

Female High School Students' Perceptions and Experiences of Gender Roles and Stereotypes in Dating Relationships

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Abstract

Female high school students' experiences and perceptions of gender roles and gender stereotypes is largely missing from research on sexual health and dating violence. The aim of this study was to examine how adolescent females perceive of and experience gender roles and gender inequity in dating relationships. A secondary data analysis of seventy in-depth interviews from a larger study on adolescent females' perceptions of healthy and unhealthy dating relationships was conducted. The majority of participants were 16 or 17-year-old, almost 80% self-identified as Caucasian or African American, and the majority were 11th or 12th graders. Five themes emerged: 1) Biology, socialization or what? with subthemes 1a) Biology and 1b) Socialization; 2) Experiences and perceptions of power and control in relationships; 3) The conundrum of stereotypes: challenges, confrontations, confusions; 4) The importance and motivation of sex; 5) Communication, caring, commitment, with subthemes, 5a) Males not wanting committed relationships, females wanting them, 5b) Who cares? Males do not care and females care deeply, and 5c) Role reversals. Public health programs can be strengthened by inclusion of the voices of adolescent females. Programs promoting healthy adolescent relationships should engage adolescent males and females, utilize role models, and focus on collective action.

Key Words: Gender Roles, Gender Stereotypes, Adolescent, Dating Relationships

Introduction

Adolescence is a time for substantial identity formation. This includes discovering one's own values separate from one's family, experimenting and taking risks in order to learn about one's self, planning future goals, and solidifying ethnic and gender identities [1,2]. Adolescents challenge authority and experience conflict with their families as they seek more and more autonomy [3]. However, adolescents also desire increased intimacy with peer groups and explore sexual and romantic interests [3, 4]. Romantic involvement is a common and important developmental task of adolescence [1,4,5].

Unfortunately, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse

is common in teen relationships [6]. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines Teen Dating Violence (TDV) as "physical, sexual, or psychological/emotional violence within a dating relationship, as well as stalking" [7]. Young girls are the group most at risk for dating violence [6]. Besides immediate physical and emotional harm, TDV can lead to multiple negative mental health issues including sad/hopeless feelings, binge drinking, eating disorders, and suicidal ideation as well as compromised performance in school and engagement in physical fighting [3,7-11]. Violence in adolescent relationships has also been associated with violence in adult relationships and marriage [5,12,13].

Early in dating and relationships, traditional gender roles, e.g. based on socially accepted norms around masculinity and femininity, are often relied upon to provide familiar scripts for the dyad in order to decrease anxiety and demonstrate social savviness [14]. Masculinities and femininities signify the values and practices that relate to the positioning of females and males in gender roles and other social dynamics [15] and encapsulate how these become a "form of culture, social structure and social organization" [16]. Gender hegemony, a concept borrowed from Antonio Gramsci's work [17], describes the construction and legitimization of hierarchical relationships [16]. Thus, in adolescent dating relationships, such gender role dynamics may become expected or viewed as 'natural' for the entire course of a relationship and constrain the development of authentic and more equitable relationships [14].

Recent qualitative research has begun to explore how gender roles and differential status and power increase risk for gender-based violence, including TDV [1,4,5,11,18]. Adams and Williams and Williams and Adams reported, based on focus groups with high school girls, that it was widely understood that boys have more control or power in adolescent relationships and girls often compromised their values in order to stay in a relationship [5,1].

Sears, Byers, Whelan & Saint-Pierre discovered, through focus groups with ninth and eleventh grade students, that boys and girls are aware of gendered power differentials in relationships [19]. However, they also pointed out a double standard in condoning physical violence by women and condemning violence by men in romantic relationships. Other studies have suggested that if girls do compromise their ideal relationship goals in order to begin or maintain a relationship, a power differential is furthered [4,18,20]. These studies only briefly mention the importance of gender roles and gender inequity in teen dating relationships; an in-depth examination of these issues is needed. While adolescents may reference behavior as being 'natural' or 'boys being boys' or a reaction to peer influence there is still very little insight into how girls explain gender roles and stereotypes [5,13]. Examining how girls explain gender difference and gender roles in their own relationships, and whether or not they accept gender roles as a given or decide to challenge them, may be important for understanding relationship dynamics that could lead to TDV.

While experts generally accept that boys and girls are socialized into their gender roles, based on the influence and interaction of hormones, biology, and evolution, it is unclear how girls themselves explain gender roles and gender difference [4,11,21,22]. Gender roles and stereotypes in adolescent dating relationships have been characterized as males avoiding emotional intimacy- with a focus on physical attraction and sexual activity- and females being more concerned with achieving an emotional connection [2,4,5,23]. Males are also viewed as exercising the majority of control in adolescent relationships, especially in the stage of relationship initiation or formation [5].

While perceptions are acknowledged as important underpinnings of behavior, inviting adolescent females to share, through personal narratives, their perspectives on how gender roles shape healthy and unhealthy dating dynamics has been rare [1,4,13]. Further, most TDV research focuses on white youths in college settings, noticeably omitting minority and younger adolescents [1,5,13]. Because ethnicity, race, and social economic status intersect and influence dating relationships, they are particularly important to examine [4,5,12,24].

Achieving a better understanding of how adolescent girls perceive gender roles and social stereotypes in the context of contemporary dating relationships could be instrumental to positive youth development. The aim of this study was to achieve this understanding through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a demographically diverse group of high school girls. A social ecological perspective, which encompasses cognitive and learning theories of development, is requisite to this understanding. The Socialization Influence Framework (SIF) guided the research [25]. SIF identifies multiple domains of socialization (primary and secondary) which influence adolescent health-related attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, and help shape developmental trajectories [26]. SIF builds on Bronfenbrenner's theoretical conceptualization of ecological systems of development. It underscores the crucial role of immediate settings such as home,

school and peer group (microsystems), the interrelationships among these elements (mesosystem) and their links to community structures (exosystems) [27]. The SIF purports that youth attitudes and beliefs, their family, peer, religious and school dynamics, as well as the socialization mechanisms that influence their health outcomes, are all nested within and influenced by the larger socio-cultural context. The study also builds on Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, in that norms and customs translate into social expectations, obligations and also influence conformity [28] In general, we were interested in what shapes girls' conceptualizations of healthy and harmful dating relationships, the appropriateness of adolescent dating and acceptable dating behaviors. We explored girls' appraisal of the norms and social pressures that affect their dating dynamics. Findings will help fill a knowledge gap and provide direction for intervention efforts aimed at girls' empowerment and well-being as they strive for achievement of adolescent developmental milestones.

Methods

Participants

The qualitative data used for this project is part of a broader research study examining female high school students' perceptions of healthy and unhealthy dating relationships. The study protocol was approved by the Principal Investigators' home institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Eligibility included being female, between 15-18-year-old, enrolled in one of seven Mid-Atlantic high schools, and willingness to have the interviews recorded. Descriptors of the 70 participants can be found in (Table 1). The majority of participants were 16 or 17-year-old, almost 80% self-identified as Caucasian or African American, and the majority were in the 11th or 12th grades. Two high schools were public co-educational, two were single gender Roman Catholic, two were single gender private, and one was co-educational Jewish.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of semi-structured in-depth interviews based upon an interview guide designed around the broader study research aims which included: 1) To better understand adolescent females' perceptions of healthy and unhealthy dating relationships; 2) Determine the role of socializing spheres, including religion, family, peers, school, media, etc., in shaping these perceptions. The goal of the current study was to determine how female high school students accept, challenge, explain, and describe gender roles and stereotypes in teen dating relationships. While girls talked about gender roles implicitly and explicitly in the context of multiple interview guide questions, one specific question directly addressed the following: "Are there different things that girls and boys want from dating relationships?" Interviews lasted, on average, 1.5 hours and were conducted in-person by the second author "(study Principal Investigator)" in parenthesis and her research assistant during or after regular school hours.

Table 1 Description of Study Participants

Participant Descriptors	
Age	Percentage
15	10.1%
16	39.1%
17	42.0%
18	8.7%
Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
Caucasian	42.1%
African American	37.1%
Hispanic/Latina	4.3%
Asian	2.4%
Native American	1.4%
Mixed	11.4%
Grade Level	Percentage
10 th	14.5%
11 th	43.5%
12 th	42.0%
School Type	Percentage
Co-ed, Public	28.6%
Single gender, Roman Catholic	28.6%
Single gender, private	28.6%
Co-ed, Jewish	14.2%

Data Management and Analysis

Digital recordings were transcribed, systematically coded and entered into Atlas.ti for data management. In accordance with a phenomenological approach, a coding dictionary consisting of key terms and their operational definitions was developed, piloted and revised. Once the dictionary was finalized by the study team, two team members applied it to code responses across all participants. To strengthen synchronic reliability, a primary coder first coded all transcripts [29]. Then, a second researcher reread and reviewed the coded responses to assure that all coding was accurate, and discordant codings were flagged and discussed until consensus was achieved.

All passages that included the code 'gender roles' were exported as a single word file, generating 143 pages in Microsoft Word and 304 distinct quotations. The code term 'gender roles' was operationalized as "reference to male or female stereotypes or expectations of gender-based attitudes, behavior or norms". Next, a complex, iterative, process of analysis of the 'gender roles' query began [30,31]. Individual quotes were transferred into Microsoft Excel to facilitate initial examination [30,31]. Third, the iterative process involved aggregating emerging concepts into categories that led to the generation of themes and subthemes

[30,31]. Finally, quotes were organized by theme and subtheme in an excel spreadsheet for ease of tabulation of frequency distributions. Themes and subthemes are summarized and salient quotes from the female high school students' narratives are identified to accompany the descriptions [31]. The results presented here reflect the perspectives from the sub sample of girls who spoke about gender roles and stereotypes.

Results

Theme 1: Biology, socialization or what? Explanations for gender based differences in relationship dynamics

Over half of participants (61.4%) described differential gender roles and stereotypes in high school relationships as being created through biology or socialization. Some explained these gender differences, roles, and stereotypes by referencing biology and hormones, others provided a developmental explanation, while others emphasized socialization. Thus, Theme 1 is broken into two subthemes: biology and socialization.

Sub theme: Biology

Sixteen percent of the participants pointed to a physical or biological basis for some power differences, i.e., by expressing that females are more "physically weak" (17-year-old). While some of the participants begrudgingly admitted they thought women were weaker "even though it pains me to admit women tend to be weaker physically" (17-year-old), they agreed that males were built differently, "they're boys, they seem stronger not like stronger emotionally but just like they're stronger, muscular" (15-year-old).

Twenty-six percent of the participants expressed the belief that males and females are naturally or biologically different from one another in their approaches to relationships. Girls suggested that biological drives and hormones partially explained why "girls are more emotional" (18-year-old), while their male peers "just want a sexual relationship" (16-year-old). Some participants alluded to these characteristics as being intrinsic to being male or female, "like they just want to have sex, they're guys" (15-year-old), while other directly pointed to biology, "I think that's just biological that girls tend to be like, we tend to think about that emotion more" (15-year-old), and hormones, "I think like a hormone thing" (17-year-old).

In contrast, 16% of the participants offered a developmental perspective for gender differences, highlighting the importance of "maturity level" (18-year-old). How male high school students' maturity level affects their relationship preferences was summed up as follows: "So right now girls are looking for something deeper and guys just want to have fun and that's understandable because guys mature slower than girls do..." (17-year-old). With maturity, the perception was that males would become interested in a more profound connection, "so at some point in time I feel like guys will look for a deeper satisfaction" (17-year-old).

Sub theme: Socialization

Sixty-three percent of the participants discussed the importance of socialization. As one 17-year-old explained *"Even though we are considered equals legally, women are definitely taught that they are not necessarily inferior but that just men are more powerful"*. Participants pointed to media, including music videos, as sources for these beliefs; *"It's like one main person in the video... with like a hundred girls around them"* (17-year-old). The participants were aware that *"boys are like portrayed as like only wanting sex... I think they're given like that bad image like based on media"* (15-year-old).

Fifty percent of the participants felt that appearing masculine or being pressured by friends influenced why males act differently in relationships. *"Some guys they feel pressured from their friends to sleep with people especially if they are virgins"* (17-year-old). Surrounded by their friends,

"... they are very like yeah I am gonna like get with her and I'm gonna like tap that. It's just very like vulgar and then they will talk to her like I really like her and eventually get with her... yeah they have to have that masculine image all the time" (17-year-old).

Girls perceived that there was more beneath this macho exterior, *"you know [boys] just have to act like a boy but then they are really soft inside"* (17-year-old).

Girls seemed very aware of explicit and implicit rules for gender roles in relationship formation, especially *"to make it official"* (16-year-old). Several described a social norm whereby females should not be the ones to initiate a relationship with a male. This was exemplified as follows: *"Usually the guy does it cause at times especially certain people can be seen... like desperate I guess if the girl does it"* (16-year-old). The agreement among the participants was, *"within [our] age group ... it's known that the guy has to ask the girl out in order for them to be quote unquote official, going out, in a relationship"* (17-year-old). Different rules based on gender and the nature of the relationship seemed to be operative. The confusion, frustration and hypocrisy that the girls felt was articulated as follows:

"See that's what I'm confused about. Like we're all-- girls get put in positions where we're sluts. We're whores if we have relationships with multiple guys, but a guy can do it, and it's still-- it would be okay" (18-year-old).

Theme 2: Experiences and perceptions of power and control in relationships

Ten percent of participants referenced cultural, traditional, and religious beliefs as the basis for males holding the power in relationships, making a contrast between traditionalist and more modern views.

"In a lot of more traditional cultures, the guy has the pants in the relationship ... the guy makes the decisions and controls money or whatever. Um he has the position of power. But I think in most, most modern relationships, it's a partnership" (16-year-old).

Girls specifically discussed traditional gender roles in the context of males controlling decision making and finances, *"the man goes to work and the woman stays home and has the kids and the man's more in control of them... with like decisions and financially"* (18-year-old).

Males were seen as having more power to decide whether to initiate a high school dating relationship and what kind of relationship is entered into, e.g., hooking up or official boyfriend/girlfriend. One 17-year-old said that *"because girls are entirely afraid of being alone"*- due to the double standard and biased judgments that they receive- they were willing to put the power into their male partners' hands. The notion that males have the power to determine the nature of the relationship was seen to carry over into an unhealthy power dynamic where the guy *"essentially control[s] everything about them, the way they talk to you, the way they stand up, like what they do, what they buy you, what they say... and it starts with little small things that people don't even notice"* (16-year-old). One 17-year-old bemoaned that females were so powerless that *"the one thing they can control is their virginity,"* while another added that females make their own rules about sex and males either *"do it my way, and respect my decision, or [they] can go about your business..."* (17-year-old). While males usually controlled the decision to begin a dating relationship in high school, once in a relationship, some participants felt that the female often had more power. This sentiment was expressed as follows:

"Actually I've seen more girls have more power in relationships than guys which is interesting because before the relationship... the guys- they control but once it actually starts happening I've seen girls sort of having more power than the guys" (16-year-old).

Some participants felt strongly that males carry so much power, and treat females so poorly in relationships that they need to protect themselves from being hurt, *"Girls, we just fall head over heels...for a cute guy. But you have to stay a step ahead of them"* (17-year-old). Girls explained that their female peers:

"should have some type of security wall that blocks all of it from being put out there because not everybody...I mean, you may think you can trust somebody but, you may...I mean that person can turn on you at any time" (15-year-old).

Theme 3: The conundrum of stereotypes: Challenges, confrontations, confusions

While 61% of the participants emphasized gender differences, 50% challenged the concept of gender-based difference in relationships. Seventy-one percent of those who challenged gender difference focused on the importance of personal differences and 57% on gender similarities. Participants specifically discussed that not all of their male peers are the same, *"It depends on like the person"* (15-year-old); that *"...some are looking for long term"* relationships (17-year-old) while others *"...more want physical stuff"* (15-year-old). They emphasized varied motivations for why females seek relationships including:

a) fulfilling psychological needs, *"Like somebody don't like being alone... well I never really like had a dad around so, and my mom was never really around, my grandparents raised me, so I look for constant company"* (17-year-old); b) love: *"someone that loves us or that wants to spend time with us"* (17-year-old); c) needing a prom date: *"She's just going out with him now so that she has a prom date"* (16-year-old); and, d) sex: *"it could be about the sex"* (17-year-old).

Twenty-three percent of participants who challenged gender differences specified that there are *"two different type[s] of boys"* (17-year-old). They described some males who only cared about sex, and others who were interested in caring, committed relationships:

"there's the guy who's like really sweet and he just really wants a relationship, then there's the guy who just cares how many girls he sleeps with" (17-year-old).

Participants also described males who treated their girlfriends poorly, and those who respected and loved their partners: *"some guys are sensitive, some guys are jerks"* (17-year-old).

Among those who challenged gender stereotypes, 57% focused specifically on gender similarities in dating expectations, *"I think it's pretty much the same actually"* (18-year-old). They suggested that both males and females are interested in caring relationships, *"I think guys just want somebody to talk to just as much as girls do"* (15-year-old) as well as physical intimacy, *"as you get older and like your hormones or something start going crazy and then in the end kind of like guys and girls are not too much different"* (17-year-old).

Twenty percent of participants who challenged gender difference were very aware that the gender roles they were describing were stereotypes, but at the same time found truth in those stereotypes, *"I mean this is sort of stereotypical, but also sorta true"* (18-year-old).

Fourteen percent of participants directly challenged the accuracy of these stereotypes, *"the like stereotypical difference that everyone's always like all the boys wanna do is just get with people and the girls don't, I don't think that's quite as true"* (18-year-old).

Theme 4: The importance and desire for sex

Fifty-six percent of participants discussed sex and the importance of sex for males and females. Of these, 74% described how males care mostly or only about sex: *"Like nine times out of ten...actually ten times out of ten, they're just getting into the relationship for sex and if it ends up being more than what they thought they just go with it"* (16-year-old). Indeed, 25% felt both males and females cared about sex:

"...I mean, it's a, as much as boys want to have sex, I think girls do it and it might be less obvious and more taboo for girls to talk about it but I think, I don't think intentions are as different as

they might be made out to be" (18-year-old).

Participants also described both males and females wanting someone special, who cared about them and was attentive to them: *"... I think it's just a universal thing for everyone really it's just having someone to listen to you having someone like just for you and only yours"* (17-year-old).

Participants discussed how social norms influence the priority that both males and females place on sex, suggesting these societal and peer pressures may overshadow personal considerations when teens make decisions about whether to engage in sex. They discussed how both males and females are pressured to have sex to fit in with friends: *"And a guy-and some guys do have that heart that wants love. But most of them just want the sexual relations to fit in with all the other guys that are getting it in the school"* (16-year-old).

Theme 5: Communication, caring, commitment

Participants described gender differences in the typical behaviors and attitudes they perceived their peers held about high school dating relationships. Overall, they felt that males were less interested in pursuing committed relationships and less likely to care about the feelings of their female partners. However, they did note instances of role reversals.

Sub theme: Males not wanting committed relationships, females wanting them

Males were seen as much less interested in committed, caring relationships as females. One girl spoke about it this way: *"Girls really like commitment. And you won't find too many boys that's ready for a commitment"* (16-year-old). Participants described a difference in priorities between females and males, with females prioritizing finding the right guy quickly and settling down, *"A girl just wants to find that one person like they can spend the rest of their life with"* (17-year-old), whereas females have heard males say, *"Oh, yeah I'm going date all these girls before I get married"* (17-year-old). In general, the participants seemed to think that females took relationships a lot more seriously than males did, expecting them to be committed, long-term, and caring. The idea that males are more content just spending time with their male friends, was cogently conveyed as follows:

"Um I think girls want a lot more time spent with the boy but boys want more time with their friends so sometimes it doesn't work out, and girls want attention nonstop from the boys" (17-year-old).

Another explanation for males being less interested in committed relationships was that males want varied experiences, *"...they don't want to be stuck with ... that one person for a really long time... they want to do different things with different people"* (17-year-old). Girls described males as feeling too young to be committed to a long-term relationship, *"...they're young and they're trying to get everything they can while they can"* (16-year-old).

Sub theme: Who cares? Males do not care and females care deeply

The perception that once in a relationship, males often did not feel the same emotions as females was expressed by 64% of participants. Females, they felt, were more likely to be the ones to develop feelings for their partner, *"...once you get into a sexual relationship... you become close to them, so you automatically have feelings for them, but the guy, most likely, won't feel the same way as you do"* (18-year-old).

Twenty percent of participants conveyed the perspective that males actually treat females very poorly, both inside and out of relationships; *"...it's very common just for guys at [my school] to treat girls um rather badly"* (16-year-old). Girls described males as: 1) unfaithful, *"they go out with a girl and they just...half the time they're cheating on them because they feel they've found someone better"* (17-year-old), 2) using females for sex, *"guys don't like you because you're pretty or you're smart or what you have to offer, they're just like 'oh well from what we hear you're easy, so we're basically going to try to get with you'"* (17-year-old), or, 3) not caring about her feelings, *"They don't have any sense of feeling for you"* (17-year-old).

Sub theme: Role reversals

While participants largely characterized males as less caring and less interested in relationships than females, 53% described instances of role reversals, i.e., sometimes *"it's the guy who wants a really good relationship and it's her that doesn't want to commit to it"* (17-year-old), and *"sometimes it is the opposite. Like, the guy will be emotionally attached and the girl just want the sexual aspects of the relationship"* (16-year-old).

Discussion

Research within the last decade places renewed emphasis on the importance of gender roles and status differentials as contributing factors in the formation of unhealthy relationships, TDV, and gender violence [1,4,5,11,18]. Extensive research has focused on the roles of biology and socialization in the creation of gender roles [4,5,7,22]. To our knowledge, explanations for causes of gender differences and gender roles from the perception of adolescents themselves have not been explicitly reported. Mid to late adolescence involves many developmental tasks or goals. These include rapid physical growth, cognitive development, and developing identity and evolving social functions [2]. Research shows that experiences and attitudes developed during adolescence can have long term consequences, affecting both identity and future relationships [4,32]. The lens by which we frame this research is decidedly female. It presents a multi-layered yet nuanced understanding of factors and forces that impact young females' cognitions and behaviors around dating. Thus, our findings facilitate understanding of how females experience and perceive gender roles and have significant implications for the promotion of healthy relationships and the prevention of unhealthy ones.

Females' experiences and perceptions of power and control in relationships emerged as a central theme. Feminist scholars have argued that differential expectations or gender stereotypes are deeply rooted in patriarchy, a worldview in which women's diminished status compared to men is considered natural and expected, along with male entitlement to control and dominate [18]. These beliefs about gender expectations manifest as beliefs about men's and women's roles in families and relationships and are constraining not only for women but for men, as well [11]. The participants in this study were aware of differences between what they described as more traditional male dominant and more modern egalitarian gender norms. Participants also described males as having more power during the initiation of a relationship. They seemed aware that this may create ongoing power dynamics in the relationship that are unhealthy. This is disconcerting as differential power in a relationship can lead to the relationship being unfulfilling for both partners or even potentially dangerous, as differential power roles have been associated with TDV [2,4,33-36]. Yet, other participants perceived that once in a relationship, females held more of the power. This perception is especially relevant in light of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS) data suggesting that girls also perpetrate TDV and not just in self-defense or retaliation [37-39].

The current study provides added depth and context to the understandings of how females experience and perceive gender roles and stereotypes. Moreover, what emerged were nuanced and complex dynamics and a lack of homogeneity in the ways females perceive and experience power and control in relationships. This complexity is an important part of understanding high school dating relationships and gender roles and is much less apparent in large survey data.

Challenging stereotypes, while highlighting gender similarities, emerged as an important narrative. It is substantiated by a building literature that suggests adolescents and young adults believe that relationships should be egalitarian and place importance on emotional intimacy and commitment in relationships, as well as respect and love [14,13]. Obtaining perspectives directly from high school students may be the best source of information for public health programs aimed at the promotion of egalitarian norms and healthy dating dynamics [1,4,13].

Participants directly confronted gender roles and stereotypes, noting their inherent dangers. Indeed, adolescent females who feel less empowered in their dating relationship are more likely to accept compromises to what they consider ideal [4,5]. Compromising relationship goals to initiate or maintain a relationship leads to the creation of power differentials in the relationship [4,5,18].

It is important to note that adolescents' awareness of power differentials may not automatically translate into more equitable relationships or resistance to hegemonic gender dynamics. After all, the creation, dissemination and transformation of

masculinities and femininities are “on-going, dynamic, social processes” [16]. Changing gender norms and ideologies, therefore, require time but also personal agency to challenge social constructs that may be viewed as ‘natural’ [40].

Limitations

The qualitative study has several limitations. First, while recruitment methods were varied, selection bias was likely, i.e., females who were most comfortable talking about relationships were most willing to participate. Those not enrolled or regularly attending school are not captured in the current study. Findings are delimited by size and region. More research from more diverse geographical areas, including rural communities, is needed to more completely understand high school girls' perceptions of gender roles in dating relationships. However, the study greatly benefited from a sampling frame that included large proportions of Caucasian and African American females from urban and suburban communities who were enrolled in different types of schools. While eligibility criteria did not address gender identification or sexual preference, few participants mentioned same sex attraction or same sex relationships. Learning about gender roles and normative beliefs within same sex relationships would be an important addition to research in this area. Similarly, the voices of adolescent males are missing from the study. Future research should place increased focus on how males perceive of gender roles and stereotypes in relationships. Determining how and to what extent female students' perceptions of males' motivations match (or differ) from males' actual feelings, is an important area for future research. A longitudinal approach could facilitate understanding of how adolescent' experiences and perceptions of gender roles and stereotypes in dating relationships change over time.

Implications

Examination of females' perceptions of gender roles and stereotypes- from where they are sourced and the extent they are accepted, internalized and endorsed or challenged- is critically needed to inform prevention and intervention efforts. This study's findings help build a knowledge base that informs our understanding of high school dating relationships.

Females' insights regarding gender roles appear to be complex and context dependent. Confusion about gender roles and gendered expectations exists. Public health practitioners and researchers who work with adolescents need to assist them in deconstructing and addressing gender roles and stereotypes as part of a comprehensive program to promote healthy dating dynamics and prevent unhealthy or harmful relationships. This work is especially important since relationship experiences in adolescence may contribute to the creation and solidification of long lasting and less egalitarian gender identities and gender roles in relationships [18]. While some existing TDV prevention programs aim to address and alter gender roles [31,41-43], they largely a priori, make assumptions about prevailing stereotypes.

For example, one of the aims of the Youth Advisory Council in Wisconsin was to have participants examine and change their own gender beliefs and expectations [42]. However, researchers measured this by asking whether participants agreed with the following statements; “A male can control his behavior no matter how angry or sexually aroused he is” and “You don't listen to music with lyrics that are violent/disrespectful to women”. Similarly, McCauley et al. measured gender attitudes through a modified Gender-Equitable Norms Scale which included items like; “Girls try to get pregnant to trap boys into relationships” and “Boys don't usually intend to force sex... on a girl but sometimes they can't help it”. Miller et al. also measured gender attitudes through the Gender-Equitable Norms Scale which included items like “If a girl is raped it is often because she did not say no clearly enough” [33,41]. Many of these studies used scales based on the Gender-Equitable Norms Scale which was developed using qualitative work in Brazil with adult men [44]. These programs may be strengthened by the inclusion of the voices of adolescent females through Community Based Participatory Research Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) [49] and mixed methods approaches [45] incorporating teens' understandings of gender roles and stereotypes into programs.

The existing programs, listed above, share a similar focus on aspects of gender attitudes that may be important in creating either healthy or unhealthy relationships. Yet, our participants' perspectives seemed to challenge some of the broad assertions, i.e. that men cannot control themselves or that if a woman is raped she is to blame. Instead, they expressed more subtle yet still potentially dangerous and unhealthy gender attitudes. Similarly, most of the literature focuses directly on TDV and date rape and excludes more nuanced understandings of general relationship dynamics and healthy relationships. For example, during adolescence, intimacy and autonomy are closely connected with identity formation and when relationship values are challenged there may be long-term consequences affecting identity development [4,32].

The aim of CBPR is to involve the community equitably in working to produce research or solve problems through resources available in the community [57]. Mixed methods approaches, utilizing quantitative and qualitative methods concurrently, are important in gaining contextual understandings, multiple perspectives, understandings of cultural influence, and scientific rigor [45]. The complexity and nuance we uncovered reinforce the need to include voices of adolescents in planning, implementing, and evaluating programs, since understandings and perceptions of gender roles may vary by context, individual, and community. Further, existing programs tend to focus on the prevention of TDV perpetrated by men against women [33,41-43]. Without discrediting the importance of this, national data suggests that girls also perpetrate TDV [37]. Our findings reinforce the notion that, at times, females actually hold more power than their male partners in dating relationships. Programs should continue to focus on preventing TDV against women but should also make

sure they are not ignoring the problem of TDV perpetrated against men.

Further, it is important that programs attempting to affect change in harmful gender norms and stereotypes move beyond a focus on negative outcomes, including interpersonal and TDV, and focus on the promotion of healthy relationships [46-50]. It is important for those working with adolescent females to help them to build an understanding of where these stereotypes and gender roles emerge from and what can be done to make relationships more egalitarian and healthy. A number of programs are doing this important work, to differing extents. Working within an ecological framework that includes a focus on individuals, peers, family, schools, and the community, CDC developed the Dating Matters Initiative which engages 11-14-year-olds from urban communities in prevention and empowerment programs that promote respectful, safe and healthy relationships [46]. Others programs include the Date Safe Project, Inc. (providing skills and insight into consent, respect, and decision making), The Fourth R (teaching positive relationships skills and negotiation) theater programs that use interactive theater to deliver messages about healthy relationships and Love U2 Communication Smarts (emphasizing healthy and unhealthy relationship patterns, communication, and conflict resolution) [47-50].

The programs listed above often include media literacy and advocacy work as well as deconstructing other socialization sources for stereotypes such as parents and peers [51]. Programs could also benefit from utilizing a more critical approach to unpack the complexity of factors contributing to unequal gender dynamics in adolescent relationships. Gender-focused health programs should recognize the ranges of masculinities and femininities, and their intricate relationships [15,52]. The diversity of femininities, for instance, could include 'emphasized femininity' - associated with acceptance of and compliance with male domination [53], 'pariah femininity' - marked by patterns of practices and values of hegemonic masculinity performed by females such as authority and violence [16], and what Jewkes and Morrell refer to as 'emerging youth femininities' - focused on the drive and commitment to be in charge of one's life [52]. Thus, such differences between femininities could mean differences in the adolescent girl's expectations and experiences in dating relationships and gender programs should acknowledge these differences [52]. By doing so, programs may be more effective in both targeting and deconstructing specific normalized patterns that dictate and reinforce gender hierarchies in adolescent relationships as well as in conveying the importance of challenging and changing such norms. Additionally, understanding of the variations in hegemonic masculinities and femininities in relation to location [15], race and class [16] could allow gender programs to be context specific and culturally relevant.

In terms of specific strategies, programs should focus on engaging females in dialogue and critical analysis about gender roles and stereotypes that empower them to examine and reconstruct gender roles and expectations in relationships.

For example, Kervin and Obinna had adolescents create their own presentations to one another about unhealthy gender norms, allowing students to learn while teaching and also to develop self-esteem and leadership skills [38]. Others argue for the importance of collective efforts to address systematic inequality for the empowerment of young females, in addition to thinking about empowerment for the individual [54]. SPARK (Sexualization Protest: Action, Resistance, Knowledge) while not specifically working to increase healthy adolescent relationships, collaborates with young females in becoming activists to challenge sexualization, rather than protecting young females from the problems [55]. Manago, Greenfield, Kim & Ward emphasize the importance of large cultural shifts in values as requisite for shifts in sexual and gender roles. Programs attempting to promote healthy adolescent relationships should look to engage adolescent males and females, utilize role models, and focus on collective action [56].

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NA

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