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Racial and Ethnic Differences in Girls' Sexual, Marital, and Birth Expectations

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Abstract

This study examines potential racial and ethnic differences in early adolescent girls' desired and perceived normative role timing and the extent to which various socioeconomic and family factors and school and job aspirations might be linked with girls' role-timing expectations. Using a racially and ethnically diverse sample, (*n* = 574; 183 Hispanics, 177 Blacks, 93 Whites, and 70 Southeast Asians; *M* age = 12.9), results indicated that young women of different races and ethnicities saw their life course unfold in different sequences based on different timetables and independent of their socioeconomic circumstances. Hispanics desired rapid transitions at a young age, and Southeast Asians desired more gradual transitions at an older age. Blacks perceived the greatest likelihood of nonmarital childbearing for themselves, the longest normative interval between first sex and first birth, but they desired the shortest interval between first marriage and first birth. Within-race regressions revealed that girls' future aspirations were important for their expected role timing, even within the context of socioeconomic disadvantage (welfare receipt, low family income). Findings suggest the importance of culture-specific age norms for motivating role timing and role sequencing in young women's lives.

Keywords

girls' job expectations; girls' school expectations; Hispanics; race and ethnicity; role-timing norms; Southeast Asians

The scheduling of life course events is relatively well defined in modern society. Socially recognized norms exist for the timing and sequencing of events associated with the transition to adulthood (Elder, 1975; Hogan, 1978; Marini, 1984a; Modell & Hareven, 1978; Neugarten, Moore, & Lowe, 1965). Although most individuals ultimately decide when to marry and when to begin childbearing, they are undoubtedly influenced by the socially prescribed norms for such transitions. The perceived normative timing, pacing, and sequencing of such life course events have been known to vary for persons of different ethnic and racial backgrounds and to correspond with actual race-specific demographic trends (Modell & Hareven, 1978; Teachman, Polonko, & Leigh, 1987). For example, the different sexual, marital, and fertility patterns of Blacks and Whites have been well documented. First intercourse occurs earlier among Blacks than among Whites, and childbearing in the absence of marriage is more common among Blacks than among Whites (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994; Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 1993; Day, 1992; Furstenberg, Morgan, Moore & Peterson, 1987; Smith & Udry, 1985). These patterns coincide with the normative beliefs reported by White and Black adolescents. Black teens are more accepting than White teens of intercourse at younger ages and of nonmarital childbearing (Smith & Zabin, 1993; Zabin, Hirsch, Smith & Hardy, 1984).

Although differences in Black and White adolescents' perceived scheduling of life course events have been well documented, less is known about the norms of role timing for two of

the fastest growing minority groups in the United States: Hispanics and Southeast Asians (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). There are several reasons to expect that these ethnic groups would have similar perceived norms of role timing. For example, Hispanics (Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans) and Southeast Asian groups (Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians) place a high value on marriage and family. Child-bearing and childrearing are considered the ultimate fulfillment of a woman's life (D'Avanzo, 1992; Frye, 1995; Martinez, 1986; Williams, 1990). Both ethnic groups also share the cultural belief that "premarital chastity is the zenith of feminine virtue" (Mirande & Enriquez, 1979, p. 115) and that pregnancy outside of marriage is a personal and family disgrace (D'Avanzo, 1992). Despite these similar cultural emphases, however, patterns of teenage nonmarital childbearing are quite different in the two groups. The teenage birthrate of all Hispanic subgroups is three times higher than that of Southeast Asians (103 births per 1,000 women and 34 births per 1,000 women, respectively), and Hispanics have a 2.5 higher percentage of nonmarital births than do Southeast Asians (33% vs. 13%, respectively; CDC, 1993). The teenage fertility rate of Hispanics is between that of Blacks (121 births per 1,000 women) and Whites (43 births per 1,000 women), and the percentage of nonmarital births among Hispanics is lower than that of Blacks (at 67%) but higher than that of Whites (17%; CDC, 1993).

What could explain this paradox? Do Hispanics and Southeast Asians have corresponding differences in their role-timing norms and expectations? Are factors related to each groups' nativity status, socioeconomic background, and school and job aspirations relevant to their role-timing perceptions? Do these relations hold for other racial groups, such as Blacks and Whites? The current study tried to determine the extent to which early adolescent girls of different ethnic and racial backgrounds perceive norms for the role timing and role sequencing of particular life course events and how various socioeconomic and aspirational factors might be linked with these role-timing norms and expectations. This study's sample included sizable subsamples of Black, White, Hispanic and Southeast Asian girls in early adolescence, many of whom in the latter two groups recently immigrated to the U.S. The existence of racial or ethnic differences in girls' norms for role timing would suggest that the disparate timing of life course events that is apparent for adult women of different ethnic backgrounds is shaped, at least to some extent, in early adolescence. Moreover, the extent that girls' socioeconomic and aspirational characteristics are related to their role-timing expectations would suggest that these factors may contribute to a pattern of life events and that the socioeconomic constraints endemic to girls of particular racial backgrounds may be motivating particular role sequencing.

Mexican Americans and Southeast Asian Americans, in addition to sharing attitudes that support traditional family values, have similar socioeconomic profiles. Both populations are characterized by low educational attainment, high unemployment, and a high incidence of poverty, especially compared with Whites (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995a, 1995b). Both groups also report experiencing prejudice and social and job discrimination that likely stems from their lack of English proficiency, immigrant status, nontransferable job skills, and non-White race (Aponte, 1991; Melville, 1980; Yu & Liu, 1992). However, these two ethnic groups have quite disparate histories in the U.S. Mexican immigration dates back to the original settlers and has been consistently steady (Frisbie & Bean, 1989). Southeast Asian immigration to the U.S. is a relatively recent phenomenon. Census data show that 95% of Southeast Asians in the U.S. are foreign born, and most Southeast Asians arrived between 1975 and 1979 or during the decline of the Vietnam War. In contrast, only 36% of today's Mexican Americans are foreign born (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995b, 1995c). Many Mexican immigrants have circular migration patterns between the U.S. and Mexico; individuals cross the border frequently to do seasonal work, depending on job availability (Frisbie & Bean, 1989). In contrast, Southeast Asian immigrants are largely political

refugees who were forced to flee their war-torn countries, and many experienced culture shock when they arrived in the U.S. (Rumbaut & Weeks, 1986). Thus, although these two ethnic groups share a few specific cultural and socioeconomic characteristics, they have quite disparate migration histories and patterns of cultural assimilation.

Immigrant status appears to be a significant protective factor against early nonmarital birth. Among Mexican Americans, recent trends show that teenage childbearing is more than twice as common among U.S.-born Mexican American mothers (12%) than among Mexican-born mothers (5%; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). Acculturated, pregnant Mexican American teenagers also have been found to engage in sexual behavior at earlier ages than their less-acculturated Mexican American counterparts and are more likely to consider single parenthood as a viable option (Reynoso, Felice, & Shragg, 1993). Thus, as individuals assimilate, they appear to acquire values, attitudes, and behaviors of the host country (Szapocznik, 1978), which in this case translate into earlier sexual behavior and higher rates of nonmarital teenage births. It remains to be seen whether the nonmarital and teenage birthrates will increase among second generation U.S. (or U.S.-born) women of Southeast Asian background.

Because of the relatively recent inclusion of Hispanics and, especially, Southeast Asians in social science research, less is known about the factors that contribute to early role timing in these groups, but for Blacks and Whites, early and non-marital childbearing have long been associated with a host of social, economic, and family structure variables (Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1994; Hayes, 1987; Miller, 1995). Poverty status (Hayward, Grady, & Billy, 1992; Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985), family welfare receipt (Duncan & Hoffman, 1990), low parental educational attainment (Hogan, Astone, & Kitagawa, 1985; Zelnik, Kantner & Ford, 1981), and living with a single parent (Bumpass & McLanahan, 1989) are positively related to adolescent nonmarital birth. Adolescents whose mothers were themselves early childbearers are more likely to become pregnant as teens (Furstenberg, Levine, & Brooks-Gunn, 1990; Kahn & Anderson, 1992), and a perceived lack of job or career opportunities has been discussed as a contributor to early nonmarital birth (Hogan & Kitagawa, 1985; Lawson & Rhode, 1993; Luker, 1991; McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988). Results of several longitudinal studies also show that among Black and White women, those who give birth as adolescents are more likely to have more modest educational and career goals before they become pregnant than those who postpone childbearing (Astone & Upchurch, 1994; Marini, 1984b; Moore, Simms, & Betsey, 1986; Mott & Marsiglio, 1985; Rindfuss, Bumpass, & St. John, 1980). Similarly, Ohannessian and Crockett (1993), using a longitudinal analysis, found that educational investment predicted adolescent girls' subsequent sexual activity, but not the reverse. Thus, one would expect that girls who place little importance on or perceive little likelihood of achieving educational or work-related goals would choose sexual activity and childbearing relatively early in the life course, and those who value school and career goals would choose to deliberately postpone sex and childbearing.

In this study, we sought to determine the extent to which racial and ethnic differences were present in girls' desired and perceived normative role timing and in the factors potentially contributing to such norms, such as girls' socioeconomic background and their future school and job aspirations. We examined, in particular, girls' desired ages for first marriage and first childbearing and the ages considered best for first intercourse and first birth. The best-age items have been used in previous research (e.g., Neugarten et al., 1965; Rindfuss et al., 1980; Zabin et al., 1984) and are thought to provide the best measure available for norms regarding transitional events. Racial and ethnic differences in girls' sexual status, intended sexual activity, desire to marry, desire to have children, and perceived likelihood of nonmarital childbearing also were examined. We analyzed (via regression analyses) the extent to which girls' socioeconomic background (e.g., family income, family welfare

receipt, single-mother household, mothers' age at marriage and first birth), their school and job aspirations, and, for Hispanic and Southeast Asian youth, their nativity status and length of time residing in the U.S. were predictive of girls' sexual and birth expectations. For these analyses, we focused on girls' intentions for adolescent sexual behavior, the age that they desired to have a first birth, and their perceived likelihood of having a nonmarital birth. Results reveal how family background characteristics, immigrant status, and future aspirations of the girls might be differentially linked with specific norms of role sequencing for girls of each race and ethnicity.

Methods

Respondents

Respondents were 574 girls in sixth through eighth grades (*M* age = 12.86, *SD* = 0.87, range = 11–15) who were attending one of four public junior high schools in suburban Southern California. Each respondent completed a face-to-face interview about basic demographic information (e.g., age, grade in school, and race and ethnicity). All the girls spoke English. Their racial and ethnic background was determined by their answers to the question: "What race or ethnicity do you consider yourself?" The question was followed by these options (parentheses included): "White, Hispanic, Black, Southeast Asian (Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian), Asian (Filipino, Japanese or Chinese American), or Other." Thirty-two percent of the respondents described themselves as Hispanic (*n* = 183), 31% as Black (*n* = 177), 16% as White (*n* = 93), 12% as Southeast Asian (*n* = 70), 2% as Asian (*n* = 11), and 7% as "other" or an unreported race (*n* = 40). The racial and ethnic groups that are the focus of this study are Hispanic, Black, White, and Southeast Asian. Individuals in the "other" category were excluded from analyses because of their heterogeneous racial and ethnic composition, and girls of Japanese, Chinese, or Filipino descent were excluded because of the relatively small sample size and, consequently, the reduced statistical power of analyses involving this group.

Although we did not individually solicit the various types of Hispanic origin (e.g., Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban American), it is likely that most, if not all, of the Hispanic respondents were Mexican American because the schools where the study took place were 6–23 miles north of the U.S.-Mexico border. Additionally, the study took place in a county that is 21% Mexican American, with less than 1% representation by Puerto Ricans or Cuban Americans. The specific country of origin of the Southeast Asian students also was not specifically solicited, but school data show that approximately half of all Southeast Asian students are Vietnamese, one quarter are Laotian, and one quarter are Cambodian. The racial and ethnic composition of the sample mirrored that of the four study schools, which were 41% Hispanic, 31% Black, 15% White, and 10% Southeast Asian.

All participants were asked their place of birth. Responses indicated that 78% were born in the U.S., 10% were born in Mexico, 10% were born in another country, and 2% did not know where they were born. When analyzed by racial or ethnic group, the following percentages were born in the U.S.: 74% Hispanic, 94% Black, 94% White, and 34% Southeast Asian, χ^2 (3) = 121.6, $p < .001$. Thus, except for Southeast Asians, most were born in the U.S. (Six percent of both Whites and Blacks were unsure of their country of origin; they were not foreign born.) The girls also were asked in the interview how many years they had lived in the U.S. If the respondent had lived in the U.S. since her birth, she was instructed to answer her current age.

Most respondents were from economically disadvantaged families. Almost half of the respondents' families (49%) had a mean annual family income of less than $15,000. Twenty-five percent of the families were receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children

(AFDC) when this study was conducted, and 47% of the families had received AFDC at least one time previously. Thirty-two percent of respondents' mothers had less than a high school education, 26% had completed high school, 30% had completed some college, and 12% had a college or graduate degree. Less than 38% of the respondents reported living with both their biological parents. (Data on family income, welfare receipt, and mothers' education and marital status were based on questionnaires completed by participants' mothers.)

Respondents were recruited by sending a letter to all parents of girls attending the four study schools. The letter requested the daughter's participation in a study on girls' beliefs about marriage and childbearing. Of all eligible girls, approximately 87% agreed to participate.

Measures

All respondents completed a self-administered questionnaire about their role-timing desires and norms and their school and job aspirations. Additionally, their mothers completed a short questionnaire about their educational attainment, the total annual family income for the past year, whether the family had ever received AFDC, and whether they were currently receiving AFDC. Mothers also gave information about their current marital status, their age at first marriage, and their age at first birth. The following items make up the scales that the early adolescent female participants completed.

Role-timing desires and norms—Girls responded to questions that asked about their desired age at first marriage ("how old do you want to be when you get married?"), their desired age at first child-bearing ("how old do you want to be when you have your first child?"), their perceived normative age for first sexual intercourse for girls ("what do you think is the best age for a girl to 'go all the way' or have sexual intercourse for the first time?"), and their perceived normative age for first childbearing ("what do you think is the best age for a woman to have her first baby?"). Response options ranged from 1 (*13–15 years*) to 9 (*41 years or older*); each option (except 9) encompassed 3 years (e.g., 2 = *16–18 years*, 3 = *19–21 years*).

Participants also responded to five additional questions about their desire to get married one day (response options were yes, no, and unsure), their desire to have children some day (response options ranged from 1 = *very much don't want to* to 4 = *very much want to*), the importance that they be married before they have a baby (response options ranged from 1 = *not very important* to 4 = *very important*), and the likelihood that they will have a child before they get married or without getting married (response options ranged from 1 = *very unlikely to 4 = very likely*). They also indicated if they had ever had voluntary sexual intercourse with a male. Response options were yes or no, coded respectively 1 or 0.

Four questions also were asked to determine the participants' intention for future sexual behavior. Items were drawn from Olsen, Weed, Daly, and Jensen (1992) and included: "How likely is it that you will have sexual intercourse in the next year? If someone tried to get you to have sex with him, what would you do? How sure are you that you are ready to have sex? Would you date someone who tried to get you to have sex with him?" Response options ranged from 1 (*very unlikely or very unsure*) to 5 (*very likely or very sure*). High scores indicated positive intention for sexual activity. Olsen et al. (1992) report high internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$) for a five-item scale. (One item pertaining to intention to engage in sexual petting was excluded from use in this study because we were interested specifically in the participants' intention to engage in sexual intercourse, not petting.) Using the current sample and the four items described, Cronbach's alpha of the sexual intention scale was .77.

School and job aspirations—Participants' school and job aspirations were assessed by three items that asked about the importance to the participant that she finish high school, go to college, and get a good job, and by three items that asked about the likelihood that the participant will finish high school, go to college, and get a good job. Response options ranged from 1 (*not important or very unlikely*) to 4 (*very important or very likely*). High scores reflected strong importance placed on school and job achievements and a high likelihood of achieving those goals. A factor analysis computed on these items indicated a one-factor solution, with all items having a component loading greater than .74. Using the current sample, the internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of all six items was .73.

Procedure

Testing was conducted in a small, private room in the girls' schools (e.g., a conference room or the library). Two adult women (one White and one Hispanic) administered the questionnaire packet to four or five students at a time so that students' questions about the survey could be answered fully and individually. The students were instructed to be quiet and not to discuss their responses with each other during or after the testing session. While participants completed the questionnaires, girls were called by one of the survey administrators and asked to complete the interview. They completed the questionnaire in about 1 hour and the interview in less than 5 minutes. All questionnaires and interviews were coded using only an identification number, and all participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

The girls' mothers completed at home a short questionnaire, which their daughters delivered to their mothers the day of the testing. Seventy-six percent of the mothers completed and returned the surveys (n = 436). Girls whose mothers participated did not differ from girls whose mothers did not participate on such characteristics as age, grade in school, family size, religion, or sexual status. Equivalent percentages of mothers and daughters from each racial and ethnic group responded: 148 Hispanics (34%), 150 Blacks (34%), 83 Whites (19%), and 54 Southeast Asians (12%). One mother was of an "other" race.

Results

Prior to evaluating the main questions of this study, we wished to determine whether girls of each racial and ethnic group were comparable in age. An analysis of variance was conducted using the four racial and ethnic groups as the classification variable (Hispanic, Black, White, and Southeast Asian) and participants' ages as the dependent variable. The ANOVA yielded a significant F (df= 3, 519) of 7.24 ($p < .001$), indicating that girls of different race and ethnicity were of different ages. Follow-up contrasts indicated that Southeast Asians (M age = 12.5) were significantly younger than Hispanics (M age = 13.0) and Whites (M age = 13.0), and Blacks were equivalent in age to all groups (M age = 12.8). Given these differences, participants' age was used as a control variable in all subsequent analyses. By statistically controlling for this variable, any differences that emerge among the various racial and ethnic groups cannot be said to be due to factors related to the girls' age.

Racial and Ethnic Differences

To determine whether the socioeconomic characteristics of the girls' families, the girls' school and job aspirations, and their role-timing desires and norms varied by race or ethnicity, three separate multiple analysis of covariance were computed using participants' age as the covariate and their race and ethnicity as the classification variable. For girls' socioeconomic background, seven (mother-rated) indices were available and included in the MANCOVA. (See Table 1.) The past year's total family income was coded using six response options (1 = under $8,000; 2 = between $8,000 and $14,999; 3 = between $15,000

and $24,999; 4 = between $25,000 and $34,999; 5 = between $35,000 and $44,999; and 6 = over $45,000). Current and ever use of AFCD were coded as 0 to indicate no use and 1 to indicate current or previous use. A mother's highest level of education was coded using the following options: 1 = did not finish the ninth grade; 2 = finished the ninth grade; 3 = some high school; 4 = graduated high school or GED; 5 = some college, no degree; 6 = 2-year college degree; 7 = 4-year college degree; and 8 = masters degree or beyond. Single-mother household was coded as 1 = yes and 0 = no.

Results of the MANCOVA indicated that girls of different race and ethnicity had different family socioeconomic characteristics, multivariate F (21, 1275) = 115.67, $p < .001$. Follow-up contrasts (controlling for participant's age) were computed using Newman-Keuls and the $p < .05$ level of significance and are shown as asterisks in Table 1. These results indicated that Southeast Asian mothers reported the lowest family incomes, and Black mothers reported the highest current use and ever use of AFDC and were more likely to be single parents. Almost 80% of Black girls were living in single-mother households, compared with 30%–40% for the other groups. Hispanic mothers reported the lowest educational attainment and the youngest age at first marriage. Black mothers were youngest at first birth, and apparently many had their first birth premaritally. (Although the current coding system likely under-estimates the number of premarital births, the available data show that at least 5% of Hispanic, 25% of Black, 6% of White, and 0% Southeast Asian mothers reported a younger age of first birth than first marriage; χ^2 [3] = 44.35, $p < .001$.)

Results of chi-square analysis showed that significantly more Southeast Asian girls (76%) than Hispanic girls (36%) indicated that they were foreign born, $\chi^2 = 18.04$, $p < .001$. Among foreign-born participants, Southeast Asians reported residing longer in the U.S. (M = 9.1 years) than did Hispanics (M = 7.3 years), independent of the girls' age, F (1, 252) = 4.31, $p < .05$.

MANCOVAs for girls' school and job aspirations and their role-timing norms and desires were calculated using age and each of the seven socioeconomic characteristics listed in Table 1 as controls. These analyses indicate whether girls of different race and ethnicity differ in their future aspirations and perceived role timing, independent of their different socioeconomic backgrounds. In order to minimize case mortality due to missing data, all missing mother-rated socio-economic data were assigned the mean of that racial or ethnic group for that variable.

Results of the ANCOVA on girls' school and job aspirations showed a significant race and ethnicity effect, F (3, 520) = 3.58, $p < .05$. Results of follow-up contrasts (controlling for girls' age and the seven socioeconomic indicators and computed using Newman-Keuls and the $p < .05$ level of significance) indicated that Hispanic girls placed significantly less importance on achieving school and career goals and considered it less likely that they would achieve these goals than Black, White, or Southeast Asian girls. (See Table 1.)

A MANCOVA was computed on the 10 desired and perceived normative role-timing scores shown in Table 1. The scores for the desire to marry were receded to reflect no (0), unsure (1), and yes (2) so that these scores could be included in the MANCOVA. Results showed a significant race and ethnicity effect on girls' role timing, controlling for their age and socioeconomic background. The multivariate F (30, 1286) = 2.66, $p < .001$. The univariate F values associated with girls' responses for each variable are shown in Table 1. The calculations of the mean age scores shown in Table 1 were based on participants' mean responses to the coding scale used to measure best ages and desired ages. For example, a mean score of 2.50 on the desired and best age items was converted to 17.0 years, and a mean score of 2.75 was converted to 17.5 years, and so on. The MANCOVAs were

computed on the scores from the actual items (i.e., having a range of 1–9). The mean age scores presented in Table 1 are shown only to aid in the interpretation of results.

Several patterns are of note in these results. Hispanics perceived the youngest desired age for marriage, the youngest desired age for first birth, and the youngest best age for first birth. Blacks, however, perceived the youngest best age for first intercourse but the oldest desired age for marriage. Southeast Asians perceived the oldest best age for first intercourse and for first birth, and the oldest desired age for first birth. Whites fell consistently in the middle, generally reporting older ages than Hispanics and Blacks but younger ages than Southeast Asians. Looking at the time interval between best age for first intercourse and best age for first birth, we found that Black participants perceived as best the longest interval between these two events, but had the shortest period between desired age at marriage and desired age at first birth—due, in part, to a very late desired age for marriage. Southeast Asian girls, however, desired the longest period of marriage before giving birth.

The mean scores of girls' perceptions about marriage, childbearing, and sexual intentions reveal that, although Whites had the strongest desire to have children, they were most unsure about whether they ultimately would marry. However, when coded on a continuum from 0 (no), 1 (unsure), to 2 (yes), girls of different race and ethnicity did not differ in their desire to marry, F (3, 520) < 1, *ns*. Blacks perceived marriage as least important for childbearing, and they perceived the greatest likelihood that they would have a nonmarital birth. They were significantly more likely than other girls to already have had sexual intercourse. Blacks (19%) were more than twice as likely as Hispanics (8%) to have had sex and were more than six times as likely than either Whites and Southeast Asians (3%) to already have had sex. Southeast Asians were least desirous to have children and least intent on having sexual intercourse in the near future.

Regression Analyses

To determine how girls' socioeconomic background, their school and job aspirations, and, for Hispanic and Southeast Asian youth, their nativity status and length of time residing in the U.S. were related to their role-timing desires and expectations, multiple regressions were computed within each racial and ethnic group using girls' sexual intentions, desired age at first birth, and perceived likelihood of nonmarital childbearing as the dependent variables. These outcomes were chosen because they provide the clearest picture of how early adolescents' pessimistic future aspirations might motivate adolescent sexual behavior, adolescent childbearing, and nonmarital childbearing, independent of a poor socioeconomic background. Or, conversely, results might show that optimistic school and job aspirations—even in the context of a disadvantaged socioeconomic background—are predictive of low intentions for adolescent sexual behavior and nonmarital childbearing. All models were computed separately within race to examine whether the determinants for each outcome varied for girls of different race and ethnicity.

In these analyses, participants' ages, six of the seven socioeconomic variables, and participants' school and job aspirations scores were entered as predictors for Black and White girls. Nativity status (0 = *foreign born* and 1 = *U.S. born*) and number of years residing in the U.S. also were entered as predictors for Hispanic and Southeast Asian girls. Current use of AFDC was not included because ever use of AFDC was more encompassing than current use and because we wished to reduce the number of predictors for each equation. Single-mother household was coded as 1 (yes) or 0 (no).

Results for girls' intentions for adolescent sexual behavior (shown in Table 2) indicate that, for Black, White, and Southeast Asian girls, the older age of the participant and pessimistic school-job aspirations were linked with positive intentions for adolescent sexual activity.

For Hispanic girls, however, low family income (β = −.40, $p < .001$), mothers' young age at marriage (β= −.41, $p < .001$), and mothers' young age at first birth (β = −.29, $p < .01$) were predictive of girls' positive intentions for teenage sexual activity. Similarly, for Southeast Asians, mothers' young age at marriage (β = −.41, $p < .01$) and mothers' young age at first birth (β = −.53, $p < .001$) also were strongly linked with girls' positive intentions for adolescent sexual activity. For girls of all races and ethnicities, the predictors included in the model contributed significant amounts of the variance in sexual intentions, ranging from 11 % for Blacks to 35% for Southeast Asians.

The regression results for girls' desired age at first birth (shown in Table 3) revealed that for girls of all races and ethnicities, optimistic school and job aspirations were linked with a later desired age at first birth. The effect is particularly strong for Whites (β = .39, $p < .001$). For Hispanics born in the U.S. and for Blacks, a mother's young age at first birth was associated with a girl's desire to have a first birth at a young age. Among Southeast Asians, older girls were more desirous of a young age at first childbearing than were younger girls (β = −.37, $p < .01$).

Regression results for girls' perceived likelihood of a nonmarital birth are shown in Table 4. Results were quite different for girls of each race and ethnicity. A high perceived likelihood of non-marital birth was associated with low family income for Hispanics and Whites, with mothers' low educational attainment for Blacks, and with a history of receipt of AFDC for Southeast Asians. Although being born in the U.S. was associated with a greater perceived likelihood of nonmarital birth for both Hispanics and Southeast Asians, only more years living in the U.S. were linked with a greater perceived likelihood of a nonmarital birth for Hispanic girls (β =.23, $p < .05$). For all girls but Hispanics, positive aspirations for school and job were related to a low perceived likelihood of a nonmarital birth (for Blacks, β = −.20, $p < .01$; for Whites, β = −.23, $p < .05$; for Southeast Asians, β = −.29, $p < .05$). The predictors contributed significant amounts of the variance in all girls' perceived likelihood of having a nonmarital birth, ranging from 10% for Blacks to 31% for Southeast Asians.

Discussion

This study examined racial and ethnic differences in girls' expectations about the life course as a means to better understand the social and cultural patterning of particular role timing and role sequencing for women of different races and ethnicities. Little is known about Hispanic girls' norms of role timing and their desires. Even less is known about the sexual, marital, and birth expectations of Southeast Asian American girls. Previous research on White and Black women has found that actual pathways to family formation vary substantially by race and are heavily influenced by the socioeconomic and family context (Kahn & Anderson, 1992; Miller & Heaton, 1991). Thus, it seemed important to consider how particular socioeconomic, family structure, and aspirational characteristics impact girls' perceived timing of family role transitions. It also was important to analyze how immigrant status and length of time living in the U.S. were related to girls' norms for role timing for Hispanic and Southeast Asian youth. The results of the study presented here suggest three general conclusions about girls' desired and perceived normative role timing and the factors that contribute to them.

First, wide racial and ethnic variations were found in girls' sexual, marital, and birth expectations and their school and job aspirations, independent of the girls' family and socioeconomic background characteristics. In general, Hispanics desired early and rapid transitions, and Southeast Asians desired later and more gradual transitions. Blacks perceived the greatest likelihood of non-marital childbearing for themselves, the longest normative interval between first sex and first birth, but the shortest desired interval between

first marriage and first birth. Southeast Asian girls were least desirous of having children and perceived the lowest likelihood of having sexual relations during adolescence and of having a non-marital birth, although there was a nativity effect for the latter variable. These results suggest that girls of different races and ethnicities are likely exposed to and evidently react to different socialized expectations of the timing of events associated with the transition to adulthood. Moreover, these cultural norms apparently exist independent of the varying social and economic circumstances in which girls of different racial and ethnic backgrounds live.

The young women in the sample also perceive different values and opportunities for continuing their education, getting a good job, getting married, and having children—differences that were not attributable to their particular socioeconomic or family context. For example and consistent with historical trends, results indicated that Black participants seem particularly vulnerable to early sexual activity and nonmarital childbearing, predispositions derived neither from their socioeconomic status, nor their family background. Thus, culture-specific age norms appear to be important for how these individuals progress through the life course, a progression that some would argue culminates in a more adaptive life course strategy (Burton, 1990, 1996; Geronimus, 1992). Although none of the participants has experienced marriage or childbearing yet and relatively few have experienced sexual intercourse, girls of different race and ethnicity are seeing their life course unfold in different sequences, based on different timetables.

Second, results of this study highlight the importance of girls' aspirations for school and job success and for a desired later age for first birth, independent of socioeconomic status. Girls' school and job aspirations were also important for not intending to have teenage sexual relations and for not intending to have a nonmarital birth for Black, White and Southeast Asian youth. It appears, then, that a strong school-job orientation might act as a protective factor against early, non-marital sexual behavior and childbearing, even within the context of socioeconomic disadvantage (e.g., welfare receipt and low family income). This trend was not evident, however, among Hispanic girls. For these youth, the prospects of an advanced education and a stable job were unrelated to intended sexual behavior or nonmarital childbearing. It is perhaps not coincidental that Hispanic girls were most pessimistic about their futures, desired to take on marital and parenting roles at the youngest ages, and had mothers with the least education and who were youngest at marriage. This pattern suggests that Mexican American girls—unlike girls from the other racial and ethnic groups—are being socialized for marriage and childrearing to the exclusion of work-related or school-related roles (cf. Martinez, 1986; Melville, 1980; Mirande & Enriquez, 1979). In contrast, Southeast Asian girls—even though they had the lowest family income, a 50% rate of current AFDC receipt, and the highest immigration rate—had school and job aspirations comparable with those of Black and White girls. Such optimistic aspirations were linked with delaying intended sexual activity, delaying age at desired childbearing, and low intentions of a non-marital birth. Thus, it may be that significant risk factors contributing to Hispanics' higher rates of nonmarital and teenage childbearing relative to Southeast Asians are the former groups' younger norms and desires of role timing and their pessimistic outlook regarding school and jobs.

A third finding of this study was the importance of nativity status for Hispanic and Southeast Asian girls' perceived role timing. In this study, Hispanics born in the U.S. desired a younger age for first birth and perceived a greater likelihood that they would have a nonmarital birth than Hispanics born in Mexico. Moreover, as the length of time that Hispanics born in Mexico lived in the U.S. increased, so did their perceived probability of having a nonmarital birth. These findings suggest that as Mexican Americans assimilate into U.S. culture, their behavior becomes more closely aligned to the behavior patterns of White

and Black non-Hispanic youth (cf. Marchi & Guendelman, 1995; Reynoso et al., 1993). Similarly, Southeast Asian girls born in the U.S. perceived a greater likelihood of nonmarital childbearing for themselves than their foreign-born counterparts did. It may be, then, that, analogous to the Hispanic population, as current second-generation (or U.S.-born) Southeast Asians reach childbearing age, nonmarital childbearing within this ethnic group will increase. This would be significant for U.S. demographics, given the high fertility rate and high immigration rate currently observed within the Southeast Asian population. For example, between 1980 and 1990, the U.S. population of Asian Pacific Islanders increased by 108%, more than twice the 53% increase of the Hispanic population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990).

Patterns of nonmarital childbearing certainly reflect a range of factors and determinants, including variations in income, employment, education, cultural norms, and access and willingness to use contraception (Bumpass & McLanahan, 1989; Miller, 1995). These factors, in turn, are likely to differ among recently immigrated groups and groups that are already acculturated. Future research that examines adolescents' sexual, marital, and birth expectations within culturally diverse samples needs to incorporate immigrant status and length of time in the U.S., as well as other factors related to acculturation and assimilation.

Several limitations of this study warrant specific comment. Perhaps the most significant limitation was the relatively small size of the Southeast Asian group. This group typically has not been included in studies of women's attitudes and beliefs about marriage and childbearing, so their inclusion was particularly compelling. Moreover, this group is growing at a disproportionate rate, relative to other ethnic populations, and their attitudes and values about family formation and role timing are of particular interest. However, although Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians have similar religious beliefs and kinship profiles (Frye, 1995), there are notable differences among these groups. Vietnamese American women typically have higher educational levels, higher household incomes, and higher participation in the labor force than Cambodian and Laotian women in the U.S. (Yu & Lieu, 1992). Thus, the heterogenous nature of this group should be considered when interpreting results pertaining to Southeast Asians. Inclusion of other Asian groups (e.g., Chinese, Korean, Filipino) would have provided interesting comparisons because these groups are similar to, yet different from, many Southeast Asian groups (Rumbaut & Weeks, 1986).

The response options for the items concerning desired and normative ages contained 3-year age periods (e.g., 16–18) and, thus, limited the specificity with which we were able to measure girls' norms and desires for role timing. The scores reflecting girls' "best" ages and "desired" ages should, therefore, be considered age ranges and not specific ages. Additionally, the single-occasion design of the study was also a limitation. How girls' desires and expectations change across development and over time is an intriguing question and an issue for future research. It would be interesting to compare the sexual, marital, and childbearing expectations of the current sample with their actual outcomes. Do the patterns found using the current sample portend future racial and ethnic differences in women's role timing and educational and job attainment?

These limitations notwithstanding, the current findings begin to shed light on patterns and mechanisms that contribute to how young women of color move through the life course. Certainly the results argue against homogenizing life course expectations for women of different races and ethnicities and illustrate the need for further individualized assessments of young women's hopes and desires. Future research also should recognize and appreciate the cultural and racial-ethnic variety that exists among today's youth and should capitalize on this diversity for a better understanding of the life course trajectories of all individuals.

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Table 1

Mean Scores of Girls' Socioeconomic Characteristics, School and Job Aspirations, and Role-Timing Norms and Desires by Race and Ethnicity

	Hispanic (*n* = 183)	**Black (*n* = 177)**	**White (*n* = 93)**	**Southeast Asian (*n* = 70)**	
Socioeconomic characteristics					*F*(3,433)
Family income	3.08^{b}	2.42^{d}	4.46^{b,d,f}	2.29^{f}	13.47**
Current receipt of AFDC	0.09^{a,d}	0.54^{a,d}	0.13^{d,f}	0.50^{c,f}	11.15**
Ever received AFDC	0.31^{a,c}	0.85^{a,d}	0.25^{d,f}	0.61^{c,f}	12.20**
Mother's education	3.02^{a,b}	4.35^{a,d}	5.53^{b,d,f}	3.78^{f}	18.38**
Single-mother household	0.29^{a}	0.79^{a,d,e}	0.35^{d}	0.39^{e}	7.80**
Mother's age at marriage	18.87^{b}	20.12	20.87^{b}	20.33	2.49
Mother's age at first child	19.98^{b,c}	18.74^{d,e}	23.28^{b,d}	22.83^{c,e}	8.93**
					F(3,520)
School and job aspirations	3.59^{a,b,c}	3.74^{a}	3.73^{b}	3.67^{c}	3.58*
Role-timing norms and desires					
Best age for first intercourse	19.30^{c}	19.16^{d,e}	20.29^{d,f}	21.74^{c,e,f}	7.16**
Best age for first birth	21.88^{a,b,c}	23.04^{a,d,e}	23.55^{b,d}	24.39^{c,e}	9.67**
Desired age at marriage	22.10^{a,b,c}	24.48^{a,d}	23.17^{b,d}	24.02^{c}	7.60**
Desired age at first birth	23.26^{a,b,c}	24.35^{a,e}	24.70^{b,f}	26.38^{c,e,f}	10.50**
Desire to marry					
Yes	24%	21%	16%	26%	
No	9%	17%	8%	22%	χ^2 = 15.70*
Unsure	67%	62%	76%	52%	
Desire to have children	3.37^{a,c},	3.06^{a,d,e}	3.54^{d,f}	2.80^{c,e,f}	7.63**
Importance of marriage before childbearing	3.27^{a}	2.97^{a,d,e}	3.45^{d}	3.55^{e}	5.89**
Likelihood of nonmarital childbearing	1.75^{c}	1.90^{d,e}	1.50^{d,f}	1.10^{c,e,f}	11.09**
Percentage nonvirgins	0.08^{a}	0.19^{a,d,e}	0.03^{d}	0.03^{e}	8.14**
Sexual intentions	1.74^{c}	1.84^{e}	1.69^{f}	1.27^{c,e,f}	6.09**

Note: Means with the same letter superscript are significantly different. Follow-up comparisons were conducted using Newman-Keuls tests and the $p < .05$ level of significance to control for the number of contrasts.

[a] Hispanic-Black contrast.

[b] Hispanic-White contrast.

[c] Hispanic-Southeast Asian contrast.

[d] Black-White contrast.

[e] Black-Southeast Asian contrast.

[f] White-Southeast Asian contrast.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .001$.

Table 2

Regression Analyses of Girls' Intentions for Adolescent Sexual Behavior

	Hispanic	Black	White	Southeast Asian
Predictor	**β (R^2)**	**β (R^2)**	**β (R^2)**	**β (R^2)**
Age	.15	.28** (.08)	.25* (.06)	.33** (.08)
Family income	−.40*** (.07)	−.03	.01	.15
Ever use of AFDC	−.12	−.06	−.10	−.01
Mother's education	−.12	.08	−.10	−.10
Single-mother household	−.08	−.05	.02	.13
Mother's age at marriage	−.41*** (.09)	−.13	−.13	−.41** (.10)
Mother's age at birth	−.29** (.02)	.09	.10	−.53*** (.12)
Foreign born	.07	–	–	−.11
Years in U.S.	−.00	–	–	.07
School and job aspirations	−.06	−.20** (.04)	−.40*** (.14)	−.23* (.04)
F (df)	3. 70*** (10, 172)	2.62** (8,168)	2.91** (8,84)	2.83** (10,59)
Total R^2	.18	.11	.22	.35

Note: Dashes indicate that that variable was not entered into the equation. See text for coding of predictors.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3

Regression Analyses of Girls' Desired Age at First Birth

	Hispanic	Black	White	Southeast Asian
Predictor	**β (R^2)**	**β (R^2)**	**β (R^2)**	**β (R^2)**
Age	−.14	.10	.09	−.37** (11)
Family income	.11	.03	−.08	−.03
Ever use of AFDC	.06	−.12	−.01	−.17
Mother's education	−.09	.10	−.03	.08
Single-mother household	.08	.01	−.10	−.20
Mother's age at marriage	.06	.10	.07	.28
Mother's age at birth	.11	.22* (.02)	−.13	−.07
Foreign born	−.16* (.04)	–	–	−.06
Years in U.S.	.02	–	–	.02
School and job aspirations	.29** (.07)	.25** (.06)	.39*** (.08)	.29* (.07)
F (df)	2.76** (10, 172)	2.27* (8,168)	1.58 (8,84)	2.03* (10,59)
Total R^2	.15	.10	.13	.27

Note: Dashes indicate that that variable was not entered into the equation. See text for coding of predictors.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Regression Analyses of Girls' Perceived Likelihood of Nonmarital Childbearing

	Hispanic	Black	White	Southeast Asian
Predictor	**β (R^2)**	**β (R^2)**	**β (R^2)**	**β (R^2)**
Age	.02	.10	.14	.21
Family income	−.24* (.03)	−.11	−.34*** (.12)	−.26
Ever use of AFDC	.03	−.13	.14	.39** (.07)
Mother's education	.18	−.18* (.02)	.20	.07
Single-mother household	−.08	−.05	.12	.10
Mother's age at marriage	.21	−.09	.07	.25
Mother's age at birth	−.22	−.14	−.20	.01
Foreign born	.26* (.04)	–	–	.30* (.04)
Years in U.S.	.23* (.03)	–	–	.27
School and job aspirations	.04	−.20** (.04)	−.23* (.04)	−.29* (.04)
F (df)	2.64** (10, 172)	2.24* (8,168)	2.84** (8,84)	2.20* (10,59)
Total R^2	.14	.10	.21	.31

Note: Dashes indicate that that variable was not entered into the equation. See text for coding of predictors.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.