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The Meaning of Good Parent–Child Relationships for Mexican American Adolescents

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Abstract

Perceptions of good parent–adolescent relationships were explored among 19 Mexican American high school students aged 14–17 who participated in focus group interviews on what it means for Mexican American teenagers to have good relationships with parents. Using a grounded theory approach, five general themes emerged in the responses, corresponding to open communication, instrumental and emotional support, indirect expressions of caring, parental control, and valued relationship qualities. Both genders described distinct relationships with mothers and fathers. Relationships with mothers were closer and more open than relationships with fathers, and mothers were seen as being more affectionate, lenient, and emotionally supportive, whereas fathers tended to express caring indirectly by providing instrumental and financial support and by just being there. Parental upbringing, culture, gender, and parental role expectations emerged as explanations for parents' behavior. Theoretical, methodological, and practical implications are discussed.

T he role of positive parent–child relationships in healthy adolescent development is well established. Good parent–child relationships have been linked to better psychological well-being and school performance, whereas hostile, uninvolved parenting has been linked to adolescent internalizing and externalizing problems (Ge, Best, Conger, & Simons, 1996; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). Despite the demonstrated importance of these relationships, few studies have examined what constitutes good parent–child relationships from the adolescent's perspective. Many studies include adolescents' ratings of their relationships with parents, but the dimensions to be rated (e.g., open communication, warmth, acceptance) are typically derived from researchers' notions of good parent–child relationships.

Adolescents' understanding of good parent–adolescent relationships may be important for several reasons. First, theory suggests that children's interpretation of parental behavior—as signifying acceptance or rejection—has important consequences for their adjustment (Rohner, 1986). Indeed, children's subjective perceptions of parental support and relationship quality may be especially potent predictors of their well-being (Boyce et al., 1998). Second, children's interpretation of parents' disciplinary messages and behavior are thought to influence their capacity to comply with parental directives (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994). Thus, adolescents' psychological adjustment and behavior likely depend in part on the meaning they attribute to parental behavior. In turn, adolescents' adjustment has implications for family functioning. Therefore, adolescents' understanding of good parent–child relationships warrants attention.

Adolescents' appraisals of their relationships with parents reflect normative expectations regarding parenting which can vary with culture and ethnicity. Chao (1994) has argued that the meaning of parenting behaviors depends on the cultural and philosophical traditions in which they are embedded. For example, parenting behaviors that are viewed as critical or controlling (i.e., authoritarian practices) in European American culture have a more positive meaning in Chinese culture, where they are tied to parents' responsibility to socialize their children. Thus, it is not surprising that the detrimental effects of authoritarian practices found among European American adolescents are less visible among Asian American adolescents (Steinberg, Lamborn, Darling, Mounts, & Dornbusch, 1994). Similarly, ethnic minority fam-

ilies in the United States emphasize different cultural traditions, family patterns, beliefs, and adaptive strategies than do middle class European American families (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990; Ogbu, 1981), potentially resulting in distinct parenting norms. Consistent with this notion, Lansford et al. (2005) documented cross-cultural differences in the perceived normativeness of physical discipline. Moreover, the negative impact of physical discipline on children's adjustment was smaller when that behavior was viewed as normative by parents and children, presumably because children did not interpret it as parental rejection. These findings suggest that adolescents from different ethnic groups may interpret parental behaviors differently owing to distinct cultural norms. Thus, to fully account for the linkages between parenting and adolescent adjustment we need to understand the conceptions of good parent–child relationships held by adolescents from specific ethnic groups.

The possibility of cultural differences in the meaning of parenting behaviors also raises questions about the accurate measurement of parent–child relationships, because a behavior, if interpreted differently by members of distinct cultural groups, may not have the same implications for relationship quality. Moreover, a behavior salient in one cultural setting may be less salient or even irrelevant to relationship quality in another. Rather than assuming that current parenting measures are adequate for all cultural groups, researchers need to explore and test these assumptions. Specifically, to determine whether current conceptualizations of parenting apply to Mexican Americans, we need to know what dimensions Mexican American youth see as relevant to parent–child relationships.

We approached this core issue by asking Mexican American adolescents how teenagers in their ethnic group define good parent–child relationships. This qualitative approach avoided the presumption that existing quantitative measures, developed largely with European American samples, include the dimensions salient to youth from other ethnic backgrounds. Addressing this issue has both theoretical and practical implications. On a theoretical level, fuller understanding of Mexican American concepts of good parent–adolescent relationships can help refine formulations of healthy parent–adolescent relationships in this group and contribute to knowledge on cultural diversity in family relationships. On a practical level, results may point to dimensions of relationships that should be considered in developing culturally sensitive measures of parent–adolescent relationships and culturally competent interventions.

Parent–Child Relationships in Mexican American Families

Latinos are the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, and Mexican Americans comprise two-thirds of U.S. Latinos (Ramirez & de la Cruz, 2002). Yet, surprisingly little research exists on parent–adolescent relationships in Mexican American families, and almost none addresses concepts of good parent–child relationships. Thus, at present we do not know how teenagers of Mexican descent conceptualize good parent–adolescent relationships. However, the broader literature on Latino families suggests some cultural factors that might shape these concepts. Like other Latinos, Mexican Americans are thought to emphasize close family relationships and familial interdependence. This emphasis is reflected in the cultural value of *familismo*, which refers to "feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity towards members of the family, as well as to the notion of the family as an extension of self" (Cortez, 1995, p. 249). A second concept, *respeto*, signifies the importance of maintaining respectful hierarchical relationships determined by age, gender, and social status (Antshel, 2002; Harwood, Layendecker, Carlson, Asencio, & Miller, 2002). These cultural values invoke expectations regarding family obligations and responsibilities which may color adolescents' perceptions of good parent–child relationships (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987).

Gender roles constitute another cultural factor potentially influencing expectations about parent–child relationships. Gender roles are often sharply delineated in traditional Mexican families, with women being responsible for the home and care of children and men being responsible for providing economic support. Men traditionally have greater authority in decision making, but there is evidence of shared decision making among Mexican families in the United States (Ybarra, 1982).

Family roles and relationships also reflect the ongoing process of acculturation (Marín & Marín, 1991). Acculturation occurs on multiple levels (e.g., behavioral, psychological) and is selective, in that aspects of the host culture are adopted, but some aspects of the home culture are retained (Padilla & Perez, 2003; Perez & Padilla, 2000). Among Mexican Americans, changes in childrearing styles and practices have been linked to generational status, a proxy for acculturation (Buriel, 1993). However, core dimensions of family relationships (e.g., levels of cohesion, conflict, and control) and levels of perceived family support do not vary systematically with acculturation level (Perez & Padilla, 2000; Rueschenberg & Buriel, 1989; Sabogal et al., 1987). Thus, *respeto* and *familismo* should be salient to first- and second-generation Mexican American adolescents and their parents. How-

ever, children of immigrant families (Latino and non-Latino) tend to acculturate faster than their parents, leading to intergenerational differences in attitudes (Kwak & Berry, 2001; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1980). Accordingly, first- and second-generation Mexican American adolescents would be expected to show greater orientation to American culture than their parents, which could influence their views of parent–child relationships.

In summary, cultural values of *familismo* and *respeto*, culturally based gender roles, and acculturation experiences may condition Mexican American teenagers' understanding of their relationships with parents. Qualitative studies are uniquely positioned to explore these possible connections. Questionnaire measures typically focus on particular aspects of family relationships (e.g., communication, perceived parental support, acceptance) and may miss dimensions that are salient to a particular cultural group (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Schaefer, 1965). Observational studies (e.g., Lefkowitz, Romo, Corona, Au, & Sigman, 2000) provide a window into parent–child interactions but are limited in duration and tend to capture interactions on specific topics within a narrow range of settings (e.g., the laboratory). In contrast, qualitative interviews yield rich narratives that provide insights into adolescents' understandings and expectations regarding good parent–child relationships.

In this study, we used focus group interviews and content analysis to explore conceptions of good parent–child relationships held by Mexican American teenagers between the ages of 14 and 17. The emphasis on mid-adolescence was motivated by the recognition that some aspects of parent–child relationships change over adolescence (Steinberg, 1990; Youniss & Smollar, 1985) as well as a concern that younger adolescents would be less able to articulate their concepts of good parent–child relationships. We targeted first- and second-generation youth in order to explore connections between conceptions of family relationships and perceptions of Mexican and U.S. culture.

Early qualitative studies in the 1960s (e.g., Lewis, 1963) emphasized the difficulties and problems of particular Mexican American families. More recent scholars have placed greater emphasis on the family's resilience in the context of discrimination and structural disadvantage (e.g., Baca Zinn, 1998; McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, Fromer, & Futrell, 1995). Scholars have also called for studies of normal development in Latino youth (Raffaelli, Carlo, Carranza, & Gonzalez-Kruger, 2005). In line with this contemporary emphasis, we focused on concepts of positive parent–child relationships among Mexican American youth. Our qualitative analysis was guided by three questions: (1) How do Mexican American teenagers conceptualize good relationships with mothers and fathers?

(2) Do conceptions of good parent–child relationships differ for boys and girls, or with respect to mothers and fathers? (3) How do Mexican and U.S. culture inform adolescents' expectations for parents and their understanding of good parent–child relationships?

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants were recruited through two community organizations serving Mexican American youth in the San Francisco Bay Area. One served college track students from a working- to middle-class neighborhood; the other served a lower socioeconomic housing development. Recruitment was conducted through flyers and personal contacts within the organizations. We targeted Mexican American teenagers aged 14–18 in grades 9–12 with at least one parent born outside the United States. Parental consent and adolescent assent were required for participation.

Participants were 19 teenagers (10 girls; 9 boys) between the ages of 14 and 17 (M = 15.7 years). Twelve (63%) were born in the United States, and seven (37%) were born outside the United States. Eighteen teenagers (95%) reported foreign-born mothers and 17 adolescents (90%) reported that their fathers were foreign born. Sixteen youth (84%) reported that both Spanish and English were spoken in the home; the remaining three (16%) reported Spanish only. The majority (*n* = 13; 72%) reported living with both parents, four (22%) reported living only with their mother, and one (6%) reported living with her father. Number of siblings ranged from 1 to 8 (median = 3).

Focus groups have several advantages: participants can respond to each other, creating a synergistic effect, and some participants may feel safer and more willing to elaborate in a group setting than one on one (Hoppe, Wells, Morrison, Gillmore, & Wilson, 1995). At the same time, a focus group is a multifaceted social setting, in which peer expectations may lead participants to provide normative responses (Hollander, 2004). Four focus group interviews were conducted—two for boys and two for girls—because single-sex groups increase adolescents' comfort in discussing their views (Hoppe et al., 1995). Sessions lasted 1–2 hours and were audio taped. Interviews were conducted by a trained, ethnically diverse team consisting of a moderator and two assistants who were youthful in appearance. The moderator was a 26-year-old Filipina American student from a middle-class family, who was completing a master's degree in Education; she had extensive experience in conducting focus group inter-

views. The assistants were college undergraduates: a 23-year-old Filipino American male from a middle-class family and a 22-year-old Mexican American woman from a working-class family. Interviews were conducted largely in English, with Spanish words used to explain specific concepts. At the beginning of the session, the moderator stated the purpose of the study, stressing its exploratory nature. Adolescents also completed a brief demographic questionnaire before the session began. Participants received $30 for their time.

Measures

The focus group interviews were part of a larger cross-ethnic study of parenting and adolescent adjustment which included secondary analysis of a large national dataset, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health). The focus groups were designed to complement the survey data by providing information on how adolescents from different ethnic backgrounds conceptualized good parent–child relationships and interpreted the survey measures of parenting. To explore Mexican American adolescents' concepts of parent–adolescent relationships we asked two questions: (1) "For Mexican American teens, what does it mean to have a good relationship with your mother?" and (2) "For Mexican American teens, what does it mean to have a good relationship with your father?" Probes were used as needed to facilitate discussion, e.g., "How do you know if a teenager has a good relationship with their mom?" The core questions specified the ethnic context ("Mexican American"), encouraging adolescents to think about concepts common within their ethnic group. We used separate questions about mothers and fathers because prior studies suggest that relationships differ by parent gender and the relationships of some dyads (e.g., mother–daughter) show distinct qualities (Collins & Russell, 1991; Fuligni, 1998; Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

Following the open-ended questions, each group was asked to comment on five questions that were used to measure parent–adolescent relationship quality in the Add Health survey. These included: "How close do you feel to your mother (father)? How much do you think she (he) cares about you? Most of the time your mother (father) is warm and loving toward you. You are satisfied with the way your mother (father) and you communicate with each other. Overall, you are satisfied with your relationship with your mother (father)." The items were read aloud and displayed on a large tablet visible to participants. The moderator explained that researchers used the questions to study teenagers' relationships with parents. The groups were asked whether the items were relevant to good relationships between Mexican American teens and their

mothers (fathers), whether any of the items did not belong, and whether important things were missing.

Data Analysis and Coding

A grounded theory approach was used to identify themes emerging in the focus group discussions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Audiotapes of the focus group interviews were transcribed by a graduate research assistant and checked for accuracy. Transcripts were read by four coders for overall understanding; then general categories (themes) were generated as open codes. Five initial codes were identified to describe parent–child relationships. Reliability of these codes was assessed between one of the four coders and an external coder who was given descriptions of the categories. Based on a subset of transcripts (one for each gender), Cohen's κ was .77. Researchers met regularly to discuss coding categories, compare codes, and resolve discrepancies. This iterative process resulted in successive refinements and elaborations of the coding scheme. Examples of specific behaviors under each category were identified to ensure that the breadth of each category was represented. Next, the relations among categories were discussed and categories were positioned within a theoretical model (axial coding). Finally, a larger story was developed from the interconnections among categories.

In qualitative studies, the researcher seeks believability based on coherence, insight, instrumental utility (Eisner, 1991), and trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), through a process of verification rather than through traditional validity and reliability measures. To validate the findings we used four primary techniques (Creswell, 2003): (1) negative case analysis—analyzing and reporting discrepant findings; (2) providing thick, rich descriptions when conveying the findings; (3) external audit—asking a person outside the coding team to conduct a thorough review of the study and report back; and (4) member checks (review of the paper by two Mexican Americans).

Results

Five general themes regarding good parent–adolescent relationships emerged from the qualitative analysis: valued relationship qualities (e.g., trust), open communication, support, indirect displays of caring, and parental control. (Support was later subdivided into emotional and instrumental support, yielding six primary themes.) A final theme, parental caring, arose repeatedly in the focus group discussions, assuming

a level of prominence similar to the core notion of good relationships. The general themes adolescents associated with parental caring overlapped substantially with those linked to good parent–child relationships, and teenagers typically did not make clear distinctions between parental caring and good relationships. However, some of the primary themes were linked to only one of these constructs, so the overlap was not complete. Therefore, we interpreted parental caring as a higher order concept associated with good parent–child relationships but also linked to a subset of primary themes. The connection between the two focal concepts and the relation of each to the six primary themes, based on the positioning of each theme in the focus group narratives, are depicted in Figure 1 (right side). In the middle of Figure 1 are the focal concepts—good relationships and parental caring. On the left side of the figure are constructs that we identified as explanations of parental behavior and good parent–child relationships, including parental upbringing, culture, gender, and life stage. Explicit explanations (shown in solid boxes) are concepts teenagers cited to explain parental behavior or parent–child relationships. In contrast, implicit explanations are constructs that we inferred from participants' responses (shown in boxes with broken lines). Gender was both an explicit and implicit explanation: teenagers contrasted relationships with mothers and fathers explicitly, but, in addition, boys and girls emphasized different features in their relationships (implicit). Not shown are several overarching dimensions of parent–child relationships which we culled from the transcripts, including distinctions that adolescents made between ideal parent–child relationships and their own relationships (real versus ideal) and their affective responses to relationships.

Features of Good Parent–Adolescent Relationships

Valued qualities. The theme "valued qualities" was often among the first answers given in response to the question "For Mexican American teens, what does it mean to have a good relationship with your mother/ father?" Some teenagers replied, "you have to, like, just be honest," or "have their respect," or "she's [mother] very trusting" (Figure 1). However, this theme generated little discussion in the groups and will not be examined in detail.

Open communication. The importance of open communication in good parent–adolescent relationships was a common theme in all four focus groups. Girls spent considerable time on this theme, particularly when discussing relationships with mothers; boys cited it as well but to a
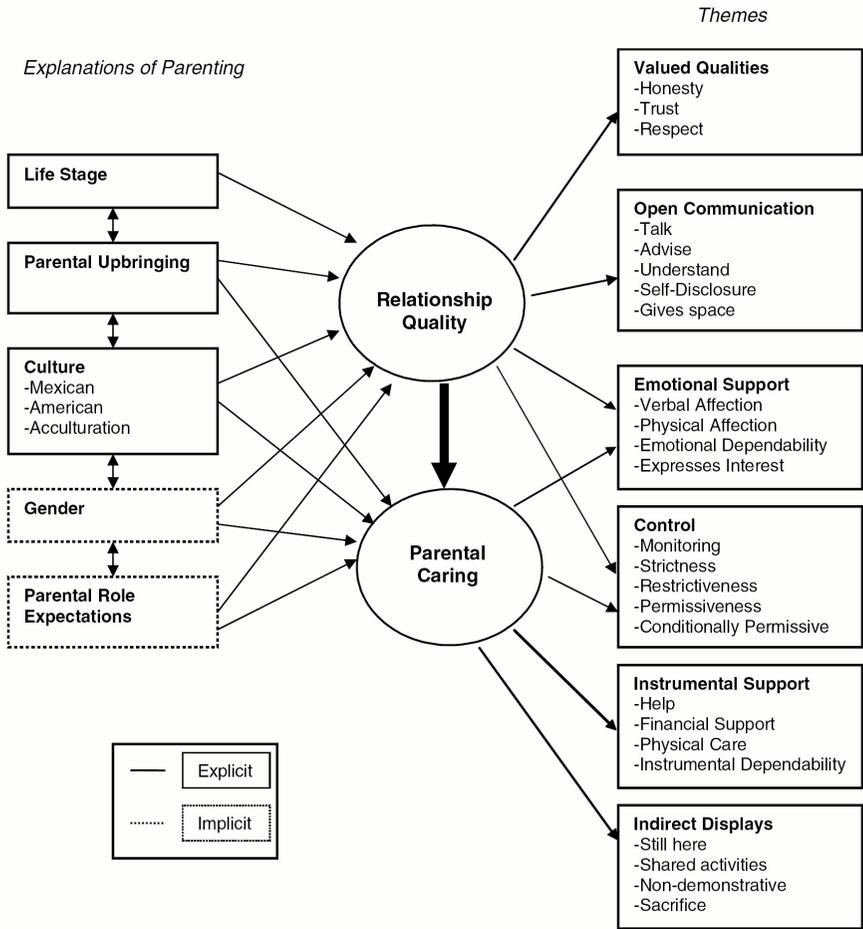
Figure 1. Conceptual model of Mexican American adolescents' relationships with parents. Explicit explanations appear in boxes with solid lines; implicit explanations appear in boxes with broken lines.

lesser degree. In describing a good mother–adolescent relationship, girls stressed having an "open relationship" in which you could "talk about anything and … not hold anything back from them."

> Probably to me, if I have a good relationship with my mom it means that I can talk to her about stuff; I can—like if I have problems, I have someone to talk to about it, you know, cause she's a woman and I am, too.

Another girl defined a good relationship as being "… able to talk with your mom like you would talk … with your friend or something … . Like have an open relationship."

Boys, too, cited being able to talk as a mark of a good mother–adolescent relationship. When asked, "How do you know if a teenager has a good relationship with their mother?" one said: "They talk, they sit down and talk and talk about school and what's happening in their lives." Another said, "I guess a good relationship would be you could talk openly about different things and not have to worry about her ridiculing you or your thoughts." One boy explicitly equated closeness with open communication: "My relation with my mom is really close, 'cause she's always been there for me and I feel I could tell her anything."

The degree of openness that teenagers described in their own relationships varied: some mentioned "talking" in general, others specified "talking about one's problems," and a few reported that they talked to their mothers about everything, including boyfriends and questions about sex. Several participants acknowledged holding things back from their mothers and not disclosing certain kinds of information. Most boys viewed this as normal and did not equate it with a poor relationship. As one explained:

> Like the relationship I have with my mom is—it's good, it's a close relationship and all but like there's some points where you leave points out. Like there's like just some topics you don't talk about in the house … We're close and everything and I like that but there's a point where we could be closer.

On a similar note, girls commented on the changing level of openness they experienced with their mothers from day to day: "It's like sometimes you know, I feel like I could tell her stuff and then she'll understand me, and then at other times, I just don't tell her."

Open communication was often linked to trust. According to one girl, free communication with her mother was based on an understanding that disclosures would be kept confidential: "… She's almost like your friend and talk about whatever and she won't say anything with your dad …" Similarly, a boy implied that talking openly with one's mother required trust that one's thoughts would not be ridiculed. Open communication was also tied to respect. Regarding a good mother–adolescent relationship, a girl said, "For me, it's somebody you can tell your problems to and if they have an opinion, to know where they're coming from and to like respect them and for them to respect you, too."

Communication was also a feature of good relationships with fathers. As one girl reflected:

… when you can tell your dad kind of what you can tell your mom also, it's kind of having good communication because even if you don't talk about personal stuff, if you talk about your problems or whatever, that shows you can talk to both of them. So, it's kind of like good communication.

Yet, for most girls, relationships with fathers were less open than those with mothers. Typically, communication with father did not include "personal stuff" and was especially limited on the topic of boyfriends. As one girl noted, "… like when you're older, it's like you go to your mom more than to your dad … just because I can't tell my dad, 'Oh, Dad, guess what? I've got a boyfriend.' You know, he would be freaking out." In contrast, school appeared to be a safe topic of conversation for girls and their fathers. As one said, "I'll tell him … oh, this is going on in school or this is going on at college track, but I don't tell him, 'Dad, I've got a boyfriend … .' "

For boys, too, a good father–adolescent relationship meant that "if you have a problem you could talk to him about it." However, few reported such open relationships. Some boys described discussions with parents about school and other activities: "… Both of them [mother and father] ask me a lot questions about school. That's how I know they're concerned with me, and my dad, too … And like about college track, school, stuff I do outside of school, too." However, boys' relationships with fathers appeared more distant than with mothers, and communication sometimes led to conflict:

… I don't think that the relationship with my father is as important or as big as the one I have with my mom. I don't really talk to my dad that much and like, personally, sometimes I can't even stand him—his views and everything is like—he's like from a totally different world than I see it and we just don't connect. And like every time we actually sit down and talk it ends up in a argument so I just like avoid it. I just like try to avoid him as much as possible.

Signs that Parents Care

Instrumental support. Teenagers mentioned various forms of instrumental support in response to questions about how they know parents care (Figure 1). One general form of support was helping out when teenagers had a problem. Speaking of her mother, a girl offered, "I guess she just like helps me if I am in trouble." Similarly, a boy noted the impor-

tance of "… knowing that they [parents] are there to help you even if you don't feel like you need to tell them everything." Boys cited several maternal activities as evidence of caring, including cooking, taking care of them when they were sick, and doing laundry. As one boy described, "… when I get home, like I feel tired, so she'll like scratch my back or something. So that makes me feel like she cares … she cooks food and she knows that if you're coming from school, you're going to be hungry. So she cooks food and that is something." However, not all teenagers counted mothers' physical nurturance as a sign of caring. One girl conceptualized physical care as a maternal duty: "I really think the mother's job is to be taking care of you when you're sick or not. That's not really showing you that she loves you or not because that's what a mother's supposed to do, take care of her child."

Instrumental support was emphasized heavily in descriptions of fathers. Fathers showed they cared by offering to buy things that teenagers needed, picking them up from school, or taking them where they wanted to go. As one boy put it, "Well, he's the one that usually gives me money like to go out and stuff. So like—I mean he cares about me and he always gives me money like to buy my clothes for school and give me money just because I need money." However, some boys found it hard to rely on their fathers. One said, "… he is there for us but like depend on him, I can't, because, you know—cause he has flaked in the past on us."

Fathers' indirect displays of caring. Whereas mothers were often physically and verbally affectionate, fathers tended to express caring indirectly. A boy said, "I know he cares about me but it's like we won't show it—you know, we won't show it to each other like hug and 'I love you.' I never said that to my dad… ." Another reported, "It's not how lovey and kissy, whatever, 'give me a hug' and whatever. It's like, 'How was your day?'… And just be there and support." Adolescents accepted this implicit form of caring as normal. As one girl explained:

I think that dads are different. They're like more closed. They're not really open. They are like, I think they have a different way of expressing their feelings. It doesn't—I don't think it necessarily have to do with telling your kid or your daughter or whatever "I love you" and hug, whatever. I think they just show it in a different way.

On a similar note, a boy said, "… you don't really have to communicate. You just know … that he cares about you."

Sharing in activities with fathers was one way that boys knew their fathers cared. For example, a father might cancel work to attend a special event (if the mother could not be there) or take his son out to a ballgame. Or a father might interact with his son after work: "Like one way he would show is that like, when he comes from work, he's tired, and then like he's willing to laugh and stuff." In contrast, girls rarely mentioned shared activities with their fathers, and only one cited spending time together as a sign of a good relationship.

The sacrifice that fathers made to provide for the family (e.g., working two or more jobs) was interpreted as a sign of caring by boys and girls alike. In fact, just being there was considered an expression of paternal concern:

> It doesn't necessarily have to do with asking you every night oh, what did you do or something. Just the fact that they're in your life, I think that means a lot. They love you 'cause obviously if they didn't love you, they wouldn't be there… . (Girl)

> I guess it's just implied because he is still here with us … He's the one working two jobs or whatever. He's hardly home because he's the one bringing food to the table and everything. So obviously, he must care for us because he is still here and everything.

The implicit nature of paternal caring also emerged in discussions of the survey item "Most of the time your father is warm and loving." Boys had two reactions to this item. One said that the item "warm and loving" should not be used to measure paternal support because "with dads, it's not going to happen." In contrast, another boy argued that a father's instrumental support was warm and loving:

> Some fathers don't show they're warm and loving, but, I mean, they are in some ways. They give you money. To them, that's warm and loving. They support the family. That's warm and loving … Like if you used to live in a faraway place and he put his life at risk to bring you here. That's warm and loving. That's more than warm and loving. He might have like saved your life. He gave you a better chance in life. That's like probably the best thing you could have. So I believe that—I mean he doesn't show it but he is … .

Signs of Caring and Good Relationships

Emotional support. Boys and girls identified emotional support as evidence of a good relationship and a sign that parents care (see Figure 1).

Mothers might express emotional support directly through physical and verbal affection. As one boy described:

> Like affection is, you know, when she goes up to you and she'll be like, Oh, you know, she'll give you a hug and she will try and give you a kiss and stuff. And my mom's done that but like it's not like all the time or like she always tries—you know, she's always like "I love you." And I'm like "Okay," and then she's like "Say it." And like she plays with me and I'm like, "OK, I love you too."

However, affectionate behavior was not necessarily required to know that parents care. A girl objected to the survey item "Most of the time your mother is warm and loving toward you" because it implied that mothers were sometimes not warm and loving. In her view, mothers were always warm and loving regardless of their behavior. For one girl, even yelling implied concern:

> … if they're yelling at you, that means they really love you because they're really concerned about you … There's not a day that goes by that she doesn't say, "Take care of yourself, be careful, don't do this, don't do that," and that means she's really loving and she's concerned.

Fathers rarely expressed affection directly, but they offered emotional support in other ways. Expressions of paternal interest signified caring. For example, a father might ask how his son is doing in school or discuss the son's future with him. Or a father might notice when his daughter is upset after school and ask her how she is doing and what happened. However, not all girls received as much emotional support from their fathers as they desired. One commented, "Well, whenever I get a chance to see my dad he like spoils me, and I really don't like that because I like him to be more comforting, like asking me about stuff, and not buy me stuff."

Parental control. A final theme that arose in reference to both good relationships and caring was parental control. Aspects of parental control included strictness, parental monitoring, and a form of conditional permissiveness. Girls spoke repeatedly of parental "strictness." Fathers in particular were viewed as restricting their daughters' freedom and activities. Although girls found this behavior irritating, they attributed it to parental concern:

> … my dad is pretty strict and even though sometimes I don't like it, I know it's because he cares … I'll say like, "Oh, can I go to the

movies?""No, 'cause it's raining so hard." So maybe I'll be mad but I know it's 'cause he cares.

In contrast, boys rarely mentioned parental restrictions, and only one made a connection between parental strictness and caring. A few adolescents expressed a contrasting view, citing parental permissiveness (low control) as an indication of good parent–adolescent relationships. As one boy said, "… for me to have a good relationship with my mom would probably be like that she'll let me do stuff, like maybe like I want to go out late with my friends and she'll let me go." However, other youth rejected this position. One girl reasoned, "I think most teens would describe a good relationship by saying …'Oh, my mom lets me do whatever I want. She cares for me or she, you know, is there for me.' And I don't necessarily agree with that."

Parental monitoring, in which parents checked on the activity of the adolescents, was mentioned by boys and girls alike. As one boy said, "… you know, like, they're asking me where am I going to be, what time am I going to come home … to me it's just a sign that they care." Boys also cited monitoring of their school performance as a form of paternal caring. One reflected, "… he always asks me about school and 'How are you doing in school?' and 'How are your grades?'… I mean he shows that he cares about me …." In contrast, one girl saw monitoring as simply part of a mother's role:

> … if someone's not getting any attention from their mother … and the mom's just letting them go anywhere they want and not even asking where you going to be, what time are you going to get home. I feel that that's just kind of forgetting about their responsibility because the mom is responsible for knowing where their kid is.

Thus, for many teenagers monitoring was interpreted as a form of caring, but for a few it was a basic maternal duty.

A special form of maternal control emerged in girls' discussions: mothers might support a girls' freedom as long as certain conditions were met, a subtheme we labeled "conditional permissiveness." As one girl recounted:

> … I would ask my dad to let me go out but he'll keep thinking about it and my mom will be like "yes, you can go" and even though my dad says "no," it doesn't really matter … 'cause I mean, my mother tells him "why shouldn't she go out when she brings

you good grades, she does the chores, she takes care of your son and daughter, what else do you want?"… my mom is always saying that and she's like "you can go as long as you do your stuff, the stuff that you're supposed to do."

Explanations of Parental Behavior: Culture, Gender, and Parental Upbringing

Although the interview protocol did not include questions on why parents behave as they do, participants often addressed this issue. Boys and girls identified parental upbringing, culture, gender, and life stage as forces shaping teenagers' relationships with parents (see Figure 1). These explanatory factors often co-occurred in adolescents' explanations. Parents' upbringing was usually cited to explain their strictness or leniency. In some cases, parents granted children freedom because their own parents had been lenient. A girl described her mother's perspective as follows:

"I [mother] enjoyed my teen years so you should be able to enjoy your teen years, too, 'cause when you grow up and you have kids, you're going to be working and you're not going to be having a lot of freedom so you might as well have fun right now."

In contrast, other teenagers said their mothers were lenient because they had been raised strictly and wanted to provide a different experience for their children:

She'll [say] like, "yeah, go, go have fun and everything"… I think my mom supports me more because she says well, her mom and her dad didn't let her go out when she was younger so I guess she wants to be different with me. (Girl)

Teenagers also understood that their parents' early experiences and upbringing differed from the lives of teenagers growing up in the United States today. As one boy stated,

… it also depends on the way we're living and the way they were living as they were growing up because like I know that … my parents and my friends' parents … they're more traditional … they're more like straight …"We didn't do things like that … we never dressed like that." And … some parents are really like overprotective.

The same boy linked this generational difference in perspectives to growing up in Mexico versus in the United States, describing the challenge of differential acculturation:

… our view is like the way we grow up is totally different. Like with me and my dad, you know, his views are like … the man says what he does and that's how it is … in Mexico, that's how he grew up with my grandpa and stuff but like here it's like "No." I tell my dad, "It's not even like that here." Like here—he used to be like, "Well that's what your mom's for … you know, cook and clean for you guys." And I'd be like, "No, she's not here for that … She's here, you know, to help us grow up and stuff …." But my dad doesn't see that.

Resolving these intergenerational differences was difficult because parents viewed pressing one's opinion as disrespectful. The same boy continued:

And … it's hard because they're older and stuff and … when you're trying to explain to them your views … they think you're talking back and they think you're disrespecting them … Even if they're wrong, you can't explain to them. That's like disrespectful. So they don't listen … I think that's what causes a lot of teenagers to not have a good relationship … like a lot of our views are Americanized … because we grew up here … You know women are as equal as men … Some of our parents don't see that, so … it's like a little conflict you have … Like in your relationship, you're not going to talk to them about other things if you know they're already arguing with you about … just views that you have.

According to this boy, intergenerational differences in attitudes arose from differences in upbringing linked to country of origin. These differences in acculturation led to conflict which affected the quality of parent–child relationships. Other boys also cited intergenerational differences in perspectives as a source of problems, particularly in relationships with fathers.

Teenagers alluded to differences between the United States and Mexico in explaining various aspects of parent–adolescent relationships, thus showing an awareness of cultural differences and acculturation. For example, a boy characterized Mexican parents as being strict in comparison with Anglo families who were perceived as more affectionate and permissive:

… You go to the restaurants and look for the White people at the restaurant. They have their little kid. You see the little kid running around doing whatever he wants and the mom just saying "No, no, stop that"… For a Mexican family, they'd be like "No … you're not doing anything or just wait until you get home."

A girl suggested that open communication was influenced by acculturation: "… if you go to Mexico it's different from like a Mexican family being raised here, because in Mexico you can't really tell nothing to your parents …." Along the same lines, a boy cited the influence of the American media on teenagers' expectations for open communication: "I think what most teens probably think of is just like be able to talk to her [your mother] about anything cause that's what like you seen in the commercial—I can talk to my mom about anything." Culture was also invoked to explain gender differences in parent–adolescent relationships:

… in the Latino family, the mother's always closer to the son and … the father's … always closer to the daughter. And I guess it's hard for the son to have a relationship … with the dad … But I mean as long as there's like something in common that the father and son have … as long as there's something solid there. (Boy)

Gender emerged as a third factor influencing parent–adolescent relationships. Boys and girls described different levels of communication and emphasized different kinds of support and caring from mothers and fathers, implying that parent–child relationships were influenced by parent gender. Some teenagers invoked gender directly by explicitly contrasting their relationships with mother and fathers. For example, commenting on the survey items on paternal support, a boy said: "I think they should have like completely different questions 'cause these are exactly the same as the maternal support questions and it's different with father." A girl linked the quality of relationships with parents directly to gender, arguing that shared gender simplified good mother–daughter relationships, whereas a lack of gender-based common interests made good father–daughter relationships difficult:

I think it's hard to have a good relationship with your dad, especially like if you're growing up. 'Cause with your mother, you know, you're a girl, she's a girl, so that's easy. But it's harder when he's a guy 'cause you don't have the same interests.

A fourth explanatory concept was parental role expectations, which were intertwined with gender and culture. Adolescents saw adult roles (especially parental roles) as rooted in the responsibilities of providing for

the family: parents are supposed to provide food and shelter. Beyond this, as noted earlier, teenagers held differential expectations for mothers and fathers that followed traditional gender lines: mothers were supposed to cook, care for the children, and take care of the house; fathers worked to support the family. Some teenagers had adopted less traditional views, which they attributed to growing up in America, and a few described more egalitarian gender roles in their own families. However, others appeared to accept traditional gender roles as being just the way things are. For example, one girl rejected caring for a sick child as evidence of maternal caring because this was "a mother's job." Interestingly, fathers' financial support, although similarly prescribed, was interpreted as a sign of caring, especially when it required visible effort (long hours, multiple jobs).

Finally, some boys referred to the concept of life stage in explaining parent–adolescent relationships. They saw the difficulties of the present period as temporary and anticipated closer relationships with their parents in the future. As one boy concluded, "I guess it's just this period like our teenage years when we're like 'Oh well, screw you because we don't have the same views.' And then later on we're going to be like, you know, more close to them."

Overarching Dimensions of Parent–Adolescent Relationships

Two overarching dimensions of relationships—real versus ideal relationships and affective responses to relationships—emerged throughout the discussions. A third notion—parental role obligations—is integral for understanding these dimensions. Adolescents made clear distinctions between ideal characteristics of good parent–child relationships and the reality of their own experience. For example, they cited open communication as the hallmark of a good relationship with both parents but went on to describe varying degrees of openness in their own relationships. Some youth (mainly boys) even described problems in their relationships, acknowledging that they were not ideal. Moreover, although we did not ask about feelings toward parents, adolescents often revealed an affective response to their relationships. A few boys expressed negative feelings about their relationships with their fathers, citing conflict and avoidance. Others had trouble relying on their fathers. Sometimes distance in father–adolescent relationships was attributed to a lack of contact early on or to a sense that the father was not reliable. These negative appraisals emerged even though the interview questions focused on the meaning of good parent–child relationships. However, despite the differences between ideal and real relationships, adolescents generally viewed their parents in a positive light, suggesting that the discrepancy did not lead to dissatisfaction. As one boy

explained, "… I guess little things that … parents do … mean a lot. We could be satisfied with just that. We might not have the best relationship but we're happy with like … with what we have."

One interpretation of this overall pattern of results is that Mexican American youth define good parenting as meeting one's role obligations. Roles for parents were often described in instrumental terms: parents should provide for the family and make sure their children are clean, well fed, and not running loose, and parents who failed to do so were viewed as negligent. In contrast, open communication and affection, although desirable, were not seen as a parent's responsibility. Similarly, the concept of "warm and loving" was not closely tied to overt forms of affection: one teenager defined maternal behavior as warm and loving regardless of its content, and another interpreted fathers' instrumental support as warm and loving. Nonetheless, the present analysis suggests that relationships which are not especially warm or open may still be evaluated positively by Mexican American teenagers: when parents fulfill their responsibility to support the family and perform other instrumental duties they are viewed as good, caring parents and parent–child relationships are satisfactory.

In summary, adolescents' discussions of good relationships with parents emphasized open communication, valued relationship qualities, emotional support, and parental control as primary themes and parental caring as a higher order theme. Discussions of how they know parents care invoked some of the same primary themes as good relationships (i.e., parental control and emotional support) but also some additional ones (instrumental support and indirect or implicit forms of caring). Mexican culture was invoked to explain some forms of parental behavior, and acculturation to explain some dimensions of relationships (e.g., open communication, intergenerational conflict). Beyond this, teenagers' understanding of parental behavior and parent–adolescent relationships was informed by gender and parental role expectations but also by their knowledge of parents' prior experiences and the notion that life stage influences one's perspective and behavior. Teenagers indicated that their own relationships often did not show the features of a really good (ideal) parent–adolescent relationship. Yet, in most cases they did not express dissatisfaction with their relationships.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to illuminate Mexican American adolescents' understanding of good parent–adolescent relationships. Theory

and research suggest that children's subjective interpretations of parental behavior influence their social and emotional adjustment (Boyce et al., 1998; Morris et al., 2002; Rohner, 1986). Moreover, children's beliefs about discipline vary cross-culturally, and the degree to which a disciplinary strategy is perceived as normative moderates its effect on children's adjustment (Lansford et al., 2005). This body of research suggests that adolescents' understandings of good parent–child relationships are shaped by cultural norms, which affect the salience and meaning of particular parenting behaviors.

Based on research showing that parenting norms differ cross-culturally (Chao, 1994; Lansford et al., 2005), we anticipated that the perspectives of Mexican American teenagers might be distinct from those generally espoused in the literature, which are largely informed by European American culture. In particular, teenagers of Mexican descent might be influenced by cultural values such as *familismo* and *respeto* and by their acculturation experiences in the United States. In line with this expectation, teenagers' discussions of parenting suggested cultural influences operating at multiple levels. Adolescents often referred explicitly to Latino culture or to differences between Mexican and European American practices to explain aspects of parenting behaviors and parent–child relationships. Furthermore, they described views and practices in their own relationships that were consistent with particular Latino cultural values.

The notion of respect emerged both explicitly and implicitly in focus group discussions. Some adolescents said that disagreeing with their parents was difficult, because parents viewed it as disrespectful. Consistent with this portrayal, some observational research indicates that Latino parents are less likely to engage in egalitarian exchanges with their adolescents (Lefkowitz et al., 2000). The connection some adolescents made between parental caring and certain forms of parental control may also reflect *respeto*. Mexican American and other Latino youth accord parents greater authority and respect than do European American youth (Fuligni, 1998; Fuligni et al., 1999), and may therefore accept greater parental control.

Similarly, the tendency to view parents positively despite imperfect relationships could indicate a protective stance toward the family that is consistent with *familismo*. Compared with Anglo youth, Latino adolescents tend to report more positive attitudes toward their parents and express greater satisfaction with family life (Fuligni et al., 1999; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1995). However, apart from this possible instance, there was little evidence of *familismo* in the present focus groups (although one boy said that showing you care about the family is very important). Because our questions focused on parents rather than the family

as a whole, they may not have prompted discussions of family solidarity or children's obligations to the family.

The focus group discussions also revealed an awareness that acculturation influences parent–child relationships. A girl commented that open communication was easier for Mexican families in the United States than in Mexico, a view supported by research showing that acculturation influences the extent to which Mexican parents encourage questions from their children (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). Furthermore, boys saw their differences with parents as being rooted in divergent experiences associated with growing up in the United States versus Mexico. The conflict some boys described as a result of these intergenerational differences in attitudes is similar to the family tensions observed in earlier studies of Cuban immigrant families (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1980). Interestingly, girls in our study did not describe such conflicts with parents. Thus, gender may moderate the impact of acculturation on parent–adolescent relationships.

Gender influenced parent–adolescent relationships on multiple levels. Mexican American boys and girls saw relationships with mothers and fathers as distinct, and some explicitly contrasted them. Teenagers appeared to feel closer to their mothers than their fathers, with the greatest closeness occurring between mothers and daughters. These gender differences may also be tied to culture. A distant father–adolescent relationship is in keeping with the pattern of hierarchical relationships and emphasis on paternal authority found in traditional Mexican families (Antshel, 2002). Differing degrees of closeness across parent–adolescent dyads have also been reported for European American adolescents (Updegraff, Madden-Derdich, Estrada, Haase, & Leonard, 2002; Youniss & Smollar, 1985), but the differences may be accentuated among Mexican American youth.

Gender also appeared to shape parent–child relationships in ways that adolescents did not explicitly acknowledge. For example, only girls discussed fathers' strictness and mothers' conditional permissiveness, and girls spent more time than boys discussing open communication. In contrast, boys emphasized shared activities with fathers more than girls did. Additionally, differences in forms of parental support followed traditional gender role lines. Mothers were more expressive and nurturant, showing affection directly and providing emotional support as well as instrumental support in the form of physical care. Fathers primarily offered instrumental support, providing for the family, but also showed some indirect forms of emotional support. The paternal role of provider is consistent with the traditional Latino value of machismo, in which males are the providers and protectors of the family (Bernal, 1982). Traditional gender roles are also found in other cultural groups, including European

Americans, but may be more prevalent among Mexican American families. At the same time, acculturation may gradually reduce this pattern, as suggested by the views of teenagers in our sample. Cross-ethnic surveys with representative samples are needed to test this possibility.

Several themes emerging in the focus groups, including open communication, support, and parental control, reflect familiar dimensions of parent–adolescent relationships, but adolescents in our sample provided a distinct perspective. For example, parental support and open communication have been identified as fundamental to healthy parent–adolescent relationships and to children's well-being (e.g., Barnes & Olson, 1985; Cauce, Mason, Gonzalex, Hiraga, & Liu, 1994; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). The adolescents in our sample identified open communication as an important marker of good parent–child relationships but did not seem to view it as being necessary for good relationships or knowing parents care. Similarly, physical and verbal affection appeared to carry less weight as markers of support among these teenagers than might be expected given the emphasis on parental warmth in the broader developmental literature. Such overt forms of affection were not needed for Mexican American adolescents to know their parents cared; indeed, parents might show warmth and love in a variety of indirect ways. A reduced emphasis on open affection is consistent with research showing that Latino parents score lower than European American parents on self-report measures of warmth and acceptance (Toth & Xu, 1999). In future studies, it may be useful to determine what counts as affectionate parental behavior and what forms of communication are salient for Mexican American youth.

Adolescents spontaneously introduced the theme of parental control and made a connection between parental control and concern. Parental control is a fundamental aspect of parenting, but one that is not typically conceptualized as a form of parental caring. The emphasis on control is consistent with research indicating that Mexican American parents are more controlling than European American parents (Hill, Bush, & Roosa, 2003). A positive view of control has also emerged in other studies of ethnic minority youth (Russell, Chu, Crockett, Doan, & Lee, 2004) and accords with the notion that parental strictness has different meanings in different cultures (Chao, 1994; Lansford et al., 2005). However, other factors may be involved. Minority families tend to live in less secure neighborhoods where greater parental control helps protect children from harm (Knight, Tein, Prost, & Gonzales, 2002; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992). Adolescents in such neighborhoods may understand and appreciate the motives behind their parents' strictness. Future studies may be able to disentangle the cultural and ecological factors that lead to positive evaluations of parental control among Mexican American youth.

The present results indicate that existing measures of parental warmth, open communication, and restrictive control may have smaller predictive relations to adolescent adjustment among Mexican Americans than European Americans, whereas effects of indirect signs of caring and instrumental support may be stronger. More broadly, the use of culturally specific themes and the distinctive slant these youth provided on common themes such as warmth and control suggest that a more nuanced approach to theory and measurement is needed to assess parent–child relationships and their consequences in Mexican American families (and perhaps other families as well). Cultural values such as *respeto* and *familismo* have received little attention in the broader literature on parent–adolescent relationships. Yet, respect in particular appeared to be salient for Mexican American youth in our sample and may be relevant for youth from other ethnic groups as well, including some European Americans. Further theoretical development is needed to elaborate these constructs and specify their roles within Mexican American family relationships. Additionally, empirical research is needed to develop culturally valid measures of *familismo* and *respeto* and to explore their relevance for other Latino and non-Latino groups. It seems likely that cultural values color adolescents' perceptions of family relationships in ways not captured by existing models and measures of parent–child relationships.

The present results could reflect unique features of the focus group sample and design. We targeted Mexican American youth with at least one parent born outside the United States, so results may not generalize to youth from later generations whose families are more acculturated. Also, the sample was recruited through specific community agencies in the Bay Area, and results could differ for Mexican American youth from other communities or regions of the United States. As noted earlier, focus groups create a setting in which peer expectations may encourage participants to give normative answers (Hollander, 2004). Because our goal was to elicit Mexican Americans' views of good parent–child relationships, ethnic norms worked to our advantage. However, our groups were also selected for gender, age, and generation status, and likely differed in socio-economic status; these "status contexts" may have created normative pressures that influenced the group discussion. Finally, we may have inadvertently excluded adolescents who were employed and working at the times the focus groups were conducted.

We asked participants what a "good relationship" means but did not ask complementary questions regarding what constitutes poor relationships. Additionally, no information was obtained on the region of Mexico from which participants' families came, the indigenous groups they represented, family social class, or participants' legal status, background

variables which could affect responses. Finally, although we used member checks to validate our findings, no coders were Mexican American, so some insights might have been missed.

Despite these limitations, the present study is among the first attempts to characterize the meaning of good parent–child relationships for Mexican American youth. Boys and girls provided nuanced descriptions of their distinct relationships with mothers and fathers, invoking Mexican culture, acculturation, and gender as a basis for differences in parental behaviors and relationship quality. Importantly, most adolescents viewed their parents positively while also recognizing that their relationships were not ideal. This may reflect culturally specific views of good parent–child relationships that are more closely tied to parental role obligations than to open communication or direct expressions of warmth and affection. These insights offer a basis for future theorizing and research on relationships in Mexican American families.

Acknowledgments

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