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Latina Adolescents' Perspectives on Relationships

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Abstract: **Objective:** To explore adolescent Latinas' perspectives on relationships and generate knowledge to inform interventions. **Setting:** Seven Latina adolescents participated. **Design:** This qualitative study was guided by principles of community-based participatory research and utilized the photovoice method. **Method:** Participants took photos depicting elements of relationships and participated in guided discussions. They identified and named five elements of healthy relationships. **Results:** The five elements included commitment, communication, faith, amigos y amores (friends and lovers) and play. These elements occur across all forms of relationships. **Conclusion:** The results revealed important information that may be used to tailor health promotion interventions for Latina/o youth.

Key Words: Latina Adolescents, Perspectives on Relationships

LATINA ADOLESCENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON RELATIONSHIPS

This study was created to provide ground work for the development of interventions that support healthy dating relationships among Latina adolescents. Promoting healthy dating relationships may prevent multiple problems, such as emotional, physical or sexual violence, unprotected sexual activity, and other risky and antisocial behaviors (Tharp et al., 2013). The promotion of healthy relationships has also been recommended as a means toward prevention of dating violence by Latino/a adolescents (Williams, Adams & Altamirano, 2012). Approximately 1 in 5 Latino adolescents (19.5%) experience dating violence victimization (Cuevas et al., 2014). Among Mexican American female college students, 43% of women in the sample reported some type of partner violence in the past 12 months (Coker, Sanderson, Cantu, Hierta, & Fadden, 2008). It is important that interventions to foster healthy teen relationships be developed through building on personal, community and cultural strengths. Latinos represent the fastest growing population in the U.S. and comprise a large proportion of the population in many communities (Ennis, Rios-Vargas & Albert, 2011).

Understanding participants' points of view is needed for effective communication and intervention (Garner & Faucher, 2014). To develop engaging interventions for Latina adolescents, it is important to understand at the outset what teens know and value about healthy relationships. A gap exists in understanding promotion of healthy dating relationships for this cultural group as evidenced by limited published literature (Whitaker et al., 2006). In particular there are few published qualitative studies in which Latina adolescents' perspectives on healthy relationships are expressed (Haglund, Belknap & Garcia, 2012; Williams & Hickie, 2010). The available data indicated that Latina adolescents desired mutual respect, trust and commitment in a relationship with their romantic partners (Haglund, et al., 2012). Latino and Latina adolescents expressed that they valued caring, friendship and trust in romantic relationships, desired unconditional acceptance and support, and to be loved for who they were (Collins & Champion, 2011; Haglund et al., 2012; Williams & Hickie, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to explore perspectives on healthy relationships with adolescent Latinas. Our research question, how do Latina adolescents describe and experience healthy relationships, was intended to generate results that would provide some information to fill the gap in the literature. Cultural gender roles influence identity, interpersonal behaviors and expectations for others' behaviors (Haglund et al., 2012; Sanderson, Coker, Roberts, Tortolero, & Reininger, 2004). Thus only girls were included in this study to facilitate deeper understanding of cultural and gender specific influences on perceptions of what makes relationships healthy. While our original intent was to explore dating relationships, the par-

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ticipants adopted a broader view identifying healthy elements common in a variety of relationships. This study provided a vehicle for participants to express their views in words and images, to be heard by members of their immediate community and to contribute to the professional discourse regarding health promotion for adolescents.

METHODS

This conceptual framework for this study was drawn from the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR) and the photovoice method for data collection and analysis (Wang & Burris, 1997). Central to the principles of CBPR and the photovoice method is the recognition of individual agency and acknowledgment that participants are experts on their lives. CBPR is action oriented and openly promotes emancipatory experiences (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). Control of the project is shared; the community and researchers are collaborative partners, both actively generating new knowledge (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Being active partners in the research process facilitates participants' awareness of their abilities to act as agents of change and empowers them to increase control in their lives (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). In this study, the participants broadened the focus from an emphasis on healthy elements of dating relationships to a view of elements common in all healthy relationships. In keeping with the principles of CBPR, the researchers accepted and supported the direction the participants chose to take with the project.

Photovoice is a community-based participatory research method that enables participants to reflect on strengths and concerns, engage in critical dialogue to produce knowledge, and reach community leaders and policy makers to promote social change (Strack, Magill & McDonagh, 2004). Several previously published studies have successfully employed photovoice with groups of Latino/a adolescents ranging in size from five to 20 participants (Gubrium & Torres, 2013; Noone et al., 2014; Postma, Peterson, Vega, Ramon, & Cortes, 2014; Streng et al., 2004; Vaughn, Rojas-Guyler & Howell, 2008). Photovoice appears to be a method well-suited for adolescents (Drew, Duncan & Sawyer, 2010). Teens have voiced interest in participation because they like photography (Garcia et al., 2013). Photo elicitation provides a means to express emotions, experiences and responses that adolescents may not have the vocabulary to describe. The guided discussions and process of reflection helps adolescents to find the words and concepts needed to talk about their emotions and experiences (Drew et al., 2010). The photovoice process itself is a way to foster and strengthen relationships among participants, research teams and communities. It is a method that overtly values the expertise of participants and allows for participants to be partners in the generation knowledge. Adolescence is characterized as a period of autonomy development in which teens are seeking to have their thoughts and opinions heard and taken into account when planning things that involve them (Schaeuble, Vukovich & Haglund, 2010). CBPR and the photovoice method are well suited for projects that include adolescents.

Sample and Setting

A convenience sample of participants were recruited from a Catholic parish in a small Midwestern city located near a large metropolitan area. In this city, Latinos were the largest minority group comprising 12.1% of the population, compared to 80% White, 3.5% Asian, 2.2% African-American, and 0.3% American Indian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The research team had an established relationship with this parish having conducted prior research there (Haglund, et al., 2012). Eligibility criteria for participation included female gender, ages 14 to 18 years, personal desire to participate, and parental consent for those less than 18 years. Approval was obtained from the pastor of the church. Researchers met with the parish youth worker to explain the study. This youth worker recruited seven participants and parents for an introductory meeting held at the parish with the researchers. Researchers explained the study to parents and participants in Spanish and English. Parental consents (in Spanish) and participant assents (in English) were obtained at the introductory meeting. All adolescents who attended this meeting agreed to participate. The study was approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Photovoice Process

The team, comprised of seven participants, two researchers, two research assistants, and a professional photographer, met once per week for eight weeks during the summer of 2010. Meetings were held at the parish on weekends. Digital cameras were provided for use in the project and returned at the end. Participants received a \$50 gift card at the end of the project.

The participants were co-researchers in this study. Data collection included the photographs that participants took, the tape recordings and transcription of the weekly debriefing sessions, and researchers' field notes. Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection. Researchers provided a space to gather and a framework for discussion of the photos. The participants chose the content and composition of their photos. They analyzed the photos to identify, name and describe elements of healthy relationships. The transcriptions of meetings were coded to correspond to the elements of healthy relationships identified by the participants. This coded material and field notes were used for this article to more richly report elements of healthy relationships as identified by the participants'.

The first session was an introduction. The photographer described how to use the cameras and photographic techniques. Researchers discussed ethics of photography and consent for photographs. The University IRB required written consent from subjects in the photographs if their faces were visible. In the large group, members introduced themselves, spoke about their experiences with photography, and engaged in discussion about healthy relationships. Participants were instructed to take photos that captured elements of healthy relationships. Participants took photos each week of the project, returning to the weekly meetings with the cameras and photos saved on SD cards.

Weekly meetings in the second through fifth weeks consisted of debriefings regarding participants' expe-

periences as photographers and discussions about the photos. Photos from each participant were downloaded onto a researcher's computer and projected on the wall. The photo discussions were facilitated by using the SHOWeD method (Strack et al., 2004). SHOWeD is an acronym for "What do you See here? What is really Happening here? How does this relate to Our lives? Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist? and What can we Do about it?" The group divided into two small groups of three or four participants, a researcher, and a research assistant. These small groups were to insure each participant would have adequate time to present and discuss their photos during the session. The researcher in each group posed the SHOWeD questions to facilitate the discussions. Each participant presented their work by responding to the SHOWeD questions and other questions from the group and talking about the artistic aspects of their photos. The professional photographer went between the groups contributing to discussions. In the sixth session, each participant selected two of their own photos to be included in the exhibition. Participants' personal preferences guided their choices such as some chose the photos that were the most artistic, the best quality or depicted content that they liked.

In week seven, participants engaged in the data analysis of their photos. To accomplish this, 8" x 10" prints of the photos they had chosen to be in the photo exhibit were provided. Participants spent several hours of discussing and categorizing the photos. This process resulted in consensus among the participants in naming five elements of healthy relationships. Titles and captions to accompany the selected photos were written by the participants as a group activity.

In the final session in week eight, an artist statement was written by the young women in this study. The process of writing began with the group discussing what they wanted to tell their audience about their photos and their views on healthy relationships. One of the researchers acted as a scribe during the discussion writing comments on newsprint that was taped to the wall. Following the discussion, writing a draft of statement occurred during this same session. One participant began the written statement drawing from the posted comments. Participants took turns writing and editing. At the conclusion of this session, the statement was emailed to all participants for additional comments. Comments were returned via email to one of the researchers. This researcher made grammatical edits as needed to incorporate participants' additions to the statement but did not add content or change the meaning of the participants' words. The statement was emailed to participants for final approval. The statement was translated into Spanish by a bilingual research assistant for the photo exhibition.

The photographs were mounted on display boards with their titles and captions. The artists' statement (in English and Spanish) and a group picture were also mounted and included in the photo show. The photo exhibition was held one Sunday at the church and open to the public. The primary attendees were parishioners' and families. The participants and research team were

present at the exhibition and engaged in discussions with those in attendance.

RESULTS

Participants

Seven, first and second generation Mexican-American Latina adolescents, aged 14-18 years participated. First generation immigrants are persons who were born outside of the U.S., second generation immigrants were born in the U.S. to parents who were foreign born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). All attended public schools, including three in middle school and four in high school. All participants reported having siblings at home; none had children of their own. All were bilingual. The participants described themselves as cheerful, independent young women who liked "to speak their minds." Activities they liked included playing sports, being active in the parish 4-H club, and dancing in a Mexican folk dance group. They enjoyed school; favorite subjects were identified as chemistry, English, literature, math, and art. All participants stated that they took pleasure in spending time with their family and friends. Helping others was important to them. Participants said that they chose to participate in this study because they found taking pictures fun and were interested in the creative aspects of photography.

Elements of Healthy Relationships

This study was presented to participants as a project about how teenage Latina girls described and experienced healthy dating relationships. In the first meeting, in response to the questions, "What is a healthy relationship?" participants engaged in a spontaneous discussion about dating relationships and interactions between boys and girls around romantic attraction. As the participants began to share photos at the second session it was clear they had adopted a broader view of relationships. They described elements that made relationships healthy whether they existed between romantic partners, siblings, friends, people and pets, children and parents, or people and God. Although they did include pictures of romantic partner couples, these did not reflect their personal dating relationships. Without prompting from the researchers, participants identified mischaracterizations of their culture and relationships among Latino people. In the artist statement, they identified negative cultural stereotypes that depicted Latino men as abusive and controlling and Latina women as submissive and accepting of abuse. The participants viewed these stereotypes as false. From the beginning they clearly claimed knowledge of characteristics of healthy relationships. At the end of the project they reported having learned more. The young women expected that their knowledge would help them establish healthy romantic relationships devoid of violence. The five elements of healthy relationships identified, named and described were: commitment, communication, faith, *amigos y amores* (friends and lovers), and play (see Table 1).

Table 1. Themes and Key Attributes

Theme	Key Attributes	Images that Depicted this Theme
Commitment	Demonstrated by the giver; devotion to a loving, supportive ongoing relationship with another person	A single father and his young daughter; a brother helping his younger sister; a teacher known for her support of her students; a rainbow after a storm
Communication	Expression of caring and understanding in words and nonverbal ways	Artistic image of a cell phone; two women hugging and crying; a sales clerk known for delivering respectful customer service
Faith	Demonstrated by the receiver; trust in another's commitment to them and the relationship	A teenage girl with her adult mentor; a brother helping his younger sister; images of religious amulets and rosaries
Amigos y Amores	Love between friends and family that sustains relationships through good and hard times	Friends playing together; friends walking arm in arm; sisters holding hands; images of parents
Play	Having fun and enjoying being together	Children playing; families at picnics; a pet dog playing

Figure 1. "Commitment." This is my dog, he was tangled in a net. He looked at me because he knew I would help him to get out of the net.



Commitment

As described by the participants, commitment was demonstrated by the giver; commitment was *to* someone. Photos that depicted the element of commitment ranged from the personal, a father and his young daughter, to a more public sphere, a cherished teacher. Commitment was depicted in a set of two photos of a father and daughter. One photo depicted a father and his infant daughter. In the second, the daughter was a young child playfully covered in mud. The participants discussed their admiration for this man who as a single father had raised his daughter from infancy. To the participants, his life portrayed how commitment characterized a healthy relationship. In discussing a photo of a brother giving his sister a ride on a small tractor, participants commented that "it shows the love of a brother and a sister" and "family will help family." This photo depicted the commitment of family members to help each other that stems from their love for each other. Commitment was also illustrated in two photos of teachers. In "Learning Target," a teacher was shown reading dramatically to a class and behind her was a white board on which teaching notes were written. The caption for this photo was "Through life you will have many teachers but there will always be one that will influence you the most." Participants stressed the importance of having teachers who were committed to their students. Commitment to students was expressed when teachers showed they believed in their students' capabilities and supported them to reach their potential. Participants

valued teachers who took time with them outside of the classroom to ensure they understood academic content. In the discussion of "Learning Target" one participant commented, "I think the healthy relationship is about me and all of the students that are in there...she is helping us learn and grow because she is telling us our path." Another photo depicted a bulletin board a teacher had in her classroom that commemorated the successes of her students, both in high school and beyond. The participant stated, "I took that picture because it shows that she really cares about her students...I think at one point everyone is going to meet someone, whether it is a teacher or parent or someone in your life that is going to help you and be there for you."

Figure 2. "Ring Ring." Communication is a skill.



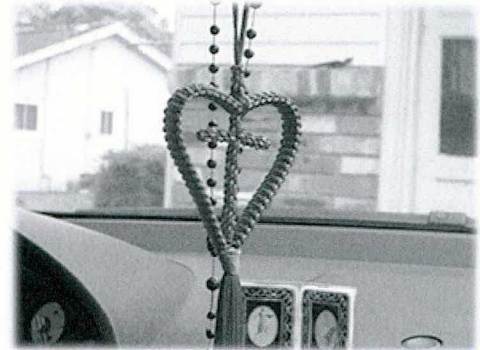
Communication

Photos illustrating the element of communication were diverse, depicting communication as both a learned technique and an emotional experience. A photo of a cell phone entitled "Ring Ring" was captioned, "Communication is a skill." A photo entitled, "Life can sometimes be rough," depicted nonverbal, emotional communication. In this photo, one woman with a look of concern on her face is holding another woman in her arms. The embrace is not returned. The woman's embrace communicates her care for the crying woman and her look of concern communicates the depth of her feeling to the viewer. The caption read, "Having a friend who you know will always be there for you through the sad and happy moments makes you realize that there is always someone who cares for you." In the discussion of this photo, one participant said, "They are hugging... the woman in the white probably had a problem or something and the other one is supporting her through the whole thing, giving her good advice on what to do."

Another photo that participants viewed as capturing communication as an aspect of healthy relationships showed a *carnicero* (butcher) in the local market. In discussing what aspect of healthy relationships this picture

revealed, the participant who took the photo said it was his manner of communication she wanted to portray. When the photo was taken, her mother was purchasing meat and he had been respectful to her mother, thus representing respect as a behavior on the part of the sender and an emotional experience on the part of the receiver as important aspect of communication.

Figure 3. "Protection on the Road." Your Faith is everywhere you go



Faith

The participants viewed faith as the reciprocal of commitment. Those who are the recipient of another's commitment have *faith in* that someone. Faith expressed participants' trust that those who cared for them, such as their parents and mentors, would protect and nurture them. For example, one photo showed a participant dancing with a mentor at her *quinceñera*, another depicted a boy riding a tractor with his younger sister. The participant who took the photo said:

This is a photo of a brother giving his little sister a ride. His dad said to take her for a ride. He (the boy in the photo) didn't say anything. He just went and took her for a ride. He did not say 'why me why me' he just went.

Faith expressed in a relationship meant that participants had someone in their lives to "lean on" and to "support them in good and bad moments." Participants' photos of young children and animals that they cared for showed that others also had *faith in* them.

Participants took photos of religious images to show how the element of faith was characteristic of their relationships with God. They had faith that, God was there for them. A photo entitled, "Faith" depicted a home altar with a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe and candles. The caption for this photo read, "Madonna has never failed me. Put my life in your hands. Guide me and those I love. Thanks for everything."

Faith also conveyed a sense of protection. Participants took pictures of, and spoke about, religious amulets and rosaries made for them by their mothers. These items were treasured by participants for they were doubly blessed by their mothers' faith in God's protection and their deep caring and love for their daughters. Participants described that these items provided a sense

of protection and security when worn or placed in their vehicles. One photo depicting a rosary on a rear view mirror was entitled "Protection on the Road." The accompanying caption read, "Your faith is everywhere you go." When discussing this photo, a participant remarked, "Protection, my mom always puts those [rosaries] in cars so God can protect the cars ... God always plays a big role in our life." Another participant said, "When I get rides from my friends, I'm like, oh, they have that (rosary). We have that too, so it makes me feel safer that they believe in that, so we're kind of protected." A photo of praying hands draped with a rosary, was entitled "Protégeme" (Protect Me). The caption read, "My God, I have you in my heart, my hands and my future. The love of a mother is also through the food with which she nourishes her children."

Figure 4. "Amigos y Amores." Two hands make a heart. This photo means that no matter what, someone else will be there for you, that someone else is the other part of your heart.



Amigos y Amores (Friends & Lovers)

Participants captured the value and importance they placed on friendship in healthy relationships in photographs taken of their own friends and of symbolic images. For example, one participant took a picture of her friends' feet forming a circle representing the continual strength found among friends. The circle was open and the participant said that "represents problems in friendships." They reflected that longevity in a friendship facilitated trust and would help friends stay together

when problems occurred. Longevity and trust led friends to feel supported by each other. Another commented that with friends, "no matter what, someone is always going to be with you in the bad and the good." A black and white photo entitled, "Can't is NOT an Option" depicted three of the participants walking in an alley. The photo showed them walking away from the camera carrying garment bags slung over their shoulders. The girls had just passed a stop sign visible in the left corner of the photo. The photographer of this picture said she thought it looked "cool because the sign says stop and they keep on going." The caption for this photo was, "Nothing stops us; we just keep going."

Lovers (*amores*) was depicted in their photos of friends and family. Several photos featured participants' sisters representing how their relationships with siblings embodied friendship and love. In one photo, the sun shone on two hands forming a heart with the shadow of the hands on the ground behind. The two hands with different skin tones were intended to depict love, friendship, and teamwork. The participant said, "It shows that no matter what, someone else will be there for you or that someone else is the other part of your heart." Photos of parents also depicted love in relationships. An exemplar was a photo entitled "Mami y Papi." The photographer took a photo of a framed picture of her parents. The participant's image was reflected in the glass covering the picture. The caption was "I've learned everything I know from you. You've taught me my values, how to love, you've helped me overcome obstacles I never thought I could achieve. You've made me who I am today. I LOVE YOU!"

Figure 5. "Play." True friends are right next to you. Friends will be there when you need them.



Play

Participants' photos depicted adults, teens, children, and pets at play. Children were photographed playing soccer, wrestling, splashing and playing in a pool, and being together at a beach. One photo that the participants categorized as describing commitment also depicted play, showing two children, a brother and sister, smiling and covered in mud. A black and white photo entitled, "True Paisas" (True Companions), showed two teenage girls in bathing suits lying in shallow water with their hands shielding their eyes. The participant who took the picture described that the girls were at a water park and were lying under the buckets waiting for them to fill and empty over them. The girls in the photo were friends, laughing and playing together. Photos

of families were taken at picnics and family parties. A photo of a small white dog entangled in a volley ball net depicted play as well as faith, for the dog was the participant's pet and 'knew' that she would free him from the net.

DISCUSSION

This study reported the perspectives of young Latina women on healthy relationships. In another study, Mexican-American and White adolescents identified themes that captured the meaning of romantic love including commitment, intimacy, reciprocity, and unconditional acceptance (Williams & Hickle, 2010). The theme most prominent for the Mexican-American teens was intimacy which was specifically described in terms of friendship, trust and caring (Williams & Hickle, 2010). These themes are similar to those reported in our study. In the current study, participants identified five elements of healthy relationships, commitment, communication, faith, *amigos y amores* (friends and lovers) and play. The theme faith, encompassed trust as an essential component. Caring as a value was embedded in each of the five elements identified in our study. Our participants chose to portray elements that were viewed as healthy in all of their various relationships. This understanding, that these elements cross relationships generating health for those involved, demonstrates maturity and depth of insight. An important implication for nursing practice is that young people can hold sophisticated understandings of human interactions despite their limited life experiences due to their youth. Before delivering nursing interventions to young people to teach or promote relationships, first assess what is known. Nurses can build on the understanding and knowledge the groups holds. This also facilitates identifying strengths that can be drawn on to enhance the efficacy of the intervention. Our results show that young people can engage in thoughtful and deep exploration of relationships, identify elements of healthy relationships, and understand how these universal elements contribute to human flourishing.

Previous research has identified elements of unhealthy relationships that contribute to violence including jealousy, control, infidelity, poor communication, and objectification of a partner (Catalozzi et al., 2011; Haglund et al., 2012; O'Leary & Slep, 2003). The elements of healthy relationships identified in this study counter the negative interpersonal behaviors that may lead to DV such as commitment rather than infidelity, faith rather than jealousy, and friendship and love instead of objectification. The results of this study or others like it, can be used in nursing practice to help young people identify, cultivate and maintain healthy relationships. The results can be used to stimulate discussions and facilitate identification of elements of healthy relationships among groups of young people. The results of this study can be presented to teenage boys and girls to help the respective gender groups understand each other better. Identifying shared values, and forging more meaningful relationships that may contribute to personal development and enrichment. Another fruitful area for intervention might be teaching young people how to cultivate healthy elements in their relationships. For example, an intervention

focused on cultivating play in personal relationships might include a discussion of what play is, how it fits in various relationships and its benefits to relationships; a brainstorming activity to identify ways to play with family members, friends and partners; resource sharing to increase awareness of and access to affordable activities or events; and lessons or guidance on relationship skills. Such an intervention may help young people to develop and deepen personal relationships, increase physical activity, avoid risk behaviors such as substance use or sexual activity, be introduced to cultural events, or learn new things.

This paper highlights the strengths of the Latino culture and community central to the lives of the participants. Participants in this study were bicultural, fully participating in Mexican traditions at home and church, and participating in academic and extracurricular activities in dominant culture high schools. The influence of, and participation in, Mexican culture was evident in many of the photos taken for the project such as photos of a dancing couple at a *quinceñera*, photos of the Virgin of Guadalupe on a home altar, and a *carnicero* in the local market. The *quinceñera* is a traditional, cultural celebration of a girl's 15th birthday, the Virgin of Guadalupe is a cultural icon, and a *carnicero* is a butcher in a Latino market. The participants' biculturalism was also demonstrated in their use of Spanish language in their photo captions and the choice of Spanish words, *amigos y amores* (friends and lovers), to describe one of the elements necessary for healthy relationships. They also clearly identified that their knowledge about healthy relationships was gained from family, friends and experiences in a bicultural world. They overtly stated that photo evidence in this project countered negative stereotypes of Latino/a men and women.

The focus on one cultural group is a strength and a limitation. The results provide an in depth understanding of the participants' perspectives on healthy relationships reflecting their gender and cultural identities. Yet, the small sample size and specific context of their lives does limit transferability. However, the method is well described should readers want to explore this topic among other populations. It is unclear whether the age range of the participants (14 to 18) or the setting (community room in a Catholic parish) constrained free expression about dating. Future studies with narrower age ranges or in other settings may yield more responses specific to dating. For this study, the setting facilitated participation because the participants were familiar and comfortable with this site and sessions were scheduled at convenient times. The perspective of Latino adolescent males was not included, however it is needed to generate a more complete picture of how adolescents view healthy relationships. Exploration of dating relationships among same-gender partners and youths from other cultural groups, to generate more knowledge regarding teens' perspectives on healthy relationships is also needed. Continued research is needed to explore and support the strengths present in Latino culture that contribute to positive youth development, especially within the rapidly growing group of first and second generation Mexican American adolescents. Finally, the results contribute knowledge that may be used to de-

velop a conceptual framework of healthy relationships that is currently missing, but needed (Tharp et al., 2013).

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