



Exploring Mexican American adolescent romantic relationship profiles and adjustment



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ABSTRACT

Although Mexican Americans are the largest ethnic minority group in the nation, knowledge is limited regarding this population's adolescent romantic relationships. This study explored whether 12th grade Mexican Americans' ($N = 218$; 54% female) romantic relationship characteristics, cultural values, and gender created unique latent classes and if so, whether they were linked to adjustment. Latent class analyses suggested three profiles including, relatively speaking, *higher, satisfactory, and lower quality* romantic relationships. Regression analyses indicated these profiles had distinct associations with adjustment. Specifically, adolescents with *higher* and *satisfactory quality* romantic relationships reported greater future family expectations, higher self-esteem, and fewer externalizing symptoms than those with *lower quality* romantic relationships. Similarly, adolescents with *higher quality* romantic relationships reported greater academic self-efficacy and fewer sexual partners than those with *lower quality* romantic relationships. Overall, results suggested *higher quality* romantic relationships were most optimal for adjustment. Future research directions and implications are discussed.

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Adolescent romantic relationships are normative events that help prepare adolescents for successfully attaining intimacy in young adulthood (Connolly & McIsaac, 2009; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). These relationships also are highly prevalent; using a nationally representative sample (Add Health, 1994), Carver, Joyner, and Udry (2003) found that 55% of adolescents between 12 and 18 reported having been in a romantic relationship during the past 18 months. Furthermore, 58% of 16 year olds in this study reported having had the same romantic partner across a one to two year time span, in comparison to 21% of adolescents younger than age 14, supporting arguments that as adolescents mature, their romantic relationships become more stable (Furman & Wehner, 1994). However, adolescent romantic relationship researchers rarely have considered the complexity of these relationships particularly among minority adolescents such as Mexican Americans.

To help improve understanding of the complexity and significance of adolescent romantic experiences on adjustment, Collins (2003) suggested a five feature framework (i.e., involvement, partner selection, content, quality, cognitive and emotional processes) that, along with context and individual differences, introduce variability into adolescents' romantic experiences. The current study focused on one of these five features: *quality* (i.e., the degree to which adolescent romantic relationships are advantageous). The purposes of this study were to (a) explore whether unique romantic relationship profiles

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emerged from 12th grade Mexican American adolescents' relationship characteristics (i.e., intimacy, satisfaction, monitoring, conflict, aggression), cultural values (i.e., familism values, traditional gender role values) and gender; and if so, (b) examine whether these profiles were distinctly associated with important domains of adolescents' adjustment (i.e., future family expectations, self-esteem, academic self-efficacy, externalizing and internalizing symptoms, number of sexual partners). The current study defined adolescent adjustment as encompassing both positive and negative psychosocial outcomes.

The importance of studying Mexican American adolescents

Mexican Americans account for nearly two-thirds of U.S. Latinos, the largest ethnic minority group in the country (Motel & Patten, 2012). Although adolescent romantic relationship research has encompassed Latinos broadly (e.g., La Greca & Harrison, 2005), few researchers have examined Mexican American adolescents specifically. In fact, most researchers have either compared Mexican American adolescents to non-Mexican American adolescents using qualitative research designs and smaller samples (e.g., Adams & Williams, 2011; Millbrath, Ohlson, & Eyre, 2009) or combined Mexican Americans with other Latin Americans, ignoring cultural differences among subgroups, while focusing on either descriptive information (e.g., Carver et al., 2003) or risks associated with adolescent romantic relationships (e.g., dating violence; Yan, Howard, Beck, Shattuck, & Hallmark-Kerr, 2010). In contrast, the current study examined more in-depth information about Mexican American adolescents' romantic relationships with a focus on normative characteristics.

Adolescent romantic relationships

Adolescent romantic relationships have been defined as continuous interactions that are mutually acknowledged (e.g., an adolescent likes a person and this person likes him/her), typically characterized by intense emotions often indicated by affectionate behaviors (e.g., kissing; see Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009 for a review). Research seeking to understand the influence of adolescent romantic relationships on adjustment has varied in complexity from a focus on involvement to various relationship characteristics. This section describes the diversity of research findings linking adolescent romantic relationships to adjustment, the potential importance of Mexican American cultural values to romantic relationships, and the value of examining these relationships from a person-centered analytic approach.

Adolescent romantic relationships and adjustment

Research suggests that romantic relationship involvement is associated with optimal adolescent adjustment. Researchers have found that, in comparison to adolescents without romantic partners, those with romantic partners reported lower social anxiety, a relationship that was found primarily for Latinos (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). Also, adolescents with higher levels of dating experience (i.e., dating someone more than two months) reported higher perceptions of social acceptance, romantic appeal, and physical appearance than adolescents with lower levels of dating experience (Zimmer-Gembeck, Sibenbruner, & Collins, 2001). Similarly, adolescents who were in romantic relationships and were in love, reported being in better moods, having higher levels of concentration (Bajoghli, Joshanghani, Mohammadi, Holsboer-Trachsler, & Brand., 2011; Bajoghli et al., 2013), and being less tired throughout the day (Bajoghli et al., 2013). Moreover, adolescents engaged in serious romantic relationships (i.e., participated in multiple dating activities such as exchanging gifts, meeting their partner's parents) reported greater marital expectations than those not engaged in such serious relationships (Crissey, 2005). Researchers also have reported negative effects from adolescent romantic relationship involvement. For instance, in comparison to adolescents without romantic partners, those with romantic partners reported lower academic performance (for girls only; Brendgen, Vitaro, Doyle, Markiewicz, & Bukowski, 2002), greater externalizing symptoms (Hou et al., 2013), and greater depressive symptoms (Hou et al., 2013; Vujeva & Furman, 2011). Similarly, researchers found that adolescents engaged in steady romantic relationships before age 16 reported having more sexual partners at age 19 than those not engaged in steady relationships before age 16 (after controlling for gender; Zimmer-Gembeck & Collins, 2008). Because of these conflicting findings, it is unclear whether simply having a romantic partner in adolescence is healthy or not.

Thus, many researchers have moved from simply examining romantic relationship involvement to studying the influence of romantic relationship characteristics on adjustment. For example, romantic relationships characterized by satisfaction, closeness, and ease of sharing with romantic partner have been positively associated with several adolescent psychosocial factors (i.e., social acceptance, romantic appeal, global self-worth), but not with mental health and academic outcomes (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2001). Similarly, researchers found a positive association between companionate love (characterized by acceptance, trust, being unafraid of becoming too close, and few emotional extremes) and self-esteem for girls, but not for boys (Bucx & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010). Moreover, relationship satisfaction was negatively associated with depressive symptoms and negative emotions (e.g., sad/withdrawn) both concurrently and two years later for girls, but not for boys (Ha, Dishion, Overbeek, Burk, & Engels, 2013). Similarly, negative romantic relationship characteristics have been associated with less optimal adjustment. For example, negative romantic partner interactions were associated with higher social anxiety (for Latinos only) and depressive symptoms (stronger for European Americans than Latinos; La Greca & Harrison, 2005). Similarly, psychological aggression within a romantic relationship was linked to greater depressive symptoms, whereas physical aggression was not (Jouriles, Garrido, Rosenfield, & McDonald, 2009). To further advance adolescent romantic relationship research, the current study explored whether Mexican American adolescents' positive and negative romantic relationship

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