

Theory of Planned Behavior: A Conceptual Framework. Exploring Rural Mexican Parent/Adolescent Communication

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Due to the negative outcomes of adolescent risky behavior considerable public health investment has focused on prevention of peer influence especially in low income communities [1-3]. Unplanned pregnancy, substance abuse, and school dropout continue to pose considerable public health risk for Hispanic teens, especially those in rural areas [4,5]. Rural adolescents are likelier than their urban counterparts to become pregnant, abuse drugs during high school and drop out, [6,7] with little known about how to prevent this phenomenon among rural Hispanic adolescents. Hispanics are about 13% of the population but will become one quarter of the population by 2050. The purpose of this study was to explore what promotes or inhibits rural Mexican parents from talking with their adolescents about prevention of risky behavior and its consequences (pregnancy, substance abuse and school dropout). The University of California Davis Institutional Review Board approved this study (# 471395-2).

Studies in urban communities have established the importance of the family social environment to prevention of risky adolescent behavior. Researchers have found parents are potential sources of knowledge that may mitigate the negative effects of peers through their conversations about such behavior [8]. Parents, especially Hispanic, are thought to provide a normative influence by verbally transmitting respect for family values that approve or disapprove their adolescent's behavior [9-11], by shaping their attitudes, beliefs, and norms [12].

The inverse relationship between parent/child communication and adolescent risk involvement is well documented across geographic areas and cultures [10,12,13]. Parents who do not talk with their children increase the probability of risky behavior by not communicating family normative values [12,13]. However, when parents openly talk about family values concerning risky behavior with teens, they are likelier to delay or reduce behaviors associated

with negative outcomes [8,14].

Research on parent/adolescent communication has focused on youth perceptions [15]. Studies on parental perspectives have investigated mother-daughter versus father-son communication on sexuality [15,16]. While research on paternal communication about sexuality with teenage sons has increased, less is known about paternal interaction that prevent risky behavior among daughters and sons in Hispanic families especially in rural areas [17].

Hispanic culture emphasizes "familism" or close family relationships and "respeto", respect. "Familism" reinforces the importance of parental communication. It conveys family rules and expectations, concerning unprotected sex, drug use, and school dropout [18,19]. "Respeto," or respect, is manifested through several domains that include respect for obedience to authority, deference, decorum, and public behavior.

Despite their intention to talk with their adolescents, many Hispanic parents feel it is difficult or uncomfortable to discuss risky behavior [2,20]. Such discussions are frequently gender focused, in order to communicate gender appropriate sexual beliefs and behaviors [15,21]. Few studies have included Mexican male perspectives [19,21-23]. Research on the importance of both parents to prevent risky behavior is inconclusive, with limited knowledge about rural, Mexican parents. Population specific knowledge is essential to developing culturally and linguistically acceptable interventions to increase parent/adolescent communication that prevents risky behavior.

The first step in designing such an intervention is to understand the complex nature of parent/adolescent communication and what promotes or deters rural Mexican parents from talking about risky

behavior and its consequences. This study employed the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [24-26], to conceptualize these complex relationships. It has been used to study prevention of risky behavior in Hispanic urban youth [17], less with rural, Mexican populations.

The TPB identifies three determinants of behavioral intentions. These include: 1) attitude (favorable or unfavorable toward performing the specific behavior), 2) subjective norm (perceived social pressure about specific reference persons who approve or disapprove engagement in the behavior), and 3) perceived behavioral control beliefs (how easy or hard it is to actually perform the behavior). According to TPB, to design population specific culturally tailored behavioral interventions we must first obtain knowledge about attitudes, social pressures, and ease or difficulty in performing the targeted intervention behavior, like parent/adolescent communication, as Figure 1 illustrates [26].

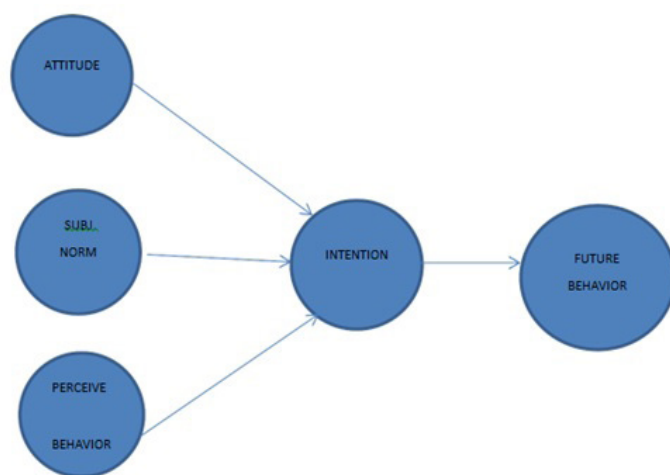


Figure 1: Concepts of Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB).

Methods

Design

This study used a qualitative design [28,29], to deeply explored parental attitudes, social pressures, ease, and difficulty in parent/adolescent communication. Qualitative designs are often used to generate hypotheses for further testing or as a guide for planning effective interventions [30]. Participants are free to share their thoughts knowing they are not alone in experiencing what is being explored through the use of semi-structured interviews.

Procedures

Guided by TPB, we developed a questionnaire to explore parental attitudes, social pressures, ease or difficulty in parent/adolescent communication about risky behavior and its consequences (pregnancy, substance abuse, school dropout). For example parents were asked to describe if talking about risky behavior was good, bad, or important (attitudes), who approved or disapproved talking about risky behavior (social pressures/subjective norm), and ease or difficulty (perceived behavioral control) to discuss prevention of risky behavior and consequences with their teens.

Using standard methods of Spanish translation the questionnaire

was translated into Spanish and back into English to assure the reliability of the Spanish translation with the English. Since the Spanish questionnaire had not been previously validated, it also was pilot tested. Pilot testing allowed us to identify discrepancies in the translation and to ensure the participants fully understood the questions being asked [30].

Recruitment

A local community worker recruited participants through door-to-door outreach using a bilingual flyer. Public service radio announcements, networking after church services on Sundays, personal invitations with telephone follow-up and home visits were also employed. Bilingual research assistants read the informed consent in English or Spanish to participants before they were asked to sign the designated form.

Facilitator Training

Group facilitators were trained in: 1) focus group methodology, 2) group dynamics, and 3) community contextual factors (poverty, resources, and rural characteristics) to become sensitized to the participants' community experience. Facilitators were bilingual in English and Spanish and demonstrated culturally sensitive communication techniques. They were certified in the conduct of research with human subjects.

Data Collection

To respect the cultural/gender specific issues we assigned mothers and fathers to gender concordant groups. We thought that parents would be less embarrassed about sharing gender specific issues among strangers of the same sex. Focus groups lasted approximately 90 minutes. They occurred in either Spanish or English, or both, based on the participant's language choice. Group discussions were audio taped and transcribed for analysis. Each group was assigned a bilingual facilitator, note taker, and observer.

Data Analysis

Trained bilingual transcribers translated all Spanish language focus group recordings into English. Standard methods of qualitative data analysis including thematic analysis were used to generate the broad themes associated with attitudes, social pressures, facilitators, and inhibitors to parent/adolescent communication that emerged from the data. The authors identified and coded themes within and across group sessions using the inductive method of data analysis. Emergent themes were triangulated and validated with a small group of Mexican-American persons to ascertain whether or not coding made sense in a cultural context.

Results

Setting and Sample

This study occurred in the Central Valley of California. The majority of the population worked in agriculture and of Mexican origin. Seventy-one (71) participants, (n = 52 mothers and n = 19 fathers) participated in this study. Most were born in Mexico (96%). They described their Latino origin as Mexican/Mexican-American/Chicano (99%). Parental mean age was 46.5 years

(range = 35–72 years); mothers mean age was 45.1 years and of fathers 50.4 years. Most parents were married (94%) and preferred to speak in their native language of Spanish (94%). While mothers' reported their occupation as homemakers or housewives, fathers' occupation was reported as agricultural.

Parent Attitudes

According to TPB, attitude is determined by favorable or unfavorable beliefs concerning expected outcomes of the intended behavior for example, parent/adolescent communication about risky behavior to prevent pregnancy, substance abuse, and school dropout. In keeping with the Mexican cultural norm of "familism, and respeto" parent/adolescent communication of family values between parents and children was a highly desired outcome and each parent's responsibility.

Parents reported positive attitude based on the expectation that Mexican parents need to share family principles to guide their teen's behavior. These principles included: 1) morally acceptable behavior, 2) truth telling, 3) family trust, 4) respect for parents, 5) reverence for the family unit, 6) family love. Mothers and fathers equally stated that, "We shouldn't let our children do whatever they want to do. We need to talk to them. Having communication is so important." One father noted the importance of truthfulness with his daughter, "I told her to speak the truth, and we will also speak the truth and everything will be okay." A mother communicating a need for trust stated, "If there is no trust between each other then there is no communication." Others reported that, "respect starts by respecting themselves." Parents agreed that giving their children love was the best way to have open and effective communication. One mother summed her attitude by saying, "If you don't get love at home, then you are going to be looking for it in the streets."

Subjective Norm

The theory of Planned Behavior [24], underscores the importance of referent persons or groups who approve or disapprove an intended behavior like parent/adolescent communication. In this study, focus group participants identified sources of approval from: 1) personal family history, 2) local community challenges, and 3) gender role cultural expectations of mothers and fathers.

Mothers and fathers equally shared challenges to talking with their adolescent. Remembering difficult conversations with their own parents during their own adolescence helped them to recognize the need to communicate with their teens. For example, one mother said, "My mom also never told me anything. Until this day, I am hurt at the fact that she never talked to me about anything. That is why I am very open with my children."

Parent/adolescent communication was socially supported by negative consequences discussed in local news and television. For example, local community news disseminated that negative consequences of risky behavior in local television and newspapers. Parents described that, "right now this town is messed up, there are a lot of drugs...therefore, that is one thing I can tell him not to do because those things are bad even if they think they are good.

Teaching them how to talk, trust, and to know that respect starts by respecting themselves. If they respect themselves, they will be able to respect everyone else... respect starts by respecting themselves." Parents perceived that the community valued and supported parental communication about risky behavior to prevent the outcomes publicized in local news.

Parents felt they needed to "to illustrate consequences of undesirable behaviors publicized in their communities", at cost to future education. Regarding pregnancy, one mother related that while many teenagers desire to continue their education after they get pregnant, "at that point going to college will become more difficult. I use that as an example of what not to do."

Published examples of substance abuse inspired parents to discuss outcomes of such behavior so that "they take another path than the one taken in the news. "I think using people as an example is good. You can point out people that are on the wrong or right track... Using examples, motivating, and having communication in general will help." Parents felt community strongly supported their talking with their teens about risky behavior.

Congruent with Mexican culture, parents commented on the importance of gender to communication in Hispanic families. Mothers expected and supported other mothers talking with their daughters and fathers with their sons. Gender affected how parents interacted with children about sensitive topics. For example, one father said, "I talk to my daughters a little about school, but with my sons I talk to them openly about sexuality and those things." One mother remarked that, "Sometimes they are embarrassed though. For example, my son doesn't ask me about these topics...so I joke around with him about these things." Another mother noted, "If I don't feel comfortable talking to our son about something, [his father] will do it, which relaxes me." A father echoed: "I tell my wife to talk to [my daughter] a lot. She is 14; it's a hard age not only for her but also for the parents."

In general, most mothers agreed that they were the ones to hold conversations about risky behavior with their children, regardless of gender roles. They felt they won their adolescent's trust more easily than their husband did. Mothers not only felt they were the first to be approached, but also the mediators between their adolescents and their fathers.

Perceived Behavioral Control

Perception of ease or difficulty to perform a targeted behavior directly and indirectly affects its execution [24]. Perceived behavioral control (PBC) moderates the relationship between intention and behavior (Figure 1) Parents identified what made it easier for them to communicate with their teens. PBC included: 1) personal lived experience, and 2) adolescent reinforcement for parental firmness and directness. Parents also revealed challenges in communicating family norms. They included: 1) lack of information, 2) perceived adolescent attitude, 3) generation gap, 4) time constraints and 3) embarrassment in talking about sensitive topics (pregnancy, substance abuse, and school dropout).

Mothers and fathers shared their personal lived experiences including the economic disadvantage of agricultural work, few opportunities, and limited education made it easier to talk about preventing school dropout. They did not want their children to do farm work, as one father asked his son not to “follow in my footsteps. I work in the fields and my son said he wanted to be just like his father. I stopped him there because he stopped doing his homework because he wanted to go work with me. Once I saw his grades, I did not allow it. He is doing better now.” Another father who reinforced education shared that “We are pushing for their education because we don’t want them to turn out like us. We don’t want to see our children work like us. We want them to be better than working in the fields or in heavy work. We want them to have an easier job that pays well.” Parents were “also examples for our children...They sometimes get mad and tell me I don’t have a career ... I don’t have a career, but I want them to have one...”

Parental firmness and directness made it easier to communicate whenever they attempted to discourage their teens from taking risks, especially substance abuse. One mother related that she knew about the amount of drugs that were currently available in the community. She resolutely communicated to her adolescent that, “those things are bad even if they think they are good...not to drink...even if people from his school do them.”

When talking about preventing pregnancy, mothers and fathers equally supported the need for firm communication. Honest discussion about pregnancy, its responsibilities, and consequences of raising a family was highly valued and helped to make it easier for parents to talk with their teens. Parents stressed to sons and daughters the responsibility for the baby was, “for the rest of their lives” in order to try to control their risk. Overall, parents shared that firmly conveying family values motivated them to talk to their teens about avoiding risky behaviors to graduate from school.

Five PBC themes emerged as challenges to parent/teen communication. These included: 1) lack of knowledge/communication skills, 2) perceived adolescent attitude, 3) generational gap, 4) time constraints 5) embarrassment.

Parents shared their inadequate knowledge about prevention of risky behavior and consequences. They also lacked communications skills needed to have such discussions. Mothers identified a need to learn specific ways to talk with their daughters: “My biggest worry is how to communicate with my daughter. I want to learn more ways to communicate with her and her teachers to help guide her towards a better future.”

Fathers echoed that: “We never studied how to be a father. We were raised differently from these times. So if there were more ways to communicate, we would become better fathers.” Another noted, “I will not say I am a good father. We didn’t study how to be parents; we just picked it up.” With the limited self-confidence due to a lack of knowledge about pregnancy, substance abuse, and school dropout, parents reported their reliance on their adolescent’s school.

Parents felt children received education about sexuality, drug abuse, and other risks as a part of their educational experience. While such classes helped to give parents a springboard into a family discussion, parents did not have the same educational resource which limited their ability to talk about these topics. “They even have classes at school about [sexuality]. So that way, [our children] get an idea and then we can communicate what little we know to them.” “Now-a-days one could talk very openly with their children because the schools have already talked about it. If not the school, [children] have already picked up a book and learned about it.”

Parents requested more education about human sexuality and risky behavior. They also desired to learn how to advise their children about academic progress and success. Due to their limited education, parents feared talking about expectations for high school graduation or higher education. A mother noted that, “economically we aren’t stable... It is not that we don’t want our children to get ahead in life. It is because we don’t know what is available; we are left in fear.”

Parents perceived their adolescents’ higher level of personal knowledge about risky behavior and its consequences prevented them from talking with them. Parents felt that adolescents had more school education about these topics than parents, “they think they know everything. If we try to talk to them, they will just say that they already know...it was old news.”

Sample parents noted that a generation gap made it difficult to share messages and communicate. However, they tried to overcome this gap by recalling their own adolescence. Mothers remembered how other family members would talk to their parents about seeing them with boyfriends. Everyone in the family seemed to be involved in their lives during that period. Still, others also remembered learning how to communicate from their parents. Mothers and fathers summed up their feelings about the generation gap when one parent stated that, “we can try to understand them because we have lived their age, but they are never going to understand us because they have never been adults.”

Parents in the sample were concerned that they did not have consistent time to talk with their adolescents, citing work schedules as a significant barrier to effective parent-adolescent communication. Many parents said they worked very long hours, and were unable to spend time with their teens when they came home from work. Despite taking pride in being able to provide for their families, parents in these focus groups expressed regret at the trade-off of losing communication with their teens due to work schedules.

One father noted that “I finish working in the fields at 10 p.m. on Sundays... there are times when one works 15-16 hours a day.” Another indicated, “I feel we leave our children alone a lot due to work.” Parents agreed that long work hours hindered communication and they may have led to poor teen outcomes. As one mother stated, “the majority of teenagers that start doing drugs

start because their parents focus more on working and forget about their children.” Another mother noted, “[Mothers] who work all the time might not ask their children how their day went. It is not because they don’t want to; it is because they don’t have time.”

Parents were often embarrassed to talk to their adolescents about sex and drugs. However, once parents overcame their embarrassment and initiated conversations, they noted that their adolescents were not willing to listen to their messages. Parents expressed feeling awkward and inadequate about their inability to communicate new messages, as if children already knew more than their parents.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand what promotes or inhibits rural Mexican parent/adolescent communication about risky behavior and its consequence. Guided by TPB, this study provided sample parents with an opportunity to share personal attitudes (good or bad), social pressures (subjective norms), and what made it easy or hard (Perceived Behavioral Control) to talk with their adolescent daughters and sons.

Positive parent attitude toward communication was based on the cultural importance of family values, (morally acceptable behavior, truth telling, family trust, reverence, love & “respeto”). Our findings were consistent with research that has stressed the importance of favorable attitudes concerning communication and firm parenting practices in the prevention of risky adolescent behaviors [13,31-33].

Interestingly, subjective norm (social approval) for parent/adolescent communication was based on personal experience. Participants who did not openly discuss sensitive topics with their own parents during adolescence were motivated to do so with their children. Their own parents managed to covertly transmit respect for family values through the socialization strategies they used, as other researcher have found, in spite of not verbally communicating them [9,34,35].

The community environment was the ultimate referent group that provided the social approval parents needed to motivate parent/adolescent communication. The public examples of teens who had succumbed to risky behavior exemplified missed parent/teen opportunities to talk about the consequences in their community. Consistent with other research, use of negative public media examples to transmit family values has provided support for the self-control needed to ignore peer pressure [36].

Gender concordance increased cultural pressure for mother/daughter and father/son conversations. This may be due to gender specific cultural traditions [34,37-39]. Studies suggest the importance of gender to communicating expectations about gender appropriate beliefs and behaviors for Hispanics [21,40]. Discussion of sex related topics are difficult and may violate cultural traditions when not gender concordant [41,42].

The use of personal experiences during “teachable moments”

encouraged conversations. While some studies have found that families are challenged in finding the right time to talk [43,44], our parents identified “teachable moments,” to engage in such conversations. They used personal experiences and public imagery to illustrate the negative consequences of risky behaviors to school success during these moments. “Teachable moments” are a common theme in communication among Latinos, referred to by some as “scare tactics” [4,45].

Participants confirmed that firm and direct conversation makes it easier to discuss risky behaviors. Fathers in particular, talked about their ease in communicating with their sons on these topics while focusing academics with their daughters. In keeping with other researchers, fathers also shared their belief that the sexual socialization of their sons was more their responsibility, while their daughter’s was their mothers [19,46]. Parents in other studies have also reported that gender differences must be acknowledged to promote communication [21].

Challenges to parent/adolescent communication included: limited knowledge and communication skills, perceived adolescent attitude, time constraints, generation gap and embarrassment. Others document that lack of information frequently keeps parents from talking with their adolescents [34,45]. Work schedules kept parents from following through on their intent by not finding the right time to talk with their adolescents as others have identified [48].

Mothers and fathers further disclosed the negative effect of the generation gap on their intent to discuss sex and drugs with their adolescents. The fact that most of these parents were born in Mexico possibly increased the generation gap was. Traditional Latino cultures emphasize control over children and but embarrassment when talking about these topics, as they had experienced with their own parents [49]. Others have also found that parental cultural traditions in Mexico may not only be a barrier for mothers and fathers to openly communicate about sensitive topics in the U.S. but also potentiate the generation and cultural gap experienced in the United States [50].

Study Limitations

This sample included a subgroup of Mexican rural parents living in the Central Valley of California. It is not generalizable to other Hispanic subgroups. Surprisingly, religion did not emerge as a group theme despite that religion is a significant family socialization factor for most Hispanics [51]. Talking about risky behavior and its consequences with adolescents may not be consistent with religious beliefs for some Hispanics.

Implications

Based on the results of this study, empirical research is needed to design a culturally and linguistically appropriate intervention that provide education and communication skills for rural Mexican parents. Such intervention is needed to help parent’s follow-through with their intent to talk about preventing risky behavior and its consequences (pregnancy, substance abuse, school dropout)

with their adolescent children.

Conclusion

TPB is a valuable framework because it identifies unique cultural and linguistic characteristics through qualitative research methods. It can be useful to develop effective interventions that are responsive to the most culturally relevant variables of a targeted group for intervention. It provides knowledge about core beliefs to perform or not perform a behavior, allowing for identification of appropriate intervention goals and measureable results.

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