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Resisting pressure from peers to engage in sexual behavior: What communication strategies do early adolescent Latino Girls use?

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Abstract

A content analysis of early adolescent ($M=12.02$ years) Latino girls' ($n=44$) responses to open-ended questions imbedded in an electronic survey was conducted to explore strategies girls may use to resist peer pressure with respect to sexual behavior. Analysis yielded 341 codable response units, 74% of which were consistent with the REAL typology (i.e., refuse, explain, avoid, and leave) previously identified in adolescent substance use research. However, strategies reflecting a lack of resistance (11%) and inconsistency with communication competence (e.g., aggression, involving authorities) were also noted (15%). Frequency of particular strategies varied according to offer type, suggesting a variety of strategies may be needed to resist the peer pressure that puts early adolescent girls at risk for engaging in sexual behavior. Findings argue for universality of the REAL typology, building communication competence skills for conflict resolution in dating situations, and including peer resistance strategies in adolescent pregnancy prevention programs.

Keywords

communication competence; adolescents; sexual behavior; peer resistance

Peer pressure is a well-recognized phenomenon that puts adolescents at risk for engaging in sexual behavior (Bazargan & West, 2006), but little is known about how adolescents resist

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peer pressure involving sexual behavior. Far more is known about their resisting peer pressure involving substance use. This body of research suggests that the use of competent peer pressure resistance strategies can delay initiation of substance use (Hecht & Miller-Day, 2007). However, this same research also indicates that many children, particularly young adolescents, lack the sophisticated repertoire of communication and relational skills needed to respond to pressure to engage in risky behaviors (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007).

This study investigates communication strategies that low-income, early adolescent Latino girls use for resisting peer pressure involving sexual behavior. A content analysis was performed using data collected as part of a feasibility trial for a pregnancy prevention intervention targeting early adolescent Latino girls (Norris, Hughes, Hecht, Peragallo, & Nickerson, 2013). Latino girls represent a rapidly growing U.S. ethnic minority who is at risk for teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Hamilton, Martin, & Ventura, 2007; O'Donnell, O'Donnell, & Stueve, 2001). Information about the resistance strategies that early adolescent Latino girls use could help advance pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection (STI) prevention efforts for this at-risk population subgroup.

Background

The social life of early adolescents is shaped by an increased influence of peers (Steinberg & Monahan, 2007). When this peer influence is exerted to encourage substance use, the situation is labeled an “offer-response episode” (see Pettigrew, Miller-Day, Krieger, & Hecht, 2011). Investigations of resistance or refusal messages that adolescents employ in such episodes have provided crucial information for substance use prevention efforts (Cuijpers, 2002).

Verbal and non-verbal responses identified for resisting peer pressure can be grouped into a typology of four primary resistance strategies: Refuse, Explain, Avoid, and Leave (REAL; Alberts, Miller-Rassulo, & Hecht, 1991). Importantly, these strategies have been found to be used for resisting substance use offers by various ethnic groups in different geographic regions, and across a wide range of developmental periods (Alberts et al., 1991; Miller, 1998; Alberts, Hecht, Miller-Rassulo, & Krizek, 1992; Pettigrew et al., 2011).

These four resistance strategies are illustrative of competent communication (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Spitzberg & Hecht, 1984), or the sharing of verbal and nonverbal messages in a manner that is other-oriented and creates satisfaction with the interpersonal interaction, particularly among friends (Hecht, 1978). This type of communication occurs when an individual is open, motivated, non-anxious, involved, and skilled. Although other communication strategies, such as verbal or physical aggression, may be effective, they are not considered part of the domain of competent communication because they can put friendships at risk, and given this, are at odds with the strong need for peer approval in early adolescents (Bakan, 1972).

Evidence of widespread use of the REAL strategies in the substance use domain (e.g., Kulis & Brown, 2008; Seibold & Thomas, 1994), coupled with the centrality of peer influence to both substance use and sexual behavior in early adolescence, suggests that the REAL typology can be applied to offer-response episodes that put early adolescent girls at risk for

engaging in sexual behavior. The aim of the present study is to evaluate the following questions:

RQ1: What communication strategies do early adolescent Latino girls report intending to use when they experience offer-response episodes involving sexual behavior?

RQ2: Do communication strategies vary with type of offer-response episode?

Methods

Sample

A convenience sample of 44 early adolescent Latino girls attending an afterschool program at a middle school in Orlando, Florida during Spring 2010 participated. The median age was 12.02 years (range: 11–14) with 61% enrolled in 6th grade. Almost half identified as Puerto Rican (49%), with 43% US born and a majority highly acculturated (73%). Most lived in a two-adult-headed household (77%), and received free or reduced price school lunches (91%).

Procedures

Parental consent and participant assent was obtained for all study participants prior to survey completion. Surveys were administered electronically using an SSL web interface (Limesurvey™) and were constructed so that questions could either be skipped or a respondent could check “I do not wish to respond.” Participants completed the survey either before or after school in a school computer lab under adult supervision and were seated in such a way as to block views of each other’s computer screen. Surveys took approximately 15–20 minutes to complete. Each participant received a \$10 gift card after completing an electronic study survey.

Measures

The survey included measures of demographic characteristics and communication strategies. Demographic items included age in years, country of birth, Latino subgroup(s) identified with, receipt of reduced-price or free lunch, number of adult figures raising the child, and a brief (4 item) measure of acculturation (Norris, Ford & Bova, 1996).

Communications strategies were assessed using three open-ended questions adapted from the substance use resistance literature (Miller et al., 2000) and revised based on focus group work with the study population (Norris, Aroian, Warren & Wirth, 2012) and the adolescent sexual behavior literature (O’Donnell et al., 2006). The text for each question was followed by five blank lined text boxes into which participants could type their answers, displayed one computer screen at a time. The specific questions used were:

1. What would you say or do if a person you liked wanted to do sexual things with you that you did not want to do?
2. What would you say or do if you were invited to a party where the parents were not home?

3. What would you say or do if you were at a teen club or party where people were doing sexual things?

Analysis

A total of 357 response units were identified for potential coding. A minority (5%; 16) could not be coded because the response could not be understood, did not answer the question, or did not indicate resistance or acceptance of the offer (e.g., “lol just idkkk” or “I would feel embarrassed”). The remaining 341 responses were coded as demonstrating (a) competent communication or resistance (consistent with REAL typology), (b) non-competent communication of resistance, or (c) acceptance of the offer.

Responses to the three open-ended questions were analyzed using a directed content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). All coding at initial and subsequent stages was done at the sentence fragment level, allowing a given response to be coded for multiple strategies. For example, the response “look away and leave” contained two fragments: “look away,” which was coded as an example of the Avoid, and “leave,” which was coded as an example of the Leave strategy (strategy definitions provided in Table 1).

An initial classification system for the content analysis was created using a slight adaption of the REAL typology. Definitions of Refuse, Explain, Avoid, and Leave were created by substituting “drug offer” and “places where people are using drugs” with “sexual offer” and “places where sexual things are occurring or likely to occur,” respectively. This system was expanded during the analysis as new strategies emerged that reflected responses not fitting with the Refuse, Explain, Avoid, or Leave definitions. The expanded set of definitions was critiqued and adjusted by co-authors who have coded open-ended substance use resistance data using the REAL typology (Hecht, & Miller-Day, 2007; Pettigrew et al., 2011).

Once the final classification system was established, responses were coded by two female nursing doctoral students with experience working with multi-cultural groups. The two coders occasionally consulted with two early adolescent, Latino girls, not a part of or in contact with study participants, and a late adolescent, Caucasian male to clarify the meaning of specific responses that contained adolescent jargon or idioms (e.g., “Whatever”). These adolescents expressed similar interpretations (i.e., no disagreement occurred). Cohen’s Kappa for inter-rater reliability for the two doctoral student coders ranged from .79 to 1.00.

Results

The percentage of participants who reported use of a particular strategy at least once is provided in Table 1. The proportion of response units coded for each strategy and examples of the strategies are presented next. Analyses testing the association between strategy and type of offer-response episode follow. Throughout the results section, responses are reproduced verbatim without inserting “sic” each time the response is ungrammatical or misspelled.

Communication Strategies

Response Units Reflecting Competent Communication (REAL typology)—The majority of coded response units (74%; 253) indicated communication competence and fit into the REAL typology. Response units fitting the **Refuse** definition represented less than a fifth of total coded units (16%; 55). Examples of refuse included: “say no;” “sorry but no;” “no, no.”

One fourth (25%; 87) of coded units met the **Explain** definition and involved deferring to some vaguely or clearly specified factor that ostensibly prevented compliance with the offer. Vaguely specified factors were reflected in responses such as: “give him a fake accuse” or “nahhh im good i got stuff to do!” Four clearly specified factors or reasons for non-compliance emerged in these data. The first involved deferring to a situational factor as reflected in statements such as: “cant studing;” or “I got a lot of cleaning to do.” The second involved deferring to previous interpersonal commitments and is illustrated by comments such as: “already promised im going to the movies;” “my family members are coming.” The third involved deferring to moral grounds or age-appropriate norms for sexual behavior. Examples of this factor include: “no because thas not correct even if i like the person;” “i wanna wait;” or “I am too young for that.” The fourth involved using safety issues, as reflected in comments such as: “you can get diseases.”

Less than one fifth (17%; 59) of response units met the definition for the **Avoid** strategy, and, consistent with the substance use literature (Pettigrew et al., 2011), could be subdivided into examples of proactive (avoiding situation described in question) and reactive (avoiding pressure once in situation) avoid strategies. Examples of proactive strategies included: “stay away from that person;” “I woul never enter that club or group;” or “stayy hoomee.” Examples of reactive strategies reflected different levels of conversational skill complexity. Least complex reactive strategies ignored the offer: “keep on dancing;” or “ignore them.” More complex strategies involved disrupting or diverting the conversation: “my moms here bye;” or “change subject and start doing something else.” The most complex strategies involved eliciting social support, such as “getting a friend to back me up,” or using persuasion: “convence my friends they shouldn’t go either.”

Less than one fifth (15%; 52) of the response units met the definition for the **Leave** strategy and either referred to leaving in general (“leave;” “I would live”) or to different degrees or ways of leaving the situation. For example, some participants described leaving the person/people (“walk away”) or immediate situation (“go to the other side of the club”). Some talked about going to another place (“leave house or stayout side”) or walking or calling home (“I would say omg and go outside and call my mom;” “i would walk home if it wasn’t to far”).

Response Units Reflecting Non-Competent Communication of Resistance—

Less than one fifth (15%; 50) of the total coded response units were not other-oriented, making them likely to promote negative emotions and dissatisfying communication among friends. These units reflected the use of one of two strategies: (1) inform authorities or (2) aggression.

A small number of response units (7%; 23) were coded as **informing authorities** because they indicated an intent to stop the activity from occurring by bringing the activity or the peer making the offer to the attention of an authority figure. Parents were sometimes included as authority figures, but these responses also included the police, a peer's parents, or other adults. Examples included: "I WOULD CALL THE COPS;" and "call the owners of the house."

A small number of response units (8%; 27) were coded as examples of **Aggression**. Examples of verbal aggression ranged from: "back off" to "get away from me, I don't know you" to "you touch me and i will use self-defense." Examples of physical aggression responses ranged from: "Push Them Away" to "slap them for asking me that" to "I would punched them" or "I'LL GET A WEAPON."

Response Units Reflecting Acceptance of the Offer—About a tenth of the total coded units (11%; 38) were categorized as examples of acceptance of the offer and fell into one of three categories. The first, unconditional acceptance of the offer, included statements such as: "i would say yes;" "ill ask my mom and if she says no, ill still go." The second reflected an inability to resist peer pressure: "maybe ill change my mind and wont go but then people tell me its gonna be awesome and ill go." The third reflected an effort to set conditions and manage the risk: "if the party seems bad or have bad people in it i would leave;" "stay for a while but be cautious;" "make sure have my phone with me;" "i would go but have lots of good friends to look after me and make sure i don't make any mistakes."

How Strategies Vary with the Type of Offer-Response Episode

The number of response units generated varied with the particular offer-response episode: The sex offer elicited the most responses (41%), as compared to the party offer (34%) or the club or party situation in which sexual behavior is occurring (25%).

While overall (see Total column in Table 2) the REAL strategies are the most commonly identified strategies, particularly Explain, chi-square analysis indicates significant variability in strategies used across the different offers ($p < .001$). For example, in the sex offer episode, Refuse (24%) and Avoid (21%) were the most common strategies used. Verbal or physical aggression (16%), Explain (14%), and Leave (14%) were also fairly commonly identified, but less than 3% indicated that they would accept this offer. In contrast, with the party invitation scenario, acceptance strategies (29%) were most likely to be identified, followed by Avoid (23%) and Explain (24%). Refuse (16%) was slightly less common, but was more likely to be identified than Leave (3%) and involving an authority figure (3%). In other words, the party invitation offer elicited the least resistance. When the episode was a club or party where other teens were engaging in sexual behavior, Explain (46%) and Leave (34%) were the dominant strategies. Involving an authority figure (9%), while somewhat rare, was still identified more frequently than Refuse (2%) or Avoid (2%) for this particular offer-response episode.

Discussion

Study findings revealed that when early adolescent Latino girls are confronted with sexual behavior-related offers, they may sometimes accept the offer, but if they choose to resist, they are likely to use one of the four primary resistance strategies previously reported in previous studies of multi-ethnic samples of male and female youth faced with drug offers. These strategies, known by the acronym REAL, are Refuse, Explain, Avoid, and Leave (Hecht et al., 2008). These findings again support the REAL typology as a means for resisting peer pressure.

Two additional strategies for resisting sexual pressure were uncovered in the current study not indicative of communication competence: informing authorities and use of aggression. Of interest is why these strategies emerged here but not in previous research regarding offer-response episodes surrounding substance use. Possibly, some early adolescent girls may perceive offer-response episodes surrounding sexual behavior as more threatening than those surrounding substance use, creating an urge to stop the offer at all costs (i.e., regardless of potential social sanctions). The latter explanation would be consistent with the presence of a dating social script that justifies girls' use of violence for self-protection (Sears, Byers, & Price, 2007).

The frequency of both REAL and non-REAL strategies reported did vary with the specific offer-response episode. If type of episode is ignored, Explain was the most commonly identified strategy, as it was for drug offer refusals (Miller et al., 2000). However, when response episode is considered, Refuse and Avoid dominate in a dating or romantic context, whereas Explain dominates for being at a party or club where other teens are engaging in sexual behavior. This pattern argues that effective resistance requires expertise in a variety of strategies and raises interesting questions about the nature of peer influence and peer resistance in social as compared to romantic situations. For example, is pressure to go to a party more likely to come from same gender friends? Are peers exerting pressure more satisfied or dissuaded by an explanation in a social as compared to a romantic offer-response episodes?

This study makes at least three major contributions. First, it extends the REAL typology from its exclusive focus on substance refusals and demonstrates that it can be used to understand resistance to sexual pressure. Moreover, this study adds to a growing body of evidence that the REAL typology depicts interpersonal resistance strategies occurring in multiple contexts, across multiple regional and geographic divides, with multiple ethnic groups, and in multiple developmental periods. This evidence supports teaching these strategies to multi-ethnic samples of youth because their use does not violate cultural expectations (Burgoon, 1995), and use of these strategies has been linked to decreased risk taking behavior (Hecht & Miller-Day, 2007).

The extension of the REAL typology to sexual behavior argues for incorporating the teaching of peer resistance strategies into existing youth programming. One example is the D.A.R.E. program's recent adoption of the *keepin' it REAL* substance use prevention intervention as its new curriculum for dissemination to 1.5 million youth in the U.S. as well

as those in 43 other countries around the world (Hecht, Colby, & Miller-Day, 2010). Other programs aimed at positive youth development (e.g., scouting, Junior Achievement) represent similar opportunities for teaching peer resistance strategies. The payoff for disseminating competent peer resistance skill training through existing programming is likely to be high: Previous research involving the *keepin' it REAL* curriculum has shown that targeted social skills training increases effective and competent resistance skills for the majority of youth in substance use prevention programs (Hopfer, Hecht, Lanza, & Tan, 2011), and that these increased skills are linked to decreased risky behavior (Hecht & Miller-Day, 2007). Increasing similar skills for episodes surrounding sexual behavior is warranted given that nearly half of study participants also reported using resistance strategies such as aggression or involving an authority figure, which are likely to elicit negative social consequences from peers as the adolescent ages.

A second contribution is highlighting the need for intervention programs that not only develop the social skills needed to competently resist peer pressure, but also motivate early adolescents to resist situations that put them at risk. Exposure to older teens engaging in sexual behavior increases the risk that younger teens will initiate intercourse (O'Donnell et al., 2006). In this study, nearly half of participants responded that they would accept an invitation to go to a party where the parents would not be home. Such parties create an opportunity for early adolescents to mingle with middle and late adolescents (i.e., high school students), be exposed to alcohol and drugs, observe other youth engaging in sexual behavior, and receive offers to engage in sexual behavior. Intervention programs that develop the social skills needed to competently resist peer pressure may not be sufficient to delay initiation of intercourse unless they also create motivation to avoid social situations that put young adolescents at risk or successfully “immunize” adolescents against the persuasive influence that exposure to such situations brings.

A third contribution is identification of a need for communication competence training in conflict resolution as part of dating violence prevention. In this study, nearly a third of participants reported planning to use an aggressive response to a one-on-one offer to engage in sexual behavior, despite the context being defined as being in a situation with someone that they liked. Research on dating violence finds that interpersonally aggressive responses are more common among younger, as compared to older, adolescent girls (Messinger, Rickert, Fry, Lessel, & Davidson, 2012), consistent with a skill deficit. A girl's choice of an aggressive response as a resistance strategy is buoyed by greater acceptance of female-initiated violence in dating contexts by both young adolescent males and females (Price & Byers, 1999) and the belief that girls are justified in their use of violence for self-protection (Sears et al., 2007). What youth fail to understand is that female-initiated aggression is more likely to be reciprocated by males and more likely to escalate to the point of injury (Capaldi, Kim, & Shortt, 2007).

It is possible that the aggressive strategies reported here reflect more fantasy than reality given that participants were providing responses for hypothetical situations. However, social learning theory (Bandura, 1986) would argue that fantasy responses provide an opportunity for a cognitive rehearsal of these less competent and potentially problematic resistance strategies, thereby increasing the likelihood of their future use.

We propose that early adolescence is a critical time at which to intervene to stop a potential cycle of intimate partner violence from developing. Central to this effort is teaching competent peer resistance strategies and increasing awareness of the risk of female-initiated aggression. A focus on substituting Avoid and Leave for verbal and physical aggression is important given Josephson and Proulx's (2008) findings that constructive confrontation involving reasoning (e.g., Refuse and Explain) escalates interpersonal conflict. Thus, it seems advisable to argue against an emphasis on Refuse and Explain in dating or romantic contexts unless future research more clearly differentiates them from constructive confrontation.

There are three limitations to this study. First, our open-ended questions assessed intended rather than actual resistance strategies. However, the mapping of these intended strategies to actual behavior is supported by consistency between our findings and those obtained in studies of actual resistance strategies reported for substance use related offer-response episodes (e.g., Pettigrew et al., 2011). Also, resistance strategy intentions have been linked to decreased substance use behavior (Allen, Chango, Szewedo, Schad, & Marston, 2012).

Second, social desirability concerns may have impacted participants' responses, leading to under- or over-reporting of particular responses. However, participants used swear words in their responses, which argues against social desirability concerns and for our data collection approach (e.g., electronic surveys) successfully minimizing social desirability concerns.

Third, this study only included Latino middle school girls and it is possible that specific aspects of these findings may vary with gender or ethnicity. For example, findings from dating violence research suggest that the association between use aggression and type of offer-response episode varies with gender (Sears et al., 2007). Hence, important questions remain regarding gender and ethnic differences in the association between competent and incompetent communication strategies and particular offer-response episodes.

In conclusion, study findings argue for the generalizability of a typology of resistance response strategies, previously identified exclusively in adolescent substance initiation and use research, to the context of sexual behavior. The presence of less competent and potentially problematic communication strategies (e.g., aggression) suggests resistance skill deficits that are in need of attention. Together with findings in the substance use literature, findings from the current study argue for the inclusion of peer resistance skill training in intervention programs targeting adolescent risk-taking behaviors. Study findings also suggest questions for future research with respect to gender and ethnic differences in the use of specific strategies in particular offer-response episodes and the efficacy of peer resistance skill-building for reducing a variety of adolescent risk-taking behaviors.

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Table 1

Final definitions and percent ever reporting communication strategy

Type of strategy	Definition	Ever reported ^a (n=44)
	Reflects competent communication (consistent with REAL typology)	100%
Refuse	Assertively saying “No”	82%
Explain	Stating a reason (real or fake) to not participate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situational factor(s) • Interpersonal commitment • Safety issues • Plea to moral or age-appropriate norms • Vague or otherwise unclassifiable reasons 	66%
Avoid	Keeping the pressure off of you: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive – pre-emptive; don’t end up in situation • Reactive – use in the situation 	73%
Leave	Physically removing self from the pressure: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leave immediate situation (e.g., go to another room or outside) • Leave location (e.g., go home or another place) 	77%
	Reflects non-competent communication of resistance	43%
Inform authorities	Tell authority figure(s) about situation	25%
Aggression	Verbally or physically: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pushing the other person away • Threatening (e.g., swearing, yelling, hitting) 	32%
	Reflects acceptance of the offer	48%
Accepting (not resisting)	Complying with the pressure (accepting the offer): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unconditional acceptance • Acceptance due to inability to resist pressure • Conditional acceptance (attempting to minimize risk) 	48%

^aPercentages do not sum to 100 because participants could report more than one strategy for each open-ended question.

Table 2

Frequency of strategy reported for each question type

Strategy:	Sex offer (n=140)	Party invite (n=116)	Club/Party where sex is happening (n=85)	Total (n=341)
Refuse	24.3% (34)	16.4% (19)	2.4% (2)	16.1% (55)
Explain	14.3% (20)	24.1% (28)	45.9% (39)	25.5% (87)
Avoid	21.4% (30)	23.3% (27)	2.4% (2)	17.3% (59)
Leave	13.6% (19)	3.4% (4)	34.1% (29)	15.2% (52)
Authority figure	7.9% (11)	3.4% (4)	9.4% (8)	6.7% (23)
Verbal/Physical aggression	16.4% (23)	0.0% (0)	4.7% (4)	7.9% (27)
Acceptance	2.1% (3)	29.3% (34)	1.2% (1)	11.1% (38)

Note. Association between strategy and type of offer statistically significant for the REAL (Chi-square=74.79, df=6, $p < .001$) and for all strategies (Chi-square=160.25, df=12, $p < .001$). Minimum expected frequency assumptions met in both analyses.

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