

Observed Conflict among Mexican American Adolescent Dating Couples:

Understanding the Roles

of Acculturation, Gender, and Communication Behaviors

by

Heidi Adams

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Lela Williams, Chair
Elizabeth Anthony
Flavio Marsiglia

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ABSTRACT

Communication skills within dating contexts are developed during the adolescent years, and are associated with a lifelong ability to have satisfying, enduring, and non-violent partnerships. As such, they are currently and increasingly implemented into both more general forms of healthy relationship education, as well as that targeting the prevention of teen dating violence specifically. Reaching Mexican American youth with culturally and developmentally appropriate relationship education, including communication skills, may be particularly important given their earlier transitions to marital and parenting relationships, acculturative stressors that present them with unique coupling challenges, and their higher rates of teen dating violence as compared to European American youth. We know very little about how Mexican American dating couples communicate about areas of conflict. This dissertation research utilizes Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework of interpersonal violence to explore how cultural and developmental considerations may be integrated in order to better understand how communication behaviors contribute to Mexican American middle adolescents' experiences with dating conflict. I use an observational study design in order to 1.) Qualitatively explore the communication strategies used by a sample of committed couples, including integration of culturally- and developmentally-relevant contexts, 2.) Quantitatively examine whether couple-level discrepancies in acculturation are associated with observed negativity, including whether this relationship may be mediated by dissimilar gender-related beliefs, and to 3.) Review empirical findings pertaining to the communication behaviors of Mexican American adolescents and to integrate ecodevelopmental theory in said framework as informed by Papers 1, 2, and literature specific to this topic area. The ultimate aim of this dissertation research is to generate findings that may improve the dating health of Mexican American adolescents living in the United States.

DEDICATION

To the kids of CampFire U.S.A., of Omaha, Nebraska, and to my mentor, Dr. Lela Williams who inspires me every day with her brilliance and ceaseless dedication to the relationship health of Mexican American youth.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The National Association of Social Workers recognizes the importance of human relationships as a core professional value, with our primary goal being to address social problems (NASW, 1999). This dissertation work aims to better understand how Mexican American (MA) adolescent dating couples communicate about issues of conflict within their relationships. This research question holds both empirical value, as no studies have explored complex dyadic processes inherent in MA couples' communication of conflict as observed in real time, as well as practical and immediate relevancy, as findings may be used to ground healthy relationship and teen dating violence prevention programs in culturally- and developmentally-salient manners that speak to MA adolescents' dating lives.

Statement of the Problem

Conflict is an unavoidable part of human relationships, and may even be used to strengthen bonds and foster increased relationship satisfaction (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Unfortunately, it also may trigger extreme emotional upset, distancing, dissolution, or one or multiple forms of violence (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Connolly & McIssac, 2009; Muñoz–Rivas, Grana, O'Leary, & Gonzalez, 2007). Studies with adult couples evidence difficulty navigating conflict in manner that supports relationship satisfaction and longevity, and perhaps even more concerning is the high degree of violence within many intimate partnerships. One in two marriages in the United States now ends in divorce (Goodwin, et al., 2009) and approximately one-third of women (and one-fourth of men) have been physically assaulted by an intimate partner in their lifetime (Black et al., 2011). There is a substantial body of literature pointing to the importance of conflict management skills in sustaining mutually satisfying marriages that are devoid of violence (see Bradbury, Finch, &

Beach, 2000 for a review), although as noted, many adolescents continue to witness maladaptive conflict tactics in their homes. Such patterns are mirrored by adolescents in their own first dating relationships (Darling et al., year); indeed, research with adolescents finds that verbal, psychological, sexual, and physical abuse is common among dating partners (Stets & Henderson, 1991) with one in three adolescents in a national sample having experiencing some form of violence (i.e., psychological/emotional, sexual, physical) and over one in 10 having been victimized by physical violence specifically (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001).

There is an increasing awareness of the importance of teaching non-violent and healthy communication skills during adolescence, when interpersonal patterns are first established within dating contexts (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2008) and in recognition that these patterns often carry over into adulthood (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013). Furthermore, and given the importance of dating relationships in their lives, adolescents desire information about how to communicate with one another (Adams & Williams, 2011). Communication skill sets are now included in both more ‘normative’ relationship-strengthening curricula (i.e., within recent federal policies that allot money to this cause as part of comprehensive adolescent sexual health education; Department of Health and Human Services, 2010) as well as in teen dating violence programs more specifically (Weisz & Black, 2009). Much of what we know about communication as it relates to conflict, however, stems from research with European American married couples (Bradbury et al., 2000; Wheeler, Updegraff, & Thayer, 2010). Emerging research with adolescents suggests, on the other hand, that their communication of conflict differs from that of adults’ in a number of developmentally salient ways (Tabares & Gottman, 2003; Welsh & Shulman, 2008). This is concerning given that programs imploring a deductive

approach are already being implemented with diverse adolescents (e.g., Adler-Baeder, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham; Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011; Gardner, Geise, and Parrot, 2004), despite that theoretical underpinnings are in their infancy. Only recently has research begun to assess how communication behaviors, marital violence, and teen dating violence may be co-examined (Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008; Cornelius, Shorey, & Beebe, 2010) and cultural considerations have thus far been unattended to.

Mexican American youth are a fast-growing and substantive population within the United States, composing two-thirds of the larger Latino population and with growth outpacing that of other youth (i.e., 37.3% are under the age of 18, as compared with 24.3% of the general population; United States Bureau of the Census, 2009). Although the terms “Latino” and “Mexican American” are both used throughout this dissertation research, the latter denotes a subgroup of Latino individuals for whom one or both parents (or other extended family included grandparents) emigrated from Mexico. The more encompassing term, “Latino”, includes other self-classifications where the Spanish language is spoken including “Puerto Rican”, “Cuban”, or of other “Spanish origin” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The term Mexican American was chosen given the present study of acculturation, as it captures the “in between” realities of many adolescents living among communities that continue to be influenced by Mexican cultural norms (i.e., particularly in border states) while also juggling a distinct set of cultural norms stemming from mainstream U.S. society (Milbrath, Ohlson, & Eyre 2009; Matsunaga, Hecht, Elek, & Ndiaye, 2010).

Mexican American adolescents may be in particular need of effective programs that offer them culturally and developmentally appropriate conflict management skill sets. First, they represent an at-risk group with higher rates of teen dating violence than European American youth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011), perhaps due in part to

their tendency to witness higher rates of violence in their homes, schools, neighborhoods, and communities (see Smokowski, David-Feron, & Stroupe, 2009 for a review). Second, acculturation processes affect gender role attitudes in dissimilar ways, translating to unique coupling challenges (Updegraff, Umaña-Taylor, McHale, Wheeler, & Perez-Brena, 2012). Third, MA adolescents are more likely to enter into more serious and committed partnerships at younger ages (i.e., marriage, parenting; Goodwin et al., 2009; Kost, Henshaw, & Carlin, 2010; Phillips & Sweeney, 2005). Thus, they may be called upon earlier to demonstrate more mature conflict negotiation skills, while simultaneously facing additional and unique stressors that may make it more difficult for them to do so.

Despite the above considerations, there is a lack of studies that explore how MA couples communicate; literature suggests, however, that Latino cultural norms may influence their interpersonal behaviors in manners that deviate from European American youth and warrant a culturally-grounded approach to program design (Castillo, Perez, Castillo, & Ghosheh, 2010; Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984; Organista, 2007). What is more, such norms intersect shift in dynamic manners as adolescents encounter dissimilar norms for heterosexual relationships within the majority culture (Raffaelli, 2005); in turn, evolving intrapersonal beliefs, expectations, and desires carry into adolescents' partnering experiences and affect each couple uniquely (Halpern et al., 2001; Miranda, Bilot, Peluso, Berman, & Van Meek, 2006). These important cultural considerations are inseparable from adolescents' development, as MA adolescents form their global and ethnic identities simultaneously (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997; White, 2009). This process is mutually supported by the intimate partnerships they build, highlighting the importance of these formative experiences (Beyers & Seiffke-Krenke, 2010; Collins et al., 2009). Thus, in exploring how Mexican American adolescents communicate, I also seek to contribute to

theory-building in a manner that incorporates cultural and developmental considerations central to their dyadic experiences.

Theoretical Considerations

Numerous theories inform the study of adolescent dating relationships, although not all are equally applicable to preventative interventions targeting healthy relationship promotion and the prevention of teen dating violence. Bell and Naugle's (2008) contextual framework for intimate partner violence is integrative in that it attends to theories that extend the most practical relevancy to ameliorating violence within ecological contexts that highlight both distal (e.g., childhood trauma, psychopathology), and proximal (e.g., current stressors, interpersonal conflict) contributors to physical violence perpetration. Furthermore, the authors' framework compliments a corresponding review and co-examination of factors that contribute both uniquely and dissimilarly to marital versus teen dating violence (see Shorey, Cornelius, and Bell, 2008). Bell and Naugle include communication/conflict resolution skills as situational antecedents to physical violence perpetration, consistent with empirical findings among both marital and dating violence literatures that has linked such deficits to partner violence (e.g., Babcock, Costa, Green, & Eckhardt, 2004; Cornelius et al., 2010). I was interested in how cultural and developmental considerations may be fundamentally attended to in better understanding how MA couples' communication of conflict, and thus were drawn to this framework for its inclusion of gendered relationship roles (i.e., critical to a culturally-grounded exploration of how communication may be influenced by Latino norms; Arciniega et al., 2012; Raffaelli, 2005; Triandis et al, 1984). By "investigating the interrelationships between two or more contextual units" (e.g., communication skills, beliefs about gendered roles; Bell & Naugle, p. 1102), this framework provides an ideal point of departure from which to build more complex and theoretically-

driven explanatory models in future work. Furthermore, its centralization of theory-integration across dating and marital fields is of relevancy to the present analysis given my desire to inform ongoing and future program development that integrates communication skill sets as fundamental to both.

As Bell and Naugle (2008) describe, current theories of interpersonal violence are limited in a number of ways that thwart their ability to provide a solid foundation from which to design effective preventative interventions. I refer the reader to their analysis, but do wish to highlight a number of particularly relevant points that are exacerbated by developmental and cultural considerations. First, models to explain intimate partner violence (and thus, programs rooted in their propositions) have historically been rooted in feminism and power theories (Bell & Naugle). While these theories are useful in explaining certain types of violence, they are only partially empirically supported due to the heterogeneity of abusive scenarios (Cavanaugh & Gelles, 2005). Such underpinnings assert that a patriarchal society supports male-initiated violence and that this desire for males to retain power results in the use of control tactics (i.e., including violence). Feminist theory is one of the most commonly cited frameworks in the design of teen dating violence prevention programs (Whitaker, Morrison, Lindquist, Hawkins, O'Neil, et al., 2006) and is similarly used by many social service practitioners in what is commonly referred to as the “power and control wheel” (including an addition modified for adolescent dating contexts; National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence, 2012). Within dating relationships, however, adolescent females are more often perpetrators of physical violence than their male counterparts (Archer, 2000), a finding that has also been evidenced among Latino youth (Swahn, Simon, Arias, & Bossarte, 2008). While it is noted that females recipients of violence suffer more life-altering consequences (i.e., serious injury, psychological damage, homicide; Ackard et al.,

2007; Archer, 2000; Garcia et al., 2007; Molidor & Tolman, 1998; Munoz-Rivas et al., 2007; Reese-Weber, 2008; Swahn et al., 2008), a haphazard application of such theories to healthy dating programming may result in a counterproductive blaming of males and actually have the effect of alienating such youth. This may particularly be the case in programs for Latino youth, given a historical over-emphasis on negative traits associated with Mexican masculinity (i.e., *machismo*; Arciniega et al., 2010). To the contrary, Mexican origin males often demonstrate adaptive masculine traits that could contribute to positive conflict negotiation (i.e., *caballerismo*; Arciniega et al.; Pardo et al., 2012) and it is important to apply a flexible and strengths approach to fostering adaptive cultural traits.

The second reason that Bell and Naugle offer concerning the insufficiency of current theoretical models for intimate partner violence stems from the first: any one theory fails to address the heterogeneity of its occurrence. I feel this point is particularly outstanding in seeking to understand how MA adolescent dating couples communicate about issues of conflict in a manner that would afford maximum relevancy to healthy dating and teen dating violence programs. Acculturative processes, coupled with global and identity formation during adolescence, result in dynamic relationship experiences, including experimentation with various relationship types (Williams, 2012) and experiences that do not always reflect mutually shared goals, agreed-upon gender roles, and/or expectations (e.g., one partner may perceive the relationship as “friends with benefits”, while the other as “going out; similarly, one partner may expect traditional gender roles). It is currently unknown how such couple-level asymmetries may put them at risk for teen dating violence, but studies have suggested that it may put them at increased risk (Miranda et al., 2006; Montoya, 1996; Sanderson et al., 2004). Moreover, each couple brings unique and changing intrapersonal characteristics to a

relationship, and thus, risk for violence in one relationship does not necessarily translate to similar risk within another (Riggs & O’Leary, 1996).

Finally, Bell and Naugle (2008) discuss how current theories of intimate partner violence are derived from prevailing literatures; while this is a noted strength, the authors warn that overreliance on long-held theories can also limit creativity, new exploration, and result in enfolding research within predetermined categories. “As such, it may be challenging to incorporate within the existing theory innovative empirical findings that identify novel variables relevant for understanding IPV perpetration.” (p. 1100). My interest in exploring how MA adolescent couples communicate about conflict (i.e., an inductive endeavor) while also comparing such communication behaviors to preestablished theories and empirical findings (i.e., a deductive endeavor) demands a flexible framework from which to synthesize findings. Each of the variables of interest in the present study are identified within Bell and Naugle’s framework as contributors to interpersonal violence, as derived from their extensive knowledge of the field; correspondingly, rigidity is eschewed concerning how such variables may be related. I do not examine the physical dating violence perpetration specifically in this dissertation research, but rather narrow my focus to communication behaviors. This is in line with my interest in integrating developmental considerations into Bell and Naugle’s theoretical framework, and corresponds with studies finding that verbal aggression is in itself a form of dating violence – one that often precedes or co-occurs with physical forms of abuse (Muñoz –Rivas, Grana, O’Leary, & Gonzalez, 2007; Shorey et al., 2008; Stets & Henderson, 1991).

Ecodevelopmental Theory. As described, Bell and Naugle’s (2008) contextual framework of intimate partner violence forms the basis for the subsequent papers in this dissertation research. In Paper 3, however, the theoretical approach also integrates

ecodevelopmental theory (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999) into their framework in order to centralize cultural and developmental considerations. The addition of this theory is useful in many ways. First, it allows for the contextualization of Mexican American adolescents' dating (and therefore, communicative) experiences within their environment and as influenced by overlapping spheres of influence (e.g., parents, peers, media; Coatsworth et al., 2002). Second, it provides a more systematic guide for testing variables (i.e., as posited by Bell & Naugle's framework as empirically linked to interpersonal violence) across the systems in which they unfold. Third, it prioritizes adolescents' identity development as a key developmental task that both influences and is influenced by dyadic and gendered communicative processes (White, 2009). It is my hope that future research build from my exploratory work as outlined within an enhanced ecodevelopmental framework of teen dating violence.

Research Questions

This dissertation work explores how MA couples communicate about conflict in their relationships. Substantial attention is afforded to Latino cultural norms (e.g., *machismo*, *familismo*), acculturative processes, and developmental considerations in line with an aim to examine how these variables may ground the empirical study, theoretical design, and practical application of findings to ultimately improve the dating health of MA adolescents. These constructs are captured within Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework as: "Communication/Conflict Resolution Skills" (i.e., considered part of a "Behavioral Repertoire") and "Beliefs about Relationships"/"Beliefs about Women" (i.e., considered "Verbal Rules"). As noted by the authors, these constructs share overlap with others of constructs grouped in the same domain (e.g., "Conflict Resolution Skills" is similar to "Problem-Solving Skills", another skill set within one's behavioral repertoire), and are

reflective of a large and complex body of literature concerning antecedents to violence perpetration (Bell & Naugle). Each of the three papers within this dissertation examine variables within Bell and Naugle's theoretical framework in ways that ultimately attend to the the primary research question driving this exploration: *How do MA adolescents communicate about areas of conflict?*

Paper 1 Research Question: How do committed middle adolescent Mexican American couples communicate about areas of conflict in their relationship, and how do their communication behaviors compare to observational studies with other ethnic groups?

Research Hypotheses: This paper is exploratory given a lack of research that examines how MA youth communicate about relationship conflict. A review of the literature did, however, offer guidance as to how (European American and other ethnicity) adolescents have observably communicated, as well as what may be expected of MA youth's communication behaviors given cultural norms. Observational methods stem from a postpositivist on-looking of the researcher, however, and we wanted to capture what may be a new blend of communicative processes resulting from a new population of interest affected by unique cultural norms and acculturative processes (see Schwarz et al., 2010, for a review). Thus, we used both inductive and deductive methods in following Crabtree and Miller's (1999) guidelines for iterative processes invoking a fluid template approach to data analysis. This allowed us to both compare findings with what others have observed (Welsh & Shulman) as well as allow for novel communication behaviors to emerge. Themes are foundationally contextualized within developmental and cultural considerations, thus providing additions to Bell and Naugle's (2008) theoretical framework and yielding recommendations for salient dating health programs with MA adolescents.

Paper 2 Research Question: Do MA adolescent couples' discrepancies in

acculturation predict observed negativity in discussion of conflict, and if so, is this relationship mediated by discrepancies in traditional gender role beliefs?

This research question was derived from literature finding that adult MA couples have experienced heightened conflict and violence in their marriages as a result of dissimilar rates of acculturation (Miranda et al., 2006; Montoya, 1996; Perilla, Bakerman, & Norris, 1994). Increasingly divulgent gender role beliefs are thought to mediate this relationship, meaning specifically that females outpace their male counterparts in adopting egalitarian gender roles while males continue to prefer traditional roles characteristic of Latino cultural norms (Miranda et al.; Montoya; Perilla et al.). Some have asserted that similar processes may negatively impact MA adolescent couples (Sanderson et al., 2004; Ulloa, Jaycox, Skinner, & Orsburn, 2008), and a study recently released by Updegraff, Umaña-Taylor, McHale, Wheeler, & Perez-Brena (2012) did indeed find that females increasingly adopted egalitarian gender role beliefs over the course of early to late adolescence while males' attitudes did not change. This created a discrepancy in their endorsement of traditional gender roles during a time when most Latino adolescents begin dating seriously (Raffaelli, 2005). This study was conducted with MA adolescents from the same Southwest region of the United States and urban area as the present study, pointing to the relevancy of the present analysis.

Although others have not examined how couple-level discrepancies in acculturation and traditional gender beliefs may affect MA dating couples, we utilized the limited available literature to ascertain that perhaps discrepancies in Mexican-orientation would be hold more predictive power than Anglo-orientation. This stems from Ulloa and colleagues' (2008) finding that Spanish media use was positively associated with traditional gender role beliefs among youth but that English media preference was not significant in predicting attitudes. Given that others studies have not, however, examined how couple-level discrepancy may

relate to communication behaviors specifically, my hypotheses remain exploratory and I will also investigate the role of discrepancy in U.S. mainstream cultural orientation (i.e., “Anglo orientation”, a measure of English language use and social activities) and discrepancy in overall acculturation (i.e., a combined rating taking into account both Mexican- and Anglo-orientation). Findings will lay desired groundwork concerning how adolescents’ cognitive working models (i.e., “verbal rules”, or beliefs about gender and relationships) translate into enacted behavior (Tabares & Gottman, 2003). Findings will lend themselves to an incorporation of couple-level considerations in acculturation and gender-related beliefs (and particularly as such processes and beliefs differ) as predictive of observed negativity in discussion. Negativity does not necessary infer verbal abuse, although may contain instances of it. Such a model may, however, be tested in the future alongside violence outcomes as outlined within Bell and Naugle’s theoretical framework and inclusive of multiple forms of violence.

Paper 3 Research Question: Taken together, how may empirical findings concerning MA adolescents couples’ communication behaviors be used to inform Bell & Naugle’s (2008) theoretical framework in ways that attend to developmental and cultural contextual considerations, as well as inform teen dating violence prevention programs, and provide directions for future research?

The aim of this conceptual paper is to take a step back, consider multiple findings together, and provide develop key recommendations for theory, practice, and research. As such, this paper integrates findings from Papers 1 and 2, as well as the authors’ other published and unpublished work with MA adolescents concerning communication as it informs healthy dating relationships/teen dating violence prevention. In keeping with expansion of Bell and Naugle’s (2008) theoretical framework, I will incorporate specific

developmental and cultural considerations central to understanding MA adolescents' communication behaviors and in order to provide contextualization for further research on teen dating violence and healthy relationship formation during adolescence. In doing so, I advocate for the integration of ecodevelopmental theory (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999) to provide a more systematic manner through which to test variables of interest across interlocking social ecological spheres of influence and prioritize adolescents global and ethnic identity formation. I integrate findings across macro, meso, and micro systems in drawing upon existing literature on Latino cultural norms and acculturative processes, all the while explicating ways in which MA adolescents exercise agency through constructing their own unique cultural blend of values, beliefs, and behaviors (see Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010 for a review). Moreover, individual acculturative processes (e.g., including changes in relationship beliefs) intersect with partner's within dating relationships; the resulting interpersonal dynamics and relationship outcomes among MA adolescent couples (i.e., including communication) are in much need of research. This paper lays preliminary work in outlining what has been learned in research with this sample of MA adolescents, including how findings may be used to ground theory in cultural and developmental considerations central to MA adolescents' communicative experiences with a dating partner. Throughout my analysis, I include recommendations for future research and end with program recommendations.

Synthesis

Communicational competency has repeatedly been cited as an important skill-based component across diverse programming types, including those aimed at strengthening relationships more generally (e.g., marriages; Gardner et al., 2004), and those whose goal is to eradicate teen dating violence (Weisz & Black, 2009). In their review of the literature on

TDV prevention programs, Cornelius and Resseguie (2007) concluded that, “Although these are clearly important facets of dating violence, without a skill-building component integrating specific training to improve proficiency of communication, negotiation, and problem-solving skills (and specifically the use of role-playing, modeling, and rehearsal) the likelihood of behavior change is improbable.” (p. 373). Despite increased and recent attention to communication and conflict negotiation as integral to healthy dating relationships among adolescents, direct observations of youth communicating about areas of conflict are few, and none have examined Mexican American dyads specifically. A central aim of this dissertation research will be to advance our understanding of how these youth communicate about areas of conflict in order to ground theoretical models in cultural and developmental considerations that seek to understand risk and to optimize and promote healthy communication among romantically/sexually involved minority youth. Although conflict may be an inevitable part of navigating intimate relationships across the lifespan, adolescent dating relationships provide a unique opportunity to experiment with different roles within various relationship contexts (Manning et al., 2006; Williams, 2012), to improve communication (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006; Tabares & Gottman, 2003), and to develop relationship competency (Masten et al., 1995; Tabares & Gottman). Moreover, given the saliency of dating relationships in their lives, adolescents are often eager to learn about how to better communicate with a partner (Adams & Williams, 2011; Wolfe & Feiring, 2000). This cluster of dissertation studies will inform theory and program design concerning Mexican American adolescents’ conflict-laden communicative experiences, thus providing evidence-based recommendations to foster communication skills and improve the dating health of these youth.

Chapter 2

PAPER 1

Mexican American Dating Couples “Talking About” Conflict:

A Qualitative Analysis of Communication Behaviors

Heidi L. Adams, Doctoral Candidate

Abstract

Observational studies have yielded important empirical findings concerning how developmental contexts shape adolescent couples' communication of conflict. The present study builds from these studies by attending to committed Mexican American couples' communication behaviors, particularly relevant in lieu of cultural norms that sanction more serious partnering, earlier marriage, and younger transitions to child-rearing. Confirmatory and exploratory qualitative methods were used to both situate couples' observed discussions of conflict within documented developmental and cultural considerations, as well as to allow for the emergence of novel communication patterns. Evidence was found of specific cultural norms in couples' discussions, which served to contextualize an emergent theme of "talking about" their issues. Contrary to other published studies of adolescent samples that tended to avert or minimize their issues, couples within this theme discussed their issues in-depth. They largely relied, however, on blaming, criticism, and one-sided attempts to problem-solve (typically by the male). Results lend themselves to culturally salient interventions targeting healthy relationship communication skills.

Introduction

The last decade of research on adolescent romantic relationships has yielded a remarkable body of empirical support for the complexity and significance of youth's intimate partner experiences (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009). Recently, research methodologies have moved beyond self-report measures towards also directly observing adolescent couples in order to further expanding our understanding of complex dyadic communication processes (Welsh & Shulman, 2008). Direct observations of adolescent dyads allows for a nuanced critique of communication behaviors in real time and has the potential to inform theoretical models concerning how communication processes characteristic of adult couples develop (Welsh & Shulman; Tabares & Gottman, 2003; Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Studies employing observational methodologies have largely included discussions of conflict issues (Welsh & Shulman), allowing more specifically for a co-examination of their communication behaviors in light of literature on relationship dissatisfaction and divorce (Tabares & Gottman). Despite a number of potential benefits to understanding adolescents' conflict tactics within the context of adult marital and divorce literatures, adolescents' communication patterns are distinct from adults' in a number of ways (Tabares & Gottman; Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman). Moreover, interpersonal communicative processes likely intersect with cultural norms and adolescent developmental considerations in contexts not yet understood. This may be particularly true of acculturating Mexican American youth that navigate romantic relationships amongst opposing communal vs. individualistic cultural norms (Raffaelli, 2005) and who possess a distinct set of cultural proscriptions for interpersonal behavior (Organista, 2007). Gaining a better understanding of the extent to which marital communication literatures may or may not apply to adolescents is important given that healthy relationship programs stemming from such literatures are already being

implemented (e.g., Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011). Currently, relationship programs are typically modified for Latino youth instead of grounded in their experiences (Holleran Steiker et al., 2008). Given that Mexican origin youth are a large segment of the United States population and experience growth beyond that of the general populace (37.3% vs. 24.3% are under the age of 18; United States Bureau of the Census, 2009), a grounded approach that explores developmentally and culturally relevant communication behaviors within the context of marital literatures is warranted. This is particularly critical given that Mexican American couples may be called upon to navigate more mature forms of conflict negotiation at younger ages due to earlier desires and transitions to marriage and child-bearing (Goodwin, McGill, & Chandra, 2009; Kost, Henshaw, & Carlin, 2010; Phillips & Sweeney, 2005).

This study's aims were to explore how Mexican American (MA) adolescent couples between the ages of 15 and 17 discuss areas of conflict in their relationship. Although observational studies have primarily relied on the deductive application of quantitative coding schemes developed from marital literatures (Welsh & Shulman, 2008), qualitative analysis of adolescents' conflict negotiation strategies has yielded important information concerning how their communication of conflict differs from young adult couples (Tuvall-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Interviews with MA adolescents have also brought to light unique sociocultural contexts and values in which their relationship experiences and expectations are situated (Milbrath, Ohlson, & Eyre, 2009). To the contrary, sole reliance on close-ended measures may miss important developmental and cultural components central to MA couples' communicative processes. Thus, while I used confirmatory techniques to assess whether communication behaviors found in studies of other adolescent groups' discussion of conflict were present among MA dating couples, I also invoked open-ended

exploratory techniques in order to allow for the emergence of novel communication behaviors. Analysis using both confirmatory and exploratory techniques is common in qualitative research (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman) given that it allows for the replication of previous findings with new groups while also informing the design of more valid measurements for understudied populations (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

I narrowed my focus to MA adolescents in a specific developmental time period and to couples experiencing high degrees of relationship commitment, as evidenced by agreement that they were in a going out relationship. A review of literature concerning adolescent romantic partnering found that the age range of 15 to 17 is developmentally critical in a number of ways (e.g., quality of interpersonal exchanges, development of interdependence among partners; Collins et al., 2009), and also denotes a time during which Latino youth often have their first serious relationship (Raffaelli, 2005). Limiting my analysis to couples involved in a going out relationship allowed for a deeper and grounded exploration of communication among more committed couples, in line with research pointing to relationship differences across contemporary adolescent coupling types (e.g., hookups; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). Furthermore, couples together for longer periods of time demonstrate distinct conflict management patterns than those whose relationships dissolve more quickly, with the former evidencing a greater tendency to negotiate differences (Shulman, Tuval-Masiach, Levran, & Anbar, 2006). Finally, this focus is also consistent with my interest in taking a first step towards contextualizing MA adolescents that are seriously dating within marital communication literatures, notwithstanding a critical exploration of potentially influencing developmental and cultural facets. In line with these considerations, I sought to a.) assess whether developmentally-salient communication behaviors found in other observational studies of adolescent conflict were similarly present

among committed MA couples, to b.) assess whether culturally-salient indicators discussed in the literature were observable (i.e., *familismo*, *machismo*; romanticized care; Milbrath et al., 2009) to c.) assess whether communication behaviors deemed important for adults' relationship health were present. The inductive and open-ended approach to data analysis further allowed for communication patterns unique to this sample of MA youth to surface. This study fills an important and pragmatic gap in the literature given MA adolescents' heightened rates of teen pregnancy (Kost et al., 2010), earlier marriage (Goodwin et al., 2009; Phillips & Sweeney, 2005), and their resultant need for mature and successful conflict negotiation. What is more, I hope that findings may be used to ground healthy relationship programs in MA youth's lived experiences. This aligns with marital research suggesting that adult relationships may be strengthened by targeting partnering communication during the teen years (Tabares & Gottman, 2003).

Adolescent Negotiation of Conflict

Research with adolescent populations suggests that youth implore a wide variety of conflict negotiation strategies ranging from facilitative (McIsaac, Connolly, McKenney, Pepler, & Craig, 2008) to minimization or avoidance (Shulman, Mayes, Cohen, Swain, & Leckman, 2008). As compared to young adult couples, adolescents are much more likely to minimize or deny the existence of disagreement in their relationship (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). This may be due to an adolescent tendency to idealize romance (Montgomery, 2005), including a focus on the "special, eternal" nature of their relationships (p. 574, Tuval-Mashiach and Shulman). Shulman and colleagues (2008) found that even where disagreement was explored, it was done so superficially and in a manner that preserved unity over furthered discourse. Adolescents in Tuval-Mashiach and Shulman's study also spent less time discussing their conflict and did so more concretely than young adult couples. In

addition, adolescents were more likely to criticize or blame their partners for relationship problems. To the contrary, young adult couples more often took the opportunity to use the interaction task as an opportunity through which to deepen their understanding of the other, to demonstrate affection and emotional closeness, and to spend more time in discussion.

Superficial levels of conflict negotiation among adolescent couples may stem from inexperience in romantic relationships and the ability to easily dissolve partnerships that are not longer desired by either or both partners (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). As the relationship progresses, however, relationship idealization decreases and commitment-related beliefs increase (Montgomery, 2005). Feelings of awkwardness also decrease, and adolescents feel greater ease of communication and emotional closeness to a dating partner (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2010). It follows that skills are gained in recognizing, confronting, and successfully negotiating disagreements as a relationship endures over time (Shulman et al., 2008). As adolescents approach young adulthood, differences are more likely to be viewed as a manner through which to deepen and improve the relationship (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Adolescent females are more likely to view the relationship as satisfying if they perceive low levels of conflict and high degrees of harmony; males' perceptions of their own supportiveness and ability to be influenced positively effect their perceptions of relationship quality (Gallagher, Welsh, Rostosky, & Kawaguchi, 2004). Although these studies offer suggestions concerning what I may find, this sample is unique in that couples that have been together for quite some time (10 months to four years), yet are still in middle adolescence (i.e., between 15 and 17). Thus, it may be expected that they demonstrate some characteristics mirroring other adolescents (e.g., conflict minimization), but may otherwise feel more comfortable around one another and evidence a certain degree of mature conflict negotiation skills (e.g., recognizing conflict and exploring it in a manner that build intimacy;

Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman). Furthermore, such developmental considerations likely intersect with cultural norms in meaningful and unexplored ways.

Cultural Considerations

Mexican American adolescents remain an understudied group, and it is crucial that their experiences not be homogenized as equivalent to other Latino groups. Given the United States close proximity to Mexico, many adopt a bicultural identity (Matsunaga, Hecht, Elek, & Ndiaye, 2010). As such, they often maintain tight cultural ties, including to Mexican traditions and values, to the Spanish language, and to relatives in Mexico (Haglund, Belknap, & Garcia, 2012). Meanwhile, they also exercise agency in drawing from United States cultural norms. The result may be a new blend of norms and expectations, holding particular relevancy for dating relationships as traditional gender roles are challenged (Milbrath et al., 2009). Traditional cultural norms delineate gender expectations including *machismo*, a male's honorable role as provider for the family and allotting him greater decision-making capacity, and *marianismo*, referring to a revered female role as a caretaker of children and the home (Organista, 2007). Within this traditional paradigm, female independence and self-achievement may be sacrificed towards the goal of prioritization the family (i.e., *familismo*; Organista). In the context of adolescent partnering, *familismo* also more broadly encapsulates a valuing of parental authority concerning dating behavior (i.e., *respeto*), valuing time spent with one's own or a partner's family, and seriousness in dating (i.e., perhaps reflective of long-term partnering goals). Finally, *simpatia* denotes a cultural valuing of caring interpersonal exchanges, including tendencies to remain agreeable, respectful, and emotionally attendant (Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). In tandem with *marianismo*, females may avoid direct confrontation and partner criticism in order to maintain interpersonal harmony (Castillo, Perez, Castillo, & Ghosheh, 2010).

Historically, there has been an over-emphasis in the literature on negative aspects of *machismo* (i.e., aggression, dominance, emotional toughness). Contemporary research has begun to separate positive aspects (i.e., assertiveness, emotional availability, responsibility to one's family and community) from negative (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008; Pardo, Weisfeld, Hill, & Slatcher, 2012). Fostering positive aspects of *machismo* holds particular relevance as relationship quality is aided by a male's capacity to be influenced, his supportiveness, and his ability to attend to emotional intimacy needs (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Galliher et al., 2004; Gottman, 1994); positive *machismo* often referred in the literature as "caballerismo" has, in turn, been associated with increased marital satisfaction on behalf of both partners within Mexican American marriages (Pardo et al.). In a similar vein, recent studies include challenges of traditional gender roles among MA youth themselves. Females in Haglund and colleagues' (2012) study, for example, voiced that they held high educational and career aspirations, contrary to what they perceived as a negative stereotype of them. They further asserted that females in their households were not subordinate to males. Adolescent females in their study did, however, disclose that males continued to hold more power in their dating relationships (e.g., males could cheat but females could not) although females desired relationships marked by egalitarianism. Other studies have also suggested that gender norms continue to influence MA adolescents' dating lives in dissimilar manners for adolescent males versus females. For example, parents expect virginity of girls and monitor males' behavior to a lesser degree (Raffaelli, 2005; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001). Irrespective, Mexican origin youth continue to experience higher pregnancy and birth rates than all other ethnic groups (Kost et al., 2010).

It is likely that the acculturative process and the grouping of Latino subpopulations into one larger category (i.e., aggregating them) plays a key role in incongruities found in

literature. Turning to acculturative processes among Mexican American adolescents, Milbrath and colleagues (2009) found a strong emphasis among such youth on marriage and family as the ultimate goal of relationships, on sexual morality of females within a Catholic religious tradition, and on what they termed “romanticized care”, the latter referring to an expectation for males to display romantic acts in courting a female. Romanticized care further aligned with desires for emotional chemistry, intensity, and passion – perhaps made more important outward signs of affection within a religious context upholding of female chastity (Milbrath et al.). These cultural influences intersected with struggles to integrate Mexican dating norms within the dominant culture (Milbrath et al.), and this cultural adaption may unfold differently for males vs. females (Updegraff, Umana-Taylor, McHale, Wheeler, & Perez-Brena, 2012). A study of Mexican American adolescents in the Southwest found that males were slower to shift away from traditional gender role beliefs concerning relationships (Updegraff et al.), and acculturation has been associated with the use of more overt conflict negotiation strategies, including higher degrees of verbal and physical aggression on behalf of the female (Flores, Tschann, VanOss, & Pantoja, 2004). In another recent study, MA couples’ discrepancies in Anglo-orientation were associated with greater observed negativity and conflict in discussion of relationship issues (Adams & Williams, Paper 2). There is a clear need for more research concerning contemporary and acculturating Mexican American adolescents’ partnering experiences, particularly as areas of conflict are negotiated among serious and committed couples.

A Marital Perspective

Marital communication literatures form a rich body of literature from which to draw insight concerning patterns that may begin early (Tabares & Gottman, 2003). Studies with adults have found that the presence of conflict is not as important to relationship health as

how the conflict is managed, and years of marital research reveal clear and positive associations between conflict management skills and relationship satisfaction (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). Communication behaviors identified as healthy among married couples include validating a partner's feelings and point of view as legitimate, emphasizing positive aspects of the relationship, avoiding sarcasm, criticism, or blaming, and clearly communicating about one issue rather than attending to many at once (e.g., past and present; Gottman & Silver, 1999). Displays of affection during discussion of conflict, and other forms of "turning towards" one's partner emotionally have also been associated with relationship health (Gottman & Silver). Marital researchers have found observational studies particularly useful in understanding communication behaviors in relation to conflict, since non-verbal communication cues yield as much if not more information than verbal. For example, even when verbally agreeing, distressed couples are more likely than non-distressed couples to display negative body language. Similarly, even while listening, distressed couples are more likely to demonstrate negative vocal, body, and facial cues (Gottman, Markman, & Notarius, 1977). Like marital research, I feel that observational methodology is well suited for an in-depth investigation of communication behaviors among adolescent dyads.

Theoretical Considerations: Framework of Intimate Partner Violence

Given my aim to situate adolescents' communication behaviors within marital and teen dating violence literatures, I relied on Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework of intimate partner violence to contextualize couples' communicative competencies as a source of risk or resilience. Drawing on several theories and empirical studies, Bell and Naugle state that the inability to successfully resolve interpersonal conflict (i.e., a "behavioral repertoire"; pg. 1102) is a risk factor for physical violence perpetration. As such, communicative competency is deemed an intrapersonal proximal antecedent to violence risk or avoidance; as it is coupled

with other distal and more stable traits (e.g., attachment style), the risk of relationship violence increases. Although this framework suggests empirically supported risk factors necessary for understanding the occurrence of interpersonal violence, it is also flexible in allowing for the integration and study of additional variables of interest as they inform the literature on partnering experiences more generally (Bell & Naugle). Given the scant literature on MA adolescents' communication of conflict, I aim to inform this framework via the integration of cultural and developmental considerations central to such youth's communicative competency. I do so by co-examining the communication behaviors of 10 committed MA dating couples alongside other published observational studies of adolescent conflict negotiation; exploring whether culturally-salient indicators discussed in literature (but not observed) are observable among this sample's discussion of conflict; and assessing whether communication behaviors deemed healthy among adult relationship researchers are observable among this sample of committed MA couples.

Methods

Sample and Procedure

This study is one of secondary data analysis. Participants for this study were selected from a larger pool that had taken an online survey as part the Mexican American Teen Relationships (MATR) study. In order to participate, adolescents were between the ages of 15 to 17 and self-identified as Mexican American. Youth were recruited from partnering high schools, community agencies (e.g., YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs), and community events in a large urban city in a Southwest border state. Participants were told that the study's purpose was to better understand the dating lives of Mexican American youth. Following the survey, thirty-four couples participated in a video-taped interaction task with a dating partner, also between the ages of 15 to 17. Individuals were linked across study components using unique

identifying numbers, stored in a password-protected database and accessible only to trained MATR researchers. Participants were ensured that their data would remain confidential including additional protection within the guidelines of the obtained Certificate of Confidentiality from the U.S. government. The governing Instructional Review Board approved this research, and all adolescents signed assent forms at the time of the survey. Consent forms were gained from at least one parent. All materials were provided in both Spanish and English. Following the survey, all participants were given \$15 and an educational handout with information on the prevention of teen dating violence and including community resources. Those participating in the interaction task also received \$15 per person. The survey (1.5 hours) and the video (1 hour) lasted approximately 2.5 hours total; couples interested in participating in the video-taped interaction task were given the option to either schedule for another time, or to participate immediately preceding the online survey.

The video-taped interaction task was facilitated by a minimum of two trained researchers, and was held in a private room either at the University or at a collaborating school or community center. A camera was set up in order to capture the faces and body language of participants, and a digital recorder was also placed on the table or desk in front of the couple. Facilitators waited outside the room while couples participated in three timed tasks. First, couples were given five minutes to collaboratively choose the top five movies of all time. Before beginning, they individually choose two issues in their relationship that were the most important or recent from a list of common problems (i.e., *Partner Issues Checklist*; Capaldi, Wilson, & Collier, 1994; also provided in Spanish) and were told to star their first choice. Following the warm-up task, they were given seven minutes to discuss each partner's chosen issue (i.e., totaling 14 minutes). Adolescents were not directed specifically to solve

the issue, but rather told generally to discuss it. This technique offered the benefit of allowing adolescents themselves to approach the conflict as they normally would if it came up. In cases where both partners chose the same issue, the starred issue of the adolescent initially recruited into the study was discussed, followed by his or her partner's second chosen issue. To conclude, couples were given five minutes (totaling 10 minutes) to discuss each partner's goals. A facilitator entered the room only at each time interval to give instructions and to keep time.

Given my interest in how Mexican American adolescent couples discuss areas of conflict, I choose to analyze those that were more seriously involved for the present study. This decision was based on literature suggesting that relationship types differ for adolescents (Manning et al., 2006), and that more committed types communicate in distinct ways (Shulman et al., 2006). This also served as a data reduction strategy that allowed me to explore couples' communication behaviors in a more in-depth manner (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). The online survey was used to identify couples that choose "going out" from a list of other less committed relationship types. Other options included "casually dating", "hooking up", "friends with benefits", "single", or "married". No couples were married and 10 couples mutually reported that they were "going out" and identified one another as their partner. Individuals were also asked to fill in the length of time that they had been dating. All couples in the present study answered within one month of one another, and each couples' averaged length of time is reported alongside example dialogue in the results section. I choose to analyze couples that mutually answered that they were "going out" at least six months, which actually yielded a range of 10 months to four years of relationship duration for the present study ($M = 26.5$ months; $SD = 14.62$ months). Three of the 10 couples analyzed were expecting a child or already parenting. Seven of the couples were the same

age; in three, the male was older. In terms of generational status, three couples were both U.S.-born; both were Mexico-born in one couple; and six couples were mismatched on this variable (i.e., one partner was born in Mexico and the other born in the U.S.) Age and generational status are also listed per couple in the results section.

Individuals from within the 10 couples analyzed attended seven different urban high schools, each of higher crime rates ($M = 207.71$ total crime rate index; CLR Choice, 2012) than the state ($M = 143$) and national ($M = 100$) averages. Of these schools, three were Title I eligible (i.e., a measure of risk indicating a low-income student body; National Association for the Education of Young Children, n.d.) and four were not. Schools consisted of ethnically diverse populations, with high proportions of Mexican heritage youth. One couple was from a particularly high-risk school (i.e., lower in SES, alternative 'last chance' school structure with nights/weekend classes). As a whole, the resulting sample of couples may be described as at higher risk in many ways (e.g., low SES, high crime rates) but also typical of the Southwest urban metropolitan area from which the larger sample was drawn. Regarding the latter, immigrant families are largely concentrated in Southwest border states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) and are at greater risk given more prevalent and severe forms of violence across multiple contexts including in schools, communities, and dating relationships (Smokowski, David-Feron, & Stroupe, 2009) as well as due to historical oppression and acculturative strain (Horevitz & Organista, 2012).

Data Analysis

This study used observational methodology to better understand how committed MA adolescent couples communicate concerning areas of relationship conflict. In comparison to individuals' self-report, observational methods uniquely reveal interactive and relational processes (Welsh & Shulman, 2008). Video-taped observations are thought to

provide an accurate snapshot of how couples interact (Galliher et al., 2004), and have been found to account uniquely for the variance explained in relationship quality (van Dulmen, Mata, Klipfel, 2011). Although researchers have more commonly utilized coding schemes to systematically and quantitatively delineate patterns of verbal and non-verbal communicative behaviors, each holds the inherent shortcoming of having been developed from marital literatures and primarily from research of European American couples (Welsh & Shulman). Qualitative analysis is particularly advantageous, however, when the research aim is to understand a new phenomenon or to compare populations of interest (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Approaching adolescents' observed discussion of conflict in an open-ended manner allowed for an enriched exploration concerning whether and to what extent MA adolescent couples' communication was (dis)similar to other adolescents, including an exploration of potentially influencing cultural norms.

Given my interest in developmental and cultural considerations central to adolescents' communication of conflict, I thus choose to use a combination of confirmatory and exploratory analytical techniques (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Each video was watched in its entirety in order to place discussion of conflict in context of the warm-up task and of goals. Conflict issues were transcribed verbatim and checked for reliability by a second researcher. Those containing Spanish were transcribed by a bilingual and bicultural researcher and validated by a native speaker of Spanish that also worked on the MATR study. Transcripts and video-taped interactions were analyzed for content, including attention to both verbal and non-verbal behaviors.

Following Crabtree and Miller's (1999) guidelines for qualitative analysis of text and observations, the data was first organized via a template approach. As Crabtree and Miller describe, the template may be close-ended or relatively open-ended, and is often modified as

a result of exploring the data. Data analysis began with an organizing template, meaning that developmental and cultural themes found among other adolescent researchers were sought for comparison in this sample of MA youth. In order to avoid forcing couples into pre-existing categories, however, new themes were sought for couples not easily classified by previous research. Modifications were then made to the template via an iterative process whereby transcripts and videos were revisited numerous times in a fluid process and with the aim of creating and verifying the application of meaningful units of analysis to the text and video. Similarly, and particularly where a new theme was found, subthemes were then sought and described via systematic inductive content analysis in order to better elucidate meaning within the larger theme (Crabtree & Miller). Segments of dialogue may have been coded using into one or more themes or subthemes. Throughout this process, I was guided by the literature on conflict resolution and communication among adolescents, young adults, and adults, as well as by that pertaining to cultural values that may differentiate Mexican American couples from other studies. Each step of the analysis process was documented in order to ensure qualitative rigor and NVivo (a qualitative software program; Gibbs, 2002) was used to maintain coding organization and to keep records of coded transcripts. Global themes were checked for inter-rater reliability by a second independent researcher with a resulting kappa of .77. In the subsequent sections, the iterative process that resulted in the final codebook is outlined.

Developmental Themes and Subthemes

First, and in order to incorporate a rich and emerging literature on observed conflict negotiation among adolescent couples, couples' communication interactions were coded for salient developmental themes. This offered the opportunity to assess whether MA couples' communication behaviors mirrored findings among other adolescents and/or possibly

among young adults. Specifically, others have found that adolescents tended to either, 1.) avoid the task (i.e., including joking around, getting off topic), or 2.) discuss their issues, but only concretely, briefly, or at a superficial level (e.g., downplay the significance the issue held in their relationship). Tuval-Masiach and Shulman (2006) found that adolescents in their study tended to do the latter in comparison to young adult couples who 3.) used the interaction task for authentic exploration of their conflict issues, thus deepening their understanding of the relationship (i.e., by seeking to understand why their partner felt a certain way, asking about others point of view, and/or decisions to adopt behaviors to help their relationship). The developmental section of the codebook (i.e., template) thus originally included each of the latter three themes, coded globally (i.e., whether or not the entirety of their interaction may be best described by one of the three broader themes). The first two themes were collapsed into one category in application to this sample. What is more, and given that many couples were not accurately described globally using any of the above themes, the revisited transcripts and videos were then revisited to inductively uncover themes that would more accurately uncover how MA couples communicated. This resulted in a new broad theme, “Talking About”. This new theme related that at least one of the two issues was thoroughly discussed (i.e., not minimized, attended to only concretely, and/or in a joking manner). This category was differentiated from Tuval-Mashiach and Shulman’s (2006) findings among young adults, however, in that by and large couples categorized within this theme did not demonstrate mutual authentic exploration of differences in order to better understand one another and deepen their relationship. Within this larger theme, inductive content analysis revealed that dialogue within the “Talking About” theme reflected the following subthemes: 1.) Blaming/criticism, 2.) One-sided taking of responsibility and/or attempts to problem-solve, and 3.) One-sided emotional supportiveness, and/or 4.)

Expressed helplessness. Although one-sided taking of responsibility and/or attempts to problem-solve may be further explored as two independent subthemes, these one-sided attempts co-occurred within this sample and it was thus considered uniformly for the present analysis.

Cultural Themes and Subthemes

In addition to developmental themes, attention was also afforded to the scant literature on MA adolescents' conflict negotiation and coded for the following: 1.) romanticized care (i.e., bids for demonstration of care/affection from the female on behalf of the male; Milbrath et al., 2009), 2.) *familismo* (i.e., evidence of strong family values including discussion of long-term partnering, parenting; respect for parental influence; parental involvement in their dating relationship; spending time with partner's family) and 3.) evidence of some positive dimensions of *machismo* (i.e., emotional availability, demonstrations of affection, desire to financially care for a female partner, for responsibility in child-rearing, and/or to the community or friends), or negative *machismo* (i.e., aggressiveness, emotional toughness, domineering, attempts to control decision-making). Romanticized care and *familismo* were considered dichotomous nominal variables and a second coder was asked to decipher whether each was present in adolescents' conversations or not. In regards to *machismo*, the second coder was also asked to decipher whether it was apparent during the interaction, and if so, whether it was primarily positive or negative. Finally, given that language use is sometimes used as proxy for acculturation and heritage retention (Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995; Updegraff et al., 2012), whether Spanish was used to any extent during the interaction by either or both partners was also coded.

Results

All couples utilized the entire time to discuss their chosen conflict issues, with the exception of one couple that was categorized as minimizing their issues and getting off topic. Three of 10 couples were classified as authentically exploring their issues (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006), and six of 10 couples were classified as talking about their issues. Each couple type is described in detail, using example excerpts of dialogue to illustrate differences across type. It should be noted that blaming and criticism were utilized in all conversations, and thus may point to a developmental trend. For some couples, however, this did not deter from authentic exploration of differences and a deepening of their understanding of the other person and of the relationship. Similarly, healthy communication behaviors (e.g., expressions of affection, problem-solving attempts) were also evidenced to at least some degree across all couples, including those that were categorized as minimizing/avoiding or talking about their issues.

Developmental themes are described in the following order, each progressively denoting the use of greater conflict negotiation skills: Minimizing/Avoiding, Talking About, and Authentically Exploring. The “talking about” theme, which emerged from the data, has been included within developmental themes in keeping with its comparison to what other studies have found. It is possible, however, that this may also denote a cultural trend (see discussion). Cultural themes reflective of the literature transcend communication style, and rather serve to contextualize it. Themes reflective of the literature on Mexican American cultural norms include *Familismo*, *Machismo*, and “Romanticized Care” (Milbrath et al., 2009). Five of the ten couples utilized at least some Spanish during their interaction.

Pseudo names are used to personalize couples’ dialogue and to ease reading. As each couple is introduced for the first time, each partner’s age and country of birth, the couple’s

length of relationship, and their chosen partner issues are listed (male's first). Refer to Table 1 for a list of numbered partner issues.

Developmental Themes

Minimizing Conflict/Task Avoidance. In line with what others have observed of adolescent conflict negotiation, I found that one couple tended to explore their issues superficially and spent much of their interaction task joking around or in silence.

Daniel (age 17; U.S.-born) and *Ariana* (age 16; Mexico-born): Relationship duration of 2 years, 1 month; Chosen conflict issues: 3, 23.

Both positive and neutral body language characterized Daniel and Ariana's interaction task, at times smiling at one another, and at times appearing distant and uncomfortable. They periodically conversed about their issues but by and large, were unsuccessful in sustaining dialogue. This resulted in brief and unfruitful segments of conversation:

Daniel: We didn't even talk for seven minutes...So why else are you jealous?
Ariana: That's the only reason.
Daniel: That's the only reason why you're jealous and you started being mean to me?
Ariana: Yea.
...
Daniel: So yea, anyways. So that's all we are going to do about it? Yea? (long silence, both partners look irritated and are staring at the table)

The couple ended their interaction task with continued joking, although notably, were more serious and held greater depth of conversation in discussing their goals.

Talking About. Many of the adolescents' conversations were not accurately described as minimizing/avoiding the topic, nor were couples authentically exploring their issues in a manner that demonstrated mutual problem-solving skills. A new category thus emerged, given that conversations did evidence serious discussion of one or both conflicts and reflected an in-depth attempt to dialogue about it for all or the majority of the time

allotted. Of note is that some couples did not limit their discussion to their chosen issues, but also veered or reverted to other issues as well. A majority of conversations were consumed, however, by blaming/criticism, interrupted by small stretches of one-sided taking of responsibility, suggestions, or voiced intentions for new behaviors to resolve the conflict. In contrast to couples categorized as “authentic exploration”, such communication behaviors were typically accompanied by unaffectionate body language, were only on behalf of one partner, and/or were met by further blaming and criticism. In addition, some partners picked new fights amidst discussion of the chosen topic. Thus, authentic and respectful conflict exploration was thwarted, led to further arguing, and sometimes to expressions of helplessness. Notably, there were instances in which helplessness was discussed early on in the conversation; however, statements reflected that this too was the result of previous arguing.

Most conversations were categorized within this theme, and I thus further inductively analyzed content for examples of various subcategories of “talking about” communication behaviors. Such communication behaviors may be considered healthy (Taking of Responsibility/Attempts to Resolve) and others unhealthy (Blaming/Criticism, Helplessness). Subcategories are outlined in the most common temporal ordering of dialogue, so as to give the reader a feel for the flow of conversation.

Blaming/Criticism. As stated, the use of blaming and criticism characterized much of the content across all conversation types; those that “talked about” their issues relied most heavily on this conflict tactic and thus often failed to make progress in their attempts at problem-solving.

Javier (age 17; Mexico-born) and *Christina* (age 17; U.S.-born); Relationship duration of 2 years, 3.5 months; Chosen conflict issues: 20, 3.

The following illustrates back and forth bantering that kept Javier and Christina from reaching a place of authentic exploration and instead resulted in escalating argument:

Javier: I try to talk to you and you just like hang up on me. How am I gonna try to talk to you if you're just going to hang up on me?

Christina: You do the same thing.

Javier: Why are you trying to flip it against me like that? We're just trying to like talk about it.

Christina: See what I just did different right now. You do that to me all the time.

Javier: Why are you trying to like - You're still doing it.

Christina: I know, but I'm just telling you.

Javier: But I'm just like...

Christina: I know, but I'm just telling you. You don't have to get pissed off.

Javier: You don't have to get defensive. I'm not getting pissed off.

Christina: I'm not getting defensive. I'm just telling you.

One-Sided Taking of Responsibility/ Attempts to Resolve. There were many instances during which one member of the pair took responsibility for a behavior, acknowledging his or her role in the conflict. These interactions fell short, however, of a respectful dialogue exchange and instead often resulted in further bantering or partner blaming:

Miguel (age 17; U.S.-born) and *Tanya* (age 17; U.S.-born); Relationship duration of 1 year; Chosen conflict issues: 3, 1.

Miguel: Okay, look! (lightly slaps her leg). I'm gonna try when I say things that I'm gonna call you when I- I'm gonna try more ok?

Tanya: You said that before.

Miguel: Okay, I'm telling you now again! Cuz you forgot.

Tanya: I forgot?

Miguel: Yea, you did.

Tanya: Forgot what?

Miguel: You forgot that I was going to try. But you don't try for nothing.

Tanya: You don't try!

The following interaction demonstrates evidence of conflict exploration, mutual attendance to the issue, and what may otherwise seem like an authentic deepening of the relationship – aside from Maria's distanced body language, negative affect, and disinterested tone of voice. Thus, the following excerpt was coded as taking responsibility/attempt to resolve within the larger “talking about” category:

Samuel (age 15; Mexico-born) and *Maria* (age 15; U.S.-born); Relationship duration of 1 year, 3.5 months; Chosen conflict issues: 3, 2.

Samuel: You think... spending a lot of time with me... will make you feel what?

Maria: Like, I like spending time with you but I need time, like for my friends and I too.

Samuel: Mmk, well, I don't know. With your friends, they're your friends and I should never have even tried to pull you away from them. I know if, I wouldn't have liked it... You want me to give you more time with your friends?

Maria: Yea. Like that's what I need. Cuz like, yea I like spending time with you, but we need to be like, a little distant so when we do see each other, it's like, it's better you know.

Samuel: Yea.

Maria: You get me.

Samuel: Yea. Like when you see- when we see each other, we'll be like expecting to be together and not worry about time.

Maria: Yea. (long pause, she sighs)

Helplessness. Adolescents' dialogue offers insight into why arguing may lead couples to a sense of helplessness concerning their ability to successfully resolve conflict. Some couples explicitly referenced their tendency to argue without resolution:

Javier: If I try to talk to you, all we are going to do is argue.

Christina: Exactly. That's the only talk about it.

Javier: Like a big argument.

Reflective of this subtheme, I also coded for specific examples of giving up during their interaction task. Some couples reflected that they hadn't gotten anywhere during their discussion and Ariana even thought the research would not be interested in their failed attempt: "Todo lo que salga mal, lo van a borrar" [Everything that comes out wrong, they are going to erase]. Another example reflects an argument whereby Miguel had texted his girlfriend a heart. She mistrusted him, and questioned where he had learned to do so:

Miguel: I'm not that stupid. I can see a heart when I see one.

Tanya: (whispered) That one girl sent you a text with the heart.

Miguel: Alright. Cuz that's way easier than trying to tell you. Just agreeing what you say... Cuz I try and do something nice for you but you won't take it...

Tanya: It's cuz, it's the first time I've seen you do hearts. It seemed weird.

Miguel: Well it's the last time I try and do anything nice. I can't even say 'I love you'.

Tanya: Oh so now you're hurt?

Miguel: Hmm? No, it's whatever. It's whatever. Now I know it's whatever to you.

Authentically Exploring. In contrast to those that “talked about” their issues, I identified three of 10 couples that used the interaction as a tool to enhance the relationship through mutual authentic exploration of their chosen conflict issues. These conversations included evidence of seeking to understand why a partner felt a certain way, decisions to adopt new behaviors to help the relationship, and/or evidence of insight gained through the conversation. Although anger was often evident, couples also displayed use of nonverbal affection (e.g., hand-holding, touching, facing one another, smiling).

Arturo (age 17; U.S.-born) and *Natalia* (age 17; U.S.-born); Relationship duration of 1 year; Chosen conflict issues: 10, 18.

Natalia and Arturo delved into discussion of their first chosen issue, quickly exploring possible solutions. In the context of the conversation, Natalia was frustrated that Arturo was living at her house.

Arturo: I don't know. Do you think we spend too much time together?

Natalia: Yes. .

Arturo: Why?

Natalia: Cuz sometimes – cuz we're always together.

Arturo: So what do you want to do about it?

Natalia: I don't know. Just something.

Arturo: Do you want me take like a day or two, maybe stay at your house for a while?

...

Natalia: I don't know what there is to do about it. Until you get your own apartment there's not really anything to do about it until you stay at your house.

Arturo: Well my car's gonna be fixed by next week. Should be. Like I told you, when Friday comes...Ok? I love you.

Natalia: I love you too.

The above chosen issue reflected too much time spent together, yet the two were expecting a child and also recognized that they were going to need to come together through the experience. Following a change in topic to discussion of not having enough money, their dialogue evidenced both emotionally turning towards one another, and attempts to

compromise. Specifically, they debated how they would afford things for themselves while also setting aside money for the baby:

Natalia: Cuz technically by law, your only responsibility is the baby. Okay, so all you need to do is pay whatever you need to for the baby.

Arturo: But that's not my only responsibility.

Natalia: (pauses, laughs) Why?

Arturo: Because I love you, I told you already.

Natalia: But that doesn't mean you have to-

Arturo: It doesn't matter. What am I gonna be a douche and like buy myself everything new?

Natalia: And I buy myself stuff when I have time to find a job.

Arturo and Natalia didn't necessarily agree, but their conversation evidenced sharing feelings with the other and they ultimately made progress in seeking solutions.

Sebastian (age 17; U.S.-born) and *Jackie* (age 17; U.S.-born); Relationship duration of 4 years; Chosen conflict issues: 23, 11.

Sebastian and Jackie communicated at length about each of their jealousy concerns and both offered suggestions for resolving the conflict. Each demonstrated a desired ability to better understand the other's needs and Arturo in particular communicated his feelings concerning how he felt when Jackie spent time with other males.

Jackie: Well what are we gonna do to fix it?

Sebastian: Stop being so territorial. And yea, I'm gonna tell you that I'm jealous.

Jackie: Okay.

Sebastian: And I-

Jackie: No, just leave it at that.

Sebastian: No, let me talk. Let me talk. But yea, I'm jealous of him because he is gonna be spending time with you. He's your friend. (she giggles) But I mean, he's your friend and I respect that. Like how you went to the movies with DJ?

Jackie: Mmhmm.

Sebastian: I got a little mad cause I didn't know about it. Don't say you're gonna do something and I have to find out through somebody else. *That's* what ticks me off.

Jackie: You rather you just knew straight up?

Sebastian: See how I told you I went to the movie with Rosie. I told you. I asked you. Yea you got mad, but I asked you.

Sebastian and Jackie's conversation was interspersed with blaming or criticism but overall, both members communicated a mutual desire to make their relationship better. The

following illustrates how Sebastian felt during conversations of conflict, and Jackie's desire to be a better communicator:

Sabastian: See and then you do that. That's not what we're talking about. And now we have it on camera. (she laughs) That's what you do when we talk, you try to dig me in a hole.

Jackie: Cuz you make me want to.

Sebatian: Well I'm digging the hole and then you're just like up there teasing me. You pull the ladder up where I can't get out.

Jackie: Okay, we can clean the hole. I'll dump all the dirt back in there.

Guillermo (age 16; Mexico-born) and *Lydia* (age 15; Mexic-born); Relationship duration of 1 year, 3.5 months; Chosen conflict issues: 23, 3.

Guillermo and Lydia's conversation exhibited mutual emotional closeness and validation of the other's point of view. Through conversation, they sought solutions to what they perceived may otherwise be an escalation of jealousy:

Lydia: So, we're gonna need to trust each other. Well...

Guillermo: Especially cuz you're moving schools.

Lydia: And we won't see each other as often. But yea.

Guillermo: We hear there's rumors about us. Doing stuff. Bad stuff that we shouldn't. Let's not get mad...

Lydia: Talk to each other.

Guillermo: First talk about it. See what's the real thing.

Lydia: See if it's true.

Guillermo and Lydia reached an agreement during their interaction that jealousy was not good for their relationship, and that they were going to both try to trust one another more:

Guillermo: Well, you know like - say I'm going to try - we try and stop being jealous. It's not because we don't care about each other, you know? Cuz we have to trust each other.

Lydia: Yes...(nodding)

Guillermo: We're dating. You're supposed to trust me, and I'm supposed to trust you.

Rather than end on terms that may otherwise evidence superficial and concrete agreement, they continued to explore differences. They also recognized that they could agree to disagree, and all the while, displayed affection towards the other:

Lydia: Sometimes we both – we both take it [jealousy] too far.

Guillermo: Yea. But sometimes I don't even, I don't show it. I'd rather just keep it in here cuz then it's gonan affect us. You might think I don't trust you. Or this and that, you know? Sometimes I just keep it in.

Lydia: I don't. I can't.

Guillermo: Why can't you?

Lydia: I always tell you when I'm jealous. Yep, I always tell you.

Guillermo: Me too, but then I realize it's just...we're gonna argue and then...

Lydia: It's not bad. I just can't keep it in.

Guillermo: We can't all have the same...Like say I get jealous, I don't say it. If you get jealous, you'd say it. We're not all the same. (holding hands, smiling)

Cultural Themes

Developmental considerations intersect with cultural norms, and couples' conversations were better understood within the premises of *familismo*, positive *machismo*, and instances of romanticized care. Each of these is presented in order of their saliency within the interactional discourse. At times, these themes took different form than that portrayed in the literature.

Machismo. No evidence was found of negative *machismo*, and many males demonstrated evidence of positive *machismo*. Such verbal and non-verbal communication behaviors reflected caring for one's partner, friends, family, or for a child. Males appeared emotionally available, rather than aggressive or domineering. As referenced above, Anthony and Karen discussed raising their daughter; there was some expectation for traditional gender-roles in doing so, although dialogue also reflected Anthony's active role in parenting:

Karen: She's a baby. She don't know what's right or wrong.

Anthony: But you do and you're supposed to teach her.

Karen: ...I think you just over-exaggerate.

Anthony: So? I love her too much.

Karen: You do love her. You don't let her play with the dog because you said she's gonna be allergic to the dog. She's not gonna be allergic to the dog.

Demonstrations of positive *machismo* also stemmed from males' sense of responsibility to friendships. For example, Anthony felt that Karen's friendships with long-held friends were important, despite the feelings of jealousy that they sometimes provoked: *"I know that either way you're gonna do it [talk to them] because it's a friend or someone you've known for a long time. Cause I know all your friends, we've known them since we were (gestures height) still that tall. (she laughs) You know?"* Finally, positive *machismo* at times took the form of romantic and expressive words towards a partner: *"Like every other girl in high school is not even close as to you. Like when I was with you..like every hour felt like minutes because, I don't know, I just wanted to be with you."* (Samuel)

Familismo. Strong family values were also evident in many couples' discussions of conflict issues. This included references to spending a great deal of time in a dating partner's home, even living with the other's family (e.g., see Arturo and Natalia's early conversation within the "Authentically Exploring" theme). For Arturo and Natalia, this exceeding amount of time together evidenced potential for conflict (*"...cuż if we had homework, we would never get it done."*, Natalia). Relatedly, Robert's father desired that Madeline spend more time with his family: *"He wants to get to know you better, and that's why he's been telling me to tell you to...come over for like burgers or like out to eat with the family."* Robert's father had expressed that he wanted Robert to have a family of his own, something the couple joked about during their interaction.

Robert (age 16; U.S.-born) and Madeline (age 16; Mexico-born). Relationship duration of 10 months. Chosen conflict issues: 7, 3.

Madeline: He [Madeline's father] said he wants grandchildren.

Robert: Mmk. Are you gonna tell him they're gonna come out with eight eyes? (points to his own glasses)

Madeline: Yea! I know, yea I told him. I'm like... "Well, dad, they're gonna need glasses."

Robert went on to empathize with the strict dating rules that Madeline's father endorsed, and *familismo* was again demonstrated via respect for his authority. Roberto felt that he had earned her father's good graces by talking with him about their relationship:

Madeline: ...And it's surprising because like in the past, like I've had, um, boyfriends and like I wouldn't tell him. I'd only tell my mom. And when he'd find out, he'd like get all mad and stuff and tell me to break up with him and stuff. So like, I'd pretty much have to cause I used to be scared of him. But like this time that's not what happened, like –

Robert: But you gotta think about it. This time it's different because I actually told him, you know?

Madeline: Oh yea, I know.

Robert: See like, there's a difference...I get how your dad is because, you know, I'm a guy too. And I know how it'd feel...

At times, *familismo* was more overt and included discussion of current pregnancy or parenting challenges (e.g., "*My time is like staying at home being nauseous or sleepy...that's why I don't think it's fair. Cuz your time you can still go out with your friends. I'm too tired to do any of that stuff.*," Natalia). Anthony and Karen shared a home together and fought about whose responsibility it was to take care of their baby.

Anthony (age 17; Mexico-born) and *Karen* (age 16; U.S.-born). Relationship duration of 4 years. Chosen conflict issues: 7, 3.

Karen: Stop! You play too much too.

Anthony: Why, I can't play?

Karen: Not if we have to share a household...You're always ragging about me doing something so you have a lot of things that we disagree on, but you just don't wanna talk.

Anthony: You don't wake up to feed her.

Karen: No, cause you- cause you're awake! Why would I wake up if you're awake? (laughs)...what else?

Anthony: You let her cry.

Karen: I do not let her cry, you let her cry. (both laugh) You let her cry, you're like "Dejala porque llore" (Leave her because she's crying).

Romanticized Care. Some evidence of "romanticized care" as described by Milbrath and colleagues (2009) was found. Often, bids for affection were in the context of

criticism; however, it is recognized this is likely given the nature of the task itself (i.e., discussion of conflict issues). This may offer strength to the validity of this theme in that such bids were deemed salient enough to dispute about.

Nathan (age 15; Mexico-born) and *Cecilia* (age 15; U.S.-born); Relationship duration of 1 year and 3 months; Chosen conflict issues: 12, 4.

In the following example, Cecilia complains that her partner, Nathan, had not bought her flowers to celebrate their one-year in anniversary. Although this request was met with name-calling, both members of the couple displayed positive affect towards the other and used sarcasm jokingly:

Cecilia: So are you going to provide money now?

Nathan: Yea, yea yea. I always have money.

Cecilia: Boyfriends should always buy their girlfriends something nice, like jewelry.

Nathan: Always?

Cecilia: Always!

Nathan: What about us?

Cecilia: Like roses. You didn't even bring me roses. You haven't even brought me roses for this year and three months we have been dating. What's up with that?!

Romanticized care is best understood as contextualized within long-term thinking about the relationship (*"What is one day we decide to get married and you don't even have a job. How are you going to support me? How are you going to provide for me?"*, Cecilia) which, in the context of marriage and family, was also coded as *familismo*. Similarly, Natalia bid for her partner's time and this instance was also coded as *familismo*, given that nature of the time request pertained to Mother's Day:

Natalia: No, but you've asked for days off too.

Arturo: Two occasions.

Natalia: Exactly.

Arturo: But they're special occasions.

Natalia: But Mother's Day's not a special occasion?

Arturo: It *is* a special occasion.

As evidenced, each of the broader cultural themes at times reflected embedded contexts. For example, relationship expectations for fiscal responsibility reflected not only romanticized care, but also a female's expectations of attributes embedded in positive *machismo*. Likewise, fiscal responsibility in the above example exemplified the couples' budding family as something to be celebrated.

Discussion

In Welsh and Shulman's (2008) review of what we have learned from the application of quantitative coding schemes to adolescent couples' observed communication, the authors conclude that "it is reasonable to question whether coding systems developed for the study of families and adult couples, despite their flexibility, are sensitive enough to capture distinctive aspects in the study of adolescent romantic relationships." (p. 883). Given this need to ground observations qualitatively in adolescents' interaction discourses, the present study used an inductive exploratory approach to better understand how Mexican American adolescent couples between the ages of 15 to 17 communicate about chosen areas of conflict in their relationships. Some evidence was found of overlapping developmentally salient themes identified in observations of other adolescent couples (Welsh & Shulman); however, most couples in this sample explored their issues in greater depth than may be expected given the literature. Culturally salient themes were also identified, particularly evidence of positive *machismo* and *familismo*. Findings point to the importance of viewing adolescents' negotiation of conflict in light of relationship commitment, and at the intersection of development and culture.

Relationship Commitment

Some have suggested that MA couples date more seriously than European American youth (Williams & Hickle, 2010), which is supported by their earlier transitions to marriage

(Goodwin et al., 2009; Phillips & Sweeney, 2005) and higher teen pregnancy rates (Kost et al., 2010). The couples in this study had been dating for a range of 10 months to four years, and three couples were either pregnant or parenting. The development of healthy conflict negotiation skills may be particularly important at earlier ages for such MA youth. To the contrary, observational studies have largely concluded that adolescents primarily attend to conflict concretely, superficially, and in a manner that upholds the idealistic nature of the relationship (see Welsh & Shulman, 2008 for a review). Thus, their conversations tend to be briefer than young adult couples (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006), and instead include a good deal of joking around and task avoidance (Furman & Shomaker, 2008). A key finding of the present study points to more serious forms of communication among committed MA couples.

Partners in this study overtly acknowledged areas of conflict in their relationship (i.e., rather than minimized their issues) and utilized the time allotted for thorough discussion. Nonetheless, many conversations were also not successfully categorized as demonstrative of authentic exploration of differences (e.g., arriving at a compromise, mutual problem-solving; Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman). Thus, a new theme emerged that characterized many of couples' exchanges as "talking about" their issues. The content of such conversations consisted primarily of partner blaming and criticism, and like adolescents in Tuval-Mashiach and Shulman's study, this often derailed the conversation and prevented finding equitable solutions. This experience was frustrating for couples, and many expressed helplessness in their ability to successfully resolve their issues. Although undesirable, this suggests that such adolescents possessed meta-cognitive awareness of their difficulty communicating, and perhaps that they would be open to instruction concerning healthy relationship skills. Marital researchers have advocated for laying important communication skills during the adolescent

years (Tabares & Gottman, 2003), and indeed, others have found that Mexican American and European American youth desire an enhanced ability to negotiate conflict successfully (Adams & Williams, 2011).

Of interest is that verbally aggressive communication tactics are common among adolescent couples (Muñoz-Rivas, Grana, O'Leary, & Gonzalez, 2007), and may therefore be a developmental trend. Irrespective of its prevalence, however, the extent to which couples resorted to verbal aggression is also concerning given that these communication behaviors have been associated with physical violence perpetration (Feldman & Ridley, 2000) and victimization (Cornelius, Shorey, & Beebe, 2010). Therefore, I also advocate for the addition of level of Deciphering more normative and transient forms of verbal aggression from enduring and relationally devastating is difficult given that theoretical underpinnings are underdeveloped (Cornelius et al.; Shorey et al., 2008). Co-examining adolescents' communication behavior alongside adult literatures remains an imperative task, particularly as preliminary evidence has suggested that the same negative communication behaviors predictive of marital distress also predict relationship aggression among adolescent couples (Cornelius et al.). Correspondingly, caution is warranted in haphazardly transferring empirical evidence deductively, as certain communication behaviors deemed healthy within marital literatures (i.e., repair attempts; Gottman & Silver, 1999) also predicted aggression in this same study (Cornelius et al.). In order to make further meaningful connections, future research should link observed patterns of communication behaviors to relationship outcomes over time. I hope that this study has laid initial groundwork for such research through its imploring of inductive qualitative methods.

Qualitative analysis of observational interactions facilitated the emergence of alternative ways of thinking about adolescent conflict negotiation, and these findings

peripherally challenge the notion that adolescents uniformly view their relationships in idealistic terms. This may perhaps reflect a cultural trend not necessarily applicable (i.e., at least not uniformly) to MA adolescents, and is informative in lieu of findings pointing to more stable marriages for this population, even among MA youth that marry before age 20 (Phillips & Sweeney, 2005). A strong emphasis on the family, together with a Catholic valuing of marriage, may contribute to a sense of resilient unity dissimilar from the majority culture. That is, where preserving a sense of unwavering and positive togetherness may lead less committed adolescent couples to downplay disagreement (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006), perhaps more committed MA couples endorse a less idealistic view of conflict as potentially leading to relationship dissolution. This sample is unique from other studies in a number of ways, each of which bears resemblance to literature concerning Mexican cultural considerations. First, adolescent relationships are typically shorter on average than the couples in the present study (Shulman & Scharf, 2000), most of who had been dating well over a year and some as long as four years (i.e., beginning as early as age 12). Also, while less committed relationship types are not uncommon in adolescence (e.g., friends with benefits, hookups; Manning et al., 2006), one-third of this recruited sample mutually attested that they were in a going out relationship. Finally, many couples discussed child-rearing and marriage in their interaction task, and three couples analyzed were already pregnant or parenting; to the contrary, others have speculated that adolescents' minimization of conflict aligns with an unlikelihood that couples are thinking of their relationships in terms of long-term partnering goals (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman). Thus, while shorter-term relationship goals, relationship naivety, and romantic infatuation have largely contextualized observations of adolescent couples' negotiation of conflict (Montgomery; Shulman et al., 2008; Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman), this study underscores the significance of attending to cultural norms that

encourage earlier and more committed adolescent relationships. Resiliency amidst awareness and confrontation of differences may actually aid MA youth in sustaining satisfying and enduring relationships unto adulthood.

Adult relationship competence follows the successful achievement of a healthy identity development during the adolescent years, although these processes overlay and mutually support one another (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). Thus, it is speculated that “talking about” may be an intermediary phase of learning how to negotiate differences in a manner that attends to one’s own needs before having learned to also incorporate a partner’s. Acknowledging the existence of an identified issue as problematic is a first and necessary step in working through it, and individuals’ ability to express their own feelings and desires within the relationship reflects a more mature form of intimacy building than circumventing such differences (Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Thus, it may be viewed as a strength that MA couples remained together despite evidenced challenges in solving disagreements in a manner devoid of partner blaming, defensiveness, threats, and insults. The next developmental evolution would reflect an enhanced ability to take the other’s needs into consideration, evidencing the ability to negotiate self with another (Blatt & Blass, 1996).

The overt nature of conflict negotiation should be considered within gendered expectations that undergo adaptations as youth acculturate. Although traditional gender roles characteristic of Mexico (e.g., *marianismo*) dictate that females foster harmonious and agreeable interpersonal exchanges (Castillo et al., 2010), this view may paint a somewhat antiquated picture of acculturating Mexican American adolescents’ relationship experiences. Acculturation has been linked to females’ use of more overt and aggressive conflict tactics (Flores et al., 2004) and many females in the present study did, in fact, utilize confrontational and direct forms of communication (i.e., including partner criticism). Although males also

relied heavily on blaming and criticism, coders agreed that males in this study more often evidenced a more mature ability to remain respectful of differences, to accept partner influence, and to raise potential avenues for relationship betterment. This evidenced tendency resulted in often coding such interactions as illustrative of positive *machismo*.

Findings align with a multi-dimensional view of acculturation, highlighting the need to continue research on the positive underpinnings of *machismo* as separate from negative (Arciniega et al., 2008; Pardo et al., 2012). Males in this study were largely emotionally available and demonstrated concern for their girlfriends' well being, as well as a commitment to friendships and, in applicable cases, parental responsibility. Such characteristics surfaced amidst negative comments (i.e., blame, affronts) generated by both members of the couple, and were made more apparent by viewing the videos in their entirety and in consideration of both verbal and non-verbal cues (i.e., body language turned towards the female, hand-holding, smiling). Although evidence of positive versus negative *machismo* during the interaction task was sought, it is important to consider that these traits may also co-exist and are context-driven. For example, as discussed by Milbrath and colleagues (2009), characteristics associated with negative *machismo* are more likely to surface among peers while “softer” attributes may be displayed in one-on-one interaction with a female partner.

In addition to a valuing of family and positive *machismo* attributes, there was some evidence of “romanticized care”, a Mexican American cultural construct described by Milbrath and colleagues (e.g., desiring gifts from a male partner; 2009). Within relationships that were already serious, however, this construct likely shares overlap with larger societal norms that dictate male demonstration of affection. For example, others have similarly found that both European American and Mexican American adolescent males feel that doing nice things for a female partner was required in order to keep them happy in the

relationship (Adams & Williams, 2011); it is reasonable to expect that this construct is particularly pronounced for holidays (e.g., Mother's Day) and relationship anniversaries. On the other hand, Milbrath and colleagues suggest that such bids may be heightened as a substitute for sexual intercourse among Catholic-abiding adolescents and within a cultural context of long-term partnering goals. Females may, in fact, view such demonstrations as evidence of caring for her and a future family – perhaps simultaneously reinforcing and fostering her partner's positive *machismo* characteristics.

Characteristics subsumed within positive *machismo* have been linked to marital health, both among European American couples (Gottman & Silver, 1999), as well as among Mexican American (Pardo et al., 2012). Although notably complex, overt forms of assertive argumentation coupled with positive *machismo* and *familismo* may reflect adolescents' struggle to reconcile competing cultural norms for gendered behavior; for example, while Mexican American males shift at dissimilar and slower rates from traditional gender attitudes than females (Updegraff et al., 2012), positive forms of male adolescent *machismo* are often unmeasured and contribute to relationship dynamics in manners not yet fully understood. Moreover, both genders' emphasis on traditional family values and dating norms (*familismo*; e.g., time spent with one another's families, discussion of marriage and childrearing) was apparent among many of the couples studied, lending support to the notion that "Changes in one dimension of acculturation may not mean that other dimensions are changing at the same rate or in the same direction, and the fact that one dimension is changing does not guarantee that others will change as well." (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010, p. 246). Although acculturation was not examined specifically, many youth were born in Mexico and many also spoke at least some Spanish during their interaction task. Such youth are called upon to navigate conflicting cultural proscriptions for dating behavior,

including relational expectations of the other (Milbrath et al., 2009). Results warrant a more nuanced and multi-faceted approach to understanding (perhaps dissimilarly) changing cultural constructs in the context of MA couple's negotiation of conflict. I suggest a continued focus on the dyadic processes central to adolescents' romantic relationships (i.e., in comparison to individuals' perceptions, as is common).

Additions to Bell and Naugle's Framework: Developmental and Cultural

Considerations

Both relationship seriousness and pregnancy have been associated with greater likelihood for couple-level violence in adolescence (Giordano, Soto, Manning, & Longmore, 2010; Silverman, Raj, Mucci, & Hathaway, 2001); level of commitment may, therefore, be a valuable developmental contribution to Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework of intimate partner violence. Perhaps greater level of commitment is tied to fear of loss, particularly during the high school years when adolescents may receive messages from adults that their relationships are unlikely to succeed long-term (Collins, 2003). Individuals within the couple experience may also experience mismatch in their level of commitment, which it itself may be a source of conflict. The latter may be particularly difficult for MA couples, whereby acculturation processes could indifferently affect each member of the dyad, including the extent to which familial versus individualist (e.g., delaying marriage for career pursuit) goals are adapted (Updegraff et al., 2012).

Study Limitations

This study provides only a snapshot of how a particular sample of MA adolescent couples communicates concerning areas of conflict in their relationship. I feel it is a valuable first step in better attending to the perhaps more serious partnering experiences among at least a segment of this population, and particularly among those deciding to date for

extended periods of time. The findings presented here are not necessarily applicable, however, to other MA youth (e.g., those dating less time, more casually, or in geographic areas other than a Southwest border state). I am unable to speculate on MA couples that have been together for less amounts of time, a notable limitation since the analyses were narrowed to more committed and lengthier partnerships. Findings do, however, allude to the importance of considering how long a couple has been dating in addition to their developmental time period. This suggestion reiterates others who have similarly noted the importance of taking relationship length into greater account in studying adolescent conflict negotiation (Cornelius et al., 2010). Furthermore, given Mexican American adolescents' diverse acculturative experiences, it is recognized that there is ample within-group heterogeneity of their partnering experiences, necessitating systematic and longitudinal study designs. I hope that together with others' findings concerning the unique nature of adolescents' conflict negotiation (Welsh & Shulman, 2008), this study will contribute to the design of valid measurements for diverse adolescent populations.

In addition to the noted considerations, future studies should assess parent-child and parent's dyadic relationships in order to place adolescents' communication behaviors within the context of intergenerational acculturative processes. The latter point is particularly relevant in light of others' findings that certain communicative behaviors are transmitted (e.g., from parental interactions to adolescent romantic relationships), while others are less so (e.g., parent-child interactions to adolescent romantic relationships; Darling, Cohan, Burns, & Thompson, 2008). Collecting data on parental relationships and their attitudes about adolescent dating, as well as among adolescents themselves, would serve to contextualize cultural themes. This would also aid in gaining a better understanding of how MA adolescents both draw from Mexican cultural norms and deviate from them, given distinct

challenges in navigating opposing frames of reference concerning dating and gendered behavior (Milbrath et al., 2009). Given that cultural allegiances reduce over time among MA youth (Updegraff et al., 2012), attending to how and which culturally-related behaviors are carried forward into dating relationships holds particular relevancy in seeking to understand couples' conflict negotiation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Communication behaviors remain far less studied than other relationship components (e.g., shared activities, sexual behavior, emotional processes), but research has consistently shown that the quality of adolescents' first relationship experiences shape subsequent intimate partnerships into adulthood (Collins et al., 2009; Tabares & Gottman, 2003). Observational methods provided a superlative manner through which to ground MA adolescents' communication of conflict in light of empirical adolescent, cultural, and marital literatures. Like marital researchers, I found that nonverbal cues (e.g., body language, tone of voice) were as important as verbal in identifying salient interactional patterns (Gottman et al., 1977). I hope that this study will stimulate increased interest in laying inductive foundations central to adolescent couples' communication behavior, particularly within conflict contexts and attending to the juncture of cultural and developmental considerations. Such research holds not only empirical but practical importance given that few programs are developed for ethnic minority adolescents using a culturally grounded approach (Holleran Steiker et al., 2008). Mexican American couples in this sample demonstrated adherence to cultural norms (e.g., positive *machismo*, *familismo*) that may serve as a protective buffer in the face of acculturative stressors; this affect may be pronounced among youth that successfully navigate between U.S. and Mexican proscriptions for behavior (Marsiglia, Parsai, & Kulis, 2009). On the other hand, having identified communication behaviors reflective of

maladaptive relationship health among adult couples (e.g., defensiveness, criticism, blaming; Gottman & Silver, 1999) points to a need for early intervention in order to help adolescents lay important healthy groundwork in their first – and potentially serious and lasting -- relationship experiences.

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Table 1. *Partner Issues Checklist.*

Item
1. Partner promising to do something and then not doing it.
2. Partner expecting you to do everything with them when you'd like to spend time with others.
3. Partner being jealous if you talk to other men/women.
4. Never having enough money.
5. Partner not doing share of household tasks.
6. Disagreeing on how to deal with the children.
7. Parents not liking your partner.
8. Sex/contraception issues.
9. Not having shared hobbies or interests.
10. Expecting you to spend so much time either with them or talking on the phone that you can't get your work, or other things you have to do, done.
11. Having a hard time talking to each other, knowing what to talk about.
12. Not feeling able to be yourself around them.
13. Not liking partner's attitudes or behaviors.
14. Not liking some of your partner's friends.
15. Partner not having a job.
16. Partner not spending enough time with you.
17. Partner flirting with other men/women
18. Partner spending too much money so you have trouble paying bills.
19. Partner not washing, taking care of hair or clothes.
20. Partner avoiding talking about difficult issues.
21. How to end a relationship.
22. Partner putting you down in front of others.
23. Where to go when you go out together

Chapter 3

PAPER 2

Discrepancy in Acculturation and *Machismo* among Mexican American Dating Couples:
Exploring Associations with Observed Negativity during Discussion of Conflict

Heidi L. Adams, Doctoral Candidate

Abstract

Adolescents in dating relationships experience greater levels of conflict than their peers, and the ways in which conflict is navigated carries important implications for the establishment of healthy relationships into adulthood. What is more, acculturating Mexican American adolescent couples face unique stressors given differing U.S. versus Mexican cultural norms for gendered behavior within dating contexts, and adolescent males retain traditional gender role attitudes to a greater extent than females. Using observational and self-report methods, this study explored the role of couple-level discrepancy in acculturation and *machismo* in Mexican American dating couples' (N=30) experience of negativity during discussion of relationship conflict. Adolescent males were more endorsing of *machismo* statements than were adolescent females, and couples' discrepancy in Anglo-orientation was significantly associated with discrepancy in *machismo*. Discrepancy in Anglo-orientation was also positively associated with observed negativity and conflict, although this relationship was not mediated by couples' discrepancy in *machismo* as hypothesized. Mexican-orientation and overall acculturation discrepancy, on the other hand, did not yield significant associations. Results support a multi-dimensional acculturative framework, as well as point to the importance of considering the couple as the unit of analysis in seeking to better understand how acculturating adolescent couples navigate differing gender-related viewpoints.

Introduction

Conflict is an inherent component of dating relationships, and studies with adults have suggested that it is not whether it occurs but *how it is navigated* that predicts longevity and satisfaction (Gottman, 1999). Research with adolescent and young adult populations, however, suggest that many youth do not possess competency in navigating intense negative emotions and conflict with a romantic partner (Stets & Henderson, 1991; Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999; Muñoz-Rivas, Grana, O’Leary, & Gonzalez, 2007; Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). This may be expected from youth’s first dating experiences, but is complicated for Mexican American (MA) youth who are also called upon to navigate differing cultural proscriptions for dating (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004) and many of whom transition to more mature forms of relationships (i.e., marriage, child-bearing) at earlier ages than European Americans (East, 1998; Kost, Henshaw, & Carlin, 2010). Gaining a better understanding of how Mexican origin youth communicate about areas of conflict in their dating relationships is deserving of scholarly study, as patterns established in adolescent dating relationships are thought to forecast the quality of long-term partnerships in adulthood (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Furman & Flanagan, 1997; Tabares & Gottman, 2003). Positive experiences are associated with feelings of self-worth (Collins, 2003), happiness and acceptance (Larson et al., 1999), and healthy identity development (Furman & Shaffer, 2003). These experiences may be critical for MA dating couples, as relationships aid in the formation of both their individual (Beyers & Seiffke-Krenke, 2010) and ethnic identities (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Relationships marked by communicative ineffectiveness, on the other hand, may be negatively life-impacting; a lack of such skills may result in teen dating violence (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Foshee, Karriker-Jaffe, McNaughton Reyes, Ennett, Suchindran, Bauman,

et al., 2008), unplanned pregnancies, and/or the acquisition of sexually transmitted infections (STIs; Ryan, Franzetta, Manlove, & Holcombe, 2007).

Although adolescence marks an important time period for the establishment of interpersonal patterns critical to relationship satisfaction and health (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009), few if any studies that explore how individual cultural components influence communication processes among Mexican origin youth living in the United States.

Moreover, scholarly work in the field of relationship research has relied most heavily on the study of individuals rather than on the relationship itself as the unit of analysis (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). It has also overrelied on samples of European American youth (Arnett, 2008; Collins et al.). Attention to the communication patterns, gender roles, and power structures within the couple is needed to gain an in-depth understanding of relational experiences (Babcock, Waltz, Jacobson, & Gottman, 1993), which are undoubtedly affected by cultural norms. Specific to MA youth, gender roles shift in dissimilar manners for adolescent females as compared to adolescent males throughout acculturation processes (Updegraff, Umaña-Taylor, McHale, Wheeler, & Perez-Brena, 2012), holding clear relevancy for studying acculturation within dating partnerships. Females in particular are more likely to shift away from traditional gender role viewpoints, while males continue to adhere more closely to them as characteristic of Latino gender proscriptions (Updegraff et al.). This divergence in acculturation and associated belief systems may contribute to tension and heightened conflict among dating couples (Miranda et al., 2006; Montoya, 1996; Perilla et al., 1994; Sanderson et al.; Ulloa et al., 2008).

This study fills a gap in the literature by investigating how couple-level asymmetries in acculturation and traditional gender beliefs may be associated with negativity and conflict in discussion of chosen problem issues among MA dating couples ages 15 to 17. This age

range captures a time during which many Latino teens enter into their first serious relationship (Raffaelli, 2005). In combination with individual self-reports of cultural experiences and values, the direct observation of couples captures adolescents' communication behaviors in a nuanced manner and in lived interpersonal contexts (Welsh & Shulman, 2008). This study design allows for an in-depth exploration of how individual gender-related beliefs and acculturation levels intersect with observed couple-level communication processes. Such a study is timely, as the integration of communication and problem-solving skill sets is already being implemented in adolescent relationship health programs (e.g., Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011; Gardner, Giese, & Parrott, 2004), despite immature theoretical and empirical underpinnings (Weisz & Black, 2009; Whitaker et al., 2006).

Applied Theoretical Relevancy

Given scarce attention to how communication processes may be integrated into adolescent dating health programs in a theory-driven manner, this study utilizes a skeletal theoretical framework that allows for exploration among relevant variables of interest. I was interested specifically in how couple-level discrepancies in acculturation and traditional gender role beliefs may be associated with observed negativity and conflict (i.e., evidenced by couple-level tension, irritation, anger; Malik & Lindahl, 2000). In line with this research question, Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework of intimate partner violence incorporates gender-related beliefs, beliefs about relationships, and beliefs about the use of violence (i.e., each considered "verbal rules") and communication competencies (i.e., a "behavioral repertoire") as proximal antecedents to physical violence perpetration. These beliefs and skill sets are culturally influenced, and act in tandem with other indirect and more stable attributes (e.g., attachment style, relationship history, exposure to violence in the home). Bell

and Naugle discuss at length the disadvantages of relying on a single theory (e.g., feminist) in explaining intimate partner violence perpetration, and the reader is referred to their manuscript for a review. Rather, their framework “incorporates empirical findings from existing IPV literature while integrating and expanding former IPV theories, drawing heavily from the Behavior Analytic (Myers, 1995), Social Learning (Bandura, 1971; Bandura, 1973; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997), and Background/Situational (Riggs & O’Leary, 1989; Riggs & O’Leary, 1996) theories.” (as cited in Bell & Naugle, p. 1101). The authors draw most heavily on these specific theories since they focus on variables most amenable to change; indeed, Social Learning theory forms the basis for many teen dating violence prevention programs (Weisz & Black, 2009; Whitaker et al., 2006), and Whitaker and colleagues recommend that the Background/Situational model of relationship violence also be utilized to inform future preventive intervention efforts. Furthermore, Myer’s Behavior Analytic theory recognizes the centrality of culturally influenced outcomes following physical violence perpetration (e.g., decisions to stay/leave) as important in determining the likelihood of reoccurrence. In sum, this framework is useful in that it a.) takes into account numerous empirically validated contributing factors associated with intimate partner violence while also b.) allowing substantial flexibility in considering how variables may be interrelated and/or new variables introduced (e.g., dyadic acculturation processes). Taken together, this framework suggests that couples’ asymmetry in traditional gender beliefs (i.e., “verbal rules”) may pair with maladaptive communication behaviors (e.g., verbal aggression, a component of their communicative “behavioral repertoire”) to illicit physical violence perpetration (recognizant of distal factors also at play).

I do not directly examine the role between communicative competencies and violence perpetration in this manuscript, although this association has already been

established empirically (Cornelius, Shorey, & Beebe, 2010; Stets & Henderson, 1991) – including among Mexican heritage youth (Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2007). Rather, I herein narrow my focus to better understand the relationship between couples’ gender role beliefs, acculturation, and communication behaviors. Although communicative competencies are poorly understood among adolescent dating couples, practitioners frequently target communication skills as key components in the prevention of teen dating violence (Weisz & Black, 2009), as well as in promoting general romantic relationship health (Gardner, Giese, & Parrot, 2004) in drawing from tacit knowledge and experiences with youth. Furthermore, communication processes among MA dating couples is even less understood than other ethnic groups; gaining a deeper understanding of their relationship dynamics, as influenced by cultural processes, is particularly warranted given their sustained and rising prevalence in the United States (United States Bureau of the Census, 2009) and attends to their desire for direction concerning how to handle conflict in their dating relationships (Adams & Williams, 2011b). To the contrary, Weisz and Black (2009) found through interviews with field practitioners that most program leaders tailor curriculum manuals to the unique populations they serve, including minority youth. In examining associations between couple-level acculturative processes, gender role beliefs, and observed negativity during discussion of conflict, I contribute to Bell and Naugle’s (2008) framework of intimate partner violence by incorporating developmental and cultural considerations central to MA adolescent couples’ experiences with conflict. This is a first step towards more empirically and culturally-grounded theoretical models from which to then design effective dating health programs.

Developmental Considerations

Negotiating conflict in adolescence carries distinct developmental importance as youth strive to build a coherent sense of self within the context of relations with another. As

opposed to adulthood when healthy relationships are marked by interdependence, adolescent dating relationships are a space through which to practice developing a coherent sense of self (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Erikson, 1968). As they progress into later adolescence, youth's relationships become longer and more intimate (Carver, Joyner, & Udry, 2003). Their ability to reconcile differences thus becomes increasingly important, as commitment-related beliefs increase (Montgomery, 2005). However, studies have found that superficial levels of conflict negotiation are common among adolescent couples, who tend to minimize differences, uphold a positive façade, and downplay or avoid disagreements (see Welsh & Shulman, 2008 for a review). This may be tied to inexperience in relationships, as well as reflect a desire to keep the relationship in tact (Harper & Welsh, 2007). Nonetheless, adolescents feel greater ease of communication and emotional closeness to a dating partner as they gain experience and maturity (Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2010). It follows that skills are learned in recognizing, confronting, and successfully negotiating disagreements as a relationship endures over time (Shulman et al., 2008). Specific communication skills that are associated with relationship success include mutual self-disclosure, listener support, emotional regulation of negative affect, knowing when to give advice versus actively listen, and the ability to engage in conflict without counter-complaining or withdrawal (Leaper & Anderson, 1997; Gottman, 1999; Tabares & Gottman, 2003).

Gender Considerations

Giordano, Manning, and Longmore (2006) assert that dating relationships are uniquely distinct from any other relationship type that the adolescent has previously experienced (i.e., parent-child, friendships), particularly due to “communication awkwardness” (p. 132), heightened intensity of emotions, concerns over exclusivity and commitment, and power asymmetries favoring males. Indeed, males have been found to

enact more power in decisions (Tschann, Adler, Millstein, Gurvey, & Ellen, 2002) and females tend to desire emotional closeness to a greater extent (Williams & Hickie, 2010). Moreover, communication may pose heightened difficulty for males, who are more likely to be part of a hierarchically structured peer group than to communicate intimately through dyadic interaction (see Rose & Rudolph, 2006 for a review). To the contrary, their learned styles of competitive and activity-driven interaction are not well aligned with females' expectations for mutual self-disclosure and egalitarianism (Leaper & Anderson, 1997; Maccoby, 1990; Giordano et al.). Gender role asymmetries and mismatched expectations may thus play a key role in the surfacing of conflict (Giordano et al.; Leaper & Anderson). Couple-level asymmetries are understudied, particularly in adolescence, and may be even more pronounced for adolescent couples exposed to differing cultural schemas (Updegraff, et al., 2012).

Traditional Gender Role Organization among Latino Youth and Families

Similar gender roles exist in both Mexican and United States cultures, but are more clearly differentiated, exaggerated, and adhered to among Mexican origin families (Organista, 2007; Raffaelli, 2005). Within traditional Latino culture, the premise of *machismo* dictates that men provide for the family, and guard its honor and respect (Organista). *Machismo* has also been associated in a more negative manner with hyper-aggression, dominance in relation to female romantic partners, sexual risk taking, and partner violence (Santana, Raj, Decker, La Marche, & Silverman, 2006). *Marianismo*, the traditional Latina gender counterpart, places importance on the female's role within the home as mother and caretaker. It may also be associated with dependence, submission, and self-sacrifice for the sake of the relationship and family (Organista). Taken together, this value system lends itself to a romantic and sexual script whereby females submit to male authority and males are granted greater sexual

freedom. Indeed, during the adolescent years, virginity and purity are highly valued and expected of females by parents and males' behavior is less monitored (Faulkner, 2003; Haglund et al.; Raffaelli, 2005; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001). Observably, Mexican-oriented adolescents are more likely to hold traditional values (e.g., family orientation) than Anglo-orientated adolescents (Cansler, Updegraff, & Simpkins, 2012).

Acculturation

The acculturation process presents unique challenges to adolescents during a time in which they are exploring intimacy goals while developing their personal identities (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). As noted, opposing cultural frames of reference for MA adolescents may present conflicting norms for beliefs and behaviors within gendered heterosexual relationships, particularly as Mexican collectivist norms differ from U.S. individualistic society (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Many have speculated that the acculturation process entails a shift away from traditional Mexican values (i.e., *machismo*, *marianismo*, *familismo*) towards American values of gender equality and autonomy (Cansler et al.; Miranda, Bilot, Peluso, Berman, & Van Meek, 2006; Sanderson et al., 2004; Ulloa, Jaycox, Skinner, & Orsburn, 2008). This shift is not necessarily linear, however, nor uniform across cultural domains. For example, certain cultural dimensions may change at dissimilar rates or remain stable as others shift (Schwartz et al.). This assertion was supported in a longitudinal study, whereby acculturating MA boys and girls remained high in *familism* values across seventh to twelfth grade (Updegraff et al., 2012). As they progressed from early to late adolescence, however, girls decreased in their traditional gender values while boys remained stable (Updegraff et al.). The result was that boys and girls became more discrepant in their beliefs about gender roles over time, leading the authors to conclude that “future research should examine the consequences of a potentially increasing

gender divide in young women's and men's gender attitudes for decisions about and adaption to adult work and family roles" (p. 1667).

Gaining a better understanding of MA adolescents' gendered relationship dynamics is important, as they may enter into more mature relationship responsibilities at younger ages than European American youth. Latino youth aspire to marry earlier and both desire and experience earlier transitions to sexual activity and pregnancy (East, 1998). Latina teens evidence more births than all other ethnicities; in 2005, Latinas averaged 82 per 1,000 births as compared to 26 per 1,000 among European American youth (Kost et al., 2010). Mexican American couples' relationships may therefore be longer, more intense, and marked by (actual or expected) adult roles (e.g., childbearing, discussion of marriage). European American adolescents, on the other hand, may be more likely to lack adult-like co-responsibilities such as childrearing and financial concerns (Manning et al.). It follows that gender role asymmetries may be cause for increased power struggles among acculturating adolescent couples that approximate more mature relationship negotiations.

Acculturation Discrepancy and Couple-Level Conflict

Shifting gender-related beliefs throughout the acculturation process remains an understudied area of inquiry, and especially for adolescent populations. Among adults, males have evidenced resistance to changing gender roles as they lose status and power relative to the female (Miranda et al., 2006). Indeed, a national sample found that Latina adults evolve their gender-related beliefs to favor "modern" social and political roles faster than their acculturating male counterparts (Montoya, 1996). Miranda and colleagues asserted that female acculturation may lead to marital disruption, as a female outpaces her male counterpart in adopting U.S. gender roles that stress equality and begins to assert her independence. Resulting from their clinical experience with Latino adult couples, Miranda

and colleagues state that, “acculturation may not be problematic for a couple, but more so the rate at which spouses acculturate and hence readjust their gender roles at dissimilar speeds” (pg. 270). Such clinical assertions are supported by research; for example, one study found that Latina females were at higher risk for violence as they were better able to contribute financially to the family (Perilla, Bakerman, & Norris, 1994), and another found that more educated Latinas or those that held greater decision-making capability than their husbands held marriages whereby male-to-female physical aggression was also more likely (Babcock et al., 1993). Although undoubtedly complex, scholars have suggested that evolving and mismatched gender roles may be a primary source of heightened risk for conflict-burdened and violent marriages among Latino couples (Sanderson, Coker, Roberts, Tortolero, & Reininger, 2004; Ulloa et al.). Rogler, Cortes, and Malgady (1991) concur, following a review of 30 publications: “Efforts to trace the influence of acculturation on psychological distress among Hispanics should consistently attend to sex role differences that may well mediate the pattern of acculturative influences” (p. 590).

Research with Latino adolescents has revealed that higher levels of acculturation are associated with increased likelihood for experiencing dating violence (Sanderson et al., 2004), and that males are slower to move away from traditional gender roles (Updegraff et al., 2012). In line with these findings, Sanderson and colleagues emphasize the importance of studying changing gender roles at the dyadic level and throughout the acculturation process in order to better understand the complexity of lived experiences among Latinos in the United States:

With acculturation comes a change in traditional beliefs. Perhaps it is the difference in acculturation between the couple and traditional sex-role expectations that may explain the observed association. For example, the male may retain traditional values of women’s subservient roles while the female may reject the traditional role assigned for women. (p. 381)

In sum, the scant literature suggests that as females acculturate to mainstream United States cultural norms, they depart from traditional gender roles characteristic of Mexican culture. This, in turn, may contribute to heightened levels of conflict among acculturating dating couples, particularly as males are less apt to undergo a similar shift in attitudes (Miranda et al., 2006; Montoya, 1996; Perilla et al., 1994; Sanderson et al., 2004; Ulloa et al., 2008; Updegraff et al., 2012). Moreover, Ulloa and colleagues (2008) suggest that the shift away from Mexican-orientation may be more salient in this process than a shift towards Anglo-orientation. This stems from their finding that Spanish media use was negatively associated with egalitarian gender-role beliefs (e.g., to disagree with statements such as “It is better if a married woman does not work”) among youth but that English media preference was not significant in predicting attitudes. The exploration of these relationships forms the basis for the present study.

The Present Study

I aim to build from Bell and Naugle’s (2008) framework of intimate partner violence by examining how dyadic acculturative processes and gender-related beliefs influence MA couples’ communicative experience with conflict. Using both self-report and observational methodologies, I specifically explore associations between couple-level differences in acculturation and traditional beliefs in conjunction with observed negativity (Malik & Lindahl 2000) in communication of chosen areas of conflict in their relationship. Given the scant literature, the following are tentative hypotheses concerning what I expect to find: 1. Couple-level discrepancies in acculturation will be positively associated with discrepancies in traditional gender beliefs (i.e., *machismo*). This relationship will be stronger when acculturation is measured as adherence to Mexican-orientation vs. Anglo-orientation (i.e., as found by

Ulloa et al., 2008); 2. Adolescent males will be more endorsing of traditional gender role statements than adolescent females within the couple, and this discrepancy will be positively associated with observed negativity and conflict; 3. Couple-level discrepancies in traditional gender role beliefs will mediate the relationship between acculturation asymmetry and observed negativity and conflict.

Methods

Sample

Border cities are an ideal locale to study the processes and impacts of acculturation on adolescents as youth are exposed to cross-cultural values, norms, and expectations for behavior (Matsunaga et al., 2010). The present study sampled from a large urban U.S. city in a Southwest state bordering Mexico. A total of 34 dating couples were recruited from a larger sample of 304 self-identified 15 to 17 year old Mexican American adolescents that had taken an online survey as part of the Mexican American Teen Relationships (MATR) study. Following approval from the governing Institutional Review Board, adolescents were recruited into the MATR study from high schools and community agencies (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs, the YMCA). Convenience sampling techniques were used to recruit diverse MA youth. Youth in dating relationships were told that, following the survey, they would be eligible to participate in a video-taped interaction task with a dating partner - defined broadly as someone with whom they currently held any type of romantic or sexual relationship. Some couples signed up to take the survey and do the video-taped interaction task jointly; others told the researcher that they were interested in participating in the interaction task and were subsequently scheduled to do so at a later date. Four couples invited a non-Mexican American dating partner to participate in the interaction task. Given the study aims, this study includes only couples whereby both members identified as Mexican American ($N=30$

dyads). Adolescents were told that their data was kept confidential, including discussion of the federally government-issued Certificate of Confidentiality obtained to protect all participants enrolled in the MATR Study. Adolescents were also told that data was linked using identification numbers, paired only with their names in a highly secure and confidential database available only to trained researchers on the MATR project. Written consent and assent was obtained from all adolescents and at least one parent or guardian.

Adolescents that participated in the dyadic interactions were diverse across recruitment location. Almost half (48.3%; 29 individuals) of the individuals that participated in the dyadic interaction task had both parents born in Mexico (2nd generation). Another fourth (26.7%; 16 individuals) of adolescents were themselves born in Mexico (1st generation) or another fourth (25.0%; 15 individuals) were born in the United States and also had parents born in the United States (3rd generation). Youth were also diverse across level of risk, although by and large may be considered at greater risk than European American youth due to acculturative strain and as affected by communities characterized by higher rates of multiple forms of violence (Smokowski, David-Feron, & Stroupe, 2009).

Youth were further analyzed for their level of risk using the zip code of the high school that they attended, via the following indicators: crime rate statistics as compared to the national average (CLR Choice, 2012), whether the school was Title I eligible (i.e., a measure of poverty among the student body; National Association for the Education of Young Children, n.d.), diversity of ethnic makeup, and average household income. Youth ($n = 60$) reported coming from eighteen high schools, 16 of which neighborhood statistics were found (one school was online; one was not listed). Crime rates as calculated using the total crime risk index score were approximately twice as high as the national average in all represented high school zip codes ($M = 208$ as compared to 100), although Arizona as a

state also held a higher than national average ($M = 143$). Almost one-third (31.67% of teens) were from higher risk schools that were characterized by Title I eligibility and in primarily ethnically-diverse neighborhoods. Five teens (8.33% of teens) attended a high-achieving high school with a 100% completion rate and over half the sample (60.0% of teens) came from schools located in primarily Caucasian neighborhoods that were not Title I eligible.

Procedure

Observational methods attend to a number of methodological biases inherent in asking youth themselves about their communication during conflict. For example, youth's perceptions about their behaviors do not always reflect lived experiences (Kerig, 2001; as cited in Welsh & Shulman, 2008), nor their partners' perceptions (Leaper & Anderson, 1997; Manning et al., 2006). Also, reporting on one's own behaviors may yield inaccurate memory recall, social desirability, or differences in how questions are interpreted (Capaldi et al.). Furthermore, both self-report and observational methods were included within the same analyses in order to assess couple-level associations between individual beliefs (i.e., gender roles) and processes (i.e., acculturation) with interpersonal communication. Including multiple methods to assess a theorized relationship has the benefit of reducing common method variance, which can otherwise result in either over- or underestimating the relationship between two constructs (i.e., Type I and Type II errors; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Interaction tasks took place either in a private room where adolescents were recruited (e.g., Boys and Girls Club), or at the university in a quiet and secluded office space. Couples were instructed to sit in two chairs next to one another, at an angle that allowed for the video camera to capture their faces and body language. Although confidentiality had been discussed with each adolescent at the time of the online survey, adolescents were again

reassured of the confidential nature of their data and told that only researchers on the MATR study would view the videotapes. As a warm-up task, couples were given five minutes to collaborate in choosing their “top five movies of all time” and were instructed to write them on a shared piece of paper. Before leaving the room, the researcher first asked each partner to privately choose two items from a list of common relationship issues (i.e., the *Conflict Issues Checklist*; Capaldi, Wilson, & Collier, 1994), and to star their first choice. Following the warm-up task, the researcher allowed each couple a total of 14 minutes to discuss each partners’ chosen issues. One member’s second issue was discussed when the same issue was starred by both members of the dyad. The researcher left the room following the instructions, returning only at seven minutes to instruct the couple to switch to the other partner’s issue. The interaction task ended with a 14 minute discussion of partner’s goals (i.e., 7 minutes each partner). After the interaction tasks, each adolescent was given a handout containing information on healthy dating relationships (i.e., including information on both positive behaviors, as well as warning signs for abuse, a list of community resources, and how to become involved in helping other teens). As an incentive for their participation, each participant was given \$15 for the online survey and \$15 for the video-taped interaction task.

Measures

Demographics. Gender was assessed via a drop-down menu on the online survey that indicated male or female. Adolescents indicated their age as 15, 16, or 17 using a drop-down menu. Couples’ average age was 16.28 ($SD = .67$) years. (See Table 2a for further descriptive information.)

Acculturation. There has been debate concerning the best way to measure acculturation, a process that is complicated by adolescent development and ethnic identity

formation (Unger, Ritt-Olsen, Wagner, Soto, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2007). Language use is a common and arguably accurate indicator of acculturation (Rogler et al., 1991; Serrano & Anderson, 2003; Matsunaga et al., 2010); some have contended, however, that language alone is insufficient to capture diverse forms of acculturation (Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995a; Schwartz et al., 2010). Acculturation affects the types of peers that Mexican origin youth associate with (Updegraff et al., 2012), which in turn affects their romantic and sexual scripts (Cavanagh et al., 2008). Exposure to media may also be important, as Ulloa and colleagues (2008) found that preference for Spanish language media was associated with traditional gender role beliefs. The Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans-Short Form (i.e., ARSMA-SF; Cuellar et al.) was chosen for its attention to multiple linguistic indicators of acculturation as they relate to media use, social life, and activity. Sample items include, *“I enjoy speaking Spanish”*, *“I enjoy listening to English language music”*, and *“My friends are of White origin”*. Of note is that the term *“White”* was used instead of the original term of *“Anglo”* given that MATR study participants reported semantic unfamiliarity with the latter term (see Table 2b for individual items). This scale also evidences the additional benefit of allowing for high or low degrees of Mexican- or Anglo-orientation simultaneously, offsetting criticisms of scales that force preference for one or the other (Rogler et al.). The ARSMA-SF, an adaptation from the 30-item measure, has demonstrated high levels of internal consistency, concurrent validity, and construct validity (Cuellar et al.). Participants answered six Anglo-oriented items (AOS; $\alpha = .70$) and six Mexican-oriented items (MOS; $\alpha = .90$) using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*“Not at all”*) to 5 (*“Very much or almost all the time”*). In this manner, adolescents could score high or low on either or both scales. In these analyses, couple-level discrepancies in Anglo-

orientation in addition to Mexican-orientation were explored, in addition to mean acculturation scores. In order to calculate each individual's overall acculturation score, their Mexican-orientation was subtracted from their Anglo-orientation (i.e., AOS-MOS; Cuellar et al., 1995a). To calculate couple-level discrepancy scores across each of these dimensions (i.e., MOS; AOS; overall acculturation), adolescent females' mean scores were subtracted from adolescent males'.

Machismo. The *machismo* scale is one of five measures of cultural constructs that compose the Multiphasic Assessment of Cultural Constructs–Short Form (60 total items, 17 *machismo* scale items; Cuellar et al., 1995b) and measures the extent to which traditional gender views are endorsed. Responses range on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“*Strongly Disagree*”) to 5 (“*Strongly Agree*”), with higher numbers indicative of greater support for the related belief. Sample items include as “*A wife should never contradict her husband in public*” and “*It is more important for a woman to learn how to take care of the house and the family than it is for her to get a college education*” (see Table 2c for individual items). This scale has been found to correlate negatively with level of acculturation and has demonstrated high internal consistency ($\alpha = .78$; Cuellar, Arnold, & Gonzalez, 1995b). Given literature indicating that maladaptive aspects of *machismo* (e.g., attitudes of dominance, aggression) are distinct from adaptive (e.g. honor, chivalry; Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008; Kulis, Marsiglia, & Nagoshi, 2012), an exploratory factor analysis was conducted to assess whether these two constructs may be validly assessed as separate in this sample and using this scale. These factors did not, however, emerge as separate and the scale was thus used with all items included.

In order to compute couples' discrepancy scores, adolescent females' scores were subtracted from adolescent males'. (See Table 2d for descriptive information pertaining to couples' discrepancy in Anglo-orientation, Mexican-orientation, overall acculturation, and *machismo*.)

Negativity and Conflict. All video-taped dyadic interactions were coded using the *System for Coding Interactions in Dyads* (SCID; Malik & Lindahl, 2000). The SCID includes 14 subscales, each assessing different communication processes essential to couple functioning including individual negative (e.g., verbal aggression, coerciveness, negativity) and positive (e.g., problem-solving, support, positive affect) behaviors and overall patterns at the dyadic level (e.g., conflict management style, balance of power). The SCID was designed from theoretical and marital communication literatures as an overall assessment of couple functioning. It is reliable across European-American, Hispanic-American, and African-American adult couples, and has been used with a diverse range of populations and sample demographics (e.g., distressed, satisfied; Malik & Lindahl, 2000). It has recently been employed to code adolescent dating couples' discussions of conflict-laden issues (Darling et al., 2008).

This study employed the use of aggregated ratings from the *Negativity and Conflict* SCID subscale. This scale measures the extent to which an individual manifests frustration, anger, tension, or irritation in a verbal (e.g., through dialogue, tone of voice, or speaking through teeth) or non-verbal manner (e.g., glaring or cold facial expression, tapping of hands or fingers, rigid posture). Ratings were coded for each partner on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*very low*) to 5 (*high*). Higher degrees of negativity and conflict reflected communication behaviors that were moderate to high in intensity and that clearly evidenced anger or defensiveness towards a dating partner. Ratings were aggregated (i.e., across time discussing

each partner's issue and across gender) given the emphasis on couple-level communication patterns. Videos were coded at 30-second intervals in order to provide nuanced data over time. Researchers were trained on using the SCID and coded independently only after demonstrating high inter-rater reliability with another trained coder on the same videos (an r of at least .8 on each subscale). Moreover, each coder watched the video in its entirety in order to place the discussion of conflict issues in context of discussion about goals and the couples' warm-up task. Coders were multi-ethnic and all were blind to the research questions and hypotheses. Videos that included Spanish dialogue were coded by natively Spanish-speaking bilingual and bicultural research assistants.

Results

As posited via Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework of intimate partner violence, I expected beliefs about relationships and about female roles (i.e., "verbal rules") to be positively associated with difficulty communicating. Specifically, and given the literature, I hypothesized that couple-level differences in acculturation (and particularly Mexican-orientation) and *machismo* (i.e., endorsement of traditional gender value statements) would predict couples' observed negativity and conflict in discussion of their chosen relationship issues. I also hypothesized that males would be more endorsing of traditional gender statements than females. These assertions were partially supported.

Pertaining to average couple-level descriptives, dyads were, on average, somewhat oriented to Mexican cultural norms ($M = 2.99$, $SD = .86$; i.e., they tended to answer that they "moderately" enjoyed Spanish language and social activities). They were, on average, more oriented to Anglo cultural norms ($M = 3.95$, $SD = .52$; i.e., they tended to answer that they enjoyed English language and social activities "a lot or very much"). Their resulting overall acculturation mean was created by subtracting their mean Mexican-orientation from

their mean Anglo-orientation: $M = .96$, $SD = .98$. They were moderately endorsing of traditional gender statements ($M = 2.48$; $SD = .59$; “2” indicated that they moderately disagreed and “3” indicated that they neither agreed nor disagree). Couples were low in overall observed negativity and conflict ($M = 1.31$, $SD = .42$), although their means ranged from 1 (“very low”) to 2.71 (“moderate”).

Original Proposed Model

This study utilized Bell and Naugle’s (2008) skeletal theoretical framework, which posits that gender-related beliefs and communication behaviors are central components in couples’ experience of physical violence perpetration (see Figure 2a). Although violence perpetration was not directly assessed in the present study, I sought to better understand how asymmetries within the couple on acculturation and *machismo* might influence their communication of conflict issues. The original model hypothesized that couple-level differences in Mexican orientation would be positively associated with observed negativity and conflict, and that this relationship would be mediated by couple-level differences in the endorsement of traditional viewpoints. In order to test this, I followed the Causal Steps Approach as outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986). A series of linear regressions were equated to establish a causal relationship beginning with first predicting the mediator with the independent variable (i.e., predicting *machismo* discrepancy from MOS discrepancy); second, predicting the dependent variable with the independent variable (i.e., predicting couples’ observed negativity and conflict with MOS discrepancy); and finally, predicting the dependent variable with a combination of both the independent and mediator variables. In order to demonstrate mediation, a previously significant relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable should decrease upon controlling for the effects of the mediating variable (Baron & Kenny).

The hypothesized mediation model was not supported. Discrepancy in Mexican-orientation was not significantly related to discrepancy in *machismo* ($\beta = .17, p = .39$) and observed negativity and conflict was not significantly predicted by couples' discrepancy in Mexican-orientation ($\beta = -.06, p = .74$). (See Figure 2b). Finally, negativity and conflict was not significantly predicted by the linear combination of couples' discrepancy in Mexican-orientation and *machismo*; the resulting model was not significant: $F(2,25) = .55, p = .59$. (See Table 2e and Figure 2c). Couple-level differences in Mexican orientation were small ($M = -.42, SD = 1.31$) with adolescent males tending to be less Mexican-oriented than adolescent females ($M = 2.78, SD = 1.02$ as compared to $M = 3.20, SD = 1.15$). This relationship was not statistically significant, $t(29) = 1.77, p = .09$. Males' and females' scores on Mexican-orientation were moderately correlated ($r = .27, p = .15$). A post-hoc paired t test of gender differences in Mexican-orientation supported preference for a partner of similar orientation (i.e., there were not statistically significant differences by gender in Mexican orientation, $t(29) = -1.77, p = .09$). Couple-level differences in *machismo* were also small ($M = .52, SD = .92$) with adolescent males more endorsing of traditional gender statements than adolescent females ($M = 2.72, SD = .84$ as compared $M = 2.20, SD = .64$). As hypothesized, a paired t test indicated that this was a significant gender difference within couples, $t(27) = 3.02, p = .01$.

Additional Exploration

Given that discrepancy in Mexican-orientation was not related to observed negativity and conflict, and was not significantly related to discrepancy in *machismo*, I expanded analyses to include discrepancy in Anglo-orientation and overall acculturation (i.e., taking into account both subscales; AOS-MOS; Cuellar et al., 1995). I again followed Baron and

Kenny's (1986) Casual Steps in assessing whether discrepancy in Anglo- orientation and discrepancy in overall acculturation were predictive of observed negativity and conflict, and whether *machismo* discrepancy was acting as a mediating construct.

A linear regression demonstrated that discrepancy in Anglo-orientation was significantly related to discrepancy in *machismo* ($\beta = .41, p = .03$) and a second regression further indicated that observed negativity and conflict was significantly predicted by couples' discrepancy in Anglo-orientation ($\beta = .39, p = .03$). See Figure 2d. The linear combination of discrepancy in Anglo-orientation and discrepancy in *machismo* did not, however, significantly predict observed negativity and conflict: $F(2,25) = 2.01, p = .16$. (See Table 2f and Figure 2e). Adolescent females were more Anglo-oriented than their partners but differences were small ($M = -.30, SD = .96$). A paired t test indicated that there was not a significant difference in Anglo-orientation by couple, $t(29) = -1.71, p = .10$. Scores in Anglo-orientation were only slightly positively correlated ($r = .08, p = .69$).

Finally, discrepancy in overall acculturation was not significantly predictive of *machismo* discrepancy ($\beta = .10, p = .63$). Overall acculturation discrepancy was also not significantly related to observed negativity and conflict ($\beta = .26, p = .16$). Given that these regression equations demonstrated non-significant paths, I did not proceed to test the linear combination of overall acculturation discrepancy and *machismo* discrepancy in predicting observed negativity and conflict. Differences in acculturation were small ($M = .13, SD = 1.74$), and a paired t test revealed that couples did not significantly differ from one another, $t(29) = .40, p = .70$. Males' and females' overall acculturation scores were moderately correlated ($r = .12, p = .53$).

Finally, I considered the possibility that, aside from couples' differences in overall acculturation, their averaged scores across each of these acculturative dimensions may shed further light on their observed negativity and conflict in interaction with one another. These additional explorations yielded non-significant bivariate relationships: AOS; $r = .02$ ($p = .93$); MOS; $r = -.12$ ($p = .58$); overall acculturation; $r = .10$ ($p = .59$). Couples' averaged ratings of *machismo* were correlated with their negativity and conflict, a relationship that was not small but not significant ($r = .11$, $p = .56$).

Discussion

Observational methods, coupled with self-report, offered a unique opportunity through which to directly assess the roles of acculturation and gender-related beliefs in adolescent couples' communication of conflict issues in their relationships. Although studies with heterosexual adults have suggested that acculturation differences may be problematic as females increasingly acculturate to egalitarian gender norms, this study found only partial support for this assertion among MA adolescent dyads. This exploratory research highlights the importance of viewing acculturation as multi-faceted (Schwartz et al., 2010). I found that couples' discrepancy in Anglo-orientation was associated with observed negativity and conflict and that discrepancy in Mexican-orientation and overall acculturation were not. Furthermore, it was couples' discrepancy in Anglo-orientation that demonstrated a moderately strong correlation with their discrepancy in gendered belief-statements (i.e., *machismo*). In line with hypothesized differences, adolescent males were more endorsing of traditional gender beliefs. It remains unclear whether such beliefs mediate the relationship between Anglo-orientation and couples' negativity given that a small positive relationship in this sample was observed but was not significant in the population. In addition to a clear need for future research, I interpret these exploratory findings to signify the relevancy of

studying distinct acculturative domains and to attend to couple-level (a)symmetry.

Differences evidenced by these preliminary findings also highlight the need to study adolescents' coupling experiences as unique and point to the significance of understanding their relationship processes through a developmental lens (Hokoda et al., 2007).

Although studies with adults have suggested the importance of studying conflict and even violence within the context of mismatched gender role expectations (Miranda et al., 2006; Montoya, 1996; Perilla et al., 1994; Sanderson et al., 2004; Ulloa et al., 2008), studies of European American adolescents have found relationships marked by high degrees of perceived equality and decision-making responsibility (Galliher, Rostosky, Welsh, & Kawaguchi, 1999). Mexican American couples in this study were moderately endorsing of *machismo* gender statements, typically in disagreement or answering neutrally (i.e., neither agreeing nor disagreeing). The extent to which they differed on such beliefs was positively associated with asymmetry in Anglo-orientation. Previous research has found that Mexican-orientation was more predictive of a loss in traditional gender-related beliefs (Ulloa et al., 2008), although this study examined couples at the dyadic level making comparisons difficult. This study suggests, however, that it may be the adoption of mainstream cultural beliefs about dating that leads to greater relationship agitation as shifts in traditional beliefs occur dissimilarly for males and females. Given that adolescent males were found to be more endorsing of *machismo* gender norms than adolescent females, it is logical that females may have adopted gender-role beliefs that stress equal power sharing through exposure to mainstream Anglo culture. Differences in Anglo-orientation may thus be problematic for the couple. This would align with Updegraff and colleagues' (2012) finding that boys and girls start out with similar levels of traditional gendered beliefs, but that girls evidence a decrease over time (i.e., thus creating within-couple discrepancies).

Taken together, these findings suggest that couples may experience increased difficulty in negotiating problem areas in their relationships as they acculturate to U.S. dating norms dissimilarly. Given the results of this study, I advocate for the inclusion of couple-level discrepancies in acculturation (and specifically Anglo-orientation) in models that seek to explain partner violence, such as Bell and Naugle's (2008) utilized framework. The role of traditional gendered beliefs within MA adolescents' coupling experiences is less clear from these analyses, although it may be that discrepancies in such beliefs also contribute to partner conflict and potential violent episodes. Such cultural considerations are at the heart of an adolescents' developing ethnic and global identity, and future theory-building efforts should centralize such macrosystemic influences within developmental contexts.

Findings point to a number of potential avenues for future research. First, although discrepancies in *machismo* were not significantly correlated with observed negativity and conflict, there was a small effect in this sample that was in the expected positive direction. Given an underpowered analysis and little variability in the criterion variable of interest (i.e., observed negativity and conflict), it may be that a larger sample observed repeatedly or over a greater length of time may, in fact, evidence the hypothesized mediation relationship. A low mean of observed negativity and conflict is not surprising given that adolescent couples' discussions of conflict typically demonstrate high levels of positivity (Welsh & Shulman, 2008). Tapping into the extent that differing gender-roles beliefs plant seeds for problematic conflict resolution is a challenging task and larger samples are required.

It is also possible that more valid measurements are needed to tap into adolescents' conceptualizations of gender-related expectations and their communication behaviors. The development of a *machismo* scale that uses language and activities more reflective of adolescents' dating relationships rather than that of adults' is encouraged. In using Cuellar

and colleagues' (1995b) *machismo* scale (e.g., "A wife should never contradict her husband in public"), it is unclear whether adolescents may have been imagining their future relationships, inferring adult relationships that they were currently familiar with (e.g. of parents), or mentally replacing spousal terms with that of their current partner (e.g., boyfriend/girlfriend). Moreover, and given emerging research on the distinct nature of adolescents' conflict negotiation (e.g., Shulman et al., 2008; Welsh & Shulman, 2008), measurement of observed negativity and conflict may also be made more valid via the inclusion of sarcasm, certain forms of joking, and conflict avoidance tactics. Adolescents are relatively inexperienced in other-sex intimate partnering, and such conflict minimizing tactics may be more likely (Shulman et al., 2008; Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006). Cultural norms also influence how conflict is navigated, and Latinas are more likely than other ethnicities to utilize avoidance strategies (Lefley, Scott, Liabre, & Hicks, 1993; as cited in Organista, 2007). Such findings shed further light on the low overall mean of observed negativity and conflict found in this study, as well as point to a need for developmentally- and culturally-attuned measurement of minority adolescents' relational beliefs and communication behaviors.

Mexican Masculinities

In addition to the above considerations, future research should also attend to differing forms of masculinity and femininity as they pertain to adolescents' behavioral norms. As Broughton (2008) discusses at length, Mexican masculinities are fluid, and evolve to meet both instrumental (e.g., goal achievement; work-oriented) and gendered (e.g., traditional family-oriented vs. autonomous) desires and needs. Furthermore, stereotypical notions of *machismo* run counter to findings that demonstrate a greater likelihood among less acculturated Mexican males to provide care and feminine-typed activities for their children (Coltrane, Parke, & Adams, 2004). Recently, there has been a push towards separating

machismo, which has largely been described as “aggressive, sexist, chauvinistic, and hypermasculine” from *caballerismo*, a positive notion of Latino masculinity described as “nurturing, family centered, and chivalrous” (pg. 29; Arciniega, et al., 2008). In their study of Latino males, Arciniega and colleagues found support for these constructs as distinct and also found that *machismo* was associated with more antisocial behavior.

Although literature on Mexican masculinities primarily reflects the study of adults, Kulis and colleagues (2012) found that maladaptive (i.e., aggressive and more highly domineering) masculinity was associated with greater substance abuse for seventh-grade MA preadolescents. Although this exploratory factor analysis did not reveal evidence of separate maladaptive vs. adaptive *machismo* in the measure used, the piecing apart of this construct is critical for future research. Kulis and colleagues also found that adolescent females higher in acculturation were more likely to use substances. As suggested by the authors, females may be exposed to greater endorsement of social drug use within the U.S. and increase their substance use accordingly. This trend may reflect their desire for peer approval and may also be a coping strategy tied to acculturative stressors, including the stress of dynamically shifting gender role expectations in their relationships with adolescent males (Kulis et al.). This is particularly concerning in that alcohol use has been associated with greater likelihood for both perpetrating and being a victim of teen dating violence (Swahn, Bossarte, & Sullivent, 2008). The role of substance use in adolescent couples’ experiences with conflict is an area ripe for future research, particularly as used to cope with mismatched gender expectations.

Limitations

This study is unique in its utilization of observational methods to assess couple-level negotiation of conflict among an understudied minority youth population, and in

combination with self-reported beliefs about gender roles and level of acculturation. It does, however, have a number of significant limitations. First, given the recruitment of diverse couple types and inability to match all individuals within the couple on their survey responses, the extent to which commitment level may have affected adolescents' conflict negotiation is unknown. It may be that couples together for longer periods of time, and that both attested to being in a committed relationship, may have navigated conflict in a very different manner than others who had just begun dating or that were involved in a relationship that was primarily sexual in nature. Future research should gather larger samples and investigate the role of diverse relationship types on adolescents' experiences with conflict. The nature of the conflict (e.g., jealousy as opposed to what to do with their time), and the extent to which more mature forms of conflict negotiation are demanded of them are also important variables for consideration. For example, while many adolescent couples are less likely to face pressing demands (e.g., financial concerns, how to co-parent) and thus have more flexibility to leave the relationship if conflict becomes burdensome, MA couples are more likely to be pregnant or parenting (Kost et al., 2010). This may especially be the case as within-group selection did occur in this sample (i.e., only four of those recruited participated in the observational task with non-Mexican dating partners). Other unmeasured influences undoubtedly also affected couples' experiences with dating conflict; for example, in Updegraff and colleagues' (2012) study, males' (but not girls') endorsement of more traditional gender attitudes were associated with lower educational aspirations over time. It may be that differing long-term plans are a source of conflict for the dating couples as well, an additional direction for future research.

Second, and as discussed at length, the current measurement of *machismo* may have lacked developmental appropriateness, as may have also been true of the negativity and

conflict scale. Measurement concerns reflect the rapidly expanding field of adolescent relationship research, and the struggle to keep up with culturally- and developmentally-sound instruments. I hope that this research is useful in informing the design of measures that validly attend to adolescents' dynamic relationship experiences. Finally, there are inherent shortcomings of relying on a brief interaction task in examination of acculturation and gender-related discrepancy on couples' communication behaviors. Participants may have only superficially explored their areas of conflict during the time allotted, and may have been reluctant to behave as they normally would while being video-taped. Aside from these limitations, Welsh and Shulman's (2008) review highlights many of the substantial benefits to using observational methods in better understanding adolescents' experiences with relationship conflict and every effort was made in this study to provide youth with a safe and accessible space through which to meaningfully discuss their concerns with one another. Personal communication with trained coders of the videos revealed that the majority of couples took the opportunity to do so seriously and without hesitation.

Recommendations

Relationship experiences may be particularly significant for acculturating MA adolescents. Intimate partnerships help such youth to successfully develop their personal and ethnic identities (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Erikson, 1968; Phinney & DeVich-Navarro, 1997), yet take place in the context of acculturative demands that evidence heightened risk. Specifically, such adolescents experience equally high rates of teen dating violence as non-Latino youth (Kievens, 2007). Some have purported that MA adolescents are more vulnerable to dating violence given increased acceptance of violence norms (Black & Weisz, 2004). Parents may relate marital gender roles that differ from that of mainstream Anglo society, and have difficulty navigating conflict both within their relationships and with their

own adolescents (Darling et al., 2008). As such, MA adolescents may lack salient role models, and also experience additive risk factors including socioeconomic strain and heightened drug and alcohol use (Organista, 2007). Organista recommends working with Latino families to recognize the strengths of U.S. and Mexican gender-related cultural values with the aim of increasing bicultural flexibility. This recommendation is strengths based, drawing upon youth agency to choose, experiment, and create new and diverse roles while also holding the added benefit of strengthening family ties. Furthermore, teaching adolescents how to successfully navigate conflict holds lifelong positive ramifications (Tabares et al., 2003).

Conclusion

Many have found that retaining ethnic norms is protective against numerous maladaptive health outcomes (e.g., drug and alcohol use, sexual risk taking) including affiliation with other Spanish-speaking individuals, participation in Latino cultural practices, and having been born in Mexico (see Schwartz et al., 2010 for a review). This study suggests that acquiring U.S. cultural proscriptions for dating behavior may be problematic, particularly where there are mismatches within the relationship. This finding mirrors the tension within families that Latino college students discussed in their retrospective accounts of adolescent dating (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004), and other studies finding that the adoption of individualistic cultural values are associated with greater risk than are collectivist (see Schwartz et al., 2010). As one partner adopts characteristics of mainstream society while the other does not, it may create differences in expectations and generate conflict. These findings support “an expanded, multidimensional model of acculturation and of the demographic and contextual forces that can influence the acculturation process” (Schwartz et al., 2010; p. 238). It is my hope that research continue to build from this exploratory study

in order to shed light on complex within-couple acculturative and gender-related processes in order to foster the development of healthy relationship patterns early on and among Mexican American youth.

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Table 2a. *Couples' Descriptive Information*

	<i>Frequency (%)</i>
<i>Age</i>	
Both same age	36.7
Male older	53.3
Female older	10
<i>Immigration Status</i>	
Both first generation	6.7
Both second generation	53.3
Mismatch	40
<i>Mother's Education Level*</i>	
Both greater than high school	3.7
Both high school equivalent or less	70.4
Mismatch	25.9
<i>Parental Relationship*</i>	
Both have mother and father at home	24
Both have one parent at home	16
Mismatch	60

Note: $N = 30$ couples. First generation denotes that the adolescent was born in Mexico. Second generation denotes that the adolescent was born in the United States. *Missing data: Information unavailable from both partners for three couples on mothers' education level ($N = 27$) and for five couples on parents in the home ($N = 25$).

Table 2b. *Items from the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans-Short Form*

Item
1. I speak Spanish.
2. I speak English.
3. I enjoy speaking Spanish.
4. I associate with White people.
5. I enjoy listening to English language music.
6. I enjoy Spanish language T.V.
7. I enjoy Spanish language movies.
8. I enjoy reading books in Spanish.
9. I write letters in English.
10. My thinking is done in the English language.
11. My thinking is done in the Spanish language.
12. My friends are of White origin.

Table 2c. *Items from the Multiphasic Assessment of Cultural Constructs—Short Form*

Item
1. A man should not marry a woman who is taller than him.
2. It is the mother's special responsibility to provide her children with proper religious training.
3. Boys should not be allowed to play with dolls, and other girls' toys.
4. Parents should maintain stricter control over their daughters than their sons.
5. There are some jobs that women simply should not have.
6. It is more important for a woman to learn how to take care of the house and the family than it is for her to get a college education.
7. A wife should never contradict her husband in public.
8. Men are more intelligent than women.
9. No matter what people say, women really like dominant men.
10. Some equality in a marriage is a good thing, but by and large the father ought to have the main say in family matters.
11. For the most part, it is better to be a man than a woman.
12. Most women have little respect for weak men.
13. I would be more comfortable with a male boss than with a female boss.
14. It is important for a man to be strong.
15. Girls should not be allowed to play with boys' toys such as soldiers and footballs.
16. Wives should respect the man's position as head of the household.
17. The father always knows what is best for the family.

Table 2d. *Couple-level Descriptive Statistics for MOS, AOS, Overall Acculturation, Machismo, and Negativity and Conflict*

	Range	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
MOS Discrepancy	5.17	-3.67	1.50	-.42	1.31
AOS Discrepancy	4.17	-2.67	1.50	-.30	.96
Overall Acculturation Discrepancy	7.83	-2.67	5.17	.13	1.74
<i>Machismo</i> Discrepancy	3.76	-1.24	2.53	.52	.92
Negativity and Conflict	1.71	1.00	2.71	1.31	.42

Note. *N* = 30 dyads. Negativity and Conflict is at the couple-level only, represented as the grand mean of individually rated scores for adolescent males and females within couples and across partners' issues. Discrepancy scores were created by subtracting females' scores from males'.

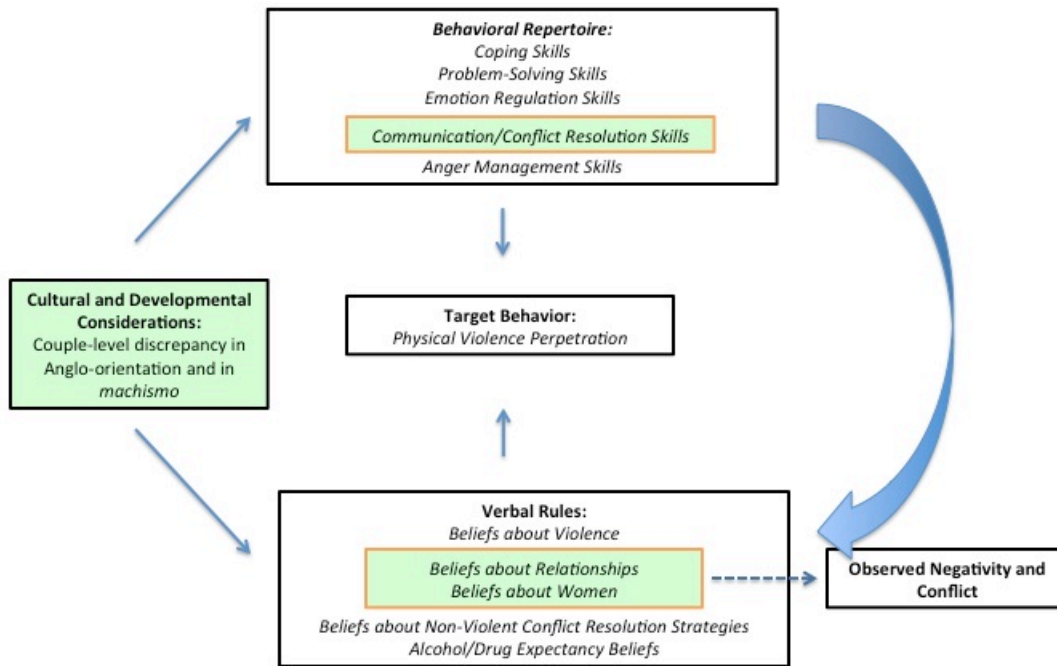
Table 2e. *Causal Steps to Determine Mediation: Linear Regression Model Summaries of MOS and Machismo Discrepancy on Negativity and Conflict*

Variables	<i>B (SE B)</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Step 1:			
MOS discrepancy on <i>machismo</i> discrepancy	.12 (.13)	.17	.39
Step 2:			
MOS discrepancy on Negativity and Conflict	-.02 (.06)	-.06	.74
Step 3:			
MOS and <i>machismo</i> discrepancy on Negativity and Conflict			
MOS discrepancy	-.03 (.06)	-.08	.68
<i>Machismo</i> discrepancy	.09 (.09)	.20	.32

Table 2f. *Causal Steps to Determine Mediation: Linear Regression Model Summaries of AOS and Machismo Discrepancy on Negativity and Conflict*

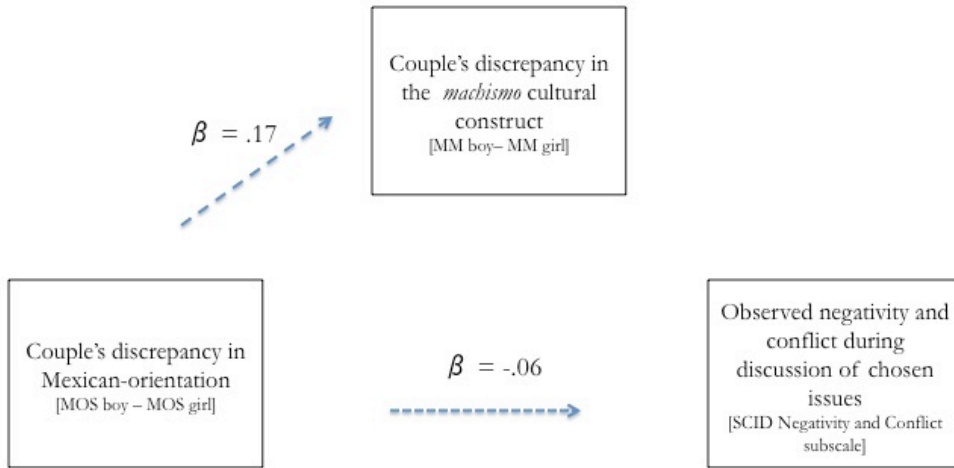
Variables	<i>B (SE B)</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Step 1:			
AOS discrepancy on <i>machismo</i> discrepancy	.38 (.17)	.41	.03
Step 2:			
AOS discrepancy on Negativity and Conflict	.17 (.08)	.39	.03
Step 3:			
AOS and <i>machismo</i> discrepancy on Negativity and Conflict			
AOS discrepancy	.15 (.09)	.35	.10
<i>Machismo</i> discrepancy	.02 (.09)	.05	.84

Figure 2a. Bell and Naugle's Modified Theoretical Framework for Paper 2



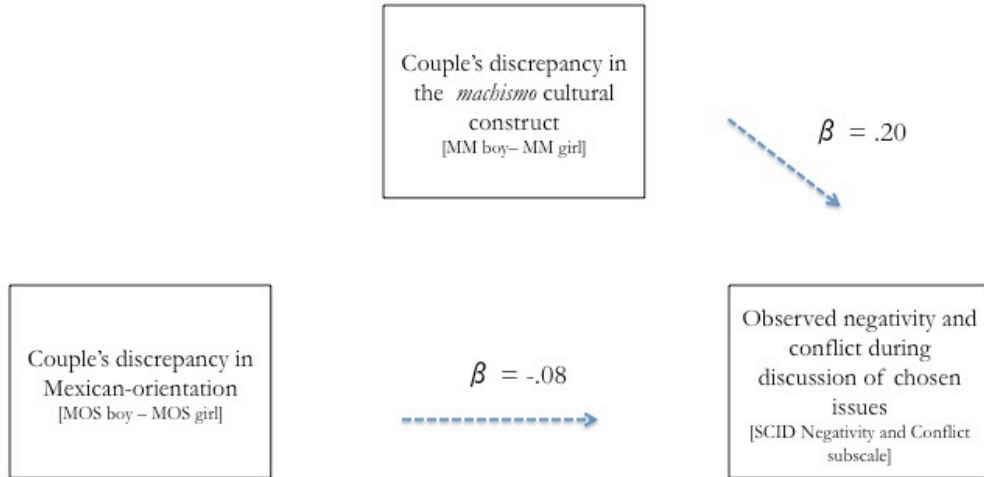
Note: Modification to Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework of intimate partner violence. Textboxes in green denote variables of interest in the present study. The dotted line reflects the hypothesized relationship between *machismo* and couples' observed Negativity and Conflict.

Figure 2b. *Bivariate Regressions in Mexican-orientation, Machismo, and Observed Negativity and Conflict*



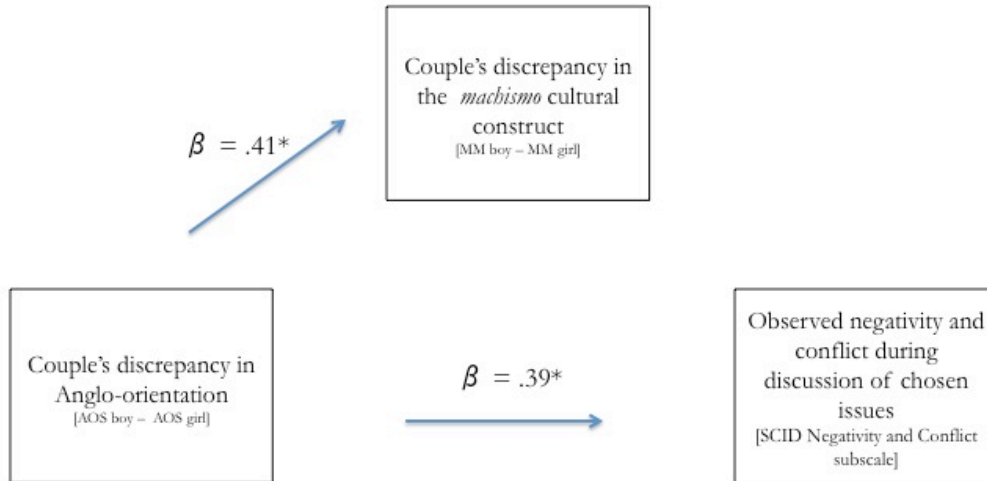
Note: Bivariate regressions are standardized beta coefficients. None were significant at $p < .05$.

Figure 2c. Regression Coefficients in Predicting Observed Negativity and Conflict with Mexican-orientation Discrepancy and Machismo Discrepancy



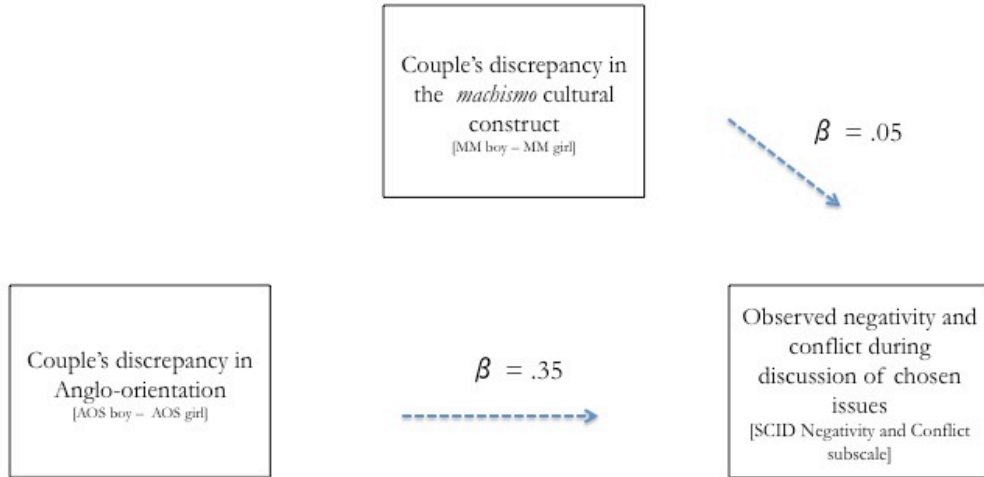
Note: Standardized beta coefficients are presented. None were significant at $p < .05$.

Figure 2d. *Bivariate Regressions in Anglo-orientation, Machismo, and Observed Negativity and Conflict*



Note: Bivariate regressions are standardized beta coefficients. Values were statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Figure 2e. Regression Coefficients in Predicting Observed Negativity and Conflict with Anglo-orientation Discrepancy and Machismo Discrepancy



Note: Standardized beta coefficients are presented. None were significant at $p < .05$.

Chapter 4

PAPER 3

Developmental and Cultural Considerations Central to Conflict, Communication, and
Violence among Mexican American Adolescents: Incorporating Ecodevelopmental Theory
into an Integrative Framework to Prevent Teen Dating Violence

Heidi L. Adams, Doctoral Candidate

Abstract

The prevention of teen dating violence (TDV) is of increasing federal priority for the United States of America Federal government, and co-aligns with a distinct yet related interest in promoting healthy dating relationships. This separation reflects independent empirical and theoretical lines of research and practice, yet highlights the importance of integrative theory-building. Communication skill sets are often included in both types of programs, yet how adolescents communicate remains an under-researched area in its own right. Rather, adult marital and violence literatures largely inform curricula across respective theoretical camps. I utilize Bell and Naugle's (2008) contextual framework of intimate partner violence to review literature concerning Mexican American dating couples' communication of conflict as it relates to risk for violence perpetration. In my aim to centralize cultural and developmental considerations, I advocate for the inclusion of ecodevelopmental theory into their framework and to take into account interlocking spheres of influence across micro, meso, and macro contexts. Mexican American youth are a growing population in need of culturally competent dating health programs that foster communicative competencies within dating relationships. I offer recommendations for such programs, as well as directions for future research.

Introduction

Policy, educational, and scientific communities increasingly recognize adolescent sexual and dating experiences as crucial developmental milestones that lay the foundation for successful lifelong partnering (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Frost & Driscoll, 2006; Tabares & Gottman, 2003; White, 2009). Of concern is that these relationships are all too often characterized by psychological, verbal, sexual, and physical abuse. The 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicated that 9.4% of adolescents had been victimized by physical violence specifically, a statistic that has remained stable for over 10 years (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Latino youth experienced heightened rates of violence (11.4%) as compared to European American youth, and are also the fastest growing minority group in the United States (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 2011). Approximately 40% are under the age of 20 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009). Prevention efforts have largely stemmed from research with European American youth, however, and programs are often modified to fit the perceived cultural needs of other ethnic groups (Weisz & Black, 2009). Mexican heritage individuals comprise a majority, or 66%, of Latinos in the U.S. (United States Bureau of the Census, 2009) and such adolescents are deserving of study and prevention efforts as they navigate competing norms living in the United States but within families and communities that often maintain close ties to Mexico (Matsunaga, Hecht, Elek, & Ndiaye, 2010; Updegraff, Umaña -Taylor, McHale, Wheeler, & Perez-Brena). Distinct sets of dating norms carry unique challenges for Mexican American romantically involved adolescents, including the ways in which they communicate with one another and experience risk for partner violence (Antônio & Hokoda, 2009; Milbrath, Ohlson, & Eyre, 2009).

This aim of this study is to attend to the theoretical and pragmatic necessity to situate empirical studies of Mexican American (MA) adolescents' partnering experiences within culturally- and developmentally-salient contexts. I focus on communication behaviors specifically within these contexts, as communication skill deficits have repeatedly been associated with risk for violence perpetration (e.g., Antônio & Hokoda, 2009; Cornelius, Shorey, and Beebe 2010; Stets & Henderson, 1991) and are often targeted with adolescent relationship programming efforts (e.g., Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011; Adler-Baeder, Kerpeleman, Schramm, Higginbotham, Paulk, 2007). I outline sources of communicative risk and resilience for MA dating couples within an integrative theoretical framework of intimate partner violence perpetration developed by Bell and Naugle (2008), and advocate for the additional integration of ecodevelopmental theory (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999) within said framework. The specific aims of this paper are twofold: 1.) To review literature specific to MA couples' communication of conflict issues as potentially related to violence in order to provide additional empirically supported variables of interest to Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework of intimate partner violence perpetration and 2.) To critically analyze how such literature may be understood within overlapping ecological contexts whereby adolescent identity formation is considered a meta-construct – influencing and being influenced by each systemic level (see White, 2009 for a separate analysis within an ecodevelopmental model and specific to adolescent development). Regarding the first aim, I narrow my focus to gender- and relationship-related relationship constructs related to a study of MA adolescents (i.e., beliefs, norms, expectations) and acculturation processes as influential of communication behaviors. As posited by Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework, multiple empirical studies point to gender-related beliefs, beliefs about relationships, and poor communicative competencies as catalyzing of individuals' use of violence against a

dating partner. These findings are consistent with adolescent populations as well (Cornelius et al.; Stets & Henderson), including of Spanish-speaking and Mexican heritage youth (Antônio & Hokoda, 2009; Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2007; Ulloa, Jaycox, Skinner, & Orsburn, 2008). Ecodevelopmental theory will provide a way through which to consider how such variables may interact across interlocking nested systems (Coatsworth et al., 2002). Finally, my focus on the dyad reflects a need to move away from individual explanations of interpersonal violence, and rather to consider the interactional, and often- reciprocal nature of communication and violent episodes (particularly during the adolescent years; Capaldi, Kim, & Shortt, 2007). Thus, an additional contribution of the present study is to re-conceptualize Bell and Naugle's framework from a dyadic perspective.

This paper is a step towards integrative theory-building in the prevention of teen dating violence among MA adolescent dating couples; I narrow my focus specifically to communication behaviors to inform programming aimed at fostering healthy dating relationships free of violence. Little research has been conducted in this area and avenues for future research are suggested throughout and at the end of the manuscript. I conclude with specific program recommendations towards the cultivation of MA adolescents' dating health. In keeping with my aim to bridge literatures and theoretical camps, I use the term "communication behaviors" to capture a wide variety of verbal, non-verbal, violent, and non-violent conflict resolution tactics.

Our Current State: Theoretical Considerations Concerning Adolescent Relationship Programming

Increasing recognition of teen dating violence (TDV) as a prevalent and serious health concern has prompted recent political and scholarly attention to its prevention (Offenhaur & Buchalter, 2011). Specifically, legislation has prioritized the development of

programs aimed at eradicating TDV (H. Resolution 1081, as cited in Offenhaur & Buchalter), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention deemed the prevention of TDV a national health concern (2010). Related, and in conjunction with high divorce rates in the United States (Goodwin, McGill, & Chandra, 2009), the enactment of the 2010 “Personal Responsibility Education Program” (PREP) funds relationship-strengthening education for adolescents within comprehensive sexual health education programs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). This parallels a growing interest in applying adult marital literatures to healthy dating curricula in order to reach teens early with effective relationship education (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Antle et al., 2011; Gardner, Giese, & Parrot, 2004). Such programs share overlap with teen dating violence programs already being implemented, particularly in targeting communication and conflict management skill sets (Adler-Baeder et al.; Antle et al.; Gardner et al.; Weisz & Black, 2009).

The inclusion of communication skills in both TDV and general relationship strengthening programs is empirically supported given that deficits have repeatedly been associated with maladaptive relationship outcomes, including dissatisfaction (Laurent, Kim, & Capaldi, 2008), dissolution (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009), and/or numerous forms of violence perpetration (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Foshee et al., 2008; Muñoz-Rivas, Grana, O'Leary, & Gonzalez, 2007). Deductive approaches to understanding adolescents' relationship dynamics are limited, however, given that their experiences are unique from adults' across a number of key developmental dimensions (Tabares & Gottman, 2003). As an example, Cornelius and colleagues (2010) found that while many of the same communication behaviors predictive of marital distress were similarly associated with maladaptive relationship outcomes for adolescents, other behaviors linked with marital health predicted adolescents' relationship aggression. Moreover, adult empirical literatures

invoke varying theoretical lenses and result in framing messages respective to the type of program developed for youth. It follows that TDV prevention programs largely reflect feminist domestic violence underpinnings (Weisz & Black, 2009), and more general relationship health programs utilize marital and family communication research (Adler-Baeder et al., 2007; Antle et al., 2011; Gardner et al., 2004). These theoretical camps are not necessarily incompatible (White, 2009), but point to the need for comprehensive and integrative theory-building in order to identify shared risk factors underlying maladaptive conflict resolution skills and various forms of violence (Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008).

I assert that such theory building must also be developmentally-attuned, as adolescents are experiencing their first dating experiences and are forming their identities within co-shaped dyadic and socially shaped ecological contexts (White, 2009). Such an integrative theoretical approach would also capitalize on building from sources of resiliency and strength. This need for bridging theoretical camps is exemplified by the inherent deficit of over-reliance on any one theoretical framework, as macro explanations of interpersonal violence (e.g., patriarchal systems of oppression) are often pitted against micro determinants (e.g., social-emotional, behavioral, cognitive intrapersonal factors; White). Ecological contexts are, in truth, richly embedded and mutually shaped by adolescents' lived relationship experiences (White).

Despite the notion that ecodevelopmental contexts are inseparable from cultural when attending to immigrant youth's partnering experiences, dating health programs are often modified for culturally dissimilar populations (Holleran Steiker et al., 2008). Latino adolescents evidence higher rates of dating violence as compared to other ethnic groups (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011), may perpetrate at more severe levels (Foshee et al., 2008), and are perhaps more vulnerable to it due to increased acceptance of

violence as a conflict resolution strategy (Black & Weisz, 2004; Coker, Sanderson, Cantu, Huerta, & Fadden, 2008). Gaining a better understanding of how such couples communicate about conflict holds relevancy in reaching them with culturally competent and effective relationship health programs. Although programs often invoke an a theoretical approach (Weisz & Black, 2009), situating studies of communication behaviors among MA couples within an integrative framework of TDV lends itself to grounded preventative interventions with this population.

An Integrative Theory of Teen Dating Violence

As discussed, adolescents are in need of TDV prevention efforts that are theoretically grounded in developmental and cultural contexts. Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework for intimate partner violence is useful as it posits communication behaviors as proximal to the situational occurrence of interpersonal violence, and within ecological contexts considerate of multiple distal (e.g., demographic features) and proximal (e.g., relationship stressors) antecedents. Understanding violence perpetration as situational may be particularly well suited for adolescents, given that more enduring psychopathological traits are not yet crystallized and cognitive and behavioral repertoires are more amenable to change (Hokoda et al., 2012). Their framework was also chosen to reflect the overarching pragmatic aim of my work to bridge literatures and theoretical camps so as to inform TDV prevention program design with a focus on communication behaviors. Bell and Naugle's framework reflects a line of published work that shares this aim, and the interested reader is referred to their manuscripts (i.e., Cornelius & Rosseguie, 2007; Shorey et al., 2008; Cornelius et al., 2010).

Despite its utility, Bell and Naugle's (2008) contextual framework does not attend specifically to developmental and cultural considerations in explaining MA adolescents'

experiences with dating violence. Their framework “incorporates empirical findings from existing IPV literature while integrating and expanding former IPV theories, drawing heavily from the Behavior Analytic (Myers, 1995), Social Learning (Bandura, 1971; 1973; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997), and Background/Situational (Riggs & O’Leary, 1989; Riggs & O’Leary, 1996) theories.” (Bell & Naugle, p. 1101). None of these theories or literatures attend specifically to key developmental determinants or take into account how cultural contexts are formative to acculturating adolescents’ dating experiences. Ecodevelopmental theory (Szapocznik, & Coatsworth, 1999) may, however, be integrated into Bell and Naugle’s framework of intimate partner violence in order to *centralize* developmental and cultural considerations that are inseparable from MA couples’ communication of conflict. Ecodevelopmental theory further strengthens a study of dating violence perpetration by offering a systematic model through which to test the influences of multiple social ecological levels and domains (e.g., family, peers) as they interact with one another to affect risk and resilience. Indeed, ecodevelopmental theory has been successful in predicting behavior and risk in studies of Latino youth specifically (Coatsworth et al., 2002; Prado et al., 2010).

Bell and Naugle’s (2008) integrative framework of intimate partner violence and Szapocznik and Coatsworth’s (1999) ecodevelopmental theory each offers value in a pursuit to situate empirical literatures concerning MA adolescent dating couples’ communication behaviors within developmental and cultural contexts. Specifically, Bell and Naugle’s framework *outlines specific empirically-validated distal and proximal variables* that have repeatedly been deemed risk factors for situational violence perpetration; ecodevelopmental theory then positions such variables within environmental systems and provides a model through which to examine *how such variables may be systematically examined* within multiple overlapping spheres of influence (i.e., micro, meso, macro). Regarding the latter, the integration of

ecodevelopmental theory situates communication behaviors performed by the individual within the dyadic contexts in which they are co-shaped and take on meaning.

Bell & Naugle's Contextual Framework of Intimate Partner Violence

Bell and Naugle's (2008) contextual framework of intimate partner violence is complex and outlines a number of empirically supported constructs (e.g., emotional distress) and contexts (e.g., presence/absence of others) associated with physical violence perpetration against an intimate partner. I do not reiterate their framework in detail here, but refer to the reader to their theoretical analysis. Their focus on physical violence perpetration as a target outcome variable is appropriate for a study of adolescents, given that other forms of abuse (e.g., psychological, verbal, sexual) may escalate to physical violence perpetration, co-exist with it, and/or occur in isolation or differ by gender (Capaldi et al., 2007; Hokoda et al., 2012; Sears & Byers, 2010; Stets & Henderson, 1991). I draw from their framework to examine literature concerning gender-related beliefs, beliefs about relationships, and beliefs about violence (i.e., each considered "verbal rules") and communication behaviors (i.e., considered within "behavioral repertoires") among MA dating couples. Each of these may be considered within situational contexts to promote or inhibit physical violence perpetration, although how such variables act in concert with one another is understudied among MA youth. Such beliefs and competencies unfold within situational contexts to elicit physical violence perpetration yet as influenced by background characteristics and learned behaviors (e.g., attachment style, witnessing parental violence; Bandura, 1971; 1973; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997; Riggs & O'Leary, 1989; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996; as cited in Bell & Naugle). Cultural norms and beliefs concerning potential outcomes of violence (e.g., compliance by a partner; Myers, 1995; as cited in Bell & Naugle) further influence the likelihood of its occurrence. The empirical relevancy of each included variable in Bell and Naugle's

framework is undoubtedly paramount to the design of programs that reach youth with effectiveness-based objectives; the integration of ecodevelopmental theory provides a manner through which to examine how non-static variables and interlocking layers of environmental influence further predict violence perpetration and may be considered in successful program aims.

Ecodevelopmental Theory

Ecodevelopmental theory (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999) is heavily influenced by Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989; as cited in Coatsworth et al., 2002) ecological systems theory in its attention to multiple layers of interacting and dynamic spheres of influence. The micro system denotes that which an adolescent participates and is influenced by directly; interpersonal exchanges with a dating partner may be considered part of this domain. Ecodevelopmental theory also incorporates mesosystemic influences, which denote the interactions between microsystems. For example, parents' conflict negotiation influences how an adolescent navigates conflict with a dating partner (Darling, Cohan, Burns, & Thompson, 2008). Finally, the macrosystem includes larger societal, cultural, historical, and political norms and influences. The macrosystem impacts MA adolescents in distinct manners given acculturative stressors, historical oppression, low socioeconomic status, and Mexican Americans' tendency to fair worse on numerous health and mental health indicators in subsequent years following their immigration to the United States (referred to as the "health paradox"; for a review, see Horevitz & Organista, 2012). Although I primarily direct attention to the microsystem (i.e., communicative interactions between MA dating partners), ecodevelopmental theory helps to position such behaviors as continually at interplay and inseparable from mesosystemic (e.g., family-dating partner) and macrosystemic (e.g., stress

related to forced assimilation, colonization, and acculturation; Horevitz & Organista) domains.

An Integrated Theoretical Approach

By incorporating ecodevelopmental theory into Bell & Naugle's (2008) framework of intimate partner violence, one may examine both risk and protective factors across systems, particularly as moderating and mediating variables act together to either directly or indirectly inhibit or promote violence perpetration. This type of systematic investigation (i.e., how may violence be explained, and to whom and for whom do specific effects hold?) is particularly needed for effective program design (Magill, 2010). Bell and Naugle put forth their framework with the intention of allowing the researcher ample flexibility in studying such interrelationships across systems, and in their assertion, an ecological systems approach is supported: "Researchers have the opportunity to selectively investigate the context surrounding IPV episodes from either a micro or macro-level perspective by examining the impact of a particular contextual unit or variable(s) within the unit on IPV perpetration or by investigating the interrelationships between two or more contextual units and their relative association with IPV perpetration." (p. 1101, Bell & Naugle). I assert the formal inclusion of ecodevelopmental theory as further enriching a study concerning how intertwined and multi-systemic influences exert impact in MA adolescents' situational enactment of violence, given its centralization of developmental and cultural considerations (see Prado et al., 2010). The addition of this theory is important as there are numerous differences between adolescent and adult populations that should not be ignored in the design of programs aimed to eradicate partner violence (Tabares & Gottman, 2003), and additional cultural considerations central to MA adolescents' dating experiences specifically (Milbrath et al., 2009).

Incorporating ecodevelopmental theory also allows for the prioritization of the dyad as the

unit of analysis. Bell and Naugle's framework, on the other hand, situates an individual's communicative competency (i.e., "Communication/Conflict Resolution Skills"; p. 1102) in isolation and as influencing of violence perpetration. Communication behaviors are, rather, non-independent sources of data that require a positioning of the dyad as the fundamental relationship unit; in research and theory-building, this reconceptualization requires attuned methods and specific analytical techniques (Kenny, Kash, & Cook, 2006). Finally, an ecodevelopmental perspective allows for the prioritization of adolescence as a key developmental time for global *and* ethnic identity formation.

Adolescent Ethnic and Global and Identity Formation

Studies have concluded that identity achievement is a key developmental task in adolescence (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Erikson, 1968), and ethnic identity formation is encompassed within global identity formation (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Identity may be defined as "adolescents' subjective socioemotional interpretations of themselves" (White, 2009, p. 9), and ethnic identity refers to "individual's subjective experience associated with the ethnic and racial designation" (Marsiglia, Kulis, Hecht, & Sills, 2004, p. 1064). Identity formation is bound to interpersonal experiences, including romantic and sexual, and MA youth's interpretations of themselves are thus inseparable from macro cultural and gendered schemas for relational expectations, motives, and behaviors (as transmitted across systems via peers, families, and societal institutions; White). Research has over-attended to European American samples in drawing conclusions concerning how relationships are associated with adolescents' and young adults' emerging identities (Arnett, 2008), yielding a noticeable gap in how these processes unfold across ethnically-diverse groups (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke).

It is widely accepted that developing an autonomous self is important during the adolescent years, and that this process is supported by an evolving ability to connect intimately with others (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Connolly & McIsaac, 2009). Both independence and interdependence are cross-cultural human needs, however, and are influenced “in complex, interactive ways not easily predicted by simple models emphasizing gender or cultural differences in orientations towards autonomy or connectedness.” (Neff & Suizo, 2006). Although Mexican culture is marked by greater collectivity than that of the United States (Flores, Tschann, VanOss, & Pantoja, 2004), MA youth may exercise agency as they both shape and are shaped by differing (and at times, competing) micro, meso, and macro influences. It follows that MA couples’ communication behaviors within dating relationships unfold in ways that are both congruent and incongruent with what may be expected from traditional Mexican cultural and gendered norms for behavior (Neff & Suizo). Thus, while Bell and Naugle’s (2008) theoretical framework for intimate partner violence suggests that beliefs about the relationship (e.g., cultural schemas for aggression) influence the extent to which perpetration is likely, ecodevelopmental theory supports the inclusion of (ethnic) identity formation to contextualize their experiences with relationship conflict and TDV. Throughout this analysis, identity formation is thus viewed as a developmental meta-construct (White, 2009), holding relevancy across my examination of literature at large as influenced by interlocking ecological systemic contexts. Central to identity formation is the social construction and enactment of gender.

Gender as Socially Constructed. White (2009) makes a compelling argument for the inclusion of gender at the center of any theory that would attempt to explain adolescent dating violence. Within an ecological systems lens, she asserts that gender is interactional and “a product of social practices” (pg. 6). That is, behavior is demonstrative of gender, which is

socially constructed and yet a critical component of an adolescent's identity formation. Within this paradigm, communication behaviors specifically may be thought of as a manner through which to demonstrate gender; for example, domination has traditionally been deemed a 'masculine' trait and a male may thus be viewed as more masculine if he silences a female partner through verbally aggressive conflict tactics. Incorporating macro systemic influences would further account for societally (i.e., and thus culturally) stratified portrayals of masculinity and femininity (e.g., as seen in the media, sports, etc.; Anderson, 2005; as cited in White). Proscriptions for gendered behavior may be more rigid within traditional Latino cultural norms (Organista, 2007). While such proscriptions pertaining to traditional cultural scripts for dating behavior may be internalized by an adolescent, he or she holds an active role in enacting and resisting such gendered scripts.

Macrosystemic Influences within Microsystemic Contexts

Traditional Cultural Scripts for Heterosexual Relationships

Cultural norms dictate cognitive schemas for behavior across systems, and ecodevelopmental theory posits the family as a central transmitter of beliefs about gendered relationship and societal roles (i.e., a "verbal rule" within Bell & Naugle's, 2008 framework) to adolescents (Coatsworth et al., 2002). To the extent that families retain collectivist and traditional Mexican cultural values, masculine and feminine proscriptions for gender roles are delineated within a paradigm that adheres to and distinctively contributes to *familismo* - a strong sense of interdependency, attachment, solidarity, and loyalty among family members. Extended family members, close friends, and perhaps even youth's dating partners are included as family in a Mexican collectivist paradigm (Flores et al., 1998). Within this framework, which emphasizes interdependence more than individual independence, males are expected to exercise authority, including greater responsibility to fiscally take care of the

family, make decisions, and garner family honor (Organista, 2007). Contemporary definitions of traditional male gender roles (i.e., *machismo*) also include attention to adaptive versus maladaptive character attributes (e.g., Kulis, Marsiglia, & Nagoshi, 2012). The former, termed *caballerismo*, denotes emotional availability, nurturance, and chivalry (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008). It may also signify confidence, leadership, and goal setting qualities (Kulis et al.). Although negative aspects (e.g., hyper-masculinity, aggressiveness, emotional toughness) have notably received more attention historically, positive characteristics are distinct and hold unique predictive power in assessing relationship outcomes (Arciniega et al.; Pardo, Weisfeld, Hill, & Slatcher, 2012). Complementing the male's position, a traditional female gender role directs that she take care of domestic responsibilities, including child-rearing (Organista). To the extent that traditional cultural values are endorsed, MA adolescent females may prioritize family-centered relationship goals over career attainment (Milbrath et al., 2009; Updegraff et al., 2012).

Recent studies evidence the saliency of family life among MA youth; such adolescents continue to demonstrate earlier transitions to marriage (Goodwin et al., 2009) and having children (Kost, Henshaw, & Carlin, 2010). In line with a family-oriented lifecourse, they are also less likely to aspire to and carry through with career-oriented goals (Kao & Tienda, 1998) and Mexican-born immigrant youth hold lesser educational aspirations than U.S.-born (Updegraff et al., 2012). Updegraff and colleagues (2012) similarly found that family values remained high across their sample as youth transitioned from early to late adolescence and many continued to demonstrate moderate Mexican-orientation (e.g., spending time with Mexican peers, speaking Spanish). Traditional gender roles also continue to hold relevancy for many MA youth. Virginity remains highly valued and expected of females by parents; in their comparative study, Milbrath and colleagues (2009) found that

MA adolescents were much less likely than African American to have had sexual intercourse (38% and 81%, respectively). A double standard is evidenced, however, in that males' sexual behavior is less monitored (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001). Thus, even while U.S. norms that prioritize individual- above family-orientation challenge traditional Mexican cultural scripts for dating, traditional values continue to influence MA adolescents' partnering experiences – including their communication behaviors in dyadic contexts.

Microsystem: Dyadic communication behaviors. Couples demonstrating adherence to traditional value systems are expected to maintain harmonious interpersonal exchanges, in line with the cultural construct of *simpatía*. In communication, this may be evidenced through courtesy, listener attentiveness, and respectful words and body language (Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). Females, in particular, may remain agreeable, non-critical, and avoid confrontational conflict tactics (Castillo, Perez, Castillo, & Ghosheh, 2010). Males' emotional openness to a female partner and respectful assertiveness (i.e., versus aggression, dominance, or the use of controlling conflict tactics) mirrors positive aspects of *machismo* (Arciniega et al., 2008; Pardo et al., 2012). This is an important avenue for future research with MA adolescents, as Arciniega and colleagues found that *caballerismo* was associated with a greater aptitude to problem-solve, remain emotionally-attuned, and to demonstrate relational connectedness. Negative forms of *machismo*, on the other hand, were positively associated with impulsivity and antisocial behaviors (Arciniega et al.). Partner violence was not included in Arciniega and colleagues' study of Mexican American adults, but suggests that perhaps it should be co-examined among MA adolescents possessing maladaptive and/or adaptive masculine traits.

Acculturative Processes

Traditional cultural scripts for gendered and relational behavior are influenced by the degree to which an MA adolescent has taken on the norms, beliefs, and values of the host culture. This process is referred to as acculturation, and is often measured in part by language use (Marsiglia et al., 2004; 2005), generational status (Sanderson, Coker, Roberts, Tortolero, & Reininger, 2004), and/or via social indicators (e.g., time spent with Mexican peers; Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995). As discussed by Prado and colleagues (2010), cultural processes are central to ecodevelopmental theory, and numerous indicators expose acculturation as a complex and multi-dimensional process (Lopez-Class, González-Castro, & Ramirez, 2011; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik 2010). As opposed to linear or simultaneous shifts across cultural value systems (e.g., *familismo*, gender roles), MA youth demonstrate agency in constructing distinct and blended identities that transform their coupling experiences – and *are transformed by* their coupling experiencing - in understudied and important ways (Matsunaga et al., 2010; Schwartz et al.). Moreover, acculturative processes vary markedly depending on diverse meso- and macro- level social experiences; for example, adolescents within communities marked by high degrees of Mexican cultural retention may experience greater transmission of traditional value systems from peers, neighbors, and extended family systems. This is particularly true of border communities where youth are close to Mexico (Matsunaga et al., 2010; Updegraff et al., 2012). Ecodevelopmental theory further posits a “trickle down” effect (pg. 99; Prado et al.) as parental birthplace (i.e., a macro acculturative factor) shapes adolescents’ cultural experiences within the United States. While first generation youth were born in Mexico and experience both cultures first-hand, second generation youth (those born in the U.S. but whose parents were born in Mexico) learn about Mexican culture through parental, and perhaps community, transmission. Such youth often serve as cultural brokers between the host

society and their parents, translating for them and teaching them about American norms (Padilla, 2006). Day-to-day life is marked by “cultural code switching” (Matsunaga et al., p. 423), or maneuvering between languages and cultural norms (mirroring “alternating” biculturalism; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Third generation youth learn from bicultural parents, who were also born in the United States. Youth from U.S.-born parents are less likely to explore their ethnic heritage, although visits to and from Mexico increase their tendency to do so (Matsunaga et al.).

Although acculturative indicators such as generational status suggest how culture is transmitted, it is important to keep in mind that adolescents demonstrate heterogeneity as their ethnic identities are shaped through interaction with multiple spheres of influence (e.g., parents, peers, significant others, and larger society; Coatsworth et al., 2002; Marsiglia et al., 2004; White, 2009). Moreover, Locke (1998; as cited in Lopez-Class et al., 2011) asserts that changes in beliefs, values, and behaviors may be better indicators of lived acculturative experiences than generational status, language spoken, or other unidimensional constructs. Each of these micro-constructs holds relevancy within dyadic romantic contexts for an acculturating MA adolescent who may experience fluctuations in his or her beliefs about gender roles, valuing of family-oriented versus individual aspirations, and in making post-secondary decisions (e.g., deciding whether or not to delay childbearing or to stay close to family versus move away for college; Updegraff et al., 2012). How these shifts affect couples’ communication and risk for violence is under-researched, especially among adolescent samples.

Microsystem: Communication among acculturating MA adolescent couples.

Given the need for more research concerning how developmental and cultural considerations may manifest within dyadic communicative contexts, I explored how

committed MA couples communicate about areas of conflict in their relationship (Paper 1). I found evidence of more overt styles of conflict negotiation than that documented among samples of other ethnic heritage youth (see Welsh & Shulman, 2008 for a review). At times their communication behaviors were embedded within culturally salient indicators of Mexican traditional values (e.g., discussion of co-parenting, spending time with one another's family). Communication behaviors on behalf of males often mirrored adherence to positive *machismo* (i.e., adaptive characteristics on the part of the male, including assertiveness versus aggression, listener attentiveness, and attempts to problem-solve). Given the small sample size and my qualitative focus, I did not attend to acculturation specifically; however, my observations revealed that blaming and criticism were largely apparent among Mexican origin youth of all generational statuses, many of whom spoke at least some Spanish during their interaction task. Moreover, conflict issues were discussed thoroughly, and repair attempts (e.g., using humor to diffuse conflict; see Cornelius et al., 2010) were also apparent. However, such attempts were typically one-sided and countered by continued blaming or criticism.

These findings run contrary to both what may be expected of traditional cultural schemas for communication behaviors (e.g., *simpatía*), and developmental communicative norms uncovered in other observational research of adolescent couples in discussion of conflict. That is, adolescents of other ethnicities have been found to discuss conflict shallowly, minimizing the impact it has on their relationship and/or often resorting to joking around or task avoidance (Welsh & Shulman, 2008). I concluded that adolescents' developmental tendency to idealize relationships (e.g., to endorse romantic beliefs such as "*The relationship I will have with my true love will be nearly perfect*"; Montgomery, 2005) might be less salient within cultural and religious norms that prioritize commitment and long-term

partnering. One-third of the recruited youth in the study were in committed and long-term relationships, lasting as long as four years, and beginning as early as age 12. Thus, while acculturation undoubtedly influenced couples' communication behaviors, only descriptive findings may be alluded to from my study (i.e., generational status) and are contextualized by these MA youth's decisions to stay in lengthy partnerships marked by mutual commitment. Couples dating for shorter lengths of time and those that are in less committed relationship types (e.g., friends with benefits) are also in need of examination. This preliminary research attests, nonetheless, to the inclusion of traditional and gendered value systems (i.e., *familismo*, *machismo*) as macro level constructs within Bell and Naugle's (2008) contextual framework. Future research stemming from an ecodevelopmental theoretical lens may examine how, for example, MA families transmit beliefs about gender roles to adolescents and thus affect their communication behaviors with a dating partner as such role expectations are voiced.

Micro System: Couple-level acculturative (a)symmetry. As discussed, MA adolescents find themselves “in between”— living in the United States, yet often in close proximity to family and cultural ties in Mexico; “code-switching”, or adapting culturally and between Spanish and English to the setting (e.g., school versus home); and navigating traditional versus mainstream value systems, which are in many ways opposed. Perhaps the greatest context in which this paradox manifests itself is in dating relationships, a setting in which they must discern and exercise gendered roles in partnership with another. It has been suggested that within-couple acculturative asymmetry may be a source of tension for dating couples, perhaps evidenced as conflict and putting youth at risk of TDV (Miranda, Bilot, Peluso, Berman, & Van Meek, 2006; Sanderson et al., 2004).

Traditional versus contemporary sexual and dating contexts. I have reviewed how more committed and traditional partnering contexts shed light on MA adolescents'

communicative experiences (i.e., including those that may escalate to physical forms of TDV), yet U.S. media and cultural norms promote uncommitted partnering contexts (e.g., friends with benefits, hooking up; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). For acculturating MA adolescents, these conflicting cultural norms may present difficulty in a number of key ways, each shedding light on intertwined spheres of environmental influence. Milbrath and colleagues (2009) found that MA adolescents struggled amidst religious guidelines that stress the morality of sex and that countered U.S. messages that sex was just for fun. Their inner battle was furthered by concern for what their parents would think and how pre-marital intercourse would dishonor their family (i.e., evidencing *familismo* and Catholic values). For many, cultural values contextualized romantic relationship goals and behavior. For example, family goals took priority (e.g., family as “the whole point of life”; p. 336), and females expected traditional acts of chivalry (e.g., buying roses; Milbrath et al.). Acculturating MA males are less likely than females, however, to view long-term partnering as a goal in high school (Adams & Williams, 2011a). Coupled with greater sexual freedom societally and culturally allotted to males (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001), such asymmetry may generate confusing partnering scripts that leave MA females particularly susceptible to emotional distress and misaligned ideals for commitment. Indeed, MA females may involve themselves in “friends with benefits relationships” in attempt to secure a boyfriend (Williams & Adams, accepted for publication). As contemporary U.S. sexual contexts are increasingly adopted throughout the acculturation process, mutual relationship goals become increasingly important and have unexplored but important implications for couples’ communication of conflict. The unstated is a form of communication itself, and relationship goals are unlikely to be discussed among youth involved in less committed relationship contexts (e.g.,

hookups, friends with benefits) that foster sexual ambiguity (Williams & Adams, accepted for publication).

Mismatched cultural orientation. Relationship type (e.g., “going out” versus “friends with benefits”) remains a poorly understood context concerning MA couples’ communication and experiences with partner violence. Recent research pertaining to acculturation more globally, has, however, revealed that females decrease in traditional gender role beliefs from 7th to 12th grade, while males remain stable (Updegraff et al., 2012). , By the end of high school, this created a gender discrepancy leading the authors to conclude that, “future research should examine the consequences of a potentially increasing gender divide in young women’s and men’s gender attitudes” (Updegraff et al., p. 1667). Incongruities in traditional gender role expectations have been linked in earlier studies to intimate partner violence (Miranda et al., 2006; Perilla, Bakerman, & Norris, 1994). Given this research, adolescent relationship scholars have eluded to the importance of studying mismatched gender roles resulting from intrapersonal acculturative processes and perhaps resulting in violence perpetration (Sanderson et al., 2004; Ulloa et al., 2008). Together, these findings underscore the importance of understanding the interplay between macro-level acculturative processes as influencing of and being influenced by a.) an individual’s gendered beliefs and beliefs about relationships (i.e., “verbal rules”; Bell & Naugle, 2008) and a.) in micro dyadic contexts as enacted via gendered scripts for communication behaviors. These studies suggest that couple asymmetry may lead to distress; in tandem with other background and contextual indicators (e.g., attachment style, the presence of interpersonal conflict and the dating partner), Bell and Naugle’s (2008) framework posits this as contributing to violence perpetration.

Given this need to examine within-couple acculturative asymmetry, I expanded my analysis from Paper 1 to include couples of all relationship types in Paper 2 ($N=30$) and specifically explored observed negativity and conflict as a function of within-dyad mismatches in acculturation and associated asymmetries in traditional gender-related beliefs. I found that couple-level asymmetry in Anglo-orientation (e.g., spending time with European Americans, preferring English) was significantly and positively associated with discrepancies in the endorsement of traditional gender statements (i.e., *machismo*). Moreover, couples' discrepancies in Anglo-orientation predicted observed negativity in discussion of conflict issues. In support of Updegraff and colleagues' findings, adolescent males were more likely than females to endorse traditional gender statements; it is noteworthy, however, that most were only moderately endorsing of such beliefs (i.e., neither disagreeing or agreeing with them) and couples' discrepancies were small. Furthermore, partners were similar to one another in Anglo- and Mexican-orientation; regardless, even small differences in Anglo-orientation were predictive of evidenced difficulty communicating (i.e., tension, raised voices, anger). My study did not examine adolescents' experiences with TDV, although numerous indicators of communicative difficulty (e.g., problem-solving, anger management) have been associated with physical violence perpetration (Bell & Naugle, 2008).

TDV as an outcome. As evidenced by Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework, communicative difficulty has repeatedly been supported in empirical studies as a risk factor for relationship violence. Co-examining acculturative processes among MA couples alongside studies of communication and risk for TDV paints a mixed picture with clear need for future research. Increased attention to the role of specific dyadic communicative processes and couple-level acculturative strain will help to unravel risk versus protective factors as influenced by multi-systemic domains.

Ulloa, Jaycox, Marshall, & Collins (2004) found that acculturation may affect knowledge about what constitutes dating violence and increase awareness of nonviolent communication techniques. In their study of 678 urban Latino adolescents (65% Mexican origin), less acculturated youth reported less knowledge about and less endorsement of nonviolence. Acceptance of dating violence has, in turn, been associated with increased likelihood to perpetrate (Foshee et al., 2008). On the other hand, higher levels of acculturation have been associated with increased likelihood for experiencing dating violence (Sanderson et al., 2004). Furthermore, biculturalism has been deemed a positive coping mechanism (Padilla, 2006), but has also been associated with increased risk for intimate partner violence perpetration among adults (Caetano, Schafer, Clark, Cunradi, & Raspberry, 2000). Biculturalism is a complex marker of identity in that individuals may range from integrated into both societies, to alternating (e.g., may feel more “American” or “Mexican” but act differently depending on the context), or separated (e.g., are forced to participate in larger society, but do not identify with it; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). Caetano and colleagues note that perhaps their finding reflected bicultural couples’ difficulty navigating both cultures without a strong social network in either, a particularly stressful task for individuals within a couple to traverse in a manner that creates increased intimacy between them rather than conflict or violence. Although biculturalism is in need of further investigation, their assertion aligns with Sanderson and colleagues’ (2004) findings that MA adolescents who spoke both Spanish *and* English equally in the home (as compared to only one or the other) were less likely to report dating violence victimization.

Sanderson and colleagues (2004) emphasized the importance of studying changing gender roles at the dyadic level and throughout the acculturation process in order to better understand the complexity of adolescents’ experiences with teen dating violence. Such an

investigation may be informed by ecodevelopmental theory; acculturation discrepancy (i.e., a macro construct) may negatively impact couples' feelings of understanding and connectedness as each brings differing expectations for gendered relationship roles within micro-level interactions. My findings from Paper 1 suggest that discrepancies in Anglo-orientation may be particularly problematic. Furthermore, and as earlier described, relationship scripts often stem from familial (i.e., micro) transmission of norms, values, and beliefs within heterosexual relationship contexts.

Intersections of Conflict, Communication, and Teen Dating Violence

In adolescence, it is important to conceptualize the fluid and transient interplay between conflict, communication behaviors (i.e., including verbal and nonverbal), and TDV. Stated another way, deciphering between more 'normative' forms of communication and TDV is not an easy task especially as theoretical underpinnings are underdeveloped and other forms of aggression (e.g., verbal, psychological) are often considered an integral and antecedent components to physical forms of violence (Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2007; Stets & Henderson, 1991). Psychological abuse may be manifested verbally, defined as degrading, criticizing, saying mean things, threatening to break up, or otherwise insulting one's partner (Cyr, McDuff, & Wright, 2006). Verbal aggression has been defined in an overlapping manner with psychological aggression (e.g., as using threats, insults, stonewalling, or otherwise upsetting a partner through anger or annoyance) and is extremely pervasive among dating partners (Muñoz-Rivas et al.). Adolescents that utilize verbally and emotionally abusive conflict tactics are more likely to engage in physical aggression against a dating partner, and less likely to engage in positive conflict resolution tactics (e.g., compromise; Antônio & Hokoda, 2009). However, while communicative and violent patterns established in adolescence are at least somewhat predictive of marital, many adolescents that perpetrate

in dating contexts *do not* go on to continue doing so in adulthood (Follingstad, Bradley, Laughlin, & Burke, 1999). Thus, while poor communication may account for adolescents' use of violence, it is also relatively expected given their inexperience in relationships (Tabares & Gottman, 2003) and expressed difficulty interacting with the other sex in dating contexts (Adams & Williams, 2011b). Untangling situational, short-term, and/or normative developmental communication behaviors from those that hold long-term ramifications for unstable and even violent adult partnerships remains a priority- particularly in light of adolescents' unfolding development within diverse cultural contexts.

Future Directions

This paper has outlined the findings of recent studies concerning how MA couples communicate about areas of conflict, potential overlap in their communicative competencies and couple-level risk for teen dating violence, and how cultural (e.g., traditional values, acculturation) and developmental (e.g., committed versus uncommitted sexual contexts) considerations are important additions to Bell and Naugle's (2008) contextual framework of intimate partner violence. Integrating such findings within an ecodevelopmental theoretical lens has drawn attention to how multiple environmental systems (including the micro context of the dyad itself) act in tandem with one another to place the individual at risk or to foster resilience (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999). (See Figure 3).

Using an ecodevelopmental theoretical perspective, future research should attend to how adolescents contextualize relationship-centered goals within family, educational, and career aspirations, as well as how these behaviors are upheld (or inhibited) by micro, meso, and macrosystemic influences. Moreover, Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework suggests specific sources of risk for partner violence that are no doubt influenced by each ecological tier, yet the extent to which each dating partner brings risk factors into a relationship (e.g.,

acceptance of violent conflict tactics) *couples* with unique relationship dynamics to predict the likelihood of violence (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001). Thus, continued research concerning partner selection and dyadic processes is essential to better attend to youths's relationship needs through effective program design. Observational research is particularly well suited for prioritizing the dyad as the unit of analysis, and here I have attended to two observational studies of MA couples in discussion of conflict (i.e., Paper 1; Paper 2). Further observational and mixed methods studies will yield meaningful connections concerning how individual factors (e.g., acculturative indicators) influence and are influenced by dyadic (e.g., observed communication behaviors).

Program Recommendations

Future research will continue to inform effective program design. Given the literature, I suggest that empirically supported risk and protective factors specific to MA couples' communication be included within Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework of intimate partner violence and tested systematically in future studies (see Figure 3). Suggested constituents stem from various levels of ecological context (i.e., micro, meso, macro); ecodevelopmental systems theory posits that changes in one ecological sphere carry forth influence across other domains, thus appropriating multiple points of entry for intervention design (Coatsworth et al., 2002; Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999). For example, we know that retaining a sense of strong ethnic heritage has a protective effect on MA adolescents (Marsiglia et al., 2004; Marsiglia, Kulis, Wagstaff, Erek, & Duran, 2005; Sanderson et al., 2004; Updegraff et al., 2012); indeed, recent TDV preventative interventions targeting this group have aimed to increase adolescents' ethnic pride (Enriquez, Kelly, Cheng, Hunter, & Mendez, 2012). This is supported within an ecodevelopmental model whereby macro contexts indirectly affect problem behaviors such as violence via their influence on more

proximal determinants; Prado and colleagues (2010) found that familial acculturative processes affected adolescents' likelihood to use substances and to initiate sexual intercourse. In attending to ethnic heritage conservation, Marsiglia and colleagues (2005) suggest that primary prevention should perhaps target teens while they are early in the acculturation process; while still Spanish-language dominant, for example, young teens may be better able to draw from cultural protective factors of family and shared language.

Translation of research into practice remains a central priority if youth are to experience healthy relationship education that holds impact in their lives. Applied research that attends to the design, piloting, and evaluation of culturally- and developmentally-grounded programs is required. A number of factors outlined here may form the building blocks for program design. Specifically, programs should centralize the protective role of *familismo* and positive *machismo* in helping MA adolescents to navigate acculturative stress and to form healthy dating partnerships. Also, differential within-couple acculturation processes (particularly in Anglo-orientation) should also be attended to as potential sources of conflict and TDV. Exploring such differences may prove an impacting site for which to practice healthy communication skills, and MA adolescents prefer that such skills be implemented in formats that tailor both to their heterogeneity and that bring them together (Williams, Adams, & Altamirano, 2012). Finally, the literature discussed here points to the importance of acquiring both communication skill sets *and* confronting dating violence norms.

Conclusion

Work by prominent marital scholars has suggested that interpersonal patterns are formed as early as adolescence, yet relatively little is known about how adolescents communicate about areas of conflict and the implications this has for the health of their relationships (Tabares & Gottman, 2003). Even less is known about Latino youth than

White (Frost & Driscoll, 2006), and practitioners often modify programs in an attempt to fit their cultural schemas (Weisz & Black, 2009). Attention to MA adolescents' unique relationship experiences is important in reaching this group with culturally salient messages towards relationship health promotion and preventing the occurrence of TDV. Moreover, emergent literature suggests the need for a "comprehensive, unifying framework" (Shorey et al., 2008, p. 188) that transcends singular theories of explanation and recognizes the heterogeneity and complexity of youth's dating and sexual experiences (Adams & Williams, 2011b; Shorey et al.). By co-examining literature on communication and TDV within Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework of intimate partner violence and as informed via further integration of ecodevelopmental theory (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999), I have attended to important developmental and cultural contexts for an understudied, yet prevalent group in the United States – Mexican American adolescent couples. Such contexts are outlined to inform the design of effective dating health programs as grounded in their unique experiences.

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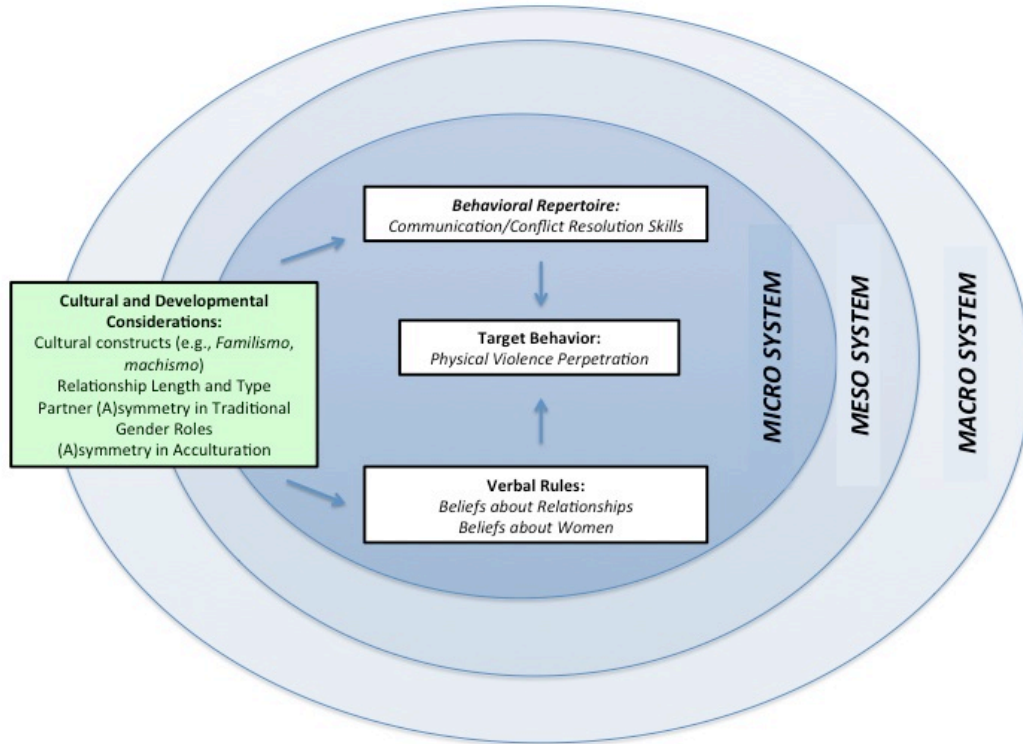
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Figure 3. *Modifications to Bell and Naugle’s Framework of Intimate Partner Violence*



Note. Modification of Bell and Naugle’s (2008) IPV contextual framework to include developmental and cultural considerations for Mexican American adolescent dating couples. Note that not all variables in the original framework are included as variables of interest in the present analysis. The green text box denotes the addition of variables. The ecological systems denote the addition of ecodevelopmental theory to their integrative framework.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Until recently, adolescent dating relationships have been thought of by the scientific community as fleeting and inconsequential (see Collins, Welsh, & Shulman, 2009 for a review). We now know that patterns established during these years are critical, laying the foundation for enduring ways of interrelating within intimate partnerships. Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health revealed that adolescents victimized by psychological and physical dating violence in high school were more likely to also experience victimization in early adulthood. They were also more likely to suffer from a range of other negative serious mental and physical health outcomes including depression, suicide ideation, and drug use (Exner-Cortens, Eckenrode, & Rothman, 2013). Psychological abuse (i.e., degrading, criticizing, saying mean things, threatening to break up, insulting one's partner; Cyr, McDuff, & Wright, 2006) is manifested via nonverbal and verbal communication behaviors, and multiple studies have deemed it a precursor to physical forms of violence (see Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008 for a review). Hispanics within the Youth Risk Behavior Survey were more likely than their European American and African American counterparts to enact physical violence against a dating partner, evidencing the importance of early preventative interventions with these youth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Communication skill sets are important in fostering relationship health and well being, including towards the prevention of violence (Tabares & Gottman, 2003; Weisz & Black, 2009). These skills may be taught, and researchers, policy makers, and program planners alike have begun to recognize the importance of doing so in the adolescent years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010; Weisz & Black; The White House, Office of the Vice President, 2013).

Despite the now-recognized importance of communication skill sets, we know very little about how adolescents actually communicate about conflict in their dating relationships. Moreover, and as reviewed throughout this dissertation research, Mexican American (MA) adolescents are deserving of study in their own right. Such youth are a particularly high-risk group given acculturative stressors, low socioeconomic status, violent schools and communities, language barriers, discrimination, and competing demands placed on them by the United States host versus Mexican culture of origin (see Horevitz & Organista, 2012 and Smokowski, David-Feron, & Stroupe, 2009 for reviews). Competing cultural norms include different values and expectations within dating contexts (Raffaelli, 2005), and differing proscriptions for appropriate communication of thoughts and feelings (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008; Castillo, Perez, Castillo, & Ghosheh, 2010; Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). Paradoxically, MA adolescents' ability to demonstrate mature communicative competencies (including the use of non-violent conflict strategies) may be particularly imperative as they are more likely to transition at earlier ages to marriage and parenting roles (Goodwin, McGill, & Chandra, 2009; Kost, Henshaw, & Carlin, 2010).

This dissertation research sought to better understand how MA adolescent couples communicate about conflict in their relationships, with critical attention to cultural and developmental considerations. Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework of interpersonal violence proved a useful tool from which to attend to communication behaviors (i.e., observed dyadic processes) alongside individual gender- and relationship-related beliefs (i.e., herein considered at the dyadic level via the creation of discrepancy scores). Papers 1 and 2 provided specific findings that may be integrated into their framework in order to more comprehensively attend to MA adolescents' relationship experiences. Paper 3 integrated such

findings, as well as others concerning communication with this sample of MA adolescents. Building from the dissertation as a whole, I also advocated for the inclusion of ecodevelopmental theory (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999) into Bell and Naugle's (2008) framework in Paper 3. I feel that future research and theory-building efforts may benefit from greater attention dedicated to overlapping spheres of influence as they affect adolescents' partnering experiences. Ecodevelopmental theory further centralizes developmental and cultural considerations within such socio-environmental contexts. I conclude in Paper 3 with recommendations for program design and directions for future research.

Key Findings

Findings from this research indicate that traditional Latino cultural values continue to impact MA adolescents to a certain degree, but not in manners easily compartmentalized or overgeneralized. On the one hand, many couples had been dating for lengthy amounts of time and held relationships characterized as mutually committed. Three of 10 couples in Paper 1 were pregnant or parenting. This supports research finding that MA adolescents' relationships may be more serious than European American youth's (Williams & Hickie, 2010), as well in line with higher pregnancy rates among adolescent Latinas as compared to other youth (Manlove et al., 2011). Furthermore, traditional cultural norms contextualized couples' conversations (Paper 1) – particularly *familismo* (Organista, 2007), adaptive *machismo* (Arciniega et al., 2008) and to a certain extent, romanticized care (Milbrath, Ohlson, & Eyre, 2009). On the other hand, youth's communication behaviors deviated in many ways from what may be expected of traditional Latino cultural norms. Such deviations point to the importance of continued research concerning changing gender roles throughout the acculturation processes and at the dyadic level.

Intersections of Gender and Culture. Qualitative analysis of observational data revealed that females evidenced non-conformity to *marianismo*, a Latino cultural construct that would describe their role as agreeable, avoidant of confrontation, and upholding of harmonious interpersonal exchanges (Castillo et al., 2010; Triandis et al., 1984). Females in Paper 1 were forthright with their concerns, often utilized blaming and criticism, and were less likely to seek solutions than were males. This aligns with literature highlighting females' tendency to utilize more overt, and even aggressive, conflict tactics as they acculturate (Flores, Tschann, VanOss, & Pantoja, 2004). Males, on the other hand, generally evidenced positive masculine traits (i.e., *caballerismo*; Arciniega et al. 2008). Such traits have been associated with greater relationship stability and satisfaction among Mexican and European American adult couples alike (Gottman, 1994; Pardo, Weisfeld, Hill, & Slatcher, 2012). This study was narrow in its focus on 10 mutually committed couples, however, and many adolescents from the full sample were less committed relationship types (i.e., in friends with benefits relationships, hookup relationships, or not in agreement about the status of their relationship). Notwithstanding, the question remains as to whether the success of partnerships in Paper 1 may have been due in part to the ability for the couple to navigate acculturative demands. For example, perhaps as females embraced gender roles more heavily influenced by notions of equality within the partnership, these males adapted to meet them with communication behaviors that received their more overt communicative bids positively. Another possibility is that males already evidencing *caballerismo* traits were better able to enter into mutually committed partnerships, a notable consideration given that adolescent males (including MA) are not as likely as females to desire long-term commitment during the high school years (Adams & Williams, 2011).

In line with other research, males within the overall sample ($N=30$) evidenced greater adherence to traditional gender roles than females (Updegraff, Umaña-Taylor, McHale, Wheeler, & Perez-Brena, 2012), as measured via a commonly utilized scale for *machismo* (see Cuéllar, Arnold, & González, 1995). This scale arguably measures more negative aspects of masculinity than positive (e.g., “*A wife should never contradict her husband in public*”), however, and therefore would not detect some of the traits (e.g., emotional supportiveness, chivalry) found in Paper 1’s qualitative analysis. This points to the importance of grounding new areas of inquiry in qualitative exploration, as having not done so may have otherwise only detected males’ greater tendency to endorse traditional gender roles as compared to females’ (Paper 2). Furthermore, this greater likelihood (albeit small), coupled with evidenced *caballerismo* in Paper 1 paints a broader picture that warrants more nuanced research on Mexican masculinities among adolescents. As suggested, the field is ripe for not only more developmentally appropriate measures to tap into Latino cultural constructs, but also for scales that expand their scope to include adaptive and maladaptive character relationship traits. As was found among Mexican adult males, it may be the case that *caballerismo* and *machismo* are distinct yet overlapping constructs (i.e., sometimes both present, and to differing degrees; Arciniega et al., 2008). If this were the case, each may explain unique variance in communication behaviors and other relationship-related constructs of interest. Such a finding would align with Kulis, Marsiglia, and Nagoshi’s (2012) finding that maladaptive masculinity (i.e., versus adaptive) within a sample of MA Mexican youth was predictive of a greater tendency to use substances.

Commitment and Relationship Type. Committed couples analyzed within Paper 1 “talked about” their conflict issues in more involved manners as compared to couples from other ethnicities in studies using similar observational methods (Welsh & Shulman,

2008). As suggested, this may reflect an intermediary communication context for such youth. Although their conflict strategies were not largely successful at increasing intimacy and/or evidencing of mutual problem-solving (i.e., more likely among young adult couples; Tuval-Mashiach & Shulman, 2006), couples did not resort to minimizing or avoiding their issues (i.e., typical of middle adolescent couples; see Welsh & Shulman, 2008 for a review). Their evidenced ability to recognize differences and confront them using the entire time allotted (i.e., 14 minutes) may stem from the seriousness of their relationships, greater length of time spent together, and/or an ability to draw from traditional belief systems that encourage resiliency (perhaps stemming from the Catholic church; Milbrath et al., 2009). A number of scenarios are likely, and a future avenue for research includes parental transmission of conflict negotiation style. Other studies have found that parental conflict styles are mirrored by youth in their dating relationships (Darling, Cohan, Burns, & Thompson, 2008), yet only one-fourth of couples within the larger sample both reported having their mother and father in the home (refer to Table 2a). Studies employing measures of parental relationships may help to elucidate the etiology of adolescents' communication behaviors and provide an additional site for intervention efforts.

More research is needed concerning couples that had dated less time, and/or in less committed contexts. I suggest furthered research utilizing qualitative methods of video data, as having done so yielded novel findings dissimilar to what may have otherwise been predicted from the scant literature concerning cultural values among MA adolescents. Given that 20 of the 30 observed MA couples in this study were not categorized as mutually dating for a period of at least six months, it is possible that new patterns of communication behaviors may emerge among the remaining couples. Perhaps such couples' patterns may emulate those of other adolescents within the same age group (Welsh & Shulman, 2008),

although separating couples by relationship length and type proved a beneficial analytical strategy in allowing for in-depth analysis from which a new type of communication theme emerged.

Couple-Level Asymmetry. Pairing observational methods with self-report offered an exceptional manner through which to understand how intrapersonal acculturative processes may intersect with interpersonal behaviors at the couple level. Of note is that couples were relatively similar across the variables of interest in Paper 2 (i.e., level of acculturation, gender roles), although even small within-couple differences in Anglo-orientation significantly predicted observed negativity in communication with one another. Findings lend themselves to a larger study of MA couples, particularly concerning the fact that only bilateral discrepancies were able to be examined in Paper 2; a larger sample size would allow for separating out whether it was the female that was more acculturated or the male. Said another way, we were only able to ascertain that couple-level differences in Anglo-orientation significantly contributed to differences in *machismo* and to heightened negativity in discussion of conflict, but not whether it would have made a difference if the male versus the female were more acculturated. Together with other literature (e.g., Updegraff et al., 2012), we may utilize this study in hypothesizing that females' greater willingness to adopt egalitarian gender roles may be problematic – especially for couples whereby the female greatly outpaces her male counterpart in adherence to Anglo-oriented cultural norms.

Taking findings from Paper 1 and Paper 2 together, it is suggested that couples be grouped and compared across relationship length and type in exploration of how dissimilar levels of acculturation may contribute to communicative processes. For example, knowing that females may be more likely to desire commitment from a relationship partner (Adams & Williams, 2011) may actually result in her use of less overt and agreeable communication

tactics. This finding would more closely parallel what is expected of traditional Mexican females (Triandis et al., 1984), although would not have necessarily surfaced in our qualitative analysis of committed couples in Paper 1. This notion also underscores the complexity of untangling cultural norms from other normative communicative processes; for example, MA females may otherwise utilize less overt communication strategies if they were in an early stage of romantic infatuation (Shulman, Mayes, Cohen, Swain, & Leckman, 2008), or in a friends with benefits relationship where confrontation may be averted to preserve nonchalance and ambiguity (Bisson & Levine, 2009). Moreover, to the extent that acculturating youth “try on” different roles (as expected during a time of identity formation; Williams, 2012), each partner may bring different expectations to the relationship. The latter highlights the importance of continued research concerning mismatched relationship desires, particularly as one partner may adhere more closely to traditional expectations while the other may not. Such mismatches may contribute to communication concerning lifelong decisions including whether or not to marry after high school or delay for career attainment, to stay near family or move away, to have children or not, and even conceivably contributing to psychological forms of dating violence (e.g., reproductive coercion). There are clearly multiple avenues of future research that hold valuable relevancy in reaching MA adolescents with effective programming.

Integrating Ecodevelopmental Theory. Stemming from critical reflection concerning the contributions made by this dissertation research as a whole, it was concluded that the inclusion of ecodevelopmental theory (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999) into Bell and Naugle’s (2008) framework of intimate partner violence would serve to better centralize adolescents’ communication of conflict within the contexts of their developing identities as influenced by multiple spheres of influence (e.g., micro, meso, macro). Key findings from

Papers 1 and 2, as well as from others studies of Mexican American couples' communicative experiences, are thus synthesized with attention to ecological systems. This provides the reader with a synthesis of what has been learned concerning MA couples' communication, including sources of potential risk or resiliency for violent/non-violent relationship occurrences.

The addition of ecodevelopmental theory in Paper 3 posits within-couple communication behaviors as inseparable from the socio-environmental contexts through which they are learned. As Bell and Naugle's framework already incorporates Social Learning theory (Bandura, 1971; Bandura, 1973; Mihalic & Elliott, 1997), the integration of ecodevelopmental theory was additionally supported. As communication behaviors unfold within situational contexts (i.e., a micro-level construct), they are influenced by societal, cultural, familial, and peer norms for behavior. Outcome beliefs (e.g., whether verbal aggression will, at least temporarily, resolve the conflict) further direct communication behaviors as influenced by each eco-systemic tier. Thus, the inclusion of ecodevelopmental theory is also supported as Bell and Naugle's theory incorporates a Background/Situational theory of violence perpetration (Riggs & O'Leary, 1989; Riggs & O'Leary, 1996) and Behavior Analytic Theory (Myers, 1995; each as cited in Bell & Naugle, p. 1101). In sum, the additional integration of ecodevelopmental theory was compatible with the other theories that formed the basis for Bell and Naugle's integrative framework of intimate partner violence and provided a perspective grounded in ethnic minority adolescents' developing identities as influenced by multiple overlapping systemic domains. I feel that the inclusion of this theory allows for a more systemic way through which to test variables of interest (i.e., as posited by those empirically-supported and outlined within Bell and Naugle's framework) and thus, to design programs grounded in rigorous study designs.

Program Recommendations

Studies such as those contained in this dissertation research are timely given increasing federal attention to the importance of laying early foundations for the capacity to partner in healthy and non-violent manners (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2010; The White House, Office of the Vice President, 2013). This research finds that couples could benefit from communication skills components, and that MA youth are in need of culturally-grounded programs that meet them where they are in navigating two cultural systems, each replete with its own set of proscriptions for dating and communication behavior. In line with social work values of individual self-determination, cultural competency, and social justice (NASW Code of Ethics, 1999), I advocate for a strengths approach that takes into account MA adolescents' experiences with acculturative stress, historical oppression and discrimination, and that draws from cultural assets. In doing so, cultural sources of strength and resiliency may be directly targeted as program objectives including strengthening positive masculinity traits (i.e., *caballerismo*; Arciniega et al., 2008), and family ties (i.e., *familismo*; Organista, 2007); as youth acculturate, youth may be taught to assess couple-level differences in forming dating relationships and to understand how differing cultural values may be sources of conflict. Specific developmental and cultural topics are now included in Bell & Naugle's (2008) modified theoretical framework for preventing intimate partner violence and attention is afforded to their experiences as embedded within multi-systemic and interlocked spheres of influence (see Figure 3). In line with programs that aim to empower youth to make healthy decisions via a positive youth development framework (Romeo & Kelley, 2009), MA youth should be afforded agency in deciphering what cultural values are important to them and how two differing sets may be successfully navigated. Helping adolescents to form a unique blend of bicultural assets may

cultivate healthy global and ethnic identities – a key task in adolescence – and, in turn, to develop skills that afford them satisfying and enduring partnerships into adulthood. In attending to within group differences, these program recommendations are in line with what MA adolescents themselves desire (see Williams, Adams, & Altamirano, 2012 for a review).

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