Dating Abuse in College Relationships

A Qualitative Study

Melissa Mangold
Research Question

- Dynamics of abusive relationships in college
  - Which behaviors are seen as abuse
  - Compare perceptions
  - Effects of alcohol
  - Effects on other relationships
- Raise awareness
Methods

- Recruitment of participants
  - Flyers posted in academic buildings and offices
  - Hand-outs and announcements in large classes
  - E-mails and blackboard announcements
- 30-45 minute interviews
- Resource list provided
- Participants received a $10 gift certificate
- Interviews were transcribed and analyzed
Qualitative Studies

- Language used by those witnessing and experiencing the abuse
- Better able to tell their story
- Importance of putting a face and a story behind the actions
- Give victims a voice – EMPOWERMENT
Participants

- 11 total (10 interviewed in person, 1 e-mail)
  - 9 female, 2 male
  - 6 friends, 5 victims
  - 4 of the 11 couples discussed are still together
  - 1 same-sex (male) relationship discussed
  - A male was the aggressor in all relationships
Interview Structure

- Interviews were conducted in a confidential on-campus location
- Topic Order:
  - Demographics
  - Verbal mistreatment
  - Physical mistreatment
  - Wrap up
Analysis

- Each interview was first transcribed
- Transcriptions were read through multiple times and coded for 6 main areas:
  - Specific behaviors
  - Mention of alcohol or parties
  - Effects on other relationships
  - Reactions to the abuse
  - When the abuse occurred/escalated
  - Defensive language
- All names were changed in transcriptions
Results: Alcohol

- A constant cycle
  - Couple would fight every time alcohol was involved
  - 4 out of 11 interviews
    - "I know [Andrea and Mike] are both good people but like when alcohol gets involved, especially on the weekends, he’ll just say really mean stuff to her"
    - "on a regular basis… every weekend when they went out."
Results: Alcohol

- Conflict Escalation
  - Arguments increased in intensity and aggressiveness
  - Physical behavior became present, even if non-existent before
  - 5 out of 11 interviews
    - “I don’t think he realized how hard he hit me.”
    - “I know when [Pat] has had a few beers that he’s a different person.”
    - “They would fight constantly, but, worse when he’s drinking.”
Results: Alcohol

- Topic of arguments
  - Going out with friends
    - “[Mike] doesn’t like [Andrea] going out with us, with friends. He doesn’t want her to go to other parties, even though she is not going with other guys. He gets mad”
  - Drinking too much
    - Jeremy was accusing her of being out of control and drunk while backing her into a corner and yelling in her face
Results: Other Relationships

- Less time spent with friends
  - Kelly’s “two childhood best friends… stopped talking to her because every time they [tried] to get together, [Kelly] would 90% of the time blow them off to be with him.”
  - “there are friends that were pretty good friends before I started dating him… they’re still around, they still go to school here, they’re just people I don’t really see anymore.”
Results: Other Relationships

- Friends becoming frustrated
  - “all our relationships deteriorated because it was like a lost cause. And, you know, it’s hard when you are constantly there are you stay up with someone crying all night but then they just keep going [back] and choosing to be in the relationship.”
  - Ashley recalls how she and many of Beth’s other friends didn’t want to be around her anymore. They didn’t want to deal with Cory’s craziness or watch Beth put up with his antics.
Results: Reactions (friends)

- Most see the relationship as abusive and try to tell their friend to get out of the relationship
  - “It’s just appalling what he would say”
  - He has anger management issues
  - Worried about her because the ex-boyfriend is not stable
  - Says to her friend, “why do you let him talk to you like that?”
  - Sad to see your friend like that (i.e. suicidal and crying)
Results: Reactions (victims)

- If out of the relationship, most viewed the relationship as abusive
  - It “wasn’t worth my time”
  - “I thought it was [abuse] later because that’s what people told me it was and I saw stuff on T.V… you know, dumb after school specials.”

- If still in the relationship, recognize or label it
  - “I guess I don’t want to say it, I’ve been abused. I mean, I guess it was.”
  - “something’s wrong with me for someone to treat me like that”
  - Couldn’t tell anyone because she was afraid people would be mad at her
**Results: Defensive Language**

- Many of the interviewees, friends and victims, used terminology or had a tone of voice that lessened the actions by the abuser.

- Some seemed to be making excuses:
  - “that’s kind of how their relationship is”
  - “I think they both need alcohol counseling”
  - “his family situation is not perfect”
  - “I know he has a bad temper”
  - “I don’t know, we just, not wrestle, but kind of”
  - The bruises weren’t “anything big”
  - “I guess it was [abuse]”
Implications

- Many had not been to dating violence programs
- Need to educate students about these behaviors so they understand that it is not okay
- Need to educate those who may be witness to these relationships on ways to help their friend
  - Mandatory sexual partner violence seminar for incoming freshmen
  - More research findings being available to college students
- Need to stand up to abusers when they are acting out
Future Research

Limitations:

- Small number of participants
- Variety of relationships
  - Interracial, same-sex, female abuser, etc.
- Interviews with more males
Thank You

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