

Intimacy and Reproduction: the Role of Hispanic Groups in American Fertility

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Abstract

This article contributes to the sociological and demographic debate on the development of fertility patterns in contemporary U.S. society. Most industrialized societies are increasingly experiencing low fertility rates, which will amount to a considerable socio-economic challenge in coming decades. In contrast, the U.S. currently has a fertility rate close to replenishment level, which would enhance a stable population growth over the long term. Based on a review of relevant academic literature, this article describes this trend, focusing in particular on the impact of Hispanic immigration into the United States. Due to its high level and notable public profile, Hispanic immigration is of central importance to current debates on U.S. fertility patterns. In the first part of the article, we describe its impact on fertility patterns in socio-economic and demographic terms. In the second part of the article, we expand this perspective with an exploration of the cultural context of intimate relationships, sexuality, and reproductive choices among Mexican immigrants. Specifically, we focus on the impact of the migration experience and of changes in cultural models of intimate life in Mexico on Mexican immigrants' sexual and reproductive behavior. These cultural factors are commonly neglected in debates on the relationship between fertility patterns and immigration, and we use our argument to highlight their importance as a base for future debate. Overall, the present analysis underscores the way in which long term reproductive patterns of Hispanics in the U.S. are highly dependent upon the dynamic interaction between cultural patterns of reproduction, desired family schemas and the socio-economic prospects of Hispanic groups in America and in their respective countries of origin in Latin America.

Introduction

In recent years, low fertility has become the norm within the societies of most industrialized nations. Boldrin, De Nardi and Jones (2005) argue that the expansion and relative success of retirement systems and pension plans in developed and in some developing nations during the second half of the 20th century, along with the overall ability of financial markets to allocate and invest funds for retirement, has

relieved parents from traditionally relying on their children to assist them financially at an old age and thus decreasing their motivation to procreate on this basis. Moreover, Morgan (2003) has argued that rapid urbanization which occurred in developed countries and is taking place in many developing nations is also strongly linked to lower fertility levels. Due to a variety of social forces, patriarchal systems of family life, sexuality, and reproduction have lost much of their normative power in the Western world during the last 50 years (Therborn 2004). Numerous studies have pointed to a ‘transformation of intimacy’ in large parts of the West (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Bauman 2003; Hochschild 2003; Illouz 2007). It has entailed individualized forms of couple relationships predicated upon notions of personal fulfillment and self-actualization. Within those new cultural models, having children has largely ceased to be a taken-for-granted mandate, for many couples turning into an optional lifestyle choice for the sake of personal satisfaction.

Low fertility is likely to become one of the main socio-economic challenges for several developed nations in the twenty-first century. For instance, a report published by the European Commission titled *Faced with demographic change, a new solidarity between the generations* (2005) forecasted a contraction of the European Union population beginning in 2025, after peaking at 469.5 million people. The lack of population growth will be reflected particularly in the decrease of the working age population. “Between now and 2030, the EU will lose 20.8 million (6.8 percent) people of working age as the number of population aged over 65 will rise by more than 50 percent and the number of people aged between 15-64 will decrease by nearly 7 percent” (Bianchi, 2005, para. 19).

Conversely, the U.S. has a fertility rate of 2.1 according to the CIA World Factbook (2008), virtually at the replenishment fertility rate required to sustain the population size over the long term. Contrary to the projected lack of population growth in the European Union, the U.S. population is set to increase by 25.6 percent between 2000 and 2025 (Bianchi, 2005). In light of the growing importance of fertility patterns in future population dynamics and population policy orientation, the purpose of the present article is to analyze the underlying factors accounting for varying fertility rates found in the U.S. while examining the respective impact of the Hispanic population on fertility trends. The analysis presented here calls for a closer examination of the socio-economic and cultural factors which impact the fertility choices of the various Hispanic groups entering the U.S. In particular, this article examines the fertility patterns of Mexican in-migrants in an effort to present particular nuances in the reproductive behavior of this specific Hispanic in-migrant subgroup. The case of Latin American and Mexican migrants is of particular interest because of their substantial numbers and high public profile, as well as the complex socio-cultural transformations of sexual and reproductive behaviors among this group in relation to the experience of migration and wider social changes in their countries of origin. The complexity of these socio-cultural forces is often neglected in demographic research on fertility trends and immigration. With this article, we would like to

incorporate it into respective discussions, as a base for a more extensive future analysis. Overall the present analysis underscores that long term reproductive patterns of Hispanics in America are highly dependent upon the dynamic interaction between cultural patterns of reproduction, desired family schemas and the socio-economic prospects of the Hispanic groups in the United States and in their respective countries of origin in Latin America.

Fertility Trends in the United States

The United States currently reports among the highest fertility rates among industrialized nations. An element frequently cited as contributing to higher fertility rates in the U.S. is the high degree of compatibility between childbearing and women's labor force participation. Morgan (2003) pointed out that American couples tend to have children at relatively younger ages in comparison to European couples, an element which could be traced to the absence of widespread unemployment among the young adults in the United States and to the common availability of childcare services. There is also a deep connection between the relatively flexible and less regulated labor market of the U.S. and high fertility levels. Adsera (2004) has argued that the high degree of flexible schedules, including the availability of several part-time jobs combined with overall lower unemployment rates, causes American women to re-enter the labor force after the birth of their first child much faster than do German women or women from other low-fertility European countries. This trend is notable as the ability of American women to re-enter the labor force swiftly after giving birth, combined with accessible childcare services, often times even partially or fully provided by employers, means that career goals do not become unattainable as a result from childbearing.

The prominent role which organized religion holds on American life, particularly in comparison to more secular nations in industrialized Europe and Asia, has been recurrently assessed to help explain fertility choices among American women. Hayford and Morgan (2008) explored the relationship between religiosity and fertility in America emphasizing the relationship between life and family schemas which religious individuals hold and their fertility choices. Using data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, Hayford and Morgan (2008) showed that women who report that religion is "very important" in their everyday life have both higher fertility and higher intended fertility than those saying religion is "somewhat important" or "not important."

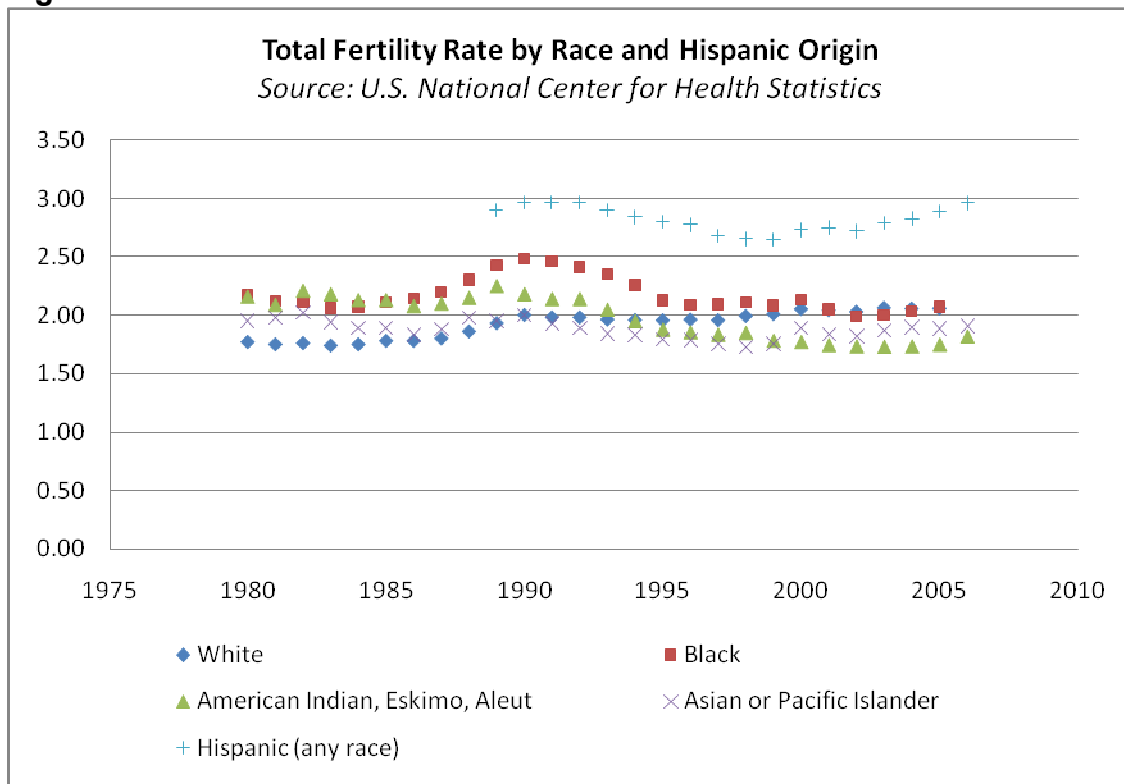
A substantial portion of the difference [in fertility behavior] is associated with differences in family ideology, including schemas about the importance of marriage and parenthood, the acceptability of nonmarital sexual relations, and gender roles in families. Results suggest that fertility

differentials are part of a widespread association between religiosity and family behavior, rather than an expression of a specifically pro-natalist orientation associated with a particular religion (Hayford and Morgan 1179-1180).

An important issue regarding higher fertility in the U.S. is that it has not been overtly encouraged through public spending: “As a result, despite a lack of public financial support for families with children, it appears that the flexibility offered to individuals through the market in the U.S. facilitates integration of work and traditional family life” (Kohler et. al., 2006, p. 31). Demeny (2003) favors this approach of non-governmental interference to amend low fertility levels in the EU: “Contemporary welfare states of the affluent world, and especially those of Europe, perform a vastly wider range of functions than the limited government of classical theory. But dirigist intervention typically stops short of any [effective] intent to influence personal fertility choices” (21).

While America has, on average, higher fertility levels than most of the developed nations, there is considerable geographical variance in population growth. For example, the majority of the population growth has been concentrated in the American South and West, the northern and the eastern states are growing slowly while several rural counties display population declines as a result of a net migration deficit (U.S. Census Bureau 2001).

Figure 1



Along with geographical variance in reproductive patterns, there are also considerable differences among America’s ethnic groups. For example, Hispanics have the highest fertility rate in comparison to any other ethnic group in America. As observed in figure 1, the Hispanic fertility patterns have been the highest among America’s ethnic groups at a rate of almost three children per woman since 1989. The following describes the current state of American fertility among American women:

Overall, women 15 to 44 years old in June 2006 had an average of 1,169 births per 1,000 women. Hispanic women aged 15 to 44 had the highest number of children ever born (1,435 per 1,000 women), compared with non-Hispanic White women, who had 1,091 children ever born per 1,000 women; Black women, who had 1,288 children ever born per 1,000 women; and Asian women, who had 992 children ever born per 1,000 women (Dye 2008: 2).

It is because of these differences in fertility that changes in the projected ethnic composition of the U.S. population are expected, as observed in figure 2.

Figure 2

Projected Population of the United States, by Race and Hispanic Origin: 2000 to 2050

Population and race or Hispanic origin	2000	2010	2020	2030	2040	2050
TOTAL	282,125	308,936	335,805	363,584	391,946	419,854
White alone	228,548	244,995	260,629	275,731	289,690	302,626
Black alone	35,818	40,454	45,365	50,442	55,876	61,361
Asian Alone	10,684	14,241	17,988	22,580	27,992	33,430
All other races ^a	7,075	9,246	11,822	14,831	18,388	22,437
Hispanic (of any race)	35,622	47,756	59,756	73,055	87,585	102,560
White alone, not Hispanic	195,729	201,112	205,936	209,176	210,331	210,283

Notes: (a) Includes American Indian and Alaska Native alone, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander alone, and Two or More Races. Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2004, "U.S. Interim Projections by Age, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin." <<http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/usinterimproj/>>, Internet Release Date: March 18, 2004.

The Role of Latin American In-migration in American Fertility Trends

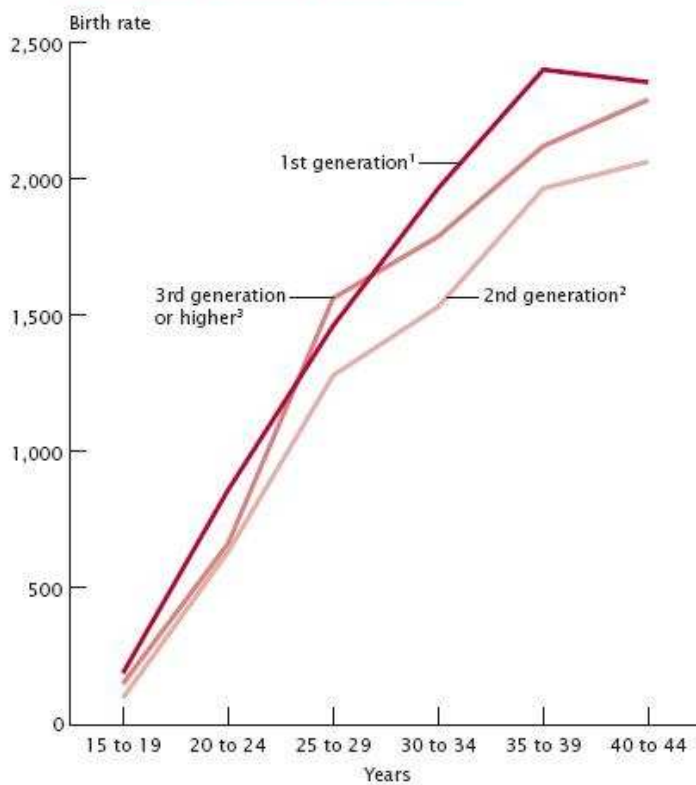
One element that has helped, and will likely continue to help, the growth of the U.S. population is immigration. From 1990 to the year 2000, immigration accounted for approximately 40 percent of the population growth (Kent and Mather 2002), while the remaining 60 percent of the growth was attributable to normal causes, that is, a surplus of births over deaths.

Immigration to the U.S., both legal and illegal, is likely to continue in for the foreseeable future and it is also likely to aid in keeping America's fertility levels at higher levels than other developed nations. In particular, the largest influx of immigrants to the U.S. comes from Latin America, and they, along with the American citizens of Hispanic origin, have considerably higher total fertility rates than the national average. On one hand, the attractiveness of America as the land of opportunity continues to be a magnet for Latin American legal and illegal immigrants, which in turn helps them add to the American population at large. On the other hand, subsequent Hispanic generations present higher fertility rates in comparison to other ethnic groups in America such as non-Hispanic whites and blacks. Seldom is immigration overall, and particularly Latin American immigration, analyzed under this light in the U.S. media as the issue is normally discussed under the scope of national

security, employment and wage levels.

Figure 3

Children Ever Born per 1,000 Hispanic Women by Age, Nativity, and Generation of Immigrant Families: June 2006



¹ Foreign born.

² Native with foreign-born parent.

³ Native with no foreign-born parent.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, June 2006.

While Latin American immigrants and the American Hispanic population at large present higher levels of fertility in comparison to other ethnic groups in America, there are important variations which occur at each generational step. A closer look at the data on fertility patterns across generations of Hispanic women provides more information about the generational variations in reproductive behavior. The data obtained from the June 2006 Current Population Survey show the average number of children born to Hispanic women 15 to 44 years old, broken down by age, for three different generations. As displayed in figure 3, the first generation, that is, those who were foreign born, recorded higher levels of fertility for the majority of the

age groups compared to second and third generation women. According to Stobbe (2008) and Dye (2008) this trend reflects larger family size norms from the migrants' countries of origin in Latin America and more optimistic views about their socio-economic future in America. Conversely, second-generation women 15 to 44 years old

had fewer children ever born than both first-generation Hispanic women and third generation Hispanic women who were American born and had two native parents as well. One explanation for the lower fertility levels found specifically in second-generation Hispanic women is the mediating effect of educational attainment and career opportunities. For instance, the 2006 Current Population Survey indicates that 47 percent of Hispanic second-generation mothers had attained education beyond high school, compared with 38 percent of third-generation mothers and 21 percent of first-generation mothers (Dye 2008: 10).

While most Hispanic immigrant groups share a similar culture, religion, language and history, the linkage between their reproductive behavior in the U.S., the fertility patterns in their countries of origin, and their migratory experience may differ drastically. Bearing this in mind, the following section provides a more detailed analysis with regard to the particular nuances found in the fertility patterns of Mexican immigrants to the United States.

Sexuality, reproduction and transnational migration in contemporary Mexico: Beyond the average

In media representations and academic discussions of this subject matter, there is a tendency to homogenize particular immigrant groups with regard to values, understandings, and practices of family life, sexuality, and reproduction. For instance, it is not uncommon to read that 'Latino' or 'Hispanic' immigrants are characterised by 'traditional', religious sexual mores, which on average lead couples to have more children and be less mindful of family planning practices than white American families. Such statements are often substantiated through references to differences in the average number of children between Latinos and other ethnic groups and general claims about 'Latino culture'¹. While such generalising or ideal-typical comparisons may be important and, to some extent, unavoidable in the analysis of reproductive patterns in different ethnic groups, they may also obscure intra-group differences and the complex interaction between immigrants' differential experiences of migration and their reproductive behaviour.

In this section, this issue is addressed by looking at the findings of recent research among Mexican immigrants in the USA. Given their high share among recent immigrants in the country, as well as their notable public profile, their case seems to be particularly suited for an illustration of the need for a more nuanced appreciation of the relationship between immigration and reproductive behavior. In this regard, two important arguments are made: First, just as patterns of sexuality and reproduction

¹ One notable example of this tendency is a recent report by the U.S. Census Bureau on fertility trends among women in the USA (Dye 2008). The report places 'Hispanic women' in one broad group and then goes on to compare fertility rates within this group and with other ethnic groups. The report does not differentiate in a sustained manner between the particular origins of these 'Hispanics' or the circumstances of their immigration into the USA.

have been rapidly changing in US society in recent decades, so too they have been undergoing notable transformations in immigrant-sending communities in Mexico. These locally specific transformations in sending communities need to be taken into account in any comprehensive analysis of immigrants' reproductive behavior. Second, immigrants' understandings, experiences, and practices of sexuality and reproduction are re-shaped in important ways by their experiences of immigrant life in the U.S. These experiences of migration in turn are differentiated by a range of factors, such as migrants' access to visas, levels of education, occupations, and access to income, goods, and services upon their arrival in the USA. These processes of differentiation in sexual understandings and practices constitute a central dynamic of the migration process and need to be placed center-stage in respective discussions.

It is generally acknowledged that, until the late 1970s, the Mexican gender order was, by and large, shaped by patriarchal cultural models strongly related to Catholic morality. Central elements of these models were, for instance, the exclusive legitimacy and public acknowledgement of sexual contact and intimate attachment within religiously sanctioned heterosexual marriage, the exaltation of female premarital virginity and motherhood, and male power and control over women's bodies and sexuality (Amuchástegui Herrera 2001; Hirsch 2003; Irwin, Nasser et al. 2003). These patriarchal cultural models constitute what is often described as 'traditional Mexican family values' in academic papers and media reports on Mexican immigrants in the U.S..

However, based on the findings of recent research, it also seems uncontroversial to state that this hegemonic patriarchal culture has recently been weakened by economic crises and neoliberal structural adjustment, a strong decline in women's fertility rate, women's massive incorporation into the labour market, feminist movements, experiences of migration, and other factors (Valdés and Gomariz 1993; García and de Oliveira 1994; Gutiérrez Castañeda 2002; Chant and Craske 2003; Hirsch 2003). In this context, Amuchástegui (2001) points to trends since the late 19th century towards a secularisation of social life and a recession of religiously rooted hegemonic visions and practices. This cultural trend, Salles and Tuirán (1998) explain, seems to have entailed a partial loss of importance of patriarchal power within the family and a change of the logic of marriage from an inseparable sacramental union to a conditional contract between partners whose acknowledgement depends on their satisfaction in terms of, for instance, mutual fidelity, understanding and tolerance, or sexual gratification.

Recent years have seen a number of important socio-cultural, political, and legal changes and conflicts in this regard. On November 9, 2006, the legislature of Mexico City [Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal] approved a law permitting gay civil unions [Ley de Sociedad de Convivencia]. The sanctioning of this law marked an important event in the increasing explicit public recognition of alternative forms of intimacy alongside historically dominant patriarchal-religious models of sexuality and relationships (Associated Press 2006; Cuenca 2006). Equally, diverse forms of family life and parenting, for instance with regard to postponed parenthood, childlessness,

and varying forms of single motherhood, are increasingly acknowledged in public life (Martínez 2006; Pérez-Stadelmann 2006). The role of the Catholic Church in Mexican society has also become, at least to some extent, an object of public discussion. This is shown by recent debates about alleged sexual abuse committed by Marcial Maciel, the founder of the Legion of Christ, and about the possible involvement of Norberto Rivera Carrera, the Archbishop of Mexico City, in a cover-up of the sexual abuse of children by the priest Nicolás Aguilar (Sánchez 2006a; Sánchez 2006b). However, alongside these pluralizing trends, patriarchal and religious models of intimacy continue to be significant in Mexican society, particularly in relation to the considerable influence of conservative political and social groups (González Ruiz 1998; Amuchástegui Herrera 2001; Hirsch 2003).

Moreover, this summary of central features of gender relations and intimate life in Mexico can only be translated to a limited extent into generalisations about Mexicans' day-to-day practices of intimate life. They have to be understood as the outcome of the globalized intersection of cultural, economic, political, and other social dynamics, in what González-López has described as 'regional patriarchies':

Regional patriarchies are those that are constructed in the diverse geographical regions of Mexican society and include the following characteristics: 1. They are fluid and contestable, depending on the socioeconomic and political contexts in which women and men live. The fewer opportunities women and men have to obtain equal education and paid employment, the greater the gender inequalities [...] and the more emphasized the regional patriarchies. 2. Not just men, but also women, actively participate in the social reproduction of different expressions of gender inequality, femininities, and multiple masculinities in contemporary urban and pre-industrialized colonial societies. 3. These dynamics have their historical roots, in part, in the formation of the Mexican state, which has been constructed through and within local hegemonies that have promoted and reproduced regionally specific constructions of social and political power and control since the early 1930s (Rubin 1996), and through regional expressions of bourgeoisie and proletariat shaped by international capital and free-market economies in contemporary society [...]. (González-López 2005: 91f.)

González-López (2005: 92) also distinguishes between rural and urban patriarchies, arguing that factors such as greater opportunities for education and paid employment as well as the stronger presence of women's organizations lead to greater possibilities for women to challenge gender inequalities and for men to perceive women as equals in comparison with rural settings.

By and large, it seems possible to think of the cultural organization of intimacies in contemporary Mexico in terms of such a pattern of contradictory pluralization. It involves, in relation to economic, demographic, and political

developments such as those we mentioned above, a limited trend towards companionate logics of intimacy. It entails shifts in women's and men's understandings and experiences of power and production divisions as well as matters of sexuality, in close interaction with patriarchal logics of equal cultural importance. The latter seem to have lost their hegemonic status in many sectors of Mexican society, but nevertheless are forcefully reasserted in public life by parts of the media, political groups, and the Catholic Church. The partial legalization of abortion in Mexico City, for instance, received widely negative media coverage and public reactions in other parts of the country, highlighting a notable cultural and political divide between the capital and other states with regard to matters of intimacy. Equally, within Mexico City, the measure received immediate and fierce resistance, including a legal challenge, from conservative social and political groups, headed by the conservative party National Action Party (PAN) (Avilés 2008), which currently controls the national government. This example illustrates the fragmentation of discourses and public opinions on matters of sexuality and reproduction that prevails in contemporary Mexico.

The growing exposure of Mexicans to foreign cultural influences as part of globalization, furthermore, seems to have had a significant impact on collective beliefs concerning couple relationships. Contemporary Mexico and Latin America are closely enmeshed in transnational cultural flows and globalized 'expert systems' through various forms of mass media, which play a significant role in many Mexicans' daily lives (Herman and McChesney 1997; Ortiz Crespo 1999; Maass and González 2005). Carrillo (2002) and Hirsch (2003) point to the importance of cultural influences from Europe and the USA, for instance through television programs, on discourses concerning sexuality, which entail more open discussions of and a greater tolerance towards same-sex relationships. Such influence has also rendered ambiguous Mexicans' cultural understandings of sexuality, which have partially moved away from patriarchal beliefs and towards an 'object-choice' model, defining roles through categories such as 'heterosexual' or 'homosexual' in terms of the gender of the individually desired partner (Carrillo 2002). Experiences of migration also facilitate the adoption of alternative models of intimate life, as the work of Hirsch (2003) and González-López (2005) has shown².

Hirsch (2003), for example, is particularly clear in her analysis of the localized dynamics that have led many younger members of the rural migrant communities she studied to espouse companionate relationship ideals. Her study is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the migrant-sending villages of Degollado and El Fuerte in western Mexico and migrant-receiving Atlanta in the USA. Hirsch relied on a range of methods, including formal life history and informal interviews, participant observation and group drawing exercises.

Within such companionate marriages, the significance of sexuality tends to lie in the experience of intimacy and mutual satisfaction rather than, as common among

² For general discussions on the social, economic, and cultural implications of Mexicans' migration to the USA, see Besserer (2004) and de Genova (2005).

older couples, in reproduction and women's duty to satisfy their husbands as part of the 'marital bargain'. Sex may be negotiated according to individual preferences, which for instance may allow women to refuse sex with their husbands instead of being obliged to satisfy them regardless of their own inclinations. The changing significance of sexuality is also manifest in changing reproductive practices among many young couples. These include the delay of first birth after marriage in comparison with older generations, which allows couples to enjoy each other's companionship and stabilize the relationship; reduced numbers of ideal children among younger women; and a greater openness towards non-traditional, technological contraceptive methods.

While emphasizing these changes, Hirsch carefully qualifies them and acknowledges their tentative character and the persistence of more 'traditional' marital and sexual norms among many young couples. Rather than superseding these traditional models, she concludes, the ideal of companionate marriage based on trust and sexual intimacy coexists with them, leaving younger participants with complex choices as to the construction of successful relationships.

Hirsch explains the generational trend towards companionate relationships and the respective differences among younger participants in relation to socio-economic and demographic developments in Mexico. Such issues as declining fertility levels, increasing access to education, the propagation of modern sexual ideals and information about sexuality by the mass media, and the experiences of migration, involving greater levels of privacy and individualism in the USA and an understanding of sexuality which does not tie it to reproduction, are all seen as relevant. Varying attitudes among participants towards marriage and sexuality are, Hirsch suggests, related to issues such as differing levels of education and the extent of migrants' access to resources, such as visas or means of transportation, which might increase their exposure to U.S. culture.

Hirsch's findings clearly reveal the glocalized, hybrid constitution of the ideals of companionate marriage she found among some of her participants. Facilitated by the mentioned structural conditions, these ideals have developed as a *mélange* of cultural elements taken from both Mexican and U.S. contexts. These ideals challenge local traditional ideals of marriage and sexuality found among older generations and many younger women and men, but at the same time respond to and elaborate these ideals by incorporating new elements discovered in the context of migration to the U.S. or medical-scientific notions of sexuality learned in the context of formal education.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion illustrates the complex relationships between different local manifestations of a global trend towards an erosion of patriarchal cultural models and the emergence of alternative forms of intimacy in recent years (Plummer 2003; Therborn 2004). Just as in the USA, patriarchal cultural models of sexuality and reproduction in Latin America have been, to varying degrees, eroded in recent years in relation to locally specific and wider transnational social, economic and

cultural developments. A pluralization or fragmentation of patterns of intimate attachment and reproduction has taken place in Mexico, leading to substantial variations of respective expectations, values, and practices among contemporary Mexicans³. This fragmentation is further accentuated by individuals' differential experiences of migration, as recently described by Hirsch (2003) and other scholars. Consequently, it seems necessary to incorporate an in-depth analysis of these variations into future research on the relationship between immigration and patterns of reproduction and fertility in the USA. While statements about averages and overall trends among particular ethnic groups constitute a starting point, they reflect in no way the complexity of migrants' experiences at the intersection of a variety of social, cultural, and economic forces.

In the short term, the Hispanic population in America is likely to continue to grow at a faster rate than other ethnic groups. However, the long term reproductive patterns will be highly dependent upon the dynamic interaction between cultural patterns of reproduction, desired family schemas and the socio-economic prospects of the Hispanic population in the U.S. and in their respective countries of origin in Latin America. Additionally, the analysis presented here underscores the need for a closer look at the role of the different cultural reproductive norms present among the various Hispanic immigrant groups and their influence upon subsequent generations, which are also heavily influenced by the overall fertility trends in America. We hope that the more detailed and nuanced socio-economic and cultural examination of fertility dynamics among the Mexican trans-migrants presented here provides a good starting point for further research on the prospective impact of other migrant ethnic groups on the future population dynamics of the U.S.

³ Similarly considerable variations may be expected among 'Latino' migrants from other Latin American countries. For an overview of the recent development of gender relations in Latin America, see Chant and Craske (2003).

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