Rural Adolescent Boys' Negotiating Heterosexual Romantic Relationships: "We Need to Sacrifice our Brains" Relations romantiques hétérosexuelles chez des garçons adolescents de milieu rural : « Nous devons sacrifier nos cerveaux »

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ABSTRACT

Twenty-four adolescent boys in Grades 9 to 12 in a rural New Brunswick high school engaged in focussed discussions that were analyzed using grounded theory to determine their heterosexual dating relationship processes. A theory was created from exchange transcriptions. The core category was *wrestling with gendered expectations*, reflecting their struggle with girls' and women's constraints on their relationships. Six related categories elucidated the 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*. *Media influences* were the contextual conditions. Comparisons with girls' processes and psycho-educational interventions are considered.

RÉSUMÉ

Vingt-quatre garçons adolescents, issus du milieu rural au Nouveau-Brunswick et au niveau scolaire secondaire deux à cinq, ont participé à des discussions thématiques, analysées ensuite au moyen de la théorie ancrée dans des données empiriques visant à déterminer leurs processus de relations de rencontres hétérosexuelles. Une théorie a été élaboré à partir de la transcription des échanges. La catégorie principale est *affronter les attentes liées aux genres*, faisant état de leur lutte à l'égard des contraintes imposées par les filles et les femmes sur leurs relations. Six catégories connexes servent à préciser la 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*. Les conditions contextuelles sont les *influences médiatiques*. On étudie aussi des comparatifs avec les processus chez les filles et les interventions psychopédagogiques.

Adolescent romantic relationships have long been regarded as integral to the healthy development of the self and the ability to form adult intimate relationships (Erikson, 1968; Sullivan, 1953). More recently, studies have focused on

the effects of family and peer influences on the quality of adolescent romantic relationships (Kinsfogel & Grych, 2004; Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Cauffman, & Spieker, 2009; Seiffge-Krenke, Overbeek, & Vermulst, 2010). Most apposite to the present study, however, gender differences in dating experiences, attitudes, and values of youth themselves have generated increasing attention (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006; Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2010; Smiler, 2008). A large questionnaire survey of Canadian rural adolescents (Cameron et al., 2007) reported a significant divergence between boys' and girls' reported attitudes and behaviours in intimate relationships and boys' lack of confidence in their perception of their own and others' comportment in handling challenging relational issues.

In spite of the developmental significance of dating and intimacy for adolescents, research suggests that a significant gap exists between girls' and boys' experiences, expectations, attitudes, and skills in navigating heterosexual relationships (Collins, 2003; Crockett & Beal, 2012; Giordano et al., 2006; Rose et al., 2012). At the onset of puberty, a shift in relatedness for both girls and boys takes place, with boys preferring close and intimate male friendships (Way, 2011) while girls tend to prioritize romantic relationships and often value making extensive sacrifices for the sake of them (Luft, Jenkins, & Cameron, 2012). Females in particular have been found to focus more than males on intimate heterosexual relationships, indicating heavier investment in creating and maintaining those relationships (Palchykov, Kaski, Kertesz, Barabas, & Dunbar, 2012). With age, boys increasingly tend to expect to enter marriage and become parents later in life whereas, on average, girls expect these transitions into adult roles sooner than boys do (Crockett & Beal, 2012). A deeper understanding of gender differences in adolescent dating and intimacy experiences is necessary to facilitate education and interventions to promote healthy relationship functioning both in adolescence and beyond.

Boys in particular have been the subject of a comparatively small number of studies focusing on psychosocial variables such as dating motivation and heterosexual behaviours. Contrary to popular media images and a common assumption that boys' motivations in romantic relationships are primarily sexual, Smiler (2008) reported that boys' most common reasons for pursuing romantic and intimate relationships were of a relational nature. Smiler found that common factors for beginning relationships were interest-based and that connection-type motivations sustained them, although boys reported physical attraction as a primary value in a dating partner more often than girls. Boys and girls have also been found to report similar levels of love and emotional involvement in their relationships (Giordano et al., 2006). Sexual behaviour in adolescent relationships for both boys and girls, however, is associated with caring and feelings of engagement (Giordano, Manning, et al., 2010). These findings suggest that boys' experiences of adolescent romantic relationships are multifaceted.

Boys' experiences of communication in romantic relationships have also received some recent attention (Giordano et al., 2006; Harper & Welsh, 2007; Rose et al., 2012). Boys report significantly higher levels of awkwardness with regard to

communication between both current and previous romantic partners. This may be related to lower reported levels of confidence in navigating their relationships although, overall, they feel quite emotionally involved (Giordano et al., 2006). Furthermore, while girls are more likely to expect that communication will improve their relationship and their self-esteem, boys report that communication feels "weird," uncomfortable, and like a waste of time (Rose et al., 2012). Poor communication within relationships is associated with self-silencing and the tendency for partners to withhold disclosure of beliefs and opinions, often causing the more open partner to feel frustrated and the more withdrawn partner to feel depressed, although this link has most consistently been found for females (Harper & Welsh, 2007). Open communication is associated with greater relationship satisfaction and also predicts the use of contraception in sexually active adolescent couples (Widman, Welsh, McNulty, & Little, 2006).

Perceived power and influence are also related to the likelihood of youths' engagement in sexual intimacy (Giordano et al., 2006; Giordano, Manning, et al., 2010; Gowen, Feldman, Diaz, & Yisrael, 2004). Gowen et al. (2004) found that girls with older boyfriends are subjected to more incidents of sexual coercion than girls with boyfriends of common age, suggesting an age-related power imbalance favouring older boys' attempts for sexual activity. Moreover, girls with higher levels of perceived power are less likely to engage in sexual intercourse (Giordano, Manning, et al., 2010). Besides sexual repercussions, power imbalances in adolescent relationships increase the odds of violence (Giordano, Soto, Manning, & Longmore, 2010) and have been linked to relational well-being for both girls and boys (Neff & Suizzo, 2006).

Giordano et al. (2006) identified differences between power and influence, asserting that power implies being victorious over another and getting one's own way whereas influence is more subtle and may take into account the wishes and feelings of others. Boys in particular have been found to report more attempts to influence their partners than girls, yet they also reported actually being influenced by their partners more often than girls (Giordano et al., 2006). Furthermore, boys' levels of perceived power became lower with the increasing length of their relationships. Giordano et al. (2006) suggest that this is likely due to boys' overall lack of familiarity and confidence in negotiating relationships.

Power and dominance form one component of a masculinity ideology that has been linked to attitudes and behaviours that lead to negative outcomes for men and those with whom they relate (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Burn & Ward, 2005; Sinn, 1997). Men have been found to use aggression in attempts to prove or restore their sense of masculinity, and manhood is sometimes seen as precarious in nature (Bosson & Vandello, 2011). Sinn (1997) found that males who scored higher on levels of traditional masculinity also reported more adversarial sexual relationships, greater numbers of sexual partners, less self-disclosure, and less ability to elicit self-disclosure from others. Similarly, Burn and Ward (2005) found that both men and women involved in relationships in which the men were more traditionally masculine reported less relationship satisfaction. Boys'

transition into adolescence and subsequent experiences of both conforming to and resisting masculine gender norms play a significant role in the development and functioning of boys' relationships (Way, 2011).

Intimate relationships in adolescence involve the fusion of complex and often gender-typed attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Lacking clear rules and guidance for relating and negotiating, it is no surprise that teens are dynamically influenced by the popular media they consume (Brown et al., 2013; Zurbriggen, Ramsey, & Jaworski, 2011). Pardun, L'Engle, and Brown (2005) and Luft et al. (2012) have found sexuality in adolescence to be significantly related to exposure to sexual content in the media. Furthermore, Luft et al. found that girls can identify the often unrealistic and gendered depictions of relationships in the media, including expectations that they adhere to traditional "feminine ideal" behavioural patterns, but struggle to find ways to address or ignore them. These findings highlight the importance of contextual and ecological factors salient in teenage romantic relationships.

Despite important research conducted into aspects of teenage heterosexual relationships, there still remains a gap in terms of fully understanding the psychosocial processes teens engage in with regard to these relationships. Grounded theory methodology (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1998) is often used to fill this type of gap in understanding. The current qualitative study uses this methodology to explore boys' particular experiences, including the specific psychosocial mechanisms involved in their heterosexual dating and intimate relationships. Since very few studies have focused on rural adolescents, boys and girls at a rural Canadian high school in the province of New Brunswick participated in same-sex focused discussions regarding navigating healthy relationships and dealing with relationship conflict. This article is complementary to Luft et al.'s (2012) comprehensive analysis of rural girls' dialogues that created the same grounded theory to account for both groups of students. Here we highlight gender-specific psychosocial variables relevant to the development and implementation of educational and therapeutic interventions with boys and highlight the importance of addressing the challenges to this population in negotiating this area of relational complexity.

METHOD

Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory method was used to develop a theory of how the teenage participants negotiate heterosexual dating relationships. Grounded theoretical methodology afforded close adherence to the reports of participants in providing a depth of understanding of the ways in which they enacted such intimate relations. Following Strauss and Corbin's recommendations concerning theoretical sampling, we commenced with a target group who could answer our questions with respect to adolescent intimate relationships. As our questions arose from a large community-based questionnaire survey of teenagers' dating knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours (Cameron et al., 2007), the present study was designed to explore these processes in greater depth via small, focused

discussion groups with teenagers from a rural community in the same Canadian province, New Brunswick.

Participants

Open sampling is a way to maximize convenience and involves utilizing those participants who are agreeable ("open") to participating in a study. This type of sampling is recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and was the recruitment method of choice, whereby the researchers assumed that approaching people in a high school setting would allow them to gather data pertinent to teenage dating relationships. The rural students' professional high school counsellor approached potential participants to explain the study and invite involvement. In accordance with local ethical and legal requirements, participants over 16 signed an informed consent form and participants under age 16 provided signed consent from a parent or legal guardian and assented to participate. The participants engaged in the focus group discussions during class time with the permission of their school administration. For this study, four small groups of boys participated in a first round of discussions. It was expected, based on the findings of Cameron et al. (2007), that younger boys with less dating experience might be too intimidated to express personal perspectives on a first meeting with those who were more experienced, so the groups were initially divided by grade: one group each for Grades 9 (n = 4), 10 (n = 5), 11 (n = 7), and 12 (n = 8). The second session involved 17 of the participants in Grades 9 to 12 who had engaged in a first discussion. The participating boys were rural middle- to working-class Euro-Canadian students living in a small farming/lumbering village of approximately 1,300 residents. The Government of New Brunswick (2006) identified 48.9% of provincial residents as rural. Participants were not questioned as to their sexual orientation.

Procedure

Madriz (2000) asserted that group discussions allow for a broader range of perspectives on experiences than might individual interviews. The methodology involved small group settings that the students could feel were safe places for describing their experiences and reflections. Further, Cameron et al. (2007) recommended that efforts to target critical gender differences in experiences of dating relationships be conducted in single-sex groups. In a recent issue of this journal, Luft et al. (2012) reported a companion study of girls conducted and analyzed in parallel with this research, so the present study focuses on boys. A more extended account of the methodology was reported in the earlier article (Luft et al., 2012).

In the discussions, some participants spoke about their own experiences as well as their observations of their friends and acquaintances. Ethical standards were carefully observed in accordance with an institutional ethics review to protect autonomy and anonymity, and the right to withdraw at any time was carefully established. Participants were informed that support was available via the school counsellor's office if desired or needed.

Ground rules regarding confidentiality and group safety were first established, and the discussions were then launched with a brief skit describing a relational dilemma by the young (college-aged) adult male researcher and his college-aged female research team colleague in order to engage the interest of participants and focus their attention on the topic of discussion for the session. The male researcher promoted discussion of the scenario and used active listening and open-ended questioning to encourage the group to discuss the scenario. The researcher then 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 responded actively, summarizing, paraphrasing, and using open questions, encouraging active group dialogues. Each discussion group lasted one classroom hour of 50 minutes.

After approximately three months, participants met again to discuss the researchers' emerging interpretations of the data and ask questions of the researchers. The second focus group was sponsored to interrogate the research team's initial forming of categories from the transcribed data, as recommended by Charmaz (2006). For this second discussion, 17 participants met in one group that included the boys from all grades. The main agenda for the follow-up discussion was to seek answers to the following questions in order to verify the developing direction of the grounded theory:

1. How do boys make sacrifices in a relationship?
2. How do boys 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?

Data Analysis

All audiotaped discussions were transcribed verbatim. A line-by-line coding procedure (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was undertaken at the outset of the analysis to "generate initial categories … and to suggest relationships amongst categories" (p. 57). After completing and discussing the line-by-line coding, the research team initiated open coding analyses, outlining subcategories from the data. Emerging codes were arranged in clusters according to meaning similarity. Thus, clusters of concepts and tentative subcategory labels were developed for each transcript. Concepts related to the codes were placed into existing categories as coding proceeded.

Linking the Categories

After each initial group interview was coded using open coding (by grade), the researchers then used both memo-writing and axial coding to further develop categories subsuming relevant subcategories and then proceeded to link these

categories. Theoretical memos summarized analyses by asking questions and identifying further areas for inquiry. Axial coding involved asking further questions for both the research team's consideration as well as for participants in follow-up interviews. The researchers focused on two questions: (a) Which conditions give rise to the process of heterosexual teens negotiating dating relationships? and (b) What particular strategies are enacted that allow teens to go through the process? Axial coding thus afforded the discovery of a set of contextual conditions (to be summarized below) that explain further how participants negotiate intimate dating relationships. Further, this type of coding allowed the team to understand the characteristics of all categories and how they varied.

After categories were further linked in relation to pertinent questions (see above) during the process of axial coding, the researchers employed selective coding (the process of integrating and refining the theory) in order to fill in categories and to select a central category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

RESULTS

Luft et al. (2012) developed a theory possessing one central category and six other categories, with the development of the theory simultaneously grounded in the words of both female and male participants. As indicated previously, the girls' reflections were reported by Luft et al. (2012). The theory was verified against the transcripts as well as being interrogated in the second, iterative group discussions with participants.

Central Category: Struggling with Gendered Expectations

The boys wrestled with girls' expectations of them as boys and, further, struggled with how they wanted girls to act as well. They reported that some of their struggles were in response to female partners' actions that they saw as characteristic of being controlled (or "whipped"). One Grade 9 boy described a dating relationship he had observed as follows: He always has to be home at a certain time, because she tells him to, like he's only allowed an hour a day outside. He's only allowed on the computer so long and like he has to call her and text her all the time.

This boy also described the girl's mother as epitomizing those same gendered expectations: "She's the boss. You just want to make sure she's happy." One boy from the mixed age session, grade unspecified, said:

From the relationships I have seen I notice that the girls are usually trusted with all the mental decisions and stuff … they get to think things through more than guys.

Much mention was made of the difficulties in relationships that participants encountered as a result of gendered ways of expressing control. Regarding this idea, a Grade 9 boy said: "A guy or a girl should have their own freedom to do whatever. They shouldn't be pushed around by the other spouse." Several boys claimed that girls also start rumours that can be devastating in terms of how some boys react:

> For guys, I'm not saying this to be sexist or anything, but girls start rumours a lot. They're mean, I'm not saying guys don't because they do but I'll give an example. Umm, I'll go back to what (X) said. This guy is only about hearing that this person cheated on him. OK. This girl cheated on the guy and the guy is getting all paranoid and then he hears that she is planning on breaking up with him but really it's just going around and someone said it as a joke, then as someone said it is getting out of hand then it just goes crazy and the guy doesn't know what to do and he could end up going crazy cutting himself, and then he just kills himself. (Grade 9 boy)

In contrast to the extreme impact commented on above, participants also showed variability in their responses to girls' expectations whilst they also navigate reflective choices in their lives: "I think the guys just blow it [rumours] off and they don't really care; girls make a big deal of it" (Grade 11 boy). Some boys are more likely to take a middle path between ignoring issues and exhibiting scripted hypermasculine physical aggression:

> Yeah like, I don't know, most guys probably wouldn't go fight a guy because they called his girlfriend a bitch or something, but they probably go up and be like "What are you doing it for?" Like "Smarten up" or whatever. They probably wouldn't just leave it alone, but not too many people would go up and start punching them or something.

The boys' processes of handling conflict within gendered constraints seemed to be different from what they thought were the girls' processes. This concept is summarized in the words of a Grade 12 boy who opined: "I think the girls are more blood-thirsty than wolves when it comes to popularity. It's actually friggin' cute, through. Oh yeah. They would backstab each other in a second if it amps more popularity." Further, another Grade 12 boy elaborated:

> The guys, it is weird because it is completely opposite. Like the guy doesn't care about being popular, even not a little bit, they don't care at all…. They do what they want to do and don't really care what people say about them.

Category 1: Determining Responsibility

This is a process whereby the boys decide who should be responsible for the areas of concern in their romantic relationships. The boys agreed that their main task in a relationship is to take responsibility for their own actions:

> I don't know, it's not so much taking care of the other person; it's taking care of yourself and things you do. Make sure to stay focused and pay attention to your relationship and where you want it to go. (Grade 12 boy)

The boys indicated reluctance to assume responsibilities for two major issues addressed during the girls' focused discussions (Luft et al., 2012). The first was sexual activity within the relationship, and the second was involvement in

alcohol and other recreational drug activities. Regarding sexual intercourse, they suggest that sexual activities are common, and although there are risks (particularly to girls), the concept of anticipating these risks and acting accordingly seem quite distant to their immediate sense of determining responsibility. They did not mention that taking charge of pregnancy risks was necessary for them. Despite not taking charge of some of the risks, they do appear knowledgeable about what they are:

> Everyone says that they do (take the risk). It happens. But if they actually have a girl come up to them and say "I'm pregnant," it's a completely different situation. Because you don't actually know what you wanted to happen if it is your kid. (Grade 12 boy)

With respect to drugs and alcohol, likewise, rather than negotiating responsibility for their own risk-taking, they prefer to focus on the discrepancy between what they and girls determine to be dangerous, and they are willing to let a girl play a custodial role by default without accepting any onus for it: "Yeah, really stupid stuff and girls kind of see that as, I don't know, some of the stuff that guys do seems really dangerous to the girls. They feel the need to protect us, I guess" (Grade 12 boy).

Ultimately, boys described taking responsibility first and foremost for themselves:

> Responsibility is being responsible for your own actions in a relationship. I know it's not so much as taking care of the other person, it's taking care of yourself and things you do, make sure to stay focused and pay attention to your relationship and where you want it to go. Yup, take care of yourself before you take care of the girl! If you're in a bad state, then you are in no state to take care of someone else. (Boy, mixed-grade group)

Category 2: Keeping It In/Letting It Out

This subcategory emerged as a way to describe how the participants made decisions about communicating with their partners**.** The boys outlined how they went about deciding what to "keep in" by not sharing with partners and what they would "let out" by sharing information with partners. For many of the boys, it was evident that they decided on the whole to keep their problems in: "Guys don't like to talk about their problems," while "girls like to talk about a lot of stuff but I find that it doesn't really get anywhere." The question of what to discuss between intimate partners was almost exclusively focused on sexual issues and the related consequences of not talking things over, especially with younger boys:

> Like a guy is dating a girl and the girl goes out and cheats on him or like goes and makes out with another guy and does crazy crap and then the guy finds out. Total break-up! They don't even like talk it over, maybe it could have been a mistake, it could have been a rumour. I think it affects it big. (Grade 9 boy)

Whereas older boys seem to try to communicate in a manner that allows them to let more "out," to keep less information to themselves:

> Another characteristic of a healthy relationship would be, umm, you talk, you don't, I mean, you ask how their day went, but you don't go on and talk about yourself or whatever, you ask how they are doing and people who are interested in each other. (Grade 12 boy)

This struggle over revealing more intimate material or keeping it to oneself is summed up by one boy in the mixed grade discussion who said, "for guys, they have to listen to girls talk about their feelings all the time. Guys personally, never ever never talk about their feelings, ever."

Category 3: Standing Up for Oneself

Unlike the girls in our research, the boys made little reference to the importance of being able to stand up for themselves, nor did they mention situations they faced in which they were able or not able to stand up for themselves. The boys seemed quite unclear as to what was meant by "standing up for oneself," primarily thinking of such extreme circumstance as physical abuse where females might be vulnerable, in which case a male might "feel that women can be [abused] because they are not as strong and they can be taken advantage of" (Grade 10 boy). The boys appear to have assumed they could and would stand up for themselves, as they are presumed to be "strong." Some boys "stand up" verbally rather than physically in the process of supporting a partner or another person, which appeared to be a way to engage in damage control in certain socially complex situations:

> I don't know, there could be relationships where, like, well, like your partner or you or whatever is like I don't know all depressed or upset about something and making stupid decisions, like I don't know, getting on drugs and stuff and like you are trying to help them and stuff, but there is nothing you can do and that can make [you] feel hopeless and useless because [you] couldn't do nothing for [them] or … (Grade 11 boy)

This sort of situation, however, was experienced as overwhelmingly complex to most of the boys:

> Yeah, like you're not going to, like, if you guys end up breaking up or whatever then you're going to go out thinking like all guys are assholes or all girls are bitches or whatnot. And like it's like I don't know anything. If he cheated on you then you're thinking like the saying "Once a cheater always a cheater" or whatever. In a way maybe for some people that's true, but for some they're not. Like there could have been different factors involved, like you could have been drunk as hell or something, I don't know, made you do it but you didn't mean to, I don't know.

The quote above from a Grade 11 boy showed, in a roundabout way, the complexity of the challenge of standing up for oneself. Ultimately they seemed to act in ways that showed they were trying to protect the other person from harm.

Category 4: Making Sacrifices

This category emerged as a way to detail the process of doing things that one may not normally choose to do for the sake of building romantic relationships. The boys were asked during their iterative discussion about times that they had to make sacrifices while engaged in their romantic relationships. Overall, they seemed to agree that making certain sacrifices would lead to enhancement of the relationship. More specifically, they spoke about two types of sacrifices that they would make for the sake of their partners: sacrificing their time when they would rather be doing other activities, and "sacrificing their brains," which seemed to mean going against their own gendered wiring for the sake of pleasing another person. One boy, briefly quoted previously on "keeping it in/letting it out," went on to sum up the process of how guys make sacrifices:

> They have to listen to girls talk about their feelings all the time. Guys personally, never ever never talk about their feelings, ever. They'll tell them if they are mad or something but they will never talk about their feelings, but guys, they always need to listen to how the girl's feeling, how her feelings are and how she feels about something. And to pay attention, like guys, it's a bad thing, but we don't pay attention as much as we should with stuff like that but that's another sacrifice, *we need to sacrifice our brains*. Try to focus and listen and understand everything that she's saying.

With regard to sacrificing their time for the sake of the relationship, some boys indicated that they spent time with their girlfriends, which took them away from their friends and other activities, such as sports. For example, one boy in the mixed-grade session commented that sacrifices made were about "sports. Sometimes a girl wants to hang out and you may have some sort of sport game and instead you take the girl instead of the sport." But the most onerous of all sacrifices ("to their brains") epitomizes and underlies all subcategories in that the gendered expectations require trying to understand baffling female expectations.

Category 5: Building Trust/Not Trusting

This category emerged as a way to encapsulate how boys build trust in their romantic relationships. Trust, for younger boys, was quite frequently related to sexual intimacy and even more specifically to pressure to engage in sexual activities. As a Grade 10 boy indicated, "trust is probably lost" if somebody is forced to have sex, and one characteristic of a healthy relationship is that partners must "trust each other."

Sexual attraction alone, especially for the older boys, is a way to detract trust from a healthy relationship, or as "no key to a healthy relationship: if it's just completely a physical attraction then there is not much point." One Grade 12 boy illustrated this by stating, "If you don't care about the person at all then you are basically just using them." Another Grade 12 boy talked about how some relationships have problems because they are only based on physical attraction

traits: "That's why a lot of the times there is a lot more drama in relationships. A lot of the time they probably don't even remember what they said."

Acting in a deceptive manner was raised as an expected part of relationships: "A lot of the times youth lie to cover stuff up. Even if it is just a simple little thing you lie to cover up because you don't want someone to know, you don't want your partner to know" (Grade 12 boy). However, there was acknowledgement that this action was not advisable and could lead to a breakdown in trust: "You shouldn't lie to your girlfriend or boyfriend or whoever" (Grade 11 boy). The boys agreed that "the worst one [lie] is when you break up with someone and they say that they are pregnant" or "the girl would say that in a relationship [they could be pregnant] just to keep the [boy] interested" (Grade 12 boy).

From Grade 11 boys we hear that trust becomes a more differentiated process; one can trust a partner but maybe not the partner's friends:

> You trust them but not the people around them, yeah. Then they are put in the position. Like, ah, peer pressure almost. Like when you are around stuff that you shouldn't be, or doing something that you really probably shouldn't be, you can say that you trust them but you don't trust the situation that they're in.

For some, the methods of building trust are foundational: "I don't know, it's kind of like the basement or the concrete that puts the whole relationships, would have to build around, because like a lot of things [that] have to build around trust" (Grade 11 boy).

By Grade 12, participants seem unequivocally to use trust as a way to create a solid relationship:

> You cannot have a relationship without trust … that's it. That does it really well. If you can start out and build your relationship on trust, you can keep it in place. If trust isn't there, you are not going anywhere. You definitely need it. (Grade 12 boy)

Younger boys mentioned trusting adults to provide confidential guidance in dealing with relationships: "Go see somebody for help or talk to somebody about it, like a guidance counsellor, a friend that wouldn't blab everything around" (Grade 9 boy). Older boys are more leery about talking to peers, specifically saying, "Telling your friends can cause drama" (Grade 12 boy).

Category 6: Showing Respect/Showing Disrespect

This final category represents the processes involved in participants demonstrating respect or showing disrespect in relationships. Younger boys were clear about the importance of respecting their partners: "Treat them with respect. They have ideas so respect them, don't think 'ahh that's stupid.' You should treat them well, don't throw them around like a rag doll. Don't flirt with other girls, really respect them" (Grade 9 boy). One Grade 10 boy highlighted how showing disrespect can be impactful: "Calling them ugly or something then they are going to think that they are ugly and all that." And furthermore, "Emotional abuse could lead to

depression which could lead to suicide." When a little older, perhaps with experience of unpleasant intimate exchanges, Grade 11 boys confirmed, "I have heard a few girls be called bitches before," and also, "but then guys get called stuff too." So decisions about what is inappropriate or disrespectful become more difficult for boys to make:

> Or you could have the guy and the girl that are both like that and you just know that and you just know that they are joking around and they have a different tone for when they are serious so you know that they are mad. 'Cause I know of relationships where the partners joke around like that all the time. Like, umm, the guy tends to swear a lot anyway and after a while the girl just got into it and started doing it back.

An older boy described lacking respect as not boding well relationally: "Restricting them from doing things, like saying you can't hang out with certain people or you can't go to this certain place or you have to come over here this day" reflected how participants engaged in being disrespectful (Grade 11 boy).

Some issues arose about respecting others' privacy: "Your phone is yours, and it's your own information and she should not be digging into [it]." The Grade 9 boys also offered that "if you are at their house don't snoop through their stuff."

Contextual Conditions: Media Influences

Boys voiced that they are critical viewers, though they perceive that others (especially girls) are taken in by unrealistic media, raising unreasonable expectations in youth:

> I think music videos really depict … umm… relationships and what people should look like and stuff because all the music videos there are is just like men driving around in their fancy cars with their money, women with just like bathing suits and all that stuff on. It's just really I don't know. (Grade 10 boy)

Another Grade 10 boy indicated that media "depicted everyone that is perfect, like no mistakes or nothing, just perfect. But in reality everyone looks so good and everything else but in real life like you are not." Some older boys agreed about the destructiveness of these improbable images of girls in relationships: "I think a lot of girls, like when they watch stuff like that and they see celebrities they are like, 'Ahh I want to be like that.' Stuff like that. I mean that's not real life, that's thousands of dollars" (Grade 11 boy).

> Well I think, for example, like if you hear about some celebrities cheating, that kind of thought gets into your head, and you start thinking "oh my boyfriend or girlfriend are cheating on me" and that thought kind of stays in your mind and builds on healthy relations. (Grade 11 boy)

They claim to resist these gendered images but do not want to live without them: "Eminem. Don't get me wrong. I love Eminem. He says in his, ah, one of his videos he's driving his wife off the bridge, stuff like that" (Grade 11 boy).

The boys had interestingly balanced and wise perceptions of the gendered media effects on relationship comportment. One Grade 12 boy said about relationship idealization: "Like everyone that wants a relationship and they watch 'The O.C.' or 'One Tree Hill' or something, they have to be like the characters in that show. They expect everything to flow just perfect with their script." Further, another Grade 12 boy said,

> I find when we are out in another place where guys get into drama is when they have a little fight with their girlfriend and they tell their friends and make it seem so much worse just to make the girl seem like they are so awful, but girls do the same exact thing.

DISCUSSION

Using the boys' discussions, we were able to derive a grounded theory of the way in which boys negotiate healthy romantic relationships. The main category that emerged centred around how gender expectations affect both boys' and girls' struggles to behave in their adolescent romantic relationships. Within this central category, the six related categories describe the specific challenges and issues that boys face while negotiating their relationships, all of which are affected contextually by media influences.

Analyses of the boys' interactions during the focused discussions point to significant obstacles, including girls' expectations of them, and the inextricable effects of gendered expectations that boys face while negotiating romantic relationships, just as Way (2011) would predict. The boys, in reflecting on healthy intimacy, identified the importance of trust, respect, and communication. However, the place of trust and respect in relationships appears more theoretical than practical. There is a gap between these ideals and the boys' skills in operationalizing them in concrete ways—such as taking responsibility for their actions, communicating personal problems or emotional issues, and making sacrifices for intimacy in a relationship—that might effectively intersect with those issues as girls process them (Luft et al., 2012). While this gap may be perpetuated by a lack of confidence and skill, gender differences and expectations can augment the barriers, as does an accumulated exposure to gender-typed portrayals of romance and sexuality.

Gender Expectations and the Participants' Process of Negotiating Relationships: Implications

Determining responsibility. The boys' actions that are reflective of the idea that one should be responsible to oneself before being responsible for others reflects a certain maturity that is in contrast with the girls' experience of taking on more relational responsibilities than they perhaps feel comfortable with (Luft et al., 2012). Although the boys speak of taking responsibility for themselves, the way that they express this often contrasts with girls' reports of reducing risks through being the sexual gatekeepers and guardians against the boys' unsafe alcohol consumption.

Boys' hesitations to remain accountable for sexual decision-making and the consequences of alcohol consumption may reflect a gender power divide. Boys analyzed their constraints more locally and saw them in terms of the apparent power girls have over them, which may be related to previous findings that boys feel less power in relationships the longer they remain in them (Giordano et al., 2006). They did not easily make associations, however, between their abrogation of responsibility for their sexual activities or their potentially risky behaviours and girls' perceived need to establish relational control. Nor did they interrogate cultural expectations for their engaging in traditional masculinities, of which binge drinking and risky sex can be representative of traditional rites of passage (Kimmel, 2008).

Boys' prioritization of independence and self-reliance potentially draws a fine line between healthy self-development and the type of autonomy that is more typical of traditional masculinity. Boys must navigate not only the attainment of manhood, but also their personal relationships, and these paths are inextricably linked and mutually affected (Way, 2011). Boys' participation in risky activities, often involving recreational drugs and alcohol, has been a subject of inquiry as boys begin feeling pressure to prove their masculinity (Kimmel, 2008). The tendency of females to invest more heavily in their romantic relationships may be due to girls' overall expectations that marriage and children will occur sooner in life than boys tend to expect (Crockett & Beal, 2012; Palchykov et al., 2012).

Keeping it in /letting it out. Boys' focus on self-responsibility and conforming to male gender norms may potentiate their lack of desire to self-disclose or to recognize the benefits of girls' attempts to communicate. For many boys, engaging in communication is awkward and a "waste of time," and they may be further intimidated by girls' openness and eagerness to connect through communication (Rose et al., 2012). Boys' realistic sense of the limitations of communication in adolescent intimate relationships could well be grounded in observation, experience, or an assessment of their own challenges in expressing their needs or understanding the needs of the girls they know (Giordano et al., 2006).

Way (2011) vividly documented boys' loss of skills in connecting intimately in early adolescence as their struggle with gender expectations begins. These sentiments are echoed in the boys' declarations that communication is essential for intimacy, yet at the same time acknowledging that guys "never ever talk about their feelings, ever," implicitly reflecting their growing concern for the masculine ideals of emotional stoicism and autonomy. Both men and women, however, are less satisfied in relationships in which men have conformed to traditional masculine ideals such as self-reliance, dominance, and emotional control (Burn & Ward, 2005).

Making sacrifices. The girls made sacrifices in efforts to prioritize their relationships and saw this as having the potential to be relationally constructive, whereas boys believed they sacrifice their "brains" in order to tolerate girls' tendencies to talk in excess (Luft et al., 2012). For the boys, the concept of making sacrifices in their relationships was linked to their difficulties with being on the receptive end of communication. Boys may be overwhelmed by girls' desire to discuss issues, due

to their beliefs that discussing matters is usually futile (Rose et al., 2012). Their discomfort may be further compounded by difficulties in reciprocating in certain verbal exchanges. While they were the first to acknowledge that boys do not want to discuss feelings, the boys did not explicitly tie this to a sense of discomfort or difficulty in expressing feelings (Pollack, 2000; Way, 2011). They did express discomfort at having to listen to girls express themselves (Luft et al., 2012). While the girls' sacrifices for romantic relationships might be reduced were they to focus more on their own personal, familial, and academic development (which could level the relational playing field), assisting boys to increase their comfort level during communication may also facilitate more egalitarian relational outcomes.

Standing up for oneself. The boys' assumption that "standing up for oneself," and doing so physically, refers to standing up for women or other weaker people also reflects traditional male gender norms depicting men as strong, independent, and invulnerable. Socialization processes related to traditional masculinity are linked to increased risk of violence and may contribute to boys' interpretations that "standing up" is solely a physical act (Feder, Levant, & Dean, 2007). Bosson and Vandello (2011) also assert that manhood is seen as precarious, and boys may feel the need to prove themselves by standing up in aggressive ways.

Building trust/not trusting. Though many boys spoke of building trust as foundational in relationships, their understanding that trust was mostly related to sexual intimacy in relationships was greatly mismatched with the girls' ways of building trust as a means of getting to know their partners' characters (Luft et al., 2012). Boys may be unable to create trust with their female partners if girls' expectations of trust are thwarted by boys' lack of transparency with regard to their feelings and motives. Not only is the building of trust further complicated by boys' lack of self-disclosure and discomfort with communication, boys' confidence also suffers with respect to navigating their relationships due to lack of communication skills (Giordano et al., 2006).

Showing respect/showing disrespect. The boys also showed a clear understanding that respect was an essential component of healthy relationships, though they struggled at times with practical applications of this knowledge. Although they deem respect to be important in relationships, that respect is compromised by unclear boundaries for joking behaviours and the perception that girls are also disrespectful toward them at times. Girls' sensitivity to the disrespect they sometimes encounter from boys, as Luft et al. (2012) indicated, may be explained by boys' tendency to joke around while remaining unaware of the impact their behaviour has on their partners. Way (2011) discussed boys' preference for close male friendships in adolescence, friendships that are often characterized by joking behaviour.

Developing media literacy. Although boys' discussion of media influences reflected an awareness of unrealistic images and relationship standards, they persist in being consumers, and social modelling processes are likely to influence their ideas about relationships regardless of the extent of their critical analysis of what they view (Kistler, Rodgers, Power, Austin, & Hill, 2010; Westman, Lynch, Lewandowski, & Hunt-Carter, 2003). Further, adolescents' greater exposure to

media images of nudity and explicit sexuality is linked to increased participation in sexual activity (Pardun et al., 2005). Increased viewing of media portrayals of romance and sexuality is reported to have negative impacts on the quality and level of commitment in romantic relationships (Osborn, 2012).

Limitations

This study focused exclusively on the experiences of a sample of rural students and is not necessarily reflective of the processes of urban or suburban adolescents. Further, the topic of discussion was particular to heterosexual romantic relationships. It is crucial to investigate comportment in homosexual romantic relationships and the relationships of transgender youth.

Educational and Therapeutic Interventions

The reflections of the boys in relation to those of their female counterparts as reported by Luft et al. (2012) provide a useful window into complementary support strategies youth workers might deploy in bridging the gender gap. Interventions aimed at encouraging critical media analysis, especially regarding gendered depictions of romance and sexuality, are recommended. Luft et al. (2012) clearly identified from their participants' responses the need for practical interventions to assist boys in acquiring relational skills separately and for girls to discuss their challenges in same-sex female groups. But it was also reported that teenagers have an avid interest in gaining opportunities for practicing relational skills and engaging in discussions in coeducational settings. Interventions aimed at increasing critical and gender-sensitive media analysis can lessen the strain of gender expectations that teens face when negotiating their relationships (Jhally, 2007).

Programs that provide opportunities for developing and practicing communication skills between the genders make significant contributions to support youth relational development (Cameron et al., 2007; Morrison, Budd, Moar, & Wichman, 2002; Wolfe et al., 2009). Simple acknowledgement of deficits will not change interchanges without practice, and learning to implement communication skills in order to express their feelings, wants, and needs would support boys to become successful in assuming responsibility for autonomy in intimate relationships. Skill development in modulating the expression of affect is crucial to healthy relational development for both genders and will assist boys in understanding that self-defence will require verbal exchanges rather than being only a physical process through posturing or aggression (Culross, Cohen, Wolfe, & Ruby, 2006; Frey et al., 2005; Wolfe, Crooks, Chiodo, Hughes, & Ellis, 2012).

Future research is recommended regarding interventions that focus on reducing hypermasculine ideals such as emotional stoicism, dominance, lack of personal disclosure, and extremes of autonomy (Burn & Ward, 2005), as they could reduce the barriers boys face when learning how to relate to significant others, especially during the crucial transition period during which they learn to become men (Foshee et al., 2005). Boys who exhibit high levels of gender-typed behaviours also show less school attachment and engagement, further compounding

interpersonal difficulties (Ueno & McWilliams, 2010). Interventions that focus on communicating and connecting with others in their schools and families also have multiple benefits for boys, including increased academic performance and a sense of well-being (Witherspoon, Schotland, Way, & Hughes, 2009).

Psychosocial interventions aimed at increasing teacher awareness of gender stereotypes and reducing gender-stereotyping among students can facilitate school environments that support youth in their struggles with gender expectations (Canadian International Development Agency, 2010; Minerson, Carolo, Dinner, & Jones, 2011). Gender is also constructed in the classroom, and increased educator awareness of the role they play in perpetuating various gender norms—through the types of educational materials used or unspoken expectations such as "boys will be boys and girls will be good"—can support adolescents in reducing their struggles with gender expectations (Pennycook, 2011). Teachers and professional school counsellors can also afford flexible social role modelling (Bandura, 2012) of androgynous qualities that show how some respected adults "do gender" in a more balanced way.

School-based interventions, however, only partly address adolescents' need for support in this area, as gender expectations are transmitted within an ecological context and boys' attitudes and behaviours related to romantic relationships are created and maintained through interactions within their families and peer groups (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Gender norms are conveyed through characteristics of child treatment and parent-child communication (Epstein & Ward, 2011; McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003). McHale et al. (2003) found that girls reported being encouraged to invest in their romantic relationships and to be submissive and courteous to the men in their lives. Many boys in the same study reported that their parents raised them to be "tough" and emotionally in control, yet others discussed the ways in which their parents encouraged attitudes and behaviours that were less traditionally masculine. Parent-child communication, interactions, and observations within the home affect boys' processes of conforming and resisting masculine norms through adolescence (Way, 2011). Interventions that address the ecological context within which gender socialization occurs by involving parents, peers, educators, administrators, professional school counsellors, and community/mental health counsellors have been shown to be effective in supporting positive change in adolescent dating attitudes and behavioural intentions (Cameron et al., 2007; Culross et al., 2006).

Readiness for change, however, is an essential component of the intervention process, and, in order for change to occur, youth must be receptive participants. Students who encounter gender-sensitive interventions within the later years of childhood or adolescence are in various stages of the change process. Prochaska and DiClemente (1986) describe the various levels of intentionality through which individuals evolve while consciously attempting behaviour change (i.e., precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, and action). Furthermore, social cognitive theory states that behaviour change must be preceded by a sense of self-efficacy, which is enhanced through mastery experiences and social modelling

(Bandura, 2012). Educators who facilitate interventions can work with adolescent boys at various stages of the change process by encouraging an awareness of the impact of unhealthy relationships and increasing teens' confidence in managing dating relationships by providing opportunities for discussion and practical skills enhancement (Cameron et al., 2007).

<div align="center">CONCLUSION</div>

Adolescents have expressed the need for support in developing relational skills to be better equipped to navigate their relationships in healthy ways. Both the boys and girls in this study recognized the role that gender expectations have in determining their dating and relating behaviours; thus, helping them change behaviour may assist them in moving beyond gender expectations (West & Zimmerman, 1987). The challenges that teens face in negotiating their relationships could be mitigated by educators becoming more aware of the constraints that emerging masculine norms may place on boys as they struggle to learn to relate to girls while becoming men, through discussing issues pertaining to gender norms more frequently during teacher training (Gray & Leith, 2004). Facilitating educators' and community youth advocates' awareness of the gap between boys' knowledge of healthy relationship behaviours and the actual barriers they face in implementing them would be an important base for skill development and psycho-educational interventions. Finally, a theory of how rural boys negotiate heterosexual romantic relationships enhances understanding of the challenges such males face in the development of successful intimate exchanges and the nature of their sense of relational identity, and provides an appreciation of the struggles they face in expressing their own personal agency while learning to connect within intimate relationships.

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