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‘She’s 16 years old and there’s boys calling over to the house’: an exploratory study of sexual socialization in Latino families

MARCELA RAFFAELLI and LENNA L. ONTAI

Compared to other ethnic groups in the USA, Latino populations are at high risk for negative sexual outcomes, including unplanned pregnancy and HIV/AIDS infection. The goal of this study was to explore the role of cultural beliefs and values in sexual socialization by focusing on the family socialization of adolescent romantic and sexual behavior described by 22 Latina/Hispanic women who took part in in-depth individual interviews. Four broad themes were explored: parental concerns regarding dating, family communication about sexual issues, family rules about dating, and actual dating and sexual experiences. Consistent with traditional cultural views, female romantic involvement outside of marriage was described as potentially dishonourable to the family. Because US-style dating was seen as a violation of traditional courtship styles, most of the respondents’ families placed strict boundaries on adolescent sociosexual interaction. As a result, many respondents described adolescent experiences of dating characterized by tension and conflict, and reported vulnerability in eventual sexual encounters. In order to better understand the sexual behavior of young Latina women in the USA, researchers must examine sexual socialization within the family of origin and take parents’ culturally-influenced beliefs and practises into account.

Introduction

As primary agents of socialization, families play a major role in shaping developmental experiences during childhood and adolescence. Parents act as models, engage in direct and indirect teaching, attempt to mould their children’s behavior in specific ways and expose their children to, or protect them from, an array of experiences (Burgental and Goodnow 1998, Parke and Buriel 1998). Although there is a rich literature showing the importance of parents in the socialization process, one aspect of socialization that has received less attention is sexual socialization.

There is widespread agreement that parents influence their children’s sexual development in significant ways (for reviews, see Katchadourian 1990, Udry and Campbell 1994). Family influences on sexuality operate through a complex web of factors, including direct communication (Fox and Inazu 1980, Casper 1990, Jaccard and Dittus 1993, Holtzman and Rubinson 1995), social control practises (Miller *et al.* 1986), and emotional qualities of the relationship (Jaccard *et al.* 1998).

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The exact mechanisms of influence may be unknown but ultimately family socialization affects the formation of sexual scripts, or guidelines for sexual interaction (Simon and Gagnon 1986). According to scripting theory, sexual behavior results from the interplay between cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts and intrapsychic scripts (Simon and Gagnon 1986, 1987). Cultural scenarios provide the basic framework for sexual interactions, delineating the roles of individuals in a sexual encounter, whereas interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts are the outcome of individual 'fine-tuning' through experience and practice.

Scripting theory gives a prominent place to culture, which has become a central concern of developmental scholars in recent years. Culture assumes a significant role in the socialization process by shaping the specific beliefs and values held by parents (McDade 1993). Parents of ethnically diverse children face a dual socialization challenge of not only transmitting their own beliefs and values, but also those of the larger population (Parke and Buriel 1998). Thus, to gain a full understanding of sexual socialization among different ethnic groups, parents' cultural beliefs must be taken into account. The current analysis draws on a retrospective study of sexual socialization in a sample of women of Latin American origin or descent living in the US. This focus was initially prompted by the fact that US Latinas are at high risk for negative sexual outcomes.

In contrast to the general decline in sexual activity among teenagers in the USA, the proportion of Latinas of this age reporting sexual activity increased between 1988 and 1995 (from 49% to 55%) whereas contraceptive use at most recent sexual intercourse decreased (from 69% to 53%) (Child Trends 2000). In 1995, 50% of White females reported sexual activity, and 71% used contraception at last intercourse; 60% of Black females were sexually active, with 70% reporting contraceptive use. Given these ethnic disparities, it is perhaps not surprising that in 1997 the teen birth rate among Latinas was almost twice the national average (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy 1999). Hispanic women are moreover disproportionately represented among AIDS cases in the USA. Although Hispanic women aged 15 and older represent just 7% of the US female population, they account for 20% of cumulative female AIDS cases (CDC 1999). In an effort to understand these health statistics, researchers have explored both demographic (e.g. poverty, discrimination, barriers to health care) and cultural factors.

Although some scholars critique depictions of traditional Latin cultures for being stereotypical and invalid (e.g. Amaro 1988, De La Cancela 1989, Singer *et al.* 1990), there is also agreement about a number of shared cultural values (Marin 1988, 1989, Taylor 1996) that are likely to be important influences on family socialization practices. These include *familismo*, an emphasis on the family as the primary source of social support and identity, and *respeto*, the need to maintain respectful hierarchical relationships.

Another set of cultural beliefs relevant to the socialization of daughters in particular pertains to the importance of virginity until marriage. Within Latino families much of the socialization of daughters is influenced by historical beliefs in religion and family codes of honour. Historical religious influences led to a high value for female chastity; violation of this value resulted in dishon-

or for both the individual woman and her family (Espin 1984/ 1997). Because chastity of women within a family was one avenue through which honour was attained for the family as a whole, families vigorously safeguarded the virginity of unmarried women.

Other cultural beliefs relevant to sexual socialization include traditional gender role expectations and norms that promote female reticence and lack of knowledge about sexuality (for a review, see Raffaelli and Suarez-Al-Adam 1998). These long-standing beliefs about female sexuality often conflict with conditions encountered by Latino families in the USA and are likely to be most salient as daughters enter adolescence. It has been suggested that the value of virginity may become a focal concern for some Latino parents who view US women as being promiscuous and link becoming 'Americanized' with being sexually promiscuous (Espin 1984/1997).

Prior research has identified specific cultural values and norms related to sexuality among Latino families, but the way that these beliefs influence the sexual socialization of children and adolescents remains largely unexplored (Barkley and Mosher 1995, Hurtado 1995). One study of 10–15 year old Puerto Rican and Mexican girls and their mothers (Villaruel 1998) revealed that to maintain daughters' virginity, families often established rules regarding dating and contact with males and tried to keep daughters close to home. Similar patterns have been reported by clinicians who work with Latina adolescents (Espin 1984/1997).

Other researchers have found that Latino parents are often reluctant to give their daughters information regarding sexuality (Darabi and Asencio 1987, Baumeister *et al.* 1995, Marin and Gomez 1997), communicating less about sexual topics than parents of other ethnic groups (CDC 1991). This lack of information and experience leads Latinas to be less knowledgeable about their own sexual anatomy and the basic physiological aspects of sexuality than non-Latino women (Barkley and Mosher 1995, Marin and Gomez 1997).

This body of research suggests that aspects of traditional culture influence sexual socialization in Latino families, but the small number of studies conducted to date limits conclusions that can be drawn. Moreover, prior research has not examined how specific parenting practises emerge from cultural beliefs, or how families negotiate a balance between old and new cultures. In an effort to add to the knowledge base about how Latino families socialize their daughters, the current analysis examined family experiences related to sexuality in a sample of adult Latinas who were interviewed about their experiences while growing up. We were particularly interested in examining how parental beliefs and values were enacted in everyday interactions around issues connected to sexuality and dating.

Methods

Procedures and participants

The study drew on an opportunity sample of Latina/Hispanic women who responded to mailings to Latino faculty and staff at a large Midwestern Univer-

sity or to informational flyers posted in public locations. Several participants also referred friends who subsequently participated. Recruitment materials targeted 20 to 45 year old Latino/Hispanic women who had grown up in Spanish-speaking families but had lived in the USA for at least 8 years. After providing informed consent, women took part in individual in-depth interviews conducted in English by the first author. Participants received \$20 for taking part in the study to cover their time, transportation, and childcare costs.

Twenty-two women had complete data and are included in the analyses (two additional women were excluded due to equipment problems that resulted in inaudible tapes). The average age of the sample was 31.2 years (median 27 years; range 20–45). Two-fifths (41%) of the respondents had never been married, 41% were currently married, and 18% were separated or divorced. Two (9%) of the women reported no religious affiliation; 68% were Catholic and 23% reported other religious affiliations.

All of the respondents had graduated from high school; 32% had attended college but not graduated; 18% had graduated from college; and 18% had post-graduate education. In contrast, parental levels of education were lower; over half of the respondents' fathers (57%) and mothers (55%) had not graduated from high school, with the majority of these parents leaving school by the ninth grade. A number of parents had graduated from high school (14% of fathers, 23% of mothers) and the remainder had attended or graduated from college (29% of fathers, 23% of mothers).

All respondents self-identified as Latino/Hispanic; 16 (73%) were of Mexican origin or descent and the remainder were from other Latin American or Caribbean countries. In terms of generation of immigration, the majority ($n = 19$) had been born in the USA. Eleven (50%) of the women had at least one parent born outside the USA (in ten cases, Mexico) and the remaining 11 had two US-born parents. Only three of the respondents had two US-born grandparents; the rest had one or both grandparents born outside the USA.

Participants had high levels of current acculturation based on language. All interviews were conducted in English. In addition, current language use was assessed using a modified version of the Marin short acculturation scale (Marin *et al.* 1987). Respondents indicated which language they typically think in and use with their partner, friends, and at work on a three-point scale (1=mostly or only Spanish, 2 = Both equally, 3 = mostly or only English). Responses were averaged to form an overall acculturation score; the average score was 2.59 ($SD = 0.51$). Two fifths ($n = 9$) of the women had an average of three (indicating English only), half ($n = 11$) were more or less bilingual (scores between 2.25 and 2.75), and two (9%) scored under 2.0 on the 3-point scale.

Measures

The interview guide consisted of open-ended and structured questions dealing with three main topic areas. The first area was sexual socialization within the family of origin, including gender role socialization (*e.g.* How did your parents teach you about how girls and boys 'should' behave? Do you remember any specific examples? Did your parents ever get angry or upset when you didn't

behave in a certain way?), sexual communication (e.g. Did your parents ever talk to you about sex? What did they tell you about sex?), and reactions to the daughter's emerging sexuality (e.g. Tell me about when you started developing physically. What did your parents say/do?). The second area was early romantic and sexual experiences, including parental rules and messages about dating (e.g. When were you allowed to date or go out with boys? What kinds of rules did your family have about dating? What did your parents tell you about boys? Did you ever get in trouble for breaking the rules?). The final area was sexuality-related beliefs, attitudes, and behavior, including pregnancy history, contraceptive use, and lifetime partners.

At the start of the interview, the investigator discussed how the project fitted into her larger research programme, and emphasized the exploratory nature of the work. Respondents were told that their role was not simply to provide answers but to help the investigator figure out what the questions were; that is, they were treated as co-participants in the research process, and enlisted as collaborators in making meaning of their experiences. Thus, although the interview protocol was used as a guide and all women were asked the same core of questions, not all questions were asked in the same order and some interviews ranged into additional areas. Interviews averaged an hour to an hour and a half, and were audio-taped.

Data coding and analysis

Responses to open-ended questions were transcribed professionally, checked for accuracy by trained research assistants, and corrected. This procedure yielded over 400 pages of interview transcripts that were coded in two stages. First, transcripts were reviewed by two independent coders to locate specific segments that dealt with the focal domains addressed in the interview guide (*i.e.* parental concerns regarding dating, communication about sexual issues, family rules about dating, and actual dating and sexual experiences). Coders compared notes, identified discrepancies, and resolved them by discussion. These broad themes were then marked in a qualitative data analysis program (QSR NUD. IST) and the relevant portions of the interviews were extracted and reviewed by two coders to identify emergent themes within each of the focal domains. These themes were coded in the data analysis programme, and patterns of responses across respondents tabulated. Responses to structured questions were entered into an SPSS data file and analyzed using quantitative analysis techniques.

Results

The current analysis examines four domains related to adolescent sexual socialization: parental concerns regarding dating, family communication about sexual issues, family rules about dating, and actual dating experiences and early sexual behavior. The major sub-themes that emerged from the interview transcripts are listed in table 1 (themes that were mentioned by fewer than five respondents are omitted from the table).

Table 1. Major themes identified in content analysis.

PARENTAL CONCERNS

Mistrust of Males/Daughter
Concerns about Sexual Behavior/Pregnancy
Image in Community
Violation of Traditional Courtship Norms
Safety

COMMUNICATION

Lack of open communication
Indirect communication of expectations

PARENTAL RULES ABOUT DATING

Behavioural Restrictions
Age Limitations
Location Restriction
Curfew
Group Dating

DATING BEHAVIOR

Avoidance of Dating
Secret Dating
Tension Surrounding Dating

Parental concerns

All the respondents described parental concerns regarding interactions with boys and men during adolescence. A major cause for concern stemmed from parental mistrust of males, as several women described:

I think [mother] was real concerned about whether or not we would be taken advantage of ... I always wondered was it that she didn't trust us or she didn't trust them and I think it was more she didn't trust them. (Lupe, 41)

[Father] would just say it's not appropriate ... for a girl to do that. Um, you need to be a certain age, um, boys can try certain things on you. I just want to keep you safe. (Antonia, 26)

Mistrust of males was linked to fear of premarital pregnancy, which was described as a parental concern by a number of participants:

My friends attest he [father] would give us all lectures about how, you know, we can't let boys get in our way, because boys are bad and boys are, you know, just, they just want one thing and whatever I do don't get pregnant and that was just, I mean I would leave and 'We don't want you coming home pregnant' ... it was just whatever you do don't be pregnant or whatever you do don't get pregnant. (Silvia, 21)

My Mom spent a lot of time saying things to me like, 'You'd better not get pregnant', even though I had no idea how you got pregnant at the time she was saying these things to me. If she had only known I was very naïve, she would have never even had to say those things, but she made it a point to always say those things to me and so of course I was afraid to do anything, so, cause I thought well, 'God, what, what will she do to me if I do get pregnant?' because sometimes she'd threaten to send me away if I did certain things like get pregnant or, you know, just didn't do what she said, she would threaten to send me away, so I thought she would so I didn't do anything, just stayed home a lot. (Gloria, 41)

Several respondents also mentioned that their parents worried about how a daughter's behavior might affect the family's image in the community. Sandra (age 40) explained that she was not allowed to date because 'we came from a pretty good family, and so it would be a disgrace if anything ... you know'. Another respondent described her father's reaction when she brought a boyfriend to church:

When I talked to my father after the mass, he was kind of upset, he was like, he didn't want me to bring any of my boyfriends there. He said, 'Unless, until you're married I don't want you bringing your boyfriends around', because he didn't want the community to get the idea that I was promiscuous or dating around. (Victoria, 24)

Similarly, Yolanda (27) said that her father

... did not want to know who the guys [his daughters dated] were ... if we're gonna get married, that's when he wants to know who our boyfriend or fiancé is. But other than that, he didn't want to know who our boyfriends are. Didn't want to see us with one guy and then another and another.

Thus, to many parents, daughters' dating behavior was seen as a potential source of embarrassment because it might expose the family to shame in the community.

Another reason for parental concern about dating was that US-style dating violated traditional patterns of courtship and marriage. Teresa (45) described the situation she experienced growing up in a predominately Mexican-American neighbourhood:

... if the guys wanted to court you they would be outside. You would be outside the house and you just talked, there was no such thing as you went to the car and you took off, you know, you wanted to talk to somebody you would be outside the house and then your parents would tell you, you have to come in and that was it, but it was no kissing or holding hands or nothing, actually it was just talking, getting to know each other actually until you decided whether you wanted to get married and then ... the guy would have to tell whoever the parent was then, ask for your hand in marriage.

Similarly, when asked about her family's rules regarding dating, Yolanda (27), whose family moved from Mexico to the US when she was a young child, said:

... this is what [my father] would tell us. Okay, you turn 15 and you have a coming out party. The two older sisters had that and then the rest of the girls didn't. [We were] supposed to be able to date at the age of 15 and dating to him or to my mother was [the boy] comes here, you know, your window and then you just talk through the window ... You know, no touching, no holding their hands and nothing like that.

The tension between traditional courtship styles and the reality of life in the USA was expressed by one 26 year old woman's description of conversations with her Mexican-born father, who moved to the USA before she was born:

I have asked him before, I've said, so, Dad, do you think that, that it is appropriate for us to go ahead and have boyfriends, to find out if this is the person that we want to marry, you know, how else are you going to find out if this is the person that you're going to marry, unless you meet this person, go out with this person, and so on the one hand it's like, you know, ah, intellectually he knows, okay, yeah, that makes sense, but it's almost as if though his social upbringing, you know, his, ah, it keeps him back from, you know, it's kind of like he's in between, you know, he's here in the United States, but yet he has all of this stuff that has told him that women are not allowed to go out with boyfriends. (Rosita, 26)

Silvia (21 years old) said her stepfather had begun pressuring her to be married because 'according to him whenever I get married is when he can stop worrying ... It means I'll be in another household ... and I'm no longer his worry, he doesn't, you know, I'll be taken care of'.

Communication about sexual issues

Respondents were asked about family communication about different sexual topics, including menstruation, physical development, facts about sex, morality, appropriate behavior, and boys/dating. The overall experience reported by study participants was for limited discussions about 'biological' topics accompanied by extensive communication about the dangers of sexual activity. Only six (27%) of the respondents had discussed physical development with their parents, and eight (36%) had talked about the 'facts of life' (*i.e.* intercourse and pregnancy). The most commonly discussed 'biological' topic was menstruation, which fifteen (68%) of the women had discussed with a parent. In contrast, the majority of women had discussed appropriate behavior ($n = 20$; 91%), boys and dating ($n = 18$; 82%) and moral aspects of sexuality ($n = 13$; 59%).

Parental expectations about sexuality often took the form of warnings or prohibitions. For example, when asked if there were any rules she had to follow when she went out, Gabriela (27) responded, 'don't let a guy, don't let a boy touch me'. Inez (23) reported:

I do remember, I'm not sure exactly when it was, but I imagine probably when I was still in grade school my mother telling us that both her and my father were virgins when they got married and that's how it should be.

Other respondents described parental messages that were much more indirect:

They would just give me some vague directions and then I think kind of expected me to fill it in. A lot of it was 'You know what we expect from you' ... it's basically understood ... it's understood that you don't have sex before you're married. (Antonia, 26)

I think it was comments, you know, that you would hear about, you know, I had an aunt who got pregnant and, and how that was so shameful. I mean it was just awful, you know, how could she do that ... [There was] always the recognition that there were good girls and bad girls and, you know, the talk about them and it wasn't just mother, it was the aunts, the *tias*, that would sit around and ... you'd sit there and you ... heard them talk ... so the message was very clear, very indirect, but very clear that, that was not acceptable. (Lupe, 41)

The bulk of family communication focused on avoidance of sexual involvement, with few families providing information about sexuality or physical development.

Family rules about dating

Parental concerns about their daughters' premature or inappropriate romantic and sexual involvement led to the implementation of a number of strategies to protect daughters. In some cases, parents attempted to shield their daughters from male attention by prohibiting the use of make up or revealing clothes. One woman described how her Mexican born father reacted to her and her sisters' adolescence:

He didn't want us to wear make up or shave our legs, I can remember times when he would check my sisters' and my legs to see if we were shaving them ... and he was just really, really cautious about us talking to guys and just growing up and becoming you know, puberty stage and just actually becoming women. Um, he's a good father though. He's, he's been supportive as far as our education. Sure there were times when he ah, he threatened not to let us go to school anymore if, you know, we kept doing, you know, saying things that he didn't want us to do. (Yolanda, 27)

Some parents did not allow daughters to have social contact with males, as Silvia (21) succinctly described when asked what her parents' rules about social life were: 'No boys'. Similarly, when Victoria (24) was a teenager her father told her 'he didn't want us to go out with, ah, to date, and he didn't want us to bring anyone, any boys to the house. That was a definite no'. Another woman described her experience as follows:

I was absolutely to do nothing. I came home from school with my school work and that was it. I didn't dare ask to go to games, movies, cause I just had to be home ... I would try, I tried once or twice. And after that it was like 'NO' ... I think they didn't trust me. So I thought what have I done that you don't trust me. Obviously I couldn't have done anything, so it was like that. I stopped asking. If I had to stay at home, I had to stay at home. (Sandra, 40)

Parents used a variety of tactics to monitor their daughters' romantic activity. One strategy was to set an age before which daughters were not allowed to date. When asked whether their parents had rules about the age at which dating was allowed, eight women (38%) said they were not supposed to date while living at home, nine (43%) were expected to wait until after age 15, and four (19%) said no explicit age limits were set. In a number of cases, group or chaperoned dates were permitted, but one-on-one dating was not.

Parents also restricted the locations where social interactions occurred. For example, some respondents were allowed to interact with boys or men in public or at social gatherings at which parents and relatives were present (e.g. weddings or community dances):

I was never allowed to have any boys in the house ... They didn't allow me to go to other people's houses. It had to be public, you know, a dance or a picnic or public thing. (Carmen, 45)

... they knew that I was going out and that, you know, there were boys there and so I guess in their minds it was, you know, they were at ease if it was I public, because nothing could happen in public, but if you were at home God knows what could happen. (Silvia, 21)

Parental rules about dating reflected the expectations that parents held for their daughters. Overall, the 'script' for adolescent sexuality was characterized by delayed and circumscribed romantic involvement on the part of their daughters, with the ultimate goal being marriage. However, actual dating and sexual behavior described by respondents often deviated from this ideal, resulting in familial and personal stress.

Dating and sexual behavior

Respondents reported a wide variation in their adolescent dating experiences. Six (29%) began dating by age 14, ten (48%) by age 15 or 16, and five (24%) did not date until age 17 or older. The average age at which respondents began

dating was 15.7 years, with early dating experiences often occurring without parental knowledge or permission.

Parental expectations that daughters would not date resulted in some respondents waiting until they left home to have boyfriends. Olivia (25), who was born in Mexico and moved to the USA as a young child, described her situation:

... because you're a girl you can't date until a certain age and there never really was a real idea of what age you were supposed to be, because the whole time I was in high school or even in college coming back home you couldn't date, because you were at home and that's not why you come home and so I always thought how are we supposed to get married if we can't even meet somebody?

In other cases, daughters engaged in covert dating to circumvent parental restrictions. About half of the respondents said they had dated without parental permission. For example, when asked about when she started dating, Lupe (41) replied, 'the end of my sophomore year and it was sneak dating'. Similarly, other women described their involvement in covert dating activities:

... in 8th grade, I snuck out, well, I didn't sneak out, I went with a girlfriend to the movies but my Mom didn't know we were meeting up with two guys and I got in trouble for that. (Antonia, 26)

... I can recall as a senior in high school, ah, sneaking out, cause by that time I had my car and, ah, a driver's license, so I'd wait until my parents went to bed and then I'd sneak out and sometimes I'd get in trouble for that. (Inez, 23)

... at that point I had learned just, I tried to avoid my Dad and I tried to avoid my Mom and just tried to do as much as I could without letting them know about anything. (Silvia, 21)

Several other respondents said their mother helped them go out without their father's knowledge, as Olivia (25) described:

She would like lie for us to my Dad, so that we could do maybe like a high school social kind of thing also if we had dates or whatever if she knew the guy she would tell my dad that we were working and let us to go out for a little bit, or send one of us to chaperone...

In other families open dating was allowed, but was surrounded with an atmosphere of tension and distrust. When Juanita (44) and her sisters came home after their curfew '[m]y Mom used to call us names ... you know, bad names ... she would just, using a Spanish word, she called us sluts and stuff like that'. Other parents made their displeasure felt in less obvious ways:

Up to when I was a senior, I probably only had four dates and my Mom was not very nice to these poor boys when they came to my house, it was so embarrassing to me that I never did it until probably the middle of my senior year. (Gloria, 41)

Because of parental suspicion and displeasure, for many women dating was a source of tension and guilt. Of the 22 women interviewed, only a handful described their parents as supportive of their adolescent dating experiences.

Despite parental attempts to protect their daughters from premarital sexual involvement, 19 of the 22 respondents had engaged in premarital sexual intercourse. The mean age of sexual initiation was 18.2 years ($SD = 3.7$, range 12–28). Eleven of these 19 respondents did not use birth control the first time they

had sex. A number of the women attributed their non-use of birth control to their ignorance about sex. Juanita (44), who became involved at 16 with a man in his 20s (and became pregnant the next year by another man), describes her early sexual encounters:

I told him we weren't going to have sex if we didn't use something and he said, 'Oh, I'll take care of it' and he didn't ... I was so naïve or dumb or something that I thought, you know, he's doing something ... he's taking care of it.

Similarly, Isadora became pregnant at 17 by her first sexual partner, a 21 year old man who told her, 'Oh, come on, nothing is going to happen the first time'. Of the 19 women who had sexual experience, six (32%) became pregnant soon after they began having sex.

Although the direct links between early family environment and eventual dating and sexual experiences could not be examined systematically due to sample size limitations, a number of the respondents talked about having difficulties dealing with relationships as a result of their upbringing. Many of the women reported feeling guilty after their first sexual experience, because having sex was a 'betrayal' of their family's values and expectations. Yolanda (27), who had sex with a 16 year old boy when she was 12 years old, said that she 'had broken every rule that my Mom and Dad were trying to raise me with' and felt so guilty that she did not date until years later, when she was in college. Lupe (41) said that 'I really think that I lived most of my adolescent life in fear that either God would get me or my parents in terms of behavior, specifically sexual'. Rosita (26), who was not allowed to have boyfriends while living at home and was not sexually active at the time of the interview, reflected on the experiences of her older sisters, who both became pregnant soon after initiating sexual relations as young adults:

... I do really think that had an effect on us when we were growing up because my sisters, the first time that they went out ... pretty much I want to say on a serious relationship [became pregnant] so to me that's telling me, OK, part of that is it could be because they were not allowed to have boyfriends when they were younger therefore now when you finally get to this point where you can have a boyfriend this is very serious.

Discussion

The goal of the current study was to examine how sexual socialization practices in Latino families emerge from cultural values and to begin exploring how early experiences influences the later sexual behavior of Latinas. To integrate the findings, we draw on the framework of scripting theory, which holds that sexual behavior results from the interplay between cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts (Simon and Gagnon 1986, 1987).

Cultural scenarios provide the basic framework for sexual interactions, delineating the roles and possible actions of individuals in a sexual encounter. The cultural scenarios espoused by many of the respondents' parents depicted adolescent women as sexually vulnerable and in need of protection. All of the women in the study said their parents expressed concerns regarding interac-

tions with boys and men. Reasons for parental concern included mistrust of males, fear of premarital pregnancy, concern about how a daughter's behavior might be viewed by member of the community, and the fact that US-style dating conflicted with 'traditional' patterns of courtship and marriage. Parental expectations regarding their daughters' involvement in romantic activity can be seen in the fact that nearly two-fifths (38%) of the respondents said they were not supposed to date while living at home and over two-fifths (43%) said they were expected to wait until after they turned 15. Interestingly, 15 is the age at which the traditional coming-of-age ceremony for Latina girls, the *quinceañera*, is held (Davalos 1996, Cantu 1999). Also consistent with traditional Latin culture, female romantic involvement outside of marriage was described as dishonorable to the family, and many parents expressed a desire to maintain traditional courtship patterns even when they were aware that those behaviors were not typical of the larger society. Similar cultural norms have been reported in other research with Latino families (Espin 1984/1997, Villaruel 1998). However, cultural norms reflect ideals that may or may not be reflected in actual behavior. The current study extends prior research by identifying specific ways that parental concerns were manifested during their daughters' adolescence, which has implications for the development of interpersonal and intrapsychic scenarios.

According to scripting theory, interpersonal scenarios develop from an individual's actual experience in romantic and sexual situations. The women in the current study described family experiences that limited the degree to which they could engage in romantic or sexual behaviors as adolescents. Parents used a variety of tactics to curtail their daughters' sociosexual involvement, including restricting the age at which daughters were allowed to date, monitoring their clothes and use of make-up, and permitting heterosexual interactions only in specific locations or circumstances. Parental expectations that daughters would not date during early adolescence resulted in over half the respondents engaging in 'sneak dating'. Moreover, many respondents described the gap between parental expectations and actual dating practises as a source of conflict and tension. Also of relevance to the formation of interpersonal scenarios was the low level of family communication regarding sexuality. Less than one quarter of respondents had discussed the 'sexual facts and physiology' with their parents, echoing what has been reported in prior research (Pavich 1986, Soto 1983, Darabi and Asencio 1987, de Anda *et al.* 1990, Baumeister *et al.* 1995, Marin and Gomez 1997). Parental messages were most often centred on the importance of not having sex, with little information being provided on how to avoid sexual involvement or prevent negative sexual outcomes. Based on these analyses, we speculate that family practises related to sexuality have important implications for the intrapsychic scripts formed by women. Women who conformed to parental restrictions on sexual experimentation reported later relationship difficulties due to their inexperience, whereas women who rebelled against parental restrictions described feelings of guilt. Similar tensions regarding sexual choices among Latinas have been described by Espin (1984/1997), who works primarily with clinical populations.

The current analysis provides some hints about why US Latinas may be at increased risk of negative sexual outcomes (e.g. elevated rates of teenage pregnancy and HIV/AIDS infection) compared to women from other ethnic groups. As Espin (1984/1997) has noted, immigrant and ethnic minority groups may preserve aspects of their traditional culture related to sexuality long after they have adopted other aspects of the host culture. Although parental adherence to traditional values and restriction of daughters' sexual opportunities have potential benefits in terms of protecting daughters from negative outcomes, there are also potential risks to this strategy. In industrialized societies, individuals are expected to set limits on their sexual behavior without many of the external restraints that characterize 'traditional' societies (e.g. arranged marriages, gender segregation) (Brooks-Gunn and Paikoff 1997). As a result, the teenage years represent a crucial time 'to practice managing sex and gender' (Thompson 1994, p. 219), as individuals are exposed to romantic and sexual situations in an age-graded fashion.

Our analysis suggests that many Latinas have limited romantic and sexual experience prior to leaving home. If traditional marriage arrangements were maintained, this limited experience would not be problematic. However, given the courtship patterns now prevalent in the USA, Latinas are faced with the task of negotiating sexual encounters when they eventually do leave home, and they may be ill equipped to do so. The women in the current study were highly educated (all had graduated from high school and most had some post-secondary education), yet over one half did not use birth control the first time they had sex and nearly one third had an unplanned pregnancy. The exploratory analysis described in this paper suggests that to understand the sexual behavior of US Latinas, researchers must examine more closely sexual socialization within the family of origin and take parents' culturally-influenced beliefs and practises into account.

Limitations and future directions

This study has a number of limitations that suggest directions for future research. One limitation is the retrospective nature of the data. Retrospective accounts are subject to distortions or inaccuracies and may not reflect current socialization patterns in Latino families. Future research could address these concerns by examining more directly socialization processes within families in which there are teenagers and young people. A second limitation is the small sample size, which precluded examination of sub-group differences due to such factors as age or acculturation and limits the extent to which we can draw conclusions about Latino families in general. Future research should be conducted to explore different socialization patterns due to country of origin, time in the US and parental attitudes regarding sexuality and gender. Finally, the exploratory nature of the study only permitted descriptive analyses, and did not allow an examination of predictive relations among the study variables. The intent of the study was to explore family experiences related to sexuality and identify themes and patterns; this descriptive information provides a basis for future more quantitative research.

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Résumé

En comparaison à d'autres groupes ethniques aux Etats-Unis, les populations latinoaméricaines présentent un risque élevé vis à vis des conséquences négatives de la sexualité, parmi lesquelles les grossesses non désirées et l'infection par le VIH. L'objectif de cette étude était d'explorer le rôle des croyances et des valeurs culturelles dans la socialisation sexuelle, en se focalisant sur la socialisation familiale du comportement amoureux et sexuel des adolescentes, décrit par 22 femmes d'origine latinoaméricaine, dans le cadre d'entretiens en profondeur. Quatre grands thèmes ont été explorés: les préoccupations des parents concernant le flirt, la communication, au sein de la famille, sur la sexualité, les règles familiales de définition du flirt, et les expériences sexuelles et de flirt. En accord avec les points de vue culturels traditionnels, l'implication d'une femme dans une relation amoureuse en dehors du mariage a été décrite comme potentiellement déshonorante pour la famille. Le flirt à l'américaine étant perçu comme une violation des façons traditionnelles de faire la cour, la plupart des familles des participantes mettaient des limites strictes dans l'interaction socio-sexuelle des adolescents. En conséquence, beaucoup de participantes ont décrit leurs expériences amoureuses d'adolescentes comme étant caractérisées par de la tension et des conflits, et elles ont fait part de leur vulnérabilité face à leurs éventuels partenaires sexuels. Afin de mieux comprendre le comportement sexuel des jeunes latinoaméricaines aux Etats-Unis, les chercheurs doivent examiner leur socialisation sexuelle au sein de leur famille d'origine, et prendre en considération les pratiques et les croyances d'influence culturelle de leurs parents.

Resumen

En comparación con otros grupos étnicos en Estados Unidos, la población latina tiene un alto riesgo de tener resultados no deseables en las relaciones sexuales, tales como embarazos no deseados e infección por VIH/Sida. El objetivo de este estudio es examinar qué papel desempeñan las creencias y los valores culturales en la socialización sexual analizando la socialización familiar en el comportamiento romántico y sexual de las adolescentes, según las descripciones de 22 mujeres latinas que participaron en entrevistas individuales en profundidad. Se exploraron 4 grandes temas: la preocupación de los padres con respecto a las citas, comunicación familiar en cuanto a temas sexuales, las normas familiares con relación a las citas y las experiencias en las citas y en las relaciones sexuales reales coincidiendo con la cultura tradicional, las relaciones románticas de las mujeres, fuera del matrimonio, se consideraron una deshonra potencial para la familia. Dado que el estilo de los estadounidenses es visto como una violación de los cortejos tradicionales, la mayoría de las familias de las participantes imponían estrictas normas a la interacción sociosexual de las adolescentes. En consecuencia, muchas participantes describieron de citas experiencias durante la adolescencia, caracterizadas por la tensión y el conflicto, y relaciones sexuales muy vulnerables. Para poder entender mejor el comportamiento sexual de las jóvenes latinas en Estados Unidos, los investigadores deben estudiar la socialización sexual en la familia de origen y tener en cuenta las creencias y prácticas de los padres, que se deben a influencias culturales.