

Sexual Attitudes and 1st Sexual Experiences among Youth in Mexico
Are Families a Source of Change or Tradition?

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Abstract

This study examines how families shape the sexual attitudes and first sexual experiences of young Mexican men and women coming of age in the 21st Century. Results suggest that the parental family significantly affects young men and women's sexual attitudes and first sexual experiences. Indeed, the type of families youth belong to, how much control parents exert over the lives of their adolescent children, what techniques they use to discipline their children, and how much they talk to their children about sex, impacts the sexual attitudes and choices youth make about their own sexuality. Through these mechanisms families can facilitate the maintenance or transformation of sexual values and attitudes. It appears then, that in the case of Mexico, families continue to play a pivotal role in shaping adolescent sexuality. These effects, however, appear to be stronger for the case of sexual attitudes than for the case of sexual behavior.

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, Mexico has experienced a period of great social and cultural transformations linked to the process of socio-economic development. Declining fertility, and rising female education and labor force participation have brought about changes in gender relations with important implications for the liberalization of sexual behavior (Modena and Mendoza, 2001)¹. Traditional norms that emphasize women's virginity and male sexual prowess are being challenged in the process of modernization (Amuchastegui, 2001). The family, as a central institution involved in the formation and transmission of norms of appropriate conduct, including sexual conduct, is a key player in this transformation.

This study examines the role of the family in shaping the sexual attitudes and first sexual experiences of young adults in Mexico at the turn of the 21st Century. In particular, I apply socialization theory to examine the effects of parental control, parenting style, mother-youth communication about sex, and other family characteristics on the sexual attitudes and choices young Mexican men and women make regarding their first sexual experience.

Is sexuality being separated from the processes of union formation and reproduction? Are families involved in this transformation? If so, how do families affect youth's attitudes regarding female virginity? How do families affect the first sexual experiences of young men and women in Mexico? Are the factors shaping sexual attitudes and first sexual experiences gender differentiated? This study attempts to address these questions using data from a nationally representative survey of youth carried out in 2000.

¹ I use the term 'liberalization' to refer to the separation of sexuality from marriage and reproduction.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews recent trends leading to the separation of sexuality, marriage and reproduction with particular attention to the case of Mexico. Section 3 develops a conceptual framework to generate testable hypotheses regarding the effects of the family on the sexual attitudes and first sexual experiences of young men and women in Mexico. Section 4 describes the data and sample used in this analysis, and defines the outcomes of interests and predictor variables. Section 5 presents the analytical approach adopted in this study. Section 6 presents and discusses the results of the analysis. The final section includes some concluding remarks.

2. Trends in Sexuality, Marriage, and Reproduction: Situating Mexico

The study of sexual attitudes and behaviors among young people is linked to two related processes. First is the emergence of adolescence as a distinct stage in the life course. Second is the separation of sexuality from the processes of union formation and reproduction taking place in advanced economies. Existing frameworks explain these related events as the result of the move away from a kinship-based economy to an economy that requires prolonged training and education. In this framework, the need for greater education leads to a postponement in marriages until well past puberty (Caldwell, et.al., 1998).

The extension of formal education and training has important implications for sexual behavior because it lengthens the timing to marriage and enhances the opportunities for informal contact between the sexes, while helping break down male hegemony in the public sphere (Furstenberg, 1998). More egalitarian gender relations develop through increases in formal education and labor-force participation among young

males and females. Together these demographic and social transformations facilitate the emergence of sexuality as a dimension of life separate from marriage and reproduction.

While these transformations have for the most part been documented in most advanced economies, evidence of their presence in the developing world remains elusive. This is partly because in many areas these transformations have just begun, but also because of important differences in the local socio-cultural context which may give rise to regional variations in the pace and characteristics of the transformations (Caldwell et.al., 1998; Xenos, et.al., 2002). Nonetheless, the effects of rising age at marriage and more egalitarian gender relations on the liberalization of sexuality are expected to become particularly important in settings where marriage has been used as a way to protect and control the sexuality of young women (Caldwell, 1998; Furstenberg, 1998). This is the case in Mexico where, based on dominant Catholic prescriptions of femininity and patriarchal notions of masculinity, a sexual-double standard has prevailed that promotes different routes of sexual initiation for young men and women.

According to the dominant norm, young Mexican women are expected to become sexually active only within the institution of marriage while young men are expected to become sexually experienced before marriage (Amuchastegui, 1998; Szasz, 1998). Since the 1970s, however, Mexico has experienced important social, economic and demographic transformations that have begun to challenge the prevailing normative environment. These transformations have involved the extension of formal education well beyond puberty and, more important, improvements in women's educational attainment and labor force participation.

Indeed, between 1970 and 2000 women's access to education and employment improved considerably in Mexico. Among 20 to 24 year-olds, the proportion of women with secondary education climbed from 3 to 38 % and the rate of female labor force participation more than doubled from 21% to 44% (INEGI, 1997, 2001). Similarly, the total fertility rate declined during this period from 6.8 in 1970 to 2.8 in 2001 (Chackiel and Schkolnik, 1996; PRB 2001). Modest changes in marriage timing were also observed with a slight increase in the average age at marriage among women, from 20.7 to 22 years of age. (Quilondran, 2001).

These changes together with the recent spread of scientific and human rights discourses of autonomy, gender equality, and family planning today pose an important challenge to the prevailing double standard regarding the sexual initiation of young men and women (Amuchastegui, 2001). Given these trends, it is likely that sexuality, particularly female sexuality, may be breaking up with marriage and reproduction in contemporary Mexican society.

It is against this backdrop that I examine the factors shaping the sexual attitudes and first sexual experiences of young men and women in contemporary Mexico. In particular, I am interested in the role that the family plays as an agent of change and continuity. Research from the developed world is unclear about the role that the family has played in shaping the liberalization of sexuality. Some argue that the strengthening of educational systems and the growing gap between generations undermines parental authority whereupon the family loses control over young people's behaviors (Furstenberg, 1998). Based on the premise that the process of modernization leads to the growth of individualism, the family is portrayed as simply losing salience or relevance

in the formation of beliefs, attitudes, and subsequent behaviors of the younger generations.

Nonetheless, to the extent that the family continues to play a pivotal role in the socialization of children and youth, its influence over the sexual attitudes and behaviors of the younger generations is likely to remain important. This is specially the case in settings like Mexico, where *familism* remains a powerful value organizing everyday social life. Indeed, in Mexico the family, and to a lesser extent the community, have historically played a central role in the maintenance of the dominant norms of sexual conduct, particularly those surrounding sexual initiation (De Vos, nd). It is likely that the family in Mexico may also be involved in the transformation of these norms of sexual conduct.

3. Conceptual Framework: The Family as a Source of Change or Tradition

Evidence of the centrality of the family in the formation of attitudes and values among the younger generation comes from research on the socialization of children. Based on socialization theory, this body of research argues that families provide the young with role models, a social and economic environment, and standards of appropriate conduct that influence subsequent sexual attitudes and behavior. From an early age, the family socializes the child, providing him/her with a system of values and norms. Later on, in adolescence, the family provides structure and guidance. Adolescent sexual behavior is influenced by both, the degree of value internalization and the relative ability of parents to compel compliance (Miller, et. al. 1986).

Research on the socialization of children and value internalization provide evidence that adolescent sexual attitudes and behavior are closely related to parental

values and attitudes (Thornton and Camburn, 1987)². Compliance with and adoption of parental values and attitudes, however, depends largely on the relationship dynamics between parents and youth. How much control parents exert over the lives of their adolescent children, what techniques they use to discipline their children, and how much they talk to their children about sex, impacts the sexual attitudes and choices youth make about their own sexuality.

The family can, therefore, be seen as an important social institution involved in the maintenance of appropriate norms of sexual conduct. Likewise, the family can also be seen as an important agent of social change through the intergenerational transmission of new values and attitudes regarding sexuality. In this study, I draw from socialization and social control theories to examine four dimensions of the family that previous research has suggested are particularly important determinants of adolescent sexual attitudes and behaviors: the attitudes and values of parents; the level of communication about sex between mother and youth; the level of parental control in dating and socializing; and the type of parenting style. The main aim is to identify the ways in which the family may influence youth's sexual attitudes and behaviors during times of rapid social change in Mexico.

Attitudes and Values of Parents

Thornton and Camburn (1987) argue that the attitudes and beliefs of parents form the basic foundation for the values of their children. Thus, parents holding more liberal attitudes towards sexuality may be more likely to have children who also hold more liberal views about sexuality. Actual parental attitudes concerning sexuality are

² Thornton and Camburn (1987) suggest that children may also influence parents but argue that the preponderant effect is from parents to children. This analysis adopts this position.

unfortunately not available for Mexico. Instead, I must rely on proxy variables and assume that they provide good measures of parental values and attitudes. For the case of Mexico, mother's education and family income are used as indirect measures of parental attitudes and values regarding sexuality. Education, particularly mother's education, may reflect exposure to liberalizing ideas that increase acceptance of premarital sexuality. In the case of Mexico, maternal education may be an important conduit for the transmission of new values regarding sexuality. In particular, educated mothers may be more likely to hold more permissive views regarding female sexuality, that is, they may be less likely to agree with the prevailing double-standard that seeks to control female sexuality while at the same time condone male sexuality. Thus, children of educated mothers will be more likely to have liberal attitudes towards sexuality and may be more likely to experience a premarital first sex than children whose mothers are not educated. Given the sexual-double standard, I expect this effect to be stronger among young women than among young men.

Household income may also reflect exposure to new ideas that increase the acceptance of premarital sexuality. High-income families may be more likely to be receptive to news from abroad; they may also be more able to protect their privacy and therefore be less concerned with maintaining the status-quo. Thus, I expect youth of high-income families to have more liberal attitudes towards sexuality and to be more likely to experience premarital first sex than youth of lower-income families. I expect the effects of income to be similar for young men and young women.

Mother-youth communication about sex

Parents may pass their values and attitudes towards sexuality to their children directly or indirectly. Direct communication between parents and children about sexuality is limited in most Mexican families, nonetheless, where it occurs it may signal parental willingness to acknowledge the possibility of sexual activity prior to marriage. Hence, youth whose parents openly discuss issues related to sex and sexuality may be more likely to hold liberal sexual attitudes and to experience a premarital first sex than youth who do not discuss sex with their parents. Given that I use the mother as the primary parent, I expect the effects to be stronger among young men particularly in terms of their attitudes towards women's virginity. It is likely that mothers who talk about sex with their sons also discuss young girls sexual rights, and therefore, help break-down the existing double-standard.

Parental control in dating and socializing

Parental values and attitudes concerning sexuality may also be transmitted indirectly through the parents' own patterns of childrearing. Parents with restrictive attitudes towards adolescent sexuality probably allow their children less autonomy, especially in terms of dating and socializing. Assuming that parental rules about dating and socializing reflect parents' own attitudes towards sexuality, I expect more autonomous youth to hold more liberal views about sexuality than youth who are less autonomous. Similarly, although also reflecting the more controlling environment, I expect more autonomous youth to be more likely to experience a premarital first sex than less autonomous youth. I expect this association to be particularly strong in the case of

young women. In addition, I expect young men to experience overall lower levels of parental control than young women.

Type of parenting style

Studies carried out in the United States suggest that parenting techniques affect the degree of concordance between the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of parents and youth. Indeed, Miller et. al. (1986) argue that the distinction between youth compliance and internalization is central to the case of adolescent sexual behavior because parenting techniques that are most effective in achieving compliance in the short term are not necessarily the most likely to produce internalized attitudes that would result in desired adolescent sexual behaviors at a later time.

Inductive parenting techniques, based on communication, explanation, and understanding may be most effective in achieving internalized attitudes and values among youth. Alternately, indifference and punishments may be least effective in achieving internalized attitudes and values among youth. Indeed, the use of punishments –and to a lesser extent indifference– may instead lead the youth to rebel against his/her parents as a form of protest. In a society where the prevailing normative environment sanctions premarital sex especially among young women, we can view holding liberal sexual attitudes as a form of rebellion. Thus, I expect youth who experience punishments as a form of problem-solving within the family to be more likely to hold more liberal views than youth who experience more inductive problem-solving techniques in the home.

4. *Data and Measures*

This analysis is based on data from the Mexican National Survey of Youth, 2000³. It is a nationally representative survey of young adults ages 12-29. Questions about dating, sexual behaviors, and sexuality were asked only to youth ages 15 and above. Hence, for the purposes of this analysis the sample is restricted to youth ages 15-29 for whom complete information on attitudes towards sexuality and sexual behavior was available. This criterion yielded a sample size of 12,934 males and 15,886 females (total 28,820) for the study of sexual attitudes and a sample size of 14, 144 males and 17,397 females (total 31,541) for the study of first sexual experiences.

Ideally to examine the influence of parent-youth relations on the sexual attitudes and behavior of young adults one should rely on longitudinal data for parents and their children. Unfortunately, such data does not exist for Mexico. Instead, I must rely on retrospective information provided by the youth. Thus, youth perceptions of parental behaviors and parent-youth relations are used here to gauge the family context. Despite the limitations, I argue that youth perceptions of parental behaviors may represent very good predictors of youth attitudes and behaviors as it is youth's perception of their relationship with their parents what ultimately informs their beliefs, decisions, and actions.

Definitions of the key outcome and predictor variables are presented in table 1. Youth's attitudes towards sexuality and their relation to existing normative views of appropriate sexual behavior are gauged based on a question that asked respondents whether they "agreed, had no opinion, or disagreed" with the statement that "women must remain virgin until marriage." A nominal variable with three categories was created

³ Known in Spanish as the ENJ 2000. From this point forward I will refer to this survey as the ENJ2000.

that reflects youth's attitudes towards the traditional view that women must remain virgin until marriage. Those who agreed with this statement are categorized as *conservative*; those who had no opinion are categorized as *ambivalent*, while those who disagreed are categorized as *liberal*.

Type of first sexual experience is measured indirectly by using respondents' answers to a series of questions regarding whether they had ever experienced sexual intercourse, age at first intercourse, and age at first union. A nominal variable with three categories was created to distinguish between those with no sexual experience, those with a premarital first sexual experience, and those with a marital first sexual experience. Respondents who have not experienced sexual intercourse are coded 0; respondents who experienced sexual intercourse are categorized as: 1) *Premarital first sex* if they were not married by the time of the survey or if they reported an older age at first marriage than the age reported for first sexual experience; and as 2) *Marital first sex* if they reported the same age for marriage and for first sexual experience⁴.

Mother's education is based on youth's reports of mother's educational attainment. Educational attainment is measured based on the highest level of education attained by the mother. Three different levels of educational attainment are distinguished: Elementary, high-school, and college or above. The reference category is no education.

Household income was estimated by pooling the individual income of all household members, for households who mentioned sharing resources⁵. Quartiles are used to generate four levels of household income: low, lower middle, upper middle, and high. Lower middle income is used as the reference category in the analysis.

⁴ Note that pregnancies were not considered in this categorization to identify shot-gun marriages. In future revisions I will need to consider this point.

⁵ At present, household income does not consider the number of household members.

Mother-youth sex communication is based on a question that asked youth how much they spoke with their mothers about sex. Possible answers included “nothing, little, some, or a lot”. Given the distribution of responses to this question, I decided to collapse the categories to create a dichotomous variable with only two possible values. “Nothing or a little” is used here as the reference category.

Levels of parental control are measured in this study based on a series of questions that asked youth whether they “decided on their own, needed to ask permission or were prohibited to” engage in a series of behaviors linked to dating and socializing, and in personal behaviors such as drinking, smoking, tattooing, and body-piercing. Two different measures of parental control were created based on youth’s answers to these questions. The first measure focuses on the level of parental control in the area of dating and socializing. The second measure focuses on parental control in personal behaviors. In the final analysis I include only the measure of parental control in dating and socializing because of theoretical reasons⁶. Principal component analysis was used to identify those questions significantly associated with the construct “parental control in dating and socializing.” Table 1.1 presents the results of the principal component analysis.

Parenting style is measured based on youth’s reports of what parents do when the youth does something they disapprove of. A nominal variable with three different categories was created. Parents who talk with the youth and discuss openly the issues at stake were considered to use *inductive* parenting techniques. Parents who ignore the youth and say or do nothing were considered to use *indifference* as a parenting technique.

⁶ Parental control in personal behaviors does significantly affect the sexual attitudes of young males and females, particularly at high levels of parental control. However, it does not appear to affect sexual behavior. At high levels of parental control in personal behaviors young males and females are less likely to hold a liberal sexual attitude than a conservative sexual attitude.

Finally parents who accuse, punish, or hit the youth were considered to use *punitive* parenting techniques. *Inductive* parenting is used as the reference category in the analysis.

5. *Analytical Strategy*

Multinomial logistic regression methods based on maximum likelihood are used to estimate the effects of mother's education, household income, mother-youth sex communication, parental control, and parenting style on the sexual attitudes and type of first sexual experience reported by young men and women. Norms about appropriate sexual behavior in Mexico are deeply gendered. To appropriately capture the gendered nature of sexuality and sexual behavior I estimate the models for males and females, separately. In this way, it is possible to identify whether similar factors affect the attitudes and behaviors of young males and females differently.

The analytical strategy that I follow is to estimate a series of models, beginning first with the key predictor variables, in this case, the measures of parental attitudes and parent-youth relations. I then proceed to include in step-wise fashion an increasing number of factors known to affect the sexual attitudes and behaviors of young males and females. I first incorporate basic demographic characteristics of the youth, and then include other characteristics of their place of residence. For brevity, I present only the full models, including measures of parental attitudes, parent-youth relations, youth characteristics, household characteristics and area characteristics.

The next section presents the results of this analysis and discusses the main findings, with a focus on the effects of maternal education, household income, mother-youth sex communication, parental control, and parenting style on the sexual attitudes and sexual initiation of young males and females only.

6. Results

Table 2 and 3 present the percent distribution of characteristics in the sample broken down by gender. Table 2 shows that a comparable proportion of young males and females hold a conservative view regarding sexuality. Indeed, close to 50% of young males and females think that women should remain virgin until marriage. Nonetheless the other half hold more tolerant views regarding sexuality. Among those with more tolerant attitudes, we see that more males tend to be ambivalent about the issue than females, while more females tend to hold a more liberal view than males.

Table 2 also shows that important differences in sexual initiation exist between young men and young women. Close to 60% of young males in the sample are sexually experienced versus slightly under 50% of young females. The greatest differences, however, are in the dominant form of sexual initiation for each gender. Among young males, premarital first sex is most prevalent (48%). Alternately, marital first sex is most prevalent among young females (33%). These differences provide evidence of the continued existence of a sexual-double standard regarding sexual initiation. Even so, close to 17% of females in the sample reported a premarital first sexual experience⁷.

In terms of family characteristics, table 2 shows that young men and women report comparable levels of maternal education. Although, young men seem to report somewhat greater levels of educational attainment for their mothers than those reported by young women. More young women also appear to live in poorer households than young men. Nonetheless the observed differences do not exceed the 5% for each level of income.

⁷ Issues of underreporting have not been addressed here, but will need to be so in the future.

More striking are the differences in the levels of mother-youth sex communication, parental control in dating and socializing, and type of parenting style reported by males and females. Communication about sex between mothers' and youth is moderately low, especially when it involves young males. Among males, only 20% reported talking somewhat or a lot with their mothers about sex. By contrast over 40% of the young females reported talking somewhat or a lot with their mothers about sex.

In terms of parental control in dating and socializing, over 80% of young males reported high levels of autonomy (low parental control), and only about 1.4 % reported very strict parental control (high parental control). In stark contrast, only about 16 % of females reported a high level of autonomy in dating, and socializing and over three-quarters reported medium (57.6%) to high (27.4%) levels of parental control. These differences in the level of control parents exert over their sons and daughters provide further evidence of the centrality of the family in controlling women's sexuality and in maintaining a double standard in the sexual initiation of young males and females.

Type of parenting style reported by the youth shows the least differences by gender. Most young males and females reported an inductive parenting style characterized by communication and open discussion between the parent and the youth. Less than 10% of males and females reported having parents who treated them with indifference. However, about a quarter of females reported having parents who punished them to instill discipline. By contrast less than 20% of males reported having parents who use punishments as a way of discipline.

Overall, the picture that emerges is one where the majority of youth continue to uphold a conservative view regarding sexuality, especially female sexuality. Nonetheless

a significant proportion of youth seems to challenge the normative standard and either choose a more ambivalent position, or develop a more liberal attitude. While the sexual double-standard is evident in terms of the routes of sexual initiation reported by young males and females, I note important deviations from the norm, especially among young females. That parents seem also to uphold divergent attitudes towards the sexuality of their sons and daughters is evident in the differential levels of control they exercise over their children's dating and socializing, and in the methods they use to instill discipline.

To understand how these differences in family characteristics and parental-youth relations affect the sexual attitudes and first sexual experiences of young men and women I next move to a multivariate framework. In the multivariate framework I first discuss the effects of family characteristics and parent-youth relations on the sexual attitudes of young men and women. Second, I discuss the effects of these same factors on the type of first sexual experience reported by young men and women in the sample. The discussion below refers to the effects of family characteristics and parent-youth relations net of other individual and area characteristics known to affect the sexual attitudes and behaviors of youth. These include the youth's age, educational attainment, current school enrollment, work experience by age 15, experience living outside the parental home for at least 6 months by age 15, religious affiliation, sexual experience (in the case of sexual attitudes), and place of residence.

Family Contexts and Sexual Attitudes among Mexican Youth

Table 4 presents the results of the multinomial logistic regression of the effects of the family context on the sexual attitudes of young men and women in Mexico. The three

columns included for each gender present the relative odds of holding a liberal versus conservative sexual attitude, an ambivalent versus conservative sexual attitude, and a liberal versus ambivalent sexual attitude, respectively. More simply, the first two columns show the likelihood of holding a more tolerant sexual attitude (ie. liberal or ambivalent) compared to a conservative sexual attitude. The third column, gives more detail by presenting the likelihood of holding a more liberal attitude versus being ambivalent about the issue of female sexuality.

Parental attitudes and values

In this study I gauge parental sexual attitudes and values through the mother's education and the household income. I had hypothesized that in the case of Mexico, more educated mothers and high income families would have more liberal sexual attitudes and that this would be reflected on the sexual attitudes of their children. As expected, table 4 shows that both, sons and daughters of mothers with college education are significantly more likely to hold a more liberal or ambivalent versus conservative sexual attitude than sons and daughters of uneducated mothers. That is, having a mother with college education increases the likelihood that young males and females will have a more tolerant sexual attitude. The effects of mother's education seem to operate as well at lower levels of educational attainment. In particular, having a mother with high-school education also increases the likelihood of having a more tolerant versus conservative sexual attitude, particularly among young females. However, the magnitude and significance of the effect is much smaller when compared to that of college education.

Family income has a significant and positive effect on the sexual attitudes of young males only. Young males of upper-middle and high-income families are more likely to hold more tolerant (liberal and ambivalent) versus conservative sexual attitudes

than young males of lower-income families. In contrast to my expectations, family income does not seem to affect the sexual attitudes of young females.

Mother-youth sex communication

Table 4 also provides evidence that mother-youth sex communication significantly affects the sexual attitudes of young males and females. Young males and females who talk some or a lot about sex with their mothers are more likely to hold more tolerant (liberal and ambivalent) versus conservative sexual attitudes than young males and females who do not talk about sex with their mothers. More so, talking about sex with mothers also increases the likelihood of having a more liberal versus an ambiguous sexual attitude among young men and women. That is, communication about sex between mothers and youth helps the youth develop a more clear personal position regarding their sexuality. As expected, the effects of mother-youth sex communication are stronger among young males than among young females. It is possible that mothers who talk to their sons about sex discuss issues related to the sexual rights of young women, thereby having a stronger impact on the break-down of the sexual double standard.

Parental control in dating and socializing

As expected, levels of parental control in dating and socializing have differential effects on the sexual attitudes of young males and females. For young males, parental control is only significant at low levels. Young males who report low levels of parental control are more likely to hold more tolerant (liberal and ambivalent) versus conservative sexual attitudes than young males who report moderate levels of parental control. By contrast, among young females we observe an important impact on sexual attitudes at low and high levels of parental control. Low levels of parental control are associated with more tolerant sexual attitudes while high levels of parental control are

associated with more conservative sexual attitudes. More so, at low levels of parental control, young women are more likely to have a more defined, and liberal sexual attitude.

Assuming that parent's sexual attitudes and values are reflected on their childrearing practices, these findings suggest that, in Mexico, parental sexual attitudes do influence the sexual attitudes of their children. That is, families influence younger people's attitudes through the intergenerational transmission of values from parents to children. This influence appears to be stronger among young females than among young males.

Parenting style

Table 4 evidences the effects of punitive parenting techniques on the formation of sexual attitudes among young people. These results show that both, young males and females who experience punishments in the home are more likely to have more liberal versus ambivalent and conservative sexual attitudes than young males and females who do not experience punishments in the home. Indeed, it is interesting that among the family factors of interest in this analysis this is the only one that does not significantly raise the likelihood of having an ambivalent versus conservative sexual attitude. This suggest, as hypothesized, that youth who experience punishments in the home attempt to rebel against their parents by embracing views opposite to the accepted social standard. It is interesting that among young women, the experience of parental indifference also increases their likelihood of holding more tolerant (liberal and ambivalent) versus conservative sexual attitudes. It is likely that women who experience more indifference in the home become more autonomous and hence develop sexual attitudes more independently.

Overall, these findings support the thesis that the family continues to be an important dimension of life shaping the sexual attitudes of young males and females. Indeed, these findings evidence that the family may not only be a source of continued tradition, but also a source of change. Parents and families can instill traditional sexual values on their children through their childrearing and parenting techniques. In a similar fashion, by choosing to talk to their children about sex and allowing them some level of autonomy in dating and socializing parents can instill more novel, in this case liberal, sexual values in their children. Evident here is also the fact that families are heterogeneous in their values and attitudes towards sexuality. Higher income families and families with educated mothers appear to hold more liberal attitudes towards sexuality, whereas lower income families and families with less educated mothers appear to hold more traditional sexual attitudes. The effects of these differences become apparent in the values held by the children of these families.

The question that emerges from these findings is to what extent do families also shape the sexual behaviors of their children? In the next section I discuss the effects of the family on the first sexual experiences of young males and females.

Family Contexts and First Sexual Experiences among Mexican Youth

Table 5 presents the results of the multinomial logistic regression of the effects of the family context on the first sexual experience of young men and women in Mexico. The three columns included under each gender show the relative odds of experiencing a premarital first sex versus no sex, a marital first sex versus no sex, and a premarital first sex versus a marital first sex, respectively. More simply, the first two columns show the

likelihood of experiencing sex versus no sex, while the last column shows the likelihood that the first sexual experience will be premarital as opposed to marital.

Parental attitudes and values

Table 5 shows that the proxies for parental values –mother’s education and household income- significantly affect the sexual initiation of their children. It is difficult, however, to interpret the effects of mother’s education on sexual initiation. The general trend appears to be one where greater levels of maternal education increase the likelihood that the son or daughter will experience a first premarital sex versus no sex, although the effect is only significant at the college level and is most significant among young women. This is consistent with my hypothesis that educated mothers are more likely to have liberal sexual attitudes towards sexuality. Moreover, greater maternal education appears to diminish the likelihood of experiencing first sex at marriage versus no sex. This is consistent with the prior statement. However, this effect is reversed for mothers with college education. Among young women, in particular, it appears that college education significantly increases the likelihood of experiencing first sex at marriage versus no sex by 80% ($p < .001$). Overall, among young females, having a mother with college education increases the likelihood of experiencing sex, both before marriage and at marriage.

The interpretation of household income is slightly more straightforward. Living in a high-income family does not seem to increase the likelihood of having premarital sex versus no sex. However, it greatly decreases the likelihood that the first sexual experience of the youth will take place at marriage. Indeed, even when youth of high-income families are no more likely to have premarital sex than youth of lower income families, in the event that they do have sex, it is most likely to be before marriage than at marriage.

The effects of household income are similar for young males and females, although the magnitude of the effect is somewhat stronger among young males. Thus, we can say that belonging to a high-income family increases the odds of eventually experiencing first sex prior to marriage among young males and females.

Mother-youth sex communication

Interestingly, and contrary to my expectations, the effect of mother-youth sex communication on sexual behavior differs by gender. Among young males, talking about sex with the mother increases the likelihood of having premarital sex versus no sex by 15%. By contrast, among young females, sex communication with the mother decreases the likelihood of experiencing sex versus no sex by 11% (premarital) and 14% (marital). This is the case for both marital and premarital sex. One way to interpret these results is that among young women, the message conveyed in the conversation with mothers is that of abstinence.

Parental control in dating and socializing

I also find differing effects of parental control in dating and socializing on the sexual behavior of young males and females. As expected, among males, low levels of parental control increase the likelihood of experiencing premarital sex versus no sex. At the same time, low levels of parental control decrease the likelihood of experiencing marital first sex versus no sex. The overall effect for males is that low levels of parental control significantly increase the likelihood of having premarital sex versus waiting to have sex at marriage by 100% ($p > .001$). Among young females, low levels of parental do not increase the likelihood of experiencing premarital sex versus no sex. However, it

greatly decreases the likelihood of waiting until marriage to experience sex. The net effect is that at low levels of parental control young females are twice as likely to experience first sex prior to marriage than at marriage ($p < .001$). More interesting, at high levels of parental control, young females are more likely to experience sex in general versus no sex, although the strongest effect is for experiencing first sex at marriage. Hence, the overall effect is that at high levels of parental control young women are about 40% less likely to experience first sex prior to marriage than at marriage ($p < .001$).

These findings are consistent with the hypotheses that parental values are transmitted to children through childrearing practices, in this case parental supervision in dating and socializing. In the case of young women, at high levels of control, there also seems to be some level of dissonance between parental values and youth attitudes, and possibly some evidence of rebellion. Indeed, the reason why young women may be more likely to have first sex at marriage than prior to marriage may be that they are marrying early in order to leave the parental home.

Type of parenting style

The effects of parenting style on sexual initiation are also intriguing. Only experiencing punishments –and not indifference– in the home significantly affects the sexual initiation of young males and females. In addition, punitive parenting techniques appear to have a similar effect on the sexual initiation of young males and females. Among males, experiencing punishments in the home increases the likelihood of premarital and marital sex versus no sex by 36% and 62%, respectively. The overall effect is that young males are more likely to experience sex, and their first sexual experience is most likely to be marital. Indeed, young males with punitive parents are

16% times less likely to experience premarital versus marital first sex than young males who do not have punitive parents. This finding is intriguing given the general environment that condones the sexual behaviors of males. It may be that experiencing punitive parents leads young males to marry quickly in order to leave the parental family. Hence, they are more likely to experience first sex at marriage.

Among young females, having punitive parents also increases the likelihood that they will experience sex, both premarital and marital, versus no sex. Contrary to young males, however, girls with punitive parents are no more likely to have first sex at marriage versus prior to marriage than girls without punitive parents. Nonetheless, young women who report being punished are 65% times more likely to experience premarital sex and 58% more likely to experience first sex at marriage versus no sex than young women who do not report being punished. Hence, these findings may also reflect some level of rebellion by young women.

The overall image that emerges for first sexual experiences is that the family does influence the choices young males and females make about with whom to experience first sex. However, unlike the effects of the family on the sexual attitudes of youth, the effects on sexual behavior are less clear. The results appear to suggest two main underlying processes shaping the relation between the family and the sexual behavior of young men and women. The first process is characterized by a close fit between parental values and the sexual behavior of youth, providing evidence of the intergenerational transmission of sexual attitudes through value internalization and compliance. This appears to be the case for household income, parental control at low levels, and to some extent, mother's education. The second process is characterized by dissonance between parental values

and the sexual behavior of youth, which provides potential evidence of the declining authority of parents over the younger generations. This seems to be the case for parental control at high levels, and punitive parenting techniques. The divergent effects of mother-youth sex communication on the sexual behavior of young males and females, however, remind us to be careful in interpreting indirect measures of parental attitudes and values. Notwithstanding this caveat, these findings evidence the continued importance of the family in shaping the sexual behaviors of the younger generations, even during times of rapid change.

7. Concluding Remarks

This study has sought to shed light on the factors shaping the sexual attitudes and first sexual experiences of young adults in Mexico at the turn of the 21st century. The underlying assumption is that Mexican society is currently undergoing profound transformations with important implications for the liberalization of sexual behavior. The main argument is that the Mexican family is implicated in this transformation through its role in the continuation and transformation of attitudes and values surrounding sexuality, especially the sexuality of young women.

Although, due to data limitations in this study I was not able to examine change over time and document that Mexico is indeed experiencing a process of sexual liberation, I do show evidence which suggests that the current normative environment surrounding sexuality is in flux. Moreover, this study also provides evidence that the parental family significantly affects young men and women's sexual attitudes and first sexual experiences. Indeed, the type of families youth belong to, how much control parents exert over the lives of their adolescent children, what techniques they use to

discipline their children, and how much they talk to their children about sex, impacts the sexual attitudes and choices youth make about their own sexuality. Through these mechanisms families can facilitate the maintenance or transformation of sexual values and attitudes. It appears then, that in the case of Mexico, families play a pivotal role in the shaping of sexuality and of norms about appropriate sexual conduct.

The effects of the family, however, appear to be stronger for the case of sexual attitudes than for the case of sexual behavior. Indeed, the overall effects of the various dimensions of the family explored here on the first sexual experiences of young males and females suggest some contradictory patterns. It is possible that in understanding sexual behavior we need to consider the existence of other pressures, external to the family environment, that may limit the sexual expression of young males and females.

In addition, this analysis also identifies gender differences in the impact of parent-youth relations on sexual attitudes and behaviors. The results presented here, however, are only preliminary. Further analysis is needed to clarify these gender differences and to understand how the attitudes and behaviors of youth are related.

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Table 1. Definition and Measurement of Key Variables used in Analysis

	Definition	Measurement
Outcome variables		
Sexual Attitude	Sexual attitude towards the value of female virginity. Based on a question that asked youth whether they agreed, had no opinion or disagreed with the statement that women should remain virgin until marriage. Those who agreed are coded as <i>conservative</i> ; those with no opinion as <i>ambivalent</i> , and those who disagreed as <i>liberal</i> .	0=conservative 1=ambivalent 2=liberal
1st Sexual Experience	Type of first sexual experience. Based on reports of ever having experienced sex, age at first sex, and age at first union.	0=no sex 1=premarital 2=marital
Predictor Variables		
<i>Mother's Education</i>	Highest level of education attained by the youth's mother.	0=no education 1=elementary 2=high-school 3=college +
<i>Household Income</i>	Pooled household income	1=low 2=lower-middle 3=upper-middle 4=high
<i>Mother-Youth Sex Communication</i>	Whether the youth's talks with mother about sex.	0=never/little 1=some/a lot
<i>Parental Control</i>		
Dating and Socializing	Youth's level of autonomy in dating, going out, arriving late, and dress style.	1=low 2=medium 3=high
<i>Parenting Style</i>	Style parents use (used) to discipline the youth. Based on youth's reports of what parents do when youth does something they disapprove of. <i>Inductive</i> : parents talk with youth; <i>Indifferent</i> : parents say or do nothing; <i>Punitive</i> : parents accuse, punish, or hit the youth.	0=inductive 1=indifferent 2=punitive

Source: National Youth Survey 2000, Mexico.

Table 1.1 Rotated Factor Pattern and Final Communality Estimates from Principal Component Analysis of Parental Control Measures

Males			Females			Items
Component*			Component*			
1	2	h2	1	2	h2	
0.12	0.76	0.59	0.16	0.70	0.51	Question: In your parents home, are (were) you allowed to or is (was) it prohibited to...
0.86	0.20	0.77	0.89	0.18	0.83	1. have girlfriend/boy friend
0.37	0.57	0.47	0.17	0.74	0.58	2. smoke
0.88	0.17	0.80	0.90	0.18	0.84	3. go out with friends
0.02	0.74	0.55	0.00	0.66	0.44	4. drink alcohol
—	—	—	0.28	0.64	0.50	5. dress as you like
0.79	0.07	0.62	0.80	0.13	0.66	6. arrive late home
						7. body piercing or tatooing

Source: Encuesta Nacional de Juventud 2000, Mexico.

*Components: 1: Personal Behavior; 2: Dating and Socializing

Table 2. Percent Distribution of 1st Sexual Experience of Youth and of Parent-Youth Relations.

	Total	Males	Females
	%	%	%
Outcome Variables			
<i>Attitude towards Sexuality</i>			
Conservative	48.7	47.2	49.9
Ambivalent	31.0	33.3	29.1
Liberal	20.3	19.5	21.0
<i>Type of First Sexual Experience</i>			
No Experience	46.6	41.9	50.3
Non-marital	30.8	48.2	16.7
Marital	22.6	9.9	33.0
Predictor Variables			
Family Characteristics			
<i>Mother's education</i>			
No education	16.4	15.3	17.4
Elementary	59.0	57.8	60.0
Highschool	18.3	20.4	16.5
College	6.3	6.4	6.1
<i>Household Income</i>			
Low (0-25%)	25.4	22.6	27.7
Lower Middle (25-50%)	26.3	25.9	26.6
Upper Middle (50-75%)	23.4	24.4	22.6
High (75-100%)	24.9	27.1	23.2
Parent-Youth Relations			
<i>Mother-Youth Sex Communication</i>			
None or Little	68.4	80.0	59.1
Somewhat or A lot	31.6	20.0	40.9
<i>Parental Control</i>			
Parental Control in Dating and Socializing			
Low	-	82.8	15.6
Medium	-	15.8	57.6
High	-	1.4	27.4
<i>Parenting Style</i>			
Inductive	69.0	70.8	67.6
Indifferent	8.7	9.6	7.9
Punitive	22.3	19.6	24.5
Number of Cases	31,541	14,144	17,397
% of total	(100.0)	(44.8)	(55.2)

Source: National Youth Survey 2000, Mexico.

Table 3. Percent Distribution of Socio-demographic Characteristics of Youth

	Pooled	Males	Females
	%	%	%
Control Variables			
Youth's Socio-demographic Characteristics			
<i>Age</i>			
15-19	41.4	43.8	39.5
20-24	32.6	31.6	33.3
25-29	26.0	24.6	27.2
<i>Educational Attainment</i>			
Elementary or less	27.4	24.7	29.7
Secondary	37.8	37.9	37.7
Highschool	24.2	25.9	22.8
College or higher	10.6	11.5	9.8
Currently Enrolled in School	34.2	36.1	32.8
First Job by Age 15	41.9	53.2	32.8
Left Home by Age 15	10.7	8.1	12.8
<i>Religious Affiliation</i>			
Practicing Catholic	42.5	38.1	46.1
Non-practicing Catholic	44.0	48.2	40.6
Other religion	11.5	11.0	12.0
Not religious	2.0	2.8	1.4
Area Characteristics			
<i>Place of Residence (Pop. Size)</i>			
Under 2,500	21.7	21.5	21.9
2,500-14,999	15.8	14.9	16.6
15,000-19,999	5.4	5.3	5.5
20,000-99,999	14.1	14.1	14.0
100,000 and above	43.1	44.3	42.1
Number of Cases	31,541	14,144	17,397
% of total	(100.0)	(44.8)	(54.2)

Source: National Youth Survey 2000, Mexico.

Table 4. Multinomial Logistic Regression of the Effects of the Family on the Sexual Attitudes of Young Males and Females aged 15-29, Mexico.

	MALES						FEMALES					
	Liberal vs. Conservative		Ambivalent vs. Conservative		Liberal vs. Ambivalent		Liberal vs. Conservative		Ambivalent vs. Conservative		Liberal vs. Ambivalent	
	OR	Z	OR	Z	OR	Z	OR	Z	OR	Z	OR	Z
Family Characteristics												
<i>Mother's education</i>												
(No education)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Elementary	1.01	(0.10)	0.95	(0.83)	1.06	(0.69)	1.06	(0.86)	1.06	(1.10)	0.99	(0.09)
Highschool	1.19	† (1.91)	1.07	(0.90)	1.12	(1.14)	1.17 *	(1.96)	1.13	† (1.72)	1.04	(0.43)
College or higher	1.49	*** (3.27)	1.23 *	(1.97)	1.21	(1.60)	1.26 *	(2.15)	1.31	** (2.84)	0.96	(0.37)
<i>Household Income</i>												
Low	1.01	(0.16)	1.03	(0.44)	0.98	(0.20)	0.91	(1.51)	0.90	† (1.89)	1.01	(0.11)
(Lower Middle)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Upper Middle	1.21	** (2.75)	1.14 *	(2.29)	1.06	(0.82)	1.12	† (1.82)	1.06	(1.07)	1.06	(0.84)
High	1.33	*** (4.05)	1.20	** (3.14)	1.11	(1.49)	1.09	(1.33)	1.07	(1.29)	1.01	(0.18)
Parent-Youth Relations												
<i>Mother-Youth Sex Communication</i>												
(None/Little)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Some/A lot	1.60	*** (7.81)	1.22	*** (3.72)	1.31	*** (4.57)	1.25	*** (4.88)	1.13	** (3.12)	1.10	* (2.05)
<i>Parental Control</i>												
Control in Dating and Socializing	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Low	1.13	† (1.75)	1.28	*** (4.22)	0.88	(1.61)	1.43	*** (5.79)	1.24	*** (3.88)	1.15	* (2.26)
(Medium)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
High	1.10	(0.44)	1.04	(0.19)	1.06	(0.26)	0.86	** (2.77)	0.79	*** (5.04)	1.09	(1.51)
<i>Parenting Style</i>												
(Inductive)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Indifferent	1.08	(1.00)	1.04	(0.51)	1.05	(0.57)	1.22	* (2.45)	1.19	* (2.46)	1.03	(0.30)
Punitive	1.18	** (2.67)	0.91	† (1.80)	1.30	*** (4.04)	1.32	*** (5.40)	1.02	(0.50)	1.29	*** (4.62)
Youth's Characteristics												
<i>Age</i>												
(15-19)	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
20-24	1.08	(1.10)	1.03	(0.65)	1.04	(0.55)	1.29	*** (4.24)	1.17	** (2.97)	1.11	(1.59)
25-29	1.26	** (2.90)	1.08	(1.09)	1.17	† (1.94)	1.39	*** (4.75)	1.23	*** (3.43)	1.12	(1.62)

Table 5. continued ...

	MALES				FEMALES							
	Premarital 1st Sex vs. No Sex		Marital 1st Sex vs. No Sex		Premarital 1st Sex vs. No Sex		Marital 1st Sex vs. No Sex					
	OR	Z	OR	Z	OR	Z	OR	Z				
Youth's Characteristics												
<i>Educational Attainment</i>												
Elementary or less (Secondary)	0.92	(1.38)	1.15	(1.56)	0.80 ***	(2.81)	1.06	(0.84)	1.24 ***	(3.79)	0.85 *	(2.55)
Highschool	1.23 ***	(4.38)	0.92	(0.78)	1.41 ***	(3.57)	0.90	(1.49)	0.68 ***	(5.72)	1.32 ***	(3.83)
College or higher	1.36 ***	(3.61)	0.81	(1.36)	1.70 ***	(3.74)	0.71 ***	(3.85)	0.43 ***	(9.00)	1.65 ***	(5.05)
Currently Enrolled in School	0.49 ***	(13.00)	0.23 ***	(12.46)	2.13 ***	(6.61)	0.41 ***	(14.30)	0.25 ***	(22.23)	1.61 ***	(6.52)
First Job by Age 15	1.22 ***	(4.17)	1.17 *	(2.15)	1.03	(0.48)	1.49 ***	(7.03)	1.40	(6.56)	1.06	(1.16)
Left Home by Age 15	2.10 ***	(8.52)	1.92 ***	(5.14)	1.09	(0.84)	2.53 ***	(11.15)	3.98 ***	(18.93)	0.64 ***	(6.42)
<i>Religious Affiliation</i>												
(Practicing Catholic)	—		—		—		—		—		—	
Non-practicing Catholic	1.24 **	(4.35)	0.97	(0.36)	1.27 ***	(3.38)	1.60 ***	(8.59)	1.40 ***	(6.84)	1.14 *	(2.37)
Other religion	0.96 †	(0.57)	1.03	(0.28)	0.93	(0.73)	1.26 **	(2.80)	1.26 **	(3.17)	1.00	(0.02)
Not religious	1.38 **	(2.43)	0.50 †	(2.40)	2.79 ***	(3.69)	1.95 ***	(3.33)	1.70 **	(2.73)	1.15	(0.68)
Area Characteristics												
<i>Place of Residence (Pop. Size)</i>												
(Under 2,500)	—		—		—		—		—		—	
2,500-14,999	1.07	(0.91)	1.28 †	(2.18)	0.84 †	(1.71)	1.22 †	(2.20)	1.36 **	(4.18)	0.90	(1.27)
15,000-19,999	1.37 *	(2.88)	1.74 **	(3.33)	0.79	(1.58)	1.31 †	(2.10)	1.42 **	(3.19)	0.92	(0.64)
20,000-99,999	1.44 **	(4.60)	1.22	(1.53)	1.18	(1.44)	1.32 **	(2.90)	1.50 **	(5.08)	0.89	(1.42)
100,000 and above	1.67 **	(7.95)	1.58 **	(4.53)	1.06	(0.63)	2.00 **	(9.03)	1.60 **	(7.03)	1.25 *	(2.99)
Number of Observations	14,144		14,144		14,144		17,397		17,397		17,397	

Source: National Youth Survey 2000, Mexico.

†p<0.1; *p<0.05; **p<0.01, ***p<0.001