



## Mexican American adolescent couples' vulnerability for observed negativity and physical violence: Pregnancy and acculturation mismatch



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### ABSTRACT

Stress and vulnerability for dating violence may be heightened among acculturating Mexican American (MA) adolescents, and MA adolescent parents, because of differing cultural values and norms within romantic relationships. We hypothesized, in a sample of MA heterosexual couples ( $N = 30$ , 15–17 years), that: 1) within-couple level acculturation discrepancies, and pregnancy/parenting, would predict physical violence perpetration, and 2) that this association would have an indirect effect through couple-level negativity during an observed dyadic video-taped discussion of conflict. Using a path model we found that pregnant/parenting adolescents ( $B = .37$ ,  $SE = .16$ ,  $p = .002$ ), and couples with greater acculturation mismatch resulted in greater couple negativity ( $B = .16$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p = .01$ ), which was associated with self-reported physical violence perpetration ( $B = .41$ ,  $SE = .22$ ,  $p = .02$ ; indirect effect,  $B = .15$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $p = .03$ ). Within-couple acculturation discrepancies and pregnancy/parenting may be a pathway to dating violence through poor communication skills around conflict for MA youth. Support services that strengthen communication skills, particularly for pregnant/parenting couples, are recommended.

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Romantic relationships during adolescence are normative, experienced by nearly three quarters of U.S. youth (Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance [YRBS]; CDC, 2014). Such relationships are not, however, experienced uniformly. Approximately 10% of adolescents have experienced physical violence by a partner; females are particularly vulnerable, with Hispanic female adolescents evidencing the highest rates (13.6%) of physical violence victimization within the past year (CDC, 2014). Although less studied among adolescents, partner violence has been associated with a tendency to invoke heightened negative non-verbal and verbal conflict tactics in young adult couples (Bell & Naugle, 2008; Cornelius, Shorey, & Beebe, 2010). Further, cultural norms and acculturative processes influence adult couples' experiences with relationship conflict and violence. Research with adult Latinas finds that orientation to U.S. culture is predictive of multiple forms of violence victimization and that this relationship is intensified by their adoption of traditionally masculine traits (Sabina, Cuevas, & Schally, 2013). Among adolescents, Mexican American (MA) girls typically adopt egalitarian gender norms at a more accelerated and attenuated rate than boys (Updegraff, Umaña-Taylor, McHale, Wheeler, & Perez-Brena, 2012). This may create unique coupling challenges for

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MA youth involved in romantic relationships. Additionally, such youth are also more likely to become teen parents (Hamilton, Mathews, & Ventura, 2013), a stressor associated with couples' experience of teen dating violence (TDV; Herrmann, 2013; Newman & Campbell, 2011; Vézina & Hébert, 2007). The present study sought to better understand the role of parenting and pregnancy, dyadic acculturation mismatch, and conflict negotiation (including the potential for physical violence) among a sample of MA adolescent couples.

## Conceptual frameworks

**Vulnerability-stress-adaptation model.** The transition to parenthood can be a time marked by excitement and anticipation, but can also be a period of heightened couple distress (Petch, Halford, Creedy, & Gamble, 2012). This transition has been associated with immediate deterioration across numerous domains in relationship functioning, including self-reported conflict management and observed communication (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). Here, we draw upon a vulnerability-stress-adaptation model forwarded by Karney and Bradbury (1995), in which couple functioning stems from individual vulnerabilities each partner brings to the relationship (e.g., background characteristics, personality traits), the life stressors encountered (e.g., pregnancy/parenting), and the actions taken (e.g., problem-solving interactions) to adapt to new circumstances. Poor adaptation may spiral into furthered stress and relationship deterioration, where the reverse is also true. Aligned with this model, we posit that couples managing acculturative stress, while also coping with the demands of pregnancy or parenting, are particularly at risk of utilizing poor adaptive coping strategies (e.g., negative conflict styles). This model has similarly been utilized to predict intimate partner violence (Langer, Lawrence, & Barry, 2008) and to qualitatively understand how situational couple violence may result from combinations of vulnerabilities, stressful events, and maladaptive communication processes among adults (Stith et al., 2011).

**Acculturative stress.** Mexican American youth experience stress as a result of acculturation, a multi-dimensional process involving a shift in viewpoints and behaviors as cultural norms representative of Mexico and the United States coincide (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). That is, each set of norms is negotiated by the adolescent, who may adopt either, both, or neither (Nieri et al., 2014). Thus, alongside a vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), we draw upon theories of acculturative stress to understand the unique interpersonal contexts that bicultural adolescents face as they navigate stress resulting both from conflict between two sets of cultural norms but also as emerging within one's own ethnic group as acculturative demands are traversed at the individual level. Although these tensions may be particularly pronounced between what Norton (1978; as cited by Robbins and Galan (2006)) has termed the nurturing (i.e., family, immediate community) versus sustaining (i.e., educational, larger societal) systems, they are also salient between members of the same ethnic group as multi-faceted bicultural and inter-generational contexts give rise to various degrees of dual language efficiency and pressures to conform to either one set of cultural norms or the other (Romero & Roberts, 2003).

Related to the present study, Romero and Roberts (2003) suggest that acculturative stress can result within interpersonal contexts when cultural discrepancies are present (e.g., acculturation mismatch), and as affected by one's cognitive appraisal of the situational context. For example, a couple mismatched in their level of acculturation and facing pregnancy or parenting demands may experience heightened acculturative stress, particularly if the situation is deemed undesirable at the individual level and as heightened in the context of mismatched relationship expectations as decisions are negotiated regarding pregnancy or co-parenting. This interpretation fits within the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), whereby couple functioning would be most compromised in the context of heightened stress conditions (i.e., acculturative processes, and specifically as couples differ) and as acute life stressors (i.e., pregnancy/parenting) tax adaptive coping processes. Such stressors may be considered cumulative, increasing risk for couple violence (Chen & Foshee, 2015; Petch et al., 2012).

## Acculturation differences and interpersonal conflict

Conflict is an inevitable part of all relationships, and research is needed to better understand how adolescents traverse culturally influenced expectations within romantic contexts. At least in certain interpersonal contexts, acculturation differences (a term preferred to "acculturation gap distress"; see Nieri et al., 2014) may create stress and heighten conflict. This phenomenon has been studied more extensively within families; findings are mixed and have ranged to include either a negative impact on parent-child quality (Birman, 2006; Dennis, Basañez, & Farahmand, 2010; Dinh & Nguyen, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2012) or no such effect (Lau et al., 2005; Nieri et al., 2014; see also Telzer, 2010). Adolescent romantic contexts are unique developmentally, however, distinct from parent-child relationships in a number of important ways that hold relevance to understanding conflict negotiation (Welsh & Shulman, 2008).

Acculturation differences have not been studied to our knowledge among romantically-involved adolescent couples, although we do know that gender roles shift in dissimilar manners for MA adolescent girls as compared to adolescent boys throughout acculturation processes (Updegraff et al., 2012). This holds clear relevancy for studying conflict negotiation within dating partnerships as couple-level differences in acculturation and associated belief systems may contribute to tension and heightened conflict among adolescent couples (Sanderson, Coker, Roberts, Tortolero, & Reininger, 2004; Ulloa, Jaycox, Skinner, & Orsburn, 2008); indeed, among MA adult couples, heightened conflict and violence have been attributed to dissimilar rates of within couple acculturation (Miranda, Bilot, Peluso, Berman, & Van Meek, 2006; Montoya, 1996; Perilla, Bakeman, & Norris, 1994). It is unclear whether the underlying mechanisms associated with conflict stem from couple

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