Relationship Violence: Risk Factors for Adolescents

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The term domestic violence usually elicits a picture of an adult relationship where the man batters a woman. This picture is an accurate picture, but there are other individuals who are affected by domestic violence. Couple from all socioeconomic backgrounds, including homosexual and adolescent couples can face domestic violence situations. Research on adolescent relationship violence is fairly recent. Adolescents seem to be a population missed by general society when it comes to being involved in relationship violence. This paper strives to examine risk factors such as self-esteem, rigid sex-role ideas, parents‟ in violent relationships, and friends who are in violent relationships that could predispose adolescents to become either perpetrators or victims of relationship violence.

Literature Review

The literature on adolescent relationship violence has recently exploded onto the scene in the past ten to twenty years. Most research indicates that males and females are mutually violent in dating relationships, but females receive the more serious injuries (Foshee et al. as quoted in Avery-Leaf and Cascardi 2002, 81). Research seeks to find the reasons that some individuals are more susceptible to becoming involved in violent relationships.

Power and control are at the heart of the main issues behind why individuals may become involved in violent relationships. Historically, America has been viewed as a patriarchal society, and in the early days of American society rigid gender roles were created where men took power over women and children. Women now have more autonomy than they used to due to the second wave of the women‟s movement, but underlying beliefs that men have control and power over everything is still deeply rooted in American society. Lloyd, Koval, and Cate (1989) cite Finkelhor‟s research that using violence in relationships is a tactic that may be employed by those who feel powerless to regain their power (127). Gamache (1998) concedes that violence in

relationships may also come out of a cultural need for a hierarchy of power in relationships (71). Society is drenched in media representations that constantly reflect this expectation of a hierarchy of power in relationships. This hierarchy usually involves individuals acting out their proper gender roles as deemed by society. Men are portrayed as aggressive and women are portrayed as passive.

Statistics show that males and females are mutually violent in relationships, but researchers have found problems in these results. Pederson and Thomas, as cited by Avery-Leaf and Cascardi (2002), figure that men probably underreport their violent behaviors and women over report their violent behaviors, for women may not distinguish their violent behaviors as self-defense (84). Sugarman and Hotaling (1998) found that both partners blamed the other for being the initiator of the violence (105).

Strict ideas about gender roles are another possible risk factor for adolescents. Adolescents are still at a stage in their lives where they are inexperienced in relationships and they may rely on their given gender role to keep the relationship working (Sculli 2000, 203). This is usually for females because the female gender role is defined in terms of passivity, nurturing, and being dependent (Sculli 2000, 203). Avery-Leaf and Cascardi (2002) point out that available literature is split on the idea of sex role socialization being a factor with the perpetration of relationship violence. They reviewed several studies and found that sometimes it was a determining factor and other times it was not (Avery-Leaf & Cascardi 2002, 88). Certainly in some relationships strictly held beliefs/ideas about gender roles are factors in using relationship violence, but the available literature is too mixed to positively say that if individuals hold strict ideas about gender that they will eventually become involved in a violent relationship. Witnessing violence in one‟s family is another risk factor for adolescents.

Research shows mixed results when it comes to the risk factor of witnessing violence in one"s family. Sugarman and Hotaling (1998) found research supporting both sides of the argument that witnessing family violence may or may not have an impact on perpetration of violence. They found a number of studies indicated witnessing violence in one"s own family confirmed possible perpetration of violence in later relationships; they also found a number of studies that supported the idea that witnessing violence in one"s own family did not indicate that the individuals would perpetrate violence in their future relationships (Sugarman and Hotaling 1998, 112).

Literature on adolescent dating violence is all but conclusive. Many studies have been done to confirm certain risk factors, but there are also studies that counter that research. The research does not determine a clear cut pattern of risk factors for adolescents, but it does help predict what influences adolescents to become involved in violent relationships. These predictions can help researchers and community workers create prevention programs for adolescents.

My research is meant to help corroborate and confirm the literature on the subject. The more research on this subject that confirms the corresponding literature will help identify an issue that needs to be addressed. Ultimately, I would like to see prevention programs instituted in communities and schools so adolescents can be made more aware of the dynamics of violent relationships. According to Avery-Leaf and Cascardi (2002) it is important to target adolescents who may be at risk, but it is also equally important to target those who are not at risk (95). Even those not at risk may have friends or know someone in a violent relationships or potentially become violent themselves, and they should know what resources are available to them if they or a friend need help.

Methods

Adolescent relationship violence research is only ten to twenty years old, but it is a topic that needs to be discussed. The relationship rules that adolescents learn when they are first forming relationships are rules they will take on to their adult relationships (Carver, Joyner and Udry 2003, 23). Therefore, if adolescents perceive that relationship violence is acceptable that lesson will stay with them for life, putting them at risk to be in violent relationships in adulthood. In order to help prevent adolescents from learning these types of behaviors, risk factors for perpetrators and victims need to be assessed. The best way to assess risk factors is to design research projects that identify specific risk factors and analyze their impact on the likelihood of adolescent‟s involvement in violent relationships.

Using a combination of six psychological and sociological studies conducted on risk factors of adolescent relationship violence, I formed a list of risk factors that related to both perpetrators and victims. Along with the psychological and sociological studies, I consulted five literary sources that cover the years 1989, 1998, 2000, 2002, and 2003. These sources were used because they contained the most relevant information about adolescent relationship violence. To evaluate these sources, I used the list of risk factors to examine the prevalence of relationship violence among adolescent perpetrators and victims. The risk factors are self-esteem, rigid sex-role ideas, parents‟ in violent relationships, and friends who are in violent relationships.

Discussion

There are many different factors that contribute to relationship violence. There is the verbal abuse aspect, the physical abuse aspect, and the sexual abuse aspect. Verbal abuse is usually a marker that a relationship has the potential to become physically violent. Some adolescents can misconstrue this verbal aggression/abuse and control as love (Avery-Leaf and

Cascardi 2002, 89). By the time they reach adolescence, romantic relationships are still a new phenomenon. Their inexperience can cause them to see their relationship through rose colored glasses. This helps skew their idea of what a healthy relationship is. Therefore they may see jealousy as a sign of romance instead of a warning sign. If the relationship escalates to physical abuse, sexual abuse can also become part of that relationship. Sexual abuse can be anything from unwanted intimate touching to actually forcing one‟s partner to have intercourse. The studies examined for this project focus mainly physical abuse that deals with intent to cause physical harm by threat or force and/or actually causing harm by threat or force.

Self-esteem plays an important role in adolescent‟s lives (Furman and Shaffer 2003, 5). During this time in their lives they are trying to figure out who they are and assert their independence. Relationships can be a way of them doing this. Self-esteem plays a role in relationship violence perpetration and victimization. Pflieger and Vazsonyi (2006) conducted a study that examined the link between parental closeness (looking specifically at the mother), how the closeness affected the self-esteem of the adolescent, and how that influenced their views of relationship violence perpetration and/or victimization (495). Their study looked at adolescents who were in the low and high socioeconomic status brackets (Pflieger and Vazsonyi 2006, 495). Difference between genders was not specifically stated in this study.

Pflieger and Vazsonyi (2006) explain that adolescence is a crucial developmental period in one‟s life and that parents have a big influence in helping develop their adolescent‟s self-esteem (498). Chen and Dornbusch as cited by Pflieger and Vazsonyi (2006) found that over-protective or parents who do not give their adolescent much freedom to make their own choices have a profound impact on their adolescent‟s self-esteem; they say that over-protective parents actually hinder the development of healthy self-esteem in their adolescent (498). They used these

examples to support their hypothesis that mothers have an impact on the self-esteem of adolescents. Pflieger and Vazsonyi (2006) theorize that if adolescents have low self-esteem they are more likely to tolerate violent relationships (499). They examined nine hundred-twenty students in grades ninth through twelfth with the majority being Caucasian (Pflieger & Vazsonyi 2006, 500).

Their findings supported their hypothesis: Parental closeness does have an effect on self-esteem which in turn has an affect on adolescent"s ideas and beliefs about relationship violence. Pflieger and Vazsonyi (2006) found a difference among low socioeconomic adolescents and high socioeconomic adolescents. Those in the lower socioeconomic bracket were more likely to have their behaviors regarding relationship violence changed due to low self-esteem and those in high socioeconomic bracket were more likely to have their beliefs/ideas changed about relationship violence (Pfieger and Vazsonyi 2006, 507). Those in the lower socioeconomic bracket with low self-esteem were more likely to use violence in their own relationships whereas those in the higher socioeconomic bracket with low self-esteem were more likely to believe that violence should be used in relationships. While they used example of over-protective parents had an impact on adolescent"s self-esteem, Pflieger and Vazsonyi (2006) focused on the lack of parental closeness and its impact on adolescent"s self-esteem.

Pflieger and Vazsonyi (2006) also found that "lack of support and low levels of self-esteem were associated with dating violence victimization" and "lower levels of maternal closeness and low self-esteem were related to dating violence perpetration…" (508). This finding helps show that parents play a role in the developing self-esteem of their adolescent and that it can have dire consequences when it comes to the future relationships of their adolescent. The rest of the quote goes on to say "perhaps due to a lack of attunement to women"s messages in dating

context" (Pflieger and Vazsonyi 2006, 508). Here it seems that Pflieger and Vazsonyi are blaming the mother for their adolescent's perpetration of violence in relationships by indicating that a closer relationship with their mother would help them interpret "women's messages in dating context" (508). Self-esteem does play a role in relationship violence perpetration, but ultimately it is the individual's decision to perpetrate violence in a relationship.

The only ones who can be held responsible for perpetration of violence in relationships are those who perpetrate the violence. There are, however, outside factors that contribute to the perpetration of violence. Self-esteem is one factor, a society that values violence is another and rigid sex-role ideas play a role as well. American society is wrought with violent images. Feder, Levant, and Dean (2007) conducted a study on how violence influenced boy's gender roles. In their initial discussion they cite Toomey who stated, "on the average, an American child by age 16 has viewed more than 200,000 acts of television violence" (Feder, Levant, and Dean 2007, 386). They quote Margollin, Youga, and Ballou stating that "harsh discipline styles, aggression in the family, and favorable attitudes towards aggression have been linked to increased aggression and violence among youths" (Feder, Levant, and Dean 2007, 386). These facts help support the idea that violence is normalized in American culture and it has a negative affect on adolescents. Feder, Levant, and Dean (2007) go on to cite a study conducted the National Institute of Mental Health stating that "'from about 4 years of age on, boys are more likely than girls to engage in both aggressive and nonaggressive antisocial behavior'" (387). Boys are learning from television and the world around them that violence is acceptable. This socialization into their specific gender roles can be harmful to a potential romantic relationship. If they are accustomed to using violence to get their way, they may use violence in their romantic relationships.

Jakupcak, Lisak, and Roemer (2002) conducted a study which examined strict sex-role ideas in relation to male"s perpetration of violence. Their study consisted of one-hundred sixty-five men from a college campus. Their study found that males who have high levels of strict sex-role ideas were more likely to perpetrate aggression or violence in their romantic relationship compared to men who held less strict beliefs about sex-roles (Jakupcak, Lisak, and Roemer 2002, 104). The literature shows that women who hold less strict sex-role ideas are more likely to sustain or exhibit violent behavior in a romantic relationship (McKinney as cited by Sugarman and Hotaling 1998, 109). Sex-role ideas are just another factor in why adolescents possibly enter violent relationships. It is hard to get away from such rigid ideas of what is appropriate for each sex. Adolescents and everyone else are bombarded everyday with images suggesting the proper way that males and females should act. Parents are another source where adolescents learn the proper sex-roles and how to act in romantic relationships. Multiple studies have examined the link between the likelihood of witnessing parental violence and becoming a perpetrator or victim of relationship violence.

These studies show mixed results just like the literature on relationship violence. For example Kinsfogel and Grych (2004) did a study that specifically looked at how interparental violence or family violence affected adolescent"s romantic relationships. They make a direct connection that parents are role models of romantic relationships for their adolescents (Kinsfogel and Grych 2004, 505). Kinsfogel and Grych (2004) found that witnessing violence between their parents was more of a predictor for boys to be aggressive in relationship rather than girls (512). However, Wolf and Foshee (2003) found the opposite. They found that witnessing family violence was more of a predictor for females to be perpetrators in violent relationships (Wolf and

Foshee 2003, 313). They also found that experiencing family violence was more associated with perpetration of violence by males rather than females (Wolf and Foshee 2003, 313).

Experiencing and witnessing family violence are both correlates for adolescents to become involved in violent relationships. While these factors are correlates, Sugarman‟s and Hotaling‟s research produced results that did and did not support these risk factors. The found seven studies that supported experiencing violence would make individuals more prone to using violence in romantic relationships, but they also found that five studies did not show any correlation (Sugarman and Hotaling 1998, 112). As for witnessing family violence their research found four studies that supported witnessing family violence predicted perpetration and seven studies that did not support that finding (Sugarman and Hotaling 1998, 112). Even though the research is mixed, it still shows that witnessing and experiencing family violence or interparental violence does have an impact on adolescent‟s romantic relationships. Along with parents, friends and peers are another influence on adolescents.

Peers have a profound affect on adolescent‟s lives. Often times they turn to their friends and peers when they have a problem instead of to an adult (Fallon and Bowles as cited in Black, et al. 2008, 742). Adolescents are trying to assert their independence and they may see going to an adult as a sign of dependence (Carver, Joyner, & Udry 2003, 23). Arriaga and Foshee (2004) conducted a study which looked at which had a greater impact on adolescents: their parents being involved in a violent romantic relationship or having friends in violent romantic relationships. They predicted that friends will have a more profound affect on adolescents than parents would (Arriaga and Foshee 2004, 165). Those who participated were in the eighth and ninth grades (Arriaga and Foshee 2004, 167).

Through their study, they found having peers who were involved in violent relationships were more likely to become perpetrators or victims of violent relationships (Arriaga and Foshee 2004, 178). Peers have more of an influence on adolescents that their parents do (Arriaga and Foshee 2004, 178). This is significant for girls. Arriaga and Foshee (2004) found victimization of girls was directly related with girls having friends who were involved in violent relationships, but not for boys (178-179). Friends also helped influence girls to become perpetrators of relationship violence (Arriaga and Foshee 2004, 179). Friends played a more important role in female"s ideas about violence in relationships than boy"s friends did. However, Arriaga and Foshee (2004) explain that boys who are victims may seek other boys who are victims as friends (179). There are multiple reasons as to why boys would seek out other boys who are victims. One reason theorized by the Arriaga and Foshee (2004) is that most people tend to seek out friends who hold similar beliefs to their own; therefore if one boy tolerates abuse from his girlfriend he may seek out other boys who also tolerate abuse from their girlfriends (179).

These studies show that both males and females can be violent. The literature shows that females are usually the perpetrators of relationship violence (Sugarman and Hotaling 1998, 104). While this may be true, females are still the ones who inflict more moderate forms of violence and receive the more serious injuries (Arriaga and Foshee 2004, 179).Wekerle and Avogoustis (2003) point out that females who use violence could be using it in self-defense (223). No matter who is the perpetrator or the victim, adolescent relationship violence is a problem that needs to be addressed. If adolescents do not know what resources are available to them, they may turn to someone who is unskilled in getting them help such as their friends.

Black et al. (2008) cite the research of Watson et al. that "females were more likely than males to talk to friends about dating violence they experienced, whereas males were significantly

more likely to do nothing" (745). Sugarman and Hotaling (1998) state that individuals involved in domestic violence situations often turn to their friends before they turn to the available resources (117). Conversely, boys who were perpetrators of relationship violence were more likely to talk to their friends about their violence and receive praise for their actions (DeKeseredy as cited in Surgaman and Hotaling 1998, 117). Clearly adolescents need to talk to someone about what is going in their relationships, but they may be too scared or embarrassed to ask for help. When they do seek out their friends for help, their friends need to know what to do: how to be supportive and how to intervene.

This research points out specific risk factors that put adolescents at risk of becoming involved in violent relationships. To help reach the teen population, this research can be put to use in the area of domestic violence. Adolescent relationship violence is often left out of the gambit of domestic violence. To make this issue better known, a curriculum could be created specifically for teens and could be implemented in high schools and middle schools. It could be a comprehensive curriculum that addresses what relationship violence entails (verbal, physical, and sexual abuse), what to do if a friend confides in them about a violent relationship, how to not blame the victim, and what resources are available so they can help. This curriculum could be implemented in a unit of health class, a school assembly, or whatever means the school saw as necessary. Avery-Leaf and Cascardi (2002) looked at two prevention programs along with their own to see if they had an impact.

Their findings report that the longer the curriculum was used in the schools the better the outcome (Avery-Leaf and Cascardi 2002, 91). Avery-Leaf and Cascardi (2002) found that the prevention programs had an impact on "students" conflict behavior, self-ratings of relationship skills, and help-seeking behavior" (91). If this problem can be targeted this early, then hopefully

rates of perpetration and victimization will decrease. If there is a decrease, maybe a small dent can be made in the rates of domestic violence. It is the attitudes adolescents have towards violence that predispose them to relationship violence.

Adolescence covers a wide age range which is why the studies used looked at ages that ranged from middle school to the first couple years of college. Self-esteem, rigid sex-roles, parents in violent relationship, and friends who are in a violent relationship are only a few of the risk factors that can put adolescents at risk. More research still needs to be done to help identify other risk factors that put adolescents at risk. Then that research an be put to use in prevention programs so that future generations will be more educated about what relationship violence is and what they can do to prevent it.

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Author biography:

Antoinette Wall grew up in St. Louis, MO. She received her Associates in Arts from Meramec Community College. To finish her Bachelor‟s Degree, Antoinette came to Mankato in 2006. She majored in Women‟s Studies and graduated Cum Laude and with departmental honors in May 2009. During her time at Mankato, she was a part of the Women‟s Studies club from 2007 to 2009. She took the meeting minutes and was co-president for her last year at Mankato. Antoinette plans to take a year off before she returns to graduate school to work on her Master‟s degree. During that year, Antoinette plans on working in the field of violence against women, however if she cannot find a job right away doing that she plans to volunteer her time at any agency that helps women. Antoinette chose the topic of adolescent relationship violence because it is an issue close to her heart. Ever since she chose to major in Women‟s Studies, Antoinette has wanted to work with survivors of domestic abuse. She believes that the acceptance of violence in relationships can start at a young age, which is why she focused on adolescents. She hopes her research will help build on the existing literature so preventative steps can be taken sooner.