# SURVIVAL OF THE EXTENDED FAMILY IN URBAN LIFE: THE MEXICAN AMERICAN CASE



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Presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Houston, Texas, November 30, 1977.

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ABSTRACT

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In a study of extended familism among Mexican Americans and Anglo Americans in three Southern California cities, the Mexican Americans have more kin in town, more frequent interaction with nearby relatives, and more exchange of mutual aid with kin. There is no indication that the traditional Mexican American extended family breaks down with urbanization, acculturation, or socioeconomic mobility. It is suggested that discrimination by the Anglo majority reinforces kin ties among Mexican Americans.

In the first half of this century, Robert Redfield, Talcott Parsons and Ralph Linton, among others, argued that urbanization is accompanied by a decline in the integration of the extended kin group. Since the early 1950's, however, evidence has accumulated indicating no simple connection between urbanization and the "isolated" nuclear family. Despite the growing weight of evidence, authors writing about Mexican Americans more often than not suggest that while the "traditional" Mexican American extended family is a strong functional kin group, this pattern is breaking down with urbanization. Moore, for example, concludes that "familism seems to be declining in the big cities of the Southwest" (1970:118). Penalosa concurs declaring "In urban areas of southern California at least, the traditional extended family group including siblings and their children is no longer found to any significant extent". Finally, in the most recent work on the Mexican American family to date, Alvirez and Bean state that while "vestiges of the more traditional Mexican American family linger on, especially in rural areas and in the more isolated barrios," for the most part "family patterns among Mexican Americans have been involved in processes of change related to generation, class differences, and increasing urbanization" (1976:290-291).

Other authors suggest that regardless of the change occurring in urban Mexican American families, the kin group continues to be important and in any event is much more integrated than that of Anglo Americans. For example, Madsen finds that the Mexican American extended family in South Texas is "slowly breaking down" with socioeconomic mobility and acculturation but "Regardless of class affiliation or degree of anglicization, the ties of the Latin family are far stronger than those of the Anglo family" (1964:46).

Obvious in many of the preceding statements about change in the Mexican American kin group is the tendency for authors to cite acculturation in addition to urbanism as a cause of familial dissolution. In their book, The Mexican-American People, Grebler, Moore, and Guzman perhaps best sum up this position: "To judge from the limited data on living arrangements and visiting patterns, then, relationships within the extended kinship group among Mexican Americans have declined in importance with increased urbanization, acculturation, and contact with the dominant system" (1970:354).

Like the relationship between kinship and urbanization, however, acculturation and family structure have no simple unidirectional association. In fact, Gordon (1964) and more recently Kramer (1970) argue that while after one or two generations ethnic groups in the United States tend to readily adopt the majority's cultural patterns such as the English language, American dress, American music and recreational pastimes, the American values and sense of a common past and so on, they remain separate social groups with distinctive ethnically-enclosed primary group relations. Thus, even with socioeconomic mobility and change of residence, the second and third generations may remain in what has been called the "gilded ghetto." Despite contact with Anglos in the schools, the workplace, neighborhoods, and places of mass recreation, ethnic minority individuals may have no intimate knowledge about or relationships with Anglos. For example, Alvirez and Bean (1976) found the vast majority of Mexican Americans in their survey sample have only friends of Mexican descent regardless of the respondent's class or acculturation status. Prejudice and discrimination by the dominant society, of course, are overwhelming reasons for the restriction of primary relations within the ethnic group but it is probably also the result of the

desire to share certain feelings of ethnic pride with others of similar background and the more vague, but nevertheless real, feeling of being "more comfortable" with members of one's own group. Given this situation, ethnic family relationships continue to offer comfort and support and take on renewed meaning regardless of acculturation, social mobility, or the adaptation to city life.

Turning to the evidence in the literature, I will not review in depth the commonly recognized characteristics of the Mexican American kin group. But in sum, what is generally referred to as the "traditional" Mexican American extended family is, specifically, a localized kin group consisting of a number of related households whose members interact together frequently and exchange mutual aid. While previous research has established the utility of this construct, the type of data collected severely hampers subsequent evaluation and comparison. Few studies have operationalized measures of interaction or exchange or for that matter present more than one or two examples of a real kin network. Without this information it is hazardous to discuss the "change" occuring in Mexican American family structure -- first, an empirical baseline is needed. Furthermore, most of the research in the past has attempted to portray the "typical" Mexican American family which, as Alvirez and Bean point out, ignores emerging segments of the population and risks perpetuating ethnic stereotypes. Finally, despite the numerous implicit and explicit comparisons of Anglo and Mexican American family ties, no existing study provides empirical data on the subject.

The results of recent research will be presented here to establish an accurate description of Mexican American extended family structure in three Southern California towns, to assess the extent to which it fits the

"traditional" Mexican-American family, and to compare Mexican American family structure with that of Anglo Americans. In addition, the effects of urbanization, acculturation, and socioeconomic status on extended family structure among Mexican Americans will be explored.

The communities chosen as a setting for research are situated in southern California, the state with the largest Spanish-speaking/Spanish-surname population in the United States. The Spanish-speaking population in California is primarily urban dwelling and is concentrated within 13 metropolitan areas, two of which cover the three towns selected for study: Santa Barbara, Santa Paula, and Oxnard. Santa Paula has 18,000 people and is an agricultural town. Santa Barbara and Oxnard are both metropolitan cities with over 70,000 people.

Interviews with a stratified random sample of Mexican Americans in 9 census tracts were conducted in the spring and summer of 1975. 77% of those contacted accepted the interview giving a total of 666 respondents. A survey of Anglo Americans was conducted in the spring of 1976. In a random selection from the same nine census tracts, 55% of those contacted agreed to be interviewed -- for a total of 340 white Anglo Americans.

Description of the Samples

The two ethnic group samples are fairly similar in age, sex and marital status. Most respondents are middle aged, female and married. Residential stability, however, is much more characteristic of the Mexican Americans than the Anglos. The large majority of the Mexican American heads of household have blue collar jobs mostly semi-skilled and unskilled occupations, and they have an average of nine years of education. The majority of Anglos, on the other hand, are white collar workers with one or more years of college.

It is also important to note the variation within the Mexican American sample itself. Forty percent of the sample is first generation (born in Mexico); 35% is second generation, and 19% is third generation. The immigrants generally have only an elementary education, speak mainly Spanish, and identify as a "Mexican." Second generation respondents are likely to have ten years of schooling, to speak English and probably also Spanish, and to identify as "Mexican American" or "Mexican." Lastly, third generation respondents have an average of eleven years of education, speak mainly English, and tend to identify as something other than "Mexican," such as "Mexican American," "American of Mexican descent," or "Chicano." While most of the first generation heads of household are in the lowest occupational categories, many in the second and third generations hold skilled manual labor jobs or white collar positions. In sum, the immigrants from Mexico differ both culturally and socioeconomically from the native-born second and third generations.

With regard to the extended family, all three generations of Mexican Americans are much more likely to have relatives in town than are Anglos. They are also related to larger numbers of households in town. In comparing the three generations in Table 1, it is clear, however, that the first generation Mexicans have fewer kin in town than either of the native-born segments. The first generation respondents obviously must leave many of their relatives in Mexico, but a localized kin group is apparently reestablished in this country through subsequent generational geographic stability. Mexican Americans visit more frequently with their relatives in town and they also visit with larger numbers of nearby kin than Anglos as can be seen in Table 2. Almost 40% of the Mexican Americans visit more than two related households a week compared to 14% of the Anglos.

Both Anglos and Mexican Americans engage in mutual aid with their kin in town but there are significant differences between the two groups regarding specific types of mutual aid. Respondents with relatives in town were asked whether seven types of help had been given to or received from nearby kin in the last year. A significantly greater number of Mexican Americans than Anglos report giving five of the types of aid to relatives and receiving four of the types of aid.

In order to evaluate family structure as a whole, we can combine a number of the indicators just discussed into a single scale depicted in Table 3. Clearly, the Anglos are massed at the lower end of the scale, the majority being totally without kin in town. Those Anglos with relatives are integrated with them to some extent but only one in one hundred has a highly integrated local extended family. On the other hand, more than one in seven immigrant Mexicans has a highly integrated kin group. The native-born Mexican Americans fall at the upper end of the scale, where about 80% have either mid or high kin integration.

It is possible that the differences in extended familism are due to reasons other than ethnicity, such as social class and geographic mobility. Since the Anglos are mainly white collar and geographically mobile, these factors alone could account for their relatively weak extended family system. Yet, the correlations between Anglo versus Mexican American ethnic group and extended family indicators remain significant when controlling simultaneously for occupation, education, and years of residence in town. In other words, the differences between the two groups are due mostly to ethnicity rather than socioeconomic or geographic mobility.

Having established the structure of the extended family among Mexican Americans, let us turn to an examination of its interrelationship with urbanization, acculturation, and socioeconomic status within the ethnic group. Our data suggest that the urban Mexican American extended family is quite similar structurally to the "traditional" family observed in rural areas. There is no indication that the extended family "breaks down" in these cities.

Already, the generational evidence presented gives us some indication about the relationship between acculturation, social class, and extended familism. But in order to investigate the effects of acculturation and class more accurately, separate scales have been constructed. The cross-tabulation of extended family structure by level of acculturation in Table 4 indicates that extended familism is greatest among respondents who are "mid" or "high" in acculturation. Furthermore, in Table 5 cross-tabulation of extended family structure by socioeconomic status indicates high family integration is present most often among respondents in the highest social status level. Nor is this finding unique. Other authors have discovered that familial visits and the exchange of aid are more frequent among the better-off urban dwellers who can afford to spend the time and money necessary to keep up relationships with kin sometimes widely dispersed in a metropolitan area.

In conclusion, the evidence indicates that the local extended family is retained in urban life by Mexican Americans. Moreover, the extended family becomes stronger with generational advancement, acculturation, and socioeconomic mobility. The association of acculturation and socioeconomic status with extended familism can best be understood in light of the generational data. The immigrants from Mexico come from rural areas and generally

have very little education and few occupational skills, as well as a limited understanding of English, all of which restrict their opportunities in the U.S. labor market. As a result, they are employed mainly as laborers. Since the first generation thus dominates both the lowest socioeconomic status and the lowest acculturation level, and since they also have the smallest local kin group, the reason we find the least integrated extended families among the unacculturated lower class becomes clear. The second and third generations have a greater facility for English, higher levels of education, and, consequently, are most likely to achieve a high socio-economic status. Their local extended families are also a product of this type of generational adaptation and amplification.

In comparison to Mexican Americans, Anglos have a limited local extended family and other comparative studies have similar findings. In a study of upper middle class Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in Chicago, Winch and others found that while Protestants are least familistic, Jews tend to have the most nearby relatives and interact with relatives most often. They conclude that Jews are non-migratory and chose to stay near their family, noting that this does not necessarily inhibit social mobility or the attainment of high socioeconomic status. In the same way, urban Mexican Americans appear to be relatively non-migratory and familistic. Moreover, besides valuing the local kin group more, perhaps both Jews and Mexican Americans find the family is an important primary support group in a society which has historically subjected them to prejudice and discrimination.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the expectation for the decline of the traditional Mexican American family is based on an assimilationist perspective -- the belief that with acculturation and socioeocnomic mobility,

Mexican Americans will become part of mainstream American life losing their distinctive types of social organization including the extended family. Whereas, the more likely pattern among urban Mexican Americans is acculturation and limited socioeconomic mobility combined with ethnically-enclosed primary group interaction.

Table 1

RELATED HOUSEHOLDS IN TOWN BY PERCENTAGE*

| Number of Households | Mexican American | | | | Anglo |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | First (N=226) | Second (N=222) | Third (N=118) | Total (N=603) | (N=184) |
| 1 to 5 | 65 | 30 | 29 | 44 | 83 |
| 6 to 10 | 22 | 26 | 30 | 26 | 14 |
| 11 to 20 | 10 | 24 | 24 | 18 | 2 |
| Over 20 | 3 | 20 | 17 | 12 | 1 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Total Mexican American vs. Anglo $\chi^2 = 93.0$; df = 3; P < .001.

*Excludes respondents who are not related to households in town.

Table 2

RELATED HOUSEHOLDS IN TOWN VISITED WEEKLY BY PERCENTAGE*

| Number of Households | Mexican American | | | | Anglo |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | First (N=226) | Second (N=222) | Third (N=118) | Total (N=603) | (N=184) |
| None | 28 | 16 | 13 | 21 | 22 |
| 1 or 2 | 46 | 37 | 36 | 40 | 64 |
| 3 to 5 | 18 | 27 | 32 | 25 | 10 |
| 6 or more | 8 | 20 | 19 | 14 | 4 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Total Mexican American vs. Anglo $\chi^2 = 46.5$; df = 3; P < .001.

*Excludes respondents who are not related to households in town.

Table 3

LOCAL EXTENDED FAMILY STRUCTURE BY PERCENTAGE

| Structural Integration of Extended Family | Mexican American | | | | Anglo |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | First (N=264) | Second (N=237) | Third (N=125) | Total (N=666) | (N=340) |
| No kin present | 14 | 6 | 6 | 9 | 54 |
| Low integration | 33 | 14 | 15 | 22 | 18 |
| Mid integration | 38 | 37 | 39 | 39 | 27 |
| High integration | 15 | 43 | 40 | 30 | 1 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |

Total Mexican American vs. Anglo $\chi^2 = 197.6$; df = 3; $P < .001$.

Table 4

MEXICAN AMERICAN EXTENDED FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ACCULTURATION LEVEL BY PERCENTAGE*

| Structural Integration of Extended Family | Acculturation Level | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Low (N=179) | Mid (N=192) | High (N=91) |
| No kin present | 16 | 3 | 7 |
| Low integration | 33 | 15 | 13 |
| Mid integration | 38 | 38 | 38 |
| High integration | 13 | 44 | 42 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 |

$\chi^2 = 67.7$; df = 6; $P < .001$.

*Some of the sample has been lost because of missing answers for items used in constructing either the acculturation or the extended family scale.

Table 5

MEXICAN AMERICAN EXTENDED FAMILY STRUCTURE AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS BY PERCENTAGE*

| Structural Integration of Extended Family | Socioeconomic Status | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Low (N=300) | Mid (N=102) | High (N=88) |
| No kin present | 14 | 8 | 6 |
| Low integration | 23 | 18 | 16 |
| Mid integration | 40 | 36 | 30 |
| High integration | 23 | 38 | 49 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 |

$\chi^2 = 27.4$; df = 6; $P < .001$.

*Some of the sample has been lost because of missing answers for items used in constructing either the socioeconomic status or the extended family scale.

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