Published in final edited form as:

Cult Health Sex. 2014 ; 16(9): 1009–1022. doi:10.1080/13691058.2014.921837.

Trust – that’s a big one: intimate partnership values among urban Latino youth

Nicole D. Laborde^a, Evan vanDommelen-Gonzalez^{a,b}, and Alexandra M. Minnis^{a,b}

^aWomen’s Global Health Imperative, RTI International, San Francisco, USA

^bSchool of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley; Berkeley, USA

Abstract

Romantic relationships play a central role in young people’s social development and sexual health. This paper examines romantic relationship ideals valued by urban Latino youth in San Francisco and their experiences in achieving their ideals in their current relationship. We draw on in-depth interviews with 33 young men and women aged 16–22 years in San Francisco, California. In spite of, or perhaps related to, the prevailing perception that their peers were unfaithful in their relationships, young people in this study identified trust as one of the most important characteristics of a romantic relationship. Trust was related not only to fidelity, but also vulnerability and emotional intimacy. Understanding valued relationship ideals and factors that facilitate and impede their attainment is critical in promoting healthy relationships.

Keywords

Young people; Romantic Relationships; Trust; Latinos; USA

Introduction

Adolescence and youth have been characterised by an increasing interest and investment in peer and romantic relationships (Giordano 2003, Furman et al. 2009). By the age of 18 years, 80% of young people in the USA have had some dating experience (Carver et al. 2003), and 42% of those aged 15–19 report having had sexual intercourse (Martinez et al. 2011). Romantic relationships, even short-term partnerships, are recognised as playing a central role in young people’s social and emotional development (Feiring 1996). Engaging in intimate relationships can offer companionship, opportunities to build interpersonal communication skills, and practice in healthy partner selection. However, romantic relationships can also pose emotional and physical risks, including inter-partner violence, unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In 2011, 9.4% of US high school students reported experiencing dating violence in the previous 12 months (Eaton et al. 2012); three in 10 US young people, and half of Latino young women, are estimated to become pregnant before age 20 (MMWR 2011, Martinez et al. 2011); and teenage and

young adult women (aged 15–24 years) have the highest rates of Chlamydia infection, the most common bacterial STI in the USA (C.D.C. 2012).

In designing interventions to promote healthy relationships, understanding the relationship ideals most valued and the factors that facilitate and impede their attainment is important. A recent report from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that a multidimensional healthy relationship approach – taking into account relationship context, relationship dynamics, partner characteristics, and individual beliefs and feelings - offers promise in addressing sexual and emotional health concerns, such as dating violence, early pregnancy, and STIs (Tharp et al. 2013). Though young people's romantic relationships typically remain short in duration compared with adults, they nonetheless assume a developmentally critical role and shape relationship patterns and properties into adulthood (Madsen and Collins 2011). Early relationships can help develop empathy, communication and negotiation skills and interpersonal skills, which help develop long-term, committed relationships in adulthood (Collins et al. 2009).

To promote healthy partnerships among young people, it is important to know what relationship characteristics young people themselves value and how these expectations may be shaped by the social environment. Scholars have demonstrated the extent to which conduct and even feelings within romantic relationships are socially constructed (Simon et al. 1992, Merten 1996, Flores et al. 1998, Giordano 2003). Gauging how to act within and what to expect from a partnership is heavily determined by cultural and family relationship norms, as well as by interactions with peers (Harper et al. 2004), including gossip and other social sanctions (Simon et al. 1992, Coates 1999). While networks incubate romantic expectations and activity, structures such as gender, culture and race or ethnicity also have an important impact in defining what feelings and behaviours are appropriate (Cavanagh 2007, Milbrath et al. 2009). For example, a study of urban African American and Latino youth found different expectations between the two groups, with African American girls having more open discussions about sexual activity, and girls of Latino heritage feeling more pressure to get married and have children (O'Sullivan and Meyer-Bahlburg 2003).

This paper examines romantic relationship ideals valued by Latino young people in San Francisco and their experiences in achieving their ideals in their current relationship. Through a qualitative study comprised of in-depth interviews, we examined their narratives regarding central relationship ideals. Drawing on these narratives we examined: 1) how social norms related to predominant partnership patterns inform relationship ideals; 2) what young people describe as the most important relationship ideal; and 3) what aspects of this characteristic emerge in discussing current relationships.

Methods

Study design and procedures

The analysis for this paper derives from a qualitative study entitled *Mi Cuento* (My Story), which involved 33 male and female Latino young people aged 16–22 years, who were currently in a heterosexual relationship and resided in or spent at least four days a week in San Francisco's Mission District. The Mission District is home to the largest Latino

community in San Francisco, California, with Latinos comprising 42% of neighbourhood residents compared to 15% in San Francisco overall (SFDPH 2012). Immigrant youth and children of immigrants were included in equal numbers, with recruitment of both recent immigrants (1st generation) and young people who immigrated prior to adolescence (1.5 generation). Despite a sizable youth street gang presence, the Mission is a neighbourhood with vibrant displays of ethnic pride and a history of cultural centres serving youth and families. As home to many Mexican and Central American immigrants, the Mission maintains a transnational character with strong connections to communities of origin.

We recruited young people from public venues, including street locations, parks, and community agencies. Building on our collaborations with community partners over the last 12 years enabled recruitment of a range of young people with various risk and demographic profiles. Interested and eligible youth were invited to participate in the anonymous interview at one of our partner community agencies near the recruitment site. The study protocol was approved by the IRB at RTI International, and all participants provided verbal informed assent/consent to participate.

The primary study aim for *Mi Cuento* was to assess how migration and adaptation to the USA influenced gender role norms, partnership formation and relationship expectations, and sexual risk among Latino young people in San Francisco. A semi-structured interview guide designed to address the respondent's current relationship served to direct the in-depth interviews. At the end of the interview, participants responded to statements related to community-level peer norms informed by our previous research in this community. Interviews were conducted in Spanish or English, and were digitally recorded. Participants received a US\$20 payment for their interview. All recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim (with simultaneous translation for Spanish language interviews by a professional translator). Following each interview, the interviewer prepared field notes to capture the environment in which the interview had taken place, participant characteristics that would not be reflected in an audio recording (e.g. appearance, self-presentation), respondent comments before and after the interview, and immediate impressions of the young person's narrative.

Analysis

Data were analysed for dominant themes using grounded theory techniques (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Interviews were transcribed and reviewed during the study so that emerging themes could be probed in greater depth in subsequent interviews. Interview transcripts were coded after repeated readings, key narratives were analysed in-depth, and analysis was summarized in memos shared with the research team. Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software was used to organise and facilitate the analysis.

A codebook was developed based on analytical themes derived from the interview guide, relevant literature, and reviews of transcripts. Two members of the research team coded the transcripts, which were periodically checked for consistency. Formal synthesis of the qualitative findings was conducted through review of coded sections of text and discussions during regular research team meetings. Then, written summaries and memos exploring themes and testing emerging hypotheses across transcripts were prepared. Because we

wanted to capture what young people found important in their relationships, we used an iterative process in analysis. After identifying trust as a dominant theme that emerged from the narratives to be expanded into a manuscript, we reviewed the codes ‘relationship values,’ ‘gender dynamics,’ ‘concurrency,’ ‘how partner met’ and ‘partner communication’ and created a new code for ‘fidelity.’ We have noted the age and immigration generation for each participant quoted. Some of the narratives address partnership ideals and relationship expectations that may have been influenced by culture, immigration, and immigrant adaptation. Thus, we elected to include this consistently for all participants as descriptive background information. All names attached to quotations cited here are pseudonyms.

Results

Participant background and relationship characteristics

Study participants had a median age of 17 years (16–22 range), and 48% were men. Nearly half (45%) were born in the USA, with the majority of foreign-born young people immigrating to the USA from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador during their teenage years. Most --73%-- lived with their mother, 45% lived with their father and 15% lived with their partner. Nearly all had foreign-born friends, and one-third were in a relationship with a foreign-born partner. All participants described exposure to community violence in the Mission District. Many foreign-born young people had also been exposed to violence in their community of origin; in some cases this had been an impetus for migrating to the USA. Exposure to violence varied. Nine of 33 (27%) of young people reported either being in a gang currently or in a relationship with someone in a gang. These participants sometimes described witnessing severe violence. Another nine reported having family members (N=4) or close friends (N=5) in a gang, including having a brother in jail, a friend’s safety compromised or a boyfriend shot. Ten young people who did not have direct or indirect gang involvement through partners, family or friends had witnessed violence in their neighbourhood. The remaining five were aware of gangs and community violence more indirectly through loosely-affiliated friends or from school incidents.

Relationships varied in length, from new relationships to those spanning up to seven years in duration. The median relationship length was one year (interquartile range: 4 months to 3 years). It was not uncommon for participants to have dated or at least known each other since middle school. Many of the foreign-born young people initiated their current relationship through rather traditional courtships that began with friendships, sometimes involved parental permission and later evolved into dating relationships. They most frequently described meeting their partners at school and through friends. While some US-born participants described similar relationship trajectories that began with friendships established at school, it was also common for them to report engaging initially with partners through social media and texting and/or to have met their partner ‘on the street.’

Community norms tied to relationship concurrency: ‘Messy girls and players’

Nearly all participants (27 of 30) strongly agreed with the statement: ‘Many Mission youth in a relationship are also seeing someone on the side.’ Concurrency was described by young people as ‘cheating’ (having a ‘main girl with ‘friends with benefits’ on the side’), as

resulting from initiating new relationships before ending existing ones, or as occurring between serial break-ups with a main partner. Participants' descriptions of cheating ranged from sexual intercourse to kissing or hugging outside the primary relationship.

Angela (16 years, 2nd Gen.) lived with her mother and was in a relationship with someone whom she liked because he was respectful to her – he did not make advances in public and her mother appreciated that he was polite. Her mother wanted her to date someone who was not a 'thug' or a 'gangbanger' (her uncle had been killed due to gang violence) and who respected and appreciated her. She told the interviewer that concurrent partnerships were commonplace for young women and men alike:

There's girls that'll go to a party and they'll be like, 'Oh, I don't really know him....if my boyfriend doesn't know, I don't have to tell him.' Or, you know, the guy's like, 'Ahh, just hit it and quit it. I'm [not] gonna talk to her ever again.'

Nonetheless, others endorsing the norm reflected gendered stereotypes for male and female behaviour in relationships, with the expectation that boys were entitled to have numerous girlfriends, while girls would get a bad reputation for doing the same. This was also the case for Angela, who explained why she believed there was a substantial amount of infidelity in the community:

P: 'Cause there's a lot of like the girls around here like are kinda messy... I know a couple of girls like that. Like I went to middle school with girls and now they just really - you don't wanna hang out with them, 'cause and then you're gonna [be] like a ho, too.

I: And what about the guys? Do you think they have people on the side even if they're in a relationship?

P: Probably. 'Cause, you know, they're men, so they can do whatever they want.

Not only did Angela initially attribute infidelity to 'messy girls', but she also felt that the promiscuity of such girls would reflect badly on other girls around them. Only after prompting did she identify the 'guys' roles in the behaviour, and she responded that they could do whatever they want. 'Messy' girls were also sometimes referred to as 'hood rats,' particularly in gang-affiliated social networks. Ricardo (22 years, 1.5 Gen.), emphasised that 'hood rats' have no loyalty, asserting that 'when you like gangbang and stuff, you meet a, you meet a lot of hood rats...basically just like...like girls that just don't respect themselves.' Parents reinforced the notion that girls should not be promiscuous. For example, Juan Carlos' (16 years, 1.5 Gen.) mother warned him, "don't mess with slutty girls. 'Cause like they'll be dirty, I guess." On the other hand, Sonia (16 years, 1.5 Gen.) emphasised that men's reputations are defined by how many girlfriends they have: 'They think they'll feel better. They think they're more man having lot of girls and stuff.' Sonia became involved with a gang shortly after immigrating to the USA. Her partner was also gang-affiliated and they had both been unfaithful at different points in their relationship.

Xavier (16 years, 2nd Gen.) confirmed the reputation of the young men in the neighbourhood, though he considered himself to be different. He and his girlfriend were waiting to have sex until marriage because Xavier's girlfriend considered this to be 'proper,'

though they spoke about having children together. He described the young men in his neighbourhood to the interviewer: ‘Nowadays like most youth of guys are like the player types. ...It’s like they get on different girls and they don’t really concentrate on just one - like I guess the old times, you would say.’

As these comments illustrate, participants indicated that concurrency was common among their peers. Their narratives also reflected perceptions shaped both by cultural gender norms expectations as well as peer neighbourhood norms. Girls who had multiple partners were described as “messy girls” or “hood rats” and were looked down on. Boys who had multiple partners were treated with more tolerance and the expectation that it made them feel “more man.”

Desired Relationship Characteristics: ‘Trust: That’s one big one’

In the context of widespread social expectations for concurrency and unequal gender norms in this regard, participants honed in on trust as the most desirable relationship characteristic. Trust was identified as an important relationship characteristic by the great majority of young people in the study – it was mentioned more frequently than any other characteristic. That trust is important to relationships does not seem immediately remarkable, given that trust is widely valued in intimate relationships. Trust is generally conceived of as the idea that a person is and will be reliable (Cook 2001). However, what it takes to be reliable can vary according to what is expected and what type of betrayal is feared, expectations that emerge from social context. Young people described relationship ‘trust’ tied to three central themes: fidelity, vulnerability and emotional intimacy.

Fidelity: Trust (or distrust) about partner being faithful—In the light of a strong perception of concurrency, one of the key facets of trust in a relationship was maintaining fidelity. Generally, participants spoke of the importance of their partner being faithful to them. However, gender differences emerged, with young men asserting the difficulty of remaining faithful, and with young women convincing their partner that she was faithful. Both male and female respondents indicated wanting to be able to trust that their partners were faithful.

When asked about important qualities in a relationship, Xavier (16 years, 2nd Gen.), who alluded to his own parents’ loving relationship, responded:

P: There’s trust: That’s one big one.

I: What does trust mean to you?

P: Trust means like I can trust her around other guys. I know that she won’t do anything and I can have that trust that, you know, that nothing’s gonna happen and she can have the same for me.

While young people felt that they should be able to trust their partner to be faithful, there was also some ambiguity regarding exactly how much they should expect. Daniella (17 years, 2nd Gen.) ran away from her parents’ house to live with the boyfriend she had been with sporadically since middle school and was four-months pregnant at the time of the interview. In the following discussion, she alternated between being emphatic about her

boyfriend not cheating on her and not expecting fidelity given the level of commitment in their relationship (i.e. no legal marriage). 'As long as he's with me... I'm expecting for him to stay faithful. ...if he ever wants to have like, you know, other women, then, you know, I'll slap the shit out of him.'

After making this assertion, Daniella rescinded: she would like for him to be faithful, even though she is not sure it is her right. 'I mean, it's not like we're married or anything like, you know, who am I to say like, 'No, you can't.'" The notion that it may be too much to expect fidelity if you are not married (despite co-habitation and having a baby together) belies the assumption in the community that partners are not faithful. In this context it may also reflect the understanding that male partners may stray, especially if they are not formally married.

As Daniella suggests, there are different expectations of trust based on the duration and type of relationship. Relationships often evolve into trusting ones after an initial period that is less 'serious.' Some of the respondents' relationships began as early as middle school, and the seriousness of relationships often evolve into more exclusivity. Gaby (16 years, 1st Gen.) described her unfaithfulness early on in her relationship as kissing and hugging other guys, but classified it as a betrayal nonetheless. She then explained the progression of her relationship into a more serious one:

During the whole first year I was unfaithful and so was he....And in our second year was when all of that stopped because we started getting more serious about our relationship....That was when it became clear we had to decide whether to trust each other and do things the right way, or not.

Her statement that you have to 'decide to trust each other' counters the notion of earning trust. Since they were unfaithful in the beginning of their relationship, the evolution of trust is not conditioned on proving fidelity. Instead, there is a declaration of trust. This leap of faith makes sense in a climate where distrust and infidelity are considered the norm. At the time of the interview, Gaby and her boyfriend had been together for several years and were planning on getting married and having children after completing college.

While both young women and young men acknowledged having cheated on their partners, there were gender differences. In the following example, Fernando (20 years, 1st Gen.), came to the USA to escape his gang involvement in Nicaragua, and shortly thereafter met a Catholic-school girl who is *seria* (serious) and knows how to interact respectfully with his family. He spoke of the importance of being faithful to his partner, framing it as a sacrifice, 'Being faithful. It's hard but it can be done. If I'm just going to play with her, it's better not to be with her and just say, 'I can't be with you,' and that's it.' Fernando's answer about faithfulness being 'hard' illustrated a common narrative about the effort young men must make to remain faithful.

While Fernando offered a male perspective on the demands of fidelity, Gloria (16 years, 1st Gen.) talked about the responsibility of the girl to make her boyfriend feel loved so that he does not doubt her faithfulness.

Trust is the main thing, because some females are ... really pretty and a lot of guys are after them. So, it depends: if she pays attention to the guys or if she just says hi and that's it, like friends. The guy who's in a relationship with her has to know that she's clear that she only loves him and the other guys are just friends and not more.

In her estimation, girls, especially pretty ones, have to make an effort to let their partners know that they are not paying attention to other guys, proving their trustworthiness. Gloria had recently arrived to San Francisco from Central America and lived with her mother and stepfather who were equally unfaithful to each other. She believed from watching her mother's experience that relationships involve a certain amount of game playing for which the female assumes the responsibility to convince her partner of her fidelity.

Physical and Emotional Vulnerability and Trust: “You can’t let the game play me”—Beyond fidelity, physical and emotional vulnerability emerged as another salient aspect of trust. Emotional vulnerability relates to the risk of entering into a relationship and trusting another person with intimate feelings, risking rejection or betrayal. The other layer of vulnerability is tied to community violence and gang involvement. Young men who were affiliated with gangs were careful about sharing information about themselves, lest it leave them or their families in physical danger. While both young men and women in the sample were gang-affiliated, avoiding vulnerability was something that came up more directly in young men's narratives.

The need to protect oneself from being emotionally vulnerable is something a number of the young men expressed, particularly in talking about why they did not want a relationship to become too serious. Juan Carlos (16 years, 1.5 Gen.), who was gang-affiliated and had moved back and forth between his home country and San Francisco over the past eight years, expressed his reluctance to concede to his partner's desire to take their relationship to another level beyond ‘fringe benefits.’ Both young men and young women used the term ‘friends with benefits’ to describe a less serious or casual relationship.

Like she told me she wanted to be more than like fringe benefits...And I told her well I don't really know 'cause those relationships they don't really be lasting and when they do they feel bad... Like if I'm going to get hooked like attracted then I'm going to be like feel bad.

To protect himself, Juan Carlos wanted to sustain a less serious relationship. At the same time, earlier in the interview, he talked about how he did not want her to cheat on him, and that they had established a level of trust whereby they could support each other in addressing personal problems.

Similarly, Philip (16 years, 2nd Gen.), whose brother had been stabbed in gang-related violence, wanted to keep his options open because he did not want to have to rely on just one relationship.

Don't fall for the person, kind of keep your distance for a little bit of time before you can get too emotionally connected to that person, because, like...something might happen and that person's not your girl no more. So, you can't keep yourself on one person. If that person breaks up with you, you got to move on...Like, I see

other people just to see so if that doesn't work, it's like a Plan B...So, you got to have your plans, your options out. And if an option doesn't work, then you get another option, and you just use that one.

According to Ricardo (22 years, 1.5 Gen.), freedom from serious relationships and emotional vulnerability directly protects against being lured by a female partner affiliated with a rival gang:

Girls like (snaps fingers) could be able to make you fall in love in a heartbeat and they could be playing for the other team. You're already blinded... I would say, man, I gotta play the game. You can't let the game play me.

Ricardo comes from a gang-involved family – a close friend killed his father in gang-related violence in Central America, and he and most of his siblings -- both brothers and sisters -- have also been involved with gangs. Vulnerability to physical violence is an important aspect of trust in this context. Ricardo related how he had introduced his girlfriend to his mother and that it was the first time he had brought a girl home. He was very concerned about protecting his mother from any kind of gang violence that might follow him home. In response to being asked about important qualities in a relationship, he responded, 'I think like, I mean, trust, you know, I know it's corny, but it honestly is trust, like because it's like you gotta be able to trust who you with.'

Later in the interview Ricardo explained to the interviewer that he was almost killed due to his gang involvement. Because of this, he expressed concern about trusting even his girlfriend with information as fundamental as where he lives. He himself attributed his preoccupation with loyalty and trust to the circumstances of his father's death. Especially for gang-involved youth, trust in a relationship can assume a very pressing and important facet of partnership dynamics that is closely linked to protecting both emotional and physical vulnerabilities.

Emotional Intimacy and Trust: 'Tell it like it is'—Emotional intimacy was another aspect of trust that emerged in the narratives. Emotional intimacy included honest and open communication as well as sharing secrets and intimacies without fear of betrayal. Honesty included being honest about infidelities – while young people did not want their partners to cheat on them, they wanted to know about it if they did. Gaby (16 years, 1st Gen.) explained what was important to her in a relationship:

A lot of trust...and a lot of communication. A lot of trust in the sense that you have to trust what the other person tells you. But you have to have communication... most of all, and tell it like it is. If you did something, if you cheated, you have to communicate that. You have to... be direct.

The emphasis here was not so much on being unfaithful, but on being honest about fidelity. A number of participants recounted stories about hearing from friends and acquaintances that their partner was spotted with another girl/guy. This notion of honesty may reflect the desire to avoid finding out from a third party the details of your relationship. Knowing about a partner's infidelity allows for posturing among peers to minimise embarrassment. Given

the level of monitoring of partners through friends (discussed below) this is a legitimate concern.

Another dimension of being honest is being able to trust a partner enough to share secrets with him/her. Trust and confiding can have different connotations: an emotional (and perhaps physical) safety in confiding in a partner without repercussions or wanting to be able to share secrets and confidences without the fear of betrayal. Michelle (16 years, 2nd Gen.) was involved in her first romantic relationship.

I: When you say honest and trust, what do you mean by that?

P: I don't know - if I, if I'm going somewhere, I think I should be comfortable enough to tell him where I'm going, so it's not like a secret. Like I'm going with... my friends.... I should be honest and...feel comfortable...I'm not doing anything bad or anything like that and... I have to trust that things that I tell him ...whether it's something like personal that it's kept between us. So I think it's good 'cause I can trust him.'

Michelle shifted easily from talking about wanting to feel comfortable being open with her partner about her whereabouts as well as being able to trust that her partner would protect her secrets. The keeping of one another's secrets indicates a level of intimacy and confidence.

For Hope (17 years, 1st Gen.), secrets served as currency to maintain a 'stable relationship.' Hope's boyfriend resided in Mexico, and they hoped to get married and have children. She recounted the story of their courtship, indicating that they first were friends and became close by telling each other things they didn't tell other people. She explained that she felt that it was not necessary to share everything with her partner, but to share enough to build emotional intimacy: 'Your secrets, you might say (not all of them), but enough... to have a stable relationship with him.'

The sharing of secrets seems to be a delicate balance wherein sharing indicates a level of trust that in turn is seen as critical for successful relationships. On the other hand, not sharing secrets is seen as a betrayal. Ultimately young people remained vigilant about with whom and to what degree they shared secrets. At the same time, being honest and sharing personal information and troubles were considered a cornerstone of a strong relationship.

(Dis)Trust and Monitoring—In spite of the overall assertion of participants that they were seeking trust in their relationships, many could not extricate themselves from the normative distrust of relationships in their social environment. The fear of betrayal was reflected in how young people managed their relationships. To reassure themselves that their partner was being faithful, they would use an array of available avenues to monitor one another. Monitoring happened most frequently through friends, social networking websites, and mobile phones, both through frequent calls to 'check-in' and by reviewing call and text message logs.

Both women and men acknowledged calling their partner's friends to find out where their partner was spending time. Frank (18 years, 1st Gen.) described his girlfriend's monitoring

of his movements. '[S]he's always calling my friends to see where I am and whether they've seen me.' At the same time, Frank described his own 'insecure' behaviour, trying to find out where his girlfriend was. He explained that they often argued when he was unable to get in touch with her.

Sometimes I call her and the line's busy and she doesn't answer and I wonder, 'Wow, where is she?' And when I don't hear from her I start calling her girlfriends to ask them where she is.

In addition to phone calling, participants used technology, including cell phone records and the social networking sites, to monitor each other. Carla (18 years, 1st Gen) lived alone and her parents were in Central America. She was in a relationship she considered more serious than any of her previous relationships and believed her partner 'truly loves her.' The following conversation illustrates the common practice of checking each other's phones to see whom the other has been talking to and to review text messages that have been sent and received.

P: [He says] 'Can I see your phone?' and I say, 'What for?' 'Oh, I just want to see it.' 'All right.' And I let him have it.

I: So do you look at what's on his phone too?

P: Sometimes, but I trust him so sometimes I don't do it.

Mission youth used texting as a primary form of communication with friends and partners. Thus, reviewing conversations on mobile devices is considered a very effective means of verifying with whom their partners are talking and the content of these exchanges. Social networking sites such as Facebook provided additional opportunities for monitoring a partner's social relationships. Emoticons such as a smiley face or suggestive text messages may be interpreted as virtual forms of betrayal. Angela, quoted above, described monitoring her boyfriend's Facebook page:

Like sometimes I go on his Facebook and I can see like people comment; like, you know, like writing little comments on him. And I'm like, 'Who's that?' ...even if it's just like a little comment; just like, 'Hi.' Like, you know, 'How you doing?' And they put like a smiley face. I'm like why do they have to put that smiley face on?

Participants tried to strike a delicate balance between reassuring themselves about their partner's fidelity and having enough trust in them not to feel compelled to check their text messages or virtual exchanges.

Discussion

In-depth interviews in this study revealed that trust was a highly sought-after characteristic in young people's romantic relationships. We had initially framed this paper as a discussion of fidelity and infidelity, but found that the broader theme of trust was paramount in participants' narratives of their relationships. Trust emerged as a nuanced concept, intricately linked to fidelity, commitment and monogamy, but it also was related to physical and emotional vulnerability and emotional intimacy. This desire to create trusting

relationships emerged in a context in which almost all of the participants believed that infidelity was widespread among their peers, such that forming a trusting union was as much a decision as an evolution.

The concept of trust has been extensively researched and theorised (Cook 2001, Rotenberg 2010), and the basic elements of trust that we describe here are not unique to this population. Additionally, previous studies have indicated that trust is a desired characteristic in youth (and adult) relationships, but that it is not always in alignment with relationship patterns (Matson et al. 2012, Towner et al. 2012). For example, in a study among urban, low-income African-American youth, Towner, et al. (2012) found that trust and commitment took on particular meanings within this group and argued that mutual monogamy was considered essential to a trusting relationship but was rarely achieved.

What we see as important and distinct in this study with urban Latino youth is the way in which fidelity, vulnerability and emotional intimacy are described and situated within their social environment. The particular patterns of expectations, gendered behaviours, self-protection and cultivation of intimacy are shaped by their peer and social environments. Woven through these narratives are indications of how particular characteristics of the community -- violence, immigration, and cultural norms -- play a role in framing relationship expectations. In this kind of context, an understanding of the situated way relationships are framed is an important step in advocating for and building healthy relationships.

Community violence has touched the lives of many of the young people in this study as well as in urban neighbourhoods across the country (Howell et al. 2011). The visible gang presence creates a climate of fear for physical safety among neighbourhood residents. Living in high-crime neighbourhoods has been linked to general feelings of caution and lack of trust, which may in turn inhibit the development of intimate relationships (Jankowski 1991, Giordano 2003, Stanton-Salazar and Spina 2005). For young men like Juan Carlos and Ricardo, gang involvement had a clear association with their feelings of vulnerability and their ability to trust. The idea that girls may use their sexuality to lure gang-involved boys into danger, as in the case of Ricardo, has been observed in Chicano gangs in East Los Angeles (Portillos 1999). For others, it is not gang-affiliation *per se* that is salient, but the pervasiveness of community violence. Vulnerability and emotional intimacy are tied to keeping physically safe and also to seeking (but being wary of) safe, trusting relationships. The neighbourhood environment, specifically community violence, therefore, has an important effect on the ways in which youth guard against vulnerability, including the capacity and desire to trust one another and form healthy and trusting partnerships.

The Mission neighbourhood is home to a large Latino immigrant population and, despite a history of cultural centres serving youth and families, contends with reversing the trends of underperformance in local schools (in which less than 30% of students meet California - educational standards in English and less than 10% in Mathematics) and high levels of poverty even in the face of rapid gentrification (Howell et al 2011, Mirabel 2009, SFUSD 2013). For young people living in underserved communities, romantic relationships may assume a more central role to compensate for the lack of social validation in other aspects of

their lives. The Mission neighbourhood is home to a large Latino immigrant population and, despite a history of cultural centres serving young people and families, contends with reversing the trends of underperformance in local schools and high levels of poverty even in the face of rapid gentrification (Mirabal 2009). For young people living in underserved communities, romantic relationships may assume a more central role to compensate for the lack of social validation in other aspects of their lives (Flores et al. 1998). Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2005) argue that while peer relationships among urban, Latino young people are often focused on as a vehicle for risk behaviour, relationships can also protect against the effects of class and racial segregation. For first generation immigrants, being undocumented can generate a profound level of vulnerability and distrust of authority (Menjívar 2006).

For the youth in this study, immigration and poverty also added unspoken elements to relationships – Gloria’s mother, for example, told her daughter there was no point having a boyfriend unless he had papers and could marry her to gain legal status in the USA. Because of the transitory nature of immigrant communities, many in the study were separated from one or both parents or moved back and forth between countries. Frank’s parents had left him in the USA, and he told the interviewer clearly that he wanted have a steady job and relationship before having a child, because he did not want to leave his child as he had been left. His isolation contributed to what he called his “insecure behaviour” in monitoring his girlfriend.

Double standards restricting girls’, but not boys’, social activities and sexuality are present in Latino families (Flores et al. 1998, Valdez 2007) and are reflected here in how participants described men and women in their neighbourhood. Portillos (1999) argues that disjuncture between immigrant parents’ expectations and peers’ expectations can encourage young people to seek close and trusting relationships outside of the home, especially for young women, who are often allowed less freedom in traditional Latino families. In this context, the young women are navigating a tricky social terrain that expects them to be attractive and to seek male companionship, while avoiding being labelled (Valdez 2007) as ‘messy.’ So for young women, finding a trusted partner can mean the difference between a respectable relationship and risking one’s reputation.

Of note, few young people in this study verbalised a concern about STIs or contraception with respect to trust and partner concurrency. Other studies suggest an association between decreased condom use in the presence of trust and emotional attachment (Flood 2003, Bauman and Berman 2005). Another study among Latino youth found that young women who felt virginity was a desirable virtue were less likely to use condoms when they did have sex (Deardorff et al. 2010). Thus, promoting healthy adolescent relationships also entails addressing partnership dynamics and relationship values that are related to sexual health.

Strengths and Limitations

The strengths of this analysis include its focus on Latino young people with targeted recruitment to include both 1st and 2nd generation youth; the inclusion of young women and men in the same study to permit examination from both perspectives; the focus on relationships as a healthy part of development; and the extended fieldwork conducted in collected data. The limitations include the lack of prospective data to examine how

relationships evolved over time; and a small sample size that limits the ability to generalise findings. Although the study included both young men and women, they were not recruited as couples. Examination of similar issues among couples might afford richer analysis of how young people communicated about relationship ideals and responded to them both in building their relationship and in decision-making regarding STI and pregnancy prevention.

This study underscores how social environment plays an important role in shaping the kinds of relationships that young people develop. Young people's intimate relationships also offer an opportunity for imagining and planning out different futures. So, while trust is something that grows out of a distrustful environment, it is could also be seen as hopeful. Finding someone you can trust and can rely on to help create a different kind of life. Coates (1999) argues that young people's relationships can be a product of both the cultural and social environment, but so too can they act as a culturing agent, developing new acceptable and expected forms of relating. In this case, perhaps we can draw on Latino young people's desire for trust in its various nuanced meanings to help them imagine and create healthy and supportive relationships (Tharp et al 2013) that will serve them as they continue the developmental trajectory into adulthood and establish romantic relationships as adults.

Acknowledgments

Funding This study was conducted with support from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health (K01 HD047434, Minnis, PI).

References

- Bauman LJ, Berman R. Adolescent relationships and condom use: Trust, love and commitment. *AIDS & Behavior*. 2005; 9 (2):211–222. [PubMed: 15933840]
- CDC. Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2011. Atlanta, Ga: enters for Disease Control and Prevention; US Department of Health and Human Services; 2012.
- Carver, K.; Joyner, K.; Udry, JR. National estimates of adolescent romantic relationships. In: Florsheim, Paul, editor. *Adolescent Romantic Relations and Sexual Behavior: Theory, Research, and Practical Implications*. Mahwah, NJ, US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers; 2003. p. 23-56.p. xvii
- Cavanagh SE. The social construction of romantic relationships in adolescence: Examining the role of peer networks, gender, and race. *Sociological Inquiry*. 2007; 77 (4):572–600.
- Coates, DL. The cultured and culturing aspects of romantic experience in adolescence. In: Furman, Wyndol; Bradford Brown, B.; Feiring, Candice, editors. *The Development of Romantic Relationships in Adolescence*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press; 1999. p. 330-363.
- Collins WA, Welsh DP, Furman W. Adolescent romantic relationships. *Annual Review of Psychology*. 2009; 60 (1):631–652.
- Cook, K. *Trust in Society*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation; 2001.
- Deardorff J, Tschann JM, Flores E, Ozer EJ. Sexual values and risky sexual behaviors among latino youths. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*. 2010; 42 (1):23–32. [PubMed: 20415881]
- Eaton DK, Kann L, Kinchen S, Shanklin S, Flint KH, Hawkins J, Harris WA, Lowry R, Mcmanus T, Chyen D. Youth risk behavior surveillance-United States, 2011. *MMWR: Surveillance Summaries*. 2012; 61 (4):1–162.
- Feiring C. Concepts of romance in 15-year-old adolescents. *Adolescence: Development, Diversity, and Context*. 1996; 6 (2):75.
- Flood M. Lust, trust and latex: Why young heterosexual men do not use condoms. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*. 2003; 5 (4):353–369.

- Flores E, Eyre SL, Millstein SG. Sociocultural beliefs related to sex among Mexican American adolescents. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*. 1998; 20 (1):60–82.
- Furman W, Low S, Ho MJ. Romantic experience and psychosocial adjustment in middle adolescence. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*. 2009; 38 (1):75–90. [PubMed: 19130359]
- Giordano PC. Relationships in adolescence. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 2003; 29:257–281.
- Harper GW, Gannon C, Watson SE, Catania JA, Dolcini MM. The role of close friends in African American adolescents' dating and sexual behavior. *Journal of Sex Research*. 2004; 41 (4):351–362. [PubMed: 15765275]
- Howell, J.; Egley, A.; Tita, G.; Griffiths, E. Bulletin 6: US Gang problem and trends and seriousness: 1996–2009. Tallahassee, FL: Institute for Intergovernmental Research® (IIR) on behalf of the National Gang Center; 2011.
- Jankowski, MS. *Islands in the Street: Gangs and American Urban Society*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, Ca: University of California Press; 1991.
- Madsen SD, Collins WA. The salience of adolescent romantic experiences for romantic relationship qualities in young adulthood. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. 2011; 21 (4):789–801.
- Martinez G, Copen C, Abma J. National Survey of Family Growth, National Center for Health Statistics. Teenagers in the United States: Sexual activity, contraceptive use, and childbearing, 2006–2010. *Vital Health Stat*. 2011; 23(31)
- Matson, P.; Chung, S.; Ellen, J. Perceptions of neighborhood partner availability and discordance between ideal and actual sex partner characteristics within a cohort of adolescent females at high risk for sexually transmitted infections. Paper presented at the National STD Prevention Conference; Minneapolis, Minnesota. March 13, 2012; 2012.
- Menjívar C. Liminal legality: Salvadoran and guatemalan immigrants' lives in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*. 2006; 111 (4):999–1037.
- Merten DE. Going-with the role of a social form in early romance. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. 1996; 24 (4):462–484.
- Milbrath C, Ohlson B, Eyre SL. Analyzing cultural models in adolescent accounts of romantic relationships. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. 2009; 19 (2):313–351.
- Mirabal NR. Geographies of displacement: Latina/os, oral history, and the politics of gentrification in San Francisco's Mission District. *The Public Historian*. 2009; 31 (2):7–31. [PubMed: 19824231]
- MMWR. Vital signs: Teen pregnancy - United States, 1991–2009. Atlanta, Ga: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; US Department of Health and Human Services; 2011.
- O'Sullivan LF, Meyer-Bahlburg HFL. African-American and Latina inner-city girls' reports of romantic and sexual development. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. 2003; 20 (2):221–238.
- Portillos, EL. Women, men and gangs: The social construction of gender in the barrio. In: Chesney-Lind, Meda; Hagedorn, John M., editors. *Female Gangs in America. Essays on Girls, Gangs and Gender*. Chicago: Lake View Press; 1999. p. 232-244.
- Rotenberg, KJ. The conceptualization of interpersonal trust: A basis, domain, and target framework. In: Rotenberg, Ken, editor. *Interpersonal Trust During Childhood and Adolescence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2010. p. 8-27.
- SFDPH. Sustainable Communities Index- Mission Neighborhood Indicator Profiles. San Francisco Department of Public Health; 2012. [online]<http://www.sustainablesf.org/neighborhoods/view/17>
- SFUSD. The Superintendent's Zone and School Improvement Grants. San Francisco Unified School District; 2013. [online] Retrieved June 4, 2013<http://www.sfusd.edu/en/about-sfusd/initiatives-and-plans/superintendents-zone-school-improvement-grants.html>
- Simon RW, Eder D, Evans C. The development of feeling norms underlying romantic love among adolescent females. *Social Psychology Quarterly*. 1992; 55(1):29–46.
- Stanton-Salazar RD, Spina SU. Adolescent peer networks as a context for social and emotional support. *Youth & Society*. 2005; 36 (4):379–417.
- Strauss, AL.; Corbin, J. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developinggrounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; 1998.

- Tharp AT, Carter M, Fasula AM, Hatfield-Timajchy K, Jayne PE, Latzman NE, Kinsey J. Advancing adolescent sexual and reproductive health by promoting healthy relationships. *Journal of Women's Health*. 2013; 22(11):911–914.
- Towner SL, Dolcini MM, Harper GW. Romantic relationship dynamics of urban African American adolescents: Patterns of monogamy, commitment, and trust. *Youth & Society*. 2012 0044118X12462591.
- Valdez, A. *Mexican American Girls and Gang Violence: Beyond risk*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan; 2007.