

PAA EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Demographic Sources of Marriage Rate Differences between Anglo and Hispanic Women

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Racial and ethnic differences in marriage rates have attracted the attention of scholars, policymakers, and the general public. The issue is salient in light of evidence on the implications of family formation for socioeconomic attainment. Marriage delay increases the likelihood of nonmarital fertility and the creation of single-parent households. Family sociologists have shown that children raised by one parent experience poorer social and economic outcomes on average than children reared in two-parent homes (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Researchers have extensively explored the social and economic bases for the white-black marriage gap. Fewer studies have examined the demographic sources of nuptiality differentials between Anglos and Hispanics. Nevertheless, some basic facts about Latino marriage patterns have been established. First, Mexican American marriage rates are similar to those of non-Hispanic whites, even though people of Mexican origin suffer from higher unemployment rates and lower wages (Oropesa, Lichter, & Anderson, 1994). Second, Puerto Ricans living on the US mainland have a substantially lower rate of entering marital unions than other Hispanic nationalities (Lloyd, 2006) and non-Hispanic whites (Oropesa, 1996). The family formation patterns of Latinos are thus complex and heterogeneous.

There are significant limitations to the research which has been conducted on Anglo-Hispanic marriage differences. First, most studies have relied on older datasets collected in the 1980s and 1990s. In this period of fast-paced social and cultural change, previous work may be of limited value for understanding of the current sources of marriage differentials. Second, no prior studies have provided numeric estimates of the influence of sociodemographic variables on nuptiality disparities between Anglos and Hispanics; instead, they have presented results from regressions pooling data on multiple groups. Third, there has not been a separate investigation of differences between Anglo populations and Hispanic nationalities other than Mexican Americans. Utilizing the 2008 and 2009 files of the American Community Survey (ACS), the current study attempts to fill in these gaps. It focuses on the marriage patterns of Mexican American and Puerto Rican women in relation to those of non-Hispanic whites and

blacks (hereafter “whites” and “blacks”). Following current theory and research on marital timing, the effects of four factors on ethnic differentials in marriage incidence are examined: women’s economic resources, mate availability, cultural incorporation, and premarital fertility. First, marriage rates are calculated for whites, blacks, Mexican Americans, and Puerto Ricans. These are supplemented with descriptive statistics on variables theorized to influence the probability of marriage (e.g. educational attainment, nativity), disaggregated by ethnicity. Second, binary logistic regressions predicting the occurrence of marriage over the past year are run for each group. Third, formal decomposition techniques are applied to the regression results in order to quantify the amount by which gaps in the expected log odds of first marriage between each Hispanic nationality and whites and blacks would increase or decrease if compositional differences were eliminated.

This topic merits attention given the importance of nuptiality to Hispanic social and economic mobility. Research suggests that marriage and two parent families facilitate the transfer of human capital between generations. Marriage patterns are therefore likely to be a critical influence in determining whether the rapidly expanding Latino population achieves socioeconomic parity with the white majority and is fully incorporated into mainstream American society. For this reason, knowledge of what factors aid and impede the establishment of marital unions among Latinas should be of value to policymakers and others concerned about the future course of Hispanics and ethnic stratification within the US.

A key hypothesis is that Latinas’ economic disadvantages reduce their marriage rates relative to those of Anglo women. Research indicates that Mexican American and Puerto Rican women possess less human capital and fewer material resources on average than their white and black counterparts (Duncan, Hotz, & Trejo, 2006; Lichter, Graefe, & Brown, 2003; Lloyd, 2006). Existing theories offer conflicting accounts of the relationship between women’s economic means and their probability of

getting married. Becker's (1981) highly influential "specialization and trading" model implies that female employment and earnings reduce the odds of marriage. According to this perspective, the greatest payoff to a marital union occurs when husbands specialize in paid market work and wives in domestic tasks - their respective comparative advantages. Rising labor force participation and earnings on women's part diminish the specialization gains offered by marriage and should thus reduce marriage rates. On the other hand, Sweeney's (2002) demographic perspective posits that women's economic resources encourage the formation of marital unions by providing means for the establishment and maintenance of new households. The results from recent individual-level studies tend to support the latter argument, typically finding positive relationships between measures of women's economic standing and marriage (e.g. Landale & Forste, 1991; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Lloyd, 2006; McLaughlin & Lichter, 1997). Given the consistency of these findings, Hispanic women's economic circumstances presumably hinder their ability to get married.

This study relies on microdata obtained from the 2008 and 2009 files of the American Community Survey. The ACS, which has replaced the Census "long form," is a nationally representative survey conducted by the US Census Bureau to provide communities with data on their social and economic characteristics and to determine the appropriate distribution of federal and state funds. Data collection occurs on a near-continuous basis. The 2008 ACS is the first to ask respondents whether they married over the past year, the outcome of interest. For this analysis, the 2008 and 2009 files of the ACS are concatenated in order to increase sample size. Since the process of remarriage probably differs in significant ways from that of first marriage, the sample is restricted to women at risk of first marriage.

The preliminary results yield several notable findings regarding contemporary ethnic differences in family formation. First, Mexican American and white women marry at similar rates, African Americans are approximately half as likely as these groups to form a marital union, and Puerto Rican

marriage levels fall between the two extremes. Second, the regression results suggest that the process of marriage formation does not vary greatly by ethnicity; the estimated effects of the economic resources, mate availability, and premarital fertility measures are similar across groups. Third, the decompositions indicate that Mexican American and Puerto Rican women's low average educational and occupational attainment reduce their marriage prospects relative to those of white and black women. Nevertheless, these effects seem to be offset by Latinas' greater access to single men with stable employment and their much higher probability of being foreign-born. Finally, compositional differences collectively account for substantial portions of Anglo-Hispanic gaps in marriage incidence.

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