

# Gender and the Transmission of Risk: A Prospective Study of Adolescent Girls Exposed to Maternal Versus Paternal Interparental 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 toward 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 interparental 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.

## HYPOTHESES

Based on prior research (4) we expected that:

1. Maternal IPV would predict higher levels of girls' aggression in romantic relationships in adolescence and early adulthood
2. IPV exposure would be related to RSA
3. RSA would be predictive of higher levels of girls' aggression
4. RSA would mediate the relationship between IPV and girls' aggression in adolescence and early adulthood

## 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.

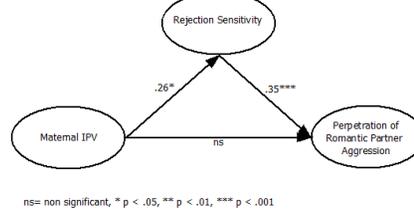
**RS Questionnaire-Revised (RSQ-R).** The RSQ-R is a revised version of the Children's RS Questionnaire (6), consisting of hypothetical situations in which rejection by a close friend/romantic partner are possible. The RS anger (RSA) subscale was used in this study.

Aggression perpetrated towards romantic partners was measured using both the **Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; 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 assault and psychological aggression towards romantic partners.

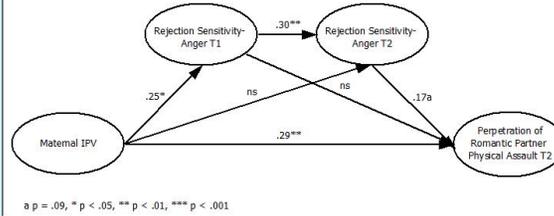
## METHOD: Participants and Procedure

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 ( $M = 16.26$  years,  $SD = 1.25$ ). Five years later, 120 of the participants were reassessed in the community ( $M_{age} = 21$  years,  $SD = 1.43$ ). Girls completed semi-structured clinical interviews, diagnostic assessments, and self-report measures as part of the study.

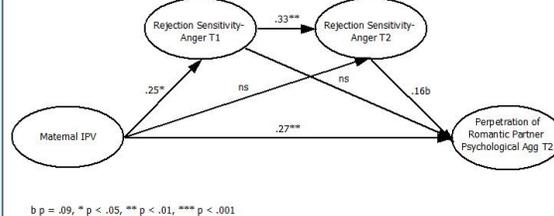
**Figure 1. Maternal IPV, RSA and Perpetration of Romantic Partner Aggression in Adolescence** ( $\chi^2(46) = 56.39, p = .12; TLI = .98; RMSEA = .04$ )



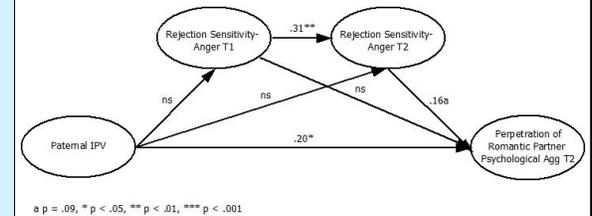
**Figure 2. Maternal IPV, RSA, and Perpetration of Romantic Partner Physical Assault** ( $\chi^2(79) = 100.16, p = .06; TLI = .97; RMSEA = .04$ )



**Figure 3. Maternal IPV, RSA and Perpetration of Romantic Partner Psychological Aggression** ( $\chi^2(82) = 93.58, p = .18; TLI = .98; RMSEA = .03$ )



**Figure 4. Paternal IPV, RSA and Perpetration of Romantic Partner Psychological Aggression** ( $\chi^2(81) = 87.93, p = .28; TLI = .99; RMSEA = .03$ )



## 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.

To assess whether findings of the impact of maternal IPV were due to concurrent paternal IPV, paternal IPV was added as a covariate to the maternal model (nested model). Effects of maternal IPV on RSA and aggression at Time 1 or Time 2 were not due to co-occurring paternal IPV.

## DISCUSSION

Consistent with past research, maternal IPV was significantly related to concurrent levels of RSA and aggression toward romantic partners. RSA was also confirmed to mediate 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.

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This research is funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Institute of Gender and Health (IGH) through a New Emerging Team Grant (#6450) and Operating Grant (#6450) awarded to Dr. M. Moretti. For further information contact moretti@sfu.ca.