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Mexican American adolescents' perceptions of dating violence programs: Recommendations for effective program design and implementation

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Abstract

Although promising dating violence programs have emerged, little is known about their effectiveness for Mexican American youth, a vulnerable and understudied population. The purpose of this study was: (1) to offer culturally-grounded recommendations towards the development of effective Teen Dating Violence (TDV) programs and/or the modification of existing programs, and (2) to identify potential barriers to Mexican American youth's participation in TDV programs. Using the perspectives of Mexican American youth (15 to 17 years old) and a phenomenological study design, focus groups ($N = 14$) were conducted that were homogeneous by gender and level of acculturation (low/bicultural/high). Youth provided recommendations for program design (i.e. Design it to explore between-group and within-group cultural variability, Design it to be broad in scope, and Keep it positive) and program implementation (i.e. Make the program fun and non-threatening, and Involve peers, couples, and individuals) within the context of acculturation. Adolescents' suggestion of a program delivered in smaller groups that support sharing within peer relationships may stem from a desire for intimacy within close relationships – re-creating a sense of *familismo*. Teen dating violence programs best meets the needs of Mexican American adolescents by including programmatic components that are grounded in personalized cultural values.

Keywords

culture, domestic violence, latino, prevention, young people

Teen dating violence (TDV) has immediate and lasting negative effects across social, physical, and psychological contexts, such as school difficulties, unhealthy coping skills, substance use problems, and eating disorders (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2009). In addition, survivors of TDV are three times more likely than persons who have not reported TDV to continue patterns of victimization in subsequent romantic partnerships (CDC, 2009). Unfortunately, most of the research on TDV has been conducted on Anglo samples, and few studies have thoroughly examined how dating violence programs may be developed for and perceived by Mexican American youth. Qualitative research offers opportunities to inform the design and delivery (Rothman and Thomas, 1994) of intervention programs for adolescents. The study on which this article is based employed a phenomenological framework, using focus groups to offer Mexican American youth opportunities to voice their program recommendations. The aims of the study were two-fold: (1) to offer culturally-grounded recommendations towards the development of effective TDV programs and/or the modification of existing programs, and (2) to identify potential barriers to Mexican American youth's participation in TDV programs.

TDV intervention programs

Schools are typical settings for teen violence programs. The programs often strive to increase awareness of dating violence and unhealthy relationship behaviors (Wolfe and Jaffe, 1999). Typical activities in adolescent programs include video presentations, theatrical vignettes, and speeches delivered to youth from survivors of abuse (Wolfe and Jaffe, 1999). Unfortunately, few programs have tailored their delivery and implementation to specific racial/ethnic populations (Whitaker et al., 2006) or considered the impact of acculturation on immigrating youth (Marsiglia et al., 2005). In a critical review of current TDV prevention programs, Whitaker et al. (2006) found only one intervention designed to target a minority population (African American youth) in a comparison of 11 widely-used programs. These authors recommended programs that focus on cultural contexts and implement culturally relevant strategies. Without taking cultural norms, cultural

variability, and level of acculturation into consideration, dating violence programs designed for Latinos may risk propagating stereotypes and alienating potential participants.

Mexican American culture and acculturation

Cultural values at the macro-level are uniquely personalized at the micro-level to influence adolescents' beliefs and attitudes towards dating violence. Several aspects of Latino culture are relevant to Mexican Americans, including *familismo*, a value associated with family cohesion (Cuellar et al., 1995), and *machismo*, the belief in patriarchal relationships and traditional sex roles (Brabeck and Guzman, 2009). Although adherence to one's culture of origin may be considered a protective factor (e.g. Brabeck and Guzman, 2009; Marsiglia et al., 2005), acculturation denotes an adaptive process whereby the perceptions and values of an individual transform as a result of exposure to contact with a differing culture (Gibson, 2001). Acculturation affects perceptions of what constitutes dating violence, reports of victimization or perpetration, and the likelihood of experiencing abusive relationships (Sanderson et al., 2004). Acculturation is a complex process that is not yet fully understood. For example, although highly acculturated Latino youth demonstrate increased knowledge of nonviolent communication tactics (Ulloa et al., 2004), they are also more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviors and to experience TDV (Sanderson et al., 2004). Furthermore, biculturalism has been deemed a protective factor (Gil et al., 1994) and occurs when individuals maintain identity with their culture of origin while simultaneously adopting the language and norms of another culture, including alternating their behavior in a context-dependent manner (e.g. feeling more 'American' at school but 'Mexican' at home; Phinney and Devich-Navarro, 1997).

The present study

Despite the importance of acculturation on adolescents' experiences of TDV, most research has treated Latino youth as a homogeneous minority group (Marsiglia et al., 2005). This study recognizes the heterogeneity of Latino youth's

perceptions and experiences by targeting Mexican American youth specifically and across levels of acculturation. Latinos currently make up 16.3 percent of the United States population and are the fastest growing minority group (US Census Bureau of Statistics, 2011); two-thirds of Latinos are of Mexican origin (US Census Bureau of Statistics, 2009). This study answers a call for research on culturally relevant TDV programs for Mexican American youth (Black and Weisz, 2004), a growing and vulnerable population. Pragmatic findings, which are derived from participants' explicit needs and demands, will be outlined for the purposes of developing innovative interventions (Rothman and Thomas, 1994). The terms 'low-acculturated' and 'high-acculturated' are employed here to denote adherence to Mexican (low) or United States (high) social and linguistic indicators of acculturation, while also allowing substantial flexibility for low or high adherence on either or both (i.e. 'bicultural' youth). Youth were divided into homogeneous focus groups of high-acculturated, bicultural, or low-acculturated, and given the importance of changing gender roles in the acculturation process (Ulloa et al., 2008), were homogeneous by gender as well, to examine both within- and across-levels of acculturation and gender.

Method

Sample and recruitment

We recruited into the Mexican American Teen Relationships (MATR) study adolescents who self-identified as Mexican American and were between the ages of 15 and 17 from high schools by means of class presentations and school announcements, and from the surrounding Southwest urban community at-large (e.g. Boys and Girls Club) by making recruitment visits and distributing flyers. We invited interested adolescents who met the sampling criteria to complete an online survey as part of a larger research project about teen dating violence ($N = 219$). Adolescents gave researchers their contact information, including a phone number and home address after which we made follow-up phone calls to adolescents and their parents, and during which time we told families more about the project. We then scheduled adolescents to complete the online survey at the

university or at a collaborating community center/high school with a computer lab. We obtained written parental consent and teen assent from all participants. We told adolescents that they might be contacted to participate in subsequent focus groups.

This study used a quantitative measure as a means of creating homogeneous focus groups stratified by level of acculturation and gender in order to allow for an examination of themes across and within groups and to facilitate dialogue (Morgan, 1996). This is important given that dating and sexual beliefs and behaviors may differ to the extent that an adolescent has acculturated to US dating practices (Sanderson et al., 2004). We used the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans short form (ARSMA-SF, 12 items; Cuellar et al., 1995) via an online survey, to calculate youth's level of acculturation. Items ranged on a 5-point Likert scale from 'not at all' to 'very much or almost all the time' (e.g. 'I enjoy listening to English language music'). We changed the term 'Anglo' in the survey to 'White' due to participants' lack of familiarity with that term in this sample. Cuellar et al. (1995) document that the ARSMA-SF is preferred for its attention to multiple indicators of language, hobbies, and social life and its high levels of internal reliability and concurrent and construct validity compared to the 30-item measure. We calculated linear scores along two subscales (6 items each) measuring the extent to which an adolescent was oriented to Anglo ($\alpha = .70$) versus Mexican culture ($\alpha = .89$). Next, we subtracted the Mexican-oriented mean from the Anglo-oriented mean to obtain an overall grouping score. The mean score of the present sample was slightly skewed towards Anglo-orientation (approximately one), while the true mean of the ARSMA-SF is zero. In order to create separate groups of adolescents orienting either high or low on both subscales, we categorized adolescents whose overall mean score was between 0 and 1 as bicultural. Participants scoring 1 or greater formed high-acculturated groups, and those scoring 0 or less formed low-acculturated groups. We also stratified groups by gender. Forty-four individuals (16 boys, 28 girls) participated in 14 groups. The project consisted of six high-acculturated groups (two groups consisting of boys; two groups of five participants, one of four, one of three, and two of two), five

bicultural groups (three of boys; two groups of four participants, one of three, and two of two), and three low-acculturated groups (one of boys; one group of four participants, one of three, and one of two), with each focus group session about an hour in length. Participants were compensated for both their survey (\$15) and focus group (\$10) participation.

We chose the focus group method because of its ability to give voice to an understudied minority group (Morgan, 1996); as such, it is an empowering approach that may even be therapeutic for participants (Padgett, 2008). Although some have suggested an ideal group size ranging from 6–10 participants, smaller groups may be ideal for dialogue around sensitive and emotionally-laden topics (Morgan, 1992a; as cited in Morgan, 1996). Smaller groups also allow for more in-depth discussion of thoughts and experiences (Morgan, 1996). Thus, we scheduled focus groups with a minimum of three participants and a maximum of five but decided to meet with five groups of two participants that were the result of ‘no shows’. In order to balance smaller group sizes, and to reach saturation across group type (i.e. the point at which additional information is unyielding of new findings; Strauss, 1987), we conducted more groups than average (Morgan, 1996).

Procedures

One female moderator and an assistant moderator led the focus groups. A female assistant moderator was present for girl groups and a male assistant moderator was present for all but one of the boys’ groups. The moderators were bilingual and bicultural and conducted the groups in the preferred language of the participants. We digitally recorded all groups using two recorders, including a smart pen device that linked detailed notes to corresponding audio segments. In general, discussions in low-acculturated groups were a mixture of English and Spanish. The bicultural and high-acculturated groups were in English. All questions regarding programming, particularly in relation to cultural needs and differences, were posed to groups by the assistant moderator (the third author) whose ethnic heritage most closely aligned with participants’. Following a discussion of teen dating violence, the moderators asked the same key questions in order to facilitate comparison across

groups: *How might Mexican American teens' experiences with dating violence be different from other teens? What would encourage you to participate in a teen dating violence program? What would discourage or prevent you from participating? As a Mexican American teen, what would be important for us to include in the program?* We developed these questions to involve adolescents in discussions of culture, including how their personal experiences and how Mexican American adolescents' needs may differ from their perceptions of others'. The moderators used prompts to deepen the conversation about culture, particularly when adolescents expressed their views on cultural differences and similarities. The focus groups continued until the researchers found that the participants did not offer ideas and examples that were different from those we had already collected. At the end of each group, youth were provided information on dating relationships and resources for assistance in unhealthy relationships.

Focus groups typically took place at the schools or community centers from which the participants were recruited to promote familiarity and ease of access. Participants sat in a circle to promote discussion and reduce the power differential with moderators. To begin each group, the primary moderator (second author) encouraged participation by conducting an icebreaker activity to promote sharing and to reduce the research-participant barrier. Throughout the discussion, we encouraged interaction among focus group participants to elicit natural conversation and strengthen the discussion (Krueger and Casey, 2000).

Analytic approach

This study uses a phenomenological framework to elicit programming recommendations consistent with adolescents' lived dating experiences. In order for programming to be effective, it must reach adolescents in a manner that speaks to their subjective realities (Weisz and Black, 2009). In keeping with this approach, a priori hypotheses were not developed. Rather, our aim was to elicit the meaning of cultural values for Mexican American youth as part of their dating experiences and to understand what they would desire in a TDV program, including their perceived barriers to participation.

Following each focus group meeting, moderators discussed points of interest (e.g. group dynamics, how conversation compared to other groups), and shared reflections (e.g. how perceptions may have changed). Each moderator then independently wrote a summary of the discussion that included personal reflections. Focus groups were transcribed verbatim and in an on-going manner, with bilingual research assistants transcribing groups that employed Spanish dialogue. An independent researcher checked each transcription for accuracy. The smart pen directly linked dialogue to the notes being taken simultaneously; this eased data transcription and analysis through contextualized notes within conversations.

We analyzed data using a form of thematic content analysis whereby we categorized participants' dialogue into meaningful recommendations pertaining to the design and delivery of a teen dating violence program. The primary coder (second author) conducted a thorough reading of the written transcripts and searched for recurring themes or ideas using the group as the unit of analysis. She gave weight to comments on the basis of the frequency and specificity of the statements, as well as the emotional expressiveness and extensiveness with which participants shared personal experiences (Krueger and Casey, 2000). We engaged in investigator triangulation by each of us reading the verbatim transcripts and making modifications to the coding scheme until we reached agreement. This was particularly important as both the second and third authors participated in the focus groups. In line with a phenomenological design, we use direct quotes to illustrate and contextualize each theme.

Results

We grouped adolescents' recommendations for the design and delivery of a TDV program into two broad categories: Program Design and Program Implementation. Dialogue coded with the Program Design category pertained to the planning and design stages of programming (cf. Rothman and Thomas, 1994). Dialogue tailored towards the execution of the program itself was coded within the Program Implementation category. Although some trends are noted, level of acculturation was unyielding of clear differences across groups. Gender

comparisons are highlighted where apparent.

Program design

Within this broad category, we identified three subthemes of program recommendations: Design it to explore between-group and within-group cultural variability, Design it to be broad in scope, and Keep it positive.

Design it to explore within- and between-group cultural variability. An outstanding recommendation across focus groups was to design the program to explore important cultural values in a way that allowed for diverse experiences. Specifically, youth recommended attending to diversity across faiths (e.g. 'like if you're Christian or Catholic... it's different', high-acculturated boy), to deliver the program in both Spanish and English, and to allow for substantial variability in content pertaining to differences in US and Mexican dating and sexual norms. For example, one high-acculturated boy group discussed certain 'old school' Mexicans as more patriarchal in their romantic relationships. One participant said, 'All races have violence, but with old school Mexicans, the guy is in charge... with old school beliefs the man works, and the woman stays at home.'

Participants highlighted within-group variability in focus group dialogue across levels of acculturation, and it was not necessarily the low-acculturated adolescents who preferred more traditional roles: 'I think it depends on like how you were raised... I think like girls should be cooking, cleaning, and stuff. But not everyone thinks like that' (high-acculturated girl). Adolescents' dialogue reflected a felt space to adopt or adapt traditional Mexican gender values: 'Some people are just tradition[al], like the man goes to work, job, like provides for the family and the woman like stays home.' 'But now it's different, like you can do whatever you want' (bicultural boys). Given this within-group variability, females felt the program should include partner selection, noting that 'you should be with somebody that has the same goals'. They felt this is important in that many boys are unhappy when a female partner pursues career ambitions – a potential source of conflict in the relationship. Correspondingly, while low-acculturated girls conversed about the importance of

finding a 'good paying job' that '*te saca pa'adelante*' ('gets you ahead'), they recognized that many girls follow traditional family values instead of pursuing a career, 'Like, once they finish high school, they get married, have kids...'. In sum, youth desired that the program be designed to embrace such within-group differences: 'It's just like – there's a lot of people that are different like Mexicans... there's all types too. They're not like the same ones, stereotypical – so they're all different... No one is the same so I don't think all of them will for sure participate, but they would try if they think it's a safe environment' (bicultural boy).

A strong sentiment was that, as a whole, Mexican American youth were more similar to other youth than different. As it pertained to a cross-group exploration, adolescents recommended that the program 'have different types of perspectives' in part to counter racial stereotypes: 'if you guys are doing like this education thing, if you put more people together from different types of races... so you won't just have like, "okay, Mexican people think this." "White people think that." You know?' (bicultural boy). One bicultural boy compared this to a recent speaker that they had really enjoyed: 'What he did was like... he connected all of us. He was like, "Who has siblings?" and like people stood up. And then, even if we are from different cultures, we have something in common... we all know we come from different cultures, but we're all connected somehow. He put that aside and he connected all of us somehow.'

Design it to be broad in scope. Youth felt that the program should be viewed both as a prevention and as an intervention for adolescents already experiencing TDV and, as such, should include an array of topics ranging from partner selection, common conflicts, managing disagreements in a healthy manner, warning signs for abuse, what to do if abuse is occurring, and how to break up with a partner. This was 'so you could be prepared if you go into a new relationship, like signs of violence and stuff like that' (bicultural girl). Adolescents felt that 'mostly every- body has the same problems' and that by targeting diverse relationship issues, the information and skills would benefit them either presently or in the future (e.g. 'either way, you can help out any couple or any future couples,

you know?', low-acculturated girl). Furthermore, a recommendation was that the program target middle school-aged students to truly be preventative of dating violence and also high school students who may be currently involved in abusive relationships. They felt that by providing programs across a diverse age range, the 'generation that follows us' would only need it in middle school and would have already learned 'what's right from wrong' (bicultural boys). Low-acculturated girls stressed the importance of reaching younger youth 'cause 8th grade, they're already dating, they're going out. Like, as an 8th grader, they're probably dating like a 19-year-old'. Moreover, these girls felt that 'the older you get' the more empowered they became in their own career ambitions – changing the face of their relationships and demanding a program that similarly parallels their dynamic viewpoints and experiences.

Keep it positive. Adolescents felt that they need help in knowing how to keep their relationships positive and wanted the program to not only focus on negative aspects of relationships, but also on how to keep them healthy and satisfying, that is, 'How to be a good boyfriend or a good girlfriend. Instead of talking about the bad stuff, you could talk about the good things' (bicultural boy), and 'Some people will probably need a way to keep their relationship healthy' (low-acculturated girl).

Adolescents felt that if healthy relationships were modeled, it would allow for the comparison of positive relationship traits. In this manner, they would actively be engaged in the material and motivated to reach higher levels of constructive interaction with a dating partner. Through this process, they may even decide to keep the relationship platonic or to hold out for a healthier relationship: 'It'll open like, people's eyes, you know? Like, "Oh, okay... I could do this and this... without having a boyfriend like be friends and do this, go out, have fun with them, or instead of, you know, having sex... just to be with them... you know?"' 'I mean, that would just motivate' em to the point that... [they] actually try to make a world without these relationships' (bicultural boys). In cases in which they come to terms that they need to terminate an unhealthy relationship, they would 'have additional help if they

wanted' (bicultural boy).

Program implementation

Dialogue that we coded within the Program Implementation category reflected specific recommendations regarding the delivery of the program itself. Within this broad category, we identified: Make the program fun and non-threatening and Involve peers, couples, and individuals.

Make it fun and non-threatening. It would be best to 'do what you're doing now', one low-acculturated girl stated, meaning an informal group setting that was comfortable and supportive of youth's conversations. A bicultural boy echoed this recommendation. He felt it is important to let adolescents 'speak their mind' and to steer clear of lecturing ('Don't do this, don't do that' (bicultural girl)). That is, 'Make it feel like a hang out setting', '... something real mellow not like lecturing on you.. .' 'cause we already get a lotta lectures in this school already' (low-acculturated girls). Youth perceived a lecture-style format as limited in its ability to easily apply the concepts to their dating lives: 'Like we know what to do – we know what not to do. We know the difference between right and wrong, but sometimes we just act like we don't' (low-acculturated girl). An interactive environment that encourages a learned skill set was preferred: 'Learn how to control the situation and your anger more.' 'Well everyone should learn how to communicate and know how to solve a problem and I think it would be good to learn it from somewhere' (high-acculturated girls).

A strong recommendation was for the program to be interactive, involving role-plays that are salient to situations they commonly encounter in their dating relationships: 'They need to visualize it'. '*Tener como esos* ['have like those'], acting.. .' 'Probably relate it to them.. . Like they... probably see signs of it already.' '... Like if the guy pushes you.. . and you're like "Oh, I didn't think it was that"' (bicultural girls). 'You know, make' em role play about.. .' 'How would you handle this situation?' 'Jealousy', 'Cheating' (bicultural boys).

In order for the modeling to be salient, adolescents felt that the actors should be similar to them in race: 'Cause like... not to be racist of nothing but like, if they

see like an African American person say that they're gonna judge, "Oh, that's just between African Americans. That's not gonna happen to me." And if it's like a Caucasian person, then they're gonna be like, "Oh, no, they're perfect" (bicultural girl). Similarly, adolescents felt that they would be more drawn in by leaders who shared personal experiences: '... at church one time we were talking about people who were abused and we had two women come in and tell their stories about how they resolved it, and it was really cool to hear about and listen to how they handled things' (high-acculturated girl). 'And talk about yourself too. Like make us feel like you've been through stuff, too' (bicultural boy).

For adolescents who would feel embarrassed, these bicultural boys suggested the curriculum should 'get creative' by having everyone write down how they would handle a particular situation and then create a chart of the class's findings so that they could learn from one another. Furthermore, they would feel more comfortable if the program used humor and were to take place in school: 'I think it would be better as a class because you'd get more people involved than like... if you do it as an after-school program' (bicultural girls). Another adolescent noted that others would be motivated to take the program if they knew what to expect from it: 'If you come to this class, this is what we're gonna do' (bicultural boy).

Some adolescents stressed the importance of making the curriculum non-threatening because of the stigma attached to dating violence and fear of embarrassment. Findings point to the experience of dating violence as both an incentive and a potential deterrent for attending the program. Many stated that they would only participate in the program if they were already experiencing abuse (e.g. 'If I needed it', low-acculturated girl). Others voiced that they could 'handle it on my [their] own' (low-acculturated girl) or would avoid the program 'if they're in an abusive relationship' to stay 'quiet' (bicultural boy) or because 'the other person [in the program] is the abuser' (high-acculturated girl).

Although many adolescents desired school credit or money to participate, girls were more likely than boys to state that it was incentive enough to have the opportunity to support one another through relationship challenges: 'To have ideas

on how to help others, ya know, that are probably in the same situation' (bicultural girl), 'And to help our friends that are in that situation' (high-acculturated girl).

Involve family, peers, couples, and individuals. Adolescents across groups recommended targeting the individual and dyad through diverse forms of peer involvement. Repeated and specific recommendations were to offer the curriculum to mixed- sex groups of adolescents, then providing opportunities to discuss and practice the content in dyads (i.e. dating couples) and in same-sex small groups. Adolescents felt that this format would allow for the demonstration of mutual support, as well as the prospect of reuniting as a larger group for reflection and comparison.

The following exemplifies youth's ideas about holding breakout sessions for couples: 'Like one time you have not couples, and then you have couples, and then at one time everyone together to see their point of views on everything' 'Boys and girls together' (low-acculturated girls). This group of low-acculturated adolescents felt that bringing everyone together again offered the opportunity for couples to learn from the larger group and to receive advice: 'and if they have a situation and many know what to do, then they could probably talk about it.' 'Like couples counseling!' (low-acculturated girls). The desire for couples' involvement in general conflict negotiation contrasts with the preference of others not to involve couples but rather to focus on 'what's healthy and what's not' in a mixed-sex setting and then break out into same-sex groups only. Advocates for small same-sex breakout sessions felt that girls and boys held similar viewpoints that could be discussed, summarized, and shared with the other gender: 'So you can get both sides of the opinion, so the guys can hear the girls' side and the girls can hear the guys' side' (high-acculturated girls). Additionally, dating partners would be kept separate for more sensitive and in- depth discussions: 'So the girls may want to talk about the guys and how their relationship is, I'm pretty sure they don't want them to hear it. So I don't think they should be together to hear it. And if you say it, they may get all mad and crazy' (high-acculturated girl).

Regardless of couple involvement or not, adolescents across groups agreed

that the program should provide an avenue for intimate same-sex group discussion. The majority opinion was that a closer-knit friends group, as opposed to unfamiliar peers, provided higher levels of support and the assurance of privacy. Youth across groups recommended that the course be delivered 'just like this' (i.e. the focus group), a theme that overlaps with the recommendation to make the program non-threatening and to 'make it interesting'. Adolescents felt that sharing their experiences with their peers was an enticing incentive and provided an opportunity to reach out to others: 'Let it be known to girls that haven't come that it's okay for them to come.' 'Like say in this group, we all become friends – it can help us in the long run' (high-aculturated girls).

Aside from peer involvement, a group of high-aculturated boys felt that it might be helpful to minimally include parents in the program because 'They're at a different level. You think way differently than them... There are different styles in Mexico and different styles here'. These adolescents felt that differing dating and sexual norms in the United States bred confusion with parents, but also noted that their parents had talked to them about dating violence. Another bicultural boy group felt that parents should be made aware of what they were learning about relationships: 'Talk to the principal to let their parents know... make a sheet for the parents to sign, make them read it.' 'It'd be better.' 'So the parents will know' (bicultural boys).

Discussion

This article demonstrates the relevance of qualitative research in intervention research. Adolescents offered numerous pragmatic recommendations to inform existing TDV programs or for the development of an innovative culturally-grounded program. Adolescents felt empowered after being given the opportunity to reflect and generate their own ideas. Their recommendations fell into two broad categories including the design and implementation of a TDV program.

A central recommendation was to design the program to explore diverse perspectives within Mexican American adolescents' viewpoints and experiences, and to compare their cultural norms to those of other racial/ethnic groups in a

manner that facilitated connectedness. Participants discussed culture in the context of TDV programs as a personalized experience that was primarily affected by their upbringing, but also combined in unique ways (e.g. personality, social experiences) to form individualized dating values and expectations. This raises a number of important considerations for the successful design of TDV programs that are culturally- appropriate for Mexican American youth. First, youth across levels of acculturation referenced themselves and other Mexican American adolescents in a comparative manner to traditionally-held value systems discussed in the literature (e.g. *familismo*, *machismo*). This supports the design and delivery of programming that includes their unique struggles to reconcile dating values held perhaps by parents or more low-acculturated friends (whom many of these youth referred to in the third person) with their own – a significant concern given that adolescence marks a key developmental time period for identity development, including their ethnic identity (Phinney and Devich-Navarro, 1997). Dialogue supported emerging literature concerning the coupling of differently-acculturated (i.e. low- versus high-acculturated) individuals as a potential source of conflict in the relationship (Ulloa et al., 2008), as gender roles may evolve and diverge with exposure to norms more characteristic of the United States (e.g. female career-orientation, delayed marriage and childbearing).

Adolescents also desired a broad program that addressed a spectrum of relationship issues (i.e. from general conflict negotiation to dating violence), as they felt that general conflict resolution skill sets would help them to avoid abusive experiences in relationships. This assertion holds empirical support (Shorey et al., 2008) although few programs include healthy communication strategies as a key component of TDV program design (Weisz and Black, 2009). Moreover, adolescents desired that the program frame messages positively. This is an important recommendation that is closely associated with healthy identity formation; particularly, positive relationship experiences are associated with increased self-worth (Collins, 2003) and self-perceived relationship competence (Masten et al., 1995).

Recommendations pertaining to the implementation of the program were to

make it interactive, using meaningful examples (e.g. Mexican American representations), and non-intimidating. One specific suggestion that had strong support was to integrate theater and role-plays into the structure of a program. Adolescents specified that role-plays should be limited to real-life, antagonistic scenarios in which the observing youth would be encouraged to formulate their own opinions and possible reactions, much like the *Safe Dates* program that teaches youth about dating violence through the use of theatrical productions (Foshee et al., 2000). Theater and improvisational theater have been found to work effectively with inner-city youth in relation to violence prevention (Kisiel et al., 2007).

In addition to having larger group activities, adolescents felt that the program would feel welcoming and safe if it allowed for intimate and same-sex small group discussions. Youth felt this would offer a place to share experiences and offer support without fear of having a dating partner present. Some desired similar opportunities for couples to unite after larger group modules and for families to be tangentially involved by being informed of the curricular goals. Perhaps due to perceived deviations in their own dating lives from their parents' cultural values, most youth did not feel that parents were a viable source of support in the experience of TDV but they did want them to know about what they were learning. Wanting to be autonomous from parents during adolescence is developmentally appropriate and part of identity exploration (Steinberg, 2009). In addition, just as youth's shifting dating norms (i.e. away from more traditional Mexican gender- and family-related values) may result in a rift between dating partners, it may also generate conflict in the home. Adolescents' suggestion of smaller breakout groups may, therefore, stem from a desire for more intimate settings through which to garner support from peers that could otherwise be provided by family – thus re-creating a sense of *familismo*. Given that adolescence is a period during which youth view peer relationships as the most satisfying in their lives (Buhrmester and Furman, 1987), the inclusion of peers appears to be a key programming consideration for both developmental and cultural reasons.

Although a salient programming recommendation, the presence of deviant (i.e. rule-breaking, substance using) peers may negatively affect a programming group through promoting and normalizing violent behaviors (Poulin et al., 2001). Understanding peer influence in program design is essential, particularly in adolescence when peer norms are a strong predictor of behaviors (Christopher et al., 1993). As the youth suggested, smaller breakout groups may temper some of those negative effects. Group size affects participation, interaction, and satisfaction with the group experience (Thomas and Fink, 1963). Youth in this study noted that the size of their focus group (no more than five participants) was conducive to a personal discussion.

Although there were more similarities across levels of acculturation than differences, dividing adolescents in this manner provided the opportunity to assess whether similarly-acculturated adolescents would hold varied conversations about the influence of culture in their dating lives. Although we did not assess adolescents' level of comfort in the groups, low-acculturated groups embraced the opportunity to dialogue in Spanish with one another and with the moderators (frequently switching back and forth for various phrases). When asked specifically about cultural values, adolescents as a whole identified more traditional values as common among other Mexican American youth, although some conversations among low-acculturated girls evidenced personal experiences tied to *familismo* and *machismo* value systems. Adolescents' recommendation to allow for within-group flexibility held across levels of acculturation.

In conclusion, focus group methodology served as a highly effective manner through which to garner Mexican American adolescents' perspectives on program design and delivery. We were surprised at the extent to which youth so highly regarded the opportunity to offer their recommendations, and their desires to re-create such environments in a program. This population proved difficult to schedule, and we learned the importance of adopting diverse strategies to form relationships with youth, their families, and community staff (e.g. having bilingual researchers call parents, texting youth on their cell phones, and having school social workers remind them of their scheduled group). We felt that focus groups were particularly

successful as a facilitative environment for dialogue among females as compared to males.

Limitations

Although this study offers a number of useful programming recommendations, it also has some limitations. First, the lens in which we interpret these conversations about Mexican American culture must be framed within the broader political environment. At the time of data collection, the urban southwest area in which this study took place was undergoing strict reform in immigration and citizenship. In focus group discussions, it is possible that adolescents differentiated themselves from values associated with their culture-of-origin to blend into the larger societal value of strict immigration reform and law enforcement. This may have restricted or altered their discussion of Mexican value systems or hindered their discussion of TDV. Furthermore, we asked adolescents to describe their culture-based expectations in the contexts of dating violence programs rather than on cultural identity and experiences of acculturation, which may have triggered a defensive response to the idea that dating violence is a problem that only Mexican American adolescents have. Second, it was difficult to create a shared language between the youth and the moderators around culture, cultural needs, and cultural differences. Adolescents often do not easily understand or identify these concepts, partly because of the communities in which they live and partly because the developmental period of adolescence is marked by an exploration of self-identity. Many of the adolescents in this sample lived in predominantly Latino/Mexican American neighborhoods so their experiences with other cultures may have been limited, thus restricting their ability to differentiate their personal cultural needs. Lastly, having smaller focus groups may be viewed as a limitation although other research with minority groups has evidenced the value of offering any individuals who wish to share the opportunity to do so (i.e. rather than cancelling the group; Toner, 2009). The quality of focus group discussions in this study seemed to depend on the group's cohesion, which varied to the extent that adolescents were friends or not in the group. In sum we found partial support for Morgan's (1996)

assertion that fewer individuals in the group facilitate greater levels of sharing among participants, and believe that all youth's contributions were meaningful to this research.

Conclusion

It is important that we understand the perceptions of Mexican American adolescents – not to create a separate and specialized curriculum and risk alienating youth, but to instead offer dating violence education that fits with their unique cultural experiences. Offering youth across differing levels of acculturation opportunities to dialogue about their relationships in the context of recommendations for programming gave voice to an understudied population. Furthermore, qualitative methodology provided an opportunity to gather input from youth themselves in a manner unconstrained by the fixed question-and-answer format used in survey research. Future directions include the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs that take adolescents' important recommendations into account and to the assessment of educators' viewpoints on the design and delivery of programs using such recommendations. The continued use of qualitative research towards these aims is highly appropriate and certainly advantageous.

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