



Unhealthy romantic relationships among young persons: Implication for social work practice in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Human beings engage in several productive and/or unproductive relationships during their lifetime. Romantic relationship, one of such relationships, can be both exhilarating and supportive, but it can also be destructive. In recognition of humans as psychosocial beings capable of experiencing social suffering, this paper explored how young people identify and deal with unhealthy romantic relationships. Symbolic interaction theory was adopted for the study. Focus group discussion (FGD) and in-depth interviews were conducted with 28 young adults in a community in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu state, Nigeria. Twenty-four persons participated in the FGD while 4 persons were interviewed. The result showed that many adolescents and young adults, especially the women, unknowingly entered unhealthy romantic relationships where they suffered emotional, psychological and physical abuses. Some chose to stay in it for the values they got, while others opted out after they had tried but failed to get the relationship to work productively. Implications of these findings for social work practice in Nigeria were explored. The study recommended prompt intervention of social workers in advocacy and counselling, identifying patterns of behaviour in an unhealthy romantic relationship, and educating the young adults on the viability of self-empowerment as a potent vehicle for the realisation of happier life and healthy romantic relationships.

Introduction

Human beings in general go through life with different kinds of needs - physical, emotional and psychological. Some of these needs require reaching out to others for the satisfaction of such needs. Hence, relationships are part of human existence, and this predisposes people to seek and get into relationships with others. Most young persons may not choose to enter romantic relationships that would be harmful to them, however, every romantic relationship has the potential for both positive and negative outcomes (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). It is estimated that abuse/violence in romantic relationships affects between 9% and 38% of young couples (González-Ortega, Echeburúa, & De Corral, 2008) and women tend to be the major victims of relationship abuse and violence with 35% of women worldwide having experienced abuse and violence in intimate relationships (World Health Organization, 2017). For clarity, unhealthy romantic relationships do not always involve physical violence. Young people also experience physiological and emotional abuse in romantic relationships, which are nonphysical behaviours designed to control, subdue, punish or isolate a partner through humiliation and fear (Engel, 2002)

In several cases of unhealthy romantic relationships, people who are lethal in the relationship are rarely aware of their toxicity. They may be too self-absorbed and preoccupied with their own emotions, interests, needs, and goals which makes them unaware of the needs, goals, interests, and emotions of others (Brown, 2017). Again, unhealthy romantic relationship is not selective of age, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or location of residence; hence, anyone could become

a victim (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2006). Research suggests that the risk of getting into an unhealthy romantic relationship and becoming a victim emerges in adolescence (Hickman, Jaycox, & Arnoff, 2004; Tharp et al., 2009), with many of the related risk factors becoming more pronounced from early to late adolescence (Wolfe & Feiring, 2000, World Health Organization, n.d), while its effects may continue to manifest throughout adulthood. Experiencing abuse in an unhealthy relationship has been associated with an increased likelihood of repeatedly entering and experiencing unhealthy relationships in the future (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013; Public Health Agency of Canada, PHAC, 2006). This may be because most relationship skills and patterns developed as adolescents, have been shown to show up in future relationships (Lundgren & Amin, 2015; McElwain et al., 2016; PHAC, 2016; Tharp et al., 2009). (PHAC, 2006; Tharp et al., 2009).

Healthy relationships help in optimum functioning of individuals, whereas unhealthy romantic relationships bring individuals to a state of despair and frustration. Kerpelman et al. (2010) identified some of the positive outcomes associated with romantic relationships such as positive effects on academic performance, interpersonal skills, support for future goals, sexual pleasures, happiness, increased self-esteem and resilience. Negative effects were noted to include abuse, violence, depression, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and other harmful aftermaths. Unhealthy romantic relationships can also lead to psychological abuse and intimidation, stalking (in person or through social media, kidnapping, property damage, robbery, threats and harassment, assaults, and homicide (Cornelius & Resseguie, 2007; Hickman

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et al., 2004). It could manifest also in emotional violence - name-calling, shaming, purposeful embarrassment, shouting, putting down and/or keeping a partner away from friends and family (Vagi et al., 2013), and unhealthy coping strategies for victims (PHAC, 2006). This shows that unhealthy romantic relationship is a public health concern that requires the intervention of social work, a profession that aims at improving the lives and social functioning of individuals (Okoye & Ijebor, 2013), with the improvement of human relationship and the protection of the vulnerable in the society among its core mandates.

Although several researchers have investigated various dimensions of unhealthy romantic relationships (e.g., McElwain et al., 2016; PHAC, 2016; Tharp et al., 2009) and the role of social work in dealing with unhealthy intimate relationships (Mesatywa, 2014; Keeling and Von Wormer, 2014; Rasool, 2012), the literature tend to focus on adult unhealthy relationships. Adolescents' involvement in unhealthy romantic relationship is an area with dearth in literature in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper aims at exploring young persons and unhealthy relationship in Nigeria with distinctive interest on how social workers can contribute to the improvement of human relationship through identification of unhealthy indices or practices in a romantic relationship, provision of counselling services to victims of abuse, advocacy and the linking of young persons with the appropriate agencies and systems that can help deal with the problem.

Theoretical framework

This study is premised on the propositions of symbolic interaction theory (Mead, 1934). Conceived by George Hebert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, the theory posits that people's selves are social products, and human behaviour should be understood as people acting towards things based on the meaning those things have for them, and those meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation (Mead, 1934). This shows that to a great extent, romantic behaviours among young people may be influenced by social processes such as peer group norms, family experience and societal culture (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2010). Other scholars have applied symbolic interaction in their studies on young people and unhealthy romantic relationships such as Waller (1937) who studied conflict and exploitation in collage dating pattern. Giordano, Soto, Manning and Longmore (2010) investigated the characteristics of romantic relationships associated with teen dating violence, and Taylor, Joseph and Mumford (2017) examined romantic relationship characteristics and adolescent relationship abuse. We are drawing from the symbolic interaction theory in this study to examine how young people give meaning to actions in a romantic relationship in order to determine if the relationship is unhealthy and how they react to it.

Method

Study Area

The study was conducted in Owerre-Ani in Nsukka Local Government Area in Enugu state. Nsukka is a town in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu state, southeast Nigeria. It shares common border with towns like Eha Alumona, Edem, Alor-Uno, Opi etc. It is the home of Nigeria's first indigenous university, University of Nigeria. We purposively selected three villages in Owerre-Ani (Ihe n'Owerre, Mkpunonu and Nru villages) for the study due to their proximity to University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

Participants and procedure for data collection

Availability sampling was used to select the respondents for this study because of time constraints and respondent's willingness to participate in the study. We selected respondents who were 18 years of age and above, who were proficient in the use of English language. Data for the study

was collected through Focus Group Discussions and in-depth interviews. Three focus group discussions were conducted in each of the three villages. The first FGD was conducted in the n'owerre with 6 female participants only. The second FGD was done in Mkpunonu with 10 male participants and the last FGD was done in Nru with 8 female participants. The rationale for having gender separate discussions was to provide a platform for all participants to air their views freely. Twomale respondents from Ihe n'Owerre, one from Nru, and one female respondent from Mkpunonu were interviewed. We used FGD and IDI protocols to conduct the focus group discussions and in-depth interviews. The protocols were vetted by colleagues who were experts in relationship studies and experienced in social research methodology in Social Work Department, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The sessions and interviews were moderated by the researchers while a field assistant helped with taking notes of the discussions in addition to the audio record done with the consent of the participants. The focus group discussion sessions and interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the respondents.

Data analysis

Audio-taped responses were transcribed verbatim into English with the help of the field assistant. The transcribed data was subsequently analysed thematically starting with assigning preliminary codes to the data in order to describe the content. We sought for themes across the interviews and discussion through the key issues expressed by the participants with assistance of colleagues who made useful suggestions that helped to refine, validate, and establish themes in the data. The data was edited for sentence structure by the authors.

Results

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents

| Variable | Category | n(%) |
|--------------------|---------------|------------|
| Gender | Male | 13 (46.4%) |
| | Female | 15 (53.6%) |
| Age | 18-22 | 11 (39.3%) |
| | 23-27 | 13 (46.4%) |
| | 27-30 | 4 (14.3%) |
| Marital status | Single | 24 (85.7%) |
| | Married | 4 (14.3%) |
| Occupation | Student | 25 (89.3%) |
| | Civil servant | 1 (3.6%) |
| | Self employed | 2 (7.1%) |
| Level of education | O'Level | 25 (89.3%) |
| | Degree | 3 (10.7%) |
| Village | Ihe n'owerre | 8 (28.6%) |
| | Mkpunonu | 11 (39.9%) |
| | Nru | 9 (32.1%) |

As shown in Table 1, majority of the respondents in the study were female, who did not have university education, and unmarried. Most of the relationship experiences of the respondents were during dating.

Young people's understanding of unhealthy romantic relationship

Unhealthy romantic relationship being harmful and toxic to those in the relationship was a major theme in the discussion and interview, some of the participants had these to say:

Just like the name implies, unhealthy is a relationship that is harmful. (FGD, Ihe n'Owerre, Female, P6).

Toxic relationship that poses threat to an individual's wellbeing; a relation that affects a person's life and performance, especially academically.... I also think unhealthy, especially abusive romantic relationship can destroy a person's relationship with others, both

present and future relationships (FGD, Mkpunonu, Male, P2).

I think is those romantic relationships that can mar academic excellence, it can also bring about bodily harm especially when it is violent and can be physical, emotional or psychological. (FGD, *Ihe n'Owerre, Female, P1*).

I can say that a romantic relationship is unhealthy when the people involved in such relationship do not have mutual respect. They don't care about how their actions affect others and they do things that hurt other people. (FGD, *Ihe n'Owerre, Female, P2*).

I called the attention of the individual in question and applied some sanctions, after everything it didn't work out, so I had to walk out of the relationship. (FGD, Mkpunonu, Male, P3).

I actually told the person about it, not just for my own good but for his future relationships, for another person that he will meet, and I think he is learning his lessons. (IDI, *Female, R4*).

I endured it for some time, found out it wasn't working so I had to quit the relationship. (FGD, *Nru, Female, P2*).

I called a close friend of hers, someone I think she listens to and spoke to her, telling her my challenges and of course she spoke to her. (FGD, Mkpunonu, Male, P10).

The results show that most of the respondents understood unhealthy romantic relationship as a relationship that affects or limits the social functioning of those involved in it. Many of the respondents added that it has negative impact on academic performances. This is likely so because most of the respondents are university students.

Revelation of unhealthy romantic relationship situation

Lack of care and respect were identified as major signs of unhealthy romantic relationship among young people.

How I knew that my relationship was unhealthy was that the other person doesn't listen to whatever I say, pays little or no attention to my feelings, or doesn't even care at all. The person is always insistent on what he wants to do; I knew that it was sad because I am always sad whenever I am around the person. (FGD, *Nru, Female, P2*).

It became unhealthy because relationship has to do with agreement and when you guys are trying to hook up, sometimes it might be with your fellow guy, it must not always be with a girl, along the line the person will start deviating from the agreement. (FGD, Mkpunonu, Male, P7).

I discovered my relationship was unhealthy because a relationship is give and take, but when you find out that you are the only one giving and the other person is always taking which leads to an imbalance in the relationship, it hurts. (FGD, Mkpunonu, Male, P2).

My relationship was unhealthy because he believed he was always right and I was the 'Miss Wrong'; so he doesn't consider how I feel and he believes that everything he does is the right thing and he never does wrong even when he hits me. (FGD, *Ihe n'Owerre, Female, P4*).

Most of the male respondents reported that they have never been in an unhealthy romantic relationship while majority of the females admitted having, at one point or the other in their lives, been in an unhealthy romantic relationship. According to the participants that have experienced unhealthy romantic relationships, they found out they were in it when they noticed their partners didn't pay attention to their feelings; majority of the females complained that the males did whatever they wanted.

Reaction to the discovery of the unhealthy romantic relationship

Exploring the respondent's reaction to the revelation that they were in an unhealthy romantic relationship showed an attempt to change the abuser in the relationship and termination of the relationship.

I reduced the communication and later told the person outright that I am done. (FGD, *Ihe n'Owerre, Female, P4*).

The result showed that many of the respondents concluded that they ended up walking away from the relationship even though some of them tried to make it work with the hope that their partners would change.

Influence of patriarchy

Unexpectedly, as the discussion progressed, some participants brought in the patriarchal culture that allows men unfettered powers to explain their role in dishing out abuses in unhealthy romantic relationships.

Our culture respects the male role in families, in societies, and in communities. That's why they say that power corrupts because male begin to see this power as making them superior, he tends to overstep boundaries. Our culture does not allow a male or a female to abuse the other rather our culture accords respect to the male figure without giving room for insults, abuse and maltreatment. (FGD, *Nru, Female, P6*).

Yes [agreeing with P6] culture has encouraged unhealthy relationship. For instance, I knew of an incident, it was actually a real life story, where the young man tried to emphasize the fact that the wife is supposed to be submissive because he is the male in the relationship according to our so called culture; that the male is superior to the woman and even if the woman has a say in an issue she has to try to reach an agreement with him in a smooth way while he himself can do anything he wants. If the girl tries to speak up because the situation is not in her favour, he shouts her down and, in some cases, beat her up. The worst part is that the girl's parents tell her to stop getting advice from friends and she should endure and not argue with the man whenever she complains to them. (FGD, *Nru, Female, P8*).

I don't think culture has much to do with it because a relationship is mutual, the two parties involved should understand that this has to do with them understanding each other rather than looking at it from the cultural perceptive. If you understand what I like and I understand what you like I don't think there will be room for us abusing ourselves. (FGD, *Nru, Female, P2*).

No culture is perfect, and no culture is the best, I think some cultures support unhealthy relationships in the sense that some cultures prescribe punishment for a woman that cheats on her partner but gives kudos to men when they do same, which breeds unhealthy relationships. (FGD, *Nru, Female, P4*).

God made man the head, but that doesn't negate the role of the woman. If as a man you constantly shut your girlfriend down, it means there is no mutual understanding and love. Culture already made man the head, but it doesn't dictate how you live your life. If a man abuses his wife, it means he doesn't understand what bible meant by saying two of you are one. (FGD, *Nru, Female P3*)

Although we didn't anticipate the issue of culture in preparing the FGD protocol a participant in Nru interestingly raised the issue of the patriarchal culture of Nigeria having influence in making relationships unhealthy and this led many others to support the opinion that culture contributes to unhealthy relationships, especially in marriages.

How young people in an unhealthy romantic relationship can be helped

Having discovered that many young people get into unhealthy romantic relationships, in many occasions unintentionally, the research probed to find out respondents' views on how such persons can be helped. They indicated that the principal prerequisite for helping someone in an unhealthy romantic relationship is for the person to realize that he or she needs help. Their responses were:

Now before you render help to anyone, the person will have to realize that he or she needs help, it is hard to help a lady [especially] in love. I may be in love and my boyfriend will be battering me and a friend tells me to leave him, because of the love I will see that my friend as an enemy. Before you help someone, you must make her understand that she needs help (FGD, *Ihe n'Owerre, Female, P5*).

I think it boils down to the individual in question, because the individual in an unhealthy relationship has to realize that he [or she] has worth. She should want a better life, so you have to make her understand that the relationship is not good for her and she deserved better (*IDI, Male, R2*).

In a boy and girl relationship where the girl is a liability to the guy, the girl usually tried to endure any form of abuse meted on her by the guy because she is gaining something from the guy, but if you engage such a girl in something that will give value, if you empower her she will acknowledge that the relationship is terrible for her! (FGD, *Ihe n'Owerre, Female, P2*).

I think it depends on the individual, if a girl says "I love him when he beats me" then she doesn't need help, but if she says "I love him, but I hate the part of him beating me" that's when she needs help. And a girl child should be empowered so that she will not be completely dependent on the guy who may start seeing her as a liability that is only good for sex. (FGD, *Mkpunonu, Male, P3*).

I think family has a big role to play in this aspect because the way the family raise their children determines their communication pattern, if they have open relationship then their children can tell them when they are in an abusive or unhealthy relationship. Secondly when the parents have a good relationship it will transcend to their children and they will not learn to abuse others (*IDI, Male, R3*).

Public sensitisation and peer education is necessary in this issue. Sometimes the shame of coming out to say this is my problem is a challenge for people

in unhealthy relationships so I believe agencies should be able to provide private counselling and set mechanisms where people can have one on one chat with relationship counsellors (*IDI, Male, R1*)

The respondents provided important suggestions on how young people in unhealthy romantic relationships can be helped, however they insisted that the person in the relationship must identify and acknowledge that he/she needs help; then the realization of self-worth will help them make informed decisions. They also pointed out the role of the family and the importance of peer education, and the need for provision of counselling to victims of unhealthy romantic relationship.

Discussion

This study explored unhealthy romantic relationships experiences of young adults in Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria. Findings from the study revealed that participants perceived unhealthy romantic relationship as a relationship that is toxic to the individual(s) in the relationship. They further indicated that it could manifest as emotional, psychological or/and violent physical abuses which invariably affect the victims social functioning. This was seen in such view as "I think is those relationships that can mar academic excellence, it can also bring about bodily harm especially when it is violent and can be physical, emotional or psychological." These findings agree with that of Kerpelman et al. (2010) who reported that unhealthy relationships are those relationships that include abuse, violence, depression, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and other harmful aftermaths.

Findings from this study showed that majority of the research participants indicated that unhealthy romantic relationship is detrimental to both the perpetrator and the victim in the relationship. They stated that it affects an individual's overall wellbeing negatively, their academic performance and their present and future relationships with others. This finding extends prior literature showing that victims were also more likely to withdraw from school, engage in harmful eating behaviours, and attempt suicide; they are also likely to experience abuse in future relationships (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013; PHAC, 2006). This may be because the relationship skills and patterns learned and indoctrinated through the developmental processes continue to guide and dictate the relationship pattern of the grown adult (McElwain et al., 2016; PHAC, 2016; Tharp et al., 2009).

Many of the young female adults in the study stated that they discovered that they were in an abusive romantic relationship because their partners did not care about how they felt; rather they did whatever they wanted without considering the adverse effect on them. Their partners became self-absorbed and blamed them for all the problems in their relationship while exonerating themselves. This is in line with the findings of Streep (2015) that perpetrators of abuse in an unhealthy relationship are frequently described as arrogant, self-centred, manipulative, and demanding. They may also concentrate on grandiose fantasies (e.g. their own success, beauty, brilliance) and may be convinced that they deserve special treatment. The findings indicated that young adults have divergent views on the role of patriarchal culture and societal structures on the development of unhealthy tendencies in relationships. Although, it was not within the scope of the current study, further investigations for a deeper understanding of patriarchy in relation to romantic relationships would make for a broader understanding of the subject matter

Ending the relationship is the consensus solution on how the young adults in this study deal with their unhealthy romantic relationship when they discover that the relationship is harmful to them. Many, at first, attempt to fix the relationship by soliciting the counsel of family and friends but they quit the relationship when they realise that the abusive partner would

heed no pleas and guidance. The study further found that the initial prerequisite for helping a young person deal with an unhealthy romantic relationship is for the person to first acknowledge he or she is a victim of an unhealthy relationship; subsequently, systems such as the family, community, and counsellors play the vital role of helping such young adults deal with the unhealthy relationship. Such a timely intervention is invaluable because early adulthood is a crucial time period for establishing healthy relationship skills and patterns.

Implication for social work practice

Findings from this study have numerous implications for social work practice in Nigeria. Social work profession has been described to have distinctive interest in enhancing human relationships and social functioning (Okoye & Ijebor, 2013). The injuries, trauma, stigma, and psychological frustration associated with abuse in unhealthy romantic relationship call for social work interventions. Therefore, the social workers have the responsibility of assisting such persons get over the effects of unhealthy relationships through counselling and therapy. Both the abuser and the victim may need counselling to change maladaptive behaviours and psychotherapy may also be needed especially in cases of sexual abuse to help the victims deal with the associated emotional problems such as anxiety, fear, worry, depression, guilt, shame, stigmatisation etc. Psychotherapeutic interventions will assist victims of rape, battering and other forms of violence.

Social workers should challenge cultural practices that subject women to violence and abuse, while also empowering women to be self-sufficient through education and training. Social workers can advocate for programmes and schemes that would empower young adults to subsist, in the least, so they do not hold tenaciously to relationships that rob them of basic rights and freedoms. Social welfare schemes that provide for the unemployed and others that enhance the general well-being and standard of living should be implemented in the country. Further social workers should also try to sensitize families on the ills of unhealthy relationship and their role in raising children that can have healthy relationships. Social workers should link the victims of unhealthy romantic relationships with resources in their localities, which can help in ameliorating their burdens or sufferings while also organizing a community wide education campaign that will challenge the believe that abusive behaviour in relationships is a private and not a public concern: a campaign that will help the community become aware of the inherent dangers, and report cases of such behaviours to the law enforcement agents as quickly as possible.

A major limitation of the present study is that it was conducted in only one state; one local government area and with a sample that is not a representation of the entire population of the studied sites, thereby making generalisation difficult. However, it is important to get the views of young people on unhealthy romantic relationships and how they attempt to deal with it. Therefore, there is need for investigation of the subject matter explored in this present study in other areas of the country. Also, following the study participants' reference to culture in the discourse of unhealthy romantic relationship, it is necessary that further studies or review of literature be carried out to investigate the role of culture on the subject matter. We also suggest a mixed methods approach which will enable the collection of quantitative and qualitative data to substantiate the observation. In this regard, questionnaire measures of the relevant behaviours will supplement the findings from interview or FGD.

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