Latin American Family Systems: complexity and heterogeneity

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Short abstract:

While the basic outline of family systems in Europe is fairly well known, our understanding of families in the Latin American continent pales by comparison. At first glance, families appear to be destructured and dysfunctional, characterized by extremely high illegitimacy (even in the remote historical past), serial relationships and household structures that resist any straightforward definition. Adding to the complexity, it is also likely that family patterns in Latin America varied substantially across the continent though the basic spatial and regional dimensions of this heterogeneity are not well-understood at all. At present, it is safe to say that our understanding of Latin American family systems is far from adequate.

In this paper, analytical instruments and perspectives that have proven useful when sorting through family systems in Europe will be used. Key life transitions to adulthood and to old age and dependency, the process of forming and raising families, the ability of the family to generate support for its members that are vulnerable for different reasons and household and marital stability are all component parts of this analytical framework. Our analysis will be based on the first round of census micro data to be available for the region (normally the 1970s) because at least plausibly it should mirror historical patterns of family organization fairly adequately. Our main result will be that there is a veritable kaleidoscope of patterns of family organization on the continent that can be explained by the ethnic and historical diversity characterizing the region. While none of the observed patterns fit any European model for family systems, on the whole the reveal a potent, unique and often efficient form of human organization that continues to be relevant until recent times.

Introduction

The basic outline of family systems in Europe is fairly well know, both in terms of the different roles they played in people's lives, the main changes over time and the basic regional diversity existing on the continent (Hajnal, 1965, 1982). It can safely be affirmed that in Europe two types of family system existed, one of which was based on strong families knit together by strong ties of loyalty and solidarity and another based on rather weak family ties (Reher, 1998). These differences are rooted in the cultural values that underlie different systems, one based on individual autonomy and another more group oriented based on family loyalties. Young children tended to be educated by their parents in these values at very young ages, and in turn they educated their own children in much the same way. The result was the appearance of very distinct patterns of behavior that can be seen in many different facets of public and private life. These divisions that are rooted deep in history continue to be present in contemporary society despite the tremendous changes that have swept the continent in recent decades, many of which are a part in one way or another of what has been called the Second

Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe, 2010). Interestingly, however, this tidal wave of change has life everywhere more or less in the same direction, but has done nothing to diminish the relative differences in an entire variety of indicators of family life (Reher, 1998; see also Roussel, 1992).

Many of these conclusion have been reached by using fairly standard empirical indicators of family life to get at the internal workings of the system, though the use of qualitative data and Social Anthropology for more contemporary societies has ended up reaffirming the basic tenets of this regionalization. This argument is a fundamentally economic argument –family systems are not determined by economic factors though these factors are part and parcel of them-, but rather a cultural one. Another important characteristic is that it is not based on the household but rather on the larger kin group, though household indicators are often used assess these larger dimensions of family life. This outline of the family in historic Europe is based on a wealth of rich empirical documentation, normally generated at a local level and based on households or on different types of documentation concerning succession and inheritance. This knowledge is also the result of the pioneering work of Peter Laslett, the Cambridge Group and the Laslett-Hammel classification system for household organization. Most scholars working on family life in Europe owe a debt of gratitude, in one way or the other, to the pioneering work of Peter Laslett.

Our basic understanding of family systems in the Latin American continent pales by comparison. Lack of abundant historical data is certainly a factor here though other elements play an important role. Anyone working on the family in the Americas might start his or her task with what seems to be a reasonable supposition that family forms and family dynamics would be similar to those holding in Spain and Portugal, the nations that colonized the continent and gave it its languages and its legal, political and social structures that in many ways have endured until the present. When attempting to compare marriage patterns in colonial America to those holding in Ancien Regime Spain and Portugal one historian expressed in a title tinged with exasperation "…from a mosaic to a kaleidoscope of marriage patterns…." (Pérez Moreda, 1997). At first blush, Latin American families, at least in many parts of the continent, appear to be destructured and dysfunctional, characterized by extremely high illegitimacy (even in the remote historical past), serial relationships and household structures that resist any straightforward definition, at least when seen against the backdrop of the relatively staid European patterns researchers know so well.

Adding to the complexity, it is also likely that family patterns in Latin America varied substantially across the continent. This variation –to be expected in any area as vast and heterogeneous as America- can be traced to the different ethnic and historical mix that has gone in the making of different areas. This mix is certainly the product of history and the way played out in different regions but is probably not constrained to specific countries. In other words, in most Latin American countries the national statistics will in fact hide a good amount of heterogeneity. Sifting through this complexity is a major goal of this paper. All of this will contribute to defining the family system or systems existing on the continent and figuring out just how they work.

Analytical strategy and data

We will approach this issue by using analytical instruments and perspectives that have proven useful when sorting through family systems in Europe. Whether or not these will be sufficient remains to be seen, but it is the best we can do, at least for now. Key life transitions to adulthood and to old age and dependency, the process of forming and raising families, the ability of the family to generate support for its members that are vulnerable for different reasons and household and marital stability are all component parts of this analytical framework. The indicators generated will not be meaningful in themselves as much as they will reveal the underlying dynamics of solidarity, control and loyalty that are, in the long run, the real defining aspects of family systems, beyond of course those related to inheritance and succession.

In this paper, we will follow these notions closely in order to generate indicators related closely to similar approaches used in Europe. These indicators can be found in the censuses that were periodically generated throughout the continent and mostly irregular intervals. From the 1970s on, pertinent indicators can be found in the census micro data that has recently been included in the IPUMS data base. While the indicators are relatively simple ones, they have the great advantage of referring to the entire society. Here we will concentrate on the earliest censuses available (normally from about 1970) so as to reflect as closely as possible the historic conditions holding on the continent at a time where in most countries the demographic transition was just getting under way. In a later paper, we will look at the enormous changes taking place over the past 40 years which include dramatic increases in consensual unions have Ron Lesthaeghe and Albert Esteve (among others) (Esteve et al. 2012a, 2012b) have demonstrated in a spate of recent publications. For now, however, it is important for us to define the basic outlines of Latin American family systems as close to the 'past' as possible. For that, the first round of censuses will do quite well.

As an example, in Table 1 we show the percent of women living in an extended household at different ages for the 16 Latin American countries that will be included in this paper. For all these countries, we use data of the 1970 round of censuses with the exception of Cuba 2002, El Salvador 1992 and Peru 1993. For the sake of comparability, we present results for Portugal 1981 and the United States 1970. Regardless of age, the percent of women living in extended households (versus nuclear or non-family households) is in all Latin American countries higher than in Portugal and the United States. The United States shows the lowest levels of extended co-residence. Among Latin American countries, Puerto Rico and Uruguay have the lowest incidence of extended households and El Salvador the highest. Despite not having longitudinal data, the age perspective provides us with hints on how the living arrangements change over the life course. The age profile is quite similar across all Latin American countries: the lowest percentages of women living in extended household are found among women age 0 to 14 and 30 to 39, mostly below 40%. Beyond age 60, more than 50% of women resided in extended households, a figure that contrasts with the much lower levels in the United States, below 25% until age 80, and in Portugal, below 50% until age 80. Men show similar patterns than women.

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Table 1. Percent women living in extended households by age, 16 Latin American countries around 1970

	AR	BO	BR	CH	CO	CR	CU	EC	SV	MX	NI	PA	PE	PR	UY	VE	PT	US	
																			Median
Age	70	76	70	70	73	73	02	74	92	70	71	70	93	70	75	71	81	70	
0-4	0.363	0.373	0.280	0.418	0.362	0.354	0.459	0.421	0.494	0.344	0.409	0.423	0.424	0.264	0.366	0.428	0.253	0,137	0.369
5-9	0.346	0.366	0.282	0.402	0.372	0.318	0.415	0.417	0.501	0.324	0.391	0.417	0.393	0.267	0.336	0.414	0.231	0,121	0.369
10-14	0.369	0.405	0.316	0.425	0.388	0.348	0.392	0.466	0.582	0.346	0,434	0.462	0.422	0.302	0.351	0.454	0.237	0,132	0.390
15-19	0.420	0.507	0.383	0.517	0.392	0.455	0.446	0.553	0.653	0.447	0,535	0.581	0.524	0.360	0.406	0.554	0.284	0,162	0.451
20-24	0.413	0.493	0.386	0.543	0.386	0.466	0.499	0.545	0.581	0.448	0,530	0.530	0.542	0.375	0.397	0.558	0.301	0,143	0.480
25-29	0.377	0.429	0.354	0.493	0.364	0.408	0.458	0.468	0.472	0.392	0,441	0.459	0.483	0.266	0.363	0.496	0.245	0,112	0.418
30-34	0.348	0.364	0.324	0.459	0.352	0.367	0.389	0.421	0.453	0.365	0,395	0.422	0.430	0.245	0.336	0.439	0.224	0,104	0.366
35-39	0.327	0.343	0.306	0.430	0.366	0.350	0.351	0.401	0.479	0.340	0,380	0.410	0.400	0.261	0.306	0.416	0.212	0,117	0.348
40-44	0.330	0.364	0.332	0.443	0.396	0.381	0.349	0.447	0.541	0.384	0,447	0.452	0.421	0.299	0.317	0.451	0.234	0,137	0.376
45-49	0.348	0.404	0.366	0.491	0.442	0.458	0.407	0.496	0.608	0.425	0,544	0.514	0.461	0.391	0.339	0.516	0.265	0,152	0.416
50-54	0.387	0.454	0.430	0.557	0.497	0.494	0.479	0.572	0.677	0.500	0,615	0.608	0.523	0.394	0.379	0.589	0.290	0,167	0.487
55-59	0.426	0.518	0.485	0.600	0.527	0.575	0.532	0.611	0.705	0.534	0,689	0.636	0.564	0.450	0.406	0.646	0.291	0,175	0.530
60-64	0.461	0.571	0.554	0.641	0.555	0.650	0.566	0.671	0.737	0.568	0,725	0.676	0.594	0.548	0.434	0.702	0.298	0,183	0.567
65-69	0.520	0.590	0.603	0.667	0.575	0.673	0.578	0.678	0.746	0.612	0,774	0.687	0.623	0.524	0.451	0.745	0.317	0,197	0.601
70-74	0.543	0.606	0.655	0.682	0.586	0.711	0.592	0.700	0.734	0.623	0,776	0.669	0.626	0.538	0.496	0.765	0.364	0,210	0.624
75-79	0.619	0.619	0.693	0.712	0.595	0.711	0.629	0.696	0.748	0.657	0,802	0.661	0.646	0.595	0.540	0.778	0.415	0,245	0.652
80+	0.688	0.652	0.739	0.765	0.596	0.756	0.718	0.723	0.793	0.663	0,779	0.737	0.679	0.643	0.640	0.782	0.546	0,322	0.694
Total	0.390	0.425	0.349	0.482	0.395	0.406	0.452	0.483	0.565	0.393	0,468	0.485	0.469	0.335	0.379	0.489	0.275	0,151	0.415

Source: IPUMS international