

Introduction to the special issue. Prevalence and predictors of teen dating violence: A European perspective

1 | INTRODUCTION

Having romantic relationships free of coercion and violence is one important precondition for the healthy development of adolescents. Violence in adolescent intimate relationships, further defined as *teen dating violence* (TDV), poses a real threat to adolescents' well-being. After little societal and academic attention to this issue in the 20th century, TDV has been increasingly researched in the last two decades (e.g., Exner-Cortens et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2015) and is now recognized as a severe global health problem (e.g., McNaughton Reyes et al., 2021). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2021), TDV is an adverse childhood experience and a type of intimate partner violence that occurs in adolescent relationships. TDV refers to physical, sexual, and psychological violence, and stalking, and it can take place face to face, online, and/or through technology (CDC, 2021).

The increased societal and academic attention to this topic led to numerous studies, examining its prevalence, predictors, consequences, and prevention measures (see Dardis et al., 2015; MacGregor et al., 2019; McNaughton Reyes et al., 2021; Taquette & Monteiro, 2019, for reviews; see Spencer et al., 2020, 2021; Wincentak et al., 2017, for meta-analyses); however, these studies were mainly conducted in North America. The available literature shows that TDV is a widespread issue, experienced and perpetrated by a substantial proportion of adolescents. For example, the meta-analysis by Wincentak et al. (2017) showed that the prevalence rates of TDV across studies ranged between <1% and 61%, with an overall rate of 20% for physical and 9% for sexual violence. These substantial numbers are worrisome considering that TDV is associated with several health sequelae, such as depressive symptoms, substance abuse, and (sexual) risk behaviors (see MacGregor et al., 2019; Taquette & Monteiro, 2019, for reviews). Furthermore, a wide range of predictors of TDV victimization and perpetration, examining factors at different levels, has been addressed. In particular, factors related to biographical experiences, such as witnessing parental violence or child abuse, as well as cognitive and behavioral factors, such as acceptance of violence, alcohol consumption, or experiencing or perpetrating other forms of violence in the past, were examined so far (see Dardis et al., 2015, for a review; see Spencer et al., 2020, 2021, for meta-analyses).

As mentioned above, these data emerged mainly from North America, and the vast majority of knowledge regarding TDV is derived from these North American studies.

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Although we know that TDV also exists in Europe (see Leen et al., 2013, for a review), too little recent evidence based on European data is currently available and it is unclear whether this phenomenon has the same characteristics, and whether the same mediating mechanisms can be assumed as in North America. For example, a cross-cultural study by Ludin et al. (2018) that examined TDV in the United States and Mexico showed that the strength of relationships between well-established predictors and TDV victimization varied across the two country samples. Previous evidence has also demonstrated that implementing prevention programs originally developed in the United States in other cultural contexts is not straightforward (Hamby et al., 2012). Hence, research outside North America is necessary for a more comprehensive understanding of TDV.

In Europe, corresponding with the Istanbul Convention, the primary focus of past research and prevention has been on violence against women and domestic violence (Council of Europe, 2021). Although a recent European research project provided prevalence rates of victimization by physical and sexual violence in close relationships among young women aged 18–29 (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014), this study focused solely on women from the 28 members of the European Union and did not include female adolescents under the age of 18. Also, international multi-country studies on intimate partner violence among adolescent and adult women considered only a few European countries (e.g., Serbia, Ukraine, Moldova; Peterman et al., 2015; Stöckl et al., 2014). In terms of TDV research and prevention, some single European initiatives have been conducted in recent years. This includes, for example, the comparative study of five European countries on different forms and predictors of TDV by Barter et al. (2017) and Stanley et al. (2018), and an evaluation study of a small-scale prevention program based on a mixed European sample by Vives-Cases et al. (2019). At the same time, there are several research groups, particularly in Spain, that examined intensively the topic of violence in adolescent intimate relationships in recent years (e.g., Fernández-Fuertes et al., 2020; Valdivia-Salas et al., 2021). However, no systematic research agenda has been developed for European countries yet.

2 | AIMS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

While studies in North America demonstrated that TDV is a widespread phenomenon with severe consequences, evidence on this issue from Europe is scarce yet necessary to build a broad international knowledge base. Therefore, this special issue aims to compile empirical evidence on the prevalence and predictors of TDV victimization and perpetration from different European countries, using different methodological approaches. Consistent with the goals of *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, this issue focuses on a topic that has been little researched to date outside North America, being, however, essential for the healthy development of adolescents worldwide. To address shortcomings of past research, this issue seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of TDV in Europe and to present new implications for future evidence-based programs that strengthen adolescents' relationship competence, preventing them from having negative dating experiences.

3 | CONTRIBUTIONS

This special issue presents studies on the prevalence and predictors of TDV across different European countries, including Germany, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, and Turkey.

Using different methodological approaches and examining all forms of violence (physical, psychological, sexual, and cyber violence), it addresses the topic of TDV in an innovative way.

The first contribution, a systematic review of studies on the prevalence rates of TDV victimization and perpetration by Tomaszewska and Schuster (2021), provides, for the first time, a comprehensive overview of research in Europe since 2010 based on peer-reviewed articles in popular scientific databases. Specifically, the review addresses different forms of TDV victimization and perpetration, gender differences, and measurement, comparing the compiled evidence to the North American studies, identifying gaps, and offering perspectives for future research. Particularly noteworthy is the analysis of gender differences for the different forms of TDV victimization and perpetration, reflecting the pattern of the subsequent contributions.

The second contribution, a study by Oyarzún et al. (2021), examines the prevalence rates and severity of different forms of TDV victimization in a community sample of Spanish adolescents and several at-risk samples, such as from child and adolescent mental health centers, residential care centers associated with the child welfare system, and centers in the juvenile justice system. The authors discuss the relevance of preventing adolescents from experiencing violence in their close relationships, especially in at-risk adolescents.

The third contribution by Bertok et al. (2021) examines the prevalence rates and predictors of physical TDV among Slovenian adolescents using data from the SPMAD study (Study of Parental Monitoring and Adolescent Delinquency). This contribution addresses multiple settings of adolescents and includes individual-level, peer-, school- and family-related variables as predictors of physical TDV victimization and perpetration.

Based on representative data of ninth-grade adolescents from the German federal state of Lower Saxony, the fourth contribution by Baier et al. (2021) addresses a wide range of individual and environmental variables and examines them as predictors of both physical TDV and physical school violence. The authors provided differentiated conclusions for prevention measures, suggesting that these measures should be more specific when only physical TDV is perpetrated or when physical TDV and physical school violence co-occurred.

The fifth contribution by Toplu-Demirtaş and Aracı-İyiyaydın (2021) presents data from late adolescents in Turkey, which is especially scarce because of external constraints for investigating dating violence in this country. Informed by the intergenerational transmission of violence theory, this contribution examines attitudes toward physical partner violence as a likely mechanism that might account for the association between witnessing interparental physical violence perpetration and physical TDV perpetration.

The sixth contribution by Schuster et al. (2021) is a two-wave longitudinal study with adolescents from Switzerland that analyzes two cognitive variables—moral neutralization of aggression and justification of violence against women—as predictors of physical dating violence perpetration and monitoring. As different pathways for female and male adolescents are shown in this contribution, the authors discuss the role of gender as well as implications for research, practice, and policy.

The final contribution by Bianchi et al. (2021) presents data from an Italian sample and explores the role of three components of love and the moderating role of conflicts in predicting different forms of sexting, including nonconsensual sexting and sexting under pressure. The authors show that one of the components of love, passion, predicts nonconsensual sexting when conflicts are high, while this relationship turns to be negative when conflicts are low.

4 | COMMENTARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Experts in the field, Barbara Krahe and Manuel Eisner, provide commentaries that present new directions for future research on TDV as well as implications for practice. First, Eisner (2021) discusses the counterintuitive findings in TDV prevalence rates that frequently higher rates of physical TDV perpetration are found among female than male adolescents and that reports of victimization are equally frequent in both gender groups. Outlining issues emerging from the gender symmetry versus gender asymmetry debate, he provides directions for future research to better understand and disentangle the role of gender in TDV. Second, Krahe (2021) reviews what is needed for developing and implementing effective and evidence-based interventions to reduce the issue of TDV. In particular, she suggests major steps to tackle violence in adolescent relationships and reviews implications for policy measures.

Together, this special issue compiles new insights regarding TDV in Europe, providing evidence on its scope and predictors, outlining open questions for future research, and reviewing promising ways for prevention and intervention. It also suggests that even more efforts in research, practice, and policy are needed to understand gender differences and the underlying mechanisms leading to violent behaviors in adolescent intimate relationships in order to effectively reduce violence. This special issue also reveals that research on TDV in gender and sexual minorities is virtually nonexistent in Europe. We hope that this issue will contribute to the debate on TDV in Europe as well as in all other parts of the world, stimulating more research and measures on this issue so that a healthy development of adolescents is facilitated.

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