills.

The sexualization of social relationships is reinforced at the community level by social rules governing how boys and girls are supposed, or allowed, to express their emotion, sexuality, and/or love and by messages and structures normalizing the objectification of girls and male promiscuity. An [American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls](#) (2007, p. 1) was recently charged with “examining the psychological theory, research, and

clinical experience addressing the sexualization of girls via media and other cultural messages, including the prevalence of these messages and their impact on girls and the role and impact of race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status.” The Task Force reached several important conclusions: The sexualization of women occurs in every form of media, including television, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, the Internet, and advertising; girls interactions with others, including parents, teachers, and peers, contribute to their sexualization; and that such sexualization has a negative impact on girls' and boys' mental and physical health, cognitive functioning, beliefs, and sexuality ([American Psychological Association, 2007](#)). The Task Force encourages practitioners in the community who work with children and adolescents to become more familiar with this issue and to find constructive ways of addressing it by, for example, implementing programs that help girls develop skills that allow them to advocate for themselves, teaching media advocacy and literacy, providing comprehensive sex education, and other programs that otherwise help counteract these dominant messages by helping girls feel powerful “in ways other than through sexy appearance” (p. 6).

Social institutions in communities often serve as the gatekeeper for adolescents' access to social and economic resources and opportunities. To the extent that these institutions use gender, or other personal characteristics such as race or sexuality, as a determinant of how they distribute a limited set of resources and opportunities, and the extent to which they provide young people with legitimate and desirable outlets for personal fulfillment, they can further aggravate or assuage adolescents' use of aggression and their response to it. While these mechanisms grant men as a group more power than women as a group, that does not mean that all, or even most, young men will feel powerful in any given social situation ([Addis & Cohane, 2005](#)). In addition, the cost to men's health and well-being of striving for, or maintaining, power and privilege may be high as it leads them to suppress their emotions, needs, and identities ([Kaufman, 1994](#)).

A FRAMEWORK FOR PREVENTION

Our model suggests that GAIA is one possible practice that emerges as both young women and young men navigate sexualized structures of labor, power, and social relationships in the process of creating their own identity, status, and roles within intimate relationships. We contend that, although the use of aggression may lead to advantages, they are short term and ultimately the use of aggression is harmful to perpetrators as well as victims and others around them. Fortunately, strategies for prevention of GAIA also follow logically from our model and its assumptions that GAIA is normative, socially constructed rather than inherent, and not desirable. Our framework for prevention of GAIA focuses on the development of structures and practices that affirm the

worth and dignity of all young people and recognizes that prevention is more than education to reduce violence-specific attitudes and behavior.

The framework for prevention practice that follows from our model, then, incorporates the following principles: ensure that resources, opportunities, and advantages are organized and distributed equitably to adults, young people, and children in communities; legitimize the importance of the feminine in our culture and link it to authority and power in equal measure with the masculine; redefine what legitimizes authority—move away from authority seen as synonymous with having power over others to authority that stems from having respect and compassion for others; expand the range and scope of acceptable social roles and activities for young women and young men; teach all adolescents to respect others, teamwork, responsibility, leadership and self-direction; develop and support workplace and community environments, health and social policies, and educational and recreational programs that make it possible for mothers and/or fathers to ensure the well-being of their children and of themselves.

Prevention practices consistent with our framework can be seen in the recent focus on primary prevention of IPV. For example, through the Domestic Violence Prevention Enhancements and Leadership through Alliances (DELTA) program, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has provided funding for 14 state domestic violence coalitions to provide technical assistance, training, and funding to local domestic violence coalitions to build community capacity to prevent first-time perpetration and victimization. The DELTA program recognizes that IPV is “rooted in societal and community norms,” and that strategies for change must target multiple levels of the social ecology ([National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008](#)). Accordingly, many of the DELTA-funded states are focusing on preventing GAIA. In Kansas, for example, the Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence is expanding Centers for Disease Control's Expect Respect campaign, which promotes healthy relationships among youth ([National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008](#)). Similarly, in crafting its state-level Five-Year IPV Prevention Plan for North Carolina, the NC DELTA State Steering Committee has chosen to focus on promoting healthy, equitable, relationships across the life span. Goals of the plan include increasing healthy relationship norms among youth, adolescents, and young adults; increasing leadership development and community engagement opportunities for adolescents; and increasing IPV prevention and healthy relationship promotion curricula in educational settings.

Our model would suggest that we can reduce GAIA by providing both young women and young men with opportunities that help them to develop their role-capacity and skills that help them

gain access to current or future social benefits; their capacity to define their own lives, as appropriate for their age and development; a broad skill set for emotional expression and for resisting unwelcomed psychological, physical, and sexual interactions; and social norms that disavow female sexual objectification and the use of force as an appropriate means for enforcing one's own definition of, and control over, a situation. Access to these opportunities must be provided equally to all young women and young men.

Our conceptualization of the prevention of GAIA, grounded in the social ecological framework, explicates factors in adolescents' gendered environments that give rise to aggression and victimization. Our model suggests that violence prevention requires that we move our culture from one that continually recreates gendered structures that reinforce power and authority as masculine and that confer opportunities and constraints in ways that favor men over women. It will require deliberate and thoughtful action by actors across the social ecology to legitimize the feminine in our culture and develop laws and practices that abolish gender inequities.

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