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7-1-2019

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Abstract

In the United States, teen dating violence (TDV) is a concern across ethnic groups. Attitudes and correlates of violence differ by gender, culture, and acculturation. This study used a qualitative interpretive approach. Data were obtained in focus groups with 23 Latino male adolescents. Themes reflected contexts of participants' lives, and definitions and nature of dating relationships and TDV. Participants described the importance of respecting dating partners, the destructive effects of TDV, and the pressure to display masculinity that can lead some young men to perpetrate TDV. These results may advance culturally relevant interventions to promote healthy relationships and prevent dating violence.

Keywords

In the United States, teen dating violence (TDV) is a prevalent concern across ethnic groups. TDV refers to physical, emotional/psychological, or sexual violence by one partner toward another in a dating relationship (Davis, 2008). Across adolescent populations, psychological dating violence (DV) victimization is most prevalent, followed by physical and sexual DV (Cuevas, Sabina, & Bell, 2014; Halpern, Spriggs, Martin, & Kupper, 2009). Adolescent males and females have reported similar rates of psychological and physical victimization (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013; Halpern et al., 2009). Similar rates of psychological and physical victimization may exist because the reciprocal use of nonsexual violence by both partners is more common among teen couples than adult couples (Wolfe et al., 2003).

Among a national sample of Latino adolescents, 19.5% reported DV victimization (Cuevas et al., 2014), suggesting this is a critical concern for the fastest growing and youngest population (Latino youth) in the United States (Ennis, Rios-Vargas, & Albert, 2011). Experiences of TDV place both victims and perpetrators at risk of serious short- and long-term physical, psychological, behavioral, and social adverse consequences and outcomes (Banyard & Cross, 2008; Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; Roberts, Auinger, & Klein, 2005; Silverman, Raj, & Clements, 2004; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001). Supporting young people to develop healthy interpersonal relationships as primary prevention of TDV is optimal (Tharp et al., 2013). Adolescents' beliefs about gender roles and their expectations of how males and females behave and interact may influence their own behaviors in dating relationships and their engagement in TDV. The social contexts of gender, ethnicity, and culture influence the development of masculinity and expectations of gender roles of young men and women in different ways. This current study included only Latino adolescent males to focus on their specific perspectives regarding dating relationships and TDV.

Gender Roles, Latino Culture, and TDV

Although there is heterogeneity among Latinos and differences in the level of adherence to Latino cultural values based on acculturation, generation status, and other variables, the constructs of *marianismo* (sacred duty and self-sacrifice expected of women), *machismo* (expectation that men be strong and provide for the family), and *familismo* (sense of belonging, solidarity, family pride, and loyalty) have been noted to influence expectations for gender roles (Gil & Vasquez, 1996; Haglund, Belknap, & Garcia, 2012; Hill, Lipson, & Meleis, 2003; Sanderson, Coker, Roberts, Tortolero, & Reininger, 2004). For males, the cultural traditions of *machismo* and *caballerismo* are conceptions of masculinity (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008). Traditional machismo is identified with qualities generally perceived as negative, such as individual power, hypermasculinity, and aggressive, sexist, and chauvinistic attitudes and behaviors. Caballerismo is typically viewed as positive, representing aspects of social responsibility, emotional connectedness, and nurturing, family-centered, and chivalrous attitudes and behaviors (Arciniega et al., 2008).

Latino cultural constructs and levels of acculturation have been demonstrated to protect teens from violence and also pose unique risk factors for TDV ([Enriquez, Kelly, Cheng, Hunter, & Mendez, 2012](#); [Sanderson et al., 2004](#)). For example, the protective factors of *marianismo and familismo* may be diminished in the complex interplay of the relationships among traditional gender roles, acculturation, and violence. Latino male adolescents have been found to hold more traditional gender role expectations than females and to be more accepting of violence in dating relationships ([Howard, Beck, Kerr, & Shattuck, 2005](#); [Quigley, Jaycox, McCaffrey, & Marshall, 2006](#); [Sanderson et al., 2004](#); [Ulloa, Jaycox, Skinner, & Orsburn, 2008](#)). When compared with acculturated youth, less acculturated youth tend to endorse more traditional than egalitarian gender roles ([Ulloa et al., 2008](#)). Less acculturation, as measured by Spanish language preference, was found to be associated with more tolerant views of TDV ([Hokoda, Galván, Malcarne, Casta & Ulloa, 2007](#)). Higher levels of acculturative stressors were also associated with more tolerant views and increased perpetration of TDV ([Hokoda et al., 2007](#)). Among Latina female adolescents, increased acculturation was related to increased experiences of TDV ([Sanderson et al., 2004](#); [Silverman, Decker, & Raj, 2007](#); [Ulloa et al., 2008](#)). This is perhaps because as Latinas acculturate, they are less likely to conform to traditional gender roles. This can create conflict when more acculturated Latinas are paired with a partner who holds traditional role expectations for the female in the relationship ([Ulloa et al., 2008](#)).

The theory of precarious manhood posits how men and boys develop their masculine identities, and it can be used to understand how cultural constructs of gender can influence identity ([Vandello & Bosson, 2013](#)). There are three tenets within the theory of precarious manhood, including that manhood is not ascribed but must be earned, the status of manhood is not permanent as it can be lost or taken away, and the status of manhood is confirmed by others, most importantly male peers ([Vandello & Bosson, 2013](#)). This theory supports that teens conform to their behaviors, and may attempt to control their dating partners' behaviors, to regulate their appearance and others' perceptions of them.

Adolescence is a pivotal stage in which young people begin learning how to develop romantic relationships; what they learn and experience in adolescence lays the foundation for relationships that they will establish as adults ([Tharp et al., 2013](#)). For example, experiences of TDV as an adolescent have been related to increased experiences of interpersonal relationship violence in adult intimate relationships ([Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, Bunge, & Rothman, 2017](#)). Adolescence is marked by an increased vulnerability for poor adjustment and, therefore, is an optimal time to intervene with education and skills to promote healthy relationships ([Umaña-Taylor, 2009](#)). However, while Latinos represent the fastest growing population in the United States and comprise a large proportion of the population in many communities, a review of DV prevention interventions identified just three interventions focused predominantly on Latino teens ([Malhotra, Gonzalez-Guarda, & Mitchell, 2015](#)). Latino males have been found to hold more tolerant attitudes toward TDV ([Ulloa et al., 2008](#)), which may increase their risk of involvement in DV. This study addresses a gap in the literature regarding primary prevention of DV. Furthermore, this study provides information from boys who have not experienced DV. Understanding a priori perceptions and attitudes provides an opportunity to develop interventions that build on protective strengths and target specific risk factors that may promote involvement in TDV. The purpose of this study was to explore Latino male adolescents' perceptions and attitudes about dating and TDV to understand how social and cultural contexts may influence masculine identity and expectations for gender roles and to identify implications for prevention of DV.

Method

Design

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive design. This approach was selected to elicit the perspectives of the young men using open-ended questions to generate rich data that were not suggested or preconceived by the

researchers. Qualitative description yields findings that are closer to the data and less interpreted than date produced by other qualitative methods ([Sandelowski, 2010](#)). It is well suited for studies in which the aim is to describe a phenomenon from the perspectives of participants.

Research Team

The research team comprised three female faculty members (two from Nursing and one from Counseling Psychology), all of whom were experienced qualitative researchers. Three graduate students assisted with the project. The faculty members' previous research and clinical experience explored identity, relationships, mental health sexuality, and violence among adolescents and adults within cultural contexts. Of female members on the team, three identified as Angla/White and one as Biethnic (Latina/White). One male graduate student identified as European American and Latino and the other as European American.

Recruitment and Informed Consent Procedure

English-speaking Latino males between the ages of 13 and 18 were eligible for participation. Eight boys ranging in age from 14-18 years (*M* = 15.6) were recruited from one parish with a large Mexican American congregation. Fifteen boys, aged 13-15 years (*M* = 13.5), were recruited from one middle school with a predominantly Mexican American student body. Contact persons within the church and school assisted with recruitment and scheduling of the focus groups. One 18-year-old provided consent. For all other participants, parental consent and participant assent were obtained. The university institutional review board (IRB) approved the study.

Data Collection

Each participant completed a sociodemographic questionnaire including age, gender, ethnicity, generational status in the United States, standard of living, dating and sexual experience, and experience of TDV. Demographics were used to describe the participants and to provide contextual cues in the process of analysis. Generational status was determined by two questions that assessed participants' birthplace and family immigration history. Dating and sexual experience were determined with dichotomous questions regarding dating preference (male or female), current dating partner (yes or no), initiation of sex (defined as oral, anal, or vaginal) (yes or no), and a question about age at which dating began. Experiences of TDV were determined with the yes/no question, "Have you experienced violence in a dating situation?" followed by a list of six experiences, namely, name-calling, embarrassing, pressuring, controlling, physical violence, and sexual violence.

Five audio-taped focus groups were conducted. Focus groups were selected to facilitate group discussions about dating relationships and DV. It was anticipated that group members' comments would stimulate other members to reflect, elaborate, contradict, and otherwise participate in the discussion. Hearing others' comments may have helped some participants express feelings and impressions verbally that they formerly had no words for ([Rodriguez, Schwartz, Lahman, & Geist, 2011](#)). It was anticipated that restricting the participants to only boys would increase their comfort with sharing their thoughts with the group and increase the candor of their responses.

Two focus groups of four boys each were conducted in classrooms at the parish. Three focus groups of five boys each recruited from the middle school were conducted at the university. Each group lasted about 1 hr and included one or two researchers. Content of participants' comments was consistent across the groups demonstrating saturation. A semi-structured interview protocol, designed by the team, was used to ascertain participants' perspectives on dating relationships, TDV, and responses to TDV. Focus groups were conducted in a conversational manner. Researchers posed

questions and prompts that invited participants to candidly share their views, respond to each other's comments, or elaborate on another's remarks. Participants received a US$10 gift card for participation.

Data Analysis

The audio tapes of the focus groups were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. Data analysis was accomplished through a group process of categorical analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Team members worked through two transcripts together to identify text that was relevant to the topics of dating relationships and TDV. The text was then reviewed for repeating ideas, which were grouped into themes. Discussion of themes continued until consensus was established. Five preliminary themes were identified through this process. The remaining transcripts were reviewed individually by team members to identify additional relevant data for each theme. Themes were discussed during team meetings until final consensus was reached. Three major themes were derived from the data, including contexts of participants' lives, definitions and nature of dating relationships, and definitions and nature of DV.

Results

Participants

Twenty-three adolescent males participated, ranging in age from 13-18 years (M = 14.3, SD = 1.3). One participant was a freshman in college, seven (30%) attended high school, and 15 (65%) were in middle school (eighth grade). All the participants identified as Mexican American. No participants described their families as being poor. Three (13%) reported that their families were "getting by," 18 (78%) reported they were living comfortably, and two (9%) described their families as being very well off. Compared with peer families' financial statuses, 13 (56%) reported that their families' status was about the same, three (13%) were somewhat worse off, and six (26%) reported that they were better off than their peers. Eight (35%) were first-generation immigrants, 11 (48%) were second-generation immigrants, and four (17%) were third- or higher-generation immigrants. First generation refers to those who are foreign born. Those who were second generation had at least one foreign-born parent, and the third-or-higher generation included those with two U.S. native parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

All participants reported that they preferred to date females. Most, 18 (78%), reported having had a girlfriend in the past and three (8%) said they had one at the time of the study. Their mean age of having their first girlfriend was 11.2 years (SD = 2.6; range: 6-16 years). No participants reported having had sex. All participants denied experiencing TDV.

Participants' Contexts: Role of Parents and Focus on Education

Role of parents

The context of being male adolescent children of Mexican American parents was a foundation for participants' identities and a background through which their remarks were interpreted and understood by the researchers. Parents were described as primary sources of information about dating relationships, through teaching and by example. One participant reported that he was intentionally seeking to avoid jealous behavior as a response to what he had observed in his parents' relationship. He said, "That's one thing I am trying to change. . . . He's [participant's father] too jealous sometimes. I don't want to be like that because I see that my mother doesn't like it. Sometimes she feels hurt." Another participant shared a story of his grandfather who had in the past engaged in domestic violence. This participant said that his grandfather had explicitly taught him that violence should not happen in a relationship: "He [grandfather] said that's the right thing to do, just give them space and

talk to them." These exemplars illustrated participants' rejection of the negative aspects of traditional machismo.

Participants noted that their parents would be disappointed and angry if they engaged in violent behavior toward their girlfriends; however, the parents would still provide support and advice to their sons. Although the participants recognized that their involvement in violence would upset their parents, they did not say that they would keep their behavior secret. The participants suggested their parents could be a source of help for couples in violent relationships.

Focus on education

Many participants described parental expectations that they work hard and do well in school. Participants and their parents believed that achievement in school would contribute to future success. Future success was described as having a "better life than what they [parents] have" and included financial security and being able to support one's family. Younger participants described tension between having a girlfriend and success in school:

> Don't make it [dating] your first priority, because you're barely in 8th grade and you still have plenty of years to go. If you make it your priority now, it's going to get in the way of your studies and affect your future. You're going to regret making that your priority.

Participants perceived that their parents shared this view, that dating might interfere with school. One said, "Our parents sometimes think that we're too young and that we should worry about our education for now and then later find a girlfriend." Caballerismo was evident in their desires to use education as a means to success later in life. Being able to provide for one's family through financial security was specifically identified as one characteristic of a good life.

Definitions and Nature of Dating Relationships

In all of the focus groups, participants mentioned that good relationships were characterized by respectful, nonviolent interactions and trust between partners. Participants believed that their parents supported them in dating "when they were ready." Some parents specified an age ranging from 13-16. They noted that mothers and fathers might specify different ages, with fathers endorsing a younger age for sons to initiate dating than mothers. Participants perceived that their parents did not approve of them having sexual relationships at this time in their lives.

Across all groups, participants noted that they had been taught by their parents to respect women and to refrain from abuse and acts of violence. One young man explained, "My parents have always taught me to never lay a finger on a woman, and they were raised in Mexico, and so they were always taught to respect women." Putting effort into the relationship was described as necessary to maintain the relationship, including doing things to make her happy and treating one's female partner as someone who is precious and valuable. The boys in this study noted that with girls, parents tended to be more protective and have more rules regarding dating. Participants understood that they had more freedom than their female counterparts to initiate and maintain relationships. In this theme, emphasis on respect and treating one's partner well and protection of daughters reflected the cultural values of caballerismo (Arciniega et al., 2008).

Definitions and Nature of Dating Violence

Participants named control, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse as categories of DV. Furthermore, they substantiated their understanding with accurate descriptions of these behaviors.

Control

Participants described control as restricting one's significant other from contact with other men or her family, forcing her to remain within the home, and making her tend to the needs of the man. Excessively calling one's girlfriend, "obsessing" over the relationship, and stalking were more psychologically restrictive forms of control cited by boys. Boys described controlling behavior as "weird" and "too much" and typified controlling men as "control freaks."

Some understood control as a precursor to more serious DV. For example, a participant stated that "if he's too controlling sometimes he demands too much from his wife or girlfriend, and sometimes it can lead to a lot of violence because someone's trying to make someone else do something they don't want to." Other boys held the opinion that "most men are more controlling [than women]." They readily identified that teenage boys expected that their girlfriends would refrain from dressing provocatively and from talking to other boys (i.e., potential suitors) or act like she was available. As one participant said, "I'd give her freedom to do whatever she wants, but just remember that you're with me." These expectations were not viewed as exertion of control. It was expected that if she liked him, she would act in a manner that pleased him. Furthermore, these expectations for the female partners' behaviors were described as a way to protect the male partners' image and reputation among other males.

An example of the threat to manhood status is present in the narrative regarding control. The phrases "too controlling," "demands too much," and "I'd give her freedom" indicate that the participants viewed some level of control as acceptable. The expectation that the girl would protect his image among other males, by not dressing provocatively and so on, is indicative of both traditional machismo and a threat to manhood.

Emotional abuse

The boys described emotional abuse as intimidating a partner into staying in the relationship by making her feel that no one else could like her, name-calling, saying negative things behind her back, and ruining her reputation by claiming to have had sex with her even if that was not true. Participants identified that a boy might make fun of his girlfriend in public or claim to have had sex with her to protect, or to promote, his own image. As one young man said, "You want your friends to see you as a tough guy so maybe you're making fun of her even though you don't mean it." Another responded,

> I think that every teenage boy has this vision of them being manly. To them manly means being tough as in talking about a girl like that in front of their friends, just to try to make them feel that they're in charge of the relationship, not the female.

In this theme, the tenets of precarious manhood, as manhood is earned, can be taken away, and confirmed by others, were clearly evident. In the exemplars given, the speakers used the words "tough guy" and "manly" in describing a behavior that, although hurtful to the girl, was used to preserve manhood status at her expense.

The emotional violence described was not necessarily intended to hurt the female partner, although the participants recognized that it did. One boy described emotional abuse as potentially worse than physical abuse because "it hurts you inside and that feeling is worse than the feeling you get outside from physical." Similarly, some of the boys stated that this sort of DV puts "fear into the girl" and makes her want to leave the relationship, whether or not she feels that she can.

Emotional abuse was recognized as a potential precursor to more serious DV. Overall, participants supported that arguing was acceptable in a dating relationship but crossed into potential for violence when couples shouted at one another. One boy explained, "It depends if they're both screaming at each other. That would be the noticeable part where that just might turn into hitting."

Physical and sexual abuse

Physical abuse was described as hitting, pushing, or some action that leaves bruises or scars. Physical abuse was included in discussions of control and sexual abuse. Sexual abuse was the least mentioned form of DV. Follow-up questions about such abuse from interviewers were answered with brief "yes or no" responses.

Perceptions of women as perpetrators of DV

Participants acknowledged that females perpetrated DV. However, girls were described as perpetrators of TDV only in the respect that their behavior prompted violence from boys. Violence by girls was also described as a response to male physical violence. Boys believed girls could indirectly provoke DV by acting in a way that made the male partner angry and prone to violence, for example, by cheating on him. A female partner might also initiate DV in response to her partner's infidelity. For example, a woman might slap her partner for cheating and may even be justified in doing so. Participants in this study expected that if a female partner initiated violence, the male partner would respond violently. They were skeptical, however, that a female could be the aggressor in a relationship and instead perceived that the male partner holds the control in the relationship. Even if a woman started the violence, she was described as not being in control of the ensuing altercation. As one participant explained,

> If the girl is more controlling than the boy, then the boy would want to change that and be even worse than the girl has been, and that would show how much fear there is in him and that's how the abuse would start.

When discussing female perpetration of DV, boys indicated their belief in male dominance as normative. This belief is consistent with both traditional machismo ([Arciniega et al., 2008](#)) and the theory of precarious manhood ([Vandello & Bosson, 2013](#)).

Discussion

This study explored and documented adolescent Mexican American boys' perspectives and attitudes on dating relationships and DV. This information is critical to understanding the nuances of DV within this population. The sample for this study was unique in that it was made up of exclusively adolescents of Mexican American heritage, primarily first- and second-generation Mexican immigrants. In this study, we found that being male children of Mexican heritage parents was foundational to the identities of the participants. This perspective was the lens through which they viewed the world; it was also the perspective we have endeavored to convey through the findings. In discussing relationships, participants explicitly stated that boys commonly expect that male partners have more control in relationships. These notions reflected both traditional machismo and the tenets of precarious manhood ([Vandello & Bosson, 2013](#)). In another qualitative study, Mexican American male teenagers reported agreement with the gender stereotype that men control dating relationships, women should listen to their male partners, and violence results when women fail to obey men ([Black & Weisz, 2005](#)). This finding is also consistent with another study that reported urban Latino youth held lesser views of gender role egalitarianism than Latinas ([Ulloa et al., 2008](#)). The theory of precarious manhood ([Vandello & Bosson, 2013](#)) appears to have some explanatory application in describing how it is that boys who maintain that respect and protection of women (noted in the findings as caballerismo) also justify a certain level of control and even emotional abuse as acceptable. Given that controlling behavior was noted to be common and a possible precursor to further TDV, further exploration of the dynamics of control and image preservation (here noted as attributes of precarious manhood) among adolescents is warranted.

One aspect of control noted in participants' comments was the notion that the restrictions on behavior of the female partner served to protect the male partner's image among his peers. The importance of maintaining one's image was repeated when discussing emotional abuse. The participants readily described making fun of a

girlfriend or claiming to have sex with her as emotional abuse. Yet, they also indicated that this was not uncommon; they did not indicate that it was to be avoided. The notion that males must protect their images, even at the expense of their female partners' feelings or safety, fits within the theory of precarious manhood (Vandello & Bosson, 2013).

As in other studies (Black & Weisz, 2005; Fredland et al., 2005), participants acknowledged that women could perpetrate violence. However, they were skeptical that women would initiate violence, and they also viewed violence perpetrated by women as not very threatening. They viewed female-perpetrated violence as a possible response to violence by the male or to his infidelity, which they felt was a justifiable response. Previous researchers have identified that male and female adolescents perpetrate violence for different reasons, males primarily to control their partners and females to resist control (Kernsmith & Tolman, 2011).

Limitations

The authors acknowledge that this study is exploratory in nature. While this study explored the relationship between gender, ethnicity, and culture and included boys with different levels of generation in the United States, we did not measure acculturation, acculturative stress, or other variables that have been found to influence attitudes and behaviors related to DV (Hokoda et al., 2007). The inclusion criteria of English for participation was a limitation and may have excluded less acculturated young men. From a prevention perspective, the participants' lack of firsthand experience with DV was a strength as our results provide a glimpse into boys' perceptions before they experience DV, which helps to tailor interventions to address risk factors before violence occurs. Their lack of experience with DV was also a limitation; a purposive sample of Latino adolescents who have had more experience in dating and possible DV may provide different perspectives and perhaps more insight into dynamics that contribute to TDV. Similarly, it would be important to investigate any differences between groups of various countries of origin (e.g., Colombia, El Salvador). This study represented only views on heterosexual dating relationships. Perceptions and attitudes regarding same-sex relationships were not identified but are important and needed.

Conclusion

Findings from this qualitative study complement findings from other quantitative studies that have explored aspects of DV and dating relationships among Latino youth. The teens in this study demonstrated a belief in the importance of respecting their female dating partners and understanding the painful and destructive effects of all expressions of DV. They also noted that the pressure to display masculinity can lead some young men to engage in DV behaviors, despite their knowledge that such behaviors are wrong. These paradoxical thoughts and behaviors provide an interesting starting point for further exploration and a more complete understanding of Latino adolescents' perspectives on relationships.

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