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Domestic Violence, Culture, and Relationship Dynamics Among Immigrant Mexican Women

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Abstract

Immigrant Mexican women experience domestic violence, yet little is known about the cultural dynamics of their living with domestic violence. The authors conducted qualitative exploratory, in-depth interviews using grounded theory to examine domestic violence among nine immigrant Mexican women who were residing in a southwestern city. Dating patterns; parental influence; cultural concepts, such as familism and *machismo*; and trying to keep the family together were subcategories that emerged in the data that led to three socially and culturally relevant hypotheses for preventing domestic violence for immigrant Mexican women. Social workers can use the findings to gain a better understanding of how to serve immigrant Mexican women who experience domestic violence.

Keywords

domestic violence, immigrant Mexican women, machismo, familism

Approximately 2 million U.S. women are severely assaulted by male partners each year (Myers & Jacobo, 2005), and girls and young women aged 16–24 experience more incidents of domestic violence than any other age group (Rennison, 2003). Domestic violence is a prevalent problem for women in the United States, yet little is known about how cultural dynamics influence the experiences of domestic violence for immigrant Mexican women. Within the past 10 years, researchers have begun to study domestic violence experiences among the Hispanic population within a sociocultural context (i.e., race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, cultural concepts, and religion; Brabeck & Guzmán, 2009; Kasturirangan, Krishnan, & Riger, 2004; Klevens et al., 2007; Vidales, 2010). By incorporating these factors into the study of domestic violence, researchers and practitioners can gain different perspectives on the prevention and understanding of and interventions for domestic violence, resulting in a fuller understanding of the problem.

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The Hispanic population is the largest and fastest growing minority group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). In 2006, of the estimated 43.2 million Hispanics (including legally immigrated and undocumented individuals) who were living in the United States, 28.3 million identified as Mexican. Among Mexican individuals in the United States, 61% identified as U.S.-native born and 39% identified as foreign-born (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Given the growing size of the Mexican immigrant population in the United States, social workers must be cognizant of the uniqueness of this culture to practice effectively and respectfully. Thus, in this article, we consider the experiences of one subgroup of the Hispanic population, immigrant Mexican women.

The literature on immigrant Mexican women and domestic violence has focused on these women's experiences with regard to legal status (documented vs. undocumented), types of support systems available to the women, the barriers the women encounter when they access services (such as the inability to speak English or fear of deportation), and how cultural concepts, such as familism (i.e., highly integrated families with supportive extended family members) and *machismo* (a set of behaviors among Hispanic males as generally having characteristics of being dominant, superior, and strong in relationships), likely contribute to immigrant Mexican women's experiences with domestic violence (Edelson, Hokoda, & Ramos-Lira, 2007; Hancock, 2007a, 2007b; Hancock & Ames, 2008; Kasturirangan et al., 2004; Perilla, 1999; Vidales, 2010). In addition, membership in religious institutions (the Catholic Church) may influence the women's decisions to reach out for help when experiencing domestic violence in current relationships (Marrs Fuchsel, 2012).

Although limited information is available on immigrant Mexican women's experiences with domestic violence, how cultural dynamics influence the women's experiences with domestic violence is unclear. A better understanding of the influences of specific cultural facets for immigrant Mexican women who have experienced domestic violence may help social workers who are working with this growing population. Using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we examined the cultural dynamics of immigrant Mexican women who are living with domestic violence to develop hypotheses about the potential targets of intervention and prevention for future work with these women. Because the study was part of a larger investigation of how immigrant Mexican women who are living with domestic violence perceive and process domestic violence and the institution of marriage, the goal of the study presented here was to examine the women's experiences before they entered romantic relationships. In the following sections, we describe the design of the study and the key findings. Then, we situate the findings in the literature and discuss the implications for social workers.

Methodology

Study Design

Grounded theory began as a quantitative method to develop hypotheses, theories, or theoretical models from the findings of studies. The resulting theoretical models are tested in future studies to examine the validity of the proposed hypotheses generated from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Within the past 30 years, grounded theory has evolved to include qualitative analyses of findings (such as the examination of themes or categories that are found throughout the data; Glaser, 2001). The main principles of grounded theory include theoretical sensitivity, sorting, theoretical coding, theoretical sampling, and theoretical memoing. Grounded theorists use the process of theoretical sampling, examining the extant literature only after they have concluded interviews to situate the theory they developed after the data analysis has been completed (Glaser, 2001). Guided by grounded theory, we collected and analyzed the data for this study.

Sample and Sampling Procedures

Following approval by the university's institutional review board, we used purposeful sampling (specific criteria that are used to recruit participants) as the primary sampling method for the study. The participants were nine Mexican-born women (M age = 43 years, SD = 9 years; age range = 34–60) who had immigrated to a large metropolitan area in the southwestern United States. Legal status was not a criterion for inclusion because it may have deterred the women's participation. The women were currently in an intimate partner relationship (dating, married, or cohabiting) and had been or were currently involved in a domestic violence relationship. Seven participants were living in Mexico at the time they entered into the relationships with their partners, whereas two met their partners after they came to the United States. All the women had grown up attending the Catholic Church, and more than half had completed high school and were undocumented in the United States.

The participants were part of a 10-week, agency-based closed support group for women. Each week, they discussed facilitator-chosen topics related to women's issues (such as domestic violence, parenting, substance use, and finances). The first author was invited to announce her research project at the beginning of the domestic violence session and to describe the criteria for participation (women who had experienced domestic violence in the past or present). Interested group members were instructed to meet with the first author after the session, or they could telephone to set up an appointment. When the first author met with the potential participants after the session or spoke with them on the telephone, she scheduled specific dates and times to conduct the interviews. At the beginning of the scheduled interviews, she asked the women if they had experienced domestic violence in the past or present. Individual interviews (approximately 2.5 hr each) were all conducted by the first author at the agency in which the support group was located, and the participants received \$45 each for their participation.

In the process of collecting data using grounded theory, the researcher codes and sorts the data after each interview, using constant comparative analysis, a method of analyzing the data line by line and comparing the data lines to other data lines to find categories and themes. The researcher selects participants to interview next on the basis of the type of information she or he is finding in the data to develop new categories and themes that may be relevant to an emergent hypothesis, theory, or idea (i.e., theoretical sampling; Glaser, 2001). In the present study, an important difference from traditional grounded theory data collection was necessary because of the restrictions placed on the study by the institutional review board. Specifically, whereas traditional grounded theory procedures would call for theoretical sampling to recruit participants, we chose instead to use criterion sampling because, for reasons of safety and confidentiality, we were approved to conduct interviews at only one point in time with each participant.

Criterion sampling involves selecting participants who meet some type of specific criteria that is of importance to the study (such as being aged 18 or older, having experienced domestic violence in the past or present, or legal status; Glaser, 2001). After each interview, having sorted and coded the data, we were able to expand the meaning of domestic violence by asking different questions of different participants. Using this method, we were able to discern and articulate theoretical relationships among the categories, a method used in grounded theory to develop hypotheses and theoretical models. For example, concepts, such as machismo, *Marianismo* (an idea or set of beliefs rooted in Catholicism that refers to the mother [the Virgin Mary] of Jesus and that signifies women's experiences with the meaning and concept of submissiveness in relationships; Vidales, 2010), and familism were incorporated into the questions and were examined after the first and second interviews were analyzed. A semistructured interview with specific questions related to domestic violence was created to guide the interviews. The following were some of the questions asked: Who told you about dating and marriage? Have you heard of the terms machismo and Marianismo? If so, who told you about them, and what do they mean to you? Can you describe what happened to your family after domestic violence incidences occurred? Although traditional grounded theory

incorporates questions or concepts that are derived from the participants, we were permitted to interview the participants at only one point in time. For this reason, we constructed additional questions that were derived from the early interviews for use in later interviews that would advance our understanding of cultural concepts and domestic violence that led to our developing three hypotheses.

Data Collection and Analysis

The first author reviewed and analyzed a total of 288 pages of verbatim transcribed interviews and 100 pages of typed memos and journal entries. A native Spanish speaker from Peru, she conducted all the interviews in Spanish, since the participants were native Spanish speakers and were most comfortable speaking in their native language. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed in Spanish by a bilingual research assistant. While reading the transcribed interviews in Spanish, we began the process of open coding. During the process, similar categories emerged that could be theoretically linked to other categories. The transcribed interviews and relevant categories were then translated into English and were used to develop the hypotheses. Native speakers from Mexico were recruited to assist with some of the translation of the Mexican words and expressions. The data were sorted using constant comparative analyses. From the nine interviews, extensive field notes, memoing, and a brief examination of the literature, a total of 231 categories emerged from the data. Examples of the categories included experiences with domestic violence, types of domestic violence, childhood trauma, coping strategies, and types of support. These categories were sorted into properties (such as dating patterns and trying to keep the family together) and were collapsed into main and subcategories.

Researcher Bias and Methods to Check for Validity

Because the first author has professional experience as a clinical social worker with victims of domestic violence, the data analysis may have been biased. Thus, we implemented journaling, peer debriefing, and memoing throughout the study to keep any bias in check. We used feedback as one method to check for validity. We dialogued with peers, professors, community members, and experts on domestic violence to understand the women's experiences of domestic violence within their own culture. For example, the participants discussed family members' reactions to disclosing incidences of domestic violence. We were interested in knowing whether community members and domestic violence experts who worked with immigrant Mexican women had encountered the concept of familism and whether they understood it to be a barrier or a type of support. In addition, we solicited feedback as often as needed from native Spanish speakers from Mexico and from people who were not familiar with domestic violence. Receiving information from various sources helped us minimize threats to validity (Maxwell, 1996).

Obtaining rich data (i.e., data that are detailed enough to provide a concrete picture of what is going on) was the second method we used to check for validity (Maxwell, 1996). We obtained rich data by having the interviews transcribed verbatim, which generated patterns and themes, rather than simply taking notes of the transcripts. We maintained an audit trail that consisted of transcribed interviews, dictated documents, memos, field notes, and a journal that were part of the process to ensure the credibility and validity of the study. Because of the various methods we used to ensure minimally biased, multi-informant sources, we have confidence in the validity of the findings.

Findings

In grounded theory, the researcher hopes to find a core category that connects all other categories and explains the relationship between each to develop a hypothesis or theory. The core category that

emerged in the larger study was the meaning of marriage. In this article, we address the subcategories reasons for entering into marriage and dating patterns, parental and family influence, trying to keep the family together, and experiences with machismo and familism. Researchers who use grounded theory do not use direct quotes from the data but instead synthesize the data and interpret the meaning of what the participants are saying (Glaser, 2001), offering interpretations of meaning and understanding of social problems.

Reasons for Entering into Marriage and Dating Patterns

The participants entered into a relationship and decided to marry for various reasons. Most of the women married for reasons other than liking or loving their spouses; rather, they married because they felt that external circumstances dictated that they should marry (such as, pregnancy, loneliness, being forced into a relationship, or legal status). The dating and courting phase was minimal, since the majority of the nine participants reported that they knew their husbands less than 5 months before they entered the relationship. Several of the women reported that moving to the United States and being away from family members was difficult. Initially experiencing feelings of loneliness, they sought romantic relationships. Several of the women's mothers had told them that they must remain committed to their boyfriends because they had already had sexual relations with them.

Parental and Family Influence

The majority of the participants reported that it was usually their fathers who told them about their role as a wife and what marriage entailed. There was a higher likelihood of domestic violence incidences in the relationships of these participants, perhaps because they felt obligated to succumb to men's power. Few of the women reported that their mothers spoke to them about the role of women and marriage. For some of the participants, their mothers told them that they had to take care of themselves as women, that they needed to be respected by men, and that it was important to enter marriage having never had sex (marrying *in white*). The participants did not describe experiences of physically being with their mothers and how watching their mothers perform duties or certain tasks may have likely influenced their own understanding of what it means to be a wife or to be married. These nonverbal messages are important in women's understanding of their role as wife and being married because women may likely be influenced through nonverbal messages.

In this way, the participants' parents influenced their understanding of marriage and what it means to enter a relationship and keep their family together. It is important to examine parental influence on the participants' understanding of marriage because of the sense of obligation to remain married despite any circumstances, such as incidences of domestic violence, in the relationship.

Trying to Keep the Family Together

The conceptualization of family. All the participants reported abuse by their husbands. Upon experiencing domestic violence, they all at some point wanted to reach out to family members, but they were afraid and embarrassed because of what the family might say. Most of the participants had no extended family members in the United States. Although they felt alone and were afraid to reach out to family members, they began to gain an inner strength throughout the relationship over time, and they wanted to "fight for their family" because of their children. Although the participants reported that building a family (i.e., comprised of a partner and bearing one's own children) was the most important thing in life, several of them experienced a separation from partners during their relationships, some by means of using a domestic violence shelter in the United States. The separations lasted several weeks to several months. Despite the strong belief in having a "family," they chose to

separate from their violent partners following the knowledge that their children had witnessed the violence; however, all returned with their children at some point in their relationship.

Machismo and Marianismo. All the participants felt that machismo includes aspects of men having affairs while they were married or in relationships and were accepting of this practice. The majority described machismo as an idea or set of behaviors, thought that it was embedded in the culture, or believed that it was negative for the man. The participants thought that acts of sexual infidelity by the male partner can be considered examples of emotional abuse—a form of domestic violence.

Another concept that was explored with the participants was Marianismo. Only one participant was familiar with the term Marianismo. It would be reasonable to assume that an immigrant Mexican woman who wants to keep her family intact and who may be influenced by Marianismo would choose to separate from a domestic violence-prone partner; however, this participant's understanding of the concept may have been skewed—she may have believed that being submissive was part of her role as a wife and mother, and it may have influenced her decision to keep her family together, despite incidences of domestic violence. Even though the cultural concepts were embedded in the participant's life and she felt a strong desire to keep her family intact, certain circumstances finally influenced her to decide to separate from her spouse. The participant reported that her husband had been sexually abusing their daughter—an act that she did not tolerate and that led her to separate from him.

Other circumstances that may cause a woman who is experiencing domestic violence to separate from her partner were listed by the participants as the impact of domestic violence on children, acts of sexual infidelity, and husbands who were sexual perpetrators toward children. Although the cultural concept is embedded in the lives of immigrant Mexican women, it is not ironclad.

Situating the Findings in the Literature

Grounded theorists use the themes and categories that emerge from the data to generate a theory of the phenomenon, examining whether their hypotheses or emerged theory contribute, support, or question the current literature. In the following section, the findings are situated within the literature in the following areas: the phenomenon of dating, parental influence, and keeping families together (familism). We do so to bring about an understanding of the dynamics of domestic violence among immigrant Mexican women, rather than to compare our findings to current theories of the causes of domestic violence. These concepts are next examined through a cultural perspective in the literature.

Dating and Parental Influence

The participants had minimal contact with their mothers regarding instructions about dating, marriage, and healthy relationships. Although they had been influenced on the meanings of marriage and relationships, they did not understand why they wanted to marry, such as liking or loving a partner. In addition, the participants did not have a lot of experience with dating, nor had they had previous boyfriends. The literature indicates that most Hispanic couples are committed to marrying their first dating partner, and family members influence decisions regarding relationships (Umaña-Taylor & Fine, 2003). What is important is that the majority of the women in this study did not know their partners long before they entered into committed relationships.

Familism, Machismo, and Marianismo

Grzywacz, Rao, Gentry, Marin, and Arcury (2009) argued that the process of acculturation is complex and stressful and that women and men in intimate relationships may adapt to their new country

at different rates. The speed at which each partner adapts to her or his new environment, accepts new ways of communicating or being in the relationship, or adheres to traditional cultural norms may all contribute to conflict within the relationship. In addition, the role of women's paid employment is a cause for the renegotiation of roles and expectations and is becoming a source of conflict. Therefore, it is useful to examine cultural concepts.

The cultural concept of familism was present throughout the study; however, most extended family members were not supportive when the women asked for assistance after a violent episode that culminated in separation or divorce. The women described their families as being important in their lives; yet, all had difficulty disclosing information about domestic violence to their immediate family members because they felt embarrassed, unsupported, and as if they had failed in their committed relationships. The ideal concept of familism needs further investigation with regard to incidences of domestic violence—familism may be a barrier for immigrant Mexican women who need assistance.

Most of the women identified their husbands as being macho. They considered machismo as a negative concept, idea, or behavior, but they did not describe any of the positive characteristics (such as nurturing and caring for children)—a finding supported by Kasturirangan, Krishnan, and Riger (2004). The participants' definition of machismo (as a negative concept) coincided with Kasturirangan et al.'s, which included being dominant, superior, and strong in relationships; however, there was no direct relationship between whether the participants' husbands' being macho created more violence within the family, as indicated by Kasturirangan et al. The participants' perception of negative traits (dominant and superior) may imply *general perceptions* of their husbands, not how much they valued their husbands, despite incidences of domestic violence.

Only one participant described the term Marianismo as women's submission to men, which coincided with Low and Organista's (2000) definition of the term. The information was limited because eight of the nine participants had never heard the term before; therefore, it was difficult to make comparisons with regard to whether the term was accurately represented. Further investigation is needed on whether sexually aggressive behaviors are part of the concept of machismo and if there is a direct relationship between the cultural scripts (machismo and Marianismo) and incidences of domestic violence.

Discussion

Using grounded theory to analyze the interviews with the immigrant Mexican women, we developed three hypotheses toward gaining a better understanding of the cultural dynamics and experiences of immigrant Mexican women who were living with domestic violence. Recall that we used the original method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) because we were interested in generating potential targets of intervention and prevention for future work with immigrant Mexican women. The goal of this hypothesis was to examine the experiences of immigrant Mexican women before they entered romantic relationships. Therefore, it is useful to examine the prevention of domestic violence in the literature. Currently, the majority of domestic violence prevention programs in the United States are within the educational system and address the reduction of dating violence among youths by helping them understand the dynamics of domestic violence, identify behaviors that may lead to an incident of domestic violence, and change their attitudes about dating violence in general (Ting, 2008; Walker & Smith, 2009). In addition, in their study of Latino adolescents and their families, Smokowski and Bacallao (2009) found that culturally sensitive family-based programs, which address issues of acculturation and parent-adolescent communication, decreased defiant behaviors, conflict, and anxious-depressed behavior through the use of psychodrama techniques. Family-based programs that include the family and that are culturally sensitive are more likely to help Hispanic youths with prevention strategies to reduce incidences of violence (Leidy, Guerra, & Toro, 2010).

Emergence of Hypotheses From the Data

The three hypotheses generated from these data are in the early stages of theory development (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Despite the fact that criterion sampling was used, as opposed to theoretical sampling, and that the sample was small, theoretical relationships and categories were developed; they were operationalized into several hypotheses toward gaining a better understanding of the cultural dynamics and experiences of immigrant Mexican women who are living with domestic violence. The hypotheses were derived from the data and must be tested in future studies. Here, we consider these hypotheses within the existing literature.

The first hypothesis examines women's reasons for marrying and the phenomenon of dating without pressure from family members because of specific circumstances (pregnancy, loneliness, being forced into a relationship, or legal status). Recall from the subcategory reasons for entering marriage and dating patterns that the participants reported several reasons why they entered romantic relationships and that they did not date their partners for an extended period. We hypothesized that if women had a better understanding of the phenomenon of dating within their own culture, they may have a better understanding of their reasons for entering dating relationships. In addition, immigrant Mexican women can discuss the dating phenomenon with their parents, who may lead them to a better understanding of what a healthy relationship within their sociocultural context encompasses and is perceived to be. Umaña-Taylor and Fine's (2003) review of the literature indicated that most Hispanic couples are committed to marrying their first dating partner, so as an opportunity to discuss the dating phenomenon with parents before committing to marriage; this discussion may be useful for immigrant Mexican women in understanding healthy romantic relationships.

Limited information is available regarding immigrant Mexican women's experiences with dating, reasons for entering marriage, and parental influence on commitment to marriage; however, one study examined the relationships among acculturation, gender stereotypes, and attitudes toward dating violence in dating among urban Latina/Latino youths (Ulloa, Jaycox, Skinner, & Orsburn, 2008). Ulloa, Jaycox, Skinner, and Orsburn's (2008) findings indicated that boys were more accepting of dating violence, whereas girls reported more belief in gender egalitarianism. Although information is available on attitudes about dating, further examination is needed on immigrant Mexican women's experiences with the dating phenomenon. In our study, the women felt pressured to date and commit to marriage by their parents.

The second hypothesis examines women's understanding of the concept of family when reaching out for help. The women in our study were afraid to reach out to family members because of shame, and a few felt pressured by family members to enter romantic relationships. These women's experiences do not reflect the ideal concept of familism, which signifies integrated families with supportive extended family members. We hypothesized that if women attempt to reach out for help even though they felt embarrassed and receive support from family members, they may be more inclined to discuss potential partners, which may contribute to the decisions they make regarding potential relationships. Several authors reported that the concept of familism is an important cultural aspect in the experiences of immigrant Mexican women with domestic violence (Brabeck & Guzmán, 2009; Klevens et al., 2007; Vidales, 2010). Brabeck and Guzmán (2009) examined women's help-seeking behaviors within a sociocultural context and concluded that the participants with higher levels of familism sought informal help more frequently than did those with lower levels of familism. In our study, the women wanted to reach out for help to informal support systems (their families), but felt embarrassed to do so. If they had sought help more frequently, their experiences might have been different. This phenomenon of familism needs further investigation with regard to whether having a tight-knit family and an extended supportive family network assists or exacerbates potential acts of domestic violence while women are pursuing partners. In addition, further research is needed on parents' ability to communicate to young girls about what it

means to have a family without violence and the impact of parenting stress or other cultural concepts that may influence their ability to do so.

Edelson, Hokoda, and Ramos-Lira, (2007) examined the differences in the effects of domestic violence on Latina and non-Latina women. As opposed to the non-Latina women, the Latina women who had been victims of domestic violence had higher levels of parenting stress because of their children's behavior. Therefore, it is important to examine parental stress and parents' ability to communicate to young girls.

Finally, the third hypothesis examines women's perceptions of machismo and Marianismo. All the women in our study described machismo as a negative concept in their relationships. One participant said that she understood Marianismo to mean women needing to be submissive; however, the participants did not seem to relate a husband's machismo with increased violence. The cultural concepts of machismo and Marianismo and immigrant Mexican women's understanding of how these concepts may influence their experiences of domestic violence is an important finding. Vidales (2010) examined the multiple challenges faced by immigrant Latinas who experience domestic violence and addressed how cultural beliefs, such as machismo and Marianismo, and traditional gender roles affected their perceptions of domestic violence and help-seeking behaviors. She found that the women were more accepting of traditional gender roles. For example, one participant believed that husbands are entitled to physically harm their wives. In another study, Kulkarni (2007) examined the lives of young adolescent mothers and their experiences with parenting and commitment to remain with their current partners despite incidences of emotional and physical domestic violence. Among Latina adolescents, specific cultural factors, such as Marianismo, influenced their decision to remain in relationships despite incidences of domestic violence. Further research is needed to determine if there is a correlation between the cultural concepts and incidences of domestic violence. We hypothesized that if women discussed these concepts with their parents and families and how they contribute to men's and women's behavior in relationships, those who are pursuing a partner may be able to detect these characteristics and may stop this experience.

Limitations

Several aspects of the study strengthen our confidence in its contribution to the literature. We are aware of few studies that have examined how cultural dynamics influence immigrant Mexican women's subjective experiences with domestic violence. From our findings, we developed three culturally relevant hypotheses toward gaining a better understanding of immigrant Mexican women's experiences with domestic violence. The hypotheses that emerged demonstrate how the findings contribute to the social work body of knowledge. In addition, because the first author speaks Spanish fluently and was previously trained to teach the dynamics of domestic violence, she provided direct services to the immigrant Mexican community in a clinical social work practice setting. Her ability to conduct the interviews in Spanish might have allowed the participants to convey more details because they might have trusted her more. In addition, the examination of immigrant Mexican women's experiences with domestic violence adds to the literature on the understanding of risk behaviors among this growing U.S. population. Despite these strengths of the study, the findings should be considered in the context of the study's limitations.

The three hypotheses emerged from a small sample and the use of the original method of grounded theory. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to the broader immigrant Mexican community or to Hispanics in general. Future research should include larger samples of members of this population to gain a better understanding of the influence of domestic violence among immigrant Mexican women. Another limitation was the inability to conduct theoretical

sampling because of the institutional review board's restrictions of interviewing the participants only one time. Had we been given permission to interview the women several times, theoretical sampling would have been much more feasible, since categories were emerging during the data analysis.

Conclusion

Need for Future Research

The hypotheses we developed must be tested in future studies. Further research is needed to examine how the hypotheses can be developed into a theoretical intervention or prevention model that may be used with immigrant Mexican women who are currently pursuing partners or who are in current relationships. Recall that one of the goals of our hypothesis generation was to examine immigrant Mexican women's experiences before they entered romantic relationships. On the basis of these hypotheses, investigators are developing a 12-week empowerment group intervention tool for immigrant Mexican women with a psychoeducational and therapeutic, culturally sensitive curriculum to explore healthy relationships and the dynamics of domestic violence within a cultural context. The curriculum may serve as a model for the prevention of domestic violence among immigrant Mexican women with specific strategies for social workers within a 12-week empowerment group. With increased research and cultural awareness, perhaps the hypotheses can be extended for use among other groups of women or other subgroups of Hispanic women.

Implications for Practice

The findings have implications for social workers who want to understand the unique experiences of immigrant Mexican women so as to provide culturally relevant and effective interventions. Social workers can gain a better understanding of the reasons why women enter relationships; the dating phenomenon; and how external forces, such as parents, influence women's decisions to try to keep their families together. Social workers can better understand how certain cultural characteristics (familism, machismo, and Marianismo) influence immigrant Mexican women's understanding of why they pursue a partner or maintain a current relationship. In addition, the findings offer more detailed information on women's experiences with how difficult it is to separate from their partners and why they may choose not to do so throughout their relationships. Social workers' use of the empowerment framework with immigrant Mexican women can be powerful. This framework addresses safety for victims of domestic violence, referrals to shelters and identifying options, explanations of domestic violence and legal rights, and empowerment and self-esteem building, and is a model for education about the dynamics of domestic violence, as well as a tool for discovering women's personal power. Social workers' understanding of immigrant Mexican women's strong belief in trying to keep the family together is important as they use the empowerment framework.

Finally, the proposed hypotheses may assist policy makers in schools and family service agencies to develop curricula for teenagers that address healthy dating and relationships among young women and men. The findings of this study may promote a dialogue and collaborations among service providers, schools, the Catholic Church, and parents regarding the dating phenomenon and external forces that may influence women's decisions to enter relationships.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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