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TEEN DATING RELATIONSHIPS:  
UNDERSTANDING AND COMPARING YOUTH AND ADULT  
CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY PREPARED FOR:

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This document summarizes the National Institute of Justice project, "Understanding Abuse in Teen Dating Relationships through Concept Mapping," also entitled "Teen Dating Relationships: Understanding and Comparing Youth and Adult Conceptualizations" (contract # GS10F0088P). This project was funded by the United States Department of Justice and Department of Health and Human Services, and led by the National Institute of Justice and the Federal Interagency Workgroup on Teen Dating Violence. In October 2010, Concept Systems, Inc. was awarded the contract to manage the project execution, including participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, and reporting. A Planning Group, including individuals from various federal offices and an external practitioner and researcher, was convened as the core team that oversaw all aspects of the study. An Advisory Group of adolescent development, teen dating violence and domestic violence researchers, leaders from national advocacy and youth development programs, and representatives from offices within DOJ and HHS were also consulted periodically on major methodological decisions, results interpretation, and dissemination guidance.

The impetus for this project emerged from a 2006 Workgroup meeting, where participants identified the inclusion of youth voices as a gap in teen dating violence (TDV) research, specifically around the conceptual definition of dating relationships and abuse. Whereas teen dating relationships more broadly are the context of TDV, the capacity to effectively address relationship violence relies on a well informed picture of how adolescents conceptualize romantic relationships. To date however, most TDV research, programming and policy efforts rely on professionals' assumptions of the characteristics of teen dating relationships, including how adolescents value and understand them. Little work has considered how well these assumptions align with how youth actually experience and think about dating relationships. The Workgroup noted the need to compare youth's articulation of dating relationships with that of adults in the field to discover how similarly these groups think about healthy and unhealthy relationship elements. Insights from this comparison would inform new research initiatives and proposals, and aid in more effectively targeting prevention and intervention efforts. It was also anticipated that the results would reveal conceptual variation even among youth participants, underscoring the need for programming to be designed in a way that effectively addresses the range of experiences, contexts and perspectives that shape adolescent relationships and relationship violence.

This project was structured as two complementary phases, each summarized below.

## **PHASE I: CONCEPT MAPPING**

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Concept mapping (Kane & Trochim, 2007; Trochim, 1989) was used to capture and represent youth and adult conceptualizations of the characteristics of teen dating relationships. This mixed methods approach includes a sequence of qualitative and quantitative participatory and analytic steps that produce visualizations of how a participant group perceives the interrelatedness among a set of ideas that define a topic. The method can also include collection of participant opinions of the ideas along one or more value dimensions.

Concept mapping was particularly well suited to the current study, as it allowed for comparison of participants' perspective on the characteristics of dating relationships, their relationships to one another, their frequency and their desirability. In this regard, the method produces a single conceptualization of teen dating relationships that can be subsequently interpreted from the perspectives of different participant groups and on multiple attributes. The process yields participant-generated content that

comprises the conceptual framework, as well as perceptions of each item's frequency and desirability in adolescent romantic relationships.

Concept mapping was selected as the optimal methodology for Phase I due largely to its capacity to engage participants in a relatively simple series of activities while yielding visual representations that capture the complexity of group wisdom. Despite the complexity inherent in the resultant maps, the visualizations retain sufficient simplicity for participants and stakeholder groups to meaningfully interpret them in the context of their worldview. This simplicity encouraged teens and young adults to fully take part in both authoring and interpreting the framework. The process also allowed the research team to compare youth and adult perspectives at multiple steps in the process and using multiple variables, including participants' perspectives on the characteristics of dating relationships, the interrelationships among those characteristics, their frequency and their desirability.

Adult participants were identified and recruited individually through nominations by Planning and Advisory Group members, and included researchers, practitioners, advocates, and federal employees with a professional relationship to the field. Teen (14-18 years) and young adult (19-22 years) participants were recruited through organizations that had ongoing, regular contact with youth within these age ranges. Young adults were included to better understand how perspectives around teen dating may be similar or different among individuals transitioning from teenagers to adults. The research team recruited youth-serving organizations that were geographically diverse, as well as representing a combination of organizations that did and did not focus explicitly on healthy relationship development and/or teen dating violence prevention.

The following steps describe the concept mapping data collection, analysis and results:

- **Idea Generation:** Between July and September 2013, participants were asked to provide their ideas in response to a single open-ended sentence, also referred to as a focus prompt: "*A thought, action, feeling or behavior that teens in dating relationships might have or do is...*" Idea generation took place entirely remotely, and in most cases participants used dedicated project websites<sup>1</sup> that allowed for anonymous response.

The participant group as a whole contributed over 600 ideas in response to the focus prompt. Teen, young adult and adult ideas were considerably similar, with many nuances of the same ideas generated across participant groups. The Planning Group reviewed all ideas for redundancy, clarity, relevance, and level of specificity, to synthesize them to a final set of 100 statements that represented the breadth and depth of the original full set.

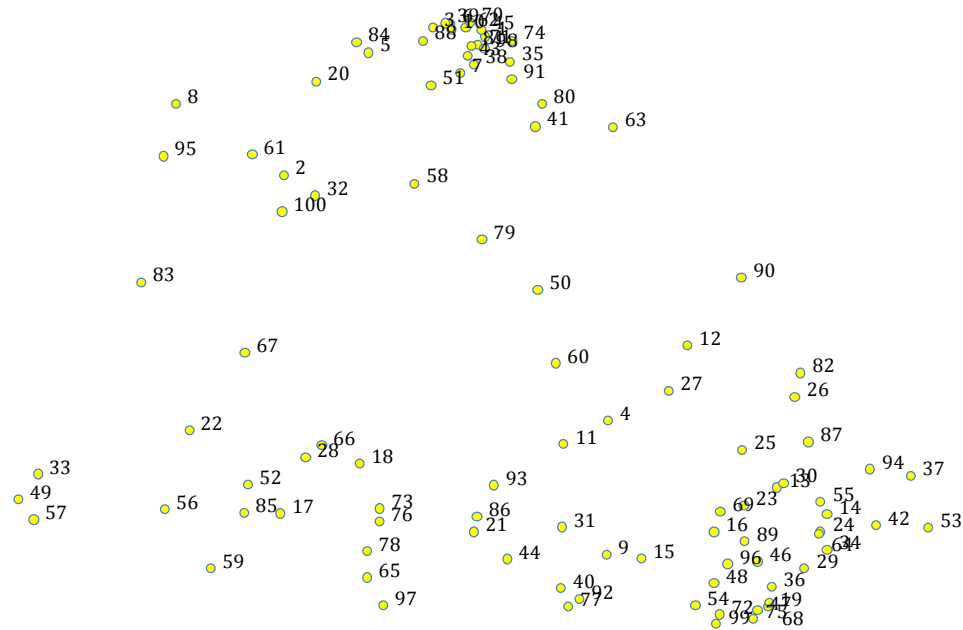
- **Sorting and Rating:** Between October 2013 and January 2014, youth and adult participants were re-engaged to individually sort each of the 100 final ideas into piles based on their perceptions of their meaning or relatedness. Participants were also asked to rate each of the ideas on how frequent and how desirable they were thought to be in teen dating relationships. Sorting and

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<sup>1</sup> The Concept System® Global MAX™ (Build 2012.243.13) [Web-based Platform]. (2014). Ithaca, NY. Available at: <http://www.conceptsystemsglobal.com>.

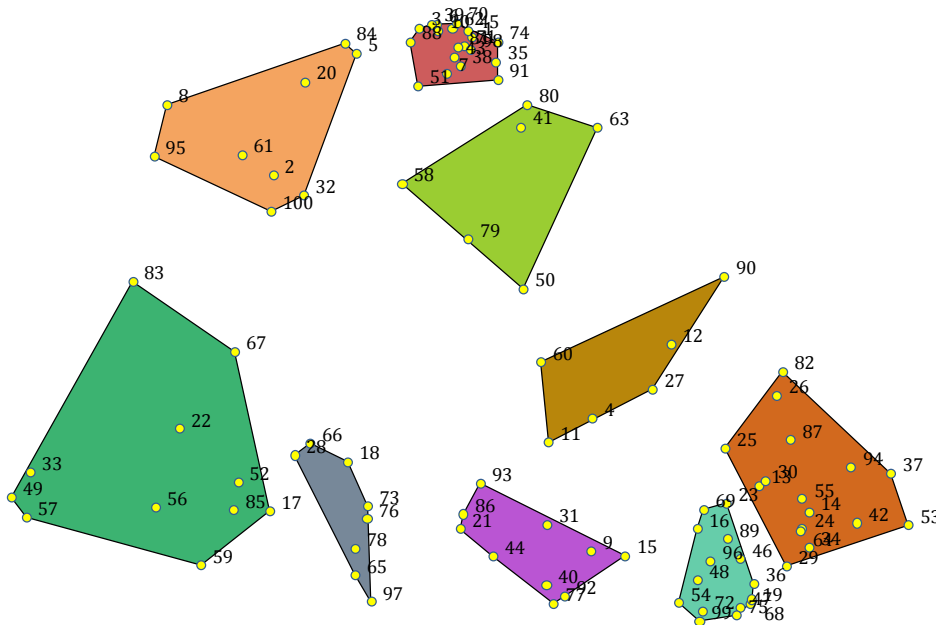
rating was primarily conducted online using a dedicated project website. A member of the project team facilitated in-person data collection with some youth-serving organizations.

- **Analysis:** All participants' sorting data was aggregated and subjected to multi-dimensional scaling, producing a point map of all 100 ideas in two-dimensional space. Spatial proximity among points indicates degree of relatedness. Ideas that are closer together tend to be thought of as being more conceptually similar than ideas that are farther apart ([Figure 2a](#)).



**Figure 2a.** This point map displays each of the one hundred statements in two-dimensional space, as a result of the aggregation of all participants' sorting data subjected to multi-dimensional scaling. Each point represents one of the one hundred ideas. Statements that appear closer together on this map tend to be thought of as more conceptually similar by sorting participants than those statements that appear farther apart.

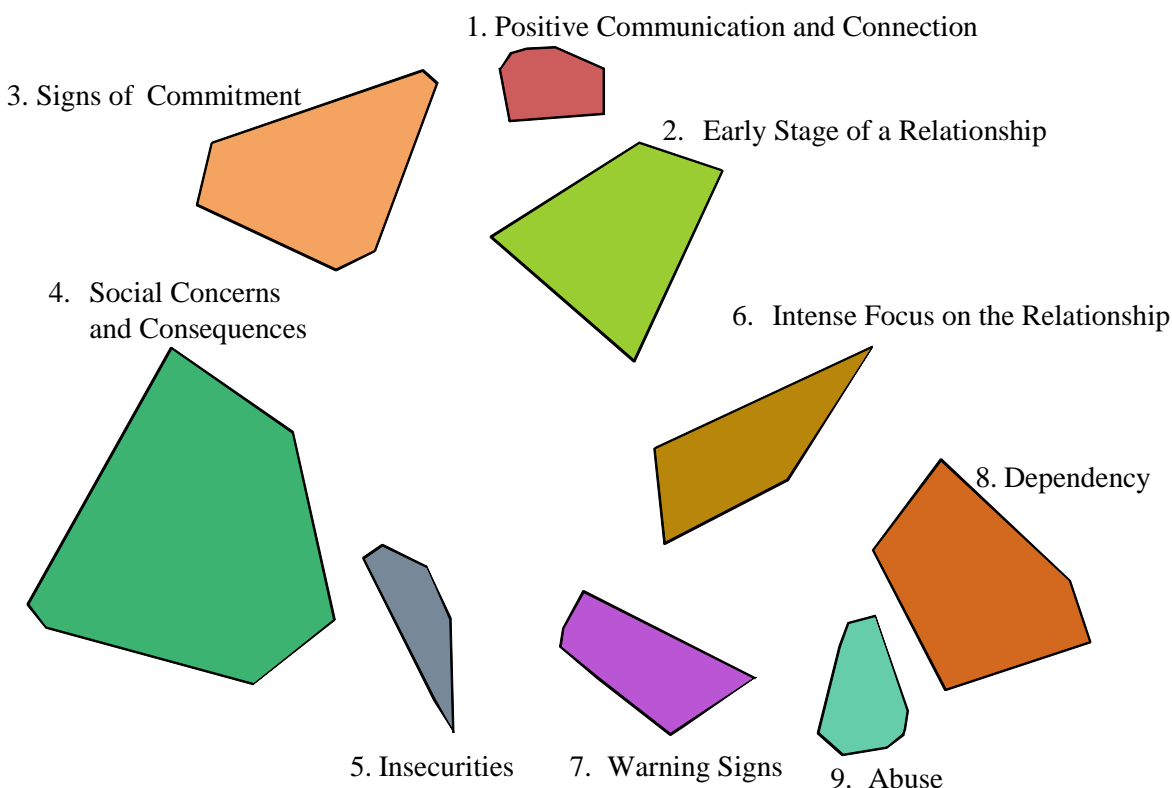
Cluster analysis was then applied to the point map to consider the individual ideas as a smaller set of higher-order themes. After reviewing multiple cluster solutions, the Planning Group determined that a nine cluster solution was the most meaningfully interpretable representation of the content ([Figure 2b](#)).



**Figure 2b.** Following generation of the point map (2a), hierarchical cluster analysis is used to partition the space on the map into non-overlapping territories of conceptual similarity or relatedness. In this case, the Planning Group determined that this nine-cluster solution was the most meaningfully interpretable arrangement of the map content into higher-order themes or constructs.

The Group also decided that the concept map including all participants' sorting data would be the final results representation, as very little difference was found in qualitatively and quantitatively comparing how the three groups (teens, young adults, adults) conceptualized the ideas' interrelatedness. While participants as a whole varied in whether they associated ideas in the center of the map with the more positive or negative conceptual territories, the nine cluster solution grouped these ideas together in a centrally-located cluster, allowing their meaning in relation to the other clusters to be expressly discussed in Phase II (Figure 3). Temporary cluster labels were later revised based on feedback from subsequent youth discussions. The final constructs included:

- *Cluster 1: Positive Communication and Connection*
- *Cluster 2: Early Stage of a Relationship*
- *Cluster 3: Signs of Commitment*
- *Cluster 4: Social Concerns and Consequences*
- *Cluster 5: Insecurities*
- *Cluster 6: Intense Focus on the Relationship*
- *Cluster 7: Warning Signs*
- *Cluster 8: Dependency*
- *Cluster 9: Abuse*



**Figure 3.** This cluster map displays the nine emergent constructs, each labeled based on consensus from teen, young adult and practitioner facilitated discussions as to its meaning, based in its constituent statements and in relation to all other constructs of the map.

- Ratings Analysis:** Analysis of participants' ratings data at the cluster level revealed considerably strong predictable alignment across ratings scales as well as across participant subgroups. All participants' opinions of the frequency of the ideas by cluster were highly aligned with their opinions of desirability ( $r=0.94$ ). Comparisons of youth and adult ratings of both scales also yielded strong correlations, as did comparisons among teens and young adults, male and female youth, black and white youth, urban and rural youth, and adult researchers and practitioners ( $r > 0.90$  for all analyses). Statement level ratings analyses also revealed relatively strong agreement among teens, young adults and adults, with ratings correlations of 0.83 and 0.95 on frequency and desirability, respectively. Larger ratings differences did emerge among youth and adults on certain items. For example statement 82, "*willing to do whatever it takes to keep a relationship,*" was rated by adults as 1.31 on the desirability scale, while teens and young adults combined rated this item as 2.59 on desirability. Adults saw this particular item as relatively less desirable than youth on average, despite overall alignment on the ratings of the statement set as a whole.

## PHASE I RESULTS SUMMARY

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The concept mapping process yielded a robust foundation of consensus among youth and adults. At each step of data collection, overall agreement emerged (idea generation, sorting, rating). The Planning Group also identified two emergent dimensions in the concept map – healthy/unhealthy and internal/external. In reviewing how the content changes from the northern area of the map toward the southern area, the ideas closest to cluster 1 were healthier and more positive aspects of a relationship, while content located closer to cluster 9 were unhealthier and increasingly abusive. Applying the analogy of geographic direction, this healthiness dimension runs from "north" to "south" along the map. Spatially perpendicular to this healthiness dimension (i.e., running from "east" to "west", the Planning Group identified an internal/external or public/private dimension, with content located closest to Cluster 4 as more public, external, or behavioral, and content located closest to Cluster 6 as more private, emotional or cognitive.

## PHASE II: FACILITATED DISCUSSIONS

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Phase II of this study was used to validate and augment the concept mapping results through facilitated discussions with youth and adults. These discussions were intended to better understand some of the complexity and nuances underlying teen and young adults' perspectives of the emergent constructs within the context of teen dating and adolescent social life. Discussions with adults were also used to consider potential implications of the concept map results for healthy relationship program development, TDV prevention, and future research in related areas.

The research team conducted twelve facilitated discussions total, spread across each of the three participant groups: four with adults (researchers, practitioners, and the Workgroup), four with teens, and four with young adults. Adult discussions were conducted virtually via webinar, and youth discussions were conducted in-person with youth-serving organizations in disparate geographic locations and with diverse organizational objectives and services.

For each discussion, the research team reviewed the project purpose, concept mapping process and results, before posing a set of questions to prompt interpretive discussion. Teen and young adult discussions also included eliciting feedback on cluster labels and their perspectives on how well the map results resonate with their own understandings of dating relationships.

In addition to the high degree of convergence in the concept mapping results, the facilitated discussions highlighted further areas of alignment in youth and adult perspectives. Perhaps most prominent was participants' common suggestion for improved, more fluid communication among youth and adults. Both youth and adults remarked on the challenges in talking with one another (youth with adults, adults with youth) on the topic of teen dating, in some instances explicitly suggesting that efforts to address this communication challenge be incorporated into future programmatic work. While youth, unlike adults, were generally not surprised by the concordance in the map results, they still conveyed an impression of adults' disrespect for or distrust of their relationships. For adults, attention to the consensus represented in the map led to similar comments around adults' general disregard or condescension toward teen dating.



Both youth and adult discussions also noted the “on the ground complexity” of teen dating relationships that underlies the visual simplicity of the map. While agreeing that the map is a generally accurate representation, participants noted that the saliency of these different concepts is highly dependent on the contextual details of a given relationship, and that oftentimes elements of multiple clusters are present at a given point in time. Teen participants also illuminated specific statements and clusters, particularly those located toward the center of the map, which could be perceived as healthy or unhealthy depending on the circumstances in which they occur.

No areas of clear divergence emerged across youth and adults discussions, though they did include different points of emphasis. Teens and young adults referred extensively to the clusters and their contents throughout the discussions as points of reference to articulate their ideas about dating relationships. Adults discussed the clusters more broadly, emphasizing the inclusion of both positive and negative ideas, as well as the presence of behaviors, emotions, and cognitions.

Youth were generally less surprised by the alignment among youth and adult conceptualizations, considering the ideas, their groupings and ratings as a reflection of "human nature." Adult participants tended to remark more on the similarity as surprising, and/or an encouraging result for the field. While young adults were purposefully included to examine any differences between the older adolescent age group and teens, many of the same themes and interpretations arose across groups.

Nevertheless, topics such as the routine use of technology and social media, and the frequency and triviality of sex, emerged as points of discussion that youth suggested adults were likely unaware or uninformed. Also notably different was young adults' attention toward certain items on the map that they felt to be more characteristic of high school or teenage relationships and less so of their own age group. Young adults also tended to discuss the post-high school environment as catalyzing a shift in their priorities, decreasing the weight or importance placed on dating relationships after high school. Youth also consistently recommended that parents and teachers be informed of the similarity in the ratings results, believing that these adults may be more inclined to take their relationships seriously in seeing that teens can clearly distinguish "good from bad."

Additional themes from teen and young adult discussions included:

- Concept map validity: General support for the validity of the concept map, including confirmation of its overall completeness in describing characteristics of teen dating.
- Missing concepts: Suggestions of some concepts as missing from the map, including the strong presence of peer pressure, "working through things" or "going through a rough spot," denying a relationship, hiding behind social media, and feeling personally empowered or independent while in a relationship.
- Relationship stages: Temporal description of clusters as stages or phases of a relationship, whereby clusters 1 and 2 were often referred to with terms such as “the honeymoon stage,” “first

love,” “the beginning,” or “puppy love phase”, while Clusters 7, 8, and 9 were talked about as “the end,” “fright stage,” or “time to get out.”

- Relevance of multiple clusters: Observation that teen dating relationships likely include elements from multiple clusters at any given point in time.
- Relationship types: Observation that while this map represents well the characteristics of a couple that is exclusively dating one another, other concepts might be present if the study asked specifically about other relationship types such as first dates, casual dating, “just hooking up,” or “friends with benefits.”
- Awareness: Challenges around teens’ ability to recognize unhealthy or abusive characteristics while in their own relationships as contributing to the incidence of unhealthy or abusive dating relationships.
- Peer networks: Peer networks as a major source of influence on dating behaviors and attitudes, above and beyond other frames of reference such as television and social media.
- High school environment: The high school environment as particularly impactful on teen dating, especially around creating a sense of intensity and "drama." The high school context was discussed in many groups as limiting youth's perspective of the relative importance of dating, in turn elevating the emphasis and overall sense of significance of the relationships beyond what might be considered reasonable outside of this context.
- Similarity of adult relationships: Perceptions of adult relationships as not being particularly different from their own. Several of the map concepts, including abuse, were noted by youth as issues that adults also grapple with in their own romantic relationships.
- Sex: An emphasis that sex can be part of any type or phase of teen dating relationships despite the statement’s location in the cluster *Signs of Commitment*. Teens conveyed that sex is far less tied to emotions, moral values or commitment than some adults may think, and can happen throughout a relationship regardless of other behaviors or emotions that are present simultaneously.

Additional themes from adult discussions included:

- The marked inclusion of positive relationship characteristics as a refreshing perspective on teen dating. Whereas many programs are designed around building youth awareness of risky or abusive dating behavior, the inclusion of these desirable, positive characteristics in the map conveys that youth, like adults, strive for healthy relationships, and that programs may focus more on supporting youth in achieving them.
- The inclusion of emotional and cognitive items in the map, in addition to the behavioral and attitudinal aspects that many programs and measurement frameworks tend to focus on most heavily.

- Whereas the field’s focus is typically on physical assault, the map conveys emotional and psychological abuse, as well as other items that may be correlates, antecedents or outcomes, such as feeling depressed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The results of Phases I and II offer several recommendations for the field, summarized below and explained in greater detail in the full report.

- **Generalizability:** Future work should more purposefully investigate the extent to which the map content resonates with a broader respondent universe and different populations, including but not limited to LGBTQ youth, youth of various socioeconomic statuses, urban and rural locations, races and ethnicities, high-risk neighborhoods, religious beliefs, family environments, TDV victims and/or perpetrators, and youth that have and have not participated in healthy relationship programming. Among adults, the validity of the map content should be tested with a broader sample of parents and teachers.
- **Revising Programming Focus:** Perhaps the most significant implication of this study for program design is around broadening focus to be more inclusive of dating characteristics that are not necessarily overtly abusive. The results of this study emphasize that many components of teen dating relationships are not explicitly unhealthy, but may nevertheless be risk factors in certain contexts and/or antecedents or correlates of abuse that teens are largely unaware of while engaged in their own relationships.
  - First, we recommend broadening the scope of these programs to include focus on positive, healthy behaviors that also carry their own complexities.
  - Second, we recommend programming designed to help teens navigate uncertain or stressful aspects of relationships. Often referred to by youth participants as “rough patches,” programming is needed to help teens make decisions around whether the combination of seemingly negative or undesirable characteristics warrant a break-up, or whether it is appropriate to “stick it out and work through it.”
  - Finally, programming that focuses specifically on abuse identification and response should consider a design that is sensitive to the likely reality that unhealthy or abusive factors are often compounded by the presence of more positive feelings and behaviors that can make it especially difficult to recognize abuse and/or warning signs.
- **Relationship Stages:** As a key objective of this study was to include youth voice in adolescent relationship research, we recommend exploring further the pathway or timeline model that many participants articulated. While youth acknowledged the co-occurrence of ideas from multiple clusters, we nonetheless recommend that the field consider whether a temporal perspective, in conjunction with the map, may be a useful tool in talking about healthy relationships and dating objectives with youth. Teens may resonate with curricula that discuss relationship characteristics in terms of a beginning and an end, with various areas of ambiguity in between. Focus on the

“end stage” of dating relationships may be particularly germane to improving youth programming. The extent to which youth are able to effectively manage relationship dissolution can have significant implications on a number of mental health issues

- **Categories as Programmatic Tools:** Many youth participants agreed that the presentation of items by cluster helped to elucidate the negative qualities of certain ideas that might otherwise be thought of as normal or neutral. For example, the association of texting all the time with items related to anxiety, worry, or feeling smothered conveys an unhealthier scenario, whereas its placement with the ideas in Cluster 2 tells a different story, one of infatuation, lust and excitement. These nine constructs may provide an instrumental organizing device in helping youth to recognize when certain behaviors or feelings might be healthy aspects of a relationship or, in other cases, warning signs. Practitioners may consider using these categorical “buckets” of dating characteristics as part of scenario building or other skill-building activities.
- **Variations in Types of Relationship:** Facilitated discussions included mention of the variation in level of commitment and formality of romantic relationships, such as “just hooking up,” “friends with benefits,” “in a serious relationship,” or other “types” of relationships. We recommend that future research further distill the unique qualities of variations in teen dating, both to enhance our understanding and operational definitions of adolescent relationships, as well as to inform the specificity of prevention and intervention programs. Specifically future research should investigate how youth conceptualize aspects of less committed relationships. Whereas the map represents how youth think about more exclusive dating relationships, these concepts may serve as a basis for examining the extent to which youth conceptualizations of “hooking up” or more casual dating include items that are similar to or different from the items in the concept map. Through this research, program design can also be more circumstantially sensitive in matching prevention and intervention efforts to better resonate with variation of teens’ experiences.
- **Associations and Interrelationships among Dating Characteristics:** We recommend that researchers use the organization of ideas in the concept map as a basis for further investigating the relationship among certain dating characteristics. Specifically, we recommend that researchers consider how emotional, behavioral and cognitive items within the same or adjacent (conceptually similar) clusters correlate with and/or may be causative factors of one another. Relatedly, research may investigate how often and in what combinations the more positive, healthy characteristics tend to co-occur with more negative, unhealthy characteristics within a dating relationship.
- **Measurement:** These study results underscore the complexity of teen dating relationships, including the co-occurrence of a variety of dating characteristics that fall along a spectrum of frequency and desirability. We recommend modification of some of the existing scales as they are used in this field, to account for many of the non-violent, non-behavioral, but in many cases highly relevant aspects of adolescent relationships that may indicate unhealthy relationship

development. The emergent dimensions in the map (healthiness, internal/external) also provide a framework for use in instrument development.

We also recommend that the field use the dating characteristics captured through this project as an “idea bank” for exploring how the emotional and cognitive items might be instigated and experienced through different means and modes, particularly those commonly utilized in teens’ social settings.

- **Research on Self-Awareness:** Multiple youth groups noting challenges in identifying unhealthy aspects in their own relationships, while still being able to recognize warning signs or risk factors in their friends' relationships. One way to use the project results to explicitly study youth self-awareness is to use the map items and various rating scales to compare youth perceptions over time or across relationships. For instance, youth could be surveyed on the presence of various relationship characteristics during and 6 months following the end of a dating relationship to evaluate whether self-awareness is improved once teens are out of a relationship. Studies could also compare how youth describe or rate the presence/desirability of items in their current relationships with a past relationship, or their own relationship compared to a close friend’s relationship. The overarching implication is to use the map content to directly observe whether and along which dimensions youth awareness of relationship characteristics changes relative to whether they are being asked about their own current relationship or a past or other relationship to which they are more of an “observer” (i.e., outside of the relationship). Beyond the concept map, research on the social psychological and developmental processes of adolescent dating may explain this phenomenon. It may be the case that adolescents are more likely to use defense mechanisms, particularly when experiencing in their initial dating relationships, and attempting to match these first experiences to an idealized vision of romance.
- **Professional Development:** We recommend that the similarity among youth and adult conceptualizations is disseminated for incorporation into teacher, guidance counselor and family therapist professional development. As both youth and adults noted the disconnect in how adults talk with youth about their relationships, communication skill-building in adult ongoing education programs could help to ameliorate this divide. Additionally, given that little work to date has consider adolescent romantic relationships using the direct perspectives and vernacular of youth, sharing the concepts and ideas that resulted from this study (and that are articulated by youth) with adults may also improve the noted disconnect in how youth and adults effectively communicate with one another on this topic.
- **Peer Networks:** Given the emphasis on peer influence as part of teen dating, we recommend that researchers in this field more routinely expand their level of focus beyond the dating couple. Within the context of this project, we suggest that much can be gained by considering how the map can be used as a lens into peer related issues. While some of the map items already relate specifically to friends, the map constructs themselves may be used as a framework for further querying the role of peers in teen dating relationships. For instance, one might consider how concepts like dependency, insecurities, and commitment within the dating relationship manifest,

influence, or are affected by dating partners' friendships in order to more fully understand how teens' broader social context intersects with romantic partnerships.

- **Theoretical Extension:** As the results of this project include detailed accounts of dating relationships from the perspectives of youth, this vernacular may be relevant to advancing theory on adolescent relationships. For example, the language used by teens and young adults to explain the sequence of "stages" within a given relationship may be used to further specify theory on the duration and temporal aspects of adolescent dating relationships. A developmental perspective may consider how this micro-level sequence changes over the course of broader developmental transitions.

Additional theory development might focus on the role of media in shaping youth perspectives of dating relationships, such as in the expected roles and associated behaviors of men and women in relationships. As media may shape youth perspectives in part through its reinforcement through peers, the developmental-contextual approach may consider incorporating the influence of public messaging and social media in theorizing about the dynamics of the peer context in adolescent romance.

## CONCLUSION

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The results of this study emphasize that teen dating relationships are complex. To date, the field has lacked a well specified, operational conceptualization of adolescent romantic relationships. The constructs and their interrelationships realized through this study provide a robust basis for resolving definitional ambiguity and further understanding of the intricacies of teen dating.

In supporting NIJ's efforts to address teen dating violence, these results shed light on some of the strengths and challenges within the field. Whereas professionals and youth hold similar perspectives of the elements of teen dating and their interrelationships, this study also prompts a more holistic perspective of adolescence romance. Despite general concordance in conceptualizations, our results encourage a more systematic consideration of both normative adolescent romantic relationships and relationship violence.

As formative experiences in adolescent development, teen dating relationships are multidimensional and so too is teen dating violence. We propose that research, programming and policy aimed to curb rates of this problem are most likely to be effective by accounting for this multidimensionality in their design and execution, along with attention to bridging the social and communicative divide between youth and adults on this topic.