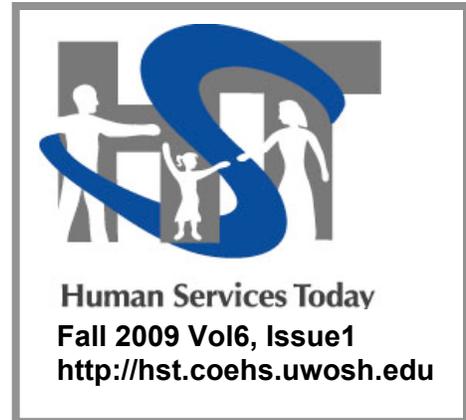


Human Services Trainees’ Conceptualization of Dating Relationships: Implications for Counseling Adolescents and Young Adults

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine human service trainees’ conceptualizations of healthy relationships and dating violence, as research is lacking in this area.

Dating violence is an objectionable, yet common issue many adolescents and young adults face (Murray & Kardatzke, 2007). Kaura and Lohman (2007) conceptualize the physical and psychological aspects of dating violence and victimization as “including being the recipient of a partner’s violent acts” (p.368). Amar and Alexy (2005) added that dating violence is a “traumatic event that can have devastating consequences for victims. Such experience may change one’s construction of reality, contribute toward deep intrapsychic and emotional wounds, and endanger one’s beliefs about self, others, and the world” (p.162-163).

Statistics indicate that 20 (Harned, 2002) to 47% (Katz, Kuffel, & Coblenz, 2002) of both males and females have been victims of violence from their partner in a dating relationship. It is estimated that about 30% of adolescents experience victimization during the transition into young adulthood (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martain, & Kupper, 2001). Humphrey and White (2000) indicate that from the age of 14 through the fourth year of college 69.8% of women had been a victim of sexual violence at least once. Further, studies have found that females were at a greater risk of being sexually victimized in college if they had been sexually victimized in high school, with the majority of these incidences taking place within a dating relationship (Smith, White, & Holland, 2003).

Research indicates that dating violence has been associated with depression, anxiety, (Carlson, McNutt, & Choi, 2003; Coker et al. 2002; Sutherland, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2001) and lowered self-esteem (Ackard, Neumark-Sztaine, Hannan, 2003). Other consequences of dating violence include eating disorders, substance abuse, somatization, and suicidal ideation and attempts (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Amar & Gennaro, 2005; Holt & Espelage, 2005), lowered academic performance, and additional risky behaviors (DuRant et al., 2007). Given the

prevalence and consequences associated with dating violence, more attention and awareness about dating violence is necessary for working with adolescents and young adults.

While there is literature available that illuminates statistics and physical and psychological consequences for victims of dating violence, there lacks research to date that explores human service trainees' conceptualizations of what constitutes healthy relationships and dating violence. This information is needed in order to develop appropriate training interventions for these trainees to work with adolescents and young adults. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine human service trainees' conceptualization of dating relationships. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed: (a) How do human services trainees define healthy and unhealthy dating relationships; (b) How do they define dating violence; and (c) What do they identify as warning signs of unhealthy relationships.

Method

Participants and Context

The study sample consisted of 20 individuals who identified themselves as trainees for human service professions (1 participant did not complete a demographic inventory.) Of those completing the inventory, 17 identified as female and 11 as White. (Four participants were African-American, 3 Native American, and 1 Latin American.) Participants ranged in age from 18 to 53 years with a mean of 27 ($SD = 8.99$). Eighteen participants identified as heterosexual while 1 identified as gay (1 participant did not answer this question). With regards to training experience, 17 participants had never before attended a workshop on dating relationships while 3 participants had previously attended at least one related workshop.

Group facilitators collected qualitative data (i.e., focus group interview and survey data) as part of a training session on recognizing and intervening in unhealthy relationships. Participants were recruited through a mailed or electronic flyer sent to graduate program directors of human services and related programs throughout a southeastern region of a southern U.S. state. Participants attended 1 of 4 sessions similar in content and process; the average duration of the seminar was 40 minutes. Participants completed a session evaluation form at the conclusion of the session. The group facilitators were individuals that had graduate training in professional counseling; one group facilitator had also served as an instructor in human services courses.

Each training session began with a focus group interview assessing human service trainees' knowledge, awareness, and skills regarding healthy and unhealthy relationships as well as dating violence signs and consequences. Following the focus groups, group facilitators provided information about dating violence statistics, indicators of healthy and unhealthy relationships, and activities and handouts to be used when working with adolescents and young adults.

Data Sources

Focus group interviews. Participants were a part of a focus group of up to 4 individuals led by 1 of 2 group facilitators, with a total of eight focus group sessions (i.e., two focus groups per training session). Sample focus group questions included: What do you think are elements of a healthy relationship? What are some elements of an unhealthy relationship? What are some warning signs of dating violence? Is there anything that might be helpful for working with adolescents and young adults?

Following the small group discussions, individuals were asked to join the original group of 5-8 participants in a circle. The two facilitators then presented current research on healthy relationships and gave handouts of information and activities that trainees may wish to use in their future clinical work. The facilitators asked several closing questions and individuals were given a chance to share what they learned from the discussions.

Demographic inventory. The demographic inventory was used to collect information about participants' age, gender, race/ethnicity, relationship status, and training experiences.

Session evaluation form. Participants completed a session evaluation form that contained four close-ended items (i.e., "Presenters were knowledgeable about the topic," "There were opportunities for discussion of the material," "Handouts were appropriate," and "The presentation style was appropriate"). Items were rated using a 6-point Likert scale (1= *strongly disagree* to 6= *strongly agree*). In addition, three sentence completion stems were included on the form (i.e., "I was most surprised during this session by," "An important thing I learned today is," and "I hope future sessions of this topic will").

Data Analysis

Each session of the seminar was audio recorded and transcribed by the group facilitators. The authors (two of which were group facilitators) independently coded the focus group transcripts and met to reach consensus on emerging themes with respect to the research questions. Means were computed for the session evaluation closed-ended items, and codes from the open-ended items were integrated with those gleaned from the focus group interview data.

Results

Data revealed four major themes in accordance with the research questions. In addition to these themes, information about the impact of the training session is provided as a fifth theme.

Healthy Relationships

The theme of healthy relationships yielded eight subcategories. These subcategories were communication, respect, equity, care, effort, self-improvement, fun, no abuse and boundaries. In regards to the communication category, individual responses that discussed honesty, trust, working together, being able to express self and open communication was coded as communication. One participant described communication as: "communication, open communication, for both sides, not just one person," and another described it as: "Coming to an understanding, an active way of understanding, the ability to compromise." Respect, a second subcategory, was present throughout and referred to participants comments about respecting one another, appreciating one another, and when referencing the ability to compromise. A third subcategory of equity was coded in participants responses that expressed healthy relationships were egalitarian, consisted of an equal playing fields, and that there were lack of control issues present. A participant noted: "in a healthy relationship, you don't have the aspect of control."

Care as a fourth subcategory encompassed responses that referred to expressing care and having support. Effort was an important subcategory and noted when participants responded that healthy relationships require effort and flexibility. Self-improvement was another subcategory present from many participants. This category included responses that referred to the desire to be a better person and other desires for self-improvement. An example of this is: "I think, to be specific, in a healthy relationship for me and being connected, it makes me want to be a better

person, I want to work hard, and be better, it motivates me to want to do good things and having that person in my life is like synergistic.” Fun was another code that referred to the fun had in healthy relationships and the playfulness that exists between individuals. A subcategory of no abuse was important under healthy relationships when participants specifically mention that healthy relationships were free from abuse and violence.

Maintaining appropriate boundaries, a sense of self-respect, and being secure and confident in self were all aspects of participant responses that were coded under the subcategory of boundaries. A couple examples of this type of response follows: “I think it’s important for you to be secure and confident in yourself and let your relationships build from there.” “I’ve found it helpful in the past to set boundaries like no sexual interaction until a certain number of months or until you have that feeling. Then you don’t get too involved in case it doesn’t work out.”

Unhealthy Relationships

Under the main theme of unhealthy relationship, seven subcategories included disrespect, inequity, lack of care, fear, lack of fulfillment, mental health issues, abuse, and lack of boundaries.

Disrespect was also mentioned many times as an element of an unhealthy relationship. When asked how to define an unhealthy relationship, one participant stated: “Negativity, anxiety, disrespect.” Inequity was another subcategory and referred to comments about control, wanting to please the other person, and subservience. One participant noted: “I think for unhealthy, I think back and there is that feeling of wanting to please the other person, like you didn’t really want to do something but you felt a pressure, like to appease that other person.”

Lack of care was noted in responses of taking advantage of someone, taking someone for granted, and manipulating for one’s benefit. A fear subcategory was noted in responses that mention fear of another person or fear of losing relationship. Lack of fulfillment was important in many responses that noted a feeling of not being wanted in a relationship and not feeling secure.

The subcategory of mental health issues was mentioned many times and appeared as a subcategory under unhealthy relationships. Participants’ responses that referenced depression, anxiety and obsession were all coded as mental health issues.

Abuse as a subcategory represents emotional and physical abuse. Emotional abuse referred to responses about manipulation and tearing each other down. The unhealthy relationships subcategory of physical abuse was present in participants’ responses that referenced physical harm and violence.

Lack of boundaries was represented by descriptions of dependence and loss of identity. Dependency was represented from participants comments related to not finding strength within self. “An unhealthy relationship is like an ‘A’, with the people leaning against each other, and if one person isn’t there, they both fall.” Loss of identity was present throughout with references to having to be a different person. Participants noted: “if you feel like you have to be a different person to have that person want to be with you or be around you, that’s not good.” “I think also enmeshment is unhealthy, when you define yourself through another person and I think that’s where a lot of problems stem from.”

Dating Violence

The dating violence theme had eight subcategories. These consisted of emotional abuse, physical abuse, personal experience, friends, family, media, role of technology and gender. Gender as a subcategory included gender stereotypes, gender equality, and gender inequality.

Emotional abuse was described by participants and included control and manipulation. At times, it was also viewed as less severe than physical abuse. *One participant noted:*

When you think of dating violence, you think of really obvious violence like throwing her against the wall or something that everyone views as abuse. You don't think of how violent it can be to just put somebody down every day. Can you imagine begin put down every day? That's enough to keep you in the relationships, because your self-esteem is so low, you don't think you can be with anyone else.

Physical abuse was another subcategory that described physical harm and violence as it related to dating violence. Personal experience came up as a subcategory and described participants' own experiences with dating violence. An example of this is:

I was in a violent relationship for years. I mean, people knew and I broke up with him and thought 'this is stupid, why am I doing this,' but then I went back. They really have this manipulating control that I can't explain. I was always this girl that thought, no you don't need a guy, you don't need to be in a relationships, guys are stupid whatever, but then in like 2 weeks he had me and I was believing that I was fat, I was ugly, no one's ever going to love me, no one liked me.

The subcategory of friends came about when participants would mention friends or acquaintances in abusive dating relationships. Family is a very similar subcategory in that it references family members involved in violent dating relationships. Media came up many times and became a subcategory for the role that it plays in dating violence along with the role of technology. Role of technology was examined for perpetuating violence and diminishing the ability to communicate. An example quote is: "There is so much technology now. They cyber-stalking and you can text someone like 50 times a day. Now they have GPS on the phone and you can see where people are."

Aspects of gender were very important in that many participants discussed gender stereotypes while others referenced gender equality and/or gender inequality. Gender stereotypes referred to discrimination against men who are abused. This was present in the following quote. "I knew a man being abused by his wife and when people found out, they ridiculed him and made terrible jokes about it. I think this should be addressed. Unfortunately, I don't think I am the only person with this stereotype." Gender equality was noticed when participants would mention knowledge of equal prevalence for both genders. For example, one participant noted: "I think that is very important and now when you have like, um, we had a massive fight with four girls and they were inter-dating each other and it was huge. Hair being pulled out, and it's not just the men, it was girls dating girls." Gender inequality was represented as a subcategory when participants mentioned discrimination by men against women. As a male participant noted, "but still in the old school, like still like people think you know, someone is in charge and it needs to be more equitable and that is better. Men haven't done a real good job." A female participant

added: “well maybe that is this historical rigid view of gender roles of women and women have done a great job of breaking out of this role, but some men aren’t open in accepting that.”

Warning Signs

The third major theme of warning signs had eight subcategories. These subcategories were isolation, control, escalation, intergenerational nature of dating violence, personal changes, self-respect, anger, and rationalization. Isolation as a subcategory of warning signs was noted when participants mentioned isolation from friends, low communication, and body language. “I mean at first it’s normal, but after the initial beginning, they usually bring that person into the group and will have that person meet friends and so on. I think when that doesn’t happen, that is a sign.”

Control was viewed as another warning sign subcategory. Participants referred to control of another person and dictating schedule and time as a form of control. In discussing a personal experience, one participant stated: “I wasn’t allowed to wear make-up to school, I wasn’t allowed to shower before school, I wasn’t allowed to talk to guys, even at one point, I couldn’t talk to girls, I had to wear sweat pants.” Escalation was examined as a subcategory when participants stated aspects of small warning signs becoming bigger. Participants’ comments about witnessing domestic violence in the home leading to further perpetration, resulted in a subcategory of intergenerational nature.

The personal changes subcategory referred to responses about change in personality and changes in appearance. Information on low self-esteem was coded in the self-respect subcategory. One participant summarized it this way: “clearly if you are staying, they’ve done enough damage to your self-esteem.”

Anger was noted as another subcategory. Temper and aspects of violent behavior such as hitting inanimate objects are examples. “If in the beginning, you think, ok, its just this one thing that you really want to change, it’s a bad thing, like he has a temper and hits the wall, you never know if your face is going to be the wall one day.”

Rationalization was the last subcategory under warning signs. This appeared when participants would make reference to making excuses for other’s behavior: “You rationalize and make excuses for them. It’s amazing how blind you are when you’re in it. Even the small things, he’s taking small digs at you. And everyone else can see it, but you can’t when you’re in it.”

Perceptions of Training Session

This last theme was noted in participants’ responses to the training. The following are examples. “I never had information about this. No one ever told me about dating violence. If someone would have told me about this, it probably would have prevented a lot with me, my friends...I really like how the back page (of handouts) focuses on the person that might be doing the abusing. There is not much that focuses on that.” “I definitely like the handouts. It’s hard to find activities.” “I like the research. It’s hard to find materials that help guide if you are trying to teach this.” “I am excited about this activity. I have a client now that I want to use this with. “

Participants reported that they were most surprised during the training session by the “inability to find information on healthy relationships” and “how harmful and hard to detect emotional abuse can be.” According to the anonymous session evaluation forms, participants learned important

information including, “the abusers need help as well,” “abusive relationships are more common than previously thought” and “the role of technology” in dating violence. They also learned, “not to assume everyone can easily walk away” from an abusive relationships and “more research is needed” on healthy relationships and dating violence. Participants hoped future sessions on this topic would include: “additional activities to use with kids,” “longer small discussion groups,” and would “include the topic of bullying.” Additional comments showed that participants found the small group discussions to be both informative and valuable.

Discussion

The main findings of this study expand on the current research in a number of ways. The researchers collected information directly from students and professionals in an intimate, yet interactive environment. The seminar was set up in a unique manner. Namely, small group discussions were prompted solely on the participants’ preexisting knowledge or experience of relationships and dating violence. At the conclusion of the session, the facilitators presented current research on the topic so that the participants’ ideas would not be tainted. Students and professionals present had varying degrees of knowledge about healthy relationships and dating violence, ranging from no previous knowledge to practicing counselors currently working with victims of abuse and perpetrators. The current study also brought light to the important role of technology in today’s dating relationships.

Just as more research is needed in this area, it is apparent that future trainings are necessary as well. Students and professionals showed interest in attending similar trainings, however, few training opportunities related to relationships and dating violence exist. Topics of future trainings might include: most recent dating violence statistics, males as victims, issues related to underreporting, empowerment techniques, and help for perpetrators.

Limitations of the current study include limited time in small group discussions, the experimenter effect, responses affected by social desirability or group think. Researchers also note that participants may be less likely to share personal stories due to the nature of the topic. A larger sample is needed as participants from the same region may have had similar training and share ideas related to the topic. The sample was also self-selected and participants were likely to take part in this training due to an interest in the topic.

Strengths of the study include small group discussion size (less than 4 people). The same two researchers facilitated multiple focus groups. In addition, the content of the sessions were consistent and were held in the same setting.

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