

Marie L. Mallet. Latino Families. In L. Ganong, M. Coleman, J. G. Golson (Eds.), *The Social History of the American Family*. Sage Publications, 2014.

Latino families

Introduction

Families are fundamental social structures which shape our societies. In the United States, recent decades have witnessed dramatic changes in the structure of the family, including later marriage and childbearing, decreased fertility, increased divorce rates and more generally a shift from traditional families to single headed families. These changes are paralleled by Latino families, as they transition from their place of origin to the United States, as well as through the acculturation of successive generations. Latino families tend to be younger, larger and poorer than the average American family, with whom they only share some cultural similarities. Although Latino families differ from non-Hispanic White families, they also tend to differ within Latino groups in a number of spheres, including with regards to demographic, socio-economic and cultural aspects. Due to the numerical importance of the Latino population, Latino families are likely to alter or redefine family norms, structures and relations within the U.S.

Historical Context

The term 'Latino' refers to a person of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American, or other Spanish culture or origin. Thus, Latinos may be immigrants or native born U.S. citizens; they may be of any race and any socio-economic background. The terminology used to refer to people of Latin-American origin or descent has evolved over time. For instance, the United States Census Bureau uses the category 'Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin' to refer to people of Latin-American origin or descent. This categorisation evolved from an original 'Spanish origin' category. The term 'Hispanic' was created and added in the 1980 Census, and the term 'Latino' was added in the 2000 Census. Further, in spite of the new broader classification, many Latinos still identify in terms of nationality, such as Colombian, Dominican, or Salvadorian and do not necessarily embrace this pan-ethnic identity.

Latinos families are very socially diverse as their members differ across countries of origin as well as within a same country. An overview of Latino families must disaggregate the main different national groups in order take into account the diversity existing among and within the subgroups groups, while trying to stress commonalities and differences with the general population. As of 2010, three national origin groups account for 75.7% of the total Latino population in the United States. The predominant group is that of the Mexicans who represent 63% of the Latino population. The Puerto Ricans are the second largest group and represent 9.2% of the Latino population. Finally, the third most numerically important group is that of the Cubans which represent 3.5% of the Latino population.

The rapid growth of the Latino population in the United States has increased interest towards the group as well as the need to gain a better understanding of Latino families as they adapt to

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life in America. Indeed, although the total Latino population in 1960 was negligible, representing 3.5% of the total population of the United States, it has quadrupled in the last fifty years, making this group the fastest growing group in the United States. With a population of 50.5 million people in 2010, Latinos represents 16% of the total population of the country according to the U.S. Census Bureau and are expected to reach 30% of the total population by 2050. It has therefore now become essential to analyse the mechanisms behind the functioning of the 10.3 million Latino families in the U.S.

Demographic profile

A close examination of the structure of Latino families reveals not only intergroup dissimilarities, notably with non-Hispanic Whites, but also great intragroup variation. Latino families in the United States appear to have distinct features compared to non-Hispanic White families. Overall, they tend to be younger and have a higher fertility rate. Latino families are formed out of rates of marriage as high as non-Hispanic Whites, but have a lower divorce rate, although more households are headed by single mothers. Significant variations can also be found within subgroups, notably between Cuban and Puerto Ricans families, who are often on the opposite ends of the spectrum.

With Latinos having a median age of 27.2 according to the 2010 Census, Latino families are composed of members who tend to be much younger than the rest of the U.S. population, whose median age is 37.2. One notable dissimilarity pertains to the difference between the median age of most Latino groups and the median age of Cubans. Indeed, while the median age of Mexicans and Puerto Ricans' is respectively 25.5 and 27.9 years, that of Cubans is 40 years. This is due to the particularities of Cuban migration in the United States, which brought older exiles following the Cuban revolution of 1959. This 10-year difference in median age between Latinos and the rest of the population has a great impact on family life, as these younger Latino adults are in their prime childbearing period. This partly explains why Latinos on average have a higher fertility rate than the rest of the U.S. population. On average, according to the 2010 Census, Latinas between the age of 15 and 50 have a higher fertility rate (76 births for 1000 women), compared to non-Hispanic Whites (53/1000). Within the subgroups, this figure is higher for Mexicans (83/1000), compared to Puerto Ricans (65/1000) and Cubans (48/1000), who have the lowest fertility rate of all Latino groups. As a corollary, the average family size for Latinos is 3.86, compared to 3.06 for non-Hispanic Whites. Similarly, Mexicans have larger family size average (4.06) compared to Puerto Ricans (3.39) and Cubans (3.31).

Generally, Latinos are more likely than the rest of the population to be living in a family household (78% and 66.4%, respectively). However, Latino families are slightly less likely than non-Hispanic Whites to be headed by a married couple (48.5% and 51.6% respectively), and more likely to be headed by a single parent in comparison with non-Hispanic Whites. Indeed, in 2010, 19.3% of Latino family households were headed by a single mother compared to 12.6%

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of non-Hispanic White households. This figure is higher for Puerto Ricans (26.1%), but lower for Cubans (13.9%).

Contrastingly, Latino families seem more stable than their non-Hispanic White counterparts, as the proportion of divorce among Latino families (8.2%) is lower than that of non-Hispanic White families (11.3%). Variation within the subgroups indicates that Cuban families have the highest proportion of divorce (13.2%), followed by Puerto Rican families (11.2%) and finally Mexican families (7.1%). However, if the rate of married couples who no longer live together and are therefore separated is included, the differences between Latinos and non-Hispanic Whites are somewhat reduced. For instance, only 1.8% of non-Hispanic Whites are separated, compared to 3.5% of Hispanics.

Socio-economic attributes of Latino Families

Latino families are at a socio-economic disadvantage in comparison with non-Hispanic White families, as they tend to have a lower median income and suffer from a higher rate of poverty. Their family members also tend to have a lower level of education and are less likely to be professionals or entrepreneurs.

On average, Latino children are born into families that present a lower level of education than non-Hispanic White families. Indeed, 43.4% of Latinos did not graduate from high school, compared to 12.3% for non-Hispanic Whites. Similarly, fewer Latinos obtained a Bachelor's degree (8.9% versus 17.7% for non-Hispanic Whites) or a graduate or professional degree (4.1% versus 10.4%, respectively). Among the Latino subgroups, the Cubans are those who have the highest level of education while the Mexicans are the subgroup with the lowest education level.

Lower educational attainment for Latinos compared to non-Hispanic Whites may partly explain the lower income of Latino families. Although Latinos and non-Hispanic Whites are similarly represented in the labor force, they tend to occupy different types of jobs. Latinos are more likely to work in blue collar occupations such as construction and maintenance (15.5% versus 9.6% for non-Hispanic Whites), and less likely to be white collars and in management (19% versus 37.6%), although notable variations occur among subgroups: the Cubans, whose migration patterns diverge from other Latino groups, generally tend to be professionals, as they brought with them social and economic capital which helped ease their economic integration into American society. On the other end, Mexicans tend to do less well than the average Latino, as they are a majority of economic migrants seeking better opportunities in the United States. As a consequence, the median annual income for a Latino family is lower than that of non-Hispanic Whites (\$41,102 versus \$64,818). As anticipated, Cuban families do financially better than other Latino families (\$47,929), and Mexican families are the ones who do slightly less well than the average (\$39,264). The poverty rate is another indicator which illustrates the differences between Latino families and Anglo families. In 2010, 22.2% of Latino families lived below the poverty level of \$22,314 for a family of four, compared with 8.7% of non-

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Hispanic Whites. Among the subgroups, the Mexicans and the Porto Ricans are the worst off (24.2%) while the Cubans do better 13.7%.

The Role of culture in family structure

Although Latinos are a heterogeneous group, they share a similar cultural background as immigrants, which reinforces their sense of commonality and identity and partly explains the above-mentioned dissimilarities between Latino families and non-Hispanic White families.

The interest of the Latino family often predominates over the individual interests of its members, a social pattern which is referred to as 'familism'. Indeed, Latino families rely heavily on the extended networks of family members, with which they interact frequently to seek support and assistance, particularly for newly arrived and undocumented immigrants. Even as Latino families adapt to U.S. society, they remain very active in this kin network and still hold a strong desire for geographical closeness with extended family members.

Demonstrating attachment to traditions from their country of origin allows these families to maintain a strong sense of collective identity, which they pass on to the next generation. This is reinforced by the links with the country of origin through continued immigration to the United States. Indeed, as of 2010, 37% of the Latino population was foreign born (35.5% of Mexicans and 58.7% of Cubans; Puerto Ricans have a special status, as Puerto Rico is a commonwealth, they have American citizenship). This is exemplified by the maintained use of Spanish within Latino families. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 75% of Latinos declared to speak Spanish at home, with slight variations within the subgroups (73.3% of Mexicans, 64.1% of Puerto Ricans and 81.9% of Cubans).

The patriarchal model is often the norm in Latin America, and this is often replicated by Latino families. Gender relations are frequently determined according to a form of 'machismo' - wherein a woman's role and appropriate behaviour are clearly determined and usually involve looking after the children and the house, while the husband assumes the role of breadwinner for the family. However, constraints imposed by external factors such as financial necessity or other environmental conditions sometimes provide more flexibility and variance to the relationship between husband and wife, and to the roles they assume within the family unit. Women may have step in and fulfil duties generally accomplished by men.

Yet processes of acculturation, by which a minority group progressively acquires the values and the behaviour of the dominant group, increasingly blur the boundaries between Latino family values and mainstream American values, and induces cultural change and social adaptation. For the Latino family, this sometimes involves letting go of traditional, rigid gender role expectations in favour of more flexible and sometimes egalitarian models wherein male dominance may no longer be a culturally preferred mode. This process is further reinforced through successive generations, as the new generations adopt the American family values and models. Indeed, this is heavily evidenced by the second generation within a Latino family –

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they are usually bilingual and bicultural, and they provide a bridge between their foreign born, immigrant parents, grandparents or great-grandparents, and American society.

Conclusion

The Latino family is a family in transition, adapting, from one generation to the next, to life in the United States. Although the acculturation process and successive generations are generally redefining gender roles and making some families transition to American family models, Latino families maintain much tighter intra-family links than Anglo families. However, the dissimilarities between Latino families and non-Hispanic White families cannot exclusively be explained by cultural differences. Structural factors, such as economic constraints and the fact that a large proportion of Latinos are immigrants, also explain the differences, as these are immigrant families undergoing a process of adaptation to their host society. Indeed, the impact of immigration on the family should not be underestimated: it sometimes separates families through voluntary migration and deportation, and it sometimes reunifies families within the United States. More generally, it is difficult to refer to the Latino family as a monolithic construct, as Latino families display great diversity in socio-economic status, in demographic profile, in immigration history and in cultural specificities. It is therefore important, when referring to Latino family, to take into account the subgroup differences that may be hidden by the pan-ethnic 'Latino' identity. The Latino family, as a construct, should be taken as a reflection of the diverse human stories which result from varied waves of immigration and the trials of acculturation into American society.

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Author:

Marie L. Mallet

Harvard University

See also: Latino families; Immigrant children, Immigration policy, Migrant families

Further readings:

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