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# Experiencing Emotional Abuse during Childhood and Witnessing Interparental Verbal Aggression as Related to Emotional Aggression in Undergraduate Dating Relationships

Robert J. Milletich and Dr. Michelle Kelley

## Abstract

The present study examined whether witnessing interparental verbal aggression and/or experiencing emotional abuse during childhood were associated with emotional abuse in current or recent dating relationships in college students ( $M = 19.51$  years;  $SD = 2.02$ ). Participants ( $N = 715$ ) completed the Conflicts Tactics 2-CA Scale (Straus & Donnelly, 2001), the Exposure to Abusive and Supportive Environments Parenting Inventory (Nicholas & Bieber, 1997), and the Emotional Abuse Scale (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). Results showed that witnessing interparental verbal aggression predicted males' self-use of Restrictive Engulfment and their partners' use of Restrictive Engulfment. For females, witnessing interparental verbal aggression predicted self-use of Dominance/Intimidation in dating relationships. Experiencing childhood emotional abuse predicted males' use of Denigration and Dominance/Intimidation in dating relationships. For females, experiencing childhood emotional abuse predicted self-use of Denigration, Hostile Withdrawal, and Dominance/Intimidation and their partners' use of Denigration and Hostile Withdrawal in dating relationships. These results suggest that exposure to interparental verbal aggression and experiences of emotional abuse by parents prior to age 16 are related to young adults' self-reports of emotionally abusive behavior in their dating relationships and, to a lesser extent, their partners' use of these emotionally abusive behaviors.

**N**umerous studies have shown that interparental violence and childhood physical abuse are related to negative adult outcomes (Paradis et al., 2009; Sappington, 2000). Relative to the effects of exposure to interpersonal aggression in childhood on later intimate partner aggression, we know much less about how childhood emotional abuse may be associated with interpersonal aggression in young adulthood. Thus, the focus of the present study was whether experiences of interparental verbal aggression and emotional abuse during childhood relate to emotional abuse in dating relationships in a college student population.

Although there is no standard definition of emotional abuse, for the purpose of the present study, emotional abuse is defined as acts that are aversive or coercive and are intended to produce emotional harm or threat of harm (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). Unlike physically abusive behaviors, emotionally abusive behaviors are oriented towards psychological harm, which targets one's self-concept. Contemporary researchers have accepted that emotional abuse may be one of the most destructive and pervasive forms of abuse. In fact, some researchers now believe that emotional abuse may constitute a core component of all forms of child abuse and neglect (Wright, 2007). Although some studies have shown that interpersonal violence is associated with psychosocial problems (such as, depression and anxiety (Bourassa, 2007; Howells & Rosenbaum, 2007), the ways in which emotional abuse can affect later development are not well understood. However, during the

The majority of the literature supports the idea that emotional abuse has a highly destructive influence on later dating relationships. In fact, Wright (2007) argued that emotional abuse may have a more negative influence on dating relationship behaviors than childhood physical abuse. Goldsmith and Freyd (2005) advocate this view regarding emotional abuse and report that individuals who have experienced emotional abuse have considerable difficulty recognizing their own emotions. The growing literature on the negative effects of emotional abuse is especially problematic given that emotional aggression predicts the onset of physical aggression among newlywed couples (Murphy & Cascardi, 1999).

At present, a 'gold standard' to measure emotional abuse does not exist. Rather, a number of measures have been developed to capture the breadth of emotionally abusive behaviors. Researchers have argued emotional abuse is a complex and multifactorial construct. As such, the present study used a multifactorial measure of emotional abuse, the Emotional Abuse Scale, developed by Murphy and colleagues (Murphy & Hoover, 1999; Murphy et al., 1999).

More specifically, the Emotional Abuse Scale assesses four dimensions of emotional abuse. The first factor, Restrictive Engulfment, is intended to isolate the partner's activities and social contacts through the display of intense jealousy and possessiveness. These behaviors are assumed to have the effect of limiting perceived threats to the relationship by increasing the partner's dependency and availability. The second factor, Denigration, measures behaviors that are intended to humiliate and degrade the partner. These behaviors are assumed to reduce the partner's sense of self-worth. The third factor, Hostile Withdrawal, involves behaviors that are intended to withhold emotional contact and pull away from the partner in a hostile fashion. These behaviors are assumed to punish the partner and/or increase the partner's anxiety or insecurity about the relationship. The final factor, Dominance/Intimidation, assesses behaviors that include threats, property violence, and intense displays of verbal aggression. These behaviors are assumed to induce fear or submission in the partner through the overt display of aggression (Murphy & Hoover, 1999; Murphy et al., 1999).

From the current literature, it was expected that experiences of interparental verbal aggression and emotional abuse during childhood would increase an individual's likelihood of exhibiting and/or experiencing emotionally aggressive behaviors in their current or past dating relationships. From this vantage, four hypotheses were developed: 1) Individuals who reported witnessing higher levels of interparental verbal aggression and higher levels of emotional abuse during childhood would report higher scores on the Emotional Abuse subscale of Restrictive Engulfment, 2) Individuals who reported witnessing higher levels of interparental verbal aggression and higher levels of emotional abuse during childhood would report higher scores on the Emotional Abuse subscale of Denigration, 3) Individuals who reported witnessing higher levels of interparental verbal aggression and higher levels of emotional abuse during childhood would report higher scores on the Emotional Abuse subscale of Hostile Withdrawal, and 4) Individuals who reported witnessing higher levels of interparental verbal aggression and higher levels of emotional abuse during childhood would report higher scores on the Emotional Abuse subscale of Dominance/Intimidation. In addition, gender was examined in the regression analyses. However, because little research has examined gender and emotional abuse, these analyses were considered exploratory and no specific directional hypotheses were made regarding gender.

## Methods

*Participants*

Participants (N= 715) were selected from a convenience sample of students enrolled at a large university in southeastern Virginia (See Table 1). Criteria for participation included: 1) between 18 and 30 years of age, 2) never married, 3) participants resided with two biological parents or a biological parent and stepparent during childhood, 4) respondents were exclusively or mostly heterosexual, and 5) participants had experienced one or more dating relationships. All participants read a description of the study and indicated their willingness to participate prior to completing the online survey and receiving credit.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics for Participants*

Characteristic	Mean	SD	Range
Age (years)	19.51	2.02	18-30
	Frequency		%
Gender			
Male	183		25.6
Female	475		66.4
Ethnicity			
White	430		60.1
African-American	119		16.6
Hispanic/Latino	33		4.6
Asian	33		4.6
Pacific Islander	6		.8
American Indian	1		.1
‘Other’	34		4.8
Year in College			
Freshman	308		43.1
Sophomore	155		21.7
Junior	103		14.4
Senior	87		12.2
Graduate Student	6		.8

*Note.* Ns = 656 to 715.

### Measures

*Conflicts Tactics Scale 2-CA (CTS2-CA)* (Straus & Donnelly, 2001). The CTS2-CA is a 62-item scale designed to measure an individual's exposure to three tactics used in parental interpersonal conflict: reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical violence. The scale includes two identical questionnaires. The first measures the mother's behavior toward the father; the second measures the father's behavior toward the mother. For the purposes of the present study only those items that assessed verbal aggression (7 items) were scored. Sample items include: "Mother insulted or swore at father" and "Father shouted or yelled at mother." Respondents indicated how often each of their parents performed these specific types of verbal aggression from: 0) never to 6) more than 20 times. A total parental verbal aggression score reflected the average of the mother-to-father and father-to-mother verbal aggression item scores; higher scores represent greater exposure to parental verbal aggression. Cronbach's alphas for the CTS2-CA were .80 for father-to-mother verbal aggression and .81 for mother-to-father verbal aggression. In previous studies, Cronbach's alphas have varied considerably (i.e.,  $\alpha$  = .41 to .96); Straus and Donnelly (2001) have argued that different versions of the scale, particularly shorter versions, may be less reliable.

*Exposure to Abusive and Supportive Environments Parenting Inventory (EASE-PI)* (Nicholas & Bieber, 1997). The EASE-PI is a 70-item scale measuring negative and positive childhood experiences with parents. For the purposes of the present study, only the items that assessed emotional abuse (19 items) were examined. Sample items from the emotional abuse subscale include: "Your mother or father insulted or swore at you," "Your mother or father said she or he hated you," and "Your mother or father made you feel worthless." All items were assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from: 0) never to 4) very often. Internal reliability for the present study was excellent ( $\alpha$  = .95). Other studies have found adequate reliability for the Emotional Abuse subscales ranging from .84 (Feindler, Rathus, & Silver, 2003) to .96 (Shaw, 2008) and good construct validity (Shaw, 2008),

*Emotional Abuse Scale* (Murphy & Hoover, 1999). The Emotional Abuse Scale is a 28-item scale measuring emotional abuse in dating relationships through a 4-factor model using an interval scale ranging from: 0) this has never happened to 6) more than 20 times. Each factor is assessed with 7 items. The four factors included in this measure are: Restrictive Engulfment, (e.g., "Complained partner spends too much time with friends," "Tried to make partner feel guilty for not spending time together"), Denigration, (e.g., "Called partner ugly," "Called partner worthless"), Hostile Withdrawal, (e.g., "Refused to acknowledge problem," "Refused to discuss problem"), and Dominance/Intimidation, (e.g., "Threatened to harm partner's friends," "Intentionally destroyed belongings"). In the present study, Cronbach's alphas for respondents' reports of emotional abuse toward partners were: .84 for Restrictive Engulfment, .82 for Denigration, .90 for Hostile Withdrawal, and .85 for Dominance/Intimidation. Cronbach's alphas for respondents' reports of their partners' emotional abuse toward respondents were: .89 for Restrictive Engulfment, .84 for Denigration, .94 for Hostile Withdrawal, and .89 for Dominance/Intimidation. Murphy et al. (1999) reported correlations between the various Emotional Abuse Scale subscales and physical aggression were high ( $r$ 's ranging from .18 to .38 for Restrictive Engulfment,  $r$ 's ranging from .41 to .63 for Denigration,  $r$ 's ranging from .25 to .40 for Hostile Withdrawal, and  $r$ 's ranging from .52 to .75 for Dominance/Intimidation).

### Procedure

The study was conducted in accordance with the code of ethics of the American Psychological Association and was reviewed by the College Human Subjects Committee at Old Dominion University prior to data collection.

A description of the study was posted on an online psychology research board. Respondents read a detailed description of the study before beginning the survey. Participants then completed an anonymous survey. After completing the survey, participants were directed to a separate website where they received extra credit for their participation; however, their identity was not linked to the data. Participation was voluntary.

## Results

### *Preliminary Analyses*

Prior to conducting hypothesis testing, the data were scrutinized for missing values and outliers. The scores were then analyzed and tested for skewness, kurtosis, and linearity. After examination, all outliers that were above three standard deviations from the mean were Winsorized such that outliers were transformed to a number one less than the next highest normally distributed score (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). Means and standard deviations for each scale and subscale are reported in Table 2. All statistical analyses were carried out with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 16.0 for Windows.

Table 2

*Mean Differences by Gender on Predictor and Dependent Measures*

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Male</u>		<u>Female</u>		<i>t</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Variables					
IPVA (Mother)	3.42	3.93	4.18	4.57	2.06**
IPVA (Father)	2.73	3.60	3.90	4.58	3.35***
EASE-PI	1.46	.47	1.59	.65	2.47**
Restrictive Engulfment (Self)	.94	.94	1.40	1.20	5.02**
Restrictive Engulfment (Partner)	1.34	1.36	1.28	1.38	.43
Denigration (Self)	.34	.74	.53	.78	2.72*
Denigration (Partner)	.41	.79	.39	.71	.52
Hostile Withdrawal (Self)	1.32	1.32	1.50	1.36	1.46
Hostile Withdrawal (Partner)	1.40	1.52	1.73	1.67	2.35
Dominance/Intimidation (Self)	.24	.68	.41	.78	2.57**
Dominance/Intimidation (Partner)	.27	.74	.48	.95	2.94***

*Note.* IPVA = Interparental Verbal Aggression scores as derived from Conflict Tactics Scale 2-CA. EASE-PI = Exposure to Abusive and Supporting Environments Parenting Inventory. *Ns* = 166-466; *dfs* = 637 to 710.

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

*Overview of Data Analysis*

To test the hypotheses, eight multiple regression analyses were conducted. Because the bivariate correlation between mother-to-father- and father-to-mother violence was statistically significant,  $r(2, 651) = .66, p < .01$ , mother-to-father and father-to-mother verbal aggression scores were averaged (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Bivariate Correlations of Maternal and Paternal Interparental Verbal Aggression Scores*

	Mother	Father
Mother ( $N = 670$ )	1.00	.66**
Father ( $N = 683$ )	.66*	1.00

\*\* $p < .01$

Therefore, the independent variables in the multiple regression equations were the averaged Conflicts Tactics Scale 2-CA (CTS2-CA) scores and the subscale score from the Exposure to Abusive and Supportive Environments Parenting Inventory (EASE-PI). The dependent variables were respondents' reports of self-use and partners' use of the four dimensions of the Emotional Abuse Scale (i.e. Restrictive Engulfment, Denigration, Hostile Withdrawal, and Dominance/Intimidation). Bivariate correlations for predictor variables and dependent variables are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

*Bivariate Correlations between Predictor and Dependent Variables*

	EASE-PI	IPVA	EASREsf	EASREpart	EASDsrf	EASDpart	EASHWsf	EASHWpart	EASDIsf	EASDIpart
EASE-PI	1.00	.57**	.10	.16	.15	.22**	.20*	.06	.26**	.19*
IPVA	.46**	1.00	.20*	.22**	.08	.14	.20*	.16*	.16*	.06
EASREsf	.10*	.11*	1.00	.61**	.37**	.45**	.55**	.46**	.46**	.43**
EASREpart	.11*	.13**	.58**	1.00	.29**	.44**	.61**	.47**	.35**	.43**
EASDsrf	.19**	.14**	.49**	.43**	1.00	.71**	.47**	.18*	.75**	.63**
EASDpart	.26**	.19**	.40**	.46**	.48**	1.00	.41**	.36**	.71**	.72**
EASHWsf	.23**	.17**	.55**	.54**	.52*	.45**	1.00	.55**	.45**	.46**
EASHWpart	.21**	.12*	.59**	.53**	.40**	.49**	.51**	1.00	.23**	.34**
EASDIsf	.22**	.19*	.43**	.35**	.63**	.40**	.44**	.37**	1.00	.73**
EASDIpart	.11*	.14**	.37**	.49**	.51**	.54**	.42**	.42**	.37**	1.00

*Note.* EASE-PI = Exposure to Abusive and Supporting Environments Parenting Inventory; IPVA = Interparental Verbal Aggression; EASREsf = Emotional Abuse Scale Restrictive Engulfment Self; EASREpart = Emotional Abuse Scale Restrictive Engulfment Partner; EASDsrf = Emotional Abuse Scale Denigration Self; EASDpart = Emotional Abuse Scale Denigration Partner; EASHWsf = Emotional Abuse Scale Hostile Withdrawal Self; EASHWpart = Emotional Abuse Scale Hostile Withdrawal Partner; EASDIsf = Emotional Abuse Scale Dominance/Intimidation Self; EASDIpart = Emotional Abuse Scale Dominance/Intimidation Partner. Scores above the diagonal are for males; scores below the diagonal are for females. *Ns* (Males) = 153 to 169; *Ns* (Females) = 413 to 444.

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ .



*Self- Reports of Emotional Abuse for Males in Dating Relationships*

*Restrictive Engulfment.* Results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 145) = 3.43, p < .05$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed that witnessing interparental verbal aggression was the only significant predictor of males' reports of their use of Restrictive Engulfment,  $\beta = .22, sr_i^2 = .03$ . See Table 5.

Table 5

*Results of Multiple Regressions Predicting Respondents' Reports of Self-Use of Emotional Abuse from Respondents' History of Psychological Abuse by Parents and Respondents' Exposure to Interparental Verbal Aggression for Males*

Dependent Variable	$\beta$	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	$t$
Restrictive Engulfment		.21	.05	3.43*	
IPVA	.22				2.29*
EASE-PI	-.02				.23
Denigration		.19	.04	2.79	
IPVA	-.04				.38
EASE-PI	.21				2.13*
Hostile Withdrawal		.22	.05	3.74*	
IPVA	.12				1.18
EASE-PI	.13				1.34
Dominance/Intimidation		.28	.08	5.88**	
IPVA	.04				.45
EASE-PI	.25				2.55*

*Note.* EASE-PI = Scores from the Exposure to Abusive and Supporting Environments Parenting Inventory; IPVA = Respondents reports of the average of the mother-to-father and father-to-mother verbal aggression scores on the Interparental Verbal Aggression subscale of the Conflicts Tactics Scale 2-CA.  $Ns = 145$  to  $147$ .

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Denigration.* Results of the multiple regression were not significant,  $F(2, 144) = 2.79, p = .07$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed that experiencing childhood emotional abuse was the only significant predictor of males' reports of their use of Denigration,  $\beta = .21, sr_i^2 = .03$ . See Table 5.

*Hostile Withdrawal.* Results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 145) = 3.74, p < .05$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed no significant predictors of males' reports of their use of Hostile Withdrawal. See Table 5.

*Dominance/Intimidation.* Results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 143) = 5.88, p < .01$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed that experiencing childhood emotional abuse was the only significant predictor of males' reports of their use of Dominance/Intimidation,  $\beta = .25, sr_i^2 = .04$ . Results of the multiple regression analyses are reported in Table 5.

*Self-Reports of Partners' Emotional Abuse for Males in Dating Relationships*

*Restrictive Engulfment.* Results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 143) = 3.76, p < .05$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed that witnessing interparental verbal aggression was the only significant predictor of males' reports of their partners' use of Restrictive Engulfment,  $\beta = .20, sr_i^2 = .03$ . Results of the multiple regression analysis are reported in Table 6.

Table 6

*Results of Multiple Regressions Predicting Respondents' Reports of Partners' Use of Emotional Abuse from Respondents' History of Psychological Abuse by Parents and Respondents' Exposure to Interparental Verbal Aggression for Males*

Dependent Variable	$\beta$	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	$t$
Restrictive Engulfment		.22	.05	3.76*	
IPVA	.20				1.99*
EASE-PI	.04				.40
Denigration		.23	.05	4.05*	
IPVA	.06				.62
EASE-PI	.19				1.93
Hostile Withdrawal		.17	.03	2.11	
IPVA	.19				1.88
EASE-PI	-.04				.40
Dominance/Intimidation		.19	.04	2.71	
IPVA	-.01				.08
EASE-PI	.19				1.96

*Note.* EASE-PI = Scores from the Exposure to Abusive and Supporting Environments Parenting Inventory; IPVA = Respondents reports of the average of the mother-to-father and father-to-mother verbal aggression scores on the Interparental Verbal Aggression subscale of the Conflicts Tactics Scale 2-CA.  $Ns = 145$  to  $148$ .

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Denigration.* Results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 144) = 4.05, p < .05$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed no significant predictors of males' reports of their partners' use of Denigration. See Table 6.

*Hostile Withdrawal.* As shown in Table 6, results of the multiple regression were not significant,  $F(2, 146) = 2.11, p = .13$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed no significant predictors of males' reports of their partners' use of Hostile Withdrawal. See Table 6.

*Dominance/Intimidation.* Results of the multiple regression were not significant,  $F(2, 146) = 2.71, p = .07$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed no significant predictors of males' reports of their partners' use of Dominance/Intimidation. See Table 6.

#### *Self-Reports of Emotional Abuse for Females in Dating Relationships*

*Restrictive Engulfment.* Results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 402) = 4.49, p < .05$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed no significant predictors of females' reports of their use of Restrictive Engulfment. See Table 7.

Table 7

*Results of Multiple Regressions Predicting Respondents' Reports of Self-Use of Emotional Abuse from Respondents' History of Psychological Abuse by Parents and Respondents' Exposure to Interparental Verbal Aggression for Females*

Dependent Variable	$\beta$	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	$t$
Restrictive Engulfment		.15	.02	4.49*	
IPVA	.06				1.16
EASE-PI	.11				1.23
Denigration		.22	.05	10.06***	
IPVA	.07				1.17
EASE-PI	.18				3.29**
Hostile Withdrawal		.25	.06	13.62***	
IPVA	.08				1.43
EASE-PI	.21				3.78***
Dominance/Intimidation		.21	.04	9.11***	
IPVA	.11				2.00*
EASE-PI	.13				2.36*

*Note.* EASE-PI = Scores from the Exposure to Abusive and Supporting Environments Parenting Inventory; IPVA = Respondents reports of the average of the mother-to-father and father-to-mother verbal aggression scores on the Interparental Verbal Aggression subscale of the Conflicts Tactics Scale 2-CA.  $Ns = 399$  to  $404$ .

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

*Denigration.* Results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 399) = 10.06$ ,  $p < .001$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed that experiencing childhood emotional abuse was the only significant predictor of females' reports of their use of Denigration,  $\beta = .18$ ,  $sr_i^2 = .03$ . See Table 7.

*Hostile Withdrawal.* Results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 400) = 13.62$ ,  $p < .001$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed that experiencing childhood emotional abuse was the only significant predictor of females' reports of their use of Hostile Withdrawal,  $\beta = .21$ ,  $sr_i^2 = .03$ . See Table 7.

*Dominance/Intimidation.* Results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 397) = 9.11$ ,  $p < .001$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed experiencing childhood emotional abuse  $\beta = .13$ ,  $sr_i^2 = .01$  and witnessing interparental verbal aggression  $\beta = .11$ ,  $sr_i^2 = .01$  were both significant predictors of females' reports of their use of Dominance/Intimidation. Results of the multiple regression analyses are reported in Table 7.

#### *Self-Reports of Partners' Emotional Abuse for Females in Dating Relationships*

*Restrictive Engulfment.* Results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 401) = 4.52$ ,  $p < .05$ . Examination of  $t$ -tests revealed no significant predictors of females' reports of their partners' use of Restrictive Engulfment. Results of the multiple regression analysis are reported in Table 8.

Table 8

*Results of Multiple Regressions Predicting Respondents' Reports of Partners' Use of Emotional Abuse from Respondents' History of Psychological Abuse by Parents and Respondents' Exposure to Interparental Verbal Aggression for Females*

Dependent Variable	$\beta$	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	$t$
Restrictive Engulfment		.15	.02	4.52*	
IPVA	.09				1.62
EASE-PI	.08				.23
Denigration		.29	.09	18.58***	
IPVA	.08				1.37
EASE-PI	.25				4.58***
Hostile Withdrawal		.22	.05	9.72***	
IPVA	.02				.44
EASE-PI	.20				3.68***
Dominance/Intimidation		.15	.02	4.77**	
IPVA	.10				1.81
EASE-PI	.07				1.31

*Note.* EASE-PI = Scores from the Exposure to Abusive and Supporting Environments Parenting Inventory; IPVA = Respondents reports of the average of the mother-to-father and father-to-mother verbal aggression scores on the Interparental Verbal Aggression subscale of the Conflicts Tactics Scale 2-CA.  $N_s = 397$  to 403.

*Denigration.* Results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 395) = 18.58, p < .001$ . Examination of *t*-tests revealed that experiencing childhood emotional abuse was a significant predictor of females' reports of their partners' use of Denigration,  $\beta = .25, sr_i^2 = .05$ . See Table 8.

*Hostile Withdrawal.* As shown in Table 8, results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 396) = 9.72, p < .001$ . Examination of *t*-tests revealed that experiencing childhood emotional abuse was a significant predictor of females' reports of their partners' use of Hostile Withdrawal,  $\beta = .20, sr_i^2 = .03$ .

*Dominance/Intimidation.* Results of the multiple regression were significant,  $F(2, 397) = 4.77, p < .01$ . Examination of *t*-tests revealed no significant predictors of females' reports of their partners' use of Dominance/Intimidation. See Table 8.

## Discussion

The study examined whether witnessing interparental verbal aggression and experiencing childhood emotional abuse were associated with emotional abuse in undergraduate dating relationships. It was expected that individuals who witnessed higher levels of interparental verbal aggression and experienced higher levels of emotional abuse during childhood would report that they and their dating partners engaged in higher levels of four different forms of emotional abuse (i.e., Restrictive Engulfment, Denigration, Hostile Withdrawal, and Dominance/Intimidation).

### *Restrictive Engulfment Behaviors*

It was predicted that participants who witnessed higher levels of interparental verbal aggression and experienced higher levels of emotional abuse during childhood would report that they used greater Restrictive Engulfment (i.e., behaviors are assumed to have the effect of limiting perceived threats to the relationship by increasing the partner's dependency and availability). Moreover, experiencing interparental verbal aggression and emotional abuse during childhood would be related to participants' reports of their partners' use of Restrictive Engulfment in their dating relationships.

This hypothesis was partially supported. Males' use and their partners' use of Restrictive Engulfment were predicted by witnessing interparental verbal aggression. Thus, it appears that exposure to interparental verbal aggression during a male's childhood may be associated with his own use of behaviors to increase his partner's dependency on him. Furthermore, this finding suggests males who experience these negative behaviors in childhood seek out partners who attempt to increase one's dependency in the dating relationship.

### *Denigration Behaviors*

Previous research has demonstrated that ridicule is the most common form of emotional abuse in dating relationships (Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, & Hause, 1990). As might be expected, ridicule is detrimental to intimate relationships (Murphy & Cascardi, 1999). Following expectations, males who reported witnessing higher levels of emotional abuse during childhood reported significantly higher use of Denigration towards their dating partners. In addition, for females, those respondents who reported witnessing higher levels of emotional abuse during childhood reported significantly higher use of Denigration towards their dating partners. Moreover, for females, higher reports of emotional abuse were related to partners' use of Denigration.

Although social learning theory has been perhaps the most valuable theory in explaining intergenerational physical aggression (e.g., see Gelles, 2007), clearly, these results suggest that experiencing childhood emotional abuse may be associated with one's expression of anger and disparaging remarks towards one's dating partners.

More specifically, these results suggest that experiencing emotional abuse may confer that emotionally abusing a partner is an acceptable way of responding to conflict. These results also demonstrate that females who experience emotional abuse during their childhood may seek out a partner who engages in similar emotionally abusive behaviors towards them.

#### *Hostile Withdrawal Behaviors*

Partial support was found for the hypothesis that witnessing interparental verbal aggression and experiencing emotional abuse during childhood would be associated with Hostile Withdrawal. Specifically, higher scores for emotional abuse in childhood were related to reports of females' self-use and their partners' use of Hostile Withdrawal in dating relationships. Although the present study was cross-sectional and causation is not possible, it is plausible that females who have been the target of early criticism and hostility by their parents may be more likely to exhibit this type of verbal behavior in their own romantic relationships. If this is the case, this would support a long history of research that has shown that negative parenting practices may bring about negative changes in behavior and cognitions (Patterson & Dishion, 1988).

Another explanation is that females who experience childhood emotional abuse may seek out partners who engage in their form of verbal behavior. However, it is also viable that hostile withdrawal is reciprocal such that partners may engage in this type of behavior together. The latter explanation would support research that has found symmetry in physical aggression among college students (Straus, 2008).

#### *Dominance/Intimidation Behaviors*

Dominance/Intimidation behaviors have been argued to be a fundamental predictor of later physical abuse in intimate relationships (Murphy & Cascardi, 1999; Murphy & Hoover, 1999; Murphy, Hoover, & Taft, 1999; Straus, 1980). As expected, females who witnessed higher levels of interparental verbal aggression during childhood reported significantly higher self-use of Dominance/Intimidation towards their partners. In addition, both males and females who reported experiencing higher levels emotional abuse during childhood reported significantly higher self-use of Dominance/Intimidation towards their dating partners.

These findings support research conducted by Taft et al. (2006) that found various correlates (e.g., interparental verbal aggression, childhood physical aggression, poor relationship adjustment style, and trait anger) predicted psychological aggression perpetration in males and females. In addition, these findings support a study conducted by Crawford and Wright (2007) that found childhood emotional abuse predicted later perpetration of both verbal and physical aggression.

#### *Clinical Implications*

In the present study, witnessing interparental verbal aggression and experiencing emotional abuse during childhood had small but in many cases, significant relationships with self and partners' use of emotional abuse in dating relationships. Because of the pervasive debilitating effects that emotional abuse can have on an intimate relationship, early identification of emotional abuse in a relationship may be essential to the prevention of later physical aggression. Moreover, the ability of a mental health professional to understand clients' needs is affected by the available knowledge. In this case, it appears that adverse family experiences in childhood may be associated with later emotional abuse.

It is also important to recognize that while emotional abuse in dating relationships does not always result in physical abuse, Follingstad et al. (1990) found that emotional abuse in dating relationships may have a more debilitating effect on the relationship than physical abuse. The results of the Follingstad et al. study provide additional support for the premise that early identification of emotional abuse within dating relationships may be key to preventing future physical and psychological trauma in romantic relationships.

It is also important that parents are educated a child's exposure to interparental verbal aggression and emotional abuse of the child are related to reports of young adult's emotional abuse in dating relationships. Although results of the present study are retrospective, they still offer understanding of factors that are associated with emotional abuse in dating relationships. From a developmental perspective, it is important that parents and mental health professionals are aware that verbal aggression between parents and emotionally damaging statements made toward children may have important long-term associations with dating behavior in early adulthood.

#### *Study Limitations and Future Directions*

There are some noteworthy limitations to the present study. First, the study examined heterosexual undergraduate students who had never been married between the ages of 18 and 30. Second, the present study did not examine the length of the dating relationship. It is possible that longer relationships may be associated with greater use of emotional abuse. It may be that those who dissolve an emotionally abusive relationship may differ from those who continue in an emotionally abuse relationship or experience emotional abuse in more than one dating relationship. The latter groups may be an important target for intervention efforts. Third, the present study relied exclusively on self-reporting. Finally, while the results of the present study were significant, the effect sizes were small (see Brand, Bradley, Best, & Stoica, 2008 for a review). Therefore, it is possible that additional factors not surveyed in the present study influence emotional abuse in dating relationships. Moreover, all data were collected contemporaneously. Therefore, the direction of the relationships cannot be inferred.

#### *Summary and Conclusion*

In summary, these results suggest that an individual's exposure to verbal aggression between parents and experiences of emotional abuse by parents prior to age 16 are related to young adults' self-reports of emotionally abusive behavior in their dating relationships, and to a lesser extent, their partners' use of these emotionally abusive behaviors.

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### **Biographical Sketches**

**Robert Milletich** began working under the supervision of Dr. Kelley during the summer semester before his junior year. Their research interests are primarily focused on emotional and physical dating aggression in undergraduate dating relationships. This paper examined relationships between exposure to interparental verbal aggression and childhood emotional abuse as related to males' and females' reports of their emotional aggression toward their dating partners and their reports of their partners' emotional aggression in their dating relationships. He graduated from Old Dominion University in May 2009 with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology. At present he is working on several manuscript publications and intends to apply to doctoral programs in biological psychology and developmental psychology.

**Michelle Kelley** is a professor of psychology in the Department of Psychology at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. Her research is in the area of at-risk families, especially in the areas of the effects of parental alcohol and drug abuse, and related family violence and parenting problems, on short- and long-term child and adolescent outcomes. In addition, she has conducted research on Navy families and the impact of deployment on military personnel and their children with a particular interest in single military parents and women. In addition, she has conducted several studies on fathering, with an emphasis on predictors of paternal involvement. She received her doctorate from the University of Houston in 1988. Her research has been supported by the National Institute of Drug Abuse, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and the Department of Defense. She currently serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Family Psychology and Fathering*.