



# Race-ethnic differences in marital quality and divorce<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Blacks report lower marital quality and face a higher risk of marital dissolution than Whites, but little is known about how Hispanics compare to these two groups. We examine five dimensions of marital quality as well as marital dissolution for Blacks, Whites, and Mexican Americans using data from the National Survey of Families and Households ( $N = 6231$ ). Mexican Americans and Whites have similar levels of marital quality, whereas Blacks report poorer marital quality than these two groups. Blacks face higher odds of marital disruption than either Mexican Americans or Whites, but this is because of Blacks' lower marital quality. Consistent with the paradox of Mexican American nuptiality, we conclude that aspects of Mexican American culture may play a role in preserving marital quality and stability for this group despite their precarious economic situation.

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## 1. Introduction

Although prior research has documented race-ethnic differences in union formation and dissolution patterns and their determinants, we know little about race-ethnic differences in

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the *quality* of intact marriages and how these differences may affect subsequent divorce. We also lack a clear understanding of how marital quality and its predictors may vary by race-ethnicity. Including Blacks and Hispanics in research on marital quality not only expands our knowledge of marital dynamics, but may also aid in understanding race-ethnic differences in divorce patterns. Using data from the first two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households, we extend research on Black–White differences in marital quality and divorce by including Mexican Americans.

## 2. The Significance of race-ethnicity

Race-ethnic differences in union formation and dissolution trends have received much attention over the past decade. Blacks are less likely to desire marriage and to get married and are more likely to divorce than Whites (Cherlin, 1998; Sweeney and Phillips, 2004; South, 1993). The marital behavior of Hispanics is more similar to that of Whites than Blacks; Hispanics, and especially Mexican Americans, have higher rates of marriage, more positive attitudes toward marriage, and lower rates of union dissolution than do Blacks (Bean and Tienda, 1987; Oropesa et al., 1994; Raley et al., 2004). The fact that Mexican Americans and Blacks are similar in their experiences of economic disadvantage, yet Mexican Americans resemble Whites in their family formation behaviors has been termed “the paradox of Mexican American nuptiality,” and suggests that both structural factors as well as cultural factors may play a role in minorities’ differential marital rates and outcomes (Oropesa et al., 1994; Raley et al., 2004).

The little research that has directly examined Blacks’ marital quality has found that Blacks have poorer marital quality than Whites, on average (Broman, 1993; Trent and South, 2003). Researchers have not been able to explain this difference. Almost no research has examined the marital quality of Hispanics in comparison to that of Blacks and Whites despite the fact that Hispanics now constitute the largest minority (Amato et al., 2003) group in America and comprise a greater share of (United States Census Bureau, 2001) marrieds than Blacks (Amato et al., 2003). The Hispanic population more than doubled in size between 1980 and 2000 (Hobbs and Stoops, 2002). Consequently, Hispanics now represent a slightly larger share of the U.S. population than do non-Hispanic Blacks (12.5 versus 12 percent), and this difference is projected to increase in the coming decades (Hobbs and Stoops, 2002). The proportion of marrieds that are Hispanic has also increased, doubling between 1980 and 2000 (Amato et al., 2003). A solid research base on marital quality and its antecedents for Hispanics is long overdue.

Marital quality not only gauges the dynamics of a marriage, but has important consequences. It is a significant predictor of overall happiness and well-being (Aldous and Ganey, 1999; Ren, 1997), and is associated with a greater risk of divorce (Previti and Amato, 2003; Schoen et al., 2002). Blacks experience a greater likelihood of divorce than Whites or Hispanics (Bean and Tienda, 1987; Oropesa et al., 1994; Sweeney and Phillips, 2004), which may be attributable to Blacks’ lower levels of marital quality. Further, few studies of divorce have incorporated Mexican Americans, whose divorce rates are lower than Blacks’ but similar to Whites’ (Bean and Tienda, 1987; Oropesa et al., 1994). To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine how race-ethnic differences in marital quality may be linked to race-ethnic differences in divorce.

The conceptual framework guiding this exploratory analysis of Mexican Americans’ marital quality is derived from the paradox of Mexican American nuptiality. As the

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