Chapter 7

The Situational Context of Dating Violence

Studies have examined intimate violence between spouses (or stable or semistable common-law relationships) and adolescents involved in conventional courtship and dating relationships. Many of these studies, along with what has been presented in previous chapters here, have identified the etiology of partner violence as embedded in socially structured gender inequalities that emerge in these relationships (McFarlane et al. 2004; Miller and White 2003; Watts and Zimmerman 2002; Amaro 1995). Limited attention, however, has been paid to adolescent delinquents involved in less clearly defined and short-term dating relationships living in economically marginalized urban communities, as is the case with the studied population.

Previous studies have not focused on circumstances surrounding the violent incidents themselves within adolescent dating relationships or even within those of adults in either dating or more permanent relationships. Understanding the situational level processes that instigate the violent act among these high-risk adolescents is a major focus of this chapter. Such processes are defined as “those factors outside the individual that influence the initiation, unfolding or outcome of a violent event” (Sampson and Lauritsen 1994, 30). These situational processes are defined as microlevel since they usually are concerned with face-to-face street encounters in everyday life. Microlevel processes are important in that they suggest mechanisms and properties that can contribute to a deeper understanding of violence. These microlevel explanations are expected to be more important in subcultures (and societies) that are less “institutionally complete” (Valdez 1993, 193). As James Short states: “Microlevel processes probably are

A. Valdez, Mexican American Girls and Gang Violence
© Avelardo Valdez 2007
more important to the explanation of the behavior of gang members, individually and collectively, than they are for young people who are involved in more formally and effectively structured, adult-sponsored institutions” (Short 1985). The situational approach is highly appropriate for examining dating violence among females involved in street gangs and marginalized and segmented from the majority society.

**Situating Partner and Dating Violence**

An extensive amount of research has focused on the issue of intimate-partner violence among adults (Amaro et al. 1990; Kaufman, Kantor, and Jasinski 1998; McFarlane et al. 2004; Watts and Zimmerman 2002). Much of this research has focused on the etiology of the violence and on predictors of such violence aimed at developing appropriate prevention and intervention strategies. During the last few decades, however, a body of literature has emerged that is focused on partner violence among adolescents, which has been referred to as “dating violence” (Miller and White 2003; O’Keefe 1997; Malik, Sorenson, and Aneshensel 1997; Silverman et al. 2001; O’Keefe and Treister 1998; Molidor and Tolman 1998; Giordano et al. 1999; Makepeace 1986; Sugarman and Hotaling 1997). Dating violence refers to a distinct situation of “the perpetration or threat of an act of physical violence by at least one member of an unmarried dyad within the context of the dating process” (Sugarman and Hotaling 1989, 5). A generalization from this literature is that differences in adult versus adolescent partner violence are due to the nature of adolescence as a developmental stage. Adolescents are less apt to have acquired the social and psychological skills at their age to successfully negotiate partner relationships and other peer interactions.

A major finding in adult partner violence relevant to adolescents is that the rate of violence perpetration across gender is similar (Miller and White 2003; Straus and Gelles 1990). Furthermore, men and women involved in partner violence often have a common psychological profile. Some, however, suggest that females engage in more female-perpetrated and nonreciprocal violence—as measured by the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) (1995). However, as she and many others acknowledge, the CTS does not adequately measure factors such as severity of injuries and other emotional and physical harm. Moreover, the nature of the violence that is perpetrated by females tends to be more trivial and less serious and occurs in reaction to their male partners’ aggression (O’Keefe 1997; Giordano et al. 1999). A criticism of this research is that it minimizes the female participant’s interpretation, motivations, and