

**LANGUAGE, GENDER AND VIOLENCE  
IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this exploratory study is to provide a deep understanding of young women's personal accounts of violence to inform prevention programs and policies. Individual and focus group interviews about everyday experiences with violence were conducted with 67 young women, ages 15-19, at a high school in San Francisco, California. Qualitative methods were used to assess the range of young women's experiences with community and interpersonal violence. Three themes emerged from the data: 1) witnessing dating violence; 2) emotions and the language of the body; and 3) the paradox of love and violence. Violence in the lives of young women challenges assumptions about what "youth violence" means, how it happens, and who it happens to.

**INTRODUCTION**

In the United States, "youth violence,"<sup>1</sup> as signaled by downward trends in arrest records, victimization data, and hospital room emergency records, has declined significant [1]. However, despite the decline in lethal violence, a high prevalence of violent behavior continues to be reported by adolescents, with adolescent females disproportionately affected [2-5]. Statistics tell only a partial story—to

<sup>1</sup>"Youth violence" is used in quotes to emphasize the ambiguity and politicization of the term. It refers to violence adolescents witness and physically experience at the hands of others, as well as the violence they respond with in their communities.

adequately address “youth violence” community health educators must bring gender consciousness into the data and build upon this official knowledge with personal stories. To develop policies and programs that are relevant to male and female youth, adults must listen to their experiences with community and interpersonal violence.

This article presents qualitative research about young women who have witnessed, experienced, and participated in violence. The article explores selected themes from dissertation research conducted between 1996-1999 [6]. The goals are threefold: first, to understand and attribute meaning to young women’s experiences of violence; second, to give voice to these experiences with intensity of feeling in order to approximate the depth and force such experiences have in the everyday lives of these young women; and third, to “start where the people are” [7] and present the complexity of female “youth violence” and its implications for community health education. Ultimately, this exploratory study contributes to health education by adding depth and meaning to research on behavioral risk factors and social determinants.

### **LANGUAGE AND EMOTIONS**

Violence is a traumatic experience that calls into question basic human relationships and ruptures attachments of family, friendship, and community [8]. A violent event boils with emotion, impacting our body, mind, and spirit [9]. Yet the scientific study of violence can mask the subject’s raw emotion. Empirical research, which relies on conceptual frameworks, investigative techniques, data analysis, and the rational organization of scientific language, rarely captures the intensity of feeling that personal expression does.

The phrase “start where the people are” suggests that to be effective health educators we must begin with people’s reality, cultural expression, and language. Verbal and body language are excellent starting points for violence prevention. To craft solutions to the problems of violence we must be skilled in listening to violence, speaking about violence, and understanding various forms of conveying information about violence. The way we speak about violence matters as much as the violence we speak about. Our ability to express feelings, to communicate difficult or disturbing emotions, is a key to preventing violence. Language and emotions play an important role in motivating, interrupting, and shaping perceptions and attitudes about violent behavior. The emotional charge of personal stories may seem unimportant when compared to: the physicality of violence problems located in the midst of massive socio-economic disparity; the availability of guns, drugs and alcohol; misguided drug enforcement and incarceration policies; and corporate greed and transnational issues. Nevertheless, stories about violence can serve to include elements previously viewed as disconnected as parts of a unified collage and thus aid in violence prevention and social change.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

From a feminist perspective, the primary root of violence is the institutionalized system of power imbalance between groups of people [10, 11]. Young women have an additional layer of oppression: gender discrimination [12] and “adulthood” [13]. On the other hand, they are able to tell very personal information about the ways they witness and label their risks of violence [14-16]. Although gender difference suggests inequality and subordination, gender is always moving—not fixed. The female voice, thus, can be an alternative discourse and site of resistance [17]. The classic study “In a Different Voice” offers interesting insights into the ways women communicate emotions and grounds the conceptual framework of the study [15]:

Voice is natural and also cultural. It is composed of breath and sound, words, rhythm, and language. Voice is a powerful instrument and channel connecting inner and outer worlds. Speaking and listening are a form of psychic breathing. This on-going relational exchange among people is mediated through language and culture, diversity and plurality. For these reasons, voice is a new key for the psychological, social and cultural order [15, p. xvi].

Qualitative studies offer a means to understand the context of human experience, language and emotions. Qualitative observation is well suited to analyze actions and behaviors within the context of culture and environment [18]. Ethnographic investigation seeks to gain meaning from situations, experiences and conversations, through thick description and reflexive writing, rather than through the seeking of cause and effect [19]. Qualitative feminist ethnography aims to report on what is studied in sufficient depth and breadth to generate hypothesis and enable those who have not experienced it to begin to understand it [20, 21]. This research has played a central role in forwarding an ideological and institutional challenge to practices that condone and perpetuate violence against women.

Qualitative research and the voice of community members is lacking in “youth violence” research projects [22]. Similarly, the researcher’s voice is also missing. Autoethnography [23, 24], a hybrid genre of qualitative research used in this study, emphasizes incorporating participants’ voices—from the micro to the macro—beyond a specific community to the larger culture. Autoethnographers possess qualities of self-identification with the group they study, with the assumption they are accorded “insider status.” The results make explicit a committed relationship with research participants [25-27] that bridges the gap between researcher and community member.

## SAMPLE AND METHODS

Sixty-seven women, ages 15 to 19, of many backgrounds and a multicultural San Francisco high school experience, were recruited to participate in a grounded

theory study to examine the meaning and social construction of violence. Students were interviewed in eight focus groups and five individual interviews as part of a larger study on adolescent violence [28]. Focus group interviews were an effective way to gather data and build community. The interviews gave access to language and concepts participants used to structure personal experience. Short demographic surveys with questions about experiences with violence were administered prior to the interviews. Young women in the sample were between the ages of 15 and 19. The vast majority of those interviewed (82 percent) were 16 or 17 years old. When asked which racial background best describes them, 55 percent chose Asian, 26 percent chose Latino, 8 percent chose African American, and 11 percent chose “other.” In terms of ethnic background, the young women reported 20 different ethnicities, with 27 percent Chinese, 16 percent Filipino, 10 percent Salvadoran, and 9 percent Chicano/Mexican. Many of the young women were from families who were recent immigrants to the United States, with 69 percent speaking a language other than English at home. Despite the diversity of ethnic and racial backgrounds, students had much in common. For instance, they all attended a multicultural high school that, like many high schools in cities across the United States, is simultaneously diverse and racially segregated [29]. Participants were all young women from working class or poor families and lived in neighborhoods of the city with the lowest median family income.

Focus groups preceded individual interviews and lasted one or two class periods of 50 minutes. Prior to the focus groups, short surveys asking demographic information and questions about experiences with violence were administered to students. Students selected pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. Informed consent was obtained prior to interviews. A discussion on confidentiality, respect, and listening prefaced the research. English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms were intentionally recruited to include populations of immigrant students usually underrepresented in violence prevention research.

Interview questions were open-ended and asked about student’s definitions of, ideas about, and experiences with violence (Figure 1). In order to both enhance experiences shared in a group setting and to explore complex themes brought out during the focus groups, seven students were selected to participate in individual interviews on the basis of their comments during focus groups. These interviews were conducted at the high school’s health clinic. Students were paid \$10 each per interview to compensate them for their time. Young women were chosen because of the subject matter raised during the interview, their lively personality, and their personal request for follow-up. Individual interviews were 60–90 minutes long and conducted after school hours. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Transcripts, audio recordings, and field notes were reviewed in three stages. First, audio tapes were listened to immediately after the interviews and salient themes were noted. Transcripts were read subsequently and emerging themes were identified. As a final step, audio and text were used simultaneously to note voice

**Violence Definitions**

—Tell me about what kinds of violence there are.

—What does violence mean to you?

**Causes and Effects of Violence**

—What are your experiences with violence?

—Why do you think that happened?

—How did you feel when this happened? What did you think?

—What was your response to the violence? Did you do anything about it?

—Are there situations where you have seen/watched violence happen?

—Why do you think that happened?

—How did you feel when this happened? What did you think?

—How about before that? And/or when it was over?

—Have you used violence against someone else?

—Why do you think that happened?

—How did you feel when this happened? What did you think?

—Based upon your experiences, at what point is something considered violent?

—Why do you think young people become involved in violence?

—What are the consequences of violence?

**Solutions or Approaches to Reducing Violence**

—What can young people do to prevent or avoid violence?

—What have you done to prevent or avoid violence?

Figure 1. Focus group questions.

intonation, sounds of movement, and other details not transcribed. Analytical memos, survey data, and participant observation were used to create themes and write a collective story based on personal accounts across interview data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is important to preface the findings by noting that results are presented from a multicultural perspective. That is, stories are not categorized by race/ethnicity variables; rather, the objective is to enlist the reader's imagination beyond mutually exclusive categories. Young women's experiences are presented as based upon gender and location (home, neighborhood, urban high school) as communities of identity.

Study participants reported that in order to navigate today's urban landscape they need to learn and use physical skills to address the violence occurring in their environments. Young women specifically pointed out that violence is a normalized aspect of everyday life and that fighting back is preferable to being a passive victim. Students said they were likely to jump in to stop another person's violence but could not count on someone stepping in to interrupt the violence they experience. They spoke about witnessing their mother's trauma or their girl friend's abuse, and they spoke of violence done to them that had been witnessed by other people. Over one-third (41 percent) of them responded that they had a close friend or family member killed by violence and 50 percent reported that they had a close friend or family member who was seriously injured by violence. Twenty-four percent reported ever having a gun in their possession; 40 percent reported they had been the victim of violence; one out of every five (19 percent) reported that they had been forced to do sexual things; and a third (31 percent) reported having used violence within the past year. These numbers highlight the urgency of addressing violence in young people's lives.

The young women overwhelmingly expressed the view that they do not agree with the established social science binary construct, *victim/perpetrator*. They explained that as witnesses of violence, rage is transformed into self-defense, and they can use violence in order to prevent violence. Their personal stories help to understand the process between witnessing violence and interrupting it with actions or words. A person witnessing violence is always involved and impacted by violence. The question is to what degree and in what form?

Three themes emerged from the data and were consistent across focus groups:

1. Witnessing dating violence
2. Emotions and the language of the body; and
3. The paradox of love and violence.

Within themes are stories that illustrate savvy, capacity, and power that exist, despite adversity. These stories exemplify the courage it takes to defy norms of silence and the natural tendency to turn away when faced with danger. Readers are

asked to “think with” stories, and not only “think about” stories. To “think with” a story is to experience it affecting one’s own life and to listen from a stance of being willing to be influenced [30, 31].

### Witnessing Dating Violence

Chalala,<sup>2</sup> a petite young woman, says she has risked her personal safety to “go do something!” about violence witnessed.

**Chalala:** I went down to my friend’s house and her boyfriend was in their bedroom. Me and my friend was in the living room and we were watching TV and all of a sudden we heard like, this noise like, someone got pushed into the wall. And I asked my friend that was sitting next to me, “Do they ever get into a physical fight?” She said, “Yeah, sometimes.” So, I said, “Go do something!” ‘cuz like I was smaller and there were two people that are really big and I can’t do anything about it, and the person next to me was like, big too. I was like, “Go do something!” She was like, “No, you go do it.” So I went all the way to the other end, to the bedroom, I opened the door (and) said: “What’s going on?” She was like, “He hit me, he hit me,” and stuff like that. I was like, “Why’d you hit her?” And then they’re angry, they’re like throwing stuff at each other. I was like, “Stop it, stop it!” I was like, in the middle. Then she wanted to beat him up. She was crying. She’s like, “He hit me, he hit me, I’m gonna, I wanna beat his ass, I wanna beat his ass.” I was like, stop it, stop it! I was like, cool down, cool down. My other friend, she was just standing there like in shock, but then, she seen that happen before. But I never seen that happen before.

Chalala’s personal account describes the terms witness, victim and perpetrator and accentuates how these are social constructs in flux. She explains the choices young women make when they witness violence. How in a split second the witness can interrupt victimization to “go do something!” Chalala’s story suggests that repeated exposure to violence may decrease the urge to respond. Her friend refused to get involved perhaps because she is used to physical fights between couples. Actions are embedded in practices that gain their meaning from particular circumstances. That is, what something means is dependent on what one knows.

Brown Eyes, from another focus group interview underscores that seeing violence as an every day occurrence impacts the response to it. She provides a vivid description of violence she’s seen before and decides not to intervene to stop.

**Brown Eyes:** I know this one girl, she was in a relationship with this guy for like, 5 years. And he used to beat her in front of her baby. The baby was 2 years old, you know, old enough to walk around and see her mom getting beat up. But, well, she left him finally. Before she left him, it was kinda hard for her to do because he was saying, “I’ll kill you, you bitch, when I find you.” The

<sup>2</sup>Young women’s names are not their real names but pseudonyms they chose for the study.

cops heard him, you know, give her a threat like that too, and they didn't really do anything.

**Vivian:** And, Brown Eyes, how do you know about this person? Did you watch one time?

**Brown Eyes:** Uh, it happened more than once. But yeah, I seen it happen a couple times, I mean, you could tell somebody 'til you're blue in the face you know, to leave 'em, to leave 'em, but it's really what they want to do. They have to get enough courage to leave. They can't just do it because you say it. They think, oh, if I leave, what am I gonna do, how am I gonna support myself, what am I gonna do with my baby? How am I gonna get away from 'em?

**Vivian:** And what did you do while you watched it?

**Brown Eyes:** I didn't want to watch it, you know? I'm not gonna sit there and stare but as soon as I seen him, I just kinda turned away. I knew what he was doing, you could hear her screaming, you could hear him yelling, but I can't do nothing, it's not my place to get in the middle. It's not my business, you know? I know what he's doing is wrong, but I can't just go over there and say: "Stop hitting her!"

In this dialogue the researcher wants to do more than investigate and take in data. The roles of investigator, advocate, and educator are also social constructs in flux. A fixed research role that sticks to a given protocol is unable to achieve the process of self-awareness through collective self-inquiry and reflection [32]. Brown Eyes says that she "can't do nothing, that it's not her place to get in the middle, that it's not her business." The researcher encourages her to be more critical of her choice to "just kinda turn away," borrowing from Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's notion of "raising critical consciousness" [33], and asking questions in ways that engage students in the production of knowledge. The dialogue shows how the moment of data collection itself can provide opportunities for education, dialogue, reflection and empowerment [34].

As Josei tells her story the room becomes silent. Josei is a slender student with long black hair, brown lipstick and a distinguishable accent. Silent during most of the focus group interview, she speaks very quickly to tell her story.

**Josei:** I had a boyfriend, he's my X now, he's locked up. When I went out with him he was really abusive. One time I was with him in the car and it was almost midnight, and we were supposed to meet up with friends. So one time, I don't know, we got into some kind of conversation and he was all like, "Go in the gas station—go get me a cup of coffee!" And I go, no, go get it yourself. And he goes, "Get your ass out and go get it for me, all right!" And I go, No! So I guess he got real angry and he yelled, "Go do what I say!" And he be tellin' me he loved me, but I know it's not true, right? But he got (out) of the car and grabbed me by the hair he pulled me out and he said, "Go and get me the fucking coffee, all right!" And I go, No bitch you go get it yourself! We just kept arguing and he was like, I'm gonna kick you out. He just dragged me

out of the car. I'm not a toy for him to play around, you know? . . . That day I didn't really want to, you know? I feel like I want to be free. I ain't no dog you just don't tell me to go fetch. He got kinda angry or something, he just went out of the car and started hitting me, I went home with bruises on my face, my legs, my stomach. My hair's all torn and I went home; my mom asked me what happened and I didn't tell her anything. I just told her I got into a fight.

How many witnesses that evening may have seen or heard the violation of Josei's human dignity? Josei hides her story of dating violence telling her mother she got into a fight. Her mother doesn't question the story perhaps because fights are a common experience of community violence. Indicating not only the implied normative status of everyday violence, but also how it is hierarchically arranged so that one form of violence appears less problematic than another form of violence.

Dating violence is a reality for a number of young women [35, 36] who are more at risk for violence than males [37-39]. However, Josei's story accentuates that the dynamics of dating violence defy stereotyped notions of girls as victims. Josei is small, but her posture and eye contact are confident. Her voice is fearless. She insults her boyfriend, calling him a "bitch," a put down young women give each other and hear from men. Josei was assaulted, but sees herself as assertive. She was dragged violently out of the car, but not without a fight. She fought back and voiced her outrage then, as she does now.

### Emotions and the Language of the Body

Discussions about violence are complicated by body-language, emotions and memory. Words and time distort and limit expression while attempting the impossible task of representing intensity of feeling [40]. The language of the body whether expressed in gesture, emotion, or biochemical reaction is at once more ambiguous and revealing than speech itself [41, 42].

Marie comments quite bluntly during the focus group that the interview itself was making her sweat. Marie says, "I feel hot because I'm talking about conflict" and describes physiological connections between violence, her body, and her community.

**Marie:** My dad was about to do something to my mother and I said, "You know what? I watched you from when I was two years old. Do you think that I'm about to sit here as young as I am, and let you yell to my mother? And put your hands in her face like you're about to hit her?" I told him that day, "If you ever hit my mother, ever, I will kill you, I don't care if you're my biological father. I don't care if you're my stepfather, my uncle, I don't care who he was. You touch my mother and I will make sure that I get a gun and it's so easy to get a gun, and I will hurt you very bad and put you in the hospital to make you understand that you just do not hurt my mother. She has gone through too much. She has been beaten up by too many men."

Marie is 16 years old. She has shiny braces that sparkle when she speaks, cinnamon skin, and golden-brown hair. With frankness she describes growing up in numerous foster homes and a history of drug addiction in the family. She also speaks about the anger that stirs within and makes the physiological connections between violence, emotions, and the body.

**Marie:** My dad he told me, “I don’t care how much I didn’t raise you, you just like me. You got my temper. You got my short span. You sweat a lot. You sweat when nothing’s even happening because you ready, you know what I’m saying? You’re like a bomb ticking. You may not fight everybody, or you may go out for certain people, but it’s gonna be one day when you grow up that a bomb is gonna just explode. And it’s gonna explode on the wrong person.”

Marie continues her story, using her hands, breath, and facial expressions to note her ability to manage the body’s responses:

**Marie:** I handle my little bomb ticking inside me. I take deep breaths, I drink a lot of water, it calms me down because I have to drink something cold, you know? Just like right now, I had to take my coat off because I feel hot when I’m talking about conflict. Anytime anything goes wrong, if I can’t open my locker, I start sweating and I get angry. And my boyfriend, he has to take my backpack and says, “Just chill, what’s your locker number?” I tell him and he opens it for me. And you know, I’m still sweating. It’s just that easy. It’s like this ball of fire inside me, and it’s just there. Me, myself I’m learning to control my anger.

Marie’s words echo Freire’s insistence that educators take into account that human beings know and experience life with the entire body, with feelings, with passion, as well as with reason [43]. Her story alerts community health educators to be holistic in proposed solutions for violence. Marie’s story demonstrates how enduring embodied violence inscribes itself on individuals and communities.

The relationship between emotions and the language of the body is a paradox. On the one hand, young women describe intense emotions that evoke the use of violence, on the other hand, they say they manage violence with body language by *not showing* emotions. In the quote below Green Eyes shares how she has learned not to show emotion so as not to appear vulnerable.

**Green Eyes:** I don’t like other people to know how I feel ‘cuz some of the time people have taken advantage of, you know, when I am feeling like down and stuff, people say, “Oh that’s when I can get to her.” I usually say I don’t know what a tear is in front of people ‘cuz I don’t like crying in front of people. I don’t like letting my feelings inside me come out.

Green Eyes navigates a multicultural environment with coded rules of conduct. Her community context and personal story describe how she has trained herself to make her feelings invisible. In another focus group, Lois acknowledges the dangers of showing “weak” feelings and emphasizes that fighting or physical intimidation is preferable to passive victimization.

**Lois:** For me, I have a lot of pride in myself. I won't back down to anything. So I know that puts me in a lot of situations where I won't walk away from a fight. Everyone says, just walk away, but I won't do that because of the way society is now you'll look like a punk and they'll just come back at you even stronger if they think you're just gonna walk away.

**Vivian:** Any situations when walking away would help you out?

**Lois:** In a fight? No!

Lois points out that the structure of everyday life requires management of emotions to prevent violence or to engage in it. Behavior makes sense when we look at the human experience out of which it develops. The relationship between emotions and violence is complex. Far from being irrational, violence has its own logic based on emotions, meaning, and the language of the body. Body knowledge struggles with the mind's decision-making process and is further complicated by power relations and gender expectations.

### **The Paradox of Love and Violence**

The most profound form of violence expressed by young women was within the family. Interviews across racial and ethnic groups provided stories of a paradoxical logic that involved being hurt by and hurting someone dear. Cleopatra begins with a story that conveys the complexity of family dynamics. Cleopatra has bright eyes filled with expression. Sitting tall and attentive, she leans forward on her chair and tilts her chin to speak. Her body language speaks even before her words are formed.

**Cleopatra:** I tried to stab my brother one time. After a while he just the boss. He thinks that he can just tell somebody what to do and they gonna do it. He think just 'cuz he older than me, he just be like, "Do it!" and I'm supposed to do it.

**Vivian:** Did you stab him?

**Cleopatra:** No, I didn't stab him, I tried to.

**Vivian:** What made you stop?

**Cleopatra:** 'Cuz I couldn't hurt my brother . . .

**Vivian:** But what was it that made you stop?

**Cleopatra:** Love.

**Vivian:** But in that moment, did you actually have a knife?

**Cleopatra:** Yep I had a knife . . . I had it to his throat, I had it to his throat and I was like, "I could kill you."

**Vivian:** So what was it that made you stop?

**Cleopatra:** 'Cuz I love my brother enough and I just couldn't hurt him.

The intensity of Cleopatra's story, the tone of her words, and brightness of her eyes reveals the paradox of love and violence. Paradox is a true phenomenon that seems contradictory but upon investigation proves well founded. Love and violence are opposite behaviors; yet, high school students assert their co-existence. They view love and violence as actions and emotions directed at something or someone. Prominent authors [44-46] define love as distinctly different from violence. "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth" [44, p. 4]. Hooks specifically asserts that abuse and neglect are, by definition, the opposites of nurturance and care. In her words, "Love and abuse cannot coexist. When we understand love as the will to nurture our own or another's spiritual growth, it becomes clear that we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive" [44, p. 6].

**Jenay:** My daddy used to hit my mom but that was when I was really little. And it's like, to this day I still love both my parents a lot. When I think about it, if he wasn't my daddy I would try to kill him if he hit my mother. But its like he's my father and I love him.

**Marie:** There is such a thing as, love you so much that I'll kill you, and I love you so much that I'll beat you, and I love you so much that I'll slap you.

Study participants challenge definitions of violence by suggesting a relationship between love and violence. This important finding echoes Paulo Freire who noted that, "true solidarity can only happen when people risk the act of love" [47, p. 35]. Young women's stories bring attention to sociocultural conditions that influence violence, including understanding love simultaneously as a source of strength and vulnerability. The paradox of love and violence draws our attention to an exploration of the sociology of emotions and feminist critiques of love [48]. The emotion of love is not only a joyous one. It can contribute to women's oppression and vulnerability by serving as a trap for exploitative relationships. As has been pointed out by Madanes, interpersonal violence is complicated by the basic human dilemma of love and violence. "Violence," she notes "can be done in the name of love, protection and help. . . . The wish to love and protect can bring out our highest qualities of compassion, devotion, generosity and kindness. It may also elicit intrusiveness, possessiveness, domination, and violence" [49, p. 7].

## LIMITATIONS

It is important to emphasize that dimensions of identity, such as race/ethnicity and class, shape the context of violence and are necessary for a complete analysis of violence. However, these variables are far from being the only determinants of violence. Violence prevention research can parochialize experience by attributing and limiting it to a particular people and place [50]. Nevertheless, young women's stories have the cultural and ethical ambiguity with which violence is viewed in all

cultures—not reduced to one particular group. The themes presented were produced in a dialogue where violence was the dominant question; henceforth, it was the overwhelming theme not necessarily because it was at the forefront of students' daily life, but because it was produced by the research encounter. These stories were told in a context, under particular conditions and with certain expectations. As such, the themes presented are a co-production between researcher and study participants.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

This exploratory study about adolescent females' experiences of violence asks community health education programs designed to prevent violence to start with young women's voices. The study brings the topic home stressing the importance and value of community-based research that is personally involved. Further, the stories and themes generated illustrate the possibilities qualitative research offers to expand what we know about "youth violence" with gender specificity, depth and meaning. Lastly, the research demonstrated that violence is an adaptation not only to the conditions of life around a community, but also what's inside an individual's body, mind, and soul. Language, gender or emotions are often overlooked in policy arenas and academic circles. Violence prevention interventions are based on rationality and punishing the point of conflict. We are willing to incarcerate young people but not to understand them. These strategies do not address the complexity, history, or context of young people's life experiences.

Violence is fueled by silence and apathy. Personal stories defy silence and can mobilize people to speak out and bring about change. Learning the language young women use to describe their experiences with violence takes time and trust in the process of participation. To hear young women's stories health educators have to let go of pre-conceived categories such as "victim" or "perpetrator" and contextualize violence as occurring in relation between people. Simple categories, such as victim or perpetrator, decontextualize the problem of violence by stressing the injury and obscuring the interpersonal relationship. Personal stories are the means by which we make meaning out of our life experiences. Qualitative research can provide the forum where research participants speak out and express how they think and feel. The challenge is to be open to their words and consider the poignant stories carried within as well as the sociocultural and economic context of violence.

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