

Understanding Mexican-American Marriage Patterns Using a Life-Course Approach*

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Objective. Guided by a life-course framework that incorporates the interconnection between marriage, migration, and other transitions, we critically examine the familism explanation for the earlier age at marriage among Mexican Americans. *Methods.* We compare the marriage patterns of Mexican immigrants derived from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) to those of women living in Mexico derived from the Mexican Census. We then use data from the NSFG to estimate proportional hazard models of marriage using fixed variables such as parent's education and time-varying variables such as school enrollment. *Results.* Analyses show that the Mexican immigrant population marries earlier than Mexicans who do not migrate to the United States. In addition, the U.S.-born Mexican population has lower marriage rates than whites once family background characteristics associated with early marriage are controlled and Anglos are no less likely than Mexican Americans to marry in response to a pregnancy. *Conclusion.* We find reason to doubt that ethnic differentials are driven by a strong attachment to marriage, female chastity, and the "traditional" family. Although cultural factors may play an important role, researchers need to more carefully specify the aspects of Mexican culture that might encourage marriage and how these factors interrelate with economic and demographic constraints.

The Mexican-origin population in the United States marries at an earlier age compared to non-Hispanic white (Anglo) women. In March 2000, 72 percent of Anglo women age 20–24 were never married. The corresponding proportion for Hispanics, the majority (65 percent) of whom are Mexican, is 55 percent (Fields and Casper, 2001). This relatively large percent married at an early age is surprising because limited economic opportunity and

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discrimination are often used as explanations for the late age at marriage among African Americans. As the Mexican-origin population also experiences economic disadvantage, one might expect that they too would have a later age of marriage (Oropesa, Lichter, and Anderson, 1994).

An alternate unproven explanation for the early age at marriage relative to Anglos is that Mexican culture is familistic, emphasizing "values which give overriding importance to the family and the needs of the collective as opposed to individual and personal needs" (Bean, Curtis, and Marcum, 1977). This explanation argues that Mexican culture emphasizes marriage, motherhood, and fidelity and discourages overt sexuality among women (Erickson, 1998). These claims about the Mexican emphasis on marriage are supported in empirical analyses that show that Mexican-origin girls expect earlier transitions to marriage and motherhood than other women (East, 1998). However, no research has directly linked familistic culture to early marriage among the Mexican population. The goal of this article is to critically examine the idea that early marriage among Mexicans arises because of a cultural heritage that especially values marriage.

Theories on Ethnic Variation in Marriage

Family sociologists have produced various theories to explain racial and ethnic variation in marriage. Economic resources, mate-selection processes, and culture are the core concepts for the most common of these explanations. Both theory and empirical observation suggest that greater economic resources enable marriage and can increase the incentives for marriage, especially for men (Becker, 1991; Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, and Lim, 1997; Landale and Tolnay, 1991). The tendency of African-American males to have lower wages and higher levels of unemployment relative to majority whites, resulting in a lower availability of "marriageable men," partially explains their later age at marriage (Lichter et al., 1992).

At first glance, it appears that marriage patterns among Mexican Americans contradict the expectations derived from the economic resources explanation for black-white differences in marriage. According to a recent report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2001), the 2000 unemployment rate for non-Hispanic white males age 16 and over was a low 3.4 percent, whereas Mexican-origin unemployment was higher at 4.3 percent. Furthermore, Mexican-origin men in the United States have substantially lower earnings than either whites or African Americans. In the year 2000, the average median weekly earnings for full-time employed men over the age of 16 was about \$670 for whites, \$500 for African Americans, and only \$400 for Mexicans (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001). Clearly, to the extent that earnings are important for marriage, low male earnings should hinder Mexican-American marriage formation, but the Mexican-American population still marries at the same age or earlier than Anglos.

To explain this unexpectedly early age at marriage, some analysts appeal to cultural factors, specifically Mexican familism. Mexican familism manifests in three domains of family behavior: extended kin ties, fertility, and “traditional” gender roles. Research comparing the kinship networks of non-Hispanic white and Mexican-origin women in the United States shows that the kinship ties of Mexican Americans are more intensive and extensive (Keefe and Padilla, 1987). The fertility rate in Mexico is higher than in the United States and within the United States, Mexican-origin women have higher fertility rates than non-Hispanic white women (Bean and Tienda, 1987). These fertility patterns, combined with research showing that women in Mexico hold stronger orientations toward motherhood than Mexican women who live the United States, suggest that Mexican culture is more pro-natal than is the culture of the United States (Guendelman et al., 2001).

The dimension of familism that is most relevant for our study is the high value placed on traditional gender roles and marriage. A substantial body of research argues that Mexican culture is more pro-nuptial than United States culture (e.g., Alvarez, Bean, and Williams, 1981; Del Castillo, 1984; East, 1998). Mexican-origin women have strong orientations toward domestic roles, and ideals of femininity encourage women to defer to men and preserve their virginity until marriage (Dietrich, 1998; Blea, 1992; Guendelman et al., 2001). In combination with other aspects of its purportedly pro-nuptial familistic culture, this emphasis on premarital chastity may contribute to an earlier age at marriage for Mexican-origin women than observed among women from Western European origins. A strategy many societies employ to reduce (the visibility of) premarital sexuality is an early age at marriage and high rates of marriage among women who become premaritally pregnant. Altogether, even though there is likely substantial variation by class and experience within the United States, Mexican Americans exhibit the three dimensions of familism to a greater degree than non-Hispanic whites. Thus, researchers trying to understand the early age at marriage and lower divorce rates of Mexican Americans have turned to Mexican familism as an explanation (e.g., Oropesa, Lichter, and Anderson, 1994; Yang and Frisbie, 1989).

A problem with the cultural argument, one that it shares with the economic resources theory, is that it is static. A theory about marriage should take into account the fact that finding a mate and jointly deciding to marry is a *process* that is shaped by multiple dimensions of the life course, such as age, school leaving, pregnancy, and fertility. An 18 year old may not feel as ready to marry as one in his mid 20s even if he has sufficient earnings to maintain a household, perhaps because he does not feel like he “knows himself” well enough yet. Moreover, his potential mates have less information on what kind of man he will become. This uncertainty is compounded while youth are still enrolled in school (Oppenheimer, 1988). Consequently, school enrollment is a strong negative predictor of marriage (Goldscheider and Waite, 1986; Thornton, Axinn, and Teachman, 1995).

Compared to Anglos and African Americans, a much higher proportion of Mexican Americans do not graduate from high school. In 2000, 7 percent of non-Hispanic white females had less than a high school degree. The corresponding figure for Hispanic females was 35 percent (Newburger and Curry, 2000). This suggests that some of the reason Mexican-American women marry earlier than Anglos is that they leave school at younger ages. The negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on marriage may offset some of this positive effect of early school leaving. Once age at school leaving is controlled, those who attain more education have higher marriage rates (Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, and Lim, 1997).

For the foreign-born Mexican-American population, migration adds another layer of complexity to the life course. The decision to migrate is interrelated with other life-course transitions like the completion of schooling, marriage, and the search for employment. For men, migration is encouraged by opportunities for employment in the receiving country and/or a lack of opportunity in the place of origin. Mexican households have traditionally sent men across the border to work in the United States, while women usually stayed in Mexico (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994). For at least the last 30 years, the balance of the sexes in the Mexican immigrant flow appears to stably split between 75 percent male and 25 percent female (Durand, Massey, and Zenteno, 2001). Compared to single women, married women and young girls are more likely to have access to family resources to facilitate migration. Having a close family member naturalized as a result of the Immigration Reform and Control Act is a strong positive predictor of women's migration (Donato, 1993). Consequently, women migrating as adults are positively selected on marriage. That is, the proportion married among the population of Mexican immigrant women should be high and not representative of the Mexican national population.

In sum, ethnic variation in marriage patterns arises via a complex web of influences. A lack of economic resources probably hinders marriage for Mexican Americans. Even so, Mexican-American women marry younger than Anglos, a pattern inconsistent with established explanations for African-American marriage patterns. One potential explanation for this contradictory pattern is that Mexican culture offsets the negative effects of economic disadvantage. However, before we attribute the difference to familism, we should investigate how the marriage process unfolds over the early adult life course, with special attention to other important life-course events, migration, school leaving, and fertility.

Analytical Approach

Our investigation takes four approaches to examining the "familism" explanation. First, we examine race-ethnic differences in marriage patterns in 1995. Much of the earlier research documenting differences between the

Mexican population and other groups in the United States used data from the 1980s (e.g., Bean and Tienda, 1987). Thus we establish that Mexican-origin women still marry earlier than African Americans and even non-Hispanic whites. This analysis also separates the immigrant from the U.S.-born population to show that a large part of the reason why Mexican-origin women marry earlier than Anglos is because of the unusually early age at marriage among Mexican immigrants. Second, we examine whether the early age at marriage among Mexican immigrants is evidence for a cultural argument. The difference in marriage patterns between immigrant women and Mexican women born in the United States might arise because Mexican women's stronger affiliation with a familistic (Mexican) culture. An alternative explanation for the earlier age at marriage among the Mexican immigrant population is that women who marry young are more likely to migrate to the United States. To investigate this possibility, we compare the marriage patterns of Mexican immigrants to the nonmigrant Mexican national population using the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth and the 2000 Mexican Census. This allows us to explore descriptively whether the Mexican immigrant population is positively selected on marriage. If so, then selectivity in the migration stream is a potential alternative to familism as an explanation for the relatively young age at marriage among Mexican Americans.

Third, we examine whether, contrary to the expectations of the economic explanation for race-ethnic variation in marriage timing, the Mexican-origin population marries no later than whites once we focus on the U.S.-born population and control for the timing of other life-course transitions associated with marriage timing, such as school leaving and employment. If the familism argument is necessary to understanding earlier marriage among Mexican Americans, we should observe two things. Familism should contribute to an earlier age at school leaving, in part by encouraging adolescent girls to marry and become mothers rather than continue in school. In that case, controlling for school enrollment should reduce some of the difference in marriage timing between Mexican Americans and Anglos. Additionally, we should expect that Mexican Americans would marry early even net of school enrollment. Adolescents and young adults leave school for numerous reasons, sometimes having nothing to do with the desire to start a family. If among school leavers, Mexican-origin women are more likely than Anglos to leave to get married, consistent with the more traditional gender role expectations associated with familism, we should expect their marriage rates to be higher net of school enrollment. Furthermore, among those who eventually leave school for other reasons, those whose cultural heritage is more familistic should marry earlier than those with a less familistic heritage.

Finally, we examine ethnic variation in premarital fertility and the impact of a premarital pregnancy on the likelihood of marriage. If Mexican-origin families place an especially high value on premarital virginity, then (everything else equal) we should expect Mexican-American women to be less

likely to become premaritally pregnant. Furthermore, if they become pregnant, we expect that they would be especially likely to marry.

Data and Method

The 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, a national sample survey of 10,847 women between the ages of 15 and 44, is our primary source of data. These data have a number of strengths, including near-complete retrospective cohabitation, marriage, employment, education, and fertility histories. Our second data source is the 2000 Mexican Census (XII Censo General de Poblacion y Vivienda, 2000). The Mexican Census is designed and developed by the National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics (INEGI). These data are released as a series of tables, which we use to describe the marital status of women residing in Mexico.

We begin our analysis by examining race-ethnic variation in the marital status of women age 20–29 in the United States. We focus on this age group because it is the time at which most people marry, and consequently it allows us to capture differences between early-marrying and late-marrying populations. The goal of this analysis is to see whether Mexican-origin women marry earlier than Anglos, as well as to see whether the Mexican immigrant population marries earlier than the U.S.-born Mexican population. We identify the Mexican-origin population using respondents' answers to a question about ethnic origin. Those claiming that they are Mexican, Mexican American, or Chicano are included as Mexican origin. A separate question, asking about country of birth, is used to separate the immigrant from the U.S.-born Mexican population.

The second part of our analysis is a descriptive comparison of the marital status of Mexican immigrants age 20–29 in the NSFG to the female population age 20–29 living in Mexico. The age constraint is necessary to make the samples comparable and to capture differences between early-marrying and late-marrying populations. However, the restriction does severely reduce the NSFG, which has only 135 Mexican immigrants age 20–29. For the NSFG sample, marital status has the following categories: never married, currently married, currently cohabiting, and formerly married. The Mexican Census has the categories, soltera, casada, en unión libre, separada, divorciada, and viuda. In most cases the correspondence between the category sets is good. However, it is possible that in Mexico there is a stronger distinction between singlehood and cohabitation/unión libre. We take this into account when interpreting our results.

We finish our analysis by using NSFG data on the U.S.-born population to investigate whether Mexican Americans still marry younger than African Americans and Anglos once we control for the timing of other life-course transitions that typically precede or accelerate marriage. We estimate discrete-time proportional hazards models. This statistical approach is

appropriate for analyses that wish to identify whether different subgroups experience longer waiting times until an event (i.e., marriage), when some cases are still “at risk” of the event at the time of interview. We prepared the data for analysis by converting the life-history information in the NSFG into person-half-year data. That is, each six months lived between age 10 and marriage (or interview for those who did not marry) constitutes a separate observation. Using the logistic procedure in SAS, we examined race-ethnic variation in marriage timing net of the control variables described below. Because our focus is on ethnic differences in marriage, we limit the sample to the three ethnic groups with a sufficient number of cases: non-Hispanic white ($N = 6,127$), African American ($N = 2,293$), and Mexican-American women ($N = 544$).

Control Variables

Life-Course Precedents. To see whether ethnic differences persist net of controls of the timing of other life-course events, we construct measures of employment, school enrollment, and educational attainment. The NSFG asks respondents about the timing of the start and stop of all spells of school enrollment and all spells of employment after age 18. The respondents’ employment, school enrollment, and educational attainment are measured with time-varying variables. The first set, measuring primary activity, indicates whether the respondent is enrolled and if not, whether the respondent has a full-time or part-time job. The reference category is not employed. The second set, measuring educational attainment, contains three dummy variables: less than high school, some college, and a college degree. The contrast category is high school degree or GED. All time-varying measures indicate the respondents’ status six months prior to the measurement of the dependent variable, marriage.

Family Background. We also include variables measuring family background characteristics. Previous studies indicate that children who experience their parents’ divorce have accelerated marriage rates in their teens and lower marriage rates in their early 20s (Goldscheider and Waite, 1991). The early marriages of those from divorced families might be the result of a teen’s desire to escape a household with high levels of conflict. At the same time, those who experience their parents’ divorce might be more cautious about marriage and delay making this commitment until later than those whose parents remain married (Thornton, 1991). However, more recent research suggests that living in a female-headed household has negative effects on marriage, regardless of age (South, 2001). We also include variables indicating the educational attainment of the most educated parent and household composition while growing up. The household composition variable

has four categories indicating the family composition when the respondent was age 14: two-parent, single-parent, step-parent, and other. Parent's education has five categories: less than high school, high school graduate, some college, college graduate, and missing.

Fertility. Finally, to examine whether Mexican Americans are especially likely to marry in response to a nonmarital pregnancy, we construct time-varying indicators of pregnancy and childbearing. The first measure indicates a premarital pregnancy. This variable is zero until seven months prior to the respondent's first birth. If she is unmarried (i.e., not censored) seven months prior to the birth, the value converts to a one. After she has the birth, the value reverts to a zero. Although the NSFG collects data on pregnancies that do not result in a live birth, in this analysis we only count pregnancies that result in a live birth. This is justified by the fact that abortions are underreported in the NSFG and we suspect that there might be ethnic variation in the likelihood that an aborted pregnancy is reported. The second two measures indicate premarital births. One indicates that the respondent has an infant child, and the other indicates that the respondent has a child over the age of one. Infant children are separated from toddlers because some couples that are unmarried at the time of the birth will eventually marry. However, the likelihood of marrying decreases substantially after the child is over one year old. Similar to the variables indicating school enrollment, employment, and educational attainment, these time-varying variables for fertility status are measured six months prior to the measurement of marriage.

Additionally, all models control for age and period. Age is measured with a series of dummy variables indicating the respondent's age during the interval represented by the person-half year. Dummy variables indicating the period distinguish intervals at risk during 1960–1969, 1970–1974, 1975–1979, 1980–1984, and 1985–1989 from 1990–1994.

Results

We begin by examining whether it continues to be true that Mexican-origin women marry earlier than non-Hispanic white women. The first column of numbers in Table 1 presents the percentage of women ever married by race-ethnicity among women age 20–24, estimated from the 1995 NSFG. A higher proportion of Mexican-origin women is married compared to Anglo women, 49 percent compared to 37 percent. This is consistent with prior work (e.g., Fields and Casper, 2001), and consistent with the argument that Mexican-American families are especially oriented around family life. However, when we separate women born in the United States from those born in Mexico, we see that Mexican-origin women born

TABLE 1
Percent Ever Married by Age by Race-Ethnicity-Nativity

	20–24			25–29		
	1995 NSFG	1995 June CPS	2000 June CPS	1995 NSFG	1995 June CPS	2000 June CPS
Anglo	37	35	29	68	67	65
African American	18*	17*	13*	39*	40*	36*
Mexican	49*	50*	48*	76	70	68*
Born U.S.	42	37	37*	72	61	60
Born Mexico	59*	64*	61*	80*	76*	75*
Unweighted <i>N</i>	1,307	3,789	3,264	1,491	4,805	3,803

*Significantly different from Anglos at $p < 0.05$.

in the United States are not much different from Anglo women. Forty-two percent in this age group is married compared to 37 percent of Anglos. The higher percentage of Mexican-origin women married is largely due to the high proportion married among the immigrant population; 59 percent in this age group are married.

We replicated this analysis using data from the 1995 and 2000 June CPS for two reasons. First, the sample of Mexican-origin women is small, leading to imprecision in the estimates. Second, our subsequent analysis compares the Mexican immigrant population in the 1995 NSFG to the population of women of the same age living in Mexico in 2000. The 1995 and 2000 CPS give us some insight into the changes in marriage patterns between these two points in time. The important finding is that we see the same pattern of results in the CPS as we do in the NSFG. In all data sets, a higher proportion of Mexican-origin women than Anglo women is married and, within the Mexican-origin population, a higher proportion of immigrants is married compared to those born in the United States.

Next, we examine whether the marriage patterns of Mexican immigrants to the United States differ from the experiences of Mexicans who do not emigrate. Table 2 compares the proportion of women age 20–29 married as reported in the 2000 Mexican Census and among the Mexican immigrant population represented in the 1995 NSFG. According to the 2000 Mexican Census, 37 percent of women age 20–29 were never married (*soltera*), 44 percent were formally married, and an additional 16 percent were in a “*unión libre*” or common-law marriage (XII Censo General de Población y Vivienda, 2000). It is not clear whether Mexican immigrants would classify their “*unión libre*” as marriage or cohabitation in the NSFG interview and so we make comparisons combining cohabiters with married and with never-married women. Regardless of the metric, the percent married among women age 20–29 is higher in the NSFG sample of immigrants than in the

TABLE 2
Comparison of Percent Married Among Women Age 20–29, the 2000 Mexican Census and 1995 NSFG

Age	2000 Census									
	Never Married/Union	Legal and/or Religious Married	Common-Law Married	Sep/Wid/Div/Dis	Total	In Union	Not in Union	Total	Unweighted N	
20–29	37	44	16	4	100	59	41	100	9,039,725	
20–24	48	34	15	3	100	49	51	100	4,752,416	
25–29	25	54	16	5	100	70	30	100	4,287,309	
1995 NSFG Mexican Immigrants										
Age	Never Married/Union	Married	Cohabiting	Sep/Wid/Div/Dis	Total	In Union	Not in Union	Total	Unweighted N	
	20–29	19	66	11	5	100	76	24	100	135
20–24	23	56	16	6	100	72	28	100	53	
25–29	15	73	7	5	100	80	21	100	82	

Mexican Census estimates. In the NSFG sample, 66 percent are married, while only 44 percent of the women of this age in Mexico are married. When we include both formal and common-law marriages, this percentage increases only to 59 percent.

Differences in the age distributions of the samples might account for some of the difference in the percentage never married, as within the broad age category of 20–29 the NSFG immigrant population is younger than the population in the Mexican Census. Yet this pattern persists when we break the age distributions down into five-year age groups.¹ Additionally, the 2000 Mexican Census is five years later than the 1995 NSFG and there is some evidence that the age at marriage is increasingly rapidly in Mexico (Solis, 2000). However, Table 1 shows that there has been little change from 1995 to 2000 in the proportion of women age 20–24 married among the Mexican immigrant population. Moreover, the difference between 66 percent and 44 percent is large enough to support the claim that the sample of Mexican immigrants in the NSFG married at a younger age than the average Mexican woman who did not emigrate. It may be that women who migrate tend to have characteristics that also encourage early marriage (e.g., low education), that the experience of migration increases the incentives to marry (e.g., for a Green Card), and/or, as previous research has argued, marriage increases the likelihood of immigration by making more resources available to women to migrate.² Consequently, it is important that future analyses of Mexican-American marriage separate immigrants from the U.S.-born population (Bean, Swicegood, and Berg, 2000; Oropesa, Lichter, and Anderson, 1994). The remainder of our analysis focuses on women born in the United States.

We next turn to ethnic variation in factors that support early marriage, specifically early school leaving and the question of whether U.S.-born Mexican Americans continue to marry as early as non-Hispanic whites net of controls for these factors. Race-ethnic differences in employment, school enrollment, and fertility are presented in Table 3. As expected, respondents' parent's educational attainment is much lower for the Mexican-American population than for other ethnic groups. In addition, fewer African Americans and Mexican Americans were in a two-parent family than Anglos. Mexican-American women also tend to experience relatively early transitions out of school and into full-time employment. At age 20, African-American women are the least likely to be full-time employed, while Mexican Americans are almost as likely as Anglos to be full-time employed. The age at school leaving is lowest for Mexican Americans, although African Americans run a close second. As the multivariate analyses show, these ethnic differences in background characteristics as well as the timing of other life-course

¹The data available from the Mexican Census provides no finer age categories than five-year age groups. However, even if it did, the NSFG sample of Mexican immigrants is too small to allow for much detail, $N = 53$ age 20–24 and $N = 82$ age 25–29.

²Additional analysis (not shown) indicates that the majority (59 percent) of women who migrated after age 15 did so after having married.

TABLE 3
Descriptive Information on the Independent Variables by Race-Ethnicity

	Anglo	Non-Hispanic Black	Mexican American
Parent's education			
Less than hs	13	27	41
High school	42	38	29
Some college	16	12	15
College	28	17	11
Missing	2	5	5
Total ^A	100	100	100
Household composition at age 14			
Two parent	73	48	65
Single parent	14	33	18
Parent and step parent	11	12	13
Other	2	7	4
Total ^A	100	100	100
% Full-time employed age 20	53.2	44.9	51.1
Median age last enrolled	21.7	20.1	20.0
Fertility and pregnancy			
No premarital birth	83	49	70
Premarital birth	10	46	22
Premarital pregnancy	7	5	8
Total ^A	100	100	100
<i>N</i>	6,127	2,293	544

^AMay not sum to 100 because of rounding error.

NOTE: Sample consists of nonimmigrant non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, and Mexican Americans age 15–44 in 1985.

transitions are important factors contributing to early marriage among Mexican Americans, given their socioeconomic disadvantage.

Table 4 presents exponentiated coefficients (relative risks) from proportional hazard models predicting the transition to first marriage. Coefficients greater than 1.0 indicate factors that increase the rate of marriage or, put differently, indicate factors associated with earlier marriage.³ Model 1 in Table 4 replicates the basic findings from previous research. African Americans have a much lower “risk” of marriage compared to Anglos, while Mexican Americans born in the United States are indistinguishable from Anglos. This finding that Mexican Americans marry no later than Anglos, despite (uncontrolled) economic factors that hinder marriage, replicates the results of previous studies and forms the basis for arguments that Mexican Americans marry at a young age because of their familistic orientation.

³By definition, a group with higher marriage rates has a shorter average waiting time until marriage.

TABLE 4

Proportional Hazard Estimates of Race-Ethnic Differences in Marriage Net of Family Background and Other Life-Course Transitions

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Relative Risk	B/se	Relative Risk	B/se	Relative Risk	B/se
Race-ethnicity (non-Hispanic white)						
Mexican American	1.01	0.15	0.87	-2.33**	0.88	-2.12*
Non-Hispanic black	0.47	-21.69**	0.41	-23.54**	0.42	-22.67**
Parent's education (high school graduate)						
Less than high school			1.19	4.62**	1.19	4.51**
Some college			0.85	-3.76**	0.91	-2.25*
College degree			0.66	-11.06**	0.71	-8.60**
Household composition at 14 (two parents)						
Single parent			0.93	-1.86 [†]	0.92	-2.18*
Step parent			1.28	5.38**	1.25	4.81**
Other			1.11	1.31	1.08	0.94
Missing			1.21	2.01*	1.20	1.88 [†]
Life course (not employed or enrolled)						
Enrolled					0.42	-21.10**
Full-time employed					1.10	2.82**
Part-time employed					1.03	0.67
Educational attainment (high school graduate)						
Less than high school					0.85	-3.32**
Some college					1.11	2.49**
College degree					1.37	5.90**

[†] $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$, two-tailed test.

NOTE: Sample consists of nonimmigrant non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, and Mexican Americans age 15-44 in 1985. Model controls for age and period (1985-1989 vs. 1990-1994).

Model 2 controls for some family background characteristics that are clearly exogenous to the decision to marry and are associated with socio-economic disadvantage, parent's education and family structure while growing up. In models that enter these variables separately we find that parent's education, but not family structure, works to suppress ethnic differences in marriage rates. Compared to Anglos, Mexican Americans tend to have parents with less education, and parental education is negatively associated with marriage. Thus, controlling for parental education raises Anglos' marriage rates relative to Mexican Americans so that in Model 2 Mexican Americans have a significantly lower risk of marriage (in any given six-month period) relative to Anglos.

Model 3 adds controls for school enrollment, employment, and educational attainment six months earlier. We include these variables because the transition out of school typically precedes marriage, and women's employ-

ment and education impact a young couple's ability to establish and maintain a household together. As argued above, while educational attainment may be endogenous to the decision to marry, we expect women with a familistic orientation to have higher marriage rates net of controls for education. Race and ethnic differences in marriage do not change with the addition of these variables. The low levels of school enrollment among Mexican-American women contribute to high marriage rates. This effect is offset, however, by the negative effects of low educational attainment on the likelihood of marriage.

Given that Mexican Americans marry later than Anglos net of controls for family background and the timing of other life-course transitions that typically precede marriage, it is not clear that we need the argument that Mexican Americans are especially familistic to explain ethnic variation in marriage rates. Note that we are not arguing that all cultural explanations are wrong, but rather that there is no *prima facie* evidence for the familism argument once we restrict our comparisons to the U.S.-born population and add appropriate controls to our models. It may be the case that if we were able to control for the negative effects of economic hardship on marriage, we would see that Mexican Americans have higher marriage rates compared to Anglos. If so, we would have indirect evidence that Mexican familism contributes to early marriage among Mexican Americans.

Unfortunately, we are unable to adequately control for economic hardship using the NSFG and to our knowledge no study has done so while limiting the comparisons to the U.S.-born population. Oropesa, Lichter, and Anderson (1994) provide the closest approximation, but their analysis is not ideal because they have only 402 Mexican-origin women. Their small sample prevents them from separating Mexican immigrants from the U.S.-born Mexican population. Instead, they control for nativity status with two dummy variables, one for the foreign born and another for the U.S. born with foreign parents. Because of the small sample size, there is potentially a problem of colinearity between the immigrant status and ethnicity variables as the majority of Mexican Americans are either foreign born or U.S. born with foreign parents. This might explain why the impact of being Mexican American is not significant, but the impact of being U.S. born with foreign-born parents is significantly negative. The current analysis adds to our understanding by separating Mexican immigrants from the U.S.-born Mexican-origin population and showing that controlling for family background characteristics, Mexican Americans marry at slightly later ages compared to non-Hispanic whites. This leads us to investigate other potential tests of cultural explanations for variation in marriage timing.

Our third approach to investigating the familism hypothesis is to investigate premarital fertility and ethnic variation in response to a premarital pregnancy. Our reading of the literature describing Mexican familism leads us to believe that Mexican-origin women should have lower levels of premarital pregnancy and fertility. Thus, if Mexican-origin families place an

especially high value on domestic roles, female chastity, and the needs of the collective, then (everything else equal) we expect Mexican Americans to be less likely to become premaritally pregnant. Furthermore, if they become pregnant, we expect that they would be especially likely to marry.

The bottom section of Table 3 clearly contradicts our first expectation. Only 17 percent of non-Hispanic whites had a premarital birth or pregnancy, whereas 30 percent of Mexican Americans and 51 percent of African Americans became pregnant premaritally. Even looking only at premarital births, there is a higher proportion of Mexican-origin women than Anglos bearing a child before marriage. These patterns of nonmarital fertility are not consistent with expectations derived from our reading of Mexican cultural history, but they are consistent with previous research (Ventura and Bachrach, 2000).

Model 4 in Table 5 adds the fertility variables to Model 3 from Table 4. Premarital pregnancies have a strong positive association with marriage, while nonmarital births are negatively associated with marriage. A comparison of the results for Model 3 to those for Model 4 indicates that relatively low levels of premarital fertility slightly depress non-Hispanic white women's marriage rates relative to Mexican-American women. In Model 4, Mexican-American marriage rates are only 85 percent of non-Hispanic white women's and this effect is statistically significant at p less than 0.05.

Model 5 allows the effects of the fertility variables to vary by race-ethnicity, which enables us to test the hypothesis that Mexican-American women are more likely to marry in response to a nonmarital conception. The results indicate that, while there are significant interactions for African Americans, the effects of premarital pregnancy and childbearing are similar for Anglos and Mexican Americans. Contrary to a familistic interpretation, premarital pregnancies do not have an especially strong positive effect on marriage among Mexican Americans compared to Anglos.

Discussion and Conclusion

The goal of this article was to critically evaluate the familism explanation for the earlier age at marriage among Mexican Americans. Often, racial or ethnic variation in family behaviors that remains net of controls for economic or demographic variables is attributed to cultural differences. The obvious weakness of this approach is that it depends on the assumption that the control variables perfectly capture economic and demographic forces that impede marriage. Yet this tendency to point to culture as an explanation has been extended to explain why Mexican Americans and non-Hispanic whites have similar marriage rates even though Mexican Americans are economically disadvantaged. Although the logic behind such a conclusion is clear, it depends on an additional assumption—that if we were able to control for the economic and demographic factors that impede marriage,

TABLE 5

Estimates of Race-Ethnic Differences in Marriage Net of Family Background and Other Life-Course Transitions

	Model 4		Model 5	
	Relative Risk	B/se	Relative Risk	B/se
Race-ethnicity (non-Hispanic white)				
Mexican American	0.85	- 2.64**	0.88	- 1.66 [†]
Non-Hispanic black	0.43	- 21.72**	0.37	- 17.42**
Parent's education (high school graduate)				
Less than high school	1.25	5.69**	1.26	5.86**
Some college	0.92	- 1.90 [†]	0.92	- 1.87 [†]
College degree	0.78	- 6.18**	0.78	- 6.04**
Household composition at 14 (two parents)				
Single parent	0.92	- 1.91 [†]	0.92	- 2.04*
Step parent	1.27	4.98**	1.26	4.92**
Other	1.02	0.19	1.01	0.10
Missing	1.24	2.22*	1.23	2.13*
Life course (not employed or enrolled)				
Enrolled	0.45	- 19.17**	0.46	- 18.98**
Full-time employed	1.07	2.02*	1.08	2.10*
Part-time employed	1.04	0.82	1.04	0.83
Educational attainment (high school graduate)				
Less than high school	0.88	- 2.56**	0.85	- 3.20**
Some college	1.09	2.15*	1.11	2.43**
College degree	1.29	4.73**	1.34	5.40**
Pregnancy and fertility (no pregnancy or birth)				
Pregnant	2.57	13.99**	3.44	14.36**
Infant	0.77	- 4.11**	0.76	- 3.04**
Child age 1 [†]	0.29	- 33.66**	0.26	- 32.01**
MexAm*Pregnant			0.78	- 1.00
MexAm*Infant			1.12	0.52
MexAm*Child age 1 [†]			0.90	- 0.73
Black*Pregnant			0.53	- 4.09**
Black*Infant			1.15	1.07
Black*Child age 1 [†]			1.68	6.42**

[†]p < 0.10; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01, two-tailed test.

NOTE: Sample consists of nonimmigrant non-Hispanic whites, African Americans, and Mexican Americans age 15–44 in 1985. Model controls for age and period (1985–1989 vs. 1990–1994).

Mexican Americans would marry more quickly than non-Hispanic whites. Consequently, we were motivated to critically examine cultural explanations for “early” marriage among Mexican Americans. In doing so we discovered alternative explanations.

First, descriptive analyses often combine immigrants with the U.S.-born population. However, the migration stream from Mexico is select, such that those who emigrate to the United States are more likely to have married at an early age compared to the sending population. Our second alternative

explanation is that Mexican Americans are more likely to have some family background characteristics that favor early marriage. This alternative explanation also receives empirical support. Mexican Americans tend to have parents with lower levels of educational attainment, which is associated with an earlier age at school leaving. Some of this positive effect of low parental education is offset by disadvantage associated with low educational attainment. Nonetheless, once we add controls for family background, school enrollment, and employment, Mexican Americans have a lower risk of marriage in any six-month period compared to non-Hispanic whites.

Lastly, we attempt to find some direct support for cultural explanations by deriving new hypotheses from the literature describing Mexicans' familistic culture. Specifically, we examine whether Mexican Americans are more likely to marry in response to a nonmarital pregnancy compared to Anglos. Contrary to the hypotheses we derived, Mexican Americans are more likely than Anglos to conceive a child premaritally and this is an additional factor that promotes early marriage. Furthermore, we find that Anglos are no less likely than Mexican Americans to marry in response to a pregnancy. In sum, we find no support for a version of the familism argument that focuses on the importance of female premarital chastity. Interestingly, recent ethnographic work has also criticized traditional depictions of Mexican sexuality and femininity (Gonzalez-Lopez, 2003).

In conclusion, we wish to clarify that cultural explanations may be important. However, this study strongly suggests that these explanations need to be refined and combined with economic and life-course explanations to provide a more complete understanding of the factors that impact marriage. The lower marriage rates among Mexican Americans compared to Anglos may arise because unmeasured dimensions of economic disadvantage that Mexican-American (and African-American) women experience hinder their marriage formation. Once we control for this disadvantage, we may see that Mexican Americans have higher marriage rates compared to Anglos. Because better measures are not available in the NSFG, future research will have to explore this possibility. If so, we would have better support for a cultural argument.

The current study also suggests that we need to more carefully examine the specific aspects of Mexican culture that might encourage marriage and how these factors interrelate with economic and demographic constraints. Familism is an incomplete explanation without a deeper analysis of how Mexican culture emphasizes various dimensions of familial bonds. A strong commitment to family may not always translate to early marriage. For example, in the early 1970s, numerous studies argued that despite higher levels of nonmarital fertility and divorce, the African-American family is strong as evidenced by robust ties among consanguinal kin (e.g., Stack, 1974). Moreover, there are multiple potential interpretations of Mexican familism. For example, while we view familism as discouraging premarital pregnancy, another interpretation might argue that the Mexican emphasis

on women's role as mothers would predict high levels of fertility even outside of marriage. The possibility of contradictory hypotheses from a single explanation just reinforces our argument that the familism explanation needs refinement before it can be useful in understanding ethnic variation in marriage timing.

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