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 tighten 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 behaviors. Furthermore, the pattern of behaviors does not exclusively involve negative behaviors but could include a tactical combination of positive and negative behaviors.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Without an understanding of control as a pattern of behaviors, the negative behaviors do not stand out 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 recognize the rationale to leave. In fact, high levels of power necessitate victim's attachment to them. This 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 position as 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) design the implications for practice and policy. We would also like to use the model to develop some games or tools for educating children.

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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.

KEY REFERENCES:

Renfrewshire Early Action System Change.

ANALYSIS

Attachment, dependence, and power levels in different relationships.

Oxford University Press.