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Mexican American Adolescent Couples Communicating About Conflict: An Integrated Developmental and Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

Using observational methods on a small sample of committed Mexican American couples ($N=10$, ages 15-17, M length of relationship = 26.5 months), we describe and categorize developmental and cultural communication patterns concerning the negotiation of conflict issues. Videotaped dyadic interactions were transcribed and qualitatively coded using iterative confirmatory and exploratory approaches. Quantitative indicators confirmed the categorization of couples into discourse styles, as well as elucidated the contexts and extent of overlap of developmental and cultural themes. Nine of ten couples had a serious discussion of relational conflict issues, lasting a majority of the time allotted (14 minutes). Five couples' conversations were consumed by blaming/criticizing, interrupted by small stretches of one-sided taking of responsibility, suggestions, or voiced intentions for new behaviors to resolve the conflict. The remaining four couples enhanced their understanding of the relationship through mutual and respectful exploration of their chosen conflict issues. Culturally salient themes were identified, including adaptive *machismo*, *familismo*, and caballero care. The latter denoted bids for demonstration of care or affection from a girl on behalf of her partner, which together with discussion of family-oriented topics, contextualized the content of conflict discussions. Adolescent boys demonstrated adaptive *machismo* traits, elucidating how conflict negotiation itself was influenced by cultural values. Taken together, findings point to the importance of viewing Mexican American adolescents' negotiation of conflict in light of cultural values including commitment to the relationship.

Keywords

adolescence, romantic relationships, culture, intimacy, Latinos, qualitative methods

The past decade of research on adolescent romantic and sexual relationships has yielded a remarkable body of empirical support for the complexity and significance of youth's intimate partner experiences (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Seiffge-Krenke, 2011; Tulman & McClelland, 2011). Adolescent communication patterns are distinct from adult communication patterns in a number of ways (e.g., greater awkwardness, problem minimization; Giordano, Manning, Longmore, & Flanigan, 2012; Shulman, Mayes, Cohen, Swain, & Leckman, 2008). Research methodologies have progressed to include directly observing adolescent couples to better understand complex dyadic and situational interpersonal processes. Studies employing observational methodologies have largely focused on adolescent couples' discussions of conflict issues during which the adolescent grapples with developmental desires for autonomy and intimacy (Welsh & Shulman, 2008). However, quantitative observational coding schemes in adolescent studies are often informed by the adult marital literature and derived primarily from European American couples (Welsh & Shulman, 2008). The developmental appropriateness of such applications is unclear and developmental considerations likely intersect with cultural norms in ways not yet understood. Mixed methodological approaches are increasingly recognized as ideal for promoting an enriched understanding of how social behaviors unfold in dynamic and culturally influenced contexts (Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark, & Smith, 2011).

Adolescent Negotiation of Conflict

Research with adolescent populations suggests that youth employ a wide variety of conflict negotiation strategies ranging from facilitative (Ha, Overbeek, Cillessen, & Engels, 2012; Mclsaac, Connolly, McKenney, Pepler, & Craig, 2008) to minimization or avoidance (Shulman et al., 2008) or engagement (e.g., "throwing insults and digs"; Simon & Furman, 2010). Compared with young adult couples, adolescents may be more likely to minimize or deny the existence of disagreement in their relationship and explore differences superficially and in a manner that preserves unity over furthered discourse (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). For example, adolescents in Tuval-Mashiach and Shulman's (2006) study spent less time discussing their conflict and did so more concretely than young adult couples. This aligns with recent research pointing to

adolescents' tendency to employ positive (e.g., problem solving) rather than negative conflict negotiation styles (Ha et al., 2012), followed by the use of withdrawal or compliance strategies (Simon & Furman, 2010).

Superficial levels of conflict negotiation among adolescent couples may stem from inexperience in romantic relationships and the ability to more easily dissolve partnerships that are no longer desired by either or both partners (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Couples who are together for longer periods of time may demonstrate an enhanced ability to meet one another's developmental needs for both autonomy and interdependence (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). In turn, feelings of commitment increase as the relationship progresses and communication discomfort decreases (Giordano et al., 2012). It follows that skills in the ability to recognize, confront, and successfully negotiate disagreements may be learned as a relationship endures over time (Shulman et al., 2008).

Although recent studies have shed light on how adolescent couples negotiate relationship needs and differences, the youth sampled have tended to date their partner for only 4 to 12 months (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Giordano et al., 2012; Ha et al., 2012). Studies are needed to better understand the conflict negotiation styles of youth who have dated for longer periods of time. It may be expected that such youth may demonstrate characteristics similar to other same-age adolescents (e.g., conflict minimization) but may otherwise feel more comfortable around one another and evidence a certain degree of mature conflict negotiation skills (e.g., recognizing and exploring conflict in a manner that builds intimacy; Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Furthermore, developmental considerations likely intersect with cultural norms in meaningful and unexplored ways.

Cultural Considerations

Mexican American (MA) youth represent a large segment of the U.S. population (32.8% MA vs. 23.3% national average are under the age of 18; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2013a, 2013b). Acculturating MA youth navigate romantic relationships within unique ecodevelopmental contexts whereby communal cultural proscriptions for interpersonal behavior continue to exert influence (Updegraff, Umaña-Taylor, McHale,

Wheeler, & Perez-Brena, 2012). MA couples, compared with youth of other ethnicities in the United States, may be called upon to navigate more mature forms of conflict negotiation at younger ages due to earlier transitions to marriage (particularly foreign-born; Copen, Daniels, Vespa, & Mosher, 2012) and childbearing (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2013).

MA adolescents are a diverse and understudied group and, given the close proximity of the United States to Mexico, many adopt a bicultural identity (Matsunaga, Hecht, Elek, & Ndiaye, 2010). As such, youth maintain tight cultural ties to Mexican traditions and values, to the Spanish language, and to relatives in Mexico (Haglund, Belknap, & Garcia, 2012). Meanwhile, MA adolescents also exercise agency in drawing from U.S. cultural norms. The result may be a new blend of norms and expectations, holding particular relevance for dating relationships as traditional gender roles are challenged (Milbrath, Ohlson, & Eyre, 2009). Traditional cultural norms delineate gender expectations including *machismo*, a man's honorable role as provider for the family and allotting him greater decision-making capacity, and *marianismo*, referring to a revered female role as a caretaker of children and the home (Organista, 2007). Within this traditional paradigm, female independence and self-achievement may be sacrificed toward the goal of prioritizing the family (i.e., *familismo*; Organista, 2007). Finally, *simpatía* denotes a cultural valuing of caring interpersonal exchanges, including tendencies to remain agreeable, respectful, and emotionally attendant. In tandem with *marianismo*, women may avoid direct confrontation and partner criticism in order to maintain inter- personal harmony (see Castillo, Perez, Castillo, & Ghosheh, 2010).

Historically, there has been an overemphasis in the literature on negative aspects of *machismo* (i.e., aggression, dominance, emotional toughness). It follows that contemporary research has begun to separate positive aspects (i.e., assertiveness, emotional availability, responsibility to one's family and community) from negative (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008; Pardo, Weisfeld, Hill, & Slatcher, 2012). Fostering positive aspects of *machismo* holds particular relevance as relationship quality is aided by a male capacity to demonstrate perspective taking, attend to emotional needs, and to otherwise engage in constructive forms of communication (see Malouff, Schutte, & Thorsteinsson, 2014); adaptive *machismo* has, in turn, been

associated with increased marital satisfaction on behalf of both partners within MA marriages (Pardo et al., 2012).

Few studies have examined how cultural norms may influence adolescents' dating lives. In Milbrath and colleagues (2009) study, MA youth, as compared with African American youth, emphasized marriage and family as the ultimate goal of romantic relationships, sexual morality of girls within a Catholic religious tradition, and "romantic care," that is, girls' desire for romantic acts of affection and provision on behalf of the boy (here, termed "caballero care"). These cultural influences intersected with struggles to integrate Mexican dating norms within the dominant culture. Such cultural adaptation processes may unfold differently for boys compared with girls. In a study of MA adolescents in the Southwest, for example, boys were slower to adopt egalitarian viewpoints concerning relationships (Updegraff et al., 2012). This discrepancy in gender views has been associated with risk for relationship conflict and violence among Latino adults, particularly as acculturating women begin to use more assertive and dominant communication tactics (Sabina, Cuevas, & Schally, 2013). There is a need for more research on acculturating MA adolescents' partnering experiences, particularly as areas of conflict are negotiated in committed romantic relationships.

The Present Study

Mixed methods are increasingly required to enhance a valid understanding of understudied at-risk populations and to translate research into effective interventions and practices (Creswell et al., 2011). The present study addresses an important and pragmatic gap in the literature given MA adolescents' heightened rates of teen pregnancy (Hamilton et al., 2013) and earlier cohabitation and marriage compared with other race/ethnic groups (Copen et al., 2012). Findings will be relevant for interventions targeting MA youth as grounded in their lived experiences—an important endeavor given that relationship programs inclusive of communication components are already targeting diverse adolescent groups (Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011) and are often modified to fit Latino youth's experiences (Weisz & Black, 2009).

Here, we analyzed a small sample of MA adolescent couples between the ages

of 15 and 17 and their discussion of issues that cause conflict in their romantic relationships. Previous research using qualitative analyses of adolescents' conflict negotiation strategies has yielded important information concerning how their communication differs from young adult couples (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Qualitative research with MA adolescents has also brought to light the unique sociocultural contexts and values in which their relationship experiences and expectations are situated (Haglund et al., 2012; Milbrath et al., 2009). Thus, while we used confirmatory techniques to assess whether communication behaviors found in previous work with adolescents were present among MA adolescent couples, open-ended exploratory techniques were also invoked to allow for the emergence of novel communication patterns and behaviors. Data analysis that uses both confirmatory and exploratory techniques is common in qualitative research, given that it allows for the replication of previous findings with new groups while also informing the design of more valid measurements for understudied populations (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). We further extended these analyses to include a quantitative component that verified the extent to which communication behaviors overlapped. This additional level of analytical rigor advanced a more in-depth understanding of nuanced behaviors within larger communicative patterns and cultural contexts.

We narrowed our focus to include MA adolescents in a specific developmental time period who were involved in a committed dating relationship. The developmental period of middle adolescence (e.g., 15-17 years old) is critical in a number of ways (e.g., quality of interpersonal exchanges, development of interdependence among partners; Collins et al., 2009) and couples involved in a "going out" relationship (for a minimum of 6 months) are distinct from other forms of dating relationships that are associated with less intimacy and commitment (e.g., hookups, friends with benefits; Williams & Adams, 2013). Couples who are together for longer periods of time demonstrate distinct conflict discourse patterns from those whose relationships dissolve more quickly, with the former evidencing less awkwardness (Giordano et al., 2012) and a greater tendency to negotiate differences (Ha et al., 2012; Shulman, Tuval-Mashiach, Levrant, & Anbar, 2006).

We utilized a mixed methods approach to categorize couples into communication

discourse patterns, inductively code all conversations for developmental and cultural themes and to capture the extent of each across conversations, and to delineate the extent and contexts of developmental and cultural theme overlap within couples' larger communication patterns. Specifically, the aims of this study were to (a) assess whether developmentally salient communication patterns found in other observational studies of adolescent conflict were evidenced among committed MA adolescent couples, (b) allow for the emergence of novel patterns of communication and to inductively delineate previously unobserved communication behaviors at a micro level of analysis, (c) assess whether culturally salient indicators in previous research were observed (i.e., *familismo*, *machismo*, *caballero care*), and (d) explore cultural and developmental themes in context of one another and within larger patterns of communication.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Participants for this study were invited from a larger pool ($N = 305$) that had taken an online survey as part the MA Teen Relationships (MATR) study, which took place in a large urban city of a Southwest border state. Youth were recruited to take the survey through partnership with area high schools, community centers (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs), and at public events (e.g., a monthly art walk). In order to participate in the MATR study, adolescents were required to be between the ages of 15 to 17 and to self-identify as MA. During recruitment, adolescents were told that following the survey, they would be eligible to participate in a videotaped interaction task with a dating partner also between the ages of 15 and 17. Youth who were interested in participating gave the researchers a preferred name and contact number at the time of recruitment and indicated whether they wanted to take the survey only or to also participate in the videotaped task. Youth were again offered the opportunity to sign up following their completion of the survey. Within 2 weeks of signing up, we attempted to contact all adolescents who had denoted interest in the videotaped dyadic task ($n = 110$) and scheduled a total of 52 couples. Scheduling was conducted concurrently with surveys; some couples could be scheduled immediately following the survey at their place of recruitment (e.g., a private room at the Boys and Girls Club) and others were scheduled to participate shortly after (i.e., at their place of

recruitment, or at a private lab at the University). Not all couples were able to be scheduled because they were either unable to be reached or they or their dating partner were no longer interested in participating, their dating partner was not between the ages of 15 and 17, they had broken up by the time of the follow-up call, or scheduling conflicts deterred their participation. A total of 34 couples participated. Each individual from the couple was reminded by phone and text the week of their scheduled visit, and was given information on the MATR website containing frequently asked questions (FAQs) about the study and directions to the University.

Of the 34 couples, 10 were “going out” for at least 6 months ($M = 26.5$ months; $SD = 14.62$ months), which met the criteria of the present study. See Table 1 for sample descriptives. Individuals were linked across study components using unique identifying numbers, stored in a password-protected data- base, and accessible only to trained MATR researchers. Participants were ensured that their data would remain confidential including additional protection within the guidelines of the certificate of confidentiality obtained from the U.S. government. The governing instructional review board approved this research and written parental consent and adolescent assent (available in both Spanish and English) were obtained for all participants. Participants were each given US\$15 for taking the survey and an additional US\$15 for participation in the videotaped interaction task. They were also given a handout on healthy dating relationships.

The videotaped interaction consisted of three timed tasks and was facilitated by two trained researchers. A camera was set up in order to capture the faces and body language of participants, and a digital recorder was also placed on the table or desk in front of the couple. First, couples were given 5 minutes to collaboratively choose the top five movies of all time. Following the warm-up task, they were told to discuss two relationship issues from a list of common problems (i.e., *Partner Issues Checklist*; Capaldi, Wilson, & Collier, 1994; also provided in Spanish) that each partner felt was the most important or recent for a total of 14 minutes (7 minutes per issue). Adolescents were not directed specifically to solve the issue, but rather told generally to discuss it. This technique offered the benefit of allowing adolescents themselves to approach the conflict as they normally would if it came up. In cases where both partners chose the same issue, the issue of the adolescent initially recruited into the study was discussed,

followed by his or her partner's second chosen issue. To conclude, couples were given 5 minutes per partner to discuss their goals (for a total of 10 minutes). For the purposes of the present study, we focus on couples' communication during the conflict interaction task. A facilitator entered the room only at each time interval to give instructions and to keep time.

Table 1. Characteristics of Study Participants

	%	<i>M (SD)</i>
Individual level		
Age		16.25 (0.85)
15	25	
16	25	
17	50	
Grade		10.95 (1.10)
9	15	
10	15	
11	30	
12	40	
Immigration status		
First	40	
Second	45	
Third	15	
Mother's educational attainment		
Less than high school	50	
High school equivalent	5	
Greater than high school	25	
Missing	20	
Father's educational attainment		
Less than high school	40	
High school equivalent	15	
Greater than high school	15	
Missing	30	
Couple level		
Age		
Both same age	80	
Male older	20	
Pregnant/parenting	30	
Immigration		
Both same generation status	40	
Mismatched generation status	60	
Spanish language spoken	50	

Note. One couple was pregnant; two others were parenting a child. First generation denotes that the adolescent was born in Mexico, second generation that (a) parent(s) was born in Mexico, and third generation that both parents were born in the United States. Spanish language spoken denotes that the couple utilized some degree of Spanish during their interaction task.

Data Analyses

Compared with individual self-report methods, observational methods uniquely reveal interactive and relational processes (Welsh & Shulman, 2008). Videotaped observations provide a snapshot of how couples interact and account uniquely for the variance explained in relationship quality (van Dulmen, Mata, & Klipfel, 2011). They also provide rich and nuanced data, similar in this manner to individual interviews. Padgett (2008) recommended that approximately 10 interviews be conducted. Ten couples' conversations of conflict issues were transcribed verbatim and checked for reliability by a trained graduate assistant. Those containing Spanish were transcribed by a bilingual and bicultural researcher (the first author) and checked for reliability by a native speaker of Spanish. Transcripts and videotaped interactions were analyzed for content in the present study, including attention to both verbal and nonverbal behaviors.

Following Crabtree and Miller's (1999) guidelines for qualitative analysis of text and observations, the data were first organized via a template approach. As Crabtree and Miller describe, the template may be close-ended or relatively open-ended, and is often modified as a result of exploring the data. The first author began with an organizing template, meaning that developmental and cultural themes found among other adolescent researchers were sought for comparison in our sample of MA youth. In order to avoid forcing couples into preexisting categories, however, new themes were sought for couples not easily classified by previous research. Of note, it may be assumed that a given segment of text is illustrative of a couple's pattern of interactions; in this manner, text may be analyzed both holistically and through more subsequent in-depth analysis of categorical content and form (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). Throughout this process, the first author was guided by the literature on conflict resolution and communication among adolescents, young adults, and adults, as well as that pertaining to Mexican cultural values.

Our first analytical step was to assign a developmental discourse style based on a holistic assessment of conflict dialogue across the entire 14 minutes of interaction. Second, we inductively coded text into meaningful categorical units (i.e., developmental and cultural themes). This analytical method permitted an exploration concerning how developmental and cultural considerations emerge in context, overlap, and reflect

holistic negotiation styles. Similar to other discourse analysis research (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006), we analyzed text and observed videos according not only to which strategies couples utilized to handle conflict but also their emotional tone, body language, and the extensiveness of each content type (e.g., familism) and method (e.g., blaming). The resulting coding schemes were developed from multiple reiterations and meetings among the first and second authors, and reflect agreement that was reached after changes were made to each successive draft. Each step of the analysis process was documented using NVivo (a qualitative software program; QSR International Pty Ltd., 2014, Version 10) in order to ensure qualitative rigor. Graduate research assistants were then familiarized with the data (i.e., read transcriptions multiple times and watched the video-recorded conversations) and trained in how to code the data into themes using the resulting codebooks. Interrater reliability was assessed 3 times: first, concerning the extent of agreement on each couple's categorization into a communication discourse style; second, on inductive content analysis of developmental themes; and finally, on inductive content analysis of cultural themes.

Developmental discourse styles. It was evident from watching the videos that couples demonstrated distinct conflict negotiation styles, apparent in context of their tonality, facial expressions and body language, and dialogue. Thus, the first reiteration of the organized template included whether couples' discourse styles may be categorized into one of the following, based on the literature on adolescent development and young adulthood: (a) task avoidance (i.e., including joking around, getting off topic), (b) superficial discussion (i.e., concretely, briefly, or downplaying the significance), or (c) cultivating relationship understanding (CRU). The latter was included given research finding this conflict style among young adults (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Coding into this category meant that adolescents utilized the interaction as an opportunity to demonstrate affection and deepen their understanding of the relationship (i.e., by seeking to understand why their partner felt a certain way, asking about the other's point of view, and/or decisions to adopt behaviors to help their relationship).

We found that the first two categories may be collapsed and that some couples were not accurately categorized using either of the two styles. This resulted in the

development of a new discourse style that, following inductive content analysis, was termed “Cycle of Blame/Criticism.” The resultant codebook thus included three developmental discourse styles, in order of adolescents’ use of maladaptive versus adaptive negotiation strategies: (a) minimizing conflict/avoidance (M/A), (b) cycle of blame/criticism (CB/C), or (c) CRU. There was agreement between the first author and an independent research assistant on 7 of 10 conversations. Disagreements in categorization of remaining conversations were resolved through meeting to review each of the transcripts in the context of the videos and making improvements to the final codebook. Through this process, agreement was reached on the remaining three.

Developmental themes. Couples who were categorized as CB/C did not fit the literature-driven discourse styles but, rather, utilized near or all of the entire time (14 minutes) to discuss their issues without demonstration of the skills and outcomes associated with CRU. This dialogue was thus explored in-depth using inductive content analysis. The first author conducted several careful readings of the transcriptions, watched the videos several times, and assigned emergent construct labels to the dialogue. The latter were conceptualized broadly to include a range of communication behaviors (e.g., “name-calling”) and conflict strategies (e.g., “defensiveness”). These initial codes were then refined and sorted into recurrent conceptual themes that reflected how the couples within this new discourse style communicated at a micro level. The following themes emerged: (a) blaming/criticism, (b) (one-sided) taking of responsibility and/or attempts to problem-solve, (c) expressing helplessness. The first author then inductively coded all 10 conversations for these communication behaviors (herein referred to as “developmental themes”) so that we could explore the extent to which they were utilized within and across each of the three discourse styles and the subsequently explored cultural themes. Text was coded to include context, and overlapping segments were assigned double codes (e.g., attempt to problem-solve followed by blaming in the same text segment). It follows that the percentages we refer to throughout are estimates. A trained graduate research assistant independently coded all transcripts in this manner after having also watched the videos. Resulting discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached and changes were built into

the final codebook explanations. However, all initial nonmatches were used to compute an interrater reliability for the developmental themes of all 10 conversations ($\kappa = .82$).

Cultural themes. A second aim of this study was to assess whether the following cultural themes applied to adolescent couples' conversations: (a) *caballero care* (i.e., bids for demonstration of care/affection from the girl on behalf of the boy), (b) *familismo* (i.e., evidence of strong family values including discussion of long-term partnering, parenting, respect for parental influence, parental involvement in their dating relationship, spending time with partner's family), and (c) *machismo*, coded separately as adaptive (i.e., emotional availability, demonstrations of affection, desire to financially care for a female partner, responsibility in child-rearing, and/or to the community or friends) or maladaptive (i.e., aggressiveness, emotional toughness, domineering, attempts to control decision making). Each cultural construct was coded via inductive content analysis in the same manner described above. After a first round of coding, it was apparent that maladaptive *machismo* was rare and difficult to decipher from blaming/criticizing. Thus, the final codebook included inductive coding of *caballero care*, *familismo*, and adaptive *machismo*. Interrater reliability of cultural themes was computed separately from developmental themes ($\kappa = .92$). Finally, given that language use is an indicator of acculturation and heritage retention (Updegraff et al., 2012), the first author also coded for whether Spanish was used to any extent during the interaction by either or both partners. A graduate research assistant verified second language use (complete match).

Integration of developmental and cultural themes. A final aim of this study was to assess the contexts and extent to which cultural themes overlapped and intersected with developmental themes. This additional set of analyses also served as a verification of the three developmental discourse styles. As coding was done in context, we used NVivo to compute the percentage of dialogue coded by each developmental and cultural theme (i.e., "percent coverage"), rather than using numeric counts. We hypothesized the following: (a) Interactions categorized as M/A would have a reduced

percentage of dialogue coded as a developmental and/or cultural theme; (b) interactions categorized as CB/C would (i) evidence a greater percentage of dialogue coded as blaming/criticizing and helplessness as compared with taking responsibility/attempts to resolve and (ii) evidence a lesser percentage of dialogue coded as adaptive *machismo*; (c) Interactions categorized as CRU would (i) evidence a greater percentage of dialogue coded as taking responsibility/attempts to resolve as compared with blaming/criticizing and helplessness and (ii) include a greater percentage of dialogue coded as adaptive *machismo*; and (d) apart from discourse categorization, dialogue coded as taking responsibility/attempts to resolve would share a high degree of overlap with adaptive *machismo*. We also assessed the percent coverage of caballero care and *familismo* alongside adaptive *machismo* and developmental themes (e.g., blaming/criticizing) although we did not have specific hypotheses in place to guide these exploratory analyses.

Results

All couples utilized all or a majority of the time to discuss their chosen conflict issues, with the exception of one couple that was categorized as minimizing their issues and remaining off topic (M/A). Five of 10 couples were classified as CB/C and four as CRU. Discourse styles are described in the following order, each progressively denoting the use of greater conflict negotiation skills: M/A, CB/C, and CRU. The CB/C category, which emerged from the data, has been included as a developmental discourse style in keeping with its comparison to what other studies have found. Cultural themes reflective of the literature transcend communication style, and rather serve to contextualize it.

We found support for global categorization of couples into one of three developmental discourse styles by calculating the average percentage of dialogue that was inductively coded as blaming/criticizing, taking responsibility/attempts to resolve, and expressing helplessness. These analyses also shed light on the extent to which cultural themes aligned with developmental and discourse categorization (see Figure 1). The couple that was categorized as M/A demonstrated reduced percentages of blaming/criticizing and taking responsibility/attempts to resolve, and a moderate percentage of helplessness. We expected that conversations that were categorized as

CB/C would have a greater percentage of dialogue inductively coded as blaming/criticizing and helplessness as compared with evidenced taking of responsibility/attempts to resolve. This was true of three of five cases; the latter two cases demonstrated similar percentages of dialogue categorized as blaming/criticizing/helplessness and taking responsibility/attempts to resolve. In context of the video recordings, however, affect, body language, and tonality resulted in a decision to maintain the original categorizations of these videos as CB/C. The averages in Figure 1 reiterate the expected trend. There was a greater percentage of taking responsibility/attempts to resolve as compared with blaming/criticism and helplessness in all four cases categorized as CRU.

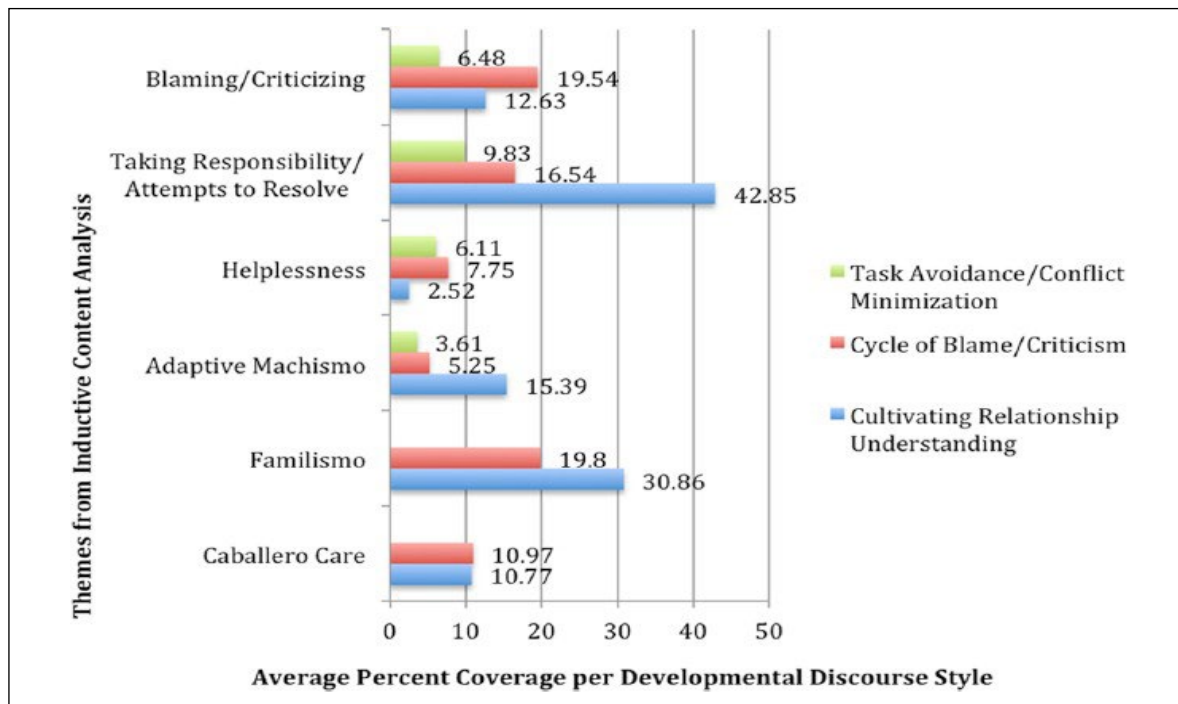


Figure 1. Average percent coverage of inductive content themes per developmental discourse style.

As expected, the percentage of dialogue coded as adaptive *machismo* was highest in the CRU category, followed by successively lower rates in the CB/C and M/A categories. Also, there was strong overlap (79.15%) with the developmental theme of taking responsibility/attempts to resolve with adaptive *machismo*. Congruently, boys demonstrated a higher percentage of dialogue coded as taking responsibility and/or

resolving the conflict (65%) than did girls. *Familismo* evidenced a greater percent coverage in the CRU category although it was also coded to a moderate degree among couples in the CB/C category. Caballero care evidenced a similar percent coverage within both the CB/C and CRU categories, reflecting that a boy may respond to a girl's bid for affection/care through various communication behaviors. Additional analyses revealed that dialogue coded within each cultural theme was sometimes understood within context of another. Specifically, adaptive *machismo* shared 20.83% coverage with *familismo* and 13.85% with caballero care. Caballero care and *familismo* shared 22.57% overlap. In the final section, we draw the reader's attention to these and other intersections of developmental and cultural themes in context of couples' conversations. We use pseudonyms throughout and provide example quotations and case studies.

Developmental Discourse Styles and Themes

Minimizing conflict/avoidance (M/A). One couple explored their issues superficially and spent much of their interaction task joking around or in uncomfortable silence. A mix of positive (e.g., at times smiling at one another) and distanced body language characterized this couple's interaction. They periodically conversed about their issues but by and large, were unsuccessful in sustaining dialogue. This resulted in brief and unfruitful segments of conversation about their conflict issues:

Case Example:

Daniel: We didn't even talk to 7 minutes . . . So why else are you jealous?

Ariana: That's the only reason.

Daniel: That's the only reason why you're jealous and you started being mean to me?

Ariana: Yea . . .

Daniel: So yea, anyways. So that's all we are going to do about it? Yea? (long silence, both partners look irritated and are staring at the table)

Cycle of blame/criticism (CB/C). Five of 10 couple conversations were categorized by this discourse style. Such couples evidenced serious discussion of one

or both conflict issues and dialogued about it for all or the majority of the time allotted. Notably, some couples did not limit their discussion to their chosen issues but also veered or reverted to other issues. Conversations were consumed by blaming/criticizing interrupted by small stretches of one-sided taking of responsibility, suggestions, or voiced intentions for new behaviors to resolve the conflict. In contrast to those categorized as CRU, adaptive communication behaviors were typically accompanied by unaffectionate body language and cycled back to more accusations and personal attacks. In addition, some partners picked new fights amid discussion of the chosen topic. Thus, in-depth and respectful conflict negotiation was thwarted, which led to further arguing and sometimes to expressions of helplessness. Notably, there were instances in which helplessness was discussed early on in the conversation; however, statements reflected that this too was the result of previous arguing. This category was characterized by the following three developmental themes: blaming/criticizing, one-sided taking of responsibility/attempts to resolve, and helplessness.

Blaming/criticizing. Couples categorized as CB/C relied most heavily on blaming and criticism, resulting in failed attempts at problem solving. Topics were raised accusingly (“So why don’t you do what you say you’re gonna do?” Tanya), resulting in back and forth bantering and escalating argument (“I’m trying to talk so shut up.” Miguel). Dialogue entailed name-calling (“Am I going to listen to you sit there and call me a bitch?” Christina), personal attacks (“You make me mad. That’s why I hate you.” Karen; “You’re the lazy one.” Anthony), exaggerations (“And you never want listen to me.” Ariana), bringing up past events or wrongdoings (“Because you’ve done stuff before . . .” Christina), and/or issuing responsibility for the issue (“You just do that on purpose.” Karen).

One-sided taking of responsibility/attempts to resolve. At times, one member of the pair took responsibility for a behavior, acknowledging his or her role in the conflict. These interactions fell short, however, of a respectful dialogue exchange and instead often resulted in provocation and further bantering (“But I’m trying to fix it. I’m trying to ask you, like, what I did so I can improve on it . . .” Javier; “Nobody has to tell you what

you do wrong.” Christina). Other times, one partner’s attempt to resolve conflict was met by an observed distancing in body language, a disinterested tone of voice, or otherwise negative affect (“I do have hope for this relationship. . . how do you want me to show it?” Nathan; “I don’t know, find a way.” Cecilia).

Helplessness. Adolescents’ dialogue offers insight into why arguing may lead couples to a sense of helplessness concerning their ability to successfully resolve conflict. Some couples explicitly referenced their tendency to argue without resolution (“. . . there’s no point, we never solve anything.” Natalia), and others gave up during their interaction task (“Oh, whatever. Shut up.” Ariana). The latter included sarcastic conclusions that a partner did not care about the conversation (“No, it’s whatever. It’s whatever. Now I know it’s whatever to you.” Miguel) or, in some cases, even about the partnership (“See you don’t even care about this relationship.” Cecilia). Others acknowledged they hadn’t gotten anywhere during their discussion and one adolescent commented that the research would not be interested in their failed attempt (“*Todo lo que salga mal, lo van a borrar.*” Ariana). [Everything that comes out wrong, they are going to erase.] Discussion that reflected a stated irresolution to change was also coded within this theme (“I don’t know what to say. That’s just who I am.” Maria).

Case Example With Developmental Themes (parentheses):

Javier: I’m just saying . . . when you talk to guys sometimes . . . you’re all bubbly and then when you talk to me, you’re all serious.

Christina: Because you make me mad! . . . You do things that make me hate you . . . if they lied to me and did \$#%@ up shit to me, I would treat them the same way . . . Because you’ve done stuff in the past . . . What makes me think you’re not gonna do it again? (blaming/criticism)

Javier: I’m not gonna do it again. (taking responsibility/attempt to resolve)

Christina: . . . You told me in the beginning that you weren’t gonna do anything and you did and now you’re telling me you won’t do it again . . . Shouldn’t it have stayed that way?

Javier: Yea, I know I messed up. (taking responsibility/attempt to resolve)

Christina: That's your fault, you should have to pay the consequences . . . (blaming/criticism)

Javier: If I try to talk to you, all we are going to do is argue.

Christina: Exactly. That's the only talk about it.

Javier: Like a big argument. (expressed helplessness)

Cultivating Relationship Understanding (CRU). Four of 10 couples used the interaction to enhance the relationship through mutual and respectful exploration of their chosen conflict issues. These conversations included genuine sharing of feelings ("I got a little mad because I didn't know about it." Sebastian; "But sometimes . . . I don't show it [jealousy] . . . You might think I don't trust you . . . Sometimes I just keep it in." Guillermo), evidence of seeking to understand why a partner felt a certain way ("You'd rather you just knew straight up?" Jackie), decisions to adopt new behaviors to help the relationship ("And yea, I'm gonna tell you that I'm jealous." Sebastian), and/or insight gained through the conversation ("Sometimes we both—we both take it [jealousy] too far." Lydia). Although anger was often apparent, couples also displayed verbal and nonverbal affection (e.g., hand-holding, touching, facing one another, smiling). Conflict issues were not necessarily resolved, but conversations evidenced an emotionally turning toward one another ("But I mean, he's your friend and I respect that." Sebastian), and acceptance of differences ("We can't all have the same—like say I get jealous, I don't say it. If you get jealous, you'd say it. We're not all the same." Guillermo—holding hands, smiling). Joking was apparent in some conversations, but it did not appear demeaning or to deter couples off topic.

Case Example:

Lydia: So, we're gonna need to trust each other. Well . . .

Guillermo: Especially cuz you're moving schools.

Lydia: And we won't see each other as often. But yea.

Guillermo: We hear there's rumors about us. Doing stuff. Bad stuff that we shouldn't. Let's not get mad . . .

Lydia: Talk to each other.

Guillermo: First talk about it. See what's the real thing.

Lydia: See if it's true . . .

Guillermo: We're dating. You're supposed to trust me, and I'm supposed to trust you.

Cultural Themes

Developmental considerations intersect with cultural norms, and couples' conversations were further understood within the contexts of *familismo*, adaptive *machismo*, and caballero care. We present each theme in order of salience. Five of the 10 couples utilized Spanish during their interaction (see Table 1).

Adaptive machismo. All conversations evidenced at least some degree of adaptive *machismo*, signifying that in the context of verbal and nonverbal behaviors, boys demonstrated listener support, affection, and/or a sense of accountability to important relationships. Boys often appeared emotionally available, rather than aggressive or domineering. At times, this took the form of romantic expressions toward a partner ("Like every other girl in high school is not even close as to you. Like when I was with you . . . like every hour felt like minutes because, I don't know, I just wanted to be with you." Samuel).

Demonstrations of adaptive *machismo* frequently stemmed from boys' expressed responsibility to a partner, family, or to friends. For example, long-held friendships (same- and other-sex) were deemed important, despite the feelings of jealousy that they sometimes provoked. Conversations were double coded alongside *familismo* when responsibility extended a sense of family to include close friends ("I know that either way you're gonna do it [talk to them] because it's a friend or someone you've known for a long time. Cause I know all your friends—we've known them since we were [gestures height] still that tall . . .". Robert), or to children ("You overprotect 'em." Karen; "I do only because she's my child." Anthony).

Familismo. Five conversations contained dialogue reflecting strong family values, three of which were among couples already pregnant or parenting. In these conversations, *familismo* was more overt and included discussion of financial provision, struggles for autonomy versus raising a family together, and current pregnancy or

parenting challenges (“My time is like staying at home being nauseous or sleepy . . . that’s why I don’t think it’s fair. Cuz your time you can still go out with your friends. I’m too tired to do any of that stuff.” Natalia). An expectation for traditional gender roles was sometimes a site for dispute (“You don’t wake up to feed her.” Anthony; “No cause you’re awake. Why would I wake up if you’re awake?” Karen). Couples who were pregnant/parenting evidenced higher percent coverage of blaming/criticism ($M = 27.55\%$ as compared with 21.73% coverage for nonparenting couples) and taking responsibility/attempts to resolve ($M = 13.38\%$ as compared with 7.79% nonparenting couples). The reader may compare these percentages with Figure 1. Notably, two parenting couples were categorized as CRU and one as CB/C. We postulate that greater discussion involving multiple negotiation strategies reflects both parenting-related stress as well as attempts to resolve conflicts that were of significance.

Aside from parenting, topics coded as *familismo* included a father’s strict rules for his daughter’s dating, a couple’s plans for a future family together, and the importance of maintaining childhood friendships. Some couples spent a great deal of time at the other’s house, and conversations reflected an acceptance among some families of a partner staying in their home (“Do you want me to stay like a day or two, maybe stay at your house for a while?” Arturo). The *familismo* theme shared 20.83% coverage with adaptive *machismo*, as exemplified amid dialogue that reflected a valuing of parental authority and rule setting (“It’s surprising . . . in the past, like I’ve had boy- friends and like I wouldn’t tell him [her father] . . . And when he’d find out, he’d like get all mad and stuff . . .” Madeline, “. . . this time it’s different because I actually told him [that they were dating], you know? . . . I get how your dad is because, you know, I’m a guy too and I know how it’d feel.” Robert).

Caballero care. Three conversations contained bids for affection on behalf of the girl, at times in the context of blaming/criticism (17.88% shared coverage; “Okay, so my issue is because you never have money, you never want to take me anywhere.” Cecilia). Two bids shared overlap with *familismo* (23.17% shared coverage). Requests primarily included tangible items and gifts (e.g., dinner, jewelry, flowers) and were best understood within long- term thinking about the relationship (i.e., marriage, family goals). Similarly embedded within family-oriented relationship contexts, one argument

stemmed from a request for her partner (and child's father) to take off time and to buy her something for Mother's Day ("But Mother's Day's not a special occasion?" Natalia; "It is a special occasion." Arturo; "Not for me apparently." Natalia). Of note, conversations by and large evidenced an expectation for financial contribution to the relationship on behalf of both partners although girls tended to pursue arguments related to male fiscal (ir)responsibility. We utilize this final case example to point the reader to overlap in developmental and cultural themes:

Case Example With Developmental and Cultural Themes (parentheses):

Cecilia: What if one day we decide to get married (*familismo*) and you don't even have a job. How are you going to support me? How are you going to provide for me? (bid for caballero care)

Nathan: I'll grow a tree that grows dough . . . Like I have money in my pocket right now . . . You always want pizza. So I guess we are going to go eat pizza. (taking responsibility/attempt to resolve issue)

Cecilia: So are you going to provide money now? (bid for caballero care)

Nathan: Yea Yea Yea . . . I always have money. (taking responsibility)

Cecilia: Boyfriends should always buy their girlfriends something nice, like jewelry . . . we're dating for months, like a year already and two months. You haven't brought me anything and you should be—like roses. (bid for caballero care)

Nathan: Nah.

Cecilia: You're such a cheapass. (blaming/criticism)

Discussion

This study sought to understand how communication of conflict among committed MA couples, aged 15 to 17 years, compared with research among youth of other ethnicities who had dated lesser periods of time. We observed youth directly and analyzed data utilizing both inductive confirmatory and exploratory approaches. Whereas other research has found that adolescent couples tended to minimize or avoid conflict, most couples in our sample utilized all or nearly all of the allotted time

(14 minutes) to explore their issues in greater depth than may be expected of the literature. Four of the 10 couples employed a discourse style reflective of research with young adults, whereby discussions fostered increased relationship understanding through warm and respectful dialogue. Five couples, however, were categorized within a discourse style characterized by blame, criticism, one-sided taking of responsibility or attempts to problem-solve, and/or expressed helplessness to resolve their issues. Importantly, culturally salient themes were identified across all discourse styles. Contrary to an emphasis in the literature on mal-adaptive forms of *machismo*, boys demonstrated adaptive *machismo* traits, including listener support, demonstrations of affection, and increased attempts to resolve or take responsibility for issues as compared with girls. The content of conversations was also influenced by culture. Caballero care reflected girls' bids for affection or demonstrations of care from their partners, and discussion of family-oriented topics (e.g., family dating rules, child-rearing) further contextualized topic matters. Findings point to the importance of viewing MA adolescents' negotiation of conflict in light of relationship commitment, and at the intersection of individual development and cultural values.

Some have suggested that MA couples date more seriously than European American youth (Haglund et al., 2012), which is supported by their earlier transitions to cohabitation and marriage (Copen et al., 2012) as well as by higher teen pregnancy rates (Hamilton et al., 2013). The couples in this study had been dating for periods ranging from 10 months to 4 years, and three couples were either pregnant or parenting. The development of healthy conflict negotiation skills might be particularly important at earlier ages for MA youth. A key finding of the present study points to more involved and conflictual forms of communication among committed MA couples than has been portrayed in previous literature. Couples overtly acknowledged areas of conflict in their relationship (i.e., rather than minimized their issues) and utilized the time allotted for thorough discussion. Nonetheless, many conversations were not successfully categorized as demonstrative of mutual and positive problem solving. Thus, a new theme emerged that characterized many couples' exchanges as a cycle of partner blaming and criticism; although these behaviors were present across all conversations, they derailed some couples from cultivating an enriched understanding of their relationship. Although

undesirable, a voiced sense of helplessness suggested that adolescents held awareness of their difficulty communicating, aligning with research finding a desire among MA youth to enhance and develop healthy relationship skills (Adams & Williams, 2011).

Mixed methods analyses of observational interactions facilitated the emergence of alternative ways of thinking about adolescent conflict negotiation, and our findings peripherally challenge the notion that adolescents uniformly view their relationships in semi-committed terms. This is relevant in lieu of more stable marriages among Hispanics, particularly foreign-born (Copen et al., 2012). A strong emphasis on the family, together with a Catholic valuing of marriage, may contribute to a sense of resilient unity contrasting the majority culture (Sabina et al., 2013). That is, where preserving a sense of unwavering and positive togetherness may lead less committed adolescent couples to downplay disagreement (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006), perhaps the presence of conflict does not necessarily signify cause for relationship dissolution among “going out” MA couples. The association between conflict style and dissolution is in need of further study, however, as research has yielded mixed findings among diverse samples (Ha et al., 2012; Shulman et al., 2006). Furthermore, future studies should follow MA youth longitudinally in order to better attend to outcomes that inform theoretical models concerning how dyadic communicative processes develop across the life span.

Of note, our sample is unique from other studies in a number of ways, each of which bears resemblance to literature concerning Mexican cultural considerations. First, adolescent relationships are typically shorter on average than the couples in the present study, most of whom had been dating well over a year and some as long as 4 years (i.e., beginning as early as age 12). This mirrors the literature finding that Latino youth often begin dating at around age 13 (Bouris et al., 2012; Haglund et al., 2012). Also, many couples discussed child-rearing and marriage in their interaction task, and some were already pregnant or parenting; this aligns with other work speculating that adolescents may minimize conflict due to less emphasis on long-term partnering goals (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Rather, this study underscores the significance of attending to cultural norms that encourage earlier and more committed adolescent

relationships, and tangentially supports the notion that relationship duration may have more to do with perceived “fit” and less to do with how conflict is negotiated (Ha et al., 2012; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009).

The overt nature of conflict negotiation should be considered within gendered expectations that undergo adaptations as youth acculturate to U.S. norms. Although traditional gender roles characteristic of Mexico (e.g., *marianismo*) dictate that girls foster harmonious and agreeable interpersonal exchanges (Castillo et al., 2010), this view may paint a somewhat antiquated picture of acculturating MA adolescents’ relationship experiences. Acculturation has been linked to females’ use of more overt and aggressive communication tactics (Sabina et al., 2013) and many girls in the present study did, in fact, utilize confrontational and direct forms of communication (i.e., including partner criticism). Girls have, however, scored higher than their male partners in conflict engagement in prior observational studies with adolescents (Simon & Furman, 2010), making it difficult to isolate cultural influences. Both boys and girls in this study employed blaming and criticism although boys evidenced a more mature ability than girls to remain respectful of differences, to accept partner influence, and to raise potential avenues for relationship betterment (e.g., adaptive *machismo*).

We align our findings with a multidimensional view of acculturation, highlighting the need to continue research on the positive and negative underpinnings of *machismo* (Arciniega et al., 2008; Pardo et al., 2012). Boys in this study were largely emotionally available and demonstrated concern for their girlfriends’ well-being, as well as a commitment to friendships and, in applicable cases, parental responsibility. Such characteristics surfaced amid negative comments (i.e., blame, affronts) generated by both members of the couple, and were made more apparent when both verbal and nonverbal cues were taken into account (i.e., body language turned toward the girl, hand- holding, smiling). Although we found more evidence of adaptive versus maladaptive *machismo*, it is important to consider that these traits may also coexist and are context driven. For example, as discussed by Milbrath and colleagues (2009), characteristics associated with negative *machismo* are more likely to surface among peers while “softer” attributes may be displayed in one-on-one interaction with a female partner.

In addition to family and adaptive *machismo* attributes, we found some evidence of caballero care (e.g., desiring gifts from a male partner), a cultural construct described by Milbrath and colleagues (2009) of MA youth. Within relationships that were already serious, however, this construct likely shares overlap with larger societal norms that dictate male demonstration of affection. For example, others have similarly found that both European American and MA adolescent boys feel that doing nice things for a female partner was required in order to keep them happy in the relationship (Adams & Williams, 2011); it is reasonable to expect that this construct is particularly pronounced for holidays (e.g., Mother's Day) and relationship anniversaries. On the other hand, Milbrath and colleagues (2009) suggested that such bids may be heightened among Catholic-abiding adolescents and within a cultural context of long-term partnering goals. Girls might view such demonstrations as evidence of caring for her and a future family—perhaps simultaneously reinforcing and fostering her partner's adaptive *machismo* characteristics.

Characteristics subsumed within adaptive *machismo* have been linked to relationship quality, both among European American couples (Malouff et al., 2014), as well as among MA (Pardo et al., 2012). Although notably complex, overt forms of assertive argumentation coupled with adaptive *machismo* and *familismo* may reflect adolescents' struggle to reconcile competing cultural norms for gendered behavior; for example, while MA boys shift at dissimilar and slower rates from traditional gender attitudes than girls (Updegraff et al., 2012), positive forms of adolescent *machismo* are often unmeasured and contribute to relationship dynamics in manners not yet fully understood. Moreover, both genders' emphasis on traditional family values and dating norms (*familismo*; for example, time spent with one another's families, discussion of marriage and child-rearing) was apparent among many of the couples studied, lending support to the notion that "changes in one dimension of acculturation may not mean that other dimensions are changing at the same rate or in the same direction, and the fact that one dimension is changing does not guarantee that others will change as well." (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010, p. 246).

Although we did not study acculturation specifically, many youth were born in Mexico and spoke some Spanish during their interaction task. Such youth are called

upon to navigate conflicting cultural proscriptions for dating behavior, including relational expectations of the other (Milbrath et al., 2009). The results warrant a more nuanced and multifaceted approach to understanding (perhaps dissimilarly) changing cultural constructs in the context of MA couples' negotiation of conflict. We suggest a continued focus on the dyadic processes central to adolescents' romantic relationships.

Study Limitations

This study provides a snapshot of how a small sample of MA adolescent couples communicated concerning areas of conflict in their relationship. We feel it is a valuable first step in better attending to the perhaps more serious partnering experiences among at least a segment of this population, and particularly among those deciding to date for extended periods of time. We are unable to speculate on MA couples who have been together for less amounts of time, a notable limitation because we narrowed our analyses to more committed and lengthier partnerships. Furthermore, and given MA adolescents' diverse acculturative experiences, we recognize that there is ample within-group heterogeneity of their partnering experiences, necessitating systematic and longitudinal study designs. Our findings do, however, reiterate the importance of considering how long a couple has been dating. We also hope that together with others' findings concerning the unique nature of adolescents' conflict negotiation (Welsh & Shulman, 2008), our study will contribute to the design of valid measurements for diverse adolescent populations.

Of importance, all the youth utilized blaming/criticism and many attempted to take responsibility or to resolve issues; we speculate that such developmental themes may reflect intermediary steps of learning to negotiate differences in a manner that attends to one's own needs before having learned to also incorporate a partner's. We understand such behaviors as embedded within cultural contexts; however, they are likely to reflect a lack of healthy relationship skills across youth of diverse cultural backgrounds. This assertion aligns with research finding high levels of verbal aggression among other adolescent groups (Muñoz-Rivas, Grana, O'Leary, & Gonzalez, 2007). Thus, although our understanding of couples' communication was derived using a MA cultural lens, we speculate that reaching diverse youth early with relationship skill sets is a universally

effective intervention strategy. Correspondingly, interventions developed within MA youth cultural contexts for substance use prevention have been efficacious across other adolescent cultural groups (*Keepin' It REAL*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2013).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Communication behaviors remain less studied than other relationship components (e.g., shared activities, sexual behavior, emotional processes), but research has consistently shown that the quality of adolescents' first relationship experiences shape subsequent intimate partnerships into adulthood (Collins et al., 2009). Observational methods provided a superlative manner through which to ground MA adolescents' communication of conflict in light of adolescent, cultural, and marital literatures. We hope that this study will stimulate increased interest in laying inductive foundations central to adolescent couples' communication behavior, particularly within conflict contexts and attending to the juncture of cultural and developmental factors. Such research holds not only empirical but also practical importance given that few programs are culturally attuned to the experiences of ethnic minority youth (Weisz & Black, 2009). MA couples in this sample demonstrated adherence to cultural norms (e.g., adaptive *machismo*, *familismo*) that may serve as protective buffers in the face of acculturative stressors. On the other hand, having identified communication behaviors reflective of maladaptive relationship health among adult couples (e.g., defensiveness, criticism, blaming; see Cornelius, Shorey, & Beebe, 2010) points to a need for early intervention in support of adolescents' first—and potentially serious and lasting—relationship experiences.

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Lela Rankin Williams, PhD, is an associate professor in the School of Social Work at Arizona State University. Her research on adolescent romantic relationships focuses on teen dating violence prevention and intervention among Mexican heritage youth.