

Teen Dating Violence and Latinas: Cultural Factors and Communication with Parents

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Abstract

Teen Dating Violence and Latinas: Cultural Factors and Communication with Parents

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Background: Latina adolescents are more likely to be the victims of teen dating violence (TDV) than non-Latina White adolescent girls in the United States, (11.5% vs. 8%). A need exists to understand how culture impacts Latina adolescents' ability to communicate about dating violence with their parents and/or other authority figures.

Methods: An exploratory qualitative study was conducted with English speaking Latina adolescents, ages 15-19 years, who were attending an urban alternative high school in King County, Washington. Most of the girls were born in the U.S. (55%) and the rest were immigrants, most commonly from Mexico. Almost all the girls' parents emigrated from Latin America. The six focus groups examined participants' knowledge of TDV, how culture impacts TDV, and whether cultural factors affect communication with parents and other authority figures.

Results: The participants discussed their knowledge and beliefs, cultural factors, and recommendations for Latina specific prevention programs. The girls were knowledgeable about dating violence. One-half of Latina adolescents had either experienced TDV themselves, or had a family member or close friend who had experienced it. The girls report that cultural issues affect their ability to communicate about dating violence with parents and other authority figures. These cultural factors include biculturalism, collectivism, familism, and machismo. The girls also suggest ways to improve prevention programs and recruit participants.

Findings: The findings indicate that cultural factors are an important consideration in Latina adolescent communication with parents and authority figures when it comes to TDV. Latina adolescents would benefit from future TDV prevention programs that are culturally tailored and which address these cultural factors.

Introduction

Adolescence is a critical time of development. Youth develop their sense of identity, individuate from family, and experiment with different life experiences. It is also the time when women are at the highest risk for violence in their intimate relationships (Miller, 2010). Parents and teens remain unaware that teen dating violence (TDV) affects teens, yet 9.4 percent of high school students report being hit, slapped, or physically hurt intentionally by their boyfriend or girlfriend (CDC, 2012).

The Center for Disease Control defines intimate partner violence (IPV) as “physical, sexual, or psychological harm by a current or former partner or spouse. This type of violence can occur among heterosexual or same-sex couples and does not require sexual intimacy” (CDC, 2012). Teen dating violence (TDV), experienced by youth, expands the definition above to include stalking as another form of violence and dating relationships that may occur in person and/or electronically (CDC, 2012).

IPV and TDV are viewed as different types of relationship violence in the literature, suggesting distinctive explanations behind the violence. Understanding the difference between the two types of relationship violence and the separate mechanisms that propagate the violence intimates that TDV may not be a precursor to later experiences of IPV. Differences may be due to several factors, including teens being new to relationships, consequently engaging in violence instead of other skills to deal with anger and frustration (Mulford & Giordano, 2008).

Understanding the different mechanisms supports advocates’ and prevention programs in their work with teen victims in disturbing the potential propagation of relationship violence.

Furthermore, research finds that risky and unhealthy behaviors are correlated with TDV. Some studies have revealed associations between being a perpetrator of TDV and engaging in

suicidal behavior and fighting with peers (Swahn et. al, 2008). Victims of TDV experience higher rates of suicidal thoughts, depression, substance use, and eating disorders (Child Safety Network, 2012). In addition, research reveals that teen females in TDV relationships are four to six times more likely to get pregnant than their peers not in abusive relationships (Silverman, Raj, Mucci & Hathaway, 2001) and are at higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STI) due to challenges negotiating condom use because of the violence (Child Safety Network, 2012).

According to the CDC (2009), Latina girls in the U.S. are more likely to report being the victims of TDV than non-Latina White girls (11.5% vs. 8%; CDC, 2009). This statistic demonstrates the need for more population specific research in order to better understand the mechanisms propagating TDV while enhancing prevention programs to ensure cultural relevance.

TDV amongst Latino youth is a growing concern due to changing demographics in the United States. “Latinos are the fastest-growing minority group in the United States, and they are relatively younger: 35% are under 18 years of age, compared to 26% of the total U.S. population. In addition, Latino youth are more likely than their White counterparts to live in urban communities that are associated with violence,” (Yan, Howard, Beck, Shattuck & Hallmark-Kerr, 2010) exemplifying the importance of researching specific cultural needs of Latino youth. As Latinas have higher documented rates of TDV than their White peers, combining this with the population increase means that there is potential for more TDV, indicating that targeted interventions are critical.

Evidence-based TDV prevention programs have been developed for White adolescents (Wolfe, Crooks, Jaffe, Chiodo, Hughes, Ellis, Stitt & Donner, 2009), but not for Latina

adolescents. Importantly, studies report that in general, most adolescents do not discuss dating violence with their parents (Black, Tolman, Callahan, Saunders & Weisz, 2008). Factors that influence discussions with parents may vary among different racial/ethnic groups in the U.S.; however, normative contexts regarding group values and behavioral patterns may be identifiable for specific subpopulations.

Currently, research lacks data on culturally specific issues when it comes to TDV and TDV prevention programs. Most violence prevention programs targeting Latinos focuses on family violence (Leidy, Guerra, & Toro, 2010). Experience with TDV varies dependent on race and culture. Research indicates specific challenges Latinas face including immigration and barriers to support services (Klevens, 2007). Research that focuses on Latinos experience with TDV is scarce (Klevens, 2007). There is limited information regarding the experience of TDV victimization among Latino youth and there is question if they may be particularly vulnerable due to mitigating factors of racism, immigration laws and individual's documentation status, among other reasons (Yan et. al, 2010). Important variables may be uncovered by collecting qualitative data that explores cultural phenomena (Newman, Zierler & Cheung, 1996).

This study investigates Latina adolescents' knowledge of TDV, how culture impacts TDV, and whether cultural factors affect communication with parents and other authority figures.

Methods

Focus groups were conducted with Latino adolescent females attending an alternative high school from March to November 2012 in King County, WA.

Focus groups provide unknown information regarding dating violence by encouraging conversations more likely to occur in real life settings (Hollander, 2004) or in subjects' responses

to questionnaires developed by researchers. “Focus groups elicit stories and in-depth explanations of people’s thoughts and experiences” (Hollander, 2004). Historically, focus groups with adolescents have been used for “culturally anchored research” and research of youth in high-risk situations (Jones & Broome, 2001). By utilizing focus groups in these settings, the data reflect the perspective of the youth research participants rather than the adults in their lives or the researchers themselves. Including their perspectives helps people understand what the needs are of the target group (Jones & Broome, 2001).

Study participants were recruited from an urban alternative high school located in a low-income community in King County, WA. Students received an email, inviting those interested to attend an information session on the school campus. Students who wanted to participate were given permission slips with details about the study and request for parental consent. Only students who submitted a signed consent form were allowed to participate.

Adolescents were eligible for the study if they were between ages 15-19 years; female; Latina; currently attending high school; and spoke English. Eligibility was not dependent on their experience with dating violence. The University of Washington Institutional Review Board approved this qualitative study.

Data collected through six focus groups included responses from 21 Latina adolescents. These groups utilized standard focus group methodology, and each group included 3-5 adolescent girls. A focus group question guide was developed.

The guide assessed the adolescent’s knowledge about dating violence, why it happens, the consequences, and their perceived barriers in communicating about dating violence with parents and/or other authority figures. Cultural values previously found to be most relevant for Latino youth violence prevention programming informed the data collection of this research on

potential cultural factors that may impede communication about dating violence (Mirabal-Colon & Velez, 2006). These previously found cultural factors included: collectivism (mutual empathy where interests of the group are greater than the individual), familism (central role of family in an individual's life), respect (places greater social worth and decision-making power on authority figures), sympathy (in Spanish this term is called "simpatia" and it describes a general tendency to avoid interpersonal conflict by emphasizing positive behaviors in agreeable situations and deemphasizing negative ones in conflictive circumstances), empathy, religiosity, machismo (male dominance and control), and marianismo (based on the Catholic ideal of the Virgin Mary, emphasizing the woman's role as mother).

Cultural factors were assessed with the following questions: "We know that Latina adolescent girls are at greater risk for dating violence than non-Latina White adolescent girls. We wonder about how (cultural factor inserted here) might make this issue even harder for Latinas to discuss and address. What do you think about that? Does that make sense to you? Why or why not? How might that work? What is it about (cultural factor) that might make it easier or harder for Latinos to address dating violence?" Responses to open-ended questions were explored further with appropriate probes to allow respondents to explicate on their personal experiences and perspectives (Gorbach, Aral, Celum, Stoner, Whittington, & Galea, 2000).

Focus groups were held in a conference room next to the school library. Each focus group was 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant permission. A female moderator was present for each focus group. A standardized moderator's guide introduced the methodology, outlined the focus group process, and led the discussion for all of the participants. Each participant received \$25 for her participation in the focus group.

The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and independently coded by two coders. Two coders separately read the transcripts to identify potential codes using a multistage inductive interpretative thematic process. They then convened to create a common coding system and data dictionary, separately assigning agreed on codes to relevant text. ATLAS.ti (Muhr, 2004), an analytic software program, was used to code and retrieve text. The goal of the analysis was to identify common themes through the qualitative analytic technique of coding text (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Themes were identified after coding the transcripts. These themes included: the participants' knowledge about TDV including their personal experiences and consequences; barriers to support; and the cultural issues (collectivism, familism, and machismo) culminating in the theme of acculturation. Although there were eight cultural factors discussed, these three were the only ones that participants found to play a role in their lives regarding TDV.

Results

Twelve of the twenty-one study participants were born in the U.S. Eighteen self identified as Latino, two self identified as multi-racial, with one non-respondent. The average age of participants was 16.6 years old. In regards to preferred language, 5 preferred English at school and Spanish at home; 9 preferred English; and 5 preferred Spanish. Ten of the participants self identified with "Latino" culture, two with "American" culture, and seven identified with both "Latino" and "American" culture. Three of the participants explicitly shared their experiences with TDV, and ten of the participants shared they knew someone who experienced TDV. The results are separated into three categories including: knowledge and beliefs about TDV, cultural factors, and suggestions for prevention programs.

Knowledge and Beliefs about TDV

The girls were knowledgeable about TDV, likely due to their personal experiences with relationship violence, either firsthand or knowing someone involved in relationship violence. Common themes that arose from these focus groups about why TDV happens include: girls' low self-esteem, boys not knowing how to handle their feelings, the girls familiarity with violent behavior, and the girls get "drawn in" by their boyfriend. They reported that dating violence happens because:

Dating violence is more common, it does not matter what culture and not just for girls but also women. I know a lot of people and that is how they are. That is all they know.

DV happens because the girls let it happen. I think personally the childhood of the boy or the girl doing the DV was bad. Maybe they witnessed violence. Like in the family... they think hitting people is solving the problem.

Inside, they (boys) are troubled.

The participants reported possible consequences of TDV to include: isolation, pregnancy, challenges in friendships and support systems, long term trauma that impacts their future relationships, and death.

If you are with an abuser, you start losing your values.

I know this girl; she got pregnant at age 14. She had a baby. She was living with him. He hit her. He dragged her out of the house and kicked her out. She really liked him. She would stay with him. He would cheat on her. He was really rude. He did a lot of drugs. It got to a point where she couldn't take it anymore; she left... Now it is hard for her to move on.

One bad relationship with one guy could lead her to believe that it is normal...when in reality it is not normal.

Anna is 16 (made-up name). She lives with her boyfriend since age 15. It is just bad. He controls her in every way. He tells her what to eat. He calls her fat. She's not allowed to go out. He has hit her before. She does not tell me anymore cause I told her I was going to call the cops the next time he hits. According to her he does not hit her anymore. He says really mean things to her. Every time they get mad, he kicks her out but she goes back. She has her mom but she has kids with this new guy and she feels she will ruin her mother's family life if she returns.

The girls experience barriers to seeking support, which include: wanting to protect their partner; not wanting to tell family, colored by acculturative factors; not wanting to tell teachers or other adults due to concerns about confidentiality; and concerns about telling friends because of possible responses from friends and peers.

They believed that telling family would mean they would have to end their relationship, or that their partner would get in trouble. Overarching themes include concerns that parents would become violent (towards participant or boyfriend), they would get mad, parents would not understand because of the acculturation gap, that the parent's behavior or life experience does not show that they know how to support their child (for example, the mom's experience with domestic violence means that the daughter does not trust her), or the possibility that the family would involve law enforcement.

...due to her past actions [i.e. poor treatment by previous partner], I have no respect for her [mother].

I would feel comfortable telling them, but I wouldn't, because I wouldn't want them to hurt him.

You don't want your parents to hate your boyfriend.

My parents are more of the traditional kind of parents. And then I see things differently.

Repeatedly during the focus groups questions and concerns about confidentiality arose. Participants were concerned that disclosing to teachers, counselors or doctors would mean that they would share the information rather than uphold confidentiality. Additionally, teachers and counselors are not seen as understanding where the participants are coming from.

No, they say that, since we're like, minors, if we tell a teacher or a counselor that we're being hit by someone else, we already know that you guys are going to go, you have to report it. So we don't want anyone else to find out.

Because I feel like they [teachers] don't really know you, they just don't know you, you're just to go telling them your problems and they don't know where you come from...

I told a teacher once but I regretted it at the end. She was giving me smart comments. Being rude.

Focus group participants cited barriers to sharing their TDV experiences with friends, while also discussing that friends tend to be a vital resource and source of support.

I personally do not want people to know my business. I like to keep things to myself. I've had bad experiences when my business gets put out there, I do not like it. I just get judged. I get talked about, I get criticized. It is hard to trust.

I said to her if he hits you, you can tell me. She said that she didn't want anyone to know cause they would think that she was stupid. She didn't want her mother to know. She said she loves him.

Friends will judge, friends do not know you like a family member.

Cultural Factors

Through the focus groups' questions about cultural factors, the theme of **acculturation** emerged. Acculturation measures how much a person has adopted the dominant cultures norms and values (Santisteban, Coatsworth, Briones, Kurtines & Szapocznik, 2012). The girls' different levels of acculturation in comparison to each other, their partners, and their parents impacted their perceptions and experiences in relationships.

With my fiancé, he says he wants a 'good' Mexican wife. She's supposed to stay home. Clean the house. My brother in law told him, she's white washed. You have to watch out. I was born here. For example, my boyfriend, fiancé, tells me that I am the first girlfriend who has ever defended herself. I am very independent. If you tell me something that I don't like, I will tell you... his friend said, Mexican girls are not supposed to smoke. You know what, nobody is asking your opinion. Leave me alone. My boyfriend just kept looking at me. Yeah, you heard me, I'm not going to be letting you talk to me like that...his family is trying to make me traditional.

A lot of Mexican girls, they grow up here, but they are still going to have the mentality [from Mexico].

Importantly, culturally specific issues of immigration and deportation were talked about in the focus groups. The participants spoke of cases where girls' parents were deported, so they lived with other relatives increasing their risk of experiencing TDV.

A lot of times Latina girls are here (i.e. in the U.S. alone). They could have families, but sometimes families get deported.

The girls spoke of the cultural theme of **collectivism**, the understanding that the individuals are a part of a larger unit. With this “we” value, participants explained the ways they understand the needs of the collective and how this value would interact with TDV.

For a Latino family, the family needs may be more important than individual needs. Sometimes, a family has to pay rent.

Your family goes through so much and you're like, oh, I put more on them, so you try to like, do it yourself.

The focus groups highlighted **familism**, which emphasizes the importance of the family rather than the individual (Santisteban et. al, 2012),

Latinos do not talk to strangers. They may talk to teachers that they trust. Latinos are more 'conservadores.' Latinos in Mexico live in small towns; they do not share anything outside of the family; they are more conservadores there. In the US it is not like that.

Parents are always telling you, whatever happens in the family has to stay in the family...Sometimes it's like, should I tell someone, not tell someone...

The theme of **machismo** was explored in these focus groups. The girls suggested that machismo is an “old fashioned” way that enforces gender roles. Girls who do not adhere to the traditional gender role find themselves in challenging situations that has the potential of both perpetuating TDV and creating schisms in their families as suggested by the focus groups.

Since women are more independent now, guys feel like they're stepped on. If a man is not supporting his family, he feels bad.

It is the culture...I guess...the guys when they were younger saw their father treat their mother like that and that is how they are going to treat their girlfriend.

He gives me my throne...but at the same time he expects me to clean...to cook. To fold his laundry. Yeah, everything.

The girl will have to keep in her comments so he won't get mad.

Guys think girls without them; they're like, nothing.

There is a lot of risk if the woman is exerting her power and authority.

Suggestions for Prevention Programs

When participants were asked about participating in a TDV prevention program, all of them expressed interest in addition to giving suggestions on ways to make it both relevant and accessible for students. They suggested recruitment strategies and content. The girls spoke of the importance of teaching skills to prevent violence since they are likely to speak to their friends if they experience TDV. It is useful to equip their friends with support strategies. Also, they shared that recruitment needs to focus on how this applies to their life, by teaching them what they want to know about relationships, and utilizing social circles to have friends recruit other friends.

I think I would have girls that have gone through different situations.

I guess if you got one of their friends to join, then their friends could tell them that it was a good program. It would have to be something that reaches all of the girls cause each girl has a different home life. It would have to be for everybody.

One way to draw them in is to make them think that it is their choice to be there.

By telling them that the intervention would focus on how to make a relationship work. A lot of girls want to know how to make the relationship good and want advice.

Discussion

This qualitative research identified important beliefs and attitudes towards TDV, the influence of culture on TDV among Latina adolescents, how culture affects communication with parents about TDV, and suggestions for TDV prevention programs. The young women

participating in this study were knowledgeable about TDV and expressed key insights into the ways that their life experiences affect their approach to TDV.

The TDV knowledge and experience of the participants reflects the research setting. Research indicates that youth attending alternative high school, often considered high-risk youth, have higher TDV prevalence than comparison groups (Offenhauer & Buchalter, 2011). “The research literature defines high-risk youth as adolescents participating in high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, or coming from high-risk environments, e.g., impoverished homes or disadvantaged neighborhoods” (Offenhauer & Buchalter, 2011). Alternative high schools often target “high-risk” youth. They are specifically designed to meet the needs of students at risk of dropping out, to promote the likelihood of graduation (Graham, 2013). One research study focusing on youth in an alternative school found “elevated rates of perpetration of physical dating violence, with 33 percent of boys and 68 percent of girls classified as dating violent (as measured by the Conflict Tactics Scale)” (Offenhauer & Buchalter, 2011).

Our findings indicate that the cultural factors most relevant to address in Latina dating violence prevention programs are collectivism, familism, and machismo. These findings differ from previous research on Latino violence prevention that indicates eight cultural factors found to be the most relevant, including collectivism, familism, respect, sympathy, empathy, religiosity, machismo, and marianismo.

According to a 2013 meta-analysis on the effectiveness of TDV prevention programs, those that involve comprehensive support, including interactions between schools, teens and parents, are found to be most effective (Koker, Mathews, Zuck, Bastein & Mason-Jones, 2013). Highlighting and encouraging familism in prevention programs would utilize what Koker et. al (2013) found to be effective.

Familism has been found to be a protective factor for Latino youth in relationship to risky behaviors (Santisteban et. al, 2012), suggesting that it may also be a protective factor against TDV. As a protective factor, familism fosters loyalty, respect, and putting the family first. Familism, as a core parenting value, endorses that parents are involved in their child's life, knowing whom they are spending time with and whom they are dating. The blend of a bicultural prevention program would mirror the acculturation that the families face and that research indicates supports youth in healthy development (Marks, Godoy & Coll, 2014).

Additionally, some studies indicate that machismo is associated with more acceptance or prevalence of violence (Yan et. al, 2010). The study participants spoke to the challenges specific to different levels of acculturation between partners, and how in those contexts, their boyfriends had differing expectations of them and their role in the home and relationship. It is unclear if a higher level of acculturation would serve as a protective factor or increase risk of victimization, which warrants further research.

First and second generation immigrants have different cultural experiences and in the process their relationship with their family is impacted. The girls alluded to this through their insights about challenges relating to their family and the way that some of their parents are more "traditional." Further complicating this theme was the ways in which the girls felt like their mothers would not understand or be supportive if they shared they were in a TDV relationship. *"My mother tells stories of being hurt by my father,"* was a common statement in the focus groups. Culturally sensitive prevention programming and supporting victims of TDV would incorporate the lived experience of generations of victims of relationship violence. To do this, it would be important to discuss the transmission of relationship expectations from one generation to the next. In order to support communication between parents and their children about TDV, a

critical conversation about how to work within both the immigrant and bicultural framework may be constructive.

Additionally, Offenhauer and Buchalter (2011) discuss, "...extra familial violence—aggressiveness in the peer network—is more predictive of involvement in dating violence than exposure to violence in the adolescent's family of origin. Researchers attribute this finding to the potent part that peers play as role models for youth behavior." Youth would benefit from incorporating a significant peer support component in TDV prevention programs that target Latinas, as it will support large-scale change and allow for individuals experiencing TDV to have a larger network. This expounds on the information shared in the focus group about how girls rely on their friends for support and the concerns they voiced about telling their friends. The girls discussed the challenges of supporting their friends in TDV relationships and needing the support from their friends when experiencing TDV.

One arena to explore further is whether race or socioeconomic status contributes to higher rates of TDV among Latina adolescents. Without this knowledge, it is likely that populations are pathologized as violent when in reality the contribution of poverty or low socioeconomic status mitigates the violence. Due to structural factors that perpetuate racism, Offenhauer and Buchalter (2011) illuminate researchers' bias when investigating the non-dominant culture.

As preliminary research, this paper provides a foundation for future studies. With this in mind, there are limitations to this study. The setting was an urban alternative high school. The specific issues faced by this population may influence generalizability. Furthermore, the study participants had been in the U.S. for at least five years, with most U.S. born, and all spoke English, which indicates higher acculturation. All of these factors combined may limit

generalizability of this information to a larger population.

This research is critical in developing interventions and prevention programs that target Latinas. Moving forward, more research is needed to extrapolate the relationship between acculturation and TDV, and violence prevention programs, with a focus on incorporating the family into the programs.

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