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Social Science Research

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No place like home? Familism and Latino/a–white differences in college pathways [☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 January 2014

Revised 16 December 2014

Accepted 30 December 2014

Available online 19 January 2015

Keywords:

Higher education

Race/ethnicity

Educational achievement

Latino/a familism

ABSTRACT

Recent research has argued that *familism*, defined as a cultural preference for privileging family goals over individual goals, may discourage some Latino/a youth from applying to and attending college, particularly if they must leave home (Desmond and López Turley, 2009). Using data from the Education Longitudinal Study, we find that Latino/a students and parents indeed have stronger preferences than white students and parents for living at home during college. For students, most differences in preferences for proximate colleges are explained by socioeconomic status, academic achievement and high school/regional differences. Moreover, controlling for socioeconomic background and prior achievement explains most racial/ethnic gaps in college application and attendance among high school graduates, suggesting that familism per se is not a significant deterrent to college enrollment above and beyond these more primary factors. However, results indicate generational differences; cultural factors may contribute to racial/ethnic gaps in *parental* preferences for children to remain at home.

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1. Introduction

The 2010 U.S. census reports that Latinos/as make up 16% of the total population; however, just 8.6% of Bachelor's degrees conferred in 2009 were earned by Latino/a graduates (NCES, 2010). Though Latinos/as' college enrollment rate is on the rise—69% of Latino/a college-age youth were enrolled in 2012, surpassing whites (67%) for the first time—persistent Latino/a–white gaps remain in patterns of higher education application and attendance that likely contribute to observed differences in completion rates. For example, Latinos/as are disproportionately enrolled in two-year institutions, which have lower completion rates than four-year colleges (Fry and Taylor, 2013; Llagas, 2003). As of fall 2010, 51% of all Latino/a students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions were attending public two-year colleges, as compared with 38% of white enrollees, 40% of black enrollees, and 41% of Asian enrollees (NCES, 2011a, Table A-36-1). As the number of Latino/a children in U.S. schools continues to rise, along with the college wage premium (Fortin, 2006; Murphy and Welch, 1989), understanding the mechanisms preventing Latinos/as from completing a bachelor's degree is important.

[☆] This research was supported by research grants awarded to Sarah Ovink from the UC Davis Consortium for Women and Research, the UC Davis Institute of Governmental Affairs, and the National Science Foundation Dissertation Improvement Grant. This research was also supported by a grant awarded to Sarah Ovink from the American Educational Research Association, which receives funds for its “AERA Grants Program” from the National Science Foundation under Grant #DRL-0941014. Opinions reflect those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the granting agencies.

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Recent research has investigated whether *familism*, defined as a social pattern unique to Latinos/as wherein family interests receive higher priority than those of the individual, may contribute to persistent Latino/a–white differences in college pathways. (Desmond and López Turley, 2009; Niemann et al., 2000; Sabogal et al., 1987). The Desmond and López Turley (2009) study, based on data collected in Texas, documented large differences between Latinos/as and whites in preferences for staying close to home while attending college and found that these preferences explain part of the Latino/a–white college application gap in that state. Explanations for why Latinos/as lag behind other groups on several key measures of higher education attainment have focused mainly on race/ethnic differences in academic achievement (test scores, grades) and socioeconomic status (parent education, income). These factors are important predictors of college attendance and completion and Latino/a students remain disadvantaged on these measures as compared with their white counterparts; however, many studies find that these factors cannot account for the entire gap (Bohon et al., 2006; Gándara and Contreras, 2009; Grogger and Trejo, 2002). Studies that examine the potential contribution of familism shed an important light on how cultural differences may affect college application and attendance choices among students who expect to finish high school, contributing to differences in college completion rates between groups.

Nevertheless, assumptions that Latino/a college aspirants will be especially reluctant to leave home for cultural reasons are problematic given that the literature lacks a thorough examination of whether culture exerts an influence on their college trajectories over and above structural constraints. Structural problems call for structural solutions; for example, college pathways hampered by students' low-income status might be addressed by increasing the availability of grants to defray rising tuition costs. In contrast, to conclude that differential college pathways depend in substantial part on cultural preferences is to alleviate a degree of societal responsibility for remaining Latino/a–white gaps. If cultural dispositions direct Latino/a college choices, then the means of addressing the completion gap will rely on encouraging Latinos/as to acculturate to U.S. norms of college application and attendance.

Furthermore, little research examines whether non-Latino/a members of underrepresented categories, such as first-generation college-goers and the children of immigrants, might similarly prefer to remain close to home during college, and the mechanisms that result in this choice are the subject of much debate (Hagy and Staniec, 2002; Horn and Nuñez, 2000; Louie, 2005; Perna, 2006; Radford, 2013; Roderick et al., 2011; Warburton et al., 2001). In addition, previous research has not examined whether preferences to remain at home are similar for both parents and children. For example, perhaps students are more likely to prefer to leave, but parents more often expect their children to live at home during college. In such cases we might anticipate that parental preferences will have a greater influence on application and enrollment outcomes than student preferences. If Latino/a parents' preferences differ from those of their children, and if generational differences exist for other groups as well, then such dispositions may instead be reflections of cohort or age-based effects. In short, it is important to assess whether a desire to remain at home during college (1) is a uniquely Latino/a phenomenon; (2) operates similarly for parents and children; and (3) exerts an influence on Latino/a college trajectories after controlling for other factors. Addressing these questions will focus policy attention toward actions that will close the remaining Latino/a–white gaps in the most expedient fashion.

Our assessment focuses on two primary research issues. First, we examine Latino/a–white differences in preferences for living at home during college. While other studies often attribute ethnic differences in preferences to Latino/a familism, a variety of other explanations are equally plausible. Choosing to enroll in a college close to home may be motivated by a variety of factors: as a way to conserve resources, as a means of maintaining important community connections, or as the only choice available due to poor academic performance. We therefore investigate college preferences in a multivariate framework to better understand the factors that contribute to ethnic differences. Second, we investigate whether differences in preferences for living at home during college can help explain Latino/a–white differences in college application and attendance rates in recent, nationally representative data. Desmond and López Turley (2009) Texas-based data may not be generalizable to the national population of Latino/a high school graduates. Moreover, their study measures college preferences and application at the same point in time, and does not include longitudinal data to reveal enrollment patterns.

We connect our research to prior quantitative and qualitative studies that have also measured preferences for living at home, reasoning that this preference is important to a familistic orientation focused on providing or accessing family support while attending college. We compare students across racial/ethnic groups using the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS). In doing so, we offer a more robust evaluation of the potential effects of cultural differences on college choice. Much of the extant literature concerning cultural factors and college choice is qualitative, focuses on small samples at a single time-point, and is not comparative across racial/ethnic groups (Cammarota, 2004; Easley et al., 2012; Sy and Romero, 2008).

We show that many factors are associated with preferences for staying close to home during college, including family income, parental education, and student test scores. Controlling for these factors explains much (and in some cases all) of Latino/a–white differences in preferences for proximate colleges, particularly for students. However, results indicate generational differences in preferences; that is, cultural factors may contribute to racial/ethnic gaps in *parental* preferences for children to remain close to home during college. Second, we examine whether racial/ethnic differences in preferences for colleges that are close to home mediate gaps in college application and attendance rates. This allows us to consider whether preferences for staying close to home—which may reflect an increased reliance on familial support—reduce Latinos/as' college application and attendance rates relative to similar high school graduates from other racial/ethnic groups. In short, we seek to problematize the concept of familism as a factor prior literature has identified as uniquely or primarily affecting Latinos/as' college trajectories. If Latinos/as' college application and enrollment behaviors can be explained primarily by socioeconomic status, prior academic achievement, or the geographic location of colleges, then it is difficult to

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