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“He cheated on me, I cheated on him back”: Mexican American and White adolescents’ perceptions of cheating in romantic relationships

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A B S T R A C T

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A qualitative approach was used to explore the meaning and perceptions of cheating in adolescent romantic relationships. Mexican American and White adolescents ($N = 75$; 53.3% girls; 56.1% Mexican American), separated by gender and ethnicity into 12 focus groups (three groups per type), discussed personal and peer experiences of cheating in dating relationships as both the victim and perpetrator. Dialogue was coded using inductive content analysis; two broader cheating themes encompassing six sub-themes emerged 1) perceptions of cheating (individual-oriented, peer-oriented, and frequency of occurrence) and 2) consequences of cheating (commitment, emotional responses, and relationship outcomes). Mexican American girls spoke most frequently and strongly about cheating, followed by White girls. The meaning and contexts of cheating by ethnicity and gender has important implications for promoting healthy dating behavior during adolescence.

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Most adolescents have had some experience with romantic relationships, yet much remains unknown regarding the context of relational infidelity and its social and emotional consequences (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a), especially for ethnic minority youth (Furman, 2002). Older adolescents’ reported behavior, causes, and consequences of cheating in dating relationships may be similar to adult extramarital affairs (Roscoe, Cavanaugh, & Kennedy, 1988), but adolescents differ in terms of their developmental capacity for intimacy and commitment (Markstrom & Kalmanir, 2001), and these differences remain largely unexplored. The present study examines perceptions of cheating in adolescent relationships by exploring the meaning, context, and consequences of cheating from adolescents’ own perspectives.

Infidelity in adulthood and late adolescence

A majority of American adults disapprove of cheating (Treas & Giesen, 2000), yet as many as 20–25% of adult marriages experience episodes of cheating (Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Recent research has focused primarily on the individuals who cheat, the marriage relationship, (Allen et al., 2008), gender (Fisher, Voracek, Rekkas, & Cox, 2008; Sabini & Green, 2004), and the social and cultural contexts of cheating (Treas & Giesen, 2000). In a recent review of the adult literature common reasons for cheating included: permissive attitudes towards cheating (men only), dissatisfaction and low levels of perceived commitment in the romantic relationship, and opportunities to cheat (e.g. in the workplace; Blow & Hartnett, 2005). Consequences of cheating ranged from dissolution of the relationship to increased closeness and stronger marital bonds (Blow & Hartnett, 2005; Charney & Parnass, 1995).

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Older adolescents' attitudes towards cheating typically mirror what is observed in adult relationships, especially regarding reasons for cheating (e.g., sexual permissiveness or dissatisfaction with a "bad relationship"; [Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b](#); [Roscoe et al., 1988](#)) and responses to cheating (e.g., ending the relationship or working to improve the relationship; [Roscoe et al., 1988](#)). However, older adolescents are more likely than adults to cite boredom, insecurity, immaturity, and poor communication as reasons for cheating, and are more likely to say that they would end the relationship as a result of cheating ([Roscoe et al., 1988](#)). Older adolescents also associate positive emotions with cheating, suggesting that some incidents of cheating in a relationship may not be about the relationship at all; rather, they may be a part of identity exploration and development ([Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b](#)) and reflect differences in developmental capacities for love and commitment. The ability to obtain a secure and committed relationship plays an increasingly important role as adolescent's transition into adulthood ([Van Dulmen, Goney, Haydon, & Collins, 2008](#)).

Developmental perspectives

Adolescent romantic relationships occur within a larger developmental context in which personal identity and intimacy goals begin to form ([Sanderson & Cantor, 1995](#)). According to [Erickson \(1968\)](#), adolescents undergo identity formation and the development of intimacy on their journey towards adulthood. Identity, intimacy, and fidelity (i.e. the ability to stay committed in a relationship) are inherently linked; as an adolescents' sense of personal identity strengthens their capacity for intimacy and fidelity grows ([Markstrom & Kalmanir, 2001](#)). Despite the connection between these developmental goals, they are often at odds ([Blatt & Blass, 1996](#)). Identity formation necessarily includes independence from other relationships while intimacy formation relies on mutual dependence ([Sanderson & Cantor, 1995](#)). Cheating in adolescent relationships may occur as a result of trying to balance these competing goals. For example, the desire for intimacy propels entry into a romantic relationship while the need for identity exploration makes commitment within the relationship difficult.

Throughout adolescence, peer relationships become increasingly important ([Brown, Dolcini, & Leventhal, 1997](#)); these relationships help support and facilitate romantic relationships as they emerge, often outlasting romantic partners ([Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000](#)). Peers influence the development of intimacy and identity in tandem with romantic relationships ([Leadbeater, Banister, Ellis, & Yeung, 2008](#)). Adolescents learn what to expect in romantic relationships from their peers and filter romantic experiences through peer interaction ([Connolly & Goldberg, 1999](#); [O'Sullivan & Meyer-Bahlburg, 2003](#)). Additionally, romantic and peer relationships reciprocally influence each other - negative experiences in one relationship affect the other ([Connolly & Goldberg, 1999](#); [Furman, McDunn, & Young, 2008](#)).

Peer evaluations have also been experimentally implicated in the development of self-concept and social-esteem ([Parker, 2001](#)). In particular, individuals were more sensitive to peer evaluations in contexts in which social comparison occurred. This may have particular relevance in adolescent romantic relationships in which mates are selected within a pool of peers and social comparison is likely. In romantic pursuit, adolescents may rely more on their peers to evaluate their desirability or attraction to a partner of interest.

The size of peer networks and the strength of connection adolescents feel to their peers also impact adolescent romantic relationships and may affect girls and boys differently, as girls report larger peer networks ([Connolly et al., 2000](#)). Connections between peer relationships, gender, and cheating in romantic relationships have not been a focus of research, but the possible role peers play in perceptions of and experiences with cheating in romantic relationships warrants further examination.

Perceptions of Cheating

Understanding adolescents' perceptions of and attitudes towards cheating is important, as according to the theory of reasoned action ([Ajzen & Fishbein, 1975; 1980](#)), we can closely approximate behavior based on attitudes and subjective norms towards the behavior. Subjective norms include the perceptions of those close to the individual, and in adolescence, the relevance of peers and peer norms in understanding behavior is greater than during adulthood ([Furman et al., 2008](#)).

In order to develop a more complete understanding of cheating behavior it is important to gain a dual perspective as both the victim and the perpetrator. Although it is difficult to disentangle whether adolescents perceptions of behavior result from personal or peer experiences as a victim or a perpetrator (or both) it is clear that motivations for behavior (or against behavior) are an important proximal factor in understanding various risk taking behaviors in adolescence (see [Patrick & Maggs, 2009](#) for a review).

Gender

Research suggests that there may be no gender differences in motive, experience, or incidence of cheating; in one study, two-thirds of boys and girls experienced cheating as either the victim or the perpetrator in a relationship ([Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a](#)). However, gender differences in attitudes or perceptions of cheating in adolescence are not clear and may suggest a more accepting attitude towards male cheating behavior. Older adolescent females in one study were more likely to report relationship outcomes that involved staying in a relationship after being cheated on ([Roscoe et al., 1988](#)), and older adolescent males in another study reported more accepting attitudes when males cheated on females ([Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b](#)). Girls may have more tolerant attitudes because of a greater desire for intimacy or capacity for

commitment but they may also experience heightened emotional responses towards cheating because of its negative impact on their reputation (Egan & Angus, 2004).

Important gender differences in the development of identity and intimacy have been noted in the literature. Some research suggests that the desire for intimacy arises earlier for girls than boys, such that girls often accomplish intimacy before identity (Scheidel & Marcia, 1985), or that the process of identity formation and intimacy achievement is more fused or integrated (e.g., Lytle, Bakken, & Romig, 1997). For example, Montgomery (2005) found that early adolescent girls had lower intimacy scores than late adolescent girls but that boys did not differ across these age groups and reported lower scores in general. Similarly, early adolescent boys scored significantly higher than girls in identity development, but that gender difference disappeared by middle adolescence. While many of these gender differences change as adolescence age, they serve to impact romantic relationships at each stage of development and influence the way girls and boys experience relationship components including, commitment, companionship, and care (Montgomery & Sorell, 1998; Williams & Hickle, 2010). Considering these differences, along with the cultural context adolescents live and learn in, is important for developing a greater understanding of how gender is experienced and impacts romantic relationships.

Ethnicity

The role ethnicity plays in infidelity remains largely unexplored in adulthood (Treas & Giesen, 2000), and has not been directly explored in adolescence. One qualitative study reported that Hispanic and African American adolescents cheated in the majority of their romantic relationships (Bauman & Berman, 2005), however, another study found that the prevalence of cheating behavior across ethnicity did not differ (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b). It is clear that culture and ethnicity do influence other aspects of adolescent romantic relationships (Coates, 1999), especially regarding expectations for sexual activity, commitment and marriage, and promoting individualistic values of love and passion versus communal values of selflessness and family respect (Flores, Eyre, & Millstein, 1998). For example, Mexican American culture places high value on family and parenthood, and Mexican American/Hispanic adolescent girls have expressed a desire for earlier transitions into relationship milestones (e.g. sexual activity, marriage, pregnancy) compared to other adolescents (East, 1998). These desires coincide with cultural values, influence how Mexican American girls experience romantic relationships (Raffaelli, 2005), and may impact their beliefs or expectations regarding commitment and infidelity, although this examination is exploratory.

The present study uses a qualitative approach to examine the meaning and perceptions of cheating in romantic relationships for Mexican American and White adolescents who participated in focus groups as part of a larger study on dating relationships. From these data, we cannot infer any objective differences in cheating behavior; however, we focus on the subjective experiences and perceptions of relationship infidelity as they were spontaneously mentioned by adolescents discussing their overall experiences in romantic relationships. Specifically, the research goals for this study are to explore the meaning and perceptions of cheating in adolescent romantic relationships within the contexts of gender and Mexican American culture.

Method

Sample

Mexican American ($n = 41$) and White ($n = 34$) adolescents ($M = 16.04$ years, $SD = .83$; $n = 40$ girls) within a large Southwestern state were recruited to participate in focus groups (6–8 participants; $M = 5.86$, $SD = 1.55$) on adolescent romantic relationships. Recruitment was conducted during the summer months, and all participants were students transitioning into the 10th, 11th and 12th grades ($M = 11.09$, $SD = .76$) from 25 different high schools the following fall. Participants were recruited through meetings with community program coordinators (e.g. Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters) and summer camps (53% of sample), high schools (32%), and word-of-mouth (15%).

A majority of participants had at least some romantic relationship experience in the past and no significant differences were identified among Mexican American and White adolescent dating experiences (see Table 1). No significant differences were identified among other demographic characteristics (e.g. age, country of origin). Chi-square analysis revealed significant differences across ethnicity regarding a number of family characteristics: compared to White adolescents, Mexican American adolescents were less likely to only speak English at home, $\chi^2(2) = 35.61$, $p < .001$, to live with their father, $\chi^2(1) = 3.72$, $p = .05$, to have a mother, $\chi^2(3) = 19.66$, $p < .001$, or father, $\chi^2(3) = 18.98$, $p < .001$, born within the United States, and to have a mother, $\chi^2(5) = 31.96$, $p < .001$, or father, $\chi^2(5) = 27.24$, $p < .001$, with greater than a high school education.

Procedure

Upon being recruited into the study, adolescents completed an initial telephone-screening questionnaire ($N = 90$). In order to participate, adolescents needed to self-identify as Mexican American or White and intend to enter the 10th, 11th, or 12th grade in the fall. Upon meeting these criteria, adolescents were asked to participate in the study (all participants met these criteria). Adolescents were mailed an introduction letter and consent form to be signed by their parents or guardians. Adolescents and parents were told that the purpose of the study was to understand the meaning of dating relationships to high school students. The first author spoke with all of the parents of the participants and none of the parents refused to give

Table 1
Demographic information.

	Mexican American		White	
	Frequency	<i>M (SD)</i>	Frequency	<i>M (SD)</i>
Gender				
Boys	43.9%		50.0%	
Girls	56.1%		50.0%	
Grade in fall		11.0 (.87)		11.3 (.54)
Age in years		16.0 (.96)		16.1 (.64)
US born				
Father***	56.8%		100.0%	
Mother***	58.5%		94.1%	
Adolescent	90.2%		97.1%	
Language spoken at home***				
English only	29.3%		97.1%	
English & Spanish	63.4%		2.9%	
Spanish only	7.3%			
Household				
Live with mom	92.7%		100.0%	
Live with dad ⁺	58.5%		79.4%	
Parents Education				
Mother > high school ed.***	41.0%		88.2%	
Father > high school ed.***	37.5%		79.4%	
Romantic Relationships (RR)				
Currently in an RR	37.5%		26.5%	
If no, ever in an RR	80.8%		83.3%	
No. of lifetime dating partners		3.30 (3.52)		3.74 (2.80)
Length of longest RR(months)		8.96 (10.57)		6.80 (8.59)
No. of times in love		1.02 (1.10)		.76 (.97)
Relationship Preference				
Other sex	92.5%		94.1%	
Same sex	2.5%			
Both sexes	5.0%		5.9%	

+ $p = .05$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

consent. Those who were scheduled for a session ($N = 85$; 5 were unable to be scheduled) brought the signed consent form to the data collection site (i.e., at the youth center they belonged to, their home, or the research lab) and gave participant assent at the site after confidentiality and respect for other participants was emphasized. Three adolescents did not show up for the focus group session and could not be rescheduled. Technical difficulties resulted in a loss of the audiotaped recordings of two focus group sessions (FG 6 and 7). Seven of the adolescents in the lost focus group sessions could not be rescheduled, resulting in a final sample of 75 participants. Saturation, the point at which the range of ideas has been heard and no new information is being gained, is typically reached after three to four focus groups for any one type of participant (Krueger & Casey, 2000). In the present study, saturation was reached after collecting data from three groups for each participant type. Two additional focus groups were collected after the loss of two groups to provide the study with three complete focus groups per group type (gender, ethnicity), however the field notes and moderator summary reports of the groups that were lost were used to ensure saturation had been met, to inform the data collection of the subsequent groups, and to verify the accuracy of the coding scheme. Some of the adolescents in the focus groups knew each other prior to participating (e.g. recruited from the same school or community program) and some did not. Regardless, adolescents were asked to create pseudo names to use throughout the session to protect their identity. Pizza, candy, and soda were provided during the focus group sessions. Following the focus group (approximately 1.5 h), participants received a debriefing handout along with \$10 for compensation.

The research questions informed the methodological approach. Focus group methodology holds an underlying premise that attitudes and perceptions are not developed in isolation but through interaction with other people (Morse & Field, 1995). This interactive environment elicits more natural communication from participants than is probable in individual interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The guiding research questions included adolescent perceptions of cheating; focus groups (i.e., group interviews) were chosen as the method of data collection (Morgan, 1993) to allow participants to influence- and be influenced by- others. Adolescents were able to interact with one another in a conversation format, thereby refuting or strengthening other participants' responses.

Each focus group was guided by a moderator who asked questions, listened, kept conversations on track, made sure everyone had the opportunity to share, and controlled discussion with minimal verbal prompts (Krueger & Casey, 2000). One moderator (first author) led all focus group sessions. An assistant moderator was also present for each focus group, and either the moderator or assistant moderator was of the same gender and ethnicity as the group.

The means of questioning appeared spontaneous and conversational, although they were developed previously by the moderator with careful thought and reflection. The key questions were consistent across groups in order to make direct comparisons, although new questions evolved over the course of the data collection period. The moderator formed questions for later groups based upon the themes mentioned in earlier groups (e.g. cheating in relationships). For example, some of the

key questions that were asked in each focus group included: What does it mean to be in a “romantic relationship”?; Think back to your last or current relationship. Describe what it was like.; What would your ideal romantic relationship be like?; What are some benefits of being in a romantic relationship?; What are some difficulties of being in a romantic relationship? Cheating was the most common response to the question about difficulties in romantic relationships. Consequently, questions about cheating in relationships became a key question in subsequent focus groups.

Plan of analysis

Data from focus groups included audiotaped recordings, field notes from the assistant moderator, and verbatim transcripts from assistant moderators. The data were entered into QSR Nvivo (i.e., a qualitative software program, Gibbs, 2002) for the purpose of conducting content analysis of the written descriptions. This method of data coding/categorizing is a form of content analysis in which the researcher considers the participants' responses within the focus group as a whole and looks for recurring themes or conceptual ideas that can be sorted into meaningful categories. That is, the unit of analysis was the group, rather than the individual. Using this approach, codes (themes) originated from several careful readings of the data itself rather than from a pre-existing conceptual framework. Weight was given to comments on the basis of frequency, specificity, emotion, and extensiveness (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Two coders (first and second authors) analyzed the data and developed an open coding scheme (Creswell, 2007) by forming categories; within each category, themes/subcategories were identified. Following the open coding procedure, a selective coding process was used to integrate, connect, and refine categories and to search for confirming examples of each category within the data (Creswell, 2007). Once the coding scheme was complete, a third researcher coded the data to verify the reliability of the coding scheme ($K = .74$, indicating good reliability). Both coders documented written descriptions of coding steps. The results include descriptions of categories emerging from the data, along with quotations from participants supporting these categories; the results are interpreted in terms of meanings by gender and ethnicity.

Results

Results for this study are presented in themes. Explanations of the themes are integrated with direct quotations from participants. Each quotation indicates a different person speaking in the group, and bolded statements indicate that the moderator is speaking. Peer names have been changed to protect their identity. It should be noted that every focus group (FG) spontaneously mentioned cheating as a problem in relationships or discussed cheating in response to open-ended questions regarding problems in relationships. For example, a White boy group (FG 10) was asked, **“So what are some problems you’ve had in your relationships?”**

“Cheating.”

“Straight up cheating.”

“Hey, I’m stating the obvious that’s all.”

All four group types (i.e., Mexican American boys, Mexican American girls, White boys, and White girls) discussed infidelity using the term “cheating”, though the original key questions were broad and did not ask directly about cheating. Rather, adolescents spontaneously used this term to describe infidelity as a part of romantic relationship experiences, through the telling of personal stories or relating experiences of their peers. Attitudes towards cheating reflected a range of emotion from anger and resentment to ambivalence and humor, and an understanding of cheating behavior varied greatly across focus groups, encompassing a range of sexual activity (e.g., from flirtatious behavior to sexual intercourse with another partner). Within this broad definition of cheating, two larger reoccurring themes emerged after several careful readings of the data and were coded as 1) perceptions of cheating and 2) consequences of cheating (see Table 2). Within the first theme, three sub-themes emerged: Individually-oriented (worry/suspicion), peer-oriented (gossip/rumors), and cheating frequency. Within the second theme, three sub-themes emerged: Commitment, emotional responses, and relationship outcomes.

Gender and ethnic differences

It is notable that throughout each of the themes/sub-themes identified across the focus groups, distinct gender and ethnic differences arose. By and large girls, and especially Mexican American girls, were the most emotionally reactive, provided the most detailed descriptions, and spent the most time talking about cheating in their romantic relationships. Gender and ethnic differences also were evident within each of the two broad themes (perceptions and consequences of cheating).

Within the first theme, perceptions of cheating, there were gender and ethnic differences within the peer-oriented perceptions sub-theme. The prevalence and impact of gossip and rumors were discussed less often by White boys compared to the other groups. Girls and Mexican American adolescents gave more descriptive examples that included stronger emotional reactions, including considerable distress as a result of peer influence in their romantic relationships surrounding cheating behavior. There appeared to be no gender or ethnic differences regarding adolescents' perceptions of how often they believed cheating occurred, all groups believed that cheating happens in most adolescent romantic relationships, or in the manner in which they described worrying about or suspecting cheating in their own relationships.

Table 2
Cheating themes.

Theme	Sub-theme	Definition	Examples
Perceptions of cheating	Individual-oriented: Worry/suspicion	Cheating is discussed in terms of worry or suspicion that a romantic partner is cheating.	"...you are worried that someone is going to cheat on you or, yeah. Because you don't want to get hurt." (Mexican American girl, FG 2)
	Peer-oriented: Gossip/rumors	Worry or suspicion over being cheated on can be fueled by gossip spread by peers.	"...if you're with her and then her friends don't like you they'll probably start some rumors like oh yeah we've seen him [with] some other girl or something, so that might kinda ruin it." (Mexican American boy, FG 13)
	Frequency	Cheating is believed to happen often, sometimes more often than can be proved.	"I'm sure that happens more than people think." (White boy, FG 12) "I don't know if I have been cheated on. I probably have." (Mexican American girl, FG 14)
Consequences of cheating	Commitment	Cheating may happen when one person does not want to commit to a relationship.	"It's hard, you know, to see one person...his eyes wander. It's like it's competition." (White girl, FG 8) "I've been cheating...you don't really want to be tied down." (Mexican American girl, FG 4)
	Emotional Response	After discovering that a partner has cheated, feelings range from hurt to revenge or indifference.	"It can be difficult sometimes especially if you know that girl's running around...and she's not like just with you and you end up hurting yourself just for her." (White boy, FG 5)
	Relationship outcomes	After one partner cheats, relationships typically end.	"If they cheat on you, dump them." (Mexican American girl, FG 14) "In my last one [relationship] the guy ended up cheating on me. We are actually still good friends." (White girl, FG 1)

Within the second theme, consequences of cheating, there were noteworthy gender and ethnic differences across each of the three sub-themes. Specifically, within the commitment sub-theme, Mexican American girls spoke more frequently and strongly about a partner's decision to cheat on them (less frequently about their own decision to cheat) while very little discussion emerged from White boys about this aspect of cheating and Mexican American boy groups did not discuss this at all. Within the emotional response sub-theme, girls spoke about their emotional reactions towards being a victim of cheating more strongly, more frequently, and included a greater range of emotional reactions than boys. Finally, within the relationship outcome sub-theme, Mexican American girls allocated a majority of the discussion to a relationship's direction after being cheated on, typically describing a relationship's dissolution.

The following descriptions of each sub-theme offer specific examples of the ways in which adolescents understand cheating.

Perceptions of cheating

Adolescents partially understand cheating through the lens of their own experiences as a victim or as a perpetrator of infidelity. They also understand cheating through the experiences of their peers; suspicion or mistrust of their partner and fears of being cheated on often begin over conversation with peers and are perpetuated by social interaction. Peers also appear to fuel the general perception that cheating happens often, possibly more than is discovered or labeled "cheating."

Individually-oriented perceptions

Much of the discussion surrounding cheating involved expressions of worry that a partner might cheat or a lack of trust in a partner's ability to remain monogamous. One Mexican American girl, voicing her own concerns, (FG 2) said, "You are worried that someone is going to cheat on you...because you don't want to get hurt." A Mexican American boy group (FG 11) discussed cheating as a constant worry for someone in a relationship:

"Any little thing...you have to do a project with that guy? Is it really a project? Or something like that."

"You just get all paranoid."

"You'll both be constantly fighting. Are you cheating on me? Are you cheating on me?"

While worry over cheating was described as a negative feeling, it was also accepted as a common emotion accompanying romantic relationships. A White female (FG 1) described her own worried thoughts:

"I wonder if this person really is where he says he is? And you want to believe that he is, you know, with his friends, but you have a feeling that he is not. And so like, it just overwhelms you and that emotion becomes something even greater. And it's all because of this guy that you wanted to believe, but you couldn't."

While an individual's worry that a partner is cheating may be unfounded, it may also be a result of past experience with cheating. When an adolescent has been previously cheated on in a relationship, the experience breeds suspicion and mistrust for new relationships. However, this mistrust in a new partner's commitment does not necessarily deter adolescents from getting into a new relationship. The risk of being cheated on is an accepted, normal risk adolescents take. One White boy (FG 5) described his perception of common cheating experiences: "There's some people that have trouble trying to trust people...it can be difficult sometimes especially if you know that girl's running around doing her thing and she's not just like with you and you end up hurting yourself for her." In this instance, the boy recognizes difficulty trusting as a part of a relationship, just as cheating and emotional pain may be a part of the relationship, too.

Peer-oriented perceptions

Peer-oriented perceptions of cheating were mentioned more frequently than individual worry or suspicion, indicating the important role peers play in the relationship process. For adolescents, romantic relationships are extremely public, susceptible to the negative opinions and suspicions of peers. A White girl group (FG 9) discussed their views on the public nature of relationships, and important role peers play, in an example of a friend 'Kate' and her boyfriend 'Jake':

"Like, a good example...you know that whole Jake drama. Like, everybody got in [Kate's] relationship, but if someone had not said something about Jake and what he was like..."

"How he was basically...talking to every other girl."

"Like betraying her."

In this discussion, peer involvement is described as negative but necessary; without peer involvement, the friend would not have known "what he was like." This example also indicates that Jake's behavior may have only involved his talking, or showing interest, to other girls; yet, that seemed to be enough for this group of adolescents to describe his behavior as a "betrayal". To address the conflict over peer involvement in relationships, another White girl (from the same group) explained that sometimes trusted peers can be helpful but that it is more likely that peers are simply involved to create "drama":

"Where it's like a friend telling you and it's no one else involved, then it's fine. But it's just to the point where people who you don't even know are like, are gossiping about you, are talking about you or giving their opinions and you don't even need them."

This statement highlights the expectation that peers (both friends and acquaintances or "enemies") will inevitably be involved in romantic relationships. Romantic partners may not always agree on welcome and unwelcome peers, especially when partners have different friends or allegiances. A Mexican American boy (FG 13) described what appeared to be his own struggle over this tension: "If you're with her and then her friends don't like you they'll probably start some rumors like 'Oh yeah, we've seen him [with] some other girl' or something, so that might kinda ruin it." Peers have a powerful ability to sabotage relationships explicitly or subtly; a Mexican American girl group (FG 2) described their experiences by relaying that, when pieces of information from peers add up, unneeded suspicion in a partner results:

"I think it's kind of hard because we hear a lot of crap from other people. Like, there's a lot of people that are like, 'Oh well, you know, I heard this and that'."

"He cheated on you at this party with this girl."

"Yeah, and then you nag them next, you know...you're like okay, 'You know, I heard you cheated on me.' And then he gets mad, 'Why you freaking listening to other people?' I think it's kind of hard."

Across focus groups, adolescents continually described the fragile nature of romantic relationships as they are influenced by peers; sometimes peers were blamed for starting rumors or passing on false information about a partner's cheating while other times partners were blamed when peers helped expose real instances of cheating. As adolescents navigate their social world, they are faced with having to choose between peers and romantic partners, and discern what truths to believe.

Cheating frequency

Although exclusivity was universally understood as an expectation for romantic relationships, it was also understood that this was frequently violated. Groups often relayed how common they believed cheating was among their peers (White boys, FG 10):

"...more common than we realize."

"Yeah."

For guys or girls or both?

"Both."

"Yeah."

"Definitely both."

"I don't know if I have been cheated on. I probably have." (Mexican American girl, FG 14)

Cheating was not only described as common, it was sometimes portrayed as inevitable; a Mexican American girl (FG 2) said, "I think they will end up cheating on you." Another Mexican American girl (FG 4) echoed this notion: "...there are a lot of

guys, or girls too, that will cheat.” The frequency of cheating (and its inevitability) was at times discussed without much emotion, as a fact adolescents simply live with.

Consequences of cheating

Perceptions of cheating discussed by the focus groups often described feelings about cheating rather than real incidents of cheating behavior. However, adolescents also described many incidents where they made the decision to cheat on a partner or experienced being a victim of cheating in their own relationships. From their descriptions, a coherent story emerged; a lack of commitment led to cheating, a variety of emotional responses were elicited when a partner cheated, and a relationship could take several directions after cheating occurred.

Commitment

The difficulty associated with maintaining an exclusive relationship was mentioned primarily by girl groups, but adolescents in many groups willingly admitted to cheating at some point in a relationship. They often cited temptation and an unwillingness to commit to an exclusive relationship as reasons for why they chose to cheat:

“I’ve cheated. Like temptations are around, it doesn’t mean that you don’t care about them, just shit comes up when you’re young.” (White girl, FG 8)

“I’ve been cheating...you don’t really want to be tied down...” (Mexican American girl, FG 4)

A White boy (FG 10) also described his difficulty committing:

“You’ll be like hitting it off with one girl at one school and another girl at another school and like they have no idea about each other but one day like you’ll start getting more interested in one of them and the other girl will be all hurt and like the whole friendship is gone.”

Difficulty committing and temptation often coincide; a White girl (FG 8) describes both these reasons for her boyfriends’ cheating:

“It’s kind of hard, you know, just trying to stay with a person. It’s like, in my last relationship...he introduced me to his sister and his mom or like even his family as his girlfriend and we just started hanging out more and more and all that stuff and then slowly but surely it stopped and he started seeing some other chick from his work and it’s like I got pushed away. It’s hard, you know, to see one person...his eyes wander. It’s like it’s competition.”

This adolescent seemed to understand and accept her former boyfriend’s difficulty committing. She does not blame him for his “wandering eyes”, and does not label the incident as real cheating because of the difficulty associated with staying with one person. Her experience was not uncommon; lacking a desire to commit was discussed across groups and was the only reason frequently given for why cheating occurred.

Emotional responses

When a romantic partner cheated, a variety of emotional and social responses followed. One Mexican American girl (FG 2) described experiencing denial, saying, “Even if it is true, it’s like you do not want to find out,” while another Mexican American girl (FG 2) experienced regret in a relationship she had had in middle school with an older boy: “I was so stupid to think that he really liked me, that guy. He had a girlfriend like in high school...and I was just stupid to think that he actually was serious about me or something.”

Discovering infidelity can produce painful emotion, especially when an adolescent is conflicted over terminating or continuing the relationship. These emotions arise across cheating behaviors (e.g. in response to a partner’s flirting with or having sexual intercourse with another person), and may reflect the heightened emotional responses common in adolescence, especially in situations where older adolescents or adults would not ordinarily perceive the behavior as cheating. Interestingly, the strength of emotional reactions did not always correspond with relationship’s length; cheating in new romantic relationships or casual dating relationships can still be painful, even when the relationship is seen by others as casual or lacking in commitment:

Do you think you would still feel like that person is your boyfriend even though they are not and it’s just casual? Do you think you would still have the same feeling [regarding cheating]?

“Maybe the same feeling, but like you know that it’s not the same.”

“If a guy cheated on [me] or something, if I was actually dating him I wouldn’t be able to like say something because I am supposed to trust [him]...and casually, I kind of don’t have a right to say anything.” (Mexican American girls, FG 4)

Adolescents also discussed potential responses to emotional (rather than physical) forms of cheating (White boys, FG 12):

“It can even be like, you don’t have to cheat on someone like physically you can cheat on someone emotionally like you know or like mentally you know just having feelings for someone else is cheating too.”

“Just in a different way.”

These complex responses reflect diverse emotional experiences with cheating, and a varied developmental capacity for commitment and intimacy in adolescent relationships.

Relationship outcomes

Once a romantic partner believed they discovered an incident of cheating, a decision regarding the relationship had to be made. Adolescents discussed the range of outcomes cheating might produce in a relationship, including revenge:

“Other couples just like cheat back. They would be like, ‘Oh, he cheated on me, I cheated on him back.’ They just keep going on and on... like, ‘Oh, he is cheating on me, so it doesn’t matter.’ You know.”

“But then on the phone, ‘Oh, I love you’.” (Mexican American girls, FG 14).

While describing vengeful behavior, this response reflects some apathy towards the infidelity (e.g. “it doesn’t matter”) and implies that relationships are often repaired (e.g., “oh, I love you”). Another Mexican American girl (FG 2) expressed similar apathy towards her experience of being cheated on: “He ended up lying to me, for one, cheating on me, for two, and three, he told all of his friends that I was his sister, so [laughter] it was just a big waste of time.” A White girl (FG 1), described her recent response towards cheating as relatively neutral:

“In my last one the guy ended up cheating on me [Laughter]...we are actually still good friends.” (White girl, FG 1)

In most of the examples above, it is implied that although some relationships are maintained the majority dissolved after cheating, and across focus groups, adolescents generally described an expectation that relationships do end after one partner cheats. Sometimes, the end of a relationship had social (as well as emotional) consequences; a Mexican American girl group (FG 14) described social consequences, indicating the prevalence of negative gender stereotypes held by peers:

“But if they don’t know what happened, then obviously they are going to believe the guy because the guy always automatically transforms the girl into looking like a ho.”

“Like, ‘Oh yeah, I caught her doing this with some guy.’”

While most focus groups described relationships ending, there were exceptions, reflecting the desire for some adolescents (specifically girls) to remain committed, as in this example of one White girl’s (FG 8) experience:

“A week into our relationship he got drunk and high with some chick who he has never met and he said he didn’t remember any of it, but he woke up the next morning in her bed with no clothes on and they had had sex. So, and I just found this out like not too long ago. That was pretty hard. I was still saying that, you know, I wanted to be with him...”

Discussion

Though the research literature is rich with information regarding perceptions and effects of infidelity among adult and older adolescent romantic relationships, this qualitative study is distinctive in its examination of cheating behavior across middle adolescence from the perspective of the youth themselves. Adolescents’ discussions of cheating revealed a wide range of emotional and social responses, differing across gender and ethnicity, and may be uniquely distinct from the experience of infidelity in adult relationships (e.g., the role of peers). Although talking time did not vary substantially across gender and ethnicity, adolescent girls spoke more strongly and explicitly about cheating than adolescent boys, and Mexican American adolescents felt more negatively about cheating than White adolescents. In particular, Mexican American girls discussed cheating in more detail than all other groups, followed by White girls, Mexican American boys and White boys. Meaningful gender and ethnic differences also emerged across the sub-themes, suggesting that the lived experiences as a girl/boy and as a Mexican American/White adolescent is a factor in shaping attitudes and perceptions of cheating in romantic relationships.

A discussion of the limitations of the study is warranted prior to interpreting a more detailed account of the findings. Despite an established link between attitudes (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) and motivations (Patrick & Maggs, 2009) to risk behaviors, adolescents’ perceptions may still differ from their actual behaviors, particularly regarding emotional reactions to infidelity. How one thinks they will feel and how they actually will feel is not as easily predicted as perhaps deciding to engage in a behavior (e.g., deciding to cheat). The methodological approach also has limitations. The focus groups allowed for the inclusion of peer perceptions and a broad question base for participants to generate their own ideas about dating relationships from their unique perspectives, however, this approach is limiting in that the participants were not directed to respond to whether they were the victim or the perpetrator of cheating due to the group environment (they chose to volunteer this information or not) and were not questioned as to how cheating may be relevant to their own identity and intimacy goals. These issues would be better explored in studies using individual interviews. In-depth interviews would allow for greater attention to be paid to developmental differences in infidelity, including explorations of intimacy and identity goals, and the meaning it has for adolescent, and later adult, romantic relationships. We were unable to explore developmental differences in the present study (i.e., a 2 (gender) × 2 (ethnicity) × 2 (age) design) but believe it merits consideration in future qualitative studies. Finally, the small, non-random sample, age range, and ethnicity selection limit generalizability to other adolescents, especially outside the age and ethnic composition represented in this study.

The experiences of cheating relayed by adolescents may suggest that the developmental goals of both intimacy and identity are sometimes at odds with one another (Blatt & Blass, 1996). The adolescents who revealed their experiences as a “perpetrator” of cheating in past relationships may express the need for independence from a relationship, seeking a personal identity outside of their connection to another person; conversely, a number of adolescents also distress over infidelity in relatively casual or short-term relationships, suggesting their search for intimacy (Sanderson & Cantor, 1995).

While the focus group interviews were unable to address whether cheating occurred as a result from adolescents' attempts to balance these competing developmental goals, they did clearly situate experiences of cheating within a larger developmental context of peer and social experiences (Sanderson & Cantor, 1995), offered a perspective on cheating in adolescent relationships that encompasses both intimacy and identity goals, and highlighted potential differing developmental needs associated with ethnicity and gender.

Differences in cheating across the two ethnic groups represented in the focus group discussions support assumptions in the literature regarding cultural/ethnic differences in the expectations for romantic relationships (Coates, 1999). For example, Mexican American girls discussed commitment problems associated with cheating and the impact of cheating on the relationship more frequently and with greater emotional fervor than any other group. These illustrations speak to the importance of commitment in romantic relationships, particularly in earlier stages in development, which is more evident in Mexican American culture. Mexican American girls may place greater value on commitment and relationship security than other adolescents, as these components to a relationship can be seen as essential for upholding the high values placed on family and parenthood in Mexican culture (East, 1998). Commitment in a relationship may also coincide with Mexican American/Latina's desire for earlier transitions to relationship milestones (e.g. sexual activity, marriage, pregnancy; East, 1998). While Mexican American girls offered a variety of perspectives on commitment and relationships after cheating, their focus on these two issues may reflect attitudes towards cheating more similar to older adolescents and adults than their peers (Raffaelli, 2005).

Unlike Mexican American girls, Mexican American boys' discussions of cheating did not emerge as markedly different from other groups. The literature has not yet identified many unique features of Mexican American boys' romantic relationship experiences or expectations. Our findings support the possibility that Mexican American boys may be less likely to follow prescribed cultural expectations than girls regarding dating behaviors (Upchurch, Levy-Storms, Sucoff, & Aneshensel, 1998) or Mexican American boys' cultural adherence to machismo (i.e., the socialization of males toward responsibility, protection, providing for the family, and demonstrations of honor and respect for others; Marin, 1993) may result in male dominance in the romantic relationship. In addition, boys experience less parental monitoring than girls (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006) and for Mexican American boys, less parental monitoring may result in greater freedoms within romantic relationships including involvement in less committed/monogamous relationships. Future research should explore the romantic relationship experiences of Mexican American boys in greater depth, within the context of cultural expectations and levels of acculturation.

By far, girls revealed stronger emotional responses to betrayal than did boys. This coincides with prior research finding emotional expression more common and more socially acceptable for girls compared to boys (Durik et al., 2006; Way & Greene, 2006), along with an earlier and more pronounced desire for intimacy among girls relative to boys (Scheidel & Marcia, 1985). In addition, girls may feel more strongly about cheating, particularly as it relates to their reputation, or they may simply feel more comfortable talking about their emotions (Giordano et al., 2006). While discussing how it feels to be cheated on, a few girls mentioned feeling like they had been cheated on but could not express it because the relationship was casual, and they did not have a right to feel betrayed without a mutual commitment from their partner. This imbalance may reflect girls' greater desire for intimacy within their relationships (Lytle et al., 1997; Scheidel & Marcia, 1985), in which girls may sacrifice some of their needs in romantic relationships (i.e., commitment obligations) in order to fulfill intimacy desires (i.e., a close, intimate connection with another person).

Some girls talked about choosing not to become involved in a committed relationship because they wanted to avoid the negative emotions associated with infidelity. These perspectives revealed a need to protect themselves against the pain of betrayal that boys did not express. Interestingly, no gender differences emerged in discussing individual worry over being cheated on; this finding may support prior literature that found that actual incidents of cheating may not differ for boys and girls (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a).

When comparing cheating in adolescent romantic relationships identified in this study to prior research on infidelity in adulthood and older adolescence, differences emerge. Adolescent relationships, by virtue of their short duration and a ready availability of single partners, lack the complexity of adult relationships which allow for easier relationship termination after cheating has occurred. Adolescents also do not typically experience the deep emotional, financial, and social aspects of commitment to a partner and/or the relationship that adults do (Blow & Hartnett, 2005); adolescents may be able to end a relationship or take incidents of cheating more lightly because they have less to lose. This was true for the adolescents in this study who expressed ambivalent or unemotional responses to cheating, and for some of the focus groups that discussed accepting the prevalence of cheating as common and inevitable among adolescent romantic relationships.

The public nature of adolescent relationships marks another difference between adolescent and adult infidelity. This study revealed frequent incidents where a friend or a partner's friend interfered with the relationship, spreading a rumor to cause suspicion of cheating or encouraging an adolescent to end the relationship over suspected cheating. Peer involvement seemed to hold considerable weight in the fate of a romantic relationship in the face of cheating behavior, perhaps due to the increasingly important role placed on peers in adolescence (Brown et al., 1997) or due to a reliance on peer evaluations in the development of adolescents' self-concept (Parker, 2001). Each of these differences provides support for a developmental distinction between adult and adolescent romantic relationships, suggesting that relationships during middle adolescence are in some ways different from both older adolescents and adults, as cheating in older adolescent romantic relationships often mirrors cheating in adulthood (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999b).

The meaning and contexts of cheating identified in this study have implications for promoting healthy dating behavior during adolescence. Feelings of mistrust and insecurity resulting from cheating experiences in adolescent romantic

relationships can inhibit trust and security within relationships in adulthood (Roscoe et al., 1988). The frequency of cheating discussed in this study through the retelling of actual cheating incidents, as well as the overall expectation that cheating commonly occurs in relationships, may also be associated with increased health risks for adolescents including sexually transmitted infections (STI's), particularly given evidence that indicates adolescents decrease contraceptive use as a relationship becomes more established (Ellen, Cahn, Eyre, & Boyer, 1996; Fortenberry, Tu, Harezlak, Katz, & Orr, 2002), especially for Hispanic youth (Aarons & Jenkins, 2002; Bauman & Berman, 2005), as an indication of trust in their partner (Kirkman, Rosenthal, & Smith, 1998; Moore & Rosenthal, 1998). Although we were not able to discern the range of partners adolescents would cheat with in a given relationship, the high rate of cheating in both casual and committed adolescent romantic relationships, coupled with the belief that condom use is a sign of infidelity, renders victims of cheating potentially vulnerable to STI's that their partner may have contracted during extradyadic sexual activity (Bauman & Berman, 2005). Despite this risk, many cheating incidents in adolescence involve behavior (such as flirting, kissing, or becoming emotionally close) that do not increase risks to sexual health but may pose increased risks to social and emotional health and well-being.

This study uniquely contributes to the adolescent romantic relationship literature, offering a perspective on infidelity drawn completely from adolescents themselves. Adolescents differed across ethnicity and gender in both their experiences of cheating in romantic relationships and the subjective meaning cheating holds. In addition, adolescents experienced cheating and understood commitment differently than adults, indicating a more limited developmental capacity for commitment during adolescence. Future research is advised to continue to explore the intersection between ethnicity/culture and cheating behavior. Our exploratory contribution to this area of adolescent research has suggested the importance of this component towards a better understanding of romantic relationships.

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