

## Mexican-Origin Couples in the Early Years of Parenthood: Marital Well-Being in Ecological Context

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Helms, H.M., Supple, A.J. & Proulx, C. (2011). Mexican origin couples in the early years of parenthood: Marital well-being in ecological context. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 3(2), 67-95. doi: 10.1111/j.1756-2589.2011.00085.x

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### **Abstract:**

In this article, we draw from Huston's (2000) 3-level model of marriage to provide an informed and integrative template for organizing current knowledge and guiding future inquiry into the study of marital well-being among a rapidly growing segment of the United States' population: low-income, Mexican-origin couples in the early years of parenthood. More specifically, we advocate for a dyadic approach that attends to elements of the macroenvironment, such as cultural background, and how those elements interact directly and indirectly with spouses' individual characteristics and marital behavior. In so doing, we demonstrate the value of an ecological approach for understanding current research and for informing future work studying marriage among new parents of Mexican origin.

**Keywords:** ecological context | Latinos | marital relationships | Mexican couples | parenthood

### **Article:**

During the past several decades, a burgeoning number of international migrants have ushered in a second wave of globalization, unprecedented in its diversity of ethnicity, cultural origin, and gender (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Currently, there are more immigrants than at any other point in history, with more than 200 million people residing outside their country of origin. With 35 million foreign-born residents, the United States hosts the world's largest immigrant population, including migrants from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Of the diverse ethnic groups created by this second wave of immigrants and their descendents living in the United States today, U.S. Latinos are the most numerous, with those of Mexican origin (i.e., of Mexican descent) constituting the largest subgroup of this population (i.e., 64%; U.S. Census Bureau, Table B03001 of 2005–2007 American Community Survey 3-year estimates).

Latinos living in the United States constitute a young population, in part because of high fertility rates and earlier childbearing, factors that reflect cultural beliefs about the value of children and

family relationships (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000). Furthermore, Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants are more likely than other Latinos and non-Hispanic Whites to be married at younger ages. Nearly one third of Mexican American 20- to 24-year olds are married, whereas only one fifth of their non-Hispanic White counterparts are married (Oropesa & Landale, 2004). This difference is even more striking when considering the number of Latinos who are living as married but who are not legally married. Despite these high rates of marriage or marriage-like unions and earlier childbearing, most studies of Latinos have overlooked the marital relationship, both theoretically and empirically. Instead, research has focused on individual responses to stressors associated with migration and adaptation, and it has found significant, direct effects between acculturative stress and individual health and well-being (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1991; Landale, 1997; Rodriguez, Myers, Mira, Flores, & Garcia-Hernandez, 2002). Although these studies provide important information about individual patterns of health and well-being, they provide little insight into the intersection of marital well-being with macroenvironmental, individual, and relational factors. It is our intent to address this gap in the literature by advocating for an ecological approach to the study of marriage among parents of Mexican origin that attends to pertinent dimensions of ecological context and their interaction with marital behavior.

### **Why Focus on Marriage in the Early Years of Parenthood?**

Recent panel data show that, although Mexican Americans may endorse cultural values that promote marriage and marry at earlier ages than other Latinos or non-Hispanic Whites, they have marital status distributions that are similar to those of non-Hispanic Whites (Oropesa & Landale, 2004) and have surprisingly higher rates of marital dissolution during the early childrearing years (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). Indeed, a recent longitudinal analysis of marital instability among women in the United States showed that 40.9% of first marriages for Mexican American women had dissolved by the 10th year, a rate approximately four times greater than that for their foreign-born counterparts (i.e., 13.1%) and higher than the dissolution rate for non-Hispanic Whites (i.e., 31.6%; Phillips & Sweeney, 2005). The combination of earlier marriage and childbearing with a heightened risk of marital dissolution during the childrearing years suggests that the seeds of marital discord are sown during children's formative years for many couples of Mexican origin. Accordingly, a focus on marital relationships during this period is critical for understanding factors that compromise and protect marital well-being for couples of Mexican origin living in the United States.

Scholars have predicted that the marriages of young Mexican immigrants and their descendants are at risk of further decline and dissolution given the unique challenges they are likely to face living in the United States (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2008; Oropesa & Landale, 2004). In addition to the normative stressors and changes associated with the early years of parenting, the majority of parents of Mexican origin must maintain their marriages and raise their children in a socioeconomic context of disadvantage and marginalization. A particular concern is that the majority of Mexican immigrants "will face significant challenges to establishing the economic foundation necessary for marriage" (Oropesa & Landale, 2004, p. 910) and that the limited economic opportunities available to them will prevail over cultural belief systems that are generally quite supportive of marriage, childrearing, and close family relationships (Oropesa & Gorman, 2000). Despite this expressed concern and interest in the marital experiences of low-

income couples of Mexican origin, fewer than 10% of journal articles on marriage or parenting include Latino couples and families (Hagen, Nelson, & Velissaris, 2004; Helms, forthcoming; McLoyd, 1998) and even fewer publications about Latinos (i.e., less than 1%) exist among the leading psychology journals (Vega & Lopez, 2001).

Given earlier childbearing and marriage coupled with the relatively higher risk of marital dissolution in the early years of marriage, it is somewhat surprising that no published studies exist addressing the marital experiences of Mexican-origin couples in the early years of parenthood—a period rife for intervention. Intervention programs targeting “high-risk” mothers of young children and low-income couples have been developed, but most are not informed by systematic research studies with Latino or immigrant populations, nor have they addressed the larger contexts in which marriages are embedded (Cowan & Cowan, 1995; Karney & Bradbury, 2005). Instead, most studies of marriage use samples of predominantly White, relatively advantaged couples and families and lament the challenges of recruiting and retaining Latino couples with young children for marital research (Karney, Kreitz, & Sweeney, 2004). In summary, the current empirical literature offers little in the way of identifying unique macroenvironmental factors that shape the marital experiences of couples of Mexican origin raising young children.

## **Goals**

In this article, we draw from several bodies of research and theory to provide an informed and integrative template to review the limited literature that exists and to guide future inquiry in the study of marital well-being among a rapidly growing segment of the U.S. population who are at risk of marital dissolution: low-income, Mexican-origin couples in the early years of parenthood. We propose that the ecological contexts that couples inhabit play an important role in shaping marital well-being (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2008; Bradbury & Karney, 2004; Huston, 2000) and introduce an adaptation of Huston's (2000) three-level model of marriage as a helpful way to frame our review. Next, we anchor a discussion of Mexican-origin couples' marital well-being in a detailed explication of the macroenvironment, addressing dimensions most relevant to new parents of Mexican origin (i.e., sociohistorical context, culture, socioeconomic conditions, social environment, and physical environment). In our review, we consider how these five dimensions of the macroenvironment may interact with individual properties and marital behavior both directly and indirectly. For example, we provide examples elucidating specifically how macroenvironmental factors translate into marital behavior, as well as how qualities of the individual may amplify or attenuate the effects of the macroenvironment in which marital behavior is embedded. Recognizing the lacuna of research investigating the combination of husbands' and wives' individual properties and macroenvironmental contexts, we next advocate for a dyadic approach to the study of marriage among Mexican-origin couples. In this section, we provide concrete suggestions for sampling and methods that support the study of couples, and we argue that a dyadic approach is essential to advance understanding of important within-couple similarities and differences in model paths. We close our review with recommendations for future research and possible theoretical extensions of the model.

Our goal is not to offer an exhaustive review or a singular conceptual model to be tested but to demonstrate the value of a theoretical approach for interpreting current research and informing

the types of research areas that should be addressed in the future study of marriage among Mexican-origin couples. Although the ideas presented may be applicable to marital couples at other locations in the life course, other families of color, or immigrant families in general, we focus our review on one particular understudied population with the goal of encouraging a thoughtful analysis of within-group variation based on the consideration of factors that are particularly relevant to this group (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000, 2007; DeReus, Few, & Blume, 2005; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000; Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007). We use a variety of contemporary research to illustrate Huston's ecological model, with an emphasis on dimensions of the model that are most relevant to Mexican-origin couples and have been underused in studies of predominantly White couples. In so doing, we lay the groundwork for future research to focus on the multilayered and interdependent contextual factors that characterize, maintain, and modify variations in the marital experiences of low-income Mexican-origin couples in the early years of parenthood.

### **Huston's Three-Level Model of Marriage**

More than a decade ago, family scholars advocated for the application of culturally sensitive frameworks to the study of immigrant, marginalized, and minority families (Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, & Johnson, 1993). Nonetheless, in the most recent edition of *Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research*, McAdoo, Martinez, and Hughes (2005) purported that researchers have yet to develop and use such frameworks, which has resulted in incomplete and, at worst, inaccurate depictions of families of color or ethnic-minority status. Originally designed to provide an interdisciplinary framework for studying marital relationships, Huston's (2000) model is particularly useful for the study of Mexican-origin couples in that it parsimoniously integrates and expands principles from various social and behavioral theoretical perspectives that have been deemed important by those promoting culturally sensitive frameworks (Figure 1). The model addresses concerns raised by scholars advocating for the study of Mexican-origin couples in that it carefully attends to “contextual factors that shape their ability to sustain their marital relationships over time” (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2008, p. 231). In our adaptation and application of Huston's original model, we demonstrate how an approach that attends to relevant dimensions of the ecological contexts in which Mexican-origin spouses and their marriages are embedded and the mechanisms linking these dimensions to individual spouses and their marital behavior is necessary to adequately understand the marital experiences of Mexican-origin couples in the early years of parenthood. Because we are interested in couples who are also parents of young children, we adapted the model to focus on marital behavior in the context of parenthood and added elements to the model that are unique to parents (e.g., division of parenting and child care, spouse's evaluations of one another as parents).

[Figure 1 Omitted]

Informed by the work of Kelley et al. (1983), Huston's (2000) model emerged from a critique of marital scholarship in which he asserted that scholars have typically focused on one dimension of a much larger causal system, thus resulting in an incomplete and perhaps inaccurate depiction of marriage. Juxtaposing research that focused on behavioral exchanges between spouses and their links with marital quality with studies that adopted a broader, macroenvironmental lens, Huston argued:

The propensity of researchers to use either an unfocused lens or to zero in on narrow and isolated slices of the larger marital terrain has produced a literature on marriage that provides limited insight into how marriages actually work. Such a state of affairs also has undermined the development of sophisticated theories designed to link the qualities and dispositions of the spouses to features of the marriage relationship and has hindered efforts to examine how the ecological context influences the details of couples' day-to-day married life. (p. 299)

We add to this critique and assert that a singular focus on behavioral interactions within marriage or attention to dimensions of the macroenvironment via imprecisely measured proxies is especially worrisome for the study of Mexican-origin couples, many of whom are low income. With increased funding for marriage-promoting interventions and public policies targeting low-income populations, it is essential to ground empirical analyses in a theoretical framework that explicitly focuses on pathways linking the multiple layers of context in which low-income marriages are embedded (Huston & Melz, 2004). Such a framework is imperative not only to elucidate processes that make for successful marriage among low-income couples of Mexican origin but also to understand unique macroenvironmental, individual, and relational conditions that make these processes more likely, including minimal criteria that must be met to adequately support marriages (Karney & Bradbury, 2005).

### **Marital Behavior in the Context of Parenthood**

At the most basic level of his model, Huston (2000) identified three central elements to understanding marriage: marital behavior, individual properties, and the macroenvironment. In our adaptation, “Marital Behavior in the Context of Parenthood” (see Figure 1, Box C), represents intradyadic behavioral exchanges and patterns that characterize the marital experiences of parents. Considered important for a thorough understanding of marriage are (c<sub>1</sub>) macrobehavioral patterns capturing spouses' daily mundane activities, including companionship, leisure, and the divisions of parenting responsibilities, child care, and housework, and (c<sub>2</sub>) microbehavioral interactional exchanges that provide details about spouses' face-to-face interaction, including not only the content of what spouses' actually say to one another but also how they communicate (e.g., the affect in their voice, facial expressions, and posturing). This distinction is useful because it underscores the nested nature of micro- and macrobehavioral interactions in the model and suggests that “macrobehavioral activities ... provide the larger ecological context within which microbehavioral marital behaviors are played out” (Huston, 2000, p. 306).

### **Individuals**

Huston (2000) drew an important distinction between marital behavior (a relationship property) and individual spouses through his inclusion of Box B. Titled “Individuals,” Box B has two key components: (b<sub>1</sub>) spouses' intrapersonal qualities, such as their psychological characteristics including personality traits, cultural and gendered orientations and values, immigration history, ethnic identity, parenting beliefs, and physical health, and (b<sub>2</sub>) spouses' beliefs and attitudes about the marriage and evaluations of each other in the role of spouse and parent. The inclusion of b<sub>2</sub> separates husbands' and wives' evaluations of and feelings about their marriage and each

other as a spouse and parent from their actual behavior within the marriage (Box C). Because this distinction is often blurred in marital research, researchers miss an important opportunity to examine how spouses' beliefs, feelings, and attitudes about the marriage and each other are linked to the interactions they engage in, or fail to engage in, in their roles as spouse and parent. Furthermore, by characterizing spouses' marital evaluations as an individual property nested within their own psychological and physical makeup, the model makes explicit the interdependence that exists regarding the ways in which spouses' personal qualities interact with their feelings about their marriages and each other. Compatibility theories of marriage further inform the model and suggest that congruence in husbands' and wives' qualities and beliefs is important for a mutually satisfying marriage. These theories further underscore the importance of the dyadic patterning of spouses' personal qualities and the potential for disparities within couples based on gender (Helms, Proulx, Klute, McHale, & Crouter, 2006; Huston & Houts, 1998; McHale & Crouter, 1992). In short, the interdependence, patterning, and potential crossover effects of spouses' personal qualities and their marital evaluations are emphasized, along with potential within-couple variations in the “match” of spouses' qualities and views of the marriage and each other.

### **The Macroenvironment**

The macroenvironment (Box A), accounts for the various contexts in which individuals (Box B) and their marital behavior (Box C) are embedded, including ( $a_1$ ) the larger macrosocietal context and ( $a_2$ ) spouses' ecological niches (i.e., the social and physical settings in which spouses function on a daily basis; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1979). In Box A, spouses' ecological niches represent proximal dimensions of the social environment ( $a_{2i}$ ; e.g., parent-child relationships; relationships with extended kin, coworkers, friends, and community members) and the physical environment spouses' inhabit on a daily basis ( $a_{2ii}$ ; e.g., housing, workplace, neighborhood, proximity to kin and work). These ecological niches are nested within the larger macrosocietal context that includes sociohistorical location ( $a_{1i}$ ; e.g., historical events, including immigration patterns of a particular group and area of the country), dynamic dimensions of culture such as norms and values members of a cultural or subcultural group endorse ( $a_{1ii}$ ), and overarching socioeconomic conditions ( $a_{1iii}$ ; e.g., laws, policies, physical resources, economic opportunity) that have the ability to either facilitate or inhibit individual development and marital functioning. The two components of the macroenvironment are interrelated in that the macrosocietal context can alter spouses' ecological niches, and spouses' ecological niches are often the medium through which macrosocietal dimensions of context are articulated, reinforced, or undermined.

### **Model Paths**

Perhaps the greatest contribution of Huston's (2000) model is the attention to the multilayered, interdependent pathways (i.e., Paths 1–6) within and between each element of the model that provide a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the myriad possibilities linking context, individual properties, and marital behavior. Both the direct and indirect paths to and from parents' marital behavior remind us of the complex and dynamic nature of individuals, marital behavior, and the macroenvironment. Huston's useful visual heuristic articulates specifically how dimensions of the macroenvironment penetrate individuals and their marital behavior, how individual qualities color how they interpret and experience dimensions of the

macroenvironment, and how behaviors repeated collectively and over time can alter the macroenvironmental landscape.

Huston's (2000) work diverged from the writings of scholars in the cultural psychology tradition who suggested that certain elements of the macroenvironment (e.g., culture, sociohistorical context) cannot be separated from observed behavior (e.g., Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1996; Shweder, 1991). Although Huston (personal communication, January 26, 2010) supports the assertion that individuals and behavior are embedded in a larger macroenvironment, his model differs in that it provides a nuanced and sophisticated analysis of the variety of ways in which macroenvironmental factors are activated in everyday behavior by disentangling them from one another. This approach aligns with the theoretical writings of a growing body of scholars who encourage an understanding of both between and within-group variability in behavior (e.g., Adamopoulos, 2008; van de Vijver, van Hemert, & Poortinga, 2008) and is particularly useful for researchers interested in examining unexplored presumptions regarding specifically how macroenvironmental factors translate into behavior. Because researchers are pragmatically limited to testing pieces of the overall model in a single study, the model provides a useful template for illustrating how “research agendas that start at different places and end at different places might be framed[,] ... and [it] shows the kind of data that would be required” to adequately answer research questions involving different dimensions of the model (Huston, personal communication, January 26, 2010). In addition, the focus on how various components of the model interact rather than simple main effects is particularly applicable to the study of couples of Mexican origin, for whom it has been stated that the most important contributions of future research will come “in the form of significant interactions of multiple sources of influence” (Roosa, Morgan-Lopez, Cree, & Specter, 2002, p. 40).

### **The Macroenvironmental Context and the Marital Experiences of Mexican-Origin Spouses**

A growing body of research documents the challenges posed by macroenvironmental factors that Latino immigrants encounter as they adjust to life in the United States (Bush, Bohon, & Kim, 2005). However, recent scholarship has underscored the tremendous diversity that exists among Latinos based on several dimensions of the macroenvironment, including their country of origin, the historical context surrounding immigration from their country of origin, their cultural adaptation, and socioeconomic conditions (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2008; Roosa et al., 2002; Umaña-Taylor & Alfaro, 2006). The macrosocietal context ( $a_1$ ) orients researchers to the consideration of several important and interacting dimensions of context on which Latinos are likely to vary, including sociohistorical location; the cultural norms, beliefs, and practices of the host society and ethnic group in which spouses' daily activities are located; and the socioeconomic conditions that often interact with cultural and sociohistorical factors. In turn, the ecological niches ( $a_2$ ) that spouses' inhabit may reinforce or undermine dimensions of the macrosocietal context as couples take advantage of opportunities and respond to challenges posed by their immediate social and physical settings.

#### **Sociohistorical Context**

An understanding of sociohistorical ( $a_{1i}$ ) location, including how contemporary Mexican immigrants are similar to and different from other Latino or immigrants groups—both

contemporary and historical cohorts—is an important first step in establishing a rationale for a within-group examination of the marital experiences of Mexican-origin couples with young children. Recent work in immigration studies has highlighted the heterogeneity of experience for contemporary immigrants and Latinos (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2008). Immigration today is characterized by greater diversity of origin and circumstance than the first period of globalization that occurred from 1870 to 1950. The recognition of striking differences among contemporary immigrant groups (including a variety of Latino subgroups) in their backgrounds, experiences in the United States, and outcomes has led scholars to question linear models of assimilation and instead search for models that better reflect the diversity of experience for today's immigrant groups (Jensen, 2001; Roosa et al., 2002). This body of work underscores the unique experience of Mexican immigrants in comparison to both their historic and their contemporary counterparts, including other Latino subgroups (e.g., Cubans, Puerto Ricans; Baca Zinn & Wells, 2008).

Historically, the Mexican experience is in some ways similar to the immigration experience of southern Europeans, in that immigrant parents and their children were discriminated against, often minimally educated, and often living in substandard work and housing conditions. Mexican immigrants are unique, however, in the historical depth of their roots in the United States. California and the Southwest are historically Mexican territories, and Mexicans inhabited these regions for hundreds of years before their disenfranchisement by Anglos after 1850. Substantial evidence shows that this unique history matters, as do the experiences of preexisting Mexican American immigrant communities formed by earlier waves of migration from Mexico. Furthermore, contemporary Mexican Americans are unique in that they have not experienced levels of upward mobility and social assimilation similar to Italian and other southern European ethnics (Lopez & Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Instead, Mexican Americans “appear stuck near the bottom ... with a small middle-class segment doing just fine, but a substantial portion seems to be left behind” (Lopez & Stanton-Salazar, 2001, pp. 61–62). This process of “downward assimilation,” in which the children of working-class immigrants fall beneath their parents' modest working-class position to an impoverished underclass, represents one path in a model of segmented assimilation that is often differentiated on color lines for today's Latino immigrant groups (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). For Mexican-immigrant couples and their children, it is believed that disproportionate poverty, immigrant group size, historical depth characterized by persistent negative racial stereotypes, and discrimination toward those who exhibit Mexican “color” interact to create unique barriers that inhibit upward mobility (Jensen, 2001). With the additional decline in manufacturing jobs, the rise in income inequality in the United States, and the current economic recession, researchers have raised concerns that Mexican immigrants who are predominantly from working-class backgrounds with little education are most at risk of downward assimilation in comparison with other Latino and immigrant groups (Oropesa & Landale, 2004; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

In exploring the conditions under which different immigrant groups assimilate into different sectors of American society, Lopez and Stanton-Salazar (2001) further explained the unique circumstances of contemporary Mexican immigrants in comparative perspective:

Large-scale labor immigration from Mexico began again after a hiatus of 35 years just as immigration of generally well-educated middle- and upper-middle-class Asians began for the first time. The only other large-scale migration from Latin America (until Central

Americans began to come in large numbers in the mid-1980s) was that of the Cuban middle and upper classes fleeing Castro's communism. Cubans, like the Vietnamese after them, were able to parlay their class resources and refugee status into substantial success, built in large part on an enclave economy. Most Asian groups did not have the advantages of being refugees from communism, but they did not need them; their individual and community resources have facilitated their integration into the U.S. economy and set the stage for a very advantageous context of assimilation for their children. Mexican and most Central American immigrants and their children share few of these advantages, and many come with the added burden of irregular legal status. Most also must struggle with the well-established negative stereotypes based on a long history of white-Mexican relations and the experience of prior treatment of the Mexican Americans already present in the United States. (pp. 85–86)

The authors argued that contemporary Mexican immigrants and their children carry a “special burden” in that they inherit a preexisting stigma that is reinforced by their lived experience in the United States. Although sociohistorical context per se may appear to be an unlikely “variable” to measure, an awareness of Mexican Americans' unique sociohistorical location orients researchers to potentially important variables of interest (e.g., country of origin, immigration history and status, experiences of racism and discrimination, political climate of the receiving country and region), informs choices regarding sampling and analyses, and aids in the interpretation of findings. Furthermore, within-group variations in sociohistorical context based on the timing of migration and regional location in the United States are underscored, as is the importance of attending to other dimensions of the larger model that may potentially modify patterns of assimilation (e.g., relational resources in the marriage or ecological niche, individual qualities, the cultural receptivity or compatibility of the receiving community).

Hondagneu-Sotelo's (1992) qualitative study of 26 Mexican American couples who were parents of young children at the time they began their migration to California is an exemplar of what can be learned from an approach that considers variations in marital behavior by sociohistorical context. Her research question was: How do patterns of patriarchal authority and the division of household labor vary for Mexican immigrant couples in which husbands migrated to the United States prior to 1965 versus those who migrated after 1965? In framing her research question in this manner, Hondagneu-Sotelo's focus was distinct from other studies in its attention to the unique sociohistorical conditions of migration before and after 1965 and their interaction with patterns of daily experiences in spouses' ecological niches during both periods of time. For example, during both migration periods, husbands migrated before their wives and children. This pattern of a staggered migration of family members was structurally supported by temporary-contract-labor recruitment programs established between the United States and Mexico from 1942 to 1964 in which U.S. employers recruited Mexican men, and it was further upheld by patriarchal practices in couples' decision making about migration.

The length of time spouses were separated before reunification in the United States differed, however, for couples who began the migration process pre- and post-1965, and this difference in time apart became important for patterns of marital interaction established by couples in the United States. For the pre-1965 migrating couples, husbands lived in the United States for an average of 6 years before their wives and children joined them. These men typically resided in

communal settings with other men and assumed responsibility for household tasks typically performed by women in Mexico (e.g., cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, shopping). Meanwhile, their wives, who still lived in Mexico, earned income to support their families, assumed responsibility for important financial and household decisions, and gained confidence in their abilities to operate independently of their husbands. On reunification in the United States, the early-migrating couples divided housework, child care, and decision making in a more egalitarian manner than they had before migration, and most established dual-earner employment arrangements. In contrast, marital behavioral patterns in couples migrating after 1965 were quite different. On arrival in the United States, husbands typically lived in established extended-family settings in which female kin cared for their daily needs and performed the bulk of the cooking, cleaning, shopping, and laundry. In addition, because periods of separation were relatively short, women did not have sufficient time to develop a sense of confidence in their abilities to manage and care for their families independently. Thus, once reunited, husbands expected their wives to be responsible for housework and child care regardless of their employment status, and wives assumed those responsibilities. Although Hondagneu-Sotelo's (1992) study was relatively small, with only 26 couples, her careful analysis was one of the first to consider variations in marital behavior for immigrant Mexican couples based on the sociohistorical context, and in so doing, she challenged assumptions about patriarchy in Mexican marital relationships and beliefs that Mexicans, as a group, were similar in the extent to which they adopted marital behavior patterns of the dominant group.

### **The Role of Culture**

Emerging in part out of a shared sociohistorical context, cultural background ( $a_{1ii}$ ) is another dimension of the macrosocietal context and refers to the heritage of an ethnic group, comprising shared history, language, symbols, institutions, common values, and assumptions (Schweder & LeVine, 1984). Although not a central element in Huston's (2000) original model, we suggest that culture, its various components, and their interaction with other dimensions of the macroenvironment as well as the larger model are essential dynamic dimensions of the macrosocietal context to consider in studies of marital well-being in couples of Mexican origin. The extent to which spouses endorse Mexican and Anglo cultural orientations, identities, and values at a given time is depicted by  $b_1$  in Box B, whereas cultural adaptation is a dynamic process represented by Path 3 in the model.

Much has been written about the cultural orientations and values of Mexican Americans. Early writings described Mexican Americans as unique from Anglos in their endorsement of *simpatía* (i.e., harmonious social relationships), *personalismo* (i.e., interdependence and a warm and/or personal manner of relating to others), collectivism (i.e., emphasizing the group over the individual), familism (i.e., the primacy of family and kin), *respeto* (i.e., the importance of showing respect for others and treating others with dignity), and an emphasis on traditional gender roles in marital and family relationships (for a review, see Roosa et al., 2002). Contemporary researchers who underscore within-group variation in cultural orientations, however, have documented variability in the extent to which Mexican Americans endorse cultural values that have been anecdotally associated with their ethnicity and advocate for the examination of the way spouses' cultural orientation, identities, and values interact with other important sources of influence in the macroenvironment to affect relational behavior (e.g., Baca

Zinn & Wells, 2008; Roosa et al., 2002). For example, although most researchers agree that, on average, the division of housework and child care in Mexican American families is gendered ( $c_1$ ), variations in the division of housework have been found when the interactive effects of components of the macroenvironment (e.g., culture, migration histories, social support from extended family and friends) are examined (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Roosa et al., 2002, Updegraff, Crouter, Umaña-Taylor, & Cansler, 2007). This small, yet promising, body of work underscores the limitations of a main-effects approach to understanding the links between marriage and culture and supports the examination of other sources of influence that are likely to interact with culture and its various components to affect marital behavior.

For young parents of Mexican origin who are in the midst of navigating their marital and family lives in the context of both Mexican and American influences, cultural adaptation occurs via daily experiences encountered in the ecological niche ( $a_2$ ), including interactions with kin, coworkers, young children, neighbors, service providers, social institutions, and other cultural artifacts (e.g., media). It is within spouses' ecological niches, nested in the larger macrosocietal context ( $a_1$ ), that husbands and wives interact with, and are confronted by, factors that shape their cultural understanding of normative roles, responsibilities, attitudes, and values regarding marriage, parent-child relationships, and parenting. Early parenthood is an important time to examine how culture and other dimensions of the macroenvironment interact to affect spouses' viewpoints and their marital behavior, because parenthood often brings with it a realignment of family roles, beliefs, and expectations, as well as a renewed awareness of them. In short, the experience of cultural adaptation during the early years of parenthood has the potential to lead to ambivalence; within-couple conflicts; and shifts in (a) values regarding marital and parenting roles and responsibilities, (b) attitudes about parenting and gender equality in marriage and child rearing, and (c) beliefs related to the importance of family (Flores, Tschann, Marin, & Pantoja, 2004). To the extent that spouses face pressure to alter their cultural beliefs and practices (Path 3), their individual experiences of cultural adaptation shape dyadic interactions within the marriage (Path 1), as well as their joint and independent interactions with their children and others (Paths 4 and 6).

Cultural adaptation comprises two unique processes through which individuals learn the shared beliefs, values, and expectations for behavior associated with both their host culture (i.e., acculturation) and their ethnic culture (i.e., enculturation) (Bernal & Knight, 1993; Gonzales, Knight, Birman, & Sirolli, 2003; Phinney, 1990). Where acculturation is largely the result of contact with the host culture via interaction with majority members in the community, at work, or through mainstream (i.e., Anglo) media, enculturation is the product of interaction within the family and with other members of the ethnic group. Although recent conceptualizations of acculturation and enculturation emphasize that immigrants can have a strong ethnic identity and participate fully in the host culture (Gonzales et al., 2003), individuals and families are likely to experience some degree of acculturative stress as they adapt to life in the United States. Acculturative stress includes difficulties that spouses might experience adapting to the host culture (e.g., language difficulties, perceived cultural incompatibilities, cultural self-consciousness) and ethnic culture (e.g., perceived pressure to maintain cultural customs, language, and familiarity with heritage; Rodriguez et al., 2002).

We suggest that cultural adaptation (including both acculturation and enculturation) is an ongoing process that affects spouses both as individuals (Box B) and as a marital dyad (Box C), as demonstrated by Paths 3 and 5 in the model. We further assert that cultural adaptation includes changes in spouses' perceptions of the macrosocietal context (Path 4), as well as changes in individual (Path 3) and dyadic (Path 5) strategies for coping with macrosocietal conditions perceived as stressful or problematic (Boss, 2002). The definition of an event as stressful will depend on spouses' personal qualities and on the perceptions and meanings they individually and dyadically attach to particular events. The manner in which couples navigate this process is dynamic and occurs via the joint and separate interactions they encounter in the ecological niche.

The following case study from the first author's mixed-method investigation of the marital experiences of 120 first-generation couples of Mexican origin illustrates the types of everyday encounters that spouses navigate as they adapt to life in the United States. In an excerpt from an interview narrative, a mother recounted to her Mexican American interviewer a time when her own cultural values clashed with those of the host culture. As she answered questions regarding gendered beliefs about marital and parenting roles, Yessica (all names are pseudonyms), a mother of two young children, a boy and girl, recalled a typical busy day in her life. On this particular day, Yessica noticed her son playing with one of his sister's dolls. Although she viewed this behavior as acceptable via U.S. standards, Yessica was unwilling to tolerate her own son engaging in an activity that she viewed as culturally unacceptable. She immediately ran and snatched the doll from his hands. She told him he could not play with dolls because he was a boy, and little boys were not supposed to play with dolls. Seeing the exchange, her husband, Felipe, told her that she should not be angry with their son for playing with his sister's dolls. Felipe explained that their son needed to learn how to be affectionate because in the future he would be a father and would have children of his own to care for. Yessica expressed how surprised, yet affected, she was by Felipe's advice. She disclosed that she had not thought about this before, but after her interaction with Felipe, she realized that her son would one day be a father and that she wanted him to be a caring and loving one. Before continuing with the interview, Yessica mentioned how her husband's words had changed her way of seeing things and influenced how she interacted with her children. She expressed gratitude for Felipe's input and an appreciation for him as a spouse and parent.

This mother, whose quantitative data showed that she strongly identified with Mexican culture and espoused more traditional gender-role attitudes than her husband, was initially distressed on finding her young son playing with a doll and took steps to realign his behavior with culturally prescribed norms. Yessica's reaction supports other studies that have suggested that, in contrast to their Mexican counterparts, first-generation Mexicans living in the United States may perceive challenges to traditional gender roles as evidence of the corrosive effect of Anglo culture on their marriage and family relationships (Parrado & Flippen, 2005). In turn, immigrant parents may more strongly endorse gendered behavior than parents in Mexico because they feel a need to preserve their Mexican heritage and protect their families from the perceived threat of Anglo influence (Bacallao & Smokowski, 2007). Variation in this general pattern exists, however, evidenced by Felipe, who was also a first-generation immigrant with a strong Mexican cultural orientation but less conventional than his wife in his gender-role attitudes. In contrast to Yessica and her initial response, Felipe supported his son's play behavior and framed his support in

familistic terms. Subsequently, Yessica altered her views regarding gender-appropriate play for her children and applied her adapted orientation to her interactions with them.

Although the research is scant, disagreements of this sort have been documented for spouses of Mexican origin who differ from their partners in their endorsement of culturally prescribed norms—a relational context that appears to foster conflict (Flores et al., 2004). Although they initially disagreed about the appropriateness of their son's play behavior, Yessica and Felipe appeared resilient to additional conflict because both partners placed primacy on the value of familism. As Yessica's reflection illustrates, an encounter that was initially viewed as problematic because it undermined her interpretation of Mexican values was reconciled by reframing the behavior in a way that fit with another dimension of Mexican culture (e.g., familism) that both spouses strongly endorsed. Thus, this initial “cultural clash” (Path 3) was reframed in culturally acceptable terms via a marital interaction (Path 1), which not only reduced the mother's initial stress but also altered her cultural beliefs and enhanced her appreciation of her husband as a father and a spouse (Path 2). Furthermore, this case example underscores the dynamic nature of cultural adaptation, the potential for within-couple differences in cultural values, the importance of a dyadic approach that considers the patterning of spouses' orientations and values as well as crossover effects from one spouse to the other, and the probability that individuals may strongly endorse some values commonly associated with their cultural heritage while rejecting others.

### **Socioeconomic Conditions**

Consistent with Huston's ecological perspective, both theoretical and empirical work has suggested that Mexican-origin parents' marital behavior (e.g., spouses' division of paid and unpaid work, marital decision making, and relationship power) is as closely tied to socioeconomic conditions (a<sub>1iii</sub>) as to individuals' cultural orientations and values and their sociohistorical context (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2008; Roosa et al., 2002; Updegraff et al., 2007). Because maternal employment—including the employment of mothers of young children—is normative in the United States, residency in the United States is believed to offer Latinas opportunities for employment that did not exist for earlier cohorts or for their contemporary counterparts residing in Mexico. These opportunities are viewed as important for marriage because women's employment may potentially translate into greater relationship power for wives. Thus, scholars have primarily focused on the implications of immigrant wives' employment patterns and human capital investments for marital behavior and quality. Results from this small body of work are mixed, however: Some have indicated a positive association of wives' employment, education, and income with shared decision making and the division of housework among immigrant Mexican couples (Coltrane & Valdez, 1993; Williams, 1990), and others have shown variation in this association based on a number of factors (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1992; Parrado & Flippen, 2005; Parrado, Flippen, & McQuiston, 2005).

Research by Parrado and Flippen (2005; Parrado et al., 2005) used both qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine how the association of wives' human capital (i.e., employment, education, age) and marital behavior varied for immigrant women residing in North Carolina versus nonmigrant women living in four sending communities in Mexico. The findings of these studies highlighted important differences in the marital correlates of wives' human

capital investments for immigrant versus nonimmigrant women. For example, although more than twice as many women were employed in the United States than in the four sending communities in Mexico, the link between women's labor-force participation and an egalitarian division of housework and financial decision making was weaker among the immigrant women than among those residing in Mexico. More specifically, paid employment for an average woman in Mexico increased the probability of her husband sharing responsibility for housework by 30%, compared with an increase of only 9% for women residing in the United States. Similarly, wives' labor-force participation increased the probability of shared decision making regarding family finances by 58% in Mexico, whereas the increase was 34% in the United States. Additional results indicated that immigrant and nonimmigrant women differed in the extent to which they endorsed traditional gender-role attitudes, with women residing in the United States endorsing more traditional beliefs than women residing in Mexico. This effect did attenuate over time, however, as every additional year spent in the United States reduced the likelihood of endorsing more traditional beliefs by 6.8%. This pattern of results runs counter to an emancipating view of migration and paid employment for immigrant women, and it challenges assumptions about the cultural underpinnings of beliefs regarding gender roles in the family. Interpreting these results in lieu of the overarching socioeconomic opportunities and conditions in the United States and Mexico, the authors asserted that women's employment is far more selective in Mexico, which renders it a more empowering tool for the negotiation of marital roles. In the United States, however, where women's opportunities for low-wage work are plentiful and necessary given Mexican men's marginal positions in the workforce, wives' employment is more a reflection of an adaptation strategy than an act of emancipation. Taken together, these findings suggest that marital behavior, including the division of roles in Mexican-origin families, may result, in part, from the socioeconomic location of families and their members and their interactions with the broader macroenvironmental and relational terrain (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2008).

Mexican-origin families are disproportionately likely to occupy subordinate socioeconomic positions in U.S. society as a result of their lower education, language difficulties, and systematic exclusion from upper mobility occupational ladders (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2008; Esteinou, 2007). Because of this, contemporary scholars have begun to explore dimensions of socioeconomic context that are unique to low-wage laborers, which has resulted in greater precision in predicting individual and marital well-being. One such dimension is underemployment (Crouter, Davis, Updegraff, Delgado, & Fortner, 2006; Dooley & Prause, 2004; Friedland & Price, 2003). Defined as involuntarily working less than desired or working for poverty- or near-poverty-level wages, underemployment dominates the existence of many Mexican-immigrant parents with young children and has been shown to be associated with both individual and marital well-being. For example, in their study of more than 200 Mexican-origin families with preteen children living in Arizona, Updegraff et al. (2007) found underemployment to be of concern to the majority of parents studied. Furthermore, husbands' and wives' underemployment was directly related to their well-being, marital quality, and interactions with their children. In addition to the direct effects, underemployment may exert an indirect influence on the marital relationship via its impact on the husband, the wife, or both partners (Path 3 to Path 1). Drawing from findings of the Iowa Youth and Families project, which examined the impact of job loss and underemployment on rural families during the Farm Crisis of the mid-20th century, the stress of underemployment on the husband, the wife, or both is likely to produce anxiety and depression, which, in turn, can lead to increased marital conflict (Conger, Wallace, et al., 2002). Spouses'

personal qualities may moderate the impact of underemployment, however, by buffering or exacerbating the effect on the marriage. For example, the effect of underemployment may be attenuated by personal characteristics such as high levels of self-esteem, or it may be amplified if either the husband or the wife is already distressed about the marriage, has a propensity toward violence, strongly endorses traditional gender roles, or is in poor health (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005). The extent to which the effects of underemployment on marital well-being varies according to spouses' cultural orientations and values (Path 3 to Path 1) is unknown, but it is a promising direction for future research with families of Mexican origin.

In addition to a focus on socioeconomic factors unique to low-wage workers, recent empirical work has examined the conditions under which the negative effects of low-wage employment and poverty are buffered for Mexican-origin parents and their families. Particularly promising in this line of research are studies that examine the intersection of socioeconomic and cultural contexts. For example, in the same study referenced earlier, Crouter et al. (2006) found that mothers' acculturation moderated the negative association between fathers' income and spouses' depressive symptoms in predominantly low-wage families. More specifically, when mothers were less acculturated (i.e., less oriented toward Anglo culture), the negative association between fathers' income and both spouses' depressive symptoms disappeared. These findings suggest that the direct effects of socioeconomic conditions on depression are experienced most severely by those families with strong ties to Anglo culture, which emphasizes material gain and individualism. Such findings suggest that individual parents' value orientations may alter the experience of socioeconomic disadvantage on depressive symptoms. Given previous research linking spouses' depressive symptoms to both observed and reported marital quality (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007), specific hypotheses generated by Huston's (2000) model should consider how the association between socioeconomic stressors and marital quality is (a) linked via parental psychological well-being and (b) moderated by parental cultural values. That is, we might hypothesize that the link among socioeconomic disadvantage, psychological well-being, and marital outcomes is less pronounced among individuals who have a stronger orientation toward Mexican culture and more pronounced among individuals with an Anglo orientation. Furthermore, the role of spouses' cultural orientations may be an important dimension to explore in understanding crossover effects between spouses' own depressive symptoms and their partners' marital well-being—a link that is likely to vary by gender (Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997).

## **The Social Environment**

The second dimension of the macroenvironment, spouses' ecological niches ( $a_2$ ), comprises the social ( $a_{2i}$ ) and physical ( $a_{2ii}$ ) environments that spouses occupy in their daily living. In their review of the marital satisfaction literature, Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach (2000) concluded that, to better understand marital behavior and spouses' perceptions of marital quality, researchers need to pay greater attention to spouses' social environment and nature of support that both partners obtain outside, as well as inside, the marriage. Huston (2000) stated:

Usually ... researchers focusing on the dynamics of marital interaction study couples as two-person units, as if they rarely spent time together as part of a social group ... the centrality of spouses in each other's day-to-day lives, as well as their joint and

independent involvement with friends and kin, reveal much about the nature of the spouses' marital relationship. (pp. 300–301)

These suggestions for research are particularly relevant to the marriages of new parents of Mexican origin, who are likely to maintain elaborate local and transnational extended social networks which they rely on heavily during the early childrearing years for assistance in caring for and culturally educating their young children (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000).

Studies conducted over the past 3 decades have documented the importance of extended-family (i.e., blood and nonblood family members related by marriage, adoption or friendship) support and participation to Latino families. Social network researchers have found that kin predominate Latino spouses' nonmarital close relationships (Milardo, 1992; Moore, 1990; Stein, Bush, Ross, & Ward, 1992). Strong social networks have been shown to be protective for individual health and well-being (Path 3) for members of poor Mexican communities (Alvarez & Bean, 1976; Hoppe & Heller, 1975; Velez-Ibañez, 1996), with kinship networks providing cultural education and emotional support (Keefe, 1984; Mindel, 1980), as well as strategies for coping with socioeconomic marginalization (Angel & Tienda, 1982; Lamphere, Zavella, & Gonzales, 1993). In highly functioning families, relationships with extended-family members who are geographically dispersed across neighborhoods, states, and even countries remain strong (Burton & Jarrett, 2000).

Dependence on extended kin has historically been described as a characteristic of Latino culture and as representative of underlying Latino values. Baca Zinn and Wells (2000) suggested that, rather than a simple artifact of culture, however, reliance on family networks is also a function of adaptation to difficult socioeconomic conditions ( $a_{1iii}$ )—a strategy for managing the stressors associated with immigration and life in the United States. Indeed, declines in Latinos' perceptions of familial obligations and the importance of family have been associated with upward mobility and acculturation, and differences in extended-family support between Anglos and Mexican Americans often disappears when education and socioeconomic status are controlled (Roosa et al., 2002).

Vega (1990) suggested that although recent immigrants do rely heavily on kin for assistance, their global social networks are smaller than those of second-generation Mexican Americans, who have larger networks consisting not only of multigenerational kin but also of other close associates and acquaintances (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000). Furthermore, in a study estimating the size of individuals' global social networks, Killworth, Johnsen, Bernard, Shelley, and McCarty (1990) found that Anglos residing in Florida had social networks more than twice as large as Mexicans residing in Mexico City, which implies that Americans may know more people by name than Mexicans. Taken together, these results suggest that the size and composition of Mexican-origin couples' social networks may vary as a function of acculturation and time spent in the United States.

The smaller social networks of first-generation Mexican immigrants largely comprise kin who are relied on more exclusively for emotional support and problem solving because of socioeconomic conditions that make the provision of instrumental support by kin more difficult (Golding & Burnam, 1990; Griffith & Villavicencio, 1985; Vega, 1990). Mexican Americans are

likely to agree that extended family members should be a resource for dealing with problems (Keefe, 1984), and kin networks have been shown to be more likely to meet emotional needs than instrumental needs for recent immigrants (Mindel, 1980). Results from both qualitative and quantitative studies, however, suggest that although Mexican-origin families may encounter challenges in responding to instrumental needs as a result of socioeconomic limitations and additional constraints encountered in their physical environment (e.g., long work hours, a<sub>2ii</sub>), extended family members' limited instrumental support is, on average, superior to that experienced in non-Latino families (Keefe, 1984; Mindel, 1980). Together, this body of work suggests that, for those of Mexican origin, extended family members are more likely to meet both affective and instrumental needs of their members than their non-Latino counterparts.

The extent to which husbands and wives garner support specific to marriage and parenting is an important and understudied function of social networks that is especially relevant for new parents of Mexican origin, who must navigate marital and family relations in the United States against a backdrop of economic disadvantage. The marital implications of parents' reliance on each other, kin, and other close associates as sources of advice, guidance, caregiving, and emotional support regarding the routine transactions of marriage and parenthood has been documented across social classes in predominantly non-Latino White populations (Burger & Milardo, 1995; Harrison, 1998; Helms, Crouter, & McHale, 2003; Milardo & Helms-Erikson, 2000; Oliner, 1989; Proulx, Helms, & Payne, 2004). Actively engaging social network members in discussions about marital and parenting concerns has been linked to spouses' reports of marital satisfaction, love, and stability—particularly for wives (Burger & Milardo, 1995; Helms, Crouter et al., 2003; Oliner, 1989; Proulx, Helms, & Payne, 2004). This body of literature also suggests that actively seeking out spouses to discuss concerns in the domains of marriage and parenting is an important predictor of marital well-being for wives (Helms, Crouter, et al., 2003; Proulx, Helms, & Payne, 2004), often overshadowing husbands' instrumental contributions to housework and child care (Erickson, 1993) and counteracting the adverse effects of economic pressure on marital evaluations (Path 5 to Path 2; Simons, Whitbeck, Melby, & Wu, 1994). For Mexican-origin couples situated in disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions, support from kin and other close associates is likely to be particularly important for those who strongly endorse Mexican value orientations. For example, preliminary findings from the first author's ongoing study of low-income, first-generation Mexican-origin couples of young children suggest that emotional support, marriage- and parenting-specific support, and child-care assistance are stronger predictors of marital quality for both husbands and wives than are socioeconomic constraints and perceptions of economic hardship. Because most spouses in the study strongly endorsed a Mexican cultural orientation, it was not possible to examine the interactive effects of cultural orientation and the social environment on marital quality for economically marginalized couples, but nonetheless examining interactions among these factors will be important in studies of couples who vary in cultural orientation.

The importance of support seeking and acquisition from nuclear and extended-family relationships is a theme that is underscored in recent public health research conducted in North Carolina. In a qualitative study using focus-group and photo-narrative methods, Mexican-immigrant mothers of young children emphasized the central role of emotional support from husbands and extended family members (Bender, Castro, & O'Donnell, 2000). These immigrant Mexican mothers saw their relationships within their nuclear and extended families as important

sources of advice and emotional support, particularly during pregnancy and the early childrearing years. They emphasized the importance of frequent contact with local family members; phone contact with significant extended kin (e.g., mothers, sisters) residing in Mexico; and their husband's presence, emotional care, and support in raising their children. Women without emotional support from husbands or their own female kin lamented their situations and longed for stronger ties with those family members (Hoban, 2005). Taken together, the findings suggest that resilient spouses of Mexican origin are likely to seek out and provide emotional, marital, and parenting support to one another and to be embedded in similarly supportive extended-family networks.

The source of this support, however, appears to matter and should be attended to in future research considering spouses' social environments. Whereas mothers' own female kin were generally viewed as trustworthy sources for marital and parenting support, their husbands' kin were viewed as placing more demands on them for assistance and, at times, even as interfering in marital and parenting endeavors (Bender et al., 2000; Hoban, 2005; Parrado & Flippen, 2005). It was in the absence of support from their own mothers, sisters, and female cousins that women sought support from their husbands in a manner they believed to be different from women residing Mexico. In this way, it may be that experiences of family separation and dislocation that occur as a result of immigration are particularly detrimental for mothers of young children who rely heavily on their own female kin for assistance. In the absence of support from female kin, young mothers may place demands on their husbands for assistance that may or may not be met. In this social context, husbands' willingness and ability to provide emotional support to their wives and assistance with child care becomes paramount for wives' personal and marital well-being. Furthermore, this work underscores the negative and ineffective nature of some social ties (see Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009) and cautions that relations with kin should not be considered uniformly supportive in Latino families. Perhaps because of assumptions regarding the benefits of family involvement for Latinos, the extent to which the presence of extended family members imposes burdens on Mexican-origin couples (particularly women) has been relatively unexplored. We suggest that attending to the social environment via assessments of the emotional, marital, and parenting support received from and provided to varying social network members ( $a_2$ ) and one another ( $c_2$ ), as well as examining caregiving demands and interference from these same members, is important to better elucidate links between macrosocietal conditions, spouses' interactions with each other, and their perceptions of marital well-being for new parents of Mexican origin (Path 5 to Path 2).

The importance of attending to spouses' social environments is underscored in research focused on the prevention of intimate partner violence—including wife abuse and marital rape. This body of work, rife with contradictory findings regarding prevalence rates of intimate partner violence among Latino families as compared to Anglos and families of other ethnicities, has begun to focus on the social conditions under which particular cultural beliefs or socioeconomic circumstances give rise to wife abuse and marital rape to resolve contradictions in the literature (see Firestone, Harris, & Vega, 2003). Particularly promising in this new body of research are studies focused on the allocation of relationship power in couples' relationships and its link with relational resources in the social environment.

In their study of 219 migrant Mexican women residing in Durham, North Carolina, and 400 women living in four sending communities of Mexico, Parrado and colleagues (Parrado et al., 2005; Parrado & Flippen, 2005) examined differences in migrant and nonmigrant women's relationship control and sexual negotiation power as a function of their social resources. Because of their nuanced approach to this central research question, the authors were able to uncover systematic variation in the effects of contact with friends versus family members, perceptions of global social support, and living arrangements on women's marital power for women residing in the United States versus Mexico. For example, weekly contact with nonkin friends proved an important source of support for both migrant and nonmigrant Mexican women and was linked to greater relationship control. Contact with friends was particularly important for women residing in the United States, however, in terms of sexual negotiation power, where weekly visits with friends exerted a stronger effect on promoting a more egalitarian division of sexual control for couples than in Mexico. Weekly contact with extended family members operated differently for migrant and nonmigrant women. For women residing in Mexico, contact with family members increased women's power and was positively associated with both women's relationship control and their sexual negotiation power. This finding supports other research conducted in Mexico that suggests that contact with extended family members has an emancipating effect for women in their relationships and protects them against spousal abuse and male control (Guttman, 1996). In contrast, weekly contact with extended family members for migrant women was negatively correlated with relationship control and sexual negotiation power, which suggests that the presence of extended family imposes constraints on women's ability to negotiate more egalitarian relationships with their husbands.

The authors explain these opposing findings by examining the living arrangements of their migrant participants in which husbands' kin predominated and males were overrepresented. A focus-group participant stated:

Because, for example, the husband comes first and later brings his wife. But while he was waiting to earn money to bring his wife over, he brought his cousins and nephews. So this woman is living with four of her husband's cousins, with five of her relatives. So she is playing the role of wife, cousin, friend, and servant in the house, making food for all these people. And then, she has to go to work so that the husband can pay off the money for her trip here. So it is this rather ugly situation. Because for example in Mexico, everyone lives in difficult conditions. But at least they live in their little shacks, their little houses, whatever you want to call them. But [the houses] are their own and just family lives there, the husband and the kids. And here they have to get used to living with 15 people. (Parrado & Flippen, 2005, pp. 622–623)

As illustrated here, contacts with extended family members may mean something very different for migrant women than for nonmigrant women, and they may thus operate in a manner that can either support or undermine women's power in their marital relationships on the basis of their social location. Indeed, the differential role that extended family plays for migrant and nonmigrant women suggests that when contact with family members is disproportionately skewed toward the husband's side of the family, women are likely to be burdened with additional family work, and patriarchal views of marriage are likely to be reinforced (Parrado & Flippen, 2005).

In addition to examining contacts with friends and family in the social environment and physical living arrangements, Parrado et al. (2005) assessed the extent to which wives felt socially isolated—a challenge to the assumption that Mexican immigrants uniformly possess rich relational resources. Women's perceived lack of social support was examined across relationships and quantified as the number of times women reported that they did not have anyone to listen to them, help them feel secure, provide information about the local environment, turn to for assistance, or give them a ride. Perceived lack of support was experienced more by migrant than nonmigrant women and was an important predictor of both relationship control and sexual negotiation power for women residing in the United States; no significant associations emerged for women residing in Mexico. For women residing in the United States, a lack of emotional, informational, and utilitarian support was a clear indicator of social isolation and translated into lower levels of bargaining power in marriage.

Taken together, this body of work suggests that a social environment characterized by limited contact with friends, regular contact with extended family predominated by husbands' kin, extended-family living arrangements, and a perceived lack of support from social network members is associated with more patriarchal divisions of marital power, which may put women at risk of abuse. Furthermore, this work challenges ethnocentric assumptions about nuclear-family household arrangements. When economic hardship and family obligation translates into extended-family households in which spouses' marital behavior unfolds, a more nuanced assessment of the social environment is needed to better examine how interactions with extended family operate to support or undermine spouses' marital and individual well-being. Because the current literature suggests that this process may be gendered, it will be important for researchers to assess the nature of the kin relationship (e.g., cousin, brother, mother), whether the extended family member is the wife's or husband's kin, and the gender of the extended family member (if not obvious) to better understand the role of the social environment in shaping marital behavior.

### **The Physical Environment**

Mexican-origin spouses' social interactions are closely tied with the physical spaces ( $a_{2iii}$ ) they inhabit in the ecological niche, which are overwhelmingly distinguished by low-wage work environments, substandard and often overcrowded housing conditions, and unsafe and undesirable neighborhoods characterized by community poverty (Atilas & Bohon, 2003; Bush et al., 2005). Direct links between these characteristics of the physical environment and marital behavior (Path 5) have gone largely unexplored for Latino families but have been substantiated for White and African American couples (see Bryant & Wickrama, 2005; Crouter & Helms-Erikson, 2000). Some attention, however, has been given to associations between dimensions of the physical environment and individual health and well-being for Latinos (Path 3).

Unfortunately, much of the work has been criticized for confounding these factors with acculturation and acculturative stress (Hunt, Schneider, & Comer, 2004). Although many immigrants from Mexico experience low-wage work and undesirable living conditions (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001), these physical settings do not reflect an endorsement of cultural values and norms ( $a_{1ii}$ ) but instead reflect imposed macrosocietal level constraints (i.e., sociohistorical and socioeconomic;  $a_{1i}$  and  $a_{1iii}$ ) and, therefore, should be distinguished from culture conceptually and analytically to allow for the consideration of meaningful interactions. To date, many studies have failed to make this distinction, thus rendering it impossible to examine the specific

conditions under which linkages between the physical environment and individual and marital well-being emerge.

We assert that the unique and interactive contribution of Mexican-origin spouses' physical locations should be studied to better understand how spouses' individual qualities and marital behavior vary as a result of living and workplace conditions (Paths 3 and 5, respectively). Updegraff et al. (2007) highlighted important avenues for future research with regard to workplace environments and their link with marital relationships including overwork (e.g., working long hours), nonstandard shifts, physical demands of work, discrimination in the workplace, and chronic job stress. Early work in this area is promising, with both direct and indirect links with marital well-being. For example, one study found that Mexican-origin fathers' (but not mothers') work hours were associated with husbands' evaluations of the marriage (Path 3) and the division of housework (Path 5; Updegraff et al., 2007). When fathers worked more hours, they reported less love in the marriage, more conflict with their wives, and less involvement in housework.

No evidence of a crossover effect between husbands' work hours and wives' marital evaluations emerged in the aforementioned study. This lack of a significant finding may be explained by wives' cultural orientations and gendered values, which color how they view their husbands' physically demanding work and lack of involvement in housework and child care:

The majority of women, they think that a man's work is really difficult. The majority of women say, "The poor thing comes home so tired, I am not going to make him [do chores or help with the children],"... because a man's work is a lot harder here [in the United States]. And even though she works as well, usually a woman's work is considered less difficult. And besides working she has to come home and keep cooking or working. I think that they are both equally difficult. But the woman—a majority of women think like that. (Parrado & Flippen, 2005, p. 619)

The extent to which husbands' physically demanding work is also linked with their own and their wives' marital evaluations (Path 3) remains unexplored, but as alluded to in the words of the young Mexican wife in the preceding quote, it is likely to vary on the basis of spouses' personal characteristics, including their level of acculturation and enculturation—specifically the extent to which they endorse traditional gender roles and views of the family ( $b_1$ ).

Previous work with both working- and middle-class White couples has documented within-group variability in spouses' backgrounds and beliefs about gender roles and has underscored the problems with assumptions of homogeneity within groups based on social class, race, or ethnicity (Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004; Helms-Erikson, 2001). Initially, the preceding quote seems to suggest that the extent to which Mexican-origin wives perceive their husbands' work as physically demanding may favorably influence wives' evaluations of husbands' contributions at home. This conclusion may inadvertently mask the role of women's cultural values and orientations in justifying their husbands' behavior, however. For example, in stating that she feels differently than the supposed prevailing view, the respondent underscores the variability that is likely to exist in how spouses, particularly wives, view their partners' contributions to paid and unpaid labor. Differences in cultural orientations and values are likely to be the source of this

variability. Thus, the extent to which wives endorse traditional gender roles and traditionally Mexican cultural values (in reference to women's role as mothers; Esteinou, 2007) may moderate the effects of husbands' work (e.g., physical demands, long work hours) on marital outcomes. That is, more traditional women may experience less adverse feelings about the marriage when their husbands work longer hours or engage in physically demanding work and contribute little to child care and housework. Given that heavy physical demands also often characterize immigrant women's employment (e.g., housekeeping in hotels, standing all day in textile or meat-processing plants), we feel it is imperative to examine the extent to which equally exhausted Mexican-origin women reframe an unequal division of labor in the home via traditional cultural scripts to offset their resentment of men's lower involvement in housework—a previously unexplored process that we predict may prove protective for marriage in the short term but detrimental to both marital well-being and wives' personal well-being over time.

The results of these preliminary studies suggest that spouses' physical environments, nested within the larger macrosocietal context, undoubtedly affect their marital interactions directly (Path 5) and indirectly via spillover from individual qualities and their links with marital evaluations (Path 3 to Path 1). In turn, evaluations of the marriage and individual functioning are likely to be altered by changes in marital behavior in response to conditions in the physical environment (Path 5 to Path 2). Research to date for Latino couples has been limited to the examination of spouses' work hours and physical demands on the job and their links with marital evaluations and the division of family work. Studies with other low-income families, however, have suggested that the examination of neighborhood characteristics, shift work, discrimination in the workplace, and chronic job stress are important avenues for future inquiry.

### **The Importance of a Dyadic Approach**

Of particular relevance to the study of marital behavior is the extent to which husbands' and wives' experiences in their respective ecological niches are congruent. The implications of within-couple incongruence in spouses' everyday experiences for spouses' individual well-being, cultural orientations and values, and beliefs and attitudes about the marriage (Box B), as well as their routine marital interactions (Path 3 to Path 1), remain unknown. Underlying an emphasis on within- and between-couple variation in the model's causal pathways is the assumption that gender differentiates marital experiences and that marriage is a dyadic enterprise composed of two often distinctly different experiences: “his” and “hers” (Bernard, 1972; Crouter & Helms-Erikson, 2000). Particularly applicable to the study of Mexican-origin new parents is a focus on how the links between macroenvironmental and marital experiences vary by gender. Within-couple variability in marital experiences becomes particularly apparent after the arrival of children when marital behavior (Box C) becomes more scripted by gender (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Cowan, Cowan, Herring, & Miller, 1991). Furthermore, whereas immigration requires change for both husbands and wives, cultural adaptation is not necessarily a unitary phenomenon within families. Mexican-origin husbands and wives may adapt to the host culture at differential rates, have different household and workplace experiences, embrace their ethnic heritage to varying degrees, differ in immigration or acculturation status, experience acculturative stress at different levels of intensity, and perceive and respond to macroenvironmental stressors in gendered ways (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000; Bush et al., 2005; Chavez, 1992; Gil & Vega, 1996; Gold, 1989). Hence, it is essential to attend to within-couple variations in the paths of the

model, particularly during the early years of parenthood, when downturns in marital quality are likely to occur, thus placing Mexican-origin couples at risk of marital dissolution.

Research and theory on resiliency in minority and immigrant families suggests that family cohesion, filial piety, and an emphasis on family goals over individual goals can greatly increase family stability (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988; McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, McCubbin, & Katson, 1993). Coupled with compatibility models of marriage (Helms, Proulx, et al., 2006; Huston & Houts, 1998), this line of reasoning suggests that shared cultural values within couples, including gendered views regarding marital and family roles, also are important for marital well-being. Indeed, preliminary analyses of the quantitative survey data collected in the first author's study of 120 couples of Mexican origin showed that the extent to which spouses were similar in their levels of acculturation, enculturation, and gender-role attitudes was associated with both their marital interactions (e.g., marital warmth, support, conflict) and their evaluations of the marriage (e.g., satisfaction). In turn, marital interactions and spouses' individual characteristics jointly influence how any given dimension of the macroenvironment is experienced (see Paths 4 and 6).

Differences in cultural values and expectations within couples ( $b_1$ ) can lead to perceptual differences regarding stressors and appropriate responses to them (Path 4), as well as difficulties in marital negotiations (Path 1; Bush et al., 2005). For example, in a recent study of Mexican migrants in Georgia (Atiles & Bohon, 2002), both men and women agreed that maternal employment was the most significant transition their family had made since moving to the United States. Although husbands and wives agreed on the importance of wives' and mothers' financial contributions to the family, husbands held very different beliefs from their wives about the appropriateness of maternal employment for mothers of young children. Husbands considered their wives' employment to be a negative consequence of immigration, whereas wives viewed their employment as a benefit of life in the United States. Alternatively, some Mexican-origin couples may jointly reframe maternal employment within a rhetoric of familism, collectivism, self-sufficiency, and perseverance and, in so doing, view maternal employment as an opportunity for wives to contribute to the economic well-being and upward mobility of the family. Framing maternal employment in this manner is consistent with cultural values supporting the importance of the family unit over the individual, and it may serve as a protective factor for the marital relationship. The likelihood of couples adopting such a stance depends on the acculturation or enculturation level of each spouse and the relative importance and flexibility of both spouses' individual beliefs pertaining to patriarchy (Bush et al., 2005).

Variation in spouses' individual qualities ( $b_1$ ) can reflect variations in the social and physical environments they inhabit ( $a_{2i}$  and  $a_{2ii}$ ). The voices of the predominantly first-generation immigrant parents of young children in the first author's study suggest that husbands' and wives' experiences in their respective ecological niches are often divergent. In this ongoing study, two very different groups of couples have emerged, primarily as a result of within-couple variations in experiences and opportunities in the workplace, the availability of affordable and trusted child care, and transportation. In the first group, husbands work long hours in low-wage, physically demanding jobs outside the home, which places them in frequent contact with other Mexicans immigrants and individuals outside their culture. Their wives, who are likely to be undocumented, are unemployed and stay at home with their young child, or children, and often

do not have access to transportation. Because large cultural enclaves are rare in most communities in which these participants live and connections with the larger Anglo community can be scarce or viewed with apprehension (particularly when family members are undocumented), these Mexican-origin women interact with few adults outside their homes during the week, placing their husbands in the position of cultural broker for the family. Alternatively, for a second group of couples, economic stress necessitates that wives with infants or toddlers find jobs to contribute to the family income—often in the same workplace as their husbands (e.g., chicken processing plants, textile mills). Because affordable child care can be difficult to find, and because female extended family members are not living nearby or available to offer care, couples may work complementary shifts to ensure the care of their child or children. In these situations, wives appear to acculturate more quickly than their husbands. They learn English more quickly, are equally successful at earning money, and are better received by the dominant society than are their husbands. In summary, spouses' experiences in their daily physical and social environments ( $a_2$ ) and perceptions of those experiences ( $b_1$ ) create “his” and “hers” paths between the macroenvironmental context and their own and one another's' individual characteristics (Paths 3 and 4) that are then linked to spouses' marital experiences in gendered ways (Path 1).

Implied in our application of Huston's (2000) model, and noticeably missing from the scant literature base on the marital experiences of Mexican-origin couples, is the importance of including both members of the marital dyad in any investigation of marriage. With two exceptions (Parke et al., 2004; Updegraff et al., 2007), no published studies of the marital experiences of Mexican-origin couples exist in which both members of the marital dyad were sampled. A dyadic approach that can take into account how one spouse's personal qualities may affect the other spouse's marriage specific beliefs and attitudes (i.e., crossover effects) and how the combination of husbands' and wives' experiences, personal qualities, and behaviors operate to influence both spouses' evaluations of the marriage is important to more fully understand the marital experiences of Mexican-origin couples. More specifically, a dyadic approach is necessary to adequately examine the interactive and joint effects of gender and macroenvironmental factors on and within marriage—a research focus called for by those advocating greater attention to intrafamilial variability in Latino families (Baca Zinn & Wells, 2000; McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000). We argue that such an approach is particularly important for studies examining the marital experiences of couples in the early years of parenthood as spouses envision raising children in the United States, because within-couple incompatibilities during this period are likely to be magnified, gendered, and have a significant impact on marital behavior and evaluations.

The lacuna of research that includes both members of the marital dyad reflects a focus in the literature on Latinas' family relationships and maternal employment but also reflects pragmatic concerns regarding sampling. Indeed, a great deal has been written about the difficulty of recruiting and retaining both spouses of ethnic-minority couples for marital research (Karney et al., 2004). Although an exhaustive review of sampling techniques is beyond the scope of this article, we offer three suggestions based on our own ongoing research with Mexican-immigrant couples in North Carolina that coincide with advice offered by others who have been less successful in recruiting Mexican couples for marital research (Karney et al., 2004) and those who have successfully studied parent-child relationships in two-parent Mexican American families

(Roosa et al., 2008). These suggestions, anchored in our own experience, are also informed by Huston's (2000) conceptual model, in that they recognize how elements of macroenvironmental, individual, and relational contexts play a role in spouses' interest, willingness, and ability to participate in research.

We first recommend selecting a sampling frame with an adequate number of Mexican families. Publicly available census tract data is a useful tool for the purpose of identifying geographic areas with dense Latino populations. Developing relationships with cultural insiders (e.g., community leaders, organizations), our second recommendation, is not only imperative for recruiting but also can assist with identifying appropriate sampling frames. Cultural insiders are not only more likely than academic researchers to have a sense of the ethnic terrain in various geographic locations but also are likely to know where couples and families (as opposed to individuals) of Mexican origin reside. Endorsement from cultural insiders is essential for recruitment, particularly given actual or perceived anti-immigration sentiments with respect to many local and state governments. Spouses of Mexican origin are highly unlikely to respond to conventional methods of subject recruitment such as mailings, phone calls, or the distribution of flyers and brochures. Despite valiant efforts on the part of local social service agencies, doctors' offices, and public health centers, fewer than 2% of the participants in the first author's study were recruited via announcements, posted flyers, or available brochures in waiting rooms. Indeed, even personal contacts made by Latina project staff members with spouses in waiting rooms were unsuccessful. Instead, 98% of couples were recruited via the efforts of cultural insiders who acted as liaisons between the principal investigator and participants. Couples' willingness to participate, and interest in participating, evolved out of personal contacts and requests from cultural insiders; public endorsements of the research project by cultural insiders; and, more generally, an established, trusting relationship between couples and cultural insiders in their immediate social context. Finally, we recommend reducing potential costs of participating by adequately compensating couples for their time, conducting interviews in spouses' language of choice (98% of the interviews in the first author's study were conducted in Spanish), providing transportation to the interview site or interviewing couples in their homes, providing child care during the interview, and using bilingual (preferably Mexican) interviewers. In addition to compensation, we found that couples also valued educational Spanish-language DVDs and brochures produced by local extension agents on issues such as parenting, immigration law, health care, local resources for Latino families, and so on. Although others have written about the difficulty in recruiting husbands for participation in marital research (Hirsch, 2003), we found husbands to be open and willing to participate and attributed this to their trust in the referring source who endorsed the research project as beneficial to furthering understanding of Mexican couples and families.

### **Summary, Conclusions, and Future Directions**

Scholars have documented higher rates of divorce for young couples of Mexican origin and have voiced concerns about the marital and family well-being of recent immigrants from Mexico. The lack of knowledge about how Mexican-origin couples' unique strengths and vulnerabilities are linked with their marital relationship represents a significant gap in the research on the early years of family formation. Although interventions for low-income couples with young children—many of whom are of Mexican origin—have been developed and funded by federal

and state resources, they have not been informed by systematic research studies with minority or immigrant populations, nor have they addressed the ecological contexts in which the marital relationships of low-income immigrants are embedded. Studies conducted with relatively advantaged, majority-culture new parents show heightened levels of depression and marital conflict and decreased levels of marital satisfaction across the early years of parenthood, particularly for those couples with fewer individual, marital, and social resources (Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Cox, Paley, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999). Although not focused on the early years of parenting per se, studies of Latino and immigrant families experiencing economic hardship and other macroenvironmental stressors have suggested that family members are vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and marital distress (Zambrana, Dorrington, & Hayes-Bautista, 1995). However, relational resources in the social environment and protective personal qualities are likely to attenuate stressors associated with marginalized social positions and acculturative stress. Most recently, scholars have suggested that researchers move beyond documenting marital risks associated with the early years of parenthood and focus on the adaptations couples make and the contextual conditions under which parenthood enhances, undermines, or has little effect on their marital well-being (Karney & Bradbury, 2005).

Responding to critiques suggesting that the marital literature is fractured in focus, inattentive to the experiences of ethnic-minority and immigrant couples, and theoretically immature when considering the unions of couples who are neither Anglo nor middle-class, we have demonstrated how an ecological approach that attends to pertinent dimensions of the macroenvironment in which individual spouses and their marriages are embedded, the intersection of these environments with individual qualities and marital behavior, the mechanisms linking these dimensions, and the combinations of husbands' and wives' experiences is necessary to adequately understand the marital experiences of Mexican-origin couples with young children. In our adaptation and application of Huston's (2000) ecological model of marriage, we have discussed potential causal processes that cut across macroenvironmental, individual, and marital domains. We presented Huston's model as a sensitizing conceptual map in that it does not necessarily depict a new way of viewing marriage or a singular empirical model to be tested but rather integrates a variety of social and behavioral theoretical perspectives to provide a more comprehensive conceptual blueprint for the study of marriage than has previously been explored. Accordingly, Huston's three-level model alerts researchers to the types of questions that they should ask about marriage from an ecological perspective and provides a template for thinking about particular subcomponents of the model in a manner that is ecologically informed.

Our review of the literature emphasizes the unique and interacting contributions of each dimension of the macroenvironment and potential linkages with spouses' individual properties and marital behavior. To best capture variation in these paths, we suggested a multidimensional and dyadic approach to the assessment of macroenvironmental sources of influence on marriage. Such an approach would include the measurement of each spouse's cultural orientations and values and perceptions of stress related to cultural adaptation (from both acculturation and enculturation), in addition to family background and demographic characteristics that typically have been treated as proxies for cultural adaptation in previous studies but instead are indicative of sociohistorical location and personal qualities (e.g., generational status, immigration status, birthplace of immediate and extended kin). In short, dimensions of culture should be

appropriately operationalized and treated as a central component of research focused on the marital experiences of Mexican-origin couples.

Aligning with Huston's conceptualization of spouses' personal characteristics that include cultural orientations and values and gendered beliefs, the extent to which spouses hold beliefs that may be differentially endorsed by subcultures and majority cultures is an important individual characteristic to assess. We expect that beliefs regarding familism, the cultural education of children, and gendered beliefs specific to marital roles and child rearing play a key role in understanding the links between macroenvironmental factors and marital behavior for parents of young children, particularly in the early childrearing years as they navigate parenthood in the United States. Researchers need not necessarily include all possible constructs related to spouses' cultural orientations and values in their work, but they should carefully consider the role of cultural factors in explaining variation in their outcome of interest as well as how cultural components may interact with other important constructs to affect marital quality and behavior. We encourage scholars to move beyond a main-effects approach to understanding the links between marriage and spouses cultural orientations and values, and to instead consider how spouses' values and orientations may interact with other dimensions of the macroenvironment to affect one's own and his or her spouse's (i.e., crossover effects) marital evaluations and behavior. Studies that examine how cultural orientation and values attenuate or amplify proposed negative associations between socioeconomic and acculturative stressors and marital quality will be particularly informative for understanding culturally derived individual factors that protect or undermine marriage for young parents.

Given the very real economic challenges that the majority of Mexican-origin couples face, the role of socioeconomic factors in marriage (e.g., income, education, perceptions of financial hardship, underemployment) are important areas of inquiry to better understand the links between socioeconomic status and marital well-being. In addition, socioeconomic factors should not be confused as proxies for acculturation but instead should be treated as factors that interact with it to affect marriage. Husbands' and wives' experiences of discrimination in the workplace, physically demanding work, long work hours, shift work, neighborhood quality, and crime are elements of the physical environment that are likely to matter for marital functioning as well, and to date, these have been largely unexplored. Although any negative impacts of these factors on marriage likely generalize across culture, ethnicity, and migration history, the relatively high frequency in which Mexican couples experience these stressors in the United States makes their impact important to understand. Moreover, by separating the socioeconomic and physical environment factors from cultural factors, we can begin to assess their relative influence and explore how cultural value orientations may buffer or amplify their associations with marital quality and behavior and the processes through which socioeconomic factors affect marital relationships.

Of particular relevance to the study of marital behavior is the extent to which husbands' and wives' macroenvironmental experiences and internalized values and orientations are congruent. The implications of within-couple incongruence for Mexican-origin spouses' beliefs and attitudes about the marriage and each other ( $b_2$ ), as well as their routine marital interactions (Path 3 to Path 1) remains unknown. Adopting a dyadic and multidimensional approach to the assessment of selected components of the macroenvironmental context will allow for a more thorough and

complex examination of the contribution of macroenvironmental factors to marital behavior than has previously been explored.

The extent to which spouses' receive support from and provide support to others in their extended families and social networks, as well as the nature of kin relationships (e.g., husbands' kin, wives' kin) represents another dimension of the macroenvironment that holds promise in both directly and indirectly supporting—or in some cases undermining—marital quality for Mexican-origin couples. We further assert that marital and family-specific supports provided by strong social bonds are likely to be particularly important for economically marginalized Mexican-origin couples and those who strongly endorse familistic and collectivistic cultural orientations. Because migration can be a highly disruptive event that weakens or strains social bonds with important kin, the extent to which first-generation husbands and wives can quickly construct new social networks is likely to be of central importance in predicting their marital quality in the early years of parenthood. Here, an awareness of the sociohistorical location of couples in their receiving communities is important, as some regions of the country are likely to have more established Latino communities with many opportunities for social contact with kin and other close associates, whereas other communities may be less well established, less receptive, and even hostile to Latino immigrants. These newer communities (located primarily in the Southeast and the Midwest), in turn, provide fewer opportunities for spouses to connect with other Latino families and kin, who are likely to be geographically dispersed across neighborhoods. Couples residing in different regions of the country are thus likely to vary in the size and composition of their social networks, which can translate into differences in social isolation, support, and provision of support to others—all factors that we assert are important to consider for those who are interested in better understanding marital quality and behavior for new parents of Mexican origin.

Clearly, both bidirectional and circular relationships between multiple layers of context are underscored in Huston's (2000) three-level model for viewing marriage and many research questions remain unexplored. Much of our review emphasized the direct (Path 5) and indirect (Path 3 to Path 1) paths flowing from the macroenvironment to marital behavior. Additional pathways, however, warrant attention. Although not central to our application of the model, Huston acknowledged that individual properties influence the choices spouses make individually and dyadically regarding their physical environments and, in the collective, alter the norms, laws, and policies characterizing the macrosocietal context (see Path 4 and Path 1 to 6, respectively). For example, financial contributions that immigrants send to family members residing in Mexico account for a substantial and increasing segment of the economy, representing 2.5% of Mexico's gross domestic product and ranking as the second-largest source of foreign income after crude oil (World Bank, 2005). The practice of reserving and remitting income to extended family in Mexico begins as an individual or dyadic decision, with direct implications for spouses' own ecological niches. When spouses routinely send money to family members in Mexico, earned income cannot be assumed to be an adequate indicator of the sending family's standard of living or available resources. Remitting funds affects immigrant couples' own ecological niches and the ecological niches occupied by recipient families in Mexico as well. Finally, the collective result of this process is a macrosocietal change in the economic landscape of the receiving country.

Furthermore, the macroenvironment may demonstrate its greatest influence on Mexican-origin individuals via difficulties created in their closest social ties, such as those found in marriage and relations with kin (Path 5 followed by Path 2; Conger, Lorenz, Elder, Simons, & Ge, 1993). One possible research question, consequently, is to consider how marital behaviors may mediate effects from the macroenvironment to the individual. Alternatively, marital behaviors might be conceptualized as a moderator of macroenvironment effects. For example, more general perspectives on psychosocial stress processes and family systems further underscore that marriage has the potential to moderate the effects of stressful macroenvironmental conditions on individuals and their family relationships during the early years of parenting (Cox & Paley, 2003; Coyne & Downey, 1991). In support of these theoretical propositions are results showing direct effects of the marital relationship on physical and mental health (Proulx, Helms, & Buehler, 2007), as well as studies demonstrating how particular marital behaviors and strategies eliminate, reduce, or magnify direct associations between stressful contextual conditions and family members' physical and psychological well-being (Conger & Elder, 1994; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004). Such questions would be particularly relevant to the experience of Mexican-immigrant couples, given their greater likelihood of experiencing socioeconomic and acculturative stressors, as well as the expectation that these couples highly value marriage (because of familism). Indeed, an underlying rationale for a focus on the marital experiences of Mexican-origin couples in the early years of parenting is that the marital dyad is a critical point of entry for macroenvironmental stressors (including the normative stressors associated with caring for infants and young children), which serves either as a buffer against or a conduit for the transmission of stress to parental well-being, the parent-child relationship, and children's early experiences.

Originally designed to focus on marital relationships in general rather than on the experiences of married couples with children specifically, Huston's (2000) model does not explicitly incorporate how children's personal qualities, or elements of parent-child relationships, may influence marital behavior and quality—a substantive area often overlooked in marital and family research (for an exception, see Crouter & Booth, 2003)—nor does it attend to developmental variations in model paths over the life course. In our discussion of the model, we demonstrated how the within-couple patterning of spouses' cultural orientations and values, including their gendered beliefs about child-rearing and parental roles, views of familism, and the importance of the cultural education of their children can be linked to their marital behavior (including the division of child care) via Box C and a dyadic approach. We further suggest that marital scholars should consider young children's temperament and physical health as important dimensions of the social environment in which marriage is embedded and as potential moderators of other paths in the model predicting marital behavior and spouses' marital evaluations (Belsky & Kelly, 1994). Although children can be considered members of the social environment ( $a_{2i}$ ) in which marriage is embedded, this conceptual representation is unlikely to sufficiently address the central role that children and parenting play in the lives of Mexican-origin couples who are also parents, fluctuations in this central role over the life course, and how this important relationship and the timing of life events interact with other dimensions of the model (e.g., culture, socioeconomic conditions, physical environment) over the life course. With the exception of Lloyd (2006), who examined the timing of marriage for Latinos, surprisingly little attention has been given to life-course transitions for Latinos, including the transition to parenting and the various transitions associated with child rearing. It is beyond the scope of this article to develop a new model that

can better account for these limitations; however, we suggest that a next step in theory development entail an expansion of Huston's model to incorporate this more proximal dimension of the macroenvironment for spouses who are parents and the potential links with marital quality and behavior across the life course. Expanding the conceptual model in this way will undoubtedly prove a useful theoretical tool for scholars interested in child outcomes and parent-child relationships.

A fundamental strength of Huston's (2000) model lies in its attention to the multilayered, interdependent, and causal pathways linking constructs across macroenvironmental, individual, and marital domains. His approach is necessarily dyadic and complex as it attends to both within- and between-couple variations in marital behavior and quality nested in multiple layers of context. Paradoxically, this conceptual strength poses pragmatic challenges for researchers, in that testing circular and bidirectional patterns of cause and effect requires longitudinal data, sophisticated analytic strategies, and adequate statistical power. Although advanced analytic strategies for examining dyadic data and testing causal pathways make the application of the model more probable with adequate data, it is unlikely that any one study or empirical test can address the multiple associations between marital behavior and the other dimensions of ecological context outlined in the model. Instead, the model offers a guiding framework for researchers to focus on subparts of the larger causal system in an ecologically informed manner or to build a program of research that methodically examines different aspects of the model, one study at a time. In this way, scholars can advance the understanding of the marital experiences of Mexican-origin couples with young children in a way that attends to the complexity inherent in the model (and, we assert, in their lived experience) in a culturally appropriate and relevant manner.

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