SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM, PARENTAL ETHNOTHEORIES, AND SEX EDUCATION: EXPLORING
VALUES AND BELIEF SYSTEMS IN A MEXICAN/MEXICAN-AMERICAN POPULATION

Adia Major

A Thesis

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Committee:

Dr. Margaret Booth, Advisor

Dr. Christopher Frey

Dr. Sandra Faulkner
The purpose of this study is to analyze the influence of three cultural components on Mexican-American/Mexican identity. After an exhaustive review of literature relating to sociology, health, religion, and sexuality, three main themes emerged in terms of shaping the values and belief systems of Mexican-Americans/Mexicans. These themes are familism, parental ethnotheories, and religion. This study then explores how these themes may influence sexual education programs that target Mexican-American/Mexican adolescents. The central hypothesis is that sexual education programs that serve a Mexican-American adolescent population must address issues of familism, parental ethnotheories, and religion in order to be culturally relevant and effective. The current study employs a qualitative research methodology that is informed by a social constructionist conceptual framework and a grounded theory analysis of the accumulated data.
Dedicated to

Samanta, Jacob, and Liset and to all my other muchachos in the DR who are too many to name, but for whom I desire to do much more

E’ Pa’ ‘Lante Que Vamos!

In loving memory of Oye, Auntie Maybelle, Javier, and Grandma
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Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. Psalm 1:1-3

Above all else, all glory goes to God, for without Him, I would be nothing. I thank the Lord for blessing me with a family that has been unfailingly supportive throughout. Specifically, I would like to thank my mother, Missionary Sherry Major, for crying and praying with me, my father, Elder Dawn Major, for understanding and believing in me, and my Uncle Kevin, for making me laugh and helping me to keep my hardships in perspective.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I. BACKGROUND</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III. FINDINGS</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Values and Norms Influencing Gender Differences</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Family within a Mexican/Mexican-American Context</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>La Fe</em>: Aspects of Faith as Core Values of the Culture</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex Education and Parent-Adolescent Communication</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV. DISCUSSION</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Construction of Masculinity and Femininity</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Parents Communicate with Their Children about Sex</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Parents Communicate to Their Children about Sex and Sexuality</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture, Religion, and Sexuality</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Sex Education</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER V. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX A. INSTRUMENTS</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX B. CONSENT LETTER</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure/Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Description of Parent Participants</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Description of Young Adult Participants</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Description of Clergy Participants</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Description of Health Educator Participants</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

A reoccurring theme emerging from healthcare literature and practice is the importance of creating sexual health prevention programs that are culturally specific and appropriate. As the researcher for this current investigation has prior experience in the implementation of sexual health education programs in the Dominican Republic, the rationale for this study derived from an interest in designing sex education programs that serve a predominantly Hispanic population in the Northwest Ohio region of the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), Hispanic-Americans constitute the largest minority group in the Northwest Ohio region; in terms of ethnic origin the majority of the aforementioned group self-identify as Mexican/Mexican-American. Due to health disparities, the Ohio Commission on Minority Health was founded in recognition of the need to combat health disparities within minority populations of Ohio. Thus, the current investigation examined how health disparities in the realm of sexual health could be overcome by culturally specific sex education programming (Ohio Commission on Minority Health, 2009).

Hence, this study examined the socio-cultural factors that may influence rates of transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STI’s) and the occurrence of unwanted pregnancies within the Mexican/Mexican-American community. In particular, this study focused on the social construction of sexuality as informed by individuals of Mexican descent. As a result, this examination contributes to the understanding of Mexican/Mexican-American attitudes and belief systems towards sexuality, in order to develop a framework for sexual health education programs that serve this particular population.

Sexual health education can play an important role in preventing the further spread of HIV/AIDS: the idea being that informed individuals can make better and safer choices that will
ultimately reduce their risk of transmission. The Sexual Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) defines sex education as “a lifelong process of acquiring information and forming attitudes, beliefs, and values…encompass[ing] sexual development, sexual and reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, affection, intimacy, body image, and gender roles” (2006, p. 1).

This comprehensive definition of sexual health education shows us that it is just as important to acknowledge pre-existing values and belief systems, as it is to acknowledge issues that pertain directly to overall human sexuality. As attitudes and belief systems are commonly shared across cultures, this study investigates three main topics from the cultural lens of individuals of Mexican descent living in the United States: the cultural construction of sexuality; the relationship between cultural values and parent-adolescent communication about sexuality; and the intersection of culture, sexuality, and religion. Overall, this study addresses the question: How does Mexican/Mexican-American culture influence attitudes towards sexuality and how then do these attitudes translate to sexual education programming for the target population?

*Conceptual and theoretical framework*

While previous research has highlighted the importance of understanding the social construction of sexuality in Mexican/Mexican-American culture, these studies generally deal with understanding relationships between heterosexual couples and how sexuality is constructed by the culture that informs these relationships (Hirsch, Higgins, Bentley, & Nathanson, 2002; Davila, 2005). This study is unique in that it examines sexuality not only through the experiences of couples, but also through the beliefs and experiences of the family and community, including parents, adolescents, clergy, and health educators.
The issues studied in this current investigation relate to religion, premarital-sex, and overall values and belief systems. As opposed to other studies, this research is not an attempt to understand sexual negotiation or sexual practices. Instead, it is more concerned with the values and belief systems that may or may not influence ideas of sexuality within the Mexican/Mexican American community.

Overall, this study went beyond the romantic dyad model to explain the social construction of sexuality, and examined the “meaning” of sexuality from sources such as family and religion, that studies have shown to be important to the Mexican/Mexican-American community overall (Umaña-Taylor & Yazedijian, 2006; Crockett, Brown, Russell, & Shen, 2007; Leon, 2004; Barton, 2006). As Young and Colin (2004) state, “Social constructionism covers a range of views from acknowledging how social factors shape interpretations to how the social world is constructed by social processes and relational practices” (p. 377). This social constructionist approach is informed by Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality*. It is the idea that “Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. [And] man is a social product” (Lemert, 1999, p. 388; Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

This paper focuses mostly on the second basic principle of Berger and Luckmann’s work by attempting to look at the sexual reality of Mexican/Mexican-Americans. As Harris (2006) states, “the central premise of social constructionism is that meaning is not inherent and that the central concerns of constructionist inquiry are to study what people ‘know’ and how they create, apply, contest, and act upon those ideas” (p. 225). Hence, as man is a social product, thoughts and attitudes towards issues such as sexuality, are constructed by social interactions which assign meaning to concepts.
Accordingly, this study will investigate meaning: in terms of how meaning is constructed by the participants involved, specifically the parents and young adults that identify as Mexican or Mexican-American. The social constructionist viewpoint implies that “words and concepts we use ‘are products of particular historical and cultural understandings rather than being universal and immutable categories of human experience’” (Bohan, 1996, p. xvi, as quoted in Muehlenhard and Kimes, 1999, p. 234). As a result, the historical context of what constitutes Mexican or Mexican-American identity and how this analysis relates to their current thoughts towards sexuality will be investigated.

The current study permits Latinos to define themselves, rather than defining their culture for them. Past research has been criticized for portraying sexuality in Latino culture in a negative light (Juarez and Kerl, 2003). In an effort to dispel “ethnocentric and essentialized understandings of both Latina/o culture and human sexuality” this study embraces the interpretations of the roots of sexual understanding from the perspective of Latinos themselves, rather than normalize dominant cultures’ ideas of sexuality (Juarez and Kerl, 2003, p.8).

As Hegarty and Pratto (2004) state: “All interpretations of intergroup difference are influenced by norms that privilege some groups as more normative than others” (p. 446). Instead of attempting to understand Latino sexuality from within the social prescriptions of the dominant culture and labeling Latino sexuality as the “other”, this study incorporates a different view. It is informed by the Juarez and Kerl’s (2003) critique, though while focusing on the breadth of the female experience in Latino culture, is applicable more broadly to both Latino and Latina sexuality:

It is critical for both popular writers and scholars to begin recognizing that Latina sexuality is complex, diverse, and always locally and historically situated… Recognizing
the ethnocentrism and essentialism inherent in both popular and scholarly paradigms and beginning to incorporate the marginal but more complex approaches will lead to better understandings of Latina and other sexualities and allow Latina/o communities to address inequality and other concerns in culturally specific ways. Latinas may have unique ways of expressing sexualities, but they are neither as repressed nor as oppressed as both popular culture and scholars would have us believe (pp. 10-11).

This study embraces the idea of understanding the discourse in which Latino sexuality is grounded rather than defining their reality by a more dominant majority US perspective. It is an overarching goal of this study to allow Latinos to voice their own understanding of their sexuality without being limited by paradigms established by the researcher.

The conceptual framework of this study is also informed by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other public health organizations. The CDC (2008) supports prevention programs that exist at both the individual and community level as effective ways to reduce the transmission of HIV/AIDS. As this study is concerned with serving a minority population, it is important to create a prevention/sexual health education program at the community level that is culturally specific and relevant. Particularly, this study will be used to show the importance of understanding cultural variables prior to working with a target population. The CDC states:

Moreover, to be effective, an education intervention must be culturally competent…

Cultural competence begins with the HIV/STD professional understanding and respecting cultural differences and understanding that the clients' cultures affect their beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (2008, p.1).
Similarly, The Health Resources and Services Administration (HSRA), under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, issued a report in 2001 entitled “Cultural Competence Works” which argues that health care issues need to be addressed in a culturally-specific manner, and suggests tools for healthcare providers to improve their level of cultural competency in diverse and multicultural settings. In terms of cultural competency, the HSRA states:

Cultural competence is demonstrated [by] the extent to which a program is able to value its target community’s knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about health care…. providers need to understand how to talk about sensitive issues such as sexuality…among others. In many cases, the provider must be willing to explore the individual life experiences of a client to find the underlying causes of their behaviors, which may not be readily apparent (p.2).

The following section is a review of literature pertaining to Mexican-American/Mexican cultural value systems, beliefs, and norms. As the previous section has indicated, before sex education can be implemented as a preventive measure against the spread of STI’s and the occurrence of unwanted pregnancies, we must first look at how and to what extent socio-cultural factors influence opinions of sex education and sexuality overall. Hence, the core cultural components of Mexican/Mexican-American identity will be discussed in greater detail below to allow health care providers to use cultural values as a guide to creating effective sexual health education programming for this target population.
CHAPTER I: BACKGROUND

Prior scholarship demonstrates that sexual education programs that serve Mexican-American adolescents must address three cultural components in order to be relevant to the target population (Colwell, Smith, Zhang, & Hill, 2000; Herrera, 2001). Specifically, these programs must address how parental cultural belief systems, familism, and religion relate to Mexican/Mexican-American identity. Successful programs should also take into consideration how cultural components impact sexual education programs that serve adolescent Mexican/Mexican-American populations.

It is also important to note that individuals of Mexican descent are not a homogenous group and that their culture and identity are influenced by a variety of factors. Their views and opinions are diverse, but there are shared experiences and values that contribute to the Mexican/Mexican-American identity. The importance of family is a theme that emerges throughout the literature concerning Mexican-Americans. Concepts such as filial piety, parent-child relationships, kinships, family cooperation and unity, are repeated in many texts and studies surrounding Mexican-American culture (Coltrane, Parke, & Adams, 2004; Updegraff, Whiteman, McHale, Thayer & Delgado, 2005; Umaña-Taylor & Yazedijian, 2006; Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). These concepts all fall under the umbrella term of familism or familismo.

Spirituality is also a prevalent topic in research concerning Mexican-American identity, as certain religious customs and traditions are viewed by Mexican/Mexican-Americans as being uniquely tied to the Mexican community (Leon, 2004; Barton, 2006; Umaña-Taylor & Yazedijian, 2006). Because of the prominence that these topics are given in terms of helping to define what it means to be Mexican-American, familism, parental cultural belief systems, and
religion will be explored in terms of how these concepts help shape the Mexican-American identity and hence, the culture.

*Familism*

The Mexican-American community shares a strong sense of familism that spans immigration status and generations (Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000; Gamble, Ramakumar, & Diaz, 2007). Thus we can look at Mexican-Americans who are first generation and those of later generations and see transgenerational importance of family within their communities, even if the level of adherence to familism is different (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007; Umaña-Taylor & Yazedjian, 2006). The typical Mexican-American family is rooted in a patriarchic system, where the husband is the head of the household. Extended families, especially grandparents, are also a fundamental part of the family system (Phinney et al., 2000).

Mexican traditions such as *La Cuarentena* and *La Quinceañera*, reinforce cultural norms that emphasize the importance of family. *La Cuarentena* “is a family ritual of 40 days duration post birth…[it] instills parental responsibility, incorporates individuals into the family, and integrates the family…crossing generational boundaries” (Niska, Snyder, & Lia-Hoagberg, 1998, p. 329). *La Quinceañera* brings together family after celebrating a female teenager’s journey from childhood to womanhood (Barton, 2006). These traditions illustrate the relationship between religion, gender, and family, linkages that are integral in the make-up of the Mexican-American family system.

Familism or *familismo* refers to the collective nature of Mexican-American families. In general it relates to the support, kinship, and togetherness that characterizes Mexican families in the U.S. and Mexico. “*Familismo* includes: (i) obedience and respect towards authority figures; (ii) helpfulness and loyalty toward the family, or support from family to solve problems; (iii)
responsibility, sacrifice and hard work for the benefit of the family” (Kao, McHugh, & Travis, 2007, p. 1462). There have been many studies that investigate the relationship between assimilation and familism (Kao et al., 2007; Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2008). In particular, these studies explore the extent to which familism remains an integral part of the Mexican-American family after immigration to the United States.

As mentioned in a variety of articles that explore ethnic identities post-immigration, acculturation can sometimes lead to a breakdown in traditional values, practices, and beliefs (Buriel, 1993). Some studies have shown that from generation to generation family systems change (Cardona, Busby & Wampler, 2004; Bacallo & Smokowski, 2007). This is a reflection of assimilation into dominant culture and the need to change family systems in order to survive in another country. Studies conducted in Mexico have mentioned that strict gender role identity has meant that women and men have traditionally fulfilled different roles in the household (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007; Smokowski et al., 2008). Men have been expected to provide the primary source of income for the household and women have been expected to stay home and take care of the family.

However, immigration to the United States has changed the strict gender roles in both Mexico and also in the U.S. Once in the United States, although husbands are still the main heads of the household, because of financial hardship, the wife also must seek employment (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). Likewise, in Mexico, when the husband immigrates to the U.S. and leaves his wife and family behind, the wife must then take on the role as head of the household (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007).

Ethnic identity has also found a strong, notable place in Mexican-American immigrant scholarship. The process of ethnic socialization plays an important role in Mexican-American
identity building. Research by Phinney and Chavira (1995) and Umaña-Taylor and Yazedijian (2006) investigate how parents and family shape children’s identity. Their research has found that despite adaptation to a new American culture, parents and other members of the family felt it was important to instill pride and knowledge of their culture in their children.

**Parental ethnotheories**

As noted earlier, familism does not preclude parental ethnotheories. In fact, familism provides the conditions that shape parental cultural belief systems (Crockett et al., 2007). Parental ethnotheories are the overall beliefs towards child-rearing that parents employ based on their cultural values and belief systems (Super & Harkness, 1997). In order to understand parental ethnotheories of Mexican-Americans, we must first be aware of the culture that influences the belief of Mexican-American parents. Super and Harkness speak of the caretaker’s psychology as the combination of concepts that parents draw upon to rear their children. Parents do not exist outside their culture so their child-rearing beliefs are molded by their culture. An exploration of values associated with Mexican-American culture illuminates the importance of these core cultural “messages” in parenting (Super & Harkness, 1997, p. 11).

Like parents of many ethnic groups, Mexican-American parents place a great deal of importance on values. However, values are subjective and defined by both one’s environment as well as culture (Segall, Dasen, Berry, & Poortinga, 1999). Various studies have investigated what values are important to Mexican-American parents. Repeatedly familism and respect (*respeto*) were mentioned (Umaña-Taylor & Yazedijian, 2006; Crockett et al., 2007; Updegraff et al., 2005). Another investigation showed that for parents respect shown through obedience was of high importance (Arcia & Johnson, 1998). Several articles also mentioned that Mexican-American parents wanted their children to learn to show respect for others and to grow up to be
good citizens, in addition to learning how to make good decisions and take care of themselves (Azmitia, Cooper, García, & Dunbar, 1996; Gamble et al., 2007). The parents in these studies stressed the importance of trust between parent and child. Another important element of parenthood was ensuring that their children grew up with confidence to be responsible citizens, to respect others and to be the type of person others respect (Azmitia et al., 1996; Delgado & Ford, 1998). This concept can be summarized under the words *bien educado* while directly translated means well-educated, but is meant to describe someone who is respectful and well-mannered (Delgado & Ford, 1998).

The family system of Mexican-Americans is not limited to the nuclear family. It is characterized by an extended family, one that includes grandparents, godparents, non-familial community members as well as religious institutions. The church, a facet of “Mexican-ness” that so far has not been mentioned, plays a vital role in Mexican-American identity. Several studies have shown a link between Mexican-American parents’ religious views and their moral expectations for their children (Azmitia et al., 1996; Delgado & Ford, 1998). The following section explores the relationship between religion, spirituality, faith, and Mexican culture.

*Religion and its connection to sexuality and culture*

The purpose of this section is to explore the relationship between sexuality and religion in Latino culture, in general, and Mexican-American culture specifically. The three major topics relating to sexuality that will be discussed are: sexual decision-making, communication, and activity. Primarily, this section will discuss how sex-role ideologies and female sexual identity of Mexican-Americans are shaped by religion. A discussion of sexuality and religion would not be complete without also exploring the cultural value systems and beliefs that shape sex-role ideologies. The following review of literature will show the link between how Latinos negotiate
aspects of sexuality in a culture where religion and identity are so closely fused into one. Therefore, to begin this review we shall look at religion and its ties to Mexican-American identity.

Nabhan-Warren (2005), has found that “traditional realities” of the Mexican American family focus on “commitments to familia (family), fe (faith), and comunidad (community). The Mexican-American community is more than just a group of individuals who share Mexican heritage. It is a group of individuals who share common beliefs, values, and opinions. It is a culture that finds cohesion in being able to link together family, faith, and community. These core components of Mexican-American culture are also seen in their religious communities. Arguably, the religious communities in which Mexican-Americans participate are an extension of their family system.

Several authors have written about the degree to which the church community acts as an extended family for many Mexican-Americans (Leon, 2004; Barton, 2006). For this reason, scholars of Mexican and Mexican-American culture have found it hard to distinguish between what is a cultural practice and what is a religious practice in the Mexican-American community (Leon, 2004; Barton, 2006, Umaña-Taylor & Yazedijian, 2006). In fact, a Mexico-born mother interviewed in one study readily agreed with this assertion stating that religion was not separate from [Mexican] culture (Umaña-Taylor & Yazedijian, 2006).

The scholarly literature suggests that Mexican religious minorities, such as Protestants, hold sentiments similar to the Catholic majority. Barton (2006) presents an exhaustive review of the experiences and history of Mexican-American Protestants in Texas. He mentions that in the United States, Mexican immigrants that identified as Presbyterian, Methodist, and Baptist were forced to remove traditions and practices from their religious services that were seen as Catholic.
They were discouraged from practicing various rituals from *Dia de Los Muertos* to *La Quinceañera*. Arguably, the forced removal of these rituals and traditions were also a means to strip away Mexican identity through religious acculturation.

Over the years, these rituals and traditions have been reinstated in Protestant churches with a predominantly Mexican congregation. Now weddings can include the traditional godparents as in Mexico, and young Mexican women can celebrate their journey into womanhood once they reach 15, regardless of their religious affiliation. Barton (2006) states that this is an attempt by Mexican-Americans to reclaim their traditions and rituals that were viewed primarily as Catholic, but are also an important part of their Mexican identity. It is also an attempt to show that these rituals are about Mexican culture and do not belong to one particular religious background (2006). Literature concerning the rise of Protestantism in the Mexican population addresses the fact that Mexican-Americans are striving to make their religious experiences fit according to cultural and ethnic ideas. In an attempt to safeguard their identity as Mexican-Americans, cultural traditions and religion have virtually become one (2006).

According to Barkan (2006), scholars such as Emile Durkheim have long attempted to explain the relationship between religiosity and sexual behavior:

Processes of social learning and social control should yield an inverse association between religiosity and deviant behavior, including certain sexual behaviors…In this way of thinking, religion is one of several socializing forces responsible for the internalization of norms of moral behavior (p. 408).

Plainly put, religion acts as a form of socialization in which certain expectations and beliefs are indoctrinated, so that one’s moral compass is aligned with religious doctrine. Accordingly, several studies have shown a correlation between religiosity and sexual behavior.
Hardy and Raffaelli (2003), as well as, Jones, Darroch and Singh, (2005) specifically mention this relationship. Similarly, Scheepers, Grotenhuis, and Van Der Silk (2002), found “that church attendance and religious beliefs are strongly related to moral attitudes” (p. 171). Accordingly, the following section reviews the construction of sexuality within a Mexican/Mexican-American context, specifically addressing religious and historical influences on attitudes towards sexuality.

**Constructing sexuality**

In *Language and Sexuality*, Cameron and Kulick (2003), state that heterosexual acts conducted solely for pleasure were originally viewed as deviant sexual behavior. As a result, if a man had oral, anal, or vaginal sex with a pregnant woman, he would be labeled a heterosexual, a sexual perversion. According to the authors, until Freud and others validated a view of sex for pleasure as being “normal”, sex for any means outside of reproduction was seen as abnormal.

Although the views of Freud and others represented Western thinking at the time, a review of literature relating to sexuality in Pre-Columbian Mexico finds other culturally influential frameworks for what constitutes abnormal versus normal sexuality. For instance, Castro (2001) writes that the Nahuas, an Indigenous group in Mexico, believed that men have a natural desire for sex, but women’s desire is born from illness. This ancient myth may influence contemporary views of acceptable sexual desire. According to one tale passed down from the Nahuas, sperm that does not impregnate a woman becomes worms, and these worms drive a woman to sexual depravity. The woman can have sex with several men, one after another, and willingly, because of these worms. The only way to stop the worms from leading to insanity is to constantly have sex with the woman. Even if there is no longer a belief in worms that drive a woman to sexual promiscuity in Central Mexico, there may be other ways in which this tale has
ingrained itself into the psyche of Mexican people. This is one example of an ancient myth that may have influenced contemporary views of acceptable sexual desire.

La Malinche and La Llorona: Tales of two women. To further the historical examination of Mexican sexuality, the stories of two women, La Malinche and La Llorona, one real and the other an apparition of questionable origins, have a relevant role in defining gender and sexuality in Mexico. The following is a discussion of these two women and what they have been known to represent for Mexico.

La Malinche is also known as the traitor of Mexico. She has many names, most of them unflattering and depicting her unfortunate fate. One of these names, La Chingada is especially relevant. La Chingada means the violated one (Leon, 2004; Umaña-Taylor & Yazedjian, 2006). There are various versions of La Malinche’s story: a general overview of the main points of agreement follow. She was of a high social standing, a daughter of a chief in the Aztec kingdom (Leon, 2004). Eventually she became a translator for Cortes, which according to legend, may have led to the fall of the Aztec kingdom. According to folklore, she was not only instrumental in the conquering of her own people, but also gave birth to Cortes’ children. She is seen as either a victim or a traitor. Some even refer to her as the whore of Mexico (Leon, 2004; Umaña-Taylor & Yazedjian, 2006).

Either way, her story is told to warn Mexican girls of their vulnerability to men and the possible consequences of giving in to their desires. Strangely enough, she is also credited with giving birth to the mestizo race. Ironically though, La Malinche is not seen as the mother of the Mexican people; La Virgen (discussed later) is bestowed that honor. It is obvious then why Mexican mothers may teach their daughters to strive to be like La Virgen and never like La Malinche (Leon, 2004).
La Llorona, which translates as the Weeping Woman, is also an important female figure that influences Mexican perceptions of female character and femininity. Those who report seeing her share a similar story. Late at night a woman dressed in white wanders the streets, openly weeping, sobbing in a state of inconsolable melancholy. She is sobbing, according to the stories, because she committed a form of infanticide. Although there are numerous accounts of what this infanticide entailed, she is never at peace for what she has done to her children. Some scholars refer to this as a metaphor for colonization that remains an ever-present reminder in Mexican identity and culture (Leon, 2004).

Arguably, for a Mexican woman, these stories act as yet another reminder of what type of woman one should not become. La Malinche and La Llorona represent different versions of femininity, and the extent to which sex-role ideologies can be linked to historical or even mythical figures. These figures arguably have helped define feminine sexuality in Mexico. This analysis would not be complete without mentioning the “Queen of Mexico”: She is the woman many Mexican girls are taught to model themselves after, La Virgen Guadalupe.

La Virgen: The epitome of feminine purity. La Virgen Guadalupe, who Leon (2004) calls the New Eve, is the feminine paragon of virtue. Pure and untainted, she has not been violated like La Malinche, nor has she ever sinned as La Llorona. She is not a traitor or a murderer, but a saint. She is said to have appeared in the 16th Century to a recently converted Indian by the name of Juan Diego (Nahban-Warren, 2006). In Mexican culture, she is the symbol of the ideal woman: the virgin.

Possibly, it is from these disparate Mexican feminine representations that the virgin-whore dichotomy is born. Leon states, “it is around this discursive and symbolic movement that
Mexican cultural norms take shape and coalesce into various modes of social codes, idioms, expectations, forms of resistance, and modes of submission” (2004, p.11).

Interestingly, men do not have the same icons, religious figures, or mythical beings by which to judge their masculinity. One Chicana feminist has stated, “Did boys have to aspire to be like Jesus? They were fornicating like rabbits while the Church ignored them and pointed us toward our destiny—marriage and motherhood” (Leon, 2004, p. 13). Perhaps religion only has a significant role in controlling the sexual desire of women, and through an absence of figures that similarly govern aspects of masculinity, religion indirectly sanctions the sexual desire of men. How then does this vilification of women’s sexual desire and the sanctification of men’s desire through the inherent belief in the naturalness of masculine sexuality, affect the sexuality of women?

*Sex roles.* Gender norms are rooted in socio-cultural values and belief systems. Sex-role ideologies are therefore connected to religion, identity, and culture overall. Religious figures such as La Virgen Guadalupe, are the backbone to the religious foundation of many Latinos. Much literature has discussed the influence of La Virgen as a paragon of Latina virtue and motherhood and the model to whom all Latinas should aspire (Leon, 2004; Nabhan-Warren, 2005). However, it is a difficult task to negotiate sexuality and religiosity, when the role model is a saint, as discussed by Leon:

What a culture of denial. Don’t get pregnant! But no one tells you how not to. This is why I was angry for so many years every time I saw la Virgen de Guadalupe, my culture’s role model for brown women like me. She was damn dangerous, as an ideal so lofty and unrealistic it was laughable (2004, p. 13).
Several studies have shown that this expectation to be like La Virgen leads to sexual ambivalence and fear on the part of females (Davila, 2005; Leon 2004). This sexual confusion does not disappear as one ages, but continues to affect women later on in life. One study in particular that focused on Mexican-American women in Georgia studied the adverse effects of living within this virgin-whore dichotomy (Davila, 2005). These women had trouble negotiating safer sex with their significant others, and they felt guilt or condemnation when experiencing sexual desire. Several studies have found that one’s ability to successfully negotiate sexual decision-making is directly linked to condom usage and other contraceptives (Finkelstein & Brannick, 1997; Harvey et al., 2002; Weiss 2007). Not having the skills or confidence to be sexually assertive makes one susceptible to unsafe sexual practices, unplanned pregnancies, and STI’s.

Unfortunately the control women have over their bodies may be limited by their husbands or significant others. For instance, the men in one particular study used the rationale of what “God” wants to justify women’s subordination. Davila (2005) writes of a man who, upon discovering that his wife was on birth control, stated “God doesn’t want you to do this. We’re supposed to have a family” (p. 363). This difficulty in negotiating contraceptive use among women is made even worse when the desire is to not only please one’s husband but honor religious ideals as well. Understandably, when faced with a sexual dilemma that is manipulated into a religious one, religious ideology usually wins over “real life” practicality.

Perhaps Mexican-American parents are even more conservative than other parents because of their religious affiliation. Perhaps this can also contribute to the previous conversation about the link between the culture of silence and religion. Possibly, Mexican-American children are afraid to talk about sex, because to do so implies that they are considering
premarital sex, i.e. fornication. One study for which adolescents from a variety of religions were interviewed showed “respondents raised by religious parents appear to be more conservative regarding moral issues than those raised by parents who were not affiliated with any church” (Scheepers et al., 2002, p.171).

Nonetheless, to what degree does Catholicism actually determine the sexual behaviors of the Mexican-American population? There are mixed opinions about how far-reaching the moral prescriptions of the church are. Studies have been inconclusive in terms of the relationship between these two variables. Certain studies have shown that religiosity, especially in terms of youth, has resulted in postponement of first sexual intercourse (Gilliam, Berlin, Kozloski, Hernandez & Grundy, 2007; Hardy & Raffaelli, 2003). Other studies have shown no correlation between religiosity and sexuality. Rightly mentioned, religion is a variable that is influenced by other variables. Socio-economic class, environment, and parental support are also important variables to consider when looking at sexuality in a Latino community, for religion does not exist in a vacuum.

This is not to say that there has been a disregard for the sexual restrictions of the Catholic Church. However, individuals both adhere to the values of their religion and also acknowledge the difficulty of doing so in contemporary times. Economic hardships and a change in family systems for instance are challenges with which Mexican-American families must contend. Herrera (2001) discusses this correlation between moral codes and “real” life.

It is important to note that although there is a general church dogma, from parish to priest, the messages that the congregation receives can be different. For example in 1976, the Mexican bishopric stated: “It is a matter for husband and wife to decide, before God, the number of children that will form their family. Not out of whim or for selfish reasons, but making a right
judgment of their way of acting, adjusting it to divine law” (Herrera, 2001, p.266). Research by Carillo (2002) investigating the implications of religion on attitudes toward abortion and contraception use in Mexico, has found that the majority of the participants in his study favored using condoms, even if they viewed themselves as conservative Catholics. A similar sentiment was expressed by Latinos in the United States, in a study performed by Romo, Berenson, & Segars (2004). The study analyzed the socio-cultural and religious influences on Latina women contraceptive use. Seventy-seven percent of those involved in the study self-identified as Catholic. The authors found that, “religion or church attendance were not directly associated with consistency of contraceptive use” (2004, p. 223).

Romo et al. (2004) also identifies three other studies that found similar results. This supports the sentiments expressed by Catholics in Mexico also that, “Catholicism in Mexico provides a social space for many, a spiritual space for some, and a decision-making tool for only a minority” (Cortes Guardado, 1997, p. 69 as cited in Carillo, 2002). Likewise Herrera (2001) states, “such moral prescriptions [restricting condom use], although dominant ideologically, do not automatically become codes of behavior” (p. 267).

For these reasons, it may not be enough to expect adolescents to abstain from sex based on their level of religiosity. One study by Rowatt and Schmitt (2003) points out the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity. Extrinsic religiosity refers to those who see religion as a “means to another personal or social end” while intrinsic religiosity refers to those that view “religion as an end” (pp. 455-456). According to Rowatt and Schmitt, intrinsically religious individuals internalize religious doctrines and are more likely to adhere to religious morals surrounding sexuality because they believe that premarital sex is morally wrong. However,
extrinsically religious individuals are more inclined to follow religious morals out of fear of social stigma or punishment, rather than obedience to an ethical code.

Barkan (2006) makes an interesting argument that supports a distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. Barkan’s article focuses on religiosity and premarital sex of adults as opposed to adolescents. The results of his study are important because they demonstrate that adolescent attitudes towards sexuality are resilient into adulthood. Two studies mention the role Mexican-American parents play in controlling their children’s sexual behavior and the importance of parents communicating sexual expectations to adolescents (Gilliam et al., 2007; Liebowitz, Calderon-Castellano, & Cuellar, 1999). Gilliam’s study in particular showed that parent-adolescent communication was an important tool in delaying teenage sexual activity. Liebowitz et al., found that parent-child agreement on sexual values was the strongest indicator of later sexual debut. The main point is that children, in an attempt to please their parents, may adhere to religious moral codes for that extrinsic reason. Once that reason no longer applies, as in when the child moves off to college, there is no intrinsic reason to remain abstinent.

Nonetheless, there have been numerous studies that show adolescent religiosity has led to postponement of initial sexual intercourse (Hardy & Rafaelli, 2003; Jones et al., 2005).

Much research has revealed how religion adds to the ambivalence and fear concerning sexuality, especially for females (Leon, 2004). For instance, Leon (2004) found one Chicana feminist to lament, that “religion and our culture, our culture and religion, helped to create that blur, a vagueness about what went on down there” (Leon, 2004, p.12). To many, religion is a contradiction of values. This can possibly be explained by a strong commitment to traditions and rituals associated with Catholicism, but a “weak commitment to its institutional obligations” (p.94). Interestingly enough, even when studies revealed that Hispanic women were more likely
to experience childbirth at a younger age, this was independent of their religious affiliation (Jones et al., 2005).

Overall, this section has explored religion, culture, and the social construction of sexuality within a Mexican-American/Mexican context. It has illustrated how the relationship between these concepts and Mexican-American/Mexican identity is complex. The following section focuses on the methodology of the current study, which takes a deeper look at the intersection of the previously mentioned concepts and how they relate to the creation of effective sexual education programs that target this particular population.
CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY

Introduction to methodology

Previous studies that examine relationships and communication in Latino populations in the United States have employed a qualitative approach in order to better understand particular concepts from the perspective of a Latino population (Crockett et al., 2007; Guilamo-Ramos, Dittus, Jaccard, Goldberg, Casillas, & Bouris, 2006; Faulkner & Mansfield, 2002). As it is a goal of this study to understand the social construction of sexuality within Mexican/Mexican-American culture, a qualitative approach had to be utilized in order to fully conceptualize meaning from life experiences that could not otherwise be gained through a quantitative investigation. Furthermore, this study employed a grounded theory approach in terms of data analysis. Grounded theory is a qualitative method that allows theory to emerge from the data rather than approaching the investigation with a predefined theory in mind (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory complements the framework that the researcher uses, social constructionism, because both methods of analysis allow meaning to emerge from the participant’s experiences and own understandings of cultural phenomena. Hence, this qualitative investigation employs an emergent design to answer the following research questions:

1) To what extent do Mexican/Mexican-American cultural values and norms influence parents’ beliefs/attitudes towards the sexuality of their own children?

2) To what extent do Mexican/Mexican-American cultural values and norms influence parents’ beliefs/attitudes towards sexuality in general?

3) For individuals of Mexican descent, to what extent is parent-adolescent communication about sexuality governed by cultural norms and values?
4) In Mexican/Mexican-American culture, to what extent does religion influence beliefs about sexuality and sexual behavior?

*Researcher subjectivity*

Having past experience as a sex educator, the researcher’s views concerning sexual education and appropriate STI/HIV intervention strategies are influenced by an intimate knowledge of the sex education field. This researcher may interpret the results through a lens that has been influenced by direct successful involvement with sex education programs that acknowledge the influence of both socio-cultural factors and individual differences on attitudes towards sexuality.

Also, because of past experiences in the realm of sex education, the researcher is aware that the themes she has found through the interviews might be quite different from those themes someone unaccustomed to the field of sex education may have noted. Furthermore, the researcher’s lens is that of a minority. As she identifies as a minority and understands that there are certain cultural aspects that separate her from the dominant culture, she tends to view the situation of other minority groups as similar to her own. Hence, through her lens she sees the needs of a Mexican/Mexican-American community as being unique and ultimately different from that of the majority population of Northwest Ohio. The researcher also assumes that as her participants are minorities they will have to contest with issues of acculturation and discrimination that, in addition to the above concepts, will also affect their views of sexuality.

*Limitations*

Several limitations must be kept in mind before drawing conclusions from this study. Both samples (parent and youth) were predominantly female, with one male represented in each group; hence, equal representation of both sexes was not achieved. Furthermore, this study only
sought to present a view of the overall culture and taboos that may prevent conversations pertinent to sex education from taking place. Further studies should try to grasp in detail if parents are willing to act as sex educators and if so to what point. This study also did not consider neighborhood context or SES. As one of the participants stated, “The environment in which you develop has influence over your family, the church…I think growing up in a place that’s extremely diverse socially, economically, culturally it has less precedence in the way that you look at key factors like sexuality, like education, like personal identity even to some extent.” Hence, the participants’ socio-economic backgrounds or neighborhood environments could have affected their viewpoints of sex and sexuality as much if not more so than culture itself. Future studies should investigate how neighborhood context and socio-economic status factors into parent adolescent communication about sex, as cultures do not exist in a vacuum. Perhaps environmental factors shape conversations regarding sexuality as much or even more so than cultural factors.

Participants

This study sought to garner information from a variety of perspectives. Lefkowitz encourages the use of multiple perspectives in studies that investigate parent-adolescent communication (Feldman, 2002). This idea was used in the conceptualization of this study. Four separate groups of participants were interviewed.

The first group of participants included a group of five parents of Mexican descent, who have at least one child of the age of twelve or above (see Table 1). Of this group of five parents, four were mothers with an average age of 49, and one 37-year-old father. One of the mothers, Cecilia, was born in Mexico and has resided in the United States for seven years; the other four parents (La Sabia, May, Pedro, and Bella) were born in Texas. The educational level of the
parents was very diverse, ranging from minimal grade school to a terminal degree. Their marital status also varied: two of the mothers were married (Cecilia and May), one divorced (Bella), and the remaining mother (La Sabia) had cohabitated unmarried with her partner for over forty years. The sole father of this group, Pedro, was married.

A second group of interviewees included three young adults of Mexican descent, including two females who were 18 and 20 years of age (La Jovencita and Soul) and a young adult male (Ricky) who was also 20 (see Table 2). As for the young adults, one female participant was born in Mexico (La Jovencita). At the time of the interview, she had resided in the United States for approximately six months. The male young adult (Pedro) and remaining female young adult (Soul) were born in the United States. Within this group, La Jovencita was married, as was Ricky. In regard to educational attainment, Ricky had completed the 11th grade, similar to La Jovencita. However, Soul is currently completing her undergraduate degree. This group of young adults had parents (not included in the study) with an average age of 44 for the mothers and 47 for the fathers. Unfortunately, equal representation of males and females in both the parent and youth groups was not achieved.

A third group of participants included two clergymen who served Latino congregations: one is a Catholic priest and the other a pastor of an Evangelical church (see Table 3). The priest was Caucasian and communicates with his members who speak only Spanish through a local translator who volunteers at the church. The pastor interviewed was originally from the Dominican Republic and was fluent in Spanish. The priest had approximately two years of experience, while the pastor had 18 years of experience working with a predominantly Latino population in the United States and the Dominican Republic.
The fourth and final group included two female health educators (see Table 4). One of the educators is employed by Planned Parenthood and the other in the public school system. They possess thirteen and five years of experience, respectively. Selection of the participants was based on a convenience sample as a result of limited access to a larger population that could satisfy the requirements of this study.

**Procedures**

Prior to the data collection process, the author sought and received research approval from the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) of Bowling Green State University. HSRB is the organization in charge of reviewing and approving all research endeavors that involve human subjects. All aspects of the research from question content to recruitment procedures received approval from the HSRB prior to the initiation of the current study.

Participants were recruited from Rural Opportunities Inc., in Bowling Green, Ohio. Rural Opportunities, currently known as Pathstone, is a private, not-for-profit organization that serves “farm workers, low income families and economically depressed communities throughout” several states (ROI, 2008). Both clients and employees of Pathstone were invited to participate. Participants were also recruited from St. Aloysius, a Catholic church within the Bowling Green area. Overall, the majority of the participants were recruited by the investigator, along with members of Bowling Green community who were familiar with the Latino population in the Northwest Ohio region.

The researcher employed a flexible yet focused interview technique, where an interview guide was used, but modified accordingly to allow flexibility throughout the interview process (Grudens-Schuck, Lundy Allen, & Larson, 2004). Prior to each interview, the consent form was given to the participant and read aloud in the language preferred by the potential participant.
Each participant was interviewed individually with the exception of the pastor, whose wife also participated in the interview. (The researcher allowed this, as it was culturally appropriate for a Dominican wife to accompany her husband in the presence of a female guest.) The parents and young adult groups were interviewed twice. The first interview focused on family and culture. Questions such as: “How important would you say is family in your culture?” or “What signifies that you have become a man in your culture?” were answered by the participants in the first interview. Questions in the second interview, on the other hand, primarily focused on religion and sexuality. Examples of these questions included: “How is premarital sex viewed in your culture?” and “What does your religion/church say about homosexuality?” The duration of the interviews varied from 24 to 77 minutes depending on the length of the responses.

Only one interview each was conducted with the clergymen and educators. As it was this study’s primary goal to focus on the views of parents and young adults, participants from the educator and clergymen groups were only interviewed once as their responses were used for the sake of triangulation. Interviews with these two groups lasted between 30 to 50 minutes and also depended on the length of the responses.

The majority of the interviews with the young adults and parents were conducted either in the office of Pathstone, or at a public facility, such as the county library. In two cases, interviews were conducted over the telephone when no other option was viable. Follow-up questions were also asked over the phone, if clarification was needed post-interview, especially during the data analysis process. On two occasions the scenario questions were emailed to the participants to complete. These questions were then answered and returned to the researcher via email. Interviews with the educators were conducted in the educator’s classroom or office. Both
educators were interviewed in a face-to-face meeting. Interviews with the clergymen were conducted in their church offices or their private residence as decided upon by the interviewee.

In addition to interviews, the parent and young adult groups were asked to write mini-journal reflections guided by questions given to them by the researcher. They were given these questions immediately following the conclusion of their initial interview. They each received a form that contained the questions and were asked to respond directly on the form. Some preferred to have the questions emailed to them, hence the form was also provided electronically for participants that preferred this method. They were told to bring their written response to the questions with them to the second interview meeting or forward their responses to the researcher’s email address prior to the second interview. For those participants that were not literate in English or Spanish, they were read the questions aloud and told to reflect on them, so that during the next interview session, thoughts about the questions could be discussed and recorded. The average time between the first interview and the second was a week.

Data collection

A social constructionist approach to the creation of the interview questions and execution of the interviews was used according to the suggestions advocated by Jankowski, Clark, and Ivey (2000). They encourage the researcher to use open-ended frameworks and to “avoid asking questions that lead participants to particular responses simply to confirm the researcher’s preexisting understandings and theories” (p. 245). It is instead an attempt to equalize the balance between the researcher and participant by allowing meaning to be the product of the participant, rather than a “restatement of the researcher’s prior knowledge” (p. 245). Hence, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and participants were encouraged at the end of the interview to add any additional comments. After the interviews, several interviewees either
added additional information or contacted the researcher later to add information that they felt was pertinent to the current investigation. Interviewees from the parental and adolescent groups were also asked to respond to a series of questions on a questionnaire. This information was also collected. As an aside, E. Lefkowitz’s suggestion to explore the content and context of parent-adolescent communication about sex was also used to shape the content of the questions used in this study (Feldman, 2002).

Data analysis

To begin the data analysis, the digitally recorded and audio-taped interviews were transcribed. Transcriptions were then reviewed and checked for accuracy by the researcher. The researcher also reviewed her pre- and post-interview notes to not only check for accuracy within the transcriptions, but to also examine any notes made previously that would help in the conceptualization of the research. This study employed a grounded theory method in order to code the data. The researcher, using the methods described by Strauss and Corbin (1998) began analysis with open coding. The interviews of the parents and youth participants were coded first, and then the interviews from the educators and religious leaders followed. Shared experiences, attitudes, and ideas as well as conflicting opinions were noted and through constant comparison of the aforementioned topics, themes were formed. Situations such as a daughter ensuring that her income was shared with her mother, an older sibling taking responsibility of the care of her younger sisters and brothers, or a mother assuming responsibility for her grandchild born out of wedlock, for example, were categorized under the theme of “help from family”, which was then placed under the umbrella theme of “family as an unfailing support system.” The themes that emerged from the data were analyzed and from this analysis, the researcher began to form conceptual categories. Once particular categories such as a man’s sexual freedom or the
importance of a woman’s virginity emerged from the data, they were analyzed to see if a conceptual relationship existed between the two (Faulkner & Mansfield, 2002). When clarification regarding any of the data obtained from the interviews or notes was needed, the researcher contacted the participant for additional information. The researcher then reviewed all the categories and themes to ensure that the concepts were actually grounded in the data, and were not the source of any preconceptions forced upon the data. For the sake of organization, the researcher also created tables, organized by question and topic, to better compare the responses of the different participants. For the researcher, these tables facilitated analysis of the data. Responses, for example, that were related to opinions regarding sex education were copied directly from the interviews from both parents and adolescents and placed side by side in charts to identify key themes and later concepts that arouse across both groups.

The following section presents the major findings associated with the current study. As this study is based on an emergent design, the primary research questions that were answered through the participant interviews were: i) To what extent do Mexican/Mexican-American cultural values and norms influence parents’ beliefs/attitudes towards sexuality in general? ii) For individuals of Mexican descent, to what extent is parent-adolescent communication about sexuality governed by cultural norms and values?
CHAPTER III: FINDINGS

The results of this study examine how culture has shaped attitudes towards the sexuality of individuals of Mexican descent in the United States. A more thorough understanding of a Mexican-American cultural context can then contribute to developing culturally-relevant and culturally-appropriate education programming for this population. A social constructionist framework for methodology and analysis was utilized when investigating the socio-cultural factors that influence the participants’ understanding of their own culture as it relates to issues of sexuality. The results of these analyses were the emergence of four major categories, including: cultural values and norms, family as a system of support, faith and religion, and finally sex education.

Cultural values and norms influencing gender differences

The first theme influencing sexuality within the Mexican-American population is the impact of cultural values and norms on male and female interpretation of themselves and others. The construction of masculinity and femininity are thus grounded in the perspectives of those within the culture and their individual life experiences. As discussed by Crockett et al. (2007), this study also found that “a behavior salient in one cultural setting may be less salient or even irrelevant to relationship quality in another” (p. 641). Within the framework of gender, an analysis of responses by parents and youth participants resulted in five interrelated sub-topics: gender expectations, the transition to adulthood, man as the “protector”, virginity double standards, and gender neutral expectations.

Gender expectations: Examining masculinity and femininity. As indicated by the themes that emerged from the interviews, expectations for males and females in Mexican-American culture are still to a certain extent governed by gender norms. Hence the following section
explores these gender expectations, beginning with the examination of the social construction of masculinity.

Male expectations were pointedly revealed in conversations directed toward being a “good son.” When asked what it means to be a good son, all parents reported that being respectful was an important quality for a son to possess. Showing respect towards his elders, especially his parents and other members of the family, was regarded as highly important. In fact, respect was the only quality that all parents agreed a good son should have. However, there was disagreement among the parents over additional “good son” characteristics. While two of the parents, La Sabia and Pedro, reported that a son should be a hard worker, the responses of the other parents varied greatly. They reported that a good son should be: responsible, “obedient”, “considerate”, “the overseer of his family”, someone who “values his family”, and finally a son should be “independent.” Throughout the interviews even when not asked directly about the characteristics of a good son, the majority of the parents also reported that a good son is one who values and fulfills his role to his family.

The responses from the youth regarding the qualities or characteristics of a good son varied. According to La Jovencita, a female youth from Mexico, a good son, in the eyes of parents, was one who earned good grades and did not go out to parties. Moreover, La Jovencita took a more holistic view of what it means to be a good person in general without differentiating between male and female. She stated that a good person, despite his or her gender, is someone who shows their character through their way of talking and interacting with others. Hence, she disagreed with what she identified as la gente’s, (the people’s) view of a good son. Although, like the parents, she mentioned that men in particular should show respect, especially towards women.
Another female young adult, Soul, indicated that showing respect was an important aspect of being a good son. Similar to the parents’ viewpoints, Soul believed that a man’s “strength” included being able to “take the reins, take the lead and really take on the leadership role” in his family. The other youth, Ricky, had a harder time defining what it means to be a good son. He instead spoke of his brothers, mentioning their positive qualities such as being smart, caring for their mother, and helping out in the household.

These results reveal a reoccurring theme emerging regarding “appropriate” displays of masculinity, including the ability to take care of one’s family and above all else, to be respectful. Part of gender socialization, as indicated by this study’s participants, is understanding that a male’s role, above all else, is to be the strength and leader of his household. In this way, traditional displays of masculinity continue to be significant in contemporary times. Hence, the meaning of masculinity is still influenced by traditional roles, but can the same be said for femininity? To answer this question, the following section discusses gender expectations for a female child.

Responses from the parents did not yield a consensus regarding the characteristics of a good daughter. However, like those qualities mentioned for a good son, the most frequent characteristic associated with being a good daughter was respect. The other responses given by the parents included: being a hard-worker, obedient, virtuous, honest, spiritual and considerate, as well as remaining innocent and attending to the home. One mother in particular, Bella, felt it necessary to compare what she described as the “old culture” to the “new culture.” According to her, the “old” culture believed that a girl should be humble, capable of cleaning the house, and submissive. Ironically, Bella expressed extreme dislike towards these traditional gender roles in terms of a good daughter, but she was the only mother who reported that a woman should know
how to clean or manage a home. The mother from Mexico, Cecilia, briefly mentioned the idea of a woman’s role being within the home, but she referenced it as a scenario that was expected in the past. She stated that with a woman’s current responsibilities, such as attending to her studies, that homemaking is no longer the norm. Overall though, most of the parents agreed that the qualities of a good daughter were not that different from the qualities of a good son.

Youth responses varied as much as parents’ ideas when reflecting on what it means to be a good daughter in their culture. Ricky answered simply, “Because she’s yours,” implying that a good daughter is not defined by her personality or actions, but is unconditionally seen as good by virtue of her birth. Similar to the responses of parents, Soul stated that a good daughter shows respect to both her elders and herself. As with the son, La Jovencita was hesitant to define the characteristics of a young woman her culture approved of because she disagreed with what “la gente” or the people believed. She stated, “they say a good daughter is one that helps clean the house, gets good grades, takes care of the kids, works and washes…So that’s a good person there in Mexico, but I say it’s not the things you do, but the feelings of a person…” She goes on to add, “The way you talk, the way that you see yourself, the way that you act speaks a lot of the person you are.” Thus, La Jovencita focused less on task-specific behaviors and more on gender-neutral characteristics of a “good daughter.”

Unlike a son, a daughter is not held to traditional gender socialization that idealizes submission from women and fosters a female’s role as being in the home. Instead, a daughter is held to the same standards as a son when it comes to respect. These results can help shape sexual health education programs because they illustrate that the expectations for a woman pertaining to her “goodness” are not that different from those of a son. Surprisingly, it is the male
that is tied to more traditional roles such as acting as the leader of the family, while the woman is not.

The transition to adulthood. The previous section described qualities of a son and daughter that the culture expects and cultivates. These qualities provide the basis for the following analysis which investigates the transition from childhood to adulthood, as expressed by the viewpoint, experiences, and perhaps, the culturally formed knowledge of the participants. This discussion begins with an examination of the transition from girlhood to womanhood, which is particularly marked by the celebration of La Quinceañera.

When asked, “What signifies that you’ve become a woman in your culture?” three of the parents reported that people in their culture celebrate La Quinceañera. La Quinceañera is a religious ceremony where at the age of 15 a young woman is said to have entered adulthood. It is usually followed by a celebratory dance. One of the parents, Cecilia, described that the transition from girl to womanhood is not just a biological change but also a change in a girl’s manner of thinking and responsibilities that she is expected to fulfill as a woman. Interestingly, Bella mentioned traditional gender roles as a litmus test for womanhood including: putting responsibilities as a female first, knowing how to take care of a home, maintaining a home, and knowing your place as a woman.

The youth related similar responses about womanhood. Although Ricky was not sure how to answer, the female respondents readily answered with similar ideas. La Jovencita and Soul mentioned La Quinceañera, as did several of the other parents. Soul answered that womanhood begins with “your Quinceañera”, and continued on with an explanation of the biological changes as well: “I think sexuality is a key point in child and adult, and that distinction. The moment when a female starts to physically change and become able to have a
child signifies that there’s new responsibilities and therefore has to inevitably become an adult.” La Jovencita expressed similar sentiments, stating when she turned 15 she entered another stage.

Interestingly, both youth refer to the transition from girlhood to womanhood in terms of sexuality. The Mexican born youth, La Jovencita, mentioned La Quinceañera, but also how prior to the age of 15 many female adolescents become pregnant in Mexico. It is interesting that even the parents relate a girl’s entrance into adulthood with her ability to reproduce. Although there is mention of the man’s biological changes as well, the sexual nature of the female’s change is predominantly the theme of what “makes” her a woman.

On the other hand, the transition from boyhood to manhood was not as easily defined by any of the participants. In fact, the parents’ responses to the question “What signifies that you’ve become a man in your culture?” varied greatly. The idea of being able to work though, as a way of knowing that a boy has become a man, was reported by several of the participants. Hence, three of the parents did mention work as a signifier of manhood in their culture. La Sabia reported that a boy becomes a man when he proves that he can work all day, when he proves that he can “help out.” Pedro, the male parent, mentioned that it is when a man can start working a full eight hours doing “a man’s work” that signifies he’s made the transition into adulthood. Interestingly, Bella stated that it is not when a boy can work that makes him a man but when he can “distinguish between his wants and responsibilities and fulfill his responsibilities before his personal desires.” She goes on to state that what makes him a man is not just that he works, but his ability to take care of his responsibilities and put important things, i.e. his family, first. This sentiment will later be echoed in the section of the results covering marriage out of wedlock.
Along similar lines, a man’s ability to work was linked with his ability to provide and take responsibility for his family. When asked to discuss in depth what constitutes a man’s work, several of the parents expressed a man’s contribution to the family as a defining factor. La Sabia stated that when a boy can “support [his] family, takeover” then he has become a man. This idea of a man taking care of his family resounded throughout many of the responses, even responses that were not related to a man’s responsibility. Without prompting, parents voluntarily offered their opinion of the role of men in the family. May stated, “the man is important in the house…he’s the foundation…he’s the foundation of the home.” Bella responded that the men act as protection. In terms of a man’s role, Bella also pointed out that the men in her life, despite her age, still want her to move home, so that she can depend on them, instead of trying to make it on her own.

There were other responses from parents regarding what they felt marked the transition from childhood to manhood. Cecilia discussed the biological factor, but also recounted a story regarding expectations, mentioning that her little brother decided to quit school and was immediately required to work. May said that it was teaching a son right from wrong that ushered him into manhood. In addition, she stated a son’s interest in girls marked his entrance into manhood. She also discussed El Quinceañero, a ceremony for young men that is similar to La Quinceañera.

When the youth were asked the same question regarding what signified that a boy has become a man, the responses were just as varied as those of the parents. Ricky directly quoted his mother stating, “My mom used to say that when you start working and when you take care of your own responsibilities” you become a man. Much like the parents’ responses the youth felt that a man is determined by his capability to be a responsible individual, and an individual who
can help contribute to the household. Overall, his ability to be responsible, to work, and to make money, were all important aspects of entering manhood. Likewise, La Sabia believed manhood also included independence (i.e. being detached from his mother). Overall, a man being able to take care of his own responsibilities, as stressed by the parents, was a deciding factor in whether or not the culture considered the entrance into manhood complete.

The man as the protector. The male as the protector of the female was a reverberating theme throughout the interviews. May stated that the concept of *machismo*, analyzed by Juarez and Kerl (2003), can be explained by understanding that males see it as their duty to protect the female. She stated, “They [men in general, husbands in particular] know now... they know what life is about, they know the suffering of the woman.” She explained that husbands understand the suffering that a woman goes through and what it’s like to be a wife, so they focus more on the daughter, because as a father it his responsibility is to “protect his daughter.” It is his responsibility to shelter her, so that she does not become a woman who the culture will condemn for not adhering to the cultural boundaries and expectations of a woman.

Soul mentioned a similar concept, referring to how once a girl enters womanhood, her relationship with her father changes and how even though young women are given more freedom at this age, they are also more protected. Similarly, Bella contributed her opinion of men as protectors stating, “You need to know how to treat them [men] so that they can also continue to be that protector for you.” This particular participant mentioned the idea of protection quite often in her interview. She went as far as mentioning how this protection plays an important role in preventing issues of sexual abuse in families.

This “man as the protector” concept also helped to explain why a man was expected to fulfill his responsibility to a woman and their child out of wedlock. Many of the previous
examples of a man’s role referred to a married man who had already formed his own family. In the scenarios questions, the parents were asked to reflect on attitudes towards unplanned pregnancies outside of wedlock, depending on if the person involved was their son or daughter. The parents were unanimous in their responses. They all mentioned how they would have their son take responsibility for his actions, specifically taking care of both the child and mother.

It is notable that only Pedro spoke of the repercussions a man would suffer if he were not to assume his responsibility to a woman whom he impregnated. He stated that he would be seen as a coward by the community and be limited in his social actions with his female peers. He would gain a reputation that would prevent him from dating other women within that community.

*Virginity: The rationale behind the double standard.* The majority of parents and young adults emphasized that female virginity in Mexican-American culture is important not necessarily for the sake of remaining pure, but because of the consequences that a woman would suffer by becoming pregnant out of wedlock. While May described virginity in regard to purity and religion, most parents agreed that not getting pregnant out of wedlock protected a daughter from condemnation in a society where a woman would be marginalized and spoken badly of if she were to get pregnant as a result of premarital sex. Hence, it was not necessarily the “immorality” of the act per se, but the consequences that bore heavily on the woman. The overall message to the woman was: do not have premarital sex, for to get pregnant out of wedlock would mean that you are ultimately responsible for baring the burden of taking care of a child. Although the respondents all mentioned that it was the male’s responsibility to take care of his obligations to the woman whom he impregnated, the culture can condemn the man for not doing so, but ultimately cannot force him to fulfill his responsibilities to the woman.
This point is further illustrated by the following statements of the parents. La Sabia, for example, stated, “If you were to have [premarital sex] or go and live with a guy…or just stay a short time….then the parents can’t obligate the guy to be with you or to honor you or get married…” This is one of the primary reasons why premarital sex is frowned upon for women. Two of the parents mentioned that the culture used to say that if a woman were to have premarital sex with a man, then according to the culture she and that man were together. In contemporary times, as Bella stated, males do not want the same responsibility as before; hence, if a woman were to have premarital sex, as mentioned by another parent, then the woman runs the risk being taken advantage of and being left without a father to her child if she were to get pregnant.

As discussed before, this is why as May responded that *machismo* is complex and not solely about the traditional definition of gender roles. It is instead an understanding of what it is like to be a woman in their culture, from the point of view of a husband. It is from that understanding that the need to protect the daughter is necessary. Out of love for the daughter and fear of how she would be treated if she were to get pregnant out of wedlock, the daughter’s freedoms are restricted. The male child is not held to the same standards because as a man, the culture does not punish him to the extent to which a female will be punished. As many of the respondents reported, parents and young adults alike, “a man is a man”, and his actions are not as restricted nor carry the same weight as those of a woman.

*Gender neutral expectations.* Although previous studies have shown that Mexican-American parents place much emphasis on obedience from their children, this characteristic was only pointedly referred to twice when speaking of either the sons or daughters. The parents did report that their children should obey and listen to them, but mostly they felt these morals or
values were developed from their own examples. The idea of obedience was conveyed through the adults’ personal experiences with their own families. Soul echoed a similar sentiment stating that it is important to mind your parents, which shows that the significance of obedience has been transmitted to this particular youth as well. The concept of obedience though did not exist only between parent and child, but also among family members. Daughters obeyed mothers and fathers, but sons also obeyed aunts and uncles. It is a system of deference to one’s superior, whether that person is an elder or another family member. The importance of filial piety among Mexican-Americans has also been shown in other literature, such as the study by Kao et al. (2007).

Hence, in terms of obedience, the parents conveyed indirectly through their stories that obedience is important, but what is interesting is that the parents also emphasize that it’s equally important that their children have values and opinions of their own. These parents also expressed the same idea for their boys. La Sabia stated that her daughter did not necessarily have to try to be like her. Bella stated, “I really don’t like the old culture so much as far as the area that a woman is home, submissive, humble…those are good qualities but it doesn’t mean that she doesn’t have the right to express her values…her ideas and be respected for them.” Pedro expressed a similar idea very bluntly, stating

Right now my wife and I agree, we’re both pushing our kids to make the right decisions. They have to create their own identity. So that’s what we’re pushing. We are not pushing our own values and beliefs on them. But getting them to question their own environment and community and making them choose for themselves whether it’s right or wrong…When we were growing up, your role is this, follow it. And if you get off the beaten track then you’re wrong and we don’t want to do that to our kids.
Wanting to instill that individuality in their children has come with a price though. For example, Pedro stated, “but that makes it hard when we go to South Texas because they don’t know what those roles are and those expectations.” In this example the father referred to a tradition in Texas where men are expected to gather with the other men in the family outside, while the women stay inside. He mentioned that these rules are not broken. Similarly, Bella mentioned raising her daughter differently, yet how her daughter is expected to behave a certain way with her older relatives:

In the culture, you don’t say hi, you go up and you shake someone’s hand and if you really know them, you give them a hug. But she knows that when she’s with his family, don’t you dare try that stuff. But with my aunts and uncles she knows don’t pull that, especially my uncles in Texas. They’re strict and that kind of stuff you don’t pull.

Hence, being an individual is important, but the culture only permits it to a certain extent. When it comes to traditional expectations of obedience and showing respect to one’s elders, the same “old culture” rules apply. Furthermore, respect as a core value is seen throughout the interviews, particularly with the parent participants. May mentioned that she and her siblings never disrespected their mother, stating “We were very disciplined. No way would we pick up our face and say no or wait [to their mother].” Although these parents readily mention that they have raised their children differently, despite the generational differences, to some extent they expect their children to adhere to the same cultural prescriptions to which their generation was accustomed.

The above statement is especially true in regard to how the concept of respect is linked to pronoun usage in the Spanish language. “As social interactions are conducted largely through dialogue and conversation, language is viewed as the primary vehicle for the transmission of
meanings and understandings” (Gonzalez, Biever, & Gardner, 1994, p. 517). Pedro mentioned how the *tu* and *usted* pronouns in Spanish are tied to respect and how if he ever failed to use one correctly with a family member he was definitely corrected for it. He stated that this concept is known by the term *tutuar*. The “informal” pronoun *tu* is used with those one is familiar with while the “formal” pronoun *Usted* is expected to be used with individuals with whom you are not familiar, to whom you should show respect, such as an employer or older family member. He expressed how his co-workers constantly referred to him in the *Usted* form, despite his protests, until they felt comfortable referring to him as *tu*. This concept of respect can be seen further in regard to the expectations for both males and females to honor their families, as the next section discusses.

*The Family within a Mexican/Mexican-American context*

As “social constructionism places emphasis on social interpretation and the intersubjective influences of language, family, and culture”, the importance of family as a transmitter of cultural values and belief systems cannot be emphasized enough (Atwood, 1993, p. 116). The following results show the significance of familial relations from the point of view of the participants, a relationship that may relate to the communication of certain topics over others, as will be discussed in the section pertaining to sex education. This section is divided into two separate themes relating to family: the family as the essence of the culture and family as an unfailing support system.

*Family as the foundation and essence of the culture.* Family is an important aspect of Mexican/Mexican American culture providing the backbone of the Mexican American community and identity (Leon, 2004; Alvarez, 2007). This study also yielded similar results. When asked about the importance of family, every parent mentioned the closeness and
togetherness of their own families. May’s statement about family was especially notable. She stated, “I think without the family…the closeness of family…there’s emptiness in yourself.” Hence, family in a Mexican/Mexican-American context is essential to identity formation and personal completion.

All the parents emphasized the significance of the family within their cultural context. Terms such as “essential” or “essence” were used to describe the importance of family in the culture. Parents described family as “your backup…your backbone”, how one looks to family “for everything.” Questions that were not even family specific led to discussions of family life and closeness. In the majority of the parent interviews, family traditions, hopes, and concerns were shared with the interviewer without any prompting. These references were not limited to the immediate family of the participants, but also the extended family as well. In fact, the importance of family was further emphasized when the participants were asked to name two cultural values that were especially important for people of their cultural background. Two of the participants reported family as one of the two key cultural values.

The father in the study, Pedro, had a notable way of framing the importance of family in the culture. He stated, “But those family relations were essential…I mean it’s just part of our social capital and without it we’re lost…” Similarly, La Sabia stated, “I think within our culture we’re close…we’re family oriented…we’re always doing things together…” When asked specifically about their experiences growing up, especially in terms of interaction with extended family members, every parent participant had a story to share. Several participants spoke very fondly of their aunts and uncles. Bella was raised mostly by her grandparents and cousins. She spoke fondly of the bond she shared with her cousins: A bond that, she noticed, made her different from her Anglo friends. Every parent reflected on traditions and experiences that
involved family. Furthermore, Pedro expanded the definition of family and community to include the migrant community of which he was a member.

Even when not directly asked about family and when given the opportunity to mention another aspect of culture, the responses from the participants frequently centered on family. Pedro, for example, expressed tradition as an important aspect of his culture. However, it is notable that when Pedro described tradition, it was rooted in familial traditions such as cookouts and other family events. Moreover, when Pedro spoke about trust between family members he reiterated how trust was implicit in family. Hence, family as a core cultural value manifested itself across responses both implicitly and explicitly.

Similar to the parents, family was significant to the youth as well, though there was some disagreement. Soul, in fact, mentioned that the family is comparable to a big support system. However, La Jovencita, disagreed with the statements of the others when she reported that family is not necessarily of much importance in Mexico. She attributed this to families separating, i.e. marriages dissolving whether because of immigration or divorce. She reported that in the past families were more united, but currently this is not the case. La Jovencita was abandoned by her parents and left to take care of her younger siblings. Likewise, Soul mentioned that her sisters might not feel the same way she does about the importance of family because her sisters were the product of prior marriages, hence they did not have the same experience in a stable household as she did. La Jovencita also indicated a lack of interaction with her extended family growing up as well. Nevertheless, Ricky, although he did not have interaction with his extended family still considered family to be important.

Out of all the youth, only Soul mentioned interaction with her extended family, stating that her family is “ridiculously huge” with many children. Hers is the only experience that is close to
the experiences of the parents who had much interaction with their aunts, uncles, grandparents, and other relatives while growing up. The parents described rich stories of family gatherings and the closeness among relatives. Interestingly, the parents interviewed who have children between 12 and 17 all mentioned that their children have not been exposed to nor have had the privilege of being raised in the same extended family system as they had.

Trust and loyalty towards family was frequently discussed by the youth. Soul mentioned her culture’s devotion to family and community and compared the community to family, much like Pedro, the male parent, compared his migrant community to family as well. Soul went on to mention the importance of family being there and supporting each other. This is an idea that was echoed by other participants who reported how necessary it is for family to stick together and be there for each other. Much like Pedro, Soul stated that the idea of trust is an integral part of being family. She stated, “I would say that [trust] would be one of the key factors in why there is a strong family relationship.” It was La Jovencita who disagreed stating, “Sometimes [trust] is important but sometimes you look for a good friend instead to talk to.” Much like the other parents mentioned, although trust is important, or as one parent would say, used to be important, understanding who to trust and how much, even within a family system, is also necessary.

Family as the support system. According to the results yielded from this study, family is understood as an infallible support system in Mexican/Mexican-American culture. Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned many scenarios where someone in the family offered help to another family member. This support from family was seen in the interviews with the parents as well as the youth. For example, May, whose mother and father were migrant workers mentioned that she and her older siblings prepared meals for the younger ones and worked in the fields. She and Bella described how they would turn over their paychecks to their mothers.
without argument. They gave the money to their mothers to pay bills, not because it was expected, but it was something one knew to do.

The importance of aiding family members was common across the responses from the youth as well. Ricky referred to how his father considered him to be a good son because he was always the one helping his father. Soul mentioned how important it is for family to be around for mundane situations such as “babysitting” or “borrowing money.” Overall, all the young adults stressed the importance of helping family. Even La Jovencita who maintained that family was not as important as it used to be in Mexico, reported that helping out family is still done in families that are united.

In these interviews, as much as there were examples of children helping their parents, there were just as many examples of parents helping their children. As La Sabia mentioned, “I tell my kids, I don’t care how old you are. You need to come back home. You live right here.” In fact, Bella reported a similar scenario, stating that she continues to receive offers of help from her mother pertaining to moving back home despite her protests to do so.

One of the most notable occurrences of the virtually unconditional support from family came from responses to particular “scenario questions” presented to participants. (The scenario questions were answered by the parents and youth after the initial interview. The content of the question ranged from unplanned pregnancies out of wedlock to parent-adolescent sexual communication. See appendix for copy of scenario questions.) Most parents admitted that they would support their son if he were to impregnate a young woman outside of wedlock. Pedro stated, “If the girl decides to not keep the baby, we would encourage her to have it and we would raise the child as our own.” Similarly, La Sabia reported that she would take in both the unwed mother and her child. She also stated that if her son was underage when he impregnated a girl
then she would “be very concerned and would feel like I would have to raise his whole family because in our culture when one eats everyone eats”, meaning despite the circumstances, it is the responsibility of family to offer unfailing support to each other.

Understandably, because family is highly important in Mexican/Mexican-American culture, nurturing a child is a task of great significance, as a child is an important unit of the family. As Soul mentioned, “parenting and family is very important…and these families have proven extremely important in helping rear the child after it’s born.” Cecilia, from Mexico, also mentioned this scenario. She stated that when her sister-in-law became pregnant out of wedlock, although the parents were initially upset, they raised the child as their own while the child’s mother worked. Similarly, May reported that when Marcia, the daughter of a friend of hers, was considering an abortion, Marcia’s mother offered to do everything for her daughter in order to stop her from having the procedure done. When this same situation occurred with May, she told the same to her daughter. As Ricky, the young adult, summarized in speaking of the community overall, “That’s what we do…we help her (the unwed mother) in any way that we can.” It can be said, that it is this unconditional support for each other that sustains the unity of Mexican-American/Mexican families.

It cannot be emphasized enough that family relationships act as the foundation of the Mexican community. In fact, family relationships as mentioned in the literature review, can also encompass church families, as religion which will be discussed in the following section, is also an essential component of the Mexican-American/Mexican identity. Accordingly, faith, religion, and morality will be discussed in terms of spirituality as a pillar of Mexican-American/Mexican values.
La fe...la religion...la moral: Aspects of faith as core values of the culture

Codes of sexual behavior can be influenced as much by religion as they are by culture. This is especially true when religion itself is found to be at the foundation of set cultural values and belief systems, as was the case from the perspectives of individuals within this study. Thus, this section discusses the importance of religion in Mexican and Mexican-American culture, but also the fluidity of religiosity across generations and backgrounds.

Family and respect are important values, but religion or faith in general was a theme that emerged from an investigation of the lives of the parents. When asked about two values that are important to people from their cultural background, in addition to family and respect, religion was reported by four out of the five parents. The importance of religion, faith, or morality was mentioned throughout the interview, even when not prompted by the interviewer. When parents described their lives growing up, their families, and the root of their values and morals, they all mentioned the Catholic Church or religion. All four of the mothers mentioned their heavy involvement with their church. The father was in search of a church that both he and his spouse would enjoy as well as his sons. Overall, they were raised in religious backgrounds, although some were more religious than others.

The importance of religion was reflected also in the parents’ answers to questions directly related to faith and religiosity. When asked about whether they thought people from their cultural background were religious, most of the parents responded “yes.” Similarly when asked how important religion is in Mexican/Mexican American culture, the respondents all agreed that it was very important. La Sabia stated, “That’s one of our things...la religion...our faith...” Another respondent stated, “Es la base (It’s the foundation).” Bella stated, “It’s very important. Everybody knows that...You’re either Catholic or some Christian non-denominational...but you
got religion. Everyone does. There are very few that don’t.” Cecilia echoed similar sentiments. However, two of the parents did reveal that although Mexicans are religious, this is not necessarily true of the younger generation.

Although all answered that the majority of those from their cultural background are Catholic, in this particular study, only Cecilia and May are Catholic, and the other three parents, Bella, La Sabia, and Pedro are Protestant: Bella identified as Pentecostal and the other two parents as Baptists. Their parents though were Catholic, with the exception Pedro whose mother did not identify with one religious affiliation. Bella said, “I think in our culture we have faith…it’s very strong…very very important…and it’s what makes us who we are.” She further recalled how her father was a strong Catholic. Cecilia stressed how morality is important and referenced examples from the church. She spoke of how the church provides guidance in terms of parent-child relationships, how to “stay on the right path”, and how to maintain a united family.

In terms of faith, two parents particularly mentioned its importance. May stated, “When faith is there, miracles happen every day for millions of people.” La Sabia reflected on a time in her life when her children were feeling discouraged and not behaving as usual. Concerned, she contacted a curandera, a healer, in the family and asked her to pray for her children. “She would do that and in a couple of days they’re fine. It’s because you have faith, faith is very important. La fe es importante, with your faith you can overcome a lot of things…you can do a lot of things.” Resounding throughout the interviews was the utmost trust in faith, religion, and God overall.

Overall, the previous sections have explored how religion, culture, and the construction of masculinity and femininity manifest itself in a Mexican-American/Mexican context. The
Sex education and parent-adolescent communication

When participants were visited a second time, they were asked to discuss the degree to which parent-adolescent communication about sexuality was governed by cultural norms and values. These conversations resulted in examining four major topics: sex education in schools, communication between parents and their children, culture’s influence on sex education, and sex education and religion.

**Sex education in schools: A cultural do or don’t?** As reported by Herrera (2001) parental opinions towards sex education in schools vary even within a culture: this study produced similar findings. A lack of unity was found among the participants regarding the need for sex education in school. For instance, May, Bella, and Pedro reported that most parents from their cultural background do not support sex education in the schools. Cecilia, on the other hand, stated that most parents of her cultural background do support sex education in the schools. While, La Sabia was divided, stating that some parents do support it while others do not. All but one of the parents interviewed has had a child participate in sex education in the public schools and they all expressed a positive opinion of the activities and content of the information their children were learning. They did not oppose their children’s involvement in the course. The youth were also divided in their opinions about sex education. Ricky and La Jovencita reported that most parents from their culture would support sex education. Only Soul, from the United States, mentioned that parents would not support it.

Parents gave a variety of responses when asked to explain why sex education is not supported by some parents. May explained that some parental opposition might be related to the
age of the child. She compared it to cutting an umbilical cord: “If you cut it [the umbilical cord] before where it’s meant to be cut, you hurt the child.” She also thought that an appropriate grade for sex education would be 9th grade. Pedro stated he would oppose it because he feels it is the parents’ responsibility to teach their children about this topic.

Soul recounted a statement made by her uncle that equated sex education in the schools to “giving a hungry person food.” Her uncle’s rationale was that if they were to talk about it, then of course the teens would want to experiment with it. For those parents that do support sex education in the schools, two of the parents reported that subjects relating to biological aspects of sexuality, such as puberty and development were safe topics for their children to hear in school. The other topics that were considered safe to mention in school included: the reality of how quickly STI’s can be transmitted, safer sex, and abstinence.

According to two of the youth, people from their cultural background who support sex education do so for two reasons. First, parents want their children to know how to protect themselves from STIs. As reflected in Ricky’s mother sentiments, “the more you learn the better.” By this, she means that sex education is necessary knowledge like any other subject taught in school. Pedro also believed that “the school is responsible for the education about it; this is A, B, C.” However, he declared that when it comes to issues like abstinence which are value-based, it is ultimately the parents’ responsibility to advocate for these value-based concepts.

Nonetheless, parents reported that sex education should be first taught in the home, coinciding with the strong emphasis on family in Mexican-American culture. May stated, “It is the parents’ responsibility by God to teach children about sex.” Likewise La Sabia stated, “parents are the first teachers.” The priest interviewed, echoed the same belief. “I think they all
are needed but certainly, without a doubt, the most powerful is going to be the home...I think the church should be a backup for parents to be able to know how to teach and to be able to do it.”

The pastor of the Evangelical church mentioned the same, stating that sex should be taught in the home first, but that church should also play a role.

*Communication between parents and their children.* As a prior study has shown, parent-adolescent communication about sex in Mexican-American culture is complex (Romo et al., 2004). This study has shown that direct parent-adolescent communication may not occur in the majority of parent-child relationships, but parents still regard it as necessary. Unfortunately, despite parents stating that sex education should first be taught at home, three of the parents reported that most parents in their culture do not openly communicate with their children about sex. It should be noted though, that all parents interviewed stated that they do believe that parents should talk with their children about this subject. When asked why parents do not communicate openly with their children about sex, the parents noted: hesitancy because of the age of the child (not wanting to steal the child’s innocence) and fear that talking about it would be equivalent to granting their approval and giving their children permission to have sex. La Sabia revealed that although many parents may not make direct statements about sex, they mention it in different ways through advice like “Take care of yourself,” a form of indirect communication about sex that is characteristically used by Latina mothers as discussed in a study conducted by Gonzalez-Lopez (2004).

Bella stated that the number of parents who talk to their children about sex in their culture is increasing, and that more parents talk to their children about sexuality than before. Nearly all parents recounted that their own parents did not talk to them about sex. And if they did attempt to talk to them about it, it was “way too late.” Both the parents and young adults stated that fear
of embarrassment and awkwardness prevents conversations about sexuality from occurring. This is a common finding in parent-adolescent communication about sex across cultures (Feldman, 2002).

The respondents explained that if conversations about sex occur, they are usually between members of the same sex. In other words, daughters seek out their mothers for advice, and sons seek out their fathers. All but one of the mothers, Bella, stated that she would feel more comfortable talking to her son instead of her daughter about sex. All the youth stated that they would prefer to talk with someone of the same sex. There were two exceptions though to this rule. First, according to La Jovencita, although children are more likely to feel more comfortable talking to someone of the same sex, children trust their mothers more, hence are more likely to seek out her counsel. Second, according to Pedro, males are less likely to ask anyone, including their father, about sex because as a man they are already expected to know about sex.

Learning incorrect information about sex and pregnancy among children and teens was one of the greatest fears of these parents. These worries motivated two of the parents to talk to their children about sex. As an example of bad information, Bella recounted a tale from childhood, stating that when she was younger she had a friend, who around the age of 12 asked another friend to hit her in the stomach with a bat because she was afraid of getting pregnant. No one had talked to this friend about sex who was under the impression that she could become pregnant by hugging and making out with a young man. Pedro had a similar example of the misinformation about sex that he was accustomed to hearing. He stated that when he was in middle school, his friends told him that he could distinguish whether or not a woman was a virgin based on how her pants fit her backside. Although these were extreme cases, the desire for
their children not to hear myths about sex influenced whether or not they themselves spoke with their children.

   Not surprisingly, the parents reported menstruation, abstinence, and pregnancy as topics of which they could communicate openly with their children. In addition, they also believed it to be important to warn children to be careful with whom they are with, and how to protect themselves. As La Sabia reported parents, “might tell their kids to be careful when you’re out there. Use protection.” These were the same topics that the youth felt parents were more likely to mention, as well.

   Certain topics were easier for parents to discuss than others. Topics such as puberty, gender roles, and abstinence were seen as the easiest. The topics that were overall more difficult to discuss were the mechanics of sex in general, condom usage, and birth control options. As Cecilia stated, “Sexual relations are always talked about with a child with reserve because you have to be careful what you say, but try to give the correct information.” These results are not surprising, as topics relating to engaging in sex were found in previous studies to be not only difficult for the parents to discuss with their children, but for the children to discuss with their parents as well (Feldman, 2002; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999).

   According to the youth in this study, their peers would have liked for their parents to discuss the following topics: their own experiences and safer sex options. On the other hand, these were the same subjects that one youth described as not wanting their parents to mention. Overall the youth emphasized not really the topics, but the manner in which their parents talked to them. First of all, they did not want to be reprimanded for asking questions about sexuality. And as Soul mentioned, her peers would say it is important for the parents to be “less critical and more understanding.”
As mentioned earlier, it is not only the parents who are reluctant to talk to the youth, but the youth who are reluctant to talk to their parents. The sex educator interviewed from the public school system recalled that she sent home an assignment telling her students to interview their parents about their experience with puberty. She stated that the students came back with complaints, such as, “This was awful. It was uncomfortable, it was so awkward. I can’t believe you made us do this.” While the parents would send back notes stating, “Thank you. This was a really good opportunity to talk.” The Planned Parenthood educator mentioned a similar scenario where parents and children would go to a session and the mother would ask all the questions, while the child hides in shame, and vice versa. Hence, youth shared the parents’ sense of embarrassment and shame when issues of sexuality arose.

It is inconclusive to what extent sexual communication between parent and adolescent is governed by cultural norms. Previous research, as explored through a qualitative ethnographic study by Davila (2005), has called this lack of communication between parent and child in Mexican-American culture, the “sexual silence.” Several of the parents mentioned how their parents did not talk to them about sex, and one parent mentioned that when her mother did attempt to talk to her about sex that it was too late. According to the parents interviewed, the majority of Mexican/Mexican-American parents do not talk to their kids about sex at all. Cecilia mentioned how her mother never talked to her, or to any of her sisters. If not for the school providing this source of information, many of the participants would not have learned about sexual health education at all, outside of their own sexual experiences or information garnered from their peers.

According to the sex educators, life experiences may play an even greater role in determining how sexual health education is interpreted by parents and may also play a role in
whether or not parents communicate with their children. “They’re all from different backgrounds so they’re all going to react differently” said the Planned Parenthood educator when thinking about parents’ attitudes towards sex education. She mentioned that even within a single culture, there are differences: a similar sentiment expressed by many of the parents throughout their interview. For instance, the parents of this current study frequently stated that what was true for their generation is not necessarily true anymore.

*Culture: One factor among many influencing sex education.* The results of this study have shown that culture has played an important role in governing certain aspects of parent-adolescent communication about issues of sexuality, but does culture alone necessarily dictate how parents will react to their children learning about sex through school or organizations such as Planned Parenthood? As the Planned Parenthood educator stated: “And you know it’s the cultural [beliefs]…and again, you know when you’re talking about the cultural you have to put it all out there: you’re talking about socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, all of that.” Hence, it is not enough to focus solely on cultural background to determine whether or not parents will support sex education.

The Planned Parenthood educator further explained this lack of homogeneity within a culture and how attitudes towards sexuality are also related to one’s morals and experiences. She mentioned as an example three African-American mothers, who are of different religions and SES and how all three will have different perspectives on what their daughters should be doing to protect themselves from pregnancy or STIs. She stated, “I can’t tell you what each individual person would say because they also have their life experiences. So yeah, parents all have different reactions and I want to say that they’re overwhelmingly positive to sex education.” Likewise, the health educator in the public school system said, “I think yes, it’s probably related,
it’s related to culture, but culture is also related to your morals and what you’re comfortable talking about in the household.” Thus, both educators expressed the need to look beyond cultural trappings when discussing acceptance of sex education in schools.

The sex educator at Planned Parenthood stated that the differences she sees in terms of parent reactions might be more along the lines of SES than any other major factor. Although she did state, “You’re least likely to hear people talk about sexuality in the Latino community…But at the same time, if they knew about the resource of Planned Parenthood, they’re most likely to say go down to Planned Parenthood versus nothing at all.” This is similar to a comment a parent participant made about how parents should seek the help of a hired professional if they need assistance in talking to their children about sex.

Studies show that communication about sexuality between parents and children is normally associated with feelings of embarrassment and awkwardness (Feldman, 2002; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999). What most parents and youth in this present study and other studies describe as a sense of embarrassment when talking to each other about sex has been found in other studies independent of culture (Feldman, 2002; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1999). Although cultural norms dominated whether or not sex was openly spoken about between parent and child in the “old culture”, as Bella calls it, it does not play much of a role now in the “new culture.” In regard to the old culture, Bella stated “There were things that I went through that I was not able to share with my mother because of that cultural ignorance that you’re not suppose to talk to your children about those things…” This statement relates directly to the concept of sexual silence as discussed earlier.

Despite cultural prescriptions, the majority of the respondents emphasized that there is a difference between how they were brought up and how their kids or grandchildren are being
raised. They mentioned issues of assimilation and effects of the media. They stressed the necessity of teaching their children about sex education first, due to the sheer amount of information that is available to their children. It is because of the media and schools that parents in this sample have had to speak with their children about sex. Only two of the parents reported that they took it upon themselves to speak with their children about sex independent of it being brought up due to something the child saw on television or heard from school.

Sex education and religion. Several studies have found that youth who are religious tend to delay engaging in sexual intercourse (Jones et al., 2005; Rowatt & Schmitt, 2003). This study though was able to investigate the extent to which religious organizations have been instrumental in creating health education courses for teens. The two participants from Mexico mentioned how their church sponsored weekend health education retreats for the youth and marriage courses, which discussed the rhythm method of family planning for engaged couples. Interestingly, the youth of this study felt that religion does not play an important role in the sexual decision-making process of people within their culture, but as two of the participants mentioned, the Catholic Church in Mexico has been instrumental in helping to prevent the spread of STIs through the workshops that they host. None of the other parents from the Protestant denominations mentioned this, although the pastor of the Evangelical church does have a workshop for youth regarding “how to take care of themselves” and decision-making.

Several of the participants further showed that sex education is not necessarily a taboo concept for many churches. The sex educator from Planned Parenthood mentioned how she was invited to speak about AIDS and was allowed to bring condoms to an apostolic church. Another parent mentioned how her church supported her decision and gave her permission to teach HIV/AIDS classes to migrant workers. The Planned Parenthood educator said that resistance
does not normally come from the parent, but more of a “bureaucratic resistance…like people don’t think we can do as much as we actually can…like people don’t think we can go to places that we actually can go…” This sentiment was also expressed by a parent who also acted as a sex educator. Resistance to sex education in this study was shown not to come from parents, but from bureaucrats in decision-making roles, such as the individuals on school boards.

Ultimately though, the results have shown that the decision of whether or not a child will learn the proper information about sex is left to the parent. As the Planned Parenthood educator stated, “I cannot do anything without parents. I can tell their kids. But you still have to play that role. You still have to be the parent, not the friend. You have to be the adult, not the peer. And a lot of parents need to come to that understanding across cultures…because that manifests itself differently in every culture…” As much as parents need the support of organizations such as Planned Parenthood to provide the correct information to their children, Planned Parenthood needs the support of parents to be, as one parent described, the first teacher, in order for sexual education to be an effective means of intervention.

Overall, this section reflected on parent-adolescent communication, sex education, and cultural components that affect attitudes towards sexuality. The following section analyzes the implications of this information, specifically focusing on how gender is constructed, how parents communicate with their children, and overall how culture, sexuality, and religion must be taken into account when implementing sex education programs for a Mexican/Mexican-American target population.
CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study was to explore the cultural value systems of Mexican-Americans in order to understand the degree to which their culture shapes their contemporary attitudes towards adolescent sexuality. A secondary goal of this study was to gain an understanding of parental views towards sexuality that may either impede or support sex education programming and to determine the degree to which these parents’ attitudes toward sexuality were influenced by their own cultural background. Finally, the social constructionist framework in this qualitative study also contributes to a better understanding of parent-adolescent communication between individuals of Mexican origin in the United States.

Social construction of masculinity and femininity

The present study discovered that attitudes towards sexuality are socially constructed through culturally acceptable forms of masculinity and femininity within a Mexican-American population in Ohio. Although parents and youth alike gave special attention to the biological aspect of sexuality, such as puberty, issues of gender expectations within the culture were also mentioned. The parents and young adults of this study discussed the difference between sexes, specifically the idea of the naturalness of masculine desire, and the consequences of unguarded feminine desire.

Fluidity of Masculinity: From “taking” responsibility to sexual promiscuity. As masculinity is a social construction, it is subject to multiple meanings which manifests itself differently even within a culture. The broad concept of machismo, which is generally defined as traditional patriarchy within Latino culture, is proof of this statement. Frequently scholars have conceptualized machismo in terms of its negative ramifications such as sexual dominance and promiscuity; this study has shown that the traditional gender role expected of a man also has
positive ramifications such as a man’s responsibility to protect and care for his family. Alvarez (2009) similarly noted this: “Socialization for Mexican origin males, which stems from machismo, emphasizes responsibility, protection, and providing for the family, along with demonstrating honor and respect for others” (p.194).

It can be said that the importance of family and respect in Latino culture trumps the man’s right to be sexually promiscuous when his actions can be seen as disrespectful towards his family or community. For example, if a man were to father a child out of wedlock, but did not take care of his responsibility towards his child’s mother, he would ultimately be viewed by the community as a coward and scorned. As Pedro firmly stated, “if any of those (core values of respect and responsibility) are affected…or lacking [in a man]...it almost cancels the other ones out.” Overall, the results demonstrate that adherence to traditional masculinity is important inasmuch as it means fulfilling one’s responsibility as a man and caring for his family.

Furthermore, this study complements other research which has revealed that cultural values may influence behavior, but do not necessarily dictate behavior. For instance, as Gonzalez-Lopez (2004) has discussed, Mexican fathers do not always fit into the mode of machismo that many scholars have suggested. Similarly, the experiences discussed by parents and youth alike in this study, presented a view of their fathers as nurturing, even if strict, but never domineering or aggressive. As the participants in this study have shown, to adhere to the masculine expectations of taking care of family and working hard is the true definition of a man. Furthermore, a good husband, son, or man is not measured by his sexual prowess, but by his ability to fulfill his responsibilities, care for his family and his ability to demonstrate respect. The challenge is to find a way to bring these positive qualities to the forefront and incorporate them into sex education programming. As Moreno (2007) suggests, “For Latino men who are
traditional *machistas*, the role can act as a protective factor against HIV/AIDS, because it encourages them to be *caballero* (gentleman), who is responsible toward social obligations and behaviors that protect the family from harm” (p. 341). It is this researcher’s opinion that social obligations can directly affect sexual decision-making, and if a man’s main concern is his responsibility towards his family and demonstrating respect towards women, then little room is left for sexual promiscuity.

Men who are *machista* in terms of sexual promiscuity are at one end of a spectrum of representations of masculinities. When speaking with the sex educator at Planned Parenthood she placed a great deal of emphasis on how she felt *machismo* played a role in sexual decision-making in the Latino community. As this study has shown, the rhetoric of *machismo* may still play a role in how some males display their masculinity. Bella, in particular, was shocked that in modern times male children were still learning this type of behavior from their adult role models. Noticeably, these youth were taught by their fathers and uncles, not their peers, that it was permissible to be sexually promiscuous and dominant. In this way, this negative consequence of *machismo* is being transmitted from the older generation to the younger, hence it is still a key cultural component that needs to be addressed in the creation of sex education programming for this target population.

*Femininity: An Explanation of the Rhetoric and an Exploration of the Realities.*

Evidence from this study showed that although young women for the most part were expected to have the same qualities and characteristics as those of their male counterparts, they were ultimately held to a different set of cultural expectations in regard to engaging in premarital sex. Moreno (2007) and Alvarez (2007) write of similar findings. This double standard existed, in the view of the participants, because of the consequences that a woman faces if she were to get
pregnant out of wedlock. They believed that because the burden of raising a child was predominantly seen as a woman’s duty, if a young woman were to become pregnant out of wedlock then consequences for her would be more severe than for a man. For a woman, she would automatically be labeled and marginalized, devalued and disrespected. As Pedro said, “Even though it tells [us] in the Bible fornication is wrong, male or female, our cultures sees it as, ‘Well our boys need to know what they’re doing.’ So it’s okay that they do it, but it’s bad with a girl.” Thus, even a strong knowledge of religious based moral obligations can be ignored when the culture expects males to exhibit certain behaviors.

The study also showed that like all discourse, the naturalness and acceptability of masculine desire versus the condemnation of feminine desire is rooted in a certain time and place. Both of the respondents from Mexico recounted that in Mexico it is quite common now for a woman to engage in premarital sex, while the previous generation was not afforded such leniency. All the young adults and the majority of the parents expressed that the younger generation, both in the United States and in Mexico, is more open and accepting of premarital sex. Hence while the beliefs may still be present, the actual adherence to abstinence until marriage for women is uncertain.

The fluidity of culture is not only found in the generational gap, but also transnationally. For example, Mexican-American parents view Mexican culture as more rigid than the culture of Mexican-Americans, despite the fact that their cultural belief systems are rooted in the same origins. The participants from Mexico, Cecilia and La Jovencita, actually depicted Mexico as much more socially liberal than what the Mexican-American parents in the United States tend to believe. In fact, when the interviewer asked if abstinence was ever encouraged in Mexico, La
Jovencita scoffed at the idea and said that it was no longer significant in Mexico, especially with the younger generation.

It is especially questionable whether or not there was ever a time when the sexual behavior of women was as governed by social norms as certain members of the parent group implied, especially when every parent participant knew of someone close to them, whether their own daughter or sister, who became pregnant out of wedlock in their generation. Seemingly, as discovered in the results, premarital sex is only a “sin” if one is caught for doing it. In this case, the sin would be if a female has premarital sex and as a result becomes pregnant. Perhaps if a comprehensive sex education program that included discussion of condom usage and birth control had been offered to the young women of past generations, the unintended pregnancies and humiliation suffered by these young women would have been avoided.

Although the majority of the female parents mentioned how they themselves were raised with curtailed freedom or how they raised their children with many restrictions, this in itself did not prevent their children, their relatives, or their friends from having sex. The important lesson that can be learned from this point has been repeated by nearly all the participants throughout the study, “Cada quien es como es”, “Cada cabeza es un mundo” loosely translated to mean everyone one is who they are and every head is its own world. Put another way by May, “you can have five fingers and they’re all different.” The idea that everyone is an individual and people are all different even if they share common cultural values is reiterated throughout the study.

Therefore, decisions about sex can be influenced by culture, but ultimately the decision is made on an individual level. To further illustrate this point, one interviewee mentioned a friend who only dated Mexican girls because he felt they were pure and untainted, as he believed
virginity to be a core value of Mexican culture to which all Mexican girls adhered. He later found that he had become infected with an STD from this young lady who he assumed would be untainted because of her culture’s expectations for a woman. Inasmuch as it is important to understand cultural expectations for males and females, and what constitutes the cultural value and belief systems of a people, it is equally important to understand that these guidelines for behavior created by the culture may be just that: guidelines, but not necessarily rules for behavior.

As Kerl and Juarez (2003) state, to suggest that the sexual experiences and realities of Latinos are dictated by the dichotomy of *marianismo* versus *machismo* would be to essentialize their personal histories. This study’s social constructionist approach showed that understanding the discourse surrounding a behavior (e.g. masculine sexual promiscuity) is as important as understanding the behavior itself. Sexuality is complex: It cannot be dichotomized, essentialized and most importantly, it is constantly being defined and redefined. Understanding that “the social construction of sexuality is inevitably linked with cultural concepts of masculinity and femininity” though, can help shape a sex education framework that addresses the socio-cultural influences on sexuality (Dixon-Mueller, 1993, p.275).

*How parents communicate with their children about sex*

As reported in a study conducted by Raffaeli and Green (2003), Latino parents have been shown to be less likely to speak with their children about sex than parents of other ethnic groups. However, this study has shown that open communication between parents and children is not uncommon. While all four of the mothers admitted that most parents do not talk about issues of sexuality openly with their children, the majority of sampled parents stated that at least *some* of the parents from their cultural background do talk to their children about sex, albeit with reserve.
Whereas parents acknowledged that their generation may have recognized some topics as taboo, the same does not apply to the new generation.

This study has discovered that fathers may need additional coaching about how to discuss issues of sexuality with their children. In fact, one respondent, Soul, was shocked that daughters would even consider speaking with their fathers about sex. Few studies have mentioned the role fathers can play in communicating with their children about sex; although Gonzalez-Lopez (2004) did focus on the opinions of fathers in regard to their daughters’ virginity. Future research should be conducted within Mexican/Mexican-American culture to investigate whether fathers talking to sons and their daughters is as uncommon as it appears and if so the reasons behind the lack of father-child communication about issues of sexuality.

If parents are willing to talk with their children openly about sexuality, then the first obstacle to disseminating information about sex to youth has been overcome. The next obstacle then is preparing the parents with the correct information about issues that may be raised such as information about diseases and safer sex practices. As Gonzalez-Lopez (2004) discussed, parents may mention safer sex indirectly through instructions to their children such as “Cuidarse” or “Take care of yourself” or “Be careful.” It is unclear whether parents indirectly communicate with their children from lack of knowledge specifically pertaining to sex or from fear of speaking too frankly about issues of sexuality with their children. Nonetheless, for the parents to have some training in communication techniques and general safer sex knowledge would be beneficial to both parents and children alike.

As this study has demonstrated, open communication between parent and child decades ago was taboo and rarely occurred. Accordingly, Bella described her disillusionment with Latino culture in regard to hiding issues of sexuality. She felt this meant children were expected
to function and succeed without the proper tools, these proper tools being knowledge of sex-related topics. She aired her frustrations with past cultural prescriptions of silence, with the following metaphor. “It’s like me telling you ok here are the materials and I want you to make a pizza…but I didn’t give you the flour…you’re missing some of the main ingredients but you better make me a pizza…if you don’t give me all the tools that I need then…I’m not going to be able to do the best I can do.” This metaphor can be seen two ways. First, if parents give their children the proper information about sex, then their children will be better prepared to make informed decisions; and, if parents of the past generation had spoken to their own children about sex, then parents of contemporary times would have an example or the “tools” to do their best by their children, i.e. by giving them information to make better decisions.

In terms of future sex education programming, parents can feel comfortable acting as the disseminators of information about issues of sexuality if they have access to the proper information. As one parent aired this as a particular concern, it should be noted that parents are encouraged to seek assistance from agencies such as Planned Parenthood to convey the correct information about sex to their children. Planned Parenthood even has a program, known as the Parents as Sexuality Educators (PASE), specifically designed for parents to provide their children with the “medically correct information about sex and sexuality.” As one parent stated, “Even some of the older people that I have talked to in the past have said in my time it wasn’t like that but I’m so glad now that you guys can do this…And I’m glad you can do that cause you need to talk to the kids about this. You need to talk to them.” It is a step in a positive direction that parents are not only being encouraged by health educators to talk to their children, but also by older individuals from their own communities, who see the advantage of providing the youth with the proper tools to make informed sexual decisions.
What parents communicate to children about sex and sexuality

Few parents in this study found it effortless or unproblematic to communicate with their children about issues of sexuality. Likewise, many children find it somewhat difficult to communicate with their parents as well. It seems that building a foundation of trust between young adults and parents where they feel that they can trust each other enough to share their experiences can be a stepping stone to keeping the chain of communication open between parent and child regarding issues of sexuality. For the most part, the young adults want to hear of their parents’ experiences. Rather than just hear parental expectations, they want the advice that their parents give them to come from previous knowledge gained from similar experiences in the past.

Overwhelmingly, parents agreed that the easiest topic to discuss with their children was puberty, as opposed to topics that pertained to the act of sex itself or the protection needed to practice safer sex. Other parents mentioned that telling their children to protect themselves, but not necessarily how to protect themselves, was also relatively comfortable. Topics that dealt with issues such as condom usage, the sexual act itself, or birth control were either harder to mention or avoided altogether. As noted in the results, a sense of embarrassment, fear of not having the latest information, and not wanting to grant approval to their children by talking about these subjects were all reasons as to why parents were reluctant to discuss sexuality with their children overall.

The key to easing into discussion of the more difficult subjects may be relying on other sources to initiate the conversation. For example, feelings of embarrassment are natural in most cases and can be overcome by easing into conversations about sex indirectly. Several parents mentioned that images from the media have spurred conversations about sex. They mentioned that it was much easier to initiate a conversation about sex when a topless woman on the
television sparked the conversation than, for example, sitting their children down and directly answering questions about subjects such as condom usage. For this reason, as acknowledged by some of the parents in this study, sex education in the schools has also played an important role in opening up communication between parents and children.

There was not a general consensus as to whether it was culturally acceptable or not to teach sex education in schools. While three of the parents said that most parents from their culture oppose sex education in schools, two of the youth said that parents actually support sex education in schools. Furthermore, since the young adults and parents represented separate generations, there may have been a difference in terms of their exposure to different opinions. Fortunately, sex education can occur anywhere, in the home, church, or in the facility of a private organization; rather, what is important is not necessarily where sex education is taught, but that the children of these parents are receiving the correct and proper information that they need in order to make informed decisions about sex.

As expected, the subject that most parents in this study would not mind their children learning about in school was puberty, which is the same subject parents felt most comfortable talking about with their own children. If this is truly the case, the schools can play an important role in providing the information that both parents and children may not feel comfortable addressing with each other. From the point of view of the parents, it was not that they feared that their children would learn information that they would rather not have them learn, but that they would learn this information too early or that hearing this information from them would be the equivalent of granting their children permission to have sex. As Ricky and two of the parents mentioned, education and knowledge is valuable no matter if it relates to a “safe” subject like music theory or a more controversial one like sex education. Schools then can disseminate the
information but when it comes to value judgments, it is ultimately up to the parents to teach those in the home.

Culture, Religion, and Sexuality

Although most of the participants of the present study have stated that religion does not guide sexual decision-making, religion can play an important role in disseminating information related to family planning. Here we may consider the diffusion of innovation theory, which theorizes that the process of diffusing a new idea or innovation through the proper channels in a social system will lead to the adoption of the innovation by the target population (Murray, 2009). This theory has been prevalent in the public health field, and perhaps accordingly, religious institutions can be an important ally in the fight against the spread of STI’s and unplanned teenage pregnancies by acting as a conveyor of information to the masses.

A popular belief is that Christianity vilifies sexuality. Despite the core message that premarital sex is morally wrong, several of the participants have reported activities and workshops that their churches have supported pertaining to sex education. Perhaps this should not be surprising, as the priest of this study explained:

And this whole theology of the body is that the body is sacred…and this is all from John Paul. He talks about the man entering the woman is [that it is comparable] to going into the holy of holies, like the Old Testament. And that probably the union of the husband and the wife is probably the closest we’ll ever get to heaven on Earth.

If the Catholic Church can discuss the pleasure of the sexual act in such a blunt manner, then it is reasonable to understand how they can mention issues such as family planning to their congregation as well. The priest further mentioned that this theology of the body may not have reached the Mexican population yet. He states, “Because this is a newer teaching…and this is
kind of this new conservatism in this way... But I think people who are Hispanic tend to be much more traditional and just kind of the rules ‘don’t do this, don’t do that, and you’re going to go to hell.’” The priest made an interesting observation that may have applied to the past generation of those of Mexican descent, but perhaps, not to the present. The parent and young adults throughout the interviews expressed how adherence to core Catholic values regarding sexuality have changed in contemporary time, thus, the traditional views have been modified by the newer generation of Mexicans/Mexican-Americans.

As the youth have mentioned, the traditional view of adhering strictly to the Catholic rules regarding sexuality does not really apply to their generation. Moreover, all the parents mentioned a close family member who conceived a child out of wedlock, whether it was a daughter or sister. This lack of adherence to strict moral guidelines was also commented on by one of the youth, Soul stated, “I think they preach it well, and I think they practice it less so. Hence, even the older generation had members who did not specifically abide by what Soul called the “religious rhetoric and theology” of her grandparents’ generation.

As this study has pointed out though, nearly everyone of Mexican descent identifies with religion and demonstrates respect towards the faith of others. One parent stated, “If you look around and see examples of the families... or look at what your parents will tell you... or your religion... or your culture... this is how we would want to be.” Hence Christianity still plays a role in forming the personal identity of many in this community. In fact, religion, culture, and family are all part of a bigger picture that represents the values of those within the Mexican/Mexican-American community.

Several participants expressed this association between cultural value systems and identity. Cecilia stated that it’s like a chain and the pieces are religion, culture, and family which
cannot be separated from one another. She says that, “My parents are like this because they were influenced by their parents that adhered to the rules of the church, and the church is of a determined manner because the culture is like that…” Likewise, when it comes to issues of sexuality, individuals of this culture learn how to balance the demands of family, culture, and religion. Pedro, in illustration of this point, stated, “The culture, saying it’s okay to [have premarital sex] and the religion saying: you shouldn’t be doing it. And I say, ‘I’m going to do it’, [but if so] then it has to be with somebody that I’m going to walk into church and say, ‘This is the girl I’m going to marry.’ That’s the balance.” Hence for many of the participants even if there are conflicting beliefs among their core values, they learn how to appease each element and to achieve a balance.

The attempt to balance the sometimes conflicting elements of religion, culture, and sexuality is a challenge that many Mexican-Americans/Mexicans must meet. The interrelationship between these concepts that produce the type of environment where sexual decision-making does not exist independent of these cultural factors is a concept that Super and Harkness (2002) describe as chaining. They state, “the most evident examples of chaining are found in the domain of physical health, where for example high rates of disease result from…customs that permit their spread, and parental ethnotheories which fail to understand or to organize action to alleviate the problem” (p. 272). In terms of sex education, this “chaining” within Mexican-American culture can be used to organize action against the spread of diseases and unwanted pregnancies.

The parental ethnotheories and customs in this case can prove useful for it is because of the sense of closeness of families that the current generation of teenagers is able to communicate openly with their parents. This study has shown that although parental ethnotheories play an
important role in how parents communicate with their children about sexuality, the personal experiences and histories of parents also shape their opinions about sexuality in general. Although the parents may strongly adhere to their cultural values and respect the moral prescriptions of the culture, they do not hesitate to improve upon areas in which they find their culture wanting. Overall, this shows that their culture is no more resistant to change than any other, and that culture is dynamic and fluid, never static.

_Implications for sex education_

While attitudes of male sexual promiscuity found in this study may result in detrimental health outcomes for the population, it is not the responsibility of health educators to discredit years of cultural upbringing, but rather “cross-cultural communication efforts should always be envisioned as an opportunity to integrate cultures and not to convince people of the rightness of a single culture” (Schiavo, 2007, p.77). Health educators instead can specifically address how sexual promiscuity can be destructive in the long run if proper protection is not used. Instead of attacking the culture that permits the act, a health educator can communicate that the act itself can be detrimental to one’s health, and that increasing one’s number of sex partners, also increases the likelihood of exposure to STI’s including, HIV/AIDS.

When working with young males who are sexually promiscuous, it is especially important to mention that men who are infected with certain STI’s may not show symptoms, so although a young man may believe he is uninfected he could unknowingly transfer an STI to his partner. Besides references to STI’s, a sex education program that addresses how men specifically make decisions about sex may also be necessary, so that the pressure they experience from their role models, society or their peers, is not ignored or discounted. Moreover, most programs that attempt to raise awareness of safer sex practices and lessen teenage pregnancy
specifically target young ladies as the primary actor in sexual decision-making and ignore the role of the man (Fine, 1998).

This study provides ample evidence that sex education programs should target young men as much, or even more so than young women, as a result of men’s greater degree of freedom in sexual decision-making and exploration as compared to young women. As these young men are more likely to have more sexual partners, they are therefore also more likely to put more individuals at risk of transmitting an STI. Nonetheless, the respondents of this study have stated that it is particularly the young males who are excluded from receiving valuable information related to sexuality from their parents, as they are expected to already know about sex by virtue of being male. As a result, sex education programs that target young males do in fact seem to be necessary.

It is essential that sex education programs that target a particular cultural group take into consideration that shared values and belief systems do not translate to shared behaviors or instruments of decision-making. While one person may believe in adhering strongly to the cultural values in which she was raised, another may make decisions based on her own experiences, needs, and wants—or perhaps in most cases, a combination of the all these variables. It is important to realize that culture may ascribe meaning to sexuality, but culture is not necessarily a tool of sexual-decision making.

Comprehensive sex education programs may sometimes include information pertaining to issues of both heterosexuality and also homosexuality. As only two parents spoke of homosexuality outside of the context of religion, it is difficult to draw any conclusions over whether or not parents of Mexican descent would resist sex education programming for their children that spoke openly about all sexualities, not just heterosexuality. Bella, in particular, did
not want her daughter to even witness a gay couple kissing. Furthermore, Pedro remarked that homosexuality is a threat to masculinity in the view of his culture. Further research is needed to specifically address how parents of Mexican descent view issues of homosexuality, to see if sex education programs that do include topics of homosexuality will be met with resistance by parents.

A common practice when initiating a sex education program for individuals whose culture one is unfamiliar with is to first become acquainted with the cultural values and belief systems of the target population. Within a Mexican-American/Mexican context, these values and belief systems may focus on themes such as familism, religion, respect, and gender roles. Accordingly, health educators should use their first in-class lesson to not only gauge the students’ knowledge of STI’s and safer sex practices through pre-evaluations, but to also learn where her students stand in terms of values and belief systems that previous literature has identified as important to members of her student’s cultural background. This can be done in multiple ways. One particular activity the researcher recommends involves dividing students into groups and having them discuss among each other their views and knowledge of sex and relationships. Consider giving each group certain items to serve as conversational prompts such as condoms, photos of couples fighting, or lyrics of a well-known pop song. In addition, lessons and activities that specifically investigate how relationships are managed and how relationship conflicts are resolved will also reveal important aspects of the culture. Role-playing and team building activities can also be used to gauge gender dynamics that may be culturally specific.

As a result of the emphasis of family and religion in the Mexican-American community, a health educator working with this particular population should attempt to incorporate different aspects of each concept into future programming. For example, the health educator should
encourage, when appropriate, parental involvement. This involvement can be a separate workshop for parents where the educator can meet and discuss with parents her goals and expectations for the class or a Q&A session for parents to have their questions answered regarding topics in sexuality or parent-adolescent communication that the sex educator facilitates. Concerning religion, if the researcher plans to work on a community-level then this study suggests meeting with church-based parental groups and clergymen of local churches to garner their support. If the intention of the facilitator is to make the project sustainable then training the aforementioned groups such as the church-based parental groups or parents of the students, in STI prevention strategies, for example, will allow the community to continue their intervention programs without relying on the aid of a technical facilitator.

Basically, the key to designing programs that are culturally relevant yet that acknowledge individual differences in a target population is to simply allow students to be part of their learning process. Above all else, it is important to start a conversation with students, so that a sex educator is not just the facilitator, but also a listener and learner. By actively listening to their concerns, a STI prevention specialist can effectively address their problems. For example, a study done in India showed that Indian adolescent males were hesitant to masturbate because they were afraid that “wasting” their sperm would lead to weakness and other medical problems (Lakhani, Gandhi & Collumbien, 2001). This issue was largely ignored by many in the public health field because fear of seminal loss was seen solely as a culturally conceived sexual myth that held no real health implications. Upon deeper inspection though, the study found that these young men, in particular, were engaging in unprotected intercourse with sex workers. Hence, what may seem harmless at first glance, such as a young girl thinking she can become pregnant
from kissing, may be a topic of grave importance, but until voices are heard and acknowledged we continue to miss opportunities to improve the sexual health of those who really need it.

This is not to say that pre-defined curriculum cannot be used, but that it should be supplemented with topics that arise from the interests of the target population, such as sexual desire. The researcher, for example, in previous occasions, addressed students’ concerns over appropriate condom usage and “worse case scenarios” post coitus as a result of individual student interest, despite using a set curriculum that suggested otherwise. Above all else, when addressing sex education programming, despite an exhaustive review of literature or understanding of a culture, it is important to acknowledge fluidity and diversity within a classroom, even among individuals of the same culture. Hence, with a Mexican/Mexican-American population, it may be taboo to mention homosexuality according to the results of certain studies, but to neglect to do so may mean oppressing conversations about sexual desire and differences.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

This study sought to provide health care providers with an overview of the cultural values and belief systems of Mexican-Americans/Mexicans that may influence their attitudes and beliefs towards issues of sexuality. Specifically, this study investigated the influence of religion, parental ethnotheories, and the overall culture that shapes Mexican/Mexican-American identity and how it plays a role in the formation of sexual beliefs and values. The results derived from this study can be then used to create effective sexual health education programs that may help to alleviate sexually-related health disparities within the Mexican-American population of the Northwest Ohio region. The following conclusions derived from this study may assist with the development of these programs.

The investigation of Mexican/Mexican-American cultural values and norms on parents’ beliefs or attitudes towards the sexuality of their own children found that the sexual expectations for males and females differ, and continue to be informed by the “old culture” to some degree. In particular, this study found that women continue to be and are expected to refrain from being sexually promiscuous, while men are still encouraged to gain sexual experience outside of wedlock. While both young adults and parents mentioned that this idea is not as prevalent as it once was, programs that serve a Mexican-American/Mexican population should keep in perspective that in certain peer groups hyper masculinity is acceptable, while female sexual desire is expected to be heavily guarded.

When investigating the influence of Mexican/Mexican-American cultural values and norms on parents’ beliefs/attitudes towards sexuality in general, similar gender based results were found. Gender differences that dictate who is permitted to engage in premarital sex are especially noticeable, but as mentioned previously, the younger generation is not held to the
same moral prescriptions as the older generation. Hence sex education programs should acknowledge that despite limitations that were previously placed on Mexican-American/Mexican women, presently women have just as much freedom as men when it comes to sexual choices. This is contrary to the sexually oppressed depictions of Latina women as described by Juarez and Kerl (2003).

The exploration of the impact of cultural norms and values on parent-adolescent communication about sexuality discovered that sexual silence was the key concept describing how cultural norms and values dictated what parents of past generations discussed or did not discuss with their children. Nonetheless, because parents today appear to be talking to their children more than before about sex, future STI interventions should focus on how to teach parents to openly discuss sex with their children and introduce parents to the various organizations that could assist in this communication, whether it is through training workshops or providing the correct information about sexual health.

Finally, the fourth inquiry concerned with the influence that religious beliefs have on sexuality and sexual behavior, also found that attitudes have changed over time and religion as a sexual decision-making tool is less relied upon. Specifically, moral teachings continue to view premarital sex as a transgression (more for men than women); however, society has become more accepting of this behavior. Furthermore, the Catholic Church has begun to play more of a role in the prevention of STI’s and unintended pregnancies. These last findings are highly important because they demonstrate that the Church and other religious bodies can help support programs that combat health disparities suffered by Mexican-Americans in the realm of sexual health.
Overall, this study recommends that health educators remember that culture is grounded in a particular place and time. As this study has revealed, what applied to the older generation of Mexican-Americans is not as strictly applied to the new generation. Hence health providers must negotiate between individuals who follow modern day modes of behavior and those who adhere to more traditional rules of conduct. Furthermore, they must contend with the individual differences that make up these populations, as the current generation is raising their children to think independently and use cultural values as a guide, but not necessarily a rulebook for behavior.
REFERENCES


Carrillo, H. (2002). The night is young: Sexuality in Mexico in the time of AIDS. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.


Interview Questions-Appendix A

Parent

Part I: Background

Hi, my name is Adia Major. Thank you again for your agreement to participate in my research study. We’re going to begin with a few background questions. First of all,

1. With what ethnic group do you identify?
2. How old are you?
3. How old are your children? / How old is your child?
4. What level of education do you have (formal education)?
5. Where were you born? US ______ If so, state __________
   Not US ______ What country? __________
6. Where were your parents born? ________________________

Part II: Family and Culture

Thank you for answering the background questions. The following questions are about family and culture…

1. Tell me about your parents (or whomever raised you)
   Living:
   Ages:
   Occupation:
   Religious affiliation:
2. Growing up did you have a lot of interaction with your extended family? Did you have cousins, uncles, aunts, or grandparents present?
3. How important would you say is family or *familismo* in your culture?

4. How important would you say is *confianza* or trust between family members in your culture?

5. Can you think of two values/morals/beliefs that are especially important to most people from your cultural background?

6. In the view of your culture, what are the characteristics/qualities of a good daughter? A good son?

7. What signifies that you’ve become a woman in your culture?

8. What signifies that you’ve become a man in your culture?

9. In general, in your culture, at what age is a child considered an adult?

10. How much do you think Mexican culture influences how Mexicans/ Mexican-Americans you personally know view marriage?

Thank you for your participation thus far. I have some scenarios that I would like for you to consider prior to our next meeting. If you can, take time to write out a response for each scenario on the paper provided. I’ll ask for your response next time we meet. If you’re unable to write out a response for any reason, just think about the questions between now and our next meeting, and we’ll talk about them next time we meet. Thanks!

*At this point the journal scenarios for reflection will be given to the participant and the questions in Part III and IV will be asked during the next interview session.*
Part III. Sex Education and Sexuality

The following set of questions are about sexuality and sex education. If at anytime you feel there is a question that you do not want to answer please tell me so that I may skip it and proceed to the next. Remember, your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw from this study at any time…

1. In your opinion, do you think most parents in your culture oppose or support sex education to be taught in schools?

2. For those parents that support sex education in school, what subjects do you think they want their children to learn about?

3. Do you think most parents in your culture openly communicate with their children about sexuality?

4. For those parents that do communicate with their children, what topics do you think they discuss?

5. Do you think some subjects are easier for parents to discuss than others?

6. In your opinion, where and when should children learn about sex? If it all?

7. If you had to talk to your child about sex, would you be more comfortable talking to a female child or male child?

8. How is premarital sex viewed in your culture?

9. Do you think people from your cultural background have a different opinion of women who have premarital sex than men?

10. How do you think most parents from your culture would react if they had a daughter who became pregnant out of wedlock?
11. How do you think most parents from your culture would react if they had a son who
fathered a child outside of wedlock?

Part IV. Religion and Sexuality

The next set of questions focus on religion and sexuality. If at anytime you feel there is a
question you prefer not to answer, be sure to stop me and I will skip that question and
proceed to the next. Remember, you can withdraw from this study at any time…

1. Would you say that people from your cultural background are religious in general?
2. How important is religion in your culture?
3. What is the religious affiliation of most individuals from your cultural background?
   Catholic, Protestant, or other?
4. Do you think religion influences how many people from your background view
   marriage?
5. Do you attend church? If so, what does your church say about issues of sexuality?
6. How much of a role do you think religion plays in your culture in terms of guiding sexual
decision-making?
7. What does your religion/church say about homosexuality?

Part V. Concluding Question

Thank you so much for your input so far. I know that I’ve asked many questions, but I
would like to ask just one last question, if you don’t mind…

Overall, do you think your culture has shaped your views of premarital sex, marriage, or
sexuality in general? If so, to what extent?
Part I: Background

Hi, my name is Adia Major. Thank you again for your agreement to participate in my research study. We’re going to begin with a few background questions. First of all,

1. With what ethnic group do you identify?
2. How old are you?
3. What level of education do you have (formal education)?
4. Where were you born? US_____ If so, state __________
Not US_____ What country? __________
5. Where were your parents born? ________________________

Part II: Family and Culture

Thank you for answering the background questions. The following questions are about family and culture…

1. Tell me about your parents (or whomever raised you).
   Living:
   Ages:
   Occupation:
   Religious affiliation:
2. Growing up did you have a lot of interaction with your extended family? Did you have cousins, uncles, aunts, or grandparents, present?
3. How important would you say is family or familismo in your culture?
4. How important would you say is confianza or trust in your culture?
5. Can you name two values/morals/beliefs that are especially important to most people from your background?

6. In the view of your culture, what are the characteristics/qualities of a good daughter? A good son?

7. What signifies that you’ve become a woman in your culture?

8. What signifies that you’ve become a man in your culture?

9. In general, in your culture, at what age is a child considered an adult?

10. Do you think your culture influences how your parents view marriage?

Thank you for your participation thus far. I have some scenarios that I would like for you to consider prior to our next meeting. If you can, take time to write out a response for each scenario on the paper provided. I’ll ask for your response next time we meet. If you’re unable to write out a response for any reason, just consider the questions between now and our next meeting, and we’ll talk about them next time we meet. Thanks!

*At this point the journal scenarios for reflection will be given to the participant and the question in Part III and IV will be asked in the next interview session.

Part III. Sexual Communication and Parents

The following set of questions are about sexual communication and parents. If at any time you feel there is a question that you do not want to answer please tell me so that I may skip it and proceed to the next. Remember, your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw from this study at any time. Most of these questions are retrospective, so please consider your earlier teen years when answering…
1. Do you think your culture approves of open communication between parent and child about issues of sex/sexuality?

2. Would you say that most of your peers are/were comfortable asking their parents questions about sexuality/sex?

3. In your opinion, if a peer wanted to talk to a parent about sex, would it have been with a parent of the same sex, different sex, or would it not matter?

4. In conversations about sexuality/sex, what subjects do you think most parents mention? (What subjects do you think they are most likely not to mention?)

5. What subjects do you think your peers would have liked for their parents to mention?

6. What subjects do you think they would have preferred their parents to not mention?

7. Can you recall a time when your parents attempted to talk to you about sex?

8. Can you recall a time when your parents attempted to avoid a conversation related to sex?

**Part IV. Values/Beliefs and Sexuality**

The following set of questions is about overall cultural values and sexuality. If there are any questions you would rather not answer please tell me, so that I may skip it and proceed to the next. Again, your participation is voluntary and we can stop this interview at any time…

1. Is dating acceptable in your culture? If so, at what age do most kids began to date?

2. Is teenage pregnancy frowned upon in your culture?

3. Certain actions have been taken in an attempt to lower the rate of teenage pregnancy in the United States, including comprehensive health education courses in public schools that
cover sex education. In your opinion, do you think most parents in your culture oppose or support sex education to be taught in schools?

4. For those parents that support sex education in school, what subjects do you think they want their children to learn about?

5. What subjects do you think your peers would like to have learned?

6. How is premarital sex viewed in your culture?

7. Do you think people from your cultural background have a different opinion of women who have premarital sex than men?

8. To what extent do you think religion influences how your culture views issues of premarital sex?

9. How strongly do you think people in your culture actually adhere to religious doctrines concerning sexuality?

Part V. Concluding Question

Thank you so much for your input so far. I know that I’ve asked a ton of questions, but I would like to ask just one last question, if you don’t mind…

Overall, how much do you think your culture influences your parents’ views of issues such as premarital sex and sexuality overall?
Scenarios for Reflection-Young Adults

1. Can you recall an incident when someone from the same ethnic/racial background as your own became pregnant out of wedlock? (It can be someone you know or just know of.) What were the consequences? How were they treated by their family, neighbors, classmates, the community, the church?
2. Do you think parents have different expectations for their female children than their male children in terms of sexuality? If so, how do you think these expectations relate to culture?
Participant Number:_____________________

Scenarios for Reflection-Parents

1. Can you recall an incident when someone from the same ethnic/racial background as your own became pregnant out of wedlock? (It can be someone you know or just know of.) What were the consequences? How were they treated by their family, neighbors, classmates, the community, the church?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

2. Let’s say you have a son that fathered a child out of wedlock, how would you react?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
3. Let’s say you have a daughter who became pregnant out of wedlock, how would you react?

4. Can you think of any incidents where conversations with your children about sex/sexuality came up? What was your reaction? How did you feel?
5. Have your kids ever directly proposed questions to you about sexuality/sex? What was your reaction? How did you feel?
The Priests/Pastors

1. How long have you been a priest/pastor?
2. Where have you worked in the past?
3. Have you worked with a predominantly Mexican community in the past?
4. How long have you worked with your present congregation?
5. In the view of the church, what’s the purpose of marriage?
6. Do you instruct parents about how to raise their children in a “Godly” or religious manner? If so, how do you instruct them? Parenting groups, sermons, workshops… (What do you tell parents about teaching or guiding their children in a way that conforms to religious standards?)
7. Do you talk about teenage pregnancy/premarital sex with your congregation?
8. What key messages concerning sexuality does the church teach its congregation?
9. In your opinion, are issues of sexuality better to be taught in church, home, or school?
10. Do you think that in the view of the church, issues of sexuality and issues of morality are linked?
11. In your opinion, how strongly does your congregation adhere to the morals and values that the church teaches?
Educators

1. How long have you taught health/sex education? With what age groups/grades?

2. What concepts do you cover in your education courses?

3. Have you met any resistance from parents regarding what you teach?

4. To what extent do you have ethnic and cultural diversity in your classes and have you noticed any differences in the way students react to health or sex education based on their cultural background?

5. In your opinion, to what extent are comfort levels or embarrassment related to student background (culture/ethnicity/maybe even SES)?

6. Have you found parental reactions to sex education to vary depending on the parents’ cultural background?
Appendix B

Informed Consent Letter

Hello, my name is Adia Major and I am a graduate student at Bowling Green State University in the Master of Arts in Cross-Cultural and International Education (MACIE) program. You are invited to take part in a research study that focuses on Mexican American/Mexican parental values, cultural norms, and attitudes towards adolescent sexuality. The purpose of this study is to explore the issues that shape parent’s ideas of adolescent sexuality. The results from this study will benefit healthcare practitioners and educators who need to better understand the relationship between sexuality and cultural belief systems. This study is limited to individuals who are at least 18 year of age. You will be asked to participate in two or possibly three 30 to 45 minute interviews. Also, I ask that I be permitted to audio record your interviews. The audiotapes will be transcribed (and translated if needed) as data for my research project. This study is at no risk to you, but certain questions may cause feelings of discomfort. Remember though: your participation in this study is voluntary and at anytime during the study, you may withdraw.

I will make every effort to preserve your confidentiality. The notes taken from the interviews will be shredded and the audiotapes used will be erased at the end of this study. Also, access to information collected from the interviews will be restricted to myself, as all the information collected from you will be stored in a locked bureau in my home. Furthermore, only a Spanish translator (if needed) and I will see the collected data. In terms of confidentiality, I will make sure your name is not associated with the transcripts generated from our interviews, nor any report from this study that may be written at a later date. If by any chance, you are associated with Rural Opportunities Incorporated (ROI) or the Latino Student Union at BGSU,
your participation in this study will not affect your relationship with or any services you may receive from either organization. **Again, information from this research will be used solely for the purpose of this study.**

If you have any questions about this study or method of investigation, please contact me at: amajor@bgsu.edu or 305-878-9524 or my thesis advisor, Dr. Margaret Booth, at (419)372-9950. You may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University, (419) 372-7716 (hsrc@bgsu.edu), if any problems or concerns arise during the course of the study. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Adia Major
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*Names shown are pseudonyms*
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*Names shown are pseudonyms*
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Table 4: Description of Health Educator Participants

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