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# Trust, Cheating, and Dating Violence in Mexican American Adolescent Romantic Relationships

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## ABSTRACT

Many adolescents experience some aspect of cheating in their romantic relationships, yet developmental and cultural influences on this experience are not well understood. A grounded theory approach was used to uncover the processes through which cheating resulted in dating violence among 64 Mexican American adolescents (15 to 17 years old). Focus groups, separated by level of acculturation and gender ( $N = 20$ ), revealed paradoxical expectations for trust and cheating in romantic relationships. Low acculturated youth, particularly males, held broader definitions of cheating behaviors, used peers to monitor cheating behaviors, and took breaches of cheating more seriously. Males were perceived as more likely to cheat, to cheat because of their diminished desire for commitment, and to use violence in reaction to cheating behavior. It is recommended that teen dating violence prevention programs use culturally attuned curricula that incorporate the integral role of peers and gendered norms and expectations within adolescents' dating relationships.

**KEY WORDS:** qualitative, adolescence, acculturation, grounded theory, gender

The initiation and formation of romantic relationships during adolescence is a normative developmental experience (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003; Dad-dis & Randolph, 2010) and included is the experience of relational infidelity or "cheating." Approximately one-third of adolescents in the past year and 70% of adults in the past 2 years reported engaging in some aspect of cheating in dating relationships (Tsapelas, Fisher, & Aron, 2010). However, adolescents'

social, emotional, and physical experiences with and reactions to cheating differ in meaningful ways from those of adults. For example, adolescents' definitions of cheating can include talking to a person of the other sex (Williams & Hickle, 2011). Compared with adult romantic relationships, adolescents place less value on commitment, prioritize companionship over emotional intimacy (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011), and typically are shorter and less complex relationships than those of adults, with increased availability of single partners and fewer emotional, financial, and social commitments (Carver et al.).

The emotional aftermath of infidelity can be devastating. Feeney's (2004) study of college students compared infidelity with other hurtful behaviors by romantic partners such as dissociation, criticism, and deception, and found infidelity yielded the highest expectations of hurt, rejection, and negative self-perception; of expected destructive reactions by the victim; and of perceived effects on the victim and the relationship. Less known are the emotional responses of adolescents in the developmental period of middle adolescence (approximately 14 to 17 years) to cheating behaviors and accusations, but some research has indicated such responses can include hurt, anger, or indifference (Williams & Hickle, 2011), as well as psychological and physical violence (Adams & Williams, 2014; Black & Weisz, 2005). Adolescent perpetrators of teen dating violence, inclusive of emotional, threatening, sexual, and physical forms, have reported feelings of jealousy and cheating in their romantic relationships (Giordano, Soto, Manning, & Longmore, 2010).

Sociocultural factors unique to middle adolescence affect the meaning of cheating. For example, peers' roles often include reporting on legitimized or suspected cheating partners (Williams & Hickle, 2011). These developmental considerations alongside broader cultural considerations have historically been understudied. In particular, Mexican American youth represent the largest growing minority group (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009) yet we know relatively little about how these youth experience cheating within the context of romantic relationships (Guerrero, Spitzberg, & Yoshimura, 2004). Some research has suggested that Mexican American female adolescents experience greater emotional distress and behavioral reactions to cheating than their European American counterparts (Williams & Hickle). This difference might be at least partially attributable to the greater acceptance of male infidelity (but not female infidelity) in the traditional Mexican culture (Hirsch et al., 2007; Roberts & Flaskerud, 2008), and greater acceptance of male violence in response to cheating (Black &

Weisz, 2005). Latina female adolescents in one study reported their boyfriends would use violence to “deal with girlfriends who were misbehaving” (Lopez, Chesney-Lind, & Foley, 2012, p. 684). However, this double standard might be challenged by U.S. acculturation to more egalitarian gender norms (Ulloa, Jaycox, Skinner, & Orsburn, 2008). How differently acculturated female and male Mexican American adolescents experience and react to cheating in their romantic relationships remains largely unexplored. To address this gap, we followed Charmaz’s (2006) grounded theory approach. Consistent with this approach, the literature was reviewed briefly and was then laid aside until the data were analyzed. Inductive methods, rather than an a priori framework, were used to prioritize the meanings and actions leading up to and resulting from cheating within romantic relationship contexts. The previously reviewed literature was then revisited and reviewed as it pertained to the emergent themes. Charmaz’s approach allows for a scholarly situation of the results within what is currently known in the field while highlighting new theoretical contributions.

### **Developmental Considerations**

Identity and intimacy development mutually influence each other (Kelly, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Boislard-P, 2012; Kerpelman et al., 2012) and the need for identity exploration can conflict with the desire for intimacy and commitment in adolescent romantic relationships (Blatt & Blass, 1996). Adolescents’ sense of personal identity strengthens their capacity for intimacy, mutual dependence, and fidelity, but identity formation also involves asserting independence from other relationships (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). Entry into adolescence is also accompanied by a stronger peer presence as part of the identity and intimacy development process (Morgan & Korobov, 2012). Adolescents rely on peers, in part, to understand and develop expectations for romantic relationships (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; O’Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003). For example, O’Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg’s (2003) interviews with African American and Latino inner-city female adolescents demonstrated that females learn romantic and sexual norms, including the progression of intimacy and early sexual exploration, by interacting with same-sex peers and by viewing peers’ interactions with romantic partners. However, peers, particularly for older adolescents, often perceive romantic relationships as threats to peer relationships (Thomas, 2012), and peers can create distress in romantic relationships by spreading rumors and gossiping about real or perceived cheating behaviors (Williams & Hickle, 2011).

## **Gender and Acculturation**

Although some studies have found no gender differences in motive, experience, or incidence of cheating (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a), other evidence has suggested a greater level of acceptance for male cheating than for female cheating among adolescents and adults (Tsapelas et al., 2010). Roscoe, Cavanaugh, and Kennedy (1988) found that as compared with adolescent males, adolescent females were more likely to stay in a relationship with a partner who had cheated on them. Feldman and Kauffman (1999b) found that as compared with adolescent females, adolescent males reported more accepting attitudes when males cheated on females than when females cheated on males. Minority adolescent females, specifically Mexican American adolescent females, might be particularly vulnerable to the experience of cheating and could experience more negative reactions to cheating behaviors, including violence, due in part to particular cultural beliefs and practices around gender (Williams & Hickle, 2011). Several researchers have noted that traditional Mexican culture may condone infidelity for males, while condemning infidelity for females (Hirsch et al., 2007; Roberts & Flaskerud, 2008). Emotional distress for Mexican and Mexican American females also arises from the potential for violence if the female is suspected of cheating. In fact, several studies of Mexican American adolescents have shown females frequently expressed fear about the threat of violence for perceived infidelity whereas males often used expressions of jealousy, threats of violence, and actual violence to control their female partners and punish them for infidelity (Adams & Williams, 2014; Black & Weisz, 2005; Williams & Hickle, 2011).

Although socialization into traditional Mexican norms around gender and sexuality can partly explain the greater salience of and more extreme emotional responses to cheating among Mexican American adolescent females, acculturation to mainstream U.S. norms regarding gender and sexuality could attenuate these effects. Acculturation has been defined as an ongoing process through which people from one culture adjust to another culture, modifying their attitudes and behaviors as a result of their contact with the new culture. Understanding the acculturation process also requires the maintenance of biculturalism, a blending of cultures from two worlds (Berry, 1997). Ulloa et al. (2008) found in a sample of urban Latino/ Latina youth that preference for Spanish-language media, indicative of lower acculturation to the dominant U.S. culture, was associated with lesser gender egalitarianism, and in turn, lesser egalitarianism was associated with greater experiences of dating violence. In contrast, another team of researchers found an

association between higher acculturation levels and greater risk of dating violence among Mexican American adolescents, particularly girls (Sanderson, Coker, Roberts, Tortolero, & Reininger, 2004). The association of higher acculturation and elevated risk of dating violence might be a result of greater risk taking among girls who no longer adhered to traditional Mexican female gender roles (Kulis, Marsiglia, & Nagoshi, 2010). Biculturalism might be an adaptive social strategy. Previous research has linked biculturalism among Mexican American adolescents with better mental health outcomes (Sullivan et al., 2007) and reduced violence (Smokowski, David-Feron, & Stroupe, 2009).

In the present study, adolescents were characterized in terms of their identification with Mexican and/or mainstream American culture: adolescents identifying as predominantly American in their culture orientation were considered highly acculturated (HA), adolescents identifying as predominantly Mexican in their culture orientation were considered low acculturated (LA), and adolescents identifying with both cultures were considered bicultural (BC). The aims of this study were (a) to delineate a grounded theory of cheating in romantic relationships among Mexican American adolescents, prioritizing their perspectives regarding the processes involved and potential consequences, and (b) to compare accounts of these experiences by gender and level of acculturation.

## **Method**

### **Sample and Recruitment**

The Mexican American Teen Relationships (MATR) study included three components: an online survey, focus groups, and a dyadic interaction task for dating couples. The MATR study took place through collaborative partnerships with schools and agencies in a large urban area of a Southwest border state, whereby many adolescents are bicultural and draw from both Mexican and U.S. norms (Matsunaga, Hecht, Elek, & Ndiaye, 2010). Participants were recruited via personal invitation at class presentations, afterschool community centers (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs), and citywide events (e.g., a monthly art walk). Eligibility to participate included (a) self-identification as Mexican American and (b) 15 to 17 years of age. In addition to participant assent, written parental consent was gained from at least one parent to participate in all three MATR study components (one consent form). All written materials were provided in Spanish and English. The governing Institutional Review Board approved this research.

Participants ( $N = 305$ ) first completed an online survey administered by trained researchers in school or agency computer-facilitated classrooms or at the University. After completion of the survey, adolescents indicated on a sign-up sheet if they wanted to participate in a focus group discussion at a later date. All adolescents who wanted to participate were contacted to be scheduled into a focus group (approximately 10 participants could not be scheduled and 12 participants were no shows and could not be rescheduled). A theoretical sampling strategy was used to create the focus groups to compare the perspectives of a diverse range of Mexican American adolescents across gender and across levels of acculturation. Homogenous groups by gender and acculturation not only allow for within- and across-group comparisons, but also encourage rich and meaningful dialogue (Morgan, 1996) as required when using a grounded theoretical lens (Charmaz, 2006).

Using the survey responses, focus group participants ( $n = 64$ ) were invited into specific groups ( $N = 20$ ) according to their gender and their level of acculturation on the 12-item Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans-Short Form (ARMSA-SF; Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995). We chose the ARMSA-SF for its assessment of multiple acculturative indicators (e.g., social life, media use, language). The short form is comparable to the larger 30-item measure regarding internal reliability, concurrent validity, and construct validity (Cuellar et al.). Responses on items ranged from *not at all* (coded 1) to *very much or almost all the time* (coded 5). Of note, the word “Anglo” was changed to “White” given that pilot work indicated the youth preferred the term White (e.g., “I associate with White people”). Items measured Mexican-orientation (MOS;  $\alpha = .90$ ) and Anglo-orientation (AOS;  $\alpha = .70$ ) via two 6-item subscales, allowing an adolescent to score between 1 and 5 on both dimensions. In combination, a difference score (i.e., AOS - MOS) reflected an overall acculturation indicator and held the added benefit of assessing biculturalism. Although we purposefully recruited in socioeconomically and racially diverse neighborhoods and school districts, our sample was slightly skewed towards Anglo-orientation ( $M = .82$  as compared with a true  $M = 0$ ). We grouped adolescents as follows: less than 0 as LA; between 0 and 1 as BC; higher than 1 as HA. Following the tenants of theoretical sampling, invitations into groups became increasingly narrowed (e.g., oversampling highly acculturated and bicultural female groups) to saturate themes and make comparisons by acculturation and gender (Charmaz, 2006). The 20 focus groups included the following categorical types (number of individuals per group is shown in parentheses): three HA (3/2/3); three

BC (2/4/3); and three LA (2/3/2) male groups and four HA (4/5/5/2); four BC (4/2/6/3); and three LA (3/3/3) female groups (see Table 1). Data from the first BC female group could not be included in the group-level analysis of acculturation because an additional HA female and LA female attended the group (i.e., adolescents were not informed that they were scheduled in specific acculturation groups, and two adolescents thought they could attend any group).

Focus groups typically include six to eight participants; however, smaller groups are preferred when topics are sensitive in nature (Morgan, 1996) and offer the opportunity to dialogue in greater depth (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004). Therefore, we intentionally scheduled our focus groups to include between three and five participants, although the actual group size ranged from two (as a result of no shows) to six participants (in anticipation of at least one no show). When a group of two occurred because of no shows, we held that group as doing so was in line with our desire for rich data from individual participants (Charmaz, 2006). In addition, continuing with the groups of two placed increased value on under-researched voices and provided the benefits of a small group size (Toner, 2009). Focus groups are often preferable to individual interviews when (a) working with populations that have less power and status in society because comfort with like-participants can overcome mistrust of researchers (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004), and (b) the researchers have specific training in group work skills, which are used in social work to create a safe environment that allows for a rich dialogue of diverse perspectives (Letendre & Williams, 2014). Grouping adolescents with peers of similar language use and cultural orientation created a secure forum in which participants could express their experiences and viewpoints.

All participants were given \$15 for participation in the online survey and \$10 for participation in the focus groups. As part of their debriefing, participants received an educational handout on healthy dating relationships and help-seeking services.

## **Procedure**

The second author moderated all focus groups in the language most comfortable to participants. One to two assistant moderators were present at each group, and were typically matched to the group by gender (18/20) and ethnicity (12/20); these assistants set up a digital recorder and took notes with a smart pen that associated live audio recording to the notes being taken. Groups were held in a private room at the university or in the school or agency from which the youth were recruited. We opened each group with an icebreaker and began with a broad questioning



route that included the same key questions across groups (see Table 2). Following Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory, the probes to key questions evolved; however,

Table 1  
*Mexican Orientation, Anglo Orientation, and Overall Acculturation Score Means and Standard Deviations by Focus Group*

	<i>N</i>	<i>MOS</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>AOS</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>ACC</i>	<i>SD</i>
Acculturation	64	3.10	1.05	3.93	.70	.82	1.20
Males	24	2.87	1.16	3.53	1.12	.7	1.14
Low	7	4.00	.71	3.33	.54	-.66	.61
Acculturated							
1	2	3.90	1.27	3.00	.00	-.9	1.27
2	3	3.83	.73	3.22	.69	-.61	.48
3	2	4.34	.23	3.83	.23	-.5	.00
Bicultural	9	3.00	1.11	3.54	1.14	.54	.32
1	2	3.42	.12	3.84	.23	.42	.12
2	4	3.67	.89	4.29	.67	.63	.44
3	3	1.83	.76	2.34	1.04	.50	.29
High	8	2.29	.71	4.27	.49	1.98	.74
Acculturated							
1	3	2.11	.63	4.50	.60	2.39	.54
2	2	1.84	.94	4.34	.60	2.50	.71
3	3	2.78	.58	4.00	.50	1.22	.90
Females	40	3.01	1.14	3.90	.92	.91	1.17
Low	9	4.13	.49	3.65	.57	-.48	.40
Acculturated							
1	3	4.11	.51	3.28	.68	-.83	.44
2	3	3.89	.51	3.72	.51	-.17	.00
3	3	4.39	.51	3.95	.48	-.44	.34
Bicultural	15	3.62	.59	4.04	.60	.45	.51
1	4	3.61	.59	4.39	.51	.78	.09
2	2	3.57	.79	3.97	.66	.40	.51
3	6	4.09	.12	4.25	.35	.17	.23
4	3	3.46	.44	3.80	.71	.42	.78
High	16	2.12	.66	4.28	.39	2.11	.73
Acculturated							
1	4	2.34	.47	4.08	1.06	1.75	.59
2	5	1.53	.84	4.43	.38	2.90	.70
3	5	2.53	.32	4.28	.16	1.75	.30
4	2	2.21	.32	4.18	.24	1.75	.50

*Note.* MOS = Mexican Orientation subscale AOS = Anglo Orientation subscale ACC = Overall acculturation score

Table 2

*Focus Group Questioning Route*

<u>Key Questions</u>	<u>Probes</u>
What does a healthy dating relationship look like?	What does a happy dating relationship look like?
What are some signs that indicate a relationship may be unhealthy?	How is trust broken in a relationship?
What are some things that cause conflict in relationships?	What are some things that might happen in a relationship that some people think is “ok” but other people might think is unhealthy?
What would you be willing to put up with to keep a relationship?	What are some reasons that couples break up?
What does dating violence look like?	What kinds of violence exist in dating relationships? Give an example.
What situations might provoke dating violence?	What types of relationship problems lead to violence? Why does abuse occur in romantic relationships?
If you had a chance to give advice to other teens about dating violence what would you say?	Has anyone ever given you good advice about dating?

cheating behaviors and difficulty trusting emerged as salient and troubling concerns in adolescents’ relationships, and these issues were explored in depth at the time they were raised by participants (e.g., *Can you give me an example of how cheating happens? Why do you think some people are okay with talking to other people, but in other relationships, that is not ok? What were some of the signs that your partner was cheating?*).

**Analysis**

We used Charmaz’s (2006) qualitative grounded theory to delineate the meaning assigned to (real or hypothetical) cheating behaviors as described by adolescents. Although this analytical approach bears resemblance to a phenomenological design in that it prioritizes adolescents’

perspectives (Padgett, 2008), Charmaz's methodology is unique in that it moves beyond descriptions to uncover an interpretive story of the processes involved as leading up to, and resulting from cheating. In this manner, themes are not only understood within social interactions, but are theoretically connected in attendance to motives, actions, and consequences concerning cheating as adolescents described them. This methodology is particularly appropriate given that the study sample offered rich descriptions of such processes, including reasons for which issues with trust and cheating resulted in violence.

Trained researchers transcribed the digital recordings verbatim and bilingual research assistants transcribed those containing Spanish. We used QSR Nvivo (Gibbs, 2002) to manage large amounts of data that were collected for delineating and comparing/contrasting multiple perspectives (Charmaz, 2006) within and across levels of acculturation and by gender. We considered all data as code-worthy, and subsequently compared incidences and contexts related to trust, cheating, and violence resulting from either to raise codes to theoretical categories. Memo writing and constant comparative methods were used to attend to temporal orderings, and to relate categories to one another in a storytelling process (Charmaz). This approach further allowed for insight into the paradoxical entrenchment of trust concerns within a peer environment described by youth themselves as normed by cheating behaviors. To protect participants' anonymity, we have used pseudonyms in the results.

## **Results**

Adolescents across groups desired trust in their dating relationships, a desire that was complicated by the reality of rumors, lies, cheating behaviors, and potential dating violence. Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, results are portrayed as contextualized by social processes and in a comparative manner (see Table 3). Across acculturation, we found more similarities than differences; however, we have outlined such differences within the context of each theme where they emerged. Differences were pronounced by gender; thus, comparisons by gender are summarized not only in the context of each theme, but also in-depth via an additional stand-alone category.

**Trust and Cheating: “¡Es la Moda!” (“It’s the trend!”)**

**Table 3.** Grounded Theory of Trust, Cheating, and Dating Violence Among Mexican American Adolescents

**Trust and Cheating: ¡Es la moda!**

Content	Examples of Participant Comments	Acculturation
Trust was a sign of relationship health	Moderator: “¿Cómo es una relación saludable?” (How does a healthy relationship look?)	Low acculturated and bicultural
...	Gerardo: “How much you trust one another and you have respect for each other.” (low acculturated male)	... males and females defined cheating as any type of other-sex activity, including talking.
but was made difficult by the perceived commonality of cheating (particularly male)	Moderator: What else makes you happy in a relationship? Tara: That they are not cheating on you. Maria: That they are just for you. Moderator: Does that happen a lot you think? Tara: Oh my God! (laughing) Maria: Yea! Tara: Now days that’s the like moda (trend). ¡Es la moda! (It’s the trend!) (low acculturated females)	Highly acculturated ... males did not define cheating as loosely as other groups.

Peer Involvement: "They start ragging on you"

<p>So youth monitored their partner's other-sex interactions ...</p>	<p>Martin: Alright, you're not jealous, you obviously trust your partner a lot. But (participant's girlfriend's name) is walking around with some guy. You're not gonna deal with her? You're not gonna be jealous?</p> <p>Julio: You never know what could happen.</p> <p>Esteban: Okay, but what if she's walking around with her brother? It's still another guy.</p> <p>Julio: You should know whether it's her brother or not.</p> <p>Esteban: What if you don't know if she has a brother and it's just a guy. It's still another guy. (low acculturated males)</p> <p>Julio: What's the point of trusting her?</p> <p>Esteban: That's the point. You trust and you ask her.(bicultural males</p>	<p>Low acculturated ... males and females learned of cheating through rumors and talking to peers directly.</p> <p>Highly acculturated ... males and females learned of cheating by monitoring text messages and social media interactions.</p>
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<p>and relied on peers for information about their partner.</p>	<p>“Like I went out with this one girl, right? And all her friends, they liked me -as in they would date me. All her friends started telling her lies that I was going around cheating on her...when it actually wasn’t true. But I don’t know, I guess her friends just kept going around and saying it and saying it. So I don’t know, I guess like eventually she believed it.” (David, low acculturated male)</p>	
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Gender Differences: “I’ll just keep my head up” while you’re “living life on the up”

<p>Males ... were influenced by peers to cheat</p>	<p>“Cause the people you could hang out with - you can hang out with a lot of thugs- they can tell you, ‘Oh, you know what? Go out with her ... you got some other women at you, go with them too.’” (Walter, <i>bicultural male</i>)</p>	<p>Bicultural</p>
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... and benefited from a double-standard.

Erica: "... 'Oh I'm about to do this and I'm about to get away with it.' And some girls are like, 'I have a guy and I'm always going to be here, so I'll just keep my head up.'

Regina: "Males like to be dominant, feel like high up, they're like a king. So I guess that they know that the female's always going to be there, and they're like 'Okay I'm still up there, talk to whoever I want. She's gonna be right there.'" (highly acculturated females)

... males struggled to reconcile a peer culture that popularized cheating with parental messages about romantic relationships.

#### Females

... had more at stake (e.g., pregnancy) and cheated for a better relationship alternative,

"Another guy treats you better, that's why girls cheat." (Tara, low acculturated female)  
"I was talking to another guy because I did not like how he [current partner] was treating me ... this other guy treated me good ..." (Dora, highly acculturated female)

...struggled to leave a relationship where a partner had cheated,

... and paradoxically viewed staying together as both a strength and weakness.

“If they want you back, diles que ‘no!’ (Tell them “no!”) But you’re going to take them back anyways if they cheat on you—you’re going to take them back because you love him.” (Tara, low acculturated female)  
“It has to do how strong the relationship is. But like when he cheated on me, I told him, ‘The next time you cheat on me I’ll be done.’ And he always told me, ‘If you ever cheated on me then I’d be done, I would never look back’ ... I always wondered if I would have cheated on him if he’d be able to walk away, you know what I mean? Because, I don’t know- I guess it’s how strong the relationship is. It depends on the person. Cause I’m not that strong of a person. It’s kinda hard to just walk away from all that. And we’re having a baby



	<p>together now, so.  <i>“(Clarissa, highly acculturated female)”</i></p> <p>“Some girls are strong and they just hold it in and not say nothing ...  <i>“(Regina, highly acculturated female)”</i></p>	
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Violence: “This guy is going to get it”

<p>Sometimes cheating catalyzed male perpetration of relationship violence.</p>	<p>Moderator: What kind of relationship problems lead to violence?  Daniel, low acculturated male: Cheating.  Moderator: Is that pretty common?  Daniel, low acculturated male: Around here, I see a lot of it.(low acculturated males)</p>	
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Adolescents raised “*no trust issues*” (Martin, BC) as a key characteristic that differentiated healthy relationships from unhealthy ones. In fact, the extent to which partners trusted one another served as a measure of overall relationship health, and was often framed in terms of males’ tendency to cheat—particularly as “*abusing the trust*” (Samuel, HA) was described as a common behavior. Many adolescents defined cheating as any type of other-sex activity, ranging from just talking (e.g., “*They probably talk to her, and to me that is considered like cheating,*” Maria, BC) to having sexual intercourse. Of note, HA adolescent males did not define cheating as loosely as other groups; HA adolescent males were more likely to question whether just talking to someone constituted cheating and debated whether a partner should be allowed to speak with other-sex friends:

*Like one of the things that makes it worse is if one of the people in the relationship doesn't think that they're doing something wrong and the other one does—like if they're okay with just talking to somebody but the other person thinks it's bad.*” (Christopher, HA).

Despite this difference, males and females across levels of acculturation provided personal examples of becoming angered by a partner interacting with someone of the other sex (e.g., “*I get mad that she's over there with other guys so I'm like, 'Ok, that's f& %\$ed up!'*” Francisco, BC).

Males reported feeling that, regardless of whether they could trust their girl- friend, they could not trust the motives of other males: “*Let's say a girl, she asks you—'Don't you trust me?' I'm like, 'Yes, I trust you, but I don't trust the guy.' That's very common. We can tell and see the motives of other guys.*” (Martin, BC). Not trusting the motives of other males’ might have been based in reality; both males and females across levels of acculturation described males as easily led by the lure of another tempting partnership. Moreover, cheating was described as common behavior, and even trendy as demonstrated in the following exchange

Moderator: *What else makes you happy in a relationship?*

Tara (LA): *That they are not cheating on you.*

Moderator: *Does that happen a lot you think?*”

Tara (LA): “*Oh my God! Now days that's like the moda [the trend].*”

Peer involvement: “They start ragging on you.” Adolescents sometimes learned of a partner’s cheating behavior through “*friends getting involved,*” particularly when “*they start ragging*

on you” (Daniel, LA) for talking to people of the other sex. This was the case among LA youth in particular (Moderator: How do you usually find out? “*Just walking around. I catch them with other people.*” Daniel, LA), and typically framed in terms of male offenders. Adolescents described partner monitoring as sometimes helpful, but at other times rumors were malicious and unreliable: “*Their friends, when they’re saying rumors about their boyfriend- supposedly when they’re like cheating or something*” (Dulce, LA). In turn, rumors carried the potential to erode trust, as described by Robert (LA):

*Like if someone says rumors about the guy, like especially that he was talking to some other girl . . . and then maybe it’s not true, you know? And like the girl, she might take it out of perspective before even asking the guy.*

In comparison with LA youth who learned of cheating behavior through talking with peers, BC and HA adolescents raised social media and texting as ways to monitor a partner’s other-sex activity. Although dialogue included monitoring by both genders, primarily females shared personal examples:

*. . . he would put his phone away when he came over. Like there were a lot of signs.”*

(Erica, HAF);

*And you’re just like, ‘Why are you adding all these girls [on Facebook] that you don’t even know?’”* (Irene, BIF);

*“Oh, he was looking at my text messages to see if I were talking to another boy”*

(Diane, HAF); and

*“Like he cheated before so I’m not afraid to say anything about it . . . and if I want to look through his phone.”* (Marisol, HAF).

Gender differences: “I’ll just keep my head up” while you’re “living life on the up.” Dialogue among males and females across levels of acculturation portrayed the perception that “*the guy is more likely to cheat*” (Belinda, LA), which was stated overtly among LA females and was supported through personal examples by other groups (“*Like he cheated before . . .*” Marisol, HAF; “*He brings these girls around and tells me ‘We’re talking’*” Regina, HAF; “*If they’re [girlfriend is] not watching but maybe like we’re holding hands . . .*” Jaime, BIM). Notably, participants reported exceptions marked by reciprocal infidelity: “*There are some couples though where like the girl cheats on the guy, and the guy cheats on the girl, and it goes back and forth.*” (Gabriela, LA). After a female was the first to be unfaithful, males then cheated too (e.g., “*They’re always trying to do what- ever the girl’s done.*”

Tara, LA). Thus, females were perceived as being more calculating in their cheating (e.g., “*Girls think about it a little more.*” Dora, LA) and more likely to cheat to exchange one relationship for a more promising one: “*Another guy treats you better, that’s why girls cheat.*” (Tara, LA). Females also had more at stake by cheating, including harsher peer judgment (e.g., “*If we do it, they consider us hoes.*” Christina, BC), unintended pregnancy (e.g., “*We can get prego or something.*” Maria, BC), and in some cases, the potential loss of a father to an existing child (e.g., “*He had sex with another girl, he did a lot of other stuff with other girls. He was texting other girls, um, like while I was pregnant.*” Clarissa, HA).

Females reported feeling males were permitted more tolerance toward cheating and could just “*do it cuz they’re guys*” (Tara, LA). This double-standard made it particularly difficult for females to trust male partners or to know how to prevent cheating (e.g., “*Like it’s okay [for males] to be cheating because it’s boring or you weren’t there at the time.*” Olivia, BC; “*Some guys are like, ‘Oh, I’m about to do this and I’m about to get away with it.’*” Erica, HA). Mirroring females’ dialogue, BC males described “*just wanting to do it*” (Walter, BC) as a reason for cheating. However, males also voiced that cheating was impractical when breaking up would be an easier alternative: “*Why waste your time, and the other person’s time when you could just, you know, leave her.*” (Walter, BC). One group of BC males discussed at length a high-school peer culture that promoted experimentation and uncommitted sexual relationships kept in secret in addition to more exclusive partnering. This group recognized this behavior as an adolescent developmental stage, yet simultaneously attributed the lifestyle to a backsliding in maturity as compared with younger dating experiences: “*They’re more mature when it comes to relationships. I mean, they could have their drama and all that, but . . . high school . . . that’s where all the ‘. . . I’m gonna have her, and then I’m gonna have this other girl on the side’ [happens]*” (Walter, BC). Despite their attribution of cheating as developmentally normal, these males reported feeling as if this way of behaving was immoral given their parents had taught them otherwise: “*It depends on . . . how you’re raised. Like, you know what’s right, and what’s wrong, so why should you be doing that? You’re not with that person.*” (Manuel, BC). Moreover, aside from their strong opinions about the illegitimacy of cheating, Manuel and Walter reported feeling that for some, cheating was just living life as they “*see it.*” This lifestyle was described as provocative and as living life “*on the up.*” When asked to elaborate, Manuel and Walter described how being in a serious relationship could stifle opportunities with other females while in high school: “*Being with*

*other girls, whoever I want. And not worrying about 'Oh, I have you.'*" (Walter). When the inconvenience of having an exclusive dating partner outweighed the desire to experiment with another person, Walter felt that the solution was to "You know, leave her and-" (interrupted by Manuel) "*Just enjoy life on the up.*"

In direct opposition to males' dismissive contextualization of cheating as a waste of time and inconvenient, females' dialogue reflected personal examples of struggle with submission and tolerance in order to keep a cherished relationship. In turn, their discussion of cheating reflected instances of regret, discomfort, and emotional pain: "*Well, I put up with him cheating on me three times . . . I'm going to cry, like I hate thinking about it.*" (Clarissa, HA). This story prompted another female in the group, Regina, to share her own experience with partner cheating:

*Right, and mine- he found another girl. He's in love, he told me. He thought she was the wifey type. And I was like "Alright, well do your thing. I'm not going nowhere, I'm always going to be around . . . I'm just right here. Do your thing—if you're happy, then I'm happy. That's all that matters." And I ask all his close friends and stuff, and "I don't know why he keeps you around." I know I can't stay around, but it's weird.*

This group of adolescent females viewed the ability to withstand cheating as sign of relationship strength, although participants paradoxically agreed that such behavior was emboldened by females that put up with it and remained available. Their tolerance stemmed, in part, from the belief that males' cheating behavior was inevitable (e.g., "*And some guys can't help it . . . and some girls are like . . . 'I'm always going to be here, so I'll just keep my head up.*" Erica, HA).

Violence: "This guy is going to get it."

Among male adolescent Mexican Americans, perceived cheating sometimes resulted in a violent response toward either their partner or the third party involved (e.g., "*You know he's going to go like beating him up*" Lorena, BC; [When Francisco was asked how he would respond if his partner was talking to an ex] "*I'd go f&\$% up the other guy and dump her.*" Francisco, BC). Violence could be provoked even by trivial forms of cheating (e.g., "*Like someone might be a little too flirty. . .*" Julio, BC), and violence as the end result of cheating emerged as a salient theme across groups. The fear of violent repercussion was discussed across gender, but only in reference to males as perpetrators. Dora (HA) relayed a

story of violence:

*So one day I went to the movies with this guy and the other guy found out, and when we got out of the movies, he put a little paper . . . he said "This guy is going to get it" . . . on the other guy's windshield. So I think I was kind of cheating. So we went to Game Works . . . and that guy came in . . . Then he grabbed me and dragged me . . . he said "You said this and you said that, and you said you were not doing nothing . . . and you're out with this other guy." "Yeah, because you don't treat me right . . ." He went over there . . . then he hit him.*

Dora went on to state that her former partner then came to her house, "*saying he was going to kill me, or saying he was going to kill my family,*", and proceeded to light her curtains on fire. She recognized the potential for the abuse and violence to escalate and the probable result if she had not found a new partner to help her escape the abusive relationship: "*Probably if I went back with him, he would have probably shot me or something.*"

Tara (LA) also shared her experience with an extremely abusive partner triggered by cheating—one of which continued to create terror and fear because the male was to be released from jail shortly:

*I have a lot of experiences, like a lot . . . for example, we went to a party . . . and I said "Hi" to a guy from a long time and then he [her partner] went to the restroom and punched the windows and he was bloody and got all crazy . . . I was like "What?!" . . . Then one time we were in the car. We were going home from a quinceañera (birthday party) and he followed us. We almost crashed because he pushed our truck and I did not know that it was because he thought I was cheating on him. And he pushed the truck, and then he took the gun out and *tiró un balazo* (shot a bullet) out of nowhere and my mom was there and my dad was there. He was obsessed. My mom was like, "You have to leave him," but I couldn't leave him, I loved him . . . Right now he is in jail . . . He says that when he comes out, I am not going to go out with another guy, because then he is going to kill him...He still sends me letters and everything I am like "nooo."*

## **Discussion**

The finding that adolescents experience difficulties in trust, breaches in fidelity, and at times, dating violence, in their romantic relationships is not new; however, the extent to which acculturating Mexican American adolescents experience these relationship difficulties and how

these experiences are culturally understood has been unknown. In developing a deeper understanding of the experience of cheating in Mexican American adolescent relationships, a theoretical model grounded in their lived experiences revealed the experience of violence, at times extreme, enacted against themselves and others was often a consequence of mistrust and perceived or real cheating in their romantic relationships. These findings clearly indicate that Mexican American adolescents' romantic relationship norms and expectations paradoxically include both trust and cheating.

Despite the consistency of these emergent themes across gender and acculturation levels, we also found evidence of the meaning of these experiences to vary alongside adolescents' identification with broader cultural groups. Youth with greater identification to Mexican culture, particularly males, held broader definitions of cheating behaviors, used peers moderators for cheating behaviors, and took breaches of cheating more seriously. Male youth with identification to both Mexican and American cultures described their motivations for cheating as a result of the social pressures to engage in multiple relationships. Some gender differences cut across cultural differences. Males were viewed not only as more likely to cheat than females, but more likely to cheat because of their diminished desire for commitment, as well as more likely to use violence in reaction to their partners' cheating behavior. Females on the other hand, described cheating as a way to escape an existing unhappy, and potentially violent, romantic relationship with the hope the new partner might offer something more.

Many of these themes are consistent with the existing literature. Adolescents' definitions of cheating behaviors often go beyond sexual intercourse (Williams & Hickle, 2011). The notion that this perspective might be stronger among less acculturated youth is novel, yet is consistent with a cultural value that condemns relationship infidelity, particularly infidelity among females (Hirsch et al., 2007; Roberts & Flaskerud, 2008). Mexican American males might threaten or use violence as a punishment for infidelity, resulting in legitimized female fear for perceived infidelity (Black & Weisz, 2005; Dietrich, 1998; Levy, 1999; Williams & Hickle, 2011). Further, although adolescents place less value on commitment compared to adults (Connolly & McIsaac, 2011), some evidence suggest has suggested this diminished regard for commitment is less true among Mexican heritage youth (Williams & Adams, 2013). The high cultural value on commitment could explain why some breaches in trust result in violence; that is, Mexican American adolescents might perceive they have more to lose when a partner cheats.

The emergence of disparity in the experience of cheating across gender was not surprising. Our findings align with greater societal acceptance of male cheating behaviors (Tsapelas et al., 2010). This double standard is heightened among Mexican American populations (Cramer, Lipinski, Bowman, & Carollo, 2009) and may be further exacerbated among Mexican immigrants (Parrado & Flippen, 2010). Mexican American adolescent immigrants might find committed relationships more attractive (Parrado & Flippen), although this attraction might be true only for females. Further, as a result of this greater attraction to committed relationships, females are more likely than males to suffer from mismatched desire and expectation for relational commitment in the high school years (Williams & Adams, 2013).

Across diverse samples of adolescents, suspicions of real or perceived cheating is associated with a range of emotions and behaviors, including indifference through physical violence, and the role of peers is often central in this drama (Black & Weisz, 2005; Williams & Hickie, 2011). Paradoxically, peers pressure adolescents to engage in cheating behaviors while simultaneously serve as reporters of partner other-sex activity. This dual role of peers undoubtedly has an effect on adolescents' engagement in and reactions to cheating given the importance of peers in the development of romantic relationship expectations (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003). How these processes unfold as acculturating adolescents enter into young adulthood is an area for future research, as youth negotiate prior cheating experiences with the need for trust in committed adult relationships. On the other hand, evidence suggests that many continue cheating in their adult relationships (Tsapelas et al., 2010), begging a larger question regarding incongruent relationship ideals (i.e., for trust) and realities (i.e., of cheating) across the lifespan.

A particular strength of the study was that voices with less power and status in society were given a secure forum to express their experiences and viewpoints (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004). Focus groups allowed for trust to develop among peers, as stories encouraged further sharing by others in the group (particularly among females). However, more in-depth information about trust and cheating might have been obtained by interviewing youth individually. Personal interviews would have allowed for further probing on the ways adolescents coped and negotiated paradoxical and, at times, troubling experiences. Despite powerful stories that lent themselves to a grounded analysis of youth's experiences (Charmaz, 2006), we also note the sample was not random, and thus, the generalizability of



findings is limited to acculturating Mexican American adolescents in the Southwest.

This study paints a bleak picture of the early partnering experiences of acculturating Mexican American adolescents, particularly in light of the increasing recognition given the importance of these early relationships as influential experiences for future relationship quality. Practice implications stem from adolescents' lived portrayals of cheating as common and even popularized aside from dyadic contexts that entreat trust. Offering youth the opportunity to address such inconsistencies in safe contexts is of paramount practical necessity, particularly because cheating catalyzed violence. The finding that minimal differences arose across levels of acculturation suggests that adolescents experience culture "as a personalized experience . . . [that] combine[s] in unique ways to form individualized dating values and expectations" ( p. 11, Williams, Adams, & Altamirano, 2012). This way of experiencing culture has important implications for intervention such that adolescents should be offered the opportunity to create a dialogue to describe how they personally experience culture and romantic relationship beliefs in a way that can be safely challenged and re-formed to foster healthy relationships that are sustaining into adulthood. Teen dating violence prevention will be most efficacious as embedded within a culturally attuned curriculum that incorporates the integral role of peers, gendered norms, and expectations for adolescent dating relationships.

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