Rigid Male Gender Roles: An Analysis of Adolescent Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between rigid male gender role attitudes, dating relationships, and engagement in violent behaviors and sexual harassment. The current study was a secondary data analysis of the Experimental Evaluation of a Youth Dating Violence Prevention Program. A total of 2,655 students in 6th and 7th grade from 30 New York City middle schools (29.3% non-white, 27.7% male) participated in the *Shifting Boundaries* program, a multi-level domestic violence intervention for middle-school aged children in increasing awareness of and preventing harassment and violence behaviors in the future. Students filled out a self-report closed-ended questionnaire before and after the intervention. Responses from the first wave of questionnaires were utilized to examine the baseline attitudes of middle school youth. Results from this study support the hypothesis that those who report higher levels of rigid male gender role attitudes also report higher levels of sexual harassment. However, the results do not support the hypothesis that those who experience higher levels of rigid male gender role attitudes also experience higher levels of physical violence. Higher levels of traditional dating behaviors were also associated with higher levels of engagement in sexual harassment and rigid male gender role attitudes. The findings presented in this study emphasize the need to have discussions with youth regarding acceptability of gender norms and to intervene early when rigid male gender roles start to influence peer and romantic relationships. Harassment and violence are problematic behaviors that often start to take place in youth and must be addressed not only in school settings, but in community, other social, and family settings as well.

INTRODUCTION

Significance of Study:

- In today's society, our behaviors and expectations for ourselves and others are greatly impacted by the roles we have been assigned. Gender role attitudes can be best explained as one's beliefs about role-related behaviors that are appropriate according to the gender binary (Reyes, et al, 2015).
- Adhering to male gender role expectations such as restricting expression of their emotions and being dominant and aggressive in nature is associated with increased potential for boys to engage in violent behaviors, bullying, and verbal aggression which can lead to poor relationship, physiological health, and mental health outcomes if they persist into adulthood (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Purpose:

- To explore the relationship between rigid male gender role attitudes, how males behave in dating relationships, and their engagement in violent behaviors and in sexual harassment

Hypothesis:

- Boys that have been taught to live rigid male gender role attitudes will experience increased sexual harassment and physically violent behaviors compared to their peers who were not.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rigid Male Gender Role Attitudes: Three common aspects of the traditional male gender role: toughness, antifemininity, and power (Ingram, et al, 2019). Adherence to traditional male gender roles is associated with partner violence and sexual coercion perpetrated by males (Reyes, et al, 2015; Santana, et al, 2006).

Dating Behaviors: Men instigate and control the use of violence in relationships more often than women (APA, 2018). The following areas tend to be negatively impacted when dating violence occurs: academic achievement, conflict management, self-esteem, and overall mental health (De La Rue, et al, 2014).

Sexual Harassment: Those who commonly engage in sexual harassment behaviors often report feeling victimized by sexual harassment themselves (Rizzo, Banyard & Edwards, 2020).

Physical Violence: Approximately 3 million households in the United States experience physical violence every year (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). Exerting physical violence is a common strategy seen in males to show dominance (APA, 2018). Many assaults experienced by youth and adolescents happen within interpersonal relationships such as friendships, romantic relationships, and familial relationships (De La Rue, et al, 2014).

METHODS

Original Data:

- The current study utilized data from the *Shifting Boundaries* New York Middle School study
- Original study had 2,654 participants (1,266 6th graders and 1,388 7th graders)

Research Design and Data Collection:

- Secondary analysis of *Shifting Boundaries,* a multi-level cross-sectional domestic violence intervention for middle-school aged children in increasing awareness of and preventing harassment and violence behaviors in the future (Taylor et al., 2012)
- Participants were randomly-assigned to 1 of 4 intervention conditions: 1. classroom-based intervention 2. school-wide intervention 3. interventions with both a classroom-based and a school-wide component or 4. no treatment
- Pencil and paper pre and post student surveys were administered by in three separate waves: once immediately before being assigned to one of the conditions, a second time immediately following the intervention, and the third time was between five to six months after they were assigned to one of the conditions (Taylor, et al, 2012)

Measures:

- Independent Variables – Rigid Male Gender Role Attitudes measured by questions including: "if a boy tells people his worries, he will look weak" and Dating Behaviors measured by questions including: "in a good dating relationship, the boy gets his way most of the time"
- Dependent Variables – Sexual Harassment measured by questions including: "has anyone ever showed, gave, or left you sexual pictures, photographs, messages, or notes when you did not want them to?" and Physical Violence measured by questions including: "have you ever threatened them with a knife or gun or slapped/scratched them?"
- Demographic Variables – Age, Gender, Race, and if participants identified as Hispanic or Latino

RESULTS

One-way ANOVA:

- A significant difference was found among ethnic groups and sexual harassment ($F(4,670) = 4.491$, $p = .001$). Bonferroni's post hoc test showed that participants who identified as Black or African American reported higher levels of sexual harassment ($M = 7.7234$, $SD = 2.03497$) than participants who identified as White ($M = 7.0714$, $SD = 1.43140$).
- A significant difference was found among age groups and sexual harassment ($F(2,1213) = 6.362$, $p = .002$). Bonferroni's post hoc test showed that participants ages 11 years or younger reported higher levels of sexual harassment ($M = 3.422$, $SD = .705$) than participants ages 13 years and older ($M = 3.121$, $SD = .777$).

Pearson Correlation:

- There were significantly positive relationships between rigid male gender role attitudes and sexual harassment, between rigid male gender role attitudes and dating behaviors, and between dating behaviors and sexual harassment
- There were significantly negative relationships between rigid male gender role attitudes and physical violence and between dating behaviors and physical violence.

Pearson's Correlation Coefficients

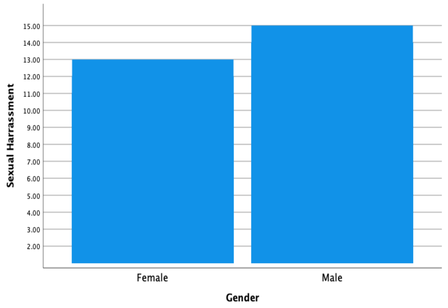
Variables	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4
1. Rigid Male Gender Role Attitudes	3.0472	0.62698	1			
2. Dating Behaviors	2.3714	0.53255	.207**	1		
3. Physical Violence	0.8957	1.31107	-.128**	-.071*	1	
4. Sexual Harassment	7.3509	1.71504	.093**	0.053	.137**	1

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Independent Samples T-test:

- A significant difference was found amongst physical violence and those identified as Hispanic or Latino ($t(612) = 2.174$, $p = .030$). The mean physical violence score of participants who identified as Hispanic or Latino ($M = .811$, $SD = 1.079$) was significantly different from the mean physical violence score of participants who did not identify as being Hispanic or Latino ($M = 1.046$, $SD = 1.521$).
- A significant difference was found amongst sexual harassment and gender ($t(1204) = 8.360$, $p < .001$). The mean sexual harassment score of the males ($M = 3.1646$, $SD = .840$) was significantly different from the mean sexual harassment score of the females ($M = 3.517$, $SD = .618$).

Simple Bar Graph of Sexual Harassment Experienced by Gender



DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings:

- Higher levels of rigid male gender role attitudes were positively associated with higher levels of sexual harassment indicating that male youth struggling to meet societal expectations for their gender may be at risk for both internal and external mental health problems.
- Higher levels of traditional dating behaviors were positively associated with higher levels of sexual harassment and rigid male gender role attitudes indicating it may be important to intervene during the middle-school years before these patterns become hard to break habits that could lead to emotional victimization or even intimate partner violence (IPV).
- There could be many social opportunities throughout this stage of development wherein youth learn and accept these beliefs such as in school settings such as in a classroom, locker room, during recess, or outside of school at a peer's house or within one's own home life. Teachers, parents, and therapists may need to explicitly educate early adolescents on peer and societal influences as well as education on consent and debunking the myths youth may have been taught.
- Family reputation, socioeconomic status, and cultural norms play an important role in whether or not an adolescent condones physical violence

Strengths and Limitations:

- Data collected in this study was based solely on self-report of New York middle-school-aged children. However, participants were drawn from the New York City School District due their populations being some of the most ethnically, linguistically, and racially diverse in the country to help increase the generalizability of the results.
- Participants were given the options to respond "I don't know," "prefer not to say," and "blank" for many of the questions resulting in a restricted amount of analyzable data.
- Fortunately, the study involved a large sample of participants.

Implications:

- Emphasized the need to have discussions with youth regarding acceptability of gender norms and to intervene early when rigid male gender roles start to influence peer and romantic relationships.
- Further intervention and support are needed for adolescents not only in school settings, but in community, other social, and family settings

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