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# Mexican American and European American Adolescents' Dating Experiences across the Ecosystem: Implications for Healthy Relationships within an Ecodevelopmental Framework

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Dating health interventions that target the complex, multi-systemic spheres in which adolescents experience their first romantic relationships are required. This study utilizes an ecodevelopmental approach to better understand Mexican American and European American youths' perceptions of how peers, parents, school, and the media act both independently and collectively to affect their dating lives, also elucidating how such systems are at times in conflict. Seventy-five middle adolescents participated in focus groups divided by gender and ethnicity to uncover differences and similarities within and across groups. Findings underscore the importance and widespread effects of romantic relationships for adolescents' social development and the need for intervention programs that target multiple points of intervention while attending to mesosystemic conflicts across systems.

**Keywords:** Adolescence, romantic relationships, culture, parenting, peers, media, qualitative

## INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships are a normative developmental task of adolescence (Daddis & Randolph, 2010). Carver, Joyner, and Udry's (2003) analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that over half of adolescents participated in a romantic relationship during the past 18 months; such relationships often lasted more than 1 year. Given that the quality of adolescents' romantic partnering experiences carries into adulthood (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013), relationship-strengthening programs are now under way—including backing by federal dollars as part of comprehensive sexual health education (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). How to best intervene is a critically important question, and previous research has established the importance of parental, peer, school, and larger societal (e.g., media) variables in predicting the quality of adolescents' dating relationships and adolescents' understandings of these relationships. Less explored are the interrelationships among such influences, particularly as perceived by adolescents themselves. Further, cross-cultural comparisons are sparse; much of what we know is derived from European American samples (Collins, Welsh, & Shulman, 2009). Latino youths are a prominent and growing minority population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009) and hold distinct cultural value systems concerning dating expectations and behaviors (Milbrath, Ohlson, & Eyre, 2009). Mexican American adolescents in particular may struggle within U.S. peer and media contexts that emphasize differing romantic relationship expectations than those afforded by parents (Milbrath et al.). Gaining a better understanding of how Mexican American youths perceive their romantic lives and how their romantic relationships influence other relationships across multiple systems is critical in reaching them with salient and effective dating health programs.

The present study used an ecodevelopmental approach to explore how European American and Mexican American adolescents perceive parents, peers, schools, and the media to affect their dating lives. Further, we recognize and attend to the multidirectional nature of such relationships, considering how each tier dynamically interfaces with the other within nested environmental systems. The present study fills a gap in the literature by using focus group methods to make within- and across-group

comparisons by gender and ethnicity with European American and Mexican American middle adolescents. Results highlight the saliency of interrelationships across systems (i.e., meso-systems) and highlight the romantic relationship itself as a micro-level context that is central to adolescents' developmental and social experiences. Recommendations for policy and programs follow.

## **ECODEVELOPMENTAL FRAMEWORK**

Coatsworth and colleagues' (2002) ecodevelopmental framework, based on concepts from Bronfenbrenner (1992), emphasizes the primary role that families play in the socialization of children, the multiple social contexts beyond family that influence development, the interrelations among contexts, and the changing nature of these contexts and relations over time—including how these elements heighten or decrease risk for the development of psychopathology. Ecodevelopmental theory proposes that the social domains for human development can be represented by a set of nested structures, organized into micro-systems, meso-systems, and macro-systems.

*Micro-systems* are those settings in which the child participates directly and is influenced directly, including family, peers, and school. The family is the most proximal and fundamental system influencing human development, and thus, its structure, patterns, and quality of interactions are expected to have a particularly powerful influence on development. The family system is particularly relevant in this context as it is strongly valued among Latinos (Milbrath et al., 2009). *Meso-systems* involve the transactions between micro-systems (e.g., parent–school or parent–peer relationships) and are hypothesized to have developmental effects beyond the micro-systems. For example, family practices of monitoring adolescents in other social environments, such as school and peer contexts, can influence the quality of development in those contexts. *Macro-systems* are the broad social forces and structures, such as the media, culture, and political climate that influence development. Macro-system–level variables, such as cultural norms, may influence development directly or through its influence on the quality of the micro-system or meso-system functioning (Coatsworth et al., 2002).

## **Micro-System: Parental Influences**

Consistent with the ecodevelopmental framework's emphasis on the primary role of families in the socialization of children, and particularly parents, the bulk of the research on determinants of the quality of adolescents' romantic relationships has focused on parental influences. Such influences stem from witnessing interparental exchanges, as well as experiences between the adolescent and his or her parent(s).

### ***Parental Transmission of Relationship Quality Determinants***

Supportive relationships between parents and children provide the foundation for the adolescent's romantic attachments, caretaking, and sexual behavior systems (Furman & Wehner, 1994) given that parent-child relationships serve similar attachment functions as do dating partnerships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The Roisman, Booth-LaForce, Cauffman, and Spieker (2009) longitudinal study of mostly European American participants found that high-quality parental experiences indicative of greater attachment prior to and during adolescence tended to be associated with the quality of adolescents' dating relationships. Their results also underscored the importance of early and late childhood experiences with both parents and peers as protecting youths from too intense of romantic and sexual engagement early on (e.g., pertaining to depth of emotional intimacy, sexual experience; Roisman et al.).

Adolescents' cognitive representations of and behavior within dating relationships are learned in part by witnessing parental relationships. Kinsfogel and Grych (2004) found among a sample of 391 mostly European American, African American, and Latino adolescents ages 14 to 18 years that adolescent males exposed to greater parental discord were more likely to view aggression as justifiable in a romantic relationship, had more difficulty managing anger, and believed that aggressive behavior was more common in their peers' dating relationships. These variables, in turn, were predictive of higher levels of adolescent males' (but not females') verbal and physical aggression toward their own romantic partners. Although not examined by gender, Clarey, Hokoda, and Ulloa (2010) similarly found that Mexican heritage high school students' exposure to interparental conflict was predictive of dating violence perpetration. This relationship was mediated by anger control and acceptance of

violence beliefs. Finally, Darling, Cohan, Burns, and Thompson (2008) found few gender differences in their observed correlation between inter-parental conflict resolution tactics and adolescents' use of similar tactics within dating partnerships. Only physical aggression between parents and adolescents was predictive of adolescents' use of physical aggression in dating contexts (Darling et al.).

### ***Parental Monitoring and Supervision***

Much of the research on parental impact on adolescents' romantic relationships has focused on monitoring, typically as preventative of engagement in problematic dating and sexual behaviors. Among a sample of adolescent Hispanic, African American, and European American females 14 to 21 years of age, Auslander, Short, Succop, and Rosenthal (2009) found that adolescent females' greater perceptions that parents were accepting, involved, and provided appropriate strictness and supervision were predictive of greater perceptions of mutuality within their own romantic relationships. Such mutuality (i.e., bidirectional movement of thoughts, feelings, and activities between persons) was related to their romantic relationship satisfaction. Auslander and colleagues interpreted authoritative parents as warm and accepting, setting firm rules, and supervising their adolescents appropriately. This parenting style has been associated with adolescents' reduced likelihood of engaging in risky sexual behaviors (Pittman & Chase-Lansdale, 2001). Consistent with these findings, a longitudinal study of a national data set found that earlier coercive parenting, associated with an authoritarian rather than an authoritative parenting style, increased the likelihood of earlier sexual intercourse, while parental monitoring decreased this likelihood (Longmore, Manning, & Giordano, 2001).

In her study with European American parents and 17- to 19-year-old adolescents, Madsen (2008) found that most parents utilized dating rules with their sons and daughters, although daughters experienced greater restrictions. This is consistent with other research (Kan, McHale, & Crouter, 2008), including with Latino youths (Raffaelli, 2005). It might be expected that traditional Mexican values of *familismo*, stressing the importance of family, may lead Mexican American parents to be more intrusive in their adolescents' behaviors, including dating relationships (Marsiglia,

Nagoshi, Castro, & Parsai, 2012). Raffaelli found that Latino parents were more restrictive with daughters than sons, although higher levels of parental education status and generation status were associated with more lenient dating rules. Although Raffaelli did not assess which parent was more responsible for setting rules, Madsen found that mothers were more likely than fathers to regulate dating activities. Interestingly, parents' own relationship satisfaction in Madsen's study was associated with the type of dating rules established; those who were dissatisfied tended to use more prescription rules (i.e., reflective of personal values and behaviors they wished to instill in their youth). Furthermore, Madsen emphasized the important role that adolescents play in parental management of their dating relationships. For example, more than one-fourth of the parents in their study established rules conjointly with their adolescent. Parents were able to more effectively monitor the romantic relationships of their adolescent children if adolescents were willing to disclose to their parents information about the nature of these relationships. Daddis and Randolph's (2010) study of mostly European American middle and late adolescents found that youths were more likely to disclose to parents about the type of partner they were dating, including information about his or her family and how he or she performed in school, as compared to other types of information. Adolescents were more reluctant to discuss supervised issues that were perhaps perceived as more personal in nature (e.g., what they did with unsupervised time with a dating partner). Adolescents' reports of parent-child trust were positively associated with all types of disclosure.

The parent micro-system context unearths numerous ways that parents influence the development of their adolescents' romantic relationships, but studies are needed that seek adolescents' perceptions concerning how parent-child relationships are also affected by youths' dating involvement. Moreover, several of these aforementioned studies noted the importance of peers as a critical developmental micro context.

### **Micro-System: Peer Influences**

Peers exert an increasingly important developmental influence during adolescence, as they provide cognitive and behavioral models that shape individuals'

norms and values regarding social interactions (e.g., Capaldi, Dishion, Stoolmiller, & Yoerger, 2001; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999). Given the importance of peers for adolescent social development, studies have examined the influence of peers on the number and quality of adolescents' romantic and sexual relationships. Cavanaugh's (2007) analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health found that adolescents' involvement in sexual and romantic relationships was predicted by earlier peer socialization. Further, romantic and sexual ideals fostered by peers set the stage for behavior within such relationships. Sexualized conceptions of ideal relationships were fostered within smaller peer groups and by the presence of older females in the group. Greater involvement with male peers was associated with greater romantic ideals, although greater time spent with males increased sexualized ideals further. Given the saliency of peers in dyadic relationship formation and romantic/sexual activity, the author concluded that "peer networks are incubators for romantic thinking and behavior during adolescence" (Cavanaugh, 2007, p. 594).

Latino youths, at least those living in the United States, appear to be similarly influenced by peer norms as European American youths. Christopher, Johnson, and Roosa (1993) found that Hispanic adolescents who perceive that their friends are having sex are more likely to also do so. In a study of mostly Latino/a adolescents, La Greca and Mackey (2007) found that those who had fewer other-sex friends and those with poorer interactions with their best friends reported higher levels of dating anxiety. Thus, while romantic relationships are in many ways a novel experience for adolescents, peer relationships help to prepare youths for romantic involvement. In another study of mostly Latina adolescents, Kuttler and La Greca (2004) found that a greater number of cross-sex friendships was associated with an increased likelihood to date. The authors also discovered that friendships were affected by adolescents' involvement in dating relationships. On the one hand, dating was associated with better interactions with best friends, but on the other, increasing age and dating involvement were linked with increased reliance on romantic partners at the expense of best friend relationships. It may be that friendships provide a platform through which to practice dating skills.



### **Micro-System: School Influences**

The school system is often overlooked as a micro-level influence on the quality of adolescent romantic relationships. Schnurr and Lohman (2008) analyzed data from a longitudinal sample of mostly African American and Latino adolescents and explored school variables as potential moderators of known parental and peer risk factors for dating violence. They found that a lack of school safety and academic difficulties during early adolescence exacerbated the effects of parental domestic violence exposure by increasing dating violence for adolescent males. This study points to the importance of viewing systems as overlapping, as the effects of exposure to and opportunities for greater violence in schools fostered a greater likelihood of violent behaviors across contexts. Likewise, qualitative interviews conducted of adolescent females in the Lyons, Giordano, Manning, and Longmore (2011) study found that school and societal culture continued to emphasize a sexual double standard that pejoratively evaluated females' greater number of sexual partners. Of important note, the effects of negative appraisals on females were buffered by the immediate peer group's approval or support of their sexual activity.

### **Macro-System: Media Influences**

The media also hold the potential to affect adolescents' attitudes about sex and gendered relationship roles. Ulloa, Jaycox, Skinner, and Orsburn (2008), for example, found in a sample of urban Latino/a youths that preference for Spanish-language media was associated with lesser gender egalitarianism, where greater egalitarianism was associated with lesser experiences of dating violence. Among a sample of Dutch adolescents, ter Bogt, Engels, Boger, and Kloosterman (2010) found that exposure to TV, music videos, Internet surfing, and Internet chatting was associated with more permissive sexual attitudes in adolescent females; preferences for erotica on TV and in Internet surfing were particularly associated with more permissive sexual attitudes in adolescent males; and preference for hip-hop music was associated with more permissive sexual attitudes for both adolescent males and females. Finally, viewing reality dating TV programming has also been associated with disempowered gender attitudes (e.g., that the male sex drive is irrepressible) among a sample of ethnically

diverse young adults in the United States (Zurbriggen & Moran, 2006). As a macro-system factor, the effects of media are best understood in terms of their overlap with other macro-systemic domains (e.g., culture), as well as their effects on micro-system and meso-system factors. We know that multiple systems interact to exert influence on adolescents' dating lives (Coatsworth et al., 2002), and examining these systems together offers an opportunity to better understand the complexity of youth's romantic relationship experiences.

### **AN ECOSYSTEMS APPROACH: PARENTS, PEERS, SCHOOLS, MEDIA**

Some have attended to how different spheres of influence interact to affect adolescents' partnering experiences (e.g., Connolly, Friedlander, Pepler, Craig, & Laporte 2010; Wood, Senn, Desmarais, Park, & Verberg 2002), although the majority of studies are quantitative. Wood and colleagues examined the reported influence of parents, peers, the media, and sex education on shaping Canadian adolescents' (ages 13 to 16) knowledge about dating relationships. Friends and sex education teachers were perceived as providing more information about dating than parents or the media. Participants felt most comfortable asking friends about dating matters. In terms of gender differences, adolescent females, compared to adolescent males, received more information on dating across sources, perceived parents and the media to be more accurate sources of information, and were more influenced by their parents. Adolescent males gave higher rankings to dating partners and their own dating experiences as comfortable sources of information. In a second notable study, Connolly and colleagues utilized an ecosystems approach to examine the impact of risks across multiple spheres of influence (i.e., individual, relational, sociocultural, and demographic) in predicting dating violence among a sample of Canadian adolescents. They found that each tier influenced dating aggression and that that use of aggressive media by ethnic minority youths was particularly problematic. The latter relationship was mediated by one's attitudes that tolerated aggression.

There is a need for research that more comprehensively assesses how the micro-system influences of parents, peers, and schools as well as the macro-system influence of media act together and separately to influence (and, as appropriate, to be

influenced by) adolescents' romantic relationships. Further, influences across systemic domains are not necessarily universal and cross-cultural studies are required (Collins et al., 2009). Culture serves as a macro-system influence, although adolescents may not be able to identify specific aspects of their own cultural values that impact their dating lives (Williams, Adams, & Altamirano, 2012). Focus group methodology offers a way through which to compare within and across cultural groups. This study is informed by the perspectives of youths themselves and further serves as a cross-cultural comparison of European American and Mexican American adolescents' relationship experiences.

## **METHOD**

### **Sample and Procedure**

Brief sampling and methodological details for this study are provided, as they may be referenced in a previously published article (Adams & Williams, 2011). The sampling strategy followed a phenomenological study design in which "typical" adolescent participants were purposively selected (Padgett, 2008) to speak about their experiences associated with romantic relationships in high school. Adolescents (22.7% 15 years old; 52.0% 16 years old; 25.3% 17 years old; 53.3% females) from a large Southwestern state who self-identified as Mexican American  $n = 41$  and European American  $n = 34$  were asked to participate in focus group discussion about high school dating relationships. Focus groups ( $n = 12$  groups; six to eight participants per group) were stratified by race/ethnicity and gender in order to make meaningful comparisons within and across relatively homogeneous groups, within a specific developmental time period (i.e., middle adolescence). This strategy resulted in three groups of each group type (Mexican American/European American, male/female), at which point saturation was met (the point at which no new information or thematic development was identified).

### **Plan of Analysis**

Focus groups were purposively chosen as the study method in order to allow adolescents to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and experiences about dating

relationships with similar peers, as they do in everyday life. Focus groups allow adolescents to openly engage in conversation, influence, and be influenced by others in a naturalistic context and are particularly optimal when discussing a sensitive topic, as comfort and openness increase when participants are surrounded by those with similar experiences (Letendre & Williams, 2014). The PI (third author) moderated all focus group sessions, along with an assistant moderator who was matched by gender and ethnicity to the focus group. The moderator asked a semi-structured set of questions using minimal verbal prompts and probes in order to allow for natural dialogue to emerge (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The questions were developed a priori from a review of pertinent literature, and key questions were consistent to allow for comparisons across groups. Following a warm-up task, adolescents were asked a series of key questions and prompts that were designed to identify the meaning of romantic relationships to adolescents' lives, the benefits and drawbacks to being in a romantic relationship, and the impact of romantic relationships on their lives. The focus group questions and probes were as follows:

1. *What does it mean to be in a "romantic relationship"?*

Probes: How would you know if you were in a romantic relationship? How would you describe a romantic relationship?

2. *Think back to your last or current relationship. Describe what it was like.* Probe:

What is it like for people your age to be in a romantic relationship?

3. *What would your ideal romantic relationship be like?*

Probes: What would you like your current romantic relationship to be like? What would you have liked your past relationships to be like?

4. *What are some benefits of being in a romantic relationship?*

Probes: What are the positives, or the pros, of dating someone? What are some good things that have happened in your relationship? What are some good things that have happened as a result of your relationship?

5. *What are some difficulties of being in a romantic relationship?*

Probes: What are the negatives, or the cons, of dating someone? What are some problems that you've had in your relationships? What are some problems you've had as

a result of your relationship?

6. *How does being in a romantic relationship impact your daily life?*

Probe: How would you describe a typical day for someone who is in a romantic relationship?

7. *How does being in a romantic relationship affect your relationships with other people?*

Probes: Has a romantic relationship ever caused any problems with your relationships with family or friends? Has a romantic relationship ever had positive effects on your relationship with family or friends?

Focus groups were audiotaped, transcribed, and entered into a qualitative software program (Nvivo; QSR International Pty, Ltd., Version 8, 2008; Richards, 2005). Written dialogue was analyzed via a form of inductive content analysis where an open coding scheme was used that considered participants' responses on the basis of frequency, emotionality, specificity, and extensiveness (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The researchers sought and compared themes by analyzing dialogue within and across each focus group; that is, the group, rather than the individual, was the unit of analysis. Although the final question targeted how romantic relationships influenced adolescents' relationships with other people (i.e., peers, parents), all data were analyzed, as several careful readings of verbatim transcripts yielded meaningful categories across each ecological tier stemming from discussion across multiple questions. Thus, themes and subthemes emerged primarily from spontaneous dialogue rather than imposing an ecodevelopmental lens a priori. Confirming examples of each theme and subtheme were sought to support each theme, and portions of text could be included across multiple (sub-)themes as appropriate (i.e., double-coded). The final coding scheme was the result of several codebook reiterations between two researchers, each kept as an audit trail. The final coding scheme demonstrated excellent reliability as verified by an outside researcher ( $\kappa = .90$ ). Of note, adolescents did not refer to their relationships using the term "romantic" but rather characterized relationship types by their level of commitment (see Williams & Adams, 2013a). Given that themes and subthemes were not differentiated by relationship type,

“romantic” is herein used interchangeably with “dating” relationships to denote that various relationship terms were preferred by adolescents as differing by commitment (see Williams & Adams, 2013a, 2013b).

## **RESULTS**

Results are presented in order of saliency, meaning that themes that were constitutive of more in-depth dialogue, use of personal examples, and that were emotionally laden or discussed by the youths as having the most influence are presented first. The following acronyms are utilized to ease reading: EA, European American, and MA, Mexican American. Example quotations are provided to support emergent themes and subthemes; multiple quotations presented together denote a conversation within a group. Themes and subthemes are organized by ecological systems. Dialogue was often coded multiple times for its evidenced overlap across systemic domains. Tension and interactions between microsystem influences were not coded independently but, rather, are framed interpretively in the discussion using an ecodevelopmental perspective (Coatsworth et al., 2002). It is desirable for the reader to bear in mind the transactional nature of each ecological tier. The following introductory conversation serves as a whimsical example:

Like your friends, and then your boyfriend, and then like home or school and it's really hard to prioritize everything... Because you know people get mad and then...

And then you don't have friends.

And then your relationship ends.

And then you have no one.

Except for your parents.

Yeah. But, what if they were unhappy with your boyfriend?

Well then you have your dog. (EA females)

### **Micro-System: Peers**

Adolescents across gender and ethnicity felt that dating relationships primarily

negatively impacted their peer relationships, and they further identified numerous ways that peers exerted influence on their dating lives. Moreover, peers held the power to influence whom an adolescent dated and how an adolescent thought of a partner and behaved within the dating relationship. The role of peers was discussed within the context of several key subthemes.

### ***Dating Relationships Negatively Impacted Adolescents' Relationships with Their Peers***

Adolescents across gender and ethnicity spoke at length and provided detailed examples of the effects dating partnerships had on their relationships with their friends/peers. Adolescents expressed that their dating relationships caused them to spend less time with friends, leading to a decline in feelings of closeness. Same-sex friendships were noted as the first to suffer from the introduction of a new relationship (e.g., “::: then she gets mad at me because like she invited me somewhere but I’m always with my boyfriend :::” MA female). Examples were plentiful and reflected difficulty balancing time spent with friends and a dating partner. Within the school environment, perceived slights and insults were blatant and led to upset on behalf of friends:

I remember one of our friends—like I sit at table with four or five guys, and one of them left because his girlfriend had the same lunch and they started going out. And so he’d go sit with her, and then while they are going out we just said “We’re sick of this crap, I don’t want to talk to you anymore.” “You know he’s ditching us for her.” (EA male)

Well like you’ll make time for your girl and then you’re not making time for your friends and they get mad at you and they start saying stuff to you. (MA male)

Peers often felt ignored or neglected by friends who were in dating relationships, which became a source of conflict. Managing time spent with a partner and friends was a noted difficulty:

You choose to hang out with your boyfriend or girlfriend :::  
Not your friends.

You’re friends are like, “You’re hanging out with your boyfriend again?” People

get so mad about that : : :

But, I guarantee you when they are in a relationship, they are going to do the same thing. It's so annoying.

Like you do have to find that medium. (EA females)

This strain was compounded when peers did not approve of a friend's romantic partner (e.g., "Or your friends may not like the person you are with and they're like, 'You've got to choose them or me.'" MA female), or held romantic or sexual feelings for a friend's dating partner ("Well sometimes like your friend likes them and then you get with them and they start getting mad at you." MA male). Such negative emotions from peers often translated to peer gossip and rumors, which, in turn, held the potential to negatively impact the dating partnership.

### ***Peers' Negative Gossip Influenced Adolescents' Perceptions of and Experiences with a Dating Partner***

Gossip was a noted theme within adolescents' discussion of their dating partnerships. Adolescents across gender and ethnicity expressed feeling that peers often scrutinized their relationships and aptitude as a partner (e.g., "Why are you dating that guy?!" "He is a real skinny punk." EA males). Rumors were viewed as a powerful social activity; as they circulated among peer groups at school, they held the potential to cause conflict within dating partnerships. The following example highlights overlap concerning how friends not liking a dating partner (i.e., double-coded within the latter category) negatively impacted a dating partnership as rumors were fashioned:

If you're with her and then her friends don't like you, they'll probably start some rumors like "Oh yeah we've seen him with some other girl" or something. So that might kinda ruin it. (MA male)

Adolescents also identified jealousy as a common source of conflict within their dating partnerships, as instigated by peers via gossip and rumors. Peer relationships and the dating partnership were compromised as friends became romantically interested in the same person:

And then like I started dating like this one guy and I guess she liked him a lot or whatever and me and her used to be really, really good friends. Then she started



terrorizing me and she would, you know, make up a bunch of crap like, “Oh, she’s such a slut.” You know. “She had sex with so many guys. And blah, blah, blah.” (EA female)

Rumors, gossip, and resulting jealousy were raised as sources of difficulty for adolescents across ethnicity and gender. The ability for a couple to weather the storms of peer gossip depended, at least in part, on the couple’s sensibility to rumors:

It depends on the maturity of the relationship, like if you’re just going to believe anything people say, then you’re not going to have a relationship. You’re just going to be dumping people over what other people say. (MA male)

### ***Peers Influenced Partner Selection and Exerted Pressure to be in Dating Relationships***

Male and female adolescents across ethnicity felt that their decision to enter into dating partnerships was mitigated by a perceived notion that *normal* adolescents engage in them. Being single was, on the other hand, considered a mark of social ineptitude. Dating someone popular was seen as particularly desirable:

The first day of school, everybody was already going out with each other and they didn’t even know each other: : : Sometimes you go out with somebody for peer pressure, because people keep telling you, “Come on, come on.” You don’t want to go out with him, but you can’t say no: : : In high school they try to date the so-called popular kids. (MA females)

Youths concurrently felt pressured to date a partner that their friends and peers acknowledged as being sexually attractive and assessed their own attractiveness by their partner’s (e.g., “: : : and like you won’t really see a really not attractive guy with a really hot girl or like the other way around.” EA male). Additionally, youths discussed feeling left out if their friends were involved in dating relationships and they were not:

Your friends call you up and then you’re kinda like the third or eighth wheel: : : And then like they have their girlfriends and they ask you to hang out with them.

You’re kind of like left behind while they’re with their girl : : : (EA male)

Ultimately, adolescents acknowledged the pivotal role of peers as promoters, influencers, and critiques of their dating relationships:

Sometimes you gain more friends because of it [a dating relationship]: : : It's a relationship between you and that other person and all the friends surrounding you. Other people around you judge your relationship and create it and it's kind of sad. (EA female)

### ***Adolescents Felt Peer Pressure to Engage in Sexual Activity and Were Also Concerned about Their Sexual Reputations***

Both males and females across groups described feeling pressured by peer group standards to engage in sexual activities with their dating partners; however, these influences manifested differently by gender. Males were more likely to express feeling pressured by other male peers to give an account of their sexual activities, how "far" they had gone with a partner and how attractive that partner was:

Guys can brag about the girl : : : like what they do and stuff and then I mean guys talk: : : "Ah dude his girlfriend does *this*" and it'll get around like that. And their girlfriends will get mad. But I mean guys like to talk about stuff like that : : : I mean they say guys think about it [sex] every four seconds : : : (EA male)

Like, some of his friends are asking him, "So, you know, what have you done with her? Why don't you move faster? What's going on with you? Did you do *this* with her?" : : : Guys get a lot of props for that. (EA female)

Females felt pressure to have sex, and their willingness to do so was a balancing act between pleasing their partner while avoiding being ostracized by peers as being too "prude" or too "slutty." The latter fear also reflected peers' perceptions that they may be willing to engage in similar activities with other partners:

A lot of people have sex because their friends have sex. And they're like, "Oh, well I'm just going to have sex with this guy because, you know, I'm a virgin so like, hey, whatever." That's what I—like all the girls and people I know are like that. (MA female)

[People have] high expectations even when they don't know you. They take one look at you and they can be like, "Oh, she's a slut," or "Oh, she's prude." You know, it's like they have expectations for you and those expectations can be very

brutal : : : and when you kiss guys and stuff like that, you are going to have to put up with that. Like, “Oh, that girl is such a slut : : :” (EA females)

Bad and good can come from like actually doing things, like yeah, you will be happy for awhile, but what are other people going to like think next time you are in a relationship? Are they going to think you are easy and you are going to do things? (EA female)

### ***A Breakup Negatively Influenced Adolescents’ Relationships with Peers***

At times, adolescents expressed a negative impact on their friendships resulting from a dating relationship terminating. Youth noted that because they had neglected peer friendships during their dating relationships, they were left without emotional support after a breakup. Females, in particular, discussed the ways in which a breakup also signified the loss of a good friendship with a previous dating partner, and proved difficult to deal with emotionally:

It’s a big part of your life, especially if it’s a long relationship and then to have the person missing, you know. It’s like you’ve lost them in your life. That’s like the way it feels like with Julio.<sup>1</sup> He is like my really, really good friend and now I don’t even talk to him. (MA female)

Both males and females expressed that a breakup also led to a loss of a larger group of friendships previously facilitated through a former romantic partner.

Well the thing with friends, okay you go out with a girl and like you hang out with her friends—now like you become friends with her friends. And then after you break up with her, then they’ll be like mad at you and you can’t like hang out with them anymore or they’ll like hate you because you broke up with their friend. (EA male)

As exemplified, friendships stemmed from connections made through another’s dating relationship, and volatile social bonds formed between peer groups. Breakups created a sense of tension between parties as loyalties to original friends were tested.

### **Micro-System: Parents**

In addition to peers, adolescents’ dating lives were both affected by the family

and affected the quality of parent-child relationships. Parental rule setting, desire for approval from a partner's parents and of a dating partner, and dating relationships as negatively impacting the parent-child relationships each emerged as subthemes. The latter occurred in the following ways: Sneaking around and resulting mistrust, time spent away from the home, and parents' minimization of adolescents' dating relationships.

### ***Parents Affected Adolescents' Dating Relationships via Rule Setting and Monitoring***

Adolescents discussed various manifestations of parental rule setting and monitoring that, in turn, influenced their dating relationships. Many MA participants in particular noted that they were forbidden from dating relationships. Their mothers justified such restrictions within cautionary warnings that stemmed from their own negative experiences with males:

All the time she [the adolescent's mother] gets so scared: : : : "Oh, they will just, you know, hit you and like leave you the next day. You won't hear from them. So, it's best to just stay single and not to be messing with boys." (MA female)

Our mom had us when she was like really young, so she doesn't want us dating: : : : "They only want one thing." (MA female)

EA males and females, on the other hand, expressed that their parents displayed high levels of monitoring behaviors as they entered into dating relationships. This was noted as a particular source of frustration: "They want to know what is going on: : : : It's like you have a little collar on, a little shock collar." (EA females)

EA females expressed that their parents often tried to initially intimidate their dating partners. This parental subtheme overlapped with desire for partner approval where the potential for disapproval felt to these adolescents as a continual source of tension:

It's kind of strange [when parents like a partner]. It's like utopia. What's happening? You know. I know my parents are happy to see their kids happy. But they are still watching, you know. They are still there with like their knife behind their back. (EA females)

### ***Adolescents Desired Approval from a Partner's Parents and of Their Dating***

## **Partner**

Positive value was placed on receiving approval and acceptance from a dating partner's parents. Adolescents noted that it was a relief and often a pleasure to gain this acceptance and desired that similar gestures be extended to their own partners on behalf of their parents as well. Some adolescents voiced that parental approval was more likely if they perceived that the dating relationship was beneficial to their son or daughter:

At first you are kind of like "sucking up." But then, once the parents see that you really make their child happy, like that really make a positive influence and they are like benefiting from the relationship, then they are really into it : : : like my boyfriend's mom buys me like outfits and like, it's really cool. It's like, "Wow." You know, it means she does really like me. (EA female)

Where dating was allowed, involving a partner in family life was viewed as a way to build approval and trust in adolescents' dating decisions: "I definitely think it's a good idea to involve your parents: : : Have her come hang out some days and like then they'll trust you so much more with like everyone else." (EA male)

## ***Dating Relationships Negatively Impacted Adolescents' Relationships with Their Parents***

*Sneaking around damaged parent-adolescent trust.* Despite a desire for involving parents and gaining their approval, parental restrictions and partner disapproval often prompted adolescents to keep their dating relationships a secret from their parents—thus fostering parent- child relational strain:

I can't tell my parents about it because like they'll make us not be able to see each other or whatever. (EA male)

Moderator: So what are some difficulties of being in a romantic relationship?  
Parents.

Moderator: Parents, how?

Because sometimes the parents don't always like the boyfriend or the girlfriend. And sometimes there's not a lot of trust between the parents and the child that's in the relationship. (MA female)

Adolescents of both genders and ethnicities suffered a loss of parental trust as a result of sneaking around with their partner, although this phenomenon was described more among MA females and with the use of more in-depth and emotionally laden examples:

Yeah, my mom will say that too. "If I find that you guys are dating -- uh-uh," she goes all crazy and it's just like, that's what bothers me the most. Because it's like—your parents want to trust you."

Or when you are talking to them, they pick up the other phone: : : You're like afraid to use the phone. (MA females)

If your parents don't let you date : : : you do a lot of sneaking around. (MA female)

Well, like my mom thinks she's a total slut, she like doesn't want me to be with her so I gotta sneak out. (EA male)

I snuck out of the house to go with him and my dad and family caught me and it was a big 'ol drama: : : After that, me and my dad, like he lost so much trust in me. (MA female)

*Adolescents spent less time with family.* Although parents did not always know when an adolescent was with a dating partner, home absenteeism held the potential to damage parent- adolescent relationships (e.g., "I spend a lot of time with my boyfriend and like my mom always thinks it's bad when we're together." MA female).

Adolescents of both ethnicities attributed a decline in feelings of closeness with their parents to time away from family, often spent instead juggling time with friends and a dating partner. This was discussed most often among EA adolescents:

I'm going out with my friends four [days a week] and my guy three: : : Like, I'm never home, I'm like, "Hi mom, bye mom," They're just kind of like "Wow, you live here?" (EA female)

And a lot of times girls are calling, want you to drop everything that you're doing at your house and come and be with them. (EA male)

*Parents minimized adolescents' dating relationships.* Adolescents across groups expressed a sense of frustration with parents and other adults who minimized their

dating relationships and the emotions that went along with them:

“Aw, you’re cute. Have a donut or a cookie or whatever.” (EA female)

It’s not really taken seriously by older people : : : it’s like “Awwwww”: : : : It’s just like “Oh you don’t know what you’re doing,” something like that. They should take it serious. (MA male)

You don’t want to tell your parents, “My boyfriend made me sad” or whatever: : : : They will be like “Get over it.”

Yeah it’s just like “Oh, you’re too young. It doesn’t matter. You’re not in love. You don’t know what you are talking about.” And like if you really are, to have somebody tell you that, you are just going to get hurt.

You are going to get mad. (MA females)

### **Micro-System: Schools**

#### *School Personnel Did Not Take Adolescents’ Relationships Seriously*

Like parents, adolescents across gender and ethnicity also perceived that school faculty and staff minimized their romantic relationships: “Yeah, there’s a lot of doubting, like ‘Oh, it’s not going to last’ : : : they just don’t take it seriously, and kind of like blow it off.” (EA male)

Minimization of adolescent dating relationships on the part of school administration and staff made youths hesitant to talk to school personnel about their partnerships. Adolescents voiced teachers’ role as rule-enforcers (e.g., “Yeah, they’ll tell us to like stop holding hands or kissing in the hall.” MA male) and felt that the message was to avoid relationships (e.g., “I remember once at school they told us like students who don’t have relationships experience less stress and like do better in school.” MA male).

#### ***Dating Influenced School Achievement***

By and large, adolescents noted a decline in their academic achievement stemming from their involvement in dating relationships and as a result of time spent with a partner instead of dedicated to coursework. They additionally felt distracted and mentally or emotionally consumed thinking about their partner:

All you think about is that. Like even in class, you will get so distracted. Like, “What is he doing right now?” Or like, “I want to see him” : : : “Oh, I wonder what we are going to do later on?” : : : You don’t eat, you don’t do your work, you just, your mind is somewhere else. Or you are texting him : : : (MA females).

I don’t know, you can get some real crazies, like, you know, that just totally ruin your life. That just mess with you mentally and, you know, when you’re not mentally in a good place, like, it ruins the rest of you. Your school, your eating habits, and just basically everything. (EA female)

As a noted example, this particular EA male felt that his girlfriend had a positive effect on his academic performance—an effect that was reversed upon experiencing their breakup:

I know when I was in my last relationship, the first part of the year my grades were like incredible and then she broke up with me and they just [bomb whistling then explosion sound]—just like complete plummeted. It was horrible. (EA male)

### **Macro-System: Media**

#### *Adolescents Felt the Effects of Media on Their Relationships and the Necessity to Decipher Media Messages from Reality*

There was limited discussion concerning specific influences of media on dating relationships, although all group types voiced media consumption (i.e., TV, movies) as a primary dating activity, and some adolescents voiced messages they received from media outlets. Adolescents felt that media portrayed involvement in dating partnerships as a normal part of adolescence. While they felt that the dating relationships represented were unrealistic, EA adolescents in particular also expressed that it was sometimes difficult to make the distinction between reality and fictionalization (“You know, because I think that’s what most teens think : : : They see the movies and they are like, ‘Oh, happy ending. They kiss. This is how it is going to end.’”, EA female; “It’s just usually difficult to watch TV, see these things that are so obviously not true : : : you have to look at things around you and somehow distinguish your real life.” EA



male). They also recognized television's ability to elicit sexual feelings (e.g., "But you don't realize that you can get turned on just watching TV." EA female). It is notable that some adolescent males raised media as a source of pressure to have dating relationships. When asked whether they felt pressure to have a girlfriend, a MA male noted "Well, personally, uh just peers or mostly, like I've have seen stuff on TV : : : commercials and other types of stuff." Although asked about perceived pressure from friends or parents, an EA male similarly stated, "I feel pressure from television." An individual within this group felt that "everyone expects you have a girlfriend at some point or another, so if you don't you're weird or gay."

## **DISCUSSION**

Using a focus group approach, the present research explored adolescents' perceptions of the multisystemic environmental and social influences that acted in tandem with their dating relationships to exert influence across relational tiers. An ecodevelopmental approach (Coatsworth et al., 2002) is utilized in interpreting findings and is useful in bringing to light how systems intersect in meaningful ways—often generating conflict within adolescents' most important relationships among family members and friends. Much social development and learning occurred in these meso-systemic interactions, and adolescents demonstrated agency in navigating tensions at this level (e.g., sneaking around parents to date a romantic partner, balancing time among friends and a romantic partner). Further, youths primarily viewed school personnel as restrictive of dating relationships, a micro-context that opposed macro-level (i.e., media) messages that romantic and sexual activity are both normal and highly desirable. Some differences surfaced by gender, particularly with regard to the appropriateness of sexual activity, and in discussions among EA versus MA female youths with regard to avoiding dating at all. However, there were more similarities than differences across groups, pointing to shared dating experiences among this sample of adolescents from the Southwest United States.

Consistent with an ecodevelopmental framework and the developmental research literature, adolescents in the present study discussed numerous ways that parents continued to exert influence in their lives. Correspondingly, relationships with

parents were also affected by adolescents' dating lives, and youths in this study felt that their relationships with parents were primarily negatively impacted. In the Milbrath and colleagues (2009) comparative study, Mexican heritage youths were more likely than members of other ethnicities to emphasize appreciation for parental opinions, and the influence of immigrant parents was thought to outweigh even the consistent effects of peers with whom students spent their school days. The MA females in this study described their parents as restrictive of dating and snuck around in order to avoid losing parental trust. It follows that they provided more emotionally laden examples of broken parent-child bonds resulting from getting caught than did EA youths, as well as more supportive rationale as to why their parents (i.e., and mothers in particular) restricted their dating (e.g., mothers' negative experiences with early pregnancy or abuse). Navigating stressors elicited by dating at the parental micro-system may be particularly challenging for MA adolescents, for whom cultural norms for dating differ and among whom already experience acculturative stress within the family (Milbrath et al.). By either involving family in relationship education or providing culturally appropriate support to adolescents themselves, dating programs may be made more effective for this population.

EA adolescents also perceived a decline in closeness with their parents, although they offered more examples of time spent away as the reason for diminished familial relationships. They were also more likely to raise a concern for parental approval of a dating partner, although this was not necessarily taken to mean that MA adolescents cared less about this but rather that EA parents were more accepting of dating and thus had the opportunity to exercise their opinions of a partner. Similarly, EA youths complained of parental monitoring, although it is noteworthy that adolescents across groups displayed frustration and dissatisfaction that parents (and school personnel) minimized their relationships. Among the youths in this study, having support and approval from parents was strongly desired and dialogue evidenced meso-systemic tension, as adolescents' relationships with their parents suffered as a result of dating. Thus, these perceptions of adolescents complement research indicating that parental monitoring is commonly viewed by adolescents as intrusive (Auslander et al., 2009; Longmore et al., 2001; Madsen, 2008; Tharp &

Noonan, 2012). These findings further suggest that the quality of parent-adolescent relationships is directly damaged through created or exasperated conflict over this and other dating concerns.

Also consistent with an ecodevelopmental framework (Coatsworth et al., 2002), adolescent participants in the present study perceived several ways that the micro-system influence of peers impacted their romantic relationships and were, in turn, affected. Peer socialization has been associated with romantic and sexual involvement during the adolescent years, and our findings similarly support the notion that peers serve as incubators for expectations and behavior within dating relationships (Cavanaugh, 2007). Similar to Kuttler and La Greca's (2004) study, dating relationships also provided challenges to adolescents' friendships as increased time and reliance were dedicated to a dating partner. This resulted in felt tension at the meso-level, a phenomenon that requires greater attention both in order to be more effective in working with youths as well as in research aimed at understanding the developmental implications of relationships across systems. Further, as new partnerships were formed and others disbanded, peer groups shifted, and alliances were tested. Each of these processes was facilitated by peers, as gossip and rumors impacted how the adolescent thought about and interacted with his or her partner. In this manner, peers were afforded similar roles as parents in their critique of adolescents' relationships, although participants voiced greater attention to peer influence *within* their relationships. Marked gender and ethnic differences arose pertaining to sexual messages and peer influence in particular, where EA females expressed difficulty in balancing reputational demands between being a "prude" or a "slut," and EA males felt pressure to give an account to other male peers about how "far" they had gone with a partner. These findings may be contextualized at the macro-level, as EA culture places more emphasis on hooking up as part of a party scene (Williams & Adams, 2013a), and as females within both MA and EA struggle amid societal double standards that offer reputational benefits for male sexual gratification and not female (Williams & Adams, 2013b). While the developmental literature emphasizes the key role of peers in adolescents' transition to romantic partnering (Collins et al., 2009), the utilization of an ecodevelopmental framework has elucidated the dynamic nature of peers' involvement as a source of both

support and tension in these processes.

Adolescents afforded less attention to school and media influences, although within and across group comparisons revealed that messages from these micro- and macro-contexts are in direct contrast to one another. On the one hand, adolescents felt that school personnel did not take their relationships seriously. On the other, media—the enjoyment of which was reiterated by teens as being their primary dating activity—normalized and encouraged (at times pressured) adolescent romantic relationships while offering stimulating sexual content. Males in particular voiced pressure from media to be in relationships. School messages to avoid relationships, or those condescending of sexual and romantic involvement, may have a negative impact on programs aimed at strengthening adolescents' relationships, including sexual education efforts (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Rather, an ecodevelopmental framework elucidates the saliency of dating experiences for adolescent identity and social development. Indeed, the systemic tension evidenced across multiple overlapping spheres of influence suggests that perhaps romantic relationships should be considered as a meaningful and unique micro-system influence in and of themselves in understanding adolescent development.

## **Limitations**

A strength of this study is that it corroborates much other research but highlights the challenges inherent for adolescents as influences from multiple systems intersect in distinct and often oppositional manners. While interview prompts specifically focused on the impacts of adolescents' romantic relationships on those with parents and friends, this study may have been strengthened by specific questions aimed to elicit responses concerning school and media. That some adolescents considered the influence of these systems without prompting suggests that perhaps they were seeking approval, modeling, and/or practical information from these sources, and that was not satisfactorily provided. Moreover, evoking an ecodevelopmental framework in the interpretation of findings uncovered how not only did adolescents' dating relationships impact their relationships with parents and peers but also highlighted the saliency of dating relationships for teens in that they often discussed the

bidirectional nature of these phenomena. This research points to the importance of centralizing adolescents' relationship experiences in understanding other developmental processes as well as to continued research with minority youth populations: Perhaps particularly for acculturating MA adolescents, damaged family and peer relationships may pose a unique developmental challenge. As a final point, future research should seek to better understand the heterogeneity of adolescents' "romantic" relationship experiences as we now know that such experiences are actually diverse in type and level of commitment (author citation); utilizing an ecodevelopmental approach may again prove beneficial in exploring the impact of varied relationship types across systemic domains.

## **CONCLUSION**

Experiencing dating relationships during adolescence is normative; however, involvement in these relationships also increases the risk for negative health outcomes (e.g., dating violence, sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancy, substance use, depression). Results of this study suggest various points of intervention in order to both optimize adolescents' dating experiences and to preserve other important relationships in their lives (i.e., with parents, friends). Parents are optimally positioned as a proximal influence, but in order to be effective, trust must be mutually established (Daddis & Randolph, 2010). Adolescents in this study desired a positive relationship with their parents yet lacked the tools to repair the closeness they previously had; strengthening these bonds might be a promising avenue for the reduction of risk. These findings and others (see Adams & Williams, 2011) point to the importance of parental validation and support in youths' dating experiences. They further highlight the importance of contextualizing school-based healthy relationship programming within appropriate developmental and cultural contexts and as delivered by school personnel that recognize the saliency and importance of dating experiences for diverse adolescents. Results suggest that curricula include modules that incorporate partner selection, balancing multiple relationships, and navigating dating experiences within peer-dominated environments (e.g., school, parties). Furthermore, noted cultural differences indicate that the universalization of U.S. relationship research may not be

culturally appropriate for minority youths, especially within a sexual education framework. Programs may be optimized via attention to gender and ethnicity.

## NOTE

1. Name has been changed to protect participant's anonymity.

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