

Relationship contexts as sources of socialization: An exploration of intimate partner violence  
experiences of economically disadvantaged African American adolescents

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Author Note

This study was funded by a grant from the University of Georgia Poverty and the Economy  
Faculty Research Grants Program, awarded to the second and third authors. Tera R. Jordan  
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### Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) among African Americans is a serious public health concern. Research suggest that African Americans adolescents, particularly those from economically disadvantaged communities, are at heightened risk for experiencing and perpetrating dating violence compared to youth from other racial and ethnic groups. In the present study, we examined different relationship contexts that are sources of IPV socialization. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 economically disadvantaged African American adolescents. Content analysis yielded five relationship contexts through which the participants witnessed, experienced, and perpetrated IPV: (a) adolescents' own dating relationships (64%), (b) siblings and extended family members (e.g., cousins, aunts, uncles) (59%), (c) parent-partners (27%), (d) friends (23%), and (e) neighbors (18%). Adolescents also frequently described IPV in their own dating relationships and in parent-partner relationships as mutual. Moreover, they appeared to minimize the experience of IPV in their own relationships. Efforts to reduce rates of IPV among economically disadvantaged African American adolescents should consider these relational contexts through which adolescents are socialized with regards to IPV and adolescents' beliefs about mutual violence in relationships. Results highlight the importance of culturally relevant prevention and intervention programs that consider these relationship contexts.

*Keywords:* intimate partner violence; adolescent dating violence; teen dating violence; relationships;

African Americans adolescents; qualitative

### Introduction

Intimate partner violence (IPV), defined as “physical violence, sexual violence, stalking and psychological aggression (including coercive acts) by a current or former intimate partner,” is a serious public health problem that affects numerous adolescents in the United States (Breiding, Basile, Smith, Black, & Mahendra, 2015). National prevalence rates of IPV among U.S. high school youth range from 7% to 20% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014; Eaton et al., 2012; Hamby & Tuner, 2013), although significant variability exists across specific adolescent subgroups and by methods of defining violence (McDonald & Merrick, 2013). For example, extant research indicates that race and socioeconomic status (SES) are important factors to consider when examining IPV among adolescents such that economically disadvantaged African American adolescents are at disproportionate risk for experiencing and perpetrating dating violence compared to youth from other racial and ethnic groups (Cunradi, Caetano, Clark, & Schafer, 2000; Wilson, Woods, Emerson, & Donenberg, 2012). African American couples residing in economically disadvantaged communities were 3.7 times more likely to report IPV in their romantic relationships (Caetano, Field, Ramisetty-Mikler, & McGarth, 2005; Cunradi et al., 2000). Scholars suggest that because economically disadvantaged communities have the highest rates of violence and that poverty stresses intimate relationships, relational challenges of these individuals become exacerbated when coping with economic disadvantage (Beyer, Wallis, & Hamberger, 2013; Foster, Brooks-Gunn, & Martin, 2007).

Decades of research have documented the salience of exposure to relationship models in adolescence and have often attributed the socialization processes of IPV in adolescence to family of origin and peer contexts. Adolescents learn about what a relationship should be like by observing the interactions of important others (models such as their parents and peers) (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003; O’Keefe, 1997). Moreover, exposure to IPV in the intimate relationships of parents and peers has been found to be significantly associated with IPV among adolescents (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Sullivan, Masho, Helms, Erwin, Farrell, & Taylor, 2012). Despite this valuable research however, the scope of IPV socialization may be different among economically disadvantaged African American adolescents. For example, previous studies suggest that extended family members are particularly important agents of socialization and development for African American children and adolescents (McAdoo & Younge, 2009; Taylor & Roberts, 1995). Limited information is available on other relationship contexts where these adolescents are exposed to IPV. Given that adolescents often model relationships that they see, it would be interesting to examine how economically disadvantaged African American adolescents experience IPV in their daily lives and what

relationship contexts (i.e., extended family, neighbors, etc.) may be sources of IPV socialization. Thus, identifying the role of relationship contexts, including parent and peer contexts, provides a more holistic understanding of the sources of IPV socialization for economically disadvantaged African American adolescents—a population most at risk for IPV.

Historically, studies on IPV during adolescence primarily reflected the experiences of White middle-class youth resulting in a paucity of literature that captures the unique IPV experiences of economically disadvantaged African American youth (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). In addition, limited studies have extended theoretical frameworks to include the important influence of multiple relationship contexts as sources of IPV socialization. This study is guided by social learning and ecological systems theories (Bandura, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Social learning theory, which posits that individuals learn behaviors through observing others and recognizing the consequences that occur, has been used in previous studies on sources of IPV and emphasizes how important figures (e.g., parents, peers) serve as the chief socialization agents with regard to intimate relationships (Bell & Naugle, 2008). In addition, it is likely that other important figures such as extended family members and neighbors will also serve as socialization agents. Ecological systems theory outlines how individuals in the microsystem and mesosystem, such as parents, friends, and neighbors, influence adolescent development.

Prior research on IPV during adolescence has burgeoned in the past decade as researchers refer to IPV among teens and adolescents as Teen Dating Violence (TDV) or Adolescent Dating Violence (ADV) (McDonald & Merrick, 2013). Most of the research has been dedicated to conceptualization of IPV in adolescence and how IPV relates to deleterious developmental outcomes such as increased risk of depressive symptoms, substance use, and sexual risk behaviors (Foshee, Reyes, Gottfredson, Change, & Ennett, 2013; Hamby & Turner, 2013). Other studies have illustrated high rates of co-occurrence and polyvictimization (e.g., multiple forms of victimization) of psychological, physical, and sexual abuse among adolescents (Elsaesser & Voisin, 2015; Friedlander, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2013). Researchers have started to understand IPV experiences in adolescent dating relationships; however, there are still many gaps.

One group of adolescents who are disproportionately at risk for IPV is economically disadvantaged African American adolescents (Foster et al., 2007; Wilson, et al., 2012). However, limited information is known about how these adolescents experience IPV in their dating relationships. Quantitative studies have suggested that African American adolescents, particularly economically disadvantaged adolescents, may have different definitions of their

intimate experiences (Black et al., 2009). For example, a study by Black et al. (2009) exploring the perceptions of IPV among low-income African American and Iraqi refugee adolescents found that African American adolescents were less likely to consider incidents of pushing and shoving as violence and often viewed violence they see as “normal.” Despite these findings, few investigators have qualitatively examined experiences IPV in the daily lives of this high-risk population.

Extant research on factors that contribute to IPV during adolescence has most commonly documented parent-partner dyads and parent-child interactions (e.g., witnessing violence between parents, experiencing harsh parenting practices/child abuse) as key sources of influence and violence exposure (Foshee, et al., 2011). More specifically, research on exposure to IPV has traditionally focused on parent-partner violence (i.e., by one or both parents) experienced directly, through witnessing or hearing violence, or indirectly, through experiencing its ramifications (Jouriles, Mueller, Rosenfield, McDonald, & Dodson, 2012). In addition to parent-partner dyads, scholars have documented that sibling-to-sibling violence predicts dating violence in adolescents (Noland, Liller, McDermott, Coulter, & Seraphine, 2004). Siblings are important to consider in African American families; African American siblings may take on additional roles in child care and play a more important part in the socialization process of their brothers and sisters than siblings from other racial and ethnic groups (Brody, Stoneman, Smith, & Gibson, 1999; McHale, Updegraff, & Whiteman, 2012). This is especially true among African American adolescents from economically disadvantaged communities (Brody & Murry, 2001). Witnessing violence in the family of origin is consequential because earlier studies have shown a positive association between witnessing family violence and adolescents’ use of violence in dating relationships (Foshee, et al., 2011). Thus, for African American adolescents, witnessing siblings’ relationship interactions may be another important source of IPV socialization beyond parents.

Notably, adolescents are likely to observe interactions in other contexts besides the nuclear family; another important context to consider among African Americans is extended family networks (e.g., aunts, uncles, cousins). Decades of research have shown that extended family members are salient to African American family life and child development (Landor et al., 2013; McAdoo & Younge, 2009; Taylor & Roberts, 1995). For example, studies report that adolescents were more likely to be well adjusted on a range of outcomes (e.g., psychosocial development, academic outcomes) when they had support from extended family networks (Lamborn & Nguyen, 2004). In addition, extended family members may serve as models for behavioral norms in dating relationships (George et al.,

2013). Thus, extended familial networks are likely to be involved in the IPV socialization process of African American adolescents (Kornreich, Hearn, Rodriguez, & O'Sullivan, 2003; McAdoo & Younge, 2009). In a previous study, Thornberry (1994) noted how a significant proportion of adolescents who report living in a nonviolent family environment but engage in violent behavior may learn about relationship violence in other contexts. Using longitudinal data, Thornberry (1994) found 60% of teens reported being involved in violent behavior if exposed to one form of family violence as compared to only 38% of teens who noted no exposure. Overall, the literature suggests that extended family networks may play an important and influential role on adolescents' IPV socialization.

Friends also become increasingly important influences in adolescence, in part because they serve as behavioral models and shape individuals' norms and values regarding social interactions (Foshee et al., 2013). Research has shown that friends act as unique influences by providing information about intimate relationships and behavioral norms (Miller-Johnson et al., 2009). Consequently, how friends handle conflict in their own dating relationships may be as important—or perhaps even more important—than parents. Arriaga and Foshee (2004) found that having friends who reported being in violent relationships was a more important predictor of dating violence in adolescents' own intimate relationships than IPV in the parent-partner dyad.

Almost half of adolescent dating violence occurs when a third party is present (Mulford & Giordano, 2008). Friends are often present to witness relationship interactions given that a large portion of their time is spent in school and in social groups. Adolescents whose friends normalize dating violence are more likely to view such violence as acceptable and justified (Henry & Zeytinoglu, 2012). For example, Capaldi et al. (2001) suggest that if aggressive behavior is viewed as normative by an adolescent's friend, such behavior will be more likely to occur; in contrast, if friends value and encourage treating dating partners with respect, then abusive behavior will be less likely to occur. In sum, having friends involved in dating violence and witnessing their IPV may convey to adolescents that dating violence is acceptable.

Extensive research has also indicated a link between community violence and dating violence in adolescence (Jain, Buka, Subramanian, & Molnar, 2010). For example, Frye and O'Campo's (2011) study of adolescents found exposure to community violence to be positively associated with dating violence for males and females. It has been suggested that such exposure to community violence may have a spillover effect and increase the likelihood of violence in adolescents' intimate relationships by increasing their acceptance of violence. There has been a dearth of empirical research, however, on the effects of witnessing IPV among neighbors in one's

community. Studies should begin thinking beyond exposure to community violence such as assault, shootings, or conflicts not linked to dating relationships and ask questions about neighborhood relationship models (e.g., IPV in neighbors' intimate relationships). For instance, it may be that adolescents witness IPV among neighbors within their communities and relate that to how they should interact with their dating partners. The purpose of the present study was to provide descriptive accounts of IPV experiences and the relationship contexts that are sources of IPV socialization for economically disadvantaged African American adolescents. Specifically, we are interested in the relationship models that these adolescents see. We draw on the strength of adopting a qualitative approach and allow the salient relationship contexts through which the participants are exposed to IPV to emerge from the data. Economically disadvantaged African American adolescents were specifically targeted so that these issues could be explored among adolescents most at risk for dating violence (Foster, Brooks-Gunn, & Martin, 2007). A better understanding of the relationship contexts adolescents see is critical for efforts to respond to the social and health needs of this population through development of culturally sensitive programming to strengthen prevention, intervention, and policy efforts to reduce rates of IPV and promote healthy adolescent dating relationships (Bent-Goodley, 2007; Sullivan et al., 2012). For instance, if these adolescents experience IPV among extended family members and siblings, interventions might focus on these additional contexts rather than only parents and peers as relationship models.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Youth were recruited from a Boys and Girls Club located within a public housing community in a medium-sized city in the southeastern United States in 2010. To qualify for participation in the study the youth were: (1) at least 13 years of age, (2) willing to participate in a 13-session relationship education program, (3) willing to take part in three interviews, and (4) residing in a household with earnings equal to or less than the median household income for the county. Youth and parents were informed about the project by the club director and invited to attend an information session. The research team hosted a recruitment event at the club to meet with youth and parents/guardians and enrolled eligible participants. Twenty-five Black youth were asked to participate in a project focused on romantic relationships, including their own personal experiences and relationships they had observed. Youth also took part in a relationship education program. Research team members read the Informed Consent document to parents and youth and responded to any questions they had regarding the study. Parental consent and

minor assent were obtained for youth 17 years old and younger by requesting each individual sign the university-approved paperwork. No one refused participation. The research team was unable to contact three boys to schedule the first interview; the remaining 22 youth (13 girls, 9 boys) completed the research study (an 88% retention rate). Participants were paid \$25 at the first interview, \$50 at the second interview, and \$75 at the third interview.

At baseline, the mean age for the sample was 16 years (range: 13 to 19 years) (see Table 1). Tenth grade was the average grade level (range: sixth to twelfth grade); all students were enrolled in school. Most youth (64%) reported dating but were not committed to one partner (27% committed, 9% no response). Two teens had children (1 boy, 1 girl). Participants were not asked to report their sexual orientation but this information naturally emerged during data collection (19 heterosexuals, 1 homosexual). Most youth (64%) resided with their biological mothers in a single-parent living arrangement. Twenty-seven percent reported living with both of their biological parents or a biological parent and a step-parent; another 9% divided time between their mother's and father's homes, spending equal time at both parents' homes in a joint custody arrangement. Youth resided in households with an average yearly income of \$14,304 (range \$6,000 - \$21,936) or \$1,192 per month (range \$500 - \$1,828). In terms of religious background, 68% reported being Christian and 23% reported having no religion.

### **Procedure**

Youth and interviewers were matched on race and sex, demonstrating sensitivity to the youth as well as an awareness of the importance of connecting with others with a similar cultural background. This matching took place in hopes of maximizing the likelihood that the youth would feel comfortable with the interviewers (Cooney, Small, & O'Connor, 2007). The three Black interviewers (2 men, 1 woman) were experienced in working with youth in low-income communities and skilled in conducting qualitative interviews.

The youth were interviewed three times, with the second interview occurring approximately 3 months following the first interview, and the third interview occurring six months following the first interview. Interviewers visited with the youth in a private room at the Boys and Girls Club or another reserved room (e.g., a conference room at an office or university library) to ensure confidentiality. Youth enrolled in the study participated in Love U 2 (<http://www.dibblefund.org/>), an evidence-based, culturally-sensitive, relationship development program specifically designed for youth (Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, & Paulk, 2007; Pearson, 2007) between the first and second interviews. The 13-session program was delivered at the Boys and Girls Club after



school, twice per week, for two hours per session (four hours per week) over a 7-week period. Before each session's dismissal, youth were served a meal to encourage attendance and facilitate rapport with the research team.

Adopting a constructivist perspective, this study focused on understanding how youth viewed their own social realities (Creswell, 2012). A phenomenological approach guided data collection to best record the youth's attitudes. A semi-structured style of interviewing was used to learn about the youth's attitudes. In general, each interview focused on the youth's relationship expectations, communication and conflict management styles, relationship history, and relationship socialization. Although interviewers used the questionnaire protocol as a guide, they were encouraged to allow the conversation to flow and permit youth an opportunity to share experiences that might not relate to the line of questioning. Related to the current analyses, interviewers focused on specific questions that addressed IPV. Most interviews lasted 1.5 hours. All interviews were documented using digital recorders, stored using participant identification numbers to ensure confidentiality, and transcribed.

### **Data Analyses**

Data were analyzed through several steps to ensure a rigorous process of qualitative research. The first author focused on specific questions that addressed IPV (e.g., Have you ever been involved in or witnessed violence in a relationship? What have you seen? Tell me about it.). Given the sensitive nature of the violence questions in the interview protocol, the majority of the in-depth responses were divulged during the second and third interviews, after rapport was established with the respondents. All additional information from rephrased questions and follow-up questions were included in the analyses. Data was then organized into a spreadsheet detailing each participant's response to the violence-related questions and discussions. Next, responses were analyzed using content analysis. In particular, a within-case analysis approach (Huberman & Miles, 1994) was conducted in which case profiles were created for each adolescent and used to identify and label the various relationship contexts through which adolescents reported experiencing IPV. Following this approach, cross-case analysis was used to compare participant responses to find key themes across adolescents' experiences of IPV. Krippendorff (2004) suggested that this method of analysis captures the meaning and experiences reported across all content. In the final step of analysis, key contexts were identified; the resulting spreadsheet included tables of all text relevant to each domain that emerged when adolescents described their experiences in detail. Overall, this analytic process established dependability in data coding, which is analogous to reliability in the quantitative paradigm (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

For peer examination, the first author shared her insights with the co-authors. Co-authors were asked to validate themes identified in the data and review a manuscript draft in which the results were detailed. Previous work has highlighted that peer review is best conducted when a finished product can be reviewed and interpretations are offered for themes and patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The co-authors reflected on their experiences with the sample and their review of the data. They believed that the first author had accurately reflected the adolescents' perspectives (Creswell, 2012).

### **Results**

Six relationships contexts emerged from the qualitative interviews relative to how economically disadvantaged African American adolescents witnessed, experienced, and perpetrated IPV. These contexts included: (a) adolescent respondents' relationships (64%), (b) siblings and extended family members (e.g., cousins, aunts, uncles) (59%), (c) parent-partners (27%), (d) friends (23%), and (e) neighbors (18%). All participants experienced and witnessed IPV in at least one relationship context. Thirty-six percent (n=8) of participants reported IPV exposure across two relationship contexts. Twenty-seven percent (n=6) of participants reported IPV exposure across three relationship contexts. It should be noted that gender or age differences were not found in adolescents' experiences of IPV. Next, IPV experienced in the respondents' own dating relationships and two central aspects of their IPV experiences are discussed.

#### **IPV in Adolescents' Dating Relationships**

Fourteen adolescents (8 males, 6 females) experienced violence in their dating relationships. In discussing IPV experienced in their own relationships, adolescent respondents reflected on two aspects of the IPV--who initiated the violence and the severity of the violence.

All 14 respondents discussed who initiated violence in their dating relationships. A small proportion regarded themselves as being victims of violence (n=5) or perpetrators of violence (n=2). Half of this group (n=7) engaged in mutual violence. In particular, results show the reciprocal nature of violence in these adolescents' dating relationships— hitting a partner because the partner hit them. For example, 16-year-old Amanda believed that men deserved to be hit, especially if they were caught cheating on their girlfriends. Amanda, who dated her boyfriend for over a year, admitted to arguing and retaliating with violence when her boyfriend hit her. She said: “We [would] argue... he hit me first, so I hit him.” She viewed her violent behavior as a justifiable response to her boyfriend's violent actions. In another case, Craig, age 18 and a father of one, discussed incidents when his girlfriend would hit

him by slapping him on the back or arm. He would react by holding her arms in place and pinning her down so she could not get up. Craig stated, "If you get violent with me, I'm going to get violent back." In a third case, 14-year-old David discussed a violent incident with his girlfriend, which began she started hitting him first. He said, "I told her to stop playing 'cause I don't like playing. [She] just kept playing and I said, 'Can you please stop playing?' and then she kept hitting me so I hit her back."

Other descriptions that emerged in the adolescents' discussions of IPV related to severity of the violence, which ranged from grabbing a partner's arm to being stabbed. Most adolescents (6 males, 5 females) did not view the IPV they experienced severe. This pattern is illustrated by drawing on 15-year-old Jason's experiences. When asked if he ever hit a romantic partner and why, Jason stated,

She would hit at me. I [would] grab her hair sometimes... grab her shoulder or grab her hand to keep her from hitting me again. I ain't going to hit her and make her cry, though I just grab so she won't go nowhere.

Tammy, age 16, discussed her relationship with a past boyfriend and said, "He never hit me but he pushed me hard one day, other than that, he hasn't really hit me. I wouldn't consider it violence [because] it's not hurting."

Three participants experienced severe violence (e.g., use of a weapon, being punched in the face). David, age 14, reported being stabbed in the arm by a romantic partner because he ended their relationship. He recalled, "I mean... she really tried to stab me. I broke up with her and she got a piece of glass and tried to stab me. I was sitting down and she stabbed me in my arm." Stephanie, age 16, spoke about an argument between her and her boyfriend that led to a fight in which her boyfriend punched her in the face.

In sum, as described by this sample, adolescents attributed meaning to the experience of IPV. For example, it mattered who initiated the violence and whether the violent response was justified based on a partner's actions. Adolescents did not regard IPV as severe unless the violent action was associated with pain, injury, or a weapon. In the next section, results related to other relationship contexts that are sources of IPV socialization for economically disadvantaged African American adolescents are presented.

### **Relationship Contexts as Sources of IPV Socialization**

Thirteen participants (8 males, 5 females) reported witnessing IPV among their siblings and extended family members (e.g., cousins, aunts, uncles). For example, of her female cousin and her cousin's boyfriend, Laurel, age 13, stated "When I came to see her, she [had] marks all over her face and [had] a black eye... the next day, I saw

her arm broken. He started beating on her for no apparent reason.” Sixteen-year-old Lance witnessed violence between his cousin and his cousin’s girlfriend. He described an incident in which his cousin gave his girlfriend a black eye and a busted lip. Craig recalled observing his sister and her boyfriend fighting. He shared, “I’ve been there a whole bunch of times throughout, where she’s had arguments or when there was you know a little violence in the relationship... [a] couple of punches and little kicks thrown you know.” Craig continued that his sister was usually the aggressor and would “throw licks;” her boyfriend would respond by holding her down sometimes or hitting her back. All in all, these results underscore the importance of siblings’ and extended family members’ intimate relationships as a critical context for being exposed to IPV.

Six adolescents (1 male, 5 females) witnessed violence between their biological parents or biological parent and a step-parent. In detailing their observations, adolescents stated that most of the parent-partner violence they witnessed could be characterized as mutual violence. For example, Chris, age 16, recalled several incidents between his mother and father throughout his childhood and adolescence. He witnessed his parents call each other “foul names” and fight. He said, “[My father] punched [my mother], then she slapped him, then he head butted her.” Of another incident, he shared:

We woke up from my dad’s yelling. So we hurried up and ran to the living room and we saw some furniture turned over. [A table] was shattered into pieces and stuff, and my mom and dad was yelling by the door. I predicted that my dad was going to hit my mom. But basically for some reason, I couldn’t go over there and stop him, but Stacy my sister, she ran over and stopped mom and dad from hitting each other. But it was too late though. They already started hitting and stuff. And then Stacy, she tried her best to try and get mom off of him, but I couldn’t move or nothing. All I could do was yell, but for some reason I couldn’t move because I was petrified by fear... cause I don’t know what my dad would have done if both of us tried. I felt broken... my mom and dad won’t never be the same again. They won’t have no fun times no more ‘cause if they were to keep on fighting and stuff, then soon enough my dad’s going to leave.

Fifteen-year-old named Torie observed constant fighting between her mother and father. She stated, “They used to always get into a fight and get into it a lot. It made me sad and mad at the same time.” Lacy, age 17, noted how she often watched her parents argue and fight each other as a child and hated it. She regarded her parents as an unhealthy relationship. When asked why she felt that way, she stated “...Cause they didn’t work out as well as you know a good relationship should go. There’s a lot of fussing and fighting. My dad used to beat my mom a lot when

we were little.” All in all, adolescents vividly recalled observing IPV in parent-partner dyads and were troubled by emotionally and psychologically by these experiences.

Five participants (2 males, 3 females) witnessed their friends being violent with their romantic partners. Participants emphasized that their friends argued extensively with their romantic partners before the conflict escalated to their friends hitting their boyfriends or girlfriends. For example, Byron, age 15, shared, “[My friends] argue a lot and fight in their relationships.” He recalled a time when a friend fought with his girlfriend over whether he should attend to a party. Seventeen-year-old Kimberly discussed visiting her friend’s house and witnessing violence with two different close friends. She stated:

A friend of mine, her boyfriend use to hit her... then my other friend... she is pregnant by this boy but he be cutting her out, calling her all kind of names, and hitting her and stuff... and he just beat her and she is still with him.

Overall, friends’ romantic relationships provide unique opportunities to learn about IPV.

Four participants (3 males, 1 female) witnessed IPV among neighbors. Thirteen-year-old Jamie witnessed multiple incidents of IPV in her neighborhood. Of her experiences, she said, “[My neighbors] were both hitting each other... fighting and stuff like that.” Jamie often traveled outside of her neighborhood to play basketball with her cousin as a means to distance herself from IPV in her environment. Another respondent, 16-year-old Andrew, recalled witnessing IPV in his neighborhood as he would walk down the street. He said, “[I] would see the guy beating his girlfriend up... beating her up like she was a dude.” In sum, adolescents learned about IPV from witnessing the intimate relationship interactions of the neighbors in their community.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this descriptive study was to obtain a more in-depth assessment of the IPV experiences of economically disadvantaged African American adolescents—a group that disproportionately reports the highest prevalence rates of IPV but are often disregarded in research— by investigating how they witness, experience, and perpetrate IPV in their daily lives. Current research has often attributed the socialization processes of IPV in adolescence to witnessing parental or peer IPV (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004). However, results from this study highlight multiple relationship contexts (e.g., adolescents’ own relationships, siblings and extended family members, parent-partner, friends, neighbors) to consider and underscore findings from previous research about the importance of examining the IPV socialization of adolescents within specific socioeconomic contexts (i.e., economically

disadvantaged African American adolescents). Taken together, the results provide a more nuanced assessment of IPV experiences among economically disadvantaged African American adolescents than have been outlined in previous studies. Specifically, this research extends IPV literature and the social learning theory by highlighting the importance of extended family members (e.g., cousins, aunts, uncles) and neighbors as critical contexts for being exposed to IPV; these figures serve as socialization agents. Though scholars have underscored the significance of these figures, particularly among economically disadvantaged African Americans, past research has not clearly delineated the role of extended family members and neighbors (Lamborn & Nguyen, 2004; Simons, Simons, Lei, & Landor, 2012) in IPV socialization. Therefore, focusing on only one or two relationship contexts such as parent-partner and friends IPV may limit our understanding of the predictive relationship between early IPV experiences and later relationship outcomes among economically disadvantaged African American adolescents. These relationship contexts are very salient for the group under study and important to consider for cultural reasons.

Consistent with literature showing the high prevalence rates of IPV among African American adolescents and economically disadvantaged African American adolescents more specifically (Beyer et al., 2013; CDC, 2011), findings revealed that every participant experienced and/or witnessed IPV in at least one context. Thirty-six percent (n=8) of participants reported IPV exposure across two contexts and twenty-seven percent (n=6) of participants reported IPV exposure across three contexts. Guided by the ecological theory and current prevalence rates, study results illustrate the ubiquitous nature of IPV among this sample. Unfortunately, IPV appears to be a normative part of their daily lives in that these adolescents have identified a constellation of IPV experiences that occur in their micro and meso-systems across multiple relationship contexts (e.g., siblings, extended family, neighbors). The ubiquity and normalization of IPV in these adolescents' lives may be a contributing factor to the adolescents minimizing their own experiences, both in the way they described their experiences in this study and in responding to quantitative measures in other studies.

Relative to adolescents' dating relationship experiences, a high number of adolescents reporting IPV echoes previous research that reported on survey data (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001; CDC, 2011). Results also showed that there are various complexities within the IPV experiences of economically disadvantaged African American adolescents that need to be evaluated further. First, this study showed that half of the adolescents who reported being in violent intimate relationships were either victims or perpetrators of IPV; the other half of the sample engaged in mutual violence with dating partners. These experiences are consistent with

previous research (Whitaker, Haileyesus, Swahn, & Saltzman, 2007) and reflect the importance of recognizing not only violence victimization but also perpetration in these African American adolescents' dating relationships; reciprocal violent interactions that often occurred in these relationships were commonly described as a means of responding to a partner's violent actions. Other studies have confirmed these results (Próspero & Kim, 2009) but with samples comprising adolescents from other racial groups. In addition to adolescents recalling the experience of mutual violence in their own dating relationships, they observed IPV of mutual nature in parent-partner dyads. This may suggest that adolescents view mutual violence as a normative relationship interaction and that it is justified when the adolescent is responding to a partner's aggressiveness or violent acts.

The prevalence of mutual violence raises questions about the role of retaliatory aggression because many of the adolescents in the study mentioned that they hit back in response to being hit by a partner. As such and consistent with other studies based on mostly White samples (Capaldi et al., 2007; Gray & Foshee, 1997), it would be warranted for researchers to further examine mutual violence in dating relationships of economically disadvantaged African American adolescents. Future research inquiries could answer this question: What other factors motivate African American adolescents to hit back or retaliate against a dating partner?

The second aspect that emerged from adolescents' discussions of their own relationships was the severity of their IPV experiences. Most adolescents viewed violence in their relationships as low in severity; many did not label the low severity behavior or the behavior of their partners even as a violent act. For instance, some adolescents mentioned that they experienced "hair-pulling" and "pinning or holding a partner down;" another adolescent suggested that if the act does not "hurt," it's not violence. Previous work has described the continuum of violence from less severe (e.g., restraining, shoving, shaking) to more severe (e.g., stabbing, punching, biting), which can cause serious harm (Straus, 1979). These statements illustrate how economically disadvantaged African American adolescents view and define IPV; their perspectives are surely influenced by the prevalence of IPV in the contexts in which they live. Adolescents only recognize a behavior as violent when it is more severe; neither acts low in severity nor verbal threats or coercive tactics were defined as violence. If the adolescents are using their parents' or extended family members' relationships as a reference point for what qualifies as violence, perhaps this could be a reason for minimizing their own experiences. Most of the descriptions provided by the adolescents of their parents' and family members' IPV appeared severe and traumatic. Consistent with other recent work (Hamby & Turner, 2013), these qualitative findings illustrate a discrepancy between researchers' and adolescents' definitions of

violence. Although the aforementioned behaviors would be defined as violent acts, most scholars employing quantitative-oriented studies do not ask questions of this nature and adolescents do not define them in this way for researchers. In light of these results, scholars should ask a full range of violence questions and include violence inquiries that are culturally relevant to the sample under study. Otherwise, rates of violence may go under-reported. Findings may also highlight the need for including information in relationship education programs about how IPV can escalate from something less severe to something more severe. This may help adolescents appropriately recognize violent behavior earlier in the relationship and disengage from an unhealthy relationship.

A small sample of adolescents was employed to explore the participants' experiences in an in-depth way. However, our study is not without limitations. The sample was nonrandom and recruited from a public housing community in the southeastern United States. Therefore, the results may not reflect the experiences of African American adolescents dwelling in other geographical areas and from other economic backgrounds. Second, because participants were asked to recall their experiences of IPV, findings are contingent on participants' accurate recall of IPV, interpretation of IPV, and willingness to openly share them with the interviewers. The next section offers some concluding points and implications of this research for practice and intervention.

This study may be heuristic for future investigations and provided a window of thought that needs verification. The qualitative nature of this study not only provided description and nuanced understandings of IPV experiences among adolescents, but the results also illuminated the types of IPV to which economically distressed African American adolescents are exposed. Previous work conducted by Anderson (1999) and Stewart and Simons (2009) highlight this point. Current prevention and intervention strategies are limited in focus and underestimate the scope and contexts (e.g., siblings, extended family, parents, friends, neighbors) that may expose adolescents to IPV. Future studies should consider the influence of all of these contexts. Study findings illuminate key settings that should be targeted for preventative interventions that serve economically disadvantaged African American adolescents. Understanding how adolescents learn about IPV and the complexity of such experiences are key for ensuring that prevention efforts are successful in promoting positive developmental pathways for healthy relationship development.



### Conflicts of Interest, Human Subjects Research, Informed Consent

There are no potential conflicts of interest, real or perceived. Our research involves human participants therefore our study was conducted under IRB at the University of Georgia (#685312628). In terms of informed consent, the research team members read the informed consent document to parents and youth and responded to any questions they had regarding the study. Parental consent and minor assent was obtained for youth 17 years of age and younger by requesting each individual sign the university-approved paperwork. For youth 18 years of age or older, research team members read the Informed Consent document to the participants and then gave them the opportunity to sign the consent form. No one refused participation.

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