

# A *Dynamic Model* of Coercive Control in Adolescent Relationships

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## BACKGROUND

Coercive control is a pattern of behaviours of threats, humiliation, intimidation, manipulation or other abuse, typically to frighten or constrain the victim (romantic partner in this case). Existing evidence reveals concerning levels of controlling behaviours in adolescent relationships, and suggests that this abusive nature is indicative of future relationships.

Identifying coercive control can be difficult as it is not given by a single event, but a pattern of behaviours. Furthermore, the pattern of behaviours does not exclusively involve negative behaviours but could include a tactical combination of positive and negative behaviours.

## PURPOSE

To understand the dynamics of coercive control in adolescent relationships, with the aim of educating adolescents and practitioners, as well as identifying leverage points.

## METHOD

We conducted a literature review to identify theoretical frameworks in the field that serve the basis of the causal theory. This was workshoped with researchers and one subject expert. A second literature search was done to guide parameter estimates for the simulation model and estimate reference modes.

## KEY ASSUMPTIONS

- Coercive control emerges when one or both partners have an expectation of power.
- Both partners can engage in controlling behaviours. There is no structural difference between partners.
- Controlling behaviours can include negative reinforcement such as put downs. This is modelled to influence the victim's self esteem. It can also include isolation from friends and family, which reduces the victim's social support.
- Self esteem and social support, *common targets of coercion and risk factors for victimisation, together give a partner's dependence.*

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Without an understanding of control as a pattern of behaviours, the negative behaviours do not drain attachment sufficiently for them to want to leave the relationship. **Thus, attachment levels are not low per se in abusive relationships making it difficult for victims to recognise the rationale to leave.** In fact, high levels of power necessitate victim's attachment be high. This is echoes the literature, which finds little or no difference in the levels of love between violent and non-violent relationships.

Self-esteem is a vulnerability but not a deciding risk factor. Victims with low initial levels can leave the relationship. Without the understanding of control, however, these individuals experience more severe controlling behaviours because their partner will perceive their power is greater. **Victims with moderate self-esteem and social support may not be able to leave the relationship because moderate starting dependence reduces the power of the perpetrator making the use of coercive control tactics more gradual and less intense.** Such patterns could be harder to spot especially when the understanding of control is low.

## LIMITATIONS

- Expected power is modelled as an exogenous and static factor; self-esteem is likely to play a role.
- Social support does not consider normalisation of coercive control.
- No consideration of how and why healthy relationships end.

## NEXT STEPS

We will be presenting the model to practitioners and young people to (1) validate and refine the model and (2) to design the implications for practice and policy. We would also like to use the model to develop some games or tools for educating children.

### Key References:

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- Miller, K. B., Lund, E., & Weatherly, J. (2012). Applying operant learning to the stay-leave decision in domestic violence. *Behavior and Social Issues*, 21(1), 135-151
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## CLD 1

Dynamics of expected and perceived power for partner A. In this case, A is the perpetrator and their partner B is the victim

A partner's power - ability to dominate their partner - is based on: (1) their partner's attachment to them (akin to love) and (2) their partner's dependence on them.

Tactics employed by A is based on A's perceived power, expected power and B's desire to be in the relationship.

	B wants to stay	B wants to leave
Expected Power > Perceived Power	Controlling behaviour more frequent/ severe than positive	Controlling behaviours only
Expected Power < Perceived Power	Positive reinforcement only	

A key factor in B's desire to stay or leave, not given in the CLD, is their understanding of control. The greater the understanding, the higher their ability to interpret controlling behaviours as 'warning signs' of an unhealthy relationship. This accumulates over time and influences how attachment drains in response to controlling behaviour.

## CLD 2

Dyadic dynamics of the relationship between A and B

This reinforcing loop is dominant in healthy relationships (where neither partner expects power).

## ANALYSIS

Attachment, dependence and power levels in different relationships

	Attachment	Dependence	Power	Relationship
Healthy relationships	High for both	Low for both	Moderate for both	<b>Lasting</b>
A expects power	A - high; B - moderate	A - low; B - moderate	A - approaches expected power; B - low	<b>Often end</b>
Both A & B expect power	Low for both	Low for both	Low for both	<b>End</b>