Melting Pot or Mixed Salad? Exploring assimilation and maintenance of fertility behavior of first and subsequent generation Central American women living in the United States

Classic paradigms of fertility analysis suggest that immigrant fertility patterns converge towards those of the destination culture (Jonsson & Rendall 2004). Formal demographers mathematically model this convergences as instantaneous assimilation to the host society's fertility schedule (Rogers 1975). Recent fertility research has revealed extreme differences in behaviors among foreign-born US residents in comparison to native-born women, differences that appear to extend beyond the first generation (Hill & Johnson 2002, Frank & Heuveline 2005). These results reject the assimilation assumption that frames the mathematical models but the use of crude ethnic groupings and reliance on cross-sectional vital statistics and survey data that contain little information about family and migration history limits their usefulness in establishing a contemporary model of immigrant fertility behavior (Heim & Austin 1995, Hill & Johnson 2002). The purpose of this research is to examine the fertility behaviors of Central American immigrants and their descendants living in Los Angeles County. Comparing fertility rates and determinants of three categorizations of L.A. County residents: Central American-born women, California-born women of Central American descent and the California native-born population (not of Central American descent), will enhance scientific understanding of immigrant assimilation and cultural maintenance as expressed through fertility behavior. Two important features of this work are careful attention to the foreign-born women's duration of exposure to place-based determinants of fertility, and the development of quantitative models that reflect the complexity of the fertility adaptation process. The planned research will advance conceptual, measurement, and modeling issues of fertility analysis. As such, the three broad research questions that will be addressed in this project are: (1) How does time spent in L.A. County impact Central American fertility rates? (2) What role do origin- and destination-community characteristics have in future fertility behavior? (3) What is the interrelation of individual and neighborhood factors on individual fertility outcomes?

Data for this analysis come from the NICHD supported Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey (L.A. FANS) collected by RAND. The public use longitudinal data set contains information on individual and neighborhood characteristics of randomly selected households and household members in L.A. County (sample size is approximately 2,500 households). These data contain information on fertility and reproductive health, country of birth, time spent in the US, employment, child-care and migration status (extremely rare in survey data) (Goldman, Smith & Sood 2006). The inclusion of both neighborhood (macro-level) and individual (micro-level) characteristics enables the development of a multi-level model where individuals act within their particular community context. The multi-level structure effectively incorporates different levels of social and cultural factors to reflect the complexity of family planning decision-making (Pebley, Goldman & Rodriguez 1996, Goldstein 2003, Lindstrom & Munoz-Franco 2005). While the first wave of the data has been used in education and healthcare research, none of the data has been used to analyze fertility or reproductive health determinants.

The first wave of the data collection occurred in April 2000 – January 2002 while the

second began in 2006. The data are scheduled to be available in 2008. As the data are current the research will present an extremely up-to-date analysis of Central American reproductive decision-making trends in the L.A. area. Population based models will also be developed using vital statistics data that are closely monitored by the US Census Bureau. While vital statistics information does not contain the depth of information found in L.A. FANS, the data will be innovatively matched enabling "tracking" of the births of an individual woman and those of her descendants (Currie & Moretti 2003). Focusing primarily on the relationship between time spent in the US and fertility, these models will disentangle the generational, age, and exposure components that confound scientific understanding of the impact of time on fertility. These models will frame the primary L.A. FANS analysis and can also be expanded to model fertility in other multicultural communities for future fertility research. Finally, Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data and population census data from the sending countries will be used to develop rates of fertility for comparison of Central American women residing in Central America and those residing in the US.

Hazard models, a micro-level approach to multi-state life table analysis, will be used to model and compare the fertility trends of the three categories of L.A. residents. While traditional life-table analysis explores populations from a macro perspective and model parameters are estimated from aggregate data, this analysis will model the "risk" of parity transition using individual-, household- and neighborhood-level independent variables, thereby combining macro and micro factors. This type of analysis, multi-state, multi-level hazard modeling, requires a richer data set than than cross-sectional survey data and the methodological approach alone advances existing research on immigrant fertility patterns.

Across disciplines, social scientists are actively exploring the concepts of multiculturalism and assimilation and have begun deconstructing the idea of the "melting-pot" - the seamless integration of individuals across cultures, backgrounds and languages into a homogenous monoculture (Alba & Nee 1997, Alba 1999). The proposed research aims to explore the processes of cultural maintenance and assimilation of under-represented Central American women and their descendants through an evaluation of fertility behavior. Since multiculturalism and assimilation are multidimensional constructs, increased understanding of immigrant fertility contributes to the larger field of research. The conceptual and methodological advancements resulting from this research ensure that this project will have important implications for social science research, quantitative research and immigrant focused analyses.

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