Perceptions of Risk for Dating Violence Among Rural Adolescent Males: An Interpretive Analysis

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Abstract

About one in eight U.S. high school students in Grades 9 to 12 report experiencing teen dating violence (TDV) in the form of physical, sexual, or psychological dating violence in the past year in person, on school grounds, and online. Compared with their urban counterparts, rural teens face nearly double the rate of physical dating abuse and an elevated risk of experiencing multiple forms of violence. Rural young males are exposed to regional masculinities and gender norms that may simultaneously promote female subordination (a prelude to dating violence) while impeding help-seeking intentions. We used an interpretive and dialectical approach grounded in Relational Dialectics Theory to explore how rural young males perceive and describe their own risk of experiencing and perpetrating dating violence and the factors contributing to their help-seeking intentions and behaviors. Data from three focus groups and individual interviews with 27 rural young males (ages 15–24) were collated. We identified two central dialectical themes described as (a) Social Tension Dialectics (subthemes include: Abusive vs. Unhealthy Relationships: A Dialectic of Language; #MeToo vs. #WeToo: A Dialectic of Victimhood; "It's All Country Boys": A Dialectic of Masculinity) and (b) Help-Seeking Dialectics demonstrating the dual roles Religion, School Guidance Counselors, Peer Mentors, and Social Cohesion play in promoting or preventing dating violence. Overall, we found dialectic tensions in rural youth risk perceptions about dating violence. These findings bear implications for advocates and practitioners working with rural youth in planning developmentally and culturally appropriate TDV prevention programs, offering policy and research-relevant insight.

Keywords

adolescents, risk perception, dialectics, rural, youth, dating violence, dialectics

Background

Teen dating violence (TDV) has been defined as an "old disease in a new world" (Murray & Azzinaro, 2019), and a significant public health issue affecting millions of young people worldwide. According to the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System survey, one in eight high school students in Grades 9 to 12 experienced physical, sexual, or psychological dating violence in the past year, occurring in person, on school grounds, and online (Basile et al., 2019). This statistic represents an alarming year-over-year increase in dating violence prevalence (Basile et al., 2019; Kann et al., 2018).

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In addition to its prevalence, the equity implications of TDV are stark. Historically, prevalence rates (and risk) for experiencing TDV have been highest among adolescents who are female, members of the LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more) community, or from a racial or ethnic minority group (Basile et al., 2019; Kann et al., 2018; Katz et al., 2017; Murray & Azzinaro, 2019). Specifically, female adolescents are significantly more likely to be victims of psychological, threatening, relational, and sexual abuse and to report chronic consequences (Taylor & Xia, 2022). However, recent epidemiological data indicates twice as many males than female students report experiencing a higher frequency of physical and sexual dating violence (>4 times in a single year), even though incidence rates remain higher among female students (Basile et al., 2019; Cascardi & Avery-Leaf, 2015; Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001; Reidy et al., 2016; Taylor & Xia, 2022).

Despite these peculiarities in the trajectories and experiences of dating violence among adolescent males, few studies have focused on how at-risk adolescent males describe their risks of experiencing dating abuse as victims or perpetrators (Scott-Storey et al., 2022). Likewise, who adolescent males turn to, where and how they seek help, as well as barriers and motivators for help-seeking for dating abuse are also less understood (Lachman et al., 2019; Sianko & Kunkel, 2022). In communities where hegemonic norms persist and are reinforced, there is a lack of information on effective strategies for reducing dating violence among at-risk adolescent boys.

Rural young males are often described as "hard-to-reach" in dating violence research, making them worryingly absent in the literature (Sianko et al., 2019). Likewise, rural culture presents a unique setting for (re) examining the lived experiences and perceptions of dating violence risk for young adolescent males (Emezue et al., 2021; ; Martz et al., 2016; Vézina & Hérbert, 2007). We approach rural life as a space of inherent contradictions. This is because male adolescents in rural areas are frequently (though not always) in close social proximity to conventional gender and societal norms that may foster male dominance and female subjugation (i.e., the "good old boys networks"), thereby discouraging help-seeking (Capaldi & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2012; Foshee et al., 2015; Sianko & Kunkel, 2022). Furthermore, sociocultural gender norms idealize masculinity as an unbreakable, trauma-resistant, economically, socially, and politically dominant status (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Douglas & Hines, 2011; Hines & Malley-Morrison, 2001; Hogan et al., 2021; Huntley

et al., 2019). Therefore, in these hegemonic contexts, abused men are viewed as "weak, unmanly, or heteronormative deviants" (Emezue & Udmuangpia, 2020; Hlavka, 2016; Javaid, 2017), and these gender norms significantly impact their help-seeking behaviors (Emezue & Udmuangpia, 2020; Hedge et al., 2017b; Hlavka, 2016; Javaid, 2017).

Therefore, this study examines how rural male adolescents view their own risk of being a victim or perpetrator of dating violence, and how current gender norms and sociocultural factors influence their risk perceptions, masculine identities, and help-seeking behaviors. We use Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT; Baxter, 2004, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) and contrapuntal analysis (Baxter, 2011; Thomas, 2017) to examine the language young rural males use to communicate their risk perceptions and help-seeking behaviors. In this way, we consider *rural* as more than a location but a discursive construct (Sandberg, 2013).

Rural Adolescent Dating Violence

The lack of coherence on rural dating violence experiences in the literature is an important omission. Some studies report that urban adolescents are more prone to dating violence (Fedina et al., 2016; Wincentak et al., 2017); others identify no differences in prevalence rates between rural and urban youth (Edwards, 2015). However, there is growing evidence that rural adolescents face nearly twice the rate of physical TDV (Hedge et al., 2017a; Marquart et al., 2007; Martz et al., 2016; McDonell et al., 2010) and an elevated risk for general TDV (Edwards, 2015; Sianko et al., 2019). Likewise, TDV rates remain unevenly distributed across geographic regions in the United States, with the highest physical TDV rate of 13.7% in Tennessee and the lowest rate of 6% in both South Dakota and Iowa (Basile et al., 2019). Dating violence is 1.3 times more common among southern youths than among their peers, according to a previous survey (McDonell et al., 2010).

Furthermore, specific forms of dating violence are common among rural youth. Given the prevalence of online dating abuse among rural teenagers and the importance of technology to facilitate and maintain dating relationships, cyber abuse and bullying may be particularly prevalent among this demographic (Taylor & Xia, 2022). Sexual, spousal, and ex-spousal violence and intimate partner homicide also remain higher in rural areas (Edwards, 2015), even as rural survivors report the worst psychosocial and physical health outcomes (Edwards, 2015; Peek-Asa et al., 2011).

There are also distinct risk factors governing rural TDV. First, living in a rural area is considered a stable risk factor for interpersonal violence (Foshee et al., 2015; Martz et al., 2016; Vézina & Hérbert, 2007). Similarly, sociodemographic factors, such as early sexual onset, suicidal ideation, alcoholism, rigid gender norms (Martz et al., 2016), gun-related suicide, and accidental firearm mortalities contribute to the higher rates of TDV in rural areas (Espelage et al., 2020; Nance et al., 2010). Pro-violence norms at the community level, fundamentalist religious beliefs favoring female subservience (Capaldi & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2012; Foshee et al., 2015), and distrust of government-proposed solutions all contribute to an increase in the likelihood and sustenance of partner abuse (Edwards et al., 2014; Lichtenstein & Johnson, 2009).

This risk accumulation in rural communities also influences help-seeking intentions and behaviors among rural youth (McCauley et al., 2015; McDonell et al., 2010). According to the cumulative risk hypothesis, the higher the number of risks, the greater the probability of adverse outcomes (Perkins et al., 1998). Most rural adolescents would rather confide in their peers than anyone else, not even their parents, and only a third of those affected by dating abuse seek professional assistance (Hammer et al., 2013; Hedge et al., 2017b). Male adolescents, in particular, are described as "reluctant help-seekers," meaning they are hesitant to tell anybody about experiencing dating violence outside of their immediate social convoy (Sianko & Kunkel, 2022). When rural adolescents seek help for TDV, they are more likely to seek help for physical and sexual assault but not for psychological abuse (Hedge et al., 2017b). This reluctance to seek help is partly attributed to young people underestimating their risk of dating abuse (Murray & Azzinaro, 2019).

Defining Risk Perception

Risk perception research examines how at-risk groups explain their risks or cognitively and emotionally appraise hazards to which they may be exposed (Rohrmann & Renn, 2000; Slovic et al., 1982). In this study, we consider all forms of risk perceptions (deliberative, emotive, and experiential risk perceptions; Ferrer & Klein, 2015), and we look at how these play out in the context of dating violence. We not only identify these risk perceptions in youth discourse but also consider how these perceptions are shaped by societal, cultural, and individual variables (Taylor & Xia, 2022). Studies indicate there are double standards in youth descriptions of their TDV risk. For example, Murray and Azzinaro (2019) state, "girls tend to describe behaviors as abusive if the *impact* is negative, whereas boys describe behaviors as abusive if the *intent* is negative"

(p. 29). Muehlenhard et al. (2016) identified core tensions in U.S. and Canadian youth conceptualizations and attitudes toward sexual consent, sexual assault, and rape, enough to influence how they navigate sexual consent in their daily lives. At-risk adolescents who misjudge their risk for TDV may rationalize relationship violence, resist gender-equitable attitudes, misread red flags, and suffer lifelong consequences (Taylor & Xia, 2022).

Theoretical Framework: RDT

We used the RDT (Baxter, 2004, 2011; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, 1998) from the interpersonal and relational communications literature to answer our research questions:

> **Research Question 1:** How do rural adolescent males perceive and dialectically discourse dating violence and their risk of experiencing or perpetrating it?
> **Research Question 2:** What, if any, competing discourses contribute to their help-seeking behaviors and intentions for dating abuse?

As a dialogic theoretical framework, RDT depicts dialectical contradictions in "opposing needs" and "competing discourse" communicated and negotiated within relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). In addition, we utilized contrapuntal analysis, a type of critical discourse analysis used to examine multiple perspectives co-existing in speech or text (Thomas, 2017). Contrapuntal analysis is also the recommended analytical companion of the RDT (Baxter, 2011; Baxter & Scharp, 2016; Byrne, 2022; Thomas, 2017) and is best suited to identify polemic or multiple meanings often described as dialectical tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes.

Although not explicitly stated, we argue that the dating violence literature is rife with dialecticisms. For example, the *victim-perpetrator* dialectic of sexual assault (i.e., "he said—she said" dialectic) is a typical example of a discursive trope. Perpetrators in sexual assault cases often use this "he said—she said" dialectic to breed contradiction and ambiguity. Analyses of how social media contribute to the development, upkeep, conflict, and eventual demise of romantic partnerships have also been informed by relational dialectics (Fox et al., 2014). However, dating violence has not been studied from a lens of dialectical tensions and paradoxes. Arguably, dating violence represents a period of heightened dialectical struggle characterized partly by a breakdown in essential communication and communicative management practices. During this time, adolescents need both individuation and autonomy in relationships, representing a classic example of the autonomy–connection dialectic. Therefore, these

tensions and contradictions precipitating dating violence warrant further examination.

Method

Study Setting. We conducted online focus group discussions and in-depth individual phone interviews with rural adolescent males across the United States. We chose to age-stratify all interviews by age (15–17 and 18–24 years) to account for differences in risk-taking, peer culture, and self-identification based on developmental age (Arnett, 2006). In a male-only research space, adolescents would be more inclined to reflect on their sexist and abusive histories or discuss their experiences as victims (Flood, 2018, 2019)—hence our use of a male-only sample.

Recruitment Strategy. This study was approved by the University of Missouri-Columbia Institutional Review Board (#2024502). Parental consent was waived for two primary reasons: This research posed no more than minimal risk, and we actively worked not to "out" young men to their parents, as some of these young men resided in rural communities and utilized other confidential behavioral services. Recruitment followed a convenience sampling strategy (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015). Recruitment was done via word-of-mouth, social media (Facebook and Instagram), and direct mailing to youth-serving organizations. We also utilized a weekly campus bulletin in a large U.S. Midwest university. Titled the Health-*e* BRO! Study: (**B**etter & Healthy **R**elationship **O**utcomes), we described the study as "An Adolescent and Young Adult Health & Relationship Study." The phrase "dating violence" was avoided in study materials not to problematize this topic or study. On Qualtrics, participants completed a brief enrollment questionnaire. To finalize their enrollment, we compared their zip codes to the 2010 Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes—developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA, 2014). Participants were contacted via their preferred and safe contact method to schedule a study session.

Eligible participants identified as male, 15 to 24 years old, having ever dated since age 13 (serious or casually dating), English literate, with access to an internet-connected computer or phone. As established by RUCA codes, they also had to be living or schooling in a rural or medically underserved area or health provider shortage area. Past dating abuse history was not an eligibility criterion. Participants were sampled until data saturation was achieved (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Study Procedures. We conducted three focus groups via videoconferencing and 13 individual interviews via phone. Focus groups ranged from three to seven people per session ($n = 14$). Participants verbally assented or consented first on the study enrollment website (by clicking YES/NO to the assent/consent form electronically) and then verbally at the beginning of each interview session. With discretion advised, participants watched (or listened to) two short video vignettes before each interview to contextualize dating violence. The first video showed a young woman being isolated, monitored on social media, and stalked by a male partner. In the second video, a girl verbally and physically assaults a young man on school grounds. Each video ended with the National Dating Violence 24/7 text, phone, and live chat numbers should any participant need this resource. Open-ended, interpretive interviews were then conducted (see Online Appendix for interview protocol). We tested the interview protocol with a group of topic experts familiar with dating violence research to ensure that it flowed correctly and that the questions were well-understood. All sessions utilized the same semi-structured interview guide, which asked questions about views on healthy and unhealthy relationships, rural male victimization, rural masculinity, and help-seeking behaviors. As an example, one question explicitly asked, "What role does masculinity (or "being a man") play in abusive or violent relationships?" We also asked about actions/behaviors that demonstrated an unhealthy vs. abusive dating relationship. The semi-structured nature of the interview guide allowed for prompting questions to stimulate in-depth discussions. Each interview session lasted approximately 45 min to over 1 hr, followed by debriefing with participants, who received a US$20 Amazon e-gift card for their time and expertise.

Data Analysis. We predicted rural adolescent males would list out risk factors in relation to abusive relationships they had been in, as was the case in a recent study addressing adolescent TDV perceptions (Taylor et al., 2017). However, we found instead that dialectical themes (competing patterns of utterances) emerged as struggles and conflicts in participant narratives. As a result, we used the RDT (Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, 1998) as an organizing framework to clarify the conflicts we observed in participant narratives. These conflicts occurred in focus groups and individual interviews, with some discourses competing for supremacy (Thomas, 2017). However, as we will demonstrate, the same utterances represent multiple perspectives and are part of the larger "utterance chain," thus encouraging a critical and interpretive approach.

As the recommended analytical companion of the RDT (Baxter, 2011; Byrne, 2022; Thomas, 2017), we used a critical and interpretive approach via contrapuntal analysis. Traditionally, contrapuntal analysis is done at two levels: (1) using thematic analysis to identify essential discourses within a text. In our case, we used Braun and

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Characteristics	n	(%)
Age, years		
15–17	9	15
18–24	18	85
Race and Ethnicity		
White	21	81
Black or African American	1	2
Asian	4	14
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	2
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	1	1
Other	1	3
Hispanic	3	8
Non-Hispanic	24	92
Education		
College	10	37
Pre-college	NAª	
U.S. regions		
Midwest	18	65
Northeast	4	15
South	3	12
West	2	8

ªCollege information was extrapolated from recruitment and interview data.

Clarke's (2019, 2020) *reflexive* thematic analysis (RTA), (2) followed by a higher-order interpretive analysis to extract and analyze competing discourses. A nuanced breakdown of this analytic process is as follows:

Level 1. We used Braun and Clarke's (2019, 2020) RTA in the following six steps: (a) data familiarization and note-taking through reading and re-reading the data; (b) systematic data coding, first on a notepad and then using NVivo; (c) generation of first dialectical themes from coded and compiled data; (d) theme development and review; (e) theme refining, defining, and naming; and (f) report production.

The first author actively listened to all audio-recorded interviews to become extensively acquainted with the dataset. A paid transcriptionist transcribed these recordings verbatim and checked for accuracy, yielding 170 pages of data. The paradigmatic frameworks of interpretivism and constructivism (recommended for RTA) placed the researcher and participant as subjective co-creators of meaning while capturing tensions and contradictions in participants' discursive descriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020; Burr, 2015; Byrne, 2022). Our goal was not to simply count risk factors (i.e., technical risk analysis) but rather to engage in interpretative analysis at the intersection of (a) participants' discursive descriptions; (b) theoretical assumptions; and (c) our own

experiences as qualitative researchers (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 3; Byrne, 2022).

Level 2. The second level of analysis was a contrapuntal analysis done in three parts: text selection, discourse identification, and examination/presentation of the discursive interplay through which meanings are produced (Baxter, 2011). After selecting text or utterances, discourses were identified through an iterative process based on the selected text (Thomas, 2017). We then identified discursive competitions in weekly de-briefing meetings. We also discussed interpretations of meaning and ambiguity as well as predicted, negative, and even differential findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Finally, we explored multiple assumptions or interpretations of these utterances.

Cross-Validation of Data Analysis and Themes

Three verification procedures increased the validity of our findings using cross-validation of data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, several transdisciplinary researchers led this analysis (i.e., investigator triangulation) to find rich interpretations. Second, reflexive bracketing kept us mindful of the influence of our personal biases, past research experiences and established literature on our interpretations. For example, we bracketed in a common bias attributed to rural culture as either an idyllic place where everyone respects traditional values and each other (thus, a nonviolent setting) or, in a negative way, a backward and nonprogressive place where violence was normalized (Sandberg, 2013, p. 352). Reflexive bracketing was a critical verification procedure, reinforced by the fact that some members of our team grew up and now still live in rural areas. Finally, we kept a journal of reflective statements (i.e., an audit trail) itemizing our methodological and analytic decisions (Gearing, 2004).

Results

Participant Characteristics

From August to November 2020, 27 rural adolescent males were interviewed (nine aged 15–17 and 18 aged 18–24). Participant ages ranged from 15 to 24 years (*M*: 18.6 years; *SD*: 1.9) (Table 1).

Overview of Dialectical Themes

Drawing from the transcripts of the focus groups and individual interviews and using contrapuntal analysis, two main dialectical themes emerged: *Social Tension Dialectics* and *Help-Seeking Dialectics*. Within each, we illustrate constitutive sub-themes accompanied by

Table 2. Summary of Main and Sub-Themes.

Main dialectical themes	Sub-themes	Dialectical tension categories
Social tension dialectics	Abusive vs. Unhealthy Dating Relationships: A Dialectic of Language	Micro-discourse
	"It's All Country Boys": Dialectics of Masculinity	Meso-discourse
	- Rural vs. rural dialectic of masculinity	
	- Rural vs. urban dialectic of masculinity	
	- Present vs. absent father dialectic	
	#MeToo vs. #WeToo: A Dialectic of Victimhood	Macro-discourse
Help-seeking dialectics	Peer mentors	Social actors
	School guidance counselors	
	Religion and spirituality	Social processes
	Social cohesion	

representative excerpts in the participants' own words (Table 2).

Social Tension Dialectics

Our study found opposing discourses in rural adolescent males' perceptions of dating violence risk at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of discourse, indicating that their risk perceptions were the result of a complex multi-layered environment (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Abusive Versus Unhealthy Dating Relationships: A Dialectic of Language

At the micro-discourse level, the first dialectic we found was how participants struggled to identify and explicitly articulate their understanding of dating violence. The severity of *abusive* versus *unhealthy* dating relationships—two labels used interchangeably in TDV prevention messaging—appeared to be consistently mischaracterized. For example, "unhealthy dating behaviors" were described as general wrongdoing but not entirely as abusive actions and behaviors that could constitute dating violence.

When prompted, one participant explained unhealthy dating relationships as "One-sided, greed, bad communication. Probably dishonesty. And then also, I would say something down the lines of like, not being fully upfront or hiding stuff from your partner" (17yo).

Another elaborated,

Honestly, it's like when someone is mistreating someone and kind of giving them no opportunity to leave, or if they have the opportunity to leave, they don't want to, because, for whatever reason, they're stuck with them. And it's just not a good situation for anyone. (15yo)

Both participants appeared to convey their impressions of unhealthy behaviors using broad and generic terminology, which, upon closer examination, could suggest a minimizing or mischaracterization of the severity of

actions that constituted an "unhealthy" dating relationship. This minimizing language seemed inconsequential at first until we asked, "What comes to mind when you think of *abusive* relationships?" Here, we identified substantial narrative variations in TDV perceptions when the word "*abusive*" was introduced. Participants used terminology that implied more serious, intense, and consequential actions and behaviors.

An abusive romantic relationship was characterized by a 15-year-old as follows: "physical abuse, which is like hurting your significant other, and then there's psychological abuse where there may not be any physical bruises, but they get mentally torn apart by the relationship, even if they don't know or won't accept that it's happening" (15yo).

An older participant commented: When I hear abusive relationship, I automatically assume like physically abusive, not so much emotionally abusive, but I tend to think about like, you know, domestic abuse or, you know, sometimes like I guess, like marital abuse (19yo)

The above quotes explicitly showed the importance of language in describing and conveying risk. More physical (than psychological) forms of abuse were conceptualized as "abusive," even though psychological forms of abuse have been shown to be more chronic and result in severe and long-lasting socioemotional and health problems. Contrast this with the language used to describe unhealthy dating relationships ("giving them no opportunity to leave" or "mistreating someone"). This first example of a dialectical struggle kicked off our close examination of language (and behaviors) as vehicles for inherent contradiction. If TDV severity and abusive behaviors were misinterpreted, it was likely that risk perceptions were as well.

Ambiguity in Dating Violence Behaviors. Aside from language differences, we discovered differences in participant reports of the same abusive action, showing yet another language dialectic. For example, password sharing—a common practice among adolescent dating

partners (Lucero et al., 2014), has been shown to precipitate cyberdating abuse, cyberstalking, relational abuse, and controlling behaviors among dating and ex-dating partners. On this behavior, participants were dialectically divided. Some described password-sharing as a "control tactic" and others as a "display of trust or love." These uncertainties point to a fundamental misunderstanding of what may be red flags in abusive relationships.

In keeping with the role language played in understanding dating violence behaviors, a participant critiqued how TDV was described to his peers and addressed in school settings:

> In high school, it wasn't a frequent discussion. Maybe once a year, we would have a counselor come in, and they would ask, "Like, are you getting abused by your parents? Or if you have a friend that's getting abused by their parents or abused inside [school] clubs. Like, are you getting hazed? Are you getting bullied by other players on the team you're on?" But they never directly [asked] "if you are being abused by a significant other, or know anyone that is abused, then this is a resource you can go to. (19yo)

As previously stated, uncertainties in rural youth perceptions (of what constitutes dating violence) and abusive dating behaviors might contribute to mischaracterizations of their risk of these behaviors. In addition, these ambiguities may influence how we consider risk levels when we design interventions for at-risk youth, as well as how we construct TDV measurement surveys, interpret at-risk youth outcomes, and formulate policies to mitigate dating violence.

"It's All Country Boys": Dialectics of Masculinity

Dialectics can transcend two polemic stances to become multidimensional or occupy more than two positions (Baxter, 2011). We identified this type of multidimensionality when comparing meso-level discourse about rural masculinity in relation to TDV risk—that is, discourse on how participants interacted with their social network and environment. This meso-level discourse divided our participants into units of discursive groups based on differences in perceptions. Thus, we identified three dialectics of masculinity: rural versus rural dialectics, rural versus urban dialectics, and present versus absent father dialectics. An interpretive lens allowed us also to identify instances of diachronic separation (where contrasting discourses arose and disappeared but not simultaneously) and synchronic interplay (where contrasting discourses emerged simultaneously).

Rural Versus Rural Dialectic of Masculinity. How rural adolescent males perceived their masculinity was highly subjective and dependent on meso-level interactions with other rural males and meaning-making mechanisms in their communities. Two groups emerged that disagreed on how rural masculinity may contribute to their risk of experiencing TDV. The first group seemed to posit that rural masculinity might encourage female submission and cis-heteropatriarchal male dominance, which may engender relationship violence. This group, we found, expressed a form of resistance to hegemonic masculinity. However, a second group emerged that decried this notion as stereotyping rural men. Instead this group compared rural to urban masculinity, highlighting the latter's flaws. Through self-reflection and repudiation, both groups set up an interesting dialectical tension.

In support of the first group, one participant described rural masculinity as navigating strict gender roles: *"As guys, we're kind of raised to be like, "Oh, you just man up and get over it"* (Focus group, 15–17yo).

Another identified rural hegemonic masculinity as a predictor of relationship violence:

> In rural communities more than other communities, the male is definitely the dominant one, because kind of the paradigm is it's the male who goes out to the field, he feeds the cows, does all the tractor work while the female, you know, stays at home and keeps things going there. Not that it's exclusively that way, but that definitely happens much more than the reverse. I think it sort of makes the woman in the relationship have a greater sense of helplessness—if that's the right word?—because if the man is controlling all the money because he's the breadwinner, then he can, you know, put ridiculous sanctions on the woman...which could potentially lead to more physical abuse or things of that nature. (19yo)

Both excerpts exemplified how rural masculinity may (re)produce hegemonic normative norms and gendered roles that emphasized rural men as providers who were also self-sustaining, emotionally repressed, and privileged in their control over household power (i.e., husband leadership), finances, and decision-making.

The second group of rural adolescent males, on the other hand, saw heteropatriarchal masculinity as stereotypical of rural men and out of date perspective. They considered rural masculinity as intrinsically misunderstood, with the concept intertwined with the normalization and acceptance of relationship violence as an unfair evaluation of rural men.

Further resisting this rural "pro-violence" narrative, a 19-year-old commented, "I think that stereotype is just a touch overdone. I suppose this is stereotyping a little bit, but very much so, families are not split up in rural towns like they are in urban areas. Usually, I mean, the pattern is that you have a father and a mother and children"

(19yo). This participant defined rural family intactness as proof of good masculinity while introducing another essentialist stereotype of urban family brokenness. Consequently, a rural-urban dialectic of masculinity was introduced.

Rural Versus Urban Dialectic of Masculinity. Our participants compared rural to urban men to counter this stereotyping of rural masculinity. For example, one young man alluded to a higher risk for dating violence in urban contexts, where other forms of violence were also prevalent: "It's all country boys, it's a different culture [here] than in the city, maybe in the city they would, but here in the country, it's kind of like, just like macho, like you know" (18yo). Repeatedly, our participants problematized urban masculinity by expressing chaotic and violent urban scenarios, minimizing their risk for TDV and exaggerating this risk in young urban males. One participant exemplified this rural–urban dialectic:

> I believe that at least from what the media tends to show, or at least the media that I consume, the masculinity issues that I tend to find, they are either fights, it tends to be violent instances where you see the clashes of masculinity, you see gunfights, you see like physical fights or riots or gang violence. And I do think that's very different in like growing up in a rural area. There's not as much tension, I believe. . . That sense of having to prove yourself might not really exist in a rural area. There's definitely still clashes of masculinity presented as violence, but it's not as frequent, and it's not as intense. (19yo)

The rural–urban dialectics informed dualistic social positions of rural masculinity with multiple meanings and ontological variants. Clearly, an essentialized belief system was at play here that could be attributed to media portrayals of urban youth and idealized perceptions of rural youth in rural discourse. We suspected these young men criticized urban masculinity through a constructivist perspective that functioned to (a) preserve their status and reputation as "rural men," (b) buffer risk by downplaying their likelihood of experiencing or perpetrating TDV, and (c) establish dominance in discourse by repudiating urban men. This conformity to hegemony made this group also embrace—as a 'badge of honor'—this "country boy" trope and the perks of this status, in contrast to the assumed dysfunction of urban males.

Overall, this rural versus urban dialectic of masculinity discourse represented an age-old dialectic. Echoing the literature, if rural males believed their version of masculinity to be faultless (i.e., a type of monologic or unbending masculinity; Hiebert et al., 2018), they were likely to resist behavior change initiatives, double down on hegemonic norms, hold a hierarchical worldview, and experience other "problematic consequences of this

[hegemonic] conformity" (Kahn et al., 2010, p. 31). Although complex and homeostatic, this monologic perspective inevitably led to an underestimating of TDV risk, making rural young males willing to tolerate high levels of dating violence risks, potentially exposing themselves or their partners to other risky behaviors. On the other end of this continuum were the young rural males who subscribed to a dialogic, hegemonic-resistant, open-to-change form of masculinity (Kahn et al., 2010). This dialogic group not only presumed a higher risk for TDV but also was likely to identify signs of abuse better, be positive bystanders, disclose their abuse and seek help, and embrace violence non-tolerance.

Present Versus Absent Father Dialectic. Within this ontological clash between rural versus urban masculinities emerged the *present vs. absent father dialectic*. Participants described urban fathers as "absent in their sons' lives" and "unable to bond," thereby delegitimizing urban fatherhood as they did with the rural vs. urban masculinity dialectic. One participant stated,

> In a rural community, at least until school age and during the summers, the son is always with the father, and the father always comes home and eats lunch and dinner. I feel like that relationship is much, much, much stronger in rural communities than in urban communities. The worry that rural fathers are not understanding because he has a "big macho man mentality," in some cases, is true. But in the vast majority I would say probably not for the rural community. (19yo)

Another elaborated,

> One thing with rural communities, especially farming communities like the one I grew up in, is the father and son bond is much tighter than in say an urban community because ever since the son has been knee-high to a grasshopper, if you can call it that, they have always been out in the field working with their dad, whether that's, checking the cows, bringing the corn in, they're constantly working with their dad, and they're with their dad so much more in the rural communities than in an urban. . .The father has a greater understanding of where the son is coming from. (19yo)

Examining these discursive utterances critically revealed the appeal of the rural father-son bond but also hinted at the impact of rural father-son bonds against adverse dating experiences. It appeared that father–son activities fostered parental bonding, gender socialization, and norm transmission—often described in a positive light. Rural fathers were positioned as vital parts of their son's socialization not only to gender roles but potentially to attitudes toward women and help-seeking intentions. In defending their masculine position, some rural young men contrasted rural fatherhood with the presumably flawed version of urban fatherhood. Their

perceptions also seemed interwoven with religion, rural culture, and rural norms, although this did not occur enough to justify analysis with our data.

#MeToo Versus #WeToo: A Dialectic of Victimhood

The final social tension we observed reflected a macro-level discourse focused on female and male victims of relationship abuse. Specifically, we observed a discursive interplay in how society treated female victims differently from male victims in discourse about who could lay claim to being a victim in an abusive relationship. We also show how one dominant perspective silenced another, revealing inherent power structures in victim utterances. A participant situated his comments within the current #MeToo movement (his own words), thus creating what we describe here as a "Dialectic of Victimhood."

As a global social campaign, the #MeToo movement was formed to raise societal awareness of rape culture, sexual assault, and harassment impacting survivors of sexual violence, particularly young Women of Color worldwide, resulting in increasing public support and belief for female survivors (Gibson et al., 2019). However, over time the #MeToo movement seemed co-opted by a predominantly celebrity- and white-female-focused agenda (Hasunuma & Shin, 2019). In response, the ancillary #WeToo campaign was formed to mitigate this exclusion and erasure of other women's experiences. Specifically, Asian American women, immigrant and refugee survivors, transgender, Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, non-binary people, and working-class women who did not feel represented in the mainstream #MeToo movement were drawn to the #WeToo campaign (Hasunuma & Shin, 2019; Johnson & Renderos, 2020; Ninh & Roshanravan, 2021).

Within this context, this participant described his masculinity and male victimhood as a marginalized discourse (peripheral discourse that lacks power) that had been lost within the #MeToo movement (Burke, 2018; Gibson et al., 2019). According to him, since "men cannot be abused," his experience was both the source and the target of social contradiction. This marginal discourse warranted inclusion in our interpretation since these types of utterances are never isolated but linked to a prior or predicted utterance or broader cultural contexts (Baxter, 2011), often with "real-world" implications for male victims of dating abuse. This participant stated,

> I think it would not occur to most guys that there is even any type of support from the men who are the victims of abusive relationships. Because all of this [#MeToo] stuff has said men are the abusers, men are the abusers, men never will get abused. It is not politically correct to say men are abused. In many colleges, if you say that men are abused, then you'll get *canceled*, trust me. Do you know what canceling is? (20yo)

By emphasizing the widespread belief that male victimhood was an anomaly in society and asserting that "it is not politically correct to say men are abused," this participant paradoxically expressed a type of silencing and exclusion of male victims, showing how one dominant perspective silenced another (Thomas, 2017). From his experience, we draw parallels between this participant's discourse (as a male victim) and societal discourse around female victims of relationship and non-relationship abuse. The same participant went on to describe his frustration with this social exclusion:

> I think if a guy may have publicly stated, "I have been abused," that would not be seen as credible, and that he would be treated as though he was lying. And if a guy who hasn't been abused says, "men get abused, too," then he is *canceled*. (20yo)

This quote exemplified the conflicting emotions and internalized stigmas male victims contend with as both the source and the target of social contradiction. This paradox dictated *how* and *if* males disclosed their abuse. Aside from that, this participant embodied a form of protest masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). By mentioning *canceling* of males who disclose abuse, he characterized the disbelief and stigma male victims face within the current "cancel culture"—the social and public ostracization of society members for inappropriate acts, statements, or actions, resulting in retributions and rejection expressed in their willful exclusion from social, online, or professional groups. This isolation enhanced the risk perception for male victims who believed their victimization would not be taken seriously and hampered abuse disclosure, which could further increase TDV risk for male victims in rural settings where male victimization was punished.

Help-Seeking Dialectics

Although several forms and sources of help-seeking were discussed, few were dialectically narrated as factors that prevented and promoted TDV risk. Participants described help-seeking actors (peer mentors and school guidance counselors) and social processes (religion/spirituality and social cohesion) as "unified opposites" that both prevented and encouraged dating violence (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Here, rural adolescent males discoursed a *dialectic of function* and utility attributed to these help-seeking sources.

Peer Mentors

As stated earlier, when rural adolescent males talked about the roles their peers and social network played in help-seeking, they consistently spoke of their peers as

filling a void by offering material and emotional support for dating violence (Hedge et al., 2017b; Lachman et al., 2019). Some participants described their use for this type of social support:

> There's only about 40 people in my, or 60, no, 40 people in my class total, so all the guys have been really close since the very beginning of school, since like kindergarten. So, any problem comes up, we all talk about it. The lunchroom is basically just a group therapy session for most of us, I guess. (17yo)

In describing the lunchroom as "basically just a group therapy session," it was apparent this space had therapizing qualities. However, the nature and degree of support peers offered presented some contradictions. First, peers provided a means of coping but frequently did not know where to turn for assistance. Second, while a valuable way to cope, peers were socialized to the same attitudes and behaviors, making it likely they shared similar norms and risk tolerance regarding dating violence (Hedge et al., 2017b). in this way, peers seemed to mitigate and sustain TDV risk simultaneously.

Social Cohesion

Participants discussed using informal school advisory groups comprised of student role models or senior peers as a resource that provided the guidance and assistance they required, "even with dating relationship issues." Given the high social cohesion of rural communities and the lack of access to support services and rural-serving organizations in some areas, ruminating with a peer was not only a practical and valuable resource but also alleviated some of the concerns we discussed. Here is an excerpt of a conversation with a 17-year-old describing student role models as an asset:

Participant [P]:	We have a school counselor, obviously, but we also have student mentors who are there to talk to us about our problems or to refer us to help hotlines for other websites for all that kind of stuff.
Researcher [R]:	Okay. So, these mentors, are they people older than you or a class above you? How does that work?
P:	Well, it depends. All the senior mentors are seniors, so they help the freshmen and the sophomore and the juniors, too, but they're just there to generally be a friend and a guide for all the students in general.
R:	Okay. And would it be pushing the line if someone talks to them about an abusive relationship?
P:	No, they actually ask us about that pretty much every week in advisory. They ask us all how we're doing if we're stressed out about anything if we have any major updates we need to make.

However, high community cohesion can be disadvantageous when "everybody knows everybody," particularly in small rural communities where teenagers attend the same social circles (school, church, library, sports and entertainment centers, etc.). High community cohesion can protect against abuse, but it can also prevent abuse disclosure and help-seeking.

School Guidance Counselors

School guidance counselors also played a crucial role in the school ecosystem and students' lives by providing vital social and emotional resources. However, they seemed to be the most problematized in our participants' discourse on help-seeking. One participant narrated a degree of social stigma associated with openly help-seeking through school counselors:

> I don't know of any guy that ever went to the counselor because we're such a small school that everyone knows if someone goes to the counselor with a problem, not because the counselor is irresponsible and doesn't take confidential things confidential. It's just that everyone sees someone walking into the counselor's office. They're like, "Oh, that person's going to counseling. They must have some sort of problem. (17yo)

Note how this participant substantiated the stigma associated with using school guidance counselors when help-seeking, given the perceived damage to the teen's reputation when publicly seeking support. The risk of this loss of reputation impaired help-seeking, especially in small rural communities where there may be a lack of anonymity and confidentiality in procuring behavioral and counseling services—a significant concern in communities where "everyone knows everyone." This is a significant concern, considering young men state they would rather talk to a trusted adult than to their parents about dating abuse.

Religion and Spirituality

As indicated by weekly church attendance, spiritual devotion, regular prayer, self-assessed importance of religious perspectives to daily life, and claims of having had a religious experience, rural Americans have been deemed more religious than their urban counterparts (Dillon & Savage, 2006). Religion and religiosity have been regarded as either protective (Ellison & Anderson, 2001) or promoting male perpetration of psychological aggressiveness and physical violence (Renzetti et al., 2017). When defining the risk linked with dating violence, the issue of religious piety emerged: "Probably 80% of people, [me] included, were church-going every single Sunday unless you're sick or you had some other big thing going on." Participants perceived that rural religious conservatism and beliefs governed intra- and inter-personal behavior while also protecting against risky behaviors, as exemplified in this dialectical contradiction:

I think that religion could work both ways. In some ways, you could be seen as using religion as a justification for what you're doing abuse-wise. But in other cases, you could be like, "Oh, my good behavior stems from my religion. This is why I would never abuse my partner." So yeah, I think it typically goes in a good way, but I can see it being used for either. (Focus group, 18–24yo)

Primarily, religion played a harm–benefit function, with gendered effects that governed relationships through established gender roles, according to another participant:

I went to the Methodist church, I have friends that were in the Catholic church or the Nazarene, and they were all against abusive relationships. I feel like a lot of guys joke about like women should submit to them, but I think it was just a big joke. In their relationships, they never acted like that. So, I think religion made it, so they were less abusive in relationships. (18yo)

Beyond the relationship, participants described how partner violence affected the family's reputation in the church:

I really think that one of the big factors as far as negating abuse is that there's always church on Sunday morning—I've never looked into the statistics—but I would assume that some of the bigger days for abuse, at least physically, would be Friday night and Saturday night. Now, I don't think that you would be as likely to physically abuse someone if you plan to get up and go to church where you're gonna be around all the community in the morning. (19yo)

From a dialectical point of view, religion seemed to play a dual role, emphasizing one's compassion ("love thy neighbor") while also promoting female subjugation and male supremacy moralization. In fact, abusive men have cited religious texts as justifications for abuse (Hancock & Siu, 2009). Moreover, an ingrained ideal of trauma fatalism (God-ordained fate) contributes to an aversion to seeking help among rural victims (Maercker et al., 2019).

Local Preachers. Rural populations as traditional religious devotees tended to seek help within religious contexts. However, participants identified local church pastors as an "overlooked" and underutilized dating violence resource. One participant explained,

Pastors probably spend, at least in rural communities and I think probably in urban areas too, spend much of their time dealing with various problems between the members of the church, whether that's marriage counseling, abuse counseling, or just giving general advice to someone. Pastors really are very big. I think you called it like a social resource. I think one of the most overlooked responsibilities of a pastor is to be a counselor and to bridge disagreements and whatever problems the members might have. (17yo)

The preacher, according to this participant, went beyond their clerical duties. Local clergy had many responsibilities and were vital to the community. Specifically, the local pastor functioned as a de facto mediator, confidant, and service provider. However, rural adolescent males saw local clergy as balancing risk and protection, as seen in the following comment:

There is some chance that word gets out among the community, but it's much, much less than if you would go to the guidance counselor. Because if you go to the guidance counselor, then everyone's gonna know, that's a given. So, the pastor, I suppose he kind of bridged the gap in that way. (19yo)

Some participants feared that seeking help would stigmatize and punish them if their abuse was revealed to other church members. In addition, dating outside of marriage may be considered morally reprehensible and frowned upon by religious denominations, making this avenue of help-seeking risky. Overall, we found several ways the same factors and process could help prevent or sustain relationship abuse highlighting critical help-seeking dialectics that warrant careful consideration in intervention planning and design.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine how rural male adolescents view their own risk of being a victim or perpetrator of dating violence, and how sociocultural factors influence their risk perception, masculine identities, and help-seeking behaviors. Informed by the RDT, our findings revealed competing discourses in rural male adolescents' perceptions and attitudes regarding victimization or perpetration of dating violence. We also found divergences in their understanding of how social and cultural contexts and discourse may influence their risk perception, masculine identity, and help-seeking behaviors.

Consequently, our findings indicate instances where the same discourse from rural adolescent males frequently contained two or more competing interpretations (Byrne, 2022; Thomas, 2017). For example, we discovered that prevention language framing impacted how rural young males interpreted unhealthy dating relationships and how they differentiated them from abusive dating relationships. Furthermore, when we looked at TDV severity and abusive behaviors, we discovered that this at-risk population had varying perceptions of what constituted risk, which could influence whether they took preventive measures to reduce their chances of perpetrating or being a victim of dating violence. These discrepancies necessitate additional research to inform TDV preventive efforts among at-risk rural youth.

Taylor et al. (2017) also point to the role of unneeded "complex language" and essentialist keywords such as "toxic," "aggressive," "violent," and "abusive," as well as agreeable words like "unhealthy" and "unsafe" can play in violence prevention messaging (p. 13). These terms are theoretically indistinguishable and difficult to operationalize, particularly for young people new to dating. When constructing prevention messaging, young people prefer clear, unambiguous descriptions of violence to inform their risk judgment (Taylor et al., 2017). Therefore, we advocate for clear, descriptive language and descriptors in dating violence prevention messaging, particularly for at-risk youth. Ambiguity in prevention messaging may leave youth victims and perpetrators unclear about how to decipher their acts, how to navigate abusive relationships, how to disclose abuse, and how to seek help.

In addition, we found that rural males' perceptions of their masculinity influenced how they appraised their risk for TDV and how receptive they were to interventions designed to minimize that risk. We discovered unsurprising multidimensionality in discourse at the micro- to macro-level on rural masculinity and TDV risk. We especially identified discourse that indicated diverse masculinity negotiation strategies in rural settings. For instance, by comparing themselves to urban males, rural males appeared to downplay their risk of experiencing or perpetrating TDV while portraying their form of masculinity as ideal (i.e., monologic masculinity; Hiebert et al., 2018). This attitude enhanced their likelihood of resisting behavior change measures, reinforcing hegemonic norms, and holding a hierarchical worldview (Kahn et al., 2010). In contrast, a second group of rural males exhibited a variant of dialogic masculinity that acknowledged how rural masculinity could promote feminine subordination and cis-heteropatriarchal male dominance, which can lead to interpersonal violence.

Our findings indicate that in a gender climate that is rapidly changing, behavior-related risks are dynamic and complex. For instance, the #MeToo versus #WeToo dialectic appears to reflect contradictions in male victimization narratives, which describe male victims as disbelieved and even vilified. These dialectical conflicts have real-world consequences, as programs seeking to prevent dating violence among rural teenagers must contend with these social tensions. If male abuse victims anticipate disbelief, they are hesitant to seek assistance. Furthermore, because male victims are less likely to seek help on their own, targeted outreach initiatives for male victims may be required (Lachman et al., 2019). However, universal prevention messaging continue to benefit all adolescents, regardless of gender (Taylor & Xia, 2022).

Furthermore, findings from this study support previous research claiming that adolescent conceptions of interpersonal violence generally focus on physical acts,

causing debate about whether psychological or verbal attacks can also be deemed violent (Hamby, 2017). Rural young males could benefit from youth-endorsed systemic programs with a clear risk perception framework that considers the dual roles that social processes and agents play in mitigating risks for TDV.

Furthermore, we show how the same social actors (school guidance counselors and local clergy) and social processes (i.e., social cohesiveness, religion, spirituality, and parental support) can both create and mitigate risk. Even as we come to terms with their contradictory roles, risk-informed community-based initiatives that address the lived experiences of rural youths can benefit from incorporating these underappreciated community allies and nonparental role models into their program design. Similar approaches with urban youth have shown promise. For example, programs that use coaches to deliver interventions, such as "Coaching Boys into Men," are effective and behavior-changing (Miller et al., 2012, 2013).

Rural fathers' involvement in their children's behavioral and social-emotional development remains an underappreciated component in preventing violence against women (Alleyne-Green et al., 2015; Brandth, 2016). Moreover, paternal involvement as part of a whole-family approach to preventing dating violence is still poorly defined among rural families, presenting an opportunity for further research into how fathers can serve as positive role models, particularly in rural settings where heteropatriarchal norms are prevalent.

From a dialectical perspective, avenues to refine risk communication, such as at home and school, are untapped. This is primarily because some forms of dating violence are difficult to define and discuss and are even considered taboo in some contexts. Besides, parents and school officials may lack the requisite emotional, cognitive, and pragmatic skills to intervene successfully in highly sensitive adolescent risky behaviors (Draugedalen, 2020; Hedge et al., 2017). In addition, essential parenting skills such as emotional support (e.g., warmth and empathy), informational support, and instrumental assistance (e.g., referral to care) may be challenging to actualize for some parents (Ashley & Foshee, 2005). Our findings bear implications for advocates and practitioners working with rural youth to plan developmentally and culturally appropriate prevention programs. We also hope our findings can encourage researchers to develop a more precise agenda for developing a theory guiding violence prevention in low-income, rural contexts.

Finally, narrow study goals, urban-centric funding priorities, and sample convenience have contributed to the exclusion of rural youth from TDV studies (Jewkes et al., 2015; Sianko et al., 2019), as well as a shortage of "in-network" researchers who can access rural areas. As a result, the bulk of dating violence research has focused on

college-age youth (Taylor & Xia, 2022), cisgender female survivors, or heterosexual, urban, middle-class, white youth—described as the "urban norm in violence research" (Sandberg, 2013, p. 351). As a result, rural youth continue to fall through critical gaps in dating violence prevention efforts.

Study Limitations

Our sample was predominantly white (81%) and from the Midwest and may not reflect rural youth experiences, challenges, and complexities with dating violence. Moreover, rural communities are heterogeneous, making generalizations from this study problematic. Young men may draw from different ethno-racial and geographical schemas of masculinity and may be more responsive to programs designed to consider their risk perceptions (Dworkin et al., 2015). Second, given this study was conducted entirely online during the pandemic lockdowns, we used a convenience sample and not a respondent-driven sampling approach. Third, our participants were likely self-selected, which may have skewed our sample toward those willing and able to participate in a completely online study. Finally, because this study was done during a worldwide pandemic, it was challenging to recruit participants from historically underserved minority groups to allow for both dissent and congruence in our findings.

Conclusion

The current study sheds light on dating violence in rural settings, particularly among rural adolescent boys. Although dating violence is ubiquitous, our findings show that it can be perceived differently by youths who are already at risk for this and other forms of violence (e.g., domestic violence), given differences in micro-, meso-, and macro-level factors. Notably, perceptions of risk for TDV differ across socio-cultural contexts and ultimately influence help-seeking intentions and practices of rural adolescent males in a resource-limited context. Because of the interpretive nature of this study, our findings should not be considered representative of all rural young boys' dating violence experiences. However, these findings may help to design an adaptive risk perception paradigm applicable to rural settings. Instead of imposing strict risk factors in program design, we argue for a research agenda exploring and responding to dating violence risk within a dialectical framework that is responsive to diverse youth perceptions of risk and vulnerability, that is, how they perceive their risk for experiencing dating violence, often co-occurring with other socio-behavioral issues.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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