Gender and the Transmission of Risk: A Prospective Study of Adolescent Girls Exposed to Maternal Paternal Intergenerational Violence

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INTRODUCTION
Aggressive behaviour in girls has received relatively little attention. Studies show that females perpetrate aggression in intimate relationships at least as frequently as do males (1,2). Although the involvement of girls in aggressive behaviour towards intimate partners is increasingly recognized, relatively little is known about the factors that place girls at risk.

The current study examined two factors that are important in this regard: exposure to maternal versus paternal intergenerational violence (IPV) and sensitivity to interpersonal rejection (Rejection Sensitivity; RS), which is defined as the chronic disposition to expect, perceive, and overreact to rejection (3). We examined whether girls who witnessed IPV were more likely to perpetrate aggression in romantic relationships, and the role of RS as both a risk factor for aggression and mediator of the impact of IPV.

METHOD: Measures
Family Background Questionnaire (FBQ). The FBQ is a self-report measure of lifetime experiences of interparental violence and maltreatment by mothers and fathers (5). Items were used to measure exposure to IPV perpetrated between caregivers and their partners.

RS Questionnaire-Revised (RSQ-R). The RSQ-R is a revised version of the Children’s RS Questionnaire (6), consisting of hypothetical situations in which rejection by a close friend/romantic partner is possible. RS sensitivities (RSA) subscale was used in this study.

Aggression perpetrated towards romantic partners was measured using both the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-7; 7) and the Conflict Tactics Scale Revised (CTS2, 8). A modified version of the CTS was used at Time 1. The CTS2 was used at Time 2 to measure perpetration of physical and psychological aggression towards romantic partners.

METHOD: Participants and Procedure
Participants were part of a longitudinal study of high-risk youth in North America. The current study examines associations at Time 1 and Time 2. At the time of enrollment, girls ranged in age from 13 to 19 (M = 16.28 years, SD = 1.25). Five years later, 120 of the participants were reassessed in the community (M = 21 years, SD = 1.43). Girls completed semi-structured clinical interviews, diagnostic assessments, and self-report measures as part of the study.

RESULTS
Paternal IPV, RSA, and Partner Aggression
A comparable model tested the relationship between paternal IPV and romantic partner aggression at Time 1 and Time 2, with model indices not indicating a uniformly good fit for Time 1 aggression or Time 2 perpetration of physical assault.

DISCUSSION
Consistent with past research, maternal IPV was significantly related to concurrent levels of RSA and aggression towards romantic partners. RSA was also confirmed to moderate this relationship. The prospective impact of maternal IPV was more complex; while exerting direct effects on aggression at Time 2, this association was not mediated through RSA. Furthermore, mediation models for paternal IPV did not produce comparable results concurrently or prospectively.

These results add to growing evidence that maternal IPV plays an important role in shaping daughters’ use of aggression in intimate relationships. Such findings are consistent with research concluding maternal IPV is a potent factor in determining child aggressiveness, as mothers more frequently serve as primary caregivers and role models for their children (10). The current findings also point to important prevention and risk reduction targets. Two significant targets include family and/or individual therapy for parents in the context of IPV, and the reduction of girls’ RSA through interventions such as cognitive behavioural or dialectical behaviour therapy.

REFERENCES