

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Conflicts with Friends and Romantic Partners: Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses of the Experiences of Girls in Care

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Correspondence: Jennifer Connolly (connolly@yorku.ca)**Received:** 14 October 2021 | **Revised:** 12 December 2023 | **Accepted:** 27 January 2024**Funding:** This research was supported in part by the Xchange grant from Women's College Hospital and an award from the LaMarsh Centre for Child and Youth Research at York University.**Keywords:** adolescent | conflict | foster care | friendships | out-of-home care | romantic relationships

ABSTRACT

Conflicts are common in adolescent friendships and romantic relationships. The ways girls in care navigate conflicts in close relationships have implications for their resilience, since their family relationships are compromised. We employed qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the conflicts in the friend and romantic relationships of 37 girls in care. They completed an interview about the conflicts with their best friend and boyfriend and a measure on the positive and negative quality of the friendship and romantic relationship within which the conflicts took place. Thematic analysis indicated the girls experienced more intense and volatile conflicts with their boyfriend than best friend. However, the intensity of these conflicts was mitigated by their positive perceptions in their quantitative reports. Despite conflicts, the girls reported significantly higher levels of positive than negative relationship quality within their romantic relationships and similar levels of negative quality between the two relationships. Findings highlight the girls' struggles with their romantic relationship compared to their friendship and especially their attempts to interpret conflict within a more global assessment of relationship quality. The findings provide a nuanced understanding of the girls' relational patterns, which can be used to inform interventions to support their development of healthy relationships.

1 | Introduction

Conflicts are common in adolescents' and young adults' friendships and romantic relationships, and the ways youth manage conflicts reveal important information about their relationship qualities (Shulman et al. 2006). Most studies of conflicts are with youth living with their biological families, and little is known about youth whose families have dissolved, such as youth who are placed in out-of-home care through child protective services (hereafter, 'youth in care'). Friendships and romantic relationships are particularly important for youth in care as they experience disruptions in their family relationships (Courtney and

Heuring 2005; South et al. 2016). Further, girls in care are at an increased risk for socioemotional problems compared to boys in care (Leve, Fisher, and DeGarmo 2007). Although research has focused on the early adverse relational experiences of girls in care and their heightened risks for relational difficulties, there is limited understanding of the girls' conflict experiences in the close relationships they form after they enter care. The current study utilized qualitative and quantitative approaches to explore the conflicts in the best friend and romantic relationships of girls in care. This understanding is crucial to inform interventions to promote healthy relationships and resilience among girls in care.

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1.1 | Friendships

From a developmental perspective, friendships become increasingly significant in youth's development as they grow older (Rubin, Bukowski, and Bowker 2015). As early as preschool, friends provide companionship and opportunities for children to establish positive connections and develop social and communication skills (Corsaro 2017). Friendships are adolescents' first, voluntary relationships that allow them to develop autonomy and independence from their parents and to receive companionship, intimacy, and support from their friends (Connolly et al. 2000). Friendships also serve important functions for youth to acquire and consolidate skills to manage conflicts and jealousy and navigate normative experiences of relationship dissolution (Hinton and Erwin 2013; Rubin, Bukowski, and Laursen 2011).

1.2 | Romantic Relationships

Youth first develop closeness and intimacy with friends, which are essential relational skills for successful romantic relationships (Connolly and McIsaac 2011). By mid-adolescence, youth begin to date and develop strong bonds with their romantic partners (Lantagne and Furman 2017). With the increase in romantic involvement, youth experience higher levels of conflict and pressure in romantic relationships than in friendships and are faced with the need to negotiate conflicts in ways that balance their own and partners' needs (Connolly et al. 2014; Kuttler and La Greca 2004). Youth who have supportive friendships feel more comfortable taking risks and expressing their perspectives in romantic relationships (Taradash et al. 2001). On the contrary, youth with higher levels of aggression and conflicts in their friendships are more likely to have conflictual relationships with their romantic partners (Ellis, Chung-Hall, and Dumas 2013; Reed et al. 2011). Indeed, not all youth navigate romantic relationships successfully and adolescents' romantic relationships typically do not last longer than a year (Connolly and McIsaac 2009). In understanding more deeply about youth's friendships and romantic relationships, examining how they navigate conflicts with their best friends and romantic partners is especially useful in revealing the nuances of their relationships.

1.3 | Conflicts in Relationships

Conflicts provide an opportunity to express one's needs and feelings and negotiate differences (Connolly et al. 2015). While conflicts deepen the connections and communication in the relationships, they are also common reasons for relationship dissolution (Flannery and Smith 2021). Fighting among friends, betrayal, lack of reciprocity, and dissimilarity of values are some of the reasons that led youth to end their friendships (Flannery and Smith 2021). Similarly, flirting and cheating, differences in personality and values, and difficulty balancing multiple relationships and school are causes of conflicts in romantic relationships (Sullivan et al. 2010). Adolescents are often able to resolve conflicts through positive communication skills and coping strategies (Connolly and McIsaac 2011; Sullivan et al. 2010). However, they may also resort to less adaptive strategies, such as withdrawal for

fear of being rejected by their partners and friends, downplaying their disagreement, and ignoring their partners' aggression to preserve the relationship (Bonache, Gonzalez-Mendez, and Krahe 2017; LeFebvre et al. 2019; Tuval-Mashiach and Shulman 2006). These less adaptive conflict resolution strategies may lead to poor relational outcomes, such as teen dating violence (Baker 2017; Bonache, Gonzalez-Mendez, and Krahe 2017). As such, developing high-quality friendships and romantic relationships is a developmentally salient task, and the ability to navigate conflicts is crucial for youth's well-being and development (Holder and Coleman 2015; Kuttler and La Greca 2004). However, forming high-quality relationships may be particularly challenging for vulnerable youth, such as those who have experienced disruptions in their caregiving relationships and are involved in out-of-home care (Connolly et al. 2015).

1.4 | The Friend and Romantic Experiences of Girls in Out-of-Home Care

In the United States, there are approximately 423,997 youth receiving out-of-home care through child protective services (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2021). Youth are removed from their families due to disruptions and dissolutions in their family relationships, as well as potential exposure to child maltreatment and neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2021). Many youth live in out-of-home placements for years and experience placement instability while in care (Konijn et al. 2019). They are often required to adapt to new physical and social environments, such as their schools and neighbourhoods and experience repeated losses of relationships (Strijker, Knorth, and Knot-Dickscheit 2008). These experiences also impact their self-concept development, contribute to their loneliness and fear of abandonment and limit their opportunities to experience healthy relationships (Ball et al. 2023).

Research has shown that having close friendships is a source of resilience for youth in care, as it is significantly associated with lower levels of anxiety and less frequent use of avoidant coping strategies (Legault, Anawati, and Flynn 2006). Having friends promotes the youth's sense of belonging and the unconditional support and encouragement from friends is particularly helpful when they are coping with the stigma associated with being in care and overcoming the challenges in university (Gairal-Casadó et al. 2022; Rogers 2017). However, studies have also shown that some youth in care do not have any friends who could help them and they have fewer friendships than peers their age (Sala-Roca et al. 2012; Schiff and Benbenishty 2006). A meta-analysis also showed that youth and young adults with care experiences report lower quality peer relationships when compared to their peers who are not in care, highlighting a strong need for research to further understand their difficulties in forming high-quality friendships (DeLuca, Claxton, and Dulmen 2019).

Similarly, research has shown that young adults with foster care experiences were less likely than their peers to be involved in a romantic relationship (Courtney et al. 2011). Those with care experiences also reported having more conflicts and less happiness in their marriage compared to their counterparts who

were not in care (Buehler et al. 2000). On the contrary, a recent meta-analysis showed that young adults and adults with care experiences do not differ significantly from a biologically reared sample in terms of their romantic relationship involvement and quality (DeLuca Bishop, Claxton, and van Dulmen 2019). However, the authors emphasize the importance of further examining the different features of youth in care's romantic relationships given there were only a few studies on the foster care samples included in the meta-analysis (DeLuca Bishop, Claxton, and van Dulmen 2019).

While studies have focused on the friendships and romantic relationships of those in care, these studies are mostly on older youth's and adults' global, quantitative assessments of their relationship quality (DeLuca, Claxton, and Dulmen 2019; DeLuca Bishop, Claxton, and van Dulmen 2019). There is limited research on the nuances of the relational experiences of youth who are currently in care. Developing high-quality friendships and exploring romantic relationships have increased developmental significance across adolescence and young adulthood and are particularly important for youth in care who are coping with loneliness and gaining corrective relational experiences (Ball et al. 2023; Connolly and McIsaac 2011). There is also very little examination of their experiences of conflicts, a normative feature of adolescents' and young adults' friendships and romantic relationships, particularly directly from their perspective. Including youth's perspectives on their conflicts would expand on the quantitative results of their friendship and romantic relationship experiences and add a more nuanced perspective to how they navigate conflicts within these relationships.

1.5 | The Current Study

This study explores the conflict patterns in the best friend and romantic relationships of girls in out-of-home care as they are at a heightened risk for disrupted friendships and intimate partner violence victimization than boys (Jonson-Reid and Bivens 1999; Leve, Fisher, and DeGarmo 2007; Wekerle et al. 2009). Our first research question was: What are the girls' experiences of conflicts in their friend and romantic relationships and how are these conflicts similar and different within these relationships? We used qualitative interviews to elicit the girls' perspective directly, which provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the girls' conflicts, grounded in the context of their lived experiences. Our second research question was: How do the girls assess the positive and negative relationship quality of their friendships and romantic relationships? We gathered quantitative data through questionnaire items pertaining to the girls' perceived levels of positive and negative quality in their friendship and romantic relationship, with the goal of expanding on the research on the friend and romantic experiences of youth in care. Our third question was: How are the girls' lived experiences of conflicts reflected within their global assessments of positive and negative relationship quality in their friendships and romantic relationships? The quantitative data complements the qualitative data which allows us to explore the girls' conflicts within the broader framework of their global assessments of the relationships. The study results provide unique insight into how girls with disrupted family relationships navigate conflicts and the potential effects of these conflicts on their friendship and romantic relationship quality.

2 | Method

2.1 | Study Design

The current study was part of a larger mixed-method study of the resilience of girls in care. A child protective agency in a large Canadian city and a group of researchers at a university collaborated on the formulation of the research questions and the study design and implementation. We collected and analysed the quantitative and qualitative data concurrently but separately, with the goal of integrating the two types of data in the interpretation (Creswell et al. 2003).

2.2 | Participants

The agency identified 70 girls (aged 12 to 20 years) who were placed in an out-of-home setting in 2014 and 2015. Of those 70 girls, 15 girls were not interested or were deemed by their workers that they were unable to participate. Fifty-five girls provided consent to be contacted. Of the 55 girls, six declined to participate, and five were unable to reach. The final sample in the larger study included 44 girls who provided consent and attended an in-person meeting for data collection. A subset of 38 girls reported having a best friend and having had at least one boyfriend in their lifetime. We included 37 out of the 38 girls in our current study as one girl reported that their best friend was 43 years old, and it was inferred from her interview that she was referring to her foster parent. We excluded this girl as we were interested in the girls' friendships and her relationship with her foster parent might not be comparable to our sample who had a best friend of similar ages.

The final sample of the 37 girls ranged in age from 13 to 20 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 17.03$, $SD = 1.85$). Participants self-identified as White ($n = 17$, 45.9%), mixed ethnicity ($n = 7$, 18.9%), Black ($n = 3$, 8.1%), Asian ($n = 3$, 8.1%) and First Nations ($n = 3$, 8.1%). Four girls (10.8%) did not identify with any ethnic background. All girls were either wards of the court or in temporary or permanent care of the child protective service. In most cases, the girls ($n = 25$, 67.5%) had been in care for 1 to 6 years. All girls were removed from their home of origin and were placed in out-of-home care: foster homes ($n = 17$, 45.9%), kinship homes ($n = 7$, 18.9%), group homes ($n = 3$, 8.1%) or supervised independent living or at university ($n = 10$, 27.0%). More than half of the girls have spent 1 to 3 years at their current home ($n = 19$, 51.4%) and have lived in multiple settings in the past 3 years ($n = 23$, 62.2%). The demographic characteristics of our sample are reported in Table 1. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board at York University. All participants and their caregivers or workers if they were under 16 years of age provided verbal and written consent.

2.3 | Procedure

The case workers learned about the study from the researchers and introduced the study to the girls using a standardized script. The researchers then followed up with the girls to further explain the study and obtain consent. The girls completed a semi-structured interview on their relationships, followed by an online or paper-and-pencil questionnaire. Only information relevant to the current study is reported. Graduate-level

TABLE 1 | Demographic characteristics.

Demographics	n (%)
Ethnicity	
White	17 (45.9%)
Mixed ethnicity	7 (18.9%)
Black	3 (8.1%)
Asian	3 (8.1%)
First nations	3 (8.1%)
Did not identify with any ethnic background	4 (10.8%)
Time spent in care	
1–3 years	11 (29.7%)
4–6 years	14 (37.8%)
7 years or more	11 (29.7%)
Current placement setting	
Kinship or family	7 (18.9%)
Foster	17 (45.9%)
Group home	3 (8.1%)
Independent living or living at university	10 (27.0%)
Length of time in current placement	
Less than a year	12 (32.4%)
1–3 year	19 (51.4%)
4 or more years	6 (16.2%)
Number of placement settings in the last 3 years	
1 setting	14 (37.8%)
2–3 settings	19 (51.4%)
4 or more settings	4 (10.8%)

researchers with clinical interviewing experiences conducted the interviews to ensure the safety and comfort of the girls as they were asked to discuss sensitive topics. Data collection took 1 to 2 h. Participants received a \$50 gift card and a list of local mental health support services. Interview sessions were audio-taped and transcribed. The girls' case workers also completed a brief questionnaire to provide additional demographic information and the girls' experiences in care.

2.4 | Qualitative Interviews

The semi-structured interview was supported by a relationship history calendar, which provided a visual tool for participants to recall their experiences. In the interview, the girls described when they had a fight with their best friend and their current or most recent boyfriend and how they felt and acted in the situation. A definition of 'best friend' and 'boyfriend' was not initially provided, and these relationship terms were open to the girls' interpretations. The interviewers used open-ended prompts, such as asking if the girls consider their friend as their 'main best friend' and whether the girls were 'seeing' or 'dating' anyone. These prompts were intended to support the girls in deciding whether the person in mind was their 'best friend' or 'boyfriend'. The interview also did not include specific prompts about the girls' positive or negative conflict experiences to allow them to discuss any relevant

experiences. However, the interviewers used open-ended prompts (e.g., what led to the fight, what was the outcome) to ask for clarification and elaborations on the girls' reports of conflicts.

2.5 | Quantitative Measure

2.5.1 | Negative and Positive Relationship Quality

The Network of Relationship Inventory–Relationship Qualities Version (NRI-RQV; Furman and Buhrmester 1985) is a 15-item measure with two subscales on negative relationship quality and three subscales on positive relationship quality. The girls rated their relationship quality with their best friend and boyfriend on a scale of 1 (*never or hardly at all*) to 5 (*always or extremely much*). The girls were instructed to answer the questions based on a best friend who was not their romantic partner, as well as their current boyfriend if they were in a romantic relationship or their most recent boyfriend if they were not in a relationship. We created the negative and positive relationship quality summary scores for their friendship and romantic relationship by averaging their respective subscale scores. Higher summary scores indicate higher negative or positive features in the relationship. The NRI-RQV allowed us to assess the girls' friendship and romantic relationships on the same set of items and helped to contextualize the relationships within which the conflicts took place.

2.6 | Data Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis to identify themes within the qualitative data based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of analysis, namely: (1) getting familiar with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes and (6) producing the report. The second author completed Phases 1 and 2 for all the data collected for the larger study on the resilience of girls in care. The first and second authors then selected a subset of data relevant to the research questions, identified themes and sub-themes among the codes and developed the thematic map. The themes and subthemes were reviewed with the research team to ensure they form a coherent pattern and are reflective of the participants' experiences (Braun and Clarke 2006). We also ensured the wording of the codes, subthemes and themes was either a direct quote or kept as near to the girls' narratives as possible. In addition, we conducted a directed content analysis (Table 2) to quantify the number of girls who expressed similar ideas under each subtheme to make inferences on how the girls generally navigated their conflicts.

For the quantitative measure, we conducted ANCOVA to compare the negative and positive quality summary scores between and within the girls' friendship and romantic relationship, while controlling whether the girls were currently in a romantic relationship. Given half of the girls reported on their current romantic relationships and the other half of the girls reported on their most recent romantic relationships, we decided to use ANCOVA to simultaneously examine the differences in negative and positive relationship quality scores between and within the girls' friendship and romantic relationship and to control for the impact of the girls' current romantic relationship status.

TABLE 2 | Frequencies of codes grouped by subthemes.

Subtheme	Code	Definition	Example responses	Frequency
Conflicts unique to romantic relationships	Lack of commitment and betrayal	The girls' experiences of being cheated on or having doubts about their boyfriend's commitments to their relationship	'He cheated on me more than a few times'	23
	Coercion and giving in	The girls' experiences of being threatened or pressured to do something and/or their worries about their boyfriend being upset and leaving them	'And I would just like suck it up and apologize to him because I didn't want to be alone'	20
	Sexual victimization	The girls' experiences of any actions related to sexual victimization	'I don't know, first I had sex it wasn't very consensual with him... I hate to call it rape, but I tried to escape and he left a scar on my face'	8
Conflicts unique to friendships	Relational aggression	The girls' experiences of being hurt and embarrassed by their best friend's actions to damage their relationship or reputation	'they started bullying me and calling me names and putting rumors around the school'	24
	Guys and dating	The girls' experiences of conflicts about their own or their best friend's decisions related to dating	'I don't like her choices, she's the type of person who always has to be in a relationship and she forces that all the time. I was just like take your time, I was like when you are not looking for someone, you will find somebody. And she gets mad all the time. She's always talking to another guy if nobody pays attention to her.'	18
Similarities in conflicts with best friend and boyfriend	Avoidance of conflicts	The girls' denial of a fight ever happens, or they did not remember or did not want to discuss the fight	'I'm not a, not a very confrontational person. It's not like, I don't really cause fights'	34
	Trying to figure out	The girls' and/or their best friend's or boyfriend's attempts to resolve the conflicts between them	'No, when we have issues, we normally like tell each other and figure it out'	32
Ongoing frustration and jealousy	Physical and verbal aggression	The girls' experiences of being threatened or any actions related to physical and/or verbal aggression in their relationships	'She punched me in the face and then we just got into a fight'	26
		The girls' discussion about having ongoing disagreement and fight with their best friend or boyfriend and/or jealousy in their relationships	'we fought over everything, like one wrong word and we would fight'	25
	System-related issues	The girls' discussion about the issues related to their involvement in the child welfare system that impacted their relationships	'we are actually kind of going through a rough patch now because um being in care there are so many rules'	12

3 | Results

3.1 | Description of their Friendship and Romantic Relationship

Among the 37 girls, 32 (86.5%) identified a female best friend and five identified a male best friend (13.2%). The age of the girls' best friend ranged from 13 to 21 ($M_{\text{age}} = 17.00$, $SD = 2.10$). Specifically, approximately one-third of the girl's best friends were in early adolescence (ages 13 through 15, $n = 13$), one-third were in middle adolescence (ages 16 and 17, $n = 10$) and one-third were in older adolescence (ages 18 through 21, $n = 14$). The age difference between the girls and their best friend ranged from 0 to 5 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 0.54$, $SD = 1.01$). In terms of romantic relationships, 18 (48.6%) girls reported having a current boyfriend, 1 (2.7%) girl reported having more than one boyfriend and 18 (48.6%) girls reported not having a current boyfriend. Thirteen (35.1%) girls have had one or two boyfriends, and 24 girls (64.8%) have had two or more boyfriends in their lifetime.

3.2 | Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis revealed one meta-theme, 'It's so much more intense and volatile with my boyfriend than with my best friend!', and three subthemes that characterized the girls' conflicts with their best friend and boyfriend: (1) conflicts unique to romantic relationships, (2) conflicts unique to friendships and (3) similarities in conflicts with best friend and boyfriend. Many girls initially denied that they ever fought with their best friend or boyfriend and emphasized the positive attributes of their relationships. However, upon further prompts, these girls talked about their conflicts, and the themes of the discussions are reflected below.

3.3 | Meta-Theme

The meta-theme indicates that the girls' conflicts with their boyfriend were more emotionally laden and explosive than with their best friend. The girls were both victims and instigators of mild to moderate forms of interpersonal aggression with their best friend. Yet with their boyfriend, the girls were exposed to much higher levels of coercion and violence and were far more often victims than perpetrators. The conflicts with boyfriend were characterized by betrayal, fear of abandonment, and lack of commitment whereas with best friend the girls mostly fought about their decisions related to dating. The girls also reported some similarities in their sources of conflicts and how they responded to the conflicts in both relationships. Both of the girls' relationships were challenged with ongoing frustration and jealousy, as well as issues related to the girls being in care. Many girls also discussed their tendency to avoid and dismiss their disagreements and attempts to negotiate their needs and expectations in both relational contexts.

3.4 | Conflicts Unique to Romantic Relationships

3.4.1 | Lack of Commitment and Betrayal

Twenty-three girls discussed infidelity and betrayal and signs that made them question their boyfriend's commitment to the relationship. The girls reported fighting with their boyfriend about

being cheated on, which sometimes led to a breakup. Some girls continued to stay in the relationships, perhaps due to their desperate need for love. The girls raised issues about their insecurity in the relationships but also acknowledged their boyfriend's flirtatious behaviours with other girls in fuelling their insecurity and distrust. In addition, the girls fought about their boyfriend's commitment to the relationships as their boyfriends reportedly acted like they did not want to be in a relationship, such as ignoring the girls and 'choosing his friends over [the girl]'.

3.4.2 | Coercion and Giving in

Twenty girls described their fear of losing their boyfriend, despite their boyfriend being unreasonable and controlling. The girls reported giving in to their boyfriend's demands and apologizing, even when they felt they were not in the wrong: 'And I would just like, suck it up and apologize to him because I didn't want to be alone'. Some of the girls' responses also revealed their low self-worth and need for love. After being hit by her boyfriend, a girl shared that she had apologized to him for the reasons of '[her] being stupid and wanting to be loved and running after him again'. Some girls noted that they would try to minimize or ignore their conflicts and continue to stay with their boyfriend despite feeling that they should leave the relationship. The girls also recalled arguments about their boyfriend's controlling behaviours, such as needing to know everything, putting restrictions on their activities and texting and calling them repeatedly. One girl even described her experience as 'I felt like I was in a prison'.

3.4.3 | Sexual Victimization

Eight girls reported being the victims of sexual violence in their romantic relationships. These highly negative and violent incidents significantly impacted the girls physically and emotionally: 'I hate to call it rape, but I tried to escape, and he left a scar on my face'. The fear of their boyfriend's unpredictability and abusive behaviours also prevented some girls from turning to the police or seeking help: 'And then [in] grade 11, my ex-boyfriend beat the crap out of me and raped me and broke two of my ribs and my nose and like, it took me forever to come out and say something and be able to say like this happened.'

3.5 | Conflicts Unique to Friendships

3.5.1 | Relational Aggression

Twenty-four girls reported having experienced relational aggression with their best friend, which harmed their reputations, relationships and feelings. For instance, one girl said, 'they started bullying me and calling me names and putting rumours around the school'. Their best friends have also excluded the girls, spread rumours about them and shared their personal information and secrets with others. Instead of directly confronting each other, some girls and their best friend had reportedly done things to purposefully annoy or ignore each other.

3.5.2 | Guys and Dating

Eighteen girls fought with their best friend about their decisions related to dating. The girls discussed having feelings for or flirting with the same boy as their friend, which led to

the 'biggest fights' and feelings of frustration and anger. In addition, the girls reported fighting over their disapproval of their friends' dating decisions: 'I don't like her choices, she's the type of person who always has to be in [a] relationship and she forces that all the time. I was just like take your time, I was like when you [are] not looking for someone you will find somebody, and she gets mad all the time.' Some girls also reported conflicts with their male best friends, which arose when they had romantic feelings for them. This made their friendships 'awkward' as the girls did not reciprocate these feelings for them.

3.6 | Similarities in Conflicts With Best Friend and Boyfriend

3.6.1 | Avoidance of Conflicts

Thirty-four girls tried to avoid or withdraw from conflicts by apologizing quickly and giving in to their best friend or boyfriend. Some girls also withdraw from conflicts by simply ignoring their friend and boyfriend or pretending nothing happened and hoping that the conflicts would resolve themselves: 'I'd just let him have his space and calm down and then everything would be ok again'. The girls tended to downplay and minimize their disagreement and feelings because 'it wasn't that big of [a] deal' and to not appear as 'too clingy' and 'mad' to their boyfriend.

3.6.2 | Trying to Figure it Out

Thirty-two girls discussed attempts to 'figure it out' with their best friend and boyfriend. One girl recounted her conflict with her boyfriend, 'So I just tell him like you know this is where I'm coming from and this is why it affects me the way it affects me and he understands it right away he's like you [know] what, I'm so sorry, I didn't know that it would affect you like this way ...'. In some instances, these attempts did not lead to a resolution and contributed to further disagreements. The girls' feelings were not always acknowledged and their friend's and boyfriend's plans to change were not followed through. They have also tried to confront their best friend and boyfriend about their feelings but were unable to reconcile their differences. Eventually, these conflicts led to the girls' difficult decisions to end their relationships, particularly their romantic relationships.

3.6.3 | Physical and Verbal Aggression

Twenty-six girls reported physical and verbal aggression in their conflicts. Fifteen girls reported being the victims of physical and verbal aggression in their romantic relationships and eight girls reported being the instigators of fights with their boyfriend. The girls shared details of the physical violence or threats of violence as their boyfriend tried to maintain control over them, which led the girls to suffer from severe injuries and hospitalizations. The girls describe their boyfriends as a 'very scary man' and 'physically abusive' and recalled intense feelings of stress and anxiety when their boyfriends were angry. The girls also experienced different forms of verbal abuse (e.g., yelling, blaming) by their boyfriend. For the subset of eight girls, they also reported yelling, screaming and provoking their boyfriend when they were frustrated. In the girls' friendship, the aggressive behaviours appeared to be more reciprocal in nature among the 16 girls. They

faced similar challenges in communicating their thoughts and feelings, which led their conflicts to easily escalate to a 'screaming match' and sometimes even involved physical hitting between the girls and their best friend. Although the aggressive behaviours were described as intense in the girls' friendships, these behaviours were not as severe as their conflicts with boyfriends.

3.6.4 | Ongoing Frustration and Jealousy

Twenty-five girls described having arguments with their boyfriend and best friend, sometimes over 'the randomest [and] the stupidest things'. Many girls experience normative disagreement, which results in verbal back-and-forth that did not seem to be significant to the girls' relationships. Their fights with boyfriend were over more serious issues, such as their feelings of non-compatibility with their boyfriend. The girls also described these fights with boyfriend as more easily triggered, intense and frequent than with their best friend, as one girl recounted her dating relationship and said, 'we fought over everything, like one wrong word and we would fight'. Feelings of jealousy also posed challenges to the girls' relationships. Compared to the conflicts with best friend, it appeared that the girls' boyfriend showed a stronger desire for exclusivity in their relationships, to the extent that the boyfriend would get 'really mad' when they spent time with others.

3.6.5 | System-Related Issues

Eleven girls shared how being in care impacted their relationships. Living in out-of-home care posed challenges to the girls and their boyfriend: 'we are actually kind of going through a rough patch now because um being in care there are so many rules'. The girls felt frustrated as it was difficult for them to gain their foster parents' trust and approval to spend time with their boyfriend. Other issues included the girls' difficult relationship with their own family, having to relocate with the foster family and the boyfriend's mother's disapproval and negative judgement of the girls being in care. These issues sometimes led to the breakup of a relationship, with one girl's boyfriend sharing that he would like to date her again when she 'gets out of care'. In addition, some girls recalled fighting with their best friend who were also in care about money or their friends taking their personal belongings (e.g., clothes, phones) without permission.

3.7 | Quantitative Comparison of the Relationship Quality of the Girls' Friendship and Romantic Relationship

The ANCOVA results showed that when controlling for the girls' relationship status, the girls reported significantly lower levels of positive relationship quality with their boyfriend ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 1.04$) than with their friends ($M = 4.29$, $SD = .68$), $F(1, 33) = 16.60$, $p < 0.001$, but similar levels of negative relationship quality with their best friend ($M = 2.34$, $SD = 1.07$) and boyfriend ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.15$), $F(1, 33) = 2.32$, $p = 0.137$. Within their romantic relationship, the negative relationship quality summary scores were significantly lower than the positive relationship quality summary scores, $F(1, 33) = 16.60$, $p < 0.001$, while controlling for their relationship status. The positive and negative relationship quality summary scores did not differ within the girls' friendships, $F(1, 33) = 2.32$, $p = 0.137$.

4 | Discussion

In this study, we elicited the girls' perspectives on the conflicts they experienced with their best friend and boyfriend. The qualitative results extend previous research by revealing the girls' perspective on how they view their conflicts and navigate them in both relational contexts. Further, we assessed their global assessment of the levels of positive and negative relationship quality within these relationships, which provide contextual information on the relationships in which the conflicts took place and allow for a comparison between the girls' perceptions and those of young people in normative and youth in care samples. Finally, the integration of the qualitative and quantitative findings allowed us to explore how the girls' qualitative experiences of conflicts were reflected within their global quantitative assessments of friendships and romantic relationships, as well as the aspects of care experiences that might have impacted their conflicts and relational experiences.

In our study, all the girls identified a best friend, which was consistent with a recent meta-analysis showing that many youth in care have a close friend (DeLuca, Claxton, and Dulmen 2019). While the girls in our sample were able to form friendships, the positive quality of their friendships did not outweigh the negative quality, which was in line with research suggesting that they may struggle to form high-quality friendships (DeLuca, Claxton, and Dulmen 2019). With respect to romantic relationships, 89% of the girls in the original sample were either currently involved in a relationship or had a boyfriend in the past. The result was consistent with research showing that dating is prominent by mid-adolescence in normative samples, as well as recent meta-analysis results showing that youth in care's rates of romantic involvement are comparable to their peers not in care (DeLuca Bishop, Claxton, and van Dulmen 2019; Lantagne and Furman 2017). The results indicated that the girls reported significantly more positive than negative quality in their romantic relationship when controlling for their current relationship status. Within the context of disrupted family relationships, the girls may develop greater interdependence with their boyfriend and rely more on them to meet their relational needs (Connolly and McIsaac 2011; Kuttler and La Greca 2004). They may also disregard the conflicts to preserve the positive features of their romantic relationships (Forenza, Bermea, and Rogers 2018).

4.1 | Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis results showed that the girls reported various conflicts with their best friend and boyfriend, with some similarities and differences within these relationships. In both relationships, the girls reported varying levels of ability to manage the conflicts. Challenges navigating conflicts are experienced by adolescents and young adults in the general population and are not exclusive to the experiences of youth in care (Connolly et al. 2015; Sullivan et al. 2010). However, girls in care may be particularly vulnerable to these challenges as they may lack positive models of healthy relationships and the skills needed to resolve conflicts (Forenza, Bermea, and Rogers 2018). The girls may also prefer to avoid and dismiss conflicts to prevent their disagreement from escalating to violence and aggression, which may be the experiences with their families in the past (Forenza, Bermea, and Rogers 2018).

Further, our study findings highlight that the girls reported more intense and volatile conflicts with their boyfriend than their best friend, which was consistent with research showing that youth report more negative features in romantic relationships than in friendships (Kochendorfer and Kerns 2020). Given the experiences of dissolutions in their caregiving relationships, as well as potential exposure to family violence and maltreatment, girls in care may have learned to expect relationships to involve harm and have limited opportunities to gain corrective relational experiences and model healthy relationship skills (DeLuca Bishop, Claxton, and van Dulmen 2019; Lee et al. 2016). Indeed, exposure to family violence places young people at greater risk of being the perpetrator or victim of violence in the context of perceived conflicts, particularly in romantic relationships (Katz, Courtney, and Sapiro 2020). As exclusivity becomes more important, girls with limited positive relationships may also struggle to build trust and communicate effectively, leading to greater and more severe conflicts (Baker 2017; Forenza, Bermea, and Rogers 2018). The nuances of the qualitative findings are further discussed below within the context of the girls' global assessment of relationship quality and their care experiences.

4.2 | Quantitative Findings

The quantitative findings showed that the girls reported lower levels of positive quality in their romantic relationship than in their friendship, but similar levels of negative quality in both relationships. These results are inconsistent with a meta-analysis showing that adolescents in the general population experience similar levels of global positive quality with their friends and romantic partners (Kochendorfer and Kerns 2020). Friendships may acquire heightened importance for the girls in care in the context of disrupted family relationships (DeLuca, Claxton, and Dulmen 2019). Indeed, youth in care consistently perceive friends to be an extremely important source of emotional support (Singer, Berzin, and Hokanson 2013). The girls in our study might also be friends with youth who were also in care, which fostered a sense of belonging and 'sameness' and promoted the positive quality of their friendships (Rogers 2017). Further, the results were in contrast to adolescents in the general population experiencing more global negative quality in romantic relationships than in friendships (Kochendorfer and Kerns 2020). Given the heightened importance of close relationships for youth in care, the girls in the current study might minimize the conflicts with their boyfriends, which was consistent with our qualitative results.

4.3 | Integration of Findings

Integration of the qualitative and quantitative results highlighted two major findings and the care experiences that might be influential on the girls' conflicts with boyfriend and best friend. First, the girls reported more positive than negative relationship qualities in their romantic relationship, despite having some intense conflicts with their boyfriend. The results were consistent with research showing that youth tend to describe their relationships in positive terms (Shulman and Kipnis 2001). Our qualitative results also revealed the girls'

tendency to deny conflicts by emphasizing the positive qualities of their relationships, which might bias their relationship perceptions. When prompted further, many girls discussed their avoidance of conflicts by trivializing their problems, ignoring their friend or boyfriend and the conflicts with them, and suppressing or minimizing their emotions. These responses were favoured by the girls, as they might be less threatening to their relationships than direct confrontation and might help to preserve the relationship harmony (Fernet, Hébert, and Paradis 2016). At the same time, many girls also talked about their attempts to negotiate their expectations and communicate their needs and feelings, which reflected their capacity to manage dissolutions and maintain intimacy in relationships.

Second, although the quantitative results indicated that the girls reported similar levels of negative quality in their friendships and romantic relationships, the interview data revealed that the girls' conflicts with boyfriend were more emotionally laden and explosive than the conflicts with their best friend. For instance, interpersonal aggressions were present in both relationships; however, they were more manifested in the form of violence and coercion in their romantic relationships and the girls were far more often victims than perpetrators in these violent incidents. Youth in care are vulnerable to experiencing intimate partner violence perpetration and victimization due to their high rates of parental maltreatment and violence exposure (Katz, Courtney, and Sapiro 2020). Further, girls with more frequent exposure to intimate partner violence were more likely to have increased expectations that relationships include harm and accept violence in their own romantic relationships (Lee et al. 2016). Many youth in care, especially female youth, also struggle to engage in difficult conversations about their romantic relationships in the context of overwhelming emotions and may use more aggressive and passive-aggressive strategies to communicate their disagreement (Ahrens et al. 2016).

On the other hand, interpersonal aggression was more experienced in the form of relational aggression victimization in the girls' friendships and these experiences, even if verbal and physical aggressions were present, were described as less intense and less frequent compared to their romantic conflicts. Consistent with prior work, victimization is common within the friendships of young adults without care experiences (Dryburgh et al. 2023). Youth in care are also often perpetrators and victims of verbal insults and relational aggression (Attar-Schwartz and Khoury-Kassabri 2015; Barter 2011). Many youth in care share histories of disrupted family situations and maltreatment, which may impact their perceived ability to manage challenges in social situations and lead them to be less assertive and confident in their ability to resolve conflicts in constructive ways (Attar-Schwartz and Khoury-Kassabri 2015; Barter 2011).

Similar to the general population, the negotiation between one's and partner's commitment to the relationship is a challenging aspect of maintaining a relationship (Fernet, Hébert, and Paradis 2016). Jealousy and distrust were reported by girls in the current study as sources of conflict. However, the girls' boyfriends when compared to their friends were more likely to act on their jealousy by controlling the girls' behaviours

(Baker 2017; Draucker et al. 2010). The conflicts with boyfriend were also characterized by more serious trust issues, such as their boyfriend's betrayal and the girls' fear of abandonment. Research has indicated that heightened emotionality is expected in romantic relationships as young people are usually less comfortable in romantic relationships than in friendships (Giordano, Manning, and Longmore 2006). Youth in care's lack of security in relationships and feelings of unworthy of love, likely contributed to their experiences of heightened volatility with their boyfriend and tendency to react more negatively when they perceived a relationship threat (Baker 2017; Giordano, Manning, and Longmore 2006).

Overall, the integration of findings suggests that despite the girls experiencing more intense and volatile conflicts in romantic relationships than in friendship, the intensity of these conflicts was not fully reflected in the girls' quantitative reports. This may suggest that the girls may over-emphasize the positive quality and minimize the negative quality in both relationships, but more so in their romantic relationships. In both relational contexts, the girls reported normative arguments and conflicts unique to their experiences of being in care. The girls noted some attempts to resolve their conflicts and maintain their relationship harmony; however, some of these conflicts nonetheless lead to intense arguments and aggression, particularly within the girls' romantic relationships. The findings shed light on the importance of promoting girls' relationship skills to understand and model healthy behaviours in relationships. Given research has shown that youth in care value communication and trust in their relationships (Forenza, Bermea, and Rogers 2018), supporting girls to recognize aggression within their relationships, as well as to strengthen the skills necessary to maintain high-quality relationships is crucial.

4.4 | Limitations

Our findings should be considered in light of their limitations. First, our study involved a non-random sample of girls in out-of-home care. Our findings may not be generalizable to girls who live in other settings (e.g., residential treatment) as their living situations will likely impact their relationships with their caretakers, friends and boyfriends in the settings (Attar-Schwartz and Khoury-Kassabri 2015). Second, all girls reported to be in a heterosexual relationship. The results may not be generalizable to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth (LGBTQ) in the child welfare system as they may experience additional struggles related to their romantic relationships and friendships, such as a lack of acceptance of their sexual orientations from their friends and caretakers (McCormick, Schmidt, and Terrazas 2017). Third, the girls reflected on their current or most recent romantic relationship if they did not have a boyfriend at the time of the study. The girls whose relationships had ended might perceive their conflicts and relationship quality with their boyfriends differently than those who were still in a romantic relationship. Future research is needed to investigate the conflict experiences of girls in care with different relationship statuses. Fourth, a methodological limitation is that the qualitative data was analysed and reviewed by the researchers and the girls were not involved to support the interpretation of the

findings. However, we collected quantitative and qualitative data, which allowed us to compare the two forms of data and resulted in a comprehensive understanding of their relational experiences (Merriam and Tisdell 2015). Studies integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches are needed to examine the relationship quality of diverse samples of youth in care, as well as the processes of how they navigate these relationships.

5 | Conclusion

This study contributes to the scarce literature on the friendships and romantic relationships of youth in care by exploring their conflicts with best friend and boyfriend directly from the perspectives of girls in care and providing an in-depth understanding of their conflict experiences within the context of their global assessments of their relationship qualities. The findings were discussed within the context of normative development and the unique relational challenges faced by girls in care. The study highlights the importance of future studies to utilize both quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a holistic understanding of the relational patterns of girls in care, with the goal of supporting them in building high-quality relationships.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the study conceptualization and design. Data collection and analysis were performed by Samantha Chan and Katherine Wincentak. All drafts of the manuscript were written by Samantha Chan. Katherine Wincentak and Jennifer Connolly commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Statement

This study was approved by York University Research Ethics Board.

Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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