

Theory and teen dating violence victimization: Considering adolescent development

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research paper is a summary of five theories of adolescent development that may be relevant to the study of teen dating violence. The five theories are: Sullivan's theory of interpersonal psychiatry, Erikson and the stages of psychosocial development, Selman's social-cognitive theory of interpersonal understanding, Kegan's constructive- developmental framework, and Furman and Wehner's behavioral systems conceptualization for adolescent romantic relationships. These theories are further supported by empirical research throughout the paper.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW:

- Most research studies about teen dating violence have been conducted independently from theories on adolescent development and adolescent romantic relationships.
- The more knowledge we have of the current literature on adolescent development and dating relationships, the better understanding we will have about where the gaps in the literature are and how we can guide new directions in future research on teen dating violence.

WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS DO?

The author reviewed key principles of five psychosocial theories of adolescent development by Sullivan (1953), Erikson (1963), Selman (1980), Kegan (1980), and Furman and Wehner (1994), and how these key principles can be incorporated into future research on teen dating violence. These theories were selected based on reviews of textbooks and work on adolescent and romantic relationship development, and from discussions with senior researchers about which theories might be most useful to supporting future research on teen dating violence. Each of the five theories is summarized in the article, with a specific focus on the key points that are most relevant for teen dating violence research. The author also included research on non-violent adolescent romantic relationships in order to provide suggestions for future researchers about which themes from 'normative' relationships may be relevant to study for aggressive or violent dating relationships. The author used the database PsycInfo to search for articles that included key constructs from the selected theories (e.g., anxiety, intimacy). Next, the titles and abstracts of the returned articles were reviewed, and the articles that were deemed as relevant were fully examined. In this paper, adolescence is defined as ages 10 to 17.



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WHAT DID THE RESEARCHERS FIND?

Several similarities were found between the five theories. One such similarity is that all theories argue that adolescents develop through an interaction between themselves and their social environment (e.g., peers, family, partners). In addition, throughout their development, adolescents may go through developmental arrest, which means that their development may be paused, slowed down, or reversed due to an adverse event which can lead to negative outcomes. A summary of the theories, supporting research and key questions for teen dating violence research is provided below;

- Sullivan's theory argues that anxiety and intimacy have bidirectional influences on one another, where intimate relationships can influence anxiety and vice versa. Support for this theory was found through research on the fear of negative evaluation (FNE; anticipation of being negatively judged by someone whose opinion is important) component of social anxiety. Research has suggested that dating experiences are associated with FNE-Dating and negative interactions within a dating relationship can increase FNE-Dating. Future research could thus explore the relationships between anxiety, intimacy and TDV victimization.
- Erikson's concept of interpersonal identity exploration (i.e., who am I in relationships?) changes with age, and research has found that interpersonal identity issues may be more pertinent for girls. Possible research questions exploring Erikson's theory could ask how prevention and intervention programs can tackle the negative interpersonal identity adolescents may develop when they experience dating violence.
- Selman's theory suggests that an individual's functional negotiation skills (e.g., labeling problems, evaluating results) with a romantic partner are influenced by their age, gender, IQ and other factors. Prevention programs could look at strategies to better promote healthy forms of interpersonal negotiation while taking into account contextual and individual differences (e.g., age).
- In Kegan's theory, adolescents use their relationships to define themselves (specifically, relationships with their peers and romantic partners). Research using Kegan's theory could explore how an individual's reality is constructed when teen dating violence is present.
- Furman and Wehner believe that relationship views (i.e. internalized expectations of a relationship) are related to the interactions individuals have in romantic relationships. This theory stems from attachment theory. Positive interactions lead to secure views (i.e., comfort and security) and negative interactions lead to insecure views (i.e., discomfort and danger), with potential differences by gender. Research using their theory could investigate which insecure views may serve as risk factors for teen dating violence victimization and if secure views can act as protective factors.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

This research may be especially useful for researchers who are interested in, or are currently conducting, research on teen dating violence. Understanding how teen dating violence relates to theories of adolescent development and romantic relationships can help us understand the origins, course and significance of teen dating violence. Further, this deeper understanding can help guide prevention and intervention programs for adolescents, with the ultimate goal of lowering teen dating violence.

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