

The Ideal Marriage vs. the Reality of a Bad Marriage: The Experiences of Mexican-American Women

Kristine Hopkins¹ & Cynthia Osborne²

¹ Population Research Center, University of Texas at Austin

² LBJ School of Public Affairs and Population Research Center, University of Texas at Austin

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Introduction

The decline in marriage, increase in cohabitation, and increase in nonmarital childbearing over the past 40 years are three of the most significant demographic trends in the U.S. These changes have occurred among all groups, but they have disproportionately affected low-income and minority women. For example, whereas approximately 37% of all children are born to unmarried parents, this figure is 25% among non-Hispanic Whites, 70% among African Americans, and almost half among Hispanics. In addition, fewer than three out of four Black women will ever marry by age 50, compared to over 90% of White and Hispanic women. Native-born Hispanics are less likely to marry than their foreign-born counterparts, however.

Because of the variation by groups, scholars have begun to examine the nature and the meaning of marriage, cohabitation, and fertility choices among different race and ethnic groups. Hispanics, however, have been the least studied group due to data limitations and the heterogeneity of the social and economic experiences of Hispanic sub-groups. More attention needs to be paid to Hispanic families, however, because they are the fastest growing group in the United States, and their immigration status appears to be largely linked to their opportunities and behaviors. Specifically, foreign-born Mexican Americans have rates of nonmarital childbearing and marriage that are similar to native-born Whites; by contrast, US-born Mexican Americans have family formation behaviors more similar to African Americans.

Using in-depth interviews, we explore Mexican-American women's attitudes about ideal marriages, their attitudes and, in some cases, experiences with bad marriages, and their assessment of why marriage is becoming less common among people they know. In general, the women seem to be able to clearly articulate an ideal marriage, but only about half claim to actually know anyone with this type of marriage. Most women have strong opinions about what makes for a "bad marriage" and they can provide clear examples of people they know in bad marriages, and many claim to have experienced one themselves. When asked why couples are marrying less, the majority of women draw on their notions that most marriages are bad and will likely end in divorce, which prevents most couples from wanting to marry in the first place. They know few people with an ideal marriage, and those who are married rarely claim that their marriages are ideal. They know many people in bad marriages, or have experienced a bad marriage themselves, and believe that their "reality" of marriage will fall short of their "ideal," and thus many avoid a(nother) marriage to avoid this inner conflict.

Methods

Thirty-five Mexican-American women living in El Paso, Texas were interviewed in-depth as part of a study exploring the oral contraceptive pill use practices among women who live on the U.S.-Mexican border. Each woman was interviewed twice, about 1 year apart. As of this writing, 26 of the 35 have completed the second interview. The first round interviews asked women about their contraceptive and childbearing experiences as well as their experiences with U.S. family planning clinics and/or with obtaining their pills in pharmacies in Mexico, future childbearing intentions, and social networks. The second round interviews explored women's experiences with the pill in the previous year, gathered more information about nonuse of contraception before the first pregnancy and more on social networks. In addition, the second interview, following similar questions used by Edin and Kefalas in *Promises I Can*

Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage (2005), included a new module about the ideal timing of childbearing and general questions about marriage. In this paper, we analyze women's responses to the marriage questions and will report on the 26 interviews that have been completed to date.

Results

Sample Characteristics

All women in the sample are Hispanic, Mexican, or Mexican-American. Among those who have, to date, been interviewed, they range in age from 19 to 44 with an average age of 28.6. Parity ranges from zero (5 subjects) to four children (3 subjects), with mean parity of 1.8. Fifteen of the 26 respondents (58%) are first generation immigrants from Mexico, seven (27%) are second generation immigrants and the remainder (3) are third generation immigrants. Highest year of schooling completed ranges from seven years to sixteen years, with the majority (7) having completed high school, or 12 years. Moreover, 77% of this sample has completed high school or higher. According to U.S. Census Bureau statistics, approximately 71% of all El Pasoans over age 25 have completed high school. Therefore, this sample is more educated than the general population, particularly since eight of the 26 respondents are under age 25 and have potentially not completed their schooling. While education levels are higher than would be expected compared to the entire population of El Paso, a proxy for income, receipt of public assistance, shows that a large majority of the respondents (17, or 65%) are in households that receive at least one form of public assistance (such as WIC, food stamps, Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance Program, but none received direct cash payments, or TANF). Moreover, higher education level did not protect a woman in this sample from receiving public assistance: 13 of 19 (68%) with completed high school or higher received some form of public assistance, compared to 4 of 7 (57%) of those who completed less than a high school education. Finally, marital status showed that the majority were separated or divorced (17, or 50%), eight were living with their partner, six were married, and three were widowed.

Ideal marriage

The primary descriptions of an ideal marriage were trust, communication, and respect. Twenty of the 25 respondents who answered this question included some or all of these concepts, along with the corollary ideas of understanding and support. Examples include:

"There needs to be mutual respect. There needs to be trust. There needs to be a lot of communication and of course the bonding. The material stuff, the money, and everything else comes after." – *29 year old divorced woman*

"Well, I think that there should be lots of communication, and a lot of unity, and in order to have kids and all that, well, that there's a lot of understanding in the couple so that together they can move the family forward. And not just the woman, but both of them together." – *36 year old married woman, translated from Spanish*

"As long as you get along and communicate and trust each other, I think those are like the key words in marriage. Because if there is no communication and there is no trust, I don't think there's really anything." – *32 year old married woman*

"Marriage, well I don't really think there's like a perfect marriage because you're always going to have problems but for me trust, respect, is very important, because, first of all, I wouldn't be able to be with somebody I can't trust. I could love them but if I don't trust them that's just like misery for me." – *26 year old single woman*

In addition, nearly all of the women could clearly articulate what they ideally would like to see in a marriage. Examples of other descriptions of the components of an ideal marriage include "love" (though perhaps surprisingly, this only appeared in five responses), "fidelity" or "no cheating" in three responses

(no doubt an extension of trust and respect), and sharing goals, the good and bad, and sharing life 50/50 (four responses in total)

Several of the women discussed having a real partnership with their husband as being ideal, in which "they work through their problems as a couple, not one." This seemed to be a slightly more common response among the childless women than the mothers. In addition, several women noted that it was important to be financially stable prior to marriage, but that the money and material things were less important than trust and communication. Many women noted that no marriage is perfect and that couples will have "problems," but that good marriages are those that know how to work through these issues.

Only about half of the women actually knew a married couple that met their definition of ideal. Those who didn't know of one answered with things such as "Not really, no. No I have no idea," "No (laughs), it doesn't exist," or "No, until now, no." The most explicit response was "The best marriage? Oh God. I don't think I know. Well, let me see. The best marriage? I don't think I really know or I could say somebody that has a good marriage." The other half reported witnessing a marriage that achieved their vision of an ideal marriage, but more often among more distant kin or co-workers. Only one noted that her parents' relationship was ideal:

"I think that I grew up with like the ideal. My parents are so great and like they've never fought in front of me or my sister, and, you know, I think I just had the perfect example, which is amazing because, you know...a lot of people at these days like, they don't have that positive upbringing and, you know, people come from broken homes and stuff and I think that I have such a positive view on relationship and love because my parents showed me that, you know, it is possible." – *24 year old single woman*

Finally, only four noted that their relationship (or marriage) was ideal ("My and my husband's," Yup. I do") and:

"I think my relationship right now is like that. It's so different from my first and my second marriage. My first marriage provided me everything financially and everything was material, but there was no love, no respect there. And with this one, he can't provide me much at all, but the values and the morals and the communication and the trust is there. Well, there's that communication, there's that "you help me with this..." they're there for the kids. It's not just like, "Okay, you're the woman. You figure it out." It has to do a lot with them working together as a family, as a partnership." – *29 year old married woman*

Bad Marriage

Violence was the number one descriptor of a "bad" marriage. Of the 26 interviews completed to date, half mentioned some sort of violence or abuse in defining a bad marriage, followed by five who referred to fighting, conflicts, and insults. Distrust, disrespect and infidelity were also mentioned by many women as primary descriptors of a bad marriage. For example:

"No communication, no trust. That's bad. Abuse by the husband, by the male in a relationship. Hitting the wife. I've known about some of those. That's bad, especially when kids are involved. They get to see all that. That's bad." – *31 year old cohabiting woman*

"I think a bad marriage is like when there is abuse involved, or like cheating or like there's no communication whatsoever or they're fighting like everyday." – *25 year old married woman*

"A bad marriage, oh, all my cousins' marriages. (Laughs) The abuse, domestic abuse and, you know, verbal, physical, or mental, or whatever, all that. Anything that has abuse in their family is totally wrong, the worst." – *22 year old married woman*

"Well, conflicts, fights, disagreements about a lot of things, and up to being unfaithful, you know?" – *37 year old married woman, translated from Spanish*

Women were supposed to have also been asked to describe a bad marriage they had witnessed or experienced personally, but unfortunately the question was not asked in seven of the interviews. In the remaining 19 interviews for which we have data, all but three could vividly describe a bad marriage. These bad relationships were often close friends, sisters, or their parents. Moreover, for those who had been married previously, several stated that their prior marriages fit their description of "bad".

"I think my mom. ... [My dad] would like hit her and like call her names, bad words and just like you know, psychologically it was terrible and he was very jealous and, but I think that was the worst one because I lived there, I lived through it and I saw all that..." – *27 year old married woman*

"My worst marriage ...the worst marriage was my first marriage and a current one that I know of which is my *comadre* [her godson's mother] and her husband. Her husband is never around. He goes out on weekends and doesn't get home until six in the morning. I mean, its just....he belittles her. It's always about him, nothing about her or my godson." – *29 year old separated/divorced woman*

"And I tell you because I lived it in my first marriage. For me I think, I don't want any women to have to go through that because it's terrible when they hit you, when they insult you, when they make you feel really small, that you're not worth anything. That is, I am a woman and I am of value, understand? And that you have to respect." – *29 year old divorced woman, translated from Spanish*

Significantly, the woman's experience in this last quote shows that she has learned to value herself after getting out of her abusive first marriage.

Why are fewer people getting married?

Women were asked what they think keeps people from getting married these days. The overwhelming majority of women responded that most women they knew (or they themselves) had been through a bad relationship or marriage and didn't want to repeat their same mistakes. They feared that marriage would inevitably lead to divorce and divorce is a costly mistake.

"Well, I mean look at the divorce rate. Like that in itself is very scary." – *24 year old single woman*

"Because I think they've already been through it, because I know a lot of people who got married at a young age and divorced or separated or whatever, didn't make it. And I think it's harder for you to get into another relationship again." – *32 year old married woman*

"Because they would get divorced and divorce is expensive. Actually besides that, I think before they get divorced its hard to get over it because if you're not gonna make it, it was your fault, stuff like that." – *23 year old single woman*

"Because if you get married and it doesn't work out you're going to have to get a divorce and with great expendage. The same thing. A divorce, a lawyer and all that. My friend just paid more than a thousand dollars." – *23 year old cohabiting woman*

Finally, several women noted that cohabitation provides for an alternative to marriage and potential divorce and that because couples get comfortable in the living arrangement, they don't see the need to transition to marriage just for the "paper."

"[My sister's] seen her friends fail, she's seen her sisters fail, she's seen, yea, so at this point she's like, 'I don't want to get married. Hell no, I don't want to get married. I'll live with him but I don't want to get married.'" – *26 year old single woman*

"The divorces maybe. A lot of the majority are getting married young, it doesn't work out and then they say, 'I'm not getting married ever again.' No, not really. The ones who refuse, are like I said, the ones who have already been through it once. They're like, 'Okay, not again.' They'll live together and that's what I always hear. If they separate, 'you take your stuff, I'll take my stuff.'" – *31 year old cohabiting woman*

"I mean I'm not sure, but I think that at least part of it is that a lot of couples start living together before they get married and they just figure well we're already living together so what's the point in getting married? Not necessarily what's the point, but it just never happens, like it never happens. Either they're not sure the person they're with is the right one or they're just comfortable how they are." – *25 year old married woman*

Conclusion

Overall, it appears as if the women in this study have reasonable ideals of what a healthy marriage might look like that above all else involves trust and communication. Many women have not actually witnessed or experienced their ideal marriages, or have only witnessed them from afar. By contrast, most women who were asked have witnessed or experienced many bad marriages, that invariably include violence of one form or another or disrespect.

These women argue that fewer people are marrying today because they fear theirs will be a bad marriage, or they don't want to repeat their same mistakes. There is an incredible fear of divorce, that is likely realistic given their histories. Cohabitation provides a less risky (and less expensive) alternative to marriage. The women would prefer marriage, if it were more akin to their ideal; but because their reality of marriage is less than ideal, few see the need to take this chance.

References

Edin, Kathryn and Maria Kefalas. 2005. *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women put Motherhood Before Marriage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.