

## **VARIABLES RELATED TO ATTITUDES TOWARD DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND USE OF REASONING, VERBAL AGGRESSION, AND VIOLENT CONFLICT TACTICS IN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS**

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*It is estimated that 20 to 30% of adolescents experience dating violence. Identifying variables that are related to dating violence could help in reducing the rates of this abuse. This study investigated how gender, self-esteem, attitudes towards cohabitation, family openness, parents' annual income, and race were related to attitude towards dating violence, and use of reasoning, verbal aggression, and violent acts. The 122 participants in this study were high school students from California. Each completed a detailed questionnaire. Demographic information, along with scores for self-esteem, attitude toward cohabitation, and family openness, was used in a step-wise multiple regression to assess their relationships with attitudes about dating violence; and use of reasoning, verbal aggression, and violent acts in resolving conflicts with dating partners. The results of this study revealed that higher scores of family openness were related to more use of reasoning in dating conflicts versus more violent tactics. Also, low scores on self-esteem were related to high amounts of verbal aggression. Implications for family and consumer sciences educators are also discussed.*

While the area of domestic violence has been at the forefront of study since the 1970s, more recently there has been an interest in understanding the causes of dating violence. Estimates by experts are that 20 to 30% of teenagers experience dating violence (Berry, 1995; Levy & Giggans, 1995). Dating violence many times does not cause the relationship to end, and it may continue into marriage. Simons, Lin, and Gordon (1998) and Gelles and Cornell (1985) found that often the patterns of domestic violence are established before the marriage. In a study by O'Leary, Arias, Rosenbaum, and Barling (1985), the researchers found that approximately one third of the participants who experienced dating violence later went on to marry someone that had abused them during dating.

O'Keefe (1997) called for the study of specific factors affecting the adolescent in order to determine which factors do and which do not lead to aggression in dating situations. This study explores which factors impact attitudes about dating violence and participation in reasoning, verbal aggression, or violence.

Bowen's (1978) family systems theory applies to the adolescent in several ways. The concept of self-differentiation is a desired outcome in the adolescent stage of development and is a critical crisis being dealt with by adolescents (Bartle-Haring, 1997; Ginsberg, 1997). This is seen in many ways as young adults struggle to find what their attitudes and beliefs are in relation to their families. Bartle-Haring explained that from Bowen's viewpoint, how well the family is able to differentiate affects the children's ability to differentiate, which then affects the individual's development. It has also been found that the more differentiated one is from family, the better able he or she is to independently perform on emotional and intellectual levels (Ginsberg). If the family allows members to develop their own attitudes and opinions while still

being able to be part of the family, the adolescent should also be able to find and express his or her own attitudes and opinions.

Another way Bowen's theory applies to the adolescent is in the way Bowen explains anxiety. Anxiety in the family is experienced in different degrees. High degrees of anxiety would be associated with increased feelings of family stress, while low degrees would be associated with less stress. Adolescence is a time when the young person is going through many relationship changes. Families that are healthy are able to tolerate normal differences in closeness and distance, and low-anxiety levels are sufficient for returning the family to normal levels of functioning (Benson, Larson, Wilson, & Demo, 1993). In less functional families, even the smallest level of change in relationships can result in anxiety. The anxiety will affect the young adult's future relationships in the degree the adolescent takes on this anxiety as part of him or herself (Benson et al.; Larson, Benson, Wilson, & Medora, 1998). Since the adolescent takes on levels of anxiety from his/her family, when the adolescent experiences a high level of family anxiety, the anxiety will most likely be carried into future relationships. Nichols and Schwartz (1998) found that those who had handled anxiety in the past by withdrawing and distancing themselves do the same thing when married. The patterns one establishes in dating are often the same patterns used in marriage.

Family boundaries are another premise of Bowen's family systems theory, which specifically affects the adolescent. Anxiety for the adolescent can also result from variations in family boundaries. Family boundaries can be fused or enmeshed which means the family is merged together and is too closely involved emotionally. Different boundaries than what was appropriate when the child was younger and which allow the young adult to move in and out of the family need to be set during adolescence (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988). Nichols and Schwartz (1998) suggest that adolescents make a great effort to become autonomous and to open family boundaries, and a certain amount of flexibility allows the adolescent to accomplish autonomy. Flexible or permeable boundaries best meet the adolescent's needs. Families with adolescents need to form permeable boundaries so the adolescent can separate from the family without breaking off their ties with their family (Ginsberg, 1997). In contrast, boundaries that are too rigid would not allow the adolescent to experience the freedom needed.

### **Dating Violence**

Adolescent dating violence is a widespread and potentially fatal occurrence that presents special challenges because of the population involved (Berry, 1995). Adolescents have a difficult time freeing themselves from abusive relationships because of a lack of knowledge of the resources available to them (Berry) and enduring isolation from resources to help them (Bergman, 1992; Foshee, Linder, Bauman, & Langswick, 1996). Additionally, teenagers who have experienced dating violence tend to tell their peers and not adults, if they tell anyone at all (Bergman; Gelles & Cornell, 1985; Wolfe & Feiring, 2000). Along with lack of knowledge, the adolescent often does not have the past life experiences to which the violent relationship can be compared and thus does not know how to handle conflict or violence (Wolfe, Wekerle, & Scott, 1997).

Adolescents are less likely to be informed about verbal abuse and that verbal aggression can heighten into physical aggression (Powell, 1991). Carey and Mongeau (1996) used the Conflict Tactics Scale with college students and found that verbal aggression was the strongest predictor of physical aggression. Therefore, verbal aggression is a part of dating violence that must be considered when dealing with adolescents and dating violence.

Since dating violence is often an antecedent to domestic violence (Simons, Lin, & Gordon, 1998), the dire consequences of domestic violence must be considered. Such consequences include injuries, anxiety, depression, damaged self-image for both partners, decreased quality of life for the family, and sometimes death (Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989).

Berry (1995) describes the domestic abuse problem as not being limited to any one group anywhere in the world. Other studies also have found that domestic violence can happen to anyone (DiNitto & McNeece, 1997; Locke & Richman, 1999; McShane, 1988; Stewart, Senger, Kallen, & Scheurer, 1987). The rates of domestic abuse are hard to accurately count because many never report the abuse. Estimates are that up to 6 million women in the United States are abused in their homes each year; about 4 million occurrences are reported (Berry). Men are victims of domestic violence at a lower rate. Estimates are that 100,000 men are battered in the United States each year (McCue, 1995)

Various researchers have found the emergence of several factors when studying dating and domestic violence. Several of these previously found factors were assessed in this study, along with family openness, to see if they affected attitudes about dating violence and the participation in violent acts, verbal aggression, and reasoning. One factor often found in past research is differences in attitudes and participation between the genders. Self-esteem is another area that comes to the forefront in past dating and domestic violence literature. There are studies showing that those who cohabitate are at greater risk for experiencing dating violence. In addition, income also seems to have a link to violence, with more violence occurring in married couples with low-incomes. Lastly, race has been shown to relate to dating violence. See Figure 1 for proposed variables.

### Family Openness

Ginsberg (1997) explains that family systems theory recognizes the importance of families that are flexible so that the adolescent can developmentally grow. Similarly, Benson et al. (1993) found that families that were not open but that were fused led to adolescents that had closed communication in dating relationships. Fused families transmitted closed communication patterns to the adolescents, which were then used in dating relationships.

### Gender

Studies have found conflicting findings on which gender perpetrates more abuse. Some studies say men abuse more, some say that women abuse more, and other studies have found rates to be about equal.

The finding that females were equally as likely as males to be violent is supported in a number of studies. Johnson-Reid and Bivens (1999) found when studying dating violence that males and females were equally the abuser. O'Leary, Malone, and Tyree (1994) found in their study using the Conflict Tactics Scales that physical aggression in married couples was as likely to occur from the wife as from the husband. National surveys by Straus and Gelles (1986) and Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980) also found similar rates of violence being inflicted by women as by men.

Various studies report that the female is more often the perpetrator of the violence. (Foshee, Bauman, & Linder, 1999; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996). Also, females were more influenced by violence in their peers' relationships than by violence in their parents' relationships (Gwartney-Gibbs, Stockard, & Bohmer, 1987). O'Keefe (1997) noted that the number one reason given by females for using dating violence was anger, followed by self-

defense. Self-defense or retribution was found in numerous studies as the reason women hit (Dutton, 1994; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987).

Other studies have found that men are more likely to participate in both dating violence and domestic violence than are women. The number one reason given by males for using violence against a partner was anger, followed by wanting to gain control over the other person (O'Keefe, 1997). Various reasons were given to explain the higher rates of abuse inflicted by men. For example, Foreman and Dallos (1993) think that males are socialized to be aggressive and females are socialized to be submissive, while Anderson (1997) found men use violence to re-establish their dominance in a more equalitarian society.

Berry (1995) suggests when it comes to dating violence, in most cases it is the male who is the abuser, and Foshee and Linder (1997) found that those who help victims of abuse view frequent abuse of women as more normal than frequent abuse of men. Also women are more likely to be seriously hurt because of the abuse (Cantos, Neidig, & O'Leary, 1994; Joseph, 1997; Stets & Straus, 1990).

Based on the findings by Berry (1995) related to males being the abuser in more incidences and due to the serious nature of abuse inflicted (Cantos, Neidig, & O'Leary, 1994; Joseph, 1997; Stets & Straus, 1990), gender must be addressed.

### Self-esteem

O'Keefe (1998) found that males who had low self-esteem were violent in their dating relationships. Other studies have also shown that low self-esteem raises the probability of abusing or experiencing dating abuse (Burke, Stets, & Pirog-Good, 1988; Stets & Pirog-Good, 1987).

Victims of dating violence have lower self-esteem than those who are not victims (Infante et al., 1989; Sugarman & Hotaling, 1991). People with low self-esteem focus on the positive qualities of others and think they are inadequate in comparison (Stets, 1988). Stets suggests that low self-esteem plays into violence by men because they want to defend their image, and the woman who is a victim feels she deserves the treatment and is not worthy of anything better.

A person's self-esteem is particularly susceptible during adolescence because of the ups and downs of self-image and importance of peer approval (Berry, 1995). During this stressful time of life, the adolescent wants to be accepted by others and often remains in the violent relationship rather than risk feeling unaccepted. Involvement in a violent relationship can lower self-esteem so the adolescent does not feel they deserve better than this type of relationship.

### Cohabitation

Several studies have found that cohabitating relationships are more violent than marital ones (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999; Jackson, 1996; Stets, 1991). In fact, Stets found that aggression occurs twice as much in cohabitating relationships as it does in marriages. In a 1-year time frame, 35 of every 100 cohabitating couples experienced acts of physical aggression, as compared to 15 of every 100 couples who were married (Stets & Straus, 1989).

Since cohabitation is becoming more and more accepted and practiced today (Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990), it is important to find out why these relationships have higher rates of abuse than marriages. Anderson (1997) believes that cohabitators are more unsure about the future of their relationship, but Stets (1991) believes that cohabitators have certain characteristics, such as being young, African American, socially isolated, depressed, and

struggling with alcohol problems, that when combined, lead to higher levels of physical aggression.

With rates of cohabitation on the rise, there is reason for concern over the violence occurring in these relationships. Many of today's adolescents will become future cohabitators. Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel (1990) note that cohabitation has quickly become an accepted part of life for the younger cohort. In a study done in 1989, it was estimated that by their early 30s, about half of the population had cohabitated (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989).

### Income

Various studies support that violence happens more in low-income families (Gelles & Cornell, 1985; McCue, 1995; Okun, 1986). Bolton and Bolton (1987) explained the connection of low incomes to violence as due to the stress that occurs from having limited resources. Those with low incomes do not have the economic means to get help when they need it. Higher income families have more economic resources and more access to help if they were experiencing stress. Also, it should be noted that while lower-income families have higher rates of domestic violence, domestic violence is not confined to only the low-income groups.

### Race

One's race can influence his or her attitudes and actions due to cultural factors and upbringing (Kristiansen & Giulietti, 1990). What is accepted in some cultures is unacceptable in others. Also, opinions about domestic abuse can be affected by one's race (Locke & Richman, 1999). Often it is not race alone that influences one's behavior, but a combination of factors. Anderson (1997) states that a variety of factors influence power and violence in relationships. And in a study by O'Keefe (1997), African Americans were shown to have higher rates of dating violence until the effects of other variables were accounted for, and then no major differences were found between the African Americans and Caucasians. However, other studies have found that African Americans are more likely to be involved in domestic violence (Anderson) and participate in more extreme forms of aggression (Stets, 1992).

The purpose of this study was to identify which of the following factors—family openness, gender, self-esteem, attitudes towards cohabitation, parent's income, and race—would impact an adolescent's attitude about dating violence and their participation in reasoning, verbal aggression, or violent acts.

## **Hypotheses**

This study assessed the following research hypotheses:

1. It was hypothesized that family openness, measured in terms of family adaptability, will be inversely related to attitudes about dating violence and higher rates of participation in verbal aggression but positively related to use of reasoning.
2. It was hypothesized that males will have more accepting attitudes toward dating violence and higher rates of participation in verbal aggression and violent acts and lower rates of the use of reasoning than females.
3. It was hypothesized that self-esteem will be inversely related to accepting attitudes about dating violence and rates of participation in verbal aggression and violent acts but will be positively related to reasoning.

4. It was hypothesized that accepting attitudes towards cohabitation will be positively related to attitudes toward dating violence and higher rates of participation in verbal aggression but inversely related to use of reasoning.
5. It was hypothesized that parents' income will be inversely related to accepting attitudes about dating violence and rates of participation in verbal aggression and violent acts but positively related to use of reasoning.
6. It was hypothesized that race will be related to attitudes about dating violence, participation in verbal aggression and violent acts, and use of reasoning.

## **Method**

### Procedure

As part of a larger curriculum evaluation study, various high school teachers in Family and Consumer Sciences from California were contacted and asked to have their students in two courses complete questionnaires. Curriculum publishers offered teachers free student workbooks for participating in a study. After parental consents and school administration approval was obtained, participating students were given questionnaires by their teachers to complete. Teachers then mailed the completed information back to the researchers.

### Sample

A total of 122 high school students from seven California schools participated. These schools are in urban communities of over 90,000 people. Ages of the students ranged from 14 through 19 years old with a mean of 16.6 years old and a standard deviation of .98. Grade level ranged from freshmen to seniors with a median being juniors. Both genders were given the survey but there were many more females,  $n = 99$ , in the classes than males,  $n = 23$ . The following races were represented: Hispanic, Asian, Caucasian, African American, and Native American. The average parental annual income of the students fell in the category of \$30,000 to \$40,000.

### Measures

The Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales III (FACES III) is a 20-item Likert-type self-report instrument that assesses family levels of adaptability and cohesion. For this study, only the adaptability scale was used as a measure of family boundary adaptability and openness. High scores, the highest possible being 50, on the FACES III instrument indicate high levels of family adaptability. The Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales III has a Cronbach's alpha for cohesion of .77 and .62 for adaptability. Test-retest reliability is .80-.83 (Olson, 1986). This study found a Cronbach's alpha of .65 for adaptability.

The Conflict Tactics Scales is a common measure of conflict tactics and violence in close relationships. The measure of actual aggression used in this study was 16 items taken from the Conflict Tactics Scales, a revision of Form - R by Straus (1979). Various acts are rated in terms of the number of times the participant used reasoning, verbal aggression, and violent acts in resolving a conflict with his/her boyfriend/girlfriend. Scores then are summed for the reasoning scale, verbal aggression scale, and violence scale (Straus & Gelles, 1990). The scale was revised slightly for this study to ask about violence between dating partners versus married partners. Additionally, three more violent acts, "burning or scalding him/her," "threatening him/her with a knife or gun," and "using a knife or firing a gun," were deleted in order to be acceptable to school administrators for use in their schools.

Straus (1990) reported the following reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) for the Conflict Tactic Scales: (a) Reasoning, Cronbach's alpha of .61 (ranged from .50 to .76); (b) Verbal Aggression, Cronbach's alpha of .80 (ranged from .77 to .88); and (c) Violence, Cronbach's alpha of .79 (ranged from .62 to .88). Gardner (2001) used a revised version of the scale with high school students and reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients as follows: (a) Reasoning of .65 (ranged from .64 to .66), (b) Verbal Aggression of .85 (ranged from .83 to .87), and (c) Violence of .91 (ranged from .90 to .93). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha for Reasoning was .54, Verbal Aggression was .84, and Violence was .87. Straus has established validity of the Conflict Tactic Scales.

A Likert-type scale was developed to assess attitudes towards relationship violence (see Appendix). Scores on the two dating violence questions that totaled eight or more (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) indicated accepting attitudes of relationship violence. The questions for establishing accepting attitudes of relationship violence had a Cronbach's alpha of .80. As this is not an established scale, validity has not been documented.

Rosenberg's (1979) Self-Esteem Scale provided a general overall self-esteem score for each respondent and was chosen for its widespread use and conciseness. High scores on Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale, with the highest score possible of 45, show high levels of self-esteem.

The validity of Rosenberg's scale is first shown by its scores being associated with a variety of positive characteristics such as: (a) confidence, (b) popularity (Lorr & Wunderlich, 1986), (c) school abilities, (d) physical appearance (Fleming & Courtney, 1984), and (e) self-esteem as measured by the Learner Self-Esteem Scale (Savin-Williams & Jaquish, 1981).

In the area of reliability in terms of internal consistency for Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale, Dobson, Goudy, Keith, and Powers (1979) obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .77, and Fleming and Courtney (1984) had a Cronbach's alpha of .88.

Test-retest reliability was reported by Silber and Tippett (1965) as a .85 correlation of 28 subjects after a 2-week period. Fleming and Courtney (1984) found a test-retest correlation of .82 with 259 subjects over 1 week. For this study, a Cronbach's alpha of .88 was found.

A Likert-type item was developed to assess attitudes toward cohabitation (see Appendix). Scores on the cohabitation questions that summed three or more (1 = Strongly Agree, 4 = Strongly Disagree) indicated accepting attitudes of cohabitation.

### Analysis

A stepwise multiple regression was used to assess which variables (family openness, gender, self-esteem, income, attitudes about cohabitation, and race) influenced attitudes about dating violence. Then three stepwise multiple regression analyses were run to see if any of these variables were significantly related to participation in reasoning, verbal aggression, or relationship violence.

## **Results**

This study investigated the influence of family openness, gender, self-esteem, attitude toward cohabitation, parents' income level, and race on attitudes about dating violence and participation in reasoning, verbal aggression, and violent acts. The findings of the following research hypotheses are reported.

1. Family openness was found to be significantly and positively correlated with reasoning scores on the Conflict Tactics Scale with a Pearson correlation  $r(115) = .20, p < .005$ .

2. Low self-esteem scores were related to high verbal aggression scores with a Pearson correlation  $r(113) = -.32, p < .001$ .
3. Although the dummy coded variable for race showed it to be significantly and positively correlated with reasoning scores on the Conflict Tactics Scale, a more appropriate test, ANOVA, revealed that race only approached significance. Because race is a categorical variable, an analysis of variance was necessary to determine if the various racial groups differed significantly on the dependent variable.
4. None of the other variables of gender, attitudes toward cohabitation, income level, or race were found to be significant.

### Significant Variables

A series of stepwise multiple regression analyses showed two models with variables remaining in the regression equation at the .05 significance level. High degrees of family openness predicted high amounts of reasoning ( $\beta = .121, R^2 = .041$ ). Family openness accounted for 4% of the variance in reasoning. Low scores on self-esteem predicted high amounts of verbal aggression ( $\beta = -.389, R^2 = .101$ ). Self-esteem accounted for 10% of the variance in verbal aggression.

## **Discussion**

### Family Openness

Family openness was tested in stepwise multiple regression to establish the relationship, if any, between this variable and attitudes towards dating violence and participation in reasoning, verbal aggression, and violent acts. No significant correlation was found between family openness and attitudes towards dating violence or participation in verbal aggression or violent acts. An association was found between family openness and reasoning.

Families that were more open and adaptable had adolescents who used more reasoning in resolving conflicts than did adolescents in more closed families. This result stresses the importance of family openness as a positive family characteristic for the adolescent. Bowen's family systems theory states the importance of looking at the whole family and not just individual members (Bowen, 1978). Family openness was related to reasoning which focuses on the whole family. Higher levels of family openness were related to higher scores for use of reasoning. Bowen felt family openness was needed for family members to be able to successfully differentiate from one another. Bowen would also see family openness as especially important to adolescents who need more flexibility in their families.

Open and adaptable families would also model open and adaptable communication styles when a parent-adolescent conflict occurs. These families are open and adaptable enough to listen to the adolescent's point of view and both reason together even with heated issues. These skills are modeled for and learned by the adolescent who can now easily use them in conflicts with boyfriends or girlfriends.

### Gender

Gender was tested in a stepwise multiple regression to see if males in this study were, as some other studies have found, more abusive than females. No significant relationship was found for gender and attitudes towards dating violence, reasoning, verbal aggression, or violent

acts. The finding that males were not more abusive than females supports various other studies (Johnson-Reid & Bivens, 1999; O'Leary et al., 1994; Straus & Gelles, 1986; Straus et al., 1980).

### Self-esteem

When stepwise multiple regressions were used, no significant relationship was found between self-esteem and attitude towards dating violence, reasoning, or violent acts. Self-esteem was found to be related to verbal aggression. Since verbal aggression often leads to physical abuse (Carey & Mongeau, 1996; Powell, 1991) this study's findings agree with many other past studies. It may well be that those who feel poorly about themselves use verbally aggressive conflict tactics to put others down to feel superior to them.

### Cohabitation

This study investigated the relationship between attitude about if cohabitation is acceptable and attitude about dating violence and reasoning, verbal aggression, and violent acts by using stepwise multiple regression. No significant relationship was found to exist between any of the above variables. More questions about cohabitation would add to the reliability of actual attitude towards cohabitation and help assess how these attitudes relate to attitudes about and participation in reasoning, verbal aggression, and violent acts. It is important to remember that attitudes about cohabitation do not predict actual cohabitating behavior.

### Income

Since the study assessed high school students, who are assumed to have limited incomes due to the amount of time in school and lack of college educations, the study used parents' annual income as a measure of the student's family income. When put in a stepwise multiple regression, parents' annual income was not significantly correlated with attitudes towards dating violence or participation in reasoning, verbal aggression, or violent acts.

Income alone may not be a very good indicator of domestic violence. However, income does influence the resources that can economically be obtained for dealing with stress and other problems (Bolton & Bolton, 1987). Although domestic abuse does not occur exclusively in any one economic group, low-income families do have higher rates (McCue, 1995). However, income may not be a factor in this study because it may not be as stressful on an adolescent living in a low-income family as it would be the parent who is responsible for meeting the family's needs.

### Race

Races represented in this study were Hispanic, Caucasian, Asian, African American, and Native American. This sample accurately represents California's overall population, which has a mixture of Hispanics, Caucasians, Asians, African Americans and Native Americans and others. No significant relationship was found for race and attitudes towards dating violence, reasoning, verbal aggression, or violent acts.

Because race influences attitudes and actions due to cultural factors and upbringing (Kristiansen & Giulietti, 1990), it is an important variable to include when studying relationship violence. Although this study assessed participant's race, cultural identification was not assessed. Therefore, we do not know the degree to which a participant who says he or she is Hispanic truly subscribes to traditional Hispanic values and beliefs.

### Limitations and Recommendations

The findings of this study need to be viewed with caution because of the study's limitations. A more equal distribution between genders would be desirable. Also, the small number of males included in this study could have influenced the lack of significance found. The reason that more females responded than males is most likely due to greater numbers of females taking family and consumer sciences classes. A more equally divided gender sample may have led to different results.

Other limitations occur because of the use of the Conflict Tactics Scales. Violent acts are not distinguished between aggressive acts and ones used for self-protection. Also, since this is a self-report with no partner to average scores actual rates of violence may be under-reported or possibly over-reported (Archer, 1999).

Another limitation is that adolescents who did not receive parental permission did not participate. It is possible that families with more aggressive adolescents did not let them participate in the study. There is no way to assess why these students were not allowed to take part in the study or how they would have answered. Other students who were removed from the study did not complete the needed information or appeared to have guessed when answering the questionnaire.

One recommendation is to do a similar study with different populations. For example, students from rural areas and additional races could be included to see if similar results were achieved. Certain populations such as low-income families could also be targeted. Comparing results from different populations would help in the understanding of which factors are related to domestic violence.

A second recommendation would be to add more items to the questionnaire to determine more completely one's attitude about cohabitation. By adding more questions or a scale, inter-item reliability would be determined and ensure reliability of the measure.

A third recommendation is to have dating couples fill out the survey to determine how accurate students are being when they report on acts of reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence. More accurate results would be able to be obtained from averaging two scores, one done on self and one completed from the dating partner's perspective. Since it has been found that self-reports on the Conflict Tactics Scale tend to under-report actual incidences, averaging should provide more accurate scores.

Another recommendation is to construct a detailed study on how to increase family openness as a means to increase adolescents' use of reasoning and how to raise self-esteem in adolescents. This additional study could determine what specific factors in open families lead to more acts of reasoning and study ways to increase openness in families and increase self-esteem in adolescents.

A final recommendation would be to add other variables not presently studied to try and account for more of the variance in attitudes about domestic violence and participation in reasoning, verbal aggression, and violent acts.

### Implications for Family and Consumer Sciences Educators

Implications from this study are important to those teaching adolescents and working with families. This study shows that low self-esteem is related to increased use of verbally aggressive conflict tactics. When an adolescent uses verbally aggressive means of resolving conflicts (putdowns, threats, etc.), teachers and others often interpret their motives as negative and oppositional. In reality it may be a response to feeling a negative sense of self. Such

adolescents need new ways of dealing with these negative feelings of self, such as using “I” messages, commenting on the process, etc.

In terms of family openness, often times families with younger adolescents struggle with allowing the child to voice opposing opinions. Those working with parents and families can encourage parents to model respectfully listening to the opposing viewpoints of the adolescents, taking the time to reason with them, and avoid pulling out the “Because I’m the parent and I said so” trump card to cut off further dialogue. In this way, adolescents learn positive methods of resolving conflicts in their lives.

Family and consumer sciences educators can use findings from this study in many ways to decrease the use of verbal aggression and increase the use of reasoning. One of the main ways educators can use these findings is by implementing programs that build on the adolescent’s self-esteem, since lower self-esteem was shown to be linked to use of verbal aggression. One way that youth build self-esteem is by being given opportunities to experience feelings of aptitude and success through educational experiences (Wolfe & Feiring, 2000). Family and consumer sciences classes could provide students with such experiences.

Another implication for family and consumer sciences teachers from this study is the importance of educating students on how to handle conflict appropriately without using verbal aggression or violent acts. Wolfe and Feiring (2000) state how important it is for adolescents to learn how to handle interpersonal conflict in appropriate ways. Family and consumer sciences educators could provide the much needed conflict management skills to their students.

Lastly, since family and consumer sciences educators teach about families, it would be important for classes to include information on the importance of family openness to adolescent development. This information would be valuable for not only students, but the student’s families as well.

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### Appendix

#### *Measures Used to Determine Attitude Toward Dating Violence and Attitude Toward Cohabitation*

**Directions:** Using the following scale as a guide, indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement. Circle one response for each statement. Answer as honestly as you can. Remember your answers will be kept strictly confidential.

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree (SD)	Disagree (D)	Not Sure (NS)	Agree (A)	Strongly Agree (SA)

In today's society, slapping a spouse or dating partner is understandable under some circumstances.....	1	2	3	4	5
In today's society, pushing a spouse or dating partner is understandable under some circumstances.....	1	2	3	4	5

**Using the following scale as a guide, indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement. Circle only one response for each statement. Answer as honestly as you can.**

YES!	yes	no	NO!
Strongly Agree (SA)	Somewhat Agree (sa)	Somewhat Disagree (sd)	Strongly Disagree (SD)

It's O.K. to live with a dating partner and not be married..... YES!    yes    no    NO!

Figure 1: Proposed variables related to attitudes toward dating violence, reasoning, verbal aggression, and violent acts.

