

Emphasizing Interactions to Advance Violence Research

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Abstract

Research on interpersonal violence has identified numerous biological, developmental, psychological, social, and situational risk factors, yet further progress requires greater attention to how these influences interact. This article argues that violence research should move beyond the study of isolated predictors toward multilevel, developmental models that explain how combinations of risk factors produce heterogeneous pathways to aggression. Two forms of interaction are emphasized: cross-domain interactions among influences operating at different levels and within-domain interactions among multiple risk factors that may yield similar behavioral outcomes through different causal pathways. Moffitt's developmental taxonomy of antisocial behavior and the Confluence Model of Sexual Aggression illustrate the value of this approach. Research on depression further demonstrates how multilevel models can facilitate the identification of meaningful subgroups and support more mechanism-focused interventions. An important next step for violence research is to integrate developmental risk models with intervention science by identifying individuals' dominant risk mechanisms and matching prevention strategies to those mechanisms. Such an approach may improve the field's ability to identify who is at greatest risk, understand the processes driving that risk, and determine which interventions are most likely to reduce perpetration.

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Introduction

Research on interpersonal violence has advanced considerably over the past several decades. At the same time, many foundational challenges remain. Progress over the next several years will depend less on the accumulation of additional isolated findings and more on the development of a more integrated and cumulative science. This direction aligns closely with the intellectual priorities emphasized during Jon Conte's editorial leadership of the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, including theoretical integration, methodological rigor, and translational relevance.

Violent behavior rarely results from a single cause. It is usually the product of multiple interacting influences operating across biological, developmental, psychological, social, and situational levels. Progress in violence research will therefore depend less on identifying isolated risk factors and more on understanding how risk factors combine and interact. Longitudinal studies can best determine the developmental cascades reflecting such interactions. The principal scientific advances have been and will be made in the future by elucidating how combinations of interacting processes produce divergent developmental pathways to violence (e.g., Moffitt et al., 2001; Thornberry et al., 1991).

Two kinds of interactions deserve particular attention. First, cross-domain interactions involve processes operating at different levels, such as biological vulnerability interacting with childhood trauma, cultural norms, or immediate social context. For example, a biologically heightened stress response may, when combined with chronic early abuse, contribute to persistent threat sensitivity and aggressive reactions. In another case, cultural beliefs emphasizing entitlement or dominance may interact with situational peer reinforcement to increase aggression risk. Second, within-domain risk-factor interactions involve combinations of risk factors within a similar domains. In sexual aggression research, for example, trauma history, psychopathic traits, hostile masculinity, impersonal sexuality, alcohol use, and peer reinforcement may combine in different ways to produce similar levels of risk. Second, within-domain risk-factor interactions involve combinations of risk factors within a given domain. In sexual aggression research, for example, trauma history, psychopathic traits, hostile masculinity, impersonal sexuality, alcohol use, and peer norms may combine in different ways to produce similar levels of risk.

Two individuals may score equally high on hostile masculinity yet arrive there through very different pathways. One may be shaped primarily by

trauma-related hypervigilance and chronic mistrust, whereas another may be shaped primarily by cultural entitlement and peer reinforcement. Similar outward profiles may therefore reflect different causal pathways.

The interaction of multiple risk factors may also help explain heterogeneity among perpetrators. Some individuals display broad antisocial behavior across many settings, whereas others show aggression primarily in specific contexts, such as intimate relationships or dating situations. These different patterns likely reflect different combinations of causal mechanisms. As a result, interventions effective for one subgroup may be ineffective for another. Prevention programs should therefore not be judged solely by average treatment effects, because an intervention may benefit lower-risk individuals while having little effect on the smaller subgroup at highest risk.

Depression research offers a useful illustration. The field was once more fragmented, with different lines of work emphasizing neurobiology, genetic vulnerability, maladaptive cognition, childhood adversity, recurrence history, or social stress. Major advances in pharmacological treatment, including the development of new antidepressant medications, clearly played an important role in changing the treatment landscape. However, the broader conceptual advance was not simply the discovery of new drugs, but the movement toward models that viewed depression as arising from interactions among biological, psychological, developmental, and social-contextual factors. Over time, this multilevel perspective encouraged researchers and clinicians to identify more meaningful subgroups of depressed individuals and to consider why different patients may require different forms of intervention (Cicchetti & Toth, 2009). In this sense, depression research illustrates how multilevel interaction models can help connect basic research to clinical application: treatments become more mechanism-targeted, such as cognitive interventions for rumination or relapse-prevention strategies for recurrent depression, while prevention becomes more proactive through early intervention with high-risk groups and resilience-oriented approaches that address multiple interacting vulnerabilities (Buntrock et al., 2024).

Two well-established violence models illustrate the value of this approach. Terrie E. Moffitt's developmental taxonomy distinguishes life-course-persistent from adolescence-limited antisocial behavior. This framework integrates neuropsychological vulnerability, developmental adversity, family context, peer influence, and developmental timing. Its central contribution is demonstrating that similar violent behavior can emerge through different developmental pathways, implying the need for different prevention strategies for chronic versus developmentally limited offenders (e.g., Moffitt et al., 2001; Moffitt, 2018).

A second example is the Confluence Model of Sexual Aggression. From its earliest formulations, the model emphasized multiple interacting influences, including cultural and family environments, traumatic experiences, personality characteristics, hostile attitudes toward women, dominance motives, sexual behavior patterns, peer reinforcement, and situational factors such as alcohol or rejection (e.g., Malamuth & Briere, 1986). Subsequent research has shown that many of these variables can be organized into two broad dimensions: Hostile Masculinity and Impersonal Sex. Their interaction has consistently emerged as one of the strongest predictors of sexual aggression in both cross-sectional and longitudinal research (e.g., Malamuth et al., 1995, 2021; Orchowski et al., 2023). The central question for the field is whether such multifactorial models can lead to interventions that produce measurable reductions in violence. Existing prevention programs, including male-focused interventions and programs, often improve knowledge, attitudes, or intentions. However, evidence that they reliably reduce actual perpetration remains limited and inconsistent (Park & Kim, 2023). A next-generation prevention trial could be to first assess theoretically derived risk profiles and then be assigned to intervention components matched to their dominant risk mechanisms. A promising next step is to integrate developmental risk models with intervention science. Individuals with particularly high hostility, chronic antisocial traits, or entrenched coercive beliefs may be especially difficult to change in adulthood and may require more intensive or longer-term interventions. The strongest current evidence suggests that cognitive-behavioral approaches for youth and dialectical behavior therapy-based approaches for high-risk adults show the most promise.

The field will advance most when it can demonstrate not only that its theories explain violence, but also that they identify who is at greatest risk, which mechanisms are driving that risk, which interventions are most appropriate, and when those interventions should be delivered to produce meaningful reductions in perpetration.

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Author Biography

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