



Being ‘Dissed’ and Abused: African American adolescent males’ ideas of unhealthy or harmful dating dynamics

Timothy Johnson, Caesar Bankole, B.S., and Dr. Donna Howard, DrPH

Background

While the prevalence of teen dating violence (TDV) is among the highest for African Americans (AA), the research and narrative surrounding this issue has been historically one-sided. This study was conducted to further explore the candid perspectives of adolescent AA males regarding unhealthy dating relationship characteristics. This research is part of on-going research exploring teen dating dynamics. Findings can support the development of comprehensive TDV prevention programs by incorporating Black male adolescent voices.

“Oh I think of fighting, not enough attention in a relationship. Not enough communication in a relationship.” [10]

Figure 1. Participant #10 response

Goal

The goal of this study is to challenge the one-dimensional stereotype that adolescent AA males do not know the characteristics of unhealthy dating dynamics and to further incorporate their voices in the narratives, research, and prevention programs centered around TDV.

Objectives

The objective of this study was to explore adolescent AA males’ perceptions regarding unhealthy teen dating relationships to further incorporate these voices in the narratives, research, and prevention programs centered around TDV.

“Like you’re teasing, bringing that person down, way down. You ain’t supposed to do that.” [5]

Figure 2. Participant #5 response

Approach

A qualitative study was conducted with 19 AA males recruited from schools and community youth groups located in with in the Washington DC Metropolitan Area. Recruitment methods included convenience and snowball sampling.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted individually with each participant. Analysis consisted of open coding, sorting, aggregation and synthesis of responses to the guiding question question: “How would you describe a dating relationship that was unhealthy or harmful?”

Through an iterative process, emergent themes and sub-themes were generated and further discussed.

Table 1. Emergent themes and sub-themes generated from adolescent AA males’ descriptions of unhealthy dating relationships.

Theme	% (n) ¹
Theme 1: Amiss or Dissed Communication	26.3 (5)
Lack of or excessive communication/attention	26.3 (5)
Theme 2: Distrust, Dishonesty, Disloyalty	47.4 (9)
Theme 3: Fighting and Poor Conflict Resolution	57.9 (11)
Theme 4: Abuse	73.7 (14)
Physical Abuse	60 (12)
Verbal and/or Emotional Abuse	50 (10)
Sexual Abuse	20 (4)
¹ Percent of participants that mentioned each sub-theme; N=19	

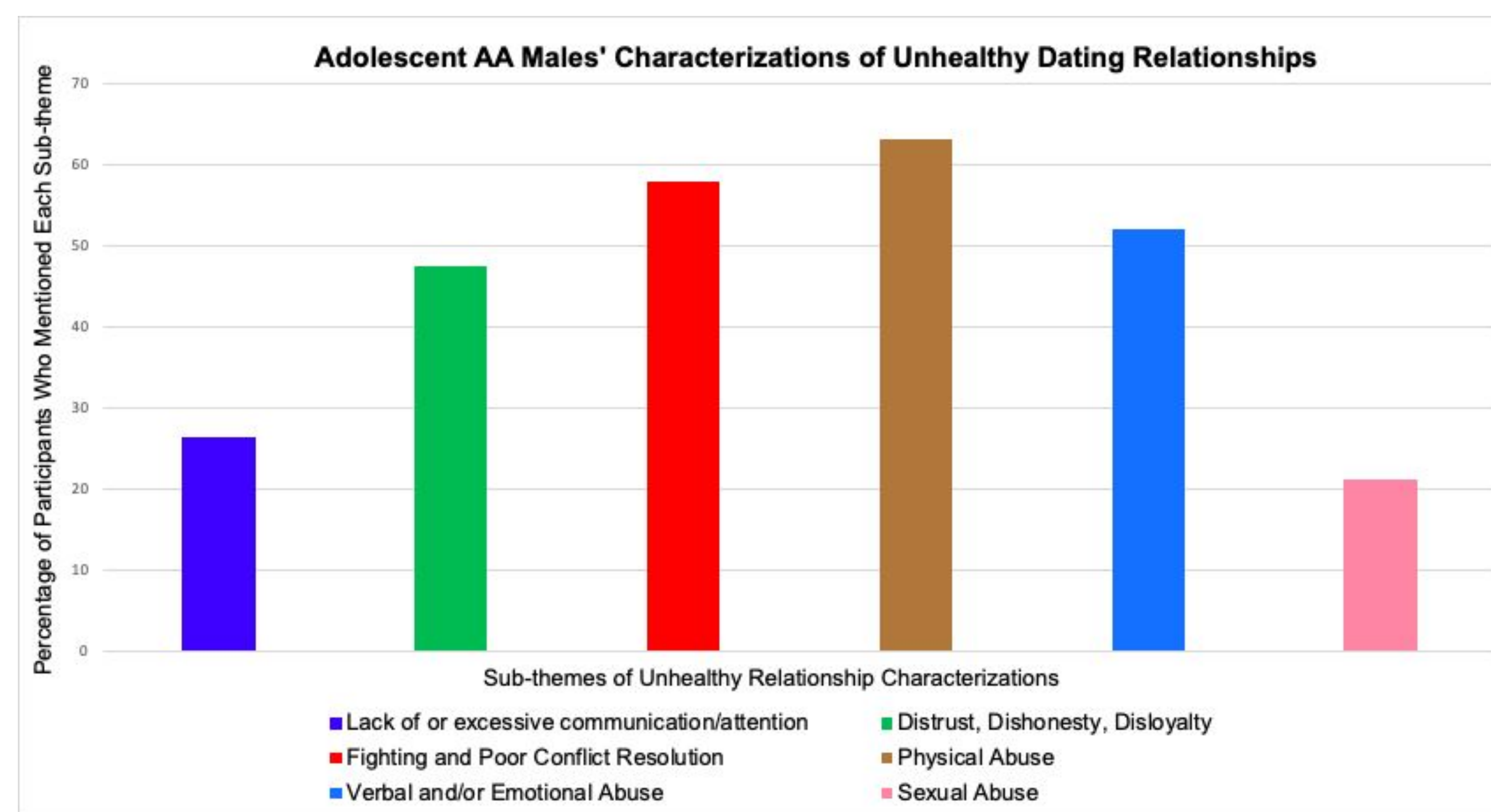


Figure 3. Percentage of participants that mentioned each generated theme or sub-theme in describing unhealthy dating relationships.

Results/Conclusions

The results demonstrate that these adolescent AA males have a thematic understanding of TDV. From 19 participant responses, 4 main themes emerged: Amiss or Dissed Communication; Distrust, Dishonesty, Disloyalty; Fighting and Poor Conflict Resolution; and, Abuse. Abuse was the most widely discussed theme. The majority of participants displayed strong understanding of physical and verbal or emotional abuse, but few mentioned sexual abuse. The second most frequently discussed theme was Fighting and Poor Conflict Resolution. The collective responses challenge biased stereotypes and limiting assumptions about AA males’ perception of TDV in relationships. While adolescent AA males displayed strong understanding of the negative impact excessive conflict and abusive behaviors can have on a relationship, less than half of the participants addressed sexual abuse, poor communication, and distrust, dishonesty, and disloyalty. This may indicate that these are areas that should have increased focus in future TDV prevention and intervention programs. More research should be conducted on the socialization factors that shape males’ perceptions and influence their dating dynamics. Programs focused on positive youth development should encapsulate these narratives and the lived experiences of adolescent AA males to truly resonate with them. This reframing is needed to counter the persistent focus on negative dynamics within teen dating relationships that reinforce stereotypes.

Importance to public health

Prevention and intervention programs aimed at decreasing TDV within the AA community will benefit tremendously from this authentic perspective. By building off of the knowledge and values already expressed among adolescent AA males rather than perpetuated stereotypes, programs will be able to more effectively create programs that connect with, educate, and empower them to build healthy dating relationship dynamics.

“Swearing at the person... Telling them they are not good enough. Probably telling them they can’t find another person if it wasn’t for them.” [2]

Figure 4. Participant #2 response