

# **Bendito Amor:**

## *Religion and Relationships among Married and Unmarried Latinos in Urban America\**

Center for Research on Child Wellbeing

Working Paper #2007-06-FF

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\* This research was funded by grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Grant 90XP0048), the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Bodman Foundation, and the John Templeton Foundation. We gratefully acknowledge the statistical analysis and advice of Nicholas Wolfinger.

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### ABSTRACT

The family arrangements of Latinos in the U.S. are increasingly diverse, with growing numbers of Latino children living in households headed by married and unmarried parents. Latinos also tend to be more religious than the population at large. Yet no research has examined the associations between religion and relationship quality among married and unmarried Latinos. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which focuses on new parents in urban America, we find that the religious attendance of Latino fathers promotes higher-quality relationships among both fathers and mothers; by contrast, the effect of maternal attendance on relationship quality is insignificant or negative.

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In the last half of the twentieth century, the United States witnessed marked increases in family diversity, marked by increases in single-parent families, families headed by cohabiting or romantically-involved couples, and stepfamilies. These changes have proved particularly consequential for racial and ethnic minorities in the United States: for instance, nonmarital childbearing is now highest among African Americans and Latinos: in 2002, 68 percent of African American births and 44 percent of Latino births were out of wedlock, compared to 29 percent of white births (Maher, 2004). Moreover, many of these births, particularly among Latinos, are to “fragile families” where couples cohabit or remain romantically-involved with one another and share responsibility for the material and emotional care of these children (Carlson, McLanahan, & England 2004; Landale & Oropesa 2001; Oropesa & Landale, 2004). Although both Latinos and African Americans have been affected by these demographic trends, most research on minorities and family change has focused on African Americans (Patterson, 1998; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan 1995; Wilson, 1996).

This study takes a different tack, focusing on marriage and relationships among Latinos, who now make up the largest minority group in the United States, at 14 percent of the U.S. population (Suro, 2005). Although scholars have begun to think more systematically about causes and consequences of demographic change among Latinos (Oropesa & Landale, 2004; Stier & Tienda, 2001), very little work has been done on the nexus of religion and family among Latinos (but see Crane, 2003). This research gap is surprising, given the central role that religion has played and continues to play in influencing Latino family life (Badillo, 2004; Laumann, Ellingson, Mahay, Paik, & Youm, 2004). Accordingly, this article focuses on the association

between religion and relationship quality among married and unmarried Latino parents living in urban America.

The following two questions animate this study: (1) Does religion influence the quality of the relationships between married and unmarried parents in urban America? and, (2) Does the association between religion and Latino urban families vary by the gender and marital status of parents? We investigate the answers to these questions using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCW), a sample of married and unmarried parents living in 20 cities around the United States.

The answers to these questions are important for at least two reasons. First, a growing body of social scientific research indicates that children do best when their parents—whether married or unmarried—enjoy happy, supportive relationships with one another (Amato & Booth, 1997; Carlson & McLanahan, 2004). Thus, religion may have indirect effects on the well-being of Latino children in urban America, insofar as it influences the quality of relationships among their parents.

Second, the link between child well-being and has spurred considerable interest on the part of government, foundations, and faith-based and community organizations in promoting marriage and good relationships among parents, particularly in minority communities most affected by recent demographic changes. Indeed, the Bush Administration has proposed spending \$1.5 billion on a Healthy Marriage Initiative aimed primarily at improving the quality of relationships among low-income and minority parents (Wilcox, 2002). Faith-based organizations will probably play a central role in delivering relationship services to these populations. Thus, we need to know how religious institutions are currently influencing the quality of married and unmarried relationships among Latino parents. By exploring the

association between religion and relationship quality among Latino parents, this study provides scholars, policy makers, and civic leaders with an overview of the current influence that religion is having upon Latino families and with a sense of the possibilities and limitations of faith-based programs for Latino families.

## **MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS AMONG LATINOS**

Family diversity has increased among Latinos in recent years. As a consequence of increases in nonmarital childbearing and divorce among Latinos in the last three decades, more than 50 percent of Latino children will spend some time living outside of an intact, married family (Maher, 2004; Phillips & Sweeney, 2005). The growth of nonmarital childbearing and divorce among Latinos has been concentrated among lower-status and assimilated Latino families—for instance, U.S.-born Latinos are more likely to divorce than foreign-born Latinos (Oropesa & Landale, 2004; Phillips & Sweeney, 2005). These demographic trends suggest that what Portes and Rumbaut (1990) call “segmented assimilation”—where some immigrants and their children assimilate into the culture of the American lower class—is playing an important role in driving up rates of out-of-wedlock childbearing, divorce, and cohabitation among Latinos.

Of course, it is important to point out that a large percentage of the children born of wedlock to Latinas are born into informal unions where parents are in an ongoing cohabiting or visiting romantic relationship. Using data from the FFCW, we estimate that 74 percent of Latino children born out of wedlock in urban America are born into these fragile families. The literature suggests these families are fragile insofar as they are more likely to be dissolved than marital unions, the couples heading these families are less happy than married parents, and they are less likely to receive normative and social support from kin and other civic actors than are marital

unions (Carlson & McLanahan, 2004; McLanahan, Garfinkel, & Mincy, 2001; Wolfinger & Wilcox 2005). But this literature has focused on fragile families using nationally-representative samples of urban parents; consequently, we do not yet know if fragile families among Latinos also face the same vulnerabilities as do fragile families in general. Insofar as informal relationships have greater cultural acceptance in many Latino communities than they do among whites, it is possible that the negative relationship outcomes typically associated with fragile families may be attenuated among Latinos (McLoyd *et al.*, 2000).

Apart from the issue of marital status, the literature on Latino family relationships suggests a mix of strengths and weaknesses in these relationships. Familism—the idea that the family is an important institution and that family roles and responsibilities should be accorded a high priority in the organization of daily life—is common among Latinos, especially foreign-born Latinos (Baca Zinn & Pok, 2002; Oropesa, 1996; Oropesa & Landale, 2004). This familism is reflected in Latino behavior: Latinos are more likely than whites and African Americans to live with and socialize with family members (and with *padrinos*, godparents), and to provide social and material support to kin and fictive kin (Baca Zinn & Pok, 2002; Mahay & Laumann, 2004; Velez-Ibañez, 1996). The familism found among Latinos is probably associated with high-quality couple relationships, since studies using nationally-representative samples of married adults indicate that familism is associated with higher levels of marital affection and understanding, insofar as it promotes trust and commitment between partners (Amato & Rogers, 1999; Wilcox, 2004).

This strong family orientation is not always reflected in the behavior of Latino men. Although there is considerable scholarly controversy over the extent to which Latino families are shaped by a *machismo* ethic that is harmful to families (Baca Zinn & Pok, 2002; Ginorio,

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Gutierrez, Cauce, & Acosta, 1995; McLoyd *et al.* 2000) the empirical evidence does suggest some Latino men embrace a *machismo* ethic characterized by displays of strength and power, alcohol abuse and sexual promiscuity, and the domination of women. For instance, scholarship focusing on predominantly Mexican American communities in Chicago finds that Mexican Americans are more likely than other Chicago residents to have a double standard for sexual activity, such that wives are expected to be faithful and husbands are allowed to engage in adulterous relationships, so long as they continue to support their families (Mahay & Laumann, 2004). Research also suggests that Latino men are more likely to engage in domestic violence, compared to whites (Frias and Angel 2005; McLoyd *et al.* 2000; Zinn and Pok 2002).

Paradoxically, however, domestic violence appears to be more prevalent among Latino men who were born in the United States, perhaps because such men are more cognizant of their relatively unequal economic standing in the U.S., their relationships incorporate elements of tradition and modernity in ways that do not work well, or because they are less likely to hold familistic attitudes (Buntin, Lechtman, and Laumann 2004; Frias and Angel 2005; McLoyd *et al.* 2000). In any case, this research does suggest that the *machismo* ethic plays an ambivalent role in Latino family life.

The quality of married and intimate relationships among parents is important—among other reasons—because it is linked to the welfare of children. Parents who are happily married are more likely to be involved and affectionate with their own children than parents who are deeply conflicted or unhappy (Amato & Booth, 1997). Moreover, children in fragile families whose parents are affectionate and supportive to one another are more likely to engage in similar behavior with their children (Carlson & McLanahan, 2004). Not surprisingly, studies using both nationally-representative samples and Latino samples of children generally find that parental

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In any case, this research does suggest that elements of the *machismo* ethic can present difficulties in Latino families where men take this ethic as a license to engage in bad behavior.¶

marital quality is linked to better romantic relationships later in life, higher levels of religious involvement, more education, and better psychological well-being (Amato & Booth, 1997; Lindahl & Malik, 1999). In sum, then, empirical evidence suggests that children—including Latino children—typically benefit from high-quality relationships between their parents.

## **RELIGION AND RELATIONSHIPS**

The majority of Latinos in the United States are religious in one way or another. One indicator of religiosity is found in our estimates of religious practice among Latino parents living in American cities. According to the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a high percentage of both married and unmarried Latino parents in urban America are regular churchgoers. Figures 1 and 2 indicate that 50 percent of Latina married mothers in urban America attend church several times a month or more and that 44 percent of Latino married fathers in urban America attend church that often. They also indicate that 33 percent of unmarried Latina mothers attend church frequently, compared to 26 percent of unmarried Latina fathers. Note also that Latino religious attendance patterns fall between those of non-Latino whites and African Americans.

With respect to religious tradition, one recent estimate found that 70 percent of Latinos are Catholic and 23 percent of Latinos are Protestant (Espinosa, Elizondo, & Miranda, 2003). In turn, the vast majority of Latino Protestants are members of theologically-conservative evangelical or Pentecostal Protestant churches (Espinosa, Elizondo, & Miranda, 2003). Both of these traditions view marriage as a sacred relationship between a man and woman that is supposed to image the relationship between Christ and the church. These traditions also emphasize that premarital and extramarital sex is sinful, that marriage is a lifelong relationship,



and that children ought to be born and raised in a married family (Wilcox, 2002). Thus, the familism found in Latino culture receives important social and normative support from the Catholic and Protestant churches with which most Latinos are affiliated.

However, some research suggests that the link between familism and religion is now particularly strong in Protestant churches. Protestant religious vitality, measured by high levels of religious attendance and religious salience, combined with biblical conservatism (Espinosa, Elizondo, & Miranda, 2003), may translate into a stronger focus on marriage among Latino Protestants. For instance, research using nationally-representative survey data suggests that Latino Protestants are more likely to oppose premarital sex, compared both to Catholics and unaffiliated Latinos (Oropesa, 1996). Ethnographic research in Chicago also indicates that the religious intensity associated with Latino Protestantism makes Latino Protestants more likely to follow church norms regarding marriage, sexual activity, and sobriety than Catholics and unaffiliated Latinos (Ellingson, Van Haitisma, Laumann, & Tebbe, 2004). Thus, we predict that the association between religion and marriage will be strongest for Protestants in our sample of urban parents in America.

But we also suspect that many of the effects of religion on marriage among Latinos are generic across religious traditions. As noted above, religious institutions provide religious and moral reasons to get married and stay married, particularly for adults who plan to bear and rear children. They provide rituals—e.g., weddings, baptisms, and worship services—that invest family relationships with transcendent significance and often encourage members of congregations to take an active interest in the family relationships of others in their community (Wilcox, 2004). They also embed adults within family-oriented social networks that reinforce church norms regarding sex and marriage and provide married spouses with social and emotional

support in navigating the challenges of married life (Ellingson, Van Haitsma, Laumann, & Tebbe, 2004; Wilcox, 2004).

Not surprisingly, research relying on nationally–representative samples of American adults indicates that the normative and social support that religious institutions provide to marriage translates into higher-quality marriages for adults who attend religious services several times a month or more (Call & Heaton, 1997; Wilcox & Nock, 2005). But what specific mechanisms explain the association between religion and marital quality? First, religious and moral norms in favor of sexual fidelity, sacrifice, forgiveness, and love steer adults away from extramarital liaisons and toward higher investments in their marriages (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Wilcox, 2004). Second, religious teachings about the sanctity of marriage and fidelity encourage spouses to trust one another and to take a long-term view of marriage; this long-term view, in turn, is associated with a more positive assessment of one’s marital relationship and with a greater willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of the relationship (Wilcox & Nock, 2005). Finally, the social support that religious institutions provide couples helps them negotiate the challenges of family life (Wilcox, 2004).

Although there has been no survey research focusing on the links between Latino marital quality and religion, ethnographic research on religion and Latinos in Chicago suggests that religious attendance is associated with higher-quality marriages (Ellingson, Van Haitsma, Laumann, & Tebbe, 2004). Accordingly, we expect that Latino spouses in urban America who attend church on a regular basis will have happier marriages than those who do not.

But religion may be less likely to foster strong relationships among Latino parents in fragile families—be they cohabiting or visiting. Specifically, these parents may be less likely to enjoy normative and social support from their congregations for their relationships. Unmarried

parents may be stigmatized both for having a child out of wedlock and for maintaining a romantic relationship with the parent of their child. Unmarried parents may also be less likely to get support for an unmarried relationship from church-based social networks. On the other hand, unmarried parents' relationships may benefit indirectly from the social and psychological support provided by religious participation. Thus, one of the central aims of this study is to determine if religious participation is associated with higher quality and more stable relationships among both married *and* unmarried parents in urban America.

The effects of religion on relationships may also vary by gender. Men appear to be influenced more by the institutional contexts of their relationships than women (Nock, 1998; Stanley, Whitton, & Markman, 2004; Wilcox, 2004). Although women are socialized to focus on relationships, men typically are not encouraged to attend closely to the emotional dynamics of their relationships (Maccoby, 1998; Thompson & Walker, 1989). As a consequence, men seem to depend more than women on institutions that supply them with relationship-focused norms, status rewards for relationship-focused behavior, and relationship-focused values that accord meaning to their relationships (Nock, 1998; Wilcox, 2004). As we have seen, religious institutions supply these norms and values. They also provide devoted family men with status rewards for their family orientation (praise, prestigious positions in their congregation, etc.) (Wilcox, 2004).

Indeed, a large body of ethnographic research on Latino Protestantism suggests that religion is successful in turning Latino men's attention to the needs of their families. Ethnographic research on Protestantism in Latin America, Central America, and the United States suggests that Latino men who are actively involved in their churches are less likely to abuse alcohol, engage in domestic violence, and commit adultery than their secular or nominally

Catholic peers (Brusco, 1995; Ellingson, Van Haitisma, Laumann, & Tebbe, 2004; Maldonado, 1993). More generally, religious practice appears to turn the hearts and minds of Latino men to their families by suggesting to them that they have a unique and divinely-ordained role to play in their families (Maldonado, 1993). Accordingly, we predict that urban fathers' religious attendance will be more closely tied to investments in couple relationships and positive perceptions of one's partner than will be mothers' religious attendance.

## **DATA AND METHODS**

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey (FFCW) provides data on approximately 4,800 families of newborn children in 20 cities around the United States. Seventy-five percent of these children were born to unwed mothers. Between 1998 and 2000, this survey interviewed mothers and fathers in hospitals within 48 hours of the birth of their child; if fathers were not present at the hospital, interviewers sought them out elsewhere. In this survey, 85 percent of eligible mothers and 76 percent of eligible fathers responded to the first wave of the survey, which is a high response rate for this particular population. This survey is representative of unmarried parents living in cities with populations over 200,000. The majority of respondents were reinterviewed in two follow-up surveys over the next four years.

This study focuses on 557 married and unmarried Latino couples who were still together 30 months after the birth of their child. We rely on the first and third waves of data collection (T1-Birth; and, T3-30 months after birth) to analyze associations between religion and relationships among Latino parents in urban America. Because all of our couples were still together at T3, our sample is selective of couples who had more stable (and probably better) relationships at birth. Consequently, we probably have fewer observations of our dependent

variables at lower values than we would otherwise observe. This suggests that the size of any religious effects may be smaller than they would have been had we relied on a cross-sectional analysis of religion and relationship quality at T1. But we think our longitudinal approach affords us greater confidence that the associations between religion measured at T1 and relationship quality measured at T3 may be causal.

This study focuses on two outcomes: partner's supportive behavior, and overall relationship quality. Our two measures of relationship quality are obtained at the 30-month follow-up. The first measure determines whether each parent perceives his or her partner to be *supportive*. This is a scale composed of four items, measuring the extent to which each partner: encourages his/her partner to do the things important to him/her, expresses affection or love, really understands his/her partner's hurts and joys, and listens to his/her partner when s/he needs someone to talk to (mother's  $\alpha=.76$ ; father's  $\alpha=.72$ ). *Overall relationship quality* varies from 1-“poor” to 5-“excellent.”

For our independent variables, this study focuses on two measures of religiosity: church attendance and religious affiliation at T1. Fathers and mothers who attend religious services several times a month or more at the time of the child's birth are coded as *frequent attendees*. We consider regular church attendance an indicator of a parent's integration into the normative and social order of a congregation (Wilcox, 2004). Finally, we code Latinos as *Catholic*, *Protestant*, *Other*, and *unaffiliated*, depending upon the affiliation they indicate in the survey. We code all Protestants in one category because the vast majority of Latino Protestants are evangelical or Pentecostal Protestants and because only a few of the Latino parents in our sample attend mainline Protestant churches (Espinosa, Elizondo, & Miranda, 2003).

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We also created a categorical variable for *national origin* (Mexican, Puerto Rican, Other Latino; Mexican is the reference category). We combine Latinos from Cuba, Central America, and Latin America into the “other” category because there were comparatively fewer of them in our sample of urban parents. We also include a variable for *nativity* (U.S.-born and foreign-born; foreign-born is the reference category).

We also include controls for the following demographic and socioeconomic factors, which are known to be associated with marriage and family behavior: *parents’ education*, *parents’ work* in the previous year, *parents’ age*, and whether the mother was living in an *intact family at age 15*.

We rely on two different types of statistical models for our analyses. For our analysis of partner supportiveness, we rely on Ordinary Least Squares Regression. For our analysis of global relationship quality, we rely on ordered logistic regression. In each set of models, the first model focuses on religious affiliation and religious attendance, and includes appropriate socio-demographic controls; the second model adds interactive measures of religious attendance and marital status to see if the effects of religion on parental relationships vary by marital status.

## RESULTS

Table 1 indicates that most Latino parents in urban America report that the overall quality of their relationship is “very good” or better, a majority of these parents indicate a Catholic affiliation, and substantial minorities of these parents attend religious services several times a month or more.

Table 2 indicates that religion is also linked to higher reports of partner supportiveness—that is, affection, understanding, conversation, and encouragement—for Latino fathers but not

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Latina mothers in urban America. Models 1a and 1b indicate that religious affiliation, religious attendance, and interactions for religious attendance and marital status are not associated with mother reports of their partners' supportiveness. However, mothers who worked in the previous year report that their partners are more supportive.

Model 2a shows that fathers are more likely to report that their partners are supportive when the father attends frequently. Models 2a and 2b also indicate that fathers who share the same religious affiliation with their partner report higher levels of supportive behavior on her part. The religious attendance and affiliation of the mother, however, do not predict father's assessments of partner supportiveness. There is also no interaction between religious attendance and marital status. Models 2a and 2b also indicate that unmarried fathers report lower levels of partner supportiveness, whereas fathers with a high school education report higher levels of partner supportiveness.

We view these reports primarily as indicators of the way in which religion colors perceptions of one's partner's relationship behavior. Here, married and unmarried fathers' attendance seems to make them look more favorably on their partner's behavior. But our results may also indicate that attending fathers actually get more support from their partners (see below). In any case, these results are generally congruent with our prediction that religion matters more for men than women in fostering good relationships (or positive assessments of relationships). It is also interesting to note that religious effects for fathers' reports of supportiveness are generally larger than other sociodemographic factors.

However, Table 2 does not suggest the effect of religion is generally stronger for married Latino parents, compared to unmarried Latino parents. It also does not suggest that religious

affiliation matters, except insofar as fathers report more support when they share the religious tradition of their partner.

Table 3 also indicates that religion is associated with overall assessments of relationship quality. Here, however, religious effects vary strongly by gender. Models 1a and 1b indicate that mothers are happier when the father is a regular churchgoer. However, maternal attendance is not significant, and neither are paternal religious affiliation and the interactions between parental attendance and marital status. Mothers are also happier when the father has a high school education, or has taken college courses, and when she has worked in the previous year.

Likewise, Models 2a and 2b suggest that fathers are happier when the father attends regularly; however, contrary to our expectations, the effect of maternal attendance on overall relationship quality is negative. Fathers who share the same religious affiliation with their partners are also happier. But otherwise, religious affiliation does not influence the global relationship quality of fathers; moreover, parental religious attendance does not interact with marital status. These models also indicate that unmarried fathers are less happy with their relationships, compared to married fathers.

In making sense of the results in Models 2a and 2b of Table 3, we speculate that Latino women who attend church regularly are more likely to make demands on their partners: for example, that they pursue sobriety, or devote more time to the family (Ellingson, Van Haitsma, Laumann, and Tebbe 2004). In turn, these expectations may be linked to lower levels of relationship quality on the part of Latino fathers. Indeed, ancillary analyses of our data indicate that fathers are only unhappy if their partners attend but they do not. In these households, there may be tension around a range of religious, normative, and behavioral issues.



On the other hand, Table 3 indicates that paternal religious attendance is consistently related to global relationship happiness for both fathers and mothers. This is consistent with our prediction that religious attendance matters more for men than for women in influencing family relationships. We suspect that paternal attendance is associated with greater maternal relationship happiness because his attendance may be associated with higher levels of commitment and sexual fidelity on his part, both of which predict women's overall relationship quality (see Amato & Rogers, 1997; Wilcox & Nock, 2005). This, in turn, may be associated with more supportive behavior on her part (which would help explain our results for fathers in Tables 2 and 3). We also speculate that fathers who attend regularly receive normative and social support for their relationships that makes them more likely to view their relationship in a positive light. Finally, it is worth noting that Table 3 provides no support for the notion that the effect of religion varies by marital status.

### **DISCUSSION**

This study began by asking two questions: (1) Does religion influence relationship quality among urban Latino parents?; and, (2) Do the effects of religion on Latino relationships vary by marital status and gender? We find that religion does matter for Latino parents in urban America but that religion does not promote high-quality relationships in a uniform manner. We find that religious attendance of Latino fathers, and the religious homogeneity of Latino couples, is positively linked to three out of our four relationship outcomes. On the other hand, the religious attendance of Latina mothers is negatively related to Latino father's overall relationship quality and unrelated to the other three outcomes.

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Overall, then, our results strongly support our prediction that Latino men's relationships benefit from institutionalization: in this case, religion appears to be turning the hearts and minds of Latino fathers in urban America toward their partners. But we were incorrect to predict that religion has an otherwise generically positive effect on relationships. The religiosity of Latina mothers seems to generate dissatisfaction among Latino fathers in urban America. Future research will have to determine precisely why the effects of religion on relationships among urban Latino parents vary so much by gender.

But we suspect that one reason that religion is so beneficial for fathers is that church attendance may soften negative elements of the *machismo* ethic among Latino fathers in ways that make them more understanding, affectionate, faithful, and responsible family men (for a related argument, see Wilcox, 2004). Latino fathers who are embedded in a religious context that rewards them for family-focused behavior, that furnishes them with family norms, and that provides them with access to other male models of family devotion probably invest themselves more deeply in family life and take a more favorable view of their partner than men who are not regular churchgoers.

On the other hand, it appears that mothers' religiosity does not necessarily promote better relationships among Latinos. Specifically, Latino fathers who are in a relationship with a churchgoing woman but do not attend church themselves are less happy with their relationships. We also find that Latina religious attendance does not predict supportive behaviors on their part. These results are surprising but we think it is possible that religious mothers in relationships with secular fathers demand more from the men in their lives, and in so doing make them less satisfied husbands or partners.

Although attendance and religious homogeneity do influence the relationship quality of Latino parents, this study provides no evidence in support of our hypothesis that specific religious affiliations matter for the relationship quality of Latino parents. Specifically, we found no evidence that Protestant parents are happier than other parents in the sample, despite the fact that Protestant churches appear to focus more on family life among Latinos (Ellingson, Van Haitsma, Laumann, & Tebbe, 2004). We also found no evidence that the effects of religion vary by marital status. Despite the possibility that unmarried parents may get less normative and social support for their relationships than do married parents, our findings suggest that both married and unmarried parents are affected in similar fashion by religious attendance. This may be because nonmarital unions have greater levels of cultural acceptance among many Latinos than they do among non-Latino whites (McLoyd, *et al.*, 2000).

Our results are significant, in part, because a large body of social scientific research indicates that high-quality relationships between parents foster a good environment for the rearing of children (Amato & Booth, 1997; Carlson & McLanahan, 2004). This research, as well as new governmental initiatives to promote better family relationships, has prompted public officials, policy advocates, foundation leaders, and clergy to think about the ways in which religious institutions might be catalysts for better relationships, particularly better marriages, among parents. This interest is especially focused on the state of family life among racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, largely because minority families tend to be more vulnerable than non-Latino white families to poverty, racial and ethnic discrimination, and union disruption.

This study indicates that religious institutions are playing an important role among Latino families, who now make up the largest minority group in the United States. But, as of right now,

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their role is not unambiguously positive. Judging by our findings, churches serving predominantly-Latino populations can and should build on their successes with churchgoing fathers in urban America. But they may need to rethink their approach to family life among mothers. These churches need to figure out ways to promote more harmonious relationships between both parents in Latino families, and strategies that help women in both married and unmarried unions craft better relationships without alienating their partners, especially when that partner is not religious. (Of course, there may be also relationships involving infidelity or domestic abuse where the best course would be to encourage mothers to end the relationship.) Consequently, if policy makers, foundation executives, and clergy seek to use religious congregations or programs to promote *bendito amor* (“blessed love”) among Latino parents, they need to design initiatives that help women work with their partners to craft relationships that make both of them happy, and—as importantly—their children happy.

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Figure 3. Mothers' religious attendance

African American married mothers	63
African American unmarried mothers	40
White married mothers	42
White unmarried mothers	21
Latina married mothers	50
Latina unmarried mothers	33

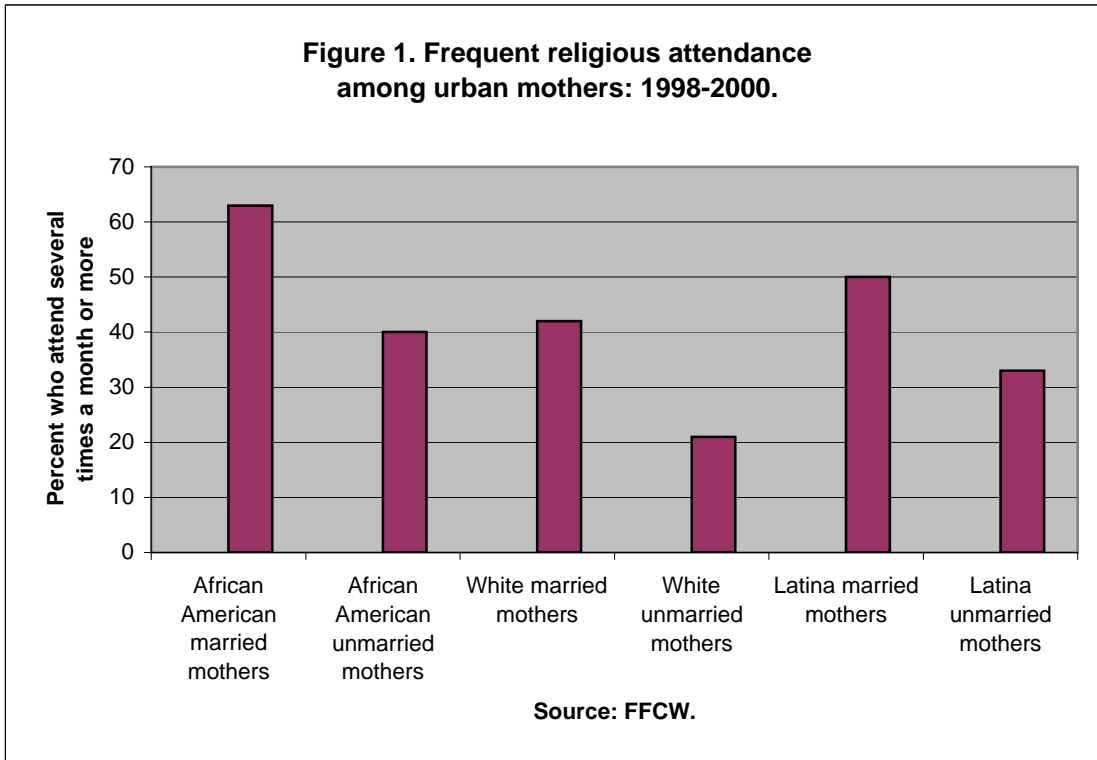
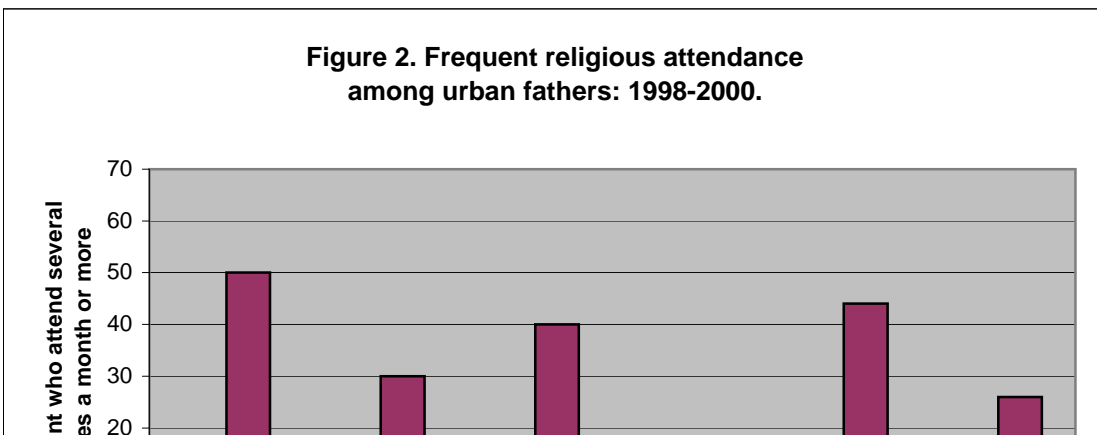
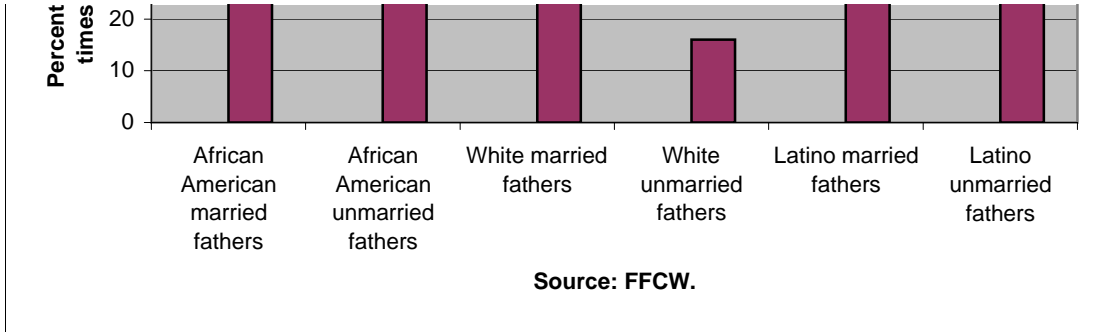


Figure 4. Fathers' religious attendance

African American married fathers	50
African American unmarried fathers	30
White married fathers	40
White unmarried fathers	16
Latino married fathers	44
Latino unmarried fathers	26





**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics**

	<b>Father</b>		<b>Mother</b>	
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
Outcomes				
Partner is supportive	0.00	0.76	0.00	0.74
Overall relationship quality	4.03	0.96	3.94	0.98
Religious attendance				
Attends	0.34		0.40	
Religious tradition				
Secular	0.21		0.06	
Catholic	0.55		0.69	
Protestant	0.18		0.21	
Other	0.06		0.04	
Share religion	0.58		0.58	
Family structure				
Unmarried	0.59		0.59	
Ethnicity/Nativity				
Mexican	0.66		0.65	
Puerto Rican	0.15		0.16	
Other Latino	0.19		0.19	
U.S.-born	0.54		0.56	
Controls				
Not H.S. grad	0.57		0.53	
High school	0.21		0.25	
Some college	0.17		0.17	
College	0.05		0.05	
Worked last year	0.87		0.43	
Age	27.32	5.74	25.11	5.73
<i>N</i>	557		510	

**Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Analysis for Religion and Partner Supportiveness**

	Mother's Reports		Fathers' Reports	
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 2a	Model 2b
<b>Religion</b>				
Mother attends	0.14	0.08	-0.07	-0.05
Mother attends*unmarried		0.11		-0.05
Father attends	0.06	0.16	0.26 **	0.19
Father attends*unmarried		-0.24		0.19
<b>Partner's Religion</b>				
Secular	--	--	--	--
Catholic	0.10	0.11	-0.29	-0.30
Protestant	0.06	0.07	-0.26	-0.27
Other	0.18	0.19	-0.19	-0.20
Share religion	0.08	0.10	0.20 *	0.20 *
<b>Family structure</b>				
Unmarried	-0.04	-0.02	-0.17 *	-0.21 *
<b>Ethnicity/Nativity</b>				
Mexican	--	--	--	--
Puerto Rican	0.06	0.05	0.00	0.01
Other Latino	0.14	0.15	-0.05	-0.06
U.S.-born	-0.08	-0.09	-0.09	-0.09
<b>Controls</b>				
Not H.S. grad	--	--	--	--
High school	0.15	0.15	0.18 *	0.18 *
Some college	0.13	0.13	0.07	0.06
College	0.08	0.08	0.20	0.20
Mom worked last year	0.14 *	0.14 *	-0.01	-0.01
Dad worked last year	0.03	0.02	0.09	0.09
Mother age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Father age	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Intact family at age 15	-0.13	-0.13	0.06	0.06
Constant	-0.21	-0.22	0.06	0.08
<b>R<sup>2</sup></b>	0.05	0.05	0.09	0.09
<b>N</b>	557	557	497	497

\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\* p < .001.

**Table 3. Ordered Logistic Regression Analysis for Religion and Overall Relationship Quality**

	Mother's Reports		Fathers' Reports	
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 2a	Model 2b
<b>Religion</b>				
Mother attends	0.15	0.07	-0.52 *	-0.55 *
Mother attends*unmarried		0.13		0.06
Father attends	0.42 *	0.63 *	0.66 **	0.76 **
Father attends*unmarried		-0.52		-0.24
<b>Partner's Religion</b>				
Secular	--	--	--	--
Catholic	-0.19	-0.18	-0.19	-0.18
Protestant	-0.12	-0.12	-0.22	-0.21
Other	-0.05	-0.03	-0.76	-0.76
Share religion	0.00	0.03	0.50 *	0.51 *
<b>Family structure</b>				
Unmarried	-0.15	-0.03	-0.66 ***	-0.61 *
<b>Ethnicity/Nativity</b>				
Mexican	--	--	--	--
Puerto Rican	-0.09	-0.08	0.27	0.27
Other Latino	0.13	0.12	0.18	0.19
U.S.-born	0.09	0.08	0.22	0.21
<b>Controls</b>				
Not H.S. grad	--	--	--	--
High school	0.40 *	0.40 *	-0.21	-0.21
Some college	0.44 *	0.43	-0.18	-0.18
College	0.53	0.54	0.14	0.14
Mom worked last year	0.40 *	0.41 *	-0.14	-0.14
Dad worked last year	0.21	0.19	-0.07	-0.06
Mother age	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.03
Father age	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Intact family at age 15	0.01	0.02	0.04	0.04
$\chi^2$	33.09	34.99	44.81	45.16
Log Likelihood	-719.27	-718.32	-628.37	-628.20
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.02	0.02	0.05	0.03
N	557	557	510	510

\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01. \*\*\* p < .001.