

“I Know What Love Means”: Qualitative Descriptions From Mexican American and White Adolescents

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A qualitative approach was used to explore the meaning of being in love for Mexican American and White adolescents. Adolescents' written descriptions were coded using inductive content analysis. Five broader love themes encompassing five additional subthemes emerged: commitment (sacrifice and time); intimacy (friendship, trust, and caring); reciprocity; unconditional acceptance; and unsure/unknown. Mexican American adolescents mentioned intimacy components, White adolescent boys mentioned commitment components, and White adolescents and girls mentioned unconditional acceptance components in their self-definitions of love more than their counterparts. Understanding the meaning of love has implications for prevention efforts targeted at reducing the health risks associated with romantic relationships in adolescence.

KEYWORDS *Romantic relationships, adolescence, content analysis*

Researchers and practitioners are concerned about the negative consequences associated with sexual behavior among youths, yet little is known about the relationship context in which these behaviors occur and adolescents' perceptions of their own romantic relationship experiences (Bauman & Berman, 2005; Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006; O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003), including romantic love. Both boys and girls are very involved in the exploration of intimacy during early and middle adolescence and take the notion of love quite seriously (Montgomery & Sorell, 1998), yet little is known on the meaning romantic love holds.

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Even less understood are the cultural contexts of adolescent love, especially regarding ethnic differences in romantic expectation and experience (Crissey, 2005; Raffaelli, 2005; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001). Mexican American and White adolescents both engage in romantic relationships and report feelings of love, but cultural influences provide different frameworks for experiencing these feelings. For example, Mexican American adolescent girls are more likely to plan pregnancies than White adolescents, and there is a higher value placed upon family and motherhood in Latino and Hispanic culture (Erickson, 2003; Flores, Eyre, & Millstein, 1998). This cultural difference indicates that love may be expressed and understood in different ways by Mexican American and White adolescents. The present study uses a qualitative approach to explore the meaning of love for Mexican American and White adolescent girls and boys.

LOVE

Three qualities of love—passion, intimacy, and commitment—have been differentially combined to create distinct love types in adults (Sternberg, 1986). These love types may manifest differently in adolescent relationships and behavior, but the strength of emotion associated with love is described similarly across the life course (Schwartz, 2006). One of the greatest noted differences between adult and adolescent love is in the experience of commitment (Arnett, 2004); adolescents' romantic relationships typically last only a few weeks or months (Feiring, 1996) but do not render them incapable of understanding commitment as it relates to love (Montgomery & Sorell, 1998). Though theoretical literature from adult romantic love provides some insight, it is limited in depicting adolescents' unique experiences and beliefs about the meaning of love (Montgomery & Sorell).

Adolescents give a wide variety of explanations regarding what love means to them in current or past romantic relationships, including companionship, friendship (Montgomery & Sorell, 1998; Shulman & Kipnis, 2001), and sexual attraction (Collins, 2003), though they understand that love and sexual behavior do not necessarily always coincide (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). Adolescents also describe less-tangible concepts such as emotional involvement and care, the mystery of love, the pain it can invoke, and the ways that love may change over time (Montgomery & Sorell). Adolescents' understanding of these love qualities is likely rooted in experiencing relationships with peers and family (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Shulman & Sharf, 2000); their experiences also shape an understanding of what love should mean in future adult relationships, including marriage (Graber, Britto, & Brooks-Gunn, 1999). Though these concepts provide a broad overview of what love means during adolescence, ethnicity and gender account for differences in both experiences and beliefs about love in adolescent romantic relationships.

ETHNICITY

Beliefs about the meaning of love adolescents learn from their culture serve to reciprocally influence romantic relationships as they experience them (Coates, 1999). The current dominant cultural norms in the United States promote ideas of love that emphasize passion and romance while other cultures and ethnic groups may emphasize selflessness (Coates), family, respect (Flores et al., 1998), or other values as essential to experiencing love. Cultural norms impact the timing of relationship milestones (e.g., first date, first kiss, first serious relationship; Regan, Durvasula, Howell, Ureno, & Rea, 2004) and the role love plays in romantic relationships (O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003). For example, both Hispanic and White adolescents report similar expectations for marriage at some point in their lives (Crissey, 2005), but White adolescents are more likely to date (Crissey) and typically date earlier than Hispanic adolescents (Regan et al., 2004). However, Hispanic adolescents engage in sexual activity earlier, more often with more partners, and experience pregnancy at higher rates than White adolescents (Eaton, Kann, Kinchen, et al., 2006).

Hispanic adolescents, specifically Mexican American adolescents (Flores et al., 1998), may experience sexual activity and pregnancy at earlier and more frequent rates than White adolescents because of the high value placed on family and parenthood in Mexican culture. Hispanic adolescent girls have expressed a desire for earlier transitions into sexual activity, marriage, and pregnancy/birth (East, 1998), indicating that their adherence to cultural beliefs may influence how love is interpreted within romantic relationships and influence how decisions are made. Relative to White adolescents, Mexican American adolescents may place greater value on reciprocity and commitment in their understanding of love, as these values coincide with cultural beliefs (Flores et al.).

GENDER

Though adolescents may increasingly feel comfortable to adapt to flexible gender identities (Feiring, 1999), traditional masculine and feminine traits learned in early adolescence significantly shape how same-sex and opposite-sex peers learn to interact with one another across cultures throughout the United States (Leszczyński & Strough, 2008). In the context of romantic relationships, adolescent girls are more likely than boys to identify attachment and care as important components of love (Shulman & Scharf, 2000) and to mention self-disclosure, support, and jealousy as salient features of their romantic relationships (Feiring, 1999). Boys report being in love more often, endorsing love at first sight, and falling in love at earlier ages (Montgomery, 2005; Montgomery & Sorell, 1998) but have significantly lower levels of

confidence in navigating many communicative aspects of relationships (e.g., refusing a date, telling a partner how to treat you, breaking up with someone) than girls (Giordano et al., 2006). Thus, girls may be more likely to interpret romantic love as feeling unconditionally accepted by their romantic partner (e.g., being able to self-disclose and feel supported) and interpret intimate connections through feelings of closeness, attachment, and caring, whereas boys' lack of confidence in navigating relationships may make it more difficult to express how they experience love. Though girls are being socialized in relational skills such as interpersonal connection and understanding, boys are being socialized to act individualistically and express autonomy; these traits do not foster the capacity for intimate expression girls generally learn to articulate (Way & Greene, 2006).

Despite gender differences, there are similarities in how boys and girls view love, specifically regarding ideas of closeness (i.e., strength of intimate connections between two people), power, and reciprocity (Adams, Laursen, & Wilder, 2001). Elements of power and reciprocity impact how close adolescents feel with their romantic partner (Adams et al.), and the lack of gender differences among these characteristics of closeness may indicate that boys and girls do experience similar emotions in romantic relationships and interpret love in similar ways. Boys and girls also express similar romanticized conceptions of what an ideal romantic relationship should be; boys are more likely than girls to have sexualized conceptions of ideal romantic relationships (Cavanagh, 2007), but they remain similar in their overall expectation that relationships should be romantic, including a verbal expression of love for their partner.

The expectations and beliefs about love are important for understanding the behaviors (and consequences of the behaviors) associated with adolescent romantic relationships. Prior literature indicates that adolescent physical health, affected by risky sexual activity (Bauman & Berman, 2005) and violence in relationships (Hanson, 2002), along with mental health (e.g., depressive symptoms; La Greca & Harrison, 2005), are linked to behavior, and adolescents' behaviors are often influenced by their beliefs (Friedman, 1989). Adolescents' personal beliefs about healthy and unhealthy behavior may indeed change over time and are often directed by peer influences (Lau, Quadrel, & Hartman, 1990; Thornberry, Lizotte, Krohn, Farnworth, & Jang, 1994), indicating that it is important to examine adolescents' beliefs around romantic love at various stages across development to better understand behavior within romantic contexts. The present study uses a qualitative approach to explore beliefs about the meaning of being in love for Mexican American and White adolescent boys and girls. Adolescents' written descriptions are examined both within and across ethnicity and gender to develop a greater understanding of the context of adolescent love. From this examination, we expect to see gender and ethnic differences in conceptions of love, along with ideas of intimacy, passion/sexual attraction, and commitment.

METHOD

Sample

Mexican American ($n = 48$) and White ($n = 34$) adolescents in a large Southwestern state participated in a study on adolescent dating relationships. All participants were high school students ages 14 to 18 ($M = 16.01$ years, standard deviation [SD] = .82; 54% girls).

No significant differences in demographic characteristics (e.g., country of origin, age, gender) were identified across White and Mexican American adolescents within the sample (Table 1). Most participants had at least some romantic relationship experience in the past, and no significant differences were identified between Mexican American and White adolescent dating experience. Chi-square analysis did reveal significant differences across ethnicity regarding family characteristics. Compared to Mexican American adolescents, White adolescents were more likely to speak only English at home, $\chi^2(2) = 30.04, p < .01$: to have a father, $\chi^2(3) = 15.54, p < .01$ or mother, $\chi^2(3) = 17.13, p < .01$: to be born within the United States; and to have

TABLE 1 Sample Demographics

	Mexican American (58.5%)		White (41.5%)	
	Frequency	<i>M (SD)</i>	Frequency	<i>M (SD)</i>
Gender				
Boys	43.7%		50.0%	
Girls	56.3%		50.0%	
Age in years		15.9 (0.93)		16.1 (0.64)
U.S.-born				
Father	63.6%		100.0%	
Mother	64.6%		94.1%	
Adolescent	91.2%		97.1%	
Language spoken at home				
English only	29.3%		97.1%	
English and Spanish	63.4%		3.0%	
Spanish only	7.0%			
Household				
Live with mom	91.7%		100.0%	
Live with dad	54.2%		79.4%	
Parents education				
Mother < high school	60.8%		11.8%	
Father < high school	65.8%		20.6%	
Romantic relationships (RR)				
Currently in a RR	38.3%		26.5%	
If no, Ever in a RR	80.0%		83.3%	
No. of lifetime dating partners		3.4 (3.35)		3.7 (2.80)
Length of longest RR (months)		8.8 (9.91)		6.8 (8.59)
No. of times in love		1.1 (1.10)		0.8 (0.97)

a father, $\chi^2(5) = 29.24, p < .01$, or mother, $\chi^2(5) = 36.79, p < .01$ with greater than a high school education.

Procedure

All participants were recruited during the summer through meetings with agencies and program coordinators at local youth community centers (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters: 53% of sample), high schools (32%), and word-of-mouth (15%). Ninety adolescents were recruited into the study and completed an initial telephone-screening questionnaire. Participation requirements included entering the tenth, eleventh, or twelfth grade in the fall (at least 1 year of high school experience and not transitioning into college) and self-identifying as either Mexican American or White (participants who identified as Mexican American and another ethnicity were included in the study). All participants met the screening requirements. Ninety-one percent of those who completed the screening agreed to participate, received parental consent, and were able to be scheduled, resulting in a final sample of 82. Signed parental consent forms were required to be brought to the data collection site (i.e., at the research lab or the youth center they belonged to). Participants gave assent at the site.

Participants were asked to complete a survey (approximately 15–30 minutes to complete) on their romantic relationship experiences and then participate in a focus group discussion as part of a larger project outside the scope of the present study. Pizza, candy, and soda were provided, and participants received a debriefing handout along with \$10 for compensation.

Measures

ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCE

During the telephone screening interview, participants were asked whether they were currently in a romantic relationship. If not, they were asked whether they had been in a romantic relationship in the past. If not, they were asked whether they have had any romantic relationship experiences. On the written survey, adolescents listed the number of relationships they had had and the length of time of their longest relationship.

LOVE

Adolescents were asked on the written survey how many times they had been “in love.” After this question, adolescents responded in writing to an open-end question in which they were asked, “What does it mean to be ‘in love’ with someone? Describe below and give examples if needed.”

DATA CODING

The open-end written portion of the data collection (i.e., “What does it mean to be ‘in love’ with someone?”) was coded via a form of inductive content analysis into themes that emerged from the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Morgan, 1993). Responses were thoughtful and varied, and only 10 adolescents (12%) failed to answer this question. QSR Nvivo (i.e., a qualitative software program; Gibbs, 2002) was used to conduct the content analysis of the written descriptions. The coding/categorizing data analytic strategy that was used is a form of content analysis in which the researcher considers the participants’ responses and looks for recurring themes or conceptual ideas that subsequently can be sorted into meaningful categories. Using this approach, codes (themes) originated from several careful readings of the data themselves rather than from a preexisting conceptual framework. Weight was given to comments on the basis of frequency, specificity, emotion, and extensiveness (Krueger & Casey, 2000). One benefit of using Nvivo was that it allowed participant responses that included several themes or ideas of love to be coded into more than one category. Differences that emerged across demographic information and relationship experience were noted.

The coding scheme was developed by the first and second author, and one coder (second author) analyzed the data. A third researcher coded the data to verify the reliability of the coding scheme ($\kappa = 92\%$). A written description of the coding steps was documented by all of the coders. Themes and categories emerged from the data and are presented with support provided by quotations from the participants. The results are interpreted in terms of meanings for the different groups of participants.

RESULTS

Example responses of three adolescents follow, presented in their entirety:

Being in love with someone is a little complicated. You have to know the person very well and give up anything for them, even if it means taking a bullet for them. That’s what love is. (Mexican American boy)

It means that the two people who are in love have things in common, respect each other, have similar interests and goals. Sex is only an extension of love, and I believe sex should not be the basis of the relationship. I have not yet “fallen in love” because I want to make my career work before I look for a mate. (Mexican American boy)

I think it means to want & love everything about the other person so badly that you would do anything for them. They make your life complete!! You will go through anything to keep them in your arms & be willing to sacrifice the rest of your life to them. (White girl)

Qualitative Analysis

From adolescent's descriptions of love, five themes encompassing five additional subthemes emerged: commitment (sacrifice and time); intimacy (friendship, trust, and caring); reciprocity; unconditional acceptance; and unsure/unknown (Table 2).

COMMITMENT

Love was described in terms of the commitment involved, expressed specifically as a willingness to sacrifice and devote time to a partner. Regarding sacrifice, one White boy said, "[You] would do anything for the person you are in love with." A Mexican American girl described sacrifice with stronger emotion, saying, "You can't live without another person." Commitment was also expressed in terms of time: "Love is where you always want to be together and miss each other when you're not together" (White boy). Love means that you would spend all of your time together and, if you are in love, you should want to spend time together: "You could spend every second [together] and never get bored" (White boy).

INTIMACY

An intimate connection with a romantic partner was seen as another important meaning of love and was specifically described in terms of friendship, trust, and caring. Friendship was often mentioned as an essential component of a love relationship. For example, a Mexican American girl described "Wanting to help/being with that person. Supporting that person emotionally and physically/mentally." A Mexican American boy depicted love as "Being friends . . . feelings of compatibility and friendship." Trust was another important part of intimacy with a loved one, described as: "feeling] safe and secure" (White girl) and "being completely honest and open" (Mexican American girl). Trust indicated both an ability to trust in a romantic partner and the presence of mutual trust in the relationship. Caring for a romantic partner was mentioned most frequently across love descriptions and seemed generally to indicate the less-tangible (Montgomery & Sorrell, 1998) positive feelings accompanying a special connection to a loved one. A Mexican American boy described, "Its when you care about someone a lot." A Mexican American girl echoed this sentiment: "to deeply care about someone."

RECIPROCITY

Reciprocity was also identified in adolescents' love descriptions and indicated mutual interest, affection, and strength of emotion between romantic

TABLE 2 Qualitative Love Themes

Love category	Subthemes	Explanation	Example responses
Commitment	Sacrifice	Giving something up to be with a significant other or putting them before yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You would do anything for the person you are in love with” (White boy) • “Be willing to sacrifice the rest of your life to them” (White girl) • “You can’t live without another person” (Mexican American girl)
	Time	Time spent with partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Any time away and your heart aches” (White girl) • “Always want to spend time with the person you are in love with” (White boy)
Intimacy	Friendship	Friend characteristics such as respect, comfort, support, and knowing someone well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “To not just be a boyfriend but a best friend” (White boy) • “Completely comfortable” (White girl) • “Supporting that person emotionally and physically/mentally” (Mexican American girl)
	Trust	Trust, safety, honesty, and security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “To feel safe and secure” (White girl) • “A relationship full of trust & honesty” (Mexican American boy)
	Caring	Inferring feelings or emotions for another person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It means you care about this person” (Mexican American boy) • “You deeply care about them” (Mexican American girl)
Reciprocity		Something experienced equally by both parties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You would do anything for them and they would do anything for you” (White girl)
Unconditional acceptance		Accepting another person without wanting to change them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The other person loves you back” (White boy) • “This person will love you for who you are” (White girl) • “You are able to be yourself” (White girl)
Unsure/unknown		Unable to describe love or was unsure of what it meant	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I have never been ‘in love’ so I can’t really describe it” (White girl) • “Inexplicable- I’ve never experienced it” (White boy)

partners. A White boy expressed this clearly: "You are attracted to somebody emotionally and physically and the other person loves you back." Reciprocity was also described as "when you and someone else have the same feelings" (Mexican American girl) and "[when] two people who are in love have things in common, respect each other, have similar interests and goals" (Mexican American boy). Though the first two examples here indicate mutual feelings, the latter example expresses reciprocal interests and goals, indicating the pragmatic side of reciprocal love.

UNCONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE AND UNKNOWN

Unconditional acceptance was described as accepting a romantic partner, regardless of flaws or imperfections. One White girl described unconditional acceptance: "This person will love you for who you are." Another (White) girl said, "You are able to be yourself." Finally, a number of adolescents felt unsure about love and did not know how to describe it. One Mexican American girl expressed honestly, "I am not completely sure [what love is] because I haven't been in love."

Quantitative Analysis

To examine possible ethnic and gender differences, quantitative variables were computed based on the qualitative categories. Each participant received one point for each love subtheme they included in their definitions, and all subthemes were summed to compute an overall score for each theme. Scores for commitment ranged between 0 and 2 ($M = .32$, $SD = .53$); intimacy ranged between 0 and 2 ($M = .82$, $SD = .74$); reciprocity ranged between 0 and 1 ($M = .17$, $SD = .38$); unconditional acceptance ranged between 0 and 1 ($M = .14$, $SD = .35$); and unsure/unknown ranged between 0 and 1 ($M = .19$, $SD = .40$).

LOVE THEMES AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP EXPERIENCE

Non-parametric bivariate correlations were used to examine the association between love themes and adolescents' romantic relationship experience (Table 3). Adolescents who included intimacy components were less likely to include commitment and unsure/unknown components and were more likely to include reciprocity components in their self-definitions of love. Additionally, these adolescents more often reported being in love. Adolescents who were not currently in a romantic relationship were more likely to include reciprocity components. Adolescents who included unsure/unknown components were less likely to include reciprocity in their self-definitions and, as expected, had less experience with being in love. In examining adolescents' romantic relationship experiences, as expected, adolescents who

TABLE 3 Non-Parametric Bivariate Correlations of Love Themes and Romantic Relationship Experience

	Commitment	Intimacy	Reciprocity	Unconditional acceptance	Unsure/unknown	Currently in a romantic relationship	Number of times in love	Length of longest RR (months)	Number of lifetime dating partners
Commitment	1								
Intimacy	-.24*	1							
Reciprocity	-.16	.28*	1						
Unconditional Acceptance	-.09	-.10	-.17	1					
Unsure/Unknown	-.16	-.48**	-.24*	-.10	1				
Currently in a Romantic Relationship	-.07	.07	-.28*	.21 ⁺	-.06	1			
Number of Times in Love	-.06	.34**	.18	-.13	-.37**	.19 ⁺	1		
Length of longest RR (months)	-.06	.15	-.15	.25*	-.12	.57***	.26*	1	
Number of Lifetime Dating Partners	.18	-.07	-.10	.14	-.13	.38***	.34**	.54***	1
Prefer to date same- or both-sexes.	-.17	-.10	.02	.15	-.02	.03	.18	.24*	.19 ⁺

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

had more dating partners had experience with longer romantic relationships, more frequently reported being in love, and were more likely to be currently in a romantic relationship. Adolescents who had longer-lasting romantic relationships were also more likely to be currently in a romantic relationship and report being in love more often.

LOVE THEMES AND ETHNICITY AND GENDER

Quantitative analysis via a series of Univariate analyses of variation and logistic regressions, revealed a number of ethnic and gender differences across the sample. White adolescents were more likely to include commitment as part of their definitions of love, $F(1,67) = 18.71, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .15, r = .39$, particularly among White adolescent boys, $F(1,67) = 4.51, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .04, r = .20$ (Figure 1). Mexican American adolescents were more likely to mention intimacy components than White adolescents, $F(1,68) = 9.28, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .12, r = .35$ (Figure 2). A logistic regression indicated that girls were 9.5 times more likely to include unconditional acceptance as part of their definition of love ($CI = 1.10$ to $83.72; p < .05$), and Mexican American adolescents had 22% likelihood of Whites as including unconditional acceptance as part of their definition of love ($CI = .05$ to $.99; p < .05$; Figure 3). Reciprocity and unsure/unknown did not significantly differ by gender or ethnicity.

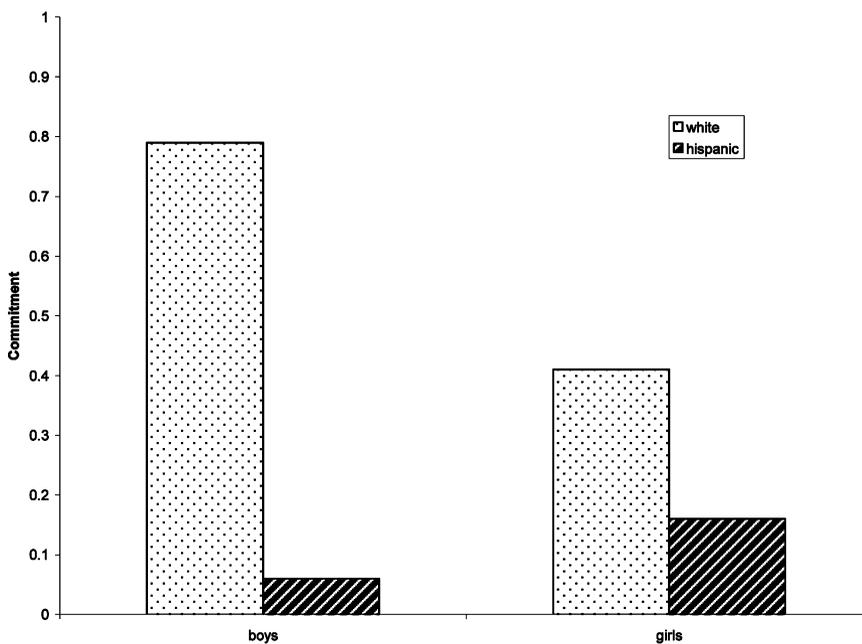


FIGURE 1 Commitment as part of being in love as a function of ethnicity and gender.

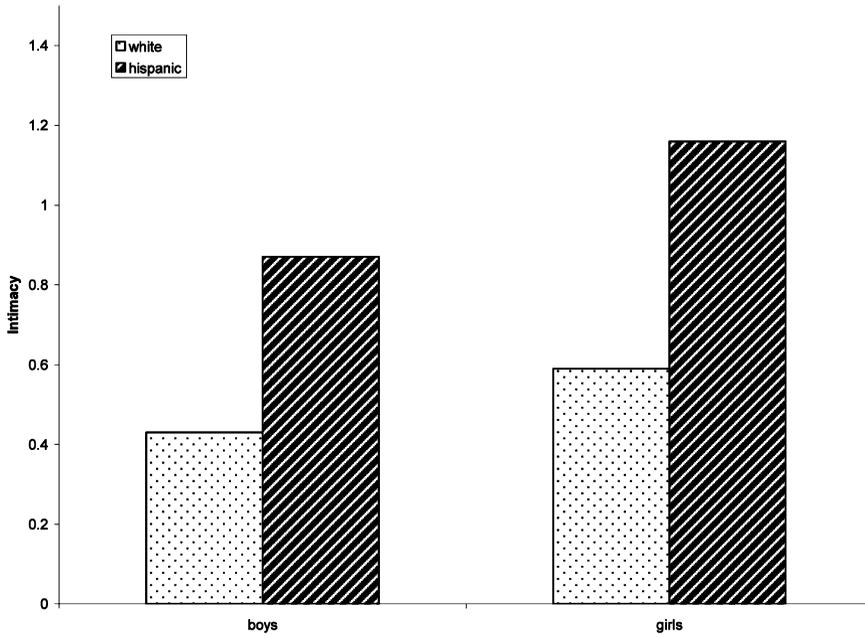


FIGURE 2 Intimacy as part of being in love as a function of ethnicity and gender.

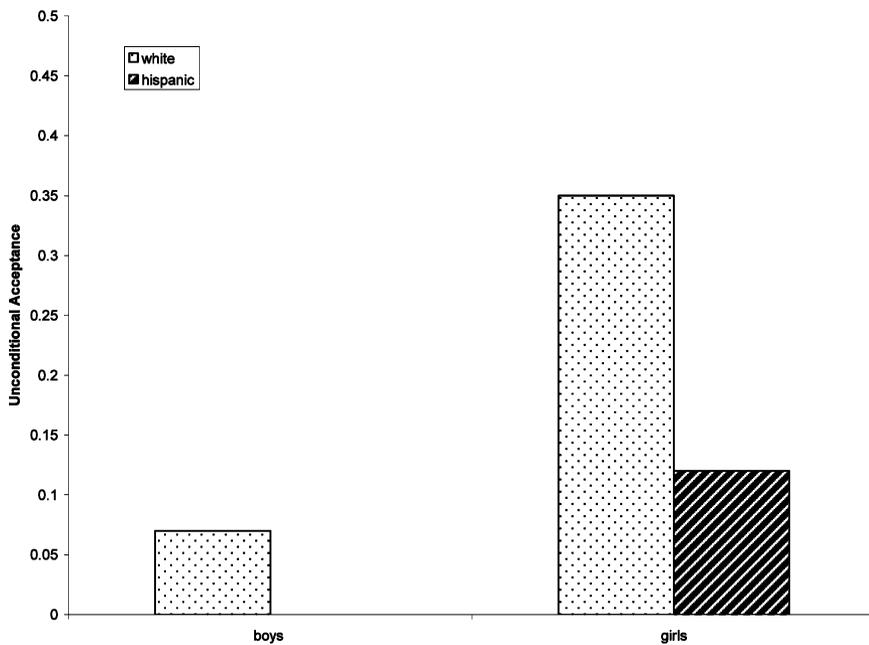


FIGURE 3 Unconditional Acceptance as part of being in love as a function of ethnicity and gender.

DISCUSSION

Adolescents vary in their understanding and interpretation of what love means in a romantic relationship context. Five broad themes emerged from adolescents' written descriptions of what it means to be in love. These themes captured the action-oriented (commitment) and emotional (intimacy) components and the bidirectional nature of romantic relationships (reciprocity). Additionally, adolescents included individually oriented or self-focused concerns (unconditional acceptance) and descriptions surrounding the mystery of love (unsure/unknown).

Commitment

These qualitative findings first point to the marked similarities found in adult definitions of love. Particularly, the development of an intimate connection and commitment has been noted both among adults (Sternberg, 1986) and among adolescents (Montgomery & Sorell, 1998; Schwartz, 2006). Of note in the present study was that the endorsement of commitment (time, sacrifice) was unrelated to adolescents' romantic relationship experience, including the number of previous romantic partners or the length of their longest romantic relationship. This is consistent with the literature in that although adolescent relationships are relatively short-lived (Feiring, 1996), they appear to be able to perceive and value the effort that is required to be in love with someone (Montgomery & Sorell).

White adolescent boys included commitment components in their descriptions of what it means to be in love the most. Boys may make important distinctions between romantic relationships that include love from those that do not. Boys may be more attuned to the sacrifices that are needed in a loving relationship because they view them more negatively than girls—perhaps as a reason to avoid being in love. That is, loving someone requires work, whereas being in a romantic relationship without love involves little obligation. This is consistent with traditional gender role adherence, which heightens post-pubertal development (Feiring, 1999), and prescribes men as the hunters or pursuers in the quest for love. In loving relationships, a traditional male role requires significant time and effort. Conversely, boys may express their love through their commitment. Commitment indicates more action-oriented, tangible expressions of love (i.e., time spent, sacrifices made), and boys are socialized to identify with action-oriented words and concepts (Arnett, 2004) in contrast to the verbal expressions of intimacy more common in girls (Way & Greene, 2006). This may explain why adolescents who included commitment components were less likely to include intimacy components in their self-definitions of love.

Intimacy

A closer examination of the cultural context of caring, friendship, and trust revealed that Mexican American youths place greater importance on intimacy components of love compared to White youths. The value placed on a deep intimate connection may reflect a more mature or serious conceptualization of romantic love. In support of this view, we found intimacy components among adolescents who were in love more often. This perspective of a more mature conceptualization of love is consistent with the Mexican American cultural value of earlier entry into adult-like romantic relationships (e.g., earlier first-birth, marriage; East, 1998).

Previous literature has found that girls are more likely than boys to identify caring and closeness as important components of love (Hillier, Harrison, & Bowditch, 1999; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Although qualitatively we found that girls were more likely than boys to describe intimacy components, this did not reach statistical significance quantitatively. Perhaps this reflects the perspective that both boys and girls value intimate connections but that girls' expressivity toward intimacy is greater than boys' (Way & Greene, 2006).

Reciprocity and Unconditional Acceptance

The emergence of both reciprocity and unconditional acceptance themes may reflect underlying developmental needs of adolescents that are not easily captured in a structured questionnaire format. Identity, autonomy, and intimacy goals are at the forefront of the period of adolescence (Arnett, 2004). Although adolescents are negotiating intimacy development through romantic relationships, they are also focused on the self through identity exploration and individuation. These competing goals may manifest in self-focused definitions of love. Feeling unconditionally accepted by a romantic partner would take on greater importance during a period in which self-acceptance or concrete identity development has not yet occurred or during a period in which parental acceptance as an autonomous individual has not yet occurred. In the same way, ensuring that your partner "loves you back" may reflect adolescents' focus on their individual needs.

Girls in particular valued unconditional acceptance as a part of being in love. In general, girls value self-disclosure in a romantic relationship (Feiring, 1999) and have lower self-esteem and higher dissatisfaction with their appearance than boys (Furnham, Badmin, & Sneade, 2002). Girls may have greater difficulty with self-acceptance and may seek and place greater value on acceptance from a romantic partner. Additionally, we found that White adolescents were more likely to include unconditional acceptance as part of their definition of love. Mexican cultural values may serve to protect adolescents from a greater need for external validation of acceptance. For

example, although we were unable to ascertain what adolescents wanted to be accepted for, the literature supports the view that boys rate physical attractiveness as more important than girls in their romantic relationships, and that girls are at greater risk for body dissatisfaction than boys. Mexican American girls, however, are more likely to have cultural values protecting them from the idealized thin body type (Austin & Smith, 2008).

Unsure/Unknown

The final love theme was distinct from the other love themes in that it spoke directly to the inability to describe love, either because love is viewed as mysterious or because of a lack of experience with love. Unlike adults, adolescents are more likely to describe love as a mystery (Montgomery & Sorell, 1998), which is likely owing, at least partially, to their relationship inexperience. Quantitatively, we found that adolescents who described love as unsure/unknown were more likely to have fewer experiences of being in love. However, this love theme may also reflect adolescents' idealized views on love. Although unsure/unknown was significantly associated with fewer times of being in love, it was not related to other relationship experience, including number of romantic partners and length of their longest romantic relationship. The literature finds that youth hold idealized views and expectations about romantic relationships even before they experience one (Conolly & Johnson, 1996), and youth who have experienced romantic relationships may view their real past or current relationships as imperfect, non-ideal, and not as "real" love.

LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS

Several cautionary words are noted in interpreting the findings of this study. Although the sample is not necessarily small by qualitative standards, the quantitative analyses were limited by the sample size. The examination of interaction effects particularly reduced the power in the analyses. Though adolescents' written responses allowed for increased anonymity, the findings are limited by adolescents' ability to articulate their perceptions of love in writing. Additionally, we were unable to ask follow-up questions to tease out the themes described here. Though attempts were made to include adolescents across varied economic and geographic backgrounds, the results do not come from a representative sample. Mexican American adolescents were less likely to live with both of their parents, and their parents were, on average, less educated. Additionally, the participants came from a community sample of agencies that were willing to allow the researchers to speak with the adolescents who spent time there. Although only one agency was unwilling to cooperate, the sample is nonetheless non-random. The study would also

be strengthened by greater contextual information on adolescents' current romantic relationships. Future research that will address these concerns is warranted.

Among the strengths of this study was a focus on adolescent love from the perspective of youths themselves and from youths who are frequently underrepresented in the literature but exist in growing numbers, particularly within southwestern United States. The utilization of qualitative methodology allows adolescents to have a voice in an area that is important to them, which may have significant health implications. Beliefs about what it means to be in love, including beliefs about what behaviors are important in the context of love, may have a direct impact on risky sexual activity, intimate partner violence, substance use, and mental health outcomes (e.g., Bauman & Berman, 2005; Friedman, 1989; Hanson, 2002; La Greca & Harrison, 2005). Adolescents whose conceptualization of love includes more attributions directed toward their partners needs and desires (e.g., "You would do anything for them," "Willing to sacrifice your life to them") may place those needs above their own. This may include greater acceptance of violence within the relationship, greater susceptibility to sexual coercion, or willingness to engage in sexual activity without contraception. Future research needs to examine relational attitudes and behaviors within the context of love. For example, understanding what love means to Mexican American adolescents can inform sex education and teen pregnancy prevention programs targeted at prolonging first birth among this high-risk group by talking about what love means to them and highlighting alternative life options. Using language generated by adolescents themselves to discuss love and romantic relationships helps to bridge the gap in communicating about difficult or sensitive topics. This will serve to strengthen interactions between practitioners and their adolescent clients, thereby increasing a practitioner's ability to convey healthy relationship behaviors in ways adolescents will understand and internalize.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Though experiencing love in a romantic relationship during adolescence may provide opportunities for growth and social development, it may also be associated with physical and psychological health risks. Adolescents who perceive their romantic relationship to be very secure often disregard safe sex practices (Bauman & Berman, 2005). In addition, adolescents in love may also experience tumultuous and stressful romantic relationships, which are predictive of mental health problems including depressive symptoms (La Greca & Harrison, 2005) and intimate partner violence (Hanson, 2002). It is important for researchers and practitioners to understand how adolescents conceptualize romantic love in ways that are contextually relevant to them.

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