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To cite this article: Jessica M. Vasquez (2014) Gender across family generations: change in Mexican American masculinities and femininities, *Identities*, 21:5, 532-550, DOI: [10.1080/1070289X.2014.904231](https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2014.904231)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2014.904231>



Published online: 14 Apr 2014.



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Gender across family generations: change in Mexican American masculinities and femininities

Jessica M. Vasquez

(Received 28 October 2012)

How do conceptions of gender – attitudes, expectations, and behaviours – change from generation to generation in Mexican American families? The notion of gender as socially constructed allows for the possibility of change, yet existing studies documenting change provide insight into *why* gender changes occur but do not sufficiently describe *how* this process happens. Based on interviews with three-generation Mexican American families in California, this article finds that reflection on natal family experiences and intergenerational family communication – autobiographical stories, lessons, and advice – are mechanisms that shift masculinity, femininity, and gender relations. Men use their natal family dynamics to rethink male dominance in favour of improved familial and romantic relationships whereas women consider their biographies and cross-generational advice to challenge patriarchy and become more educated and assertive. Families are crucibles of social change: reflection on natal family experiences and communication that crosscuts family generations actualise and initiate paradigm shifts about gender.

Keywords: family; femininity; gender; migration; masculinity; Mexican American; social change

How do conceptions of gender shift across generations in Mexican American families? This article argues that contemplation of natal family experiences and intergenerational family communication – autobiographical stories, lessons, and advice – have formative influence on how conceptions of gender shift across generations in Mexican American families. Families are the first agents of gender socialisation (Hill and Sprague 1999), creating value systems about gender as people share experiences across generations. Mexican American families exhibit a unique constellation of features derived from their...specific context' such as class status, familism, and nonexclusive mothering that shape both gender and ethnic group identity (Segura and Pierce 1993, p. 64). Despite this contextualisation of Mexican Americans, there remains a dearth of knowledge concerning how Mexican American families mediate changes in gender norms. The reasons *why* shifts in beliefs about gender occur include migration, class mobility, and period effects. International migration modifies gender norms as behaviours are adjusted to national contexts (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, Smith 2006, Dreby 2010), socio-economic status changes diversify gender norms (Coltrane *et al.* 2004), and

period effects, especially the repercussions of social movements such as Civil Rights and feminism, also shift conceptions of gender (Hochschild 1989). Yet precisely *how* shifted beliefs operate in and are transmitted across multiple family generations remains unanswered.

This article draws on interviews with three-generation families in California to answer the question of micro-interactions within Mexican-origin families change conceptions of gender. Mexican Americans are an appropriate case for this study because of their noted higher gender traditionalism and familism (Gonzales 2007) relative to non-Hispanic groups. This generalisation concerning Mexican Americans' emphasis on family, while negating notable distinctions (Gutmann 1997), has currency in how Mexican Americans perceive themselves (Vasquez and Wetzel 2009). Selecting a racial/ethnic group reputed to have stricter gender norms and higher levels of family-orientation offers a case through which to observe potentially significant levels of change. Examining multi-generation Mexican-origin families headed by immigrant grandparents allows for the analysis of gender shifts across generations. Gender attitudes and norms are liberalising through time (patriarchy is decreasing and women's empowerment is increasing) because of reflection about family experiences and intergenerational family communication.

Perspectives on shifts in gender norms

Gender theory has not yet provided a convincing model as to how change occurs. The 'doing gender' approach (West and Zimmerman 1987) roots the accomplishment of gender in interaction, something people enact rather than inherently *are*. This approach positions gender difference as 'an ongoing interaction accomplishment' (West and Fenstermaker 1995, p. 8). This interactional approach allows for change, for 'if gender is constructed, then it can be deconstructed' (Deutsch 2007, p. 108). Social interactions contain the potential for resistance, changed interactional patterns a way to weaken traditional gender system (Hollander). This article investigates the underexplored proposition that 'to understand resistance to gender expectations, we must...focus on social relations and interaction' (Hollander 2002, p. 491).

Why and how gender shifts occur are important questions. I review the structural explanations accounting for why gender change arises before moving to how families contribute to this process. International migration, class mobility, social movements, and family relations all influence gender schemas. International migration reshapes gender in the new national context (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, Smith 2006, Dreby 2010), masculinity and femininity ranging from traditional to more modern forms. As women migrants are emboldened by income-generating activities and increased police protection in the US, men who engage in feminised labour re-envision ideas about gender (Smith 2006). After migration, families generally exhibit 'more egalitarian gender relations in household divisions of labor, family decision-making processes, and

women's spatial mobility' (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, p. 98). As economic need requires both men and women to engage in paid labour, men 'by necessity' (Gutmann 1997) take greater responsibility for household chores previously associated with women's work, thus 'degendering' these tasks (Gutmann 1997, Hirsch 2003). In this way, class mobility also drives gender norm shifts.

As migrant families spend time in the US, each subsequent generation becomes increasingly embedded into the national culture. This trend is reflected in gender attitudes; first-generation Latino immigrants were less liberal than later generations (Bejarano 2014). While there may be a period or cohort effect at work here too, US-born counterparts of Mexican immigrants holding similar attitudes, scholarship showing that migrants negotiate tensions around gender in the host country suggests that migrants' experiences are uniquely shaped by migration. In a study of gender and sexuality in a transnational community, Jennifer Hirsch (2003) argues that multiple forces contribute to 'modernity' which advances the companionate marriage ideal over traditional marriages of respect. Migration and class mobility may encourage presentation of more modern masculine identities, for 'men may...perceive social mobility advantages to this change in style' and therefore emulate a 'more gringo style' (Hirsch 2003, p. 152). If 'modernity' pushes forward gender norms, *how* exactly do are these shifts inspired? Furthermore, studies on gender and migration concentrate on the immigrant generation or transnational families, leaving a gap concerning later-generations among families who settle in the US.

Period influences and cohort replacement are additional exogenous features which also stimulate changes in gender ideologies (Ciabattari 2001). Social milieus have changed throughout the period covered by the three generations of interviewees, including the first and second World Wars, the Civil Rights movement, the feminist movement, and court-mandated legislation meant to reduce race and gender inequities. Due to affirmative action policies, Mexican Americans were granted greater access to education and occupations. Women's increasing presence in the paid labour force prompted the re-distribution of household responsibilities, broadening gender schemas (Daly 1993, Coltrane *et al.* 2004). Concerning social movements, women who participated in the Chicano Movement developed a feminist discourse and 'began to question their traditional female roles' (Garcia 1989, p. 219). All of these social forces liberalised gender norms in ways that are actualised in multigenerational families.

Class status also affects gender dynamics within families. Research on Mexican immigrant men makes the case that aggressive machismo (male dominance (Mirandé 1997)) is a reaction to their low class status (Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1997, Peña 1998). Subordinate socio-economically, these lower class men assert male dominance in their gender relations, flouting whatever privilege they can (Peña 1998), displaying hypermasculinity in response to their lack of access to ascendant middle-class masculinity (Pyke 1996, Rios 2011). In the absence of jobs where they can succeed according to working- or middle-class standards, lower class men become hypermasculine to prove themselves (Rios 2011).

Social forces internal to families can also motivate gender shifts. Parents are extremely influential in shaping children's gender ideologies (Cunningham 2001, Carlson and Knoester 2011). Parents' autobiographical stories teach the younger generation by example (Thorne 2000), providing critical intergenerational instruction about racism and racial stereotypes as well as anti-racist tactics and positive cultural images (Feagin and Sikes 1994, Vasquez 2010). While Mexican American mothers are more influential than fathers in ethnic socialisation (Knight *et al.* 2011), fathers are 'points of reference' for their sons who view them as examples to be modified as they construct their own definition of fatherhood (Daly 1993). Men use their own fathers as models or anti-models to determine how they will parent, replicating the strengths and rectifying the limitations of the fathering they received (Snarey 1993, p. 323). New fathers follow positive role models or compensate for negative ones and are increasingly involved beyond economic provision and discipline (Coltrane 1996).

Influence of family relationships on changing gender norms may be especially profound among Latinos since, compared to non-Hispanic whites, Latinos are more involved with kin (Gerstel 2011). Close contact with extended family suggests that kin influences are an important influence on the cultural practices, including gender strategies. The relevance of multigenerational family relationships on gender norms is an underexplored area that this article fills. Existing literature fails to interrogate how families are vehicles of cultural messages. This article contributes to our understanding of processes of social change. Further, it critiques the idea of static cultures that are unmoved by fluctuations in cultural context and family dynamics. Immigrant and ethnic groups, generations, and families are not unitary entities but are riven with internal fractures, heterogeneity (Alba *et al.* 2014), and dynamics (such as intra-familial, inter-generational communication) which foster change.

This article explains *how* gender alterations transpire within families, filling a gap concerning the mechanisms behind shifting gender norms. Micro-level processes rooted in families – reflection on natal family experiences and inter-generational family communication – shift conceptions of gender. Following a discussion of methods is the results which are subdivided into two parts. First is a section on masculinity that demonstrates patriarchy is decreasing as men reflect on negative family of origin experiences and strive to become better fathers and spouses. (By 'patriarchy,' which technically refers to 'rule of fathers,' I mean more broadly 'any system of male superiority and female inferiority' (Rothman 1989, p. 29).) Second is a section on femininity that shows how intergenerational communication favouring the disruption of patriarchy and increasing women's education and assertiveness is pivotal to reformulating femininity.

Method

This article is based on interviews with 67 individuals from 29 three-generation Mexican American families in California, specifically the San Francisco Bay area

and Santa Barbara and Los Angeles counties. According to US Census Bureau estimates, 38.2% of California's population in 2012 was of Hispanic origin, as compared to the national average of 16.9% (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06000.html>). The state is also home to the largest absolute number of Hispanics residents (14.5 million, the majority of whom are Mexican-origin). I recruited potential subjects through Hispanic Chambers of Commerce, Catholic Churches, and high schools. I continued with snowball sampling, asking respondents for referrals.

All 67 interviewees were either first-generation immigrants, second-generation Mexican American (born in the US to at least one Mexican immigrant parent), or third-generation Mexican American (born in the US to at least one US-born Mexican-origin parent). I interviewed two to three generations per family. Eight interviewees were first generation, 30 were second generation, and 29 were third generation. Median ages for each generation were 83, 59, and 28 years, respectively. There was near gender parity in my sample: 34 interviewees were male (2 in first generation, 15 in second generation, and 17 in third generation), 33 were female (6 in first generation, 14 in second generation, and 13 in third generation). All but one openly gay man were heterosexual.

While first-generation immigrants were poor upon arrival to the US, they or their children were upwardly mobile. By the second generation, all families had become middle class. I defined middle class using three factors: if household income met or exceeded \$57,000 (average of all median household incomes for all 11 counties of California in which interviews were conducted), if the respondent possessed a college degree or above, and if the respondent held a managerial or professional occupation. If an individual possessed any of these qualities (and they usually possessed two or three), I considered the person middle class. My household income question was fixed-choice, one option of which was \$45,000–\$65,000. I included the respondents who selected this option in the middle class category. All eight immigrant respondents eventually earned a middle class standing independently or qualified because of financial support from the next generation. In these retrospective interviews, immigrants and second-generation respondents referred to earlier years when they were poor, a socio-economic position distinct from their current financial situation. Third-generation respondents who reported low incomes were all students, had their family's resources at their disposal, and were on track to earn undergraduate or graduate degrees. The focus on middle-class families affects the generalisability of my findings, experiences of gender and family interactions possibly varying according to class status. Because this sample is not nationally representative, I do not attempt to generalise to the larger population, although the conclusions are indicative of important phenomena.

The interviews were semi-structured, conducted primarily in English (two were done in Spanish), at a location chosen by respondents, often their home, work, or a coffee shop. Interviews typically lasted two hours. I first asked respondents to complete a brief biographical data form including demographic

characteristics such as age, sex, marital status, individual and household income, education level, and occupation. I then inquired about their migration, family, and life history. I asked how respondents experienced their race, ethnicity, and gender identity in various settings, attending to institutional (family, school, church, workplace), social (face-to-face interactions), and social-psychological (cognitive and emotional processes) settings (Chodorow 1999). I tape-recorded and transcribed all interviews and wrote field notes after each interview, including recording a physical description. I use pseudonyms to protect interviewees' anonymity, assigned to correspond with interviewees' Hispanic or non-Hispanic first and last names.

I used an inductive, grounded theory approach to analysing the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967, Lofland and Lofland 1995), generating theory through 'simultaneous data-collection and analysis' of data (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001). I utilised ATLAS.ti (ATLAS.ti GmbH, Berlin, Germany), a qualitative data analysis software program that allows researchers to code sections of interview material based on keywords and themes. I, the sole coder, reread all verbatim transcripts, identified themes, and coded key thematic categories. Some categories were anticipated based on the research topic (for example, gender, gender shift, family communication, natal family experiences, parent-child relationship, social change) whereas other categories were 'emergent' and 'bubbled up' (Lareau 2002) from the data (for example, patriarchal fathers, sexism, gendered division of labour, romantic partners). I reread and coded all transcripts more than once in order to ensure that all coding categories were applied to all transcripts. Coding categories were not mutually exclusive, meaning that a passage could pertain to more than one thematic category and be coded as such. Following the aim of grounded theory to uncover social processes and integrate categories into a theoretical framework that specifies 'causes, conditions and consequences' (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001, p. 160), I analysed the relationship of codes to the outcome under study (gender norm shifts). In this way, data analysis parses out the mechanisms that drive gender change.

Results

Changing masculinities: rethinking machismo and romantic relationships

Men who reflect on their upbringing are shifting gendered expectations and behaviours. In particular, second-generation men recalled suffering domineering fathers and overwhelmingly emphasised negative childhood experiences. In a study of new fathers, Kerry Daly (1993, p. 517) found that 'their fathers served only as a negative role model or a reference point for what respondents wanted to change in their own lives.' Instead of modelling behaviours, fathers more often 'compensate for' dissatisfactory or abusive behaviour they experienced with their own fathers (Coltrane 1996, Hirsch 2003). In the present study, in reaction to a strict upbringing where lower-class fathers were punitive, authoritarian, and

relied on verbal directives (as opposed to negotiations) as their primary child-rearing logic (Lareau 2003), many men resolved to be more communicative and tender with their offspring. By contrast, the third generation was generally reared in a more supportive familial and post-feminist environment, reflected in most members' expression of anti-patriarchal sentiments and endeavours.

Consider second-generation Sergio Diaz who is committed to rearing his children with more obvious care than his father used when raising him:

After school...I would go work with my dad [at the auto mechanic shop]. When I was ten years old he told me to go fix [a bad motor]. I said, 'What do I do?' He said, 'Take it apart and fix it.' He didn't tell me how – I was supposed to figure that out.... I guess I do it sometimes with [my son] and I have got to keep reminding myself how I felt. Just lost. That taught [me]: Don't be that way. I saw that as a Mexican...*machismo* thing: Don't spend time with your kids so much as...boss [them] around. [I realized] you don't have to be the boss – it's okay to communicate.

Sergio initiates changes in masculinity based on his own dissatisfying relationship with his father. Even if the changes fall short of his ideals, Sergio revises his childhood understanding of masculinity by being an approachable, communicative parent.

Harry Torres has similarly resolved to be less patriarchal in his parenting style than his father: 'My father came from the old-school; he was a very tough old man. He had been brought up very harshly. He did the same thing to me.... I didn't follow all the harshness.... Why? I didn't like him.' Raised by an emotionally distant and demanding father, Harry revises parent-child and gender dynamics with his own children: 'I try to talk to [my son]. ...Fathers can be fathers more, I think.' While Harry does not identify the source of his father's gendered parenting, scholarship finding that lower-class parents rely on directives (Lareau 2003) and that poor immigrants employ a 'survival mode of parenting' where financial exigencies take priority over emotional closeness (Vasquez 2011), we can surmise that class status influenced parenting tactics. Shifts in fatherhood ideals, as seen with Sergio and Harry, demonstrate that 'masculinity is not an essential or static quality but a historical manifestation, a social construction and cultural creation' (Vigoya 2003, p. 37). These men explicitly reject their fathers' harsh model of masculinity, choosing instead to craft more compassionate behaviours.

Relationships with romantic partners were another chief motivation for men to make deliberate changes in their domineering behaviour. While people inherit conceptions of gender through family socialisation, they are also capable of 'undoing' (Deutsch 2007) or 'redoing' (West and Zimmerman 2009) gender through conscious contemplation and changed interactional patterns. As gender scholar Francine Deutsch (2007, p. 122) notes, 'Men sometimes need and want love and care from women enough to be willing to trade power for it.' Fifty-nine-year-old Rafael Treviño altered his portrayal of masculinity after a failed

marriage. He first mirrored his immigrant father's display of masculinity that conflicted with his wife's expectations:

[From] very young I tried to mimic the role of a man and woman. I mimicked it from my father and...my uncles. ...You were supposed to be the guy that knew it all...the women had their place. I learned real quickly that wasn't true. In that marriage...I tried to mimic that model.... It was nothing but conflict. It even ended up in a divorce.... When I got married the second time...I was already learning... the idea of treating a woman equally to you, the idea of listening.... The second marriage was very different.... I've...treated women equal to a man.

Rafael's experiences shows change: when he engaged in unequal gender relations in a marriage where he 'knew it all' and his wife 'had [her] place,' the marriage ended, and when he treated his second wife equal to himself, he reported a long-lasting (35 years), happy marriage. Romantic relationships compelled Rafael to rethink and rework his gender ideology and practices to create a harmonious marriage. By reflecting on family of origin experiences and taking intimate relationships seriously, second-generation men drive changes in masculinity.

The third generation was reared in the shifting gender culture enacted by second-generation parents. While diverse, the vast majority of third-generation Mexican American men employed rhetoric of equality and was outspoken about the need to equalise traditional gender norms. Seventeen-year-old Manny Medina learned about gender equality from parental instruction and observing intergenerational family dynamics. He declares: 'My parents taught me not to use gender as criteria when judging people.... Females are equal counterparts and in no way should you...think that they are inferior to you and less capable.' Manny's primary frustration with Mexican American culture is domineering masculinity. Referring to both of his parents as 'very liberal and opened-minded,' Manny explains how his father cites his parents' (Manny's grandparents) disrespectful gender relations as a reason for his own behaviour modification:

My dad has always talked to me about learning from your previous generations, learning from your mistakes. He says, 'I learn from my dad. Watching him interact in the family when I was younger and seeing...how he treats us. Thirty years ago... the way he treated mom and...my brothers...was not so great.... [I said,] "When I grow up and...start a family, I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to yell at my kids."'

This narrative highlights the importance of intergenerational observations, changes, and cautionary tales in pushing forward changes in gender relations. Manny notes his father's commitment to change, inspired by his own natal family life and for the benefit of his marital family.

Third-generation Rick Torres, 21-year-old son of Harry, commented outright: 'I don't like *machistas*. I just don't like tyrants, basically. A lot of men push their weight around a lot.' Rick, a recent graduate from the University of California,

Berkeley, refers to the history of colonisation which has produced the hypermasculinity associated with machismo that is a reaction to subjugated class and racial status. (Pyke 1996, Rios 2011):

I think it passed down since 1521 [when Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés conquered the Aztec emperor Moctezuma II].... So all these insecurities...get passed down: the poverty...the hegemony, the alcoholism.... We've just got to break that chain. It's like Gandhi says: "You must be the change you wish to see in this world."

Rather than pinpoint exact ancestors, Rick sees his entire ethnic group's cultural dysfunctions as a legacy of colonialism.

Third-generation Mexican Americans with parents attentive to gender and racial inequalities received advice to avoid 'gender specific racisms' (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993, p. 32). Forty-one-year-old, third-generation Tyler Mendoza recalls his parents cautioning him against academic underachievement and teenage pregnancy: 'My parents always pushed school, school, school, school.... I had to try harder and prove that I wasn't one of those dumb lazy Mexicans or... that [I was] going to drop out and get somebody pregnant.' Intergenerational family counsel challenges stereotypes of Mexican American masculinity. Heeding his parents' advice, Tyler got an education and is now a college counsellor who calls his work 'feminist':

I know that there is a double standard and that a man gets more privilege than a woman.... It's up to me to be as feminist as I can to promote women when they qualify. ...If I'm helping women obtain their education, career, self-esteem, and self-empowerment, I can be influencing future generations of children. That is my hope.

Pushed by his parents to disrupt negative expectations, Tyler's intergenerational counsel is now geared toward younger cohorts of female students he professionally advises, actions that can have repercussions for 'future generations.'

The move toward a gender-equal society requires institutional and interpersonal changes that are supported not solely by women and girls but also men and boys (Connell 2005, p. 1802). Support for gender equality increased across the three generations of men interviewed. Some third-generation Mexican American men called themselves 'feminist,' one man calling himself a 'Chicana,' using the female form of the word as a gender-bending tactic to be in greater solidarity with Chicana feminism. Latino feminist men redefine masculinity in a way that emphasises emotional connection with others and openness to meaningful relationships (Hurtado and Sinha 2008), in particular relationships with children, wives, and girlfriends.

Well-versed in post-second wave feminism, nearly all third-generation young men were eloquent about the ideal of gender equality. Yet, there was some push-back to gender equality, illustrating that multiple narratives and constructions of gender coexist (Fouron and Schiller 2001, Hollander 2002)

and revealing variation within the group. Twenty-eight-year-old Daniel Zagada is more comfortable with conventional gender expressions: 'I'm completely modern: I'm like fifty-fifty. I just think in certain things I wanted a little extra say. So maybe fifty-one, fifty-two percent in terms of control.' This preference for dominance produced 'conflict' with previous girlfriends and sparked modification to his ideas about gender: 'I've made changes to myself because...I shouldn't have any extra say because I am a man.... It's come to the forefront because of conflicts that I've had with some girls in...past relationships.' Men may heed women's desire for revised gender relations if they wish to preserve the romance. In this way, women have an influential role in changing masculinity, some of whom choose to discontinue romantic relationships with men who oppress them.

Women are integral to the interactive teaching-and-learning process that reshapes masculinity and gender relations through parenting as well. Third-generation Mexican American mothers directly shift masculinity through parenting their sons. Twenty-eight-year-old Araceli Treviño, who divorced an abusive husband, is raising emotionally sensitive sons. Araceli explains her anti-macho parenting style: 'I don't want [my kids] to have the whole macho mentality.... I get frowned upon [by]...Mexican guys that I hang out with: "He's going to be a sissy or he's going to be gay...." I want them to know that it's okay to own up to their feelings; it's okay to cry and...be sad.' Araceli's parents had different rules for boys and girls: her brothers could attend parties but she was allowed to cry. She deliberately encourages sensitive masculinity in her young sons, equalising the 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 2003) for boys and girls through her androgynous childrearing techniques.

These multigenerational families reveal that both men and women contribute to changes in masculinity. By reflecting on their own relationships with domineering fathers, Mexican American men position themselves in contrast to the 'negative ideal of machismo' (Hirsch 2003, p. 128) and develop relationships with their children that are more caring. Because they value their heterosexual romantic relationships, they enact more equal partnership dynamics in order to preserve the relationship. Women play an important role in changing masculinity as they demand more modern, less patriarchal forms of interaction from romantic partners as well as engage childrearing practices that foster emotionality and an ideology of equality in their sons. Intergenerational contemplation and interaction advance shifts in masculinity.

Changing femininities: challenging patriarchy and promoting independence

Intergenerational family communication – grandparents or parents sharing their experience to advise the younger generation(s) – that challenges men's authority and promotes women's education and assertiveness helps change femininity over generations. Not just any autobiographical stories but those that subvert patriarchy and advance women's independence are instrumental in shifting femininity

norms. Grandmothers and mothers who resisted gender oppression and promote independence expand notions of femininity.

All three generations of women in Vargas family contested patriarchy. Ramona Vargas, the 77-year-old matriarch, immigrated to the US following her husband, Hector, who was recruited in 1944 by the Bracero Program, a federal guest worker programme. Ramona lived her marital life under her authoritarian husband's supervision. She was clear about male privilege stating firmly, 'I wish I would be a man instead of a woman. (Laughs) ...I couldn't do things on my own; I couldn't make my own decisions....' Ramona existed within a patriarchal household wherein the woman is subordinate and is 'always taking his [husband's] pulse to see how [she] should feel or act' (Contratto 1987, p. 117).

Over the span of three generations, American attitudes on gender equality became increasingly liberal (Bolzendahl and Myers 2004). As women's empowerment became more normative and, not coincidentally, after the death of her husband, Ramona espoused an ideology of self-fulfilment and self-determination that she herself did not live out. The two younger generations were not only reared in more liberal social milieus but witnessed their (grand)mother's oppression and were recipients of her didactic autobiographical stories. As a result, Ramona's 48-year-old daughter Elena and 31-year-old granddaughter Erica quickly detect gender inequality. In the Vargas family, protests against patriarchy became more strident as generations progressed: women moved from silent unhappiness to divorce (see also Hirsch 2003).

Ramona counselled her granddaughter, Erica, in independence. As told by Erica, Ramona 'constantly says, "Don't be with a man.... Well, don't just pick any guy." ...She wanted better for her kids or grandkids.' Ramona's advice to her female offspring concerning independence and mate selectivity is a way for her to compensate for the constraints she endured. Erica tells me that her grandmother was married by age fourteen and that her grandfather 'was an alcoholic, a womanizer.... He pulled guns on her...threaten[ed] to kill her...threw kids out of the car....' Erica's familiarity with her grandmother's abusive relationship taught her to end troubled relationships. When Ramona laments her hardships, Erica reassures her that she learned from her experience, saying, 'Grandma, I'm never gonna be like that.' Intergenerational family narratives encourage alteration of patriarchal family systems, especially in the context of financial stability and legal protections. Each earning \$40,000–\$60,000, Elena and Erica can select partners without an economic imperative directing their choice. Since paid labour, violence, and the state are all implicated in patriarchy (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993, p. 108), in the US context where the police force is responsive to domestic violence (Hirsch 2003, Smith 2006), these women had legal protections to help them resist oppression.

Even if intergenerational communication does not directly encourage the dismantling of patriarchy, observation of gender oppression can inspire change. Twenty-one-year-old Marisol Fuentes reflects on her parents' troubled relationship as she contemplates the masculinity she desires in a husband, focusing on

strategic mate selection as a way to circumvent gender inequality (see also Vasquez [Forthcoming](#)): ‘The whole patriarchal issue...worshipping the man... I’m totally not going to do that. My dad can be an asshole.... [My mom] just takes it and...cries.... I don’t want to be afraid of my husband and I don’t want to cry all the time.’

Marisol uses her parents’ relationship as a model to revise, planning to engineer change through careful mate selection and demanding fair treatment.

Understanding men’s authority and women’s lack of power to be inextricably bound, US-born Mexican American women destabilise patriarchy in order to broaden understandings of femininity. Educational achievement helps second-generation Tamara Montes-Rosenberg and her daughter Jillian Rosenberg decouple femininity from subservience. Twenty-year-old Jillian describes how norms of femininity have changed in her family:

[My family is] very, very traditional.... The women stay around and cook and have no jobs and the men go out and come back and kick their feet up and demand beer and food. No one goes to college and you should be married and having kids at my age [authoritative tone]. It’s really, really, really traditional. My mom has always been the black sheep because she went to college.... She actually had goals and did something.

In contrast to the extended family’s traditionalism, nuclear mother–daughter communication resists narrow gender expectations. Tamara remarks that her father discouraged her from college: ‘Going to college wasn’t...respected.’ Social class shapes family organisation and ‘may limit...[non-affluent] children’s educational or career options’ (Sarkisian *et al.* 2007, p. 51); hence, Tamara’s father’s anti-college response was a product of the family’s early years as working-class. Tamara, however, emboldened by the activism of the 1960s became her natal family’s ‘black sheep’ as she became an educated, professional woman and ruptured their narrow definitions of femininity.

Since ‘parenting is political’ (Lester Murad 2005, p. 500), natal family experience can inspire corrective measures. Tamara, now middle class, is explicitly supportive of her children’s education, in contradistinction to her father’s behaviour. Historical period also influenced Tamara’s gender ideals: ‘The ‘60s, the women’s movement, and the hippies, was part of what I was raised with.’ Combining familial and social influences, Tamara models encouragement and heightens her children’s educational aspirations: ‘I’ve always been involved with school programs or PTAs....’ Aware of her mother’s gendered biography, Jillian learned that she had more options than her extended family exhibited and chose a progressive ideal, attending an Ivy League university at the time.

Similarly, Yolanda Segura, a second-generation Mexican American in her mid-40s, converted her father’s gendered discouragement of her education into gendered encouragement for her three daughters’ schooling. Yolanda’s father scorned her desire to go to college: ‘When I started to go to college right after

high school, my dad ridiculed it, “What do you need that for? ... You don’t need that.” Her education was ‘denied’ by migrant parents who saw more value in income-generating jobs than schooling (Zhou *et al.* 2008). While she did not complete her college degree, this dissatisfying experience informed her high aspirations for her daughters. Active in the Parent–Teacher Association and extra-curricular events at her children’s schools, Yolanda is committed to her children’s scholastic goals: ‘I didn’t want [my kids] to feel that way [ridiculed, unsupported]. ... From day one I always told them “when you finish college’ as opposed to ‘when you finish high school.’” Upon reflection of their unsupportive parents, these second-generation women conscientiously change their interactions with their own daughters, elevating their vision of what a young woman can achieve. Attending a well-renown private liberal arts college, Yolanda’s daughter, Davina, summed up her relationship with her mother: ‘You knew that there was someone that supported who you were.’ While it is difficult to pinpoint the precise origin of these gender shifts – international migration, the feminist movement, and increased educational and occupation opportunities all constitute the broad framework – these changes pushed forward because of intergenerational family interaction geared to remedy the prior generation’s shortcomings.

There are exceptions to the need to rectify intra-family gender oppression, as illustrated by 30-year-old third-generation Cristina Talavera who upholds her grandparents as positive examples for her femininity. She admires her grandmother who did not submit to her grandfather in his stern years: ‘My grandmother – I love her strength. ... I love how she just didn’t take [my grandfather’s] word...and...tolerate [him]...when he would get out of line! [Laughs] ... I didn’t want to be the submissive, demure woman out in the world that would just tolerate...abuse.’ Cristina receives a behavioural model of self-assuredness from her grandmother and directly links her grandmother’s intolerance for insolence to her *own* desire not to be ‘the submissive, demure woman.’ Thus, cross-generational interaction sets up not only anti-models but also affirmative models.

Interaction with her grandfather, whose masculinity has softened since his rambunctious Navy years, is also instructive for Cristina. Their grandfather–granddaughter relationship sets an expectation for caring interaction that cripples patriarchy and encourages her self-worth. Cristina is the only third-generation respondent to speak fondly of her grandfather’s tempered masculinity, saying:

He has no problem demonstrating his pride in our family and...for the *macho Mexicano*, that’s a hard thing to do. He is always telling me, ‘I’m so proud of you.’ ...It helps me to look for that right type of guy when I’m...dating.... I expect a certain level of respect or interaction.... I love [that] about my grandfather.

Cristina juxtaposes the ‘negative ideal of machismo’ (Hirsch 2003) with caring masculinity which has shaped her expectations for how she should be treated. She extends this interactional expectation to dating, upholding her grandfather as a ‘really good male role model’ and crediting him with establishing a requirement

of respectful interaction. Since gender is performed in interaction and interaction is a space in which gender may change (West and Zimmerman 1987, Hollander 2002, Deutsch 2007), cross-generational family relationships can revise oppressive interactional patterns and perpetuate respectful ones.

Cross-generational family interactions that aim to rectify gender imbalance experienced in one's own natal family supports the development of progressive forms of femininity. Communication of family history and counsel that encourages younger female kin's educational achievement, assertiveness, and expectations for kind treatment help produce shifts in conceptions of gender. Changing femininities beget more change as women select heterosexual partners with the intent to equalise gender power imbalances. By using intergenerational family communication as a learning tool, women challenge patriarchy in personal and public domains: they resist restrictive role expectations, gain educational degrees and independent incomes, foster assertiveness, and change behavioural expectations. By examining family interactions and revising troublesome patterns, Mexican American women are liberalising definitions of femininity over generations.

Discussion

This article's contribution is twofold: to theorise the mechanisms by which gender change happens within families and to analyse shifting visions of masculinity and femininity for two generations beyond migration. Migration prompts revision of gender strategies and relations, yet do these changes carry forward to successive generations of a family? If we consider migration a 'shock' to a family's gender system, there are 'ripple effects' that extend to the third generation. While migration scholars argue that adapting to a new national context (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994, Smith 2006) and 'modernity' (Hirsch 2003) pushes gender norm modification, I posit that changes evoked by international migration keep or gain momentum in multigenerational families if members see benefits to this revision. While men and women alike criticised authoritarian masculinity, they benefit from rebalancing gender relations differently: men achieve close emotional connections with their spouses and children whereas women gain public sphere successes and more rewarding romantic relationships. These multigenerational changes in gender norms work in conjunction with, or even express, fluctuations in the wider socio-political environment, immigrant groups not wedded to a primordial culture but susceptible to change. While there are reasons external to families that explain *why* shifts in gender norms occur, this article highlights *process*, that is, how gender shifts are actualised and transmitted across family generations.

Family is central to gender changes: Reflections on natal family life and communication that crosscuts generations shift gender attitudes, expectations, and behaviours. Since gender is socially constructed, it is inherently malleable. Yet studies documenting why paradigm shifts in gender relations occur

insufficiently describe *how* this process of social change happens. This study fills that gap by showing that reflection on family life and intergenerational family communication – autobiographical stories, lessons, and advice – influence how people conceive of gender and perform gender relations. Families help shape value systems and people make choices about how to ‘do’ gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) based in part on lessons learned across family generations.

Societal-level changes (such as social movements, period influences, and cohort replacement) and life course stages or circumstances (such as migration, childrearing, or class mobility) all help drive gender norm shifts. Yet these macro forces need to be ‘translated’ to show that ‘everything macro is composed out of micro [and] conversely, anything micro is part of the composition of macro’ (Collins 1988, p. 244). Pursuing the micro–macro connection, this article has asked: How do interactions within multigenerational families shift gender norms? Over the three family generations interviewed, conceptions of masculinity and femininity broadened, patriarchal notions of masculinity loosened, and ideas about femininity diversified. Two mechanisms principally drive gender shifts over family generations. First, experiences within natal families, principally negative experiences that people wish to change in their own and their children’s lives, diversify conceptions of gender. Second, intergenerational family communication delivered from older to younger family members advances gender shifts. Lessons learned within families propel gender shifts across generations.

Mexican Americans use negative natal family experiences as fodder with which to revise gender norms. Most immigrant fathers parented their children with restrictive visions of gender, lacking overt displays of love for their sons and circumscribing the educational endeavours of their daughters. In response, men avoided reproducing the patriarchal anti-models of their own fathers by relaxing control and increasing sensitivity. Women reformulate masculinity as well, signalling their intolerance for subjugation by retreating from oppressive relationships with men and countermanding male privilege by teaching their sons gender equality. Women, like men, use family histories as a learning tool to refashion femininity. Mexican American women broaden conceptions of femininity by sharing their biographies and offering esteem- and opportunity-building advice to younger female kin. With patriarchy as a focal point, US-born Mexican Americans expand notions of masculinity and femininity and devise more equitable gender relations and caring parent-child dynamics.

Intergenerational communication within families is crucial to shifting gender attitudes, expectations, and behaviours. Upon hearing autobiographical stories from the elder generation(s), children and grandchildren enact lessons learned. Younger generations are mindful of their older family members’ experiences as they navigate their lives. Taking a multigenerational view, it is clear that intra-familial messages about gender, plus a liberalised social milieu and socio-economic ascension have helped diversify masculinity and femininity; gender egalitarianism is a stated objective of over one-third of the second generation and two-thirds of the third generation. By observing how lessons rebound within

families to enact gender shifts, we can see how families are the ‘nursery of human nature’ (Cooley 1998, p. 180).

Mexican American families in California profiled here confront a specific set of circumstances, including immigration, racialisation, and native-immigrant relations which may restrict applicability to other groups. The extent to which these findings are more universal than particular needs to be assessed in future investigations. While this article does not compare Mexican immigrants with US-born Mexican Americans from similar birth cohorts, or other racial/ethnic groups or class statuses, comparisons would be a fruitful avenue for future research. Teasing out to what extent migration, Mexican national origin, and intergenerational upward mobility are distinctive would help determine the universality or specificity of these findings. Another question is whether the relevance of family differs by generation, the influence of family greater in one generation than another. These remaining queries are intriguing questions for future research.

Definitions of Mexican American masculinity and femininity have been liberalising with successive generations. Reflecting on their own natal family experiences and being recipients of older family members’ advice, Mexican American men and women are modifying gender in their own lives. Over the past century, the functions of families have changed, including increased ‘extension of family bonds, of affection and affirmation, of help and support, across several generations’ (Bengtson 2001, p. 14). One consequence of this turn to multigenerational families is that experiences had, lessons learned, and autobiographical stories exchanged within families have become the vehicles through which notions of gender are rebuilt.

Acknowledgements

For comments and suggestions I thank Christopher Wetzel, Natalia Sarkisian, Jocelyn Hollander, and the editors and anonymous reviewers of *Identities*. This project was funded by the University of California, Berkeley, University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States (UC MEXUS), University of Kansas, Ford Foundation, and Russell Sage Foundation. Audiences at the University of Kansas and annual meetings of the American Sociological Association and the Pacific Sociological Association provided useful feedback.

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