Reviewer’s report

Title: A Grounded Theory of Female Adolescents Dating Experiences and Factors Influencing Safety: The Dynamics of the Circle

Version: 2 Date: 11 June 2007

Reviewer: Kristin F Lutz

Reviewer’s report:

General
I appreciate and would like to commend Dr. Toscano’s efforts to address the reviewers' concerns. I believe that this manuscript would make a positive contribution to the understanding of teen violence. I would recommend attention to the following issues to enhance the quality and clarity of the article:

Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)
NONE

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

1. Background section:
   a. The meanings of the following sentences (p. 3) are not clear to me:
      "Interpersonal violence is occurring within adolescent dating relationships similar to that in adult relationships and constitutes a social problem worth investigation [4-11]." What is similar? – Prevalence rates? Trajectory? Forms of violence?
      "Differences in reported violence depend on the severity of the form of violence measured (physical versus verbal) and age of sample." Again, what differences are being referred to?
      "Findings from one study suggest an increased prevalence of dating violence in twelfth-grade compared to 1 in 10 prevalence of dating violence in female adolescents in grades 9-12 [12]." I believe that this sentence needs to be re-stated to more accurately convey the findings from the cited study.

2. Methods
   a. I would recommend changing the second sentence of the first paragraph under methods (p. 5) from “A grounded theory approach was used to generate substantive theory about this phenomenon. These methods are based on symbolic interactionism.” to “Strauss and Corbin’s grounded theory approach was used to generate substantive theory about this phenomenon [28]. Grounded theory methods are based on symbolic interactionism.”
   b. Please consider changing the first three sentence of the second paragraph (p. 6) to more clearly distinguish when you are referring to general tenets of grounded theory and when you are specifically referring to unique attributes ascribed by Strauss and Corbin:
      i. “Grounded theory method generally begins with a question or area of study without any preformed concepts or connections.”
      ii. “The method’s aim is not only to generate theory, but to generate theory that is grounded in the data.”
      iii. “According to Strauss and Corbin [28], grounded theory method is comprised of three main processes.”
   c. Page 8, last sentence to first continuing paragraph: “In subsequent interviews, refinement of the guide also occurred in order to include new themes about adolescent dating as they emerged (Table 1).” I appreciate the inclusion of the interview questions, but it is not clear to me whether the interview guide provided in table 1 includes all of the questions, or was the initial interview guide. Could that be made clearer?

3. Results
   a. Consistent labeling of dating stages is needed (pgs. 8-9).
   b. Punctuation needs to be corrected on page 12 to the following: Alley said, “I’m in awe of him and I’m like, ‘Oh ya, you’re home.’ But then he comes in and we just watch movies and I’m like, ‘Wow, I wish I could talk to you.’” A similar change is needed on page 13 with the quote by “Trish”.


c. On page 12, you might want to add the word “strategy” or “tactic” after the word “this” to the following sentence: “However, they admitted that teens would become physical in an attempt to connect emotionally, but reported that this usually failed.”

d. Page 13: “Isolation from the Circle was an important factor in gaining control in abusive relationships. Isolation from the Circle prevented the teens from leaving, blocked interventions from the Circle, and prevented knowledge passing from Circle member to the teens’ parent(s).” These sentences need some editing. One suggestion: “Isolation from the Circle was an important way to gain control in abusive relationships, as it prevented the victim from leaving the relationship, blocked interventions from the Circle, and prevented information about the abusive relationship from passing from a Circle member to a victimized teen’s parent(s).”

d. Page 13: “The teen’s level of uncertainty dictated how she would respond to abuse.” Do you mean uncertainty as to whether the abuser intended to hurt her?

e. Page 14: “Positive relationships were distinctive from friendships in the amount of investment and the level of connectedness between the couple.” What are you referring to regarding the word “investment”? Is it time, emotions, or some other form of investment?

f. Page 16: I would suggest re-ordering the second and third sentences of the first complete paragraph. I would also suggest editing the following sentence: “In order to succeed the female must: accept the loss of the ideal relationship; accept that she can’t fix her date; re-affiliate or become affiliated with a peer group; and end any continued contact with her date.” To have parallel structure of elements and clarify what the young woman is trying to succeed at.

4. Discussion

a. It was not clear whether the model referred to on page 22 was derived from a literature review, a study, clinical experience, or some combination of those sources.

b. The discussion section should be more integrative. What does Dr. Toscano believe accounts for the differences in the study she is reporting and the literature/research that she is comparing that study to on pages 23-25? Regarding the “model” that is compared with the grounded theory, could it be that the first model was derived from a literature review while the grounded theory emerged from the data? If so, an important difference would be the use of inductive and deductive methods. How might those differences be addressed in the future?

5. References

a. Several references cited (e.g., #2, 7, 15, 20) seem to be missing authors’ names.

b. Reference #2 lists the Journal issue instead of the volume.

c. Please review the reference list for accuracy and completeness.

Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

1. Background section:

a. Sentence 3 (p. 3) could be improved with parallel construction (i.e., “Stage one…”).

b. You may want to begin the last paragraph on page 4 with a version the second sentence in the paragraph, “Research suggests that teens may have difficulty identifying violence when it occurs within their own lives.”

2. Methods

a. Page 6, first sentence describing sample: Please add “female” after the word “twenty” to the sentence, “Twenty adolescents ages 15 through 18 (age 18, n=9; age 17, n=4; age 16 n=1; age 15 n=6), attending one of two rural/suburban high schools located in Suffolk and Middlesex Counties in Massachusetts were selected.”

b. Page 7, first full sentence: Please consider changing to the following: “To be eligible for the study, adolescents were females who had at least one dating experience.”

c. Page 7, second to last sentence on the page: You may want to change to “Use of the interview guide provided ample relevant data and pilot study participants commented on the clarity of the questions and suggested changes.”

d. Page 8, last sentence of first full paragraph: You may want to change the sentence “Written consent was obtained from the teen and their parent or legal guardian” to “Written consent was obtained from each participating teen and her parent or legal guardian”
3. Results

a. On page 9, please consider adding the following preface to the first sentence in the first paragraph: “To ensure the credibility of the research process and findings, all coded transcripts…”

b. Page 11, the last sentence of the first complete paragraph could be changed to serve as a stronger conclusion to that paragraph. One suggestion would be the following: “Therefore, while there was overwhelming consistent agreement on the actual dating stages and their progression, the activities engaged in (intimate touch versus sexual penetration) adhered strongly to group norms which were determined by each particular Circle.”

c. Page 17: The following sentence could be clarified: “In order to meet the critical certainty level, the intention to hurt must exist.” Isn’t it more accurate that the young woman must perceive that her partner’s intention is to hurt her?

d. Page 17: The following sentences, “There was uncertainty as to whether the boyfriend meant to cause harm. In these cases, teens relied on their sense of a priori knowledge” could be edited to “When there was uncertainty as to whether the boyfriend meant to cause harm; the young women relied on their a priori knowledge.”

e. Page 21: “In the model, the increasing size of the circles represents this increased risk over time and distance (not physical).” This sentence could be changed to, “In the model, the increasing size of the circles represents growing risk over time and emotional distance.”

4. Discussion

a. I would suggest avoiding the use of “my study”, and instead use “the current study” throughout the discussion.

Again, I appreciate Dr. Toscano’s thoughtful revisions. Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript.

What next?: Accept after minor essential revisions

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.