"A Thin Line Between Love and Hate"? Black Men as Victims and Perpetrators of Dating Violence

Carolyn M. West

ABSTRACT. Black men are a resilient, diverse group of individuals. However, due to their economic and socially marginalized status, they are at increased risk for intimate partner violence. The purpose of this article is to review the literature and discuss (a) Black men as victims of psychological, sexual, and physical dating violence; (b) Black men as perpetrators of the aforementioned forms of violence; (c) risk factors that make Black men vulnerable to dating violence, including socioeconomic status, exposure to family violence during childhood, and exposure to community violence; (d) limitations of the current research and future research directions; and (e) suggestions for prevention programs and culturally sensitive intervention programs that address sexism, challenge oppressive images, and encourage help-seeking and social support.

KEYWORDS. Dating violence, abuse, victimization, African American, Black, prevention, risk behavior, aggression

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Here I am lying in the hospital
Bandaged from feet to head
Just that much from dead
I didn't think my woman could do something like this to me
It's a thin line between love and hate

– *Thin Line Between Love and Hate* by the Persuaders (Poindexter, 1972)

Dating violence has been documented among individuals from all socioeconomic classes and racial/ethnic backgrounds (e.g., Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, & Hannan, 2003). However, it is important to focus on the experiences of Black men. They are a remarkably resilient, diverse group of individuals who span the spectrum of lifestyles, interests, education and income levels, religious backgrounds, and extent of assimilation, yet the legacy of slavery, racism, and economic oppression continues to influence their lives. As a result, a disproportionate number of Black men are incarcerated, unemployed, and impoverished (Jenkins, 2006; for an additional discussion on Black men and incarceration see, in this issue, Oliver & Hairston, 2008).

Due to their economic and socially marginalized status, Black men are at increased risk for intimate partner victimization and perpetration. For instance, compared to their White and Latino counterparts in both high school (O'Keefe & Treister, 1998) and college (Rouse, 1988), Black men were more likely to be victims of dating violence, such as pushing and shoving. In addition, Black men who had applied for marriage licenses were twice as likely as White men to have slapped their future wives (McLaughlin, Leonard, & Senchak, 1992).

Although violence may erupt among cohabiting, engaged, married, and divorced heterosexual couples, it is important to focus on aggression in dating relationships. The marriage rates for African Americans have been dropping since the 1960s, and today they have the lowest marriage rate of any racial group in the United States. To illustrate, Black men were more likely than their White counterparts to have never been married (45% vs. 28%, respectively; McKinnon, 2003). As marriage rates among Black Americans have decreased, the rates of intimate partner violence and homicide among Black unmarried intimates have increased. This suggests some displacement of violence from marital to nonmarital partnerships (Dugan, Nagin, & Rosenfeld, 2003). Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to review the literature and discuss (a) Black men as victims

of dating violence, (b) Black men as perpetrators of dating violence, (c) risk factors that make Black men vulnerable to dating violence, (d) limitations and future research directions, and (e) suggestions for prevention and intervention.

BLACK MEN AS VICTIMS

The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (1997) defined *dating violence* (also referred to in the literature as *courtship violence* and *premarital abuse*), as the ". . . perpetration or threat of an act of violence by at least one member of an unmarried couple on the other member within the context of dating or courtship. This violence encompasses any form of sexual assault, physical violence, and verbal and emotional abuse" (p. 1). Early research on dating violence seemed to be conducted under the premise that women were the primary victims and the majority of perpetrators were men. In fact, some studies only measured male-to-female aggression, which made it impossible to detect male victimization (e.g., McLaughlin et al., 1992). However, it is now clear that a substantial number of young men will be assaulted by their female partners.

Although difficult to operationalize, the most frequently reported form of dating violence involved some type of psychological, emotional, or verbal abuse. For instance, 64% of Black male middle school and high school students had been emotionally abused by a girlfriend (Holt & Espelage, 2005). In a college sample, some Black male students indicated that their girlfriends were jealous, overly critical, possessive women who monitored their time and discouraged their opposite sex friendships (Rouse, 1988). When asked about specific forms of verbal abuse, 91% of Black male undergraduates reported that their girlfriends had insulted or cursed at them, refused to talk to them, or said something to spite them (Clark, Beckett, Wells, & Dungee-Anderson, 1994). Similarly high rates were found among economically disadvantaged Black youth (ages 16 to 24) who were enrolled in Job Corps, a government-sponsored education and training program. A substantial number (48%) of these Black men had been degraded and 67% had been either insulted or called names by a girlfriend (West & Rose, 2000).

Typically, researchers and community members have neglected the sexual victimization of boys and men, but sexual coercion has been documented among Black men. For instance, 50% of Black male college students in Rouse's (1988) sample had been pressured to have sex or had

partners become angry if they refused sexual activity. More serious forms of sexual violence also were reported. A small number (2.3%) of Black male Minnesota high school students in the 9th and 12th grades indicated that they had been the victim of date rape (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002). A somewhat higher prevalence rate was found in nationally representative samples of students in grades 9 through 12. Over 6.6% of Black male high school students responded "yes" when asked, "Has a date ever forced you to have sex against your will" (Ackard et al., 2003). Although it was not possible to know how many of these rapes occurred within the context of a dating relationship, 8.4% of Black male high school students responded "yes" when asked, "Have you ever been physically forced to have sexual intercourse when you did not want to?" (Howard & Wang, 2005). In a sample of economically disadvantaged Job Corps participants, an even higher number of Black men reported sexual aggression, including forced genital fondling (21.7%), forced oral sex (16.9%), and attempted (20.5%) and completed (10.8%) rape (West & Rose, 2000).

Researchers have primarily focused on measuring physical aggression. Using a single-item measure, several scholars found comparable rates of victimization (7.2%) among Black male high school students in Minnesota (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002) and in nationally representative high school samples. For example, 6.3% of young Black men had been beaten up by the person they had dated in the 30 days prior to the survey (Valois, Oeltmann, Waller, & Hussey, 1999) and 7.9% indicated that a girlfriend had threatened to or had actually physically hurt them (Ackard et al., 2003). Investigators found similar amounts of victimization among Black male high school students: 13.5% (Eaton, Davis, Barrios, Brener, & Noonan, 2007) and 10.6% (Howard & Wang, 2003) responded "yes" when asked "During the past 12 months, did your girlfriend ever hit, slap, or physically hurt you on purpose?"

Single-item measures may not accurately capture the prevalence of dating violence. When researchers used standardized instruments that included behavior-specific items, participants reported higher rates of physical victimization. For example, when researchers utilized the Victimization Dating Relationship Scale, slightly more than one half (53%) of a sample of Black male middle and high school students reported dating violence victimization (Holt & Espelage, 2005). However, most researchers have used the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) or a modified version of this scale, which categorized intimate partner violence as *minor* (e.g., threw objects, pushed, grabbed, shoved, and slapped) or *severe* (e.g., choked, beat up, used weapons; Straus, 1979).

Based on the CTS, Clark and colleagues (1994) discovered that 41% of the Black college men in their sample had been physically abused by a partner at least once. The aggression most often took the form of pushing, slapping, or hitting. Similarly, 35% of young (19- to 20-year-old) Black men in a low-income community sample had been hit, punched, or slapped (16.3%); pushed, grabbed, or shoved (13.5%); and scratched or bit (10.4%) by a partner (O'Donnell et al., 2006). However, more severe acts were found when the CTS was administered to Job Corps participants. More specifically, the young men in this sample had been beaten up (16.9%) and choked (18.5%) by a girlfriend. In addition, an alarming number had been threatened with a knife or gun (25%) or actually assaulted with a weapon (13%; West & Rose, 2000).

The rates of psychological, sexual, and physical dating violence perpetrated against Black men are unacceptably high. In fact, Rouse (1988) noted that when compared to White and Latino male undergraduates, "among dating students in this sample, the highest percentages for partner's use of physical force and consequences experienced as a result were for Black men" (p. 318). Although researchers did not survey both members of the couple, an examination of gender differences revealed that Black women reported using more violence against boyfriends than Black men reported using against their girlfriends (Clark et al., 1994; DeMaris, 1990).

Interestingly, some researchers have inferred that young men may actually experience multiple types of dating violence (Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007; O'Keefe & Treister, 1998). One form of female-perpetrated violence may be perceived as acceptable, "playful" aggression that is not taken seriously and therefore has few deleterious emotional or physical consequences. For example, some impoverished Black adolescent girls used violence in response to infidelity and others inflicted violence to evoke a reaction from their emotionally numb boyfriends or in frustration after their partners were unsupportive. However, the violence initiated by these teenage girls was viewed as overly "emotional" and ineffective. Rather than feeling threatened, perhaps because of the physical strength differential, the adolescent boys minimized the violence and, in some cases, described it as comical (Miller & White, 2003). In contrast, a second form of female-perpetrated violence may be viewed as an assault, in which the male victim experienced some adverse consequence. For example, 13% of the Black college men surveyed by Rouse (1988) sustained a visible injury or required medical help after being assaulted by a girlfriend. Clearly, violence inflicted by women, even if it

is meant to be "playful," should not be excused and men's victimization should not be minimized.

On the other hand, it would be premature to conclude that violence in Black male-female relationships is gender-neutral. Most researchers have merely counted violent acts, neglecting to consider gender differences in the context, severity, and motivations for female-perpetrated violence, such as self-defense or retaliation for violence used against them. Furthermore, Black women's use of violence often occurs in the context of gender inequality in which their aggression lacks the same meaning and impact as aggression used by their male partner. That is, although Black women assaulted their partners, sometimes severely enough to cause injuries, they also sustained serious injuries and higher rates of intimate partner homicide. In fact, Black women were twice as likely to be killed by their boyfriends compared to the rates of Black men murdered by their girlfriends (3.49 and 1.75 per 100,000, respectively; Fox & Zawitz, 2006). In general, Black women lack the social and physical power to use coercive control to terrorize and subjugate their male partners (for a detailed discussion, see West, 2007).

BLACK MEN AS PERPETRATORS

Researchers have found a positive association between sustaining and inflicting verbal and physical dating violence (Clark et al., 1994). Alternatively stated, a substantial number of Black male victims are also aggressors. As expected, perpetrators most frequently reported verbal and psychological abuse. The majority (92%) of Black college men had insulted or cursed at, refused to talk to, or said something to spite their girlfriends (Clark et al., 1994). Male Job Corps participants had inflicted high rates of emotional abuse as well. More than 70% had said mean things, insulted, or criticized their girlfriends. In addition, more men made their partners feel inferior (57.5%) and degraded them (53.7%) than their female counterparts (36.5% and 37.9%, respectively; West & Rose, 2000).

Sexual violence is a frequent but often underreported occurrence in Black intimate relationships (for a detailed discussion, see West, 2006). In a nationally representative sample of Black high school students, 9% of males endorsed the item "Have you ever forced anyone to have sexual intercourse with you?" (Valois et al., 1999). Among Job Corps participants, Black male youth committed a broad range of sexually aggressive

acts, including forced breast fondling (20.5%), genital fondling (15.7%), and oral sex (14.5%). More serious forms of assault were reported as well. Over one fifth (20.5%) of participants had committed an attempted rape and 14.5% had forced a female partner to have sexual intercourse (West & Rose, 2000).

Regrettably, some men do not perceive forced sexual intercourse as rape. To illustrate, one Black male antirape activist, who had a history of sexually aggressive behavior, noted in his survey:

> When I was growing up, my buddies and I used to think that getting some [sex] on a date automatically meant *taking* some . . . Now that I'm older, I know how wrong that was, and that what we did back then was really rape (even though we didn't see it like that). (White, Potgieter, Strube, Fisher, & Umana, 1997, p. 413)

Some sexual attacks took the form of gang rapes or "running trains" on girlfriends or other vulnerable women in the community. Notably, among the 40 impoverished Black adolescent boys interviewed by Like and Miller (2006), 16 admitted to participating in this form of sexual aggression. Even these brutal sexual attacks were not always categorized as rape. Instead, this form of sexual aggression was viewed as a conquest or as a form of male bonding (Like & Miller, 2006). In other cases, gang rapes were a form of recreation as McCall (1994), a *Washington Post* reporter, explained in his autobiography: "Although everyone knew it could lead to trouble with the law, I think few guys thought of it as rape. It was viewed as a social thing among hanging partners, like passing a joint" (p. 42).

Sadly, McCall (1994) and his peers were correct in their assessment of the legal and social consequences associated with their sexual aggression. African American men who assaulted Black intimate partners and acquaintances received the most lenient punishment of all race/relationship categories (e.g., compared to Black men raping a White female stranger; Maxwell, Robinson, & Post, 2003). Following such a brutal assault, the women and girls, some of them as young as thirteen, were traumatized, stigmatized, and deemed ineligible for the status of respectable women or girlfriend. Thus, "no way she could be somebody's straight-up girl after going through a train" (McCall, p. 43).

Black men also inflicted an unacceptably high rate of physical dating violence. Among high school students, 8% had used violence against a girlfriend (Valois et al., 1999). The rates of violence increased with the

age of the perpetrator. Approximately, one quarter of young, urban Black men (O'Donnell et al., 2006) and one third of Black college men (Clark et al., 1994) and Black men who had applied for a marriage license (McLaughlin et al., 1992) had used violence against an intimate partner. Much of the violence was minor, as defined by the CTS.

Nevertheless, it should not be minimized. Being slapped, pushed, or shoved can be traumatic for both victims and perpetrators. Powell (2001), a noted hip-hop journalist, described such an assault:

> My girlfriend and I had been arguing most of the day . . . Enraged, I grabbed her by the seat of her shorts and pulled her back into the apartment. We struggled in the kitchen, the dining area and the bathroom. As we were moving toward the living room, I shoved her into the bathroom door. Her face bruised, she began to cry uncontrollably, and I tried to calm her down as we wrestled on the living-room floor. When she let out a high pitched yell for help, I jumped to my feet, suddenly aware of what I was doing. Shaking with fear and exhaustion, I watched my girlfriend run barefoot out of our apartment into the street. (p. 221)

When Powell reflected on his abusive conduct, he was deeply disturbed by how quickly he had "managed to join the swelling ranks of abusive men with relative ease" (p. 221). In contrast, other perpetrators seemed to minimize such behavior. One Black inner city adolescent explained, "my friends don't much hit their girlfriends. If anything, they'll push 'em and yank 'em and grab 'em but it ain't like a balled up fist or smack type of thing" (Miller & White, 2003, p. 1236).

Equally disturbing, the presence of minor premarital violence does not prevent some couples from establishing more committed relationships. For example, upon completion of their application for a marriage license, 29% of the interviewed Black men admitted that they had pushed, shoved, or slapped their future wife (McLaughlin et al., 1992). A smaller but substantial number of perpetrators escalated from inflicting minor to more severe aggression. As evidence, one quarter of the Job Corps men had beaten, choked, threatened, or actually used a weapon against their girlfriend (West & Rose, 2000).

Interestingly, young Black men commonly asserted that male violence against women was inappropriate and unmanly (e.g., only "punks" strike their girlfriends). How then did they justify dating violence committed by themselves and their peers? When interviewed, inner city adolescent

males claimed that male violence was an appropriate reaction to a young woman who disrespected her boyfriend or challenged male authority by "running her mouth to much." If she was upset or had confronted him about his undesirable behavior, such as infidelity, young men identified dating violence as a necessary or effective technique to help an emotional girlfriend "chill out" and relax. Physical violence was also warranted when women violated traditional female gender roles, such as drinking too much, using drugs, or being unfaithful (Miller & White, 2003). In focus group interviews conducted with young adults (ages 14 to 22) who were enrolled in an urban high school and training center for disadvantaged youths, Black males described gender-based violence as an emotional relief that enabled the perpetrator to express his frustration. Moreover, dating violence could enhance the batterers' self-esteem and sense of power (Johnson et al., 2005).

To summarize, dating violence can begin in middle or high school (Holt & Espelage, 2005), occur among college students (Bougere, Rowley, & Lee, 2004), and continue during the engagement period (McLaughlin et al., 1992). Black men are the victims and perpetrators of emotional, psychological, and verbal abuse in the form of insults, name calling, and degrading comments. Although some African American men endure sexual coercion and forced sexual contact, they also commit serious acts of sexual aggression, including attempted or completed rape or gang rapes, which are often unreported. Physical assaults, primarily pushing, shoving, and slapping, were inflicted and sustained in approximately one third of dating relationships. However, in some cases dating violence escalated to more serious assaults, including homicide.

RISK FACTORS

Of course, the majority of Black men do not commit violent acts against their girlfriends and dates. Consequently, it is important to identify the risk factors that increase the probability that some young men will assault their partners. Three risk factors have consistently emerged in the literature. First, lower socioeconomic status was associated with higher rates of dating violence (e.g., Ackard et al., 2003; DeMaris, 1990). For example, although middle-class, suburban Black youth reported premarital abuse (Feldman & Gowen, 1998), dating violence was more prevalent among African Americans who resided in communities that were characterized by entrenched poverty (Scherzer & Pinderhughes, 2002).

Second, dating violence has been linked to childhood exposure to family violence in the form of witnessing parental abuse or being the victim of physical or emotional child abuse. Often referred to as the intergenerational transmission of violence, this theory suggests that when family violence is modeled and rewarded, there is an increased probability that violence will be enacted in adolescent and adult intimate relationships. This is not to say that exposure to violence in the family of origin will inevitably lead to dating violence victimization or perpetration. In fact, among Black male undergraduates, observation of parental violence was not significantly associated with dating violence victimization (Rouse, 1988). However, this association was found in a number of other studies. In a sample of eighth and ninth graders in a rural county in North Carolina, exposure to family violence (in the form of father's use of corporal punishment, defined as spanking or hitting) predicted the initiation of courtship violence by adolescent Black males (Foshee, Ennett, Bauman, Benefield, & Suchindran, 2005). Among Black college men, witnessing parental fighting (e.g., either or both parents hitting each other; DeMaris, 1990) or describing their father as psychologically controlling (e.g., "Says if I love him, I'd do what he wants me to do") was positively related to violence against girlfriends (Clark et al., 1994).

Finally, being involved with or exposed to community violence has been linked to dating violence (Malik, Sorenson, & Aneshensel, 1997). In a 6-year longitudinal study with inner-city Black male eighth graders, researchers found a correlation between middle school aggression and subsequent dating violence. Even after controlling for risk behaviors such as substance use, early sexual initiation, and the presence of physical aggression in the childhood home, participation in earlier childhood aggression (in the form of fighting or carrying a weapon) was positively associated with dating violence victimization and perpetration (O'Donnell et al., 2006).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

It is important to acknowledge the limitation of the current research on prevalence rates and risk factors associated with dating violence among African American boys and men. Many of these studies were based on urban, low-income, African American youth (e.g., Miller & White, 2003). Consequently, these findings may not reflect the experiences of a vast majority of Black men. Future researchers should utilize more diverse

samples. For example, researchers could include demographic variables such as age, racial identity, geographic location, level of education, social class background, and sexual orientation.

Cross-sectional data cannot address cause and effect. Longitudinal studies, which follow a large group of boys through their dating years and into adulthood, are needed to understand the short-term and long-term effects of dating violence and to address the question of causality (e.g., Holt & Espelage, 2005). To date, the majority of the research on premarital abuse utilizes data based on responses from only one member of a dating couple. Couples data are needed to gain a deeper conceptualization of the dynamics of dating violence.

Aside from methodological concerns, researchers should use caution when they interpret and discuss their findings. Harrison and Esqueda (2001) presented a careful, scientific discussion of the formation, maintenance, and impact of negative stereotypes regarding Black men and interpersonal violence. The fear is that these stereotypes, coupled with research findings, will be used to dismiss large numbers of Black men as deviant, incorrigible, and unworthy of public policy efforts aimed at anything other than incarceration and social control. On the other hand, the high rates of dating violence in this population must not be ignored. Ultimately, antiviolence activists, community members, and other stakeholders must engage in candid discussions about the complexity of intimate partner violence in the lives of African American men. That is, they must acknowledge the problem without reinforcing the stereotype that Black men are culturally or biologically more prone to violence.

PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION

Dating violence can compromise the physical and mental well-being of African American men. As evidence, Black men who are dating violence victims reported higher levels of anxiety and depression (Holt & Espelage, 2005). In addition, dating violence among young Black men has been associated with a range of risky behaviors. More specifically, victims and perpetrators had more sexual partners, participated in more physical fights, and drank more heavily than their nonviolent peers (Valois et al., 1999). Based on the serious risk behaviors and the psychological health problems associated with dating violence, it is important to craft culturally sensitive programs that address sexism, challenge oppressive images, and encourage help-seeking and social support. Accordingly,

this final section will provide examples of culturally sensitive programs, responses, and techniques.

Culturally Sensitive Programs

Ideally, prevention efforts should be initiated before violence begins and unhealthy relationship dynamics become established. This may be accomplished in several ways. First, higher rates of dating aggression are reported by Black men who experience violence in their families, communities, and peer groups. Presumably, dating violence would diminish if there were a reduction in Black men's exposure to family violence, in the form of parental fighting and child abuse, community violence, and access to weapons (Malik et al., 1997). It is worth repeating: Although African American men experience elevated rates of violence, they are not biologically or culturally more prone to violence than any other ethnic groups. Rather, many Black men are economically and socially disadvantaged, which increases the probability that they will inflict and sustain all forms of violence. Consequently, improving the employment status, job conditions, and economic well-being of all African Americans should drastically reduce intimate partner violence (Fox, Benson, DeMaris, & Van Wyk, 2002).

Several prevention initiatives targeting African American males have been successful with middle school (Macgowan, 1997; Weisz & Black, 2001) and college students (Heppner, Neville, Smith, Kivlighan, & Gershuny, 1999). Even adjudicated African American adolescent males were receptive to prevention programs, especially if they had witnessed high levels of parental male-to-female violence (Salazar & Cook, 2006). After the programs were conducted, researchers noted increased knowledge and changes in attitudes toward relationship violence. This suggests that prevention programs should begin in middle school and continue during high school and college. However, a significant number of Black men are pushed out of the traditional education system (Jenkins, 2006), which makes school-based programs less accessible to many Black men. Therefore, a special effort should be made to reach incarcerated men and men in the larger community. For example, faith-based groups, social service organizations, and medical centers could create media campaigns and sponsor prevention programs for men who are cohabitating, engaged to be married, or dating after a divorce.

Initially, young men may posture for their peers or hesitate to discuss interpersonal relationships. Therefore, they may benefit from longer

sessions (e.g., 12 weeks vs. several hours) and gender-segregated groups. A Black male facilitator could model nonviolent behavior (Weisz & Black, 2001). More importantly, prevention and intervention programs should be culturally specific. For example, facilitators and participants could explore the intersections of racism and sexism, dispel stereotypes about Black women, and watch and critique movies from Black popular culture to uncover how male dominance encourages violence against women (Salazar & Cook, 2006). The program should include culturally relevant content, such as specific information about race-related rape myths and statistics on the prevalence rates of intimate partner violence. When intervention programs are infused with culturally sensitive content, they become more personally relevant, which in turn makes Black men more motivated to participate and listen to the message (Heppner et al., 1999).

Address Sexism

Williams (1998) strongly asserted that "sexism gives all men who batter a license to abuse" (p. 85). The expression of sexism in the form of gender-based violence is further complicated by Black men's displaced anger and internalized racial oppression. For example, although he and his peers professed to love Black women, as an adult McCall (1994) concluded that gang rape was actually a reflection of their contempt for Black women and themselves as Black men. He poignantly wrote: "I realized that we thought we loved sisters but that we actually hated them. We hated them because they were black and we were black, and, on some level much deeper than we realized, we hated the hell out of ourselves" (p. 48). Male socialization and the desire to control a female partner, which is "the highest form of sexism," are some of the other influences that contribute to dating violence (Powell, 2001, p. 222). In contrast, sexually nonaggressive Black men and their anti-rape activist peers possessed more egalitarian attitudes toward women (White et al., 1997). Therefore, prevention programs should strive to change male dominant attitudes that promote woman abuse, which will hopefully prevent future assaults (Salazar & Cook, 2006).

Addressing sexism does not mean that women's use of violence should be tolerated or excused. Whereas both partners may use violence, when taken in context the frequency, severity, and motivations (e.g., self-defense) are seldom equal or gender-neutral. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that some women are the primary aggressors or use violence

in a playful manner (West, 2007). If the dating partner was perceived as physically aggressive, Black men were more likely to report using physical aggression against their partner (Clark et al., 1994). Thus, each violent episode creates a risk and vulnerability for a violent response and sets the stage for future violent episodes. Simply put, intervention and prevention programs must strive to break the cycle of aggression for both men and women.

Challenge Oppressive Images

A major emphasis should be placed on exploring the perceptions that Black men have of themselves and their partners. For example, more dating aggression was reported by young African Americans who endorsed adversarial sexual beliefs (e.g., "men are only out for one thing," "a lot of women get pleasure from putting men down") and antagonistic beliefs concerning Black male-female relationships (e.g., "all Black men have a little dog in them," "Black women have too much power in their families"). It is not possible to know the temporal order of these beliefs. That is, were the adversarial beliefs the result of being victimized or were the beliefs developed prior to the relationship and used to justify dating aggression (West & Rose, 2000)? Regardless of the origins, antagonistic beliefs are quite prevalent among young Black adults and are reinforced by the popular culture in the form of hip hop lyrics and music videos. For example, Black women are visually and lyrically beaten, raped, verbally abused, and murdered in "gangsta" rap music and videos. Sex becomes a form of torture in which men are encouraged to break "that thing in half" and "leave some stretch marks" in a woman's mouth after oral sex (Armstrong, 2001).

In general, when compared to White male and female and Black female college students, African American male undergraduates endorsed more rape myths and held more gender role stereotypes about rape. For example, they more strongly agreed with items such as "Women often falsely accuse men of rape" and "Victims of rape are usually a little to blame for the crime" (Giacopassi & Dull, 1986; Sapp, Farrell, Johnson, & Hitchcock, 1999). Misogynistic music may desensitize listeners to sexual exploitation and violence against women, which may encourage and reinforce these rape myths. As evidence, Black male college students who preferred explicit rap lyrics had attitudes that were significantly more rape-prone than those who disliked these lyrics (Wade & Thomas-Gunnar, 1993). Even exposure to nonviolent hip hop music and imagery

has been associated with greater acceptance of dating violence among Black adolescents (Johnson, Adams, Ashburn, & Reed, 1995). Although young adults may claim immunity from these media images, their exposure to some forms of hip hop seem to reinforce the myth that "certain women 'choose' be abused, and also that abusive men are the products of their environment but abused women are products of their (faulty) choices" (Squires, Kohn-Wood, Chavous, & Carter, 2006, p. 733).

It is troubling that more than 50% of the college educated Black men in one study agreed that rap music accurately reflects at least some of the reality of gender relations between Black men and women (Wade & Thomas-Gunnar, 1993). It is equally problematic if Black men attempt to mimic the excessive sexual activity that is promoted in hip hop. Early sexual initiation, perhaps through increased intimacy and perceived need for power over one's partner (O'Donnell et al.., 2006), and greater numbers of sexual partners (Howard & Wang, 2003; Valois et al., 1999) are risk factors for dating violence perpetration among Black men. Although there is no causal link between dating violence and exposure to hip hop music, prevention programs should include a component that identifies and challenges all negative media images that encourage and normalize violence against women or depict Black men as inherently violent or hypersexual (for a discussion of rap/Hip Hop music and Black male violence see, in this issue, powell, 2008).

Encourage Help Seeking and Social Support

Too often, African American men are portrayed within the mainstream society, and sometimes within the Black community, as irresponsible and prone to violence, which can result in self-perpetuating stereotypes. As a result, intervention with Black men who are suspected of premarital abuse brings them into direct confrontation with undesirable societal images of themselves. In order to avoid their discomfort and fear of reinforcing this stereotype, some Black men are reluctant to seek help (Clark et al., 1994). Intervention and treatment programs should acknowledge the existence of these stereotypes and avoid vilifying African American men while simultaneously offering support and holding men accountable for their violence (Williams, 1998). On the other hand, help-seeking and victimization are incompatible with the stereotypical masculine gender role. Failure to achieve this masculine standard can result in embarrassment, denial, self-blame, and fear, which can contribute to the underreporting of dating violence by Black boys and men. Efforts should be made to destigmatize the reporting of all forms of courtship violence, especially sexual coercion.

On a more positive note, access to a strong social support network seemed to reduce the likelihood of dating violence and helped victims cope with the abuse. Black youths were less likely to be victims of dating violence if they attended religious services or if their parent/ guardian monitored their behavior most or all of the time (Howard, Qiu, & Boekeloo, 2003). When faced with the possibility of dating violence, Black male middle schoolers expressed a willingness to seek assistance. Compared to girls, boys were less likely to turn to friends, mothers, and grandmothers and instead preferred to talk to their fathers (Black & Weisz, 2003). This highlights the importance of Black fathers and parental figures as nonviolent role models and trusted confidantes. Maternal social support is equally as important and was associated with a reduction in anxiety and depression among Black male adolescents who experienced high levels of dating violence (Holt & Espelage, 2005).

To summarize, primary prevention efforts can increase participants' awareness of dating violence and strengthen social support systems, which can reduce the likelihood that youth will experience premarital abuse. Secondary prevention and treatment for Black boys and men who are at risk and those who have already experienced violence can include appropriate screening and early intervention in the form of education programs and therapy. The goal is to minimize the negative effects of dating violence and to prevent future assaults. Regardless of the type of intervention, service providers should strive to provide culturally sensitive programs that address sexism, challenge oppressive images, and encourage help-seeking.

CONCLUSION

The sweetest woman in the world
Could be the meanest woman in the world
If you make her that way
You keep hurting her
She'll keep being quiet
She might be holding something inside
That'll really, really hurt you one day.

– from the Persuaders' *Thin Line Between Love and Hate* (Poindexter, 1972)

Popular music is filled with descriptions of the dating violence that is experienced and perpetrated by Black men. For example, the Persuaders' sung about intimate partner assault in their 1972 rhythm-and-blues classic, *A Thin Line Between Love and Hate*. It is 5:00a.m., and the singer explained that "I'm just getting in." His partner never raised her voice in anger; instead, she opened the door, took his coat, and offered him a meal. Although the woman appeared welcoming, she eventually assaulted him and left him the hospital "bandaged from foot to head." More recently, hip hop artists have used misogynistic lyrics and a funky beat to describe sexual assault and violence against women (Adams & Fuller, 2006). Regardless of the soundtrack, the message is the same: There is a great deal of violence and sadness in the lives of some African American couples. It is imperative that these intimate partners work with advocates, therapists, community members, and other stakeholders to develop more appropriate conflict resolution strategies and create more healthy relationships. If this goal can be accomplished, far fewer Black men and women will cross the thin line between love and hate.

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