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### Title

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Toward Gender Equality

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0xb1g6rw>

### Journal

Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 18(3)

### ISSN

0739-9863

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### Publication Date

1996-08-01

### DOI

10.1177/07399863960183005

Peer reviewed

# Predictors of Mexican American Mothers' and Fathers' Attitudes Toward Gender Equality

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*This study examined factors related to attitudes about gender-role equality in 50 Mexican American married mothers and 33 Mexican American married fathers. Each parent completed the Attitudes Toward Gender Scale (a modified version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale) and other attitude questionnaires. Mothers with communal values who were born in the United States, with higher levels of education, and who placed less value on competition were significantly more likely to have gender-egalitarian attitudes. Fathers who had higher levels of education and who placed less value on competition were significantly more likely to have gender-egalitarian attitudes. The results suggest that Mexican American parents tend to endorse egalitarian gender attitudes as they become more acculturated. Other factors such as language spoken, religion, income, and maternal employment did not significantly account for independent amounts of variance for either mothers' or fathers' gender-egalitarian attitudes.*

During recent decades, there has been a steady increase in the United States toward greater gender equality (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). Women have

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AUTHORS' NOTE: This research was supported by grants to the first author from the National Institute of Mental Health (R03-MH49239-02), the Academic Senate of the University of California, Santa Cruz (503035-19900), and the Social Sciences Division of the University of California, Santa Cruz (443060-09523). Leslie Leve, Trisha Strasser, and Jennifer Prado are especially appreciated for their important assistance in this research. Additionally, the following persons are thanked for their help: Stella Adame, Veronica Aguirre, Jeanette Castro, Mercedes Chavez, Linda Cutting, Erin Dailey, Marika Foltz, Stephanie Groll, Sandra Guevara, Lisa Heidt, Laura Holmquist, Lisa Lee, Heather Martin, Dana Martinez, Rebecca Martinez-Chavez, Nydia Medina, Cynthia Miranda, Charles Padilla, Angelina Pinedo, Rosa Plaza, Leticia Recio, Rosalyn Schwartz, April Vogensen, Marilyn Yañez-Osborne, and Rebecca Yanowsky. Dena Valin is now at the Human Development Program in Social Ecology, University of California, Irvine. Address correspondence to Campbell Leaper, Department of Psychology, University of California, Santa Cruz, CA 95064. Electronic mail may be sent to cam@cats.ucsc.edu.

Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, Vol. 18 No. 3, August 1996 343-355  
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become regular participants in the paid workforce and continue to increase their numbers in positions of power and prestige. Also, sexism and gender discrimination are generally treated as serious issues. There is also a trend toward shared child care between parents. As dramatic as these changes may be, they do not necessarily reflect the values of all members in the society. In this regard, an egalitarian gender ideology may be more common for those persons who are better educated and more apt to have the economic resources and skills to transcend traditional patriarchal roles. Additionally, egalitarian ideals may be less common among those persons who are recent immigrants from more traditional cultures, such as Mexico. To explore these possible influences, the present study compared Mexican American mothers' and fathers' attitudes toward gender equality in relation to their ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Mexican Americans constitute the fastest growing ethnic minority in the United States (Vega, 1990). Although some writers have suggested that patriarchal gender roles (*machismo* and *hebrisimo*) are especially emphasized in Mexican American families (Peñalosa, 1968; Taggart, 1992), other researchers have criticized this view as being an erroneous stereotype (Mirandé, 1979; Staples & Mirandé, 1980; Vazquez-Nuttall, Romero-Garcia, & De Leon, 1987; Vega, 1990). Instead, they argue that Mexican American families are more commonly characterized by egalitarian marital roles. Thus, as Vega (1990) concluded in a recent review, "gender roles in the Hispanic family continue to be a primary area of conjecture and research" (p. 1019).

One way to reconcile the discrepant views is to recognize the heterogeneity among Mexican American families in terms of acculturation (Cousins, Power, & Olvera-Ezzell, 1993; Hurtado, Gurin, & Peng, 1994; Mendoza, 1989; Negy & Woods, 1992; Orozco, Thompson, Kapes, & Montgomery, 1993; Padilla, 1980). Although there are some reports indicating that Mexican American and other Latina women are more likely than European American women to endorse traditional beliefs about gender roles (Gonzalez, 1982), other studies suggest that these apparent ethnic differences may be better accounted for by other factors such as employment outside of the home (Ybarra, 1982; Zinn, 1980), education (Kranau, Green, & Valencia-Weber, 1982), or acculturation (Kranau et al., 1982). Although several of these factors have been investigated in relation to Latina women's gender ideology (see Vazquez-Nuttall et al., 1987, for a review), most previous studies have looked at college students (e.g., Gonzalez, 1982). In contrast, our investigation specifically targeted women who were mothers. Being a mother and having a family are apt to make issues pertaining to gender-role equality especially salient in a woman's life (Abrahams, Feldman, & Nash, 1978).

Moreover, there are no corresponding studies considering factors related to gender-egalitarian attitudes among Latino men. Therefore, our study also included a sample of Mexican American fathers.

Many researchers have studied the effects of acculturation through the use of indirect variables such as country of birth, language spoken, education, and socioeconomic status (e.g., Cousins et al., 1993; Orozco et al., 1993). These factors are presumed to reflect the extent that a person has been exposed to and integrated into the mainstream, middle-class culture. Related variables include education and socioeconomic status. Alternatively, other researchers have directly assessed factors that are believed to reflect people's cultural values (e.g., Domino & Acosta, 1987; Knight, Bernal, Garza, & Cota, 1993). For instance, researchers have proposed that Latin American cultures place relatively more emphasis on communion (e.g., closeness to in-group) and less emphasis on individualism (e.g., competition, self-reliance) compared with mainstream American culture (see Triandis, 1989). To examine the relationship between both indirect and direct indexes of acculturation, both types of measures were included in the present study. We collected information on parents' backgrounds (e.g., country of birth, languages spoken in the home, education, etc.) and assessed their attitudes regarding individualistic and communal values.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 50 Mexican American married mothers (mean age = 31.08,  $SD = 4.64$ ) and 33 Mexican American married fathers (mean age = 34.91,  $SD = 6.80$ ). Of the 50 mothers in the sample, 33 were married to the 33 fathers in the sample. The husbands of the remaining 17 mothers in the sample did not participate in the study. Families were recruited for a larger study on gender socialization in young children through commercial mailing lists and day care centers in urban and agricultural communities near the central coast of California.

Demographic background information for the mothers and fathers in the sample is summarized in Table 1. It can be seen that the mean reported income for the families was between \$25,000 and \$29,999. The mean education level for both mothers and fathers was having graduated high school. More specifically, 30% of mothers and 27% of fathers did not have a high school diploma; 20% of mothers and 18% of fathers had a high school diploma; 50% of mothers and 54% of fathers reported at least some college education.

**Table 1. Demographic Profile of Mothers and Fathers in Sample**

|  | Mothers ( <i>n</i> = 50) | Fathers ( <i>n</i> = 33) |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Parent age                                 | 31.08 (4.64)             | 34.91 (6.80)             |
| Number of children                         | 2.48 (1.31)              | 2.58 (1.50)              |
| Education ranking <sup>a</sup>             | 3.56 (1.99)              | 3.73 (1.79)              |
| Family income ranking <sup>b</sup>         | 6.06 (3.07)              | 6.85 (3.24)              |
| Occupational prestige ranking <sup>c</sup> | 4.33 (2.39)              | 4.48 (2.53)              |
| Maternal employment (hours/week)           | 18.02 (18.67)            | 14.58 (18.15)            |

NOTE: Standard deviations are in parentheses.

a. The corresponding rankings for education level were as follows: 1 = elementary school, 2 = some high school, 3 = high school diploma, 4 = some college, 5 = college degree, 6 = some graduate/professional school, and 7 = graduate/professional school degree.

b. The rankings for income were the following: 1 = Under \$5,000, 2 = \$5,000-9,999, 3 = \$10,000-14,999, 4 = \$15,000-19,999, 5 = \$20,000-24,999, 6 = \$25,000-29,999, 7 = \$30,000-39,999, 8 = \$40,000-49,999, 9 = \$50,000-59,999, 10 = \$60,000-74,999, 11 = \$75,000-99,999, and 12 = \$100,000 or more.

c. Family occupational prestige rankings for each family were based on the highest ranking associated with either the mother or the father using Stevens and Cho's (1985) categories: 0 = not employed, 1 = unskilled laborer, 2 = unskilled worker, 3 = semiskilled worker, 4 = skilled worker, 5 = clerical or sales worker, 6 = technicians and semiprofessionals, 7 = managers and minor professionals, 8 = administrators and white-collar professionals, and 9 = executives and major professionals.

A total of 66% of the mothers and 47% of the wives of the fathers in the study were employed outside of the home at least part-time. Among the mothers who were employed, 79% of them worked at least half-time. Among the subset of wives married to the fathers in the study, 75% were employed at least half-time.

The mean highest occupational prestige ranking for mothers or fathers in families on Stevens and Cho's (1985) 9-point scale corresponds to *skilled worker*. More specifically, 52% of mothers and 19% of fathers were not employed; 7% of mothers and 15% of fathers were employed in unskilled or semiskilled jobs; 10% of mothers and 25% of fathers were employed in skilled occupations; and 39% of mothers and 41% of fathers were employed at clerical, semiprofessional, or higher occupational levels.

Other demographic information that was collected included language(s) spoken in the home, parent's religion, and parent's country of birth. A total of 24% of the mothers and 21% of the fathers spoke English only; 56% of the mothers and 56% of the fathers spoke Spanish only; and 20% of the mothers and 24% of the fathers spoke both English and Spanish in the home.

A total of 76% of mothers and 85% of fathers indicated that they were Catholic; the rest indicated preference for either another religion or no religion. Of the sample, 44% of mothers and 38% of fathers were born in the United States. The others were born in Mexico with the exceptions of one mother who was born in Cuba (with a Mexican-descent husband) and one father who was born in Costa Rica (with a Mexican-descent wife).

### *Procedure*

Two or three female research assistants visited each parent at the home. Mothers and fathers were visited on separate occasions approximately 1 week apart. A total of 17 research assistants assisted during data collection. All were bilingual in Spanish and English, and 13 of the 17 assistants had Latina backgrounds.

First, the parent was interviewed to collect background demographic information. After the demographic information was collected, the parent and her or his preschool-age child were videotaped while playing with various sets of toys that the researchers brought. These data were used for a separate study on parent-child play interactions. After the play sessions, the parent completed a set of attitude questionnaires (described below). Parents who could not read were not included in the present study. Parents had the option of choosing either English or Spanish versions of the questionnaires. Translation of interview protocols and questionnaires into Spanish was carried out with a certified translator. Copies of the questionnaires are available through the first author.

### *Individualism and Communion Measures*

Two measures of individualism (self-reliance and competitiveness) and one measure of communion (concern for in-group) were included in the questionnaire. They were taken from Hui's (1988) Individualism-Collectivism Scale. Each measure included a set of items that was rated on a 6-point scale (ranging from 1 = *Strongly agree* to 6 = *Strongly disagree*). There were two items each for self-reliance (i.e., "If you want something done right, you must do it yourself" and "In the long run, the only person you can count on is yourself") and for competitiveness (i.e., "It annoys me when other people perform better than I do" and "Doing your best is not enough; it is important to win"). Concern for in-group, which we refer to as a measure of communion, included six items (e.g., "I would help within my means if a friend told me that he or she is in financial difficulty" and "I like to live close to my family"). Hui provided evidence for the subscales' reliability and validity.

**Table 2. Language, Religion, and Country of Birth as Predictors of Parents' Gender-Egalitarian Attitudes**

| Predictor                      | Mean (SD)      | F              |
|--------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| <b>Mothers</b>                 |                |                |
| Language spoken in home        |                |                |
| Spanish only ( <i>n</i> = 28)  | 111.93 (16.08) | 5.02*          |
| Bilingual ( <i>n</i> = 10)     | 114.20 (18.07) |                |
| English only ( <i>n</i> = 12)  | 128.50 (10.25) |                |
| Religion                       |                |                |
| Catholic ( <i>n</i> = 38)      | 113.50 (16.57) | 5.12*          |
| Other ( <i>n</i> = 12)         | 125.42 (13.43) |                |
| Country of birth               |                |                |
| United States ( <i>n</i> = 21) | 125.33 (12.89) | 13.30**        |
| Other ( <i>n</i> = 28)         | 109.86 (14.90) |                |
| <b>Fathers</b>                 |                |                |
| Language spoken in the home    |                |                |
| Spanish only ( <i>n</i> = 18)  | 115.00 (13.35) | 1.44 <i>ns</i> |
| Bilingual ( <i>n</i> = 8)      | 124.13 (13.66) |                |
| English only ( <i>n</i> = 7)   | 110.00 (25.79) |                |
| Religion                       |                |                |
| Catholic ( <i>n</i> = 28)      | 115.36 (18.06) | < 1 <i>ns</i>  |
| Other ( <i>n</i> = 5)          | 120.60 (7.13)  |                |
| Country of birth               |                |                |
| United States ( <i>n</i> = 12) | 116.92 (22.31) | < 1 <i>ns</i>  |
| Other ( <i>n</i> = 21)         | 115.71 (13.49) |                |

\**p* < .05; \*\**p* < .001.

### *Attitudes Toward Gender Scale*

Parents completed the Attitudes Toward Gender Scale (AGS), which assesses the respondent's attitudes regarding equal rights, roles, and privileges for females and males. It consists of items selected from the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence & Helmreich, 1978) and the Attitudes Toward Women Scale for Adolescents (Galambos, Petersen, Richards, & Gitelson, 1985). Both scales target attitudes regarding mostly female roles (e.g., "It is insulting to women to have the 'obey' clause remain in the marriage service"). Therefore, additional items were added that specifically target male roles (e.g., "A man should not expect to have as much intimacy with his children as his wife does"). Respondents rated a total of 25 statements on a 6-point scale (ranging from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 6 = *Strongly agree*), with some items reverse scored. The AGS items had high internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ). The samples of mothers and fathers were not different

**Table 3. Correlations Between Continuous Predictors and Attitudes Toward Gender Equality Scores for Mothers and Fathers**

|                                  | Mothers ( <i>n</i> = 50) | Fathers ( <i>n</i> = 33) |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Parents' education               | .49****                  | .40**                    |
| Maternal employment (hours/week) | .15                      | .20                      |
| Family income                    | .31**                    | .30*                     |
| Self-reliance score              | -.38***                  | -.39**                   |
| Competitiveness score            | -.47****                 | -.31*                    |
| Communion score                  | .54****                  | .44**                    |

\* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

in total scores ( $M = 116.36$ ,  $SD = 16.56$  for mothers;  $M = 115.12$ ,  $SD = 17.69$  for fathers).

## Results

In the first set of analyses, predictors were individually tested in relation to mothers' and fathers' scores on the AGS questionnaire. One-way ANOVAs were used with the categorical predictors (language spoken, religion, country of birth), and Pearson correlations were used to test the continuous predictors (family income, father's education, mother's education, mother's hours of paid employment, self-reliance score, competitiveness score, and communion score). The results from the ANOVAs are presented in Table 2, and the findings from the Pearson correlation tests are summarized in Table 3. These analyses indicated that Mexican American mothers were significantly more likely to have gender-egalitarian attitudes if they were born in the United States, spoke only English at home, were not Catholic, had higher levels of education, came from higher income families, or endorsed communal values (concern for in-group) rather than individualistic values (self-reliance and competitiveness). Mexican American fathers were significantly more likely to have gender-egalitarian attitudes if they had higher levels of education, they scored high on communion, or they placed less emphasis on individualistic values (self-reliance). There were also nonsignificant trends suggesting that the fathers were more likely to have egalitarian gender attitudes if they had a higher income or they scored low on competitiveness.

In a second set of analyses, linear regressions were carried out for mothers and fathers separately to test the effects of the following predictors on parents' AGS scores: language spoken (English only vs. bilingual/Spanish only), country of birth (Mexico vs. United States), religion (Catholic vs. other),



**Table 4. Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses of Attitudes Toward Gender Equality Scores With Mothers and Fathers**

| Variable Entered        | Step | Partial $R^2$ | Model $R^2$ | F       |
|-------------------------|------|---------------|-------------|---------|
| <b>Mothers (n = 50)</b> |      |               |             |         |
| Communion               | 1    | .30           | .30         | 20.16** |
| Country of birth        | 2    | .16           | .46         | 14.19** |
| Mothers' education      | 3    | .15           | .61         | 17.65** |
| Competitiveness         | 4    | .04           | .65         | 5.76*   |
| <b>Fathers (n = 33)</b> |      |               |             |         |
| Communion               | 1    | .19           | .19         | 7.50*   |
| Fathers' education      | 2    | .13           | .32         | 5.69*   |

NOTE: Regression analyses used forward selection procedure with .05 significance level required for entry into the model.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .001$ .

maternal employment (hours per week), family income, mother's education, father's education, self-reliance score, competitiveness score, and communion (concern for in-group) score. A forward selection method was used with a .05 significance level for entry of variables into the model. A summary of the resulting models for mothers and fathers is presented in Table 4.

Mothers' communion score, mothers' country of birth, mothers' education, and mothers' competitiveness score were four significant variables that were found to explain independent amounts of variance in mothers' AGS scores. Those mothers (a) who had higher communion scores, (b) who were born in the United States, (c) who had higher levels of education, and (d) who had lower scores on competitiveness were more likely to hold gender-egalitarian attitudes. These four variables combined accounted for 65% of the variance. In contrast, mothers' language spoken in the home, mothers' religion, mothers' self-reliance score, family income, and fathers' education did not appear as significant factors in the regression.

Fathers' AGS scores were predicted by their communion score and their own level of education. Those fathers with higher communion scores and higher education levels were more likely to hold gender-egalitarian attitudes. These two variables combined accounted for 32% of the variance in fathers' AGS scores. In contrast, fathers' country of birth, fathers' language spoken in the home, fathers' religion, fathers' competitiveness score, fathers' self-reliance score, family income, and mothers' education did not appear as significant predictors of fathers' AGS scores in the regression analysis.

## Discussion

Some researchers have suggested that Mexican American married couples are more traditional in their gender attitudes and roles than their European American counterparts (Mirandé, 1979; Peñalosa, 1968). This type of analysis is problematic, however, because it tends to perpetuate a notion of Mexican Americans as well as European Americans as static and monolithic groups of people. An alternative strategy is to consider factors related to variability within particular ethnic groups (see Padilla, 1980). Consistent with the latter approach, our findings indicated that variations in Mexican American mothers' and fathers' gender beliefs were related to a variety of demographic and acculturation variables.

Both mothers and fathers with higher levels of education were more likely to endorse egalitarian gender attitudes. Other studies have similarly reported a positive relationship between Latina women's education level and their gender attitudes (see Kranau et al., 1982). Our findings indicate that this correlation applies to Latino men as well. Higher education may be important in fostering an egalitarian gender ideology for people in general. Attending college typically involves training for the professional world, which, particularly for women, involves transcending the traditional feminine role as wife and caregiver. Also, education is a form of acculturation. Those Mexican American women and men who have had more education are more likely to have been exposed to the gender egalitarian ideals prevalent in modern, middle-class U.S. society.

It is notable that education—and not income—appeared a significant factor in the regression analyses for both mothers and fathers. Although income was correlated with parents' gender attitudes when analyzed by itself, apparently it did not account for an independent amount of variance when education (and other variables) was also taken into account in the multiple regression analyses.

Other acculturation-related variables were related to Mexican American mothers' gender ideology. First, it was found that mothers born in the United States were more likely than those born in Mexico to endorse gender-egalitarian attitudes. Second, mothers who spoke only English in the home were more likely to have egalitarian gender ideologies than those mothers who were bilingual or spoke only Spanish. And, third, mothers who were not Catholic were more likely to endorse gender-egalitarian values than mothers who were Catholic. However, the latter two effects disappeared in the

regression analysis when language spoken and religion were considered at the same time as the other variables.

Other researchers have similarly observed a relationship between Latina women's acculturation and their egalitarian attitudes (Kranau et al., 1982; Tharp, Meadow, Lennhoff, & Satterfield, 1968; Vazquez-Nuttall et al., 1987). Presumably, those women who have spent more time living in America are more apt to adopt gender-egalitarian values. Our results indicate that mothers' country of birth contributed to an independent source of variance than other acculturation-related factors such as mothers' level of education or family income. It suggests, therefore, that the acculturation process itself (independent of an improvement in one's income or education) may account for increases in gender-egalitarian beliefs.

Although forming gender-egalitarian attitudes may be related to some forms of acculturation, egalitarian beliefs are not necessarily incompatible with maintaining other cultural values. Latin American cultures tend to place more value on communion over individualism compared with mainstream North American culture (see Triandis, 1989). Yet our results from the multiple regression analyses indicated that both mothers and fathers who valued communion (concern for in-group)—as well as mothers who placed less value on individualism (competition)—were more likely to value gender equality.

Because we measured individualism and communion separately, it is possible that gender egalitarianism was not related to valuing both communion and individualism (which characterized some persons in the sample) but, rather, was related to valuing communion over individualism. Thus, at least with the present sample of Mexican American parents, gender-egalitarian beliefs appear more compatible with the traditional feminine role's emphasis on communion than with the traditional masculine role's emphasis on individualism or the so-called androgynous role's dual emphasis on both values (see Block, 1973; Leaper, 1994; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). This effect was found with mothers as well as fathers in the study.

In closing, two caveats about our study are noted. First, although the present study identified factors that accounted for variations in Mexican American mothers' and fathers' gender-egalitarian attitudes, we acknowledge that these same factors may not necessarily predict the same parents' gender-role behaviors. Parents' attitudes may not actually coincide with their family behavior. In this regard, Vega (1990) cautioned that "care should be taken not to confuse assenting statements in interviews about family values . . . with actual behavior. . . . Values can be retained that are conflicting" (p. 1022). For example, Mirandé (1979) observed that despite a strong endorsement of

patriarchal values among the Latino mothers and fathers that he studied, there was also a pattern of egalitarianism in their actual behavior. Conversely, other studies have found that parents with egalitarian gender ideologies may nonetheless follow traditional patterns of behavior in the family (Hochschild, 1989; Weitzman, Birns, & Friend, 1985). With many other parents, however, gender ideology and behavior are consistent. Thus it is unlikely that a direct relationship exists between parents' gender attitudes and their behavior.

A second limitation is related to the definition of gender equality that was used. The AGS (and the Attitudes Toward Women Scale on which it is derived) defines equality in terms of similarity in roles, rights, and privileges for females and males (e.g., "Women should have equal position with men in all jobs and professions"). However, rather than defining gender equality only in terms of similarity of roles, we should also consider the extent that cultures place equal value on women's and men's roles. In mainstream U.S. society, the characteristics associated with the traditional female role have long been considered less desirable than those associated with the traditional male role (see Leaper, 1995). In contrast, studies suggest that the mother typically commands a great deal of authority and respect in the traditional Mexican American family (Staples & Mirandé, 1980; Vega, 1990). Further studies into the relationship between gender beliefs and behavior are needed that consider different possible aspects and meanings of gender equality in family roles.

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