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A Theater Intervention to Prevent Teen Dating Violence for Mexican-American Middle School Students

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Abstract

Purpose

To test a theater intervention designed to raise awareness of the dynamics and consequences of teen dating violence (TDV) and to facilitate creation of nonviolent responses to TDV among Latino and Latina adolescents. The intervention was based on Theater of the Oppressed, which advocates the use of theater methods to explore social issues and to allow audiences to experiment with problem-solving, thereby promoting change.

Methods

This study used a pretest–posttest, no control group, mixed-measures design to study 66 Mexican-American adolescents (mean age, 13.4 ± 5 years). Two plays containing subtle and overt signs of control and abuse were written and performed. Scripts were based on data from prior studies of TDV among Latino and Latina adolescents. At baseline, we measured sociodemographics, personal safety, and ethnic identity. Pre–post instruments measured acceptance of TDV, confidence to resolve conflicts nonviolently, and intentions to use nonviolent strategies to resolve conflict. We collected qualitative data via essay.

Results

At posttest, participants had less acceptance of TDV ($t = -2.08$; $p < .05$), increased confidence to resolve conflicts nonviolently ($t = 3.82$; $p < .001$), and higher intentions to use nonviolent strategies ($t = 3.35$; $p = .001$). We analyzed 20 essays. Qualitative results provided context for understanding participants' changes in attitude, confidence, and nonviolent behavioral intentions.

Conclusions

This adaptation of Theater of the Oppressed was an effective way to interact with Latino adolescents. In a safe setting, participants vicariously experienced TDV, which facilitated self-reflection and cognitive rehearsal strategies to respond nonviolently to TDV.

Keywords

Dating violence, Hispanic, Adolescent, Mexican-American, Intimate partner violence

Implications and Contribution

Latino male and female adolescents experience significantly higher rates of teen dating violence (TDV) than their white peers. Among Latino and Latina adolescents, attitudes, correlates, and experiences regarding TDV differ by gender and acculturation. This study was therefore culturally tailored to more specifically address TDV within the Latino community.

Interest in romantic partners and dating often begins in middle school. In a diverse sample of 1,430 seventh-grade students, 75% reported ever having a boyfriend or girlfriend [1]. Latino girls and boys have reported their ages at first boyfriend or girlfriend as 11–13 years [2], [3], [4]. Teen dating violence (TDV) also occurs among early adolescents. Teen dating violence is emotional, physical, sexual, or verbal abuse in a teen dating relationship [5]. In a TDV prevention study for seventh-grade students, 37% were victims of psychological TDV, 15% were victims of physical TDV, and 31% were victims of electronic dating aggression in the past 6 months [1]. Among Latino and Latina ninth-grade students in the United States (U.S.), 11% of girls and 9.5% of boys reported being a victim of physical TDV in the past year [6]. Latino and Latina youths had significantly higher rates of physical TDV than white peers [5]. Latino and Latina youths reported that TDV may include name calling,

humiliation, gossiping, arguing, cyberbullying, forcing sex or drug use, physical abuse, intimidation, and exerting control and jealousy [2], [3].

Previous studies among Latino and Latina adolescents have investigated relationships between TDV and gender identity, gender roles, families, and levels of acculturation to U.S. culture [2], [3], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11]. These studies revealed that attitudes toward and correlates of TDV were influenced by cultural views on gender roles and differed by gender and levels of acculturation. Less acculturated teens endorsed more traditional rather than egalitarian gender roles [7]. Latino males held more traditional views of gender roles and were more accepting of violence in dating relationships [7], [12]. For Latinas, increased acculturation was associated with increased dating violence [7], [9], [11]. Within the Latino culture, constructs of *marianismo*, *machismo*, and *familismo* influence gender roles [2], [9]. Latino cultural constructs have also been demonstrated to be protective factors from violence [9], [13]. We based the scripts developed for this study on data derived from bicultural Latino adolescents, which created an intervention tailored to address TDV in this population.

This study was a pilot test of a theater intervention with Mexican-American adolescents. In previous studies, theater-based interventions significantly decreased aggression and TDV among ethnically diverse teens and among Mexican-American adolescents [14], [15], [16], [17], [18]. The purpose of this study was to raise awareness of the dynamics and consequences of TDV and to facilitate alternative responses to TDV among Latino and Latina adolescents. Specific aims were to (1) change attitudes about TDV; (2) increase confidence in ability to resolve conflicts nonviolently; and (3) increase intention to act nonviolently in a dating relationship.

We based the intervention strategy for this study on Theater of the Oppressed (TO), developed by Augusto Boal [19]. The purpose of TO is to promote social change and human liberation from oppressive phenomena such as TDV. Theater methods are used to examine social issues and experiment with problem solving [20]. The theory underlying TO posits that oppressed persons who performed emancipatory actions in theatrical fiction would experience internal changes that would lead to increased awareness and decreased acceptance of the oppressive situation, and increase their confidence and intention to perform those actions in real life [21]. Theater of the Oppressed has been used to address power relationships, and therefore was well suited for this study, because power differentials underlie all forms of violence [21]. In a safe setting, TO allowed young people to vicariously experience conflict in dating relationships and reflect on their responses to that situation [22].

Methods

Design

This study used a pretest–posttest, no control group, mixed-measures design. We obtained human subjects protection approval from the university's review board. Participants received a \$5 gift card. Those who submitted a written essay received a second \$5 gift card.

Sample and protection of human subjects

All eighth-grade students from two parochial middle schools and a coeducational public charter school were eligible for participation. School staff distributed a letter describing the study and parental consent forms to parents. To the knowledge of the researchers, no parents refused consent and all eligible students were interested in participation. Participant assent was obtained before baseline data collection. Power analysis revealed that a sample of 30 participants would yield 80% power to detect differences at the level of $p \leq .05$. We obtained a sample size of 66.

Intervention

We used data from two prior qualitative studies regarding perceptions of dating relationships and violence among male and female Mexican-American adolescents to develop scripts for two 15-minute plays [2], [3].

These previous studies revealed how adolescents described their understandings of themselves, their dating relationships, and their perceptions of TDV within the context of their bicultural identities.

An acting group of four undergraduate students and a professional theater director wrote, directed, and performed the plays. The acting group engaged in an iterative process of discussion, improvisation, and writing. Data from the previous studies provided the context from which they created characters and derived some dialogue. One direct quote from a young woman describing her ideal partner, "I want someone who will stand beside me, not in front of me or behind me; I want a best friend," became a key line in *Lily and Jake*, the play it helped inspire.

Two plays were written. *Homeroom* explored nonphysical violence such as coercion, using someone for personal gain, manipulation, and humiliation. This play depicted a young man, Nico, who takes advantage of a young woman's, Maria's, romantic interest. Maria believes that a romantic relationship is blooming. Nico, who has no romantic intentions toward Maria, takes advantage of her crush to get her to do his homework. Maria speaks with her friend Isabelle and expresses how hurt she feels when she realizes what is happening. Isabelle models how to listen and respond to a friend who is experiencing TDV. Isabelle also suggests alternative responses to avoid being a victim of this type of TDV and not be taken advantage of. Nico's friend, Tony, challenges his behavior, providing an alternate view that what he is doing is not funny and not acceptable.

The play *Lily and Jake* includes examples of sexual and physical violence. The play begins with a scene in which Lily is arguing with Jake about his persistent pressure to have sex. He picks her up to carry her to the bedroom, at which point Lily slaps him in the face. Jake slaps her back. Jake's male friend questions Jake's behavior and models more respectful interactions with a woman he is just getting to know.

The plays depicts a variety of violent behaviors and portrays the responses of the victims and perpetrators. In each play, friends of the couple in the dating relationship provide an alternate nonviolent view by challenging the behaviors, motivations, and intentions of the involved couple. It was intended that as audience members identified with the characters, they would experience vicarious questioning of their own behaviors, responses, motivations, and intentions. Three performances were delivered to audiences derived from three schools on three different days. Performances occurred at the university. Each performance included both plays and a talkback session with the actors and director.

Operational definitions

Independent variables included gender, current dating partner, generational status in the U.S., personal experience of violence, perceived personal safety, and ethnic identity. A sociodemographic questionnaire written by the investigators collected information about gender, generational status, current dating partner, and experiences of violence. We determined generational status in two questions that assessed participants' birthplace and family immigration history. Current dating partner was determined with a dichotomous question: "Do you have a boyfriend or girlfriend now?" Experiences of violence were determined with seven dichotomous questions. The question "Have you experienced violence in a dating situation?" was followed with a list of six violent experiences including name calling, embarrassing, pressuring, controlling, and physical and sexual violence. A "yes" answer to any of the seven items indicated personal experience of violence. Perceived personal safety was measured with the 5-item Personal Safety Survey (PSS)–Joyce Foundation Youth Survey [23]. We measured ethnic pride and respect for differences with the 4-item Ethnic Identity (EI)–Teen Conflict Survey [23]. The PSS and EI were tested with youths in grades 6–8. Internal consistency was .63 and .73, respectively [24], [25]. The PSS and EI included a series of "I" statements. Participants rated how often they would say these statements using a 5-point scale from "never" to "always." Statements on PSS included, "I live in a safe neighborhood" and "I worry about my safety at school." The EI had statements such as, "I am proud to be a member of my racial/cultural group."

First	5	25	8	26	5	31	18	27
Second	8	40	11	37	3	19	22	33
Third or more	7	35	11	37	8	50	26	40
Family's standard of living								
Very poor	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Poor	1	5	0	0	0	0	1	1
Getting by	5	25	11	37	3	19	19	29
Living comfortably	14	70	18	60	11	69	43	65
Very well off	0	0	1	3	2	12	3	5
Family socioeconomic status compared with peers								
Worse	3	15	3	10	0	0	6	9
About same	12	60	22	74	10	63	44	67
Better	5	25	4	13	5	31	14	21
Much better	0	0	1	3	1	6	2	3

^aFirst-generation persons are foreign born; second-generation persons have at least one foreign-born parent; the parents of third-generation or more persons both are native to the U.S. [29].

All participants had high levels of ethnic pride (mean, 18.1 ± 2). Participants lived in neighborhoods in which 56% of residents were Latino or Latina, compared with 12% of the city's entire population [27]. In participants' neighborhoods, 28% of families lived below the poverty level [27]. Despite the likely actual low incomes of the participants' families, the majority (65%) described their economic status as "living comfortably," 29% that they were "getting by," 5% were "very well off," and only 2% described their family as poor. Participants felt their personal safety was moderately at risk in their neighborhoods and schools (mean, 13.5 ± 3).

With regard to dating, 37 participants dated (56%), 18 reported a current dating partner (27%), and five had experienced intercourse (8%) (Table 2). A total of 30 participants reported personal experience of violence (46%). Nineteen reported their role in the violence: six were victims, four were perpetrators, and nine were both victims and perpetrators. There were no significant differences in experiences of violence based on gender.

Table 2. Sexuality-related demographics

Sexuality measure	Males (n = 25)		Females (n = 39) ^a	
Mean age at first girlfriend or boyfriend	11.7 ± 1.6 years (n = 20)		11.7 ± 3.2 years (n = 18)	
Mean age allowed to date	12.4 ± 2.1 years (n = 21)		14.6 ± 2.8 years (n = 31)*	
	n	%	n	%
Preferred to date				
Opposite sex	25	100	38	97
Same sex	0		1	3
Had started dating	21	84	15	39**
Had current boyfriend or girlfriend	11	44	6	15*
Had sex	4	16	1	3

^aMissing data for gender, n = 2; *p < .05; **p < .001.

Results

Three themes characterized participants' responses to the intervention. Results of quantitative and qualitative analyzes were combined to describe themes.

Change in attitude: “It made me think”

Postintervention, participants had less acceptance of TDV, as measured on the subscale acceptance of dating violence ($t = -2.08$; $p < .05$) (Table 3). Males exhibited significantly higher acceptance of violence at pretest and posttest than females. Both males and females had higher acceptance of female-on-male violence than male-on-female violence (Table 4).

Table 3. Instrument scores

Instrument	Range	Relationship ^a	Pretest		Posttest	
			n	Mean (Standard Deviation)	n	Mean (Standard Deviation)
Ethnic identity	4–20	↑	66	18.1 (2.0)		
Personal safety	5–25	↓	66	13.5 (3.1)		
Acceptance of couple violence						
General violence	5–20	↑	65	6.8 (2.3)	65	6.4 (2.5)*
Male on female	3–12	↑	64	3.3 (.9)	64	3.9 (.3)
Female on male	3–12	↑	64	4.4 (1.7)	64	4.2 (1.6)
Self-efficacy	5–25	↑	66	18.1 (3.0)	65	19.6 (3.7)**
Violent intentions	8–32	↑	65	19.9 (4.1)	64	21.5 (4.5)**

^a Direction of arrow indicates relationship; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$.

Table 4. Gender differences in acceptance of violence

Scores	Male	Female
	Mean (Standard Deviation)	Mean (Standard Deviation)
Acceptance of male-on-female violence		
Pretest	3.7 (1.2)	3.1 (.5)*
Posttest	3.6 (1.1)	3.2 (.4)*
Acceptance of female-on-male violence		
Pretest	5.4 (1.9)	3.7 (1.1)***
Posttest	4.9 (2.2)	3.9 (1.1)**

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Qualitative data also revealed changes in attitudes. The theme “It made me think” captured this change. A young man wrote, “I used to think that it [violence] was good once in a while. It's bad because violence can take you over. ... I thought it [violence] was good because you let out all that was inside you out and later on you can forgive.” The intervention led this participant to question his acceptance of violence as a response to conflict. A second male also wrote about his changed opinion. He said,

Before, I thought being in a relationship made you cool. I changed my thoughts after watching the plays. They made me believe relationships are a serious thing. I guess it's a way to prepare for marriage. Also, if you want to be in a relationship, do it for love, not for your satisfaction.

Another young man wrote, “Before I went to this play I used to think of relationships as just a joke and that men just had relationships for sex. Now I don't think so. A relationship has to have love and care for each other.”

Some described how prior negative attitudes toward TDV were reinforced. One young woman wrote, “Before, I believed that violence is not okay, and the plays have convinced me to never change my opinion.” Another wrote, “After watching the plays, I am more on the side of no violence. ... I believe that all violence is never the answer. It should never be tolerated.”

Change in confidence: “I would stand up for myself”

Analyses of data from the SE-TCS revealed significant pre–post changes ($t = 3.82; p < .001$), indicating increased confidence in ability to control anger and resolve conflicts nonviolently. Qualitative results revealed confidence in ability to respond nonviolently in a dating situation. In essays, descriptions of nonviolent responses to conflict included walking away, reporting the violence, ending the relationship, standing up for one's self, and purposefully refraining from violent responses. One young person wrote, “I would end it [relationship] because I know it's not right to put my body through that. No, I would not be afraid. I would stand up for myself.” Another advocated for nonviolent responses, writing, “If your spouse abuses you, don't hit them back. It makes you just as low as your spouse. If you hit them back, it will only make the situation worse.”

Participants identified that self-awareness and reflection prevented violence. One wrote, “Another way to prevent violence is to stay true to your self. Don't change your personality just because you like someone. If you aren't ready to take it to the next level, don't force yourself.” Regarding reflection, a young man wrote, “After I saw those [plays], it really got me thinking, ‘Will I ever do that to a girl?’ but then I encourage myself to say, no I won't.” Writing was suggested as a means for reflection.

Change in intention: “Tell someone”

Significant post–test changes on the VI-TCS scale indicated higher intentions to use nonviolent strategies to control anger and conflicts ($t = 3.35; p = .001$). The strategy “Tell someone” was included in 11 of the essays (58%). A male participant wrote: “If I ever see violence, I would report it to someone. I wouldn't be afraid—it would actually give me courage to do everything to stop the violence.” Most respondents indicated that “someone” should be told. Three indicated that they would talk to the person who was mistreating them. Two indicated they would talk to the person who was mistreating another. A few said that a trusted adult should be notified. A young woman wrote,

If you are afraid you should tell a friend or a teacher. ... When you tell someone that you trust, they will help you out. They will talk to that person or they will talk to your parents if you don't want to. That's why it is important.

The sociodemographic questionnaire included a list of persons and asked participants who they would turn to for assistance with TDV. Most participants (94%) identified at least one person. Male participants most often identified friends and male relatives. Female participants identified friends and female relatives (Table 5). No participants indicated that they would contact police in response to TDV.

Table 5. Seeking assistance with TDV

Relationship	Male (n = 25)	Female (n = 39)
	n (%)	n (%)
Father	15 (60)	6 (15)
Friends	14 (56)	26 (67)
Mother	12 (48)	28 (72)
Uncle	6 (24)	0
Cousin	6 (24)	13 (33)
Adult at church	4 (16)	5 (15)
Aunt	4 (16)	14 (36)
None	4 (16)	0

Adult at school	3 (12)	11 (28)
Brother	3 (12)	6 (15)
Grandparent	3 (12)	6 (15)
Sister	2 (8)	17 (44)

Discussion

The aims of this study were to change attitudes about TDV and to increase confidence and intention to resolve conflicts in dating relationships nonviolently among Mexican-American early adolescents. Consistent with previous research, this theater intervention resulted in decreased acceptance of dating violence and increased confidence and intention to act nonviolently [15], [17]. The significant changes on the posttests were small. One explanation is that participants held disapproving attitudes toward TDV at pretest. The significant changes indicated that their negative attitudes were reinforced and acceptance of TDV decreased further. This intervention yielded no significant differences in dependent variables by gender. The results support that the cost-efficiency of theater interventions for a single intervention delivered to mixed-gender groups yielded significant results.

We found two gender differences. Among persons preferred for help with TDV, the most preferred one was the same-gender parent. This finding may reflect the centrality of parents and family within Latino culture. However, it contrasts with a recent study in which most participants felt that parents were not a viable source of support for TDV [28]. Exploring youths' preferences for assistance from parents and others within their social networks represents an important direction for future research. Second, as reported previously, males had higher acceptance of TDV than females [7], [12]. These gender differences are important for health care providers to understand when approaching teens regarding TDV assessment and intervention.

This intervention provided a model for creating culturally specific theater interventions. The scripts were derived from data collected from bicultural Mexican-American youths, rendering cultural specificity that makes the transferability of the method and the findings to others with the same background more likely. This study fills a gap in the literature about Mexican-American youth as a specific cultural group within the larger Latino population.

The convenience sampling of schools and participants was a limitation. Inclusion of students from two private parochial schools may limit generalizability. However, both schools served low-income families from the neighborhoods surrounding the schools, and tuition for most was paid through the school-choice program or grants provided by the schools. Both groups came from similar backgrounds; results revealed no differences based on school. Another limitation was a bias toward heterosexuality. The plays included heterosexual couples and instruments implied heterosexual relationships. The plays also portrayed the male partner as the aggressor and the female as the victim. Male adolescents are victims of TDV, although little is known about male victimization. Further exploration is needed. Participant responses may have been influenced by social desirability. Finally, lack of a control group is a limitation.

In the plays, actors were not Latino. Yet, the significant results provided support that matching the ethnic appearance of actors and audience need not be a primary consideration. The culturally specific content may have helped the audience to identify with the characters despite their lack of ethnic appearance. Participants displayed engagement by leaning forward in their seats, nodding, laughing, and being silent when appropriate. This quote from an essay supports the accuracy of the scripts and characters:

This was an interesting play, because this is what it would look like if you actually followed a normal life of a teenager. It is true that many teenagers have violence and pressure to do things they don't want to. The first act

is very common with people who are popular and unpopular, when one is asked to do something for someone, but is only using them.

In conclusion, this intervention provided an engaging and effective vehicle for interaction with Latino youths regarding TDV. We recommend theater interventions to others engaged in violence reduction research and intervention with adolescents.

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