

Gender Differences in Problem Situations Experienced by Urban, African-American Adolescents in Dating and Romantic Relationships



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Background

Dating violence occurs far too frequently in adolescence and places youth at risk for injury and adjustment difficulties, and may also impede the development of healthy romantic relationships in adulthood. Though a number of studies examine risk factors, correlates, predictors, and outcomes associated with dating violence, relatively little attention has focused on understanding specific problem situations that may place adolescents at risk for dating violence and the social-ecological contexts in which these situations occur. Whereas peer-based violence prevention programs often incorporate skill-building and behavior change components (e.g., conflict resolution, problem-solving skills), dating violence prevention programs have often focused more on changing attitudes and norms. In order to design more comprehensive dating violence prevention programs that focus on such conflict resolution and problem-solving skills, researchers are beginning to examine the types of problematic situations youth experience in dating and romantic contexts. However, little attention has been directed to the possibility of gender differences in dating conflict and problem situations. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to expand on emerging research on problem situations experienced by youth in dating situations by examining ways that these problematic experiences may be similar or different for boys and girls.

Method

This research was conducted in one public middle school and one public high school in an urban, low-income setting in the Southeastern United States, with mid-adolescents in the seventh and ninth grades. Sixty-seven students were randomly selected from their health and physical education classes for recruitment in the spring of 2006. Of the 67 students recruited, 51 students were consented and 50 participated (75% participation), with approximately equivalent representation across grade and gender (46% seventh graders, $N = 23$ seventh graders, 27 ninth graders; 56% females, $N = 28$ females, 22 males). The majority of the students identified themselves as African American or Black ($N=44$, 88%), with fewer students identifying as Latino/a or Hispanic ($N=5$, 10%) and White, Caucasian, or European American ($N=1$, 2%). The interview was a semi-structured qualitative protocol that asked youth to identify recent (i.e., within the past few months) problem situations that occurred within dating contexts. Problem situations were defined as situations that do not feel good or comfortable, or that make the adolescent feel angry, sad, scared, disappointed, or worried. The dating context was defined broadly, including being approached or wanting to approach others, things that happen on dates, dating, going out with, going with, going together, talking, liking, or wanting to spend time with someone special. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim by trained transcription staff, and reviewed for accuracy by a separate transcriber. Because a small portion of the sample was bilingual, students were offered the option of completing the consenting process and the interviews in English or in Spanish, or a combination of the two with specially-trained bilingual interviewers. Transcripts were imported into NVivo 7 software for analysis.

In a previous study, transcripts were coded for problem situations in dating and romantic relationships. During first level coding, a team of 4 researchers identified 68 emergent themes of problem situations through open and axial coding. In second-level coding, the team utilized methods of triangulation to examine and recode text until non-agreements and negative cases were resolved through consensus. During this process, non-saturated themes and themes reflecting similar content were merged, resulting in 18 final themes within three broader domains (see table). The current study expanded upon this previous study's coding by utilizing chi square tests to examine gender differences in the percent of students discussing specific problem themes. Further, coding matrices were used to facilitate re-analysis of the data for qualitative differences in how themes were described by boys and girls.

Results and Conclusions

- Chi-square tests revealed two significant gender differences:
 - More Females (50%) than Males (19%) discussed problems with Conflict and Conflict Resolution ($\chi^2=4.95, p<.05$)
 - More Females (68%) than Males (29%) discussed problems with Approval and Disapproval ($\chi^2=7.41, p<.01$)
- Qualitatively, males and females often identified different types of problem situations associated with dating across the various themes identified, despite some commonalities (see table)

- There are relatively few quantitative differences in the numbers of boys and girls identifying problem situations across various themes of dating experiences. Those that did exist suggest that girls may experience more difficulty managing interpersonal conflict and handling issues of approval and disapproval of dating by family and friends.
- By contrast, although girls and boys endorsed many themes of problems at similar rates, girls often showed a greater variety of problems within their narratives.
- Although boys did contribute unique problems to these analyses, in many cases girls described additional problems that boys did not experience. This suggests that girls may experience unique gender-based problems associated with dating.
- These results highlight the importance of examining both quantitative and qualitative differences in youth experiences in order to better inform prevention and intervention efforts.
- The incorporation of skill-building and behavior change components (e.g., conflict resolution, problem-solving skills) into dating violence programs may represent an important contribution to youth violence prevention programming. Consideration of specific problems experienced by youth may contribute to the development of such curricular revisions, as well as adding to the ecological relevance of such interventions by grounding curriculum in youth's lived experiences.
- Consideration of gender-based differences in problem situations may be particularly relevant when creating such revisions to dating-based interventions.

Results

Themes	Males	Females	Both
Structure of Dating			
Approach and Initiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teased/Damage to status or image because of nervousness to approach a female • Involvement of peers in asking someone out for you • Ignored or rejected when approaching someone of interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approached in an inappropriate way (e.g., inappropriate touching, verbal victimization, pressure for sex, approached by older men) • Uncertain if an approach or request is serious or a joke 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nervous to approach/Fear of rejection • Approached by someone you don't like • Peers or friends approach someone you already liked or were dating
Dates and "Dating" Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skipping school in order to have a time and place to connect with a partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty balancing multiple priorities (e.g., dating interferes with success in school/grades) • Desire to do more activities or go on "dates" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being ignored by a partner, especially in front of a group of other peers
Sexuality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teased for not having sex • Knowing friends who have sex and then leave the girl • Managing distance/closeness in sexual relationships • Hearing sexual rumors about a girlfriend 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling rushed, pressured, used or having boundaries crossed regarding sex • Seeing lots of other girls having babies; Concerns about pregnancy • Friends talk about sex excessively and give differing advice about sex • Difficulty talking to adults about sex • Feeling disappointed in yourself for having sex too soon in a relationship • Rumors about your sexual reputation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling guilty after cheating on your partner with an "on-the-side" partner
Multiple Partners and Jealousy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems associated with dating multiple people at once • Timing issues (going with one person, want to get with another partner who is going with someone else, break-ups don't coincide) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image and reputation concerns associated with being "carried" or being "played" • Having feelings for two people at once • Lack of trust • Boys try to control who you can talk to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Witnessing flirtation involving your partner; Emotional reactions to being cheated on • Conflict, break-ups, and aggression related to jealousy • Jealous of opposite-sex friends or ex-partner's new partner • Intentionally flirting or having sex with someone to make a partner mad/get even" • Accusations/Denials of cheating; Lies • Peers instigate conflict; He-said/She-said
Break-Ups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retaliation for being broken up with (got people to fight me, damaged property) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed advice about whether to stay or leave a relationship • Concern about whether someone will still be your friend after you break up • Regrets when you see an ex-partner with someone new • Friends interfere in relationships to try to instigate break ups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling bad about hurting someone when breaking up • Rumors and gossip (both lead to break ups and result from break ups) • Verbal and physical victimization associated with break ups • Difficulty balancing priorities (sports, other friends)
"Playing Around"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Playing on the phone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Play" sexual harassment (verbal and physical) • Friends minimize or rationalize others' actual victimization experiences as "playing around" • Pranks; Unsure whether to believe something or whether it is a joke • "Play" verbal victimization and teasing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Play" physical aggression or touching
Abuse, Harassment, and Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer instigation • Asked to defend a partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual harassment • Sexual violence • Pressured to do things that make them uncomfortable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Witnessing violence • Aggression and victimization (verbal, physical, relational, threats) • "Play fighting" that crosses the line
Individual and Interpersonal Factors Influencing Dating			
Sense of Self: Esteem, Confidence, and Concept	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling like less of "a man" because of difficulty initiating relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling insecure, inadequate, or upset when not with a partner • Pressured by partner to change who you are 	
Age and Maturity Differences		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being approached by older men • Breaking up due to age-related differences (e.g., graduation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict in relationships due to age or maturity differences (e.g., acting too "childish," differing levels of desired commitment, lack of common areas of interest)
Personality, Characteristics, and Dislikes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easily persuaded or bossed by her friends • Ignores me in front of others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts too tough, hard, or "huggish" vs. Acts too emotional or sentimental • Temper, controlling, trust • Boring, childish 	
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language barriers to dating for Latinos • Hard to express yourself without feeling like a "punk" • Partner only talks to me in private/ignores in public • Hearing sexual rumors about a girlfriend 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He-said/She-said; Rumors and gossip • Approached with inappropriate language • Nervous to talk to boys • Feeling ignored, left out, or dismissed when trying to talk about serious topics • Being lied to/Lying to others • Feeling uncomfortable talking to adults about dating issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't trust friends or siblings with private information because they will share with others
Interpersonal Connection and Emotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling dismissed by partners who rush off or ignore you in public 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Snap" in reaction to victimization or "playing around" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear hurting someone's feelings; Own hurt feelings impact future relationships • Difficulty with emotion regulation in dating and breaking up • Differences in emotional connection, commitment, and definition of the relationship
Conflict and Conflict Resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ignoring conflict or "playing it cool" • Conflict regarding jealousy or multiple partners • Escalation of conflict (aggression, property damage) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bringing up old problems in new conflicts • Conflict related to control issues • Try to hide conflict from peers • Who apologizes to whom • Conflict between friends when one makes advances on another's partner • Conflict over sexual topics 	
External Factors Influencing Dating			
Approval and Disapproval	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner's parents don't approve of dating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents don't approve of dating in general, or of specific partners (e.g., due to age differences) • Friends don't approve of specific partners • Dating as a means of improving peer status 	
Resources, Skills, and Support		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of support or resources after experiencing or being exposed to violence • Reluctance to report victimization because of perception of lack of support • Conflict related to girl-buying or spending money on a partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structural and resource-related barriers to dating (lack of transportation, attending different churches or schools)
Structure, Supervision, and Behavior		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules about dating; "Overprotective" parents and older siblings • Family monitors cell phone, call logs, contact lists • Hiding dating behaviors, sneaking out, and lying to get around parents' dating rules • Different family rules for sons' versus daughters' dating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules about phone calls (not allowed, only allowed from certain people, only allowed at certain times)
Values, Messages, Advice, and Norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teased or laughed at when asking for advice from friends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling pressured to violate one's own beliefs or values in order to support a partner (e.g., let him cheat off of my paper, skip school with him) • Difficulty asking adults for advice; Adults having difficulty talking with youth about dating • Lack of respect for people's values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receiving mixed advice, advice that violates your beliefs or values, bad advice; Resistance of people to taking advice that they are given • Feeling torn about giving advice or intervening because it's "not my place" to do so or "none of my business" to get involved
Media and Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hard to accurately portray and interpret emotion when communicating via technology • Concerns about dating based on violence witnessed on television and movies • Peers' use of technology to instigate conflict between partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Control tactics (monitor cell phone call logs, check partner's messages) • Jealousy-related conflict (girl answers his phone, boys call my phone, refusal to tell partner who is calling you, special ring tones for people other than my partner) • Perpetuating conflict via text message rather than calling and talking it out • Showing disrespect by calling someone's home phone rather than cell phone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rules about phone calls (not allowed, only allowed before a certain time of night) • Playing games on the phone (calling from blocked numbers, hanging up and calling right back, calling so frequently that you have to turn the phone off, pranks via phone call or text message)

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