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Negotiating Bisexual Desire and Familism: The Case of Latino/a Bisexual Young Men and Women in New York City¹

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Abstract

Families are of critical importance for Latino communities in the United States. Familism (i.e., the cultural value that weighs on the interdependence among nuclear and extended family members for support, emotional connectedness, familial honor, loyalty, and solidarity) has been demonstrated to reduce sexual health risks among heterosexual youth, and yet, this relationship has not been examined among Latino bisexual teenagers. In this study we examined how familism shapes sexual-decision making regarding behavior and expressions of bisexuality among Latino youth. To accomplish this, we conducted 25 in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations in social environments of bisexual male and female youth (15–19 years of age) for nine months (February – October 2007, New York City). We conducted a recurrent theme analysis together with the selection of case studies to illustrate key themes regarding familism and Latino teenage bisexuality. Our findings suggest that bisexual Latino youth valued closeness to their families by maintaining family ties, and seeking their emotional and material support. The negative consequence for those who wanted to keep their bisexuality private is the constant surveillance of the family network. Familism is a complex construct that has a strong potential for providing insights into sexual health practices of bisexual Latino youth.

Families are critical elements in the protection and promotion of healthy behaviors among youth in the United States and globally (Guilamo-Ramos et al 2006, 2007). One of the ways of conceptualizing this relationship between family ties and the health status of youth is through the construct of familism, i.e., the cultural value that weighs on the interdependence among nuclear and extended family members for support, emotional connectedness, familial honor, loyalty, and solidarity (e.g., the notion of *belonging* to a family; Magana 1999). It includes the attitudes, behaviors, and family structures operating within an extended family system and is believed to be one of the most important factors influencing the health practices of Latinos in the United States (Coohey 2001, Gil et al. 2000, Ramirez et al. 2004, Unger et al. 2002, Vega 1995).

Familism is found to be a strong social factor in cultures characterized by the orientation toward the welfare of one's larger community or collectivism (as opposed to the orientation toward one's own welfare, i.e., individualism; Gaines et al. 1997). Individuals who report higher levels of familism are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and less likely to practice risky ones. For example, the higher the level of familism, the lower the frequency of substance use among Latino adolescents and children (Gil et al. 2000, Ramirez et al. 2004, Unger et al. 2002). Higher levels of familism have been associated with higher self-esteem among Latino adolescents (Bush et al. 2004) and higher self-efficacy with respect to negotiating sex and condom use among Latino and non-Latino college students (Rodriguez 2002, Valenzuela and Dornbusch 1994). In spite of the positive aspects of familism as a factor promoting healthy

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behavior and reducing risk practices, familism has been also observed as a predictor of maladjustment (e.g., anxiety and depression; Youn et al. 1999) or as a factor that creates social burden for care providers (John et al. 1997).

Familism seems to have an impact in regulating the sexuality of individuals. In cultures where collectivism is a predominant value, the sexual orientation of individuals, is no longer simply a matter of individual choice, but rather a struggle between placing an individual's own preference over apparent collective social order. Thus, it is important to view family as integral to the framework for understanding the behavior of individuals in collectivist societal groups. Given the importance of family relations, it is striking that familism has rarely been conceptualized in sexuality research or HIV/STI prevention with young adults, with the exception of the work on marital satisfaction among Mexican Americans (Bean et al. 1977). Familism could serve as potential risk reduction factor for bisexual Latino youth as it has been shown for heterosexual Latino youth (O'Donnell et al 2004). Regrettably this has rarely been examined among bisexual Latina (o) youth.

Rafael Diaz (1998), one of the pioneers in investigating the association between family and HIV risk, found that the strong ties within Latino families and the major role that families play in the care and support of Latino individuals can become a major source of conflict and tension for Latino gay and bisexuals men (Diaz 1998). Diaz's argument reflects that the protections of familism are contingent upon restrictions; that is, in order to receive the benefits of the network, individual members have to conform to the social norms and expectations of the network (Diaz 1998, Diaz et al. 2004). Drawing on this finding we examine the role of familism in the lives of bisexual Latina/o young women and men in New York City. To our knowledge there are few studies that explore the role of familism in the sexuality and gender relations of bisexual Latino female and male teenagers, a critical group with regards to sexual health issues. In this study we examine how familism shapes sexual-decision making regarding behavior and expressions of bisexual Latino youth through a two year qualitative study in New York City.

METHOD

Study Population

Bisexual Latino/a young women and men were the target group for this study. We included both youth who self-identified with a bisexual identity and those who were sexually active with both male and female partners but who did not have a bisexual identity. We defined 'sexually-active' as a person who has had any type of sexual encounter, non-penetrative to penetrative with both female and male partners more than once over the past 12 months.

To qualify for this study the youth had to be of Latino ancestry. We defined 'Latino/a' as an individual whose birthplace, or that one of her/his parents or grandparents, was in any territory of Latin America or the Spanish Caribbean. Individuals were eligible to participate in this study whether they spoke English, Spanish or Portuguese (however, there were no Portuguese speakers in the sample). While 'Latino' is in some ways a useful ethnic identity label, it is also a simplifying construct, missing much of the complexity and variation among members of this group, with conceptual and empirical shortcomings that have been discussed in other publications (Asencio 2002). The diversity within Latino groups is important to acknowledge in the analysis of familism because variations by ethnicity, generation and kinship structure lead to different expressions of familism (Luna et al. 1996, Cortes 1995). This cautions us from making broad generalizations about familism in a group as diverse as Latinos.

With these conceptual definitions in mind, the authors conducted a qualitative study with participants drawn from four predominantly Latino neighborhoods in the city of New York. These neighborhoods were selected based on our prior research on Latino bisexuality in the

city (Muñoz-Laboy et. al. 2008). Within the spaces of these neighborhoods, flyers were distributed outside high schools, in collaboration with youth organizations and person-to-person outreach was conducted with key youth leaders in these communities. This recruitment strategy yielded a mostly second-generation Latino sample from a working-class background with high levels of education (see Sample Characteristics section below).

Sexual History Interviews and Procedures

Drawing from the literature on life history research (Plummer 1983), a sexual history in this study refers to the construction of a chronological narrative of the events in the sexual life of an individual and the perceptions, reactions, meanings, feelings, thoughts, and life events that surround an individual's interpretations of those sexual experiences (Dowsett 1996, Weeks 1986). The brief sexual histories consisted of an open-ended, in-depth interview of 60 to 90 minutes.

Depending on the convenience of research participants, the interviews took place at community organizations, our university offices, or coffee shops. Consent procedures were not a barrier to the study for minors. Since the study was conducted under the title *Urban Youth Cultures, Health and Behavior* and although the parental authorization form explicitly stated the types of questions that will be asked (e.g., sexual behavior, sexual orientation, drug use), we received no rejections from parents authorizing minors in the sample to participate in the study. The participants received a monetary compensation of USD \$25 for their time. The interviews were conducted in Spanish, English, or both, depending on the participant's choice. The interviews were taped and transcribed within two weeks from the day of the interview. To protect informants' privacy and comply with human rights procedures, the study was approved by the Columbia University Medical Center Institutional Review Board (IRB AAAA 7371).

Data Analysis

The transcribed sexual histories were analyzed using the code of 'family,' which referred to any statements that made reference to family members (parents, siblings, relatives, and children); familial practices (household chores, parenting, impregnating, pregnancy, and raising children); notions of familial relations (fatherhood, motherhood) and literal iterations of the words 'family' and 'home.' The two central analytical questions were: What elements of familism, (the interdependence among nuclear and extended family members for support, emotional connectedness, familial honor, loyalty, and solidarity) were depicted in the narratives? How was familism connected to the sexual histories and sexual-decision making of the youth in the study?

A thematic analysis in this study refers to how the analytical codes of family and familism (as defined above) link together with broader themes within the research participant's narrative accounts. The central focus was to identify common themes in answering our research questions (Creswell 2007). We used a combination of open coding and selective coding. The primary level of coding by topics was conducted as soon as the interviews were transcribed and transferred into ATLAS.ti (qualitative data management software). A second level of coding of the different meanings related to family and familism were conducted by data analysts in 4 steps: 1) a sample of 5 narratives were coded collectively by a small group of data analysts from the research team in order to agree on the emerging themes and meanings; 2) from this coding exercise, a thematic matrix was developed by the data analysts (two of the authors); 3) using the thematic matrix, data analysts coded 25% of the interviews independently and adjusted codes to reflect inconsistencies across data analysts; and, 4) using the thematic code matrix, two data analysts coded the remaining 75% of the interviews. Once the codes were applied to the narrative data, the senior data analyst (first author) generated a report answering the general analytical tasks. This was presented to the research team, who collectively discussed

each of the analytical questions to assess the accuracy of the report and generate interpretations regarding the thematic codes of the data. Based on the above analyses we generated the analysis presented in this manuscript.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Of a total of 58 Latino youth screened, 25 meet the above study criteria and consented to be part of the study. In terms of sexual orientation 75% of the young men self-identified as bisexual and the remaining 25% as bisexual and gay. Of the young women, 69.2% self-identified as bisexual, 7.7% as bisexual and questioning, 7.7% as straight, 7.7% as lesbian and 7.7% as unsure. In terms of age at first vaginal/anal intercourse (AFI), four of the young women reported not having experienced intercourse at the time of the interview contrary to the young men who reported having had intercourse. The age distribution of age at first sex was the same between young men and women, 38.1% reported AFI between ages 12 and 14, 42.9% reported AFI at 15, and 19% reported AFI at 16 or older.

Of the 25 youth who consented to participate in the study, 16% (4 out of 25) self-identified as both from a Spanish Caribbean nation (Cuba, Dominican Republic or Puerto Rico) and from African American or West-Indian (Jamaica, Barbados or Trinidad and Tobago) descent. The rest of the youth self-reported their ethnic affiliation as mostly Spanish Caribbean with the exception of one Peruvian and two who reported dual Latino ethnic affiliations: Honduran and Puerto Rican, Dominican and Puerto Rican. All but three of the youth were born in the United States (i.e., second generation Latinos). (82% were in high school or just completed high school; 14% were in their first year of college; and 4% drop out of high school). The sample ranged from 15 to 19 years of age. The mode was 17 years of age (36%). As intended, half were female (52%), 44% were male and one self-identified as male-to-female transgender. (The narrative of this transgender individual were included in our general analysis but not in the analysis presented below).

Bisexual youth and familial responsibilities

Families were considered ‘important’ for bisexual Latino youth. The importance seems to emerge along two themes for the youth in the study: centrality of families in their social lives and identities and how familial connections make them better social beings. This seems consistent across all participants regardless of gender. Summer barbeques and house parties with relatives and extended family with dancing and domino games were the scenes described by many of the youth as examples of their familial activities. These examples were similar to those documented in other studies on Latino families (Suarez-Orozco and Paez 2002).

Household responsibilities are critical to the ways youth construct their masculinities and femininities (Connell 1987). In our sample, gender played a role in the dynamics around household responsibilities. Several of the youth who lived with their mother(s) and father(s) stated that their parents assumed different gender roles in domestic chores, where the mother was in charge of indoor chores and the father of outdoor activities.

Chores were divided by gender among youth. Mothers, grandmothers and young women respondents often carried the burden of household responsibilities. Jessie’s (female, 15 years old) account of her family experience illustrates a common pattern among the young women in the study. Jessie, who has lived with her grandmother and her uncle’s family, was socialized in a context marked by rigid gendered division of labor and entertainment activities. For example, on the occasions that Jessie tried to help on outside tasks her uncle would say: ‘No!’,

you're a girl. Go inside.' As a girl, Jessie was told not to 'climb trees or play basketball, stuff like that, you know, so boys like always get it easier.' She continues:

You're a girl, you should learn how to cook, you can't keep a man if you don't know how to cook. You gotta learn how to keep a clean house, do your hair. Stuff like that (Jessie, Cuban and West-Caribbean, female, 15 years old).

Young women carried a higher burden of household work as compared to young men, who self-reported low household chores and expressed that most of the household responsibilities were carried out by their mothers and sisters. The division of familial labor, however, was not only primarily dictated by gender difference but interconnected with children's age and educational attainment. Older youth in the sample had more responsibilities than younger ones. Those siblings or respondents who were not doing well in school were assigned more responsibilities than those who were doing well in school. This complex system of chores not only means a form of social participation for the youth in the familial space but suggests a mechanism of maintaining youth closer to the familial nucleus.

'Sticking' to ones family was expressed as one of the characteristics of being good daughters or sons. A frequent theme within the answers from our respondents to the questions of being good daughters and sons was: 'In my family it would have to be for you to be straight. Yes, be straight, bring the best grades home and don't go out to parties, stay home, clean the house and that's it' (Melissa, Dominican, female, 18 years old).

The role of families in shaping the bisexuality of youth in the study became evident at the moment where they become sexually activity or start to define their sexual orientation. In the following set of findings we examine how the familial space influenced the sexuality of bisexual youth.

Familial space and youth bisexuality

The first and most prominent theme in the interviews regarding family and their sexuality was related to their processes of defining their sexual orientation. Labels used in the sample included: bi, bisexual, no labels, confused lesbian, gay, and, straight. Annika and Tom illustrate the types of definitional processes that youth in our sample went through. Annika realized a change in her view of her sexuality after experiencing a sexual interaction with a female classmate.

Q: What would you say your sexual orientation is?

R: I don't consider myself bisexual but I hook up with both boys and girls. But I wouldn't consider myself bisexual.

Q: So what would you say, if someone said what is your sexual orientation?

R: That I'm not sure.

Q: When did you start thinking of yourself as not sure?

R: When it was in high school my freshman year when my best friend was and we was trying to hook up and stuff like that, after that. It was weird it was just happening and it felt like I had no control for it. It was a state of mine because she was and it was pretty much happening (Annika, Puerto Rican, female, 19 years old).

Different from Annika, Tom defined himself as 'bi.' He said that he never thought of himself as 'bi' until he was 16 years old. His self-definition was not the result of any particular sexual

experience or emotional attraction. Interestingly when discussing Tom's participation in different youth cultural spaces he makes references to the gay and Down Low 'communities.'

Q: As a young person what would you say your culture is?

R: I'm African American² but when I hear you say it, my culture is, how do I say it, like the not really gay community but my culture is more along the lines of like the homeboys hanging out like 'what's up my nigga?' hanging out, but at the same time lets fuck around and do some shit on the low. In the DL³ community, that's my culture (Tom, African American and Puerto Rican, male, 19 years old).

Developing a self-notion of bisexuality seems to be accompanied by a clear awareness of the consequences of sexual labels. On the one hand, some youth referred to negative value connotations of bisexuality by contrast with only same-sex or heterosexual attraction, since being 'bi' was associated with confusion or 'being greedy' (defined by some of the youth as wanting to have everything, girls and boys). On the other, 'hooking up' with boys and girls was considered the 'new thing.' Patricia said:

Hooking up with boys and girls is the new thing. Everybody wants to be bi. Everybody wants to be with a girl and a guy. I don't think that's right if you are supposed to be with one person but a lot of my friends are bi. Everybody has their own interpretation of what bi is. [Q: What's your interpretation?] It's just that for me it doesn't matter to me. Its one, if I find a guy that I like and have interest in I'll go with that. If I don't find a guy and I find a girl that I have interest then I go with that...you know (Patricia, Cuban, female, 17 years old).

Establishing emotional relationships with both girls and boys, simultaneously or sequentially, were also common types of relationships that both male and female youth in the study follow. These emotional and meaningful relations were problematic for the respondents in their familial space. Coming out as bisexual was a strategy that a group of the research participants opted to follow. A second group felt that their sexuality and romantic/emotional relations were their private 'personal business.' Of those who came out there was a spectrum of familial reactions. The most typical experience in the sample was similar to Francisco's.

Q: So you came out to your family. How old were you when you came out to them?

R: I was, at first I told my mom at 13, through a letter she found and then I told them again I think at 17. My father was at 17.

Q: How did they react when you told them?

R: Well my mother took it a little bit more light, she, both of them thought it was a phase. When I came out to my father, my father actually went um, he was very disappointed, very mad, he was screaming at me saying 'where did I go wrong?' this and that, and I have to, I myself couldn't stay shut because I've always been shut. And I expressed myself telling him how it's not being homosexual, like it's a part of my life but it doesn't determine what I do. In my family, the views on homosexuals is that they're rapists, they're always sexually active, they just want to get in a relationship to have sex, they're pretty much everything that describes inferior. I mean I tell them I'm not like that. I'm going to school, getting good grades; I'm just

²Later in his narrative, he discussed the flexibility of his dual identity as African American and Puerto Rican, and the situations in which it is useful to use one identity versus another. This is beyond the scope of this analysis.

³Labels such as 'men on the down low' or 'DL' refers to maintaining same-sex sexual practices in a low profile and often without self-identifying as gay or bisexual. Although not all the youth in this article are on the DL, keeping a 'low profile' of their bisexuality characterizes a number of youth in the sample.

everything that's not. But yeah they definitely took it not lightly, they were mad (Francisco, Peruvian, male, 19 years old).

Negative reactions ranged from disappointment to asking the youth to leave the house, which was reported by both young men and women in the sample. Research participants reported that the idea of bisexuality was found to be 'confusing' to the parents. Being gay or lesbian, although heavily stigmatized was perceived to be less problematic for their families than being bisexual. Four of the youth in the sample left their houses. Two of them returned while the other two stayed in the New York City shelter system. Siblings served as a source of support for those youth who came out or were 'outed' to their parents. For one of the respondents, coming out as bisexual was facilitated by the fact that his mother came out as lesbian. Nonetheless, approximately half of the interviewees viewed their sexuality as their private, personal business not to be shared with their family. Lucas's account clearly describes this perspective.

I'm living a double life in a way. My parents don't know about it. My brother does – he's willing to keep a secret for me. But it's like, when I'm outside with anybody they know. I'm not trying to say that I don't talk to my parents because I trust them very much but I know I can't tell them yet. (Lucas, Dominican, male, years old).

Later in his interview, Lucas expressed that his ideal life would involved 'not having to live a double life.' Tom viewed his sexuality as 'none of their business' but at the same time he 'does not want to talk to them because I'm afraid of what they say and what they might think.' Krista (female, Dominican, 16 years old) has avoided speaking to her family about her personal or romantic life because she 'dislikes' lying to her parents.

Youth who kept their bisexualities compartmentalized from their families were careful in not being observed, found or discovered in same-sex interactions (or perceived interactions). Respondents who were 'out' to their parents about their bisexuality minimized their same-sex interactions in the familial space but were often harassed by some family members (e.g., in our sample, fathers to sons and daughters; mothers and grandmothers to daughters) about their bisexuality and 'state of confusion.' Although most youth did not articulate why their parents use the terms 'being confused' as a point to make to their children, four of the youth who were out/outed to their parents also commented on their parents expectations of 'passing this stage... this phase of confusion.'

Another factor influencing youth to keep their bisexualities in secret was their religious familial background. All the youth in the study grew up in Christian traditions including Roman Catholics, Historical Protestants (Baptists, Methodists), Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witness. Although not all of them attended religious services some of the families or their family members were active religious individuals. Our data suggest that religiosity or identification with a religion were recurrent themes in the restriction or regulation of the bisexual practices of youth in the sample. Similarly, Jeffries, Dodge and Sandfort (2008) found that Black bisexual men perceived rejection from religious institutions because of their bisexuality. Nonetheless, their participation in religious life served to cement their family values and provoked the men to rethink their sexual practices (Jeffries, et al., 2008). Contrary to Jeffries and colleagues' study, our youth did not report finding acceptance from religious institutions and faith communities.

In our study religion was used by parents to support their negative views of their children's bisexualities. References to religion and god were often made by youth as part of reflections of their own sexual experiences. Diego's reactions to his first experience kissing another boy when he was 11 years old illustrate this point.

The first couple of months were so weird for me. I was dealing with oh my god, I'm religious and had grown up, I was dealing with what would my mom think about this?

What would god think about this? Very mixed, very confused but then I started to grow up and think that sexuality is constantly changing and evolving in this century and I'm not going to advocate experimenting too much but I feel if you experiment a little bit and put your finger in the hole, you'll start to see a lot of things you hadn't noticed (Diego, West Caribbean and Puerto Rican, male, 18 years old).

Diego's account suggests that the initial reaction to sexual exploration familial and religious expectations become interpretative tools, elements to make sense and judge the sexual experience.

Sexual behavior and risk

In the bisexual interactions of youth with their sex partners, the gender of the object of desire had little significance to their sexual experiences. Statements such as the following reflect the perceived independence of sex from gender.

Sex is sex to me, regardless if I'm hitting a woman in her pussy or regardless if I'm fucking a dude in his ass or sucking a niggas dick or sucking a woman's click or sucking a woman's breasts or a man's breast – sex is still sex to me. (Tom, African American and Puerto Rican, male, 19 years old)

'Sex is sex' was as much a recurrent theme in the narratives as the theme of 'love is love.' Love and the ability to have multiple emotional relations regardless of the gender of the other was also a common theme expressed by the youth. Nonetheless, there was a notion of performing like a woman or like a man during the sexual interactions. Some youth felt that they were consistently the woman in sex or the man in sex regardless of partner's gender, which were often defined as the passive or active role during sexual interactions.

For the male teenagers in this sample there was less flexibility in exchanging gender roles than in prior studies with bisexual young adult Latino men, therefore the respondents rarely reported feeling 'like the woman' during sexual encounters with male partners. Some of the female teens expressed feeling masculine, when enacting aggressive behaviours during sexual interactions with female partners but never with male partners. Jessie, for example, assumed a masculine role in same-sex relationships, and subordination and softness with male partners.

When I'm with girls I'm the guy. Like I'm the masculine one completely. My girl can't even talk to me back. My girls have to call me daddy. I have to be catered to, know what I'm saying? You have to treat me like your king. When I'm with guys that's how I treat the guys. I'm soft with the guys but I'm harder with the girls (Jessie, Cuban and West-Caribbean, female, 15 years old).

How the gender roles and gender expectations learned in the familial environment influence performing gendered-sexual courtship and sexual behavior remains an unanswered question that deserves further research. How these familial gender lessons shaped bisexual youth sexual negotiation skills and gender dynamic conflicts and resolutions also deserves further examination. Regarding familial regulation of sexual behavior, our research differs from prior research in the field regarding adult bisexuals. For adult bisexual Latino men, the desire to have families on their own by having children was connected to unprotected vaginal intercourse and the lack of encouragement to utilize family planning methods (Muñoz-Laboy 2008). The teenagers in our study were not thinking about having families on their own, thus, this linkage between the desire of families and the regulation of heterosexual behavior was not observed. In fact none of the youth in the sample have impregnated or become pregnant. However, a number of the female and male youth have had experienced been scared of an unintended pregnancy.⁴ Carlos said:

There was a time that I thought I got my girlfriend pregnant. I was doing anal sex, right, and I ejaculated a lot and I knew it wasn't possible but it leaked out and I still had the doubt in my head, 'she can't get pregnant' but it touched in there and it has to shoot up and all that stuff. When it comes to STDs I always get tested. Well now I don't get tested but before I used to mess around a lot so I used to get tested. I always wear a condom though (Carlos, Puerto Rican, male, 16 years old).

Carlos stop getting tested regularly because he has been in a series of stable relationships and he reports using condoms during intercourse with female and male partners. Carlos alludes to a behavior often underreported among heterosexual youth, anal intercourse with female partners, which is a critical HIV/STI risk behavior. His justification for having unprotected anal sex with his girlfriend was to avoid pregnancy and that she was a 'virgin.' Although they already had vaginal intercourse at the time of the above episode, it was common to hear from youth in our sample to have sought their first intercourse experience with someone who was also a 'virgin,' which some of them define as a person who has not had anal/vaginal intercourse before. Avoiding 'messing around,' going 'too fast' to intercourse were some of the strategies youth used to protect themselves from HIV/STIs.⁵

The concerns of bisexual young women regarding their sexual behavior had less to do with unintended pregnancy than about acquiring sexually transmitted infections (STIs) from sexual intercourse with male partners or from performing oral sex to female or male partners. Young men were most concern about getting STIs from having anal intercourse (receptive or insertive) with male partners, but female partners represented less of a source of risk. Yet, a common story among male and female youth in the study consisted of the respondents performing oral sex (putting mouth or tongue in penis, clitoris or vagina) with a same-sex partner and feeling sick (sore throat, fever) 4–5 days later. One of the young women was injected with penicillin by a physician in a clinic. Although the doctor said that this was not a STI, she believes that it was the outcome of 'going down' (cunnilingus) on a girl.

Unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse experiences often involved withdrawal (ejaculation outside vagina/anus), but were regularly followed by STI/HIV testing within a month because of fear of becoming infected. None of the youth were HIV positive or had received a positive diagnosis of having had a STI.

Due to the qualitative nature of the study we were not able to directly test whether the emergent themes in this study (e.g., feeling sad, harassed or disengaged from their families because of their bisexuality), together with whether or not bisexuality was hidden from their parents, internalised biphobia or other family factors such as alcohol abuse and interpersonal violence in the household resulted in higher HIV/STI risk behavior for bisexual youth. These questions need to be explored in further studies.

DISCUSSION

Our research findings suggest that familism cannot be conceptualized as intrinsically positive or negative. From our theoretical perspective familism plays an essential role in providing or denying access to resources within the familial network, including informational, material,

⁴From 1980 to 2001, the rates of pregnancy (regardless of whether the pregnancy was carried full term, miscarried or ended in abortion) for Latina teenagers were 4 times higher than those of White teenagers of similar age (Mosher et al. 2005)

⁵Previous studies have shown that bisexually-identified Latino young men who have sex with men (YMSMW) are more likely to engage in unprotected sex (Agronick et al. 2004). Bisexually-identified youth were also more likely to have unprotected sex when compared to gay or lesbian-identified youth. Although there is limited data that specifically documents sexual risk among Latina bisexual young women, in the broader context, the rates of STIs amongst Latino youth consistently increased between 2001 and 2005 (Lindberg et al. 2008).

instrumental and emotional forms of support, which are critical to individuals during adolescence.

The familial environments of bisexual Latino youth in the study both directly and covertly pressure them to keep their bisexuality outside the scope of their families. The everyday practice of being ‘good’ sons and daughters not only implies the fulfillment of household chores and educational responsibilities but also an explicit challenge to their normative gender because of their sexual desires and expressions. Social ‘tokens’ of familial respect (e.g., heteronormative behavior) and milestones of femininity and masculinity are difficult for bisexual Latino youth because the flexibility of their identity, expressions and diversity of sexual practices and emotional ties are in conflict with the larger dominant polarized cultural system (heterosexual and homosexual) for understanding and interpreting youth sexual experiences and desires. Bisexual Latino young women and men have to negotiate these tensions together with the regulatory pressures derived from strong familist systems.

Bisexual youth valued closeness to their families by maintaining family ties, participation in the household chores and seeking their emotional and material support. The negative consequence for those who wanted to keep their bisexuality private is the constant surveillance of the family network. We were not able to examine youth bisexual identities over time but we know from prior research that bisexual identification declines with age amongst bisexual teens (Blake 2001). Among bisexual Latino teens, the reasons for this relate to their close family relationships. Bisexual identification could potentially signal a lack of respect for the individual’s family, and therefore, Latino teens disclose their bisexual identity to fewer people (Rosario et al. 2004, O’Donnell et al 2002).

An important implication of this study is the issue of homelessness among bisexual youth. In researching, LGB runaways and homeless youth, investigators have found how direct familial conflict as well as ongoing, ‘low impact’ tensions due to youth sexual expressions are strong precursors of youth homelessness (Cochran et. al. 2002). Furthermore, bisexual Latino young men have also shown greater ethnic community attachment, when compared to those young men who only had sex with men (O’Donnell et al 2002). Stigma from being associated with non-heterosexual orientation reduced some of the ability of bisexual youth to maintain ethnic community attachment. Consistent with the work of Rosario and colleagues (2001), bisexual youth in our study also feel estranged from gay and lesbian communities, due to perceived differences in orientation by bisexual youth (Rosario et al 2001).

This was a small-scale study, limited in scope and generalisability. All but three of the youth were born in the USA, and therefore, our findings have limited implications for recent migrant Latina/o bisexual youth. Although we did not intend to generate a second-generation sample, sampling venues and strategies did not allow for the inclusion of recent migrant youth into the study. Furthermore, the selection criteria and sampling strategy for the study yielded findings that are relevant to urban bisexual youth of Latino ancestry. By including self-identified bisexual and bisexually active females and males, we were able to explore issues of family and bisexuality and the potential differences between subgroups. However, this was not designed as a comparative study, but as an exploratory design to examine familism and bisexuality during adolescence. Therefore, further examination is needed to empirically document the relationship that familism plays within subgroups of bisexual Latino youth.

Further research is needed in order to identify positive elements in the relationship between familism (including familial support, emotional interconnectedness, and familial honor) and bisexuality. Can familism serve as a protective mechanism as it does for heterosexual adolescent health or is it a cultural operator of larger heterosexist norms about normalcy and family values? Latino bisexual youth perceived their families as essential to their social lives

and their future. In the face of multiple sexual health epidemics (HIV, STIs, unintended pregnancy, sexual violence) that disproportionately affect Latina (o) youth, exploring innovative ways to approach sexual health (such as conceptualizing the role of family in STI prevention) is essential to design culturally and age appropriate comprehensive health promotion programs for bisexual and other Latino youth in the United States.

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