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Research Article

Knowledge of One's Own Rights, False Beliefs About Quality Relationships, and Dating Violence Victimization: The Mediating Role of Setting Boundaries

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine the relationship between false beliefs about what makes a quality relationship, knowledge of one's own rights, the ability to set personal boundaries, and adolescent dating violence victimization. The research was conducted on a sample of 895 adolescents who completed a battery of tests, including the Scale of false beliefs about a quality relationship, Knowledge of one's own rights in a relationship scale, Setting boundaries in a relationship scale, and the Victimization in a relationship questionnaire. The results showed gender differences and similarities in the antecedents of dating violence. Personal boundaries acted as a full mediator between false beliefs about the quality of a relationship and all forms of dating victimization in girls and psychological violence in boys. On the other hand, knowing one's own rights significantly predicted victimization only in a male subsample, and this relationship was mediated by the ability to set boundaries. Our results also indicated that boys were more likely than girls to experience all forms of violence. Possible practical implications of the results are discussed.

Keywords: dating violence, adolescence, beliefs, rights, personal boundaries

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Introduction

Adolescence is a developmental phase during which individuals establish their first relationships with partners (Hickman et al., 2004), have their first romantic experiences, learn about partnerships (Smetana et al., 2006), and develop their own attitudes and opinions regarding quality relationships or a lack thereof. Given that adolescents encounter a new form of intimate relationships, it is likely that the range of their communication and relationship skills is limited (Fredlanda et al., 2005). For these reasons, adolescence is a particularly vulnerable period when it comes to dating violence (Hickman et al., 2004).

Dating violence is a form of intimate partner violence (IPV), one of the major health and human rights issues faced in the world. Teen dating violence is a term that describes a range of abusive behaviors that preteens, adolescents, and young adults experience in the context of a past or present romantic or dating relationship. The behaviors include physical and sexual violence, stalking, and psychological abuse, which includes control and coercion (Mulford & Blachman-Demner, 2013, p.756). Manifestations of these forms of violence can be numerous: physical violence (e.g., pushing, slapping, hitting, kicking, pulling hair, biting); sexual violence, including all unwanted behaviors of a sexual nature (e.g., unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion, sexual assault, rape); psychological violence (humiliation, insults, isolation from friends and family, using derogatory names, controlling behavior, verbal and emotional threats; Ajduković & Ručević, 2009; Niolon et al., 2017). Dating violence can occur in both homosexual and heterosexual relationships and may be experienced in person or via technology. In this paper, we focused on exploring dating violence that occurs in heterosexual relationships in person.

Data on the prevalence of dating violence vary across studies. Recent research shows that around 36% of adolescents have experienced violent situations (Dosil et al., 2020), mostly aggressive behavior, such as being punched or held tightly by their partner, being kicked or bitten, stalking etc. (Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2022; Rothman et al., 2020). Furthermore, approximately 1 in 12 adolescents reported experiencing physical dating violence, whereas about 1 in 10 reported experiencing sexual dating violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2025). The results of a meta-

analytic study conducted in several European countries (Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021) showed that the prevalence of victimization varies across different countries and also differs by gender. Several previous studies have confirmed that girls perpetrate more violence in relationships or at least as much as boys (O'Leary et al., 2008; Sears et al., 2007; Wolfe et al., 2001). Additionally, some researchers have suggested that the violence perpetrated by girls is less severe and often occurs in response to experienced violence (Archer, 2000).

The consequences of dating violence are varied and can sometimes be very serious, particularly when the violence takes place during a time when partners are forming their identity (Stith et al., 1992). Some of the consequences of victimization are higher levels of depression, suicidal thoughts, anxiety, somatic mental health symptoms, posttraumatic stress disorder, low self-esteem, poorer educational outcomes, worse general health, reproductive disorders, and poorer pregnancy outcomes (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Campbell, 2002; Kaura & Lohman, 2007; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001; Papadakaki et al., 2009; Plichta, 2004; Slee & Rigby, 1993). Given these critical links between dating violence and undesirable outcomes for youth and young adults, prevention of this kind of abuse is extremely important.

Over the past thirty years, many theories from different disciplines (sociology, psychology, social work, feminist studies, public health, etc.) have been offered to explain the risk factors of intimate partner violence. Etiological theories of intimate partner violence are numerous and range from genetic theories, which focus on the heritability of aggression, to sociological theories, which emphasize the cultural context and the role of society (e.g., social learning theory, social control theory, feminist theory, resource theory, etc.). Since many personal characteristics have been recognized as important antecedents of victimization, psychological theories have also been used as the conceptual framework of intimate partner violence (e.g., theories of psychopathology, family system theory, attachment theory, etc.). There are also contemporary theories of IPV, such as the neurobiological theory of trauma, theories of intersectionality, and human rights (Figueredo et al., 2012; Kelly, 2011; McLeod et al., 2020), which provide a better framework for understanding the risk factors of IPV and for developing more

effective prevention strategies for dealing with it. Finally, some efforts have been made to propose a more integrative approach to the phenomenon of IPV (e.g., Bell & Naugle, 2008; Johnson, 2006; Winstok, 2007).

One such attempt is Dutton's ecological systems theory (2006). Dutton proposed a nested ecological theory – a framework closely related to the systems theory for understanding intimate partner violence. He identified four levels of systemic social context that bear upon individual behavior. The macrosystem is composed of cultural values and belief systems. It reflects sociocultural influences, such as factors that maintain gender inequality, gender role norms, and pro-violence societal norms (Edleson & Tolman, 1992). The exosystem connects the family and broader environment, covering all the relevant groups and institutions. The microsystem refers to the family as the immediate context that surrounds the individual. It includes factors such as the interaction between intimacy and independence within a dyad (boundaries), the individual's predisposition toward jealousy, and violent responses as a reaction to perceived abandonment (Dutton, 1995). Finally, ontogenetic factors refer to an individual's personal development, and they "define what a particular individual's unique developmental history brings into this three-level social context" (p. 19). Actually, Dutton focuses on the individual as the unit of analysis, but he considers an individual's environment and relationships to be essential for understanding their behavior. The basic premise of his ecological explanations is that each level within the ecosystem interacts with the systems closest to it. Consequently, the social systems (macrosystem and exosystem) have only an indirect influence on a person through the micro-system. The influence of a boarder system is mediated by factors within the intervening ecological systems (Dutton, 1995).

We wanted to follow this line of thinking and explore risk factors of violence during adolescence (knowledge of one's [human] rights, false beliefs about the quality of a relationship, and personal boundaries), all conceptualized as nested within broader social and relational contexts. More precisely, the knowledge of one's (human) rights and beliefs about quality relationships are individual characteristics derived in a broader context – the macrosystem (e.g., the feminist model and social learning theory). Further, personal boundaries are learned in the primary family and through the

relationship with the primary caregiver (microsystem; e.g., the family system theory and attachment theory). Besides focusing on the complex and interrelated networks of risk factors, we aimed to include other factors that are insufficiently researched but are commonly referred to in practice (e.g., personal boundaries) or mentioned in the contemporary theory of violence (e.g., human rights). The inclusion of these underexplored factors could represent an important contribution to existing scientific knowledge on intimate partner violence.

Human rights are rights established in legally enforceable norms that protect both individuals and groups from actions that endanger human dignity and fundamental freedom (Nikolić-Ristanović & Dokmanović, 2006). McLeod et al. (2020) argued that a human rights perspective provides a strong foundation for promoting social justice across diverse areas of professional practice. They emphasized that policy and institutional documents addressing women's rights and autonomy are particularly relevant for developing a holistic understanding of IPV. Such a perspective may also facilitate further advances in research, education, and professional practice. Within this broader human rights framework, it is important to consider how personal rights are experienced within close interpersonal relationships. Tolmacz (2011) highlighted the specific nature of rights and entitlements in close dyadic relationships. Because these relationships are characterized by high levels of intimacy, they generate needs, desires, and expectations that differ from those present in other social relationships. Consequently, the exercise of personal rights in intimate relationships is often intertwined with partners' mutual expectations. At the same time, dating violence and other forms of IPV constitute violations of fundamental human rights. From this perspective, individual differences in the importance attributed to personal rights may influence how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to potentially harmful partner behaviors. This raises the question of whether the importance individuals attach to exercising personal rights (e.g., the right to diversity or freedom of expression) is related to their experiences of partner violence.

There are often culturally-based misconceptions about the characteristics of a healthy and high-quality relationship. Beliefs that are associated with upholding traditional gender stereotypes, justifying the use

of violence during conflicts, and expecting positive consequences from such conflict resolution are risk factors for relationship violence (O'Keefe, 2005; Riggs & Caulfield, 1997). Some studies confirm the specific relationship between the acceptance of traditional views regarding women's roles in society and gender. Women with such attitudes are more likely to be victims of dating violence, while men are more likely to commit dating violence (Currie, 1983; Sigelman et al., 1984). Hodžić (2007) found that girls who support gender stereotypes in which women are seen as passive, caring, and sensitive are more likely to experience jealous and possessive behavior from their partners. Overall, studies suggest that there is a relationship between justifying teen dating violence and its occurrence (Foshee et al., 2001; Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004; Williams et al., 2008). This correlation between such an attitude and dating violence and victimization is explained by the belief that violent behavior is justified (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004) and by accepting dating violence as a norm (Foshee et al., 2001). According to Foshee et al. (1999), family violence and its subsequent perpetration in girls and boys were mainly facilitated by an accepting attitude towards dating violence.

Finally, personal boundaries are commonly defined as invisible demarcations that regulate interactions between individuals and their surroundings, providing a sense of security, clarity, and comfort in everyday life (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008; Ben-Ze'ev, 2011). In romantic relationships, boundaries function as mechanisms through which individuals learn to identify, communicate, and negotiate their needs, preferences, and emotions in intimate contexts (Cook, 2015). The ability to set and maintain boundaries with a partner is therefore considered a fundamental skill that adolescents and young adults must acquire to establish supportive relationships free of abuse (Cook, 2015; Piercy, 2024). The importance of boundary-setting is also reflected in violence prevention programs. For example, *Shifting Boundaries* (Taylor et al., 2015) and the *Expect Respect* program (Ball et al., 2012) explicitly address boundaries, while broader interventions such as *Dating Matters™* (Tharp et al., 2011) incorporate boundary-related content as part of relationship skills education. Despite their central role in practice, boundaries are often inconsistently defined and rarely measured directly in empirical research (Niolon et al., 2019; Zarling & Berta, 2017). Recent advances, such as Hutchison's (2024)

operationalization of boundary-setting styles, represent an important step toward systematic measurement, yet the field remains underdeveloped. Earlier studies in the region (e.g., Ajduković et al., 2011a) primarily aimed to map the prevalence and gender differences in adolescent dating violence, as well as to identify school and psychosocial correlates relevant for its prediction. Their approach was situated within a broader framework of adolescent development, focusing on how inaccurate beliefs about relationships and the perceived importance of personal rights contribute to violent dynamics. As part of this analytical framework, readiness to set boundaries was also introduced, examined through gender differences in adolescents' willingness to establish boundaries in relationships. However, boundary-setting was not further examined as a predictor of victimization. At the same time, existing research suggests that individuals with poor boundary-setting skills, often associated with low self-esteem, anxious attachment, or adverse family history, are at greater risk of victimization (Bonache et al., 2017; van Geel et al., 2018; Wekerle et al., 2009; Wolfe et al., 2004). This indicates a theoretical and practical gap between prevention program content and empirical evidence.

This study seeks to address the existing gap by examining boundary-setting as a risk factor that has been highlighted in prevention practice and contemporary theories of violence but remains insufficiently empirically investigated. Drawing on the ecological model of intimate partner violence (Dutton, 2006), we developed a framework in which macrosystem-level factors (knowledge of rights, false beliefs about relationships) and microsystem-level processes (boundary-setting) interact to predict adolescent dating violence victimization. Specifically, we formulated a model to test the following research questions: 1) Can the knowledge of one's rights and false beliefs about the quality of relationships (shaped by the macrosystem) predict adolescent dating violence victimization? And 2) Is the ability to set boundaries (formed in interactions with significant others in the microsystem) a mediator in these relationships? In addition to testing the model, the present study also aims to examine the prevalence of dating violence victimization by gender, given that previous research has produced varying results (O'Leary et al., 2008; Sears et al., 2007; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021; Wincentak et al., 2017). Accordingly, the proposed model will also be tested on subsamples of girls and boys.

Method

Sample and procedure

Since there were no empirical data from previous research on the intercorrelations between the examined variables, we were unable to conduct an a priori power analysis to justify the sample size. Instead, we followed the rule of requiring more than 200 participants for more complex statistical analyses, including the structural equation modeling (Kline, 2016). The study included 1,022 students from eighteen secondary schools in eastern and southern Serbia. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Third grade level. The sample was drawn from both grammar schools and vocational schools. Since many vocational schools have a three-year program, only third-grade students were included in order to ensure sample consistency.
- Currently in a romantic relationship or having been in one during the previous six months. This criterion followed the instructions provided in the questionnaires.

The final analytic sample consisted of 895 adolescents who were currently in a heterosexual relationship or had been in one within the previous six months. Of these, 513 (57.3%) were women. Participants were aged between 17 and 19 years (M = 17.89, SD = 0.35). The research was approved by the Council for Ethical Issues of the Serbian Psychological Society (No 12-2019). Participation in the study was anonymous and voluntary. The questionnaires were administered in a paper-and-pencil format in classrooms (i.e., group format) during school and class hours (approximately 25 minutes). Informed consent was obtained from each participant and the parents of underage students. In the end, the participants received the contact details of a psychologist with whom they could talk if they felt the need to.

Instruments

The research used a battery of tests to examine violence in relationships between young people, developed by a group of authors from Croatia (Ajduković et al., 2011b, 2011c, 2011d, 2011e). Since the original

items were in Croatian, minimal adjustments were made during their translation into Serbian. A back-translation confirmed the consistency in the meaning of the items formulated in both Croatian and Serbian.

The Scale of False Beliefs About a Quality Relationship

The Scale of False Beliefs About a Quality Relationship (Ajduković et al., 2011c) is an 18-item (e.g., “A young man/woman must always know where and with whom his/her girlfriend/boyfriend is”) measure designed to assess false beliefs about a quality relationship. Items are rated on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In the present study, the scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency (α = .80).

The Knowledge of One’s Own Rights in a Relationship Scale

The Knowledge of One’s Own Rights in a Relationship Scale (Ajduković et al., 2011d) is a 10-item (e.g., “I can openly express my opinion”) scale designed to assess knowledge of the rights that people have in romantic relationships. Items are rated on a scale from 1 (*it doesn’t matter to me at all*) to 5 (*it is extremely important to me*). In this sample, the scale showed high reliability (α = .89).

The Setting Boundaries in a Relationship Scale

The Setting Boundaries in a Relationship Scale (Ajduković et al., 2011e) is a 12-item (e.g., “I would allow my boyfriend/girlfriend to determine who I will hang out with when I am not with him/her”) scale designed to assess a person’s ability and willingness to set personal boundaries. The items are rated on a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*almost always*). A lower score on the scale indicates better ability to set boundaries in a relationship. The scale demonstrated good internal consistency in the present study (α = .85).

The Victimization in a Relationship Questionnaire

The Victimization in a Relationship Questionnaire (Ajduković et al., 2011b) is a 30-item scale designed to assess three forms of violence: psychological (19 items; e.g., “My boyfriend/girlfriend insulted or cursed me”), physical (7 items; e.g., “My boyfriend/girlfriend slapped me”), and sexual violence (4 items; e.g., “My boyfriend/girlfriend threatened me in order

to have sex”). The questionnaire was modeled on the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS-2; Straus et al., 2003), with changes and new items added that were appropriate to the age and type of adolescent relationships, culture, and typical forms of violent behaviour among young people. The content was adapted according to the characteristic behaviors of young people who are typically not in a long-term relationship that involves living together. Respondents indicated how often they had experienced a certain form of behavior by their partner in the last 6 months, using a scale from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very often/several times a week*). In the present study, internal consistency for the subscales was high: psychological violence (α = .93), physical violence (α = .89), and sexual violence (α = .80).

Data analysis

In this study, the independent variables were False beliefs about quality relationships and Knowledge of one’s own rights in a relationship. The dependent variables were three forms of dating violence victimization (psychological, physical, and sexual violence). The ability to set boundaries was viewed as a mediating variable.

During the data screening, participants with more than 10% of their data missing were removed. For participants with less than 10% of missing data, the data were imputed using the expectation-maximization method (Gold & Bentler, 2000). The data were analyzed using SPSS and AMOS. SPSS 26 was used for descriptive and correlation analysis of the data, and the software AMOS 20 was adopted to assess the psychometric properties and measurement invariance of the instrument, in order to test the model fit of a mediation model, path parameters, and indirect effects. In AMOS, when testing the structural equation model (SEM), the asymptotically distribution free method (often used to estimate models without a normal distribution assumption of variables) and the bootstrap method were used.

Results

Descriptive statistics were computed to determine the percentages of participants who experienced dating violence. Table 1 shows the percentages of participants who experienced psychological, physical or sexual violence and certain manifestations of these forms of violence at least

once. The results show that the largest percentage of participants experienced psychological violence, both in the whole sample and in the subsamples.

Table 1

Percentages of Participants Who Experienced Dating Violence

	Sample	Subsample – girls	Subsample – boys
Psychological violence	60.7%	59.3%	62.6%
Physical violence	31.6%	24.4%	41.4%
Sexual violence	17.4%	12.9%	23.6%

Note. N_{boys} = 382; N_{girls}= 513.

Subsequently, Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for the study variables across the subsamples of boys and girls.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variables

	M boys	*SD* boys	*Sk* boys	*Ku* boys	*M* girls	*SD* girls	*Sk* girls	*Ku* girls
False beliefs about quality relationships	2.13	.57	.59	.23	1.78	.43	1.43	4.38
Knowledge of one's own rights in a relationship	4.14	.07	-1.19	2.21	4.13	.72	-2.7	12.99
Setting the boundaries	1.70	.06	1.61	3.99	1.26	.39	3.85	23.7
Physical violence	.58	.82	2.86	8.94	.36	.60	5.28	32.4
Psychological violence	.43	.87	2.07	5.35	.16	.49	2.79	9.63
Sexual violence	.36	.88	2.99	5.35	.12	.46	5.40	9.63

Note. *Sk* – skewness; *Ku* – Kurtosis; N_{boys}= 382; N_{girls}= 513.

The Shapiro–Wilk test showed a significant departure from normality for all variables (false beliefs about quality relationships: $W(888) = .94$, $p < .001$; knowledge of one's own rights: $W(888) = .81$, $p < .001$; setting the boundaries: $W(888) = .76$, $p < .001$; physical violence: $W(888) = .45$, $p < .001$; psychological violence: $W(888) = .68$, $p < .001$; sexual violence: $W(888) = .38$, $p < .001$). Therefore, the Mann–Whitney *U* test and Spearman's correlation coefficient were used. The Mann–Whitney *U* test indicated that boys were more likely than girls to experience all forms of violence: physical violence, $U = 78{,}703$, $p < .001$; psychological violence, $U = 85{,}858.50$, $p < .001$; and sexual violence, $U = 86{,}532$, $p < .001$.

Regarding the correlations between the study variables, results (Table 3) showed that almost all variables significantly correlated with each other, with the magnitude of correlations being weak or moderate (-.12 – .67).

Table 3

Spearman's Correlations of the Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. False beliefs about quality relationships	-				
2. Knowledge of one's own rights in a relationship	-.32**	-			
3. Setting the boundaries	.49**	-.34**	-		
4. Physical violence	.29**	-.12**	.36**	-	
5. Psychological violence	.23**	-.01	.22**	.67**	-
6. Sexual violence	.34**	-.13**	.30**	.23**	.39**

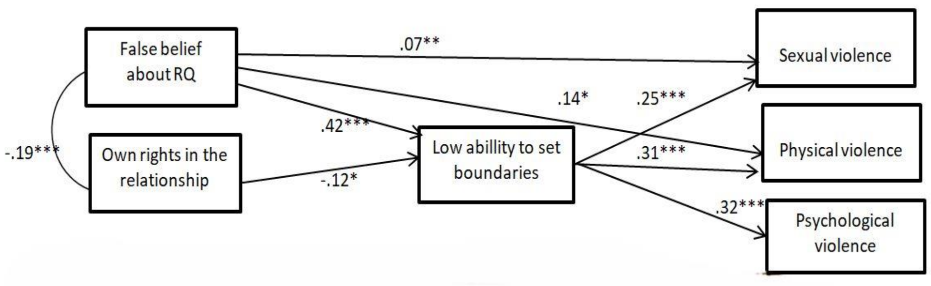
Note. $^{**}p < .01$.

In the following analyses, we attempted to answer the question of what kind of relationship exists between knowing one's own rights and false beliefs about quality relationships and different forms of dating violence, with a special analysis of the mediating role of personal boundaries in the relationship between the aforementioned variables. This analysis was carried out using structural equation modeling. Based on previous findings, we tested the model for males and females separately.

After conducting the SEM, it was determined that the theoretically derived initial model was saturated, but some pathways were not significant. In the male subsample, the pathways from knowing one's own rights toward all forms of violence were not statistically significant and were thus deleted in the following step. By testing the second model, satisfactory fit indexes were obtained (SRMR = .01; $p(\chi^2)$ = .787, CFI = 1.000, RMSEA = .000). However, it was also determined that now, by deleting the pathways from knowing one's own rights toward all forms of violence (in the second step), the relationship between false beliefs about quality relationships and psychological violence lost its statistical significance, and so this relationship was also eliminated. In the case of the third model, fit indices were somewhat lower but still satisfactory (SRMR = .026, $p(\chi^2)$ = .344, CFI = .993, RMSEA = .018). Additionally, in the third step, we reached a more parsimonious model than in the previous one, concluding that the third model of relationships between the variables was the most acceptable one (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Proposed Model of Adolescent Dating Violence for the Male Subsample



Note. Standardized beta coefficients are presented in the diagram. All pathways are significant. Error terms and covariances (between different forms of violence) are omitted for clarity.

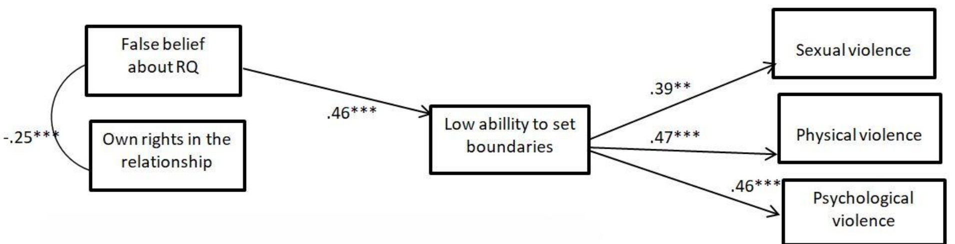
*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

The results presented in Figure 1 suggest that the total effect from false beliefs about quality relationship on physical violence was β = .20, 95% CI = [.184, .423] and β = .25, 95% CI = [.249, .594] on sexual violence, where the indirect effect through personal boundaries was significant and positive (physical: β = .13, 95% CI = [.086, .205] and sexual: β = .10, 95% CI = [.048, .177]). When it comes to psychological violence, false beliefs about quality relationships had only an indirect and positive effect (β = .13, 95%CI = [.072, .207]). Similarly, the second predictor, knowing one's own rights in the relationship had only a significant indirect effect, through setting boundaries, on all forms of dating victimization: physical (β = -.04, 95%CI = [-.084, -.002]), psychological (β = -.04, 95% CI = [-.083, -.001]) and sexual violence (β = -.03, 95% CI = [-.076, -.002]) among male adolescents.

The results of the SEM on a female subsample were different. Again, the initial model was saturated but showed that the pathway from knowing one's rights to personal boundaries was not significant, neither were any of the direct pathways from either of the predictors towards the criteria variables. After deleting non-significant paths in the following step, the model (Figure 2) with acceptable fit indices was obtained (SRMR = .07, $p(\chi^2)$ = .086, CFI = .876, RMSEA = .039).

Figure 2

Proposed Model of Adolescent Dating Violence for the Female Subsample



Note. Standardized beta coefficients are presented in the diagram. All pathways are significant. Error terms and covariances (between different forms of violence) are omitted for clarity.

*** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$.

These results indicate that female adolescent victimization can only be explained by false beliefs about quality relationships, fully mediated by

girls' capabilities to set clear boundaries in the partnership. The total, and at the same time indirect, effect of false beliefs about the quality of a relationship on physical violence was β = .22, 95% CI = [.098, .399], on psychological violence was β = .21, 95% CI = [.080, .354], and on sexual violence was β =.18, 95% CI = [.052, .414].

Discussion

This study aimed to test the model of risk factors of adolescent dating victimization. We followed the ecological model for understanding IPV and tested a model in which false beliefs about quality relationships and knowing one's own rights in the relationship predict victimization, while the ability to set boundaries mediates these relationships.

The results suggest gender similarities and differences in the antecedents of dating violence. First, we found that false beliefs about quality relationships predict all forms of violence through the inadequate boundaries that a person sets between themselves and their partner, regardless of gender. In fact, lower ability to set boundaries is a full mediator in the relationship between false beliefs and psychological violence in boys and between false beliefs and all forms of dating violence victimization in girls. Also, it is a partial mediator in the relation between false beliefs about the quality of a relationship and physical and sexual victimization in boys. Namely, wrong beliefs about what makes a quality relationship reduce the ability to establish clear boundaries within the relationship, which may, in turn, increase the likelihood of experiencing dating violence. Such findings are consistent with those of Hutchison (2024), who reported that clear boundaries were associated with lower odds of experiencing dating violence, whereas porous, protective, and controlling boundary styles were linked to increased odds. Although that study did not examine the mediating role of boundary-setting, the importance of false beliefs about quality relationships in predicting the frequency of dating violence victimization was also confirmed in the study by Ajduković et al. (2011a).

While understanding what a quality relationship should look like has quite a similar effect and underlying mechanism for boys and girls, knowing one's rights has a different position in explaining male and female victimization in adolescence. In fact, while knowing one's rights in boys

predicts their victimization, and this is, again, mediated through the ability to set boundaries, in a female subsample, knowing one's rights was not a significant predictor of any form of violence experienced; it only had an effect through its relationship with another predictor, i.e., false beliefs about a quality relationship. Such findings suggest that male adolescent victims of dating violence are less able to set personal boundaries in a relationship when they do not attach importance to exercising certain rights, such as the right to diversity (in terms of desires, needs), the right to express one's own opinion, and disagreeing with their partner. For girls, this pattern was not observed. Their perception of personal rights within the relationship was not directly related to boundary setting or experiences of victimization.

The results may be interpreted in the context of gender differences in terms of commitment to the relationship and the importance of intimacy in the relationship. Namely, research confirms that women, due to socialization, are more invested in relationships, and that satisfaction with a relationship is assessed based on established closeness and intimacy with a partner (Duncombe & Marsden, 1993). Women are relationship-oriented, since they define their sense of self by their feelings and by the quality of their relationships (Gray, 1992). It can be assumed that for women, emphasizing their own rights in a relationship is contrary to establishing closeness and intimacy with a partner, and that, therefore, beliefs about what makes a quality relationship are important for setting boundaries, while understanding one's own rights is not. So, girls may be aware of their rights in a relationship (e.g., the right to choose or say no to a partner), but this will not be important for setting boundaries; at the same time, this awareness significantly predicts setting boundaries among men. Such findings align with the established differences in the way men and women use language: independence vs. intimacy (Tannen, 1991). If we look at the data obtained in the context of the ecological model (Dutton, 1995), we can assume that the macrosystem creates a context in which gender norms, attitudes about gender equality, human rights, and notions of quality relationships are presented and further distributed through other systems (exosystem, microsystem), resulting in numerous individual differences at the ontogenetic level.

Although Ajduković et al. (2011a) did not examine the mediating effect of boundary-setting ability, contrary to our findings, they reported that

adolescents who attached greater importance to personal rights within relationships experienced dating violence more frequently than those who valued such rights less, and this effect was independent of gender. This discrepancy may reflect differences between the Serbian and Croatian samples, including variations in social norms, cultural expectations regarding gender roles, and relationship dynamics. However, the available data do not allow for a direct test of these assumptions.

The result that adolescent young men are more likely than adolescent women to be victims of dating violence also deserves attention. The previous studies also found that, in contrast to intimate partner violence in adulthood, male adolescents are more often victims of psychological and physical violence than females (Ajduković et al., 2011a; Harned, 2001; Hammock & O'Hearn, 2002; Hodžić, 2007; Luthra & Gidycz, 2006; O'Keefe, 1997; Straus & Ramirez, 2004; Shen et al., 2012; Wolfe et al., 2001). The results obtained in terms of psychological violence can be explained by the fact that girls may not approach problem-solving adequately when their desires and needs are not met. In these situations, they are prone to psychological violence. Another possibility is that psychological violence becomes a means of attack in situations where their partners behave dominantly or even violently (Hammock & O'Hearn, 2002). As an explanation for more frequent physically violent behaviour by girls in relationships, O'Keefe (1997) states that in American culture, the media convey that in no situation is it acceptable for boys to hit girls, but they romanticize girls slapping boys. It is quite reasonable to assume that such an interpretation could be applicable to our sample as well. Some researchers have also pointed out the need to consider a developmental perspective and the conflict resolution patterns that girls and boys first adopt in same-gender friendship groups during childhood and then apply in early romantic relationships (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Underwood, 2007). While girls typically adopt masculine aggressive behaviors to express frustration and resolve conflict, boys are more likely to inhibit such behaviors (McIsaac et al., 2008; Rose & Rudolph, 2006; Shute & Charlton, 2006). What further encourages these behavioral styles is the greater social acceptance of violent behavior by girls towards boys in romantic relationships compared to the reverse situation. Additionally, research shows that adolescents often report that it is entirely acceptable for a girl to hit a boy (Simon et al., 2010). Another possible explanation for these

findings is that boys report experiencing violence less often than girls, or it may be that girls have become more aggressive (Jain et al., 2010).

However, while previous research indicates that girls are more often victims of sexual violence (Hodžić, 2007; Harned, 2001; Hickman et al., 2004; O'Keefe, 1997; Shen et al., 2012), or that no gender differences exist (Ajduković et al., 2011a), this was not the case in the present study. An explanation for these results may be found in the nature of the instrument used. Namely, all the items on the sexual violence subscale refer to various types of sexual coercion. Numerous studies confirm that women also use different tactics of sexual coercion in an intimate relationship to obtain sexual acts from a male partner. The tactics used range from verbal threats, threats to end the relationship, pressure and blackmail, to threats of physical force, actual physical force, and use of a weapon (Anderson & Struckman-Johnson, 1998; Krahé et al., 2003; Russell & Oswald, 2001; Oswald & Russell, 2006; Waldner-Haugrud & Magruder, 1995).

The results of our analysis were statistically significant; however, the effect sizes were small. This may suggest that knowledge of one's own rights and beliefs about what makes a quality relationship are not the only, nor the biggest, causes of dating violence. Nevertheless, this is still an important association. We may venture to say that the findings have multiple practical implications. A particularly important result of this research is the role of personal boundaries as a mediator in the relationship between dating violence and the examined variables. In many psychotherapeutic paths, this construct is highlighted, and often one of the goals of therapy is to learn to set boundaries with close people (Ball et al., 2012; Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2008; Taylor et al., 2015). Although setting boundaries in a partnership is recognized as an important segment in prevention programs designed to combat dating violence (Joseph & Kuperminc, 2020; Taylor et al., 2013), empirical studies examining the relationship between this construct and adolescents' experiences of dating violence remain scarce. In this sense, our findings have notable theoretical significance, but also carry practical implications for efforts to prevent dating violence.

School-based youth violence prevention programs should prioritize educating adolescents about the characteristics of healthy romantic relationships. School counselors play a key role in this process by promoting

respect for one's own rights and the rights of partners, as well as by supporting the development of skills for setting and respecting personal boundaries. Educational activities such as workshops, lectures, and group discussions can help adolescents learn to express their needs and desires appropriately while respecting those of their partners. These activities may also strengthen assertive communication skills and encourage critical reflection on beliefs about dating relationships, particularly the assumption that love justifies violations of personal rights. In addition, prevention programs should include opportunities to practice emotional regulation and conflict management. Experiential methods, including role-playing, conflict simulations, and guided peer discussions, enable adolescents to rehearse constructive responses in emotionally challenging situations. Such practice increases the likelihood that acquired knowledge and skills will be transferred to real-life relationships. Finally, observed gender differences in both predictors and prevalence of dating violence victimization highlight the importance of gender-sensitive prevention programs. The value of incorporating a gender perspective has already been recognized in some existing interventions (Weisz & Black, 2001).

Despite the relevance and novelty of the topic, the present study has several limitations. First, although the sample is relatively large, it is not representative of the adolescent population in Serbia, and caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings. Second, we did not examine cyber violence as a form of dating violence, which would provide a clearer insight into the frequency of different forms of dating violence in the test sample. Third, self-assessment may not be the most appropriate method of researching sensitive topics such as partner violence. In addition to the issue of social desirability, it is possible that not all forms (e.g., subtle forms) of violence were captured by the questionnaire. Thus, future studies may consider using a qualitative approach. For instance, through interviews and/or focus groups, researchers could collect more in-depth information about the topic, thus gaining deeper insight and a better understanding of the relationships between the variables examined. Finally, while the selected variables are relevant for understanding dating violence victimization, it should be acknowledged that setting boundaries and knowledge of relationship rights have limited empirical support as predictors, and the model was primarily guided by the theoretical ecological framework. For

these reasons, future research should include a few more well-known predictor variables in addition to the variables used in this research.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that adolescents' ability to set boundaries is influenced by often inaccurate beliefs about what constitutes a quality relationship, as well as by neglecting their personal rights and freedoms. Importantly, all of these factors are modifiable through targeted educational and preventive interventions. Some violence prevention programs are already applying these findings in practice, for example by educating adolescents about healthy relationship qualities, promoting respect for personal rights, and strengthening boundary-setting skills. Educating adolescents about these aspects of healthy partnerships may help them recognize early signs of potentially harmful behavior and respond safely. However, boundary-setting skills, although valuable, need to be understood within the broader context of relationship dynamics. Accordingly, prevention efforts should also address relational processes in order to avoid unintended consequences, such as the escalation of reciprocal violence.

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Conflict of interest

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of these studies are openly available at: https://figshare.com/s/95bc218685ad01f00b84.

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