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Summary
Understanding Dating Violence: A Qualitative Study

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Dating violence refers to engaging in physical, verbal, sexual, psychological, and economic violence in a romantic relationship or imposing social restrictions on the partner(s) (Polat, 2015). Dating violence is investigated within its five aspects: physical, emotional, sexual, economic, and stalking. Research on violence points out that violence in dating relationships is at least as typical as in marriage (Makepeace, 1981; Roscoe & Bemaske, 1985). In a study with a sample of college students, Sugarman and Hotaling (1989) found that the rate of violence in dating relationships was approximately 30%, similar to in marriage. Dating violence is a common public health problem. Risk factors of dating violence are scrutinized to explore dating violence more effectively.

The Ecological/Transactional Model developed by Cicchetti and Lynch (1993) emphasizes individual, familial, and contextual factors to explain violent behaviors; therefore, this study employed these categories to examine risk factors of dating violence. Considering personal characteristics, those who have low relationship satisfaction, change partners excessively, have low self-esteem (Ackard & Neurmark-Sztainer, 2002; O'Keefe & Treister, 1988), experience anger and depression (O'Keefe, 2005), use alcohol and substances (Harned, 2002), and take sexual risks (Kaukinen, 2014) are reported to exert dating violence more. In the context of familial characteristics, those who have been subjected to domestic violence (O'Keefe, 2005), punished by their parents in childhood (Temple et al., 2018), neglected (Earnest & Brady, 2016), exposed to sexual abuse (Debowska et al., 2017) are reported to be inclined to dating violence more. Finally, cultural structure and the meanings attributed to gender roles have often been examined as contextual factors of dating violence (Reidy et al., 2015). In Turkey, Page and Ince (2008) suggested that the desire of men to control and punish women and to exercise and demonstrate power on them prevails when it comes to violence against women. Patriarchal family structure, isolation of women from the social environment, and discrepancies between educational attainments of couples are known to increase the risk of violence (Heise, 1998). Dating violence, which encompasses a large part of society and poses several risk factors, has many adverse consequences.

Individuals subjected to dating violence were previously found to report low self-esteem, self-blame, anger, anxiety (Makepeace, 1986; Smith & Donnelly, 2001), depression (Callahan et al., 2003), smoking and substance use (Ackard et al., 2007), eating disorders (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002), and suicidal thoughts and attempts (Ackard et al., 2007). There are also findings that dating violence may be a precursor to domestic violence in the future (Frieze, 2000; Smith & Donnelly, 2001), which reinforces the cycle of violence.

As evident in the literature, dating violence has many short- or long-term adverse effects on university students. For this reason, conducting a qualitative study appeared as a must to obtain an in-depth understanding of dating violence. Ultimately, this study aimed to explore male and female university students' thoughts and experiences about dating violence.

Method

Participants

The sample of the study was composed of 78 university students enrolled at Ege University. While 56% (n = 44) of the participants were females, 44% (n = 34) were males. The age range of the students was 18-22 years (M = 19, SD = 1.2).

Data Collection Instruments

The researchers generated open-ended questions to investigate the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of the participants concerning dating violence. Some questions used in the focus group interviews are: "What is dating violence?" "Could you tell us about the behaviors exhibited by the person you like and making you feel scared?" "Could you tell us about your behaviors making the person you like feel uncomfortable and frightened?" "How would you describe the people who have committed dating violence in your relationship or other

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relationships you know about?", "What would you say about the people who have experienced dating violence in your relationship or other relationships you know about?"

Procedure and Data Analysis

Ege University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee granted the ethical permission for the research. We also sought relevant permissions from the lecturers of the classes where we conducted the present study. Then, female and male interviewers conducted one-on-one interviews with female and male groups, respectively. We obtained written consent from the participants upon informing them about the purpose of the study. We held a total of 8 focus group interviews which lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. The interviews were recorded via a voice recorder upon the permissions of the participants. We ensured confidentiality during the interviews by using "numbers" assigned to the participants instead of their real names. In this study, we subjected the data to content analysis. Accordingly, two of the researchers carried out coding of the contents. Intercoder reliability was found to be .98. Also, they coded the responses to the question about the prevention of dating violence as "Effective" and "Ineffective." For this coding process, intercoder reliability was found to be .90. The researchers needed to come to a consensus on two statements.

Findings

In the study, where university students revealed their opinions on dating violence through the interview questions, the frequency of statements exceeded the number of participants (n = 78). The first question of the research was related to how the participants would define dating violence. However, the participants exemplified some behaviors in dating violence rather than defining it. Therefore, a small number of definitions (n = 22) were elicited from the participants. The definitions obtained were like "Anything done without the consent of the partner," "Anything that can stress the partner out," "Not being able to respond to mutual requests," "It is rather the abuse of love." The responses to the second and third questions were evaluated together. The responses given to these questions were clustered under 5 categories of dating violence: physical (9%, f = 22), emotional (72%, f = 187), sexual (17%, f = 45), economic (1%, f = 2), and stalking (1%, f = 3). The responses to the fourth question revealed the participants' opinions on the characteristics of perpetrators. We found out that 77% (f = 114) of the responses included individual, 14% (f = 20) included familial, and 9% (f = 14) were related to contextual explanations. Meanwhile, the characteristics of the victims were determined by the responses to the fifth question. Eighty-five percent (f = 98) of the statements were included in individual, 4% (f = 4) were considered in familial, and 12% (f = 16) were included in contextual aspects. In response to the sixth question, the participants produced solutions for what could be done after exposure to dating violence. The responses were in the categories of inability to do anything (28%, f = 18), ending the relationship (25%, f = 16), making decisions by the intensity of violence (22%, f = 14), taking action to solve the problem (11%, f = 7), doing the same to the perpetrator (9%, f = 6), reporting to authorities (3%, f = 18), and giving emotional reactions (2%, f = 1). The seventh question of the study allowed the participants to talk about the causes of dating violence. The responses were related to individual reasons (42%, f = 47), familial reasons (2%, f = 3), contextual reasons (50%, f = 56), cycle of violence (4%, f = 4), and avoidance of greater problems (2%, f = 3). The eighth question of the study was about people with whom the victims can share their dating violence experiences. The participants stated that they could share their such experiences with their friends (38%), families (32%), and partners (8%), a specialist (3%), everybody (1%), and unbiased people (1%). While 12% of the participants stated that they would not tell anyone about their dating violence experiences, 5% expressed that family members would never be informed about such experiences. We examined the reasons for not sharing such experiences through the responses to the ninth question. While 58% (f = 15) stated that they were afraid of negative reactions, 30% (f = 8) pointed out self-blame. In addition, 8% (f = 2) thought that their relatives could be biased towards them, and 4% (f = 1) stated that there was nobody around to share such experiences. The last question of the study was related to the prevention strategies. The categories were classified as effective and ineffective. Although few of the participants (f = 3) stated that dating violence could not be prevented, almost all proposed individual (34%, f = 36), familial (8%, f = 8), and contextual (58%, f = 62) prevention strategies. Whereas 69% of individual interventions (f = 25) were classified as "Effective," 31% (f = 11) were deemed to be "Ineffective." All of the familial and 85% of contextual interventions (f = 53) were considered "Effective," but 15% of contextual interventions (f = 9) were classified as "Ineffective."

Discussion

This study aimed to reveal an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of university students concerning dating violence. The results

showed that the participants uttered examples of emotional dating violence more than other types of dating violence, which may be explained with some possible reasons. First, considering the sociocultural structure of Turkey, the fact that sexuality is still a taboo may have prevented the participants from talking about sexual violence. Also, we thought that university students might abstain from talking about physical and sexual violence in front of others. Although we formed the study groups with students from different departments and unfamiliar with each other, they might remain reluctant to talk about such issues. We also discovered that the participants talked the least frequently about stalking and economic violence, which is consistent with previous findings. Other studies suggested that stalking and economic violence were reported less among the participants than other types of violence (Niolon et al., 2015; Sünetçi et al., 2016). The participants were more likely to get support from their friends and families after exposed to dating violence. A study by Martin et al., (2013) concluded that those exposed to dating violence sought help from informal sources, such as peers and family, rather than professionals. However, some of the responses were related to staying silent about such experiences. Ashley and Foshee (2005) discovered that the majority of the participants did not want to seek help after experiencing dating violence. As a continuation of this problem, we sought to uncover the reasons for not sharing their dating violence experiences. The themes that emerged based on their responses were fear of undesirable reactions, self-blame, biased attitudes of relatives, and having nobody around to share such experiences, respectively. Similar to the findings of this study, previous research concluded that adolescents and university students faced many obstacles in seeking help for dating violence, such as feeling shame, lack of information about the support sources, fear of stigma, and privacy concerns (Ashley & Foshee, 2005; Martin et al., 2013). Consequently, it is essential to inform the population about dating violence. Furthermore, the participants noted individual, familial, and contextual risk factors for dating violence. It is widely known that there is no single cause of violence but that it shows up due to the accumulation of multiple individual, familial, and contextual risk factors (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993).

This study has some considerable strengths. This study was the first to address the definition of dating violence among university students, types of dating violence, the students' experiences of dating violence, causes of violence, methods of coping with dating violence, and prevention strategies. In the study, eight focus group interviews with 78 participants enhanced the heterogeneity of the sample. In addition, the number of focus group interviews contributed to the validity and reliability of the research. Conducting focus group interviews can also be considered a strength of the study in providing a dynamic and interactive environment. Another strength of this research is that the interviewers and participants were of the same gender in the interviews, allowing the participants to share reliable and candid information. However, this study has some limitations. Firstly, conducting focus group interviews can also be considered a limitation of this study. Although we carefully formed the groups where the participants did not know each other, some students may have been affected by the grouping process and did not provide accurate information. Secondly, the findings of this study were only based on the experiences of university students. Further studies may replicate the research with a different sample. Thirdly, we did not regard whether the participants exerted or were exposed to dating violence before. Future research can be conducted only with university students who were subjected to dating violence or perpetrators of dating violence. Dating violence is a prevalent problem with adverse effects on individuals; hence, its recognition is critical among academics, specialists, teachers, and policymakers. Finally, there is a need more for prevention and intervention studies to be conducted in Turkey.