


Fall 2014

Adolescent Perceptions of "Healthy" Dating Relationships: Implications for Programming

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family and friends for all of their support throughout my time in the Counselor Education Department at The College at Brockport. To Patrick, my husband and best friend who has dealt with the stressful nights, the difficult changes I had to make within my own life, and many a night with carryout dinners. Yet you have been my rock through it all and supported me in every way possible. You are the reason I am the person I am today.

To my peers in the Counselor Education program Class of December 2014, I never imagined the connection that we would form as we leave the program together. I have developed lifelong friendships with each of you. You accept me for who I am and have been my lifeline throughout this process. Each of you have shaped the counselor (and the person) that I have become and for that I am grateful.

I would also like to thank each of the faculty in the Counselor Education Department. Each of you has shaped the counselor that I have become and it is an honor to say that I have learned from you. Each of you has been there for me to celebrate my successes and support me through my challenges. In turn you have challenged me to grow to my fullest potential. Specifically I would like to thank Dr. Summer Reiner, who has served as a mentor for me helping me become engaged and leadership and better understand the school setting. Your dedication and passion for the field of counseling inspires me to create change. Also, Dr. Tom Hernandez who provided unconditional support as I completed my internship and stressed about completing my thesis. Always while reminding us of the bigger picture and to take care of ourselves.

Lastly, but definitely not least, I want to thank the counselors at my internship site. Todd Wallace, Danielle Watters, Jessica Kane, Karen Kline, Sandy Tydings, and Deb Salamone. You have all taught me valuable lessons, supported me as I grew and discovered my role within the school setting, and ensured that I had the experiences I needed to be successful. Each of you brings a different approach and perspective and I am lucky to have learned from each of you. You are all wonderful examples of what it means to be a school counselor and truly care about your students. At the same time you taught me valuable lessons about self-care and creating balance within my life. Your fun-loving and supportive attitudes have created an environment that I have enjoyed coming into for the past year and that I will sincerely miss.

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Abstract

Adolescence is a time of important developmental changes and the formation of relationships outside of the family. While most experiences children have with dating relationships are positive toward their developmental growth, there is the potential for unhealthy or abusive relationships. Adolescent dating violence (ADV) is a significant public health issue. Nearly 9% of teenagers experiencing physical violence by the time they turn 18 (CDC, 2014). It is possible that the high prevalence of ADV is a result of lack of definitions of healthy and unhealthy relationships and ambiguity that exists within teen relationships. This study examines qualitative interviews with adolescents regarding their perceptions of healthy relationships. These findings are applied to the school setting in order to inform dating violence prevention programming.

Adolescent Perceptions of “Healthy” Dating Relationships: Implications for Programming

The teenage years are filled with various challenges as students move toward greater autonomy while attempting to explore their identities. These developmental tasks are due to a number of changes as children develop physically, cognitively, and emotionally. Adolescence is defined as the period of life from puberty to maturity and typically ranges from the ages of 11-25 (Forke, Myers, Catalozzi, & Schwartz, 2008). It is a time of new experiences and encounters such as developing new friendships, planning for college and careers, and newfound independence. One shift occurs when adolescents expand their interpersonal circle to include their friends as a source of reference and support. They tend to seek out support from and communicate less with their parents (McCarthy & Casey, 2008). This results in greater influence of peers and dating relationships, whereas previously this support may have come from within their immediate families. Additionally, the adolescent years feature the development of abstract thought, which involves becoming aware of their thought processes and the fact that others may be thinking about them (Erikson, 1968; Piaget, 1969). These developments have a significant impact on peer and dating interactions and how adolescents engage in social problem solving.

With these developmental changes begins the onset of dating relationships. Adolescent dating relationships are often difficult to define and thus viewed as unimportant by society. In reality these relationships have significant consequences for the development of the child (Ellis, Crooks, & Wolfe, 2008). These dating activities heavily influence identity development, means of receiving social support, development of a secure attachment base, and changes in peer and family relationships (Foshee, Benfield, Suchindran, Bauman, Karriker-Jaffe, Reyes, & Mathias, 2009). For example, students’ frames of reference tend to move from the family domain to their peers perspectives during adolescence (Martin, Houston, Mmari, & Decker, 2012). This suggests

that they begin to value peer opinions more so than in the past. Also, peers have greater influence over decision-making and their perspective of the world. This means that students are receiving information and support from those that are at the same level of development as them. One can see how important dating relationships are for adolescent development. However, while there are many benefits to the engagement and exploration of dating relationships in adolescence, there are also risk factors that can impact later development (Burton, Halpern-Felsher, Rankin, Rhem, & Humphreys, 2010). If a student is involved in an unhealthy or abusive relationship, he/she is at greater risk for developing a range of problems, including negative future relationships (Lewis & Freemouw, 2001). Due to these risk factors it is important to gain an understanding of adolescent relationships to inform prevention and intervention efforts.

This review of the literature will discuss the importance of dating relationships for adolescent development. It will examine the benefits and risk factors of these relationships, factors of dating violence, and resiliency factors within abusive relationships. Finally it will examine what interventions have already attempted to address the issue and how future programming can be developed to address adolescent dating violence.

Development of Adolescent Dating Relationships

Teenage dating relationships are an integral part of development. It is not uncommon for teens as young as middle school to begin exploring and experimenting with intimate relationships. Those students engaging in relationships face a number of risk and resiliency factors (Dobbs, 2009). This importance is highlighted by the fact that romantic partners tend to replace parents as the primary attachment figures in teenagers' lives (Ellis, et al. 2008). This highlights the fact that dating relationships are a significant influencing factor within the adolescent's life.

Adolescent dating relationships are often marked by exploration and ambiguity. For example, due to a lack of perspective taking, it is often difficult for teenagers to determine whether they are truly in a romantic relationship (Rose & Campbell, 2000). This is demonstrated through the fact that many teens are unable to describe the exact moment they started dating their partner (Almanzor, Jimenez, & Ruiz, 2013). Additionally, teen dating relationships tend to differ from adult romantic relationships in several ways. For example, adolescents often view dating as recreational, a source of companionship, expression of romantic love, and an outlet for sexual experimentation (Arnett, 2001). Furthermore, these relationships are often time limited, lasting only a few weeks to a few months. This adds a level of complexity as many adolescent relationships are in a consistent state of transition. Teenagers often have not determined the nature or definition of their relationship. This is often reflected through the use of language such as “we are talking” (Burke Draucker, Martsolf, & Shockey Stephenson, 2012). Many teenagers are not able to identify what “talking” means to themselves or their partners. This is complicated by the fact that often adolescents do not use tangible signs of their relationship, such as class rings that were used in previous generations. As a result of these factors, it is not uncommon for two individuals who are in a relationship to have differing opinions on the nature of their connection and the desired level of commitment (Burke Draucker, et al., 2012). It can be expected that this lack of clarity would lead to confusion and/or conflict. These developmental factors have the potential to heavily influence teen relationships and students’ perceptions of healthy versus unhealthy relationships.

Conceptualizations of a Healthy Relationship

Due to a lack of clarity about adolescent relationships there have been many attempts to define healthy versus unhealthy relationships. There are various ways to consider healthy

relationships. These are influenced by individual, societal, and cultural factors. One well-known theory of healthy relationships is the Duluth Model's *Healthy Relationship/Equality Wheel* (Wheel gallery, n.d.). This conceptualization entails non-threatening behavior such as creating an environment where each person feels that he/she is able to express himself. Another key component considered to contribute to a healthy relationship is respect. This includes behaviors such as listening and valuing the opinions of one's partner. Trust and support involves respecting one's partner's rights as well as having other friends, activities and opinions. Honesty and accountability consist of each partner accepting responsibility for one's self and admitting when wrong. Responsible parenting includes sharing parental responsibilities. This is not as common for adolescents, as many have not reached that point in development, but is still relevant in some circumstances. For example, school counselors will occasionally encounter students who are pregnant or have children while still in high school. These students may need extra support in respect to their romantic relationships because they are unable to turn to friends' experiences for reference. Additionally, shared responsibility such as a fair distribution of work and economic partnership include ensuring that both partners benefit from financial arrangements. Finally, negotiation and fairness, such as being willing to compromise, are considered important aspects of a healthy relationship. This model of relationships consists of many factors but ultimately centers on a goal of equality between both partners.

The Duluth model of healthy relationships is more characteristic of adult women than adolescents. Adolescents are less likely to have the same factors such as Responsible Parenting and Economic Partnership. Therefore, it is important to consider adolescent relationships from a developmental perspective. Edwards and Sylaska (2013) explored factors that contribute to the continuation of young adult women's relationships. The participants identified positive qualities

within a boyfriend such as being loving, funny, handsome and sexy. Additionally, relational love such as declarations of love, positive emotions such as “I really care about him” or “he makes me satisfied and happy” were part of the perception of positive attributes in the partners. These students describe their partner as being their “best friend”, and envision a future with their partner. These factors represent subjective views from young adults of what entails a positive relationship experience. Positive relationships can assist an adolescent in adjusting to social groups and improve relationship adjustment skills across multiple areas (Wolf & Foshee, 2003). Therefore, gathering information directly from adolescents about how dating behaviors impact them can be a valuable step for increasing our understanding of the benefits and consequences of dating relationships in adolescence.

Several considerations are important in examining how a healthy adolescent relationship is defined. For example, the most effective models are multidimensional in that they include a range of aspects of the health (Tharp, Carter, Fasula, Hatfield-Timajchy, Jayne, Latzman, & Kinsey, 2013). This is demonstrated within the Duluth model with the various components of the relationship such as respect, accountability, and trust. In addition, definitions of healthy vs. unhealthy relationships exist on a continuum. The existence of unhealthy behaviors is not categorical and there is a range of degree of qualities exhibited from less severe to more severe. Finally, effective models recognize that the implications of relationships change across adolescence due to development in cognitive, biological, and emotional domains. For example, it is not uncommon for the definition of dating to evolve between the ages of 15-18. This requires the openness available with a continuous conceptualization so that definitions can be adjusted based on the individual and their circumstances.

Conceptualizations of a Problematic Relationship

Not every relationship is beneficial to those involved. Problematic relationships can include a range of unhealthy behaviors including intimate partner violence (IPV) or adolescent dating violence (ADV). IPV is defined as a pattern of coercive and controlling tactics that may include physical violence, threats, emotional and psychological abuse, and sexual abuse (Schrag, 2012). Several types of abuse have been defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Physical abuse entails a person being pinched, shoved, slapped, punched or kicked. Psychological/Emotional abuse is threatening, harming self-worth, name-calling, bullying, shaming, and isolation. Sexual abuse involves forcing a partner to engage in a sexual act without consent. Stalking involves harassing or threatening victims that results in fear. This is concerning due to the psychological consequences for the victim and the fact that stalking often escalates into more violent behaviors (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Finally, relational aggression is described as actions that are used to sabotage others' relationships or reputations in an effort to gain social control (Prather, Dahlen, Nicholson, & Bullock-Yowell, 2012). For example, spreading rumors that defame one's partner's character. There are a number of various behaviors that are considered abusive. Often, these various forms of behaviors and abuse do not occur in isolation. For example, a person will often be psychologically and physically victimized. These actions exist on a continuum from less to most severe and can manifest themselves in both peer and dating relationships.

The Duluth Model (2013) has also released a *Power and Control Wheel* that is proposed to characterize an unhealthy or abusive relationship. This includes using intimidation; inflicting emotional abuse; isolation; minimizing, denying, and blaming; using children; using male privilege; and using economic abuse in order to establish power and control over a partner.

Similarly, Edwards & Sylaska (2013) characterize young adults' perceptions of unhealthy relationships that result in ambivalence or a desire to leave. These include clinginess, alcohol abuse, jealousy, control issues, and/or an undercurrent of fear. While every participant who was being abused did not leave the relationship, they did identify these characteristics as negatively impacting themselves and the couple.

Adolescent Dating Violence

Adolescent dating violence (ADV) is considered a significant public health issue (CDC, 2014). This is due to the severe effects of dating violence and its prevalence. In fact, dating relationships are often more violent than married or committed relationships (Straus, 2004). One theory related to the higher rates of violence is the varying definitions and expectations that each partner has for the relationship. 9% of high school students have reported being physically harmed by a partner within the past 12 months (CDC, 2014). Moreover, the FBI reports that 21% of women who are murdered in the United States are between the ages of 15-24 (Berry, 2000). In addition, approximately 29% of high school students report having experienced some form of psychological abuse in the past year (Foshee, et al., 2009). Foshee et al. (2009) also discovered that among adolescents ages 13-19, the use of psychological dating abuse increases over time. This suggests that intervention at an early age is critical. These statistics are alarming, as once an incident of dating violence has occurred, it is more likely to happen again or continue to occur over a long period of time (Foshee, et al. 2009). Intervening at a young age helps to break the cycle of escalation in violence and revictimization that is common within ADV and IPV.

There are also cultural and gender characteristics that are of vital importance when considering ADV. For example, girls report perpetration more often than victimization (Foshee, et al. 2009). This suggests that, contrary to common belief, females are more often perpetrators

in ADV and IPV than males. However, these actions tend to be a low level of violence, such as slapping or name calling, whereas males tend to perpetrate more severe violence. A person who perpetrates dating violence is in an intimate relationship that uses a pattern of assaultive and/or coercive behavior against his or her partner. This is done to establish power and control over the victim (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, 2012). The victim is the person to whom this controlling behavior is directed. Definitions between perpetrator and victim are not always clear, as both partners may be engaging in abusive behavior toward the other.

Additionally, Black students report more victimization and perpetration than White and Latino students (Orpinas, Nahapeyton, Song, McNichols, & Reeves, 2012). It is not clear why this differential exists. Some explanations may be the number of additional risk factors these students are facing and different cultural views on seeking help. For example, Black students are more likely to seek help from family members than formal support sources. This can result in underreporting of ADV among Black students. This demonstrates that there is a racial differential in the occurrence of dating abuse, whether it be incidents that occur or those that are reported.

Cultural beliefs have an impact on what is perceived as dating violence or abuse. Different cultures accept varying levels of aggressiveness and violence. For example, one study examined the different attitudes toward dating violence between Jewish, Thai, and Arab individuals (Pradumoork-Sherer, P., & Sherer, M., 2011). The authors found that the Thai and Arab participants more strongly endorsed the use of dating violence than the Jewish participants. One explanation that is proposed for this is that the Thai and Arab cultures tend to hold more traditional gender roles. These cultural factors may be a consideration when working with culturally diverse students or students that have emigrated from another country.

Another group at risk for dating violence victimization is the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ) population. There are a number of factors that increase this group's vulnerability. These include a lack of societal awareness about abuse in same-sex relationships, and the fact that these youth are more often targeted for abuse within their own families based on their sexual orientation (Pilkington, & D'Augelli, 1995). Additionally, there is a great deal of shame and silence surrounding sexual orientation. This shame often limits these individuals from seeking help (McClennen, 2005). If they report abuse they are also faced with the task of revealing their sexual orientation, sometimes before they are ready. Once again, these dynamics may result in underreporting of ADV for this population.

These facts demonstrate that there are cultural and gender disparities that exist in association with dating violence that need to be addressed. The interaction between risk and contextual factors, societal attitudes, and cultural beliefs is complex and influences the way one defines a healthy or unhealthy relationship, and recognition of dating abuse as it is occurring. These cultural considerations are central to effective dating violence prevention programming.

Factors Contributing to Teen Dating Violence

There are several risk factors associated with the development of teen dating violence. While they are not causative they are highly correlated with the presence of ADV. These include individual traits, societal influences, and dynamics within the relationship. Examining these risk factors is essential to developing an approach toward the prevention of adolescent dating violence.

Individual Risk Factors

Several individual factors are related to the development of dating violence. For example, the higher the levels of frequent alcohol use, the greater the likelihood that a person will

perpetrate or be victimized by dating violence (Lee, Busch, Kim & Hyunsung, 2007; Loiselle & Fuqua 2007; Lysova & Hines, 2008). In fact, 41% of those who perpetrate dating violence were under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the time of the incident (Daisy, 2014). These statistics do not indicate causation and could be explained in various ways. This includes the fact that those engaged in dating violence may be more likely to use substances, or those who use substances may suffer from decreased inhibitions or high emotional reactivity. Regardless, it is evident that substance abuse prevention and dating violence programming may be closely linked.

Additionally, the temperament or personality of the individual may contribute to a lack of coping skills, making it difficult for the person to resolve conflicts (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Those who are high in neuroticism (a long term tendency to be in a negative emotional state such as worrying, envy, jealousy, and moodiness) tend to be more hostile, anxious and depressed, all of which are implicated in the development of ADV (Tassy, & Winstead, 2014). Males who are involved in the perpetration of dating violence tend to have hypermasculine traits, be dominating, and have had violent tendencies in the past (Black, Chiodo, Weisz, Elias-Lambert, Kernsmith, Yoon, & Lewandowski, 2013). Male violence was also predicted by low anger management skills and emotional dysregulation where the subjects experience dramatic mood swings and an inability to control these emotions or self-soothe (Boivan, Lavoie, Herbert, & Gagne, 2012). These personality traits can have a significant impact on how relationships are viewed and how an individual reacts to conflict and stressful situations within the relationship. These traits also indicate that the potential for dating violence perpetration or victimization can be identified early in life. One can base this assessment on other relational interactions and the ways that individuals cope with stress and conflict as children.

Various mental health issues have been indicated in unhealthy and abusive relationships. Social anxiety is associated with numerous interpersonal difficulties (Hanby, Fales, Nangle, Serwik, Hedrich, 2012). For example, social anxiety is linked to hostile attitudes toward others (DeWall, Buckner, Lambert, Cohen, & Fincham, 2010). This suggests that an individual with social anxiety will be more likely to feel negatively toward others in their lives and potentially act out towards others. Those with social anxiety may misinterpret social cues within a relationship and become fearful that they will lose their partner. This can result in an overreaction and hostility toward their partner (Muris, Leurmans, Merckelbach & Meyer, 2000a; Muris, Merckelbach & Damsma, 2000b). Additionally, the fearfulness may be congruent with the possessive trait of unhealthy relationships. However, social anxiety can also lead to factors that contribute to being victimized. For example, social anxiety often leads to the development of non-assertive patterns and avoidance of conflict (Alden & Taylor, 2004). These mental health challenges increase the risk for both victimization and perpetration of ADV.

Other mental health disorders can be associated with the development of dating violence. In posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), hypervigilance involves over-reacting to events or cues that do not pose a threat to the individual. This can lead the person to overreact to benign social cues (Daisy, 2014). For example, their partner leaves to go out with friends, a person with PTSD may be reminded of another time where they experienced abandonment and retaliate out of fear that this is happening again. These mental health issues may precede dating violence or develop as dating violence occurs, perpetuating the cycle.

Attitudes toward victimization have also been associated with increased dating violence. For example, those who have a stronger belief that date rape is a myth are more likely to victimize another person (Lee et al., 2007). Many people rationalize that an act against a partner

cannot be rape because they are in a relationship, know each other, or the victim gave their partner the message that they wanted to have intercourse. This pattern of victim blaming is prevalent throughout society and harms the victim psychologically as well as removes supports that the victim can benefit from. Many states do not have legislation targeting ADV specifically. Therefore; many teens believe that the perpetrator will never be punished (Suarez, 1994). As a result it is understandable why many teens would find themselves trapped in abusive relationships, unable to seek help.

Relational Risk Factors

Peer relationships are predictive of future patterns in dating relationships. Peers often reinforce the behavior of aggressive youth (Connolly, Pepler, Craig, & Taradash, 2000; Black, et al., 2013). These patterns can often extend to dating relationships (Chiodo, Crooks, Wolfe, McIsaac, Hughes, & Jaffe, 2012). In addition, those who spend time with an aggressive peer group are more likely to develop negative strategies of communicating and coping (Ellis, Chung-Hall, & Dumas, 2013). This is particularly important for those entering adolescence, as aggression is associated with social status (Miller, et. al., 2013). These behaviors are used as a way to assert power and control within the social hierarchy as adolescents struggle to develop their identity and autonomy. Clearly aggressive behaviors and attitudes are often present in a variety of relationships, contexts, and settings.

Factors of the dating relationship are also associated with whether or not dating violence occurs. A common feature of abusive relationships is seeking power and control over another person. When a relationship already has an imbalance of power, this can indicate that the couple is at risk for dating violence (Banister, Jakuber, & Stein, 2003). Miller (2003) examined factors of a relationship leading to dating violence and discovered that anger within the relationship was

the most frequent cause of abuse, followed by desire to gain control, and jealousy. Another indication of potential abuse in a relationship is the use of psychological dating violence. Psychological dating violence involves threatening a partner or harming his or her sense of self-worth (CDC, 2014). Bossarte, Simon, & Swahn (2008) identified four types of psychological abuse that occurs in the adolescent population: Threatening behavior, behavior monitoring, personal insults, and emotional manipulation. This is often viewed as a precursor to more severe forms of violence (O'Leary, Malone, & Tyree, 1994). Events within the dating relationship can lead to conflict and hostility as well. Often abuse occurs when couples struggle over closeness and intimacy, obedience, perceived rivals, unmet expectations of each other and alleged disrespect (Draucker, Martsof, Stephenson, Risko, Heckman, Sheehan, Perkins, Washington, Cook, & Ferguson, 2010). These factors and dynamics can be warning signs of development of unhealthy behaviors within the relationship that could progress to abusive practices.

Aspects of adolescent development result in approaches to relationships that differ from those of adult relationships. For example, infatuation and crushes are a typical part of adolescent development (Leitz, & Theriot, 2014). This results in the adolescent becoming more focused on the relationship. In a healthy relationship context the adolescent is able to resolve this infatuation shortly after the relationship ends. However, in an unhealthy relationship adolescents may struggle to reconcile their feelings with their reality and engage in stalking behaviors or other unhealthy relational patterns.

Family Risk Factors

Family dynamics have a significant influence on childhood development and interpersonal relationships. The attachment bonds formed in childhood are developed and qualified throughout the lifespan, contributing to later dating relationships (Bowlby, 1984).

Early childhood abuse has been associated with the increased likelihood of dating violence (Gover, Kaukinen, & Fox 2008; CDC, 2014; Laporte, Jiang, Pepler, & Chamberland, 2011).

Attachment theory proposes that if, in childhood, a caregiver is unresponsive or the attachment between child and parent is compromised, this can create difficulties in forming future attachment bonds (Bowlby, 1984). This attachment can be disrupted either through neglectful parenting or through the use of harsh corporal punishment (Chiodo, Forsee & Matthew, 2007). This can influence the development of aggressive behavior within the relationship. For example, those with preoccupied and fearful attachment styles are more likely to perpetrate violence in premarital dating relationships (Bookwala & Zdaniuk, 1998). These individuals are often preoccupied with feelings of jealousy, afraid that the relationship will not continue, and have a desire for emotional and psychological proximity to their partner. Attachment theory is also commonly used to explain why victims remain in abusive relationships (Burton, Halpern-Felsher, Rankin, Rehm, & Humphreys, 2011). If a person has an insecure attachment pattern they are more likely to remain with their partner despite any abuse that may be occurring.

Research demonstrates that violence within the family tends to repeat throughout generations (Wolf, & Foshee, 2003). One explanation for this is that children learn to express anger by witnessing their family members or surrounding peers demonstrates anger. For example, if they have seen their family discuss when they are angry children are more likely to adopt these patterns as they develop (Wolf, & Foshee, 2003). Likewise if family members retaliate verbally or physically when angry children are likely to adopt similar patterns when facing stressors. There is strong evidence that family relationships have an influence on adolescents' behavior and coping styles.

Challenges associated with general risk factors can also contribute to dating violence. Theobald & Farrington (2012), show that children whose parents do not have a high school diploma are more likely to perpetrate psychological dating violence than those who have completed high school. This can be attributed to a number of barriers associated with having a parent who has not completed high school such as low income and an inability of the parent to support the child educationally. These influence the students' bonds with school and the opportunities they have access to.

Societal Risk Factors

Strain theory posits that when someone is unable to meet cultural expectations, they are more likely to commit a crime (Merton, 1938). This failure to meet expectations typically occurs as a result of societal barriers that are not within the person's control such as social status and racism. The person then acts out in an attempt to gain control. Dating violence may occur as a result of attempting to regain control in order to meet those expectations (Mason & Smithey, 2012). Unfortunately, a person may turn to harmful behaviors in order to compensate for the power and control they are lacking.

Another contextual factor that leads to adolescent dating violence includes the media. There is evidence that viewing violence in the media increases the acceptability of violence and can increase aggressive thoughts and behavior (Coyne, Nelson, Graham-Kevan, Keister, & Grant, 2010). In addition, social cognitive theory explains aggressive behavior as being learned from parents, peers, and the social environment (Riggs, O'Leary, & Breslin, 1990). Media portrayals of romantic relationships often reinforce or reward those that persistently pursue their love interests. However, these depictions are not always realistic and create ambiguous lines

between persistence and stalking behaviors (Leitz & Theriot, M.T., 2014). These various factors intersect to contribute toward the development of healthy or unhealthy relationships.

There is an increasing use of technology to communicate with friends and romantic partners. This includes texting, social media, email, and video chats. This technology influences the way that adolescents communicate with one another. For example, teens now have the opportunity to be in contact 24 hours per day (Subrahmanyam, & Greenfield, 2008). This close contact can grow a relationship or may result in obsessive stalking behaviors. Technology is rapidly changing the way that people interact and interventions for adolescent dating violence and harassment.

Various aspects of the culture of a society are believed to have a significant impact on the development of relationship violence. One such assumption is a belief that relationship violence is uncommon. This results in a failure to address prevention efforts and support individuals involved in a violent relationship (Berry, 2000). However, society has started to gain a greater understanding the significance of dating violence and the need to address this issue from an early age. This understanding has developed as a result of the severe effects that adolescents face when in unhealthy or abusive relationships.

Effects of Adolescent Dating Violence

Emotional

Adolescent dating violence results in numerous harmful effects on victims and perpetrators. The emotional impact of dating violence includes decreased self-esteem (Siminoli & Ingram, 1998). This can lead to a tendency to become involved in harmful relationships in the future. This could explain why these individuals tend to engage in abusive relationships later in life. It is believed that individuals will seek out relationships that confirm their beliefs about

themselves (Katz, Arias, & Beach, 2000). If a person has low self-esteem they may unconsciously be drawn toward abusive relationships in the future. Among perpetrators, low self-esteem contributes to further jealousy and insecurity, perpetuating the cycle (Lewis, Travea, & Freemouw, 2002). Additionally, individuals who are victimized within relationships often develop ongoing fear even after they have left the relationship, self-blame, guilt, and shock (Petra, 2002). In fact at times the emotional consequences resulting from the fear and stress are reported to be worse than the physical effects, largely because of their ongoing nature (Golden & Frank, 1994).

Social

Dating violence has a significant impact on a person's interactions with others including friends, family, and the broader societal context. For example, when an individual is being stalked they may change their routines as part of their daily life or change their phone number (Amar, 2006). This behavior is adaptive in that it protects the victim. However, this can also serve to disrupt their lives as well as cut them off from potential sources of support. Dating violence can also result in social isolation as part of maintaining power and control (Duluth Model, 2014). These social interactions then have an impact on the mental/emotional well being of the victim.

Physical

The physical impact of dating violence can include mild to severe injuries. This may result in fractures, contusions, lacerations, and ocular injuries (Campbell, 2002; Besant-Matthews, 2006; Sheridan & Nash, 2007). Severe injuries can result in a long-term disability (Heintz & Melendez, 2006; Kramer et al 2004). These injuries can impact the victim for a lifetime and cause significant hardship, requiring numerous adaptations in order to perform daily

life tasks. Most alarmingly, among African American youth, partners are responsible for up to 44% of homicides for females aged 15-18 years old (Martin, Houston, Mmari, & Decker, 2012).

Additionally, physical affects can include medical problems stemming from the stress and trauma experienced as a result of the dating violence. These include chronic disease, headaches, sleep disturbances (Heintz & Melendez, 2006; Kramer, Lorenzon, & Mueller, 2004), chronic pain, fatigue, gastrointestinal problems, gynecological problems, sexually transmitted infections, mortality, reproductive disorders and overall poor health. The link to dating violence may not be as evident to the victim, but these are commonly associated with dating violence victimization.

Psychological

Adolescent dating violence is commonly associated with a number of psychological and mental health challenges. One common effect on victims is eating disorders (Ackard & Neumark, 2002). This includes binge eating, weight control such as restricting or taking diet pills, and weight loss practices such as excessive exercising (Ackard & Neumark 2002). Ackard & Neumark propose that the development of eating disorders serves several purposes. The individual may be trying to sabotage their body in order to stop the abuse, or they may be using the practices to punish their body as a result of self-blame for the abuse. While providing the control and emotional outlet that a victim is seeking, their physical and mental health is sacrificed.

Additionally, dating violence can lead to posttraumatic stress disorder (Callahan, Tolman, & Saunders, 2003; Heintz & Melendez, 2006; Kramer et al 2004; Coker, Smith, Thompson, McKeown, Bethea, & Davis, 2002; Sutherland, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2001), depression (Callahan et al 2003; Heintz & Melendes, 2006; Kramer et al 2004; Coker, Smith, Thompson, McKeown,

Bethea, & Davis, 2002; Sutherland, Sullivan, & Bybee 2001; Exner-Cortes, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2012), substance use and abuse (Heintz & Melendez, 2006; Kramer et al 2004; Exner-Cortes, et al, 2012), somatic mental health effects (Coker et al 2002; Sutherland et al 2001), and suicidality (Amar & Gennaro, 2005; Exner-Cortes, et al. 2012). It is believed that those in abusive relationships often turn to suicide due to feeling as if they are a burden to those who are trying to help them or feeling that no one understands what they are going through (Lamis, Leenars, Jahn, & Lester, 2013). This highlights the risk of mortality among victims. While denial is commonly cited as a negative way to cope with stressors, those who used denial to manage their victimization were actually protected from mental health problems. For example, those with fewer negative beliefs about the victimization did not suffer as many mental health complications (Jackson, Cram, & Seymour, 2000). The mental health complications and fear and stress that accompany adolescent dating violence are often cited as being more harmful than the physical impact of the violence (Golden & Frank, 1994). Therefore, there is a great need for adequate mental health supports for adolescent victims of dating violence.

Academic

Adolescent dating violence has a significant negative impact on academic functioning and performance. Students who experience problematic relationships often have a decline in academic performance, multiple school transfers, changes in extracurricular activities, and a lack of future orientation (Chronister, Marsiglio, Linville, & Lantrip, 2014). School transfers are often initiated to distance students from an abusive partner in an attempt to increase their safety. While these transfers may bring about positive changes and foster resilience in the student, there is the potential for further harmful effects as a result of the transition. For example, students that transfer schools often have lower academic achievement, poorer behavior, and often become

socially isolated (Sorin, & Illoste, 2006). Also, many students chose to quit extracurricular activities because the abusive partner was also involved or forced them to quit as an exercise of control. In these cases the victims are sacrificing developmentally appropriate activities in order to keep them safe. Adolescence is a difficult time because people do not have as many resources to remove themselves from an unsafe situation. For example, they often attend the same school as the perpetrator (Chronister et al. 2014). Due to the mental health consequences many adolescents lose their sense of future and abandon vocational goals. Many students report that school faculty and staff wanted to help and be supportive, but the faculty/staff were often unsure about what would be helpful to the student. This highlights an uncertainty about the role of the school and relationship violence.

Resiliency

A number of victims of adolescent dating violence lead positive lives with few mental health and physical affects. In developing programming aimed at decreasing adolescent dating violence, it is important to consider these resiliency factors to promote positive coping skills. Factors related to the development of resiliency in the face of dating violence include having social support, a positive self regard, perception of control, the ability to have a positive outlook, high self esteem and self efficacy, spirituality, and good health (Carlson, McNutt, Choi, & Rose, 2002 Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Additionally, situational factors lead to resilience. For example, when students feel that they have some measure of control over their environment they are more likely to be able to cope positively with the dating abuse and avoid adverse outcomes.

Chronister, et al. (2014), identified many behaviors that were used by females to cope with dating violence. These include writing, talking to friends and family, exercising, drawing, listening to music, and engaging in counseling. These behaviors are helpful for girls in that they

provide social support, distraction from stressors, allow for emotional expression, and provide insight into their relationships and how to remove themselves from unhealthy relationships.

Interventions

A number of interventions and prevention programming options are available for schools to select. However, not all of these have been extensively evaluated to determine their effectiveness. Two intervention programs that have been evaluated and proven to be effective in improving gender role attitudes and increasing positive interpersonal interactions are Bystander interventions and the Expect Respect program.

The Bystander Approach

Branch, Richards, & Dretsch (2013), evaluated the effectiveness of various components in a bystander approach to dating violence prevention/intervention. Bystander interventions involve teaching “uninvolved” parties how to effectively identify abuse, intervene in violent situations, and seek help from formal sources of support. Additionally, these interventions feature an empowerment component to foster confidence in students regarding their ability to intervene in a situation where they witness or learn of conflict. This particular intervention includes examples of how to safely and effectively intervene, education on dating violence, modeling appropriate intervention behavior, and information on who can be contacted for help. The researchers found that the intervention increased students’ ability to seek help for negative interpersonal situations.

Another example of school programming is the Expect Respect Program (Ball, 2012). This programming features community engagement, school wide universal prevention strategies, youth leadership training, and selective interventions for at risk youth. Every student receives prevention programming in the form of classroom-based lessons that educate teenagers about

healthy, unhealthy, and abusive relationships. The selective interventions include such programming as school based peer support groups for those who have experienced violence at home or in peer relationships. Those who participated in the support groups reported that they gained healthier conflict resolution skills but that this did not have an influence on the rates of victimization or perpetration.

Future Interventions and Research

Evidence shows that those experiencing dating violence victimization in high school are more likely to experience violence in later dating relationships (Roscoe & Benaske, 1985). This indicates the need to address the issue of ADV at an early age. Many schools use the Response to Intervention (RTI) Model to address challenges and difficulties that students face. This approach consists of a multi-level prevention system, universal screening, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making (American Institutes for Research, 2007). The multi-level approach consists of three tiers: Tier one (classroom or school based programs), tier two (group counseling), and tier three (individual counseling). This approach can be used when addressing relationships and ADV within the school system.

Educational Components (Tier One)

Given the fact that many adolescents struggle with determining whether they are in an abusive relationship, it is important that the school counselor engage in education about what constitutes a healthy relationship. However, this involves developing a consistent definition of what such relationships look like. This study will examine how current definitions align with students views of relationships.

Literature shows that victims of dating violence often do not seek help while the abuse is occurring. This is especially relevant to adolescents. Teens often have difficulty identifying

abuse because of their limited experiences, in fact they may even perceive controlling behaviors and jealousy as love (Callahan, 2013). Starzynski, Ullman, Filipias, & Townsend (2005) conducted a survey of adolescents, 38% did not know how to get help for themselves if involved in an unhealthy relationship and 58% did not know how to get help for someone else. When students do disclose the abuse, they often tell informal supports such as family and friends or a significant other (Golding, et al., 1989; Starzynski. et al., 2005). However, some were concerned that their female friends would also be experiencing similar violence and therefore would not be able to help them (Martin, et al., 2012.) Sometimes students may not want to leave a relationship because they are committed to the person. They will often use denial to cope with the dissonance between what they would like out of the relationship and what their reality is (Wolf & Foshee, 2003). Many service providers found that the adult resources available for dating violence are not suitable for teens (Martin, et al. 2012). However, those with social support were better able to cope with the abuse and its aftereffects being at decreased risk for suicidal ideation and actions (Coker, et al. 2002). Additionally, students who have been victimized often struggle to identify resources that will benefit them. Counselors can provide those resources on an individual and large-scale basis. Counselors are able to educate on a broad basis while completing classroom presentations on healthy and abusive relationships (Ball, 2012). Given that dating abuse is a continual, repeated activity it is important to begin outreach early in development. Research suggests that primary prevention efforts should begin at age 13 years of age (Foshee, et al. 2009). However, one could argue that early programming would be well-suited.

Group Counseling (Tier 2)

One component of many programs and approaches is the use of group counseling. These groups are often focused on building relational skills but also may provide support for those who

are or have been in an abusive relationship or have witnessed abuse within the home (Ball, 2012). These groups target students who demonstrate one or more risk factors for adolescent dating violence. Separate sex groups are often used in order to increase the sense of emotional safety and decrease the risk of revictimization for any of the participants (Ball, 2012). Many participants in school based groups report that they use significantly more healthy conflict resolution skills but still perpetrate dating violence.

Individual Counseling (Tier 3)

There is a need for counselors to develop skills to identify students that might be experiencing dating violence. School counselors should be trained on screening and referral processes for adolescents experiencing dating violence or other unhealthy relationships (Exner-Cortes, et al. 2012). One consideration that is helpful in identifying students that are at risk for victimization in dating relationships is by being aware of the dynamics of students' peer relationships. Students who have been bullied are more likely to be victimized in dating relationships (Espelage & Holt, 2007). Espelage & Holt (2007), suggest that the impact of victimization in peer relationships includes feelings of confusion, anger, sadness, and poor self-esteem. These can all contribute to victimization in other types of environments. Those who do experience victimization in multiple relationships report more psychological distress than those who have not been victimized or who have only experienced victimization in one context. Bully-victims (those who have bullied others and have been bullied by others) are particularly at risk for physical dating violence and peer sexual harassment (Espelage & Holt, 2007). Behavior within friendships is often similar to behavior in dating relationships. Additionally, bullying and peer aggression is often used in order to assert power and control over another person (Miller, Williams, Cutbush, Gibbs, Clinton-Sherrod, & Jones, 2013). As in dating relationships, peer

aggression tends to occur on a mutual basis. Often the victim is also bullying (Miller, et al., 2013). Thus, the school counselor can gain an impression of how a dating relationship may be progressing for students based off of their interactions with other peers (Ellis, et al., 2008).

It is helpful for the school counselor to work with students as they are entering relationships. The counselor can help the student define their relationship and develop an awareness and articulate their expectations of each other. Additionally, school counselors play a key role in assisting students to develop social skills such as cognitive skills that allow students to take the perspective of another person and compare their relationships with others (Burke Draucker, et al 2012).

Behavioral theories demonstrate that individuals tend to expect people in the present to treat us the way that they have been treated in the past. Thus, humans tend to repeat the behavioral strategies utilized to handle those events in the past (Alden & Taylor, 2004). Part of an individual intervention may entail assisting students in identifying ineffective coping mechanisms and developing new strategies for use in interpersonal relationships.

Working with Victims and Perpetrators

Many programs for healthy relationships and preventing dating violence focus on recognizing when one is in an unhealthy relationship and how to seek help. Many of these interventions are targeted toward victims. However, the school counselor is in a unique position to assist potential victims and perpetrators. Research demonstrates that factors in children as young as ages 8-10 predict the use of aggression in dating relationships by mid adulthood (Theobald & Farrington, 2012). Many of these features are consistent with students that are at-risk for a range of other harmful behaviors. For example, these students often face social and familial challenges such as divorce within the family, neglect or abuse, or exclusion from peer

groups. These children often engage in delinquency, hostile actions, lying, truancy, drug use, and have early interactions with law enforcement.

Summary

It is evident that adolescent dating violence is a significant issue. Since it often reoccurs and escalates throughout time, it is important for this to be part of the comprehensive school counseling program. This includes primary and universal prevention efforts, development of interpersonal skills, and individual counseling for those who are already in abusive relationships. In order to do these there needs to be a better understanding of what a healthy adolescent relationship consists of. This study examines what the definition of an ideal relationship is for adolescents.

Method

The purpose of this study is to examine adolescent's perceptions of a healthy relationship. The study utilized a qualitative approach in which students were asked a variety of questions to determine their experience and expectations within romantic relationships. Themes related to these constructs were examined in order to determine how adolescents view relationships and how this can inform programming within the school system.

Setting

This study took place in a suburban high school located in the Northeastern United States. 41% of students in the school qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. 4% of students are American Indian or Alaskan Native, 11% African American, 9% Hispanic or Latino, 2% Asian or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 76% White, and 1% Multiracial.

The interviews were conducted on an individual basis. Students were interviewed during their Advisement periods at the end of the school day. All interviews were conducted in the

counseling center conference room. The conference room is a medium sized room located within the counseling suite off of the main office.

Participants

The sampling procedure used by the researcher was a convenience sampling. The researcher selected students at the school site, who were willing to participate and able to obtain parental permission. Participants included four high school students that attend a public high school in the Northeastern United States. Participants were selected based on random selection of those that had inclusion of an Advisement period in their schedules, were in grades 9-12, and were not at significant risk for suicide or current abuse.

The participants in the study were of diverse ethnic backgrounds. One student is a multiracial female ninth grader, one female is of Russian descent and in 12th grade, one student is a white 9th grade female, and a white 10th grade female. All descriptive information was obtained utilizing the Infinite Campus school records system and verified during the interviews.

Intervention

This study explored how adolescents perceive healthy relationships. The students were asked a series of questions based off various constructs in the literature. These questions include a series of descriptive questions such as how old are you? What grade are you in? What is your current relationship status? The following questions were asked as part of the information gathering phase. Describe your ideal relationship. Describe a relationship where you have experienced this. Describe what an unhealthy relationship would look like. Describe a time when you experienced these things. Describe different types of relationships that show varying levels of commitment. What does love mean to you? What does commitment mean to you? How do you resolve conflict in your relationship? Describe the time that you and your partner spend

together. All questions were developed based off of the Health Relationships/Equality wheel and previous research. No validity or reliability measures have been conducted on the series of questions.

Procedures

The data was collected through interviews. The interviews were conducted with the participants individually during their advisement periods, using the interview questions listed previously. All students were given informed consent/assent documents and given the opportunity to ask questions. Students were informed of their right to refuse to answer any questions. Finally, they were given the option for the researcher to take notes or audio record. Three of the participants chose to be recorded and one elected to have the researcher take handwritten notes. Each interview lasted between 20-40 minutes.

Data Analysis

The collected data was transcribed and categorized according to major themes. A coding method was used in order to organize the data into those themes. Additionally, the researcher identified key quotations that reflected the significant concepts identified by participants.

Results

Participants identified several aspects of healthy and unhealthy relationships throughout the interviews. Often the subjects appeared to have difficulty in describing the definitions of healthy and unhealthy, suggesting that there is ambiguity and differing opinions within the topic. Several themes emerged throughout the participants' dialogues including differing definitions of relationships, trust, love, respect, communication, time spent together, and the identification of abuse within relationships.

Differing Definitions of Relationships

All of the subjects identified different types of relationships consisting of varying levels of commitment. Three out of four of the participants expressed that there was not a clear boundary between each type of relationship but that each person would know when the relationship had progressed. They spoke of an implicit understanding within the couple that signified that they were ready to enter the next relational phase. Several themes were discussed in this area including “Hooking Up”, “Talking” or friendship, and Exclusivity.

“Hooking Up”

All four of the participants discussed “hooking up” as a developmental stage of relationships. Most of the participants identified “hooking up” as a beginning stage of a committed relationship. For example after some consideration of the concept one participant stated:

“To hook up is just to be a couple or start dating. But I would define it as taking that first step to having a serious relationship with someone and being committed to like spending time with them and if they end up slowly deciding to spend your life with them.”

Another participant described hooking up as the progression from “talking” to the next level of a relationship:

“Hooking up means talking to each other like more than wanting to be true friends. Talking to each other about problems. It becomes dating when they come to know the true feelings that are there and just like one of them asks the other out.”

One individual did provide a dissenting opinion that “hooking up” is an action as opposed to a relationship. When explaining the concept of a “hook up” she became adamant and animated in

defending the concept of relationships against the construct of a “hook up”. She described it as a connection that does not appear to be progressing into a committed relationship:

“I don’t know if its real like hooking up because like you don’t really know the person. Because like people can like have a relationship for years and like not want to be tougher. So like you would want to know if that person is someone you will last a long time with or if you might waste your life with them for like two months, and you might not really know them because you like wanted to hook up with them.”

When asked, all four participants were unable to define how one would know the difference when hooking up becomes something more within the relationship emphasizing that it is a process.

“Talking” or Friendship

Three of the participants spoke of the overlap between friendship and romantic relationships and referred to the “talking” stage as being similar to a close friendship before a couple dates. One participant described the “talking” stage as being the point where one realizes the feelings that they have for the other person.

“I feel like talking is a pre stage before you start dating. Like this butterfly feelings, always thinking about them. You’re nervous but excited. Just like you both know you like each other.”

Another participant highlighted the overlap between this type of relationship and friendship:

“Well of you’re just on a hi-hi basis like hi, hello, how are you doing that type of thing well you don’t talk to each other very much like there’s not much going on

so I couldn't see them being committed in an actual relationship. It's more just like a higher level of friendship."

While there was some dissent regarding whether "talking" could be considered a romantic relationship, and the definition of "talking", every participant identified it as a vital first step before becoming committed to another person.

Exclusivity

Throughout the interviews each of the participants repeatedly identified exclusivity as being an important aspect of a healthy and committed relationship.

"In an exclusive relationship you know you're both dating and you're off limits to everyone else... And then of course there is like married and stuff legally."

This participant emphasized the need for a clear understanding of when a relationship has become exclusive based off of her past experiences where her partner was dating other girls at his school. She expressed frustration over something that appears clear to her but that he claims is not something that is guaranteed.

"Open relationships are something that is really bad but I guess some people could be ok with that because its pre discussed."

All participants identified trust becoming an issue when a relationship did not remain exclusive. They connected this with growing discomfort and conflict within the relationship.

Trust

All participants identified trust as a necessary component of a healthy relationship and a lack of trust as an indicator that one is in an unhealthy relationship. Several themes emerged through these discussions including the ability to trust that a partner will be romantically

involved with the person they are in a relationship with, a partner will be open with others about being in a relationship, and what kinds of behaviors indicate a lack of trust or untrustworthiness.

Being in a Relationship With One Person

Each of the participants identified the need to be able to trust their partner to be romantically involved with only them and not engage in outside romantic relationships or pursuits. One subject described the need to be able to trust their partner to engage in other friendships without assuming they are betraying her.

“Especially they should never ask someone do not talk to this person. Unless their warning them that that person is a bad person. Like let’s say they think that person is going to hurt them like they should warn them about it but they can’t just be like oh I got in a fight with them so just don’t talk to them. That’s not fair because it’s just mean.”

Another participant shared her struggle with trusting her boyfriend while in a long distance relationship. She described the challenge in trusting him to be only with her and suggested that this was the reason she valued exclusivity so much.

“And loyalty. Like monogamy and not going behind their backs or cheating or lying. Commitment is being faithful and loyal and not cheating.”

All participants mentioned that they would not be able to remain in a relationship if they did not trust their partner. Interestingly enough the participant who is in a long distance relationship stated that she does not feel she could trust her boyfriend but stated that they have been dating for 2 ½ years, suggesting that the issue is more complex than they suggested.

Openness About Being in a Relationship

Three of the participants said an important precipitant to being able to trust their partner was if both individuals are open with others about being in a relationship. This includes being seen in the halls together, holding hands, explicitly telling others that they are in a relationship together, and posting pictures and statements on social media outlets. The three underclassmen identified this as an essential part of trusting their partners.

“You just tell each other your committed to each other and you tell everybody about him and he tells everybody about you... Telling people I’m in this relationship, being public about it... Taking your pictures for Instagram.”

This participant stated that she does not view long distance relationships as real relationships because they are not able to be seen together during school. She indicated that if others do not know about the relationship there is more going on such as cheating or the partners do not want to be together.

Behaviors that Indicate Trusting Relationships and Trustworthiness

One student detailed the fact that the definition of cheating is not always clear making it difficult to establish trust in her own relationship.

“Every relationship has a different definition for cheating. Flirting could be cheating for some couples. If you feel like it’s something bad that would hurt the other person then you probably aren’t being faithful.”

However, the lack of clarity in the definition created problems for her boyfriend and her as he thought that cheating was being intimate with another female. Therefore, when he was spending time with others, she became jealous and he did not understand why she felt the way she did.

Another student described behaviors that indicated a lack of trust in one's partner such as controlling their actions, following them around, and deciding who they are allowed to spend time with. For example:

“So like if they go somewhere you're not going to be that person that follows them everywhere to see what they are doing. First off that means you have no life... Just controlling their lives is not right.”

The students believe that if a partner does this to them it is a sign that they do not trust them and that they are unable to trust that person will treat them respectfully.

Love

All participants talked about love as an essential component of any close relationship. However many of the students had difficulty defining what love is to them. Common themes in the discussion about love included the desire to spend a lifetime or a great deal of time together, love as a feeling, and behaviors that express love.

Spending a Lifetime Together

The participants continuously referred to love as a desire to spend their lives with one person. They referenced a true relationship as being more emotional and having a greater longevity than a superficial relationship.

“I love my friends, I can't imagine life without them It would be the same with someone you're in love with. If you're in love with them its like you can't live without them and their like your other half and your best friends.”

Another participant said that one knows when they love another person:

“When you really have deep feelings for someone and you know that you really want to be with them for a long time.”

Another person attempted to give this concept a more logical explanation:

“I mean it’s like weird. Like I got bored so I was looking through a dictionary the actual definition is another word which means another word, but when you are devoting your life to someone and it doesn’t even have to be like being together, it can be like family love as well.”

The main component of love that the students identified was that it could last a lifetime. This conceptualization cut across romantic, familial, and peer relationships.

Love as a Feeling

All of the participants struggled to attach a definition to love. As they thought about it most of them giggled, smiled, and looked upward. Three of the subjects eventually stated that love was more of a feeling than anything they could define. For example:

“Um I don’t know. It’s like when you really love someone you would know. I think I don’t know. Love is not... You don’t know what love is until you start to feel it.”

Another student to felt she has experienced true love described how she came to that realization.

“Like I learned the feelings once I started dating **** I’m like wow all the other feelings I felt for other guys its like nothing compared to what I have with him.”

All of the participants stated that love was something that one needed to experience in order to know what it was.

Behaviors that Demonstrate Love

All four of the participants found it easy to consider ways that love is expressed and actions that demonstrate love. They came up with multiple actions that demonstrate love in a short time frame, without needing to think about them. These included compliments, protection,

support, forgiveness, purchasing material goods, accepting their partners faults, and getting to know one's family. For example, one participant that heavily relied on a description of behaviors when discussing love described it as the following:

“Like when you are really in love with a person like when you get to know them and your like oh he's perfect and he knows how to make me smile and I really like him and like everything about him. And like I love his personality and how he treats me so nicely and how he compliments me and protects me.”

Another participant focused on the provision of support as a key component to expressing one's love for another.

“I think that's love and how he would do things for you and help you through things, and get you through tough times, and he would still be there for you in times when you are mad at him for I don't know what and then he would come back with something for you.”

Another theme that was given in relation to support was forgiveness. For example:

“But you're willing to be there with someone and your willing to forgive. You can't just hold grudges against someone. Like you can hold a grudge for like a day or something but you're not going to hold like a lifelong grudge against someone you can just forgive them. So love is just being there for people.”

These discussions gave insight into what the participants wanted out of their relationships and ways that they may gauge that they are in love.

Respect

Another common theme that the participants discussed as important for a healthy relationship is respect. Common themes of these discussions frequently overlapped with other

relationships such as friendships, dealt with the issue of space and boundaries, and each participant described specific behaviors and ways that respect and disrespect is shown within the relationship.

Overlap with Other Relationships

All of the participants spoke of respect as something that is not unique to dating relationships. They stated that this is something they expected in all relationships and particularly spoke about friendship. For example

“Respect is like basically like the respect you’d give anybody. Like not calling them names like stuff you wouldn’t do to anybody. But in a relationship level its like also about like making them feel comfortable, like not doing, like being nice to each other and respecting them enough not to go behind their back and lie to them. I would never be someone’s friend if they didn’t respect me.”

Another participant described a situation where she experienced disrespect within a peer group.

“But like with friends I have some pretty close relationships like a few of us have always had like mean jokes with one another. Like that’s just how we are... We’re understanding of each other. Like we don’t take it personally... But that is kind of just our way of nudging each other. We don’t like fully hate on. I think that is okay as long as the other person is okay with it. But like most of my friends have been really good. I’ve had one or two friends try to control what I do so I did the opposite.”

These subjects emphasized that respect is a human condition not just a requirement of a dating relationship.

Respect of Space and Boundaries

In the discussion of respect that was an area that participants focused on the most. This included a respect of a person's space and right to have a life outside of the relationship, and spend time with other friends and family. For example, one participant shared that it is important not to sacrifice one's own personality and schedule at the expense of another, but instead there is a need to create balance between the two.

“But being able to not like everything they like but being in sync a little bit and being able to like adapt to their schedule too. So it's not like all about you but it's not all about them too.”

She went on to describe that one should not need to spend the entirety of their free time with their romantic partner and that they should try to establish time to spend by themselves or with friends and family.

The participants also discussed respect for boundaries in relation to choices about engaging in sexual activity. They emphasized that a male should always respect a female's wishes about whether to become intimate and one participant explicitly stated that this respect must be provided by both people within the relationship.

“And being able to respect each other's wishes too. Like how some guys were like oh I want to have sex and stuff they should be able to respect a girl whose like no I don't want to do that or like I'm not prepared for something like that. Or like they shouldn't force a girl to do anything. And girls shouldn't force a guy to do anything.”

This participant described this type of pressure from a former boyfriend when she was in 6th grade. However, she excused it off due to their age at the time.

“But he still kind of pressured me to do it kind of. But then again this is a 6th grade kid thing. But then again the person that he is now. He still thinks of himself as more superior and entitled than everyone.”

Behaviors that Demonstrate Respect

Participants identified a range of behaviors that demonstrate respect for their partner. These included being there for support, not treating them according to gender stereotypes, and avoiding making disrespectful comments due to not knowing what a situation truly entails. For example one participant stated:

“Whenever things were going on with my mom he always knew that I was upset so he would always make sure that he talked to me before he would comment on anything.”

These behaviors were more important to the participants than verbal expressions of respect.

Communication

All four of the research subjects identified communication as essential to maintaining a healthy relationship. All participants discussed the need to talk through problems and discuss issues on an emotional non-superficial level.

“Being able to be comfortable with that person. Um be comfortable with showing them to your family and talking to them about your life and past things and stuff. Like to tell each other everything it like makes the friendship stronger because like keeping things away from each other then you wouldn’t know about the person and their problems and why they like you.”

Most of the participants identified this level of communication as important for conflict resolution as well. For example:

“If you make a mistake and you felt that you didn’t want to do it but you did it anyway but you tell the person hey I made a mistake. Just like when you have a problem with that person you like go up to them and tell them what’s wrong. If I don’t like something I would tell them and be like hey can you stop doing this cuz I don’t like it or you will have conflict and the conflict will build into arguing.

Another participant shared a similar perspective on how a conflict should be handled.”

“I would deal with it by just like trying not to be arguing or like arguing really loud. Just talk to the person and ask them why they feel they should have done that and what made them do it. Talk the answer out of them instead of arguing it and just yelling at each other.”

Despite all four participants identifying the need to talk to each other about problems three subjects stated that in practice they did not tend to do this.

“We try to talk about things but in my current relationship it is hard to do that. Some things get ignored. Then there is a big blow up later. He doesn’t understand what I’m trying to say... In my head it is clear but it doesn’t click in his.”

Another subject shared that she makes an effort to talk to her partner about problems but that she prefers to ignore them.

“We either ignore each other until we both get over it or talk to each other until we both understand why we are upset. Usually it’s ignore each other.”

These themes are one of many that showed discrepancies between what the students value in relationships and what they practice.

Time

Three of the students identified the amount of time spent with their partner as an indicator of how well the relationship is progressing. They described the amount of time spent together.

For example:

“Um like you would want to spend a lot of time together. Like you would want to see them if they went to your school like you would see them everyday and like hang out through the hallways. Just spend a lot of time together and grow the bonds. Because the hours will go fast because your having fun with the person you would want to spend a lot of time together and maybe let them sleep over.”

Another student shared the amount of time that she currently spends with her boyfriend

“Like every day of the week. Like after school till like 9:00 at night. Then weekends it’s like morning until night.”

They also described the types of activities they engaged in with their partners.

“Hold hands and stuff, maybe go out on the weekends, on holidays bring them over to the family, just like go to amusement parks together, and take your pictures for Instagram.”

However, they also emphasized the need to balance these activities with time apart from their partner.

“You have to have your own life too.”

One student shared that she is currently in a long distance relationship and has been dating her boyfriend long distance for 2 ½ years. She said that she is able to see him frequently and that their time together is “carefree” and enjoyable. However, she describes the challenges that she faces within a long distance relationship.

“It’s a big deal. Really hard. I’m honestly surprised that we have been in a long distance relationship this long. When I met him he was a senior and I was a freshman and then I moved out of state. He told me then that him being 18 he would move out here and get an apartment and since I was still excited about the relationship I didn’t realize how unrealistic that was.”

As the subject shared her story and the things that she values in a relationship she physically began to slump in her chair as she realized that what she was saying was not matching the relationship that she makes tremendous effort to sustain and grow.

Other participants commented on long distance relationships. All three of them stated that long distance relationships would not work because the partners would not see each other enough. For example,

“They are not going to work. Cuz like they don’t see each other it will probably be hard to talk to one another and they don’t know exactly what’s going on. Like emotionally. They don’t know for sure what is goin’ on with the other person.”

They also described the fact that one does not know what is going on in the other’s life if they are not spending time together.

“Like in long distance relationships you never know what they are doing at their school or there are other girls around because you barely see the person. And you don’t know if they are committed to you, telling everybody about you because you’re never very with them and no body knows you are in a relationship.”

These differing opinions and experiences highlight the uniqueness that a long distance relationship entails.

Abuse

Three of the four participants mentioned behaviors that they identified as abusive while discussing unhealthy relationships. Common themes within these narratives include fear, types of abuse, and responses to abuse. One person that identified fear as an indicator of abuse explained an incident she experienced with her former boyfriend.

“Last year I would constantly fight with my ex boyfriend and one day we were yelling at each other in the hallway and he was just screaming at me and it was just kind of scary to me because like I don’t, I’m not used to that stuff and I don’t like it.”

She proceeded to explain that the argument grew to a point where she did not think that it was equal.

While one student described several types of abuse including emotional, sexual, and physical abuse most of the participants discussed physical abuse. The student that described emotional abuse described it

“Because when a guy like especially it can also be abusive like emotionally or verbally but that’s like when they are saying oh you fucking bitch, you whore. Like when they are just yelling insults at you constantly.”

While the students connected instances such as this with abuse they did not connect instances of psychological abuse such as controlling behaviors with abuse.

Two of the students discussed responses and signs to abusive behavior in a relationship, both internally and externally. One student described hiding as a personal response to abusive behavior.

“And if they try to hide it too that’s another sign because that means that their scared of the other person. Like if you’re an onlooker in the relationship and not

hearing stuff about what happened. Then at some point you know something's wrong so it could be signs of an abusive relationship. Because they don't want people knowing."

This participant went on to describe an external response that a person may take to deal with an abusive relationship.

"And if something's wrong like their abusive and stuff then that's when you have to tell someone no matter who it is so that they can do something. Because if like its during school the school can probably do something or like keep them away from you. If its like afterwards you can call the cops if you file a restraining order. There are things you can do to prevent it."

Discussion

Adolescence is a time of expanding social circles and the development of intimate relationships outside of the family setting. Along with this teenagers are faced with the difficult task of defining relationships and identifying respectful behavior within these relationships (Ellis, et al., 2008). Unfortunately this ambiguity within the exploration of relationships often leads to adolescent dating violence. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of adolescents' perceptions of what healthy and unhealthy relationships consist of. This was done by conducting interviews with students in grades 9-12 in order to capture their experiences and descriptions of relationships. Overall, the students identified behaviors and attributes that overlap with the Healthy Relationships/Equality Wheel including trust and support, honesty, respect, and non-threatening behavior.

Ambiguity in Defining Relationships

Participants identified several types of relationships with differing definitions. The majority of the participants identified relationships such as “hooking up” and “talking” as being steps toward an exclusive relationship. This indicates incongruence between the findings and previous research. Previous research has defined “hooking up” from a negative viewpoint and as a short term relationship (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). While one student did acknowledge this definition as a possibility, generally the students indicated that “hooking up” was part of the natural evolution of the relationship. This indicates a need for school counselors to gain a better understanding of the terminology that students are using. Additionally, counselors should make an effort to understand what these phrases mean for individual students in order to better support students that are in relationships. This involves monitoring one’s own assumptions regarding the nature of the various types of relationships and an openness to learning from the student. Other research identifies these terms as having differing definitions where roles are not clearly defined. Therefore, these transition points could become points of contention between partners (Arnett, 2001). It appears that consensus among partners in relation to definitions such as exclusivity, talking, and hooking up are important when assisting students in identifying their relationships.

Trust

Trust is an essential component that students identified in order to have a healthy relationship. Their descriptions of trust tended to overlap with those of respect and exclusivity. For example, in order to respect their partner they needed to be able to trust that they would be faithful. It appears that the majority of participants think that trust involves knowing that their partner will not engage in outside romantic relationships. However, their responses indicate that there is a lack of clarity regarding when outside pursuits may be acceptable, the boundaries of a

friendship vs. a romantic relationship, and dissonance between expectations and reality. For example, despite stating that trust is essential in order for them to remain in a relationship, several of the participants stated that they remained in relationships despite being unable to trust their partners to remain faithful. This suggests that the decision to remain in a relationship is more complex than one may perceive.

For the younger participants a prerequisite of trust was openness about being in the relationship. It appears that students in 9th and 10th grades rely more heavily on social media outlets and behavioral demonstrations of intimacy such as holding hands in the hallway to validate their relationships. Multiple participants stated that when these are not met, the couple is not actually together. This could reflect varying levels of maturity among the participants. Likewise, this could be a reflection of the shifting cultural dynamics that rely heavily on technology and social media as a means of connecting with others.

Overall the students' conceptualization of a trusting and supportive relationship is similar to the Healthy Relationships/Equality wheel's definition of trust and support. These definitions both entail trusting the person enough to respect their right to their own friends, activities, and feelings. Where their definitions differed was that the students' conceptualizations of trust also involved the need to trust that their relationship remain exclusive.

Love

There appears to be a great deal of ambiguity within the participants regarding what constitutes love. Most of the participants identified true love as an expectation that one will spend a long period of time or a lifetime together. However, this is inconsistent with the trends of adolescent relationships. For example students often describe their relationships as short-term yet state that at the time they thought they truly loved the person. Most students emphasized that a

person can not understand love until they experience it. However, this dynamic increases the complexity of adolescents' decisions as they begin to explore romantic relationships. Other indicators of love that the students identified were the provision of material goods and support. Several of the girls spoke in an idealistic manner where they view their partner as perfect when they compliment them, treat them nicely, and purchase material gifts for their companion. It is important to consider the dynamics of the power and control wheel and the fact that often the abuser will engage in activities such as these after they have "exploded." One must connect what this perception could mean for a person that finds him or herself in an abusive or unhealthy relationship. This may contribute to a tendency to stay in an unhealthy or abusive relationship. Love as an essential component to a healthy relationship was an added feature that the students' identified that is not included on the Healthy Relationships/Equality wheel.

Respect

The discussions about respect seemed to reveal an expectation of how the students would treat others and how they expect to be treated in all relationships, including romantic relationships. They spoke frequently about the respect that they give and expect with their friends and family. This indicates that skills related to developing and identifying healthy relationships extend to basic social skill development and overlaps with other curriculum and interventions. This may contribute to the fact that students that are bullied or engage in bullying are also more likely to be involved in dating violence as either a victim or perpetrator (Chiodo, et al, 2012).

One way that the students' discussions surrounding respect focused on dating relationships was in reference to a respect of space and boundaries. The participants emphasized the need to respect their time to engage in activities outside of the relationships. Additionally

they emphasized the importance that their partners not pressure them to engage in sexual activity. Interestingly, only one of the subjects mentioned the possibility that the female should avoid pressuring the male to engage in intercourse. This may reflect the common misperception that males are typically the perpetrators in abusive relationships, when in reality females perpetrate more often than males in more subtle ways.

Relative to the Healthy Relationships/Equality wheel students consistently identified that respect entails being able to listen to their partner with a desire to truly understand the other person on a deep level. This component overlapped with the discussions surrounding the need for open communication. Students did not relate respect to the concept of valuing their opinions but they did mention that the individual should value their wishes about what activities they engage in.

Communication

It was important for all participants to be able to effectively communicate and talk with their partner on an emotional level. The subjects appeared to consider the ability to do this as allowing their partner to know their true self. Additionally, they identified this as the conflict resolution skill that they would most like to use but are not likely to use. The participants seemed to think that their male partners were unable to understand their true feelings during conflict. It would be important to consider differing patterns of communication in developing interventions and social skill trainings. Additionally, it would be important to consider whether and how this information might differ had males been included in this study.

Students' perceptions of healthy communication patterns were similar to the Healthy Relationships/Equality Wheel. Common factors include the need to have open dialogue about a range of subjects such as feelings, conflict, and one's past. Additionally, when resolving conflict

all participants shared that it is important to problem solve in a way that both partners benefit and learn to compromise without overshadowing the other. Interestingly, one factor that the Healthy Relationships/Equality Wheel includes that the students did not mention was the need for a balance between giving and receiving. All participants focused heavily on what their partners should do for them but did not mention what they can do for their partner.

Time

Interestingly, the younger participants vocalized that spending a lot of time with their partner is important in order to grow the relationship. This was not the case with the senior participant who is in a long distance relationship. The 9th and 10th grade students tended to focus on the immediate present while the 12th grader tended to focus on a broader perspective of a future after graduation. However, all four participants did highlight the challenges of a long distance relationship. The participant who is in the long distance relationship explained that as she answered the questions in the interview she began to recognize aspects of her relationship that were unhealthy and possibly abusive. This suggests that extra attention and or support should be provided for students surrounding long distance relationships, particularly during senior year when many students are dating those that have already graduated and moved to college or other locations.

Abuse

All participants expressed some difficulty distinguishing the difference between a healthy, unhealthy, and abusive relationship. Three participants directly labeled certain behaviors including yelling, calling names, sexual, and physical abuse. However, the participants tended to consider physical acts to be more abusive than other acts. The students also identified a pattern of secrecy that they think accompanies abusive relationships. The younger students identified

several ways that a person can handle an abusive relationship and sources of help. However, the participant in 12th grade was not confident in the ability of police and school officials to protect a person in an abusive relationship. It would be valuable to explore this difference between ages and perceptions of outside support and help to discover if there is a difference and what this may be attributed to. It is possible that younger students have had greater success in approaching adults with problems with friends. Additionally, older students may have more complex dynamics within relationships with increased dependence, greater commitment, access to a car and their own transportation, and greater similarities to those of adults making it more difficult for them to leave the relationship.

Student Conceptualizations in Comparison with the Healthy Relationships/Equality Wheel

Students' conceptualizations of a healthy relationship overlapped greatly with the Healthy Relationships/Equality Wheel and previous research conceptualizations of healthy relationships. Concepts which students identified that are represented on the Wheel include negotiation, fairness and compromise. Non-threatening behavior or acting in a way that their partner feels safe. Also, respecting and trying to understand their perspectives is a common theme. That their partner have respect for her right to her own thoughts, feelings, and activities, and engaging in open communication. Factors that students did not identify included shared responsibility in making decisions, respecting and encouraging personal growth, and supporting her goals in life. Additionally, the participants did not convey a sense that the relationship should be equal, but were able to identify what they needed and wanted out of the relationship.

Student Conceptualizations in Comparison with the Power and Control Wheel

Most of the students spoke of their views of unhealthy and abusive relationships. Common themes that they discussed in relation to the Power and Control Wheel include using

intimidation through speaking or yelling loudly, controlling what their partner does, and engaging in physical/emotional/sexual abuse. Students did not identify aspects such as economic abuse, the concept of male privilege, blaming her for conflict or abuse, putting her down, making her feel bad about herself, or using coercion or threats. These suggest that students either do not view the more covert acts as abuse or do not recognize them as abuse.

Disconnect Between Knowledge and Experience

As mentioned earlier the students perceived many aspects of a healthy relationship similarly to the Healthy Relationships/Equality Wheel. However, in practice the students struggled to incorporate this understanding into their own relationships. For example, multiple students stated that they would not remain in a relationship if they were unable to trust their partner. However, they could also provide examples of times that they have remained in a relationship with someone they were unable to trust. One student stated that she had never previously thought about the things that she values in the context of her current relationship. This suggests that relationships are complex and that there may be several factors that contribute to a person's desire to enter or stay in a relationship that does not align with one's values. Research suggests that these decisions to remain in a relationship that is unhealthy are based on a number of factors. For example, self-esteem and the value that one sees in themselves when they are not in a relationship (Few, & Rosen, 2005). Often individuals will turn to others for validation and being in a relationship may provide them with this validation of their worth. Additionally, socialization patterns may influence a person's decision to remain in a relationship that is unhealthy (Few, & Rose, 2005). As mentioned previously, the media and other relationships play a significant role in adolescents' views of healthy and unhealthy relationships. If an individual believes that these behaviors are typical or they have been exposed to these patterns of behavior

within their families they may be more likely to accept unhealthy or abusive treatment. Other factors that influence decisions to remain in unhealthy or abusive relationships include fear of retaliation by their partner, learned helplessness (Few, & Rose, 2005), and dependence on their partner for emotional or economic support (Few, & Rose, 2005). Having an understanding of these factors will help counselors to understand their students' perspectives and experiences.

Recommendations

As mentioned previously a Response to Intervention approach is commonly used to address issues within the school setting. Based on varying degrees of need it is recommended that this approach be used to most effectively assist students in the time that counselors have. This approach will require screening of individuals and data collection in order to determine what approaches are using and whether more intensive interventions need to take place.

Screening

There are several ways that screening can take place within the school system in order to identify students that are involved in unhealthy relationships and friendships or are at risk for becoming involved in unhealthy relationships/friendships. Informal assessment measures may take place in individual sessions with students or be data driven based off of behavioral referrals related to conflict. However, there are formal assessment measures that can assist counselors in identifying students that are engaged in abusive relationships.

One formal measure that measures several risk factors is the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS). This assessment tool measures the top health-risk behaviors that lead to death or disability. These include behaviors that contribute to violence or unintentional injury, sexual behaviors, alcohol and other drug use, unhealthy dietary behaviors, and inadequate physical activity (CDC, 2014). This assessment measure does not provide as much in depth

information about dating violence as specific measures would. However, it does provide a comprehensive picture of the issues students are facing including risk factors that often contribute to dating violence.

Additionally, a screening method that is focused specifically on adolescent dating violence and provides in depth information regarding experiences is The Conflict In Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory Short Form (Fernandez-Gonzalez, L., Wekerle, C., & Goldstein, A.L., 2012). This measure consists of 46 items that distinguish between victim and perpetrator. It assesses five different forms of abusive behaviors including physical abuse, threatening behavior, sexual abuse, relational abuse, and verbal/emotional abuse. Additionally, demographic information is gathered. If administering on a large scale counselors will need to be aware of qualifications for administering the instruments and the need to have referral sources for students of concerns if the school does not have the resources to follow up with each student.

Assessment

As school counseling programs shift toward comprehensive models, data and accountability become more important. Measuring accountability entails determining whether the interventions being put in place are effective. If these interventions are not effective the counselor can use this information to adjust the intervention in order to better help each student. School counselors are included in this drive for accountability (American School Counseling Association, 2014). Therefore, counselors should assess individual interventions to measure progress. One way to do this is to administer pre and post tests to students when evaluating groups and other programs as well as tracking data year to year.

Tier One Interventions

Prevention and intervention efforts related to dating violence must begin at a young age, arguably during elementary school. This is when the basics of relational skills and perceptions of appropriate relationships are formed. By approaching the issue early in development schools can work to alleviate the devastating effects of adolescent dating violence and peer bullying.

Intimate partner violence is often viewed by society as an issue that is faced during adulthood. However, adolescent dating violence often begins during Middle school and progressively worsens as the students become older (Orpinas, et al., 2012). It is important that school counselors work to increase awareness of adolescent dating violence as an issue within Middle and High schools. It may be difficult to recognize these activities as they may be mistaken for bullying. Additionally, because students are in close proximity throughout the school day they may not recognize stalking (Amar, 2007). It is important that students be given information about the various forms of abuse and how they may manifest within the high school setting. Counselors can provide students, teachers, and parents with data and signs of adolescent dating violence through presentations or informational pamphlets.

The school system consists of many components. Throughout the day students interact with teachers, support staff, administration, counselors, and school nurses. Therefore, it is important that all stakeholders within the building have background knowledge on the identification of dating violence within their students and a formal process for referral in place. There has been a significant effort within the community to encourage health based screening for intimate partner violence. Therefore, it is necessary that the school nurse incorporate these measures in his/her practice. Additionally, because many of the consequences of intimate partner violence manifest themselves physically, it is likely that the school nurse may encounter a victim of dating violence as part of a routine visit (Martin et al., 2012). Teachers interact with students

on a daily basis and therefore may be the first ones to identify students that are in an abusive relationship. In addition, the school counselors can advocate for and train teachers on trauma informed practices within the classroom in order to effectively work with a student that has experienced dating violence victimization. Counselors should work with other mental health professionals and administrators to establish a system around identifying and referring students that are at risk for dating violence.

Due to the fact that students are more likely to disclose dating abuse to informal supports, such as peers or friends, it is important to provide students education on recognizing these behaviors and what to do if one suspects that their friend is in an abusive relationship (Martin et al., 2012). This education involves acknowledging the difficulty of the subject and the concern that friends may have for one another. It is essential that the school counselor provide an environment where students are comfortable seeking help for a friend. By providing this education it may be more likely that peers can encourage the person to seek formal help and/or support.

Participant responses in relation to the origin of dating violence and the fact that there are just as many if not more female perpetrated acts of violence than male perpetrated acts of violence indicate a need for greater awareness of gender and dating violence. It may be beneficial to include an educational component in school counseling curriculum related to awareness of the various gender roles and the fact that males and females can be victims of dating violence (Miller & White, 2003). This education is one step toward helping victims of all genders become more confident in disclosing and seeking help.

Adolescents are heavily influenced by the media and their peer group. Schools are often called upon to ensure a climate conducive to optimal development. While school climate is

frequently considered in the context of bullying behaviors, it can also be considered when engaging in prevention strategies for dating violence and abuse. Based on this, schools have a number of considerations that can foster positive relationships. For example, schools should actively work to promote equality and target gender stereotypes. These efforts can prevent rigid gender roles from developing and promotes respect for all students. School counselors can also advocate for the use of popular media that promotes healthy relationships. For example, during school dances educational institutions can avoid playing songs that send negative messages about either gender or promote dating abuse and violence. Posters around school can include celebrities that promote positive self-esteem and relationships. This creates an atmosphere that fosters an expectation of non-violence and respect.

Tier Two

Due to the fact that adolescent dating violence does not occur in isolation, school counselors have a responsibility to expand students coping skills in order to build resilience. Often anger is a precursor to dating violence and the participants highlighted this fact when detailing the ways that they cope with conflict within their relationships. In theory they know how to handle conflict but their emotions overcome them and they react in a different way. While teaching anger management skills may be helpful, it is also important to help students unlearn or challenge destructive ways of coping that they have learned throughout their life experiences (Wolf & Foshee, 2003). Research indicates that providing anger management in the school setting decreases level of conduct infractions and decreases the number of aggressive acts the participants engage in (Kellner, & Bry, 1999). Providing anger management groups may assist students in developing new patterns of expressing anger.

Other group approaches that may be effective at reducing the prevalence or impact of adolescent dating violence include social skills, girls or boys groups, and self-esteem groups. Social skills groups are effective in promoting effective communication skills, assertiveness, and conflict resolution (Ruble, Willis, & Crabtree, 2013). Students that participate in social skills groups tend to have fewer antisocial associations, fewer peer problems, increased self-esteem, greater social efficacy, and decreased social anxiety (DeRosier, 2004). These benefits can mediate the risk factors toward adolescent dating violence. Girls or boys groups are often used as a way to address issues that are specific or unique to gender, provide an outlet to challenge gender stereotypes, and provide support for each other through the difficulties that students face throughout high school. Self-esteem groups can address some of the effects of past abuse and work toward preventing revictimization that might occur among students that have experienced dating violence.

Tier Three

Another essential component when working with students that have experienced relationship difficulties or in prevention efforts is clarifying the definition of commitment, love, trust, and respect. While this may be different for every couple it can be helpful to help couples gain a better understanding of how they and their partner view their relationship so they can arrive at a consensus (Miller & White, 2003). Without this common definition feelings of jealousy and insecurity can arise, leading to conflict within the relationship. Additionally, it is important for the adults in the students' lives to have an understanding of the ambiguity within adolescent relationships. Often adults view adolescent relationships as trivial or transient, when in fact these connections have a significant impact on the child's development. Adults supporting adolescents should have an understanding that definitions within the relationships may differ

from their own and even between adolescents. It is important to gather information from the individual in regards to how they view the relationship and the importance within their life.

While several programs and research studies have found that preventative dating violence programming is effective in reducing prevalence and increasing understanding of relationship violence it is also clear that many of these preventative approaches fail to address the complex factors that prevent individuals from recognizing abusive relationships and coping with dating violence. This indicates that there may be the need for individual interventions and referrals that take into consideration the individual's personality, history, needs, and other contextual factors that influence relational decisions. Despite a desire to help it is essential when helping a victim of dating violence that they have control and are able to complete steps to protect themselves according to their own timeline, when they are ready. Individual interventions may entail a number of factors including family, substance abuse, and social skills. By building coping skills for daily life events counselors are able to assist students in coping with the challenges associated with exploring dating relationships.

School counselors may need to engage with interventions with the person seen as being victimized as well as the person accused of perpetrating dating violence or unhealthy behaviors. When working with those that perpetrate the counselor needs to maintain a sense of safety and avoid seeing the couple together (Murray, 2014). While specific "batterer" intervention programs would happen outside of the school setting the school counselor has an obligation to support all students within the school setting. Specific issues that may present for students that are perpetrating dating violence include their own experiences of abuse, education on power and control dynamics, skill-building, stress management and the need to accept responsibility for behaviors (Murray, 2014). It is essential that the school counselor seek

supervision and consultation experiences in order to monitor one's own assumptions and biases, particularly if working with both the person being victimized and the person who is perpetrating.

Counselors should take several steps toward risk management when working with a student that is a victim of dating violence. One way they can do support students is to encourage them to keep a log of contact with the perpetrator including dates, times, and events in case they want to take legal action (Amar, 2007). Additionally, because IPV is linked to suicidality and feelings of hopelessness it is essential that the counselor assess for suicidality frequently.

At an administrative level, schools are able to use their anti-harassment policies to protect students while in the school setting (Leitz, & Theriot, 2014). School officials must create efficient procedures for reporting harassment in order to ensure victims that their claims will be followed up on. All school staff members should be trained on these procedures and held accountable for filing reports. Several states have enacted legislation to ensure that these steps are taken. For example, New York State created the Dignity for All Students Act. The main goal of The Dignity Act is to “provide students with a safe and supportive environment free from discrimination, intimidation, taunting, harassment, and bullying...” Schools are held liable for filing reports and following up with disciplinary/remedial action when appropriate (New York State Department of Education, 2014). Additionally, New Jersey has enacted the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (State of New Jersey Department of Education, 2014). School counselors should familiarize themselves with legislation in their areas to inform responses to dating violence within the school setting.

Limitations

This study was designed to gain in depth information about how adolescents view healthy relationships. However, there are several limitations to consider when utilizing the findings. This

was a qualitative study and the sample size was small, with only four students interviewed. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable to the larger population. Utilizing a quantitative component in tandem with the qualitative approach may be beneficial in the future. This would allow one to gain an understanding of the prevalence of the issue within this institution.

Additionally, there were restrictions on the types of participants that were recruited for the study. For example, this study only examined the perceptions of females. It would be beneficial to compare the views of males and see how these values are similar or different. Finally, there were few upper classmen (11th and 12th graders) included in the study. This was primarily due to limited free periods for upperclassmen and difficulty obtaining parental consent. Also, the researcher worked primarily with the 9th and 10th grade students on a regular basis which may have had an impact on their willingness to participate in the study.

Cultural Considerations

Given the diversity within this community as well as cultural differences related to relationships it is important that school counselors consider adolescent dating violence within a cultural context. This is evident within the interviews. It could be beneficial to do more qualitative research with diverse populations. This is demonstrated as the one African American participant places a heavy emphasis on how her family views her partner and/or their relationship. This is a strong determinant of whether she will enter a relationship or remain in one. Additionally, there are other considerations that one should take into account when thinking about healthy, unhealthy, and abusive relationships in a cultural context.

Legal and Ethical Obligations

School counselors have an ethical obligation to provide services to all students in order to ensure academic, career, and personal/social success. Given the importance of relationships in

adolescents' lives it is inevitable that counselors will encounter these issues and therefore have an obligation to engage in prevention and intervention related to dating violence (American School Counseling Association, 2014). This involves not only working with victims but also working with perpetrators of dating violence and abuse.

However, a counselor needs to consider several ethical principles that may prove complicated while working with a student involved in adolescent dating violence. For example, confidentiality is a prevalent ethical issue that occurs with minors in a school setting. Counselors must balance the rights of the parents and child as well as the safety of the child. It is important that school counselors make themselves aware of district policies that may be related to dating violence situations, local laws, and balance these with the rights of the student. It is imperative that the counselors preserve autonomy and allow the students to make their own decisions and make changes for themselves.

Some school settings have implemented groups for those that have been victimized by dating violence or who have perpetrated dating violence. It is important that school counselors consider the context of the school setting and the fact that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed for the group participants. With these constraints on confidentiality counselors may consider to focus groups on psychoeducational components related to the topics discussed previously such as anger management, social skills, and healthy relationships. Additionally, counselors should inform all participants that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed within the group setting.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the results and implications of the study, there are several recommendations for further research. For example, the study can be replicated with a larger sample and a mixed methods design. This would ideally include males and a balance between 9th/10th graders and

11th/12th graders. This may provide a more accurate picture of adolescents' perceptions of healthy relationships but also their experiences with healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Additionally, it would be valuable to examine how cultural factors impact students' views of relationships. There was a noticeable difference in the values of the African American student in this study. Additionally, literature suggests that the cultural context may have an influence on perceptions as well as experiences with dating violence. Further studies that examine what this means for school counseling programs would be essential in order to provide adequate services to all students.

Finally, it would be helpful to focus on how students think they contribute to a healthy relationship specifically. Most of the participants focused only on how they are treated as a healthy relationship. In order to examine equality within relationships this is essential. Additionally, it provides insight for the school counselor if working with someone who is victimizing another person and how their views of relationships are influencing those actions.

Conclusion

Adolescent dating relationships are a significant milestone in human development. However, it is evident based on this study that they are complex and ambiguous. This suggests that traditional approaches to dating violence prevention are not adequate in preventing the development of abusive relationships. School counselors play an important role in helping students explore and define the meaning of their relationships and what that means in the context of the rest of their life.

It is evident from this study that students identify many factors of a healthy relationship that have been conceptualized within the Healthy Relationships/Equality wheel. However, their understanding of abusive relationships is limited to physical abuse. The participants' hesitancy to

label other behaviors as abusive suggest that preventative measures need to focus on all forms of relationship abuse in order to assist students in accurately identifying abusive behavior when it is occurring in their relationship or in a friends.

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