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Reasons for Fighting among Violent Female Adolescents: A Qualitative Investigation from an Urban, Midwestern Community

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the self-reported reasons for fighting among female adolescents (n=72). Data are drawn from brief intervention sessions addressing violent behavior and alcohol use. Young women ages 14–18 (mean=16) were recruited in an urban emergency department (58.3% African-American/Black, 31.9% White and 9.7% other races/ethnicities). Participants identified multiple reasons that they engage in fights including: self-protection/self-defense, enhancing social status and respect, safety (e.g. preventing future fights or sexual assaults), revenge/retaliation, social motivations (e.g. defending family or friends, fighting over romantic interests), coping, and enjoyment. Results provide insight into opportunities and challenges in developing interventions addressing aggression among female adolescents.

Keywords

youth violence; peer violence; fighting; female adolescents; violence prevention; brief interventions

A Qualitative Investigation of Reasons for Aggression among Violent Female adolescents

Although youth violence has traditionally been thought of as a problem of adolescent boys, violence research and policy initiatives are increasingly focused on the physically aggressive

behavior of female adolescents. Evidence from school and community-based national surveys indicate approximately one-quarter to one-third of female adolescents report having been in a serious fight in the past year (Eaton et al., 2012; SAMHSA, 2009). Similarly, almost half of all adolescent emergency department visits for assault-related injuries are among females (CDC, 2012). While female adolescents represent a smaller overall proportion of juvenile arrests than their male counterparts (29.3% compared to 70.7%) (FBI, 2012) this difference is narrowing (SAMHSA, 2009; Zahn et al., 2008). Between 1995 and 2008 the proportion of adolescent arrests involving females for violent crimes¹ and aggravated assaults have increased (from 14.6 to 18.3% for violent crime and from 19.7% to 24.9% for aggravated assaults, FBI, 2012). In 2011, over a third (35.6%) of adolescent arrests for simple (i.e. non-aggravated) assault involved females (FBI, 2012). Although these changes may reflect shifts in societal responses to female adolescents' physical aggression (Goodkind et al., 2009; Haight et al., 2010; Luke, 2008; Steffensmeier & Schwartz, 2009; Zahn et al., 2008), it remains clear that prevention and intervention programs are needed to address physically aggressive behavior among female adolescents.

Youth violence researchers have highlighted the ways that female violence is both similar to and different from male violence. Quantitative studies show, for example, that many of the correlates of female youth violence, such as previous exposure to violence, low socioeconomic status, substance abuse (Molnar et al., 2005; Ranney et al., 2011), poor communication and anger (Epstein-Ngo et al., 2013; Hettrich & O'Leary, 2007) are similar to those for males. Qualitative researchers have shown that for males and females in inner-city communities, violence can serve as a source of pleasure, self-esteem, and cultural capital (Jones, 2009; Ness, 2004; 2010); It can allow teens to feel powerful in situations where that feeling is rare (Borowsky, Ireland and Resnick, 2009; Duke et al., 2009; Hine & Welford, 2012). Despite these overlaps, there are notable differences in the causes, patterns and circumstances that surround female violence compared to male violence. Female adolescents are generally more likely to get in a fight with someone they know, including dating partners (Walton et al., 2009), more likely to get in fights at home, less likely to use guns, and more likely to fight in response to previous verbal altercations (Cunningham, et al., 2010; Mollen et al., 2004; Ranney & Mello, 2011). In contrast, males report more violence at younger ages (Caldwell, et al., 2002; Zimmerman, Steinman & Rowe, 1998), are more likely to turn to extreme responses to conflict than females and are more likely to inflict injury (Archer et al., 2000; Richardson, 2005). For female adolescents, fighting is more often used as a strategy to prevent sexual harassment or assaults (Copeland-Linder et al., 2012; Miller, 2001; Molnar et al., 2005).

Scholars have begun to develop more nuanced approaches that also take account of within-group differences in the expression and consequences of aggressive behaviors among young women. Recent studies have highlighted how violence can be a means of negotiating and responding to gender and gender inequality (Miller & Mullins, 2009; Tasca, Zatz & Rodriguez, 2012). Violence becomes a vehicle for gaining status and recognition by demonstrating toughness in gendered environments, protecting oneself or others, claiming

¹Violent crimes include homicide, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault arrests.

and asserting power, obtaining emotional rewards and obtaining economic gains (Tasca, Zatz & Rodriguez, 2012). Studies of low-income and/or minority youth (e.g. Molnar et al., 2005; Ness, 2004; 2010; Reese et al., 2001) have similarly shown that fighting can have an instrumental function and offer a venue for young women to build and maintain social status and self-esteem.

While understanding of fighting among female adolescents has increased, additional research is needed to more fully understand the social context and the function that engaging in violence can serve (Hine & Welford, 2012; Letendre & Smith, 2011). Focusing on the experiences of female adolescents who had engaged in violence in the past year (e.g., hitting, pushing, or beating someone) is important to gain insight into the reasons for fighting. Studies to date have not examined self-reported reasons for fighting within the context of an intervention designed to reduce future involvement with violence. It remains unclear whether female adolescents in this context will talk about their involvement with fighting in a way that is similar to what has been found in more traditional research contexts (e.g. focus group, qualitative interview). Gathering this knowledge is a key step in enhancing the effectiveness of prevention programs addressing violence among this population.

The current qualitative study explores and describes self-reported reasons for fighting among female adolescents with a history of violence perpetration. We draw on secondary data from audio-taped, brief intervention sessions administered in the context of the SafERteens Study. This large randomized controlled trial tested interventions to reduce alcohol use and violence among adolescents seeking medical treatment in an urban emergency department (Cunningham et al., 2012; Walton et al 2010). SafERteens provides a unique opportunity to examine female adolescents' perspectives on violence in their own words and in an intervention context. Understanding the circumstances and reasons why females become physically aggressive is essential for developmental and prevention researchers interested in adolescent health (Graves, 2007; Greene, Peters & Associates, 1998). The current study builds on previous research that has used traditional qualitative methods to examine the social context for fighting among female adolescents (Jones, 2009; Molnar et al 2005; Letendre & Smith, 2011; Ness, 2004; 2010).

Methods

Data for this study were drawn from 72 audiotaped brief intervention sessions with female adolescents aged 14 to 18. These sessions were conducted as part of SafERteens, a larger randomized controlled trial testing the effectiveness of interventions that aim to reduce alcohol use and violent behaviors among adolescents seeking treatment at an inner-city emergency department (See Cunningham et al., 2012; Walton et al., 2010).

Participants & Procedures

Participants for SafERteens were recruited during the afternoon and evening shifts (12pm–11pm), seven days a week, from a hospital-based Emergency Department located in Flint, Michigan². Patients between ages 14 and 18 were approached to complete a screening survey via audio computer-assisted self-interview. Those adolescents who self-reported past year alcohol use (e.g., drinking beer, wine or liquor more than 2 times in the past year) and

engaging in one or more violent behavior (i.e., pushed/shoved, hit/punched, serious physical fight, group fighting, carrying or using a knife or gun) were eligible for the original study. Patients were excluded from screening if they had unstable vital signs, were actively suicidal, being treated for a sexual assault, in police custody, or unable to provide consent due to impaired cognitive function. All eligible and consenting participants were randomized into one of three treatment groups: a brief intervention (BI), focusing on alcohol use and violence, administered by a therapist; a similar BI administered by a computer; and an informational pamphlet control condition. For the current analyses, we examined a subset of females who were randomly assigned to the therapist-delivered BI ($n = 72$, 51% of the sessions for females and 28% of the total therapy sessions). Each of these participants completed one therapy session. These sessions were conducted over the first sixteen months of the SafERteens study. Audiotapes of these sessions were transcribed verbatim, reviewed by the research team for accuracy, and entered into NVivo for analysis. The intervention sessions lasted an average of 34.9 minutes ($SD = 11.2$ minutes) and were administered onsite in the emergency department by clinical research staff (e.g. social workers).

The intervention was grounded in motivational interviewing and used skill training techniques to help reduce the participant's involvement with violent behaviors and alcohol. Tablet computers were used during the semi-structured intervention sessions to both collect information and help provide feedback on the participant's alcohol use and involvement with violence. During the sessions, the therapist and adolescent discussed the teen's goals, values and involvement with alcohol and violence. Therapists encouraged the adolescent to reflect on the things that are important to them and how their current or future behaviors (i.e., fighting, weapon carriage and alcohol use) might impact future goal attainment. Therapists provided feedback on the adolescent's current involvement in violence and drinking in a nonconfrontational, nonjudgmental manner consistent with motivational interviewing. The intervention also used skill-building scenarios and role-plays that allowed participants to practice refusal/coping skills for not drinking and non-violent conflict resolution. These role plays were tailored to the adolescent's gender, level of involvement with alcohol and violence, as well as specific skill deficits (e.g., anger management, conflict resolution), and risk factors (e.g., illicit drug use, weapon carriage, contextual factors) (Cunningham et al., 2009; Resko et. al, 2012).

Participants ranged in age from 14 to 18 years old (Mean= 16 and $SD=1.3$). Over half the sample (58.3%) self-identified as African-American/black, 31.9% as white and 9.7% as another race or ethnicity (e.g. Asian, Hispanic). Two-thirds of participants (62.5%) reported their family received some form of public assistance (e.g. food stamps). Following the larger study inclusion criteria, the entire sample self-reported alcohol use and violent behavior in the past year. Nearly all participants (96.2%) reported violent behaviors directed toward peers while 57.7% reported aggression directed at a dating/romantic partner. In addition, 41.7% of the females reported involvement in a group fight and 37.5% reported carrying a weapon (e.g. knife). Over half the sample (58.3%) reported experiencing physical victimization at the hands of their peers while 40.3% reported physical victimization at the

²The Emergency Department where this study took place is a Level-I Trauma Center that provides the highest level of emergency medical services.

hands of a dating or romantic partner. A small proportion of participants (6.9%) reported that they were members of gangs.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in a two-phase process. Data analysis began with a “start list” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013 p. 81) of deductive codes developed from prior motivational research, clinical experience and theory. Charmaz (2014) encourages this approach where sensitizing concepts such as literature searches and clinical experiences serve as points of departure from which to study the data. The start-list included themes identified in previous studies such as protecting family members and defending one’s reputation. Two members of the research team independently read the transcripts and began open coding in NVivo, using the thematic approach suggested by this list. As coding and analysis continued, this initial “start list” was refined by removing codes that were not useful and adding codes that emerged as themes in the data. The two coders compared themes, discussed and clarified the meaning of the thematic codes, and revised the coding framework until there was consensus. After 25% of the transcripts were coded, the list of codes was organized hierarchically and developed into a fixed codebook that was used to analyze the remaining interviews in NVivo. The reasons the participants described for fighting in one particular situation often fit into more than one category. Twice during the coding process, at about half way through and about three-quarters of the way through, the coders completed a self-check and compared coding on the same sections of an intervention session (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). This comparison indicated high levels of agreement between coders (>80%). During analysis, the coders began writing thematic and then integrative memos to explore connections and contradictions across relevant themes. These memos formed the beginnings of this manuscript (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

For the second phase of data analysis, we used Erickson’s model (1986) of analytic induction, which is an iterative procedure for developing and testing empirical assertions in qualitative research. The corpus of data was reviewed by additional members of the research team with the goal of evaluating and organizing the reasons for fighting that were identified in the first phase of data analysis. In order to determine which themes to include on the final list, we went back to the data and assembled confirming and disconfirming evidence. We examined how often each reason was mentioned as well as the extensiveness, specificity and emotion with which the participants described these reasons. The extent of disconfirming evidence and discrepant cases was also examined (Erickson, 1986). Themes were revised or eliminated, based on their evidentiary adequacy, until a set of well- warranted themes remained.

Results

Based on their conversations during the brief intervention, it was clear that these young women viewed fighting as a ubiquitous behavior for female adolescents. Most participants believed that the majority of their female peers were frequently engaged in physical fights. As one seventeen year old noted: “It seems like all the females I know are always fighting, always fighting about something. Some dude, or clothes, pair of shoes, what she just did, she

rolled her eyes or bug you or all type of crazy stuff.” Similarly, many of the adolescents described how they were exposed to violence in their communities and consequently felt unsafe in their neighborhoods. Although therapists generally did not ask directly about victimization, many of the female adolescents in this study mentioned experiences of physical and sexual abuse. Several young women, for example, acknowledged that they were rape survivors or had experienced teen dating violence. References to these experiences were typically rather brief and minimized the impact of these experiences (e.g. “It’s nothing serious.”; “It was just that one time and he hasn’t done it since”). A few teens also described how they witnessed their mother being hit or had learned about abuse after the fact (e.g. saw bruises).

During the conversations with the therapists, the teens described many different reasons for fighting. In the following section, we describe the reasons for fighting that were most frequently offered. We also identify additional themes that were less commonly mentioned, but were described at great length or with considerable emotion. Because data have multiple meanings (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992) and the teens often had multiple reasons for fighting, the coded categories were not mutually exclusive.

Self-defense

Self-defense or self-protection was the most frequently cited reason for fighting. Situations where the participants gave self-defense as their reason for fighting included a broad range of incidents where someone either verbally harassed the teen (e.g. another teen was “talking mess” or “called them out” to fight), encroached on their personal space (e.g. “got in my face”) or physically touched them (e.g. “put their hands on me” or hit them). Participants who were quicker to fight described aggressive responses when faced with any of these situations. Fay³, a fifteen year old African American teen who reported numerous fights in the past year, stated:

I fight more than I should when I get into altercations, like it’s just these people come to you, they come to your house and they call you out and you know they wanna call you out in front of your friends and make you look like you’re scared or something and you kind of want to prove yourself like, you know I’m not scared.
(Fay, age 15)

Several teens who had been in multiple fights in the past year and were motivated by self-defense made a point that their fights were often initiated by other people. Lisa, a seventeen-year-old white teen stated:

I’m not really a shit starter, I’m not really trying to fight with people. I don’t want to fight for a stupid reason. But when they come at you, and put their hands on you, I mean you got to do something” (Lisa, age 17).

Kim, an African-American fourteen year old, expressed similar thoughts: “You know I have never fought unless the person hit me first and if I ever fight again they have to hit me first.” Other teens like Tia, a sixteen-year-old African American teen, noted that that they “had to

³The names of all participants have been changed.

fight” only when non-violent approaches to avoid conflict (e.g. talking to the teen or a teacher, avoiding the teen at school) were unsuccessful.

This girl, who was supposedly a friend, said some things to my best friend about me...I asked her about it and she was like ‘I didn’t say it and even if I did you’re not going to do nothing about it.’ I’m like okay whatever, let that be the end of it because she tried to make a scene. I tried to ignore her but then we had this class together. We get to that class and she just keeps constantly talking. I’m trying, that’s when I’m trying to avoid her and get my temper together. She’s gonna keep talking and keep talking until I got to the point where I was like ‘If you keep talking I’m gonna come across the desk and I’m gonna kick you in your face’. Then she was like ‘well you do what you gotta do’. and just kept talking. So I walked across and I kicked her in her face. It’s not funny but that’s what I did. (Tia, age 16)

These teens were more inclined to fight when they experienced extended verbal harassment and had been unsuccessful in getting the harassment to stop. Fifteen-year-old Jamie, for example, described how she eventually fought another teenager that had continually picked on her. She viewed the fight positively because afterwards:

She [the bully] just left me alone, and I was straight. It was nice to be able to go to school and not be all nervous like ‘oh what’s she gonna do today’ and looking over my shoulder, looking north, south, east and west just to make sure that I’m gonna be alright....I was like so tired of being picked on. (Jamie, age 15)

In situations involving repeated harassment, some teens considered aggression to be a form of self-defense. Comments from Dani, a sixteen-year-old African American teen, provide one example of this.

I didn’t want to get in that fight, but I had to beat that girl up because she was just like real disrespectful and I wasn’t trying to hear that. I had to beat her up, you know, she just had to get it. She was doing things like opening my locker, stealing my stuff...and the whole school had found out about that. She also tried to kiss my boyfriend, my baby’s dad, she tried to kiss him...I just used to get so humiliated, she would just do everything to stop anybody else from liking me and you know it was messing up my self-esteem and if I didn’t beat her up then you know, I just had to be the one to beat her up so she would just quit messing with me. (Dani, age 16)

Status, Respect and Safety—Closely related to the discussions of self-protection, the young women frequently described how fighting can provide a measure of status and respect. Many teens in our sample felt very strongly that fighting in some situations was “necessary” in order to protect their reputation and to prevent them from being bullied or attacked in the future.

You just can’t not fight. More people are gonna bother you if you don’t fight. If you don’t fight then everybody is gonna feel like they can run you and control you and bully you. If you stand up for yourself then people are not gonna mess with you. (Tia, age 16)

I don't wanna control it [my temper] because if I sit there and back off, you know, people are gonna think I'm a punk. I can't have it like that...If somebody comes to me wrong I have to start yelling or start hitting them. (Taylor, age 15)

I mean I'm not just gonna let anyone put their hands on me and disrespect me like that, I'm not. I hope it don't get to that point where she pulls out a razor or something like that...I can't let nobody put their hands on me. (Nina, age 16)

Several teens that discussed the enhanced reputation that comes with fighting mentioned incidents when they received praise for their fighting prowess. Manika, an African American teen age fifteen for example, described how her classmates applauded as she was arrested at school for fighting.

People started ...yelling like 'beat her butt, beat her butt. I tried to talk her out of it but she...dropped me to the ground and I ended up punching her...Then about 20 minutes after class started our officer of the school came in and was like put your hands behind your back. Everybody started cheering me on again. (Manika, age 15)

Several young women also raised the idea that fighting helped enhance their safety in addition to their reputation. These participants connected their experiences with fighting to other violence and crime in their communities. They told the therapist that fighting can help enhance their reputation and alter how people behave towards them. From this perspective, fighting had the potential to reduce future assaults, including sexual victimization. Several teens noted, for example, that fighting a guy was protective as it discouraged both males and females from "messing with you." In the following, fifteen-year-old Alethea echoed the sentiments expressed by several participants:

I feel like if I do beat the crap out of a guy more people will quit...trying to mess with me or you know, they try to make me mad enough...You know you get credit and nobody really messes with you. (Aleatha, age 15)

Revenge, Retaliation & the Cycle of Violence—Related to the discussions on fighting's impact on status and reputation, several teens described how fighting was important for getting revenge. In this context, the teens described the need for revenge for either real or perceived wrongdoing. Several females talked to the therapist about how some fights came about because they were intent on 'getting back at someone' that 'got them' or had 'won' a previous fight. A white sixteen-year-old participant, for example, described how important it was for her to get revenge after getting jumped:

I got jumped and then I went back for them at their house. Me and all my friends jumped in and got those girls. The cops got called and we all got arrested...My momma came and picked us up. It was just that, I mean I had to get her back. (Sierra, age 16)

An eighteen-year-old African American recalled an incident where another female hit her friend in the head with a bottle. Later on that participant and her friends "ended up going back and jumping that girl because of what she did" (Macy, age 18). Several of the teens discussed how they felt this cycle of violence was a difference between female and male adolescents' fighting patterns:

Guys fight and whoever wins, wins, whoever loses, loses and you're done. That's it. Like typical girl fights, you fight again if you lose. You come back and make sure you win some other time and it just never ends. (Sammie, age 18)

Many participants discussed how they got into fights with the same individuals on multiple occasions. Macy, for example, described how "the whole time I was in school I got in a fight at least twice a year with the same girl until I dropped out." When the therapists asked participants to think about how they could end this cycle, they frequently struggled to come up with a response. Several young women, including sixteen-year-old Sierra, expressed the view that the cycle of fighting would simply not end: "that's how it is. We just are gonna be fighting every time we see each other."

Defense of Family and Friends—Many of the young women commonly described fighting to protect or defend family members and friends. These situations were frequently described as "justified" and "necessary" forms of aggression. As Dani, age sixteen, noted, "If I have to defend myself, I'll defend myself. If I have to defend my little niece who is thirteen and coming to that age, if I have to defend her, I'll defend her." Robin, a white seventeen year old, recalled an incident involving her younger sister: "I was at home, sitting on the front porch and these girls across the street... was like jumping my little sister. I ran up there. I didn't think. I just ran over there and started fighting" (Robin, age 17). Several teens noted to their therapist, that in these types of situations their instinct was to start fighting and defend their family, often without much thought or effort to resolve the conflict in another manner.

Helping a friend who was threatened or attacked was also a commonly mentioned reason for fighting. In situations where a friend was physically attacked, many of the teens described fighting as a impulsive response. Jasmine, a seventeen-year-old African American teen, described one such example:

A big group of girls were following my friend, because they didn't like my friend. And she asked me to go to the locker room with her because she was scared a bunch of people were going to gang up on her. So I said yeah I'll go with you, and we never planned on fighting or anything until one of them got in her face and smacked her. (Jasmine, age 17)

A few participants described being drawn into a fight in order to get revenge for a friend:

I was fighting for my friend. It was her fight but it was because the girl had threatened her. It was over a boy. She [my friend] got caught messing with him and the girl threatened her house like 'when we see your car, my brothers and them are gonna shoot it up.'...When they first fought, the girl hit my friend in the head with a bottle and we was just up here [at the Emergency Department] not too long ago for that. And then we ended up coming back and jumping her because of what she did to my friend. That's where I came in to it. (Macy, 18)

Teens also described other instances where their friend was the aggressor who started a fight and drew them in:

Just recently we had a birthday party and we were drinking. My friend has a problem with somebody else. She [my friend] started it and got me involved and we ended up fighting that girl. I hurt myself and that girl. (Ana, age 16)

While teens like Ana were sometimes reluctant to fight in these situations, their loyalty to their friends was a strong motivator to fight.

Romantic Interests—Although the teens in our sample rarely admitted that they themselves engaged in fights over males, many stated that other females commonly fought over males or competing romantic interests. The comments of a African American participant provides one example of how these types of fights were typically viewed negatively

Girls these days mainly they wanna fight over stupid stuff like ‘oh you stole my boyfriend’. I almost got into a fight one time because this girl said ‘oh you stole my boyfriend’ and I was like he told me he broke up with you. Girls fight over the stupidest things. (Sammie, age 18)

The participants who described negative views of fighting over competing romantic interests often expressed similarly negative views of the males in their community. These teens talked about how males were not reliable and that relationships and hook-ups were short lived. Consequently, these teens viewed fighting another female over romantic interests as a foolish endeavor. A comment from Kendra, a seventeen-year-old African American teen, exemplifies this view:

Most of the girls at my school are fighting over boys. I would never fight over a boy, it’s not that serious because boys are gonna be boys. I don’t know any faithful boys at all. I don’t know, just because I’m only 17 and I’ve got a lot to go, but I haven’t met one worth it yet so I wouldn’t waste my time. I mean they’re liars to me, they lie about everything. They’re just trying to get what they want. (Kendra, age 17)

A sixteen-year-old African American participant expressed a similar perspective during the scenarios section of the intervention:

We ain’t even supposed to be fighting. I mean this is over a dude. After we fight he’s going to move onto the next girl anyway. Laughing at us cause we fighting over him and he know he’s lying to both of us. We’re looking crazy standing up here fighting over this boy. He don’t care about either one of us. He’s gonna go to the next girl anyway. (Rae, age 16)

Family Influences—Participants described the influence that their families, particularly their mothers, had on their fighting. Several African American teens noted their mothers *did not disapprove* of them fighting. One fourteen year old, for example, noted:

My mom don’t really care about me fighting. She said that’s something you’ve gotta do to make it through this world. I don’t believe in that. (pause) But you know, I can’t get into trouble with my parents cause my mom don’t care if I fight. (Vanessa, age 14)

During conversations with the therapists, a few African American participants described how their parents *actively encouraged* them to fight. Tanisha, an African American sixteen year old, suggested that this was a difference between white parents and African American parents:

Here you have your parents, when you're growing up, you have your parents saying 'oh if somebody hits you, you hit them back.' In white communities you have your parents saying you see a fight coming on or something like that you walk away. it's not like that in African American communities. It's if they hit you, you hit them back you don't let nobody put their hands on you. (Tanisha, age 16)

On more rare occasions, participants described situations where their mothers had become physically aggressive with them after they lost a fight. Tiffany, an African American seventeen year old, recalled a time where her and her cousin "were getting whooped by our mommas because we ain't beat these girls up." A small number of female adolescents also mentioned that they had fought alongside their mothers or aunts in group-fighting situations when they had gotten "jumped" or had "jumped" others to get revenge. One description of this type of situation arose during the scenarios section of the intervention. A seventeen-year-old, responded to the hypothetical situation suggesting she would get the help from her family in order to get revenge if she had gotten jumped:

Ali: I'd call my momma and my sister if that happened
 Therapist: And what would happen after that?
 Ali: We'd all go fight them.
 Therapist: Okay. Do you think that would be the best solution?
 Ali: Yes. There is no other way.

Coping motivations—Although not one of the most commonly cited reasons, several participants described the ways in which fighting was a coping strategy. These teens used fighting as a way to attenuate negative emotional arousal or cope with stressful experiences. Several females in our sample acknowledged that they fought to deal with feelings of anger. One white teen, for example, described how her fighting was less about her reputation and more about dealing with these strong emotions:

I know I don't have to fight you to prove that I'm not scared, but sometimes I just fight because I get anger built up. Sometimes I want a healthy way to release it; sometimes I just choose to fight because I don't care about a healthy way at that point in time. (Kayla, age 15)

Several teens expressed similar sentiments. An African American seventeen-year-old acknowledged that "when I'm irritated or I'm upset or I think about the people that have done me wrong I get the urge to fight, and that's more than it should be" (Destiny, 17). Another participant stated: "I just wish I didn't have a quick temper. I don't know cause little things make me mad so, I get irritated easy." These teens described how they are often unsuccessful in controlling the urge to fight when they are angry or in a "bad mood". They described how their aggression was an "automatic" response where they act impulsively when they are upset. Comments from an African American teen provides an example: "My temper was like out of control. Like one thing can be said and I just go haywire. Like 'What

did you do? Oh, I know you didn't'" (Tamika, age 15). These teens described how they "snap" often in response to something that, in hindsight they consider to be minor. A few of the African American teens in our sample felt that anger problems and quick reactions were more common among African American females. One African American teen

In Black communities you fight because it's an ongoing problem or the girl just has an attitude problem or an anger problem. 9 times out of 10 that's how it is in African American communities and white communities you don't really find it like. I was going to this one school and you don't really find a lot of fighting there unless it's between two black girls. I find that black girls snap faster than white girls do. (Michelle, age 17)

Alcohol and Fighting—Perhaps not surprisingly, since the SafERteens intervention focused on alcohol use and violence, several of the females in our sample connected their substance use and their fighting. Several older adolescents described how they were more prone to fighting after they had been drinking:

Whenever I'm drunk and I'm thinking about fighting somebody I'm gonna do it. If I'm not drunk 9 times out of 10 I'm not gonna fight them. (Michelle, age 17)

I don't fight that much. The only time I fight is to defend myself and if I'm drinking and somebody says something wrong to me. Then I'll try to fight them, but that's only because I'm under the influence. If I was sober I wouldn't. (Tasha, age 18)

I beat up my best friend's boyfriend when I was drinking. He walked past me and hit my hand and the drink spilled all down the front of me so I beat him up...then a couple weeks later I was drinking and I blew up on my boyfriend's best friend. I have a thing for best friends. (Tiffany, 17)

A few participants described how drinking or smoking marijuana was a coping strategy that helped them calm down or "chill" so they could avoid fighting.

Enjoyment—Although not frequently mentioned, a couple participants noted that fighting creates or enhances positive emotions and moods. These adolescents were internally driven and focused on the excitement and personal gratification that came with fighting. Several other females described fighting as "fun" that escalated and "got out of hand". As the teens described these incidents, they frequently noted they were "just playing around" or "play fighting" with friends or a romantic interest. In these situations, the adolescents were often unable to recall exactly how the "fun" escalated to something more serious.

I wrestle with my friends and we get carried away. Last night some of my friends got carried away when they were playing and they jumped this kid that was hanging out with us. Like for no reason, it was crazy. But I ended up having to push people off of him and people were pushing me and trying to get tough and stuff like that. (Rae, age 16)

Discussion

While all of the participants of this study had engaged in some form of aggressive behavior (e.g., hitting, pushing, or beating someone up) within the past year, it is notable that not all of the young women had ever discussed the reasons they were aggressive with an adult. Analysis of the brief intervention sessions highlights how the decisions to engage in fights are complex and multidimensional for female adolescents. Many of the young women in our sample had different reasons for fighting across situations and frequently had more than one reason for fighting within a particular situation. It is important that social workers understand what female adolescents perceive to be the benefits of fighting. From an individual level perspective, addressing what these adolescents perceive to be the benefits of fighting may be a key part of efforts to intervene and prevent violence among female adolescents. Participants in our sample frequently cited self-protection as a reason for fighting, which is consistent with previous research on delinquency. Pugh-Lilly, Neville, and Poulin's (2001) qualitative study of African-American female adolescents who were in an alternative school, found that the primary reason given for fighting and weapon carrying was for defense and protection. However, our qualitative analysis highlights how "self-defense" was used very broadly. For many teens protecting one's reputation, self-esteem and respect were a clear part of self-protection. Self-defense went beyond defending one's own physical integrity. Some teens in our sample described self-defense as responding to an impending attack, while many others described "self-defense" situations where there was no immediate threat but extended verbal harassment or threats. Prevention and intervention staff should take this into account and probe further when adolescents describe fighting in "self-defense."

Among the young women in our sample, violence and fights were also not typically described as discrete events. This is noteworthy as researchers generally examine violence among adolescents as individual events (Epstein-Ngo et al., 2013; Foshee et al., 2007; Rothman et al., 2012). Aggression among the young women was often the result of long standing rivalries and bullying. As such, it is important for social work clinicians and researchers to understand female adolescent aggression in its full context; otherwise, prevention and intervention efforts addressing violence as discrete, individual events may be misguided and incomplete.

Many of the young women in our sample identified reasons for fighting that were relational in nature. Relationships with their family, friends, romantic partners and other peers strongly influenced many decisions to fight or not fight. It is rather notable that the teens in our sample acknowledged fighting over competing romantic interests was fairly common in their schools and communities but did not report any personal experiences of fighting for these reasons. Prevention and intervention staff should be aware that young women may view these types of fights negatively and may not be willing to bring up these types of personal experiences. Fighting among the young women in our sample was sometimes influenced by a desire to protect people they cared about. Other times it was a way to gain approval from one's peers or family members. Previous studies (Ness, 2004; 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2004) among minority youth from inner-city communities has found fighting among female adolescents is commonly motivated by loyalty to friends. The influence of family members

who encouraged a teen to fight appeared to be more pronounced in our study. The females in Zimmerman and colleagues (2004) study of middle school students, for example, focused on peer influences for fighting and mentioned family less often when describing the influences on aggressive behavior. In our racially diverse sample we found family members, and particularly mothers, had a marked influence on the females' involvement in fights. Recognizing that family members, including parents, do not universally encourage their children to avoid fights and sometimes even encourage fighting is important for violence prevention programs. Many programs assume that parents will discourage their child from fighting (Johnson et al., 2012). To increase the effectiveness of violence prevention programs addressing fighting and other forms of violence, social relationships must be taken into account. Social relationships are particularly important when they combine with a quick anger trigger, alcohol consumption, the inability to see other options to fighting and a family expectation to fight. Our finding that parents do not unconditionally support non-violent conflict resolution highlights how prevention and intervention staff may face challenges when they encourage strategies to avoid fighting that go against the advice of family members and friends. Despite this challenge, interventions should consider strategies to leverage positive social influences as protective factors to discourage fighting among female adolescents. Prevention and intervention staff in urban communities should also be aware that some teens may suggest their cultural background plays a role in their fighting. Several of the African American teens described their perception that young African American women fought more often and for different reasons than young white women. A few African American participants also noted that their parents encouraged fighting and that this was a cultural difference among African American and white parents..

Consistent with earlier research on college students (Harris, 1992), our sample included several females who discussed how fighting was a way to deal with anger. These participants described how yelling at and hurting other persons helped them to feel better in some ways. Although fewer participants described fighting as a coping strategy and fighting for enjoyment, these reasons appeared to be particularly salient in our sample. The young women who mentioned these reasons spoke about these motivations at length or with considerable emotion. Understanding these perceived benefits of fighting can help clinical staff tailor prevention and intervention messages that are more personally meaningful and potentially more effective in reducing violence among young women.

Although the qualitative approach employed in this study provides a valuable perspective, it also has some inherent limitations. Unlike more traditional qualitative research in this area that has relied on interview or focus-group data, the current study used data from audio-recorded brief intervention sessions completed in an inner city ED. While this is a novel source of information, the context and the intervention's goal to reduce alcohol use and violence may have influenced the reasons for fighting that the females in our sample described. It is possible that participants in this context will have been more likely to minimize their involvement with violence, whether as victim, aggressor, or both. During a few of the sessions, for example, the young women sometimes appeared to downplay their behaviors stating that "it's nothing serious" or "we were just playing." Regardless of whether these participants may be underreporting or minimizing their behaviors, the findings from the current study provide unique insight on how young women discuss youth violence

in the context of an intervention. These results may therefore be useful for the development of interventions to prevent and intervene with violence among female adolescents, as well as for the clinical staff who deliver such programs. Participation in this study is also limited to those who self-report involvement with violence. It may be that reasons for fighting are different for female adolescents who do not accurately disclose their aggressive behaviors.

The results of this study build upon the existing literature and deepen understanding of the reasons young women choose to engage in fighting. The data provide additional information on the contextual factors (e.g. family influences) and perceived benefits related to physical fighting among female adolescents. Earlier qualitative studies have relied primarily on samples of female adolescents in large American cities, primarily Philadelphia and Chicago (e.g. Jones, 2009; Molnar et al, 2005; Ness, 2004; 2010). The current study focuses on the experiences of females aged 14 to 18 in a smaller inner-city community in Michigan. This sample includes a mix of African-American and white females, who are mostly not involved in gangs. While most of these teens are currently enrolled in school, our sample does include several participants who have dropped out of school and have not been represented in previous research in this area. In contrast to previous studies of female adolescents with a history of violence (e.g. Letendre & Smith, 2011; Molnar et al., 2005), we also focus on participants that have not necessarily come to the attention of officials because of their violent behavior. Insights from this study may help to improve our understanding of the reasons female adolescents choose to fight or not and highlight how female adolescents describe fighting in an intervention context. These insights could help inform the development and refinement of efforts to intervene and prevent violence among this population.

Conclusions

Examining the reasons for fighting provides important information for understanding the etiology of physically aggressive behavior and the promotion of health. By drawing on adolescent female's personal accounts and descriptions, we are able to further understand the complexity and heterogeneity of adolescent female violence (Foshee, et al., 2007). Analyses illustrated several reasons for female adolescents to engage in fights. Results of this study offer insights into female adolescents' involvement with fighting and highlight the opportunities and challenges in developing interventions addressing aggression among female adolescents. Addressing these reasons and the perceived benefits associated with fighting is important in order to more effectively intervene with and prevent violence among this population.

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