Rural Adolescent Girls Negotiating Healthy and Unhealthy Romantic Relationships
La gestion des relations romantiques saines et malsaines chez des adolescentes de milieu rural

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ABSTRACT

The focused discussions of adolescent girls were analyzed to explore the processes of managing healthy and unhealthy aspects of dating relationships. Grounded theory methods were used to generate an outline of these processes. The core category elicited from discussions with participants was *wrestling with gender expectations*. This category reflected participants' struggle to behave within the constraints they perceived that gender placed on their intimate relationships. Six subcategories explicated this core category: *determining responsibility, keeping it in/letting it out, standing up for oneself, making sacrifices, building trust/not trusting,* and *showing respect/showing disrespect.* Implications for psychotherapeutic work and educational applications are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

On analysa les discussions ciblées d'adolescentes en vue d'explorer les processus de gestion des aspects sains et malsains de leurs relations amoureuses. On utilisa des méthodes de la théorie à base empirique pour schématiser ces processus. La catégorie principale qui s'est dégagée des discussions avec les participantes fut *l'art d'affronter les attentes liées à l'identité sexuelle*. Cette catégorie rendait compte des efforts des participantes à se comporter en fonction des contraintes inhérentes à leurs relations intimes qu'elles percevaient comme étant imposées par leur identité sexuelle. Six sous-catégories rendaient compte de cette catégorie principale : *détermination de la responsabilité, intériorisation/extériorisation, capacité de se défendre soi-même, capacité de faire des sacrifices, aptitude à susciter la confiance/la méfiance* et *témoignage de respect ou de non-respect.* On y discute des applications possibles au travail de psychothérapie et d'éducation.

Researchers have long indicated that adolescence is a time when teenagers look to romantic as well as peer-group relationships as crucial sources of social contact and intimacy (e.g., Santrock, 2005; Wekerle & Wolfe, 1999). A recent summary of current psychological research on adolescent romantic relationships documents a radical increase over the past decade in investigations of the interactive impacts of such intimate relationships on developmental processes (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Collins et al. (2009) describe trends in recent studies to recognize the multifaceted and nuanced nature of healthy and unhealthy relationships, high-

lighting teenagers' perceptions of the importance of closeness, interdependence, and supportiveness in such relationships.

Furman, Schaffer, and Giordano, as recently as 2003, have called for more attention to this aspect of adolescent psychosocial development (Furman & Schaffer, 2003; Giordano, 2003). In exploring adolescents' reasons for dissolving romantic relationships, teens identified personal needs for interdependence, intimacy, and affiliation as relational functions striven for in intimate partnerships (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). These needs are highly nontrivial indices of healthy growth, and are consonant with assertions of the importance of intimate relationships in adolescents' navigations of their increasingly complex socio-emotional landscapes.

Significant gender differences have been documented in adolescent perceptions of romantic relationships (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006). For teenage girls, in Western societies in particular, romantic relationships appear to be of central importance in the development of their psychosocial functioning (Brabeck & Brabeck, 2006; Hoskins & Artz, 2004). The present study focuses on teenage girls' perceptions of romantic relationships, their concerns about gender expectations of them, and the implications of these expressions of concern for effective psychoeducational interventions.

Since Gilligan's (1982) and Pipher's (1994) classic studies with girls and Maccoby's (1990) gender analysis of teenage relationships, much careful and detailed research, especially with girls, has occurred (Cameron & Gillen, 2010). The characterization of female tendencies to "tend and befriend" when encountering stress (Taylor et al., 2000) is of importance when addressing gender differences, and relational security between best friends moderates attitudes toward romantic relationship aggression (Feiring, Deblinger, Hoch-Espada, & Haworth, 2002).

Rudolph (2002) identified both costs and benefits of girls' relational orientations. The costs can include vulnerability to anxiety and depression with respect to relationships, while the benefits can be identified as the potentials for adaptive behaviours in the face of interpersonal challenges. Selfhout, Branje, and Meeus (2009) qualitatively analyzed the struggles that girls face in dating relationships, showing that, over the adolescent years, girls develop interdependence and increasingly balance relatedness and constructive problem-solving in intimate relationships. Banister and Jakubec (2004) reported that adolescent girls faced many barriers when trying to express romantic relationship needs and desires. They tend to blame themselves for their boyfriends' abuse and lack of commitment and feel they were faced with an "impossible choice" (Banister & Jakubec, 2004, p. 33) between compromising self to either maintain or end their relationship.

A study of U.S. public high school girls found that nearly one in five reported physical or sexual abuse in heterosexual dating relationships (Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). Silverman et al. (2001) called for more extensive qualitative studies to further analyze the impact of intimate partner violence because much of the existing research does not emanate from personally expressed perceptions of teenagers themselves. More recent research has sounded alarms regarding the prevalence of violence in youths' heterosexual dating relationships.

Focus discussions were deployed in a Canadian study to identify important issues in prevention of dating violence (O'Leary et al., 2006). O'Leary et al. (2006) reported that the participants emphasized the need for information on characteristics of healthy relationships and required support in acquiring relationship skills to prevent dating violence. Participants said that jealousy, possessiveness, and control need to be addressed when promoting healthy relationships, along with learning effective ways of handling anger and stress, improving communication skills, building mutual respect, and being conscious of another's feelings. Also, participants perceived that youth should be taught to stand up for themselves.

Cameron et al. (2007) followed up on O'Leary et al.'s (2006) qualitative research by distributing an extensive questionnaire to 1,473 Canadian high school students about both their experiences and their deployment of psychological, physical, and sexual dating violence. Students indicating having dated were included in the analyses. Examples of psychological abuse included threats, name-calling, and controlling behaviours; physical abuse included pushing, slapping, punching, and throwing objects; sexual abuse included unwanted sexual activity due to force, threats, and/or continual arguments, or pressure. Overall, 38% of students reported having experienced one or more types of dating violence: 28% reported psychological, 17% reported physical, and 17% reported sexual abuse. No gender differences in experiencing dating violence were found.

A substantial percentage of students (21%) also reported acting violently in dating relationships in one or more of the following ways: psychologically (14%), physically (10%), and/or sexually (5%) (Cameron et al., 2007). No gender differences emerged in the report of using violence in dating relationships, but there were significant gender differences with respect to knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours regarding healthy and unhealthy dating relationships. Girls were (a) generally more knowledgeable than boys of the dynamics of intimate relationships, and (b) somewhat less accepting of dating violence issues and evidenced more positive behavioural intentions for addressing them. Cameron et al. (2007) made recommendations that a comprehensive, interdisciplinary approach be taken in the prevention of dating violence and that further inquiry be conducted into girls' perspectives and actions with respect to such relationships.

Thus, although a good deal of survey and other quantitative data focuses on prevalence and implications of dating violence in teenage girls' lives, few studies have focused on asking them, within a qualitative feminist framework, how they establish healthy relationships and cope with the violence that is sadly sometimes a part of their intimate relationships. Given the centrality of relationships to girls in particular (Brabeck & Brabeck, 2006) and the prevalence of dating violence in girls' lives, the purpose of this study was to understand the processes whereby girls negotiate dating relationships and the violence that can be part of these relationships.

We aim to target some of Cameron et al.'s (2007) quantitative findings of gender differences in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours regarding healthy and unhealthy dating relationships and answer questions specifically about underly-

ing processes in girls' perceptions of intimate relationships. We seek to reveal psychosocial processes underlying girls' relationship experiences. How do high school girls cope with romantic relational struggles? These questions are essential to appreciating more fully the development of these critical relationships and to providing information that would assist in therapeutic and community-based interventions, and implementations of education curricula and apposite-focused programs for dating violence primary prevention.

METHOD

Rationale and Key Considerations

This study utilized a grounded theoretical methodology, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998), to develop a theory of how adolescent girls negotiate dating relationships and how they respond to conflict and potentially to violence within these relationships. A grounded theory method is particularly appropriate for an inquiry in which there is a gap in the literature and a subsequent need to gain more understanding of the topic (Hutchinson, 1993).

Strauss and Corbin (1998) indicated that at the beginning of a grounded theory project, the researchers have two precursor questions to consider before implementing the project. They emphasized that the broader research question itself should drive the answers to these two questions; however, they also acknowledged that research ethics and limitations may preclude the attainment of the ideal conditions for studying a research question. The first consideration involves choosing both a group to study and a site in which to study them. In the case of this investigation, it would not be practical or ethical to be present to observe teenagers interacting in conflictual or possibly abusive ways in various settings. The research team decided that the best option was to recruit teenage girls and to ask them to discuss in relatively small groups their experiences and observations of intimate relationships and dating violence.

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) second precursor decision to be made was that of deciding what types of data were to be collected. The investigators must decide if they want to use "interviews, documents, biographies, audiotapes, videotapes, or combinations of these" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 204).

The authors decided that focus group interviews with groups of adolescent girls would provide a rich source of data that would allow for relevant theory development. According to grounded theory researcher Madriz (2000), focus discussions can allow for a wider range of opinions and definitions to be revealed than can individual interviews. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, the research team reasoned that relatively small group settings could be safe places for participants to express their thoughts. Further, the team considered one of the recommendations of Cameron et al. (2007): that new studies both respect the perspectives of youth and acknowledge critical gender differences in experiences of dating and dating violence.

The present researchers did not ask participants at the outset of the study if they had experienced some form of intimate partner violence; however, the topic of intimate partner violence between heterosexual teens was discussed objectively and at length. Within the discussions, participants spoke about experiences they had observed within their own circle of relationships, as well as in their own experiences. This research was subjected to institutional ethical review, and all procedures to protect autonomy, anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time were carefully established. The researchers also informed participants that support was available through the school's guidance counsellor if needed.

Participants

This study employed "open sampling" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as the primary way to recruit participants, the goal being to seek out people and situations that would offer a maximal opportunity to gather the most pertinent data relating to the research topic. A well-respected youth-friendly guidance counsellor at a rural high school acted as a liaison for the research team by approaching potential participants to explain the purposes of the investigation and to ask if they wished to participate. Once participants had agreed to be involved in the research, and prior to focus-group discussions, parents or guardians were provided with an information letter and consent form. These forms informed the parents/guardians of the research purpose and requested their signed approval, which was returned to the counsellor indicating parent/guardian consent. Participants under age 16 were required to have parental consent. The consent forms also provided a mailing address so parent/guardians and/or participants could obtain reports of final research results.

School personnel allotted time during regular school hours to facilitate participants' engagement in focus discussion sessions. Four different groups of girls participated in a first round of discussions with the researchers. There was some suggestion in the Cameron et al. (2007) data set that younger girls with less experience with dating relationships might be somewhat intimidated to state their own perspectives on a first meeting, **s**o the groups were initially divided by grade —one group each for Grades 9 ($n = 8$), 10 ($n = 5$), 11 ($n = 5$), and 12 ($n = 10$). All participants were rural middle- to working-class Euro-Canadian students. In 2006, 48.9% of the residents of the province were listed as rural (Government of New Brunswick, 2006*)*. Boys at each grade were also interviewed separately. This report focuses only on the girls' response sessions, as their experience was very different from the boys. Consequently, the boys' responses will be the subject of a separate paper. After discussing ground rules regarding confidentiality and group safety, the first round of focus discussions were launched with a skit by the young (college-aged) adult female researcher and her college-aged male research team colleague to engage participants in the process, as well as to focus attention on the topics at hand. The skit portrayed a conflict between dating partners over whom the young man was talking to on a cell phone. The researcher asked the participants about their reactions to the scenario and used active listening and open-ended questioning to encourage the group to discuss whether such scenarios

were familiar to them, to learn more about how that situation might relate to their lives, and to set the stage for the discussions to follow.

For the main part of each focus discussion, the researcher asked participants to discuss

1. important factors for managing dating relationships,
2. actions involved in creating healthy as well as unhealthy relationships,
3. their observations of salient dating relationship incidents, and
4. their views about how the media affect their dating relationships.

The researchers listened and responded actively by using open questions, paraphrasing, and summarizing throughout each group discussion. The intent was to encourage dialogue amongst group members and to clarify different ideas raised. Each of the four initial focus discussion groups lasted about one classroom hour (50 minutes).

Approximately three months after the initial focus discussions, participants were asked to meet again for their input on the researchers' initial emerging interpretations of trends in the data, as well as to provide the opportunity for them to ask questions for their own clarification. A second focus group was conducted to validate or invalidate the research team's interpretations of the initial focus group data. This common qualitative research practice is also common in grounded theory approaches (e.g., Charmaz, 2006). For this second discussion, 21 participants, having become comfortable with the discussion process, and having voiced interest in what members of the other groups were thinking, were gathered in one group to include girls in Grades 9 through 12. The main agenda for the follow-up discussion was to seek answers to the following questions arising from analyses of the first discussions:

1. How do girls make sacrifices in a relationship?
2. How do girls respond to conflict in a relationship?
3. Do they think that the way girls solve issues in dating relationships is different from how boys solve them?

The researchers utilized the above-described group interviewing skills to elicit responses and clarifications regarding these three questions.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed verbatim. The initial phase of analysis deployed a line-by-line coding procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This microanalytic technique is used at the beginning of the data-coding process to "generate initial categories … and to suggest relationships amongst categories" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 57). After completing and discussing at length the outcomes of line-by-line coding, the research team proceeded to open coding analyses. Through open coding, the building blocks of the grounded theory are revealed by the data. As open coding proceeded, emerging codes were arranged visually in clusters according to meaning similarity. Thus, clusters of concepts

and tentative category labels were developed for each transcript. As analysis went forward, concepts related to established codes were placed into existing categories. The researchers continually determined whether new codes required generation of new categories or if they should be subsumed into those already generated.

Relating Categories to Subcategories

The analytic technique of axial coding was a means for linking categories to subcategories. Strauss and Corbin (1998) define subcategories as "concepts that pertain to a category, giving it further clarification and specification" (p. 123). The development of subcategories (to be outlined below) allowed the researchers to answer specific questions about phenomena represented by the categories. Axial coding also allowed the researchers to discover and outline a set of contextual conditions, which are understood in grounded theory to explain further how participants negotiated healthy and unhealthy dating relationships.

A theory containing one central category and six related subcategories, grounded in the words of the participants, emerged through the above data-coding process. The theory was checked and rechecked against the transcripts as well as with participants in the follow-up group discussion.

RESULTS

Central Category

The resulting grounded theory utilized a central organizing category, called "wrestling with gender expectations." This central process reflected participants' struggle to behave within the constraints or parameters that they perceived gender placed on their intimate dating relationships. Participants outlined wrestling with their own decision-making about what actions were appropriate for them as girls in relationships. They also struggled with interpreting their male counterparts' actions in intimate relationships. There was a sense among participants that males have an unfair advantage in society at large as well as in dating relationships. The following illustrates this aspect of the central category:

> And like society is still sort of in a sense ruled by men. Men have nothing to worry about. They don't have to worry about getting pregnant. They don't have to worry about going and doing pap tests. Like it is just not fair in a way, they think, "Well, why don't you just have sex with me, it's not a big deal." For them it isn't a big deal, they don't have anything to worry about. (Grade 12 girl)

The six subcategories that further explicate the wrestling with gender expectations central category follow.

DETERMINING RESPONSIBILITY

This is a process whereby girls decide who should be responsible for what areas of concern in relationships. Specifically, girls spoke about taking responsibility for trying to minimize risk with regard to limiting alcohol consumption (their

own and their partner's) as well as being the ones to plan or make decisions about sexual activity. One Grade 12 participant indicated that she would rather be a designated driver than risk the consequences of a boyfriend having consumed too much alcohol: "I would rather be the one to go and be the designated driver." Then a few moments later, she said, "It's like a sacrifice you make just so you know that everyone is going to be ok."

Girls described taking responsibility for being the gatekeepers of sexual activity, as they were very focused on the possibility of getting pregnant. As one participant commented:

> Sometimes a person will get pregnant and you are always pressured to give the baby up. And I realize that it is going to ruin … well, I shouldn't say ruin, but it is going to make your life more difficult. (Grade 12 girl)

Overall, this subcategory demonstrated that girls take on responsibility for decision-making about sexual activity, as well as attempting to minimize risk at parties with their partner by making decisions about contending with alcohol consumption.

KEEPING IT IN/LETTING IT OUT

This subcategory emerged as a way to describe decision-making with respect to participants' communications with their partners. On the whole, they acknowledged the importance of good communication within a healthy dating relationship, agreeing that communicating, or letting some information "out," was helpful for both boys and girls in building respectful relationships. As one Grade 10 girl stated, "Communication may be where you talked about and understand where the other is coming from." Further, "letting it out" or discussing thoughts and feelings was discussed as a healthy problem-solving strategy:

> You have to make sure you talk when you are having problems. As soon as a problem comes up you should talk about it. You shouldn't be like, "No, I don't want to deal with this. I don't want to fight." You should just deal with it. Talk it through, and if it is a big thing try and think of something that can fix it. (Grade 12 girl)

Participants also described their struggles with deciding what information they should communicate to their partners and what they should keep to themselves. Some participants indicated that it was a healthy choice to share some information but also to hold some back. One Grade 9 girl summed up this dilemma:

> I guess like it's personal things that could be going on at home—You don't need to know everything about the person, just like basic things you should know, like their personalities and stuff. You should still be able to have things to keep to themselves.

Overall, this subcategory showed that girls face decisions regarding what information should be talked about within a romantic relationship and outlined how this sharing may contribute to the health of such relationships.

STANDING UP FOR ONESELF

This category described how girls negotiate responding to such abusive behaviours as pressure to engage in sexual activity and other forms of abuse. Participants generally agreed that, in principle, one should stand up for oneself when faced with unwanted sexual pressure. However, there was general consensus that this is difficult. A Grade 11 girl illustrated this difficulty:

> I see more of people giving into the pressure because they have got all these pressures, and a lot of times you have your friends pressuring you to do it as well, and then you have the guy pressuring you to do it. Sometimes you just break down and it's like "oh I don't want to 'break up,'" so you just do it.

Some participants described success in breaking off relationships when partners were behaving abusively and/or pressuring them into unwanted sexual activity:

> Sometimes the girl, when a guy would do that, like put them down because of it, they'll be pressured into doing things. But sometimes they'll take their stand or whatever and go, "I don't want to be in this relationship anymore" and they'll end up breaking up. (Grade 11 girl)

A major consequence of not standing up for oneself was damage to feelings of self-worth. This subcategory illustrated girls' acute awareness of (specifically sexual) abuse in relationships wherein they struggle to stand up for themselves (i.e., breaking off a relationship) when faced with such abuse.

MAKING SACRIFICES

Participating girls described many instances of making sacrifices for the sake of their romantic relationships. They spoke about two main types of sacrifices; the first was giving up time with family, friends, and schoolwork to spend more time with partners. The following comment illustrates how participants sacrificed time they could be devoting to completing academic work: "Girls make sacrifices in relationships when it comes to school. They put their school work behind them to maybe hang out longer with their boyfriends or something." In addition to describing giving up school-related time, they also spoke about disengaging from friends and family:

> You can sacrifice not only your friends, but sometimes your family. Like, um, maybe your family is going on a trip somewhere but you don't want to go because you want to stay home and not miss your boyfriend all week.

In addition to time sacrifices for the sake of relationships, girls also described losing some individuality by engaging in a romantic relationship:

> You also kind of sacrifice a little bit of your individuality sometimes, I think, because you get to be known as a couple as opposed to, like, just yourself. Like everyone is like "Oh, that's so and so's boyfriend [or girlfriend]."

On the whole, girls indicated that they struggled with the expectations of being in a relationship and how to strike a balance between their own needs and those of their partners:

> I think some [sacrifices] can be positive and some can be negative because I think that if you make too many sacrifices, in that like you, instead of doing stuff with your family, because your family is going to be there forever but you got to realize that you should probably be building a good relationship with them. Because the boyfriend may go but you will always have your family, so I think you should really choose to build upon those relationships over ones with your boyfriend or whatever.

Overall, this subcategory outlined the girls' process of making sacrifices and trying to find a balance in time spent with partners and a sense of individuality within those relationships.

building trust/not trusting

Participants described tension that arose from questioning the other gender's motives, especially with regard to involvement with other romantic partners. There was consensus that building trust was important for the health of a relationship. In response to the rapport-building initial skit about a jealous girlfriend, one Grade 9 participant said: "You should probably trust the other person so that if you tell them where you're going that they are not going to freak out." They agreed that it was difficult to navigate a relationship that was not based on trust, one in which there had been a lying and/or cheating incident. One Grade 12 girl stated that once trust is lost, it is often hard to regain:

> It would be hard to trust him again, because whatever he said you would be like "yeah ok. Like why should I believe this, he did cheat on me. That was a lie, and that was one of the worst things you have ever done. How do I know? You said that you didn't go to this party. How do I know that's not a lie?"

One strategy offered for building relationship trust converged with the "keeping it in/letting it out" subcategory and focused on talking things out in a relationship and getting to know the partner's character. As one Grade 11 student explained: "I think you gain people's trust by talking to them, because when you talk to them you learn what kind of character they are." Overall, this subcategory demonstrated female participants building trust through communication processes; however, the building of trust is difficult if the other person is deceptive or elusive.

showing respect/showing disrespect

A final subcategory was the effects of gender roles on respect in their romantic relationships. The subcategory of "showing respect/showing disrespect" emerged from how participants addressed the issue of relationship abuse. They indicated

that partners should respect each other in various ways and mentioned that the absence of abuse was obviously a basic component of respect. Discussion of behaviours considered disrespectful, and sometimes abusive, related to dialogues regarding respect. Disrespectful behaviours included putting others down, destroying their property, and physically hurting them. Some participants were hopeful that male-to-female abusive behaviours were more a phase that males would "grow out of":

> I think it [abuse] usually starts in high school and as they get older they kind of grow out of it, I think. Like some guys, they can stay mean throughout their whole life, but there are some of them that actually grow up and realize that it is wrong to treat a woman with such disrespect. (Grade 10 girl)

Overall, this subcategory focused more on the girls' descriptions of boys' actions as indicators of being respectful, disrespectful, or, in many cases, abusive. There was some acknowledgement that peers do not regard girls behaving disrespectfully toward boys as seriously. A Grade 9 girl noted, "Well, I noticed that a lot of times if a girl hits a guy that it is not all that big of a deal, but if a guy hits a girl then it's a huge, huge deal."

Contextual Conditions

Strauss and Corbin (1998) identified "contextual conditions" as sets of events that help create situations relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (in the case of this article, the process of teenage girls negotiating various facets of dating relationships). Strauss and Corbin explained that contextual conditions help to create circumstances whereby the central category processes (i.e., wrestling with gender expectations) arise. In this study, participants spoke at length about the influences of the media on how they acted in romantic relationships.

Participants commented throughout the interviews about how media portrayal of gender influenced them to behave with romantic partners. One of the dominant themes involved "perfect relationships," as portrayed on television shows such as *One Tree Hill* and *The O.C.* Many participants commented that the attraction of portrayals of nonconflictual heterosexual relationships of "beautiful people" put pressure on their relationships to measure up. Girls in three different grades commented:

> Well, one thing I notice is that they always portray perfect relationships that have no problems, so some people see so much of this on TV and the movies that they want their relationships to be perfect. (Grade 9 girl)

> It [the media] kind of makes girls think of what their relationships can be like, like the fairytale idea. (Grade 10 girl)

> Well, sometimes girls will try and be like that person in the music videos, like, and sometimes their boyfriends will expect them to be like that person. (Grade 11 girl)

DISCUSSION

The results of this study led the authors to outline a theory of how the teen girls in the study negotiated their romantic relationships with boys. The theory suggested that these girls engaged in a process of wrestling with gender expectations as they interacted in dating relationships. The different grounded theoretical categories above reflect several salient themes in the research literature regarding adolescent development and the impact of gender. These themes are discussed below.

Empowering Girls to Transcend Traditional Gender Expectations

There has been a strong community movement toward empowering North American adolescent girls to make healthy choices in their relationships and to break out of traditional roles associated with being female—specifically, remaining passive, not speaking up, and making unhealthy sacrifices. As O'Leary et al. (2006) and Cameron et al. (2007) noted, girls often have some understanding of the injustice of abuse that they experience in their relationships. This research demonstrated that, despite possessing the knowledge about what is healthy and what is unhealthy, girls have difficulty in taking action with regard to this knowledge. A growing number of researchers and practitioners have emphasized the importance of having separate spaces for girls to discuss their concerns with the help of adult facilitators (e.g., Cameron et al., 2002; Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2005). Brown (2004) discussed the importance of what she describes as "hardiness zones" for teen girls where girls are encouraged to make healthy choices and to set limits regarding abuse through social learning and social skills training. Of course, these types of programs are only one side of the equation; equal attention needs to be given to the processes of and adherence to traditional masculine roles that boys may demonstrate.

Although sexuality was not a specific focus of this study, participants indicated that they wrestled with the implications of gender in making sexual decisions in their relationships. These struggles have been echoed in recent works by Western feminist scholars and front-line workers who have sought to define what girls' empowerment represents in the realm of sexuality. Some see empowering sexuality as constituting a subjective sense of self, whereby making personal decisions is based on knowing personal wants (e.g., Impett and Tolman, 2006; Peterson, 2010; Tolman, 2002). Impett and Tolman (2006) viewed the concept of girls' sexuality as encompassing what girls actually want or desire as a "sea change" in the view of gender roles and sex. Participants in the present study did not discuss getting in touch with their own sexual desires. They exemplified more traditional discourses about girls' sexuality, such as girls' role as being "gatekeeper," or making decisions and taking responsibility for sexual activity. This theme was particularly evident in the "determining responsibility" category. Rahimi and Liston (2009) remind us that a girl's traditional role as sexual gatekeeper is especially alive and well within communities where boys and girls attend school together, as our participants did.

Various studies also indicate that sex-typed and abusive relationships are more common among teens in rural settings than in more urban ones (e.g., McDonell, Ott, & Mitchell, 2010; Spencer & Bryant, 2000). Further, it may be harder in some respects for the participants in this inquiry to be able to be sexually assertive when they fear potential violence in reprisal.

Bilateral Nature of Participants' Process of Negotiating Relationships

With the exception of the "determining responsibility" subcategory, each of the remaining five subcategories show that participants pendulate between two often opposing options relevant to each theoretical subcategory with respect to their romantic relationships. For example, in the process described within "keeping it in/letting it out," participants are making decisions about what type of information to share with their partners and whether it is appropriate to do so.

Further, the category "standing up for oneself" can be contrasted with "making sacrifices." In the former, participants take stands to assert their own rights, as they perceive them, within the relationship. In the latter, participants engage in a process of staying quiet or not standing up for themselves in order to protect the relationship. The authors were struck by the description of these bilateral processes, as this finding seems to fly in the face of traditional and more recent research regarding teenaged girls and their choices. In particular, these results were disruptive to the dominant themes in the literature where girls are frequently portrayed as either victim or to a lesser extent as survivor (e.g., Machoian, 2006; Sax, 2010; Vézina & Hébert, 2007).

A recent study by Noonan and Charles (2009) showed that middle-school-age girls tended to do things to please their boyfriends and were reluctant to "feel as open or free to express themselves" (p. 1092). However, the data from the present inquiry demonstrated that girls go through processes in their relationships that are not merely "either/or." At times they express themselves (as in "standing up for oneself"), but they also choose not to be assertive, as in "making sacrifices." The bilateral nature of the categories shows that girls are engaging in "both/and" types of decision-making.

Why did the participants in this inquiry summarize their relationship negotiations as being more than black-or-white choices? Researchers such as Giordano, Soto, Manning, and Longmore (2010) offer a perspective that may help explain these results. Their study of teen romantic relationships and dating violence focused on a spectrum of qualities that were associated with relationships that contained violence. They concluded that violent teen intimate relationships were associated with a longer duration of relationship, more frequent contact, a greater frequency of sexual intimacy, and a higher level of instrumental support (such as helping a partner do things, giving money or presents). These findings suggest that a traditional understanding about violence in relationships (such that they are always associated with only negative qualities) may not be as informative as once thought. Just as teen relationships that contain partner violence are more complex and are associated with a wider range of contextual characteristics, teens in

this study might also be accommodating complex interactional patterns requiring multidimensional considerations. Indeed, their behaviours and choices in relationships may vacillate between two poles as they contemplate both the benefits and the drawbacks within their relational contexts.

Capitalizing on Girls' Media Literacy

A significant component of this study's grounded theory was that of the "contextual conditions" that the media imposed on participants. Much current research on the topic indicates that girls are the target of gendered media messages and that they often remain unaware of the insidiousness of the messages themselves, as well as their harmful impact (e.g., American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2010; Brown & Lamb, 2007; Orenstein, 2012). The fact that the girls in this study spoke clearly about their awareness that the media depicts standards that are impossible to attain was both surprising and hopeful. Although participants had an encouraging awareness of the impossible and gendered standards that the media portray in relationships, their awareness is only the first step in ameliorating the problem. As Cameron et al.'s (2007) research also demonstrated, while girls were more knowledgeable about abusive dynamics than boys, there was often a gap between girls' knowledge and their behaviour. The scope of this article precludes examining in greater detail the gap between participants' awareness of media standards and how they chose to act in response. This finding is significant, however, and warrants further attention to uncover avenues for counsellors and caring adults to encourage girls to apply their media-literate attitudes to their decision-making processes.

Curriculum Development, Programming, and Counselling Implications

The above findings also have implications in several areas of Western educational curriculum development and community programming. School guidance counsellors or other helping professionals could facilitate discussions with girls about their perceived roles as frequently unhealthy "sacrificers" and also as recurring sexual gatekeepers. They might also usefully interrogate with girls the implications of their potential experiential sacrifices in the service of their romantic relationships, such as those that jeopardize familial and same-sex relationships and academic commitments. It can be noted here that the boys who participated in this research prioritized their professional goals over intimate relational goals, demonstrating an asymmetry between genders that could lead to disparate goal setting within romantic partnerships.

As Cameron and Team (2002) have demonstrated, it would also be beneficial for girls and boys to discuss, first separately and then together, this same topic in groups where all members feel safe and can be open in discussing this important issue. These types of exchanges might potentiate other possibilities for girls' and boys' choices for healthy sexual relationships. They may also facilitate trust-building between girls and boys, one of the subcategories of the grounded theory

instantiated in girls' grappling with daunting gender expectations. Counsellors and community workers who provide these types of gender-sensitive spaces could use such fora as ways to raise the consciousness of both boys and girls about reducing abuse through mutuality of personal actions and interactions.

Primary prevention programs within the community might focus on helping girls become intentional about their choices in relationships—specifically discussing with a trusted adult or counsellor when they might choose to stand up for themselves, or when they may choose to stay quiet and consciously choose to "sacrifice." Girls could be encouraged in psychotherapy to explore what the middle ground on this continuum might look like as well.

It would be of continuing importance to engage girls in active, critical media analysis—through teachers or guidance counsellors—that facilitate media literacy discussions in school, as well as communities joining together to address this topic. Using established curricula, such as resources found on Brown's "Hardy Girls, Healthy Women" website, adults (including parents and counselling professionals) and peers could help girls and boys alike to become more informed about the influence of the media and how it impacts on their developing adolescent sense of self (Hardy Girls, Healthy Women, 2011). As discussed, it will also be important to harness girls' knowledge in this area, as this study suggested that girls are more media savvy than some researchers and counsellors give them credit for. The development of a peer education program that encourages girls to learn from and mentor one another in applying knowledge to practice might be one offshoot of the implication of this finding.

Study Limitations and Future Research

The authors speculate that the participants' level and type of disclosure was likely influenced by the setting of the interview itself. Two key considerations regarding generalizability of findings were the group discussion format deployed here and the rural nature of the participants' school and home lives. The facilitators noted on occasion that some participants looked to their peers for approval of what they said, and speculated that some might have held some opinions back because of the group format.

As mentioned, the rural setting may have made anonymity of reflections more constrained, and thus participants may not have spoken as freely as they might have liked to. Future research could include individual interviews as well. It is also important to examine how processes of negotiating relationships might vary between rural and urban settings.

The study was further limited by the timelines for the research. Due to the need to limit the study to one academic year, the researchers were precluded from engaging in a more extensive follow-up interview process, which would have allowed for additional questions to be asked and for resultant areas of focus to be included as part of the grounded theory development. For instance, a topic only briefly touched on by participants but that could comprise a follow-up study is the connection between gender, sexual assertiveness, and sexual experience. Auslander,

Perfect, Succop, and Rosenthal (2007) found that girls' sexual assertiveness (e.g., initiating sexual encounters, refusing same, or using birth control) varied depending upon the extent of participants' sexual experience. Because this study did not explicitly explore levels of sexual experience, future research could productively examine the interrelationships between these potentially critical factors.

A final constraint on the generality of the findings is the fact that participants were encouraged to focus exclusively on heterosexual dating relationships. It would be beneficial for future work to focus on the processes that gay, lesbian, and transgendered teens go through in their dating relationships. Comparisons to the model developed in this study would be welcomed.

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