PERCEPTIONS OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE (IPV) AMONG YOUNG CANADIAN WOMEN

Michelle Coghlan,
Centre for Research in Women’s Health, Toronto
Ilene Hyman, University of Toronto,
Robin Mason, University of Toronto &
Centre for Research in Women’s Health, Toronto

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This paper examines young women’s perceptions of intimate partner violence (IPV) and contextual factors that help shape these perceptions. Qualitative research using in-depth focus groups were conducted with diverse young women, aged 18 to 24 years, from diverse backgrounds, living in Toronto, Canada. Open-ended and semi-structured interview questions were designed to elicit information regarding how young women think about, describe, and define IPV. Thematic analysis was used to identify the core constructs that shape young women’s understandings. Findings suggested that young women clearly defined IPV and considered psychological, physical and sexual acts as abusive. However, contextual factors related to the nature of abuse, such as the type and frequency of abuse and intent of the aggressor to cause harm, as well as factors related to the social context such as the acceptance of mutual aggression, power and control, influenced their ability to recognize IPV in their own relationships. Understanding the contextual factors shaping young women’s perceptions of IPV can inform the development of effective IPV prevention education programs for young women.

As defined by the United Nations (1993), violence against women is “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.” It can take place in relationships between spouses and ex-spouses and current or former dating or steady partners (Saltzman et al., 1999). Violence against women is present in every society and culture (Locke & Richman, 1999) and takes many
different forms. This paper addresses intimate partner violence (IPV), which is one of most universal and widespread forms of violence against women (Heise & Garcia-Moreno, 2002).

Although individual level factors and personality traits have been the focus of much of the research on the etiology of IPV (Thompson et al., 2006), feminist theorists have long considered IPV to be the expression of embedded gender inequalities and structurally sanctioned male domination (see for example, Dobash & Dobash 1979; Yllo & Bograd, 1988). Feminist researchers and theorists suggest that the more unequal women are in comparison to men in society, the more likely men are to be violent toward women. This hypothesis has been borne out by research that found women experience higher rates of sexual violence and much higher levels of fear in societies where they hold less status (Yodanis, 2004). Not surprisingly, fear (and its lesser form, anxiety) both delimits and constrains women’s participation in civic and social life and is associated with poorer health (Saarni et al., 2006; Csoboth, Birkas & Purebi, 2005).

Despite attempts to develop common definitions of IPV, differences persist in the definition and/or acknowledgement of what constitutes abuse across settings and circumstances (Ellsberg & Heise, 2005; Saltzman et al., 1999, p. 12). While the debate continues, several international and national studies have examined the prevalence of IPV. In Canada, a recent national survey found that 7% of Canadian women experienced physical and/or sexual abuse and 18% experienced psychological and/or financial abuse by a current or ex-partner in the previous five years (Statistics Canada, 2005). Violence in intimate relationships is also a common experience for many girls and young women. A national study of 3,142 post-secondary students found that between 16% and 35% had experienced at least one physical or sexual assault by a boyfriend in the previous 12 months and approximately 45% of the young women interviewed reported that they had been sexually abused since leaving high school (DeKeseredy & Kelly, 1993). Another study examined the incidence of dating violence among youth aged 11 to 20 years old in New Brunswick, Canada and found that 22% of girls and young women surveyed had experienced psychological and/or physical abuse, 19% had experienced sexual abuse and 29% had experienced some form of abuse in their dating relationships (Price et al., 2000).

The profound negative impact of IPV on the physical, sexual and mental health of women is well documented (Campbell, 2002; Heise, Pitanquy & Germain, 1994; Jaffe et al., 1986; Kernic, Wolf, & Holt, 2000; Linton, Larden & Gillow, 1996; Moeller, Bachmann & Moeller, 1993; Plichta & Abraham, 1996; Schei, 1990; Schei & Bakketeig, 1989; Stark, Flitcraft & Frazier, 1979; Wisner et al., 1999). Adolescent females who reported abuse from dating partners are also at a higher risk for health
problems such as substance abuse, unhealthy weight control, suicidal thoughts or attempts and unhealthy sexual practices (Seimer, 2004). These ill health effects cost an estimated between $408 million (Greaves, Hankivsky & Kingston-Richers, 1995) and $1.5 billion (Day, 1995) while in-patient hospital costs related to violence range from $37.8 million to $70.7 million (Statistics Canada, 1993).

A woman’s decision to disclose and/or seek help depends upon her ability to name and define her experience as abusive. Despite this, few studies have examined women’s perceptions and definitions of IPV. However, the literature does suggest, for example, that older women are more likely to hold values and attitudes that reinforce secrecy and acceptance of blame for violence, subservience in marital relationships, acceptance of the belief that occasional violence is in order to keep wives and children ‘in line,’ and the strong sense that family business should not be aired publicly, compared to their younger counterparts (Wolkenstein & Sterman, 1998). The social context of young women’s lives is different enough from their older counterparts that their understandings about and experiences with normative male/female relations and intimate partner roles, beliefs governing acceptable and unacceptable behaviours and familiarity with concepts of abuse may also differ. Additionally, young women may have more contact with media and social institutions than older women, thus influencing their knowledge of resources and health behaviours (Hyman, 1999). Although young women are not a homogenous group, insofar as their experience is shaped by age, experience and social context, young women may have different understandings of IPV than do older women.

Previous research on young women and IPV has primarily focused on definitions and perceptions of severity and causality (Batchelor, Burman & Brown, 2001; Mullender, 1997; O'Keefe, 1997). These studies suggest that the extremes of the definition of IPV are easy to identify, but, as Burge (1998, p. 31) asserted, “individual attitudes and perceptions limit our ability to label grey areas.” The application of intersectionality theory to IPV has an enormous potential to increase our understanding of how IPV is understood by young women. According to this theory, individual attributes such as identity and sense of self are embedded in a social context that shape both experiences in and of the world (Crenshaw, 1989). At any one time a young woman occupies a number of varied social positions that mediate “various psychological processes, such as well-being, acculturation, moral reasoning, judgment and decision making and everyday understandings of social relations” (Mahalingam & Leu, 2005). An analysis of the intersection of these varied identities avoids essentializing any one aspect of identity (such as young woman or Canadian woman) over all others (Crenshaw, 1989). In this way, one category of being is not privileged over any other (Phoenix,
2006). Utilizing this framework we set out to understand young Canadian women’s perceptions of intimate partner violence and the social contextual factors that shape their perceptions.

METHODS

This qualitative, pilot study used focus groups to gather information from young women regarding their views about IPV. Qualitative research methods allow the researcher to explore in depth the feelings and beliefs that women hold, i.e., how young women make sense of IPV as a part of their lives, experiences and structures of their world (Cresswell, 1994). The focus group method assumes that as people listen to others’ opinions and understandings, their own ideas become clear and they are able to articulate their opinions in response to those of others. As a result, focus groups are designed to promote participants’ self disclosure through the creation of a permissive environment (Marshall & Rossman, 1995; Morgan, 1988). In this study, the focus groups promoted and encouraged meaningful discussions among the young women participants allowing us to explore their varied perspectives about IPV and revealing how those perceptions are influenced by several contextual factors.

In designing this study, we relied on interpretive description methodology, a grounded qualitative approach to articulating patterns and themes emerging in relation to various clinical phenomena, originating in clinical nursing contexts (Thorne, Kirkham & MacDonald-Emes, 1997). We found this methodology well suited to our intentions of exploring young women’s attitudes and perceptions about IPV. This approach acknowledges the constructed and contextual nature of human experience, yet also allows for shared realities (Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997). This method provided direction for qualitative description (Sandelowski, 2000) and allowed for an interpretive and explanatory account of young women’s perceptions to be generated on the basis of informed questioning, reflective techniques and critical examination of the conversation material (Thorne, Kirkham, & O’Flynn-Magee, 2004).

Study Participants

Participants were selected for the focus groups using purposive sampling and snowballing techniques (Seidman, 1991). Participants were recruited from the University of Toronto (undergraduate classes, campus clubs and student associations) by e-mail, posters, information sheets and personal contacts. Initial ‘contact visits’ (phone calls) with potential participants helped establish the quality of and foundation for potential interview relationships (Seidman, 1991).
Two focus groups were conducted; each lasted approximately two hours. One focus group was comprised of six individuals, the other of five individuals. All participants were women, aged 18 to 24 years (mean age was 22), living in Toronto. About half of the participants were single; two participants were in a short-term relationship (less than three months); and four participants were in a long-term relationship (two years or more). None of the participants had been married or were living with a dating partner at the time of the interviews; one participant had lived with a dating partner in the past. All participants had completed some university. Nine participants were born in Canada and two participants immigrated to Canada when they were young. Participants’ or their parents’ countries of origin included Canada, Columbia, England, Hungary, Ireland, Russia and South Africa.

**Study Questions**

The primary objective of this pilot study was to engage young Canadian women in discussing and defining IPV. The two main areas of questions explored (1) young women’s definitions of intimate partner violence and the types of language, actions and behaviours young women consider to be abusive; and (2) their perceptions about whether there are times or situations when IPV is acceptable within relationships.

**Data Analysis**

The focus group interviews generated a great deal of information which was entered into a computer-based qualitative data analysis program, QSR N6, which facilitated identifying and piecing together of patterns and categories for analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Initial categories and codes were based on the interview guide but flexibility was maintained in order to allow for the shifting of ideas and changing of initial concepts and codes (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Subsequent analysis relied upon the inductive approach characteristic of interpretive description (Thorne, Kirkham & O’Flynn-Maggee, 2004) to understand young women’s perceptions of IPV as illuminated by their personal realities, the context of their lives and relationships. Materials were independently coded and compared (Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Seidman, 1991) by team members. The themes that emerged were gradually developed from these categories (Seidman, 1991).

Ecological and postmodern feminist perspectives guided the research. Ecological theory embeds individual and familial experiences within broader social and historical contexts. Postmodern feminism with its emphasis on intersectionality extends this theoretical lens into a sociopolitical context that brought to the fore issues of gender, age and class. This perspective emphasizes the importance of context, processes and the subjective experiences of the young women participants.
Interpretations were made to resist explanations that represent a universal ideal of young womanhood. Critical theory with its questioning of assumptions about power and control proved important in the analysis phase of the project.

RESULTS

A great deal of data was collected during the focus group discussions, only a fraction of which is reproduced here. The findings focus on information central to the study’s main objectives. This includes data on young women’s perceptions of IPV, including information on how participants defined IPV and specific actions and behaviours participants considered to be abusive.

Young Women’s Understanding of IPV – Common Definitions

This section presents data on young women’s perceptions of what IPV is, how it is understood and its impacts on women’s health and society.

Definitions: To help us understand young women’s perceptions of violence and abuse in intimate relationships, participants were asked to define IPV. Participants defined IPV broadly and they discussed the issue in terms of physical, sexual and emotional forms of abuse. They discussed a broad range of physical behaviours including shoving, grabbing, pushing, punching, hitting, using an object to punch or hit and slapping. They defined sexual abuse in terms of sexual coercion, sexual assault, rape and unwanted touching. Participants from both focus groups seemed to think most readily of physical and sexual abuse, although some were quick to mention emotional and/or psychological abuse. Some participants spoke about verbal abuse such as insults, swearing, belittling or constantly putting someone down. As one woman described: “I think for verbal abuse, it’s basically anything that just puts down the other person or makes them lose their dignity or whatever just makes them feel bad” (group 2, participant 2). Another participant offered the following comment:

I think that when, in cases of verbal abuse when it’s just emotional, it doesn’t have to be physical contact, but the demeanor of people says a lot. Like if someone is sticking themselves in your face like showing their hands in your face, not touching you, but still yelling at you and just displaying their anger by making themselves you know scary even by what they’re, how they’re displaying themselves, that can have a real effect on your perception of what they’re saying as well (group 2, participant 1).
Some participants discussed threatening behaviours when defining IPV:

It may not just be physical abuse, but I would also include emotional and sexual abuse in that, like verbal abuse as well. And it’s not even just the act of doing it, but the threat and the feeling that it could happen in this situation so it could just be threats that it will happen (group 1, participant 5).

Some of the study participants spoke about intimidation:

…it could also be in terms of actions, making somebody do something that they don’t really want to do, it doesn’t have to be sexual or otherwise, but even, I’m trying to think of a good example. Um I don’t know, participating in something they really don’t want to, they feel very uncomfortable about or that offends them, or whether it might be I don’t know something religious that they don’t believe in or otherwise, you know always forced to do something that goes against their will (group 2, participant 4).

Some of the study participants spoke about berating acts and backing someone into a corner as a form of IPV. One young woman said:

Whether it be physically or mentally berating them, like in a mental way or a verbal way, you can berate someone, if you continue to just ask them questions and be loud and be I don’t know right in their face, where a person can’t really get out of it or they don’t feel that they can. Also like physically backing someone into a corner and telling them to do something or using your presence to dominate them (group 1, participant 3).

Some of the study participants discussed limiting freedom and included the act of controlling financial resources in their definitions of IPV. One young woman stated:

Anything that disrespects the integrity of the other person like um even financial, I even think financial abuse like let’s say, somebody has more access to the money and they take away your money or something like that kind of pretty much leaves the other person you know like very helpless (group 2, participant 3).

Another young woman felt that manipulation was a form of IPV and was “probably one of the easiest ones to overlook and be blind to” (group 1, participant 1). Participants from both focus groups discussed a wide range of harmful acts that can occur in relationships that go beyond what
people traditionally think of as ‘serious’ abuse, that is, physical or sexual violence. In addition to some of these more commonly recognized forms of abuse, participants defined a man’s expectation to control a woman and/or her emotions as abusive. As one woman described:

Something like if you loved me, you’ll blank, basically do anything, if you loved me, you should do this, if you loved me, if you actually cared, you would do this. So it’s almost like a challenge to, that’s how you define the relationship, that oh if I love you, then I have to do whatever you say, or I have to agree with everything you say. I’d say that’s a form of abuse too (group 1, participant 1).

In summary, despite minor differences, it was clear that all of the study participants defined IPV quite broadly. They recognized that IPV is actual or threatened physical or sexual violence or psychological and emotional abuse directed toward a spouse, ex-spouse, current or former boyfriend or girlfriend, or current or former dating partner.

**Recognition of Power & Control**

The study participants were clear in their belief that IPV occurs as a result of a power imbalance between two people who share an intimate relationship. One woman described:

I believe there is a power dynamic that takes place in terms of domestic violence. It’s one person who is in a position of higher power than the other and who is you know using that to their advantage and exploiting the other person (group 1, participant 4).

Study participants associated the idea of power and control with different settings or types of relationships in which IPV can occur. One young woman stated:

I would say that it’s somebody taking advantage of the fact that you are either in close quarters or close with one another, that you have a close relationship and taking advantage of that fact, of that situation in order to abuse you…So somebody taking advantage of their position and the role that you both have and that it’s a private relationship (group 1, participant 5).

Study participants noted that IPV occurs in the home, in families and some participants included children in their definitions:

Typically and up until recently, I would just say that violence in the household like at home, basically between husband and wife, but I guess
we could include kids as well and typically the husband beating up on the wife or children. But actually today we were just discussing this issue in my women’s studies class and so I’m realizing that it can also be just like verbal abuse not just physical so like verbal, emotional, cultural, even financial abuse. Anything on a personal sphere basically (group 2, participant 2).

Study participants discussed the term ‘domestic’ and noted that IPV often goes beyond the ‘private,’ domestic realm and can affect two people who live together and/or people who are dating:

*It’s not only limited to families, but also in just general relationships, it doesn’t have to be within a home and it can just be anything, it doesn’t have to be at home basically, a relationship between two teenagers, it could be two people in university who don’t even live together and it still exists there* (group 1, participant 1).

In other words, study participants thought about IPV in terms of power and control. They most readily thought about men exerting power and domination over women, but they acknowledged that women act abusively as well. Although they noted that men are sometimes the victims of IPV, they acknowledged that women tend to suffer more serious injuries as a result of the abuse. In addition, participants spoke about both heterosexual and same-sex couples when describing the types of relationships that can be affected by IPV.

**Impact of IPV**

Participants’ common definitions of IPV reflected their understanding that IPV is a serious problem for women causing not only physical harm but also emotional and psychological harm. Those who had some experience with IPV described situations in which threatening and controlling actions and emotional abuse can be just as harmful if not worse than physically violent situations. As one young woman described: *“I think emotional abuse is just as bad as physical abuse, if not even worse, because it really sticks with you. I think emotional abuse is as problematic or even more so than physical abuse because it can stay there longer”* (group 2, participant 3). Some of the study participants spoke about the shame and guilt that women face as result of IPV. As one young woman stated:

...some of those feelings and distress...which I think is really important is its influence on kind of the person’s, like their stress, their personality organization, like how it affects their mental health in the long-term and whether those potential consequences would change maybe the advice we
would give or how we would deal with a situation or even how we would define it. So some of those long-term consequences I think are important to discuss (group 2, participant 5).

Another young woman noted the effects of verbal abuse on women’s self-esteem and self-confidence.

*Just criticism… if you call someone ugly with the intention of just joking… I think that would be verbal abuse because anything like that if you perpetuate it in your mind and you continually repeat it, it could eventually give you like a complex, like anything that you could eventually become to believe that is negative toward yourself I think is verbal abuse* (group 2, participant 2).

Many of the study participants expressed the view that IPV is a serious social problem and that more attention should be paid to ensuring that IPV is prevented. As one young woman described:

*I just think that I wish as a child, I learned more about it and not like really as a kid you can really do that much, but just you know I wish there was more education in school and they really explained it very well and they had people come in and really talk about it and uh, yeah, because I’ve just seen it with friends and teachers and you know so many times and you know I think there just should be more education about it, I think that’s a good way of at least maybe the next generation will start to hear about it when they are little and then maybe it will be better, I don’t know* (group 1, participant 6).

In summary, study participants associated IPV with physical and mental health outcomes for women and all participants recognized the significant burden of IPV on women and society.

**Young Women’s Understanding of IPV – Where the Lines are Blurred**

As discussions progressed, study participants were asked to consider whether there are times or situations when IPV is acceptable. At first, many participants said that violence of any sort should never be tolerated and that there are no situations in which violence in relationships was justified. However, when asked to consider specific types of situations and relationships, most of the young women in this study defined situations as “abusive” relative to the individuals and situations involved.

Six themes emerged from the discussions that reflect respondents’ perceptions about what constitutes IPV in different contextual settings: a) frequency of abuse; b) intent of the aggressor to
cause harm; c) type of relationship; d) personal feelings about abuse; e) mutuality of aggression in relationships; and f) mutuality of power and control in relationships. Participants’ beliefs about “acceptable” and “not acceptable” behaviours were influenced by their personal experience within relationships as well as ideas about the seriousness of and harm caused by different actions.

**Frequency:** Most of the study participants identified frequency of abuse as an important factor in defining IPV. Participants’ perceptions of IPV were contingent upon the frequency of abuse occurring (i.e., whether the abuse happens every day or in an emotionally charged situation). Some participants discussed the issue of frequency in relation to physical forms of abuse. As one young woman stated:

… there would probably be a point when I actually felt like if it happened frequently, I would probably end the relationship, if it happened to the point where I was uh severely physically harmed or thought that he might harm my children, I think I would probably end the relationships, like if I felt that it was a great threat, if I felt that he was going to kill me, then I would probably end the relationship. But if it was a really a one-time deal, I don’t know, but if it probably happened more than that, then you know (group 1, participant 5).

A young woman who initially said that IPV should never be tolerated offered the following comment:

… we don’t want to say that it’s ok to hit or to do anything like that but if it happened, you know, heat of the moment, not necessarily tolerate it but move past it, don’t break up…Maybe that, you know it comes a point where it’s like, ok, it happened, you forget about it, you move forward…it would depend on you know does that happen often? Is that a way that someone shows their, you know their anger, because that’s certainly not conducive to anything. But if something came up and you are able to move past it and move forward and address the situation…I can’t say if I would be ok with that, it hasn’t happened yet, I hope it doesn’t, but I think that would be one (time when abuse is tolerated), if it’s you know a one time thing (group 1, participant 1).

**Intent:** Some of the study participants felt that intent of the aggressor to cause harm was an important factor in defining IPV. As one young woman stated:

I think one of the most important things is that there is an intent to cause harm. It’s not just you know joking around and saying ‘ha ha, you’re ugly,’ or something to try and get a reaction but it’s, there’s
actually an intent to affect the other person negatively whether they
know it or not, or whether they say it isn’t true or not… (group 1,
participant 1).

Other participants disagreed and felt that even if an abuser does
not intend to hurt the other person, it still counts as IPV. As one woman
described: “I think there’s a lot of times when domestic violence, it can be
unintentional like if someone doesn’t intend to hurt someone, they can
still be hurting them constantly without the intent” (group 2, participant
2). Another young woman agreed and offered the following comment
regarding the issue of intent:

I think sometimes it’s even done unintentionally and that it’s almost a
lack of awareness too about what’s being done and who you are affecting
with it, whether it’s physically, physically I would say you’re probably
more aware of what you’re doing, but especially with emotionally and
verbally abusing somebody else…(group 2, participant 4).

Some of the study participants discussed the issue of intent as
being hard to define, both for the abuser and the victim. This comment
came from a young woman in response to a discussion about verbal or
emotional abuse:

… I think that I would say that it should never be tolerated…but
thinking of my own personal relationships, I think that there are a lot of
situations where I have tolerated it and I think the reason why a lot of
people do is because it’s hard to, it’s not as clear cut as physical violence,
it’s harder to identify when you’re being emotionally or verbally abused
and I think it’s also a lot harder for the person doing it to realize when
they are emotionally or verbally abusing someone because it’s not a
physical act. It’s very easy to realize when you are lifting your hand and
hitting someone (group 2, participant 2).

Type of Relationship: Although many participants recognized that IPV
occurs in a variety of contexts and types of relationships, they felt that the
type of relationship was an important factor in defining IPV. For example,
most participants tended to discuss the issue in terms of marital
relationships only unless prompted to think about and discuss the issue
in terms of dating relationships. In addition, most participants felt that
violence occurring in marital relationships was more serious than
violence occurring in dating relationships, especially if there are children
involved in the situation. However, some participants felt that they were
willing to tolerate abusive behaviours in a marital relationship than in a
dating relationship. As one young woman stated:
In my personal opinion, there’s a lot more that I would be willing to tolerate in a married relationship than I would be with somebody I was casually dating. Like if I was with somebody constantly, like called me a certain name and I said, ‘Don’t do that,’ and he continued to do it and I was dating him, I would probably just break up with him, whereas I think in a married relationship, I really could see myself putting up with a lot more because the situation, especially if there was children, because the situation is so much harder to take and get out of it, which is what I was thinking about (regarding) physical violence. Like if somebody slapped me now, like just in the heat, like if we were really, really in an argument and I was really like you know, because I’m a verbal abuser, like I would call him names and things like that and if he slapped me, that would be the end of it. Like if you touch me in that way where it hurts, that’s the end of it. But I think in a married relationship, I wouldn’t be like, ‘we’re getting a divorce, you just slapped me,’ I think that in that sense, I could see myself allowing a lot more to happen (group 1, participant 5).

Another young woman agreed and offered the following comment about tolerating abuse in a marital relationship: “Yeah, you have a lot more invested in that point and if it ends, there’s a lot more that you have to go through than if you’re just dating and you’re not living in the same place” (group 1, participant 5).

Some participants felt that it is harder for women who are affected by violence in their marriage to leave the relationship for the following reasons: a) for the sake of the children; b) for the sake of the relationship (i.e., if they are in love, they can work it out); and c) if it increases the risk of future violence and/or abuse for the woman involved. Participants felt that in these situations, women who are affected by violence will tolerate IPV. Another young woman offered the following comment when asked to explain why women in abusive marital situations may tolerate violence:

I think shame. Like I could see that if I chose somebody and I made a whole life with them and then I was like they hit me once or twice, if I tell everybody, are they going to be like, ‘you’re making a big deal out of nothing’? And I think that there’s a level of, like it’s hard to think in an actual time, so it’s easy to say I would leave the relationship and be like that but I think that there would be a level of ‘I’m making something out of nothing, I should just tolerate this.’ You know, like it’s just a slap, it’s going to seem like I’m making a really big deal and a big production (group 1, participant 5).
**Personal Feelings:** Participants were clear in their belief that if a woman does not ‘feel’ as though she is being abused, then it is not necessarily IPV. For example, if a woman does not feel diminished or ‘offended’ by the act, participants did not feel as though it constitutes IPV. As one young woman described: “In my opinion, it is on a person-to-person basis and whatever hurts that person or whatever the person would take offense to, then that’s violence and that’s abuse for that person. But if that’s true, then it’s really hard to define” (group 2, participant 2). Another young woman stated: “If the person finds it abusive, then it’s abusive, so I guess that could be one way of defining abusive language, so the person who is, I guess abused, like if they feel abused, like from anything that person says, then it’s abuse” (group 2, participant 5).

Another young woman offered the following comment when asked to consider whether there are times or situations when IPV is acceptable:

> It really depends on the person, so you’re saying if you’re boyfriend said something to you and it really hurts you then it’s abuse. But if you were a different person and you didn’t take offense to it and you weren’t hurt by it, well then is it still abuse? Because the exact same thing is happening but the people who are involved are different. And so, we have to decide whether it’s clear cut, it’s like no matter who it happens to it’s abuse, or does it depend on whether the person is hurt or not, not on the intention, but is it actually you know, is it painful for the person because they could be a really strong person who just is you know, is nonchalant about it and says ‘I don’t really care what they say about me, it doesn’t matter, I’m comfortable with myself and I’m not going to take it personally’, but it could be the exact same action or behaviour (group 2, participant 1).

Although many study participants expressed the view that there are no situations in which violence and/or abuse is justified in relationships, participants felt that strongly that IPV is highly contingent on how a woman feels in response to the behaviour. As one young woman described:

> There are times when I would tolerate it and there may be other people who would take much more offense to the things that I guess I would blow off because I didn’t think they were important and where, in that person’s case, I would think that it shouldn’t be tolerated because it’s affecting them so much more, so it depends (group 2, participant 5).
Perceptions of what constitutes IPV depended upon whether or not the woman feels as though she is being abused. Participants believed that different women deal with conflict and respond to incidents in different ways. They acknowledged that women may feel a wide range of emotions and that two different people may respond to the same incident in different ways. For these young women, a woman’s perception of the situation was important. They felt that if a woman doesn’t feel as though she is being abused, it’s not abuse.

Mutuality of Aggression: Participants spontaneously disclosed their involvement in mutual fighting, sometimes to the point where others would call it violent. This related to both physical and verbal behaviours and forms of abuse that seemed to occur regularly in participants’ relationships. Some participants felt that hitting, slapping and pushing are common ways for two people to relate to each other or show that they care. As one young woman described:

I agree with you when you’re in a relationship with someone you wouldn’t want to harm them, but I play fight with my boyfriend, I don’t really see it as being harmful, um, its just a way to let off steam and I don’t really see it as being damaging to our relationship because I’m not threatening him and he’s not threatening me. I don’t really see it in the same way (group 1, participant 1).

Another young woman offered the following comment:

I think when you’re playful, hitting between people, even if it does end up hurting somebody, usually that’s considered ok. So if you know like I can think of times when you know like I’ve slapped my boyfriend on the arm and it was just like we were having a discussion about something and I was like, ‘don’t do that,’ and I liked slapped him on the arm and I don’t think he felt threatened by it and I didn’t mean it in a threatening way but it could still have hurt him and I think that that goes both ways, although I don’t think he would slap me on the arm, but that kind of like a playful, where you’re doing it in a joking way (group 1, participant 5).

Another young woman described the following situation when thinking about playful aggression between two people who are dating: “I’ve been punched before, like just punched in the arm and it’s really hurt and I’ve had bruises, but is that violence? Yes, but it was meant to be ‘oh look I just punched you, it was a play fight’” (group 1, participant 2). Some study participants felt that insults are also ways for two people in a relationship to show each other that they care. As one young woman described:
I know myself and a lot of my friends and it turns out some of the people that I date, we are extremely playful and we’re very laid back, so in a sense, a lot of the times, insulting each other is the ways that we show each other that we care… it’s what we do (group 1, participant 4).

Some study participants felt that insults and screaming are just ways for some people to resolve things in relationships. As one young woman described:

“I’m the kind of person, I don’t like conflicts or fights, but I think some people think that’s a really good way for them to, I mean just like verbal fights, like when you just yell at somebody or you say things that you know you really shouldn’t say, I mean, I don’t like that so I don’t really think that it’s ever a good time to call somebody stupid or you’re fat or something but I think that sometimes people just say things out of anger and they know you know you know they shouldn’t have said it but it’s like almost ok because it was in a fight, but I guess to many people, some people might do it all them time, but only once in while if you said something maybe it’s ok, but I don’t personally think so, but I could see how some people would say well you know I was just angry, it was the heat of the moment, I was just arguing so, but I don’t think that way. I think I’m always careful to try to not say anything that’s terrible because you can’t really take it back and it’s going to be in that person’s head just from my own experiences, like if I’ve heard somebody say something, I’m like, its you know you just don’t want to say something that you’re going to regret later. But I think some people don’t mind as much, I don’t know (group 1, participant 6).

Responses suggest that participants experienced forms of aggression and conflict in their relationships, but that the aggression is often mutual or accepted by both individuals involved. In relation to IPV, they expressed that different forms of aggression is justified if both people agree that the actions are ‘acceptable’. In these situations, they stressed the importance of establishing boundaries and limits for how they will act in different situations, especially if the relationship is ‘serious’.

**Mutuality of Power & Control:** It was apparent from the focus group discussions that study participants valued equality in relationships and held strong convictions that the two people involved needed to decide what were acceptable and unacceptable to them in a relationship. They were also clear in their beliefs that they were powerful in their lives and relationships. In fact some study participants admitted that they were ‘verbal abusers’ themselves. This was also apparent in their spontaneous disclosures of the strategies they used to maintain or gain control over their partners. For example many considered it acceptable to manipulate...
men to control the situation. However study participants also described contradictory beliefs about IPV that might explain why at times IPV was tolerated in a dating relationship. As one study participant explained:

*I don’t think that violence should be tolerated at all, in any case. But speaking from some personal experience and some from my friends, when you are in a situation um, when these things do come up and you’ve had, I guess, a violent act against you, in the situation, you tolerate it, you don’t know, like you don’t know it now but if it comes up, like we all don’t know how we would react in certain situations, but um, from a personal case, you can not reach, like you just don’t think of it at the time because there’s so much stuff going on and you may put it, like if you’re trying to work out an argument, you’re trying to work out a fight and it does happen, um, you may not think of it at the time and you may tolerate it and not do anything about it, not thinking that it’s that big of a problem with maybe the other issues going on, but it’s just a hit, it’s nothing, unless someone points it out to you or, I’m just, like you can be blinded by a situation I guess through the whole thing (group 1, participant 3).

DISCUSSION

The objective of this pilot study was to engage young women in discussing and defining IPV and to examine the contextual factors that shape their perceptions. Our major finding was that young Canadian women were able to recognize multiple forms of IPV, psychological, physical and sexual and had no difficulty recognizing that IPV involved unequal power relationships and control. These findings are similar to other studies reporting young people’s definitions of IPV (Batchelor, Burman & Brown, 2001; Mullender, 1997).

However, our study findings also revealed that despite young women’s abilities to articulate the full range of behaviours and relationship dynamics that constituted IPV, their perceptions of IPV were strongly influenced by contextual factors related to the nature of abuse, such as the type and frequency of abuse and intent of the aggressor to cause harm. This was especially true when it came to defining violence in their own relationships. For example, if a young woman experienced verbal abuse or even the occasional ‘hit or slap’, if the abuse happened one time or in the heat of the moment and if the aggressor did not intend to cause harm to the victim, it wasn’t always considered to be IPV.

Equally troubling was the finding that young women’s perceptions of IPV were clearly shaped by a social context that influenced their views about normative, thus acceptable, male-female behaviour; normative behaviour that often involved displays of power, force and
mutual aggression and created conditions whereby young women declared they were not abused if they did not feel abused and if the behaviour occurred ‘just once’, in the context of a play fight, or other playful situation. The location of women in a social context that normalizes behaviours such as violence has been noted by other scholars (Comack & Balfour, 2004). Further research is necessary to understand the social and cultural factors that contribute to young women’s perceptions of the permissibility of IPV in different situations and whether it is possible to resist or modify cultural and social discourses that perpetuate gender inequality and/or the acceptance of violence as normative in young people’s relationships.

Naming what has happened and investing that experience with meaning is also critically important in helping individuals to understand and define their experiences and to determine an appropriate course of action (Kelly, 1998; Lempert, 1996; Mehrotra, 1999). However, naming and defining phenomenon is neither wholly objective nor apolitical but dependent on social mores, values and political will. For example, early use of terms such as “wife abuse” and “battered woman” in the 1970s (Kelly, 1998) led to a social response, i.e., battered women’s shelters and the current reconstruction of abuse from a personal or familial problem to a public health issue (World Health Organization, 2002). Our study findings suggested that the ways in which young women recognized, defined and understood IPV were influenced by both individual and contextual factors. These factors will in turn need to be considered in framing and naming a young woman’s response to IPV, for example, whether or not to disclose and/or seek help.

Healthy relationships, based on respect and gender equity, are fundamental to young women’s health and are determinants of healthy communities. The caring and respect that occurs in social relationships and the resulting sense of satisfaction and well-being, may also act as a buffer against health problems (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2000). Although study participants were familiar with many of the adverse consequences of IPV on individuals, families and society, it was not clear whether they understood or recognized their own increased risk of continuing dysfunctional and/or abusive relationships if these patterns are not addressed. It is well established that patterns set in youth may continue into adult relationships (Foshee et al., 2005). Although there are few longitudinal studies on the impact of dating violence on adult health, there is an extensive literature on the long-term health impacts of childhood sexual abuse (Trocme et al., 2001) as well as future health problems associated with health risk behaviours that frequently accompany dating abuse (Seimer, 2004).

As with most research, several limitations of the current study should be recognized. First, although young women were selected from
different types of classes and organizations throughout Toronto, all were university students and their views may not be reflective of other young women.

Secondly, although we did not attempt to screen participants for prior exposure to IPV, some participants were more familiar with IPV or had direct knowledge and/or experience with IPV than others. One participant was a volunteer distress line counselor and other participants expressed having studied family violence. One participant was in a verbally abusive relationship that ended; four participants’ mothers were either physically or sexually assaulted as children; and two participants said that there was domestic violence within their families.

Thirdly, differences were noted in terms of the participants’ parents’ relationships and upbringing. Canadian-born participants of Canadian parents were more likely to report growing up in a non-patriarchal family environment, where their mothers and fathers had an equal relationship, shared formal authority and encouraged their daughters to be independent. In fact, some participants reported that their mothers were the primary authority figures, made more of the final decisions and were the primary breadwinners. In these situations, participants described their fathers as more nurturing, doing more household tasks and having primary responsibility for the childrearing. Participants born to immigrant parents were more likely to report traditional family characteristics and, although they described their parents’ relationship as equitable, men were identified as holding the dominant role.

Although it was difficult to disentangle the effects of culture, parents’ country of origin and beliefs about IPV, this preliminary study provides useful information on perceptions of IPV among young women within the specific Canadian context. The findings suggest that although young women have similar levels of familiarity with concepts of abuse, ideas about normative male/female relations, familial roles and beliefs governing acceptable behaviours may be different among different groups of women.

Study findings have implications for research and practice. In terms of research, two important questions were identified: 1) is it abuse if the woman doesn’t feel as though she is being abused; and 2) are young women becoming more tolerant of violence within relationships? The young women in this study perceived high levels of power in their lives and relationships and they may be equating aggression with strength and equality. In this case, they may be influenced by a social milieu that is increasingly tolerant of violence in general and of aggression in relationships more specifically.

In terms of practice, study findings can be used to inform the development of age-appropriate interventions, including screening
guidelines and protocols. There is clearly a need for more public and school-based educational and prevention programs that emphasize healthy behaviours in relationships for young women and men. In addition, this study demonstrates that focus group interviews are valuable for engaging young women in discussions about IPV; helping them to ‘name’ their experiences consider help when warranted.

REFERENCES


