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HISPANIC FERTILITY, RELIGION AND RELIGIOUSNESS IN THE U. S.

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Introduction

About one-sixth of the U.S. population is now of Hispanic origin. Its population is growing rapidly, fueled both by immigration and higher fertility. The total fertility rate for Hispanics was estimated for 2006 at 3.0, significantly higher than that for either non-Hispanic whites (1.9) or for non-Hispanic blacks (2.1) (CDC, NCHS, 2007). The rates for Hispanics are higher at every age, especially for teenagers for whom it is three times higher than for non-Hispanic whites. Within the Hispanic population, the highest fertility is for those of Mexican origin and for those born abroad. According to a recent population projection (Passel and Cohn, 2008), the Hispanic population in the United States is projected to triple in numbers by 2050 and increase from 14 to 29 percent of the total population.

The primary focus of interest here is on the role that religion and religiousness play in the higher fertility of Hispanics. Several sources of data have been used: the 2002 and the 1995 National Surveys of Family Growth (the 1995 data show a very similar picture as the 2002 data), the four General Social Surveys between 2000 and 2006, and the 2006 survey of Hispanics by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the Pew Hispanic Center. The age range for women is 18-44.

Religion and Religiousness

Most Hispanics (66%) report their religion as Catholic, 21% as Protestant and 11% saying that they have no religious affiliation. The influx of Hispanics in this country has evidently had a major rejuvenating impact on the Catholic church (Reiff, 2006). The Church has apparently adjusted to the fact that many Hispanics are expressing a different form of Christianity, increasingly associated with pentecostal and charismatic movements (Pew, 2006). About 22 percent of Hispanics identify themselves as “born again” or “evangelical or charismatic” with 31 percent of non-Hispanics in this category.

Latinos are more religious than non-Hispanics with 37% reporting church attendance at least weekly compared with 31% of non-Hispanics; 60% of Hispanics say that religion is very important in their lives compared with 42% of non-Hispanics. Very similar differences from these in the 2002 NSFG are reported in the Pew 2006 survey. One striking difference measured in the Pew survey is the greater Hispanic belief in God as an active force in their lives. Some 52% of Hispanics believe that “Jesus will return to earth in my lifetime” in contrast to 34% of non-Hispanics (among Catholics, the contrast is even greater: 51% among Hispanics and 22% among non-Hispanics). Belief that the

bible is the literal word of God also shows a pronounced difference with 49% of Hispanic Catholics in accord compared with 18% of non-Hispanic Catholics.

The Pew report concludes that: “Overall, the findings thus suggest that Hispanic Catholics practice a distinctive form of Catholicism, one that incorporates many of the beliefs and behaviors most commonly associated with Pentecostal or renewalist Christianity, while at the same time upholding the main features of traditional Catholic teaching.” (p.30)

The Pew report covers religious experience of Hispanics in great detail but unfortunately includes no information on fertility. In contrast, the 2002 NSFG includes extensive coverage of reproductive behavior but little on religion and religiousness.

Religion and Fertility

The number of children ever born is greater among Hispanics than non-Hispanics in every religious category except charismatic/evangelical Protestants which is a small group (Table 1). The fertility is highest in the “born again Christian” category among both Hispanics and non-Hispanics. Overall, there is no difference in fertility between Catholics and Protestants but Hispanic fertility is higher than non-Hispanic fertility in virtually every religious category. In effect, holding religion constant, including women with no religion, does not erase the fertility difference between Hispanic and non-Hispanic women. The analysis of the General Social Survey data for 2000-2006 show the same basic result (not shown here).

Religiousness and Fertility

Among both Hispanic and non-Hispanic women, religiousness as measured by the frequency of church attendance and by the perceived importance of religion in daily life is strongly associated with the number of children ever born (Table 2). In order to refine the comparisons, this and several subsequent tabulations are confined to white, Catholic women who are the largest sub-category of Hispanics. Again, the greater fertility of Hispanics appears at each category of religiousness but it is relevant that Hispanics are more religious especially in terms of the perceived importance of religion measure.

These associations are examined simultaneously along with whether the woman is foreign-born and whether she has more than a completed high school education (Table 3). Comparing Hispanic and non-Hispanic women among white Catholics shows that the importance of religion has the same predictive value for fertility, indicating a 30-40 percent greater likelihood of having two or more children if religion is seen as important. Church attendance, however, is not significantly associated with fertility among Hispanic women but shows a strong association for non-Hispanic women. If the woman is foreign-born rather than native-born, the odds of Hispanic women having two or more children are about one-third higher. (The mean number of children ever born is 1.89 for

the foreign-born and 1.53 for the native-born). Higher education has a negative impact on fertility among both Hispanic and non-Hispanic women.

Analysis of the 2002-2006 General Social Survey data shows essentially the same results as the preceding analysis based on the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth. Hispanic fertility is higher than that of non-Hispanics even among Catholics. Women of Mexican origin have the highest fertility. The number of children ever born increases both with the frequency of church attendance and with the frequency of prayer. A multivariate analysis shows that religiousness retains its association with fertility in the presence of numerous controls and is somewhat stronger for Hispanics. Unlike the NSFG results, however, the GSS shows church attendance with a stronger association with fertility.

Total Expected Births

The above analysis focused on the number of children ever born which, of course, varies with the age of the woman. The NSFG 2002 survey included questions about the future reproductive intentions of women which permits some idea of what completed fertility might be. Again, focusing on white Catholic women, we see that the mean total expected number of children is somewhat higher for Hispanic than for non-Hispanic women and that both measures of religiousness show a positive association with fertility for both ethnic groups (Table 4).

Religiousness or Economic Insecurity?

In studying the influence of religiousness on childbearing, it is of interest to determine whether the observed direct association is a function of economic insecurity. The general notion is that economic insecurity can lead to a greater reliance on religious values and thus to higher fertility or, conversely, that women who feel secure economically rely less on religion and have fewer children. This general question assumes greater significance in the context of Hispanic fertility since the estimates from the data indicate that 37 percent of Hispanic women are classified in the poverty category compared with 16 percent of non-Hispanic women.

Is there a relationship between religiousness and poverty? The short answer is yes but it is not very strong with about two-thirds of poor women responding that religion is very important in their daily life compared with half of the non-poor. This applies both to Hispanic and non-Hispanic women.

Is there an association between poverty and fertility? The answer is clearly yes and the association is quite strong. Poverty and relative income (in six categories) is cross-tabulated with two measures of fertility for Hispanics and non-Hispanics for women 18-44 and 35-44 in Table 5. In both age categories, fertility increases with poverty for both groups although Hispanic fertility remains higher at most income levels. There is some ambiguity in the direction of causation since poor people have more children but people with more children are poorer. Since the definition of poverty takes

family size into account, some of the association is built into the measure. However, a substitution of total family income shows the same association with fertility as the poverty measure.

The key question is whether the association between religiousness and fertility is a function of their joint association with poverty or income and whether the same structure of association obtains for both Hispanics and non-Hispanics. A detailed tabulation showing the mean number of children ever born (not shown here) indicates that at each of the six intervals on the economic scale those women who feel that religion is important have higher fertility as measured both by the number of children ever born and the total number of children expected. Nonetheless, there is progressively higher fertility as poverty increases both for those who feel that religion is important and those who think that it is unimportant.

Another approach is through multivariate analysis which examines the simultaneous associations of religiousness and poverty with fertility dichotomized as having had less than two or two or more births and with total expected fertility divided into women who expect two or more children and those who expect fewer. This analysis, which includes the importance of religion and the poverty measure as well as education and marital status (Table 6) shows that both the importance of religion and poverty significantly affect both measures of fertility. To rephrase this, the influence of religiousness on fertility is not eliminated in the presence of poverty or income. The measure of poverty in this analysis is dichotomized into the bottom and top three categories but contrasting women at the extreme poverty level with all others does not alter the general results. Education consistently shows the familiar negative relationship with fertility except for total births expected among non-Hispanics.

Age at First Birth

Another measure of reproductive behavior that is important for both total fertility and for life chances in general is the age at which women begin childbearing. Hispanic women (white, Catholic) clearly begin at an earlier age with 42 percent having their first birth before age 22 compared with 19 percent of non-Hispanics. Religiousness, however, appears to have only a slight effect of encouraging earlier childbearing.

The Role of Unintended Fertility

The question here is whether Hispanic (white, Catholic) women are more or less likely to have unwanted births than their non-Hispanic counterparts. One approach is to see whether they are more likely than non-Hispanics to have had an unwanted birth among women who had at least one birth in the past five years. The answer is yes, but the difference is not great: 16 percent of Hispanic women compared with 12 percent of non-Hispanic women had an unwanted birth. The difference increases when the comparison is between women who had no birth in the preceding five years and those who report having had an unwanted birth – 14 percent of Hispanics and 6 percent of non-Hispanics.

Another approach is to compare the distribution of births by planning status, with births in the past five years classified as intended, mistimed or unwanted. Since there is some suspicion that “unwanted” births may be over-estimated, possibly because of some confusion between that category and “mistimed”¹, the estimates in Table 7 refer to the sum of these two categories, births that were “unintended”. These data are derived from an earlier report (Abma, et.al., 2004) and refer to white, non-Hispanics, and all Hispanics are based on women 15-44. The estimates for 2002 clearly suggest a higher rate of unintended fertility among Hispanic women, a rate that has increased since 1995.

Hispanic Blacks

The analysis has been confined to white women because of the small number of black women who identify themselves as Hispanic (126). A comparison of these black Hispanic women with black, non-Hispanic women (1494) shows only the importance for fertility of low income and having ever been married. Among black, non-Hispanic women, religiousness and education are additionally involved.

Summary and Discussion

This paper is the third part of a more general study of the effects on fertility of religion and religiousness. The first paper (Frejka and Westoff, 2007) focused on the differences in religiousness between American and European women and their implications for the higher U.S. fertility. The second paper (Westoff and Frejka) looked at the levels of Muslim fertility in Europe and the extent to which differences in religion and religiousness explain the higher fertility of Muslims. The present effort is an extension of this same question of how much of the higher fertility of Hispanics in the U.S. can be explained by their Catholicism and the possibility of their greater religiousness.

The considerable influx of Hispanics in the U.S. has had a major impact on the Catholic Church in this country which has been recently commented on in the popular press. The analysis in this paper has shown that indeed Hispanic women (mostly of Mexican origin) are more religious than non-Hispanics in terms of the perceived importance of religion in their personal lives. It is also clear that religiousness is associated with higher fertility among both Hispanics and non-Hispanics but that Hispanic fertility is higher regardless of religion or religiousness. Fertility is negatively associated with income in both groups but has more of an effect among Hispanics because of their greater concentration at the poverty level. Part of the higher fertility of Hispanics is a result of a higher proportion of unintended births.

¹ The percent of unwanted births to women under the age of 20 is reported to have increased from 10.6 to 21.6 percent of all births in the preceding five years between 1995 and 2002, an increase that seems high since the meaning of “unwanted” is a birth that theoretically would never have occurred if women’s preferences had prevailed. It is possible that there was some confusion with a birth that occurred earlier than wanted, a mistimed birth.

In sum, American Hispanics are more religious than non-Hispanics but this difference explains only some of the higher fertility of Hispanics. The number of children ever born to white, Catholic Hispanic women is 28 percent higher than the fertility of comparable non-Hispanics. If Hispanic women attached the same (lesser) importance to religion, this difference would still be greater, by about 22%, among Hispanic women. More of the fertility difference is associated with the higher rate of poverty among Hispanics and their higher proportion of unintended births. For example, if all Hispanic women had the same income-poverty distribution as all nonHispanic women, their fertility would be only 6 percent higher than that of nonHispanics rather than the observed 30 percent higher.

References

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Table 1. Mean number of children ever born for Hispanic and non-Hispanic women 18 - 44, by religion.

| | Mean Children Ever Born | | Percent Distribution | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|----------------------|--------------|
| | Hispanic | non-Hispanic | Hispanic | non-Hispanic |
| All women | 1.75 | 1.35 | 100 | 100 |
| Catholic | 1.73 | 1.37 | 66.3 | 20.2 |
| Born again Christian | 1.89 | 2.05 | 6.1 | 1.5 |
| Charismatic or Evangelical | 1.49 | 1.12 | 2.2 | 0.5 |
| Other Catholic | 1.72 | 1.31 | 58.0 | 18.2 |
| Protestant | 1.81 | 1.45 | 21.3 | 58.0 |
| Born again Christian | 2.03 | 1.52 | 10.6 | 27.3 |
| Charismatic or Evangelical | 1.39 | 1.43 | 3.0 | 1.8 |
| Other Protestant | 1.70 | 1.38 | 7.7 | 28.8 |
| Other religion | 1.37 | 1.06 | 1.4 | 6.7 |
| No religion | 1.84 | 1.03 | 11.0 | 15.1 |
| Number of women | | | 1,438 | 5,367 |

Source: NSFG 2002

Table 2. Mean number of children ever born for Catholic white Hispanics and non-Hispanics by religiousness.

| Frequency of church attendance | Mean Children Ever Born | | Percent Distribution | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| | Hispanic | Non- Hispanic | Hispanic | Non- Hispanic |
| At least weekly | 1.91 | 1.77 | 37.2 | 31.2 |
| 1-3 times a month | 1.69 | 1.52 | 21.1 | 19.9 |
| Less than monthly | 1.62 | 1.09 | 23.6 | 38.5 |
| Never | 1.57 | 1.02 | 18.1 | 10.4 |
| | | | | |
| Importance of religion | | | | |
| Very important | 1.87 | 1.68 | 60.4 | 42.3 |
| Rather important | 1.56 | 1.23 | 35.9 | 47.7 |
| Not important | 1.14 | 0.83 | 3.7 | 10.0 |

Source: NSFG 2002

Table 3. Odds ratios of having two or more children by Hispanic origin for white, Catholic women 18 - 44.

| Covariate | Hispanic | Non-Hispanic |
|--------------------------------------|----------|--------------|
| Religion important | 1.34 | 1.41 |
| Attend church more than once a month | NS | 1.77 |
| Foreign-born | 1.35 | NS |
| More than high school | 0.60 | 0.73 |
| Number of women | 723 | 890 |
| Chi squared | 23 | 39 |
| R ² | 0.02 | 0.03 |

Source: NSFG 2002

Table 4. Mean total expected number of births for white, Catholic Hispanic and non-Hispanic women by two measures of religiousness.

| | Hispanics | Non-Hispanics |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| Total | 2.61 | 2.24 |
| Attend church at least monthly | 2.69 | 2.50 |
| Attend less frequently | 2.49 | 1.96 |
| Feels religion: | | |
| Important | 2.70 | 2.43 |
| Not important | 2.46 | 2.10 |

Source: NSFG 2002

Table 5. Mean children ever born and total number expected by poverty status.

| | 18 - 44 | | | | 35 - 44 | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------|--------------|-----------------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| | Children ever born | | Total births expected | | Children ever born | | Total births expected | |
| | Hispanic | Non-Hispanic | Hispanic | Non-Hispanic | Hispanic | Non-Hispanic | Hispanic | Non-Hispanic |
| > 500% above poverty | 0.47 | 0.39 | 1.86 | 1.65 | 0.86 | 0.67 | 1.33 | 1.06 |
| > 400 < 500% | 0.83 | 1.11 | 1.69 | 1.89 | 1.36 | 1.58 | 1.53 | 1.78 |
| >300 <400% | 1.53 | 1.54 | 2.28 | 2.32 | 2.33 | 2.27 | 2.46 | 2.39 |
| >200 <300% | 1.59 | 1.38 | 2.52 | 2.20 | 2.34 | 2.09 | 2.62 | 2.21 |
| >100 <200% | 1.80 | 1.66 | 2.60 | 2.51 | 2.57 | 2.36 | 2.71 | 2.49 |
| <100% of poverty | 2.17 | 1.82 | 2.98 | 2.68 | 3.12 | 2.67 | 3.22 | 2.79 |

Source: NSFG
2002

Table 6. Odds ratios of having had two or more children ever born or of expecting a total of more than two children, for white Hispanic and non-Hispanic women 18 - 44.

| Covariate | Number of Children Ever Born | | | Total Births Expected | | |
|------------------------|------------------------------|----------|--------------|-----------------------|----------|--------------|
| | All women | Hispanic | non-Hispanic | All women | Hispanic | non-Hispanic |
| Importance of religion | 1.38 | 1.31 | 1.36 | 1.64 | 1.35 | 1.66 |
| Poverty (income) | 2.00 | 2.94 | 1.86 | 2.08 | 2.28 | 1.98 |
| More than HS | 0.64 | 0.70 | 0.65 | 0.88 | 0.58 | NS |
| Ever married | 21.94 | 10.80 | 28.00 | 1.70 | 1.35 | 1.66 |
| Number of women | 5254 | 1142 | 4112 | 5254 | 1142 | 4112 |
| Chi squared | 1808 | 348 | 1451 | 319 | 91 | 216 |
| R ² | 0.26 | 0.22 | 0.26 | 0.05 | 0.06 | 0.04 |

Source: NSFG 2002

Table 7. The percentage of births in the past five years reported as unintended, by Hispanic origin among women 15-44: 1995 and 2002.

| | <u>2002</u> | <u>1995</u> |
|-----------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Hispanic ¹ | 44.4 | 30.3 |
| Non-Hispanic White | 28.9 | 26.7 |

¹Includes women of all races.