

1-13-2014

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# “It’s Not Just You Two”: A Grounded Theory of Peer-Influenced Jealousy as a Pathway to Dating Violence Among Acculturating Mexican American Adolescents

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## CITATION

Adams, H. L., & Williams, L. R. (2014, January 13). “It’s Not Just You Two”: A Grounded Theory of Peer-Influenced Jealousy as a Pathway to Dating Violence Among Acculturating Mexican American Adolescents. *Psychology of Violence*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0034294

**Objective:** To develop a deeper understanding of how jealousy escalates to physical dating violence within Mexican American adolescent romantic relationships.

**Method:** Using grounded theory, 20 focus groups of self-identified Mexican American adolescents ( $N = 64$ ; 15–17 years old) were analyzed by level of acculturation and gender.

**Results:** Three distinct “jealous” typologies resulting in dating violence were identified: normative jealousy (typically highly acculturated or bicultural male and female adolescents), jealous and possessive (typically bicultural male adolescents), and jealous and accepting of dating violence norms (typically low acculturated male adolescents). Across types, jealousy was upheld within a peer culture that constructed loose definitions of cheating behavior and was identified as the most salient relationship issue that held the potential to escalate to extreme forms of anger and resulting violence.

**Conclusions:** Adolescents’ behaviors within their romantic relationships are embedded within a peer environment that legitimizes and fosters relationship jealousy. Jealousy is a particularly salient and troublesome relationship issue among acculturating Mexican American adolescents, who struggle as it is normatively experienced yet initiates processes leading to partner violence. Dating violence preventative interventions need to target both culturally influenced intrapersonal factors (e.g., communication and anger management skills, acceptance of dating violence) as well as peer norms (e.g., partner monitoring) to effect change among Mexican American youth.

**Keywords:** qualitative, ethnicity, acculturation, adolescence, romantic relationships

This research received funds from the Lois and Samuel Silberman Fund in The New York Community Trust

Jealousy is a complex emotional, perceptual, and behavioral experience stemming from a sense of threat to an important relationship (Guerrero, Spitzberg, & Yoshimura, 2004). Jealousy is pervasive among adolescent couples (Antônio & Hokoda, 2009), yet remains relatively unexplored. Moreover, cultural norms determine how threats to a relationship are perceived and interpreted, yet ethnic minority adolescents' emotional and behavioral responses within relationship contexts are even less understood than European American (EA) youth (Guerrero et al., 2004). Communication about jealousy may provide an opportunity for increased intimacy, but may otherwise damage romantic relationships through manipulation, distancing, or even the enactment of violence (Guerrero, Trost, & Yoshimura, 2005). Dating violence is not uncommon among adolescents; a recent study revealed that more than four fifths have experienced psychological abuse (e.g., insults, threats) and almost one third has been physically aggressed against (O'Leary, Smith Slep, Avery–Leaf, & Cascardi, 2008). The present study is a grounded theory of Mexican American (MA) adolescents' perceptions of the intra- and interpersonal processes involved in physical violence perpetration against a dating partner, including an in-depth exploration of the role of jealousy.

### **Jealousy Among Mexican American Adolescents**

Although jealousy has been widely studied with adults, it is less understood among adolescents and across culturally diverse groups. Mexican heritage immigrants make up a significant portion of the U.S. population (one sixth is Latino, two thirds of which are of Mexican origin), and 37.3% are under the age of 18 (United States Bureau of the Census, 2009). Mexican heritage youth are at greater risk for more serious forms of partner violence compared with other Latino subgroups (Frias & Angel, 2005). Compared with other Latin immigrants, stressors are exacerbated for Mexican immigrants, such as increased economic strain, household strain (e.g., more people in the household), life stressors (e.g., fear of deportation, language barriers), and community violence, of which youth are especially vulnerable because of their underdeveloped coping mechanisms, dependency, and inability to process events like adults (for a review see McCloskey, Fernandez–Esquer, Southwick, & Locke, 1995).

Understanding jealousy in the context of culture is important in that it is a

multidimensional cognitive and behavioral construct, often evoking conditioned responses (Guerrero et al., 2004). Jealousy may be viewed by MA adolescents as a justification to use violence against a dating partner (Black & Weisz, 2005), which is concerning given that it is not uncommon for MA youth to try and make a dating partner jealous (~70% had done so within the past year; Antônio & Hokoda, 2009). A recent qualitative study found that MA adolescent females experience particularly strong emotional reactions to cheating behaviors (Williams & Hickle, 2011); such males and females were also more likely than EA to emphasize deeply and intimately involved connection components in their definitions of romantic love (Williams & Hickle, 2010). It is noteworthy that Latina adolescents in the United States evidence higher pregnancy rates than other ethnicities (Kost, Henshaw, & Carlin, 2010) and marry at younger ages (Goodwin, McGill, & Chandra, 2009). Given more mature partnering experiences, jealousy may reflect distinctive and perhaps more legitimized threats to the self and relationship. More serious relationship forms are associated with greater likelihood of violence (O'Leary et al., 2008). On the other hand, acculturating adolescents are embedded within U.S. media and peer norms popularizing casual and uncommitted relationship types (e.g., friends with benefits relationships; Williams & Adams, 2013; hooking up; Williams & Adams, in press) and jealousy within such contexts is an area ripe for exploration.

Concerning the role of acculturation, studies that sample Latino youth yield mixed findings. This is due, at least in part, to samples that are comprised either entirely or primarily of Mexican heritage adolescents but without attention to subgroups (e.g., Sanderson, Coker, Roberts, Tortolero, & Reininger, 2004; Ulloa, Jaycox, Skinner, & Orsburn, 2008). For example, although adhering closely to cultural norms serves as a protective factor against violence victimization within the past year among Latino adolescents (Sanderson et al., 2004), it has also been associated with greater endorsement of dating violence norms (Ulloa et al., 2008). Others have found that medium levels of acculturation among Mexican heritage adolescents specifically protect against attitudes sanctioning violence (Hokoda, Galván, Malcarne, Castañeda, & Ulloa, 2007), and that biculturalism is particularly advantageous in borderland states where adolescents in close proximity to Mexico negotiate two distinct sets of cultural

norms (Matsunaga, Hecht, Elek, & Ndiaye, 2010). However, biculturalism is a complex marker of acculturation and its association with dating violence changes in respect to parental birthplace, ethnic discrimination, and the extent to which one language versus the other is spoken in the home (Sanderson et al., 2004). Traditional masculine gender roles (characteristic within Latino cultural norms; Gil & Vazquez, 1996) have been associated with increased risk for violence perpetration (Santana, Raj, Decker, La Marche, & Silverman, 2006). Such ideologies are not necessarily uniform or inherent across Mexican heritage youth and may be better understood for their maladaptive versus adaptive characteristics (Kulis, Marsiglia, & Nagoshi, 2012). These value systems are confounded by changing gender-related norms as youth acculturate to the United States versus traditional Latino dating styles (Raffaelli, 2005). Gaining a better understanding of the potentially catalyzing role jealousy may play in the experience of teen dating violence (TDV) among MA adolescents has far-reaching implications toward the design of increasingly desired culturally attuned preventive intervention programs (Kulis et al., 2012).

### **Jealousy and Violence**

Although empirical knowledge stems primarily from study of EA adults, by definition, jealousy arises from either suspected or real emotional or sexual involvement by a partner with an outside individual (Guerrero et al., 2004). It is commonly dichotomized into either a more stable and enduring character trait or a situational response to a particular event (Muise, Christofides, & Desmarais, 2009). Jealousy often coincides, however, with a host of other emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, or even increased feelings of love or attraction (Guerrero et al., 2005). Reactions to jealousy are associated with a diverse range of behaviors toward a partner, from expressions of affection (Guerrero et al., 2005) to enacting various forms of violence (Capaldi, Kim, & Shortt, 2007; Guerrero et al., 2005). Hostility, a type of intense anger often marked by rage, coupled with low levels of guilt was most predictive of physically violent forms of communication among a sample of EA college-age students (Guerrero et al., 2005). Boivin, Lavoie, Hebert, and Gagne (2012) similarly found that feelings of hostility mediated the relationship between past violence victimization and dating

violence perpetration among mutually aggressive Canadian adolescent dating partners. The authors suggested that even neutral events (e.g., a partner talking to an other-sex peer) might be interpreted as a threat, thus, provoking strong feelings of jealousy and anger resulting in partner violence.

### **Gender and Developmental Considerations**

Evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Buss, 2000) have proposed that jealousy is triggered by markedly different contexts for males versus females (i.e., sexual vs. emotional infidelity); however, the influence of gender is complex as it intersects with developmental considerations during adolescence and evolutionary mechanisms may favor increased sexual experimentation among contemporary adolescents of both sexes (Weisfeld & Woodward, 2004). Developmentally, adolescence is a time during which relationship fidelity may pose an exceptional challenge. On the one hand, a sense of individual autonomy must be gained before intimacy with another is truly obtainable (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010), and adolescents explore and experiment with diverse relationships types (Williams & Adams, 2013); on the other, adolescents desire intimacy and commitment from a romantic partner (Williams & Hickle, 2010). Although recent work has forwarded a more advanced understanding of identity and intimacy achievement during the adolescent and young adult years, there has been a noticeable gap across ethnically diverse groups (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke). This is an important caveat, as Latino relationship and gender role socialization is distinct from EA (Raffaelli, 2005). Further, expectations and norms within dating relationships stem from socialization within peer groups and mixed-sex cliques set the stage during early adolescence for transitions into dyadic partnerships by middle adolescence (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000). It follows that between ages 15 to 17, many youth have their first serious romantic relationship, become sexually involved, and establish interpersonal patterns of relationship behavior (for a review see Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Such interpersonal patterns continue to be highly influenced by peers, who are intricately involved in adolescents' dating lives (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Williams & Adams, in press). What is more, peers and dating partners alike monitor one another's relational activity in school and social contexts, generating a context ripe for

jealousy. For example, social media sites such as Facebook have been linked with higher degrees of jealousy and partner censoring (Muise et al., 2009). Theoretical models of jealousy that attend to intersections of culture, development, gender, and emotional/psychological dispositions of contemporary adolescents are required (Guerrero et al., 2004). Qualitative inquiry is particularly well suited for this aim.

### **Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Contrary to quantitative methods, which rely on a subset of predetermined variables, qualitative methods are ideal when the aim is to discover the cognitive, emotional, and social meanings ascribed to a phenomenon of interest by study participants themselves. Charmaz's (2006) qualitative grounded theory has its historical roots in Glaser's (1978) classic grounded theory, but is unique in its attention to processes that unfold and are given meaning by social interaction (see Hallberg, 2006 for a comparison of grounded theory methods). Divergent from the positivist underpinnings that formed earlier grounded theory methods, Charmaz's approach accentuates multiple constructed realities and grounded theory becomes an interpretive storytelling process of temporal action best understood as driven by social contexts. Strengths of this methodology include the ability to understand the processes involved in physical violence perpetration, as perceived by diverse and acculturating MA adolescents, and attention to their perceptions as inseparable from the peer contexts that are crucially influential to the dynamic and mutually constructed meanings assigned to actions during adolescence (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999).

The aims of this study were to: (1) Develop a grounded theory of the processes involved in physical violence perpetration against a dating partner from the perspectives of MA adolescents, centralizing the role of jealousy; and (2) make within- and across-group comparisons by level of acculturation and gender. As noted by others (e.g., Matsunaga et al., 2010), previous research has tended to overgeneralize Latino subgroups. By focusing on within-group comparisons of MA adolescents from a Southwest border state, the acculturative experiences of adolescents in close proximity to their family's country of origin are taken into account.

## **The Present Study**

### **Sample and Recruitment**

Focus group participants ( $N = 64$ ) were invited from a larger sample pool that participated in an online survey as part of the Mexican American Teen Relationships study ( $N = 305$ ; 15 to 17 years old). Recruitment of self-identified MA adolescents was conducted in person in collaboration with school principals and staff at high schools and community agencies (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs) in a large urban area of the Southwest. Data collection was completed at the school/agency that teens were recruited from or at the University in a private research space. Written parental consent and adolescent assent were obtained for all study participants for all components of the study. Participants were informed that confidentiality could not be guaranteed but were asked to not share what was said outside the group. Written materials were provided in Spanish and English. Groups were led in the adolescents' preferred language; typically English and switching between Spanish and English. Survey and focus group participants were given monetary incentives (\$15, \$10, respectively) and an educational handout on healthy dating relationships and community resources.

Given that peers hold a salient role in forming expectations and norms within adolescents' romantic relationships (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999), focus group methods were chosen to reflect this lived social reality. Further, focus groups offered a forum through which adolescents could openly dialogue with one another, allowing for greater depth of understanding through prompting and making comparisons within and across populations of interest (Charmaz, 2006; Morgan, 1996). They also afforded voice to minority youth; by placing participants with less power and status in society with like-peers with similar life circumstances, increased comfort and openness was fostered through opportunity to discuss and reflect on shared experiences (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004). Finally, Mexican heritage youth differ in their behavioral and attitudinal norms by level of acculturation to U.S. society (Kulis et al., 2012; Sanderson et al., 2004), a process that also affects gendered behavior and relational expectations (Ulloa et al., 2008). Grouping youth similarly facilitates focus group dialogue (Morgan, 1996) especially among adolescents of varying Spanish and English language preferences; thus, homogenous groups were created to draw comparisons within and across



acculturation and gender. Although adolescents were grouped homogeneously, the heterogeneity of the total sample was maximized in line with grounded theory methods to make meaningful comparisons (Hallberg, 2006).

Adolescents were grouped based on their acculturation scores from the online survey (Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans–Short Form/[ARMSA–SF]; 12 items; Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995). The ARMSA–SF has established concurrent and construct validity and considers multiple indicators of acculturation, including not only linguistic (e.g., “I enjoy speaking Spanish”), but also activities and social life (e.g., “I associate with White people;” note that “Anglo” was changed to “White” because this sample was unfamiliar with the term). Responses ranged on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (“*not at all*”) to 5 (“*very much or almost all the time*”). The scale allowed for adolescents to be high or low in either or both Mexican- and Anglo-orientation by assessing each across two linear subscales (six items each). An overall acculturation score was calculated by subtracting the mean Mexican-orientation score ( $cx = .89$ ) from the mean Anglo-orientation score ( $cx = .70$ ). The present sample was skewed somewhat toward Anglo-orientation ( $M = .82$ ). Groups were divided by individuals’ mean acculturation scores:  $<0$  as low acculturated, between 0 and 1 as bicultural, and  $>1$  as high acculturated. All teens were initially recruited to partake in focus groups until saturation was met across gender and level of acculturation; purposive sampling strategies became increasingly more targeted to reach individuals that were needed for across group comparisons. Participants were divided into three highly acculturated (3/2/3 participants), three bicultural (2/4/3 participants), and three low acculturated (2/3/2 participants) male groups, and four highly acculturated (4/5/5/2 participants), four bicultural (4/2/6/3 participants), and three low acculturated (3/3/3 participants) female groups. Because two additional females mistakenly participated in the first bi-cultural group (i.e., a low acculturated female and a highly acculturated female came with friends that had also participated in the larger study), data from this group was not analyzed for group level acculturation comparisons. See Table 1 for sample demographics and Table 2 for acculturation descriptives by group. Survey responses indicated that most focus group participants had personal experience with violence in their current or most recent dating relationship in the year preceding the

survey. This information adds strength and validity to the findings concerning the processes that under- score violent dating experiences as perceived by adolescents.

**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Information of Study Participants*

	<i>N</i>	Frequency	<i>M</i>	( <i>SD</i> )
Sex				
Male	24	37.50%		
Female	40	62.50%		
Age			16.16	(.8)
15	15	25.00%		
16	22	34.38%		
17	27	40.63%		
Grade			10.75	(.96)
9	7	10.94%		
10	18	28.13%		
11	23	35.94%		
12	16	25.00%		
Relationship status				
Going-out	31	48.44%		
Single	23	35.94%		
Other	10	15.62%		
Heterosexual				
Males	14	93.33%		
Females	17	85.00%		
Perpetrated any violence	44	91.67%		
Victim of any violence	47	92.13%		
Perpetrated any physical violence	28	49.12%		
Victim of any physical violence	28	50.00%		

*Note.* A relationship status of “other” denotes that the adolescent was either casually dating, in a hookups relationship, or in a friends with benefits relationship. One adolescent in this category was married. Valid percentages were used when there was missing data. Violence indicators denote that the adolescent had enacted violence against a dating partner or had been victim to violence at least one time by a dating partner in the past year. Emotional, relational, sexual, and physical violence are included in the measure of any violence.

Focus groups were scheduled to include three to five participants although actual

group size ranged from two (as a result of “no shows”) to six. The majority of groups (17 of 20) included two to four participants. Smaller group sizes are ideal for discussion of sensitive topics (Morgan, 1996) and also offer immigrant youth an empowering opportunity to discuss their thoughts and experiences in greater detail (Toner, 2009; Umaña–Taylor & Bámaca, 2004). The first author moderated all focus groups alongside one to two assistant moderators. Efforts were made to match the ethnicity (12/20 groups) and gender (18/20 groups) of the moderators to the group. The same key questions were asked across groups to keep dialogue structured and facilitate group comparisons. Each group began with an icebreaker to build rapport with the researchers and with one other. The questioning route began with discussion of healthy dating relationships (i.e., “*What does a healthy relationship look like?*”) and of what constitutes dating violence (i.e., across multiple forms including emotional, verbal, sexual, and physical). Discussion then shifted to adolescents’ perceptions of common sources of conflict among dating couples, and how and under what circumstances violence may occur among partners. The authors were sensitized to jealousy as a pervasive and antecedent event in the occurrence of adolescents’ experiences with physical dating violence, and thus, explored this topic in increasing depth (Charmaz, 2006). Groups were digitally recorded, and one assistant moderator took notes with a smart pen that was linked to the audio recordings. A team of researchers transcribed all digital recordings verbatim following each group; bilingual and bicultural staff (including the first author and primary moderator) completed transcriptions where Spanish was used.

## **Analyses**

The aim of this study was to develop an interpretive model concerning how dating violence unfolds, and particularly physical violence perpetration, according to the perceptions and experiences of diverse MA adolescents. Charmaz’s (2006) grounded theory method offered an ideal set of guidelines for delineating a conceptual framework that took all of the rich data into account. Constant comparison is a core tenant of this and other grounded theory methods, meaning that all units of text are analyzed line by line, and all data—including emerging categories—are continually compared and

contrasted to one another throughout the data collection and analysis processes (Charmaz, 2006; Hallberg, 2006). The first author engaged in memo-writing and constant comparative methods in this “incident by incident” manner (Charmaz, 2006, p. 53) as participants within and across groups described physically violent episodes. In vivo codes were sought that reflected the language and symbols used by adolescents themselves. Theoretical coding highlighted associations between codes, particularly the temporal order and conditions (i.e., social, circumstantial) under which actions were described as occurring.

Table 2  
*Mexican-Orientation, Anglo-Orientation, and Overall Acculturation Score Means and SDs 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	3.1	(1.05)	3.93	(.70)	0.82	(1.20)
Males	24	2.87	(1.16)	3.53	(1.12)	0.7	(1.14)
Low Acculturated	7	4	(.71)	3.33	(.54)	-0.66	(.61)
1	2	3.9	(1.27)	3	(0)	-0.9	(1.27)
2	3	3.83	(.73)	3.22	(.69)	-0.61	(.48)
3	2	4.34	(.23)	3.83	(.23)	-0.5	(0)
Bicultural	9	3	(1.11)	3.54	(1.14)	0.54	(.32)
1	2	3.42	(.12)	3.84	(.23)	0.42	(.12)
2	4	3.67	(.89)	4.29	(.67)	0.63	(.44)
3	3	1.83	(.76)	2.34	(1.04)	0.5	(.29)
High acculturated	8	2.29	(.71)	4.27	(.49)	1.98	(.74)
1	3	2.11	(.63)	4.5	(.6)	2.39	(.54)
2	2	1.84	(.94)	4.34	(.6)	2.5	(.71)
3	3	2.78	(.58)	4	(.5)	1.22	(.9)
Females	40	3.01	(1.14)	3.9	(.92)	0.91	(1.17)
Low acculturated	9	4.13	(.49)	3.65	(.57)	-.48	(.4)
1	3	4.11	(.51)	3.28	(.68)	-0.83	(.44)
2	3	3.89	(.51)	3.72	(.51)	-0.17	(0)
3	3	4.39	(.51)	3.95	(.48)	-0.44	(.34)
Bicultural	15	3.62	(.59)	4.04	(.6)	0.45	(.51)
1	4	3.61	(.59)	4.39	(.51)	0.78	(.09)
2	2	3.57	(.79)	3.97	(.66)	0.4	(.51)
3	6	4.09	(.12)	4.25	(.35)	0.17	(.23)
4	3	3.46	(.44)	3.8	(.71)	0.42	(.78)
High acculturated	16	2.12	(.66)	4.28	(.39)	2.11	(.73)
1	4	2.34	(.47)	4.08	(1.06)	1.75	(.59)
2	5	1.53	(.84)	4.43	(.38)	2.9	(.7)
3	5	2.53	(.32)	4.28	(.16)	1.75	(.3)
4	2	2.21	(.32)	4.18	(.24)	1.75	(.5)

*Note.* Scores were computed using the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican-Americans–Short Form (ARMSA–SF); 12 items (Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995). MOS is the group’s mean Mexican-orientation score, AOS is the group’s mean Anglo-orientation score, and ACC is the group’s mean acculturation score taking both subscales into account (i.e., AOS-MOS).

In keeping with a grounded theoretical lens, hypotheses were not developed a priori. As described, the questioning route did evolve, however, to fit theoretical

sampling techniques “which means that the emerging results direct in which direction to go and what questions to ask in order to saturate each emerging category/ concept” (Hallberg, 2006, p. 143). That is, jealousy was not a topic specifically addressed or probed in early focus groups, but emerged naturally within the context of dialogue following the structured questioning route. The prominent role that it held in adolescents’ perceptions of conflict leading to physically violent episodes became apparent as data were actively and inductively coded (e.g., **“What kinds of things do you argue about?”** “Jealousy . . . I think that’s like the main thing”), and was thus subsequently probed in greater depth (e.g., **“Okay, jealousy has come up in a lot of groups of people that I’ve talked to. It seems like it’s a pretty big issue that can be difficult—how do you deal with jealousy when it happens?”**). Jealousy thus served as a core theme by which to construct a developmentally and ethnoculturally sensitive theory of physical violence perpetration. Here, the term “theory” is used interchangeably with “model” or “process” given that the aim of constructivist grounded theory is not to develop a causally driven explanation, but rather to construct an interpretive story of the social processes as perceived and experienced by participants including associations among meaningful categories (Charmaz, 2006; Hallberg, 2006). It is recognized that a comprehensive theory of jealousy would need to not only account for cultural considerations, but also numerous interpersonal, intrapersonal, and environmental factors (Guerrero et al., 2004). Notably, substantial attention was also paid to adolescents’ cognitive assessments of jealousy (e.g., as sometimes healthy) and the social contexts that fostered and sustained jealous episodes. The focused coding methods described narrowed and connected themes to those pertinent to the present theoretical analysis, resulting in a nuanced story rich in context and plot (Charmaz, 2006). With the possible exception of low acculturated male groups (see limitations), analytical categories were theoretically saturated (i.e., additional data did not uncover new findings; Charmaz, 2006).

Results are presented using pseudo names of adolescents with actual quotes to illustrate findings. Abbreviations are used to indicate the acculturation level of the group: highly acculturated (HA), bicultural (BI), and low acculturated (LA).

## Results

*“Just imagine the cycle as in . . . like spring, summer, autumn.”* Tony, bicultural male’s analogy of escalation from jealousy, to anger, to physical violence perpetration.

Theoretical saturation resulted in rich descriptions of jealousy as a potential antecedent to multiple forms of violence and all groups raised it as the most salient and common relationship problem. It was also the most likely problem to elicit anger, which held the potential for physical violence perpetration against a dating partner. Given jealousy’s property to catalyze anger and potential violence, many felt that an *absence* of jealousy was important for a healthy relationship: *“What do you think a healthy relationship looks like?,” Moderator “No jealousy.”* Tony, BI. On the other hand, it paradoxically served as a measure of relationship health, denoting a fear of losing someone they cared immensely about: *“They love you a lot, but they don’t want to lose you. That’s why they get jealous.”* Diego, HA. Sensing this threat of loss alerted them that *“you really liked the person”* (Tony, BI), and it was in this manner that jealousy was deemed *“normal”* and even *“natural.”* In fact, many adolescents questioned their feelings for a dating partner altogether when they did *not* experience jealousy. Consequently, adolescents struggled in their descriptions of jealousy and often contradicted themselves: *“Jealousy might be good or bad.”* Hidalgo, BI.

Findings illustrate the following grounded theoretical relationship: fueled and contextualized within a world of peer interaction, jealousy spawned feelings of anger that intersected with intrapersonal characteristics to determine the processes leading to physical violence perpetration. Findings are divided into theoretical components to demonstrate the associated processes concerning first, how jealousy was fostered, legitimized, and sustained by peers, and second, how jealousy served as a trigger for anger within a typology of intrapersonal contexts (i.e., Type A. Normative Jealousy, Type B. Jealous & Possessive, and Type C. Jealous & Accepting of Dating Violence) that then resulted in physical violence perpetration against a dating partner (see Figure 1).

### A Peer Culture of Jealousy

Adolescent descriptions of relationship conflict may be best understood through invoking what will be referred to as a “peer culture of jealousy.” This phrase situates the

experience of romantic jealousy within a social world that fosters, legitimizes, and sustains it, which was described across group types with few differences by level of acculturation or gender.

**Fostering jealousy.** Most adolescents de- fined cheating behavior as any type of other- sex interaction: *“They probably talk to her, and to me that is considered like cheating.”* Miriam, BI. Cheating was the primary catalyst for jealousy, and the peer- laden school environment was fertile ground for a continual struggle: *“It’s not just you two . . . ”* Cheri, BI. Other-sex interactions were often un- avoidable and posed a continual threat to the relationship. For example, Enrique (HA) de- scribed how being placed into mixed-sex groups for class projects resulted in struggling with jealousy: *“I have her in a class . . . and it’s like ‘she’s talking to a guy, she’s talking to a guy.’”* Despite the challenges posed, recurrent mixed-sex contexts also offered adolescents the opportunity to assess the extent to which a partner cared about the relationship. Specifically, the choice to talk to an other-sex peer was viewed as a test. Even so, adolescents often described circumstances where they themselves faced difficulty in up- holding other-sex restrictions. A conversation between Hidalgo and Sergio (bicultural adolescent males) exemplified this finding: *“Like if they see you walking around with another girl and they’re not jealous, then I would think they don’t really care.”* *“Well, you walk around with a lot of girls.”*

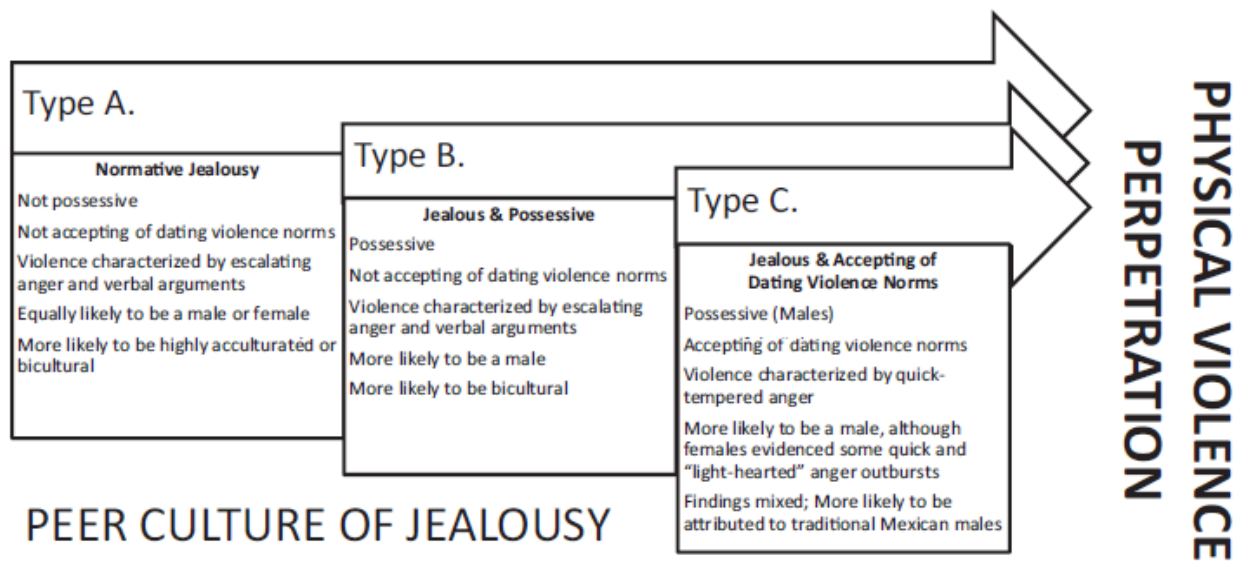


Figure 1. Typology of intrapersonal characteristics associated with physical violence perpetration of a dating partner in a peer culture that fosters and sustains relationship jealousy.

Jealousy was particularly difficult to handle when a partner interacted with someone un- known to his or her dating partner. Friendships of the other sex, on the other hand, were not necessarily considered cheating but were some- times entirely prohibited to prevent the occurrence of jealousy and arguing: *“He can’t have any girlfriends and she can’t have any guy friends.”* Aaron, HA. Moreover, uncommitted contexts such as friends with benefits relation- ships were particularly prone to jealousy given their ambiguity: *“Yea, if you’re friends with benefits with a girl, and the girl starts talking to another guy, and you guys are arguing ‘cause you don’t know if you’re together.”* Julio, HA. Thus, while experiences with jealousy were inherently intra and interpersonal (i.e., experienced emotionally, and affected the dating pair), they were intricately fostered by the peer environment.

**Legitimizing and sustaining jealousy.** Adolescents socially constructed loose definitions of cheating, thus legitimizing feelings of jealousy. Jealousy was, in turn, continually reinforced as adolescents relied on peers to monitor and report on one another’s other-sex involvement: *“. . . someone said that he was talking to some other girl . . .”* Martin, LA. Aside from the inescapability of the school environment, extracurricular peer contexts fostered more extreme forms of jealousy since it was difficult to know whom a partner was with; peers served an important role in verifying the truthfulness of who was spending time together. Partners frequently texted one another through- out the day and also asked to see one another’s text messages: *“Like sometimes I feel like I go overboard . . . like if I ask for his phone like five times a day.”* Maria, HA. Moreover, social media sites were particularly problematic, and were sometimes a public forum for more blatant forms of flirtation: *“Yeah it’s like ‘Like’ my status and I’ll tell you it ‘the truth is’ . . . and then they like write all this stuff like ‘the truth is you’re pretty cute, you’re really funny.’”* Christina, BI. Partners often monitored one another’s Facebook activity and sometimes shared pass- words to their accounts. Finally, Christina also noted that parties were another social environment ripe for the peer culture of jealousy to thrive: *“People tell you like ‘Oh you let him party and you don’t know what he’s doing,’ so they change the way you look at it,”* which necessitated changes in social behavior: *“I’d do anything not to lose her or nothing, I wouldn’t go out that much to parties . . .”* Roberto, LA.



## Anger as a Catalyst

Whereas adolescents' descriptions of jealousy are best understood as embedded within peer culture, the effects of jealousy on interpersonal contexts (i.e., the dating relationship) solicit a nuanced critique of dialogue reflective of intrapersonal characteristics. Jealousy was described in a graduated manner where some were regarded (or regarded themselves) as the "jealous type." Although trait-like jealousy was used as an encapsulating term, adolescents often contradicted themselves in also characterizing jealousy as normative, frequently personally experienced, and often situational (i.e., state-like). Moreover, violence was perceived as inevitable despite a number of outstanding distinctions concerning the intrapersonal characteristics that manifested alongside it. Consequentially, attention is afforded to specific intrapersonal characteristics that intersected with jealousy to spawn anger and that determined the trajectory resulting in physical violence perpetration. Differences in these processes were pronounced by level of acculturation and gender.

**Types A and B: Jealous and (sometimes) possessive.** Jealousy was described as persistent and often extreme by both sexes and across levels of acculturation. Individuals particularly disposed to jealousy were perceived as equally likely to be females or males; such individuals were perceived as hyper-vigilant to real or potential threats to the relationship, and felt powerful accompanying emotional reactions. In some cases, this jealousy was far-reaching, including isolation from family members: "*Like sometimes if you're with them and you're texting, even if it's your mom . . . they just automatically get jealous, like overwhelmingly jealous.*" Maria, HA. Sometimes a proclivity to jealousy was coupled with a felt sense of possession of a partner. Both males and females across levels of acculturation felt that this was primarily true of males: "*The male probably thinks he owns the world.*" Daniel, BI; "*She's still my property, don't talk to her.*" Cheri, BI. Low acculturated and bicultural females were more likely than highly acculturated females to describe personal experiences with possessive boyfriends: "*Pero 'tu eres mía,' así me dicen*" / But "you are mine" is what they say to me; Beverly, BI. They were also more likely to view this as more the norm than the exception: "*Not saying they are all like that, but it's a majority.*" Nicole, LA. Highly acculturated and bicultural males contrasted themselves to this type of

possessive individual, whom they referred to in the third person: *"They claim ownership."* Christian, HA. However, metacognitive awareness did not necessarily reflect a lack of this characteristic: *"Another way I would like kinda get rid of that [jealousy] is like if she was talking to a guy or something, I would walk up to her and hug her and like try to show him 'Oh, she's mine. You can't take her.'" Sergio, BI.* Bicultural males evidenced a struggle in their attitudes reflecting possessiveness together with a nonacceptance of violence; in conversing with Sergio, Javier talked about the need to talk to a partner about anger resulting from what he perceived to be his own jealousy trait: *"I know I am the jealous type. Like I always see something, I'll be like 'What the hell is going on?!' . . . But then I would talk to her and ask her. Like I can't just jump into it . . ."*

Possessiveness was a motive for experiencing jealousy, but the same process of escalating anger to physical violence was described among Type B, who did not endorse dating violence norms. First and foremost, extreme anger was the precipitating emotional state that fueled "lashing out" against a dating partner. Most often, this kind of anger did not come immediately, but rather through a *"cloudy mind"* (Andrea, BI) that ruminated over the possibility of loss. Given a peer culture that fostered loose interpretations of cheating and thus legitimized feelings of jealousy, anger was a common result and was left to internally fester: *"Cause you're holding onto it . . . and it just builds up."* Nicole, LA. Addressing concerns over jealousy, however, often resulted in defensiveness, yelling, and escalating verbal aggression, which lent itself to the physical attack of a dating partner: *"Your first reaction is to say something back and then there's two people yelling at each other. Eventually one of them is just going to get mad and hit the other one."* José, LA. This process was reiterated by Jessica, a highly acculturated female: *"But, it [anger resulting from jealousy] just starts out little and then it goes like up and up and up, until it gets to a point where they're actually hitting them."* Often, anger was described as coupled with emotional hurt for females. In addition to escalating anger whereby females slapped or threw things at their partners, they also reacted by crying and/or retaliating by talking to another male. This escalating process whereby jealousy and anger were both high was viewed as unhealthy; physical violence perpetration was not endorsed, but was difficult to avoid. As Enrique (HA) stated, *"It's*

*like instead of you controlling yourself . . . your anger controls you."*

**Type C: Jealous and accepting of dating violence.** In contrast to the above descriptions, adolescents across levels of acculturation described a "*bad boyfriend*" (Jarrod, BI) who was not only jealousy-prone, but was also endorsing of partner violence. Whereas those non-accepting of dating violence were formerly described, those accepting of it were routinely paired with possessiveness and a desire for control. This type of individual was described as apathetic, disinterested in talking about the issue and disposed to anger that quickly resulted in physical violence: "*Some people just talk with their fist.*" Pedro, LA; "*They get mad, they get violent.*" Drew, BI. These males desired to "*act tough*" (Aaron, HA), and keep a partner "*wrapped around their finger*" (Elisa, HA). This conversation among low acculturated females exemplified this finding: "*Guys don't find really anything abusive . . . some guys think it's okay to like go off hit a girl . . .*" Felicia, "*All the guys say 'Keep your pimp hand strong.'*" Maribel, "*Or 'You keep your lady on a leash.'*" Felicia. Highly acculturated and bicultural males tended to describe this type of boyfriend in the context of Mexican cultural values. As Gerardo (HA) explained, "*All races have violence, but with old school Mexicans, the guy is in charge.*" Such traditional "*old school*" Mexican heritage youth were viewed as more patriarchal in their beliefs about gender and coupled this with an acceptance of violence in their dating relationships. Gerardo went on to say that, "*Gangsters are proud to be violent. It goes into their relationships too.*" In these contexts anger held a short fuse when paired with jealousy. Further, acceptance of violence among females led to hasty violent reactions whereby escalating anger again played a less prominent role: "*Like a home-girl, she's gonna get mad, she'll like throw down.*" Martin, LA. This was sometimes described light-heartedly: "*Females just hit them.,*" "*Then they laugh, 'Oh, sorry baby.'*" Lydia, LA; "*Females will throw dishes at them. [group laughs] I would do that.*" Ana, BI. This nonchalance was reinforced by amusement on the part of males: "*Yeah, 'cause a girl can hit you all you want, but don't hit a girl.*" "*You just laugh.*" Hidalgo and Jarrod, BI.

Discussion of negative intrapersonal characteristics among traditional Mexican heritage youth led to a close examination of dialogue among low acculturated males. Findings were mixed; some of their conversations mirrored the stereotypes raised by

more highly acculturated adolescents, while others did not. Jealousy leading to escalating anger and yelling was again reiterated as the cycle leading to physical violence, although these processes were discussed less overall than the other groups. One male in particular felt that dating violence could be potentially helpful in solving conflict and building intimacy: *“When people actually think about it [dating violence], or when I do, I see it like it can benefit the relationship to make both of them see each other’s view more. Or make the relationship even stronger because if they have this problem again they’ll know how to handle it . . .”* José, *“So what would you do in a situation you considered violent?”* **Modera-tor**, *“I would walk away and laugh about it.”* José. More commonly, however, low acculturated males did not accept dating violence norms: *“You should be able to talk about things and not be able like to hurt each other.”* Moises, LA.

## **Discussion**

Adolescents described jealousy as a phenomenon that permeated their partnering experiences and as pivotal in how they defined and experienced violence in their dating relationships. A grounded theory of the processes involved in physical violence against a dating partner followed the same temporal pattern regardless of gender or level of acculturation: Jealousy—fostered, legitimized, and sustained by peers—led to anger, and anger to violence. Moreover, while some were described as possessing more stable and enduring jealousy, this quality held little prominence given adolescents’ contradictions. Specifically, other-sex peer involvement was deemed as “cheating” and as inevitable, in a sense nullifying the extent to which one possessed “trait-like” jealousy. Rather, jealousy surfaced as the most prominent relationship problem discussed among adolescents across the sample and in this sense, all were prone to it. Thus, findings point to the importance of situating adolescents’ experiences with jealousy, and thus of TDV, square in social contexts that foster and sustain it. However, differences did emerge by level of acculturation and gender concerning how youth experienced and interpreted jealousy. Perhaps most notably, the degree of acceptance of violent dating norms differentiated couples: Types A and B for whom physical violence perpetration was the unintended result of festering anger and heated

arguments and Type C, who accepted dating violence norms and quickly escalated from anger to violence perpetration. Low acculturated males were described as more likely to accept the use of violence in their relationships and this was coupled with possessiveness and desire for control. Both HA and BI males compared themselves to this “*old school*” type; BI males, however, evidenced struggle in their reconciliation of possessive attitudes with a nonacceptance of dating violence norms. Moreover, LA males’ dialogue only partially reflected the stereotypes discussed among more highly acculturated youth. Finally, females’ perpetration of partner violence was deemed laughable among males and females across levels of acculturation.

### **A Peer Culture of Jealousy**

It is not surprising that participants discussed jealousy as their most common relationship challenge given that romantic partnerships stem from mixed-sex groups of friends (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999), yet once in a dyadic relationship, other-sex friendships pose an ongoing threat to the stability of a romantic partnership. It is possible that acculturating MA adolescents face unique challenges as these processes unfold; for example, dissimilar cultural norms may lead youth to feel estranged from their parents and cling more closely to a developing romance. Maintaining peer networks may also be particularly important in creating a sense of support mirroring strong familial values (Williams & Adams, 2013). This study points to the important role that peers play in assessing and monitoring cheating behaviors across school, social, and media environments. Rumors of infidelity could pose exceptional challenges to MA youth for whom connection and commitment may be particularly salient given earlier marital and child rearing trajectories (Goodwin et al., 2009; Kost et al., 2010). The key role that peers and cultural processes play in upholding and sustaining violent versus nonviolent conflict tactics is critical in further study of TDV.

### **The Role of Anger in Teen Dating Violence**

Amid a peer environment that legitimized jealousy and created a culture of hypervigilance for cheating behaviors, this study found that adolescents across groups reiterated a similar unfolding of events whereby anger stemmed from jealousy and

catalyzed the potential for physical aggression toward a dating partner. Acceptance of dating violence as a conflict management strategy, however, differentiated couples that attempted to first resolve jealousy through communication. Adolescents that are able to maintain their anger at milder levels may be more likely to problem-solve in a calm manner that benefits the relationship (Guerrero et al., 2005). The inability to regulate anger and holding attitudes accepting of violence, on the other hand, may result in dating violence (Boivin et al., 2012). This study sheds light on differential processes involved in the latter two antecedents to violence, including marked differences across levels of acculturation and with reactions to violence by gender.

### **Within- and Across-Group Comparisons**

**Acculturation.** Whereas traditional Mexican cultural norms sometimes infer negative connotations of *machismo* (i.e., male domination and control), focus group dialogue explicates the heterogeneity of jealous experiences across levels of acculturation. A subtype of LA males may align with maladaptive forms of traditional Mexican gender role proscriptions (Kulis et al., 2012), particularly in the pairing of jealousy with an acceptance of dating violence norms and a proclivity to quickly become aggressive. LA males did not discuss jealousy to the same extent as BI and HA males, and some accepted dating violence norms while others did not. It is noteworthy that adaptive forms of *machismo* (e.g., honor, respect) were also reflected in LA adolescents' dialogue throughout other discussion not pertaining to jealousy. Maladaptive *machismo* traits were described by more HA youth of traditional Mexican males (i.e., using the third person; e.g., as "thugs"), although such adolescents also described their own experiences of jealousy as pervasive, difficult to handle, and at times escalating to physical violence perpetration. Their assessments of "state" versus "trait" jealousy were not clear-cut, including clouded interpretations of this emotion and confusion over whether and to what extent jealousy was appropriate. This questioning unfolds from social constructions of jealousy as a sign of caring, contradicted by lived experiences of violence stemming from it. Despite a desire to refrain from violence, it is possible that increased reliance on a dating partner contributes to powerful feelings of jealousy that approximate "trait-like" jealousy and exasperates the escalation of anger to physical

violence perpetration. It is reasonable to expect that these demands would be greater as youth acculturate, and help shed light on findings pointing to greater violence among more highly acculturated Latino youth (Sanderson et al., 2004) despite attitudes that become increasingly nonaccepting of it (Hokoda et al., 2007; Ulloa et al., 2008).

**Gender.** O’Leary and colleagues (2008) found that females’ physical violence against a dating partner stemmed from attitudes accepting of it. These study findings reiterate this with a sample of MA youth, and highlight a tendency among both males and females to laugh at females’ use of violence. Whereas acceptance of dating violence was a powerful catalyst for quick-tempered anger resulting in violence among males— hitting, slapping, and throwing things was not viewed as serious when it was females doing the perpetrating. This sheds light on processes underlying violence reciprocity during adolescence (Capaldi et al., 2007), and underscores the significance of unearthing gendered cognitive processes associated with physical violence perpetration. Possessiveness, for example, did not play as critical a role in Mexican American females’ experiences with jealousy as it did males’.

### **Implications for Teen Dating Violence Prevention**

One of the basic tenants of grounded theory methods involves the testing of one’s assumptions about a given population and existing theoretical models (Charmaz, 2006). Intimate partner violence is often situated within an explanatory model of power and control; for example, the “power and control wheel” is prominent in social service settings and is used to train advanced level practitioners. Modeled from adult batterer literatures, this model also includes a TDV component that associates “using jealousy to justify actions” with power and control mechanisms (National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, 2012). Although assessing participants via focus group methods lacks the inherent ability to explore causality, results of this study lend support to criticisms of a “homogenous approach to a heterogeneous population” (Cavanaugh & Gelles, 2005, p. 157). This study exposed a typology whereby possessiveness and desire for control had less to do with physical violence perpetration than did the acceptance of dating violence norms. More- over, even when such norms were not endorsed, many

adolescents resulted to violence for lack of anger management and communication skills. During adolescence, when jealousy is a common dating conflict issue (Antônio & Hokoda, 2009), diverse youth may benefit from curricula aimed at addressing multiple risk factors for violence, including socioemotional components, maladaptive forms of peer involvement, and communication skill deficits. Results also hold relevancy for clinical practice with MA youth, pointing to the importance of exploring intrapersonal characteristics underlying potentially violent episodes (e.g., anger management), and including discussion of youth's conceivable struggle between distinct and often opposing cultural dating norms (Raffaelli, 2005). Moving forward, future applied research endeavors should aim to change peer norms that cultivate and legitimize excessive jealousy and continued exploration into the unique cultural underpinnings of adolescents' partnering experiences (e.g., acculturative demands, gender-related values, community and family influences) is also warranted.

### **Limitations**

Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory methods encourage repeated engagement with participants; prolonged engagement under differing study contexts (e.g., individual interviews) may use this study's findings in creating questioning routes that attend to various youth perspectives. The transferability of this study is limited because findings represent viewpoints of a particular group of MA adolescents in the Southwest, and experiences may differ for other Latino youth living elsewhere in the United States. Furthermore, while differences across levels of acculturation and gender were discussed, they should be taken in light of difficulty recruiting low acculturated adolescents. An acculturation mean positively skewed toward Anglo-orientation, however, may not be uncommon among MA adolescents from a bicultural border community (Matsunaga et al., 2010). Additionally, adolescents were recruited in a unique historical time in which the state was undergoing significant changes in immigration policy, which may have hindered participation, particularly from less acculturated youth. In any case, "no shows" resulted in a number of small groups (see Toner, 2009, for justification regarding the importance of running these groups), and LA males were the most difficult to recruit. Given these limitations, it is important to consider findings



exploratory—particularly those describing adherence to negative depictions of patriarchal gendered behavior and their intersections with acculturative processes.

## Conclusions

Practitioners and researchers alike have called for increased attention to diverse adolescents' dating experiences toward the promotion of healthy relationships and the prevention of violence. The results of this study highlight jealousy as a frequent and emotionally salient experience for MA dating couples, understood within a cycle leading from anger to aggression and supported by a peer culture that cultivates it. Teaching adolescents how to navigate this powerful emotion has important consequences for relationship quality and the ability to negotiate conflict in a healthy manner. To the contrary, left to their own confusion over this commonly experienced phenomenon, they risk the crystallization of maladaptive resolution tactics and resorting to perpetrating violence against a partner.

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