

“Living Together Without Being Married”: Perceptions of Female Adolescents in the Mexico-United States Border Region

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INTRODUCTION

Falling in love, getting married, having children and starting a family are aspirations many young women from various cultures around the world share, including female adolescents of Mexican origin living on either side of the Mexico-United States border region. Building a family remains one of the top values in the familistic Mexican culture (Griswold del Castillo, 1984, Ribeiro, 2009). Young people, especially women, expect to get married and have children, preferably more than one, and, as the Mexican saying goes, “begin a family as God wills.” This has been the social mandate transmitted from generation to generation, although some important changes in social expectations have taken place. Getting married and having children continues to occupy a prominent place in Mexican values. However, it now competes for the younger generation’s attention and time with other opportunities. Younger Mexican women now expect to study and prepare for gainful employment as men do in an increasingly globalized economy that poses greater conditions of competition for both genders. Social change has also made some conjugal arrangements such as “living together without being married” more attractive to the younger generations of Mexicans transitioning to adulthood and family formation.

Social inequality, however, limits options that young Mexican and Mexican-American women have to meet their marriage and career goals according to their particular social conditions and the corresponding array of opportunities to which they might have access. Equally as important for future outcomes are the perceptions that the young women have of their available life choices or their ability to choose or prioritize certain choices to build their own life trajectories in education, work and family. This suggests analyzing the frame of reference that under which young women perceive they operate under to understand their potential family life choices.

Young women both consciously and unconsciously consider individual, institutional, social context, cultural, and gender factors when taking life choices. However, some factors correspond closer to the overall social structure and demographic conditions rather than to the individual. The demographic transition theory specifies that private matters such as establishing a conjugal union, childbearing and family building are strongly influenced by the developmental level of society (Lesthaeghe, 1998). This study seeks to identify the

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social factors affecting how female adolescents perceive the advantages and disadvantages of "living together without being married" combined with how the girls view education and work during their transition to adulthood and family formation. Concretely, we analyze the case of working class Mexican-origin female students from public high schools living on both sides of the Mexico-United States border. Comparative analysis of countries with different developmental levels such as Mexico and the United States provides the opportunity to examine important societal structure factors influencing perceptions young women have about this important personal matter. Accordingly, the study conducts qualitative analysis using information obtained from 15 focus groups and 120 individual interviews with female students who identified themselves as Mexican-origin. The students came from five different public high schools: two high schools located in Tijuana, Mexico and from one high school each in the San Diego County, California cities of San Ysidro, National City and Chula Vista, California. All high schools are located in working class neighborhoods.

The overall hypothesis follows the demographic transition theory in that multiple social factors will shape the young women's perceptions about the idea of "living together without being married." Yet important differences exist between the two groups of Mexican origin adolescents that reside on the opposite sides of the international border—in spite of their shared Mexican family culture—that result from the unique societal structural factors of each country.

A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE IN ANALYSING CONSENSUAL UNION AND COHABITATION

The demographic transition theory provides an overall social explanation for population growth resulting from the combination of two main demographic components: the decline of mortality rates and high and moderately high fertility rates across societies. Each society experiences its demographic transitions according to its developmental level so that the higher the level the earlier the transition (Lesthaeghe, 1995). From this perspective the first, or initial, demographic transition is rooted in social behavior where sexuality, marriage and reproduction are closely connected. This behavior follows the values and rules set by the social institutions. Advanced social and demographic change in postindustrial societies, however, gradually weakens the link between sex, marriage and reproduction while creating the structural conditions of the so-called second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe, 1995). In the second demographic transition, social and demographic behaviors increasingly disassociate from the values and rules set by social institutions. Instead, the individual's self-interest and personal fulfillment become more important to explain sexuality, reproduction and the formation of non-marital conjugal arrangements and life span stages among young generations (Lesthaeghe, 1998). "Living together without being married" as cohabitation among the young in post-industrial countries and a new type of consensual union in less developed countries are two examples of the social behavior changes under the second demographic transition theory.

The number of non-marital conjugal arrangements has increased in countries with very different development levels in Latin America, Europe and North America (Heuveline & Timberlake, 2004; Rodriguez, 2004). The social nature and the factors explaining this phenomenon are not necessarily the same in different countries. In Latin America *uniones*

libres, or consensual unions, form part of a long-standing traditional cultural practice that evolved over time (Rodriguez, 2004). In Western Europe and North America, however, "living together without being married" represents a more recent and distinct phenomena of cohabitation. It results from the secularization of both the transition into adulthood and the family formation process, corresponding to the so-called second demographic transition in Western post-industrial nations (Lesthaeghe, 1995).¹

Consensual union and cohabitation are two types of conjugal arrangements that have broad impacts on the family formation process and transition to adulthood. Comparative analysis of these two arrangements is particularly important to understand the social meaning attached to "living together without being married" arrangements among the younger generation of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans and its impact on the traditional Mexican family culture.

Family formation in Mexico traditionally occurs through four types of conjugal arrangements: marriage by the church, *unión libre* or consensual union, marriage by the church combined with civil marriage, or civil marriage only (Quilodran, 2001). The combination of marriage by the church with civil marriage became the predominant and cultural ideal by the mid-twentieth century. Uncombined civil marriage is the fastest growing type of marriage while marriage only by the church has become a minority, especially in urban areas of the country (Ojeda, 2007). Following Mexican tradition, consensual union continues to be the "initiation" for families and a type of informal marriage for many couples, particularly among the poorest sectors (Ojeda, 1988; Pebley and Goldman, 1986). In the last two decades, however, an increasing proportion of young couples from many different socioeconomic groups chose consensual union as a marriage alternative. Several factors explain this situation, including the rise in poverty levels, the dearth of any massive campaigns promoting civil marriage by the Mexican government and cultural changes among younger couples (Solis, 2005). Nevertheless, it remains unclear if the social meaning attached to the recent increase in the formation of consensual unions equates to the traditional social meaning of consensual unions in Mexico. If the social meaning of consensual unions in Mexico becomes similar to European-style cohabitation, it may point toward a broader social change in Mexico's long-standing Mexican family culture.²

Secularism and the deinstitutionalization of marriage are two characteristics of the second demographic transition's impact on family formation in Western Europe as well to a lesser extent in North America (Lesthaeghe, 1995). Given growing numbers of couples choosing cohabitation in Western Europe and in the United States, Heuveline, and Timberlake (2004) identify the prevalence of distinct types of cohabitation. They propose five types: marginal cohabitation, premarital cohabitation, cohabitation as a phase of the marital process,

¹ In this study, we used the following definitions: "Cohabitation" is the modern practice of couples who decide to live together without being married. This is as part of a modern life-style, a rite of passage into adulthood, an alternative to marriage, as a testing phase before marriage. This is also part of the interpersonal relationships among young adults who are motivated by diverse factors under an individual autonomy logic following the precepts of the referred "second demographic transition" (Lesthaeghe, 1995). In comparison, "consensual union" is the traditional practice of Mexican marriage dating from the colonial era and even tied to pre-Hispanic practices of family formation (Ojeda, 1988).

² According to Raley, Durden, and Wildsmith (2004) "The Mexican culture is familistic emphasizing values which give overriding importance to the family and the needs of the collective as opposed to individual and personal needs (Bean, Curtis, & Marcum, 1998) (p. 873)."

cohabitation as an alternative to marriage, and cohabitation as an alternative to being single. These distinct types occur at a greater or lesser frequency between countries and within sectors of each of them, giving distinct social meanings to the reasons for cohabitation. Heuveline and Timberlake propose that cohabitation in the United States presents a complex profile but it tends to predominate both as an alternative to being single and as an alternative to marriage. By the 1990s, pre-marital cohabitation became a frequent experience for American couples (Bumpass and Lu, 2000). Moreover, Manning, Longmore, and Giordano (2007) indicate that cohabitation has become part of the marriage model among younger generations of Americans who expect to cohabit before marriage. This is a significant change. Only American couples from very poor or from ethnic minority communities tended to cohabit prior to the 1960s. Puerto Ricans, for example, practiced "informal marriage" (Cherlin, 2005) while Mexican-Americans use the Mexican tradition of a consensual union as a way to initiate family formation (Griswold del Castillo, 1984).

Mexico's family-based culture strongly explains why marriage and union formation among Mexican Americans occurs at early ages (Raley, Durden and Wildsmith, 2004). However, this cultural characteristic does little to explain why an increasing number of young couples of Mexican-origin choose the option of "living together without being married" to form families. Using the same social and cultural terms as before cannot explain the complex phenomenon of cohabitation behavior among the U.S. Mexican-origin population now. Cultural diffusion across ethnic groups and new social and demographic conditions of contemporary American society requires a fresh perspective to analyze family formation among the new generations of Mexican immigrants and Mexican-Americans born in the United States (Oropesa, and Landale, 2004). Just like other ethnic groups in the United States, younger Hispanics exhibit new patterns and attitudes in couples' relationships and in family formation where they not only tolerate but also expect cohabitation, as shown in Manning et al. (2007).

The twin border communities of Tijuana, Mexico and metropolitan San Diego, California allow comparison of the social meanings of consensual union and cohabitation among the Mexican-origin youth living along the international border. Analysis begins by examining the perceptions of two female youth groups living and studying on opposite sides of the border who also very importantly share similar cultural family roots. Border studies indicate that the Mexican-origin populations on opposite sides of the international border are culturally close but interact in society-wide asymmetrical conditions that influence their social behavior (Ojeda, and Cosio, 2010). The groups co-exist between two different socio-demographic regimes. The first regime located south of the border has characteristics appropriate to a developing society in the advanced stages of the initial demographic transition. The regime north of the border corresponds to a phase typical to the second demographic transition of post-industrial societies. Consequently, this model would dictate that youth in Mexico should continue the practice of the traditional Mexican consensual union while U.S.-based Mexican-American youth should exhibit social patterns that align with cohabitation behavior of post-industrial societies. However, intense cross-border interaction existing between the two groups causes them to exhibit bicultural diffusion. It also shapes their respective perceptions about "living together without being married" as they transition to adulthood as well as their expectations for family formation.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses information obtained from 15 focus groups and 120 individual interviews conducted with female students from five different high schools located in working class neighborhoods in border communities in Mexico and the United States during the academic year of 2005-2006.³ Six focus groups took place at the two largest high schools in Tijuana, Mexico. Nine focus groups took place in San Ysidro, National City, and Chula Vista in the San Diego County area⁴. Each focus group consisted of eight girls who identified themselves as Mexicans or Latinas of Mexican origin. They volunteered to participate in the study after responding to a school-wide open invitation to all Latino female students in each participating high school. The focus groups were divided into age-specific groups: 1) 15 to 16 year olds, or freshmen; 2) 16 to 17 year olds, or sophomores and juniors; and 3) 17 to 18 year olds, or high school seniors. All participants provided their personal and their parental authorization before participating in the focus groups or undergoing recorded interviews. The principal of each participating Mexican or United States high school assigned a school classroom in which to conduct the focus groups and interviews. The focus groups were bilingual in English and Spanish. Participants were encouraged to speak the language in which they felt most comfortable. All focus groups covered the same topics of inquiries: hopes for higher education and work, personal expectations regarding sex, love, starting a family and marriage.

The study also used information obtained from an open-ended questionnaire administered privately to each student before beginning the focus group activities. The study analyzes the responses from all students to three open questions:

- 1) I come to school because...
- 2) When I grow up my dearest wish would be...and;
- 3) getting married and having children mean to me ...

Analysis of the answers allowed the study to base line the adolescent's individual positions on these subjects and later comparison with the discussions within the focus groups. We identified some key aspects to better understand how young women view "living together without being married" as they grow to adulthood and family formation as well educational and career goals. The study used Atlas-T software to analyze focus group information and Microsoft Excel software to analyze open-ended questionnaire topics.

The study used a combination of qualitative and quantitative criteria to analyze the focus group information. A ranking system measured the level of importance perceived by the adolescents about advantages and disadvantages of "living together without being married." Five levels of importance are used according to the number of times the adolescent's collective cited each reason: super important (18 and more times), very important (11-17 times), important (7-10), relevant (3-6 times), and mentioned (1-2 times).

³ The selection of high schools was based on both the neighborhood's class and proximity to the international border. The principal investigator (author) conducted the pilot study and all focus groups.

⁴ Time and financial limitations impeded the inclusion of a third Tijuana high school in the study.

RESEARCH FINDINGS**Ideals and Life Expectations of Mexican and Latino Female Adolescents**

Overall analysis of the individual answers the two groups of adolescents provided indicates interesting similarities and differences regarding their ideals and life expectations. The majority of girls plan to pursue higher education and attain economic independence despite the particular economic and other obstacles they face. Falling in love and starting a family also constitute strong ideals among the Mexican-origin adolescents on both sides of the border of Mexico and the United States. The girls say that making the correct choice in life can reconcile those goals and their expectations for the future.

Female adolescents from Tijuana generally indicate a strong desire to study a profession and become financially self-sufficient, they say, to "become someone in life." They strongly want to better themselves to provide financial assistance to their family, especially for their parents and their younger siblings, and as they say, "to bring up our kids" when in the future. They hope to be happy and start a family as future mothers. They prefer to do this through marriage but would still want to start families "even if [they're] not married." In addition, they declare repeatedly their wish to "have a stable family," a "great family," without "having to rely economically on a man." High school students, however, often manifest a strong general desire to continue their studies for a professional or vocational career as well to achieve financial independence. They anticipate this can also end up meeting their personal goal to help their parents and younger siblings. In that way, the girls can pursue their personal goals while fulfilling the seemingly contradictory strong sense of duty toward family that characterizes Mexican culture.

Mexican-Latina adolescents in San Diego respond to the same questions by broadly signaling a strong desire to finish high school and later attend the university or a community college. They exhibit a strong drive to improve themselves to make their parents very proud. They are determined to study more than did their parents, strongly desire to have financial success to avoid the financial and work problems their parents suffered. They also hope to form a family when they are older. Although they feel starting a family is very important and plan to do so, they also believe marriage and having children should be delayed until they have gained adequate financial stability and emotional maturity. Moreover, they worry about how to avoid premature pregnancies that might jeopardize their plans to finish high school or go to college. Motherhood and forming a family are important but reaching financial success is equally important.

American Latina adolescents did not explicitly state a wish to maintain economic independence from men, including their future husbands, when they are older in the way that adolescents from Tijuana did. Although U.S. Latinas did not have such a goal, however, they premise their vision of their future on the fact they would have such independence. The general notion of women's independence, and particularly financial independence, is something these young women take for granted in their future. The possibility that it would be otherwise makes no sense.

The goals and life expectations that members of both groups of adolescents expressed in their private interviews, however, appear more complex when compared to the focus group discussions on how to make such ideals come true. This is particularly so regarding how girls view the choices between marriage or "living together without being married" to form an ideal stable family and the advantages or disadvantages of those various unions, especially as it affects the female partner. The discussions began by probing for the general desire to start a family through marriage while refining how the girls understood the definition of "living together without being married." They also expanded what they saw as the "advantages" and "disadvantages" that type of conjugal arrangement could bring to accomplish their aspirations.

"Living Together Without Being Married": Different Meanings

First, the study found that each of the two groups meant different things when they talked about living together without being married. Tijuana Mexican adolescents indicated they felt more comfortable using the term "*union libre*," or consensual union, rather than cohabitation. They generally view living together without being married as a type of "informal marriage" or "a marriage without papers." In contrast, San Diego Latina adolescents use the term "cohabitation" because they were more accustomed to it than the term "consensual union." U.S.-based Latinas understand cohabitation as two people living together without being married regardless of gender. They also view cohabitation as appropriate to an early stage of adulthood. For those Latinas, cohabitation denotes a "sexual-living arrangement while exploring an intimate relationship."

Second, the study found the groups view that the advantages and disadvantages of these two types of conjugal unions have a multi-level or multi-dimensional character. These dimensions can fall into five overall categories: (1) individual; (2) institutional; (3) social context; (4) cultural and; (5) aspects dealing with gender issues. The individual level focuses on each girl's likes and preferences; family problems, ideals, and plans for personal fulfillment. An institutional concern includes aspects of legality or religion, which girls consider important or relevant. The social context dimension refers to the immediate social environment in which the adolescents regularly interact such as their home, family networks, neighbors, friends, and the community or neighborhood where they live. The cultural level considers customs, social values, traditions, prejudices, and rites of passage relevant to the girls and their social surroundings. Finally, the gender dimension includes aspects dealing with gender roles, how the girls understand what it means to be a man or a woman, and the power relations between women and men.

Advantages and Disadvantages of "Living Together Without Being Married"

Several factors influence the frame of reference both groups of female teenagers use to evaluate pros and cons that living together without being married might have on their chances to achieve their future hopes and goals. While the two groups share some similarities stemming from their shared Mexican heritage, there are important differences arising from their countries of residence.

Individual Level

Table 1 shows five individual-type aspects that Tijuana adolescents identified as advantages for consensual unions. The idea that a consensual union is "a means to be happy" stands out with the highest intensity level measure according to the number of times the adolescents as a group cited this reason.⁵ The next most important reason was that a consensual union "allows for the couples' independence" and is a "love without ties." In third place the students said "it is better to have a consensual union than to be alone" when the women are no longer young. The girls perceive a consensual union also "a demonstration of love" and "as a temporal relationship without commitment" but less so that with the first three ideas.

Table 1.

Individual factors: "Living Together Without Being Married" in the Perception of Adolescents in Tijuana (TIJ) and San Diego (SD)

Advantages or aspects in favor					
Individual factors	Level of importance				
	Super	Very	Important	Relevant	Mention
1. A way to be happy	TIJ				
2. A demonstration of love				TIJ	
3. Allows the couple to remain independent; love without ties		TIJ			SD
4. A temporary relationship without commitment				SD	TIJ
5. Better than being alone at old age			TIJ	SD	
Disadvantages or aspects against					
Individual factors	Level of importance				
	Super	Very	Important	Relevant	Mention
1. I would like to get married because it is my dream		TIJ/SD			
2. Getting married is important to the family; I want to please my parents			TIJ		SD
3. I want to follow the Mexican tradition of getting married in the church				SD	TIJ

Table 1 also presents information about the relative disadvantages or factors against consensual union. At the individual level, three different aspects argue against consensual unions. The statement, "I would like to get married" stands out followed by "getting married is important to the family and I want to please my parents." Note, however, young people feel the two top arguments against living together is clearly less persuasive than the two top reasons favoring consensual unions. Thus, the female teenagers from Tijuana appear to see important advantages for consensual unions and fewer disadvantages.

Table 1 also show three individual type aspects San Diego adolescents view as advantages to cohabitation. In contrast to the Tijuana findings, U.S. Latinas do not view these reasons

⁵ Ranking of levels of importance: super important (18 and more times), very important (11-17 times), important (7-10 times), relevant (3-6 times), mentioned (1-2 times).

as important and they show very low frequency levels. Individually, they perceive cohabitation as something that is "better than being alone at old age" and as "a temporary relationship without commitment." However, they view these reasons not important and only relevant. They barely cite that it "allows the couple to remain independent." On the other hand, U.S.-based students express three disadvantages or aspects against cohabitation, one of which ranks as highly important. Chief among those disadvantages is they have the dream "to get married," closely followed by the relevant reason of "wanting to follow the Mexican tradition of getting married by the church." They mention that "getting married is important for the family and I would like to please my parents."

Institutional

At the institutional level, Tijuana adolescents agree on three aspects in favor and five against consensual unions. Among aspects in favor, the overwhelming advantage is that a consensual union "is easy to do because there is no paperwork." Students often referred to it as a "marriage without papers." In distant second and third places they judge as only relevant is that the consensual union is "tolerated by society and confers some rights" and that this type of union "doesn't require need a divorce to end" (See Table 2). On the other hand, the relevant arguments against consensual union include that women have "less security" and that represents a "stigma for the woman and their children." Two further arguments against consensual unions are that it "has no legal recognition" and has "no value before God." A small number also observed that it is "neither a civil nor a religious marriage; it is nothing." Young girls from Tijuana see institutional factors favoring consensual unions outweighing arguments against in importance level but not by number.

Table 2.

Institutional factors: "Living Together Without Being Married" in the Perception of Adolescents in Tijuana (TIJ) and San Diego (SD)

Advantages or aspects in favor					
Institutional factors	Level of importance				
	Super	Very	Important	Relevant	Mention
1. Easy to do because there is no paper work		TIJ		SD	
2. Tolerated by society and confers some rights				TIJ	
3. Doesn't require a divorce to end		SD		TIJ	
Disadvantages or aspects against					
Institutional factors	Level of importance				
	Super	Very	Important	Relevant	Mention
1. No legal recognition					TIJ
2. No value before God					TIJ
3. Neither civil nor religious marriage; it is nothing					TIJ
4. Women have less security				TIJ	
5. Stigma for women and their children				TIJ	

Latinas in San Diego, on the other hand, mention two advantages for cohabitation and no disadvantages. Cohabitation very importantly "doesn't require divorce to dissolve" and they view that cohabitation is "easy to form and requires no paperwork" as relevant.

Social Context

Social context factors are those social conditions or surroundings girls mention that might either encourage or discourage the girls from participating in consensual union or cohabitation. Those conditions include both verbal and non-verbal comments that operate at the demonstrative level in the girls' socialization process affecting their predisposition towards "living together without being married."

Table 3 shows six aspects in this category that favor or are conducive to consensual union among Tijuana girls. Young Mexicans see the problem of male infidelity in the family, including that "my father has been unfaithful to my mother" as the most important factor. Next, and very important, is that there are many children born out of wedlock among relatives, neighbors, and friends. They note as important the existence of consensual unions in their communities or neighborhoods. This combines with the apparently contradictory situation where families, especially mothers always provide support to their single-mother daughters regardless of what they might say. Finally, the history of consensual unions within their families, including among their parents, is also an important factor. The young Tijuana women agreed on one very important social context factor against consensual unions—the irresponsible conduct by fathers towards their children born out of wedlock, both in their communities and neighborhoods, and among their relatives and acquaintances.

Table 3.

Social context factors: "living together without being married" in the perception of adolescents in Tijuana (TIJ) and San Diego (SD)

Advantages or aspects in favor					
Social context factors	Level of importance				
	Super	Very	Important	Relevant	Mention
1. Numerous consensual unions in the community			TIJ/SD		
2. History of consensual unions in the family			SD	TIJ	
3. Family support, especially mothers to single-mother daughters			TIJ	SD	
4. Children born out of wedlock in the Community		TIJ/SD			
5. History of male infidelity in the family	TIJ				SD
Disadvantages or aspects against					
Social context factors	Level of importance				
	Super	Very	Important	Relevant	Mention
1. Lack of male parental obligation toward children born out of wedlock		TIJ			

San Diego Latinas identified three important social context aspects conducive to cohabitation, the most important of which is the frequent presence of children born outside of marriage in their neighborhood or community. Only slightly less important to these young women interviewed was the frequent occurrence of cohabitation within the community as well as within their own families and even among their parents in some cases.

Culture and Gender

At the cultural level, Tijuana adolescents see multiple reasons supporting consensual unions and only a couple reasons against. Foremost among these was their wish to "become a mother even if I don't get married." Two other factors they thought were very important closely related to the first. They included "being a mother is more important than getting married," as well as believing they would have their mother's support in the event of a child outside of marriage. An important reason they gave for entering into a consensual union was that it was "a testing stage to be sure and know each other" and that it helps to "explore the couple's sexuality." At the level of being relevant was the idea that "consensual union and marriage are almost the same thing." A low importance factor was that "marriage and consensual union are for having children" while many thought that a consensual union "could be part of today's youth life-style" (See table 4).

Table 5 shows various aspects referred to by the Tijuana adolescents that have to do with gender issues. Those girls think more gender issues support entering into consensual unions than those that oppose the decision. The most prominent of these are the Mexican phenomenon of male infidelity, or *machismo*, and the wife's financial dependency on the husband. Comments at highest level of importance level include "it is easier to leave the man when he's unfaithful," "better given the *machismo*," and to avoid "man's control over the woman." Another very important aspect favoring consensual unions is that it is better because the adult women in their family and acquaintances have told them "all men change with marriage." Likewise, Tijuana girls state it is important to consider that in consensual unions "women have the same power as men" and that "there are no longer any responsible men to marry." Balancing those endorsements are four reasons in the gender dimension against consensual unions. At a very important level, the girls say that in a consensual union "there are no obligations shown by the father for the children born out of wedlock." They mention as important that "the man has no responsibility towards the woman in consensual union." Finally, but at a much lower level of importance, the Tijuana girls mention that "the woman is easily abandoned by the man in consensual union" and that "the woman is not valued by the man living in a consensual union."

San Diego Latinas regard cultural aspects are more important in this issue although they also note gender issues (See Tables 4 and 5). U.S.-based Mexicans identified several factors for each aspect type, but overwhelming placed greater importance in the cultural factors they identified. Table 4 shows while five of the eight cultural factors are important, very important, and super important, none of the six gender issues even reaches the level of important. Two cultural aspects show the highest importance levels as cohabitation advantages. They include cohabitation as a "testing phase to know each other and be sure" of the selection of the potential mate and see it as a relationship that "helps to explore the couple's sexuality." They view as very important that cohabitation is part of the new "life style of current youth" and

Table 4.

**Cultural factors: "living together without being married"
in the perception of adolescents in Tijuana (TIJ) and San Diego (SD)**

Advantages or aspects in favor					
Cultural factors	Level of importance				
	Super	Very	Important	Relevant	Mention
1. Consensual union and marriage are almost the same				TIJ	SD
2. Being a mother is more important than getting married		TIJ/SD			
3. Motherhood is the supreme value, regardless of marital status.	TIJ	SD			
4. Expectation of mother's support in case of a non-marital pregnancy.		TIJ		SD	
5. Marriage is for having children					SD/TIJ
6. It is a new life style among the youth.		TIJ/SD			
7. It is a testing stage, it helps the couple to be sure and know each other	SD		TIJ		
8. It allows to explore the couple's sexuality	SD		TIJ		
Disadvantages or aspects against					
Cultural Dimension	Level of importance				
	Super	Very	Important	Relevant	Mention
1. Society respects more married women than women in cohabitation/consensual union			TIJ		SD
2. Society respects more marriage than cohabitation/consensual union			TIJ		SD

that it is very important "to be a mother even without getting married." The idea that "having a child is more important than getting married" is also very important. Finally, the belief that the family, especially the mother, would support them if they had a child out of wedlock was a relevant consideration. They saw only two cultural aspects against cohabitation: married women are more respected than women in cohabitation and that "marriage is more respected than cohabitation."

A final comparative finding to highlight is that Tijuana youth identify the "*machismo* of men and their control over woman" in the Mexican family culture as very important. Girls perceive this gender difference as something to avoid in the future. This tends to operate in favor of consensual union as an alternative to marriage. In contrast, San Diego Latina adolescents consider that gender aspect only as relevant and practically do not raise gender disadvantages of cohabitation as issues.

Table 5.

Gender factors: "living together without being married" in the perception of adolescents in Tijuana (TIJ) and San Diego (SD)

Advantages or aspects in favor					
Gender factors	Level of importance				
	Super	Very	Important	Relevant	Mention
1. There are no longer any responsible men to marry					TIJ/SD
2. Women have the same power as men in cohabitation/consensual union			TIJ		SD
3. Women can leave unfaithful men	TIJ				SD
4. It is easier to end the relationship in case of domestic violence		TIJ			SD
5. It is better given the <i>machismo</i> of Mexican men and their control over women		TIJ		SD	
6. All men change with marriage		TIJ			SD
Disadvantages or aspects against					
Gender Factors	Level of importance				
	Super	Very	Important	Relevant	Mention
1. Men don't have obligations toward women in cohabitation / consensual union		TIJ			
2. Women are easily abandoned by men					TIJ
3. No obligations shown by the father toward children born out of wedlock	TIJ				
4. Men do not value women in cohabitation/ consensual union					TIJ

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results obtained allow us to identify some interesting clues to understand how female Mexican and Latina adolescents residing in the Tijuana-San Diego border view the idea of living together without being married in connection to forming a family and the transition to adulthood. Overall, the girls strongly desire to form a family within formal marriage. That option, however, is losing strength to living together outside of marriage as a better option because it allows girls to better reconcile their expectations, wishes, desires, illusions, and personal aspirations. Group discussions among both Mexican and U.S. Latina teenagers helped them identify the pros and cons of living together without being married. The Mexicans call it consensual union and the U.S. Latinas call it cohabitation, but both groups want to employ it to satisfy their personal and social expectations. Following this logic, an important finding in this study was the multi-level nature of the frame of reference these teenagers use to view individual, cultural, gender and other factors within their social context and daily environment.

Tijuana teenagers use a concept of consensual union that mixes elements from its traditional Mexican meaning with traces of the modern cohabitation model. For those teenagers, however, the dominant meaning of living together without being married tends to be the Mexican consensual union. Tijuana girls tend to see consensual unions as an individual alternative to marriage that satisfies their need to find love and happiness. This also simultaneously satisfies their desire to become mothers, even if it is outside of marriage. For young girls in Tijuana a consensual union can also serve as a way to enhance their social status by enabling them to become mothers because motherhood in Mexico culturally trumps marriage.

On the other hand, they also see consensual unions as a conjugal-type arrangement that confers upon the partners a certain degree of independence. In particular, it allows the woman to be somewhat independent from the man. It has a similar effect on the gender relationship. They think that a consensual union allows them to have control over their lives whereas in marriage the man would have all the power. This especially concerns young women who consider it undesirable to face the situations of masculine infidelity and often cases of domestic violence that occur due to Mexico's culture of *machismo* and *marianismo*.⁶

The importance of the individual, cultural and gender references depends on how they understand the consensual union and the possible advantages it confers on members of the couple, especially for the woman. Tijuana adolescents see greater and more important advantages for consensual unions than they see disadvantages. The disadvantages rank high at the individual, gender, and social frames of reference but lower than those assigned to the advantages of consensual union do. At the individual level, the most important disadvantage young women identify is that living in a consensual union would deprive them of the joy of dressing as brides and having a wedding. In terms of gender issues, Tijuana girls see some important disadvantages to consensual unions. That includes men not assuming the same type of responsibility towards women as they do in marriages. Mexican men often do not assume paternal responsibility for children born out of wedlock. The latter aspect apparently reflects the daily reality of the social realm or context where many of these young women interact.

Comparing Mexican-origin female adolescents from both sides of the border shows interesting differences regarding how they view "living together without being married" and its advantages and disadvantages despite the shared cultural roots. The biggest difference is that adolescents from San Diego see "living together without being married" as an individual option for independence regardless of gender and part of a new lifestyle for the new generation and as a passage towards adulthood. In this sense, the most important advantages young Latinas perceive for cohabitation lie in cultural dimensions allowing the young couple to explore their sexuality. They similarly consider that cohabitation could be a testing phase for the partners to get to know each other and be confident of the match. They are ready to experience cohabitation several times to find their "Mr. Right." For the San Diego girls, cohabitation serves as an extension of modern dating not be necessarily tied to the search for a future husband but which definitely might lead to a sexual partner relationship with some stability. This understanding of "living together without marrying" corresponds to the

⁶ *Marianismo* refers to the gender role model of women to imitate the martyrdom virtues of Virgin Mary under the Catholic doctrine. This phenomenon pertains to several Latin American countries including Mexico and by extension to Mexican-American women in the United States.

cohabitation model of the second demographical transition characteristic to more developed societies such as in San Diego, where the sex-gender system shows less marked gender inequalities than in Tijuana. Thus, Latina youth see a couple's relationship as less disadvantageous in comparison to how the Mexican girls perceive it. These differences concern the men's responsibilities for paternity outside of marriage, the autonomy and financial independence of women, and a cultural and judicial system less tolerant of domestic violence.

Given that these two groups of young women share the common cultural roots that emphasize family, it is not surprising that they both place supreme value on achieving motherhood, which surpasses even the importance of marriage. This drive to motherhood encourages both consensual unions and cohabitation. The overwhelming importance of becoming mothers for young Mexican women and Latinas of Mexican origin apparently continues to be passed down from one generation to the next. The more or less regular coexistence of two populations of Mexican origin along the Tijuana-San Diego transborder space and the cultural diffusion of social ideas and practices tied to Mexican family culture reinforces this importance of motherhood. Examples include family celebrations directly tied to the great value of motherhood, such as baptisms, confirmations, children's birthdays, and Mother's day. The typical Sunday family gatherings at the house of the mother, grandmother, or other family matron forms part of socialization process for children and adolescents. These are all distinct features of the Mexican family culture on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border. The two groups of Mexican female adolescents in our study in their transition to adulthood and forming a family see these cultural values and practices as compatible with the perceived advantages and disadvantages of living together outside of marriage.

Both groups of girls strongly desire to form a family in formal marriage. Several factors, however, make living together without being married appear as a better option. That option importantly allows girls to reconcile their hopes to start a family with other personal aspirations during their transition to adulthood. This finding may suggest a tendency towards a weakening of the family-centric orientation of the Mexican culture. However, despite that finding, attaining motherhood remains a core family expectation independently of marriage for both groups of girls. The different social meaning each group attaches to the idea living together without being married supports the core value of motherhood in the Mexican family culture.

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