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Reciprocal involvement in adolescent dating aggression: An Italian–Spanish study

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This study aimed to: (1) analyse the association of different patterns of reciprocal involvement in dating aggression (reciprocal psychological and physical aggression; reciprocal psychological aggression; non-aggressive individuals) with different qualities of romantic relationship; and (2) compare results in two European countries, Italy and Spain. Participants were 304 adolescents (141 Italy, 163 Spain) with a current dating relationship. Results in both countries showed that adolescents involved in reciprocal psychological and physical aggression are more likely to have higher levels of couple conflict and power imbalance as compared to the reciprocal psychological aggressive group and to the non-aggressive individuals. Besides, adolescents involved in reciprocal psychological aggression are more likely to have lower levels of support as compared to the non-aggressive individuals. Discussion is focused on different patterns of reciprocal involvement differentiated in relation to level of aggression, conflict and power imbalance.

Keywords: Dating aggression; Reciprocal involvement; Romantic relationship quality; Adolescence; Cross-cultural comparison.

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INTRODUCTION

Descriptive studies on dating aggression have underlined a pattern of mutual violence involving psychological and physical aggression from both partners (Archer, 2000; Capaldi & Crosby, 1997; Frieze, 2005). Especially in adolescence both male and female partners were frequently found to be involved as perpetrators and victims, suggesting a reciprocal involvement in dating aggression (Capaldi & Crosby, 1997; Cascardi & Vivian, 1995; Gray & Foshee, 1997; Johnson, 1995; O'Leary & Slep, 2003). Studies conducted on adolescents in the USA reported a frequency range of 53% to 72% of mutually aggressive dating relationships (Gray & Foshee, 1997; Henton, Cate, Koval, Lloyd, & Christopher, 1983). A similar figure was also found in Italy (Menesini & Nocentini, 2008). Mutual violence more often implies mild forms of aggression, however severe mutual aggression can also be found occasionally (Johnson, 1995; Olson, 2002; Williams & Frieze, 2005).

Most studies on mutual aggression have used a group-based approach in order to differentiate mutual from one-sided pattern couples (Gray & Foshee, 1997; Henton et al., 1983). Using the same group-based approach, the present study intended to focus on patterns of mutual involvement in aggressive behaviours, and to further investigate if different degrees of severity in the reciprocal patterns of aggression (psychological vs. psychological and physical) can be associated with different qualities of romantic relationship. Following the escalation conflict theory we hypothesized that the level of conflict severity can escalate when it passes from verbal and psychological attacks to physical aggression. On this basis two main groups can be identified *a priori* within the mutual couple aggression as they represent distinct patterns of involvement: one group, where the partners are characterized by a reciprocal involvement in psychological dating aggression (RPA), and another group where the partners are characterized by a reciprocal involvement in both psychological and physical dating aggression (RPPA). The aim of the study was to analyse whether these theoretical patterns of reciprocal involvement in dating aggression were empirically associated with different qualities of romantic relationship in terms of conflict, imbalance of power and support. In addition, data from Italy and Spain were to be compared in order to find commonalities and differences. Literature has stressed the relevance of understanding the moderating role of culture on adolescent romantic relationships and dating aggression (Seiffge-Krenke & Connolly, 2010), since youth from different cultures are more and more connected in relationships. Italy and Spain share several cultural features and have similar figures for domestic violence and violence against women: however, no cross-cultural comparison between these two countries has yet been conducted in relation to dating aggression. The aim of this cross-cultural

comparison was to understand whether two similar European countries shared the same features and mechanisms leading from different qualities of romantic relationships (conflict, imbalance of power and support) to different or similar patterns of dating aggression.

Reciprocal dating aggression

The theoretical model through which mutual couple violence or situational couple violence is studied derives from the work of family violence researchers (see Straus & Gelles, 1990). This model refers to the conflict between the two partners where physical aggressive acts are tactics used in response to a conflict, as opposed to the coercive approach in unilateral violent relationships. Situational couple violence occasionally takes place when conflict gets out of hand: it is not a general means of controlling the other partner but it is the result of a temporary attempt to establish control during a conflict (Johnson, 1995; Kelly & Johnson, 2008). This pattern of aggression is characterized by gender symmetry, defined as equivalent rates of partner violence by males and females (Archer, 2000; Frieze, 2005) and is distinct from the coercive approach, where one partner, usually the male, is the perpetrator and the other the victim and where physical aggression is a means of maintaining a general control over the partner.

The dynamics through which conflict, reciprocity, imbalance of power and different levels of aggression relate to each other is significant in explaining the process of partner conflict escalating to violence. According to a dynamic developmental system approach (Capaldi & Kim, 2007), interactions between partners can provoke or reinforce aggressive acts within the dyad, particularly one individual's behaviour may elicit similar acts from the partner. For example, starting from an argument, verbal or physical aggression may be used to respond to a verbal conflict or opposition. Higher levels of conflict can easily escalate towards higher levels of dating aggression, which in turn contribute to reinforce and expand the spiral of conflict (Straus & Gelles, 1990). From these models we surmise that psychological and verbal aggression represent a first manifestation of the conflict, which may escalate towards more violent acts, particularly when one partner or both are lacking in communication skills. In fact, several studies have shown that psychologically aggressive behaviours precede and predict the development of physically aggressive behaviours, supporting the hypothesized progression from psychological to physical aggression in young couples (O'Leary & Woodin, 2009). The desire to maintain or to (re)establish individual control within the conflictual exchange, a process involving both males and females, can be related to this progression (Connolly et al., 2010; Frieze, 2005). Olson (2002), analysing patterns of communication in escalating conflictual interactions, made a distinction

between aggressive and violent relationships. The aggressive couple has a symmetrical relationship in which both parties share power and are equally prone to use low-to-medium aggression, including verbal and non-contact physical acts. The violent couple, too, has a symmetrical relationship in terms of power and violence, but in this case the violence includes physical acts and severe verbal aggression, and both partners act violently in order to maintain or (re)establish individual control.

Moving from these considerations, the present study aimed to analyse if and how different theoretically defined patterns of reciprocal involvement in dating aggression (psychological vs. psychological and physical) are associated with different qualities of dating relationship, i.e., level of conflict, imbalance of power and degree of support. Although the escalation of conflict can be related to a causal and developmental model (from verbal or psychological conflict to physical aggression), in the present study we considered a cross-sectional perspective where the sequential steps of the conflict dynamics were represented by a distinct pattern of relationship between the two partners. We assumed that RPPA and RPA groups differentiate from the couples where partners are not involved (NI) in any type of partner violence by their more compromised profile characterized by higher levels of conflict and lower levels of support. Furthermore, the RPPA group might show a higher level of conflict and imbalance of power along with a lower level of support compared to RPA. Given the relevance of gender in this research field, all the analyses were controlled for possible gender effects. However, as gender symmetry was found in terms of frequency of behaviours (Archer, 2000) and gender invariance was found in terms of dating aggression processes involving conflict and imbalance of power (Connolly et al., 2010), we assumed that gender does not affect the relations between quality and involvement in different reciprocal profiles.

Cross-cultural considerations

Most studies on dating aggression have been conducted in the USA, Canada, the UK and New Zealand (see Archer, 2006) and only recently has research extended to Italy and Spain. Although some studies have already been published in both countries (Menesini & Nocentini, 2008, 2009; Muñoz-Rivas, Graña, O'Leary, & González, 2007a, 2007b), none presents a direct comparison between the two countries. A previous study showed the reciprocal involvement of partners in both roles of perpetrator and victim in Italy (Menesini & Nocentini, 2008), but no specific investigation has yet been conducted on this profile among Spanish adolescents.

On a general level, Italy and Spain are similar nations. They are neighbouring Western European nations whose cultures, languages, and

social identities have much in common. Italians and Spaniards have a similar approach to life and share the same types of values in business, education, and in family and religious contexts. In relation to partner violence, the high levels reported in both countries have recently drawn political attention to the problems of family and gender-based violence. A large national study on women carried out in Italy reported that 14.3% of participants had been victims of physical or sexual assault by their own partner or ex-partner at least once during their life (Italian Institute of Statistics, 2006). In Spain, a similar study showed a figure of 9.6% of women reporting partner violence (Instituto de la Mujer, 2006). Focusing on adolescence and young adulthood, physical dating aggression in Spain showed a higher involvement than in American samples (Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2007b); percentages of involvement in Italy are similar to those obtained in North America for physical dating aggression but higher for psychological aggression (Connolly et al., 2010). From these considerations, we expected to find a higher involvement in dating aggression in the Spanish sample as compared to the Italian one.

In relation to predictors of dating aggression, a study comparing Italian and Canadian youth showed that conflict was a significant factor in both groups, whereas the pathway from power imbalance to dating aggression was significant just for Italy (Connolly et al., 2010). This result underlines the fact that in Italy the perception of imbalance of power in the dyad is a possible cause for fighting. Are Italian and Spanish adolescents similar in relation to mechanisms leading to reciprocal dating aggression? Given the cultural similarity between Italy and Spain, we expected to find similar structural paths in the two countries.

The present study

The present study aimed to: (1) define groups of participants characterized by different profiles of involvement in aggressive acts—reciprocal involvement in physical and psychological aggression (RPPA), reciprocal involvement in psychological aggression only (RPA) and not involved (NI) and evaluate gender and country differences; and (2) analyse whether the multivariate effects of predictors (gender, conflict, imbalance of power and support) on different dating aggression profiles was moderated by country.

METHOD

Sample

Adolescents ($N = 588$) from two European cities (Florence, Central Italy) and Seville (Southern Spain) participated in the study. Since the present

study focused only on students who had a current romantic relationship, 284 students were excluded from the analysis as they were neither having a romantic relationship nor had had one in the past. The final sample consisted of 304 adolescents (163 Spain; 141 Italy). Sample characteristics are shown in Table 1. The sample was representative of the school distribution in Italy and Spain.

TABLE 1
Sample descriptive statistics

		<i>Italy</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>Diff.</i>
<i>Sex</i>	Male	52 (36.9%)	58 (35.6%)	<i>ns</i>
	Female	89 (63.1%)	105 (64.4%)	
<i>Age (Mean and SD)</i>		17.29 (0.982)	17.14 (1.094)	<i>ns</i>
<i>Parent education</i>	Elementary and middle school	39 (27.8%)	124 (75.2%)	$\chi^2(2, 488) = 159.497^{***}$
	High-school degree	69 (48.9%)	16 (10.2%)	
	University degree	33 (23.1%)	123 (14.5%)	
<i>Ethnicity</i>	Italy/Spain	136 (96.6%)	160 (98.6%)	<i>ns</i>
	Others	5 (3.4%)	3 (0.4%)	
<i>Mean relationship length (Mean and SD)</i>		45.31 (46.26)	56.01 (53.51)	<i>ns</i>
<i>Quality of romantic relationship (Mean and SD)</i>	Conflict	2.11 (0.71)	2.30 (0.77)	$F(1, 298) = 5.053^*$
	Imbalance of power	2.01 (1.03)	1.71 (0.81)	$F(1, 295) = 8.434^{**}$
	Support	3.68 (0.88)	4.22 (0.66)	$F(1, 298) = 36.995^{***}$
<i>Dating aggression (Mean and SD)</i>	Psychological dating aggression perpetrated	0.46 (0.62)	0.49 (0.56)	<i>ns</i>
	Psychological dating aggression received	0.36 (0.59)	0.42 (0.56)	<i>ns</i>
	Physical dating aggression perpetrated	0.12 (0.28)	0.24 (0.43)	$F(1, 292) = 8.006^{**}$
	Physical dating aggression received	0.11 (0.27)	0.20 (0.34)	$F(1, 292) = 5.593^*$

Measures

Quality of dating relationships. Dating relationship quality was measured by the Network Relationships Inventory (NRI; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992). This measure comprises 17 items, which assess three subscales on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *never true* to *always true*: (1) nine items assess “support” defined as communication (I tell my boy/girlfriend things I would not want others to know) and commitment (I’m sure this relationship will continue in the future); (2) six items were related to conflict in the dyad (I get upset with my boy/girlfriend); and (3) two items were related to imbalance of power in the dyad (How often does someone tend to be bossy in this relationship?).

Dating aggression. Dating aggression was assessed using four scales measuring psychological and physical aggression perpetrated and received. Although physical aggression is often reported as the main index of dating aggression, the relevance of considering other verbal and psychological acts was underlined by several authors on account of their interrelated nature (Capaldi & Crosby, 1997; O’Leary & Slep, 2003). Following the definition by Straus (1979) and Capaldi and Crosby (1997), we decided to include verbal aggression, offence and threatening in the category of psychological aggression. The first two scales comprised nine items for perpetrated acts and nine items for received acts, derived from the Physical Violence Scale of Conflict Tactics Scale (Nocentini et al., in press; Straus, 1979), i.e., pushing, grabbing, or shoving; slapping, kicking, or biting. The second two scales were derived from the Relational Aggression Scale (Crick, 1995) and consisted of three items focused on psychological aggression perpetrated and three items on psychological aggression received (spreading rumours or telling mean lies to make one’s boy/girlfriend unpopular; telling one’s boy/girlfriend she/he won’t be liked anymore unless she/he does what she/he is being told to do; teasing). The items of the four scales were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *never* to *always*.

Plan of analyses

The analysis consisted of three steps. As this study was based on a cross-cultural comparison, all the scales used had to have measurement equivalence across groups in order to obtain meaningful differences (Collins, Raju, & Edwards, 2000). As reported by Collins and colleagues (2000), one of the best methods to determine scale and measure accuracy is to analyse the equivalence of the construct among different sociodemographic groups. If the structure is confirmed across groups—specifically the metric and scalar invariance—the latent factor and the measure can be generalized.

Therefore, as a preliminary step, we conducted a multiple-group confirmatory factor analysis across country for the variables considered (a series of nested models adding more stringent requirements progressively were tested; Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). In the second phase we distinguished three different profiles of reciprocal involvement in dating aggressive acts. Finally, we conducted a multiple-group multinomial logistic regression across country, considering the three profiles of reciprocal involvement in aggressive behaviours as dependent variables and gender and quality of romantic relationships as independent variables.

All these analyses were conducted using Mplus 4.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2006). The models were evaluated by means of the following overall indices: the chi-square statistic, the root-mean-square error of approximation (*RMSEA*), the comparative fit index (*CFI*), the Akaike information criteria and the Bayesian information criteria. Recommended cut-off points for these measures are: for *RMSEA* the cut-off is .08 (Brown & Cudek, 1993) and for *CFI* it is .90 (Bollen, 1989). AIC and BIC models that fit better have smaller values on these statistics.

RESULTS

Preliminary analysis

With regard to romantic relationships quality, we tested a model with three correlated latent factors: support, conflict and imbalance of power. Final results showed that, deleting one item, full metric and full scalar invariance across country was demonstrated (see Table 2). All the alpha coefficients were acceptable for both countries (imbalance of power: Italy = .79; Spain = .68; conflict: Italy = .81; Spain = .86; support: Italy = .90; Spain = .84).

With regard to dating aggression, two models (one for perpetration and one for victimization) with two correlated latent factors (physical and psychological dating aggression) were tested (see Table 2). A full metric and scalar invariance was found for the perpetrated behaviours (Model 2). Latent factors correlations were .66 and .80 in Italy and Spain, respectively. Acceptable alpha coefficients for physical dating aggression perpetrated were found (Italy = .76; Spain = .73), but they were poor for psychological dating aggression perpetrated (Italy = .58; Spain = .57). Since these scales are composed of only three items, and the average inter-item tetrachoric correlations are .48 and .32, respectively, we retained these two scales in the following analysis. A full metric and scalar invariance was found for the received behaviours (Model 2). Correlations between latent factors were .78 and .71 in Italy and Spain, respectively. All the alpha coefficients were acceptable (physical and psychological dating aggression received were: Italy = .84; Spain = .67; Italy = .63; Spain = .63, respectively).

TABLE 2
Fit indices for multiple-group confirmatory factor analysis across country on romantic relationship quality and on dating aggression

	χ^2	df	p	CFI	RMSEA	AIC	BIC	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	P
<i>Romantic relationship quality</i>										
1. Configural invariance	353.957	230	.000	.94	.062 (.049-.065)					
2. Metric invariance	385.250	244	.000	.93	.065 (.052-.077)					
3. Configural invariance ^a	329.658	201	.000	.93	.068 (.054-.081)	11224.19	11598.21			
4. Metric invariance	350.953	214	.000	.93	.068 (.055-.080)	11219.51	11546.32			
5. Scalar invariance	371.778	226	.000	.92	.068 (.055-.080)	11216.31	11499.55	31.29	14	.01
4 vs. 3								21.295	13	.07
5 vs. 4								20.825	12	.05
<i>Psychological and physical dating aggression perpetrated</i>										
1. Configural invariance	46.174	22	.002	.93	.088					
2. Metric and scalar invariance ^b	50.904	24	.001	.92	.088			9.042	4	.060
2 vs. 1										
<i>Psychological and physical dating aggression received</i>										
1. Configural invariance	20.398	19	.371	.99	.023					
2. Metric and scalar invariance	21.660	19	.301	.98	.031			4.993	3	.172
2 vs. 1										

Note: CFI = Comparative Fit Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Square Error of Approximation; AIC = Akaike information criteria; BIC = Bayesian information criteria; $\Delta\chi^2$ = differences between the two nested models χ^2 statistics; Δdf = differences between degree of freedom of the two nested models. ^aThe item "I go places and do enjoyable things with my boyfriend/girlfriend" from the Support scale was deleted given that it showed non-invariance across groups. ^bThe items of Dating Aggression scales are not normally distributed, thus we dichotomized them in presence/absence and we analysed the data using WLSMV estimator for categorical data. Using this procedure, metric and scalar invariance need to be tested at the same step and AIC and BIC are missing.

Prevalence of different reciprocal profiles

In order to create different profiles of reciprocal aggressive acts we proceeded as follows: first, we created the dichotomous prevalence for each of the four scales (presence = adolescents involved in at least one behaviour). Second, we created the dichotomous reciprocal index for each psychological and physical scale: we defined presence of reciprocal dating aggression when adolescents reported a presence of dating aggression perpetrated and received. Third, we created three groups of participants: (1) RPPA are those participants who are reciprocally involved as perpetrators and victims in physical and in psychological aggressive behaviours; (2) RPA are those who are reciprocally involved as perpetrators and victims only in psychological aggressive behaviours; and (3) NI are those who are not involved in reciprocal dating aggressive relationships. Students with missing data in some variables were excluded. Overall, the following analyses involved 273 adolescents: 130 Italians (86 females) and 143 Spanish (94 females).

Results showed that out of the total sample, 46 (16.9%) students were classified as RPPA, 97 (35.5%) as RPA, and 130 (47.6%) as NI. In Spain, the percentages were: 20.3% for RPPA (22% males; 19% females), 37.8% for RPA (39% males; 37% females) and 42% for NI (39% males; 44% females): gender differences were not found in this sample, $\chi^2(2, 143) = 0.373$; $p = .830$. In Italy the corresponding percentages were: 13.1% for RPPA (20% males; 9% females), 33.1% for RPA (19% males; 41% females) and 53.8% for NI (61% males; 50% females): the test of chi-square showed slight significant gender differences, $\chi^2(2, 130) = 7.928$; $p = .02$, but no standardized residuals were significant. Overall, no significant differences were found across country, $\chi^2(2, 273) = 4.538$; $p = .103$.

Modelling the association between relationship quality and different profiles of dating aggression

A multiple-group multinomial logistic regression across country was used in order to analyse the moderation of country on the association between predictors and the three groups. We investigated a model with gender, conflict, imbalance of power and support as predictors. In addition, the interactions between gender and the other predictors and between conflict and power, given their relevant interplay, were tested for statistical significance. Since no interactions between gender and predictors were found, we deleted them from the final model.

The comparison between the constrained (log likelihood = -429.956, $df = 15$; scaling correction = 0.981; $AIC = 889.912$; $BIC = 943.777$) and the unconstrained models (log likelihood = -421.879, $df = 25$; scaling correction = 0.966; $AIC = 893.758$; $BIC = 983.532$) showed a non-significant

difference in chi-square difference test ($Trd=17.123$; $df=10$; $p=.072$), suggesting the constrained model as the best model and thus the structural paths are equal across country. Table 3 shows the regression coefficients and the odds ratio for the final model.

Significant positive associations were found for conflict and imbalance of power in the RPPA profile versus NI. A unit of change in conflict and in imbalance of power increases the odds of being in the RPPA rather than in the NI group by about 6 and 7 times, respectively. Significant negative association was found for support in the RPA profile versus NI. A unit of change in support decreases the odds of being in the RPA rather than in the NI group by about 0.64 times. Finally, the comparison between RPPA and RPA showed a significant positive effect of conflict and imbalance of power and a significant effect of interaction between conflict and imbalance of power. With regard to the main effect, RPA are less likely than RPPA to be associated with conflict and imbalance of power: a unit of change in conflict and in imbalance of power increases the odds of being in the RPPA rather than in the RPA group by about 4 and 7 times, respectively. In order to evaluate the significant effect of the interaction term, we evaluated the odds ratios (OR) of conflict in two levels of imbalance of power (lower and higher than 50th percentile). The odds ratio in the first group ($N=245$) was significant and negative ($OR=0.517^{**}$). The odds ratio in the second group ($N=24$) was marginally significant and positive ($OR=5.576^*$). Lower levels of conflict are more likely to be associated with RPA than with RPPA when the level of imbalance of power is low; on the contrary, with a high level of imbalance of power, higher levels of conflict are more likely to be associated

TABLE 3
Betas (and standard errors) resulting from multiple-group multinomial logistic regression (constrained model across Italy and Spain) and odds ratios (OR)

	<i>Psychological vs. Not involved</i>	<i>Psychological and physical vs. Not involved</i>	<i>Psychological and physical vs. Psychological</i>
Gender (M vs. F)	0.571 (0.32); OR = 1.770	0.143 (0.42); OR = 1.154	-0.43 (0.42); OR = 0.651
Conflict	0.288 (0.44); OR = 1.334	1.86*** (0.59); OR = 6.424	1.572*** (0.57); OR = 4.816
Imbalance of power	-0.063 (0.56); OR = 0.940	2.008*** (0.74); OR = 7.448	2.071*** (0.69); OR = 7.993
Support	-0.447*** (0.19); OR = 0.639	-0.29 (0.26); OR = 0.748	0.157 (0.25); OR = 1.170
Conflict × Imbalance of power	0.130 (0.22); OR = 1.139	-0.49 (0.26); OR = 0.613	-0.62*** (0.24); OR = 0.538

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

with RPA than RRPA. Overall, when the imbalance of power is low, RPPA is characterized by higher levels of conflict than RPA: when the imbalance of power is high, RPPA is characterized by lower levels of conflict than RPA.

DISCUSSION

Literature on dating aggression has shown a pattern of reciprocal involvement of both partners in perpetrated and received behaviours as the most frequent type of aggression occurring between young partners. This result was confirmed in the present study where about 50% of the adolescents were involved in some reciprocal forms of aggressive acts toward their partner.

The present study demonstrated that multiple patterns of aggression can be found in situational couple violence and that some relational factors can influence this distinction. Although the main feature of situational couple violence is the reciprocity of the acts and the symmetry of power, distinct patterns can be found considering the interplay between different levels of aggression, conflict and imbalance of power. Three theoretically defined patterns of involvement in dating aggression—non involvement (NI), reciprocal involvement in psychological aggression only (RPA), reciprocal involvement in psychological and physical aggression (RPPA)—differ in relation to these key variables. Following the family research approach, results stressed the role of the escalation of conflict as a situational correlate of aggression between partners (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Partners involved in RPPA are more likely to have a higher level of conflict and power imbalance than NI and RPA couples. However, the RPA group did not show any differences for conflict and imbalance of power as compared to the NI group. This result can be related to Italian and Spanish cultural habits. It may be that this behaviour is more “normative” for these two countries than for other cultures. A broader and more complete definition of psychological dating aggression may better explain these results.

Furthermore, RPPA is more likely to have a higher level of conflict than RPA when the imbalance of power is low. The interaction between conflict and imbalance of power showed an interesting distinction within RPPA couples. Some of them present a high level of conflict and a low level of imbalance of power, and a minority present high levels of imbalance of power and low levels of conflict. If the former represents the extreme of the continuum of a pattern of reciprocal aggression characterized by escalating levels of conflict and by symmetry in power between partners, the latter may represent a pattern of aggression where partners fight mainly for power and control in the relationship. Literature has shown that the aggression is more likely to be reciprocated when power and control are more balanced between partners (Olson, 2002). Our results showed that symmetrical

relationships can be characterized by high level of imbalance of power. However, this condition is not represented by a dominant and submitted status but rather by an aggressive dynamic where both partners fight for control during a conflict. The reason for fighting is related to the need to establish control during a specific conflict or in relation to making a decision. This finding is in accord with the classification proposed by Olson (2002, 2004), where aggressive and violent relationships are distinguished on the basis of the level of aggression and of the extent to which the partners fight for control.

The role of support, defined as communication and expectations for the future, showed a significant effect in comparing the NI and the RPA groups. Young people involved in RPA are characterized by lower level of support than those NI and this is in line with our hypothesis. However, no significant effects were found in the comparison between the RPPA and the other two groups. This result was unexpected and may be associated with literature showing that dating aggression often occurs in long-lasting and more committed relationships (Capaldi & Crosby, 1997). Reporting a good level of support despite a high level of aggression seems to respond to the need of maintaining the relationship.

An additional strength of this study is the comparison of results between two cities located in two different European countries, Italy and Spain, where only a little research has been conducted so far. The overall invariance of latent factors across the two samples allowed us to establish a significant comparison. Overall, though no significant country effect was found in the comparison between the involvement in the three groups, other significant differences were found. First, Spanish adolescents reported higher mean levels of physical aggression perpetrated and received than Italians. These results are in line with studies underlining a more consistent involvement in dating aggression in Spain as compared to other Western countries (Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2007b). Second, in relation to the quality of romantic relationships, the Italian group showed higher levels of power imbalance and lower levels of support and conflict. Despite the differences at descriptive level, no significant country-related moderation of the studied dynamics was found, supporting a generalization of our results for the two samples. The relevant role that imbalance of power has in either country could be culturally related: dating partners fight for control during a conflict or in relation to making a decision.

These results have relevant implications for prevention programmes, which, for both countries, have to be focused on conflictual dynamics and on positive strategies to solve them. Though few interventions on dating aggression are focused on this perspective of reciprocity more efforts are needed in Europe to tackle the problem by taking into consideration the perspective of both partners (Graham-Kevan, 2007).

Finally, some limitations of the study should be discussed and possibly overcome in future studies. First, future research has to consider not only the self-reported point of view on dating aggression but also the perspectives of both partners, particularly in relation to the reciprocal involvement profile. Second, a deeper understanding of the imbalance of power should be pursued considering the structure of symmetry and its direction. Third, the dimension of support showed a contradictory role, consequently future studies should progress towards understanding how aggression and support interact to maintain risk relationships over time. Fourth, the generalizability of Tuscany's and Andalusia's samples needs to be extended to more representative national samples for each country. Furthermore, studies on non-Western countries could be relevant in order to understand whether different society values can affect the dynamics of reciprocal aggressive young couples. Finally, longitudinal studies can contribute to a more thoroughly understanding of the meaning and the development of dating aggression and reciprocal involvement in conflict dyads of adolescents and young adults in either country.

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