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Mexican Immigrant Mother-Daughter Conversations: Sexual Delay as a Path to Educational Achievement

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Abstract

In this article, we examine through quantitative and qualitative analyses Mexican immigrant mothers' conversations about dating and sex with their teenage daughters who were not sexually active at the time of the study. The results of our mixed-methods study indicate that mothers give their daughters *consejos* (advice) restricting sex initiation embedded within messages that stress the importance of education as a means to achieve self-sufficiency and freedom. These messages of sexual restriction for the purpose of educational achievement and liberation are important for building a bridge of collaboration with teachers and schools to ensure the educational success of Mexican American female students. Our study examines whether the mothers' *consejos* on sexual delay to achieve educational success results in their daughters' postponement of sexual engagement for another year. We conclude by outlining the implications of our findings for teacher training.

Latino/a¹ parents² exert a positive influence on adolescents' academic achievement and educational aspirations. Latino/a adolescents who receive support and encouragement from their parents tend to be academically oriented, aspire to higher levels of education (Plunkett & Bamaca-Gomez, 2003), and are less likely to drop out of school (DeGarmo & Martinez, 2006). Parental support enhances children's self-competence and reinforces beliefs that they can succeed. Benner and Mistry (2007) found that among a sample of low-income urban youth, adolescents whose mothers expected them to go further in school had higher self-expectations related to schooling, reported higher levels of ability as part of their self-concept, and had higher levels of academic achievement. Various studies indicate that parental support and encouragement has been found to be an essential component of Latinos/as' decision to go to college and to make a positive adjustment to college (Cavazos et al., 2010; Ceja, 2004; Melendez & Melendez, 2010; Zalaquett, 2005). Together, these findings converge to suggest that Latino/a parents play a prominent role in fostering adolescents' academic success and their decision to attend higher education.

Educational achievement, however, is a gendered process in which success for Latinos and Latinas follow different socialization patterns and consequences for adolescent behavior (Hurtado & Sinha, 2016). We use the Chicana feminist literature to understand the complex reasoning Mexican immigrant mothers communicate to their daughters in guiding their decisions about delaying sexual engagement. Chicana feminists affirm women's right to choose when and with whom to engage in sexual activity. However, they also write eloquently about the gendered consequences of unplanned and single parenthood for women. The consequences are especially dire for those who are in early adolescence and are less likely to have the resources to continue with their schooling (Maldonado, 2019). We engage Chicana feminist writings (Caballero et al., 2019; Hurtado, 2020) to frame the *consejos* (advice) Mexican immigrant mothers give their teenage daughters about the vulnerabilities that early pregnancy might have on their life chances, success in school, and ultimately, economic independence.

¹In this article, "Latino/a" refers to people who have ethnic and racial roots in Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. "Latinos" in Spanish refers to males, and "Latinas" refers to females. Most recently, "Latinx" refers to someone who does not identify with the sex/gender binary.

²We are aware that in Latino/a communities education is a family affair that involves not only parents but extended family and siblings as well. However, the research findings we present here are based mostly on parents with little information on the role of other family members. We refer to "parents" when the studies we cite used this unit of analysis, and we use "family" when the discussion is broader.

One important gender difference is the educational consequences of adolescent pregnancy. Pregnancy happens to both boys and girls; however, it is mostly girls who suffer the consequences. They not only bear the child, but social responsibility and stigma for the pregnancy is cast mostly on girls. Latina adolescents from low-income backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to pregnancy outcomes. Many aspects of their environment related to socioeconomic scarcity, such as attending schools with low resources, contribute to early sex and pregnancy (Penman-Aguilar et al., 2013). By the end of high school, roughly 38% of Latina students will have had sexual intercourse (Kann et al., 2018). Generally, the birth rate among adolescents in the United States has recently declined; however, births among Latina adolescents remain high. Birth rates among Latina adolescents age 15-19 years are twice as high as that of same-age white adolescent girls (Martin et al., 2018). Adolescent motherhood increases the likelihood of living in poverty and relying on welfare. Staying in school increases the likelihood of adolescents delaying pregnancy until older and engaging in self-protective practices when they become sexually active (Hoffman, 2006).

In this study, we examined the conversations of Mexican immigrant³ mothers as a form of *Chicana underground feminisms* when they discuss dating and sex with their teenage daughters. Hurtado (2003b) proposes that many Mexican descent women who are working class and immigrants act, live, and speak as feminists engaging in daily acts of patriarchal resistance without outright calling their actions “feminisms” (p. 260). In doing so, the many definitions of feminisms that have been put forth fail to capture the experiences “of poor Women of Color” (Hurtado, 2003b, p. 260). We analyzed mother-daughter conversations to understand the role of communication about education embedded within messages about sexuality. The mothers were Spanish dominant, had not finished high school, and came from working class backgrounds. The daughters were predominantly U.S. born, English-Spanish bilinguals, first generation in high school, and educationally vulnerable to drop out of school and become pregnant during adolescence. Through quantitative and qualitative analyses of their conversations, we found that, consistent with the concept of underground Chicana feminisms, mothers gave their daughters *consejos* restricting sex initiation, which was embedded within

³ We use “Mexican” when referring to mothers who for the most part were born in Mexico but are longtime residents in the United States. We use “Mexican Americans” when referring to the daughters because they are the first generation born in the United States. If not born in this country, they have resided in the United States for most of their lives.

messages that stressed the importance of education as a means to achieve self-sufficiency and freedom. Our goal was to gain a better understanding of whether these messages, as well as communication about education in general, was linked to their daughters' intentions to delay sexual onset. These *consejos* of sexual restraint for the purpose of educational achievement and liberation are important for building a bridge of collaboration with teachers and schools to ensure the educational success of Mexican American female students.

A point of clarification is important at this juncture. As two Chicana feminists, the authors do not wish to imply that becoming pregnant during adolescence should result in stigma or condemnation of young mothers. Both of us have engaged in non-conventional mothering. One of us was indeed a teenage mother. The second author never had biological children but engaged in mothering her siblings at an early age, given their age differences and the economic hardships of the family. Our positionalities inform our research and theorizing. We attempt to contextualize the messages of independence and self-sufficiency Mexican immigrant mothers express in advocating educational attainment to their daughters. Indeed, both of us mothered successfully, finding creative ways to reject messages that blocked our educational ambitions and to heed messages, sometimes from our mothers, sometimes from other influential people in our environments, to see educational attainment as the means to our economic, social, and intellectual liberation.

We turn now to our research on the consequences for educational achievement when Latinas become pregnant during early adolescence. We then review the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in delaying adolescent pregnancy through a Chicana feminist lens of enhancing adolescents' future through educational achievement. The results of the study are presented and discussed with a focus on the implications for teachers and their relationship to Mexican American students and their immigrant parents.

Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention and Educational Achievement

Research suggests that adolescent decision-making about their sexual activity is connected to their academic achievement and educational aspirations. For example, in one study, adolescent girls who became pregnant before high school graduation had lower educational aspirations and less confidence that they could finish high school than those who had not become pregnant (Young et al., 2004). Additionally, Beutel (2000) found that adolescent girls from diverse backgrounds who aspired to obtain an advanced degree were less

likely to have a non-marital pregnancy compared to adolescents with low expectations and aspirations. Similarly, Mireles-Rios and Romo (2014) found that Latina adolescents who had a higher achievement orientation expressed a desire to have a first child at older ages and did not endorse becoming pregnant during adolescence.

The Importance of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Delaying Pregnancy During Adolescence

Communication within Latino/a families is often a gendered process in which mothers talk to children, especially daughters, and then relay the messages back to fathers. Latino fathers rarely have direct communication with their children on personal matters like sex, educational plans, and everyday logistics (Hurtado, 2003a; Hurtado & Sinha, 2016). Among a national, non-representative sample of Mexican American women between the ages of 20 and 30 who were attending higher education, Hurtado (2003a) found that Mexican origin mothers were the main communicators in the family, particularly with daughters. Mexican origin fathers, if present, did not speak directly to their daughters, especially about intimate topics such as sex initiation and contraception. Many Mexican origin mothers and daughters spoke on a daily basis even when their daughters were away from home attending college (Hurtado, 2003a). Mexican American daughters often referred to their mothers as their greatest cheerleaders in accomplishing their educational goals and the ones that knew them the best (Hurtado, 2003a).

Chicana feminists have written eloquently on the importance of mothers in helping their daughters fulfill their educational dreams (Caballero et al., 2019; Hurtado, 2020; Moraga, 2019). The help from mothers takes various forms: from giving *consejos*, to providing childcare, to providing unconditional support even when the mothers do not quite understand their daughters' experiences in higher education. As Hurtado (2003a) describes:

According to my respondents, many of their mothers saw their mission as giving their daughters as much education as possible, so they would not be economically dependent on a man. At the same time, most mothers assumed that marriage was inevitable but also desirable. They simply felt that education was insurance against a bad marriage. (p. 80)

In much of the Chicana feminist writings, mothers are committed to providing their daughters with the opportunities they never had while growing up. They also advocate delaying

childbearing while obtaining an education. Simultaneously, the expectation is that daughters will eventually become mothers.

The manifestation of support is especially present in immigrant families who still have strong ties to Mexican cultural norms of family commitment (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2006; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2009) and strong respect for *la educación* (education) (Ma et al., 2014). Respect for maternal authority and wisdom may prove to be a vital part of ensuring the educational success of Mexican American teenage girls (Becker et al., 2014). *Consejos* given by Mexican immigrant mothers may increase their daughters' aspirations to succeed in school and serve to support their efforts, not only having an impact on academic outcomes but also on health decisions involving sexual engagement. That is, Mexican immigrant mothers are key in influencing their adolescent daughters' decision-making about sexual activity, reinforcing the daughters' optimism about their future goals, and giving their daughters the confidence they need to achieve their goals.

Significantly, the *consejos* given by Latina mothers appear to be more effective *before* daughters have engaged in sexual activity. In a study conducted with Latinas enrolled in alternative high schools, Romo et al. (2008) found that advice-seeking from parents about personal life decisions was associated with a stronger desire to go to college, higher levels of optimism about attendance and graduation from college, and a stronger motivation to achieve their goals. However, these associations were statistically significant only among Latina girls who were not sexually active. Latinas students who have already initiated sex may have a different relationship with their mothers, which may affect their communication. The interconnection among the quality of the mother-adolescent relationship, educational aspirations and expectations, and sexual activity suggests that pregnancy delay hinges on more than mothers communicating their sexual values or advising to engage in self-protective behaviors. The *consejos* to delay sexual initiation is tied to academic motivations and is given within the context of a supportive mother-daughter relationship.

The Study

The central question addressed in this study is whether Mexican immigrant mothers support of their daughters' academic achievements, strengths, and maternal *consejos* influence sexual topics, including the delay of sexual initiation. We sampled Mexican immigrant mothers with daughters in high school who had never had sex. The daughters were asked to report the

likelihood that they would engage in sexual intercourse the following year. Our first aim was to explore whether the likelihood of having sex was associated with the daughters' attitudes toward teen pregnancy, educational aspirations, confidence in achieving their educational goals, and grade point average. We hypothesized that the daughters' less supportive attitudes toward adolescent pregnancy coupled with their higher education goals, and expectation of achieving those goals, and their higher-grade point averages would be associated with a lower likelihood of having sex in the next year. Our second aim was to examine if the reported quality of the mother-daughter relationship and communication about education influenced the daughters' attitude toward becoming sexually active in the coming year. We hypothesized that daughters and mothers reporting a good relationship coupled with good communication about education would be associated with the daughters' intentions to delay sexual initiation.

An innovative aspect of this study was that mother-daughter communication was investigated through a content analysis of videotaped conversations between mothers and daughters discussing the topics of dating and sexuality. Observational analysis can provide the opportunity for a nuanced understanding of the themes that emerge from these conversations. Part of our analysis explored the mothers' strategies for communicating their expectations to their daughters as they addressed sexual activity and pregnancy delay. The observational analysis addressed the following: What do these conversations between immigrant Mexican mothers and their daughters look like? How specifically do mothers communicate that early childbearing jeopardizes their daughters' chances of achieving their future goals (e.g., Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2006; Hyams, 2006; McKee & Karasz, 2006; O'Sullivan et al., 2001; Romo et al., 2008)? A better understanding of these messages can inform teachers' training, helping to create a stronger bridge between parents and schools for students to succeed.

Participants

The participants were 64 mother-daughter pairs (64 mothers, 64 daughters) from Mexican immigrant backgrounds who were recruited by posting flyers at a local youth-based organization, schools, and school-parent meetings. The flyers invited potential participants to attend a mother-daughter communication training program about sensitive topics including sexuality and HIV transmission. An additional 29 mother-daughter pairs were recruited initially but these participants were excluded from the current study because the daughters reported being sexually active. The daughters in the remaining 64 pairs reported never having had sexual

relations. The daughters were in early to middle adolescence ranging in age from 13 to 16 years ($M = 14.8$, $SD = .9$). The majority of the daughters were born in the United States (66%) and the remaining 34% were born in Mexico. Most of the daughters (74%) reported a preference for speaking both English and Spanish, while 20% reported a preference for speaking mostly in English, and the remaining 6% reported a preference for speaking mostly in Spanish. Almost half of the daughters had just started high school (48% in 9th grade) and the rest reported the following grade levels: 10th grade, 27% and 11th grade, 25%.

The mothers were relatively young ($M = 39.3$, $SD = 5.6$) for having teenage daughters and ranging in age between 30 and 55 years old. Almost all were born in Mexico (86%), with the remaining 14% born in the United States. Foreign-born mothers lived in the United States on average for 15 years. Most of the mothers (72%) reported they were married or living with a partner while 18% reported that they were single, divorced, or widowed. The majority of the mothers (61%) reported speaking mostly Spanish at home, 36% reported both English and Spanish, and 3% reported mostly English. Most of the mothers had not finished high school and, on average, had 9.1 ($SD = 3.9$) years of education. Only 38% had completed high school or beyond. Most of the families were low income earners reporting that their family income ranged between \$15,000 and \$30,000 per year. Most of the mothers (85%) were Catholic, the remaining 15% reported a different religious affiliation.

Measures

Participant Demographic Characteristics, Future Plans, and Evaluation of the Mother-Daughter Relationship

The mothers and daughters were administered a questionnaire separately, asking for their age, place of birth, and preferred spoken language. In addition, the daughters were asked their school grade level and whether or not they had ever had sex. The mothers were asked additional questions about their religious background, marital status, years of education, and income (measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from \$5,000 to over \$60,000 per year).

Likelihood of Having Sex in the Next Year. The adolescents were asked to rate on a 4-point scale the likelihood of having sexual intercourse in the next year. Response options included: 0 = *I am sure that I won't*, 1 = *I probably won't*, 2 = *I probably will*, 3 = *I am sure that I will*.

Adolescent-Reported School Grades. The daughters were asked to indicate their most recent grades. Response options included: 4 = mostly A's, 3 = mostly B's, 2 = mostly C's, 1 = mostly D's, and 0 = mostly F's. The mean GPA score was 3.0 ($SD = .9$).

Educational Aspirations. Aspirations were measured by asking the daughters to indicate how far they wanted to get in school. Response options included: 1 = *graduate from high school*, 2 = *graduate from a 2-year college*, 3 = *graduate from a 4-year college*, and 4 = *graduate from law, medical, or graduate school*.

Confidence in Achieving Goals. Education expectations were measured by asking the daughters to indicate how certain they were that they would reach their future educational goals. Response options included: 1 = *I have doubts about whether I can reach it*, 2 = *I am somewhat sure I can reach it*, and 3 = *I am very sure I can reach it*.

Attitudes Toward Pregnancy During Adolescence. The adolescents were asked to rate on a 4-point Likert scale how they would feel if they became pregnant as an adolescent. Response options included: 0 = *I would be overjoyed*, 1 = *I would be happy, but not overjoyed*, 2 = *I would be unhappy, but I would not be devastated*, 3 = *I would be devastated*. Higher scores indicated that daughters did not desire a prospective adolescent pregnancy.

Quality of the Mother-Daughter Relationship. The daughters were asked to fill out the Open Family Communication (OFC) subscale, which consists of ten items taken from the Parent Adolescent Communication scale (Barnes & Olson, 1982). The OFC is a 4-point Likert scale measuring the level of disagreement/agreement with ten statements that focus on the quality of daughters' communication with mothers (Barnes & Olson, 1982). Sample items from the OFC are: "My mother is always a good listener" and "My mother tries to understand my point of view." The ratings were totaled to create a communication score between mothers and daughters. The mean score was 27.6 ($SD = 8.8$).

Mother-Daughter Communication About Education. The adolescents were asked to rate on a 4-point Likert scale the extent to which their mothers talked to them about five education-related topics: grades, classes they are taking, homework habits, plans for high school, and plans after high school. Response options included: 0 = *not at all*; 1 = *rarely*; 2 = *occasionally*; 3 = *regularly*. Each topic was rated separately, and the ratings were summed to create an education communication score. An additional point was assigned if the daughters

engaged in communication about education with their mothers during the dating and sexuality conversations. The mean score was 11.2 ($SD = 3.1$).

Observational Measures

In conjunction with another study, a coding scheme was developed to examine the types of topics that the mothers and daughters discussed in the videotaped conversations. Through inductive coding, two bilingual, bicultural research assistants engaged in an iterative process of identifying prevalent topics to create a coding scheme, applying the coding scheme to a small subset of conversations and subsequently refining the definitions of existing categories or creating new categories. All disagreements were resolved by the researchers and research assistants. One category that emerged from this process was the value of education. In these comments, mothers cautioned daughters to focus on their studies, avoid romantic relationships that could distract them, and complete their education to ensure a career and become self-sufficient in the future. The topics were raised by both the mothers and the daughters. Conversation excerpts are presented in the qualitative section of the results to illustrate the themes identified.

Procedure

The research sessions were conducted at a university laboratory or at a local non-profit organization, depending on the participants' availability. The study protocol consisted of asking each mother-daughter pair to sit in a private room with a video camera present. A warm-up activity directed the participants to discuss for three minutes an "ideal vacation," and the resulting exchange was videotaped. The warm-up activity was followed by the request: "For the next seven minutes, I would like for you to talk about dating and sexuality." The participants were left alone for the duration of seven minutes. The researcher assistant returned and requested: "For the next seven minutes, I would like for you to talk about things you disagree about." Only the conversations about dating and sexuality are included in this study. After the conversations, the mothers and daughters were administered questionnaires in separate rooms. The mother-daughter pairs were paid \$40 for their participation.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The majority (55%) of daughters reported that they were "sure" they would not have sex in the next year, 36% reported that they "probably would not," and 9% reported that they

“probably will.” Overall, their educational aspirations were high: 13% aspired to graduate from a 2-year college, 31% aspired to graduate from a 4-year college, and 48% aspired to attain an advanced degree (e.g., law school, medical school). Almost two thirds of the daughters (66%) reported that they were “doubtful” or “somewhat unsure” they could reach their educational goals. The remaining 34% reported that they were “very sure” that they would reach their goals. On the question of pregnancy during adolescence, 45% reported that they would be “devastated” if they became pregnant, 34% reported that they would be “unhappy but not devastated,” and 21% reported that they would be “happy.” About 27% of the mother-daughter pairs also discussed education-related topics during their conversations about dating and sexuality.

The Relationship Between Sex Initiation and Participant Characteristics

We performed a series of correlations to examine the associations between the likelihood of having sex in the coming year with the daughters’ age, country of birth, maternal English language proficiency, maternal years of education and family income. Daughters who reported a higher likelihood of having sex in the next year tended to be born in Mexico, $r(64) = .30, p < .05$, have mothers with low levels of English language proficiency, $r(60) = -.35, p < .01$, and have mothers with low levels of education, $r(61) = -.33, p < .01$. The associations with the daughters’ age and family income were not significant.

The Relationship Between Sex Initiation and Attitudes Toward Adolescent Pregnancy and Education-Related Variables

We performed a series of correlations to examine the associations among the daughters’ reporting the likelihood of becoming sexually active in the next year, their attitudes toward becoming pregnant within the year, educational aspirations, confidence in achieving educational goals, and reported grade point average (See Table 1). Daughters who reported a higher likelihood of becoming sexually active in the next year had lower educational aspirations and reported less confidence in reaching their educational goals ($p < .05$). Higher educational aspirations were associated with daughters’ having less positive attitudes toward teen pregnancy ($p < .05$). Daughters with higher GPAs reported greater confidence in achieving their educational goals ($p < .05$). The remaining correlations were not significant.

Table 1

Correlations among likelihood of having sex in the next year, attitudes toward teen pregnancy, and education-related variables

	Likelihood of having sex	Rejecting attitudes	Aspirations	Confidence
Rejecting attitudes toward teen pregnancy	-.24			
Education aspirations	-.32*	.30*		
Confidence in achieving education goals	-.28*	.20	-.01	
Grade point average	-.17	.13	.23	.27*

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

The Relationship Between Sex Initiation and Quality of the Mother-Daughter Relationship

We performed a linear regression to explore the relationship between quality of the mother-daughter relationship and the likelihood of the daughters engaging in sex in the coming year. The results indicated that there was a marginal significant relationship, $\beta = -.24$, $t(63) = 1.91$, $p = .06$. A higher quality of the mother-daughter relationship marginally predicted a lower likelihood of daughters becoming sexually active in the coming year.

The Relationship Between Sex Initiation and Mother-Daughter Communication About Education

We performed a linear regression to investigate the relationship between mother-daughter communication about education and the likelihood of the daughters engaging in sex during the following year. The results indicated that there was a significant relationship, $\beta = -.25$, $t(63) = 2.03$, $p < .05$. Increased mother-daughter communication about education predicted a lower likelihood of daughters engaging in sex during the following year.

Mother-Daughter Conversations: Educational Messages Embedded in *Consejos* About Sexual Relationships

We turn now to excerpts from the mother-daughter conversations exemplifying the themes identified in the mother-daughter exchanges. The excerpts below also illustrate the patterns of results based on the correlational and regression analyses presented above. The short samples of *consejos* provide insights into how Mexican immigrant mothers urge their daughters to achieve beyond their expectations.

The Importance of Avoiding Distractions to Succeed Academically

The mothers made a direct connection between the distraction inherent in romantic relationships and the focus required in being academically successful. They urged their daughters to put their studies “*primero* [first],” especially when the daughters were in their early teens.

Mother: ⁴ If you have a boyfriend right now, your [academic] subjects will come down [grades], he’ll just be bothering you, he’ll be distracting you.

Daughter: You pay more attention to him than you do to school [echoing her mother’s point of view].

Mother: Yes, you’ll get distracted. You won’t get good grades.⁵

Mothers were also aware that educational achievement was dependent not only in avoiding distractions but also in not wasting time.

Daughter: So much stuff is going on at school, nobody has time for that [having a boyfriend]. Nobody has time.

Mother: There is no time, doing that [having a boyfriend] is losing time and taking time away from studying, you have to study first, be outstanding, and then, afterwards, we’ll see [what happens].⁶

⁴ In subsequent notes, we include the Spanish version of the conversations to provide the flavor of the communication, especially for those readers who are Spanish-English bilinguals.

⁵ Mother: *Si tu tienes novio ahorita, bajas tus materias, nomas te esta molestando, te estas distraendo.*

Daughter: *Le pones mas atención a el que a la escuela.*

Mother: *Aja, te estas distraendo. No obtienes buenos grados.*

⁶ Daughter: *So much stuff is going on at school, nobody has time for that [having a boyfriend]. Nadie tiene tiempo.*
 Mother: *No hay tiempo, eso es perder tiempo y quitarte tiempo para tu estudiar, tu tienes que estudiar primero, sobresalir y ya después.*

Mothers also alerted their daughters to the possibility that boyfriends may not be supportive of their academic endeavors and may obstruct their daughters' success. The obstruction on the part of the boyfriends could in fact sabotage the daughters' motivation. Mothers seemed to understand that being academically disciplined was not easy for adolescents and that romantic relationships could increase the obstacles impeding their daughters' success.

Mother: There are times when boyfriends destroy your career in school.

Daughter: Maybe not so much, but ...

Mother: [clarifying] The motivation that you might have for school.

Daughter: Yeah [in agreement with the mother].⁷

Educational Success Leads to Economic Independence and Freedom

The mothers stressed that educational success could also lead to financial and social independence in the future. Many of the mothers felt that women could not leave romantic relationships, especially marriages where children were involved, because they could not take care of themselves financially. They felt if the daughters could succeed educationally, they could also be free.

Mother: I want you to first study; to have a career; to know how to take care of yourself and not to have a husband, or a boyfriend, or whatever, that you have to put up with and say to yourself: "I have to take it because I need his money."⁸

Contrary to the literature that asserts that Mexican culture encourages young women to prioritize marriage, many of the mothers in this study prioritized education. Engaging in a romantic relationship, especially at a young age, limited the amount of time their daughters could dedicate to their studies.

Mother: Having boyfriends at an early age doesn't allow you to study, it doesn't allow you to move forward. It's more important to study than to have boyfriends, have [romantic] relationships, [it's more valuable to study] than to waste time with boyfriends. It's more important to study so you can come out ahead.⁹

⁷ Mother: *Hay veces que los novios te destruyen la carrera en la escuela.*

Daughter: *O sea no tanto, pero...*

Mother: [clarifying] *Tus motivaciones que tu tienes en la escuela.*

Daughter: Yeah [in agreement with the mother.]

⁸ Mother: *Yo quiero que tu primero estudies; saques tu carrera; te sepas valer por ti misma y que no vayas a tener un marido, un novio, lo que sea, que lo tengas que aguantar y que digas: "me tengo que aguantar porque necesito su dinero."*

⁹ Mother: *Tener novios a muy temprana edad no te deja estudiar, no te deja salir adelante. Y es mas importante el estudio*

As noted in the quantitative analysis above, most participants gave their mother-daughter relationship a high rating and confirmed that they had good communication. This was illustrated by many of the daughters affirming the messages their mothers proposed. The daughters also displayed trust in their mothers by answering difficult or embarrassing questions candidly.

Daughter: I didn't have sex.

Mother: You didn't have sex?

Daughter: No.

Mother: And we don't want you to [have sex], first you have to study ... you are very young, you don't have to have [sexual] relationships or be forced to take care of yourself [use contraception] ... nor protect yourself from anything because you are a child still.¹⁰

The flow of conversation between the mothers and daughters exhibited a collaborative dialog, with both arriving at similar conclusions. The mothers, many of whom were relatively young to have teenage daughters, appeared to have convinced the daughters of their points of view with reason rather than by imposing their parental authority:

Mother: You don't want to have a boyfriend at such a young age. You want to study.

Daughter: (nods affirmatively).¹¹

One strategy used by the mothers to promote collaboration with their daughters was to share with their own experiences as "lessons learned." The message was, "Don't make the same mistakes I have."

Mother: When I was in school and I had a boyfriend, I didn't learn anything, because I would think about my boyfriend and that doesn't allow you to study, it doesn't allow you to concentrate."¹²

que tener novios, tener relaciones, que perder el tiempo con novios. Es mejor estudiar para que salgas adelante.

¹⁰ Daughter: *Yo no tuve sexo.*

Mother: *No tuviste sexo?*

Daughter: *No*

Mother: *Ni queremos que tengas, primero tienes que estudiar...eres muy chica, no tienes que tener relaciones ni andarte cuidando de nada...ni protegerte de nada porque eres niña todavía.*

¹¹ Mother: *Tu no quieres tener novio a temprana edad. Tu quieres estudiar.*

Daughter: (nods affirmatively).

¹² Mother: *Yo cuando estaba en la escuela y tenia mi novio, yo no aprendía, porque pensaba en mi novio y eso no te deja estudiar, no te deja concentrarte.*

The trust shared between mothers and daughters was an indication of the positive relationship that many of the participants reported. Within a positive mother-daughter relationship based on trust and collaboration, mothers can provide guidance through *consejos* that daughters are likely to hear and use to map their life goals.

Discussion

Overall, the findings from our study of Mexican American female adolescents provide evidence of the interrelatedness of the following variables: decision-making about sexual activity, education-related issues including aspirations, closeness in the mother-daughter relationship, and mother-daughter communication about education. In this study, aspirations about higher education and confidence about achieving goals were associated with daughters choosing to delay initiating sex, thus avoiding the potential vulnerabilities in becoming a teenage mother. This is further evidenced by the finding that daughters with higher educational aspirations also reported that they would be “unhappy” or “devastated” in the event that they became pregnant. Adolescent Mexican American daughters with less than excellent grades were more likely to engage in early sexual activity, given its association with less confidence about reaching educational goals. It should be noted that although a large percentage of the daughters in this study had high aspirations, only 34% were fully confident that they could reach these goals.

Our findings further support the claim made by several Chicana feminist writers that mothers are a key source of influence on their daughters’ decision-making about educational choices (Hurtado, 2003a). The daughters in our study who reported having a positive relationship with their mothers also reported a lower likelihood of becoming sexually active in the coming year. Increased communication about education between mothers and daughters was associated with the likelihood of the daughters delaying sexual initiation. Education topics included grades, homework habits, and the daughters’ post high school plans. Mothers’ *consejos* counseled specifically against engaging in romantic relationship, which could interfere with the daughters’ focus on their studies and impede their academic well-being. The results of our study indicate that in an ideal school environment, mothers would work in tandem with teachers to maximize the students’ educational motivations and positive educational engagements.

It is noteworthy that mothers' *consejos* also had a particular subtext that came through in the mothers' justifications for their advice against romantic entanglements during adolescence. We turn to the concept of *underground feminisms* to explore the implied meanings that many of these immigrant mothers were communicating to their daughters.

Embodying Underground Feminisms

Hurtado (2003b) proposes that the underground feminisms immigrant Mexican mothers embody in their lives and in the *consejos* they give their daughters have the following five characteristics: 1) assuming agency, 2) allegiance to family in the context of struggle, 3) valorization of self, 4) rebellion against physical and mental abuse, and 5) feminist lessons for daughters. For the purpose of this discussion, we focus on three of the proposed characteristics as they relate to our study's results.

Assuming Agency

Many of the mothers had a nuanced understanding of their daughters' agency in making decisions about their futures. The mothers' *consejos* communicated the principle that the decisions a young woman makes as a 13-year-old can affect the rest of their lives. They explicitly told their daughters they were not ready for sexual engagement because "you're still a child." The suggested restriction of sexual engagement was based on the developmental perspective that as a young person matures, they can make more informed decisions. The mothers' message to their daughters was that "their day would come" when they were ready to assume their own freedom. In placing this restriction on sexual and romantic involvement, the mothers did not assert their parental authority without explanation; they did not state, "Because I'm your mother and I say so." Nor did the mothers call forth an external authority, such as a father or religious dictum in their opposition to sexual activity. Instead, the mothers contextualized the restriction as developmentally appropriate. The implication was that the daughters would grow into their own authority and agency as they matured, had a greater range of life experiences, and became educated.

In sum, the mothers, who were relatively young, appeared to understand their daughters' desire for sexual engagement. None of the mothers opposed sexual engagement on the basis of religion or abstract moral values. In its place, the conversations revolved around more pragmatic issues like educational success leading to economic independence and self-sufficiency.

Valorization of Self

The message from mothers was, “education first” before romantic entanglements, including marriage: “he’ll be bothering you; he’ll be distracting you.” They admonished their daughters against the inherent “distraction” of romantic partners demanding attention that leaves little room for a “space of one’s own.” The younger the daughters, the greater the likelihood that the boyfriends’ needs would supersede their own. The mothers sought to protect the daughters’ developmental stage during which they will acquire their own voice and sense of agency: “You won’t get good grades.”

The mothers seemed to have a profound understanding that for women, time is precious. It is not uncommon for women to have their time appropriated by the demands and care of others. Mothers were teaching their daughters to use their time, a limited commodity, to enhance their own self development and education.

Feminist Lessons

Mothers were also aware that an education can make young women seem threatening to young men, whether the men are conscious or not of their motivations. Young men can sabotage a young woman’s academic achievement: “There are times when boyfriends destroy your career in school.” Mothers saw financial independence as the key to a woman’s freedom since, as some mothers expressed, women sometimes stay in relationships because they cannot take care of themselves or their children. Education is the pathway to liberation, as one mother put it: “I want you to have a career; to know how to take care of yourself ... not to have a husband, or a boyfriend ...that you have to put up with” because “[you] say to yourself: ‘I have to take it because I need his money.’”

Two of the most important feminist lessons delivered by the mothers were repeatedly expressing pride in their daughters’ intelligence and asserting their absolute belief that their daughters could accomplish anything if they put their minds to it. As impressive as these messages of empowerment were for daughters, mothers also expressed their unconditional support and love if the daughters were unable to meet their goals. As one mother explicitly told her daughter:

Mother: I give you my trust, I know you are not going to do anything that is going to affect you [negatively]. [But] if you go and get involved with him, have sex with him,

nothing is going to happen to me. The one that is going to be affected is you, if you don't take care of yourself. You have to be careful all of the time; first because of the diseases [sexually transmitted], you have to use a condom. Second, because if you have a baby early [in life], the responsibility is going to be yours, not mine. Of course, I'm going to help you because I'm never going to leave you; you are always going to be my daughter and I'm always going to love you and I'm always going to support you, but the responsibility is going to be yours.¹³

This mother's assertion of loyalty within a message of caution is a good example of the female solidarity Chicana feminists write about in mother-daughter relationships. For many Mexican American/Chicana daughters, mothers have been a source of solace, support, and unconditional commitment to their daughter's success in life (Caballero et al., 2019; Hurtado, 2003a, 2003b; Moraga, 2019).

Implications for Teacher Training

The findings described above are especially relevant for teacher training. Many teachers understand that Mexican American adolescents who are at risk for early sexual activity and pregnancy are likely to be among the students in their classrooms who are struggling academically and are from low-income backgrounds. Our findings indicate that to reduce their vulnerability, teachers can employ strategies to maintain and increase Mexican American adolescents' engagement in school. Research shows that increased academic motivation is associated with students' perceptions that their teachers care about them (Wentzel et al., 2010). In addition, when teachers hold high achievement expectations, students experience greater self-esteem and a greater sense of competence as learners (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Wentzel et al., 2010). To aid in teacher training, we have provided concrete examples of the type of *consejos* that immigrant Mexican mothers communicate to their daughters. These verbatim mother-daughter conversations allow readers to "listen" to how the mothers do the work of parenting to help their daughters succeed in educational arenas that they could not enter. We hope the examples provided inform teachers' communication with Mexican

¹³ Mother: *Yo te doy mi confianza, y yo sé que tú no vas hacer nada que te afecte a ti. Porque si tú vas y te metes con él, tienes sexo con él, a mí no me va a pasar nada. A quien le va pasar es a tí, si tú no te cuidas. Tú tienes que tener cuidado todo el tiempo; primero por todas las enfermedades que hay, tienes que usar condón. Segundo, porque si tú tienes un bebé muy temprano, la responsabilidad va a ser tuya, no mía. Claro que te voy a ayudar porque nunca te voy a dejar; siempre vas a ser mi hija y siempre te voy a querer y siempre te voy a apoyar, pero la responsabilidad va a ser tuya.*

immigrant mothers. Many of these *consejos* are provided in Spanish within the context of the family's culture, economic, and social context as immigrants. However, their commitment to the educational success of their girls is fully present as they carefully scaffolded their social and romantic relationships in the hope that their daughters will obtain an education that they themselves were unable to achieve.

Within this discussion, there are several takeaways that may prove useful to teachers, especially those teaching in middle and early high school. One point is that communication between teachers and students' family members is essential for engaging Mexican American adolescents with their education. Second, mothers can be a great resource for teachers. In light of these findings, teachers can reinforce immigrant mothers' *consejos* to delay romantic relationships and pursue an education. Mexican American students who report that education is important to them and feel connected to their schools (e.g., being treated fairly in school, as well as feeling safe, happy, and close to others in their school) are less likely to engage in "risky sexual" behaviors (Garcia-Reid et al., 2018) and are less likely to become pregnant (Oman et al., 2013). The mothers in this study were fully aware of the importance of obtaining an education and were also savvy about the downside of early romantic relationships. They doled out wise advice to their daughters, asking them to avoid rushing into sexual activity and alerting them to the implications for their futures.

Teachers should also be aware that the quality of the mother-daughter relationship, which among our participants was quite high, means mothers can be a source of authority and respect. The typical view that all adolescents are rebellious and that mother-daughter relationships are contentious during teen years may not account for variations we see among different populations. The Mexican values of respect for elders, commitment to family, and a sense of collectivity may work in favor of teachers who use these familial resources to facilitate the success of their Mexican origin students.

In conclusion, achievement motivation and a positive future outlook are powerful defense mechanisms against early sexual activity and adolescent pregnancy. Academically motivated adolescents link their decision to refrain from sexual activity to educational aspirations and expectations. Mexican American adolescents may take part in early sexual activity if they perceive upward mobility to be limited and are skeptical about overcoming barriers to achieving educational goals. Schools can also make an important contribution to

student success by reconsidering such practices as student tracking. Research documents that tracking can result in low performing students receiving inferior educational experiences (Eccles & Roeser, 2011). In addition, school tracking reduces the opportunity for adolescents to have contact with peers who are academically oriented. Students of Color who have access to peers who value education and participate in school activities are more likely to be engaged in school than students without these relationships (Ryan, 2000; Shin et al., 2007). Teachers can help vulnerable adolescents stay engaged in school by finding ways to strengthen students' relationships with academically engaged peers.

There were some variations in the mothers' parenting styles that indicate the need for a variety of interventions to increase daughters' educational attainment. The results presented above show that the daughters who reported a greater likelihood of becoming sexually active in the coming year were born in Mexico and had mothers with lower levels of English language proficiency and with fewer years of education. In these instances, mothers and daughters may need additional help from school systems and teachers to provide a broader range of choices for their daughters' futures. Many of these mothers were young and had a more recent immigration history as measured by their English language proficiency and their daughters' birth in Mexico. These mother-daughter pairs may not be fully aware of the educational possibilities in the United States for their daughters. There is considerable research showing that parenting responsibilities during adolescence are not determinative of a person's future (Maldonado, 2019). The deciding factor is whether there are enough structural supports for adolescent mothers and their families to undergird their decisions about their futures (Caballero et al., 2019). Teachers can serve an important bridging function that can help adolescents and their mothers perceive alternatives if daughters become pregnant during their teenage years. There are many structural changes that can be implemented in high schools to ensure that all students are successful, regardless of their life circumstances.

The findings in our study also have implications for interventions. It is not sufficient to merely teach Mexican American adolescents about contraceptive use and/or abstinence as a means of preventing adolescent pregnancy. Just as important is to enhance adolescents' optimism about their futures and to provide a realistic understanding of how childbearing could jeopardize educational and economic opportunities. This approach is especially needed in poorly resourced communities where young motherhood may not be unusual and college-

bound role models may not be common. Strengthening connections with significant others in their lives who can support adolescents' educational aspirations is critical. Teachers, family members, structural supports, and innovative teaching pedagogies (Dyrness & Hurtig, 2016; Jimenez, 2020) can play a major role in making educational aspirations become real.

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