

9-24-2010

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Advice from teens to teens about dating: Implications for healthy relationships

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Keywords: Adolescence Sexuality Education Gender Mexican American Qualitative

Abstract

Seventy-five Mexican American and White male and female adolescents were asked in focus groups to offer advice to other adolescents pertaining to dating relationships. Across ethnicities and sexes, “Stay on your feet” was the most prominent advice given, followed by advice to “Know when it's right”. “Have good reasoning... especially about that was a prominent theme among females; Mexican American females focused more on pressure associated with sexual activity while White females embedded their advice more often within futuristic and long-term relationship goals. Females offered roughly three times more relationship advice than did males and dialogued collaboratively at greater length, enriching their advice with personal and emotional experiences. Findings are interpreted within a developmental and feminist perspective and in line with recent recommendations for sexual and dating education as outlined by Romeo and Kelley (2009).

Introduction

While the last decade has been characterized by a burst of research on adolescent romantic relationships, comparisons of cross-ethnic samples has been largely neglected (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009) and much of what we know is not from the perspective of youth themselves. Cultural norms affect the ways in which romance is experienced, including romantic expectations (Crissey, 2005), timing (Regan, Durvasula, Howell, Oreno, & Martha, 2004), and sexual activity (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention,

2009) and are critical components towards developing an understanding of adolescent romantic experiences. The following is a qualitative analysis of advice to teens from Mexican American and White youth regarding dating experiences. Since this study used a phenomenological study design to reflect youth's lived experiences with dating relationships, analysis was conducted without pre-existing theoretical frameworks or hypotheses. The data collection and coding processes, however, revealed the central role of gender in dating relationships and therefore is largely interpreted within a feminist framework. Given that adolescence is a key developmental period and that one of its principal tasks is identity development (Erikson, 1968), interpretations are also made within a developmental framework that highlights ethnic similarities and differences. Paying attention to the unique experiences of Mexican American youth is important given findings that point to adolescence as a salient time for ethnic identity development (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Ethnic differences highlight the need for culturally-appropriate sexual and dating health education for Mexican American youth. We conclude with recommendations for program planning, education, and policies in order to advocate for comprehensive sexual education within a framework recently outlined by Romeo and Kelley (2009).

Importance of romantic relationships in adolescence

Relationship formation is a developmental task of adolescence and whether directly or indirectly, all teens are part of this dynamic process. After having sex-segregated friendship groups for over half a decade, pre-adolescents begin to mingle in mixed sex groups (Maccoby, 1990) and devote large amounts of time fantasizing about emerging crushes (Richards, Crowe, Larson, & Swarr, 1998). Peer groups both mediate and encourage the formation of romantic dyads (Maccoby, 1990) such that by age 15, over half of males and females report having been in a dating relationship within the past 18 months (Kaestle, Morisky, & Wiley, 2002). Emotions range from elation to jealousy and anger (Feiring, 1999), which represent the cognitive processes of lust, attraction, and attachment that make early romance one of the single most stressful developmental processes (Larson & Asmussen, 1991).

Navigation through the initiation, maintenance, and possible termination stages

of relationships are stressful across the lifespan and high divorce rates evidence the fact that adults still struggle to work through these processes successfully. While common attitude often minimizes the experience of young love, recent neurobiological data demonstrates that adolescents rely on the same cognitive pathways as adults in their search for romance, their susceptibility to overwhelming feelings of romantic devotion, and their desire to maintain a relationship (Fisher, Aron, Mashek, Li, & Brown, 2002). Although early romantic experiences bear resemblance to the search for a lifelong partner in adulthood, the underdevelopment of the prefrontal cortex (the center of the brain responsible for rational and higher-order thinking; Casey, Giedd, & Thomas, 2000), pubertal changes, and a general lack of romantic experience contribute to an idealistic fascination and often obsessive outlook towards the relationship as one of lasting significance and attachment (Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999). In addition, adolescent developmental goals of establishing autonomy and identity (Arnett, 2004) are often at odds with the desire for intimacy (Blatt & Blass, 1996) and are further challenged by the ever-presence of peers within the school environment. For example, same-sex peers teach one another about the progression of romantic and sexual intimacy, and can often pressure one another to engage in sexual activity. They also look to one another for approval of their dating partner such that, for females, dating someone that is attractive, popular, and slightly older is seen as a way to gain popularity (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003).

A recent review of the past decade's accumulation of literature on adolescent romance revealed the immediate and subsequent impacts of these early developmental experiences, particularly pertaining to self-esteem, school success, sexuality, social competence, familial relationships, and identity formation (Collins et al., 2009). Interpersonal patterns of behavior are practiced and established at this time and longitudinal findings have demonstrated that high quality relationships in adolescence are associated with the same in early adulthood (as mediated by the quality of the parent-child relationship; Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000). Studies have even suggested that adolescent romantic relationship quality may influence marriage (Dion & Dion, 1993; Furman & Flanagan, 1997) and subsequent parent-child interactions (Capaldi & Clark, 1998).

Peer and media influences on adolescent romantic experiences

In transitioning from childhood to adolescence, youth begin to spend significantly more time with peers, even more so than that spent with family members (Larson & Richards, 1991). Teens become increasingly concerned with gaining peer approval, and begin to turn to one another more often for advice and support (Gould & Mazzeo, 1982). This has important implications for romantic and sexual relationships during adolescence. For example, among both White and Latino adolescents, the perceived notion that friends are engaging in sexual activity significantly increases the likelihood that teens themselves will also do so (Christopher, Johnson, & Roosa, 1993). Adolescent advice to one another is likely to stem in part from media messages, as teens report that mass media (e.g., TV, movies, music) is their primary source of sex and relationship information (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1997). The desire to gain peer acceptance coupled with commonly portrayed myths pertaining to what is “normal” could increase risky sexual behaviors. Young adults that frequently watch reality dating programs, for example, are more likely to report that the male sex drive is uncontrollable, as well as to hold disempowered gender attitudes (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006).

Ethnic considerations

Adolescent romantic and sexual experiences are shaped by the social construction of culture and gender. For instance, the emphasis on familism within the Latino culture accentuates the importance of holding familial goals (Flores, Eyre, & Millstein, 1998) and while both Latino and White adolescents report similar anticipation to someday marry (Crissey, 2005), Latino adolescents aspire to marry earlier and both desire and experience earlier sexual activity and pregnancy (East, 1998). They are also more likely to emphasize connection components such as friendship, trust, and care when they experience romantic love (Williams & Hickle, 2010). While young Latino males are consistently granted greater sexual freedom due to gendered expectations stressing male virility (Raffaelli, 2005; Villarruel, 1998), the literature surrounding Mexican American females' sexual debut suggests additional layers of complexity. For example, Latina sexual experiences are influenced by an interplay of factors such as acculturation (Gilliam, Berlin, Kozloski, Hernandez, & Grundy, 2007; Kaplan, Erickson, & Juarez-Reyes, 2002), parental

expectations (Gilliam et al., 2007; Villarruel, 1998), and geographic area (Gonzalez-Lopez, 2004).

A recent review of studies looking at the sexual activity of Latino adolescents in the United States demonstrated that higher levels of acculturation consistently predicted early sexual initiation and experience (Afable-Munsuz & Brindis, 2006). A mixed methods study of female Latina adolescents, however, found that parental values favoring education and abstinence over early marriage were key factors in predicting a later onset of sexual activity and that a greater use of the Spanish language was associated with later female sexual debut (Gilliam et al., 2007). Similarly, a qualitative study of highly acculturated Mexican and Puerto Rican mothers and their daughters revealed that many mothers place great value on the delay of sexual activity in order to prevent early pregnancy, pursue educational aspirations, and preserve the dignity of the family (Villarruel, 1998). Regional and socio-economic factors also come into play such that fathers raising their daughters in urban as opposed to rural settings are more likely to stress the educational attainment of their daughters and the preservation of sexual health as more imperative than the preservation of her virginity (Gonzalez-Lopez, 2004). The sexual debut of Mexican American females is complex and deserving of further study.

Gender considerations

Gender studies have consistently revealed that females seek closeness and care more than males (Camarena, Sargiani, & Peterson, 1990; Williams & Hickle, 2010) and that males are better at negotiating the self and other in the early stages of romance (Shulman, Mayes, Cohen, Swain, & Leckman, 2008). The desire for intimacy lies at the heart of female sexuality whereby adolescent girls are more likely to view sex as inappropriate outside the context of a loving relationship and often face social stigma and shame if their behavior says otherwise (Aarons & Jenkins, 2002; Walker, 1997). It is difficult to untangle the complex biological, social, and individual contributions that underlie female sexuality, however, due to the fact that girls continue to internalize socially constructed gender roles emphasizing sexuality as a means to please males and maintain meaningful relationships. To the contrary, the dominant discourse exalts males for sexual predation, which is viewed as a biological reaction to the female

mystique (Walker, 1997). In the context of adolescent romance, this contradiction potentially creates internal conflict, especially in the minds of young adolescent girls who may experience simultaneous desires to lure a male in but in a delicate exchange for his affection and commitment. Perhaps not surprisingly, studies have shown that often adolescent girls' first sexual experiences do not stem from desire, but rather from perceived pressure to please their partners (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Wyatt & Riederle, 1994).

This is not to say, however, that adolescent females lack sexual desire. Rather, the dominant discourse juxtaposes females opposite males in defending their sexual bodies, trapping adolescents in a rigid heterosexual schema and illegitimizing such desire. While it is true that heterosexual female desire has now been displayed widely across media outlets including the Internet and MTV, it still largely ignored within school-based sexual education programming and its place in the formation of mutually satisfying and respectful partnerships is a narrative left unexplored (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Furthermore, studies of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescent romantic experiences are scant, especially for ethnic minority youth (Collins et al., 2009). Emerging data suggest that female sexuality is significantly more fluid than males, such that females' sexual preferences and experiences are more subject to change over time and more responsive to sociocultural trends (Baumeister, 2000). Youth that report same-sex attraction are more likely to fear violence (Tolman, 1994) and be silenced in school-based sexual education stressing heterosexual norms (Fine & McClelland, 2006).

As teens have romantic and sexual concerns, they are likely to ask and offer advice of one another (Gould & Mazzeo, 1982). Although we know that adolescents themselves place a great deal of meaning on their romantic experiences, and that positive and negative proximal and distal outcomes have been linked to the quality of these early romances, more studies are needed to compare Mexican American and White youth's dating experiences (Collins et al., 2009). The present study explores what advice teens would offer one another by soliciting dialogue from a cross-ethnic sample of adolescents. Learning what teens deem important enough to offer as advice to other teens offers program planners, educators, and practitioners the opportunity to build upon their lived romantic experiences and focus on areas of concern for youth towards the

fostering of healthy partnerships and the prevention of abuse.

Method

Sample

Following approval from the local Institutional Review Board to conduct this research, adolescents from urban and rural areas of a large Southwestern state that identified themselves as Mexican American ($n=41$) and White ($n=34$) ($M=16.04$ years, $SD=0.83$; $n=40$ girls) participated in focus groups (6 to 8 participants; $M=5.86$, $SD=1.55$) on adolescent romantic relationships. Recruitment was conducted during the summer months, and all participants were students transitioning into the 10th, 11th and 12th grades ($M=11.09$, $SD=0.76$) from 25 different high schools the following fall. Participants were recruited through meetings with community program coordinators (e.g. Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters) and summer camps (53% of sample), high schools (32%), and word-of-mouth (15%). Analyses are based on a total of 12 focus group sessions, six of each ethnicity and stratified by gender.

Most youth have had at least some romantic experiences (e.g., through discussion with peers, personal feelings, or partnerships), thus “typical” youth were recruited to highlight average lived experiences (for types of purposive sampling in qualitative research, see Padgett, 2008). The sample was purposive in that specific ethnic (Mexican American and White) and age groups (between the ages of 15 and 17) were targeted in order to make meaningful cultural comparisons across a specific developmental time period. Adolescents were also targeted geographically such that they were selected from diverse neighborhoods that varied across a number of characteristics (e.g., crime rates, population density, and predominant language spoken). In line with a phenomenological study design, the researchers did not assign ethnicity labels (e.g., via language use, nativity, or acculturation status), but rather allowed students to self-identify.

Information was collected via a short survey at the beginning of each focus group in order to better understand similarities and differences across this sample of youth (see Table 1). Chi-square analysis revealed significant differences across ethnicity regarding a number of family characteristics: compared to White adolescents, Mexican American adolescents were less likely to only speak English at home, $\chi^2 (2) = 35.61$, $pb 0.001$, to live with their father, $\chi^2 (1) = 3.72$, $p=0.05$, to have a mother or father born within the United States, ($\chi^2 (3) = 19.66$, $pb 0.001$; $\chi^2 (3) = 18.98$, $pb 0.001$, respectively), and to have a mother or father with greater than a high school education ($\chi^2 (5) = 31.96$, pb

0.001; $\chi^2 (5) = 27.24$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Over 80% of participants had at least some personal romantic relationship experience in the past and no significant differences were identified among Mexican American and White adolescent dating experiences. Over 90% of adolescents preferred to date the other sex. No significant differences were identified among other demographic characteristics (e.g. age, birthplace).

Table 1
Demographic information.

	Mexican American		White	
	Frequency	<i>M (SD)</i>	Frequency	<i>M (SD)</i>
Gender				
Boys	43.9%		50.0%	
Girls	56.1%		50.0%	
Grade in fall		11.0 (0.87)		11.3 (0.54)
Age in years		16.0 (0.96)		16.1 (0.64)
US born				
Father***	56.8%		100.0%	
Mother***	58.5%		94.1%	
Adolescent	90.2%		97.1%	
Language spoken at home***				
English only	29.3%		97.1%	
English & Spanish	63.4%		2.9%	
Spanish only	7.3%			
Household				
Live with mom	92.7%		100.0%	
Live with dad ⁺	58.5%		79.4%	
Parents education				
Mother > high school ed.***	41.0%		88.2%	
Father > high school ed.***	37.5%		79.4%	
Romantic relationships (RR)				
Currently in a RR	37.5%		26.5%	
If no, ever in a RR	80.8%		83.3%	
No. of lifetime dating partners		3.30 (3.52)		3.74 (2.80)
Length of longest RR (months)		8.96 (10.57)		6.80 (8.59)
No. of times in love		1.02 (1.10)		0.76 (0.97)
Relationship Preference				
Other sex	92.5%		94.1%	
Same-sex	2.5%			
Both sexes	5.0%		5.9%	

⁺ $p = 0.05$. *** $p < 0.001$.

Procedure

Upon being recruited into the study, adolescents completed an initial telephone-screening questionnaire ($N = 90$). In order to participate, adolescents self-identified as Mexican American or White and intended to enter the 10th, 11th, or 12th grade in the

fall. Upon meeting these criteria, adolescents were asked to participate in the study (all participants met these criteria). Adolescents were mailed an introduction letter and consent form to be signed by their parents or guardians. Adolescents and parents were told that the purpose of the study was to understand the meaning of dating relationships to high school students. Participants ($N = 75$) brought the signed consent form to the data collection site (i.e., at the youth center they belonged to, their home, or the research lab) and gave participant assent after confidentiality and respect for other participants was emphasized. Saturation was reached after collecting three focus groups for each participant type. Some of the adolescents in the focus groups shared social contexts and knew each other prior to participating (e.g. recruited from the same school or community program). Regardless, adolescents were asked to create pseudo names to use throughout the session to protect their identity. Pizza, candy, and soda were provided during the focus group sessions. Following the focus group (approximately 1.5 h), participants received a debriefing handout along with \$10 for compensation.

The principal research question was what advice teens would offer other teens if given the opportunity. Given that the primary research goal was to elicit youth's lived experiences, the present study used a phenomenological design and analytical approach. As a tenant of this approach, researchers self-reflected on personal experiences and opinions, and sought to “bracket” any biases that may have otherwise resulted in soliciting advice and analyzing dialogue (Padgett, 2008). Focus groups (i.e., group interviews) were chosen as the method of data collection (Morgan, 1998) to allow participants to influence — and be influenced by — others. Focus group methodology holds an underlying premise that attitudes and perceptions are not developed in isolation but through interaction with other people (Morse & Field, 1995). This interactive environment elicits more natural communication from participants than is probable in individual interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Adolescents were able to interact with one another in a conversation format, thereby refuting or strengthening other participants' responses. Also, given the literature concerning the involvement of peers in other adolescents' romantic lives and the importance of peer influence, focus groups offer the opportunity to examine first-hand advice that is likely to circulate among adolescents.

Each focus group was guided by a moderator who asked questions, listened, kept

conversations on track, made sure everyone had the opportunity to share, and controlled discussion with minimal verbal prompts (Krueger & Casey, 2000). One moderator (2nd author) led all focus group sessions. An assistant moderator was also present for each focus group, and either the moderator or assistant moderator was of the same gender and ethnicity as the group. Each focus group began with a conversation about the terminology adolescents used to describe dating relationships, which allowed for them to apply their own labels throughout. Following an in-depth discussion about the meaning of dating relationships, the participants were asked: *If you had a chance to give advice to other teens about romantic relationships, what advice would you give?* The means of questioning appeared spontaneous and conversational to encourage natural dialogue. The key questions leading up to and including this final question, however, were consistent across groups in order to make direct comparisons.

Plan of analysis

Data from focus groups included audio-taped recordings, field notes from the assistant moderator, and verbatim transcripts. The data were entered into QSR Nvivo (i.e., a qualitative software program; Gibbs, 2002) for the purpose of conducting content analysis of the written descriptions. The method of data coding/categorizing was a form of content analysis in which the researcher considered the participants' responses within the focus group as a whole and looked for recurring themes or conceptual ideas that were sorted into meaningful categories. That is, the unit of analysis was the group, rather than the individual. Using this approach, codes (themes) originated from several careful readings of the data itself rather than from a pre-existing conceptual framework. Weight was given to comments on the basis of frequency, specificity, emotion, and extensiveness (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The coding scheme was developed by the first and second authors after several readings of the verbatim transcripts and listening to the audio-tapes. An open coding scheme was created by forming categories (Creswell, 2007); within each category, themes/subcategories were identified. Following the open coding procedure, a selective coding process was used to integrate, connect, and refine categories and to search for confirming examples of each category within the data (Creswell, 2007). Rather than use

professional jargon, every attempt was made to stay close to the data (Padgett, 2008) and, hence, themes are reflective of actual advice given by teens themselves. Detailed documentation of each coding step was kept. Once the first and second authors determined the coding scheme was complete, a third researcher coded the data to verify the reliability of the coding scheme ($K = 0.93$, indicating excellent reliability). The results include descriptions of the categories that emerged from the data, along with example quotations from participants supporting these categories. The results are summarized in terms of meanings by gender and ethnicity, and lend themselves to interpretation through a developmental and feminist framework.

Results

Results for this study are presented thematically (see Fig. 1). Embedded in rich dialogue that included both profound and light-hearted personal narratives, advice from both males and females emerged along a timeline of relationship initiation, maintenance, and termination. Subthemes emerged from within each time frame. Themes are presented in order of most relevant to least. Each theme is outlined below and is highlighted with example quotations from participants. Each quotation represents a different person speaking in the group. Every focus group freely offered recommendations and was encouraged to discuss personal experiences.

Females offered roughly three times as much advice as did males, and enriched their advice more often with personal experiences and collaborative dialogue. “Stay on your feet” emerged among both genders and ethnicities as the most prominent advice, both in terms of number of references and through the quality of the dialogue (i.e., personal examples and emotionally charged experiences enriched the advice given and created more dialogue among members of the group). “Know when it’s right” carried the second most weight among both genders and ethnicities, followed by “Have good reasoning...especially about *that*” which was raised primarily by females. Females of both ethnicities talked more extensively than males about the significance of sex in relationships and were more likely to discuss the associated consequences. Since advice from males was less frequent overall, it was also spread more thinly across themes. Although advice from males was represented in every category, the only repeatedly

advised themes for males were to “Stay on your feet” and to “Know when it's right”.

Ethnic differences emerged across Mexican American and White adolescents' advice. Only White groups offered advice pertaining to avoidance of relationships. In offering advice pertaining to dating readiness, White female adolescents were more likely to offer advice pertaining to the quality of a future relationship, speaking abstractly about characteristics desirable of a long-term partner. White females were more likely to embed sexual advice in light of future relationship aspirations, whereas Latina females more often focused their advice on sexual pressures associated with dating prematurely. Latinas recommended to carefully assess sexual readiness, and enhanced their advice with personal stories pertaining to a tendency to have sex too young. Only White adolescents offered direct advice pertaining to issues of power and control within dating relationships.

All adolescents naturally (without prompting) directed their advice to teens of the same gender, regardless of ethnicity. Although they were divided by gender in order to encourage uninhibited dialogue and to make within and between-gender comparisons, the way the question was worded was arguably more suggestive of gender-neutral recommendations. That teens' recommendations were by and large gender-specific is consistent with a general trend across advice highlighting more gender than ethnic differences. Additionally, dialogue among females contained more negative references about males than did male dialogue of females (as exemplified through many of the focus groups quotations).

Initiation

Advice under the Initiation theme pertained to pre-dating concerns and considerations. Adolescents frequently gave advice regarding the pretenses under which one should date, and females did so more often than males and offered more elaboration and personal examples. Advice to avoid relationships altogether was the least common, and was offered exclusively by White adolescents.

“Know when it's right”

Adolescents gave advice pertaining to partner selection, timing, pursuit, and the

circumstances under which one should or should not date. Male dialogue revealed a tendency to prioritize attractiveness and “bragging rights” over a female's personality, and advice was to the contrary:

“Don't go straight for like the attractive popular people. Like get to know different people and get to know everyone and like... just like find the right person that you're like compatible with.” (White male)

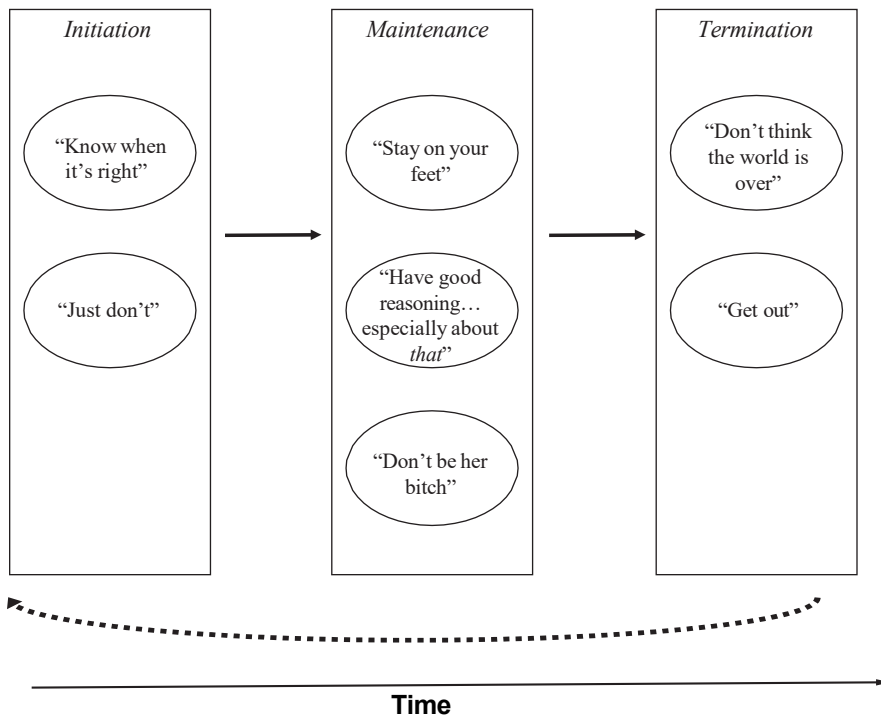


Fig. 1. Themes and subthemes.

Females of both ethnicities also advised to be friends with someone before deciding to date them. Latina females raised the issue of peer pressure and recommended not to let friends play too much influence in choosing when and whom to date. White females stressed the importance of getting to know and love oneself first and debated the role of traditional male pursuit in establishing a relationship:

“He always referred to me as like his girlfriend and I was like, ‘What? What are you talking about?’ Like, ok. That’s great. Ok, so I guess I’m now your girlfriend. It wasn’t like formally like, ‘Hey you want to go out with me?’” (White female)

Analogous to a neck that turns the head, this group of females similarly deliberated how to get around male pursuit.

“Like, in my opinion. The guy should always ask the girl. It should never be the girl that asks the guy out.” “But guys are stupid. You have to hint around it.” “You have to kick them through the door.” (White females)

White females were more futuristic in their thinking and advised other females to think about the quality of the potential relationship, and the characteristics they would want in a long-term partner before getting involved romantically. Their advice seemed to stem from witnessing unhealthy relationships among their peers.

“And [other girls] aren’t thinking of their future. They aren’t thinking about what is going to happen to their children if she ends up having children with him or if she ends up getting married to him. What is going to happen to her kids? What is going to happen to her life and everything?” (White female)

Latina females were more apt than White females to embed their advice within discourse pertaining to sexual pressure and two large conversations under this category were also coded as “Have good reasoning”. Latinas raised the issue of timing as an element of maturity, as to whether a female had the ability to say no to unwanted sexual advances:

“...I think if you’re in middle school, you should date your own age. Because if you’re in middle school and you’re dating a guy in high school, high school guys

just want sex, sex from you, from little girls...But in high school, once you already know what you want, you are mature enough to like say, 'I don't want to have sex with you, so I'm not going to', or whatever. I think then you can date older guys."
(Latina female)

Timing was an issue for males not because of pressures associated with sex but because they wanted to avoid conflict (e.g., associated with jealousy, gossiping) and thus advised to wait until one was out of high school or to date someone from another school.

“Just don't”

While advice from this category demonstrated some overlap with “Know When It's Right”, it stood independently in that adolescents qualified certain conditions under which to not date at all. While dating as an experience was generally endorsed (with one noteworthy exception by a White male who advocated to simply “Get a dog”), White females advised to avoid relationships when it could result in potential embarrassment from rejection (“Don't keep calling the guy when he's not calling you back...”) and to avoid romantic involvement when it “just doesn't feel good to you” or when a potential partner “could bring you down”.

Maintenance

Advice was coded under the Maintenance theme when it pertained to concerns within an established relationship. The bulk of the advice offered fell under this category. “Stay on your feet” was the most outstanding theme across focus groups of both genders and ethnicities. Advice to “Have good reasoning” was primarily offered by females and was double-coded as “Stay on your feet” when the reason to do so was to avoid emotional pain. Advice to have an equal voice in the relationship (“Don't be her bitch”) was raised somewhat infrequently and only by White males and females.

“Stay on your feet”

Teens across a majority of the focus groups of both genders and ethnicities emphasized the tendency to get too caught up in attachment and commitment, and

repeatedly advised that it was not reasonable at this point in their dating lives.

“And if you fall in love — no, like fall in love or whatever — but stay on your feet and know that you can get hurt and you can break up. Like, you will break up or whatever. Most likely.” (Latina female)

This statement served as a concise synopsis of the advice given by many females across focus groups who struggled with simultaneous desires to be swept away in romantic love and to keep their heads on straight in recognition that lifelong partnerships are not initiated in high school. Advice from females across both ethnicities frequently emphasized the importance of not getting lost in romantic feelings and revealed a fear of eventual pain and loss.

“I don't know, I mean, I think that, um, you are taking a risk with every relationship and good and bad comes out of it and you just can't expect good. You know, because I think that's what most teens think. Like, teens who haven't been in a relationship. They see the movies and they are like, ‘Oh, happy ending. They kiss. This is how it is going to end.’ And, and I think everyone should know that no life is like that.” (White female)

“Like, be faithful and committed and stuff. But don't be like, ‘Oh, yeah. He is the love of my life.’ Because if he is done, then it is going to hurt you a lot.” (Latina female)

Statements such as this and others (“Don't use the word love too loosely”, “Be careful”, “Be strong”, “Keeping distance, especially girls”) mirrored a female vulnerability to emotionality and a struggle to maintain a sense of balance. Females recommended that adolescents gauge the risk of being in a romantic relationship and keep their friends close by as a more stable source of support. Many of the conversations highlighted in this section were also coded under “Don't be her bitch” and “Have good reasoning” for their interwoven messages advising other females to maintain some control and to not confuse sexual activity with relationship commitment.

While males also counseled other male teens to not get too caught up in it all, they

focused more on having fun and recognized that there were other girls they would want to date after high school.

“It's, yeah it's a fun time. Don't get so committed that it takes away from having that fun.” (White male)

“There's a lot more fish in the sea than are in high school...” “And there's fifty other states and a whole bunch more countries.” (Latino males)

In terms of ethnicity, there were striking similarities across this theme.

“Have good reasoning....especially about that”

Significant gender differences emerged between males and females in advice pertaining to sex. Advice about sexuality among males was rarely raised; not at all by White males, and in two one sentence references by a Latino male who advised to “not to have sex with every single person” and to make sure that one is not in a relationship “straight up for lust”. Both White and Latina female groups dialogued at length about the meaning that sex had in their relationships, enriching their advice with personal stories. Inner discomfort was evident in their struggle to reconcile the societal message to guard their sexuality as a special gift with the desire to enter into a loving relationship and to be able to express themselves sexually. They recognized that males maintain more power and are encouraged to be sexual predators as evidenced by the following:

“Yeah, like now-a-days, I think you find very little [few] guys that want more than just a nice little bone.” (Latina female)

“Don't do it because, because guys — it's all they are going to want. It's natural.” (White female)

One adolescent summarized this discord well when she compared relationships to playing a game: “You just need to play your cards wisely and understand that, yeah, you're still playing, you know, you don't have really all that much control. But, the control you do have, you should use.” (White female)

It seemed to these adolescents as if males were given their choice of the game,

decided the rules, and gave females a limited amount of cards to use. Females were required to choose very wisely with whom they would play their cards and how they would choose to do so. The unfortunate part of the “game”, as the females alluded to in their discussions, was that the outcome was often a no-win scenario. Statements such as “...if you do it and it's not right, they're just going to ditch you”, evidenced the diminishment of female sexuality to nothing more than a performance judged by the male as sufficiently pleasurable. Additionally, participating in sexual activity put these girls at risk of being judged as “slutty”.

“You have to realize like bad and good can come from like actually doing things. Like yeah, you will be happy for a while, but what are other people going to like think next time you are in a relationship? Are they going to think you are easy and you are going to do things?” (White female)

In light of the social and emotional risk, a salient message was to proceed with caution.

“Yeah. You have to be careful. Like, like some guys can be real assholes, but other guys, I mean, you never know. Like, you actually really take the time to get to know them personally.” (Latina female)

Statements such as this one reflected optimism in finding a loving sexual partner but were coded dually under “Stay on your feet” for their twin message to always be on guard.

Maintaining control in this “game”, therefore, became a social exchange where the stakes were high. Latina females were more likely than White to dialogue about current physical pressure and to discuss the pros and cons of dating in middle vs. high school; advice was to assess maturity so as not to get roped into “physical games” and to “know what you're going to do and you have a mouth to be like, ‘no’”. Latinas offered a number of examples pertaining to having sex too young, and warned that older males are likely to expect sex. To counter advances, advice was to know oneself and to develop confidence to set limits and abide by them. Across focus group topics, futuristic and hypothetical discourse emerged significantly more among females, and more often

among White females than Latina. White females' futuristic advice centered on emotional desires and relationship goals.

“And seriously, we are so young still that we don't need to go this far and do things that we are not going to feel comfortable with later on.” (White female)

“Like when you end up with the guy you are going to marry or whatever and you think back to all the things you did before, like the previous guys, it's like, “Why didn't I save myself for like the guy I'm going to marry? How sad is that?” (White female)

In their longing to engage in meaningful relationships, girls questioned the exchange of the temporary happiness they felt from being with a partner for the loss of something they referred to as exceeding the act of sex and rather as a reflection of an integral part of who they were. Example statements include the above and others such as, “Like, is a guy worth, like, you know, giving yourself up?” and “Don't lose yourself in a guy.” Faced with the possible loss of self- dignity and simultaneous pressure from friends and boyfriends to engage in sexual activity, many females across focus groups warned other females to think carefully about engaging in sexual activity and others suggested waiting until marriage or at least until they were older to make a decision they would not regret.

“Don't be her bitch”

Issues of power and control were central to many of the themes discussed across focus groups. As discussed in the relationship initiation section (Section 3.1.1), White females expressed frustration at the greater amount of authority males had in initiating and maintaining a relationship. White males, on the other hand, teased one another about being controlled by a female dating partner and warned other males to be careful of this.

“He's completely whipped! [whip noise]” ... “being whipped — not good, like I wouldn't let that happen again.” (White males)

The vivid dialogue above highlights peer pressure from males to not appear tied down. Correspondingly, females advised other females to not appear clingy and

juxtaposed jealousy with verbal tactics suggestive of partner possession.

“...Don't be so attached where you have to know where the guy is every single minute of the day, every single day. You know like, because that, I think, freaks guys out... They always hate when you're like, 'What did you do last night?' and, you know, then they're like giving you like the third degree, 'Who'd you talk to? What did you do? Did some guy talk to you?’” (White female)

In keeping with advice to uphold egalitarian standards, males were positive, especially where it pertained to their benefit.

“A girl who pays for some things.” (White male)

“Cause whenever possible separate, separation of powers, like the constitution, it works.” (White male)

Termination

Advice was coded under the Termination theme when it pertained to the conditions under which someone should break up with their partner or how to effectively move on after a relationship had ended. Given the magnitude of advice pertaining to detachment, the minimization of advice about breaking up is noteworthy. Rather than suggest insignificance, however, it may be that the repeated advice to monitor oneself so as to not become over-attached while in the relationship echoed the resignation of eventual heartache. Viewed in this light, advice was reflective of lived experiences of suffering through the aftermath of dismantled partnerships. Latina females and White males gave advice dealing with the termination of a relationship, and only females offered recommendations pertaining to when to move on.

“Don't think the world is over”

Advice centering on the aftermath of a breakup was different for males and females and was raised only by Latina females and White males. Advice from Latina females mirrored the prominent theme throughout this study, to keep relationships in perspective and not to become overly distraught at the loss of a relationship. Some

suggested keeping busy as a strategy to keep one's mind off an ex-partner. Males acknowledged that females may be hurt by the breakup, but discussed the tendency for them to talk about what happened and to make the male look like the bad guy.

“Even though it like could have been a totally mutual thing and like it just wasn't working out, but she goes behind your back and starts talking bad about you...”
(White male)

Males speculated that spiteful gossip aimed at them may have been to enhance the female's popularity and warned for other males to “watch out” for this. One Latina female did in fact urge to “make them feel like crap” if cheated on, suggestive that at least in some circumstances it was revenge rather than popularity that drove negative gossip. One male's guidance was to:

“Try not to say anything you're going to regret.” (White male)

As evidenced, both males and females concentrated their advice on how to avoid malevolent outcomes after a romantic separation.

“Get out”

Although advice to leave the relationship was infrequent, it was illustrative of salient personal experiences. Recommendations were to break up with a partner if he or she was not loyal or they “bring you down” due to their involvement in deviant behaviors.

“If they cheat on you, dump them.” (Latina female)

“I would definitely say stay away from the guys with the drugs because if you get attached to those guys, like, they bring you down...He became a huge heroine junkie or something like that, so I put him in rehab and he didn't like that too much...You just got to get out.” (White female)

Discussion

Discussion of gender and ethnic trends

The findings of the present analysis are consistent with an accumulation of literature that emphasizes the developmental saliency of romance during adolescence and accentuates this period as a stressful process, perhaps especially so for females. Females of both White and Latino descent offered relationship advice exception- ally more often than males, and enriched their advice with personal stories, group elaboration, and a spirit of emotional fervor, each of which adds weight to a qualitative analysis. That males did not offer as much advice may be due to a perceived desirability to appear detached and indifferent about romantic relationships in the presence of other male peers (Feiring, 1999). It is also conceivable that males did not offer as much advice because they were better equipped to handle interpersonal stressors than females, as suggested by previous research (Rudolph, 2002). Other dialogue throughout the focus groups, however, highlighted male vulnerability towards relationship difficulty, so it is noteworthy that males were not as likely to offer recommendations or chose not to do so to the same extent as females.

With the exception of a few noted cultural differences (e.g. White females futuristic context for advice, Latina emphasis on sexual pressure), the majority of advice offered by teens was consistent across ethnic lines and called more attention to gender differences. It was as though adolescents were aware that advice would vary across male vs. female groups since they naturally targeted their recommendations to members of their own gender. On the whole, gender differences were consistent with literature finding that females are more likely to emphasize intimacy earlier than boys and to think about the other sex more frequently (Richards et al., 1998). Female groups in particular formed a supportive alliance with one another, as evidenced by in-depth discussion, personal examples, and collaboration in deciding what advice to give. Their primary advice to other females was to “Stay on your feet”, highlighting how difficult it was to balance emotions and the tendency to become swept away in romantic love with the foreboding awareness that high school intimate partnerships would most likely come to an end. The second most outstanding piece of advice among females was to “Know when it's right”, followed closely in references of advice to “Have good reasons...especially about that”. Conversations around dating readiness and partner selection reflected a genuine desire to rehearse mature relationships in lieu of powerful

emotions and sexual pressure. Indeed, many conversations that took place among female groups gave advice in each of these three prominent categories as adjacent dialogue that clearly reflected a grappling with issues of dating readiness, advice to not get too carried away in it all, and to be careful in succumbing to sexual pressure associated with dating. This is consistent with interviews of young women who reported that they felt pressure during their first sexual experiences and that males were frustrated at partners' attempt to set sexual boundaries (Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2007).

Although White and Latina adolescents by and large offered similar advice, White females were more futuristic in their reasoning and were more likely to frame their advice in light of how current actions could affect long-term relationship goals. Latinas across focus groups discussed dating earlier (i.e., beginning at age 9), consistent with literature finding that Latina adolescents are more likely to engage in coitus and to become pregnant at younger ages than White youth (East, 1998). White females, in comparison to Mexican American, tend to have more stable educational goals, and are more informed about college (Kao & Tienda, 1998). It follows that educational goals are more likely to be impeded by negative romantic experiences (i.e., pregnancy). Although lower parental educational attainment has been linked with lesser educational aspirations for Mexican American youth (Bohon, Johnson, & Gorman, 2006), foreign-born parents often have higher educational aspirations for their immigrant children due to optimism for socio-economic and social advancement in a new country (Kao & Tienda, 1995). Latino parents in this sample had statistically significantly lower levels of educational attainment than White, and over 40% were born in a country other than the U.S. Research suggests that, despite high hopes for their children, such parents may not possess the knowledge and resources necessary to train youth how to prepare for post-secondary education (Cooper et al., 1994). The fact that Latina females were more likely to discuss the importance of present maturity level as it pertained to timing associated with sexual pressure may reflect an awareness of parental expectations but uncertainty and frustration surrounding how to navigate individual educational goals while still within a traditional Mexican gender schema stressing male authority. As part of a larger piece of exploring one's ethnic identity, such dialogue may reflect a desire to reconcile felt relationship pressures with conflicting futuristic goals that were more obviously present

within White (i.e., mainstream) dialogue.

Studies of Mexican American youth have revealed that ethnic identity exploration and resolution contribute to increased levels of self-esteem (Updegraff & Umana-Taylor, 2007) and that adolescents that embrace their ethnicity with pride tend to exhibit greater happiness and less perceived stress on a day-to-day basis (Kiang, Yip, Gonzalez-Backen, Witkow, & Fuligni, 2006). As hypothesized above, it is likely that situational aspects elicit differing senses of ethnic identity. While at home with family or with an ethnic minority dating partner, adolescents may feel a switch towards Mexican familial values; while in school, however, they may feel pulled towards American ideals of independence and autonomy (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Such findings highlight the complexity in the exploration of one's ethnic identity, such that some youth blend their Mexican and American ethnicities and consider themselves as members of both groups, some identify more strongly with one ethnicity vs. the other, and still others identify very strongly with one ethnicity and deny the other (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Findings from this study highlight the importance of programming aimed at aiding minority youth to successfully navigate specific relationship and sexual contexts within a model of ethnic identity exploration and resolution.

As mentioned, Latinas may have more difficulty saying “no” to unwanted sexual advances due to more traditionally defined and adhered-to gender role prescriptions that place the male in a position of authority (Flores et al., 1998). This aligns with the present finding that White females were the only groups to debate the role of traditional male pursuit in establishing a relationship. While some females suggested that it should be the male that pursues the female, a rich dialogue emerged surrounding the ability to stealthily ask a male out while still allowing him the ultimate say. Female advice in this domain exposed the unpopularity of the female voice, a theme that was validated by White males who advised other males to maintain control in the relationship so as not to become “whipped”.

The foremost advice among male focus groups of both ethnicities was also to “Stay on your feet”, although males demonstrated a more matter-of-fact acceptance of high school dating as a stepping-stone along an adventurous path. Whereas females' advice to “Stay on your feet” regarded the avoidance of emotional pain, males' advice to

do the same reflected a desire to date other people and to simply enjoy the relationship for the time being. This is in line with research suggesting that males are better able to manage their emotions within the context of early romance (Shulman et al., 2008), including less internalizing and externalizing problems than females following relationship loss (Bakker, Ormel, Verhulst, & Oldehinkel, 2010). The only other consistent advice offered by males was to “Know when its right”. Males, as well as females, advised to be friends with someone before deciding to date them, to assess compatibility, and to not put too much emphasis on attractiveness. Although it has long been recognized that men tend to place greater stress on physical attractiveness than do females in partner selection (Sprecher, 1989), advice among these male adolescents to not over-emphasize attractiveness was demonstrative of a meta-cognitive awareness surrounding this tendency that has not yet been uncovered to the authors' knowledge in other research. Despite societal and peer pressure to sexually predate, male adolescent dialogue demonstrated a grappling with choosing a partner to secure “bragging rights” versus the simultaneous desire for meaningful romantic connection.

As compared to females who urged to consider sexual pressures associated with dating before getting into a relationship, males focused their pre-dating advice on avoidance of unnecessary conflict produced by the school environment and towards having more fun after high school. The freedom adolescent males had to explore their sexuality was evidenced by their minimal advice across this theme: “Just don't have sex with every single person you meet. It's pretty much that simple.” In utter contrast to the uncomplicated sexual lifestyles expressed by males, a closer look at narrative subtleties in female advice revealed an embedded feminine sexual “self” (“Is a guy worth, like, you know, giving yourself up?”; “Don't lose yourself in a guy”; “Why didn't I save myself for like the guy I'm going to marry?”). Female dialogue reflected confusion resulting from a paradox of expectations and societal messages that popularize “equality” but praise male pursuit and female availability. The female sexual voice cried out for authentic expression and esteem but advice such as “Just let it happen. Don't force yourself...” echoed a passive surrender and a belief that a strong male desire for sex is “natural” and is “all they are going to want”. Such statements coincide with research finding that over

half of teens think the male sex drive is uncontrollable and that sometimes it is okay for a male to force his partner to have sex (Moore & Rosenthal, 1993). Advice among females to use the little control they do have in relationships to their advantage, and among males to not become “whipped”, was in line with research suggesting that adolescent males report more power than females in decision-making and in intimacy within dating relationships (Tschann, Adler, Millstein, Gurvey, & Ellen, 2002). Since by its very nature advice tends to elicit avoidance of problematic circumstances, it follows that only females offered recommendations pertaining to sexual pressure. Dialogue is concerning in that females were more likely to use derogatory language and name-call in reference to males, reflective of frustrations in attempting to maintain emotional stability in the face of sexual expectations.

Rationale for prevention education

Current programming does not address the needs identified by adolescents in the present study. Adolescents' primary dating concern (i.e., “Stay on your feet”) revealed an emotional desire: to maintain stability so as not to become too caught up in high school romance. This principal theme went side-by-side with other socio-emotional advice pertaining to dating readiness and sexual considerations. In addition, findings revealed inconsistencies between male and female relationship experiences and when given the chance to offer advice, adolescents welcomed the opportunity to have a voice and chose to speak out to their own gender. From a developmental standpoint, findings evidence the important physiological differences among the developing male and female body, the tendency for males and females to come into their sexuality and emotionality at a different pace across the lifespan, and the social desirability to act in accordance with messages that are often mixed from peers, media, and parents. Findings also point to the importance of considering ethnic identity development, as adolescents may navigate this process in differing ways by gender, context, and in accordance with traditional vs. mainstream values. As posited by Ehrensaft (2008), few prevention efforts integrate research findings on adolescent romance. A movement towards positive change should consider sexual education from a holistic paradigm that is recognizant of the socio-emotional as well as developmental and cultural needs of adolescents.

A recent article by Romeo and Kelley (2009) highlighted the mismatch between currently funded sexual health education programs and teens' lived experiences. Reductionist and over-simplistic models urging teens to "just say no" are ineffective in substantially reducing sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unplanned teen pregnancies, and dating abuse. Messages to "push back" only strengthen the dominant discourse placing males in a position of sexual predation and making advice such as "Don't be her bitch" normative. Such a discourse places females on the defensive, ready to stand guard of their sexuality and inhibiting both sexes from entering into mutually satisfying and respectful relationships. Additionally, and as argued by Romeo & Kelley, these types of narrow-cited messages miss the opportunity to teach character-building skill sets important across all decisions adolescents have to make (e.g., choosing friends, whether to use drugs, academic achievement, extracurricular participation, community service). They also fail to counter false media messages giving teens the impression that everyone is having sex, and without moral obligation or tangible consequences.

Advice from adolescents confirmed that over-simplistic prevention models are not in line with socio-emotional components intricately tied to sexuality. Furthermore, advice from Mexican American females shed light on cultural considerations (i.e., greater attention to sexual pressure associated with dating, lack of emphasis on future-oriented relationship goals) that are important in the prevention of pregnancy and other undesirable outcomes among this growing population. Romeo and Kelley (2009) stress the importance of meeting teens where they are in their lived experiences and to create a dialogue among adolescents themselves. Among males, this may mean exploring the strengths (e.g., maintaining family honor, protection of women and the family) and potential weaknesses (e.g., hypermasculinity, domination over females) of machismo within traditional Mexican culture, and for Mexican American females to discuss family and career goals within the context of relationship and sexual health. Furthermore, we have suggested that future-oriented thinking aimed at higher educational and career outcomes may be protective in guarding against early pregnancy and risky sexual behavior. Designing programs in schools to help parents and their adolescents navigate the college preparation and application processes may direct youth towards

empowering alternatives for both males and females. Such programs should consider the intersections of sexual and romantic relationships with one's ethnic identity formation and family values in order to be successful. If programming is to tie sexuality into a holistic paradigm emphasizing educational goals as important, however, prevention efforts must dialogue about marriage and parenting goals as well. The idea is not to repress familial values, but rather to give adolescents of various ethnic backgrounds and value systems windows to voice their present struggles and future goals within a paradigm that puts relationship and sexual health at the forefront. For Mexican American youth, this may mean navigating one's ethnic identity in such a way that gives teens the opportunity to explore both family and educational goals. Since Latinas felt that maturity level was indicative of their ability to more clearly communicate sexual desires, programming efforts should address communication concerns early on. Finally, given that White youth tend to delay marriage and parenting, which potentially puts them at risk for longer periods of unwed sexual exposure, prevention efforts for these teens should target safe sex as it ties in with existing futuristic and goal-oriented thinking.

In communities of the Southwest, such as those studied in this sample, Mexican American and White youth are commonly integrated in schools, community centers, and neighborhoods. While ethnic segregation inevitably occurs (due to factors including acculturation, language, and preferences), cross-ethnic youth are often friends and romantic partners as well. No matter the preferred sex or ethnicity of partner, effective community and school-based programs in multi-cultural locations should look to areas of shared vs. differentiated sexual risk and protective factors. The present study, for example, suggests common advice across gender and ethnicity to "Stay on your feet" and to "Know when it's right". Reasons for such advice differed by gender, however, and ethnic differences emerged pertaining to sexual pressure and future-oriented romantic ideals.

While community centers and agencies offer invaluable services to aid youth in the healthy development of their sexualities, schools represent an ideal forum to bring students together in engaging and empowering conversations across subject matters (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Towards the aim of fostering healthy adolescent romantic and sexual relationships, Romeo and Kelley (2009) recommend sexual health guidelines

developed by The Sexual Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS). Example guidelines include: “Identify and live according to one's own values”, “Communicate effectively with peers, family, and romantic partners”, and “Enjoy sexual feelings without necessarily acting on them.” (SIECUS, p. 16, 2004). Such guidelines fit nicely into a positive youth development framework that emphasizes the holistic development of protective assets. Programs that deliver universal primary prevention education in a non-categorical manner (e.g., dating violence seminar vs. a separate class about sexual education) subsequently reduce the numbers needing intensive support (e.g., dating violence, sexual abuse, and drug use; Frankford, 2007). In order for this shift to occur, however, policies are needed at the state level that allocate dollars for comprehensive and sustained programming and that thereby reduce costlier financial and sexual/relational health outcomes. This shift also demands increased collaboration across community and school-based agencies, as well as interdisciplinary approaches to education (Frankford, 2007).

Limitations

Although this study offers a number of strengths, it also has some limitations. While not feasible given time and resources, multiple methods (e.g., observations, personal interviews with teens) would have been ideal in the construction of more in-depth meaning and to strengthen the validity and reliability of the data (Golafshani, 2003). Transferability is also limited since findings are from a very specific population of Mexican American and White adolescents in the Southwest. The focus group was the unit of analysis, and given the research question, it would have enhanced the study to also gather individual information from each adolescent. For example, it was unknown whether adolescents currently were or had been sexually active, to what extent they had experienced sexual encounters with same- vs. other-sex partners (although information was collected on their dating preference), whether they had dated outside their own ethnic group, and whether adolescents had witnessed or experienced dating abuse. Such information may have enhanced interpretations of the data and supplemented policy and programming recommendations but would have posed greater risks to our participants.

Adolescents were grouped by gender in order to facilitate uninhibited dialogue and make within- and between-gender comparisons, however, it is possible that advice would have been different or perhaps not directed exclusively towards same-sex peers had they participated in cross-gender groups. Mixing males and females would have also been more reflective of their every-day world and shared sexual education classes. Moreover, while data was gathered on language and country of origin, Mexican Americans were not grouped according to their level of acculturation. Future studies should parse out each of these components in order to assess whether and to what extent advice from teens differs across contexts.

In addition, a White female moderated all focus groups. While it is often beneficial to have a moderator that reflects the homogeneity of the group to elicit more dialogue (Krueger & Casey, 2008), Latina groups dialogued as extensively and raised many of the same themes as did White female groups and in the broader context of the other questions, White males conversed more than any other groups. Care was taken to ensure that each group had an assistant moderator or moderator present that matched the gender/ethnicity of the participants (e.g., Latino male groups had an assistant moderator present that was a Latino male).

Finally, we did not ask adolescents where they derived the information offered as advice. Since many adolescents placed recommendations within the context of personal stories, it is evident that much of the information offered resulted from experience. However, studies have confirmed that adolescents gather a great extent of their information pertaining to sexuality and dating from the media (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1997), so asking teens themselves whether and how the media influenced their advice may have yielded important information. Similarly, gathering data pertaining to the extent and type of sexual and dating health education received would have also enriched our understanding of the advice offered.

Conclusion

A major strength of this study is that adolescents were given the opportunity to speak without constriction and offer advice they had for other teens. Their advice spontaneously ranged from the preemptive stages of romance through termination and

brought out central themes pertaining to gender and sexuality. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study to compare relationship advice of high school youth of both sexes and across Mexican American and White ethnicities. Given the rise of Mexican American youth in the Southwest and across the United States, this study is important for sexual education policy and programming recommendations. In addition, it is important to identify and use language generated by adolescents themselves in discussing relationships in order to strengthen rapport among practitioners and teens and ensure personally salient messages. Multi-faceted (i.e. peer and parent components) and comprehensive interventions are needed at the school and community levels, along with media campaigns challenging the negative and mythical messages that teens are so commonly exposed to regarding sexuality. Evaluative research will increasingly be required.

Findings from this study reveal most notably that relationships and sexual experiences are tremendously important for adolescents across both White and Mexican American ethnicities. A comprehensive educational dialogue that starts with teens and takes into account their cultural and interpersonal experiences is the first step towards targeting maladaptive outcomes (Romeo & Kelley, 2009). Due to the centrality of romantic relationships during this time period, adolescents are highly motivated to learn about the establishment of healthy partnerships, and especially so when messages are framed positively (Wolfe & Feiring, 2000). Coupled with an increasing cognitive ability to think hypothetically and use higher-ordered thinking to make informed decisions, adolescence is a crucial time for prevention education. Equipping adolescents with the tools and confidence they need to make wise decisions before, during, and following the termination of romantic relationships is essential for self-perceived competence: a reliable marker of actual competence in intimate partnerships by late adolescence (Masten et al., 1995).

Acknowledgements

We thank Benjamin Woodard, Lisa Bartowski, and Abel Diaz for transcribing the audio-taped dialogue and Haydee Cruz for coding the data to verify the reliability of the codebook.

Funding for this study was provided by the Alltel connect-me-grant and the Norton School Family and Consumer Sciences at the University of Arizona. Funding sources did not have involvement in the study design, data collection methods, analysis, interpretation of data, the writing of this report, or in the decision to submit for publication.

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