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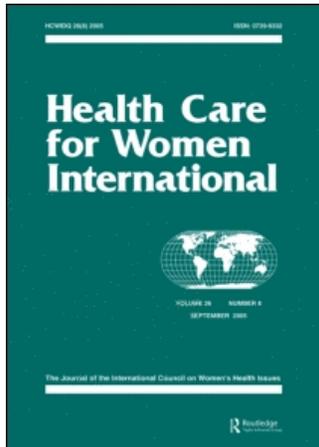
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Dating Violence and the Health of Young Women: A Feminist Narrative Study

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Dating violence is a significant public health problem in the lives of young women. Their age, in conjunction with perceived pressures to engage in intimate relationships, makes these women particularly vulnerable to dating violence. The pressures to be in relationships can be intense and therefore may add to young women's willingness to overlook, forgive, or excuse the violence that is occurring. The authors' purposes in this feminist study were to examine the experience of dating violence from young women's perspectives; investigate how contextual factors shape their experiences; examine how health is shaped by these experiences; and explore ways that dating violence is perpetuated and normalized in young women's lives. Findings revealed that family environment and gender are critical in shaping young women's experiences. The participants described a range of physical and emotional health problems and perceived few sources of support. Their efforts to obtain support were often met with skeptical and dismissive attitudes on the part of health care providers and other trusted adults. Recommendations for health care practice, education, and research are presented.

The authors' purposes in this feminist narrative study were to examine young women's experiences of dating violence with attention to the broader social, relational, and family contexts that affect their experiences; to describe how health is perceived and experienced by young women exposed to intimate partner violence; and to explore how dating violence is perpetuated and normalized in young women's lives. It is hoped that the findings of the current Canadian investigation will contribute to an understanding of the

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manner by which dating violence is supported and condoned in subtle and explicit ways and provide directions for multidisciplinary health care practice, education, and research that can be used internationally. As well, this research offers insights into the strengths and capabilities of girls exposed to dating violence and the strategies they use to negotiate and resist this form of violence in their lives. Finally, the critical, dialogic, and reflexive processes inherent in the research design have the potential to foster new insights, understandings, and strategies for change on the part of the young women who participated in this study and health care professionals who interact with this population.

For this study, dating violence was defined as “a dyadic interaction that involves the perpetration or threat of an act of psychological, physical or sexual violence by at least one member of an unmarried dyad on the other within the context of the dating process . . . and excludes married and divorced couples” (Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989, p. 5). As violence, or the threat of violence, is a prominent feature in the lives of young women (Berman & Jiwani, 2002), landmark research conducted two decades ago by Makepeace (1981) confirmed that a substantial number of female college students in the United States were exposed to violence in dating relationships. Widely held notions that the dating years were exclusively a time of innocent exploration or that violence in intimate relationships was limited to married couples was therefore challenged (Sugarman & Hotaling, 1989).

Since the time of Makepeace’s classic study, scholarly interest in violence that occurs within the context of intimate partner relationships has grown considerably. Much of this increased attention, however, has focused primarily on university and college students. Fewer researchers have examined the experience of dating violence that takes place during adolescence (Carlson, 1990; Cate, Henton, Koval, Christopher, & Lloyd, 1982; Stets & Henderson, 1991; Wolfe, Scott, Wekerle, & Pittman, 2001). In view of the fact that many young women begin dating by age 14, and research that documents the occurrence of violence in teen dating relationships (Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999), understanding the dynamics of violence within these relationships, and how this experience shapes the health of young women, is of critical importance to health care professionals who work with this population.

Efforts to establish the prevalence of dating violence among adolescents are complex for a number of reasons. Particularly problematic are the lack of an agreed-upon definition, the difficulties associated with “naming” violence, and the reluctance of young women to disclose dating violence. As a result, reported estimates vary widely. According to one study conducted in the United States by Silverman, Raj, Mucci, and Hathaway (2001), 1 in 5 adolescent girls will be physically or sexually abused in a dating relationship. Few Canadian studies have been conducted; however, according to the results from a Canadian National Survey, 4 out of 5 female undergraduates

at Canadian universities reported that they had been victims of violence in dating relationships (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993).

Despite these statistics, there continues to be a perception that the problem is not serious. As Sousa (1999) observed, adults in trusted positions often hold dismissive attitudes toward dating violence. The implied message is that at least some degree of violence is a common and acceptable feature of intimate partner relationships during adolescence. In the absence of research that documents the physical, emotional, and behavioral problems associated with dating violence, these attitudes are unlikely to change.

In recent years, a number of researchers have begun to examine the adverse health consequences of dating violence (Coker et al., 2000; Silverman et al., 2001; Wolfe et al., 2001). Much of this research has focused on the identification of the predictors of adolescent dating violence and characteristics of perpetrators and victims (Hamberger & Ambuel, 1998; Kreiter, Krowchuk, Woods, & Sinal, 1999; Silverman et al., 2001). While the understandings derived from these studies yield important knowledge, notably missing are the perspectives of young women regarding dating violence. In particular, their perceptions concerning how dating violence shapes their health and sense of well-being, and their concerns regarding the responsiveness, or lack thereof, among health professionals and the health care system more broadly, remain unknown.

This feminist narrative study was conducted in a Southwestern Ontario city in Canada and contributes to the knowledge about women and health care in several important respects. During the high school and early college/university years, young women encounter considerable pressure to engage in intimate relationships. This pressure, in conjunction with their young age, limited repertoire of dating relationships and experience, and deeply entrenched gender inequalities within North America, makes young women particularly vulnerable to dating violence. The pressures to be in relationships also may contribute to a willingness to overlook the violence that is occurring. The perceived lack of social support and the subtle sanctioning of violence in schools and the media may contribute to the normalization of violence and compound the difficulties of recognizing and leaving abusive relationships.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Much of the early research on dating violence is derived from the view that this problem is primarily a social concern. In recent years, however, a small number of investigators have provided beginning evidence that dating violence constitutes a significant public health problem, and that many adolescent girls who have experienced dating violence suffer short- and long-term physical and emotional health effects (Coker et al., 2000; Flanagan

& Furman, 2000; Purdie & Downey, 2000; Silverman et al., 2001; Wolfe et al., 2001). The causes and risks of these health effects clearly have been articulated by many researchers, but the experiences of young women and the contextual factors that serve to normalize and perpetuate dating violence merit further study.

Various theoretical and methodological perspectives have been used to inform current knowledge in this area. Gelles and Loeske (1993) observed that violence commonly has been categorized according to the persons that it impacts. For example, wife abuse, elder abuse, and child abuse are all forms of violence that draw attention to those who are on the receiving end. Stark and Flitcraft (1991) discuss three models that have been developed to describe the causes and risk factors associated with spousal abuse. Although these models deal specifically with spousal abuse, they are relevant to the discussion of dating violence because of the similarities between these two forms of gender-based violence. Within the interpersonal model, violence between adults is understood as the result of an inability to cope appropriately and nonviolently with stress or conflict. The emphasis in this model is on psychological deficits and distorted interpersonal communication as causal factors. The limitation inherent in this conceptualization is that it neglects any consideration of the underlying power dynamics that are at the core of gender-based violence.

The second model discussed by Stark and Flitcraft (1991) is the family violence model. In accord with this model, the intimacy and privacy of family life create conditions that are conducive to patterns of family violence. And it is within the institution of the family that violence is learned, enacted, and transmitted across generations. As violent patterns become entrenched, they often extend beyond the family to include peers and dating partnerships. While this model has a great deal of intuitive appeal and has been supported by considerable research, it has been criticized for its tendency toward "blaming the victim."

The third model is the gender politics model whereby family violence is depicted as the manifestation of male control, a pattern that often begins during dating relationships and continues through marriage. Support for this model is persuasive. Single, divorced, and separated women are normally at greater risk than married women because violence is exercised by men who are threatened by female independence and who feel that their rights supersede those of women. These men initiate violence to obtain greater control and exercise methods of entrapment and psychological manipulation. Women remain in these relationships because of fear, lack of support, and victim-blaming interventions, all of which help to explain why young women stay in violent dating relationships.

Together, these models are useful in helping to categorize causes and risk factors. They tend not to recognize, however, the unique experiences and feelings of the individuals who live with dating violence. Nor do they

draw attention to the ways in which gender-based violence is encouraged and sanctioned at the broader social and institution level.

Seminal research by Bograd (1988) highlighted the contributions that feminist perspectives and approaches could bring to an understanding of violence against women. In contrast to psychological approaches that emphasize characteristics of individual men and women as victims or recipients of abuse, feminist approaches illuminate the experience of violence and the contextual factors that help to sustain violent relationships. Further, feminist researchers go beyond the generation of knowledge, and engage in social action and change on behalf of battered women. While there is no single feminist perspective, most generally view wife abuse on a continuum whereby seemingly milder offences, such as pushing, lie at one end, and physical or sexual assault at the other end of the spectrum, and believe that marriage and family foster men's use of physical force against women. Increasingly, feminist researchers raise concerns about the use of gender-neutral language, such as "spousal abuse" or "domestic violence," insisting that these phrases obscure the context of violence, its nature, and its consequences. In contrast, feminist researchers focus on the reasons why men as a group abuse women and not the psychopathology that leads to the violence. Feminist narrative inquiry offers the opportunity for young women to give voice to their experiences of dating violence, as well as increased recognition of dating violence as a public health issue.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), MEDLINE, and PsychINFO databases were searched to obtain studies related to dating violence that were published within the last 10 years. In this review, several general comments regarding this body of research, followed by a discussion of the influence of the individual and social contexts that shape dating violence experiences, will be presented. Current knowledge regarding the detrimental health effects of dating violence will be examined and, finally, strengths and limitations inherent in the literature will be identified with specific attention to the significance of gender.

In a review of the dating violence research, Koval (1989) commented on the tendency to measure violence using various instruments including the conflict tactics scale (CTS). While this approach yields important information regarding the occurrence and nature of dating violence, it does not further our understanding of the meaning of dating violence in the lives of adolescent girls and young women, nor does it provide insights from their perspectives. More significantly, the use of standardized instruments cannot contribute to knowledge about how dating violence becomes internalized by young women. Feminist scholars have critiqued the CTS for its ranking of

abusive behaviors in a linear fashion, from least to most serious, noting that this ranking incorrectly assumes that psychological abuse is less injurious than physical abuse (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998). Since the CTS does not cover the full spectrum of abuse that exists, it is possible that respondents will not report abuse if it is not asked about. As the CTS simply counts the number of violent acts committed, and does not distinguish why women and men *use* violence or the context in which such violence occurs, researchers often erroneously conclude that men and women are equally violent (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 1998).

A second issue of concern is the manner in which gender is treated in much of the dating violence research. Although experiences within both the individual and social contexts are profoundly gendered, gender is rarely acknowledged in the extant body of literature other than as a categorical variable of interest. Much of the research to date examines differences between males and females, particularly in terms of victim–perpetrator characteristics and the forms of dating violence that are sustained. Few investigators, however, have applied a gendered analysis to their studies. Instead, many researchers (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Foshee, 1996; Foshee, Linder, MacDougall & Bangdiwala, 2001; Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshend 1997; Pawlby, Mills, & Quinton, 1997; Purdie & Downey, 2000) have utilized the term “gender” as a marker of biological difference between males and females rather than as a phenomenon that is socially and culturally ascribed, that people and society produce and reproduce gender within relationships and social institutions (West & Zimmerman, 1987). A meaningful understanding of dating violence requires consideration of gender as a social construct that can change as a result of the social context in which individuals exist. In the absence of a gendered analysis, it often is difficult to fully interpret research findings. As Berman and Jiwani (2002) observed, “Gender neutral descriptions obscure the root causes of violence and leave the underlying gender-related dynamics unnamed and invisible” (p. 3).

The Context of Dating Violence in Young Women’s Lives

Much of the dating violence literature has focused on the *individual context*, with attention to such factors as personality traits, individual behaviors, and characteristics associated with victims and perpetrators of violence (Lloyd & Emery, 2000). Although it is unlikely that individual traits or behaviors will, by themselves, cause one to inflict dating violence, several researchers have attempted to establish such causality. Some of the most commonly identified factors include mental illness, poor self-image, stress, abuse of drugs and alcohol, suicidal intentionality, and lack of self-control (Howard & Wang, 2003; Miller & Wellford, 1997).

Foshee, Linder, MacDougall, and Bangdiwala (2001) conducted a longitudinal study to identify predictors of dating violence. Predictors

associated with female adolescent violence included having friends who were victims of dating violence and use/abuse of alcohol. Being from a non-White background significantly increased the likelihood of perpetration of violence among females, while possessing attitudes that are accepting of dating violence predicted perpetration by males (Foshee et al.). Several researchers reported that victimization among females was positively related to the number of intimate partners (Pawlby, Mills, & Quinton, 1997; Tucker-Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001). Tucker-Halpern and colleagues also observed that greater relationship duration and commitment were associated with victimization for both sexes, while Pawlby and colleagues (1997) noted that among inner-city adolescent girls, pregnancy and having a child contributed to relationship-centered difficulties. These authors also found that the "at-risk" group tended to form relationships with adolescent boys who were involved in criminal activities such as vandalism and theft, and that their relationships lacked intimacy and were characterized by social subordination of girls by boys.

Purdie and Downey (2000) suggested that sensitivity to rejection from peers and teachers increased the likelihood that adolescent girls will experience violence in their dating relationships. These researchers observed that dependency on dating relationships may cause victimization, a finding that also was put forth by Tucker-Halpern and colleagues (2001).

Several investigators have studied characteristics of victims and perpetrators of dating violence, but findings to date have been inconsistent and contradictory. A number of investigators have reported that females are more likely to be victims of dating violence than males (Pawlby et al., 1997; Purdie & Downey, 2000; West & Rose, 2000). In contrast, prior work suggested that females perpetrated more physical violence than males (Foshee, 1996; Malik et al., 1997) even when controlling for violence perpetrated in self-defense (Malik et al.). Foshee considered only the frequency of violent acts, however, and not the severity and further suggested that the influence of peers who had experienced dating violence, the use of alcohol, and membership in a minority group increased the likelihood of a female becoming a perpetrator of dating violence.

The *social context* includes the social, relational, and the family environments. Bergman (1992) and Spencer and Bryant (2000) conducted research with students attending rural, suburban, and urban high schools to estimate the proportion of high school students who experienced dating violence. Bergman found that the incidence of repeated violence was fairly consistent among high school students, regardless of geographic location. In contrast, Spencer and Bryant (2000) found that teens in rural school districts were more likely to be victims of dating violence than their suburban and urban counterparts. Together, these studies suggest that dating violence takes place in diverse settings and that community or geographic setting is an important context that warrants consideration.

Connolly, Pepler, Craig, and Taradash (2000) examined the social context of schoolyard bullying. Results indicated that individuals who engaged in bullying began dating earlier and did so more frequently than other adolescents. These individuals also perceived relationships with their boyfriends or girlfriends to be less intimate, less affectionate, and less durable, and were likely to engage in undesirable activities to “keep” their partners. According to these authors, adolescents whose peer relationships are characterized by bullying may be at risk for continued difficulties in romantic relationships.

According to Lavoie, Robitaille, and Herbert (2000), some forms of dating violence are perceived to be more serious among the adolescent population than others. These authors used qualitative methods to examine aggression in teen dating relationships among a sample of teens, aged 14 to 19. Findings suggested that consensual use of violence, including “rough sex” (p. 9), was acceptable to males as well as to females. The authors also reported that psychological abuse, including denigration and insults, social control and jealousy, indifference and damaged reputations, was perceived by the adolescents to be worse than physical violence.

Several researchers have observed the importance of family relationships and dynamics on dating behavior (Foshee et al., 2001; Malik et al., 1997; Wolfe et al., 2001). Wolfe and his colleagues examined the relationships among child maltreatment, adjustment problems, and dating violence. Adolescent males were more likely to be perpetrators of abuse toward their dating partners if they had experienced childhood maltreatment, while adolescent females who had experienced childhood maltreatment were likely to experience greater emotional distress and post-traumatic stress-related symptoms. Similarly, Malik and colleagues (1997) suggested that males were more likely to perpetrate dating violence if they had witnessed spousal abuse between their parents, whereas adolescent girls were more likely to be victims of dating violence if they had been abused in their families of origin.

Dating Violence and Health

Several investigators have begun to examine the health consequences of dating violence. Coker and colleagues (2000) examined quality of life and found that adolescent girls engaged in serious “health risk behaviors” such as substance abuse, unhealthy weight control, sexual risk behavior, pregnancy, and suicide as a result of dating violence. Levy (1998) described symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and sexual dysfunction following sexual abuse by a dating partner. Kreiter and colleagues (1999) reported gender-specific effects, noting that males were more likely to use injected drugs, while females were more apt to use marijuana.

Silverman and colleagues (2001) examined the association of lifetime prevalence of physical and sexual violence by dating partners among adolescent girls with specific health risks. This study revealed that unhealthy weight control behaviors, suicide ideation, and actual suicide attempts were more prevalent among adolescent girls who experienced dating violence. The health effects that are experienced as a result of dating violence are often insidious. As Flanagan and Furman (2000) suggested, victimization caused by dating violence can have long-term emotional health consequences on adolescent females. These include distrust and hostility toward men and the inability to establish meaningful attachments. Similarly, Purdie and Downey (2000) found that chronic anxiety related to fears of peer rejection compromised the quality of adolescent girls' relationships.

As the research presented in the review indicates, there is growing awareness regarding the health implications associated with dating violence; however, more research is needed to gain a richer understanding of these effects. Little is known about this population's perceptions of their experiences, or their interactions with the health care system, including barriers and factors that facilitate access to services. The current study attempts to address some of these knowledge gaps.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

A feminist narrative study was conducted to examine the issue of dating violence from the perspective of young women. This approach provided a means to access participants' stories about dating violence, to tap into their usual ways of expressing themselves, and to incorporate the context and chronology of events while imparting meaning and relaying larger cultural themes and values. Through narration, participants were able to contextualize their experiences of dating violence and explain the choices they made to themselves and others (Lempert, 1994). Similarly, narrative analysis enabled these young women to provide their own definitions of abuse and recognize their changing perspectives as they matured from adolescence to womanhood (Lempert, 2004). Reflexivity, a hallmark of feminist research, was achieved through the processes of dialogue, reflection, and critique that were integrated into the data collection and analysis phases of the research. Through this process, both the investigator and the participants were able to contemplate the issue of dating violence from many vantage points, thereby fostering new understandings and possibilities for action and change at the individual and structural levels.

Recruitment strategies were selected that were most likely to yield a diverse study sample. These included contacting key informants at various community organizations and agencies, placing advertisements in culturally

diverse areas of the city, informant referrals, and snowball techniques. The sample consisted of 11 English-speaking adolescent girls and young women ranging in age from 17 to 23 years. Although this sample was at the upper range of adolescence, many described experiences that had occurred during early adolescence. Five participants had experienced dating violence themselves; 4 indicated that although they had not experienced dating violence personally, they were close to someone who had; and 2 participants expressed an interest in participating in the research because of concerns they had regarding the issue. The decision to include some participants who had not personally experienced dating violence was consistent with the premise that understandings regarding dating violence stem from a range of sources and experiences. With respect to ethnocultural background, 9 participants were Caucasian and 2 were Aboriginal. With respect to education, 1 participant had completed several years of high school but did not graduate, 1 was a community college graduate, and 9 were university graduates. All participants stated that they were from middle- to upper-class families.

Data Collection and Analysis

The participants who were uncomfortable discussing personal aspects of their dating relationship in a group setting opted for individual interviews. The remaining 8 chose group interviews that were conducted on two separate occasions with 4 participants present at each interview. A semi structured interview guide, developed for this research, was used in conjunction with probes and reflective statements. Demographic data were collected prior to the narrative portion of the interview. Consistent with feminist research approaches, the interviews were conducted in a manner that encouraged dialogue, reflection, and critique (Berman, Ford-Gilboe, & Campbell, 1998).

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes about the feelings, reactions, and observations of both the participants and the interviewer helped establish a context for interpreting the data. Thematic analysis of interview and field note data was conducted. (Berman, Ford-Gilboe, & Campbell, 1998). Adequate phrases were chosen that helped to describe the themes. Similarities and differences in experiences, ideas, and perceptions about dating violence were identified (Lempert, 1994). Narrative analysis also was used to reveal grammatical structures and word choice that was used by the participants. Narrators of dating violence stories used language structure to promote understanding and interpretation of their experiences and to uncover meanings and relationships between and among the experience of dating violence, contextual factors, and health experiences. All names used are pseudonyms.

FINDINGS

As the participants told their stories, they reflected on their experiences and thoughts regarding dating violence. Through the process of narrative analysis, four central themes emerged: (a) manipulation and control in the context of dating relationships; (b) broader contexts that shape dating violence in young women's lives; (c) health perceptions and experiences; and (d) normalization, perpetuation, and trivialization of dating violence.

Manipulation and Control in the Context of Dating Relationships

All of the participants stated that dating violence is multidimensional and may be physical, sexual, or psychological, and generally entails some form of manipulation and control. They typically defined dating violence broadly, and included such emotional forms of abuse as "being cheated on" and "finding out that somebody did something behind your back." In this regard, their definitions extended traditional notions about dating violence that included only physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. Many participants claimed that the emotional suffering associated with dating violence was typically not recognized as abuse by parents, other adults in trusted positions, or health care workers because it is often insidious and not marked by visible injury.

STORIES OF PAIN, CONSTANT DISAPPOINTMENT AND SELF-BLAME.

The young women experienced many forms of dating violence. Some told about seemingly innocuous experiences such as being lied to, while others described more explicit forms of violence, including verbal threats upon their lives and physical abuse. The intense inner turmoil that the young women experienced before, during, and after their relationships ended was evident in their stories. Amanda described a history of dating violence, including physical and psychological abuse that took place over the course of a long-term high school dating relationship:

My boyfriend was the cool guy at school, the one who sat in his car and listened to music and everybody liked him. He started to cheat on me in a way that isn't even imaginable. He was also physically violent at times. We would get into arguments and he would hit me. I thought it was my fault and I would go back to him and he would do it again. And it was just a vicious cycle. It took me about 4 years to actually realize that this wasn't the type of person I wanted to be with.

Several participants, including Amanda, expressed a sense of guilt and self-blame regarding their role in the relationships, and, more specifically,

their inability to leave. Amber had a very close friend who had experienced dating violence inflicted by a long-term boyfriend during her teen years. Her friend eventually ended the relationship but continues to be harassed by her former-boyfriend. Amber portrayed her friend's experience of dating violence as one that caused constant disappointment and pain:

It was really good in the beginning. He was really charming and endearing and just the type of person that seemed like he had it all together. It was really good. He had a contagious personality, everybody just wanted to be around him. The abuse gradually developed over time. My friend would say, "Oh, it's okay, he did that but maybe that's not really what he's like." It was like she just waited for the next time to happen and each time it happened, it became worse and worse.

Laura had experienced psychological abuse over the course of a high school dating relationship. Speaking about a friend who had also experienced dating violence, Laura explained, "He would argue with her over things, lose his temper, and physically hit her. There were many times that I sat with her, crying, but she wouldn't let this guy go." These young women's understandings of dating violence evolved over time and often entailed a pattern of leaving and returning several times until they eventually began to see and name the violence for what it was, and recognized that they were not to blame for the abuse.

Romantic Love, Young Love, and the Fear of Being Alone. The young women described pressures from their peers and the media to have boyfriends and develop committed relationships at a young age. These pressures seemed to amplify their willingness to remain in relationships that included violence. As they stated, they were willing to tolerate the violence because they wanted desperately to hold on to their romantic notions about relationships, notions that were passed along through the fairytales they read as children, and through the media and popular culture that they were exposed to as teenagers. Gwen had experienced emotional and psychological abuse inflicted upon her by her long-term boyfriend:

I've always been a romantic and I think that these ideas were put into my head at a really young age. During my childhood, I would play a game called prince and princess with my friends. I would be the princess and my prince would fall in love with me. There was a storyline that we use to act out where the prince would fight with the princess and leave her. She would cry and cry and act like her world had come to an end. Where did I get these ideas from?

Amanda stated, "Girls are so vulnerable at that age, especially in high school; you think it's love and you get caught up in that whole love relationship." During adolescence, many girls have their first sexual

experience, an event that clearly brings much anticipation, wonder, and, in some cases, fear. Amber, who acted as her friend's confidant and source of support throughout her friend's abusive dating relationship, said, "If you don't feel like you can tell others about your situation, then leaving the relationship makes you feel worse off than staying in it." The fear of social ostracism seemed to contribute to an inability to leave dating relationships. The overall sense conveyed was that a bad relationship, even if characterized by manipulation and control, was preferable to no relationship at all.

Broader Contexts That Shape Dating Violence in Young Women's Lives

The experience of dating violence was different for each participant. This variation was due, in part, to the diverse contexts, or social locations, in which they dwell. The contextual factors that were found to be particularly relevant were family environment and gender.

Parental influence and Histories of Violence. The family environment played a significant role in shaping young women's ideas, beliefs, values, and actions related to dating violence. It was within this context that early socialization experiences were learned and enacted, and it was here where these young women had the opportunities to observe adult interactions. In some cases these were based on mutual understanding and respect, while in other cases, interactions between adults were characterized by hostility, violence, and aggression. In all instances, the young women learned a great deal from what occurred in their family contexts. Several participants described a history of violence that they had witnessed or experienced within their families of origin. Amber shared her views about the role of the family:

I think that if someone is brought up with love, then they are always taught that if someone was to ever hit you or say mean things to you or manipulate you, then you leave. But if you get yourself into a situation, you try to keep it to yourself and make it work.

Jen suggested that her childhood history of sexual abuse might have contributed to her willingness to tolerate dating violence as a teenager. She recalled allowing her boyfriends to mistreat her, stating, "I just let them treat me like crap." Family upbringing and the values that parents instilled in their children were discussed by all of the participants. Nicole had experienced psychological and physical dating violence during a high school relationship and thought that the physical abuse she experienced from her father may have contributed to her acceptance of dating violence:

When I grew up I was rude to my Dad and I'd really piss him off and he would hit me. So maybe that's why when I was with my boyfriend and I would piss him off and he would hit me, I would be, like, "That's okay."

As these comments imply, family dynamics, including histories of violence, played a significant role in shaping young women's perceptions of, and vulnerability to, dating violence.

The Deeply Gendered Nature of Dating Violence. The centrality of gender to the experience of dating violence was a consistent theme in the young women's stories. They repeatedly commented on the gendered demands and expectations they faced from society, their parents, and their partners regarding the social imperative to look and act a particular way. These pressures were intertwined with their stated need to be accepted by their parents, by other adults in trusted positions, by their peers, and especially by their boyfriends. Jen, who had dropped out of high school at the age of 16, was physically, sexually, and psychologically abused by several "boyfriends." She said that she "ran from one guy to another looking for love" and was always looking for someone to accept her for who she was. Jen described the pressures she felt from her friends to be in a serious relationship and said that this contributed to her experiences during her early adolescent relationships. Tiffany described the pressures she and her friends experienced:

I think that, as a female, you have a lot of things that you have to worry about. You have to worry about your appearance, you have to worry about your weight, you have to worry about whether or not you are going to succeed in school. And I think that people judge women, young girls, differently than they do guys. I think that women, as much as they have come a long way in history, I think that they still are victims of discrimination because of the fact that they are women. And I think that that in turn leads to a lot of abuse from males.

The unrelenting pressures the young women perceived came from varied sources including their families and society. As a result of these, acceptance of violence was often the preferable alternative to risk of rejection or being viewed negatively by peers.

The young women eloquently described their behaviors in the context of dating relationships. They did not typically establish a link, however, between these behaviors and messages they received about gendered expectations. For example, several spoke about their own submissiveness and acquiescence, along with a desire to make their partners appear strong, powerful, and in control. As Holly stated,

At first I'll yell back, but then after awhile I just break down and cry because I can't keep up with that fighting. And he doesn't get upset. He

just keeps yelling, whereas after a while I just can't take it anymore, so I back down. I think that's the kind of the situation with a lot of my friends as well.

With respect to the behaviors of their male partners, the consistent perception among the participants was that dominance, power, and control prevailed. As Nicole explained,

I thought he [her boyfriend] loved me so much because he was always asking me where I was going and what I was doing. I just thought he cared about me so much, but, really, he was being possessive. He wanted to control what I was doing and who I was doing it with. He would make me call him all of the time.

Adolescent boys and young men were not interviewed in this research and it is, therefore, not possible to comment on their views or perspectives. According to the young women, however, gendered expectations were deeply ingrained in the lives of both groups and manifested themselves in ways that were not always visible or readily apparent. The pressures for young women to be submissive and boys to be domineering, and the associated rules and roles of gendered relations, were played out in the microcosmic world of dating relationships, and were repeatedly described by the girls in this study.

Health Perceptions and Experiences

The young women told of a multitude of ways in which their physical and emotional health was adversely affected by dating violence. Many of these problems persisted beyond the termination of the abusive relationships. Particularly noteworthy was their perception that little support was available to them from the health care system.

"I'm Just All Out of Whack." Health was typically defined as "physical, mental/emotional, and social well-being." The young women explained that these three aspects had to be balanced in order for one to feel healthy. Dating violence had important implications for all three of these domains. Amanda stated, "I just didn't care about the way I looked anymore. I was so stressed out, I would make myself sick." Many young women described eating disorders, sleep disturbances including nightmares, social isolation, and drug use/abuse.

The perceived societal pressure to "do it all" was compounded by the violence the young women had experienced in their intimate relationships. This pressure was taxing on the young women's emotional health and, according to them, contributed to an inability to concentrate, focus on school, and participate in activities with their friends. The subsequent lack of social

interaction made them feel isolated. As Nicole said, “When you don’t have a support network it’s really bad because you can’t go anywhere for an outlet.” The interrelationships among the three domains of health were clear. Compromises to one domain affected other domains, and the net result was an overall inability to feel healthy. However, effects on all domains were not equally apparent. The subtle nature of mental health compromises were described by Amber:

It’s like it’s up and down. When it is good, it is good; and when it is bad, it is bad. And that takes an emotional toll on you whether you’re in it or whether you’re seeing someone you care about being in it.

Referring to the effects of dating violence on her mental health, Laura stated, “Nobody ever knew what it did to me because they couldn’t see it.” Many participants noted that they were ashamed and embarrassed about their experiences and had difficulty disclosing dating violence. This inability to share what had occurred intensified their emotional stress and made the process of leaving the abusive relationship more difficult.

Encounters With the Health Care System. All participants who had experienced dating violence described encounters with the health care system. These encounters were not directly related to the abuse that they experienced but resulted because of their situations. It is particularly noteworthy that all of the young women who experienced dating violence subsequently became pregnant by their abusive partners. One also had contracted a sexually transmitted disease (STD). In all cases, the pregnancies were terminated and the STD was treated. The young women expressed shame and embarrassment about the pregnancies and STD symptoms. Many did not disclose to health providers that they were in abusive relationships, even when asked, for fear of being judged or viewed negatively. They stated that health care workers seemed “disinterested” and the young women consistently expressed their frustration with the lack of support they received.

One participant was fortunate to receive professional support for the dating violence she experienced and spoke about the counseling she received years later:

I went back to him [boyfriend] because at that point in my life I was so alone. I was 17 years old. I knew nothing else. My parents and my friends weren’t speaking to me. So I was totally scared. If I had only known about going to a counselor earlier, I could have really helped my situation.

Amanda later learned that this resource was available to her while she was in high school, although she was unaware of it at the time.

Normalization, Perpetuation, and Trivialization of Dating Violence

The participants described many ways in which the dating violence continued, and said they did not recognize any means to end it. As they explained, the perceived lack of social support; the dismissive responses on the part of parents, teachers, health providers, and other adults; and the subtle sanctioning of violence in the schools and the media, contributed to a normalization of violence and compounded the difficulties of leaving the abusive relationships.

Seeking Solace in Painful Places. Several young women spoke about seeking solace in places that continued to cause pain and hurt. The lack of support, social isolation, and family estrangement experienced by the young women contributed indirectly to their inability to end abusive dating relationships. Laura “went back to him” at a point in her life when she was alone:

My parents weren't speaking to me and there was no way I could have gone to anybody at my school because the first thing they would have done is contact my parents. So I was totally scared. So I went back to him [boyfriend]. And, again, it continued.

As this quote illustrates, Laura recognized that the abuse was “wrong” and was willing to seek support. Because appropriate resources were not available, or at least were unknown to her, however, she remained in the abusive relationship. In Gwen's words,

I think that if I had the support and love that I needed at that time, I wouldn't have been in that situation. I turned to my boyfriend for support because I felt like I had nothing else. I can't believe what I went through. I cried for days and days. I can't believe what he made me become. I felt the rejection from my parents and my friends. Everyone turned their backs on me. So when it got really bad, I had no choice but to stay with him.

As these comments reveal, the young women sought solace in relationships that they knew were harmful to them. The lack of clear options, alternatives, and support served to sustain the violence in their lives.

Violence Unnamed and Unnoticed. Although violence has become a public health issue that has gained increasing recognition over the years, the participants expressed disappointment in their encounters with health professionals, as well as with other adults. The adults to whom they turned failed to see the seriousness of dating violence, tending instead to dismiss it as a minor problem or as an expected component of any intimate partnership, as Holly poignantly stated:

There are so many movies out there where girls are abused by their boyfriends. We never see how these boys are punished for their actions. This sends the message that dating violence is acceptable and that it isn't really important.

The participants commented that school-based health education programs rarely address dating violence, and health providers do not typically inquire about their intimate relationships. The lack of discussion surrounding this issue made it difficult for the young women to openly reflect on their experiences, or to learn ways to resist and challenge the violence in their lives. The message that has been conveyed to them repeatedly is that dating violence is not a serious issue. Laura spoke about her experience in the Catholic school system and discussed her teachers' avoidance of issues such as dating violence:

Dating violence was a reality at my school, and there were tons of girls going through it. But girls felt like they couldn't turn to anybody because of the school system. Teachers never recognized it and would not listen if someone tried to tell them something they didn't want to hear. So, for me, when I had these problems, I didn't have anyone to turn to at all.

From the stories told, the manner by which dating violence was normalized in young women's lives became clear. The tendency of adults, including parents, teachers, and health care providers, to discount young women's concerns reinforced the notion that violence is an acceptable and integral component of dating relationships. Similarly, the messages that were conveyed time and again through the media, children's storybooks, and other vehicles of popular culture, have the same effect. The tendency for young women to rationalize dating violence, to hold on to and embrace romantic notions about relationships even when such beliefs may be tantamount to staying in abusive relationships, and to feel the need to have a boyfriend at all costs, were the net results of the trivialization, perpetuation, and normalization of violence in young women's lives.

DISCUSSION

The young women in this study welcomed the opportunity to discuss the issue of dating violence. In part, their enthusiasm may be attributed to the fact that many of their past efforts to address the issue have been met with skepticism, disbelief, and dismissive attitudes. As a result, the young women openly, honestly, and poignantly shared their stories about a deeply personal and painful aspect of their lives. The findings in relation to young women's experiences, perceptions, and understandings of dating violence were unique in that they extended traditional definitions of dating violence,

and young women's stories were placed at the centre of the analysis. As the young women discussed their experiences and thoughts, it became clear that they viewed dating violence as something that can manifest itself in many ways. They spoke of emotional forms of violence, including being lied to and cheated on, and indicated that emotional abuse can be as painful and harmful as more blatant, physical forms of dating violence. They described the pain, constant disappointment, and self-blame that ensued. The young women also shared their frustration that, from their perspective, unless they bore the physical scars, their concerns were not likely to be taken seriously.

The broader contexts of family and gender were central in shaping the experiences of the young women and their capacity to make sense of the violence in their lives. These findings add to the existing body of research that demonstrates a relationship between exposure to violence in the family and dating violence perpetration and victimization (Malik et al., 1997; Wolfe et al., 2001). Similarly, the findings related to gender are consistent with earlier studies that have documented dating violence differences between males and females (Foshee, 1996; Foshee et al., 2001; Malik et al., 1997; Pawlby et al., 1997; Purdie & Downey, 2000). The current findings, however, add the perspectives of young women to the extant knowledge base. As the young women shared their stories, they struggled to understand the influence of their families, and particularly the violence that they had seen or experienced in their families of origin. As they reflected on their own experiences of dating violence, they began to contemplate how these were linked to the earlier violence that was a part of their lives. Similarly, the young women described the pressures from their peers to have boyfriends and be "in relationships" and their inability to recognize the violence in their dating relationships. All of these factors, collectively, contributed to the normalization of the experience.

This study brought attention to the profound ways that gender shapes young women's experiences with respect to violence in dating relationships. They described the need to conform to widely held gendered stereotypes in order to be accepted by their peers, partners, parents, and adults in trusted positions. This pressure, and the social ostracism that resulted when they were not in relationships, contributed to a determination to "hold on to" their boyfriends at all costs, regardless of how abusive these boyfriends were. Through the young women's descriptions, the interrelatedness of dating violence, family environment, and gendered socialization became clear.

A critical and central finding of the current study was that virtually all the girls who participated and who had experienced dating violence suffered a multitude of adverse health sequelae. Many of these health effects have been described in earlier studies (Coker et al., 2000; Flanagan & Furman, 2000; Purdie & Downey, 2000; Silverman et al., 2001). However, the young women in this research drew attention to the fact that the detrimental outcomes often were not recognized due to their insidious nature. For example, several

participants described the pain and anguish they experienced while they were in the abusive relationships and after the relationships ended. They also described the mental suffering they experienced as a result of their inability to discuss the violence that was occurring. Because these effects often are not readily apparent or visible, it is essential that health care professionals be knowledgeable regarding the issue of dating violence and be sensitive to the more “subtle” responses. With such knowledge, it is then possible for health providers to collaborate with young women in the development of appropriate intervention and prevention strategies.

One unexpected finding with respect to health outcomes was that all of the young women who had suffered from dating violence had become pregnant while they were still in their abusive relationships. This important finding has received little attention in the literature and merits further study. The implications of unwanted pregnancy are numerous. At the very least, health professionals should be alert to the possibility of dating violence when working with pregnant adolescent girls. While routine screening may occur, interventions are needed that afford young women the opportunity to disclose violence, if and when they wish to do so, in a supportive, sensitive, and empowering environment.

The young women described their interactions with health care providers during the interviews. In all cases, these encounters were related to pregnancy and STDs, not violence per se. Consistently, the young women expressed disappointment and shared their perceptions that health professionals were unsupportive and were not attuned to the issue of violence. Given the current lack of content related to dating violence in most health education programs, this finding is not surprising. Health providers need education regarding the gendered nature, prevalence, and possible health outcomes of dating violence. Only then can the health care system become an “empowerment zone” (Campbell, 1998, p. 3), where recognition of dating violence, and other forms of violence, is an integral component of care and where health care providers have a repertoire of strategies to use when working with adolescent girls and young women.

Many of the young women expressed their view that adults did not take their concerns related to dating violence seriously. As well, they spoke about the pervasive and ever-present messages from the media and other forms of popular culture that glamorize violence. The net effect of these messages and attitudes is the normalization, perpetuation, and trivialization of violence in young women’s lives. Although Sousa (1999) reported that parents and adults in trusted positions often dismiss dating violence as a common feature of adolescent relationships, the full extent of this tendency has not been well studied. Rather than analyzing reasons for why victims of dating violence fail to seek help, research has emphasized gender differences in help-seeking behavior (Ashley & Foshee, 2005). Taylor and Sorenson (2004) suggested that there is general public support for prevention and intervention strategies that

are aimed at reducing and responding to dating violence, and the current study contributes new insights in this regard.

In order for young women to be empowered to leave dating relationships that include violence, they need to perceive viable and relevant options and alternatives, the support of peers and adults, and a social context that challenges and condemns all forms of violence. In the absence of these, dating violence will continue unabated and unchecked. Health professionals have the ability to develop partnerships with young women that will help them understand and challenge the causes of dating violence. Together, health professionals and young women can develop strategies aimed at the elimination of this issue. By recognizing the ways in which dating violence is socially and culturally sanctioned and understanding the ways in which it thrives, it is hoped that young women will gain greater control over dating relationships in their lives.

Fundamental aims of feminist research have been described as empowerment, action, and change. In the context of the current study, interviews were conducted that were dialogic in nature, which provided the participants an opportunity to critically reflect on the violence in their lives. Although difficult to measure, it appeared that in the process, the young women came to new understandings regarding the violence they experienced. Most notably, they gained a greater awareness that they were not to blame either for the fact that they were in abusive relationships, or the difficulties they encountered in their efforts to end these relationships. As well, they seemed to derive a sense of solidarity and collectivity as they realized that they were not alone in their feelings or experiences.

LIMITATIONS

The homogeneous nature of the sample, with respect to ethnocultural diversity, educational background, and socioeconomic class, is a significant limitation of this study. Despite efforts to recruit a diverse sample with respect to culture and socioeconomic class, these were largely unsuccessful. In retrospect, involvement of leaders from ethnocultural communities as well as suggestions from key players involved with adolescent program planning, during the early stages of the research, would likely result in greater diversity. Similarly, participants in this study were highly educated in comparison to the average population in Canada. Involvement from educational professionals including the board of education and teachers in the private and public school setting during the early stages of research may have increased the diversity of the sample obtained. In the absence of perspectives from young women of color, young women living in poverty, young women who were less educated, or young women from other marginalized groups, it was not possible to examine how intersecting vulnerabilities and social

locations shape young women's experiences related to dating violence. Further research is needed to examine this issue with these populations as the "intersection of contextual factors of gender, race, class, level of education and all other forms of identity and distinction produce situations in which young women become more vulnerable to abuse" (George, 2001). Goals of feminist research are to challenge hierarchical relationships and to engage with research participants as partners. Efforts were made in the current study to provide a fully democratic forum for young women to discuss their feelings and concerns related to dating violence. In order for partnerships to be meaningful in a deeper sense, however, young women should be invited to be a part of the research in a more fully participatory manner, throughout the development, implementation, and evaluation phases of the investigation.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of young women related to dating violence, the influence of the social context, and the perpetuation and normalization of dating violence are all intertwined with young women's experiences and perceptions of their health and well-being. This study provides new knowledge about dating violence experienced by young women and contributes to an understanding of the broader contexts of family and gender, health effects that are experienced, encounters with the health care system, and ways in which gendered stereotypes, media, and popular culture normalize and perpetuate dating violence in their lives. Health care providers have many opportunities to use the knowledge from this study to advocate on behalf of this population. Further research from a health care perspective will enhance awareness among health professionals about dating violence and the realities faced by many young women in dating relationships. The development of partnerships with young women, providing them with "safe spaces" where they can examine the root causes of violence, and where they can contemplate and challenge the gendered roles and expectations that support violence in their lives, are beginning, but important, initiatives. Ultimately, it is hoped that young women will gain a sense of empowerment that can be used to help them resist and overcome the violence that is so deeply entrenched in contemporary society.

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