The Impact of Parental Support on Hypermasculine Attitudes in Urban Adolescent African American Males

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between exposure to community violence (ECV), family support, and hypermasculine attitudes. Exposure to community violence has been positively correlated with hypermasculine attitudes in urban adolescents. This study examined the impact of family support from mother and father on this relationship. The participants of this study consisted of 99 African American urban adolescent males (M_age=15.77, SD=1.11) participating in a summer academy hosted by a major eastern university. The results indicate that males with high mother support were not vulnerable to ECV’s impact on hypermasculine attitudes. However, males with low mother support were vulnerable to ECV. Age was also found to have a significant relationship with the variables. As age increased and support from mother was low, hypermasculine attitudes were high. Alternately, males with high mother support had lower hypermasculine attitudes regardless of age. High mother support may be a marker for resilience to hypermasculine attitudes in urban adolescents.

Key Terms:

- Adolescent
- Hypermasculine
- Parental Support
- Resilience
The concept of adolescent resilience stems from a developmental process in which an adolescent is exposed to a negative event which increases their vulnerability for a specific outcome. This process has been thoroughly explained in Spencer's Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) (Spencer, 2006). The theory describes a context in which to analyze the potential effects associated with being exposed to negative events, including victimization. The theory explains that actual victimization may not be the direct cause for negative symptoms; however it is the internalization and perception of the individual which greatly influences the outcome (Spencer, Dupree, Cunningham, Harpalani, & Munoz-Miller, 2003). Therefore, scholars have investigated the particular constructs and factors that affect the process of internal victimization and its resulting outcomes.

Adolescents in urban communities are particularly vulnerable to traumatic events such as victimization and the threat of death or violence. Research into these communities finds that urban adolescents have higher risks of being exposed to traumatic violence. Overstreet and Matthews (2011) examined the effects of exposure to community violence and other traumatic events, and its impact on mental health and emotional distress. Exposure to community violence has been shown to be positively correlated with depressive symptoms in African American adolescents living in urban impoverished communities. Urban youth are vulnerable to presenting depressive symptoms because they are usually exposed to more community violence than the average adolescent. Overstreet and Matthews’ study found that adolescents in high-risk urban communities are not only exposed to more community violence, they are also more likely to internalize these problems. The internalization and perception of these problems has been associated with hypermasculine attitudes in urban adolescent males. (Cunningham, 1999).

Cunningham (1999) examined the presence and effects of hypermasculine attitudes within a sample of African American adolescent males. Implications of this study suggest that hypermasculine attitudes may be a coping mechanism for adolescent males in high-risk urban environments. This would serve as a sort of mediator between exposure to community violence and negative outcomes. Cassidy and Stevenson (2005) explored the relationship between urban community factors, such as community violence, and hypermasculine aggression in African American male adolescents. The stress associated with living in a high-risk urban environment is significantly correlated with hypermasculine aggression, perhaps as a means by which to cope with this stress. Seaton (2007) examined this relationship and hypermasculine attitudes as a coping mechanism that arises in urban African American males. Seaton used Spencer’s PVEST model in an effort to understand hypermasculine attitudes as a coping mechanism in urban adolescent males. The study discusses how hypermasculine behavior may make dealing with negative environmental experiences easier, and establishes a form of gender identity achievement. As these coping strategies are used repeatedly, they become much more stable characteristics of an individual’s personality. Cunningham, Swanson, and Hayes (2013) also examined hypermasculine attitudes in African American males. Their findings suggest that adolescent males in urban communities develop hypermasculine attitudes as a response to the personal challenges that they encounter while living in such a high-risk environment. Hypermasculine attitudes then serve as means to cope with their perception of these challenges. These hypermasculine attitudes were also found to stem from the negative perceptions that they receive from their school and community. Of the
241 participants, more than half reported negative perceptions of adults in their school and community. In this longitudinal study, hypermasculine attitudes were found to be associated with these negatively perceived experiences within both school and community.

The effects of family conflict and support within these negative experiences were examined by Hall, Cassidy, and Stevenson (2008) in their examination of fear among African American adolescents. The study established that perceptions of community violence play a key role in the negative outcomes of the exposure. The role of various community factors, such as poverty, crime, disrupted caregiver relationships, and family support impact feelings of despair, anxiety, and depression within urban adolescents. Family support and perception both had a significant impact on the relationship between exposure to community violence and mental health. The availability of family support as a moderator for exposure to community violence was studied by Overstreet, Dempsey, Graham, and Moely (1999). The relationship between exposure to community violence and depression in urban African Americans adolescents was examined along with the presence of family support. The mother’s presence in the home was found to have a significant effect on the relationship between exposure to community violence and depression. Those living in a home without a mother were at an increased risk for depressive symptoms as exposure to community violence increased. Kennedy, Bybee, Sullivan, and Greeson (2009) did a similar study involving the role of social and family support on the relationship between community violence and anxiety. The participants were 61 male and 39 female children. Gender, family social support, and change in family social support was shown to slightly moderate the effect of community violence exposure on anxiety.

Benhorin and McMahon (2008) examined the impact of social support on the relationship between exposure to community violence and aggressive, hypermasculine behavior. Social support for the African American urban participants was tested for parents, teachers, classmates, and close friends. The study found that there is a complex relationship between social support, exposure to community violence, and aggression. More perceived support from parents, teachers, and close friends was associated with lower aggressive behavior. Implications of this study suggest that there may be a significant relationship between social support and hypermasculine aggression. The effect of family support on negative life events, such as community violence, continue to present itself as a form of resilience to hypermasculine attitudes, as well as overall mental health throughout various research studies.

I hypothesized that although exposure to community violence has been positively correlated with hypermasculine attitudes, resilience can be observed through the presence of family/parental support as it acts as a moderator between the variables. High exposure to community violence and high family support from mother and father will be correlated with lower hypermasculine attitudes.

Method

Participants

The participants for this study consisted of 99 African American male youth (\(M=15.77\), age range: 13-18 years). Participants also ranged in grade level (\(M=10.96\), grade range: 9th to 12th grade). The participants were recruited from a summer academy hosted by a major eastern university. The summer academy promoted high achievement and focused on preparing urban students for academic success beyond high school. As a requirement of enrollment, participants all possessed a passing grade point.
average (GPA) and an expressed interest in academics. Participants attended the academy to learn skills and academic competencies needed for success in college. Each of the participants was considered as academically high achieving. School transcripts indicated that the students’ mean GPA was in the upper quartile of the national average for Black males in grades 9 through 12, categorizing them as high achieving.

**Materials**

Participants were asked to complete demographic information such as age, grade, sex, and whether they live in a single parent household. Single parent household status was measured by asking participants “do you live in a single-parent household,” with zero coded as “no,” and one coded as “yes.” To examine the exposure to community violence, participants completed a revised Life Events Questionnaire (Coddington, 1972). The prevalence measure included 6 questions to measure exposure to community violence. The dichotomous scale ranged from zero (has not happened) to one (has happened). Example items are as follows: “you were personally victimized,” “one or two people you know were killed,” and “the police broke into your home.”

Family support was measured by a four-item construct that asked questions pertaining to support received from mother and father. The scale of the measure was 1-4, with 1 meaning low support and 4 meaning high support. Samples questions include “importance of mother in life,” and “father wants best for you.” The standardized alpha was .72.

Hypermasculine attitudes were measured using a construct derived from Mosher and Sirkin’s (1984) Machismo Measure. The construct was used to examine males’ responses to questions that addressed exaggerated and stereotypic ideas about male attitudes and behaviors. It is a 27-item measure with a dichotomous scale. The forced choice questions were categorized into three subsets: violence as manly (“I believe it is natural for boys to get into fights”), danger is exciting (“I take risks without considering the consequences”), and callous sex attitudes towards women (“the only woman who deserves respect is your mother”). The measure given to the participants of this study was re-worded to remove adult oriented and somewhat degrading vocabulary, making it more applicable to the adolescent sample. The measure was scored with no equaling one point, and yes equaling two points, and has a standardized alpha of .72.

**Procedure**

Prior to survey administration, adolescent assent and parental consent were obtained. The survey was administered to groups of four to six participants at a time. Surveys were administered by a research team of 3 to 4 advanced graduate and undergraduate researchers. Each research team included at least one African American male graduate student researcher. One person read the questions aloud, while the other researchers monitored participants’ progress to control for reading difficulties. Due to the blunt and potentially emotional nature of some of the questions, participants were instructed that they may stop the survey at any time. The participants completed the survey in 30 minutes to 1 hour.

**Results**

A little over half of the participants reported no exposure to community violence (53.5%). A little over forty-one percent (41.4%) of the participants reported that 1-4 events occurred. Five percent of the participants reported that 5-6 events occurred. The participants reported above average support from their parents. On a scale of 1-4, the participants reported a mean level of 2.93 with a standard deviation of .65. Support from mother had an above average mean (e.g., $M = 3.12, SD = .49$).
Support from father had a mean that was slightly over the middle point (e.g., $M = 2.73$, $SD = .95$). The range of scores for the hypermasculine attitudes construct was 30-50. The mean for the current sample was 43.27 with a standard deviation of 3.32. These results indicated that the participants reported above average levels of hypermasculine attitudes.

2-Tailed Correlations and Stepwise Regressions were done to examine the study’s hypothesis of family support as a moderator between exposure to community violence and hypermasculine attitudes. Single parent household did not have a statistically significant relation with the study’s variables. Age was positively correlated with hypermasculine attitudes ($r = .24$, $p < .05$), which means that older students reported higher hypermasculine attitudes than younger males. Family support had a positive correlation with hypermasculine attitudes ($r = .23$, $p < .05$). Mother support was also positively correlated with hypermasculine attitudes ($r = .26$, $p < .01$). Father support was also positively correlated with hypermasculine attitudes ($r = .18$, $p < .10$). The results suggest that family members may offer more support when hypermasculine attitudes increase.

Stepwise regressions were conducted next. Age was entered in Step 1 as a statistical control. The main effects (e.g., ECV and Mother Support) were entered in Step 2. The interaction term was entered in Step 3 (ECV X Mother Support). The overall model was statistically significant $F(4, 94) = 6.14$, $p < .001$). As indicated in Figure 1, the interaction term was statistically significant ($\beta = -.81$, $p < .05$). The results displayed in the figure indicate that males with low mother support are more vulnerable to developing hypermasculine attitudes when exposed to high levels of exposure to community violence.

Because age had a statistically significant relationship with hypermasculinity ($r = .25$, $p < .05$), the next regression examined if mother support differed for younger versus older students. As indicated in Figure 2, older students with low mother support were most vulnerable to having higher hypermasculine attitudes. Conversely, hypermasculine attitudes did not change for younger and older students with high mother support.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between family support and hypermasculine attitudes. The study was also to determine whether family support could serve as a buffer for the relationship between exposure to community violence and hypermasculine attitudes. The results of this study supported the hypothesis and established a relationship between the variables in which family support serves as a mild moderator between exposure to community violence and hypermasculine attitudes. Participants with high mother support were not vulnerable to ECV’s impact on hypermasculine attitudes. However, participants with low mother support were vulnerable to ECV. Age is also a factor in the relationship; as age increased and support from mother was low, hypermasculine attitudes were high. Alternately, participants with high mother support had lower hypermasculine attitudes regardless of age. One possible explanation of the results suggests that parents may offer more support in the presence of higher hypermasculine attitudes. High mother support may be a marker for resilience to hypermasculine attitudes in urban adolescents. As discussed by Benhorin and McMahon (2008), there is a complex relationship between social support, exposure to community violence, and hypermasculine attitudes. This study reinforces that relationship and establishes mother support as a specific moderator between the variables. Self-reported father support did not produce
statistically significant effects on the variables. More perceived support from mothers is associated with lower aggressive behavior.

There are some limitations to the results of this study. While the participants were all African American males from urban populations, they also were attending an all-male summer academy in which they received extensive support from those around them. This may have had an influence on the responses to the family support measure and also to the hypermasculine attitudes measure. The all-male atmosphere of the summer academy may have slightly influenced hypermasculine attitudes in the participants. This may limit the application of results, since not all urban adolescents have access to this type of academic support and success, or may not have willingness to. However, it is important to note that the experiences of the participants should be understood in a manner that puts into account the experiences of urban adolescents in multiple settings. The interpretation of the experiences of being in an urban environment is an important factor in the development of urban adolescents. As Cunningham, Swanson, and Hayes (2013) stated, adolescent males in urban communities may develop these hypermasculine attitudes as a response to the personal challenges that they encounter while living in such a high-risk environment. A hypermasculine attitude then serves as a means to cope with their perception of these challenges. Another limitation of this study may be the fatigue and stress associated with completing the survey. The survey took up to 1 hour to complete and included some potentially emotional questions, which may have been strenuous for the adolescent participants. Also, the relationship between mother support and hypermasculine attitudes is weakly correlated. This could perhaps be due to the limited sample size used in this study.

Future research on this subject may examine a separate setting in which the participants may not have access to the academic and social support that these participants received in the summer academy. A larger sample size may be needed to increase statistical significance, and offer more support to the conclusions. The relationship of mother support serving as a moderator between exposure to community violence and hypermasculine attitudes may also be revisited to examine other factors associated with mother support such as what exactly urban adolescents receive from a supportive mother, or what other variables may serve as a moderator. The difference in mother support and father support may also be a topic for future research.

The results of this study will hopefully create a better understanding of the impacts of exposure to community violence on hypermasculine attitudes. The results should also reinforce the importance of family support on urban adolescents, specifically mother support. Urban African American male adolescents are exposed to many potentially negative factors, and it is important to understand how resilience to negative responses to these factors can be observed. The findings of this study may contribute to a healthier and more promising development in urban adolescents and a greater overall environment.
**Figure 1.** Mother support as a moderator of hypermasculine attitudes’ relation to exposure to community violence

![Graph showing the relationship between mother support and hypermasculine attitudes.](image)

**Figure 2.** Age as moderator for mother support’s relation to exposure to hypermasculine attitudes

![Graph showing the relationship between age and mother support.](image)
References


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