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Final Report of the Focus Group Study, which was part of my dissertation project

This study was an extension of my dissertation project titled “The Influence of the Mother-Daughter Relationship on Mexican-Origin Girls’ Sexual Agency.” The goal of my dissertation was to examine gender and sexual socialization processes in the family and cultural contexts that contribute to girls’ ability to promote their sexual health. Individual interviews with girls and separate interviews with their mothers examined the influence of the mother-daughter relationship on Mexican-origin adolescent girls’ *sexual agency*, that is, the ability to regulate sexual feelings and act on sexual needs in a relationship.

Findings from this study prompted me to develop a second study, titled “¿Qué Le Enseño a Ella? Mexican Immigrant Mothers’ Needs in Preparing Their Daughters to Navigate U.S. Sexual Practices.” The purpose was to gather information about what skills and information first-generation Mexican-origin mothers need to prepare their daughters to navigate U.S. sexual practices.

Methods

Participants (in both studies): 43 women (86% first-generation immigrants) who lived in a southwest U.S. city, self-identified as Mexican-origin, and had teenage daughters ages 13-19. Women were recruited in local community agencies with some assistance from promotoras.

Procedures: First, individual interviews were conducted with 23 women to understand their experiences learning about sexuality growing up and in relationships, and teaching their daughters about sexuality. Then, five focus groups were conducted with 23 first-generation mothers to collect their observations and opinions about how to teach daughters about sexual safety and pleasure, and needs for skills and information to prepare daughters for U.S. sexual practices.

Analysis: Content and narrative analysis were used to understand and interpret mothers’ perspectives about their own as well as their daughters’ needs.

Mother’s Background

- The majority of mothers were married, remarried, or had live-in partners. Seven women were single and not dating.
- Two mothers had professional degrees and worked as a counselor and an analyst; other mothers were housekeepers, caregivers, or homemakers.
- More than religious doctrine, mothers’ sexual messages to daughters were motivated by pregnancy and disease concerns, and educational goals.
- Mothers who converted to Evangelical Christianity were more likely than Catholic mothers to endorse traditional gender ideology of virginity for girls; almost all mothers recognized abstinence-until-marriage as probably unrealistic, and struggled to convey a safe sex message without condoning sexual activity.

Themes from Individual Interviews

- Mothers were divided about what they wanted to convey to daughters – whether sex was positive or dangerous.

- Mothers challenged themselves to talk with daughters about sexuality and answer their questions.
- Mothers wanted daughters to postpone sex and were ambivalent about how to support sexually active daughters.
- Mothers gave advice to negotiate safety with sexual partners.

Themes from Focus Groups

Mothers' opinions varied greatly about their own as well as their daughters' needs.

Regarding sexual communication, mothers thought:

- Daughters were too young to understand or have sex; should learn about sexuality at home, not just school; often knew more than mothers did; wanted to talk with mothers but acted embarrassed, so conversations sometimes felt forced.

Regarding promoting sexual health, mothers thought:

- Preventing daughters from experimenting sexually was difficult when U.S. culture encouraged it.
- Mothers needed to teach daughters to distinguish sexual feelings from love, the consequences of acting on feelings, and to respect themselves and avoid promiscuity.
- Mothers should provide accurate knowledge to counteract incorrect sexual information and pressure to have sex from peers.

Conclusions and Implications

Mothers' reasons for promoting an abstinence/virginity message to daughters are shifting and expanding.

- Traditional religious and gender ideological messages about girls' virginity did not hold a prominent place in these narratives. Instead, a majority of mothers want their daughters to postpone sex to pursue educational and career goals before marriage.
- Only one mother ever talked to her daughter about the topic of sexual pleasure, and stressed its importance. Mothers were more concerned that girls delay sexual activity or practice safe sex to avoid pregnancy, STIs, and promiscuity.

Mothers need accurate and timely information and skills to communicate about sexual safety, birth control, and contraception, and pleasure.

- Although almost 50% of mothers conveyed positive sexuality messages, all mothers feared potential dangers to daughters.
- A majority of mothers expressed willingness to help daughters take precautions regarding sexual activity, but only a minority of mothers revealed a preparedness to provide daughters with concrete information and skills.

Next Steps

- Prepare manuscripts about the findings in the study for publication in peer-reviewed academic journals.
- Prepare a research brief to disseminate to practitioners and policymakers.
- Present the findings at local workshops and conferences.