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**“It’s Not You; It’s Me:”  
The Representation of Teen Dating Violence in Young Adult Literature and its  
Implications for Prevention**

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**Abstract**

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**PURPOSE:** Teen dating violence (TDV) continues to be a significant social justice issue. The prevention of TDV requires an attention to risk and protective factors across ecological system levels. The media is one of the primary cultural drivers of societal-level social scripts about the causes, consequences, and lived experiences of TDV. Framing theory asserts that the media’s portrayal of social issues, including what contextual information is included and/or excluded, impacts individual-level attitudes about TDV and potential policy responses. Through an interrogation of the discursive properties of young adult (YA) novels, this study investigates the representation of TDV in YA literature, a media genre that is marketed to adolescent audiences.

**METHODS:** Data include all young adult novels (n=8) published between 2004-2013 that have a primary focus on TDV. Texts were analyzed systematically using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) methods. The CDA occurred in four steps. First, I read and screened all novels to familiarize myself with the plots of each novel. Then I coded all novels inductively, and clustered all similar codes into thematic categories. The third step included generating themes about how language was functioning in these texts. Lastly, I identified how these discursive themes reflected dominant cultural conversations about TDV victimization.

**RESULTS:** Victimology, pop-psychology, and postfeminist discourses were used to describe victims' entry and experience of TDV victimization, the antecedents of TDV, and perpetrators' use of abusive behaviors. Victimology discourses shape our social understanding of the victims characteristics of victims that predispose individuals to becoming crime victims. Victims were framed as inherently vulnerable due to their inexperience in relationships, enduring a significant family tragedy, and having low self-esteem. Pop-psychology discourses, which are commonsense understandings of mental health issues that have been derived from more nuanced psychological theories, were enacted through portraying the perpetration of TDV as originating from perpetrators' family and mental issues.

Postfeminist discourses, which are inclusive of neoliberal ideologies, employ a rhetoric of personal responsibility, choice, and individualism and render second-wave feminism anachronistic. Postfeminist discourses represented TDV as an individual-level issue, where victims are agentic participants in abusive relationships. External social systems were underrepresented, and victims were positioned as responsible for independently ending their relationships. Rather than framing TDV as a violation of a victim's human rights, or as a systemic issue related to gender norms, it was depicted as negatively impacting victims' future trajectories, ability to maintain their physical appearance, and individual self-concept.

**DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS:** The structural determinants of TDV have been overshadowed in the media's portrayal of TDV, in favor of narrow portrayals of victimization that focus on victims and individual-level family histories and personal characteristics. Rather than underscoring how societal-level factors contribute to TDV, perpetration was seen as stemming from family dysfunction and mental health issues. The language of gender inequality has been supplanted by a postfeminist rhetoric of choice, personal responsibility, and

vulnerability. These findings underscore how victimology, pop-psychology and postfeminist discourses have permeated the public vernacular about the causes and consequence of TDV. Implications for TDV prevention programs including the importance of media literacy will be discussed.

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## **DEDICATION**

To the countless victims of intimate partner violence whose strength and resiliency fuel this work, and who deserve to have their stories told authentically.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

*“Words are about the world but they also form the world”*  
(Wetherell, 2011, p. 16).

Teen dating violence (TDV), which includes a pattern of controlling and coercive behaviors from physical abuse to verbal abuse to social isolation in romantic relationships, continues to be a significant human rights and public health issue (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts, 2006; Krug, Dahldberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). Violence against women, including TDV, is a frequent storyline across various media genres. For example, the longest running television show, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* chronicles stories that purport to be “ripped from the headlines” accounts of violence against women and children. Entertainment magazines describe “it happened to me” stories that feature young women who escaped the grip of an abusive partner (Thill & Dill, 2009). Among top grossing young adult novels, Meyers’ *The Twilight* trilogy, has been implicated for “romanticizing” abusive relationship behaviors between the protagonist and her boyfriend (Borgia, 2014). While it is easy to disregard these stories as “fluff and nonsense” (Phillips Thill & Dill, 2009), as Meloy and Miller (2009) assert: “The media are one of the most powerful influences in shaping public perceptions about crime and victimization” (p. 29). Beyond swaying public opinion, the media has been implicated as one of the primary “cultural supports” (Stark, 2009, p. xiii) that produces, recapitulates, and reifies social scripts about the causes, consequences, and collective social actions in response to teen dating violence (Bronstein, 2008; Collins, 2011; Conley & Ramsey, 2011; Howe, 1997).

The persuasive pull of the media is unsurprising considering that throughout history, stories have played a powerful role cross-culturally as tools for constituting and transmitting knowledge and belief systems. As Barthes (1975) states, in the “very history of mankind... there nowhere is nor has been a people without narrative,” (Barthes, 1975, p. 79). Barthes is underscoring the ubiquity of storytelling as a universal means of cultural communication, but is also alluding to the power of language to create “possible worlds” (Bruner, 1986) and facilitate meaning making about complex social phenomena such as dating violence. The media, as contemporary “storytellers” in modern society, are a powerful source of messages about what is normal or acceptable.

This study explores the representations of TDV in Young Adult (YA) literature—a media genre that has been intentionally produced and marketed to appeal to adolescent young women (Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, & Nilsen, 2013). The impetus for this study of YA literature emerged organically. I have a family member who is a young adult librarian in the Seattle public library system, and she observed an increase in YA novels that had a central theme related to teen dating violence. Frequently, teens (almost exclusively young women) would come to her desk and ask for a recommendation on a YA novel for a “friend” who was in an abusive relationship. Knowing that I had a professional background working on teen dating violence prevention, she asked me to review these novels and give my “professional” opinion on which book she should recommend. This experience precipitated my journey into the world of young adult literature and sparked the research questions that guided this project.

In this introduction, I define dating violence, describe ecological approaches to preventing and intervening in TDV, and discuss the “politics of representation” as it relates to young adult literature.

## **What is Teen Dating Violence?**

Between 10% and 25% of adolescents have experienced some form of physical violence within a dating relationship (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009; Coker et al., 2014; Howard, Wang, & Yan, 2007) and 33% of adolescents are estimated to have experienced non-physical types of abuse such as mental or verbal abuse (Coker et al., 2014). Additional studies have reported that one third of teens are aware of abuse occurring in their peers' romantic relationships (Liz Claiborne Inc., 2005). Teens who have endured TDV often experience greater incidences of negative mental health outcomes such as depression, eating disorders, PTSD, and suicidal ideation (Bonomi et al., 2006; Carbone-Lopez, Kruttschnitt, & Macmillan, 2006), and physical health outcomes including obesity, chronic disease, arthritis, fibromyalgia, and ongoing stress (Basile & Black, 2011; Pico-Alfonso, Garcia-Linares, Celda-Navarro, Herbert, & Martinez, 2004). In fact, in a large sample study of Minnesota high school students, 50% of youth reporting both dating violence and rape have also reported attempting suicide (Ackard, Neumark-Sztainer, 2002). These correlates indicate the seriousness of TDV for adolescent women.

Despite the mental and physical health risks associated with TDV, some of the behavioral warning signs of abuse may seem normative to young adults (Murphy & Smith, 2010). Studies have documented that youth have accepting attitudes about the use of possessive and controlling behaviors in dating relationships (Murphy & Smith, 2010) and minimize the lethal potential of TDV (Chung, 2007). For instance, in response to R&B singer Rihanna's physical assault by her then boyfriend Chris Brown in 2009, a convenience sample of surveyed Boston area teens (n=200) found that 46% believed that Rihanna was responsible for Brown's violence by provoking the abuse (Boston Public Health Commission, 2009, as cited in Rothman et al., 2012). Furthermore, young adults, like older people, subscribe to beliefs that attribute responsibility to

TDV victims for leaving abusive relationships. In a representative sample of college students, for example, 77% of survey respondents reported that women could find a way to get out of an abusive relationship if they really wanted to (Nabors, Dietz, & Jasinski, 2006; Worden & Carlson, 2005).

### **Preventing TDV**

The Battered Women's Movement has been successful at exposing the reality of men's violence against women, reframing what was previously considered a private issue as one of public concern with collective responsibility to address (Allen, Larsen, & Walden, 2011; DeBare, 2009; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2011). Battered women's advocates asserted that Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) impacts all individuals regardless of demographic background and positionality (although not all are equally at risk) (Haaken, 2010; Patterson & Sears) and raised awareness about the reality of violence in adolescent relationships (Sanders, 2003). After years of inaction, feminist activists demanded that the state play an active role in ameliorating gender inequality and promoting women's safety (Goodman & Epstein, 2008; Patterson & Sears, 2011). Since contemporary conceptualizations of TDV have emerged from theoretical frameworks created to explain adult relationship violence (Exner-Cortens, 2014; Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008), I will be discussing the shared history, knowledge, and theory base of both IPV and TDV. I will use the term IPV as an inclusive term to cover abuse in all romantic relationships, and TDV to refer specifically to adolescent dating relationships.

Building on early feminist framings of IPV and ecological systems theories, frameworks for preventing TDV have evolved to be inclusive of the risk and protective factors across multiple interacting and mutually reinforcing micro, mezzo, and macro ecological systems levels (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009; Heise, 1998). Upstream factors at the macro and mezzo systems

levels have been identified as important locations for primary prevention approaches to reducing gender-based IPV, however they have been under investigated compared to individual-level correlates and risk factors (Taylor, Sullivan, & Farrell, 2015; Vagi et al., 2013). It is important to note that, in practice, there is considerable permeability among these systems levels with efforts to prevent violence often intermingling with strategies to respond to violence (Storer, Casey, Carlson, Tolman, & Edleson, in press). The following sections will describe these factors across ecological systems levels.

(Mbilinyi et al., 2012)

### *Micro/Individual-Level Factors*

At the micro-level, one of the most studied determinants of TDV perpetration and victimization include exposure to family violence and having experienced child abuse (Mbilinyi et al, 2012; Prothrow-Stith, 2010; Vezina & Hebert, 2007). Having individual-level beliefs and attitudes about the acceptability of using violence to resolve conflicts has been implicated for perpetrating violence (Heise, 1998). At the family level, family parenting practices such as levels of parental monitoring and the modeling of healthy relationship dynamics have been found to be correlated with TDV victimization (Vezina & Hebert, 2007). Numerous studies have documented that parental monitoring or strong parental controls coupled with caring and supportive relationships with primary caregivers can be protective against TDV victimization (Chapple, 2003; East, Hokoda, & Chien, 2010; Vezina & Hebert, 2007). Additional risk factors that have been correlated with TDV perpetration include: substance abuse, mental health issues including depression, and perpetration of abuse in prior romantic relationships (Vagi et al., 2013). While helpful for underscoring how individual life experiences such as exposure to family violence potentially influence TDV, many of these theories do not account for why some

individuals with similar personal backgrounds do not perpetrate or endure abuse in their relationships (Casey & Lindhorst, 2009). Therefore, it is necessary to examine factors across the ecosystem to develop a more nuanced understanding of the etiology of IPV.

### *Mezzo/Community Level*

The primary mezzo or community-level risk factors with demonstrated associations with TDV include prevalence of and exposure to community violence, community-level attitudes about TDV, and the role the broader community plays in collectively responding to TDV (Spriggs, Halpern, & Martin, 2009; Vezina & Hebert, 2007). Each will be briefly described below.

#### *Neighborhood-Level Norms & Attitudes*

Neighborhood and community-level characteristics such as levels of social connectedness which includes knowing one's neighbors; the presence of gender equitable social norms including examples of families sharing parenting duties; incidences of community violence; and rates of neighborhood disadvantage including levels of poverty and employment have been correlated with TDV victimization (Vezina & Hebert, 2007) and perpetration (Taylor et al., 2015). For example, Spriggs et al. (2009), using a nationally representative sample, reported that U.S. adolescents who witnessed violent crime in their neighborhoods were more likely to experience dating abuse (Spriggs et al., 2009). Similarly, Gagne, Lavoie, and Hebert (2004) and O'Keefe and Treister (1998) found a positive association between witnessing school and community violence and teen dating violence victimization and perpetration.

#### *Peer and School-Level Norms*

Studies have documented that peers play an important role in influencing attitudes, norms, and behaviors related to dating violence (Capaldi, Dishion, Stoolmiller, & Yoerger, 2001;

Foshee et al., 2013; Reeves & Orpinas, 2012; Simon, Miller, Gorman-Smith, Orpinas, & Sullivan, 2010; Taylor et al., 2015). Cross-sectional research has found an association between supporting dating violence and an increased likelihood of self-reporting the perpetration of dating violence (Reeves & Orpinas, 2012; Simon et al., 2010). In a qualitative study with middle school students, Noonan and Charles (2009) described how male adolescents who received peer support for perpetuating abuse may employ abusive tactics in order to maintain their social status. Arriaga and Foshee (2004), in a self-reported longitudinal survey of 586 eighth- and ninth-grade students, found that young women who had a close friend who experienced dating violence at one time point were more likely to also become victims themselves at a second time point six months later. In a study of early adolescence, Taylor et al. (2015) extended these findings by conducting a longitudinal multilevel analysis showing that individual-level and class-level beliefs (defined as norms for students in the same grade, cohort, and school) about the acceptability of using male violence predicted the perpetration of physical dating violence at a second time point six months later.

In addition to influencing individual-level perpetration and victimization, peer and school norms have also been associated with fostering school-level cultures that are tolerant of dating violence (Katz, Heisterkamp, & Fleming, 2011; Taylor et al., 2015). Therefore, interventions have been directed at challenging school and peer-level norms and attitudes about violence (Moynihan et al., in press; Storer, Casey, & Herrenkohl, in press). The philosophy that intervening and preventing IPV involves a concerted community-wide effort can be seen in contemporary youth bystander programs which have been implemented most prominently on college campuses, but are being tailored to be applicable to high school populations. These programs seek to mobilize all community members to challenge school and community cultures

that are permissive of violence and to interrupt violence against women (Banyard, 2014; Storer, Casey, & Herrenkohl, in press).

### *Coordinated Community-Based Responses to IPV*

As examples of tertiary prevention efforts, feminist activists have advocated for coordinated community-wide efforts to address individual women's safety, encourage batterer accountability, and bridge gaps in the coordinated community response that contribute to IPV (Allen et al., 2011; Vaughan, 2009). These efforts involved inclusive community partnerships with the criminal justice system including law enforcement, the courts, and probation; victim service agencies; school systems; child welfare agencies; and social service providers (Allen et al., 2011). Historically criminal justice-based entities have been positioned as important community-level partners in enforcing batterer accountability (Das Gupta, 2005; Miller, 2001; Pence & Paymar, 1993), deterring additional battering (Miller, 2001; Sherman & Berk, 2005), and ameliorating years of police inaction in response to the needs of IPV victims (Mills, 2003). However, some scholars have disputed whether involvement with the criminal justice system has promoted victim safety (Mills, 2003) and expressed concern that these policies negatively impact communities of color (Richie, 2012). Overall, however, the criminal justice is positioned as integral component in the communitywide services that can support victim safety and enforce perpetrator accountability.

### *Macro/Societal Level*

At the macro level, rather than focus on individual-level male deviance or victim vulnerability or community characteristics, the aim is to locate the root of TDV in the upstream structures of society (Allen et al., 2011). These structures include arenas such as the law, social welfare resources, economic practices, and the media. Early feminist activists such as Yllo and

Bograd (1988) and Schechter (1982) situated gender inequality, in the form of the systematic devaluing of women economically, socially, and politically, as being central to understanding and ultimately preventing IPV. Therefore, approaches to prevent IPV at the societal-level include economic, social, and policy approaches to improving gender equality; challenging gender-based social norms that prescribe rigid gender roles and endorse male violence; school-based prevention activities with children and youth; and ameliorating poverty and improving women's access to capital (WHO, 2009). Evidence-based TDV prevention programs, such as Foshee and colleagues' (2004) intervention SafeDates, are intentionally designed to counter societal-level social attitudes and norms that are tolerant of TDV, and foster more gender equitable dating relationships.

#### *The Media as a Location for IPV Prevention*

Of particular interest in this study, the media has been implicated as one of the primary cultural drivers producing and recapitulating social norms and attitudes that are permissive of violence against women and girls, (Bronstein, 2008; Collins, 2011; Conley & Ramsey, 2011; Howe, 1997). Scholars have asserted that the media is a significant factor influencing attitudes about IPV, and that teens glean their social scripts about behavior that is acceptable in dating relationships from the popular media (Bryant, 2008; Dixon, 2000). As Bonomi et al. (2014) state: “problematic depictions of violence against women in popular culture—such as in film, novels, music, pornography—create a broader social narrative that normalizes these risks and behaviors in women's lives” (p. 720).

The media has long been the site for feminist struggle and organizing, because of its depiction of women as highly sexualized, as subordinated to men, in gender stereotypical ways, and for reinforcing the social acceptability of IPV (Bronstein, 2008; Collins, 2011; Conley &

Ramsey, 2011; Howe, 1997). One of the earliest successful feminist actions taken against the media was in response to a billboard of the Rolling Stones album “Black and Blue” in 1976 (Bronstein, 2008). This billboard portrayed a young woman who was bloodied, bruised and bound and contained the caption “I’m Black and Blue from the Rolling Stones and I Love It!” (Bronstein, 2008, p. 418). The organization Women Against Violence Against Women successfully advocated to have the billboard removed and Bronstein (2008) asserted that this case catalyzed increased attention on the relationship between the media and violence against women.

### **“Moving from the Word to the World:” The Power & Potential of YA Literature**

One of the primary effects of language is to build and reflect socially agreed upon versions of reality and knowledge (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014; Wetherell, 2001), which when agreed upon manifests as discourses: an organized system of representation, which can be understood as a particular way of framing knowledge or information that guides social behavior (Foucault, 1972; Hall, 2001). Dominant discourses marginalize other versions of reality, such that societies come to accept certain social practices as natural or normal (Gill, 2007). Thus, language, through its use in social discourse, is not impartial or transparent but imbued with specific meaning and only intelligible by those who are conversant in the same coded language (Gill, 2007). Discourse is inherently constitutive, and therefore through language and practice, group identities, relationships, and ideologies are formed. Therefore, an analysis of language sheds light on what is rendered “sayable” or “thinkable” in a given society, (Foucault, 1972; Hall, 2001), elucidate who or what is given “the power to define” (Hall, 2001), and can shed light on why certain ideas have received such social currency.

Within the larger domain of media markets, novels, in particular, have a persuasive power to construct “possible worlds”(Bruner, 1986) that create and replicate societal scripts about seemingly everyday constructs such as victim, perpetrator, “at-risk,” and “vulnerable.” Young Adult novels are the fastest growing sector of published books, (Publishers Weekly, 2015), with YA novels such as *The Fault in Our Stars*, *Divergent*, and *Hunger Games* grossing record-breaking national and international sales. On average, teens spend 25 minutes a day reading books for pleasure, with young women reading more than playing video games (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). As a result of its ubiquity and capacity to influence young readers, young adult literature has received considerable attention for its potential to raise teen readers’ awareness about social issues, and facilitate critical thinking about the societal structures and institutions that both foster and perpetuate those issues (Curwood, 2013).

Although novels are fictional, the messages in books are often seen as truthful portrayals of reality (Petraglia, 2007; Slater, 2002; Strange & Leung, 1999). Genre fiction, such as YA novels, is intentionally designed using literary devices “that allow the reader...to disappear into the story, to experience the emotions that are intended by the writer” (Oatley & Gholamain, 1997, p. 703). Furthermore, YA novels have been found to be particularly persuasive with young audiences, because their use of first-person narration and confessional tones fosters a sense of “narrative intimacy” where the reader feels a sense of connection with the fictional protagonist (Day, 2013). These qualities make YA fiction an important emerging media arena that is influential at teaching adolescent girls about dating relationships.

### **Study Purpose**

The implicit goal of this study is to explore one element of youth’s larger social environments: their media environment. The mass media has been regarded as a persuasive

“super peer” (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005) for its ability to influence adolescents' individual-level behaviors and norms, as well as perpetuate societal-level norms about the acceptability of using violence to resolve conflicts in dating relationships. Unlike other highly scrutinized media genres such as video games and television, fictional novels and books have been under-investigated as potential drivers of broader cultural narratives about TDV.

Developmentally, adolescents are undergoing a process of identity formation, during which they may be particularly attuned to cultural scripts about the dynamics of healthy relationships, gender roles within the context of dating relationships, and the usage of violent behaviors (Exner-Cortens, 2014; Sanders, 2003).

Although the media is one of the primary societal-level factors that contributes to the social acceptability of TDV, it continues to be an under-investigated domain in the literature dedicated to theorizing and preventing dating violence (Stark, 2009). The mass distribution of realistic YA novels makes them an important site for investigating how TDV is portrayed. Violence, in general, has been under-examined in YA literature (Franzak & Noll, 2006), and no systematic study of the portrayal of TDV in YA novels has been undertaken.

In this study I will be analyzing the discursive threads that contribute to the construction of TDV within novels. Through the analysis of YA literature, the overarching aim of this study is to explore how the antecedents, lived experiences, and ramifications of TDV are described in this genre of literature that is intentionally created and marketed to adolescent women. My goal is not only to identify how TDV is described, but also to investigate the ways that these individual novels draw on and reify larger cultural ideas that affect how society understands TDV. Ultimately, my aim is to empower community responsibility in ending TDV, and encourage the development of community-level interventions in response to dating violence.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this review, I will discuss the theoretical foundation for the role the media plays in formulating, reproducing, and disseminating the substance of societal-level conversations about IPV. I then will discuss the empirical evidence base on how IPV and TDV are conveyed in the broader media's description of this social issue. Lastly, I will discuss the contribution this systematic analysis of YA novels can play in shedding light on how TDV is messaged to adolescent audiences.

In order to situate this study of young adult novels within the larger body of media representation of IPV, I will explore themes in how this issue is framed across multiple genres, including television, movies, music videos, print media, and literature. Since the focus of this research project is to assess how TDV/IPV is represented at the societal level, investigating how IPV is framed in other media genres can provide insight to the media's messaging of this issue, which in turn can provide a heuristic for investigating young adult literature. Since there are limited studies on how the media reports, frames, and represents adolescent dating abuse (Rothman et al., 2012), I will review literature on the broader category of IPV, which is almost exclusively focused on adult relationships.

### **Theoretical Foundation—How the Media Frames, Reproduces, and Messages Social Issues**

Framing theory describes the media's use of consistent patterns in how it organizes, categorizes, and delineates social phenomenon (Gillespie, Richards, Givens, & Smith, 2013). Carlyle, Orr, Savage, and Babin (2014) defined media framing as a “process by which relevant information is selected and organized around a central theme for the purpose of creating a coherent storyline” (p. 453). In terms of the media's representation of IPV, media frames operate

through use of specific language about victims and perpetrators, presenting contextual information that is deemed relevant to understanding the situation, and the inclusion of certain “expert” or insider testimony (i.e., law enforcement and neighbors instead of victim services or academics) (Gillespie et al., 2013).

Communications scholars contend that media frames influence public understanding of social issues in four distinct ways: 1) Influencing how social issues are conceptualized and operationalized; 2) Prescribing specific preconceived solutions; 3) Identifying narrow causes of social issues, and 4) Assigning moral judgments (Kuypers, 2009). Since any given social issue can be framed in a multitude of ways, the media acts as a filter by selectively including certain elements of social issues at the cost of excluding other potentially contradictory information (Carlyle, Scarduzio, & Slater, 2014; Gillespie et al., 2013). For example, media stories about rates of childhood obesity may discuss the poor diets of children, but fail to include information about structural elements of the built environment, such as access to nutrient dense foods, that contribute to health. Regardless of the accuracy of these frames, the media has tremendous potential to influence understanding of public issues (Berns, 2004; Carlyle, Scarduzio, et al., 2014; Kozol, 1995), facilitate and/or inhibit public understanding on social issues (Bullock & Cubert, 2002), shape attitudes regarding the cause(s) of social issues such as violence against women (Berns, 2001, 2004; Flood & Pease, 2009), and influence potential policy responses. In this way the media can affect both individual-level beliefs and attitudes and, at the societal level, policy responses and social action (de Vreese, 2005).

Carlyle and colleagues have argued that the media’s framing of IPV largely focuses on individual-level causes such as the behavior of the victims and perpetrators. The emphasis is often placed on dramatizing IPV, crafting a “good story,” and focusing on extreme cases rather

than seeking to educate the public on IPV (Berns, 2004; Carlyle, Scarduzio, et al., 2014). The ramifications of this type of framing can include: suggesting that victims are in some way culpable for their abuse, reinforcing societal stereotypes and myths about IPV, divorcing issues from their social contexts, and minimizing the role of the state in promoting women's safety (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Carlyle, Slater, & Chakroff, 2008; Gillespie et al., 2013; Sellers, Desmarais, & Tirotti, 2014). Lawrence (2004) asserted that individual-level framing of IPV limits the problems to just those individuals being identified rather than "invit[ing] government action" (p. 57) to address a larger systemic or institutional issue.

It is important to underscore that the deployment of media frames is not necessarily a conscious act, but rather a reflection of how the media is the product of the larger society that creates and nourishes it. Therefore, an analysis of media frames provides an interpretive lens for deconstructing and decoding dominant social explanations about and, solutions to, IPV (Gillespie et al., 2013).

### **The Framing of IPV Across Media Genres**

Compared to other types of violent crime such as homicides committed by strangers, across media genres, the coverage of IPV has not received the same depth of coverage and analysis (Boyle, 2009; Frus, 2001; McManus & Dorfman, 2005). In general, the media has been implicated for framing IPV in the following ways: normalizing and minimizing IPV, reporting on elements of the victim's behavior, focusing on the individual behavior of perpetrators, not positioning IPV as a broader social issue, and presenting dual and contradictory frames about IPV and victimization.

*Minimizes and Normalizes IPV*

One of the primary critiques of the media's portrayal of IPV is that it minimizes the seriousness of IPV in the lives of women (Meloy & Miller, 2009) and romanticizes abusive behaviors (Frus, 2001; Olson, 2013). The media recapitulates social scripts about unhealthy dating practices as an inevitable feature of relationships, downplays the lethal potential of IPV, and does not underscore the social unacceptability of IPV. In an analysis of frames employed in newspaper coverage of IPV homicide in North Carolina during a 6-year period, Gillespie et al. (2013) found that the majority of articles normalized the incident as an everyday occurrence rather than contextualizing the incident as part of a larger societal issue of violence against women. Articles were coded as commonplace or normalizing when they used language that indicated that this was "just another homicide" (p.232) in the community. Rothman et al. (2012), in an analysis of magazine coverage of a high-profile incident of IPV perpetrated against a musician, found that the magazines deployed descriptions of the incident that functioned to romanticize the victim's abuse and presented the incident as common and "unremarkable." (p.740). Similarly, in an analysis of a song and music video that features IPV, Thaller and Messing (2014) report that the song minimized the severity of IPV by indicating that physical and verbal abuse are simply parts of regular dating relationships.

Olson (2012), in her analysis of the Disney film "Beauty and the Beast," discussed how the "Beast's" abusive behaviors were portrayed as being culturally sanctioned by community members who encouraged the protagonists to be more accepting of his character flaws. These permissive portrayals of IPV prompted Olson (2012) to describe "Disney as a community narrator circulating conservative lessons on romanticizing partner violence" (p. 476).

### *Assigning Blame on Victims*

Victim blaming, or the tendency to attribute blame to victims for their abuse or homicide, has been documented in newspapers (Bullock, 2007; Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Frazer & Miller, 2009; Gillespie et al., 2013; Lindsay-Brisbine, DePrince, & Welton-Mitchell, 2014; Meyers, 1997; Ryan, Anastario, & DaCunha, 2006; Saroca, 2013; Taylor, 2009), magazines (Berns, 2004; Hensman Kettrey & Emery, 2010; Patterson & Sears, 2011; Rothman et al., 2012), celebrity blogs (Patterson & Sears, 2011), in songs including music videos (Enk & McDaniel, 2012; Thaller & Messing, 2014), and on television (Rodier & Meagher, 2014). Fairbairn and Dawson (2013), in their longitudinal analysis of Canadian newspapers from 1975-2002, reported that newspapers' use of language that blames victims for their abuse has remained unchanged over time and has become an indelible part of the media's language to describe IPV. However, although McManus and Dorfman (2005) documented isolated instances of victim blaming in newspapers' reporting of IPV in San Francisco Bay Area newspapers, they did not find evidence of victim blaming across all coverage of these instances.

The following sections will discuss four distinct examples of how victim blaming was observed across media genres. These examples include: focusing on victim's behaviors, provoking the attack, having the agency to leave abusive relationships, and focusing on their prior vulnerability that predisposed them to being targeted for abuse.

#### *Focusing on Victim's Behaviors & Personal Characteristics*

Focusing on the behavior of victims has been a consistent approach for holding the victim responsible for their abuse (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Hensman Kettrey & Emery, 2010; Meyers, 1997). This is accomplished by implying that a victim acted jealousy (and thus encouraged his/her abuse) (Patterson & Sears, 2011), questioning why the victim continued to stay in the

relationship even when physical abuse was present (Enk & McDaniel, 2012), or in some way maligning the victim's character (Berns, 2004; Saroca, 2013). Taylor (2009), in a content analysis of 188 DV-related homicides from 1995-2000 in the *Orlando Sentinel*, uncovered a propensity towards reporting on the specific behaviors of the victims that may have contributed to their fatality. These tactics included: reporting that the victim failed to report previous incidents of abuse, opted to not cooperate with the prosecution of previous incidences of IPV, and detailing her interactions with other men as contributing to her murder. These reporting strategies served to underscore how the victim's action or inaction may have been a factor in his/her homicide and thus diminishing her innocence or status as a "good victim."

In a study analyzing two homicides of Filipina women in Australia newspapers, Saroca (2013) found that many of the newspapers reported that the victims were sexually promiscuous or categorized them as "mail-order-brides" who manipulated their romantic partners to acquire citizenship. These types of descriptions of victims in the media serve to implicate them as being at least partially responsible for their abuse.

### *Provoking the Attack*

Across media genres, another means of assigning blame to victims for their abuse is to either insinuate or directly state that victims in some way provoked their abuse (Enk & McDaniel, 2012; Houlihan & Raynor, 2014; Rodier & Meagher, 2014). For example, Rothman and colleagues (2012), in a content analysis of the portrayal of dating violence in the 20 leading adolescent female fashion, lifestyle, and entertainment magazines (n=49 individual articles) published in a two-month period, found that the articles employed 38 instances of victim blaming in their descriptions of IPV. Provoking or intentionally inviting the attack was one specific frame utilized in these magazines. For instance, an article in *Sun* (a celebrity tabloid

magazine) stated: “It’s not just because she’s hopelessly in love with him; it’s also because she may have provoked the attack” (Rothman et al., 2012, p. 739). Similarly, in Patterson and Sears (2011) analysis of how celebrity blogs and magazines framed one high-profile case of IPV reported that the celebrity victim was consistently positioned as having done something to incite the abusive incident. For example, on the celebrity blog TMZ.com the following statement was made: “ I would love to hear Chris Brown's [the alleged perpetrator] version because I believe she instigated the whole thing... you can only push people so hard and their [sic] going to hit back” (para 24). By insinuating that there are two sides to every story, this statement underscores the contention that victims must have done something to instigate their assault.

#### *Agency to Leave Relationships*

In addition to inviting their abuse, the media also frequently implied that victims have the agency to leave their abusive relationships, if they can only find the courage to do so. Framing victims as agentic can be seen as a type of victim blaming, because it suggests that individuals who stay in abusive relationships are weak and lack agency. Therefore, the focus is placed on the individual characteristics of victims, rather than other confounding factors that make leaving abusive relationships challenging and potentially dangerous, or on the behavior of the perpetrator.

Across multiple genres, victims were portrayed as free agents that needed to tap into their inner strength and leave their relationships (Enk & McDaniel, 2012; Frus, 2001; Haaken, 2010). This assertion was reinforced most explicitly in two studies that investigated the portrayal of IPV in popular magazines. First, in an analysis of 35 articles in the highest circulating teen magazines (i.e., YM, Teen People, Seventeen, Teen, etc.), Hensman Kettrey, and Emery (2010) documented that the majority of the magazines used a frame that held the victim responsible for leaving the relationship. They frequently used case studies which celebrated the victim’s strength for exiting

their relationships, while omitting discussions on the danger associated with leaving abusive relationships. These findings were similar in Bern's (2004) analysis of magazines' reporting of IPV. The author noted a victim empowerment frame where former victims of IPV were lauded for courageously leaving their abusive relationships. Although this framing of abused women can seem to be supportive, it also can represent a type of victim blaming, because the implication is that women who do not leave their abusers must be disempowered (i.e., weak, codependent, etc.) (Berns, 2004). This contention is further supported in Rodier & Meagher's (2004) study of one television news program's and one talk show's portrayal of an R & B singer's physical abuse (i.e., *The Oprah Winfrey Show*). The authors found the theme of "how could someone so strong" experience physical abuse, with the implied assumption that only "weak" women fall prey to abuse (Rodier & Meagher, 2014).

The framing of IPV victims as agentic was documented in Bullock and Cubert's (2002) analysis of newspapers and Frus' (2001) investigation of IPV representation in film. Both studies reported that women were consistently positioned as independently leaving abusive relationships without the support of social systems. Since the focus of the narrative in the news story or film is on the victim's individual strength, this particular frame does not acknowledge the role external supports, such as helpful family and friends, adequate and culturally appropriate social services, and a responsive criminal justice system, play in promoting women's safety (Berns, 2004; Frus, 2001).

### *Prior Vulnerability*

In efforts to personalize victims, descriptive information about victims is provided in media accounts of IPV. In particular, characteristics of victim vulnerability such as witnessing family violence (Houlihan & Raynor, 2014; Poon, 2011) or having a personal flaw such as low

self-esteem (Poon, 2011; Saroca, 2013) are provided. For instance, in the high-profile case of an R & B singer's abuse by her equally famous boyfriend, Houlihan and Raynor (2014) described how the victim was portrayed in the popular media (i.e., celebrity, magazines, blogs, and television programs) as being at risk for abuse because of witnessing family violence during childhood and possessing demographic characteristics that correspond with popular stereotypes about who is a victim of IPV (i.e., Black, grew up low-income, and "foreign").

Restuccia (2000) demonstrates that the media focuses on the individual life experiences and characteristics of victims that predispose them to abuse. Through analyzing narratives of IPV across popular media outlets, Restuccia (2000) concludes that abused women, due to the loss of their mothers, are looking for substitutes in powerful, controlling, and abusive men. While not as explicit as stating that abuse victims provoked their assaults, ascribing abuse to women's personal backgrounds or their personal deficits serves to create social scripts about who is and isn't targeted by abuse, and perpetuates victim blaming.

### *Framing IPV Perpetration*

Across various media genres, perpetrators of IPV were described as mentally ill (Frus, 2001; Lenahan, 2009; Poon, 2011; Rothman et al., 2012; Taylor, 2009), emotionally disturbed (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Carlyle, Scarduzio, et al., 2014), socially deviant (Gillespie et al., 2013), having anger management issues (Olson, 2013; Rothman et al., 2012), substance abuse issues (Taylor, 2009; Thaller & Messing, 2014), and being easily distinguished from non-abusers (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Gillespie et al., 2013). In an analysis of the portrayal of IPV in film, for instance, Frus (2001) asserted that perpetrators are framed as "psychotic or in other ways deviant" (p. 27). In the most in-depth investigation of the framing of IPV perpetration, Poon (2011), through an analysis of an unspecified number of contemporary gay male partner abuse

“self-help” books,” found that perpetrators were portrayed as “pure villains” (p.118), desiring power & control, enduring family histories of violence, suffering from psychological deficiencies (especially personality disorders), and having internalized homophobia or heterosexism.

Framing need not vilify perpetrators to have similar effects, Olson (2013) found that the abusive perpetrator (i.e., “The Beast”) in Disney’s (1991) adaption of *Beauty and The Beast* was depicted as having anger management issues, but was framed “sympathetically” by showing the ways he was trying to modify his behavior. Similarly Sears and Patterson (2011) reported that perpetrators are framed more sympathetically than victims on celebrity websites and blogs, which functions to “let men off the hook” while holding the victim responsible for how she contributed to the abuse. This claim was reinforced by Taylor (2009) who compared the nuanced framing of perpetrators in newspapers as another type of indirect victim blaming, because perpetrators’ behaviors are contextualized as being related to a litany of social and economic issues, while victims are often portrayed in narrow ways.

### *Contextualizing IPV as a Broader Social Issue*

The discussion of the portrayals of victims and perpetrators of TDV across media genres thus far has focused predominantly on the personal characteristics of those who endure and commit violence. The preponderance of these types of individual-level framings of IPV points to a larger tendency within the media to describe IPV in such a way that it is divorced from a broader social narrative about the macro-level antecedents of this issue. In this sense, IPV is framed as an individual problem rather than a larger societal one. For example, numerous studies have reported that print media, including newspapers and magazines and film, do not consistently position IPV as a broader social issue, but rather as a personal or individual-level

issue (Bullock & Cubert, 2002; Fairbairn & Dawson, 2013; Frus, 2001; Gillespie et al., 2013; Hensman Kettrey & Emery, 2010; Ryan et al., 2006; Sellers et al., 2014). Bullock and Cubert (2002) found in a content analysis of 230 newspaper articles on 44 incidences of homicide, that in news coverage of IPV homicide, only 10% of articles described the homicide within a broader social context. These socially contextualized framings of IPV include: describing gaps in the criminal justice system that can contribute to IPV and shortages in emergency housing for abuse victims. Richards et al. (2011) and Gillespie et al. (2013) observed a correlated relationship between newspaper articles identifying an issue as domestic violence (rather than just a physical assault or homicide) and nesting it within a broader social context. Berns (2004) found that politically liberal magazines, which employ more cultural, institutional, and structural frames, discussed the challenges in exiting abusive relationship (Berns, 2004), compared to men's and entertainment magazines that focused on individual characteristics of victims and patterns of gender symmetry in the perpetration of abuse.

### *Contradictory Frames*

While some frames identified were fairly straightforward, several authors noted the utilization of seemingly contradictory frames in how IPV is represented in the media. For instance, Rothman and colleagues (2012), in their investigation of media frames in popular magazines, found that even within the same articles there was the sentiment that “abuse is wrong” and shouldn't be tolerated, while at the same time assigning blame to the victim and excusing the behavior of perpetrators. Likewise, Cuklanz and Moorti (2006) argued that the depiction of IPV on one televised crime drama (*Law and Order, Special Victims Unit*), displayed “curious contradictions” (p. 317). While on the one hand the show depicts themes that countered rape myths about women inviting abuse and highlights structural and systemic issues that contribute

to “rape culture,” on the other hand it recapitulates stereotypes that women often vindictively file false rape charges and it disproportionately portrays women perpetrating child abuse (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006).

Houlihan and Raynor (2014) also observed that victims of IPV are represented in competing ways. In an analysis of one woman’s abuse by her dating partner on celebrity blogs and websites, the authors noted that the victim was positioned as both provoking her assault and also being vulnerable to abuse because of her family and demographic background. The authors contended that these dual framings of abuse victims as being “risky” and “at risk” and as “victim” and “provocateur” illustrate the contradictory ways that victimhood is constructed in societal discourses about IPV (Houlihan & Raynor, 2014).

In the following section, I will investigate how each of these themes—normalizing and minimizing IPV, employing different strategies to hold victims at least partially responsible for their assaults, framing perpetrators in sympathetic ways, divorcing analysis of IPV from a broader social context, and constructing victimhood in dual and often contradictory ways—have been found in the handling of IPV in fictional literature.

### **The Representations of IPV in Fictional Novels**

In general, there has been limited attention to how IPV is represented in novels, making it difficult to discuss in detail how the above-mentioned themes are salient in this literature’s handling of IPV. Although studies conducted by Bonomi, Altenburger, and Walton (2013) and Collins and Carmody (2011) chronicled that multiple examples of IPV, including stalking, intimidation, isolation, and sexual coercion, figure prominently in popular fiction, more thorough analyses, including an analysis of the societal representation of IPV and TDV, have been limited.

Below I summarize the emergent themes regarding how IPV is represented in literature and novels.

### *Normalizing and Minimizing IPV*

Multiple authors have investigated the content of a popular book series (Meyer's *Twilight*) that was initially marketed to teens but has enjoyed significant crossover appeal with adult audiences as well. It is important to underscore that the plot of *Twilight* was not about teen dating violence, so these incidences were portrayed within the day-to-day romance between the protagonist, Bella, and her romantic interests, Edward and Jacob. Collins and Carmody (2011), Borgia (2014), and Durham (2012) concluded that abusive behaviors such as monitoring of a partner's whereabouts were positioned as normal components of courtship behaviors. Violence and controlling one's romantic partner were normalized, romanticized, and even justified depending on the circumstances (i.e., some men just can't help themselves) (Borgia, 2014; Collins & Carmody, 2011; Durham, 2012).

### *Constructing Vulnerability*

There has not been the same attention paid to the depiction of victim blaming in young adult literature. While there was no discussion of how the victim's behavior may have provoked the attack, the protagonists in literary depictions of everyday relationships are framed as passive and inherently vulnerable to abuse. The protagonist's passivity and codependency in Meyer's *Twilight* was noted by Borgia (2014), and illustrated by her continual need to be rescued by the men in her life.

The sense that young women are positioned as being at risk for assault in literature was discussed by literary theorist Ruth Saxton (1998), who, although not writing directly about TDV, contends that "the Girl" in contemporary fictional novels such as Allison's *Bastard Out of*

*Carolina*, Morrison's *Bluest Eye*, and Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* are portrayed as being intrinsically vulnerable to abuse at the hands of men. She states: "The Girl in popular culture is an endangered species—in her own house as well as on the streets, vulnerable to rape, abuse, violence inflicted by others" (p. 102).

Although exploring rape in adolescence specifically, not TDV within the context of romantic relationships, Marshall (2009), in a literary analysis of the short story "Wolf" within the compendium *The Rose and the Beast* by Lia Block, documented that young women are constructed as "simultaneously vulnerable and empowered" (p. 221). By this she means that young women are positioned as being susceptible to sexual exploitation simply by virtue of their gender and family circumstances, but also expected to "fight back" and overcome these obstacles independently. For instance, the young woman in the story is characterized as vulnerable due to her stepfather's abuse towards her and her mother, while also being described as avenging these assaults by murdering him. This positioning of victims as triumphing over their perpetrators' assaults is consistent with the "victim empowerment" frame that Berns (2004) identified in the coverage of the framing of IPV in magazines.

#### *Framing Perpetration & Contextualizing IPV*

Overall, the literature on how IPV is portrayed in novels is very limited. One exception was a study from Spain which analyzed three Spanish-language novels. Godsland (2012) documented that in these novels the authors positioned the perpetrator's behaviors as being part of a larger patriarchal context of domestic violence. These novels were lauded for moving beyond individual-level descriptions of IPV perpetration, and chronicled the failure of the Criminal Justice System (CJS) to hold perpetrators accountable. This study is noteworthy, because the findings diverged from the framing of IPV perpetration across media genres and

signaled the potential for novels to provide counter-narratives about IPV beyond the usual media thematic template previously identified. However, it should be noted that this study did not discuss the rationale for choosing these particular novels or detail the analytic methods, so it is impossible to conclude that these findings are representative of Spanish literature's handling of IPV as a whole.

In conclusion, this review of the limited literature on how novels describe IPV underscores that there has been no systematic investigation of the representation of IPV, especially beyond descriptive analyses of single authors or novels in adult popular fiction. Furthermore, all of the studies discussed in this section focused on a small sample of selective texts (largely popular fiction), and while that approach is certainly consistent with content and discourse analyses, it is impossible to conclude that these novels are representative of an entire body of fictional novels. The available literature is instructive for revealing that IPV is featured and normalized in the portrayal of everyday courtship behaviors and in the framing of victims as passive and vulnerable; however, these studies did not systematically seek out novels to review nor were they focused on TDV.

### *Summary of Literature Review*

The theoretical discussion of media framing at the outset of this review is instructive for understanding how the media has the potential to construct certain versions of social phenomena and thus potentially influence collective community responses to social issues such as TDV. The review of the empirical literature on the media's depiction of (mostly adult perpetrated) IPV revealed a handful of consistent themes on how this social issue is messaged in the mass media. These themes include normalizing and minimizing IPV, using various techniques to blame the victim for the assault, focusing on the individual behaviors of victims, and underrepresenting the

social context of IPV. However, the media's framing of IPV is not always straightforward. There were instances, for example, where contradictory frames could be employed even within the same article or televised program.

The limited systematic investigation of the depiction of TDV in fictional novels, particularly young adult literature, represents an important area for scholarship. Few studies have rigorously examined the representation of TDV in YA literature, and existing studies largely examined books based on their commercial popularity, rather than employing predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Furthermore, a critical discourse analysis of YA novels will shed light, not only on the descriptive themes for how the media discusses IPV, but also on the larger social messages that are being marketed to teens about the causes, lived experiences, and consequences of TDV. This type of analysis will allow for the exploration of the function of framing TDV in these circumscribed ways and will afford the opportunity to interrogate what particular power interests and ideological and political agendas are being served through these particular representations of TDV. Therefore, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. What social discourses are employed/represented in the enactment of TDV in YA literature?
2. How are TDV victimization and perpetration constructed and represented in YA literature?

## Chapter 3: Methods

### Research Design

Because this study employs a critical discourse analysis, this section will start with defining discourse and then discussing how a critical discourses analysis (CDA) differs from a discourse analysis (DA). I then will describe the genre of YA literature and elaborate on how it is well suited for analyzing the multiple macro-level conversations that frame teen dating violence as a social issue. I then will proceed with describing the specific study methods, including the construction of the sample and the multiple steps in the iterative analytic process. I will conclude by recounting how I practiced intentional reflexivity throughout this research project.

### *Conceptualizing Discourse*

In its most basic definition, discourse can be understood as written or spoken communication via mutually understood words and phrases; however, discourse can also be understood as a “system of representation” (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014; Hall, 2001) by which individuals develop shared meaning-making processes and by which knowledge is reified. Rather than the literal meaning of a phrase or sentence, discourse is the shared understanding of a phrase that hovers “above the sentence or above the clause” (Stubbs, 1983, p. 1). For instance in an article by Calhoun (2010) on “sleep training” babies (i.e., the practice of letting babies cry themselves to sleep) in the online periodical *Salon*, the following quote was included as an example of how some individuals view this practice: “Some people like to neglect their kids at bedtime...I’ll parent mine.” As this passage exemplifies, language is never unbiased or neutral, but indicative of mutually agreed upon understandings and shared assumptions (Fairclough, 1992; Jaworski & Coupland, 2014). According to this person, letting one’s child cry themselves to sleep is tantamount to abuse and neglect and thus something that most parents want to avoid, and

likely, a more rigorous examination of this type of parenting language would reveal social discourses about specific parenting philosophies and approaches. This example also makes clear that individual opinions and views are inevitably nested within larger macro-level systems, so, in other words, the examination of “micro-structures” (i.e., one person’s utterance on a mother’s blog) potentially sheds light on the nature of “macro-structures” that organize social life (Jaworski & Coupland, 2014).

### *Defining Discourse Analysis*

Grounded in postmodern, poststructuralist, and constructionist epistemologies, the primary goal of discourse analysis is to unpack the construction of everyday social practices through an analysis of language in use in texts and in spoken conversation (Gee, 2011; Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014), to expose the various unspoken but actionable tasks or functions that language is enacting. For instance, why would Calhoun (2010) title an article “The Battle Over ‘Cry it Out’ Sleep Training” and what does this use of language reveal about the cultural, political, and social practices that make up contemporary parenting (Starks & Trinidad, 2007)? Gee (2011) asserts that language has specific “building tasks” such as forming group and individual identities, constituting social relationships, enacting specific activities or practices, reifying political ideologies, and elevating the importance of specific issues. Therefore, a discourse analysis of “The Battle Over ‘Cry it Out’ Sleep Training,” could reveal specific identities related to parenting, shed light on the ideologies associated with different parenting approaches, and underscore the relationships between parents who share similar philosophies.

### *What Is a Critical Discourse Analysis?*

CDA differs from DA in its attention to and investigation of power and of how language functions in ways to recapitulate dominant knowledge systems and ideological interests. While there are some discourse theorists and linguists who contend that all discourse analysis is inherently critical in nature given that language is intrinsically one-sided and political (Gee, 2011), I join Roger and Fowler (1991) and Jaworski and Coupland (2014) in asserting that CDA goes beyond describing how language operates, by interrogating the construction of social institutions and structures that perpetuate social injustice and gender inequality. A CDA goes beyond studying the structure of language to distill how language enacts and reproduces larger systems of social inequality. Therefore the study of discourse can reveal how these knowledge systems and interests have become cloaked in invisibility and relegated “commonplace.” CDA offers the promise and potential that we as a society might, through an in-depth interrogation of these linguistic practices of inequality, reimagine the world in a more equitable and egalitarian way (Jaworski & Coupland, 2014).

### **Study Context**

The data in this study were drawn from a subgenre of young adult literature titled “realistic” YA literature or what is colloquially called the “problem novel.” In general, YA literature has consistently been one of the top grossing genres of fiction (Koss & Teale, 2009). Realistic YA literature is one of the most frequently consumed and reviewed type of YA fiction (Koss & Teale, 2009). The problem novel aims to chronicle “true-to-life” social issues such as eating disorders, family violence, bullying, and teen dating violence (Aronson, 2001; Bucher & Hinton, 2010; Nilsen et al., 2013). These books seek to facilitate meaning making about real world issues, educate about social issues, and help young readers feel like they have the agency

to initiate change in their own lives (Bucher & Hinton, 2010). To accomplish these aims the novels generally follow similar narrative structures that include first-person narration, teens solving their own problems independently from adults, and the protagonists going through a transformative process that leaves them irrevocably changed (Bucher & Hinton, 2010). In over 85% of all YA novels the protagonist is focused on finding his/her self, searching for answers to an unresolved conflict (34%), and nearly 20% add content related to some type of non relationship related abuse such as child abuse (Bucher & Hinton, 2010).

Young adult novels, particularly problem novels, are ideal sites for performing CDAs because they exemplify how a multifaceted social issue such as TDV is messaged to youth audiences. Furthermore, it is important to incorporate multilevel approaches—societal as well as individual and social group foci—in guiding the development of interventions to prevent TDV. An analysis of societal-level discursive threads about this issue is an important component in understanding how TDV is messaged in adolescents' broader social environments.

## **Methods**

### *Data and Sample*

No pre-existing list of young adult novels that focus on TDV is available. To develop a listing of relevant YA novels, I used three strategies: 1) searching academic databases which contain *Kirkus* reviews of YA literature; 2) combing online compendias of popular fiction; specifically, Amazon.com and two YA-focused websites, teenreads.com and School Library Journal; and 3) consulting with a Young Adult librarian at the Seattle Public Library and a Research librarian at the University of Washington School of Social Work. For the first two approaches I used the following search terms: young adult literature, dating abuse, teen dating violence, relationship abuse, partner violence, and relationship problems. Through these search

strategies, I identified 13 YA novels that appeared to have a primary focus on TDV. I restricted the publication date range to young adult novels that were published between 2004 - 2014. I choose 2004 because it marked the publication of Sarah Dessen's seminal novel *Dreamland*, which not only received critical acclaim for its "realistic" portrayal of abuse in adolescent dating relationships, but was also the first novel to call attention to this social issue from the perspective of a victim (Day, 2013; Richmond, 2000). Prior to release of *Dreamland*, YA novels focused on other issues related to adolescent lived experiences such as child abuse, "coming of age," and living with a disability. 2014 was the cutoff year because that was the year I conducted data analysis of all of the books in the aggregate. All books that met the date of publication requirements and the following criteria were included in the sample:

1. Were written and published in English, because that is the investigator's primary language.
2. Were published in the United States, because that is the author's country of origin and residence. I made this decision because I wanted to share the same cultural context that the books were created in so some of the "high inferences" were not lost in translation (Gee, 2011).
3. The central plot of the novel focused primarily on the experience of TDV, because, rather than investigating all YA novels, I was interested in having a more strategic focus on how abusive relationships were intentionally crafted and described.
4. The novels were catalogued as YA and were in circulation in at least one of the five largest public library systems in the United States. I defined large as by the number of volumes in circulation in the branches and research collections (American Library Association, 2012). These libraries included Boston Public Library, New York Public Library, Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County, Detroit Public Library, and

County of Los Angeles Public Library. I focused on books in circulation at large library systems, since they are likely to be books that many libraries hold, and therefore that many teens would have access to and potentially read.

I made the decision to exclude self-published books from this sample. Although this was unintentionally accomplished by the above listed exclusion criteria, I made this decision for different reasons. First, it was important to me to assess books that all youth could access in a public library system. It is also very challenging to systematically identify these books since they aren't catalogued anywhere, and it was important that I create a sample that other researchers could reasonably reproduce.

The structure of "the problem novel" genre of YA fiction generally focuses on one central issue that the protagonist is working through, therefore it is fairly easy to determine the focus of each novel. Novels in which unhealthy relationship dynamics were presented but the novel confronts another "problem" were excluded. For example, one book was predominantly focused on end-of-life issues (patient-assisted suicide), and teen dating violence was only marginally discussed. Five novels were excluded from the initial listing of 13, because they were self-published (n=3) or only peripherally focused on TDV (n=2). Table 1 documents the titles, authors, and year of publication of the eight novels included in the final sample. A brief summary of each book is provided in the following chapter.

Table 1:  
*Books Reviewed and Analyzed*

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Date of Publication</b>	<b>Publisher, Location</b>
<b>1.) Bitter End</b>	Brown, Jennifer	2012	Little Brown, New York
<b>2.) Stay</b>	Caletti, Deb	2011	Simon Pulse, New York
<b>3.) Dreamland</b>	Dessen, Sarah	2004	Penguin Group, New York
<b>4.) Pieces of Us</b>	Gelbwasser, Margie	2012	Flux, Woodbury, MN
<b>5.) But I Love Him</b>	Grace, Amanda	2011	Flux, Woodbury, MN
<b>6.) Bad Boy</b>	Jordan, Dream	2012	St. Martins Griffin, New York
<b>7.) Rage: A Love Story</b>	Peters, Julie Anne	2009	Alfred A. Knoph, New York
<b>8.) Breaking Beautiful</b>	Shaw Wolf, Jenifer	2012	Walker & Company, New York

### *Data Analysis*

The analysis occurred in three distinct steps. The first reading sensitized me to the broad understanding of the plot, characters, and general themes of the book. I memoed throughout the reading to document emerging thoughts on themes and general reactions to each book.

The second reading involved focused coding of concepts, clustering of concepts into categories and emerging themes related to how TDV was portrayed in each novel. For example, one of the categories was “Characteristics of Victims,” and the related child codes within this domain were wallflower, low self worth, innocent, first-love, and “good girl.” I developed and continually amended a codebook that included all codes and categories and definitions of these concepts. An excerpt of this codebook can be found in table 5 in the Appendix.

All books were initially coded by hand directly. I also highlighted all passages that contained a code in an e-version of the book. All coded passages were cut and pasted into a word

document from an e-version of the book. This word document was then uploaded into Dedoose online analytical software for systematic analysis and organization. Due to copyright limitations, it was not possible to upload entire versions of the books to Dedoose. At the end of this second reading, I had developed the following general themes: the antecedents of TDV were portrayed as being related to victim vulnerability, victim's poor decision-making, and/or perpetrator personal issues; the primary role of friends was to talk to the victim, though these efforts were dismissed by the victims; men were positioned as being responsible to protect women; and there were limited portrayals of social system involvement. Tables/matrices were created for each novel to facilitate both within- and across-novel/case analysis (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003). A sample of one of these matrices can be found in Table 6 in the study Appendix.

For the third reading, I returned to the novels and employed "structured questions" (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009) to unpack the larger social discourses and ascertain how language was used and to what end. I was also interested in identifying what is specifically said and what is omitted or rendered invisible (Wood & Kroger, 2000). The development of the structured questions was inspired by the themes that emerged from the initial thematic content analysis and reflections that emerged from my memoing process. It was through the process of writing responses to these questions that I was able to sensitize myself to the larger functions these discourses serve through presenting certain versions of this social issue. The list of structured questions employed is found in Table 2.

In order to address the potential for other interpretive viewpoints of these novels, I did two things. First, I partnered with a second coder (a Masters in Social Work student) who analyzed a subsection (n=3) of the books. The second researcher coded all of the books by hand using the codebook I had generated. She also took meticulous notes on her interpretive

impressions of the books. Although we had no significant differences in interpretations, we were struck by different elements of the story which we discussed, in depth. Second, I met regularly with members of my doctoral committee to present evidence generated by my codes and to discuss my evolving interpretations. These collaborations were helpful in helping me consider alternative viewpoints and interpretations.

Table 2:  
*List of Structured Questions*

- 
- What does the victim learn about herself from being in an abusive relationship?
  - What would a teen who had limited exposure to TDV conclude about it?
  - Why does a victim stay?
  - What causes TDV?
  - What is the role of bystanders/friends/peers in helping victims of TDV?
  - What happens when friends/bystanders do intervene?
  - How can abusive relationships be prevented?
  - What is the resolution of abusive relationships?
  - What special contexts do teens encounter?
  - What gender roles were present in the framing of adolescent relationships?
  - What is the impact of the abuse on victims of TDV?
- 

The process of linking the similar themes present across my answers to the structured questions to specific social discourses was a multifaceted and iterative process that occurred over several months. For example, initially I identified the theme of victim vulnerability with protagonists being framed as being poor decision-makers, having low self-esteem, being inexperienced in relationships, and having endured the loss of a parent. These preliminary thematic results were presented in a handful of settings, including interdisciplinary and social work conferences, where I received feedback on how these findings resonated with a handful of larger societal discourses. I also would be remiss if I did not acknowledge my dissertation chair for pointing me in the direction of certain societal-level conversations about IPV.

I took these suggestions and read extensively in the academic literature on the societal framing of IPV, including victimhood and perpetration. It was through this reading and from my own background as a Social Work practitioner and researcher in the field of teen dating violence that I settled on three primary discourses to highlight in these novels: post-feminism, Freudian influenced pop-psychology, and victimology. While I will explain these discourses in detail in the following chapter, what is important to underscore here is that it was through my own process of becoming familiar with the nuances of these discourses that I was able to describe how language was operating in these novels and to what end. By reading, free writing, and memoing about my personal thoughts and reactions, I was able to move from the descriptive to the discursive. For instance, in reference to the theme regarding victim vulnerability, through reading how the field of victimology frames victims as playing a role in precipitating their assaults, I was able to move beyond simply describing the protagonists as being framed as vulnerable to arguing how these framings function to reinforce victimology discourses about individual-level victim culpability. In this sense, the iterative process was one of linking the descriptive thematic results to macro-level conversations on what identities, social relationships, and versions of TDV were being enacted via societal discourses in these novels.

It is also important to underscore that these three discourses are not the only societal conversations occurring in these novels. My overarching goal through the use of CDA is to make a claim for how these identified societal discourses are operating through these cultural artifacts, and to assert how these constructions are representing or “restorying” the causes, consequences, and lived experiences of teen dating violence.

### *Reflexivity*

Since reflexivity is an important benchmark of rigor in qualitative research (Stige, Malterud, & Midtgarden, 2009), it is important to mention at the outset how my personal, professional, and academic backgrounds have informed how I have conceptualized and executed this project. The need for personal reflection emerged at different points of the project from early conceptualization through analysis. My early interest in this project stemmed from a longstanding interest in how violence against woman was portrayed in popular culture. As an adolescent (and burgeoning feminist), I became aware of IPV through its representation in media genres. Sarah McLaughlin's song "Good Enough," Suzanne Vega's "My Name is Luca," and Shakespeare's depiction of the killing of Desdemona in *Othello* stand out as being particularly profound moments when I identified the intersection between gender and IPV.

My early interest in IPV evolved into a career as a social worker and now researcher committed to ending violence against women and promoting young women's empowerment. Although I took a plethora of women's studies courses at a liberal arts undergraduate institution, my primary socialization into the causes and consequences of IPV stemmed from my community-based work in sexual assault and IPV prevention. The IPV organizations where I have worked were strongly rooted in the language of second-wave feminism, and thus my early understanding of the root causes of IPV were influenced by a feminist domestic violence discourse that included attention to issues of structural inequality, patriarchy, and "power and control." As a graduate student, I have read many counter-narratives about IPV, but still my core assumptions (however hard I may try to bracket them) about IPV stem from this early feminist socialization about the causes of IPV, the lived experience of IPV, and what community-based strategies are "appropriate" for addressing this issue.

Given my professional orientation in the IPV movement, there were moments when I felt very frustrated by the way this issue was presented in these novels; not only because I felt it contradicted elements of my training about IPV, but because the authors were so persuasive in how they messaged these issues. Even as someone who has a firm background in IPV, I found myself swayed by the framing of these books. There were times when I found myself blaming the protagonists, feeling sorry for the perpetrator, or rooting for the protagonist to finally leave their abusers. I did memo about these experiences and vented to my committee chair (or really anyone who would listen), but in many ways my own experiences interacting with these books, as a well-educated thirty-something doctoral candidate, solidified what an important area of study this is.

## Chapter 4: Study Context

This section will provide brief plot summaries of each novel included in this study and describe the demographic characteristics of the victim and perpetrator featured in each. These brief plot summaries are intended to give the reader a sense of the narrative arc of each novel. The goal of this section is to provide enough contextual information for the reader to follow the more in-depth descriptions of the results sections in the next chapter. As a note of clarification, I will use the terms “protagonist”<sup>1</sup> (i.e., the central character in a piece of fiction) and “victim” interchangeably and the term “perpetrator” to describe the protagonist’s abusive partner.

### Plot Summaries

*Bitter End*, Jennifer Brown, 2012

At the beginning of her senior year, Alex develops a crush on Cole, a new boy in school. Alex is haunted by the death of her mother and estranged from her father, who never recovered from the loss of his wife. Alex is buoyed by the support of her close childhood friends Zack and Bethany. When she and Cole develop a romantic relationship, Alex is thrilled. Due to his own family trauma (including witnessing his father’s perpetration of domestic violence against his mother), Alex feels she and Cole have a special connection and he is the only one who can relate to her pain. Cole is very jealous of her friendship with Zack and intentionally picks fights with him. As the months pass, Cole becomes increasingly more physically and emotionally abusive, and Alex becomes increasingly isolated from her friends who verbalize their concerns about

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<sup>1</sup> All of the novels except for Gelbwasser’s *Pieces of Us* use first-person narration by the focal protagonists. Although four characters share the narration in *Pieces of Us*, Katie’s experiences of sexual assault and dating abuse make up the core plot, and therefore she will be referred to as the protagonist in the results section.

Cole's behaviors. Cole's physical abuse is severe, ranging from grabbing her so hard as to leave a bruise to beating her so badly that she missed school for several days to conceal her injuries. He also refers to her as his "slut girlfriend" and minimizes her relationships with her friends.

Alex is desperate to tell someone about the physical abuse, but feels conflicted about Cole's erratic behavior (i.e., he can vacillate from being a loving and attentive boyfriend to using extreme physical abuse). After learning that Cole was abusive to his previous girlfriend, Alex finally tells an adult co-worker about her situation, who encourages her to end the relationship. When Alex confronts Cole about the unacceptability of his behavior, he brutally beats her up, and she ends up in the hospital. After this incident and learning that her deceased mother's mental illness precipitated her death, she permanently terminates her relationship with Cole. She spends the next year recovering from the abuse, reconciling the loss of her mother and healing her relationships with her friends.

*Stay*, Deb Caletti, 2011

Clara is a high school senior and daughter of a famous fiction writer. Her mother died when she was young under mysterious circumstances. After being in a previously abusive relationship, she develops an intense relationship with Christian (a boy from another local high school). Christian comes from a wealthy family, but is estranged from his father. Clara and Christian's relationship starts out like a "perfect" romance, but Clara starts to feel claustrophobic by Christian's extreme possessiveness and jealousy. He tracks the mileage on her car, accuses her of flirting with male peers, and verbally accosts her. Although Christian did utilize physical abuse, he primarily exerted psychological abuse, threats of suicide, and exhibited jealous behaviors. After numerous confrontations and concern expressed by her friends and family, Clara ultimately realizes she needs to sever her relationship with Christian. After their breakup,

Christian stalks her and continues to monitor her behavior. Concerned about Christian's behavior, Clara's father contacts a police detective, who encourages them to leave the area until Christian's obsession with Clara subsides.

Clara and her father then leave their hometown of Seattle, to live in Deception Pass (a small fishing town north of the city) for the summer. Clara has severed all contact with Christian and doesn't tell her friends where she has gone. She settles into a new life where she gets a job, starts a relationship, and befriends an old friend of her parents. It is through this family friend that she learns the truth about her mother's death (i.e., that she was mentally ill and drowned in a boat after a fight about her husband's affair with another woman). Excited about her new boyfriend, she reveals where she is staying to her best friend in Seattle. Her best friend's mother accidentally lets this information slip to Christian. Shortly, thereafter, Christian tracks Clara down and pursues her. After he arrives at her home, terrified, Clara flees into a storm. A chase scene ensues, where he corners her against the waves. Convinced he is going to physically harm her, she runs into a boat during a storm to escape his menacing advances. Finally, someone comes to Clara's rescue and Christian leaves the scene. Clara's father decides to get a protection order, though Christian gets in contact with her the day after it expires. The novel concludes with Clara's resignation that he will send letters to her indefinitely.

*Pieces of Us*, Margie Gelbwasser, 2012

Teens from two families—sisters Katie and Julie, and brothers Alex and Kyle—have spent their summers together in the Catskills since childhood. The novel is told through the perspectives of each of the four characters. While Katie and Alex start as friends, they become romantically involved midway through the book. Katie and her sister Julie have a distant relationship, due to the fact that Katie receives preferential treatment from their mother and has a

seemingly perfect life. Alex and his brother Kyle both endured their father's suicide and subsequent physical and psychological abuse from their mother's successive boyfriends. Kyle is often uncomfortable with Alex's objectification of women, but feels disempowered and unable to stand up to him.

When the school year resumes, they return to their respective lives where Katie, a popular cheerleader, is sexually assaulted by her former boyfriend and his best friend (Chris). To Katie's horror the sexual assault was video recorded. Chris blackmails Katie into having sex with him again, if he promises to destroy the recording. Unbeknownst to Katie, Chris recorded the second encounter and eventually does release the video on the internet. When Alex discovers the video, Alex is very angry with Katie and concludes that Katie is a slut like all girls. Katie becomes a shell of a person and increasingly withdrawn.

When they meet up again over the following summer, Alex becomes increasingly physically, verbally, and sexually abusive of Katie. His physical abuse is particularly brutal leaving her bruised and despondent. While both Kyle and Julie are aware the abuse is going on, neither of them do anything to stop it. The violence continues to escalate and eventually Katie's grandparents intervene. Katie ends up in an in-patient mental health facility. The novel concludes with Kyle and Katie father's supporting Katie's recovery. Katie and Julie's parents divorce due to their mother's superficiality and inability to support Katie. Despite the fact that Julie saw her sister endure an abusive relationship and that she herself previously dated Kyle, she enters into a romantic relationship with Alex.

*But I Love Him*, Amanda Grace, 2011

At the beginning of her senior year, Ann meets Connor. They quickly develop a strong connection and become an exclusive couple. Prior to meeting Connor, Ann was the co-captain of

the track team, had a close circle of friends, and excelled academically. Connor is her first significant romantic relationship. After the death of her father and her mother's subsequent depression, Ann felt estranged from her mother. Connor moved out of his parents' abusive home after witnessing his father repeatedly physically assaulting and verbally abusing his mother. His father also abuses alcohol and exerts controlling behavior over Connor (such as denying access to food ).

As Ann and Connor's relationship evolves, Connor grows more jealous of her spending time on anything or anyone that isn't him. She grows increasingly isolated from her friends and is asked to leave the track team after missing too many practices. After multiple fights with her mother about her relationship with Connor, Ann eventually moves into Connor's apartment. Connor's jealousy and anger escalates into multiple incidences of physical abuse that result in broken bones, bruises and black eyes. He also frequently uses verbal insults such as "bitch" and "slut." Ann attributes Connor's abusive behaviors to his witnessing family violence and believes she can make things better for him. Ann constructs a heart sculpture made of broken glass as a gift for Connor which he destroys during an angry episode. This incident is a metaphor for Ann feeling that she gave herself to Connor piece by piece until she has nothing left. After a brutal beating by Connor where he broke her arm, Ann decides she loves herself more than Connor and moves back in with her mother determined to reclaim her life.

*Bad Boy*, Dream Jordan, 2012

Kate, a former foster youth, has been in and out of placements her entire life. She is particularly upset when her foster parents Ted and Lynn move out of state, and she has to transfer into a new group home where she has trouble connecting with the other residents. Kate is immediately smitten when she meets a 19 year old guy. Having never been in a serious

relationship, Kate is impressed by his attentiveness. Their relationship quickly sours when he exhibits jealous behavior such as giving her a cell phone to monitor her and being critical of her appearance. Kate is confused by how Percy can be sweet and loving one minute, then cruel and angry the next. Kate's best friend Felicia is worried by Percy's behavior and even tries to give her literature about dating violence, but Kate feels judged by her friend's efforts. Percy gets increasingly physically violent and pressures Kate to have sex with him. After reaching out for support, Kate's former caseworker blames her for blindly getting herself into the relationship and not having the self-worth to exit it when it got violent. After Percy tricks her into seeing him one last time, he beats her up so severely that she has to be hospitalized for several weeks. After this incident and hearing her caseworker's input, Kate severs her relationship with Percy. She resolves to be more discriminating about dating partners in the future and makes efforts to repair her self-esteem. Her friends support her in her recovery.

*Rage: A Love Story*, Julie Anne Peters, 2009

Johanna, a high school senior who lives alone in the apartment above her sister Tessa's guest house after the death of her parents, develops a crush on her female classmate Reeve. Johanna has come out as a lesbian to her best friend Novak, but has never been in a romantic relationship. She meets Reeve after tutoring Reeve's twin brother Robbie who has autism. Both Reeve and Robbie endured physical and sexual abuse growing up and currently live with their mother, who is drug addicted, and their violent uncle. As Johanna and Reeve grow closer, Johanna endures Reeve's explosive anger, verbal abuse, and physical abuse. Reeve's physical abuse ranges from pinching to punching Johanna in the eye so hard as to give her a black eye. She also threatens to leave her causing Johanna emotional distress. Reeve's former girlfriend warns Johanna that the abuse will only get worse, and her best friend Novak encourages her to

leave the relationship, but Johanna feels deeply connected to Reeve and would do anything to maintain the relationship. After Reeve repeatedly punches and kicks Novak and Johanna, Tessa (Johanna's older sister) pressures Reeve to leave town since she is causing Johanna so much pain. Reeve leaves and moves into a therapeutic group home where she can address her emotional trauma. Tessa then supports Johanna into receiving counseling and eventually relocating out of state with Tessa and her fiancé.

*Breaking Beautiful*, Jennifer Shaw Wolf, 2012

Allie wakes up the morning following a terrible car accident that took the life of her boyfriend Trip, but she has no memory of the accident. The police tell her that she jumped out of the moving vehicle before it careened off the cliff. Trip was from a wealthy family in their small town. Trip's father was described as a bully who mistreated his mother. Trip's mother has numerous bruises, and is portrayed as a victim of abuse. Trip's father pressures the police to reopen the investigation into his son's death. As Allie heals from her physical injuries from the accident, she is flooded by memories of Trip's physical and emotional abuse, his friends who ignored the abuse, and feeling trapped and isolated in the relationship. Allie's twin brother Andrew, who suffers from cerebral palsy and chronic health issues, tried to intervene in the abuse, but felt helpless to protect his sister. The detective in charge of the investigation scrutinizes Allie's behavior after the accident, including starting a new relationship with her best friend Blake. The detective learns about her abusive relationship with Trip and encourages her to be forthright about what she remembers.

After Andrew gets sick and ends up in the hospital, Allie learns that he had cut the brakes in Trip's car. Allie finally remembers that she had been knocked unconscious during a physical assault prior to the accident, and that Blake had intervened. Blake was helping Trip transport

Allie to the hospital at the time of the accident. Blake jumped out of the car and pushed Allie out before it crashed, leaving Trip to die alone in the car. Eventually, Allie confides in the detective about the extent of the abuse, and he closes the investigation stating that there was no tangible evidence to pursue further criminal prosecution. At the end of the novel, Allie and Blake remain a couple, Andrew ultimately recovers from his illness, and Trip's mother leaves her abusive husband.

### **Victim Demographics**

As summarized in Table 3, discernable patterns emerge in the victim demographics represented across this sample of young adult novels. All of the protagonists were identified as female. Of the eight books reviewed, six of the victims of TDV were White and upper or middle class. This ranking was an interpretive determination based on the author descriptions of the type of home the character lived in, their parents' occupations, and references to their neighborhoods. The only book in which determining the protagonist's socioeconomic status (SES) was difficult was *Rage: A Love Story* (the character Johanna). Given that her parents were deceased, she worked to pay her own bills, but still lived in an apartment that was conjoined with her parent's house that was now occupied by her sister. Her sister, her primary guardian, held a master's-level social work position, but she and Johanna had a strained relationship.

The novel that diverged most dramatically from the homogeneous victim descriptions, was *Bad Girl*; the protagonist Kate, who was African American, was involved in the foster care system and living in a group home in an urban Brooklyn neighborhood. All of the relationships depicted were heterosexual, except that portrayed between Johanna and Reeve in *Rage: A Love Story*. The protagonists all had deceased, absent, or distracted parents, except for the character Katie in *Pieces of Us*, who came from a dysfunctional but intact family.

I have termed “absent parents” as those who are not deceased but not involved directly in the protagonists’ lives. “Distracted parents” are those that are physically present but not a source of guidance or support for the protagonist. Table 3 does not include a family dynamics column because none of the protagonists were described as having endured child abuse or domestic violence.

Table 3:  
*Victim Character Development*

	Name	Gender	SES	Race	Sexual Identity	Deceased or Absent Parents
<i>Bitter End</i>	Alex	F	Middle Class	White	Heterosexual	Deceased Mother; Absent Father
<i>Stay</i>	Clara	F	Middle Class	White	Heterosexual	Deceased Mother
<i>Dreamland</i>	Caitlin	F	Middle Class	White	Heterosexual	Distracted Parents
<i>Pieces of Us</i>	Katie	F	Middle Class	White	Heterosexual	
<i>But I Love Him</i>	Ann	F	Upper Middle Class	White	Heterosexual	Deceased Father; Distracted Mother
<i>Bad Boy</i>	Kate	F	Ward of the State	African American	Heterosexual	Absent Mother; Absent Father
<i>Rage: A Love Story</i>	Johanna	F	Unclear	White	Homosexual	Deceased Mother; Deceased Father
<i>Breaking Beautiful</i>	Allie	F	Middle Class	White	Heterosexual	Absent Father

### **Perpetrator Demographics**

Compared to the construction of victims of teen dating violence, there was more variation in the representation of perpetrators of dating violence. As Table 4 illustrates, with the exception of Percy in *Bad Boy*, all of the perpetrators are White, and three of them (Reeve in *Rage: A Love Story*, Connor in *But I Love Him*, and Alex in *Pieces of Us*) live in residences that are not single-family homes. Johanna, for example, describes how her girlfriend Reeve lived in a run down home in a blighted community.

Caitlin's boyfriend Rogerson, in Dessen's (2004) *Dreamland*, Allie's boyfriend Trip in Shaw Wolf's (2012) *Breaking Beautiful*, and Kate's boyfriend Percy in Jordan's (2012) *Bad Boy* were described as being wealthy compared to the protagonists' more middle-class or modest backgrounds. Rogerson's family, for instance, lived in a luxury housing development and Trip's family was described as being the most affluent in their small coastal community. With the exception of Reeve in Peter's *Rage: A Love Story*, all of the perpetrators were characterized as male and heterosexual.

Table 4:  
*Perpetrator Description*

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Type of Residence</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Sexual Identity</b>	<b>Family Description</b>	<b>Family Dynamics</b>
<i>Bitter End</i>	Cole	M	Middle Class	White	Heterosexual		Domestic Violence; Child Abuse
<i>Stay</i>	Christian	M	Middle Class	White	Heterosexual	Distracted Parents	
<i>Dreamland</i>	Rogerson	M	Upper Middle Class	White	Heterosexual		Domestic Violence; Child Abuse
<i>Pieces of Us</i>	Alex	M	Low Income	White	Heterosexual	Deceased Father Distracted Mother	Child Abuse
<i>But I Love Him</i>	Connor	M	Low Income	White	Heterosexual		Domestic Violence; Child Abuse
<i>Bad Boy</i>	Percy	M	Upper Middle Class	African American	Heterosexual	Absent Father	Child Abuse
<i>Rage: A Love Story</i>	Reeve	F	Low Income	White	Same Sex	Absent Father; Distracted Mother	Domestic Violence; Child Abuse
<i>Breaking Beautiful</i>	Trip	M	Upper Middle Class	White	Heterosexual		Domestic Violence; Child Abuse

In summary, victims of TDV were portrayed uniformly, with the majority of victims characterized as being White and female-identified, as not having endured or witnessed family violence, and as coming from predominantly middle-class backgrounds. The majority of the protagonists had endured the death of a parent or some other significant family tragedy or absence. Perpetrators were depicted as having more variability in their socioeconomic status; however, they also were predominantly White and were male. It is noteworthy that compared to constructions of victims, perpetrators were described as having been exposed to some type of family violence. This particular factor seems to be particularly illuminating for how TDV perpetration is portrayed in these books. These descriptive findings will provide a foundation for the CDA results in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Results**

### **The Enactment of the Social Discourses of Victimology, Pop-Psychology, and Postfeminism**

This section will summarize the various ways that discourses were employed and enacted to advance a particular view of teen dating violence and to interpret the causes, lived experiences, and consequences of TDV. This close analysis of the language in these novels exposes societal-level attitudes and norms about TDV. I will describe the identification of three discourses that underlie the depiction of TDV seen in this sample of Young Adult literature: victimology, Freudian pop-psychology, and postfeminism. I structure the ensuing three sections as follows: first I define and explain the larger social discourse, and then illustrate how these discourses are enacted as explanations and justifications for TDV.

#### **Entry Into Victimhood: Constructing Vulnerability Within a Discourse of Victimology**

There has been a social fascination with why people become victims of crime. Why do some people become victims? Is there a typical person who becomes a victim? Victimology emerged as a subfield of criminology, to investigate these types of questions. The field of victimology investigates victim characteristics and behaviors that purportedly predispose individuals to becoming victims of crime and prescribes particular interventions in response to victimization. The chronicling of victim characteristics is referred to as victim profiling (Turvey, 1999). In her book *Framing the Victim*, Berns (2004) traced the academic study of victimology to the early work of criminologists von Hentig and Mendelsohn. von Hentig (1948) asserted that significant portions of victims share at least partial responsibility for their victimization. von Hentig (1948) was interested in identifying “the contribution of the victim to the genesis of the crime” (p. 383). Similarly, Mendelsohn developed a scale to measure the degree of culpability

the victim had in initiating the assault, from “complete innocence” to “full responsibility,” and was concerned with empirically deducing the precipitating factors that contribute to individuals’ increased vulnerability (Berns, 2004).

Although the field of contemporary victimology has attempted to distance itself from solely focusing on victim culpability, legacies of this type of “victim-blaming” are still imbedded in the language, assumptions, and discourses of victimology (Sgarzi & McDewitt, 2003). Victim blaming can be defined as assigning blame to the behavior of victims and thus tacitly diverting attention away from the perpetrator. For instance, instead of focusing on why individuals perpetrate crime, the emphasis is still often placed on the tangible things that individuals can do to avoid victimhood such as not walking at night or locking their windows (Berns, 2004). Classically, within domestic violence discussions, victim blaming is manifested within the question: Why does she stay? Within the context of IPV, Fairweather (2012) asserted that “Much like animals, human predators select prey based on subtle signals given off by their potential victims, such as slow or nervous stride, lack of coordinated movement, or submissive posture and gaze” (p. 70). Examples of the integration of victimology discourses into popular culture can be seen in the overwhelming commercial success of self-help books such as de Becker’s (1997) *The Gift of Fear*. This book focuses on teaching readers to avoid experiences of violence by listening to their intuitions, which de Becker likens to a “brilliant internal guardian” (p. 7), and being aware of warning signs in their environments that individuals have been socialized to disregard. As De Becker (1997) states:

Every day, people engaged in the clever defiance of their own intuition become, in mid-thought, victims of violence and accidents. So when we wonder why we are victims so often, the answer is clear: It is because we are so good at it. A woman could offer no greater cooperation to her soon-to-be attacker than to spend her time telling herself, “But he seems like such a nice man.” Yet this is exactly

what many people do....The inner voice is wise, and part of my purpose in writing this book is to give people permission to listen to it. (p. 31)

This passage underscores how victims are assumed to play a significant role in contributing to their assaults, even when they are trying to avoid violence.

The field of victimology has been criticized for narrowly describing the experience of victims and for creating treatment modalities that are built on assumptions about “typical” victims. Ditton (1999) reported that the majority of victimology studies assume that victims are supposed to respond with fear, depression, passivity, and helplessness, rather than anger or hostility (Ditton, 1999). And van Dijk (2009) asserts that treatment modalities “in victimology seem to have reproduced and reinforced the stereotypical image of the victim as weak and passive rather than as angry and action-oriented” (p. 20).

In summary, victimology discourses have focused on the victims’ behaviors that precipitated their entry into the crime with the implicit assumption that there is a detectable reason that individuals are targeted. Although contemporary victimology research has distanced itself from the early, victim-blaming work in the field, the vestiges of these early conceptualizations about victims can be detected in treatment modalities that narrowly conceive of victims as inherently passive, weak, or injured. The following section will explore how this discourse of victimology was expressed in young adult literature about TDV.

#### *Perceived Vulnerability: The Enactment of a Discourse of Victimology*

In this sample of young adult novels, the protagonists are all described as being vulnerable to abuse. Consistent with victimology discourses, this vulnerability was used to interpret the reason why the protagonists entered into the abusive relationships. All of the protagonists were depicted as being susceptible to violent relationships due to: enduring a

significant family or personal tragedy; being disempowered “wallflowers,” and/or having low self-esteem. I will discuss the development of each of these personal deficits below.

*Entry into Victimization: Enduring a Family Tragedy*

The most commonly portrayed family tragedy endured by a protagonist was the death of a parent, found in four of the eight novels in the sample. The protagonist Clara in *Stay* described the death of her own mother and alludes to the preponderance of family deaths in popular culture:

Yes, this story has a dead mother. Mine. She had a sudden aneurysm when I was barely four. Died before she could even get to a hospital. Dead mothers have become a story cliché thanks to Disney movies and novel writers. All the dead mothers in books, you’d think it was a common occurrence. Even dad’s books have them. But mine was real. She’s no cliché and neither am I. (Caletti, 2011, p. 8)

For the lead characters in *Bitter End*, *But I Love Him*, and *Rage: A Love Story* their losses are compounded by rendering their remaining parent emotionally incapacitated. For instance, the protagonist Ann in *But I Love Him* described how, before her father died:

[My mother] was a good mom. She was everything I ever needed or wanted. And cruel reality stole her from me, and she became something else, and I became no one to her, because she can’t see through her own tears long enough to realize how much it hurts me. (Grace, 2012, p. 214)

Similarly, the character Johanna in *Rage: A Love Story* stated, “after Dad died, Mom sank into this deep depression. No one could lift it. Certainly not me. She just deteriorated, then she got sick and I got stuck” (Peters, 2012, p. 39).

For the four novels that did not involve the direct death of a parent, the majority of the protagonists endured other types of fractured families. Kate, the lead character in *Bad Boy* was involved in the foster care system, because she was “abandoned...before I could even walk” (Jordan, 2012, p. 28), and the protagonist’s father in *Breaking Beautiful* was absent on frequent

military deployments. In *Dreamland*, after the lead character Caitlin's older sister Cass ran away from home, her family was absorbed in processing her absence and trying to encourage her to return home. As Caitlin's internal monologue revealed: "So far everyone who had noticed something was different in me had been distracted enough by their own problems...my mother with Cass...that [she] accepted my easy explanations about falling or clumsiness and didn't look too closely..." (p. 175). In this passage it is made explicit that Caitlin's abuse was overshadowed by her sister's absence, and thus implying that her parent's distraction contributed to overlooking her changed demeanor and physical signs of abuse.

The only protagonist that came from an intact family was Katie in *Piece of Us*. While her parents divorced by the end of the novel due to her mother's shallowness and superficiality (i.e., forcing Julie, Katie's young sister to conceal her weight with slimming clothes and being overly-involved in Katie's cheerleading), Katie's vulnerability derived from being raped by her boyfriend and his best friend at a house party. This sexual assault was recorded on a cell phone and was released on the internet which resulted in Katie getting socially ostracized at school. The sexual assault and social shunning occurred in the school year prior to Katie's relationship with Alex which grew increasingly violent.

Consistent with victimology discourses, these family dynamics and personal tragedies were employed as tools to develop causal narratives for why the protagonists were susceptible to abuse. The protagonists' personal losses, for example, were utilized in some of the novels to construct metaphorical emotional voids, which were then explicitly occupied by the perpetrator. For instance the lead character Alex in *Bitter End* equated the loss of her mother to the development of this kind of emotional void. As she narrated:

I almost felt as though, just like Dad, I could break if I didn't fill in that piece. That there would always be a hole in my heart where Mom should have been, and if I didn't fill it in, I could end up empty and dull, like him. (Brown, 2012, p.14)

Similarly, Johanna in *Rage: A Love Story*, described how her girlfriend's "body wraps around me and fills the emptiness inside until I'm full to bursting at the gills" (Peters, 2009, p. 206), thereby filling the emotional void left by the death of her parents. The character Caitlin in *Dreamland* detailed how, "When Cass left it was like there was this gap to fill, but instead of spreading wide enough to do it I just fell right in, and I'm still falling" (p. 176). For the protagonists in *Bitter End*, *Dreamland*, *But I Love Him*, *Bad Boy*, and *Rage: A Love Story* these emotional voids were explicitly filled by their abusive partners.

#### *Victim Vulnerability-First Relationship/Wallflower*

The majority of lead characters in this sample of YA novels were represented as being passive "wallflowers" who waited for men to initiate the relationship. The notable exceptions were the lead characters in *Stay*, and *Pieces of Us* who had some experience in previous relationships, though all recounted that their current (abusive) boyfriend was their first "real" love. All of the protagonists who were explicitly characterized as wallflowers had been previously described as having lost their mothers or experienced a significant family tragedy. Being constructed as a wallflower illustrates a type of vulnerability, because it infers that the protagonist had limited experience in romantic relationships. As the protagonist Ann epitomized in *But I Love Him*: "Guys just don't ask me out like this. I'm not outgoing enough to be noticed. I've been on like, four dates in my whole life" (Grace, 2011, p. 229). In addition to reinforcing normative social scripts about gender roles in dating relationships, characterizing Ann as "not outgoing" and waiting for her romantic interests to pursue her illuminates how victims' inexperience in relationships predisposed them to victimization. Similarly, the protagonist Kate

in *Bad Boy* is portrayed as not being the recipient of male attention but rather a passive spectator of her friends' relationships. Kate described her jubilation at finally getting asked out on a date. She narrated: "I hung up the phone, grinning, my heart fluttering. So many times I had to overhear Marlon talking sweet nothings to Felicia [her best friend], while I had nothing. Now I had something, a real relationship. I was finally someone else's sweetheart" (Jordan, 2012, p. 74). This characterization of victims as disempowered wallflowers creates a rationale for young women's entry into abusive relationships due to their innocence and inexperience in relationships.

#### *Victim Vulnerability- Low Self-Worth/Self-Esteem*

The majority of the protagonists were also represented as inviting their abuse due to their pervasively low self-esteem. While most of the protagonists were framed as having insecurities related to such things as social standing or physical appearance (with the exception of Katie in *Pieces of Us*), this theme regarding having low self-esteem was most pronounced for the protagonists in *Bitter End*, *Bad Boy*, *Breaking Beautiful*, *But I Love Him*, *Dreamland*, and *Rage: A Love Story*. They become targets for exploitation by their abusive partners because they were unable to adequately protect themselves from another's predatory behavior. For instance, the character of Kate in *Bad Boy* is described as attributing her victimization to her fractured self-worth: "Obviously my self-esteem wasn't where it should have been; so I needed to raise it higher, out of reach from haters and abusers" (Jordan, 2012, p. 189), and in a conversation with the other young women in her group home she explains how "nobody is immune from abuse... [It depends] on where your self-esteem is on any given day, anybody can fall prey to abuse" (Jordan, 2012, p. 190). While the protagonist is attempting to clarify that abuse can happen to anyone, the subtext remains that the presence of self-esteem can be a protective factor against abuse. The protagonist Kate is also underscoring through her use of the phrase "any given day"

that self esteem isn't necessarily a fixed attribute, so even if you generally hold yourself in high regard, you still can attract abuse if you are having an off day or period. Furthermore, the use of the word prey is noteworthy because it personifies one of the premises of victimology discourse—that victims of crime are intentionally sought out for their perceived vulnerability by abusers.

Similarly, the character of Johanna in *Rage: A Love Story* attributed her abuse to her low self-esteem. In an internal monologue she described how “The longer I look [in the mirror after the assault], the more I morph. The image of me, Johanna Lynch, my external reflection. My injury merges with the way I see myself” (Peters, 2009, p. 153). In other words, Johanna is articulating how her now injured external self is reconciled with her low internal self-perception, and consequently this language functions metaphorically to knit together the causal narrative that women are in abusive relationships because of inner weaknesses. These emotional limitations render them vulnerable to exploitation. This framing of abuse victims as being differentially vulnerable due to their life circumstances, personal deficits, and character flaws reframes the feminist narrative that anyone can be a victim of abuse.

This section also illustrates the delicate balance between identifying risk factors and assigning blame for one's assault if they possess such qualities or experiences. While certainly victims of TDV may share similar individual-level characteristics such as being inexperienced in relationships, these framings also resonate with larger societal stereotypes that victims of TDV have low self-esteem. Furthermore, it is potentially problematic that the authors used the victim's vulnerabilities as explanatory mechanisms for why they entered (and continued to stay) in abusive relationships. In this sense, TDV is framed as the product of young women's personal

challenges and inadequacies rather than of a society that is in desperate need of more effective systemwide responses to TDV.

*Victim Vulnerability—Portrayals of Healing*

In addition to contextualizing the protagonists' entry into abusive relationships, victimology discourses are detectable in the prescription of defined therapeutic services in response to victimization.<sup>2</sup> After the resolution of the abusive relationships the majority of the protagonists were portrayed as getting some kind of therapeutic support, indicating they were emotionally frail and depleted by their relationships and in need of individual counseling. The protagonists in *Breaking Beautiful*, *Pieces of Us*, and *Dreamland* had lengthy stays in private residential treatment facilities, and the lead characters in *Rage: A Love Story* and *Bitter End* participated in individual therapy. The only characters who did not utilize therapeutic services was Kate, the African American foster youth, in *Bad Boy*, and Clara in Caletti's *Stay*. The following passage elucidates how therapy facilitated the protagonist in *Dreamland's* process of meaning making about why she entered into an abusive relationship:

Since our first session, Dr. Marshall had been trying to convince me that things weren't my fault. That Cass leaving had led me scrambling to fill her place for my parents, which was impossible because I was me, not her, so instead I tried to be everything she wasn't. (Dessen, 2004, p. 237)

In *Rage: A Love Story* the protagonist recounted how the conversations of her therapy sessions consisted of "You know. Abandonment issues. Self-worth stuff, blah blah" (Peters, 2009, p. 287).

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<sup>2</sup> These findings can also be representative of pop-psychology discourses (to be described in detail in the following section), because they emphasize that victims of abuse must have some kind of mental illness having gone through their ordeal with their abusive partners. I ultimately decided to cluster this finding in the victimology section, because some of the early work around victim's PTSD responses (and subsequent treatment modalities) came out of the field of victimology (van Dijk, 2009).

This passage demonstrates how the one of the purposes of therapy was to repair whatever pre-existing deficits precipitated the protagonists initial entry into the protagonist's abusive relationship.

Additionally, therapy was framed as providing a means of helping the majority of the protagonist heal from her abusive relationships. For example, the protagonist Johanna in *Rage: A Love Story* started therapy all she did was cry her way through the initial sessions, and at the end of *Bitter End* the lead character Alex described how, "There were whole days when I couldn't leave my bed, not because of the bruises and scars but because getting up and facing the world for another day felt too frightening and too pointless..." (p. 348). It was only through attending therapy, talking to others about Cole's abuse and giving herself time to heal that Alex was able to move on from her abusive relationship.

One of the primary exceptions was Clara in *Stay* who not only did not receive therapy but voiced considerable anger at her ex-boyfriend Christian. As she states, "Fury seems to roll out from the very center of my chest. I hated Christian that. Hated him. For what he had done to my father and me, for what he had done, even, to us. (Caletti, 2012, p. 253). This response is especially noteworthy, because it provides a counter narrative to victimology discourse which predominantly prescribes a narrow set of behaviors available to redeem women.

In conclusion, the predominant portrayal of victims of TDV in YA literature as suffering from low self-regard, as passive wallflowers, and as emotionally injured due to experiencing a significant family tragedy employs individual-level pre-existing deficits as causal mechanisms to explain these protagonists' entry into abusive relationships. Predominantly representing victims as emotionally deficient and in need of therapy underscores the ways in which victimology discourses about who becomes a victim and how a victim should act.

### **“Tell Me About Your Parents:” The Marriage of Pop-Psychology and TDV Perpetration**

In this section I will describe how the influential, albeit controversial, work of Sigmund Freud and general psychological theories have been utilized to create mainstream pop-psychological explanations of men’s perpetration of abuse. I then will discuss how both general pop-psychological and Freudian pop-psychological discourses have been employed in young adult literature to contextualize why abusers perpetuate abuse in dating relationships.

#### *Tell Me About Your Parents: A Discourse of Freudian Pop-Psychology*

“The ways we behave, our values, our thought associations, the things we say or desist from saying, the significances we impute to the speech and actions of others, our sense of what is funny and even what is tragic—all have been heavily influenced by this man Freud. (Perlman, 1957, p. 192)

The work of Sigmund Freud has had an enormous effect on society’s view of everyday human functioning. Prior to the work of Freud, individuals’ behaviors were seen as being the product of congenital malformations, individual immorality, “feble-mindedness,” or “morally bankrupt” social environments (Trattner, 1999). Freud was influential in locating the “drama of peoples insides” (Kellogg, as cited in Ehrenreich, p.83) in individual’s unconscious desires and proclivities; internal factors influencing interpersonal communication between individuals; and most significantly in their early childhood experiences particularly in the experience of mothering (Perlman, 1957). Psychodynamic theory developed from Freud’s early work into one of the most influential theories of human behavior. In particular, it identifies early life experiences in the family as being “the seedbed of human affliction and the primary threat to selfhood” (Justman, 2005, p. 14). Similarly, Freud underscored, “that good family life is the cradle of the child’s emotional as well as physical well being” (Perlman, 1957, p.199). In short,

psychodynamic theory located the family as the source of individuals' behaviors, dysfunctions and pathologies, including perpetration of abuse.

Although elements of Freud's work have been contested, refuted, and elaborated, psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theories have undoubtedly had a tremendous influence on social discourses that explain why abuse occurs (Ginsburg, 1940; Perlman, 1957). Freudian psychodynamic discourse has become so pervasive in people's understanding of human behavior as to be "commonplace" (Linde, 1993). Freudian concepts such as repression, the unconscious "Freudian slip," defense mechanisms, projection, and transference have been infiltrated the vernacular of the general public. As Linde (1993) states: "Freud's ideas have been developed into a popular coherence system that is so successful and ubiquitous as to be almost unnoticeable" (p. 185).

Linde's description of the commonplace understandings of Freudian theory also illustrates how more complex psychological theory gets reduced to "pop-psychology." Pop-psychology can be understood as the popularized notions of mental health and well-being that have been gleaned from a superficial awareness of the psychological literature and have become engrained in mainstream understandings of human behavior (Justman, 2005). Linde underscores that this process of translation from the psychological literature to the general public's consciousness often results in diluting the complexity of these theories and presenting them in overly simplified and decontextualized ways (Linde, 1993). Justman (2005) describes pop-psychology as "a steady soaking rain that reaches down to the roots of our common life. It not only works itself into general speech... but alters the use of those words" (p. 5). For instance, the phrase "Freudian slip" has been defined in the *Urban Dictionary* as "a slip of the tongue in which a word that the speaker was subconsciously thinking about is substituted for the one that

he or she meant to say” (Urban Dictionary, 2015). Its presence in the urban dictionary, an online compendium of vernacular “street” English, represents how imbedded Freud’s theories have become in everyday parlance.

In addition to Freudian accounts of human behavior, psychological theories such as Bandura’s social learning theory and personality theories of psychological maladjustment are employed to help explain men’s violence (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2011). Social learning theory is predicated on the idea that new behaviors are adopted by observation and modeling. Social cognitive theory explains how human learning is acquired vicariously through direct experience, observational learning, and modeling of new behaviors and positive reinforcement for the usage of such behaviors (Anderegg, Dale, & Fox, 2014; Bandura, 1977). Personality theories, which were prominent in the 1970s, underscore that abusive behaviors are the product of latent mental health issues such as borderline personality disorders, antisocial personality disorder, or unresolved attachment issues (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2011). Dutton (2006), for example, asserts that therapeutic interventions that address abusers’ underlying “attachment-based personality disorders” (p. xi) are desired treatment modalities.

A body of theoretical literature that largely builds off of social learning theory correlates men’s childhood exposure to family violence with the perpetuation of IPV in adulthood (Basile & Black, 2011; Mbilinyi et al., 2012), and some evidence suggests that perpetration of abuse can also co-occur with mental health issues such as personality disorders (Riggs, Caulfield, & Street, 2000) and depression (Basile & Black, 2011). However, when these psychological explanations are translated into a larger social discourse, they are truncated and divorced from their broader ecological context (Linde, 1993). Therefore, according to pop-psychology, IPV perpetrators are cast as “sick” and the product of unfortunate early life experiences, rather than as accountable for

their choices to use abusive and coercive behaviors against their intimate partners (Tang, Wong, & Cheung, 2002).

For the remainder of this paper, I will use the term Freudian pop-psychology when referring to the work of Freud and simply pop-psychology referring to other mental health-based psychological theories of violence. I am not using the term pop-psychology to discredit the validity of the research base supporting this work, but rather to make clear that I'm referring to the repurposing of psychological theories as mainstream understandings of aberrant behavior, often in abbreviated and narrow ways.

*"Tell Me About Your Parents:" Enactment of Pop-Psychology Discourses*

In this sample of YA novels, Freudian pop-psychology discourses were most clearly seen in the characterization of perpetrators as emotionally wounded, having mental health issues, or being exposed to family violence in childhood. Thus, the root of men's violence originates from the modeling of abusive behaviors in their homes and their own personal pathology. In the following section, I will discuss the three primary depictions of perpetrator personal issues that were framed as contributing to TDV and explain how these representations recapitulate pop-psychology discourses, including Freudian psychology and social learning theory.

*Wounded Perpetrators*

Across this sample of YA novels, all of the perpetrators were depicted as being in some way emotionally wounded. In *Pieces of Us*, for example, Katie's boyfriend's pain and anger are depicted as originating from his difficult childhood which included his father's suicide, enduring physical abuse by his mother's pimps and boyfriends, and experiencing maternal neglect. When Katie asked him "Penny for your thoughts?" he responded: "No, baby, you don't want these thoughts" (Gelbwasser, 2012, p. 152), illustrating that his thoughts were too dark to want to

share with her, whom he regarded as innocent and pristine. Similarly, the protagonist, Clara's boyfriend, is also portrayed as having significant emotional challenges. As their relationship progressed, for example, Clara became more aware of his "bottomless, clutching need" (p. 108), and she described how through their growing intimacy she "...pried the lid off of the dark places of another person, [she] had seen inside. Down deep. You don't want to look at what's rotting there" (p. 108). This imagery of something rotting and festering constructs Christian as deeply wounded and damaged. Similarly, Johanna's girlfriend Reeve, in *Rage: A Love Story*, is characterized as troubled, utilizing self-harm behaviors, prone to violent outbursts, and coming from a home where she endured physical and sexual abuse. As Johanna described:

The way she lives. The violence, the brutality in her life. How long has she been taking it? Forever? Her father, her mother, this guy. How many a\*\*holes have come and gone in her life? I knew people were terrorized. Child abuse. Spousal abuse. I've never actually known anyone who lived it. (Peters, 2009, p. 128)

This framing of perpetrators as being emotionally wounded draws on and reinforces individual-level Freudian and social learning based pop-psychological discourses that attribute perpetrator pathology to early childhood trauma. The only setting that is portrayed as being a causal social determinant of TDV perpetration, and victimization for that matter, is dysfunction in the family unit.

#### *Family History of Violence*

In an attempt to provide a rationale for perpetrators' abusive behaviors and to partially explain the sources of their emotional wounds, the majority of authors located perpetrators in abusive homes with the presence of domestic violence and child abuse. The only novel in which family violence was not present in the life of the perpetrator was *Stay*. Within these novels, the

protagonist can be seen as employing Freudian pop-psychological discourse, which function to partially explain and humanize their abusive partners. For instance, the following passage from *Dreamland* illustrates how the protagonist Caitlin felt empathy for her abusive partner because of his violent childhood:

There were some times—when things got bad—that I saw something flash across Rogerson’s face, like he couldn’t believe what he’d done. Like he’d just woken up and found himself standing over me, fist still clenched, looking down in disbelief at the place on my shoulder/arm/stomach/back/leg where he’s just hit me. I wondered if he was thinking of his father, and the marks he’s left behind. And even as I felt the spot with my fingers, knowing already what the bruise would look like, I felt sorry for him, like for that one second he was as scared as I was. (Dessen, 2004, p. 189)

Incidents in *Rage: A Love Story, But I Love Him*, and *Breaking Beautiful* illustrate how Freudian influenced pop-psychology discourses are utilized to connect perpetuating abuse with childhood experiences of abuse. The following two excerpts are illustrative: “I ring the doorbell and Anthony answers [Reeve’s step father]. ‘Is Reeve here?’ I say. He ogles me. ‘Who nailed you, bitch?’ [after seeing Johanna’s black eye] ‘You did, asshole.’ It might as well have been your fist” (Peters, 2009, p. 156). Here the protagonist clearly believes that the stepfather’s abuse has caused Reeve to physically assault her. Likewise, in *But I Love Him*, Ann stated “I know it’s not the whole Connor. He’s still ruled by things his dad has done, by the past he has lived, by his anger” (Grace, 2011, p. 31). At a later point the protagonist in *But I Love Him* concluded that her boyfriend “is a product of his childhood” (Grace, 2011, p. 64). Further, in *Breaking Beautiful* the protagonist connected her boyfriend’s abusive behaviors and mercurial moods to his mistreatment at home. As she described:

I recognized [Trip’s father’s voice] from the times I cowered in Trip’s truck while the walls of his house shook with one of Mr. Phillip’s episodes. Trip hated going to his house. Hated it. I hated it, too, because after a fight with his dad I could

never predict whether Trip would be needy or just angry. (Shaw Wolf, 2012, p. 157)

These direct statements back to the perpetrators' unhealthy childhoods are provided to help the reader connect these early childhood experiences with their current use of abusive behaviors.

While only present in two novels, *But I Love Him* and *Dreamland*, the authors did attempt to clarify that the portrayals of the perpetrators as being mentally ill, emotionally wounded, and coming from an abusive home were intended to contextualize and explain these behaviors, not excuse them. For example at the end of *But I Love Him*, the protagonist Ann states, "He did this to me. He chose to do it. Maybe he's broken and maybe he needed an outlet, but he still had a *choice*. He knew when he threw his fist what he was doing" (italics added) (p. 237). The word choice is important because it contests the underlying assumption in these books that abuse was beyond a perpetrator's control. Similarly, the character Caitlin said, "It should have been easy to finally lift the heaviest of weights and place [blame] squarely where it belongs, on Rogerson. But this, even on the good days, was hard" (p. 233). For Caitlin, it was difficult to assign blame to her boyfriend Rogerson, because of his fractured family and the role she perceived she played in the outcome of their relationship. These more nuanced discussions of perpetrator's behaviors are important, but are only briefly mentioned at the end of the novels. Furthermore, they were present only in a minority of reviewed novels, and thus not representative of how perpetration is framed across this genre of YA fiction.

In conclusion, the lack of references to other potential casual factors in the perpetrators' social environments such as witnessing community violence or their friend's attitudes about the acceptability of TDV, reflects the ways drawing on pop-psychology ideas employed in popular culture narrows and dilutes the complexity of multifaceted human behaviors. Reducing abusive

partner's behaviors down to their childhood experiences overlooks the reality that many individuals who witness family violence never choose to use abusive behaviors in their romantic relationships (Mbilinyi et al., 2012). Therefore, although exposure to IPV in childhood certainly can be predictive of later perpetration in adolescence and adulthood, such adversity can also nurture resiliency and a personal commitment to nonviolence.

### *Mental Health Issues*

Lastly, some of the perpetrators were also characterized as being mentally ill or in more colloquial terms “crazy.” The only antagonist who was not described as mentally ill was Alex in *Pieces of Us*. The other perpetrators' mental instability was exemplified by their self-harm behaviors or suicidal ideation and illustrates how pop-psychological discourses influenced by social learning theory were employed to rationalize why these young men could display seemingly senseless behavior. Although the perpetrator in *Stay* did not experience family violence, his deep emotional wounds were framed as being related to his mental instability. For instance, he was depicted “scratching his skin with his nails” (Caletti, 2011, p. 229) and leaving a rope in plain sight in his room as evidence of his suicidal ideation. Clara was portrayed throughout the arc of the narrative as gradually coming to terms with her boyfriend's emotional instability. She states, “I knew something I didn't know before. Knew, but didn't want to know. It was possible that Christian was crazy” (Caletti, 2011, p. 142). Rather than being labeled an abuser, Christian is framed as suffering from “an obsession, and [Clara] was the object of it” (Caletti, 2011, p. 230). Similarly, the character Ann in *But I Love Him* also confronts her boyfriend's suicidal ideation and depression. He tells her, “I'm just so depressed. I want to end it all. My life” (p. 166) by jumping off a bridge. This behavior could be interpreted as a form of emotional manipulation, yet the author emphasizes the mental health concern, not its effects on

the relationship. Behaviors associated with mental illness are used as commonsense explanations for the perpetrators' behaviors.

Similarly, Kate, the protagonist in *Bad Boy*, went through an internal process of realizing her boyfriend Percy was mentally ill. She states, "This guy was absolutely nuts. Not nutty over me, just plain old nuts" (p. 179). The proliferation of descriptions of perpetrators of TDV as mentally ill reveals and perpetuates the larger individual-level pop-psychological discourse that perpetrators must be crazy to commit such violence against their romantic partners. Since mental illness is not generally regarded as being within someone's control (hence its usage as a defense in criminal investigations), this characterization of perpetrators as "sick" provides a rationale for explaining and reducing their accountability for their actions. In effect, these portrayals teach readers that perpetrators couldn't help themselves, and they should be seen sympathetically.

Pop-psychological framings of IPV that focus on perpetrators' early childhood experiences and purported mental illness direct attention to individuals and ignore larger questions of social structures that create risks for perpetration and victimization. Not only do these commonsense explanations fail to take into account the reality that many individuals who endure family violence or have mental illness never perpetuate violence, they also reduce this behavior to individual-level pathology that is devoid of a potentially clarifying social context.

### **"We Did It:" A Discourse of Postfeminism**

*"There is no such thing as society only individuals."  
(Margaret Thatcher, as cited in Steger & Roy, p. 1)*

In this section I will start with defining and describing the emergence of the companion discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism. Due to their entanglement, for the remainder of this paper I will use the singular term postfeminism to capture the shared dimensions of both

concepts. In this section, after providing a brief explanation of the social and cultural phenomenon of postfeminism, I will describe how these discourses appear in YA novels to support the idea that protagonists willingly consented to being in their abusive relationships. I then will discuss how postfeminist discourses are employed to represent the ineffectiveness of the state in promoting women's safety, to position men other than the perpetrator as abuse victims' "ideal saviors," and to describe women's independent processes of extricating themselves from their abusive relationships.

## 2. *"We Did It:" The Enactment of Postfeminist Identities*

The contemporary historical moment is grounded in the intermingling of postfeminism and neoliberalism in what McRobbie (2009) referred to as the "double entanglement" of neoliberalism and postfeminism. Rather than a backlash to feminism or a philosophical shift away from second-wave feminism, feminist media scholars such as Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill have asserted that popular culture is serving to dismantle feminism "not in favor of re-traditionalization, [where] women are being pushed back into the home, but instead the process which says feminism is no longer needed, it is now common sense, and as such it is something young women can do without" (McRobbie, 2009, p. 8). Feminism is positioned within the postfeminist discourse as having not accurately capturing women's true yearnings and desires, and in a sense acts as a "psychic policewoman" (Gill, 2007, p. 228) that prevents women from enjoying the full scope of their feminine desires such as marriage, male protection, and motherhood. Gill (2007) outlines the elements of a postfeminist "sensibility" which include: an emphasis on stringent self-surveillance and discipline which is measured by one's external physical self; a focus upon individual choice and empowerment; a sense of entitlement to reach future goals, a new culture of sexiness where women are portrayed as autonomous and always

willing sexual objects; and gender differences that are reemphasized with women granted the freedom to revel in their femininity which was rendered invisible or “not politically correct” by second-wave feminism.

With postfeminism’s insistence that women’s equality has been achieved and thus is anachronistic, women are now positioned as individual entities with limitless choices and options in the free market (Gill, 2007). This discourse dovetails with tenets of neoliberalism where citizens are encouraged “to see themselves as individualized and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well being” (Larner, 2000, p. 11) free from the constraints of the state. As a dominant political rationality (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1993; Harvey, 2005), neoliberalism has become “the commonsense way many of us interpret the world” (Harvey, 2005, p. 3).

Neoliberalism has renegotiated the relationship between individuals and the state, wherein individuals, not society or the state, are personally responsible for their well-being and economic success (Clarke, 2007). Within the postfeminist neoliberal world, women are “self-making, resilient, and flexible” subjects whose “failures are attributed to poor choices, [and] insufficient effort” (Harris, 2004, p. 9).

Young women, in particular, are positioned as ideal postfeminist subjects, since the neoliberal marketplace is dependent on the (lower wage) labor and mass-consumerism of women (Gill, 2007; Harris, 2004). Harris (2004), in her groundbreaking book *Future Girl: Young Women in the Twenty-First Century*, describes the social construction of the “Can-Do-Girl” who is seen as having “the world at their feet [and] are identifiable by their commitment to exceptional careers and career planning, their belief in their capacity to invent themselves and succeed, and their display of a consumer lifestyle” (p. 14). “Can-Do-Girls” are cast as the quintessential postfeminist heroines. They are expected to take control of their careers; maintain

physical and emotional perfection; have a strong sense of themselves and where they are going; but also revel in their femininity. In popular culture, fictional movie characters such as Elle Woods in *Legally Blonde* and Rory Gilmore on the WB's television program *The Gilmore Girls*, are both portrayed as academically capable, career-minded and sexually liberated, but also enjoying stereotypically feminine vocations such as shopping, physical maintenance (i.e., pedicures, botox, and exercising), and daydreaming about (presumably heterosexual) marriage. Within a postfeminist discourse there is the assumption that all young women can achieve a "perfect" successful life— regardless of structural or systemic disadvantages (Harris, 2004). For example, within a postfeminist rhetoric of the "Can-Do-Girl" there is an "implicit ideal of the good future" (Harris, 2004, p. 26) if young women make good choices and avoid high-risk behaviors.

Juxtaposed against "Can-Do-Girls" are "At-Risk Girls" who due to their own poor choices and lack of motivation have become failed postfeminist subjects who engage in high-risk behaviors that potentially derail their future successes. Postfeminism, in this sense, obfuscates structural disadvantages in favor of attributing failure to personal deficits. Furthermore, postfeminist discourses operate as tools to control and oppress young women by promoting the ideology that even "small bad decisions can become major life-mistakes" (Harris, 2004, p. 27). Thus the fear of becoming an "At-Risk-Girl" and ultimately a failed postfeminist subject is a constant threat leveraged to control the behavior of young women. Harris (2004) describes how young women who show signs of potentially going down a negative path are expected to be "relentlessly managed back into a successful track" (Harris, 2004, p. 32). Interventions or strategies for redirecting young women towards their expected trajectory include: therapy, tutoring, self-help books, "fat camps," and fashion magazines with endless personality quizzes to

help young women know (and ultimately improve upon) their “true” selves. In short, a postfeminist discourse is replete with references to uninhibited “girl power” where young women have unlimited opportunities and agency.

*“We Did It”: A Discourse of Postfeminism*

In the following section I will describe the various ways that a postfeminist discourse served to explain the causes, lived experiences, and aftermath of TDV in the lives of the protagonists in YA literature. I will start with a description of the construction of heterogeneous postfeminist protagonists whose poor decision-making skills played a role in the continuation of their abusive relationships. I will then discuss how the lived experience of IPV is refracted through the lens of postfeminism, to reinterpret the impact of TDV. Then I will explore how notions of community responsibility to respond to IPV are supplanted by the postfeminist expectation that young women need to rely on men and/or ultimately themselves to ensure their own safety from their dating partner’s violence.

*Constructing Postfeminist Protagonists*

As was seen in Table 3 in the previous chapter, with the exception of Kate in *Bad Boy*, an African American youth involved in the child welfare system, all of the protagonists were portrayed as middle class and White<sup>3</sup>. Despite having significant personal weaknesses that facilitated their entry into abusive relationships, all of the protagonists were framed as embodying at least some of the characteristics of postfeminist “Can Do-Girls.” For instance, all of the protagonists aspired to attend college, participated in extracurricular activities (two of

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<sup>3</sup> I included the character of Johanna in *Rage: A Love Story* in this overarching characterization because she lived in a single-family home and was under the guardianship of her sister who was a MSW-level social worker, and Johanna did not describe being deprived of her basic needs (i.e., food, shelter, clothing).

them were popular cheerleaders), some held low-wage afterschool jobs, and some of them dreamed about marriage (an example of reclaiming “true female desires” regarded politically incorrect by second-wave feminists). For example, Alex, the protagonist in *Bitter End* fantasized that her abusive partner would propose. She stated: “Maybe he would officially propose and we would go ahead and get married [in Colorado]. We’d be eighteen. A mountaintop wedding. Beautiful” (Brown, 2012, p. 310).

Despite the emphasis on personal deficits such as a lack of self esteem previously described, the protagonists in this sample of YA novels were still portrayed as autonomous postfeminist subjects whose individual choices, not structural inequalities, contributed to the outcomes of their relationships. For instance, in *Bad Boy*, the protagonist’s caseworker chastised her for walking into her relationship with [her] eyes closed. . . . This isn’t about luck, it’s about poor choices” (pp. 173-174). The use of the language of personal choice is significant because it so closely echoes the postfeminist rhetoric of personal responsibility. While Kate’s caseworker could have made reference to how her identity as a foster youth created structural impediments that contributed to some of her personal hardships, this critical analysis was not present in this novel. Similar to the character of Kate, Katie, the protagonist in *Pieces of Us*, attributes her abuse in her relationships to her tendency to make bad choices in romantic partners. For example, she claimed that her “radar ha[d] obviously been defective” (p. 119).

This element of personal choice inherent to postfeminist discourse is further illustrated in Clara’s, the protagonist in *Stay*, description of her self-perceived role in her abusive relationship. As she described:

Christian and I had also been in our own book together, in a sea of his feelings, and *I* had stepped in, and *I* had willingly given myself up to the waves that carried me out. *I* had let him take me up and keep me in the ways he’d wanted. *I* had let this happen (italics added). (Caletti, 2011, p. 297)

The repeated use of I statements in this passage underscores how a postfeminist discourse of choice is being leveraged to explain the agency victims have in their romantic relationships.

Postfeminist discourses are further enacted in how the protagonist Ann in *But I Love Him* and Kate in *Bad Boy* framed their roles in their relationships. Ann described her yearlong relationship with Connor as a “year of choices” (p. 112) where she silenced her own needs in favor of her boyfriend’s. Kate is also portrayed as taking personal responsibility for the outcome of her relationship. She, for example, emphatically asserts: “I got myself into [this relationship]. Now I had to get myself out” (Jordan, 2012, p. 163). Additionally, after spending time in the hospital after an episode of serious physical abuse, she described how she “didn’t hang with anybody right away. I needed some time to myself, time to figure out why I kept getting involved with the wrong people” (p. 189). Just like the previously described representation of Clara in *Stay*, Kate is framed as having some kind of agency in the outcome of the relationship, and had she made better decisions, she could have avoided being involved with an abusive partner.

Constructing the protagonists as agentic and independent, underscores the high regard postfeminism holds for the capacity of young women to independently control their future destinies and to avoid high-risk behaviors. While framing victims as having some control over the outcomes of their relationships may seem to be celebrating victim resiliency and strength, however these are not narratives of personal empowerment. These renderings of TDV victims should be construed as myopic cultural narratives which celebrate a certain kind of victim; the one who got away due to her own inner strength. This is not to say that victims are passive and lack agency, but rather underscores the necessity of having a web of interconnected interventions

and supports, across all ecological systems levels, to support the multifaceted needs of TDV victims.

*Impact of Abuse: Blighting Postfeminist Identities*

Postfeminist discourses were further reinforced in the representations of the impact of abuse on the protagonists. The lived experience of TDV is portrayed as having a significant effect on the protagonists' well-being, including their academic standing, participation in extra-curricular activities, physical appearance, and their overall self-concept. While all of the protagonists had explicit pre-existing vulnerabilities, they still maintained some modicum of academic success prior to meeting their abusive partners. The protagonist Ann in *But I Love Him* was characterized as “not an overachiever. Just an achiever. Good grades, track, the usual” (Grace, 2012, p. 178). Similarly, the character Caitlin in *Dreamland* was on “the B honor roll” (Dessen, 2004, p. 15) but “paled in comparison” (Dessen, 2004, p. 15) to her older sister who was accepted to an Ivy League college. So while the protagonists were not exemplary examples of postfeminist “Can-Do-Girls” they certainly were not constructed as “At-Risk-Girls,” until they got involved with their abusive partners. In the following section I will describe how being in an abusive relationship was framed as an assault on three central elements of their postfeminist identities: their physical identities, their burgeoning postfeminist selves, and their current self-concepts.

*Blighting Postfeminist Identities: Physical Self*

In the majority of the novels, the protagonists' physical bodies and external appearances were positioned as additional sites for exploitation by their abusive partners. All of the protagonists, except for Clara in *Stay*, were described, at some point, as being physically bruised and bloodied. Alex in *Bitter End*, for instance, was characterized as “one giant scrape... all raw

skin (Brown, 2012, p. 285). However, in addition to enduring physical abuse, the transformation of the protagonist's physical self is also representative of her personal abandonment of her ability to maintain her postfeminist body.

The character Katie in *Pieces of Us* endured a complete physical transformation of her physical self by the resolution of the novel. In the beginning of the novel, she is portrayed as being an ideal "Can-Do-Girl," exemplified by her role as a popular cheerleader; however, after enduring sexual and physical violence she begins "slowly disappearing away. Not speaking, clothes using her body as merely a hanger" (Gelbwasser, 2012, p. 251). By the end of the book, she is likened to "an anorexic in recovery... bony and bruised. Like a pile of broken bones" (Gelbwasser, 2012, pp. 298-299). Similarly, the character Caitlin in *Dreamland* also "lets her appearance go," only wearing black clothing and adopting characteristics associated with "At-Risk-Girls." As the following passage exemplifies:

As I looked at my reflection in the chrome of the bumper in front of me. I saw myself as I was now: skinny, long baggy shirt pulled tight over my wrists, jeans, and sunglasses. Fingers smelly from smoking, the topography of bruises across my skin and bones like a road map of all that had happened, every mile of the journey. (Dessen, 2004, p. 191)

When she is released from an inpatient treatment center to recover from her abusive relationship and associated substance abuse issue, she is portrayed as regaining her previous physical identity.

As the following passage exemplifies,

I look so different from the day I'd arrived. I'd gained weight, my hair was longer, my skin clear. I was wearing a red, short-sleeved T-shirt and my arms were bare and tan... clean and unbruised, like any other girl's. (Dessen, 2004, p. 247)

These assaults on the protagonist's physical appearance are illustrative of how the experience of TDV diminishes the majority of protagonists' physical appearances. Rigid maintenance of one's

external body is an expectation of postfeminist subjects and the inability to do so represents an abject personal failure, so this becomes another feature of not succeeding as physically perfect “Can-Do-Girls”. While the decline of TDV victims’ personal appearances is not an uncommon experience, what is potentially troublesome is the way the author’s used these descriptions to construct victim’s of TDV as being “at-risk” and thus failed postfeminist subjects.

*Loss of Future Postfeminist Identities*

As a result of being in abusive relationships, all of the protagonists except for Kate in *Bad Boy* were depicted as struggling to fulfill all of the responsibilities of proactive postfeminist “Can-Do-Girls.” Due to the strain of their abusive relationships, they had difficulty satisfying the multiple demands of school, work, and their afterschool jobs—and thus descended into at least a temporary status as “At-Risk Girls.” As the following passages from *But I Love Him* and *Stay* exemplify:

I forgot all the application deadlines, and I haven’t told him yet. No, that’s a lie. I didn’t forget, per se. I was just too wrapped up in him to think about going away. Why bother applying when I couldn’t even stand the thought of leaving him behind? I just figured I’d go to community college for a couple of years, then he could go with me when I moved to the university and we’d get an apartment instead of living in a dorm. These days, even community college seems like too much. I don’t want to think about it. So I don’t. Think about it, that is. I just put it out of my mind. I’d rather focus on what’s in front of me: an intense, beautiful love. The thing I want more than anything. More than college. (Grace, 2011, pp. 115-116)

Señora Kingslet asked me to stay after class, tried to talk to me about what was wrong. My grades in her class were slipping. I was so tired. Acceptance letters were coming in the mail, colleges at home and away, but I missed the deadlines for mailing anything back. The future was impossible to think about while trying, trying to swim in the present and the past. (Caletti, 2012, p. 230)

In addition to facing challenges at school, the character Ann in *But I Love Him* was asked to relinquish her position as co-captain of the track team for missing too many practices, and both protagonists in *Pieces of Us* and *Dreamland* were also dismissed from their respective cheerleading teams. Even Caitlin, the lead character in *Dreamland*, described how cheerleading provided “some semblance of a normal life. But now, I was just a girl with a boyfriend who beat her [and] who smoked too much” (Dessen, 2004, 180). This passage illustrates how cheerleading was her last tie to her previous postfeminist identity, and now she represents a prototypical “At-Risk-Girl” engaging in behaviors socially regarded as emblematic of troubled or “at-risk” teens (i.e., smoking marijuana and cigarettes, skipping classes, and lying to her parents). Similarly, Johanna, the protagonist in *Rage: A Love Story*, was terminated from her job at a local department store after she took the blame for her girlfriend’s shoplifting of store merchandise.

In summary, the protagonists, as a result of the strain of being in abusive relationships, struggled to manage their current responsibilities, thus stunting their present and future postfeminist identities. This sentiment is captured by the protagonist Allie in *Breaking Beautiful*: “I’ve been living in survival mode for so long that anything in the future feels vague and far away” (Shaw Wolf’s, 2012, p. 166).

### *Losing Sense of Self*

In addition to blunting the protagonists’ future plans and subsequent postfeminist identities, TDV was also depicted as impacting the majority of victims’ self-concepts. Self-concept can be understood as one’s personal self-assessment or mental image of their strengths and capacities. As a result of being in abusive relationships the protagonists were portrayed as “robots” (Dessen, 2004, p. 165); “zombies” (Grace, 2012, p. 75); having developed a “lost, empty look” (Brown, 2012, p. 322); and having lost their “courage” (Jordon, 2012, p. 165).

Using the metaphor of pieces of glass in a mosaic, the character Ann described how “Each piece of glass is another piece of myself I gave to him. It’s too bad I didn’t keep any pieces for myself” (Grace, 2012, p. 9). Thus by the end of the relationship, Ann is portrayed as completely emotionally empty, because she willingly “gave” every piece of herself. The use of the word “gave” in the previous passage can be construed as her giving consent to being stripped of her identity due to her choosing to be in the relationship. This notion of consent is another artifact of postfeminist discourse, where abuse is something that individuals agree to participate in.

Similarly, when the character Johanna in *Rage: A Love Story* lost her volunteer job due to the misbehavior by her girlfriend, she described how “a candle inside me extinguishes” (p. 267). The candle is a metaphor for her depleted identity or sense of self. Lastly, the character Clara recalled how, “All of me felt separate from me. He was right. I was lost. I’d gotten separated from my own self somewhere on a dark, huge, and endless mountain” (p. 165). Essentially, the protagonists’ sense of self and guise of independence— vital components of a thriving postfeminist identity—were compromised by the protagonists’ individual “choices” to be in these relationships.

It is noteworthy that although Kate in *Bad Boy* was portrayed as making bad choices in choosing Percy as a romantic partner, there was not the same rhetoric surrounding how being in an abusive relationship compromised her postfeminist identity, as was present in all of the other novels. While Kate was described as having lost some of personal strength, there was not the same discourse surrounding her getting derailed from her true potential as a “Can-Do-Girl.” The fact that Kate was also the only African American character represented in these novels makes this finding even more compelling. This finding could reflect differing societal expectations about African American young women’s long-term trajectories or an implicit assumption that

they are already “at-risk.” However within a postfeminist discourse, race (and structural and systemic prejudices that accompany being from a minority racial group) is neutralized as being a potential determinate of life outcomes.

In conclusion, the ramifications of being in abusive relationships are displayed through the depletion of the majority of protagonists’ physical bodies. As Gill (2007) described: “The female body in postfeminist media culture is constructed as a window to the individuals’ interior life” (p. 256). Thus their bodies become an external manifestation of their emotional turmoil and an additional example of how they are failing to maintain the “perfect” female physique—a critical expectation of “successful” and competent postfeminist subjects. Additionally, the experience of TDV was portrayed as impacting postfeminist future identities and senses of self. TDV was framed not using the language of gender equality, but rather an assault on the young women’s current and futures selves.

### *Exiting Abusive Relationships*

In this section I will discuss the underrepresentation of external systems (particularly within the public domain) such as the criminal justice system or school systems in promoting victim safety or perpetrator accountability. Then I will describe how young women were portrayed as being independently responsible for exiting their relationships while also simultaneously depicted as secretly coveting male protection. I will convey how, consistent with postfeminist discourse, men were reconstituted as the appropriate saviors to “rescue” young women from their abusive relationships when they are too disempowered to protect themselves.

#### *Exiting Abusive Relationships: Role of External Systems*

Across the YA novels in this sample there were limited depictions of the protagonists using victim service agencies and peripheral examples of the criminal justice system (CJS) or

schools in facilitating victim safety or promoting perpetrator accountability. The following section will describe the absence of references to external systems involvement focusing on the CJS and schools.

*Exiting Abusive Relationships: The Role of the Criminal Justice System*

Overall, the CJS was displayed as playing a marginal role in victims' experiences of TDV and exiting their respective relationships. The perpetrators in *Bad Boy*, *Bitter End*, and *Dreamland* were arrested; however, these were very minor references at the end of the novels. The two more in-depth descriptions of the resolutions of the criminal cases against the perpetrators occurred in *Dreamland* and *Bitter End*. In *Dreamland*, the protagonist explained how the perpetrator's lawyer "brokered a deal for the charges against him for hitting me, so he was spending the weekend in jail and doing a lot of community service at the animal shelter, cleaning out cages" (p. 244). Similarly, in *Bitter End*, the protagonist's boyfriend Cole was previously accused of abusing his ex-girlfriend and his punishment was attending "anger counseling" (Brown, p. 327) and paying for his ex-girlfriend's medical bills. These minimal punishments are representative of the neoliberal arm of postfeminist discourse that minimizes the role of the wider community in addressing social issues such as IPV, while favoring a response focused on an individual's recognition of their private troubles

Postfeminist discourse is further enacted in *Stay* when the protagonist is discouraged from involving law enforcement and securing a restraining order, implying that the CJS can actually exacerbate abuse. As the following passage illustrates:

A restraining order, you hope, would give me some sense of peace and safety. Finally, someone is doing something, here, right? Capt. Branson knew what he was talking about all along. A bundle of paper is not a defense against someone's will. Protection orders are rational documents served to irrational people, a sometimes dangerous solution to a problem there is yet no answer for. (Caletti, 2011, p. 302).

Clara is alluding to the instance when she and her family were discouraged from getting a restraining order from Detective Branson earlier in the relationship because “that paper is an invitation for more contact” (p. 150). Her family was advised by Detective Branson to “stay away for awhile until things calm down” (p. 169). Therefore, as is representative of postfeminist discourse, the onus is not on the state to promote Clara’s safety, but on her to “stay away” (p. 169). In addition, Caletti’s use of the language of “a problem there is yet no answer for” underscores the inadequacy of the existing tools to promote abuse victim’s safety. While there are certainly areas for improving current interventions to promote victim safety and enforce perpetrator accountability, however, without posing alternative solutions or policy responses, the authors are reinforcing coping on one’s own rather than a coordinated or stated-based response.

Although schools were the location of several incidences of TDV in these novels, they were not positioned as resources to victims, encouraging perpetrator accountability or playing a significant role in the community-level response to TDV. Several of the victims’ teachers attempted to talk to the protagonists about their changed demeanors and behaviors; however, these efforts were minimal and did not have a noticeable impact on the victims. The following excerpt serves to demonstrate: “‘Caitlin.’ I looked up. Mr. Lensing, now behind his desk, was watching me. ‘Yes?’ ‘Wake up,’ he said. ‘Okay?’ I nodded. ‘Yeah, sure. Okay.’” (Dessen, 2004, *Dreamland*, p. 163). The only depiction of a proactive stance by a school administrator was in *Breaking Beautiful*. After noticing bruises on the protagonist’s arms, Mrs. Holt, the school counselor, made “a suspected abuse report...but never heard anything more about it” (p. 316), insinuating that this strategy is not an ineffective intervention to encourage victim safety. Rather than being a source of support, schools and teachers were absent or ineffective. Overall, the

limited discussion any system involvement tacitly underscores the postfeminist discourse that diminishes the role of the state in promoting victim safety and emphasizes the responsibility of the individual to fix her own problems.

*Bystanders, Friends and Personal Responsibility*

Throughout these texts, there were isolated incidents of the victims' peers and family members being unresponsive to incidences of abuse. For instance, the protagonist Allie in *Breaking Beautiful* recounts how her boyfriend Trip's friends "turn[ed] their faces away and never look[ed] me in the eye again" (p. 337) when they witnessed Trip punching her in the face. Also, when the perpetrator Alex's brother in *Pieces of Us* witnessed him sexually assaulting and beating Katie, he "just stand[s] there... You hear her scream, hear Alex cursing at her to be quiet. But you don't step in to help" (p. 293). These findings of complete bystander inaction were not present across all the novels.

Rather than simply ignoring the abuse as was exemplified in the previous section, throughout the majority of novels, friends, most often the victim's best friends, reached out somewhere during the course of the relationship to attempt to support them; however, these overtures were usually disregarded by the protagonists in favor of independently managing and eventually leaving their relationships. Kate, the protagonist in *Bad Boy*, for example, in response to her best friend Felicia repeatedly telling her she was concerned by Kate's boyfriend's behavior, responded via an all-capitalized text message, "WE WORKED IT OUT. NO NEED TO WORRY" (Jordon, 2012, p. 112). Similarly, the following excerpt reveals how Allie, the protagonist in *Breaking Beautiful*, rebuffs her friend Blake's concern about her boyfriend's abusive behaviors.

"I don't like the way he treats you," he blurted out, something he had been holding on his tongue for a long time.

“What?” My heart started pounding, How could he know anything?

“I said, I don’t like how Trip treats you.” This time every word was clipped and precise, bitten off with anger.

I ducked my head and tried to push past him. “It’s none of your business, Blake.”  
(p. 204)

The protagonist’s use of the phrase “not your business,” can be interpreted in a number of ways. Perhaps Allie is trying to independently handle the outcome of the relationship on her own terms or she could be fearful of the stigma that can come along with being a victim of TDV, or she could be trying to protect Trip. Regardless, the protagonists are depicted rejecting their friend’s intervention. Therefore, the protagonists are largely framed as disregarding external help during their relationships in favor of independently working through their relationship issues. Kate exemplifies the postfeminist ethos of independence and personal responsibility by asserting that “this [relationship] was my battle that I had to fight. I got myself into this mess; I had to get myself out” (Jordan, 2012, p. 167).

The decision to leave an abusive relationship, was positioned as a personal choice, where the protagonists were framed as determining that an invisible threshold had been crossed that indicated they needed to terminate the relationship. Generally this turning point was a particularly egregious instance of physical abuse or breach of trust. For instance, the character Kate in *Bad Boy* described how “Something inside me flipped, like a courage switch. Percy’s words were so hurtful, so dead wrong; I had no choice but to find my own voice,” (Jordan, 2012, p. 165). The metaphor of a light switch is important because it underscores the rapidity of the victim’s coming to the realization that she needed to take action on her own behalf. Similarly, as the following two passages illustrate, the protagonists Clara in *Stay* and Alex in *Bitter End* are portrayed as ultimately making the choice to leave their abusive relationships. They stated,

We made up, but I knew I had already decided something. I didn't know when I would break things off, just that I would. A small piece clicks into place, and it's done in your mind. You can put up with a lot of shit and then just be finished all at once. A decision can seem to make itself, quiet but firm. (Caletti, 2011, p. 158)

I had decided. It was time to tell Cole good-bye... My nose felt clogged and my eyes scratchy, and my chest hurt. And I was scared. But still I managed to feel better than I had felt in a long time. As if a weight had been lifted off. I was going to do what needed to be done forever ago...I could do this. I was strong. (Brown, 2012, pp. 333-334)

Both of these passages, with their emphasis on choice, reify the postfeminist notion that young women are autonomous decision makers, and fail to represent any potential structural impediments associated with leaving an abusive relationship. Additionally, they can also be seen as young women feeling like they are reclaiming their personal power and thus are able to terminate the relationship. With the exception of *Stay* and *Breaking Beautiful* (where the relationship officially ended with the perpetrator's demise in a car accident), all of the relationships simply resolved once the victim decided to end the relationship, underscoring the contention that the primary barrier for ending an abusive relationship is the victim's personal readiness not structural impediments.

#### *Men as "Appropriate" Saviors*

Across this sample of YA novels there was a consistent representation of men, particularly fathers and male friends, as playing the role of "appropriate saviors." The only book where this theme wasn't evident was *Rage: A Love Story*, which featured a same-sex couple and the protagonist's father was deceased. Rather than the support of female friends or community services, men are represented as the preferred "bystanders" that victims want to intervene in their relationships. Young women secretly hoped to be "rescued" by their fathers or male friends, as the following two passages demonstrate:

I closed my eyes, willing [my father] somehow to look through the dark car windows and rush out and save me from Rogerson, and from myself. But he didn't. Instead, my father did what he always did: He folded the paper, picked up the remote, moving across channel after channel, waiting for me—and Cass—to come home. (Dessen, 2004, p. 156)

I waited for Dad to press me for details about Cole. A part of me wanted him to. Wanted him to ask me who this guy was and if what Celia was saying was true... I wanted Dad to give me advice on what I was supposed to do now. But he didn't. He finished his coffee, rinsed out the cup, and crammed it into the dishwasher, all in silence. I sat at the table eating my cereal, willing him to just say... something. Anything. (Brown, 2012, pp. 144-145)

The character Clara in *Stay* exemplified this desire for male protection by stating:

I wanted to stay right there [in the arms of her new boyfriend], because it was so safe. I don't know if it's what every girl wants, but it's what I wanted, that feeling, being held firmly, the sense that any storm could come and blow the roof right off but in his arms there'd be shelter. (Caletti, 2011, p. 213)

The use of the language “I don't know if it's what every girl wants” is important, because the protagonist is acknowledging that this desire may be counter to traditional feminist notions of autonomy from men and sisterhood with other woman. While Caletti, the author of *Stay*, is not directly attacking feminism, but consistent with a postfeminist discourse, is articulating how second-wave feminism is “not speaking the truth of women's desires” (Gill, 2007, p. 242).

Caletti is granting permission to young women to silence their inner feminist watchdogs and “let [them]selves, for a moment, anyway, feel safe” (Caletti, 2011, p. 153) by surrendering to their innate desires for male protection.

This section on the portrayal of exiting abusive relationships, illustrated the underrepresentation of external public systems such as victims' service agencies, the criminal justice system, and public schools in providing meaningful support for victims or appropriately censoring perpetrators. Although friends were portrayed as reaching out in a supportive capacity,

victims wanted to independently end their relationships. This representation of external systems and the self-sufficiency of victims reinforces the tendency of postfeminism (and neoliberalism) to “subordinate the social” (Clarke, 2007) and render young women alone to protect themselves against men’s abuse. Male friends and family members, on the other hand, were reclaimed from feminist activists and reappointed as young women’s desired protectors, under the guise of this being women’s true desires and autonomous choices.

In summary, this section on the enactment of postfeminist discourses across these novels, demonstrated how postfeminist discourses constructed agentic heroines that independently navigated their abusive relationships and are ultimately capable of securing their own safety. Rather than framing TDV as a violation of young women’s human rights or as an issue of gender equality, the repercussions of TDV were filtered through a distinctly postfeminist lens. Thus, experiencing TDV was described by how it could derail young women’s future goals, including pursuing higher education, impacting their ability to maintain their physical appearance, and diminishing their sense of self. These representations of TDV function as cautionary tales for what happens when young women make poor choices in their dating partners. As is consistent with neoliberal strands of postfeminism, the role of the state and broader community are overshadowed in favor of representing women as being independently responsible for securing their safety—or potentially to be in the arms of a “good man.”

### *Results Summary*

Throughout this sample of YA novels, TDV was presented in a one-dimensional and narrow way with a primary focus on individual-level characteristics and deficits. Rather than TDV being positioned as something that could happen to any adolescent, building on victimology discourses, young women who endured a significant family tragedy, suffered from

low self-esteem, and/or were inexperienced in relationships were described as being the most “at risk.” Based on these representations of TDV victims, the antecedents of victimization are located in the young women’s injured internal psyches that precipitated their entry into abusive relationships.

As evidence of the ubiquity of pop-psychological discourses of IPV perpetration, these novels position the family as a very dangerous place. The family was the only environmental factor that was implicated for nurturing the development of perpetrators (as well as victims). Although certainly witnessing family violence in childhood is a known risk factor for perpetrating abuse, perpetrating abuse isn’t preordained; many individuals that witness abuse never resort to using violence in their own relationships. In addition, other individual-level characteristics such as insinuating that perpetrators of abuse must be mentally ill or “emotionally damaged,” illustrates how pop-psychology discourses employ over-simplified explanations and de-emphasize the role of larger social norms regarding perpetrating violence.

Lastly, when refracted through a postfeminist lens, a very different version of TDV unfolds. Rather than abuse being seen as the product of a multitude of factors across the ecological system, it is reduced to individuals’ poor choices. Postfeminist discourse operates in these novels to reposition TDV as a private issue that individuals are responsible for addressing, separate from support of the state. Through the language of postfeminist discourse, victims of TDV are encouraged to silence their inner feminist watchdogs and enjoy the protection that only men can provide. Furthermore, rather than TDV being seen as a violation of women’s most basic human and civil rights, it is positioned as potentially impacting their future identities as productive and successful postfeminist subjects.

## Chapter 6: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

One of the greatest achievements of early feminist efforts to publicize IPV and TDV was locating men's violence against women in the "macrostructures" of society. In an effort to move away from explanations of IPV that centered on perpetrator pathology and victim deficits, feminist activists redirected attention to broader systems of gender inequality and demanded that men be held accountable, via the criminal justice system, for their decisions to use violence against their intimate partners. Structural and systemic barriers were framed both as playing significant roles in perpetuating IPV, but also as presenting tangible challenges to leaving abusive relationships. Efforts to raise attention about how gaps in the coordinated community response to IPV, for instance, underscored how structural barriers such as shortages in the availability of emergency housing (especially for minors), lack of specialized services for adolescents experiencing TDV, and a criminal justice system that is not always responsive to the needs of abuse victims contribute to the perpetuation of IPV (Allen et al., 2011; Storer, Lindhorst, & Starr, 2013). Arguments regarding the structural determinants of IPV and TDV have been overshadowed in the portrayal of TDV in YA novels, in favor of an exclusive focus on individual-level vulnerabilities, personal deficits, family dysfunction, and young women's poor decision making.

The goal of this section is to summarize the primary research findings revealed in this study, with the aim of unpacking how employing pop-psychological, victimology, and postfeminist discourses distorts, co-opts, and attenuates feminist-influenced explanatory discourses on the causes, lived experiences, and consequences of teen dating violence. I will describe how decontextualizing TDV, and situating it as being caused by individual-level vulnerabilities and deficits, obscures structural antecedents of IPV. This type of framing of IPV

effectively erases the role of the state in safeguarding the human and civil rights of women, reappoints men as women's obvious protectors, and positions young women as agentic and individually responsible for ensuring their own safety. Lastly, in reading this collection of young adult novels, the language of human and civil rights, social justice, and gender inequality gets replaced with a discourse of choice, personal responsibility, and victim vulnerability.

### **Enactment of Victimology Discourses in the Construction of TDV Victimization**

Whether through the death of a parent or being characterized as a shy wallflower with low self-esteem, victims were predominantly portrayed as being vulnerable to abuse, as is consistent with a discourse of victimology. Similar to Poon's analysis of self-help books and Restuccia's (2000) examination of popular culture including novels, the framing of victimhood in these novels focused on the victims' personal shortcomings that precipitated their entry into abuse. It is noteworthy that, unlike in other media genres such as music and teen-marketed magazines, the protagonists in these novels were not described in the same dichotomous ways (i.e., being risky and at risk) as in Houlihan and Raynor's (2004) assessment of the framing of IPV in popular culture, nor was TDV overtly minimized or romanticized across these novels. Compared to other media genres discussed in the literature review, there was less of an emphasis on directly blaming the protagonists for their entry into abusive relationships, but rather, in the authors' attempts to explain why young women become abuse victims, they enacted dominant societal conceptualizations of victimhood that are consistent with victimology discourses. In this sense, these novels mark a departure from media depictions of IPV that minimize the seriousness and social acceptability of IPV; the protagonists in virtually all of the novels endured severe physical abuse or stalking, giving the impression that this is a serious issue that impacts an arguably narrow demographic of young women.

The heterogeneity of findings related to victims' entry into abusive relationships reveals the reach of victimology discourses to influence the framing of TDV as an outgrowth of victim weaknesses such as low self-esteem. Since victimology discourses identify the characteristics of victims that precipitate their victimization, the larger ecological and structural contexts of IPV that have been advanced by interdisciplinary IPV scholars is replaced with a language of individual-level prevention. In other words, the "problem" of TDV gets reinterpreted as one of individual failing rather than a byproduct of a culture that nurtures and perpetuates violence against women and is in desperate need of "adjustment" (as Freud would say). For example, in a review of Dessen's *Dreamland*, a high school-aged reviewer for *The School Library Journal* concluded: "Dreamland is the secret story of many contemporary teen relationships. Caitlin's dependency on Rogerson is a finely drawn portrait of a young woman without a strong sense of self-esteem" (Richmond, 2000). This passage provides insight into how characterizations of young women as wallflowers with low self-esteem are being packaged for readers. Rather than positioned as a broader social issue, the focus gets redirected to the personal characteristics of victims that predisposes them to abuse.

As is consistent with the genre of young adult literature, the denouement of all of the novels featured the protagonists going through a process of internal self-reflection to ascertain why they fell "prey" to abuse. Generally, this process of personal reflection occurred within a therapeutic relationship. Not only does the therapeutic focus reinforce the notion that enduring abuse triggers emotional responses that require therapy, but also recapitulates the postfeminist notion that therapy can function as an intervention where young women can overcome their perceived personal deficits and resume their trajectories towards successful adulthood. This is not to say that therapy can't be immensely beneficial, however it is only one of many possible

interventions that can potentially support victims of TDV. In addition, there is a range of conceivable emotional responses that victims of TDV can experience, from relief to anger to despondency, and it is important to represent this diversity of emotional responses and not reinforce gender normative prescriptions to recovery.

### **Moving Beyond Vilification: Constructing TDV Perpetration**

It was important to me that readers realize that Connor isn't a bad guy—just a very broken one. I spent a lot of time developing Connor's backstory, so that readers could understand what brought him to such a place. (Amanda Grace, *But I Love Him* (postscript), p. 248)

As the preceding quote suggests, these authors are mindful to construct perpetrators of TDV as being emotionally wounded, having mental health issues, and being exposed to family violence in childhood. However, these “reasons” for abuse play into pop-psychological constructions of perpetrators that are similar to the individual-level framing of perpetrators in the print media (Gillespie et al., 2013), in self-help books (Poon, 2011), and in the American cinema (Frus, 2001). Therefore, unlike the perpetrators in Godsland's (2012) study where the perpetration of the male's abuse was framed as the product of structural failures, perpetrators in young adult literature were framed in ways to reflect pop-psychological explanations for of individual-level pathology. The lack of references to other potential casual factors in the perpetrator's social environments reflects the narrow ways pop-psychology is employed in the mainstream media to explain multifaceted social issues.

Unlike in Poon's (2011) analysis of self-help books, perpetrators were not constructed as being fully villainous, but rather deeply flawed due to their own traumatic upbringings and mental health issues. Some media scholars have advanced the view that the addition of these types of background characteristics functions to deplete batterers' accountability and essentially lets them “off the hook” because their behavior is influenced by factors that are largely out of

their control (Patterson & Sears, 2011). However, the framing of perpetration in this sample of novels was more nuanced and less straightforward than simply exonerating or vilifying the perpetrators.

A contraction exists between framing perpetrators in humanizing ways, while also asserting that their abusive behavior was unacceptable. At issue is not whether people should have sympathy for abusers, but rather the reality that in reading these books young readers are transported to worlds where dating partners, generally young men, do bad things, are rarely punished, and where their behavior, even if not acceptable, is at least partially understood because they have been mistreated as well. As is consistent with framing theory, by locating perpetrators' behaviors solely in personal pathology and family malfunction, attention is directed to the individual level, and thus, undermining the importance of primary prevention efforts directed at the societal level. This framing assigns a moral judgment to the life circumstances, choices, and behaviors of adolescent victims of dating violence.

### **A Postfeminist Retelling of TDV**

Refracted through a postfeminist lens, the root causes of IPV/TDV, the lived experience of enduring an abusive relationship, and the repercussions of an abusive relationship are internalized and reduced to an issue of victim's poor decision-making, choice, and personal responsibility. Similar to the work of Patterson and Sears (2011), Thaller and Messing's (2014) and Enk and McDaniel's (2012) analysis of the framing of IPV in various media genres, companion discourses of postfeminism and neoliberalism function to assign culpability for victims' inability to avoid entry into risky relationships. The following section will describe the various ways that postfeminism has "restored" TDV.

*Recasting the Harm of IPV: Blighting Young Women's Future Identities*

While there is research to support the contention that experiencing TDV affects victims' academic performance (Hanson, 2002), self-reported emotional well-being, and self-esteem (Ackard & Neumark-Sztainer, 2002; Howard, 2007), this construction of what it means to be "at risk" is noteworthy within the context of a postfeminist discourse that privileges individual responsibility and ignores structural and systemic explanations of social problems. None of these novels discuss what victims have to do in terms of negotiating attending school with one's abuser, changing one's living situation when you live with your parents, or acquiring an order of protection when abuse escalates after the termination of the relationship. In fact, only one novel even referenced that perpetrators' abusive tactics can continue well after the victim terminates the relationship.

Because young women are expected to have "self-determining agency" (Stringer, 2014, p. 5), it is fundamentally their fault if they fail to reach socially approved ideas of successful adulthood or do not exhibit good decision-making skills (Gill, 2007). Notions of being "at risk" are intentionally manufactured and disseminated, via the media, to adolescent young women as something to be feared and avoided. For example, the lead characters Ann in *But I Love Him* and Clara in *Stay* were well on their way toward achieving their ideal postfeminist identities by having plans to attend a "good college"; however, these plans were derailed by their making the wrong choice in romantic relationships. Similar narratives can be found in other teen-focused media such as the MTV hit reality television show *16 and Pregnant*. In these novels, TDV victims were framed as agentic participants in their relationships, and the experience of TDV was positioned as another road (like teen pregnancy) towards being "at risk." These novels function as cautionary tales for what can happen when young women make "bad choices" in their dating partners.

These novels also serve to reify gender differences that were previously called into question by second-wave feminists. For instance, the protagonists were framed in gender stereotypical ways such as being described as dreaming about their wedding days and waiting for their partners (generally men) to initiate their relationships. The most blatant example of protagonists reclaiming innate feminine desires (that have been presumably commandeered by second-wave feminists) was the consistent yearning to be rescued by the men in their lives. The authors grant young women the permission to relinquish their “feminist watchdogs” and revel, once again, in their true feminine desires.

*“There is No Society, only Individuals”*

Similar to other media genres, victims in this sample of young adult literature were positioned as being independently responsible for exiting their abusive relationships (Enk & McDaniel, 2012; Frus, 2001; Haaken, 2010; Hensman Kettrey & Emery, 2010). Kozol (1995) describes this tendency in the media of framing abuse victims as “lone heroines fighting lone villains” (p. 237). In young adult literature, public social systems were characterized as being largely inadequate to promote victim safety or enforce perpetrator accountability. These depictions of the role of the broader community, friends, and family as ineffective, counters feminist discourses of IPV that seek to position IPV as a communitywide issue. Although critiques of the current tools for promoting victim safety and enforcing perpetrator accountability are warranted, these novels did not offer alternative solutions or potential policy responses, instead they positioned victims as independently extricating themselves from their relationships. This framing of exiting IPV as an individual act is an example of Clark’s (2007) notion of “subordinating the social,” where the explicit role of the state in providing social goods such as

safety and protecting the human rights of its citizens is replaced with a rhetoric of personal responsibility and choice.

Rather than leaning on the support of friends or broader systems, all of the protagonists waited for the flip of their internal “courage switches,” and they found the personal strength to independently leave their relationships. Similar to Hensman Kettrey and Emery (2010), descriptions of “it happened to me” stories in magazines, and consistent with postfeminist discourses, leaving an abusive relationship was framed as an issue of personal empowerment and courage. While the strength of abuse victims in leaving their abusive relationships is undoubtedly important to underscore, what is potentially problematic is the lack of critical analysis across these novels on the challenges of safely doing so. Without companion discourses on structural inequality and gaps in the coordinated community response to IPV, young readers are left with the moral judgment that individuals who stay with their abusers must be in some way deficient.

In summary, Gill (2007) argues that this type of narrow and reductionist framing of social issues such as IPV has turned the feminist idea of “the personal is political on its’ head” (p. 259) and reinterpreted the very notion of “victimhood” that second-wave feminists advocated for (Stringer, 2014). Rather than IPV being conceptualized as a larger societal issue that is the product of the institutionalization of patriarchal social norms, it has been reduced to stemming from individual failings or poor choice— it is a personal, not a political issue.

*Double Bind: Vulnerable Victims in Need of Protection and Empowered Agents to Solve Their Own Problems*

Similar to Marshall’s (2009) work on rape victims, victims of TDV were constructed in seemingly contradictory ways in this sample of young adult novels. In many ways the marriage of postfeminism (imbued with tenets of neoliberalism) and victimology discourses has constructed a double bind of empowerment/personal choice contrasted with gendered notions of

young women's susceptibility and vulnerability. As Marshall (2009) states: "the contemporary girl can 'kick ass' with her 'girl power,' however this is less a pedagogy of *empowerment* than a lesson in realizing and defending one's innate or cultural *vulnerability*" (p. 222) (emphasis in original). This double bind is represented in this sample of YA novels by constructing the protagonists as secretly coveting male protection while at the same time endorsing the belief that victims of TDV have a personal responsibility for ending their relationships.

This tension reveals how even within a postfeminist framework, there is a guise of empowerment and autonomy. Rather than disseminating a discourse of empowerment, readers are being reminded of young women's innate vulnerability and fragility. While the roles of the state and the broader community have been obfuscated, young women have been pushed back into the arms of men for their protection. Furthermore, like other stereotypical feminine desires such as marriage and child rearing, the desire for male protection is portrayed as something that young women long for. Liberated from the gaze of "feminist watchdogs" and confines of political correctness young women can now "speak the truth of their desires" (Gill, 2007).

### **Implications for Research and Practice**

The findings presented in this research project underscore several important implications for social work practice and future research. In this section I will describe the importance of teens having a basic understanding of the root causes of TDV, draw attention to how discourses of victimology and postfeminism are employed in Social Work practice settings, describe how novels can be used as narrative interventions in Social Work and in TDV prevention programs, and highlight areas for increased media responsibility in their framing and portrayal of TDV and IPV.

*Implications for Research and Practice: Importance of Understanding the Root Causes of TDV*

Numerous scholars have underscored the need for teens to be critical and discerning consumers of the media (Klinker, 1999; Koss & Teale, 2009). As Klinker (1999) states: “We need to prompt young people to question the interpretation of the world that the media tries to sell them. They need to learn to be critics and creators of meaning for themselves” (p. 269). However, an important component of critical consciousness is understanding the root causes of social inequality and the role structural factors play in contributing to social issues (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988), and providing the tools to “decode the system” (Stanton-Salazar, 2011, p. 1092.) Therefore, in order for youth to be critical consumers of media, they need to have an understanding of the multilevel factors that contribute to social issues, including teen dating violence. However, research has found that teens receive only marginal TDV prevention programming (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013; Weisz & Black, 2010) and receive little scaffolding to deconstruct the media’s portrayal of TDV (Dines, 2014).

In response to these issues, this research underscores the importance of teens receiving in-depth training on the antecedents of TDV, identifying the multitude of behaviors associated with TDV, understanding the responsibility of the entire community to respond to and interrupt TDV, and tools to deconstruct the media’s portrayal of TDV in the media. When discussing the causes of TDV, curricula should include information about structural factors that contribute to gender inequality and the perpetuation of TDV, with tangible examples of how these barriers make it difficult for adolescent victims to safely leave their relationships. In addition, teens need support in discussing how messages in their social environments may run counter to the information conveyed in TDV prevention programming. Given the enormity of societal messages about violence against women generally and TDV in particular, these conversations

need to be “frequent and often” and occur at multiple developmentally appropriate times during adolescence (Nation et al., 2003).

### *Mindfulness of Language in Practice Settings*

The findings presented in this research project underscore the pervasiveness of victimology, postfeminist/neoliberal, and pop-psychological discourses in the general public’s interpretation of teen dating violence. However, it is important to note that Social Work is not immune to the powerful sway of these discourses to reinterpret social issues as personal ones. For instance, Hall (2004) documented that neoliberal conceptualizations of individual responsibility and risk management have been infused into the messaging of contemporary rape education programs. Similarly, Thapar-Bjorkert and Morgan (2010) documented that staff at domestic violence agencies reported that IPV victims were “deserving their fates” (p. 32) and employed societal discourses of blame and responsibility. This research points to the need to critically analyze how mainstream constructions of victimization, risk-management, and choice are infused into the organizational practices and treatment modalities of IPV and TDV agencies. For example, TDV service providers could evaluate how a rhetoric of victim vulnerability and choice influences the types of services that are offered to abuse victims (i.e. financial management, self-defense, etc.) and hold staff development sessions on evaluating how their own approach to working with clients has likely been influenced by these discourses in unexpected ways.

### *Untapped Potential of Novels in Social Work Interventions*

There has been considerable attention in the field of public health to the potential for novels, in the form of narrative interventions, to be employed as tools for promoting health enhancing behaviors (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). For example, public health practitioners have

couched health messages within first-person narratives and stories, rather than just distributing statistics, in prevention trainings for teen audiences around issues of substance abuse (Miller-Day & Hecht, 2013) and getting vaccinated for HPV (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). This approach has been less examined in social work. Novels have been found to help readers imagine “possible worlds” (Bruner, 1986; Gee, 2011), reinforce social norms and behaviors, and influence the development of social scripts about positive social interaction (Green & Brock, 2000; Petraglia, 2007). In turn, these social scripts inform the development of everyday beliefs, including cause and effect relationships (Petraglia, 2007). Therefore, there is considerable potential to explore how novels can be used as tools to initiate critical conversations between parents, youth workers, educators and youth about the representation of gender-based violence in popular culture (Curwood, 2013).

It should not go unnoticed that the vast majority of media, including YA literature, is produced by adults for youth consumption. In many ways the writing and production of stories, from short stories to novels, could be powerful interventions to harness youth voice and provide an important platform for youth to critically examine their social worlds. Therefore, rather than just acting as recipients of media, youth also can play a critical role in reshaping and constructing a new youth-informed narrative about teen dating violence. Partnering with youth to write their own stories has been encouraged in other disciplines such as public health (Miller-Day & Hecht, 2013), and this type of youth/adult partnership is an important area for future research and practice in social work.

#### *Elevating “The Macro” in TDV Prevention*

Given the preponderance of individual-level depictions of the antecedents of TDV displayed in young adult literature, this research points to the importance of a renewed focus on

the “macro” in the public messaging about TDV and IPV. Since the framing of TDV and IPV is crucial for initiating collective actions in response to social issues and potentially influencing policy responses, forging partnerships between DV advocacy groups and media outlets (including young adult authors) would be a tangible first step in crafting a more nuanced and contextualized “storying” of TDV. For example, the Washington State Coalition Against Domestic Violence issued a media toolkit titled “Covering Domestic Violence: A Guide for Journalists and other Media Professionals” to encourage more in-depth and accurate reporting of IPV in the media (see <http://wscadv2.org> for more information). While such innovative grassroots efforts are promising, further research should explore how such collaborations potentially alter the public discourse on IPV.

#### *Investigating the Discursive Constructions of Youth’s Meaning-Making Processes*

This research underscored the ubiquity of, postfeminist, and pop-psychological discourses in the meaning-making processes about TDV in young adult literature, but it is impossible to infer how these constructions influence youths’ understanding of TDV or whether youth employ similar discursive framings in their individual meaning-making processes. It would be important to investigate the pervasiveness of these discourses in other media genres that are marketed to both young men and women, including television, movies, and video games. Given the dearth of literature that can address these questions, this is a valuable area for future research.

#### *Implications for the Media*

Media pundits have argued that the central goal of the media is not to educate the public, but to please the audience by providing sensationalized entertainment, and creating products that are noncontroversial and easily marketable to diverse audiences (Berns, 2004; Railton & Watson,

2011; Saroca, 2013). Berns (2004) asserts that: “The political story is more likely to elicit controversy, flak, and unrest. It is easier to have a ‘happy ending’ in a story about a victim who solved her problem as opposed to the unsettling ending of a culture in need of change” (Berns, 2004, p. 159).

While creative freedom and anti-censorship are important elements of media integrity and free speech, given the persuasive power of the media to reinforce permissive social norms about IPV, it is clear that the media, vis-à-vis young adult novels, is advancing a narrow portrayal of TDV that has the potential to reconstitute and attenuate the causes, lived experiences, and consequences of TDV and IPV. In response to the misogyny prevalent across media genres, media theorist, cultural critic, and author Roxanne Gay (2014) states:

These limited ways in which we talk, write, and think about gender, these vacuums in which we hold cultural conversations, no matter how good our intentions, no matter how finely crafted our approach, I cannot help but think, *This is how we all lose...* We need to overcome our deeply entrenched positions and resistance to nuance. We have to be more interested in making things better than just being right, or interesting, or funny. (p. 108)

Gay is referring to the tendency of comics, authors, and artists, in the name of creative freedom, to continue to regurgitate and enact depictions of violence against women. The media has a responsibility to be mindful of how it is framing IPV and seek to integrate more contextualized and multileveled accounts of this issue. In short, they need to do better.

### **Study Limitations**

There are several limitations that are necessary to note. First, this study does not explore all young adult literature, but rather novels that intentionally had content significant to teen dating violence. Therefore, these findings should not be generalized to the entire genre of YA literature. Additionally, I sought to include novels that young adults were reading and that youth

in the United States could reasonably access in the public library system; therefore these findings are not necessarily relevant to self-published or “fringe” novels. Lastly, every attempt was made to locate every YA novel that met the selection requirements; however, given that these novels are not catalogued in a uniform way (like research articles), it is possible that some texts were inadvertently excluded. The fact this study employed rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria also helps alleviate some of the limitations of the method of CDA which often selects texts that correspond with the investigator’s preconceived hypotheses.

While I don’t necessarily consider this a limitation, it is important to underscore that discourses analysis is an inherently interpretive act, so these accounts will inevitably be subjective, situated, and culturally bound. As Gee (2010) stated: “A discourse analysis is itself an interpretation, an interpretation of the interpretive work people have done in specific contexts. It is, in that sense, an interpretation of an interpretation” (p. 122).

## **Conclusion**

Since the early work of feminist activists in the 1970s, the IPV movement has ushered in many successes in defining, legislating against, adjudicating, and providing social supports for victims (Allen et al., 2011; DeBare, 2009; DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2011; Kozol, 1995). However, feminist language of structural inequality has been refracted, reinterpreted, and coopted by contemporary knowledge systems that have produced and enacted counter narratives about the causes, lived experiences, and consequences of TDV. The findings in this study reinforce how language is anything but neutral. The framing of teen dating violence in young adult literature, especially considering the similarity with depictions of IPV in other media genres, should be concerning for researchers, advocates, and activists committed to ameliorating TDV. Due to the preeminence of postfeminist, neoliberal victimology and pop-psychology

discourses, IPV has become indelibly associated with individual choice, autonomy (Frazier & Joffe Falmagne, 2014), victim culpability, self-help, perpetrator exculpation, and the diminished role of the state in promoting gender equality and safeguarding women's human rights.

Bruner (1986) asserted that narratives via popular culture transport individuals to new and possible worlds. We now effectively live in a world where the persuasive appeal of the media's framing of TDV is so great, that in response to Chris Brown's arrest for physically abusing his former girlfriend Rihanna, young women around the world tweeted and retweeted: "Call me crazy butttttt I would let Chris Brown beat me any day" or "everyone shut up about Chris brown [sic] being a woman beater....Shiii\* he can beat me all night long" (Gay, 2014). This is the world to which young women have been transported.

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## Appendix

<i>Table 5</i> <i>Excerpt of Codebook</i>	
Categories (in bold) & Code	<b>Notes/Definition</b>
<b>Bystander Behavior</b>	
Intervene with physical violence	Physically beats up the perpetrator
Does nothing/Ignores	Sees the abuse and ignores it/turning a blind eye
Nothing can be done	Impression that no intervention would be effective in helping victim
Share concerns with others	Talk to someone other than victim about concern about the relationship
Share concerns with victim	Talk directly to the victim about the abuse.
Intervene-other	Does something not physical when faced with abuse
<b>Victims response to Bystander Behavior</b>	
Defend perp	Provides justification for partners' behavior
Minimizes abuse	Claims is not a big deal
Deflects	Changes the topic, does not address the concern
"Not your business"	Claims it is a private relationship issue
<b>Places Where Abuse Occurs</b>	
Home of Victim	
Home of Perp	
Car	
In front of friends/peers	Any type of abuse done in front of others
At school	Any place on the school grounds including the parking lot
In private	Any place where there is an assumption of privacy
In public	In any place where other could potentially be seen
On the Phone	Via text

<b>Causes of TDV Perpetration</b>	
Anger	Strong feeling of displeasure or rage
Family hx of violence	Any reference to family violence
Mental health/crazy	Indication that the
Perps need to be in control	Desire of perp to “call the shots” in the relationship; have a say in the activities of the victim
Victim vulnerability	Seeming weakness of victim, with the assumption that it invited the crime
Victims bad/poor decisions	This includes the victim bad at picking romantic partners
Victim self-esteem	Feelings of low self-regard
Perp issues/emptiness	Emotional void, deep emotional issue or suffering
<b>Characteristics of Victims</b>	
Innocent/first love	Inexperience in relationship/first relationship
“Good girl”	Seen as following the rules and not getting into trouble
Low self-worth/self-esteem	Feels badly about oneself
Vulnerable	Susceptible to abuse
Wallflower	The girl who gets looked over by people @ school.
<b>Characteristics of Perps</b>	
“Wounded”	In some way emotionally damaged
“Bad boy”	Rule breaker/gets in trouble a lot
Uses drugs/alcohol	Any kind of illicit substance use
Steals	Theft of others belongings
Entitled/gets what s/he wants	Feels like they deserve to get what they want at any cost
Erratic driver	Does not follow traffic laws (generally speeding)

Unpredictable	Never know what they might say or do
Split Personality	“Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde” personality. Can embody seemingly different personalities, sometimes in reference to a public/private self.
Attractive	Described as physically appealing
Mysterious/outsider	New kid at school, someone on the outside
Older	Older chronicle age
<b>Family History of Perpetrators</b>	
Substance use	Any reference to substance abuse
Domestic Violence	Pattern of controlling and coercive behaviors between parental figures (including stepparents)
Absent parent	Parent that is not involved in the perp’s life
Abusive father	The father is named as the person doing the abuse.
Child abuse	Violent behavior directed during the perp’s childhood
Permissive parenting	Lets teen do whatever they want, no parental oversight.
<b>Family History of Victims</b>	
Death of parent(s)	Physical loss of parent
Absent parent	Parent that is not actively involved in the perp’s life
Family drama	Any pronounced family problem that is talked about
Supportive	Victim sees parents at a source of support
“Doesn’t get it”	Parents out of touch or simply don’t understand
<b>School Response to Abuse</b>	
Talk to victim	Talk directly about abuse concerns
Report to authorities	(i.e. CPS, police etc, any reference to reporting to non school official)
Monitoring Victim	Watching victim to see if more signs of

	maltreatment are visible
<b>Repercussion of being in an abusive relationship</b>	
“Damaged goods”	Permanently injured by abuse
“survival mode”	Just struggling to get by
Rehab/treatment	Abuse results in mental illness that requires treatment/hospitalization
Stays with you	Permanent imprint on life
Blighted future	Not planning for the future (i.e. putting off college)
Engages in high-risk behavior	Adopts high risk behaviors such as substance abuse
Personality changes	Describes not being the same person as before abuse
Shame	Feels deeply embarrassed/ashamed (related to self-blame)
Embodiment of abuse/ body trauma	Reference to physical manifestation of abuse
Engages in high risk behavior	Adopts substance use to cope with abuse
Feels crazy/losing mind	Articulates feels like losing mind/feeling less stable
Emotionally Numb	Not feeling anything
Distracted	Trouble concentrating
<b>Criminal Justice Involvement</b>	
Perp Arrested	Any reference to arrest by the police
Restraining/Protection Order	Reference to getting any kind over court order
Futility of CJS	No point calling the police, because they can't help you
<b>Gender Roles in Novels</b>	
Male protection	Reference to men intervening in abuse including victim wishing for intervention

Male initiates relationship Masculine social norms	Male partner starts the relationship Any reference to hypermasculinity/ male chauvinism
Traditional feminine norms	Beliefs about women's place or gender roles in relationships
Male pays for things	Male partner pays for meals, dates, etc.
Double standard between men and women	Reference to different social expectations for men and women

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Table 6:  
*Sample Across Theme Analysis Matrix*

	<i>Bitter End</i> Brown	<i>Stay</i> Caletti	<i>Dreamland</i> Dessen	<i>Pieces of</i> <i>Us</i> Gelbwasser	<i>But I Love</i> <i>Him</i> Grace	<i>Bad Boy</i> Jordon	<i>Rage: A</i> <i>Love Story</i> Peters	<i>Breaking</i> <i>Beautiful</i> Shaw Wolf
<i>Entry into Victimization</i>								
Enduring a personal/family tragedy	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Inexperience in Relationships	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Low Self-Esteem/Diminished Self-Worth	X	X	X			X	X	
<i>Explaining Perpetration of Teen Dating Violence</i>								
Wounded	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Family History of Violence	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Mentally Ill/Crazy	X	X			X	X	X	