

Chapter

**THE MEXICAN AMERICAN MIDDLE CLASS:
HOW THEIR RACE AND CLASS IMPACT
ON BELIEFS ABOUT CRIME CONTROL**

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ABSTRACT

This study uses pooled data from the 2004-2007 National Election Survey to assess how the race, class, and ethclass perspectives account for middle-class Mexican Americans' support for a fundamental dimension of crime control ideology, namely, whether crime should be eradicated along a continuum from conservative-punitive (capturing, trying and incarcerating criminals) to liberal-preventive (addressing the roots of criminality in bad schools, joblessness, poverty etc.) measures. Findings indicate that dynamics vary by immigrant status. Specifically, those raised in the U.S. adopt a "traditional minority" liberal iteration of the ethclass perspective: support is intermediate between the more conservative (i.e.,

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greater support for punitive measures) White middle class and the more liberal (greater support for preventive measures) Cuban working class. Further, privileged Mexicans not raised in the U.S. operate as a “traditional immigrant group”, adhering to race/class dynamics that are in accord with a conservative iteration of the race perspective: they lean more towards supporting preventive measures than Whites and this support is identical across class categories. The implications of the findings for shedding light on race/class dynamics among “new immigrant groups”, are discussed and suggestions for future research are offered.

INTRODUCTION

In the past dozen or so years a growing body of empirical research in sociology has assessed the relative effects of race and social class in explaining the ideological profile of relatively privileged segments of minority group populations -- who are routinely characterized as constituting a “middle class” (for reviews see Wilson 2001; Gilliam and Whitby 1989). In this vein, the fifteen or so existing studies have focused overwhelmingly on African Americans and have tended to address two substantive topics -- aspects of political identification such as political party affiliation (Guterbock and London 1983; Jackman and Jackman 1983) and ideological compatibility with presidential candidates/national civic leaders (Dillingham 1981; Jackman and Jackman 1983) as well as support for redistributive policy initiatives to ameliorate socioeconomic inequality in America (Gilliam and Whitby 1989; Herring 1989; Innes and Sittig 1996; Jackman and Jackman 1983; Parent and Stekler 1985; Welsh and Foster 1987; Wilson 2001). Overall, these studies have reached consistent results: racial division is present at upper-levels of the American class structure. Specifically, minority status exerts an effect rivaling that of privileged class position, resulting in adherence to tenets of political ideology that are more liberal, (e.g. higher levels of Democratic or liberal party support = liberal; support for more interventionist policies = liberal) than the White middle class but more conservative than working class, co-racial group members.

Despite the contribution made by existing studies, however, our understanding of the race/class basis of the political ideology of privileged

emphasizes individual responsibility for crime, advocating, in particular, the importance of catching, convicting, and incarcerating criminals (Browning and Cao 1992). In fact, this antinomy captures radically divergent — and hotly debated — policy alternatives that affects the appropriation of vast amounts of material and human resources that is based on assigning who is to blame for criminal behavior (Beckett and Sasson 2000; Flanagan 1996).

Overall, our understanding of the critical topic of the race/class basis of stratification ideology among minority middle classes is enhanced by broadening both the scope of minority groups and the range of ideological issues examined. This study constitutes such a broadening: it utilizes nationally representative data from the National Election Study to assess predictions from three perspectives concerning the additive and interactive effects of minority status and position in the class structure in explaining support of the Mexican American middle class toward the punitive versus preventive stance on crime control.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The Class Formulation

The first perspective -- class theory -- is grounded in the premise that regardless of racial group affiliation, position in the stratification system is the basis of ideological sentiments related to issues of crime control in American society. Class theory is a distillation of studies from disparate theoretical orientations that have in common the notion that successive rises in structural position in society are associated with greater ideological support for policies that maintain the status quo. Accordingly, this perspective posits that the Mexican American middle class — pursuant to their relatively privileged position in the class structure — should express support for agents of the state to invoke harsh and punitive enforcement of criminal activity. For example, versions of class theory rooted in both Marxist and Neo-Marxist theory assert that across racial lines economic interest created by membership in structural categories based on degrees of

ownership of, and supervisory control over, the means of production in the economies of advanced capitalist societies dictate levels of ideological commitment towards the state apparatus to maintain existing social and economic arrangements (Humphries and Greenberg 1993; Wright and Cho 1992; Wright 1988, 1985). A more Weberian conception of class theory maintains that individuals from different racial groups who occupy roughly similar degrees of privilege based on socioeconomic criteria adhere to similar ideological stances toward issues — such as the appropriate amount of social control exercised by the state -- that impacts on their shared, broad-based interests (Herring 1989; Parkin 1971).

The Race Formulation

The second theoretical perspective -- race theory — provides a basis for predicting that attitudes along the punitive-preventive crime control continuum among the Mexican American middle class should be race-specific and operate independently of social class. Significantly, however, among relatively privileged Mexican Americans this perspective may have two iterations depending on, most conspicuously, immigrant status. The first iteration would seem to involve privileged Mexicans who grew up in the U.S., a group who, similar to African Americans, represent a “classic liberal minority” in that they assert, for example, relatively high levels of perceived discrimination and prejudice in American society (Vallejo 2015, 2009). In fact, a series of studies have found that at all class levels, race effects regarding ideological issues of crime control among African Americans are driven by beliefs that racial discrimination is widely practiced in the criminal justice system. For example, the police are viewed as using excessive force in African American communities (Brooks 1993; Huang and Vaughn 1996; Lasley 1994;) and courts engage in unduly harsh sentencing of African Americans (Gerber and Engelhardt 1996; Hagan and Albonetti 1982; Schwartz, Guo and Kerbs 1993). In fact, this view among African Americans — and by extension the same view by Mexicans raised in the U.S. — underlies the rejection, relative to Whites, of a conservative or “get

tough” criminal justice ideology (Browning and Cao 1992) and the adoption of a more classically liberal solution to crime control that involves solving the social and economic roots of crime (Lasley 1994). A second iteration of race theory is more likely to be asserted among privileged Mexicans who were not raised in the U.S. This group, who express a lower level of racial discrimination (Vallejo 2015) finds a group identity in a “traditional immigrant mentality” (Steinberg 1981), brand of individualism that is based on notions of self-reliance and moral responsibility, that, ultimately, places the blame for crime disproportionately on the voluntary behavior of criminals. Overall, this orientation leads to the adoption of a “get tough” criminal justice ideology (Browning and Cao 1992) that emphasizes punitive sanctions and harsh enforcement, a classically conservative orientation to the solution of crime (Browning and Cao 1992).

The Ethclass Formulation

A third formulation -- the ethclass perspective — represents a conceptual amalgam of the race and class perspectives. Most systematically enunciated by Gordon (1964), the ethclass perspective maintains that, similar to class theory, relatively privileged minority group members are drawn to the status quo by virtue of their position in the class structure. However, operating simultaneously is a sense of shared fate as a member of a racial minority. Specifically, identification with their minority status serves to operate independently of the effect of social class (Dillingham 1981; Gilliam and Whitby 1989; Gordon 1964). Accordingly, groups such as privileged Mexican Americans should experience a “dual consciousness” in which race and class should exert both independent effects and a shared effect across a wide range of issues including those related to the control of crime.

Significantly, however, manifestations of ethclass dynamics — similar to race theory — is posited as having two iterations depending on immigrant status. Specifically, among privileged Mexicans raised within the U.S. -- who have a more traditionally liberal attitude than Mexicans raised outside

of the U.S. -- ethclass dynamics are manifest in adhering to a stance along the preventive — punitive continuum that is more liberal than the White middle class but more conservative than the Mexican American working class. Further, among middle class members raised outside of the U.S., a “get tough” attitude towards crime control is manifest if they have more liberal orientations along the preventive — punitive continuum of crime control than the Cuban working class but are more conservative along the continuum than the White middle class.

DATA AND METHODS

Data from the 2004-2007 survey years of the National Election Study (NES) are utilized to assess the issues of interest. The NES is a full probability sample of English speaking adults living in households in the United States (for a full description of the NES see Miller, Kinder and Rosenstone 1993). Pooling the survey years was necessary to generate a sufficient sample size of Cubans to sustain quantitative analyses. Accordingly, the sample for this study consists of 521 Mexican Americans and 1447 Whites who satisfy selection criteria along lines of race and social class (Socio-demographic profile of sample members is in the Appendix). The model used in this study is operationalized as follows.

Dependent Variable

Crime Control Measure

All survey respondents were asked, “Do you think the best way to reduce crime is to address social problems or to make sure criminals are caught, convicted, and punished, or that we should do something in between?” This variable was operationalized along a continuum with higher values expressing a more classically liberal crime control policy: 2 = address social problems, 1 = something in between, and 0=criminals are caught, convicted, and punished.

Independent Variables

Race and Social Class

Race is coded as 1 = Mexican American and 0 = White. Social Class is coded as 1 = middle 0 = working and is based on occupational criteria. The current occupation of sample members is coded into one of five 1990 census-based occupational categories. Those whose occupation is in one of two categories — Managerial and Professional, and Technical-Sales and Administrative Support constitute the middle class. Sample members whose current occupation falls in three other categories: a) Service, Precision, Production, (b) Repair, Operators, Fabricators, and (c) Laborers — constitute the working class. Utilizing an occupationally-based measure of social class is particularly appropriate in this study: stratification research has demonstrated a causal link between class-based occupational experiences and the formation of a wide range of values such as tolerance, trust, and intellectual flexibility that have been speculated as impacting on a range of ideological orientations including two components, the permissible role of government, and punitiveness.

Additional Variables

Several other categories of variables are examined — primarily as controls—in the model. In this regard, we include two status variables — earnings (in year preceding interview) and educational attainment (years — that are conventionally used to measure position in the stratifications system but are modestly correlated with occupationally-based conceptions of social class (Kohn and Schooler 1983; Wright 1985). We also include socioeconomic characteristics, namely, gender (dummy variables for female with male as reference), age (years), marital status (1 = married, 0 = single), and region of residence (dummy variables for North, South, West with Midwest as reference). The inclusion of the variables is based on the documented influence of stage of the life-span (Setterston and Mayer 1997), gender as an ascriptive characteristic (Jackman 1994) and region of

residence (Firebaugh and Davis 1988) on a broad range of ideological-based social issues, including abortion, school busing, and support for affirmative action policies. Along these lines, those who are younger, female, and reside outside of the South adhere to more conventionally liberal postures.

DATA ANALYTIC STRATEGY

This study performs analyses, separately, of Mexicans who grew up in the U.S. and those who did not grow up in the U.S., relative to Whites. In both analyses, descriptive and multivariate techniques are utilized to assess the crime control attitudes of the Mexican American middle class, relative to, the Cuban working and White middle and working classes. Sequentially, analyses proceed as follows: first, means and t-tests are employed to assess crime control posture and whether differences across groups are statistically significant. Next, the multivariate technique ordinary least squares regression (OLS) is used to assess the effect of race and social class on attitudes toward crime control. In this regard, the simple multivariate model is constructed to assess the independent effects of race and social class on attitudes about crime control. Then, a hierarchical F test procedure is employed to examine whether the combined or interactive effects of race and social class explain variation in crime control attitudes above and beyond all independent effects in the models. Finally, if race/class interactive terms are significant regression equations are “solved”. In this vein, predicted scores are derived on the dependent variable for particularly important observed cases among the middle and working classes for both Mexican Americans and Whites. Significantly, this procedure most closely specifies the precise magnitude and direction of interaction effects for both groups.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the mean levels of support for crime control for the race/class groups (descriptive statistics for all variables are contained in the Appendix). The results suggest that among the Mexican American middle class, race/class dynamics vary by immigrant status. First, among middle class members raised in the United States, there is support for the liberal iteration of the ethclass perspective. Specifically, prima facie evidence of an interaction effect among middle class Mexican Americans derives from the mean values (1.6) along the preventive-punitive continuum being significantly lower, and, thus, more conservative, than those of the Mexican American working class (1.8) but higher, and, thus, more liberal than the White middle class (1.4).

Table 1. Mean Levels of Support For Crime Control Strategies

	<u>Middle</u>	<u>Working</u>
Mexicans—U.S. Raised	1.6	1.8
Mexicans—Non-U.S. Raised	1.2	1.2
Whites	1.4	1.6
 <u>T-Test Middle Class</u>		
Mexicans-U.S Raised --- White	4.24*	
Mexicans Non U.S. Raised — White	4.20*	
 <u>T-Test Working Class</u>		
Mexicans-U.S Raised --- White	4.26*	
Mexicans Non U.S. Raised — White	5.73**	

*P < .05, **P < .01.

Second, among those members of the Mexican American middle class not raised in the U.S., there is more support for the conservative iteration of the race perspective. Specifically, mean values of the Mexican American

middle class are identical to those of the Mexican American working class (1.2) and are more conservative than Whites (1.4 to 1.6).

These descriptive results are suggestive and are supplemented with additional analyses that are multivariate in nature. In this regard, Table 2 presents results from OLS regressions that assess the additive effects of all variables in the model and the interaction effects of race and social class.

**Table 2. OLS Regressions of Attitudes Toward Crime Control
Among Two Groups of Mexicans**

Variable	Non-U.S. Raised			U.S. Raised		
	B	b	T-Ratio	B	b	T-Ratio
Race	.26**	.22	6.33	.17*	.14	4.94
Class	.08	.05	1.70	.18*	.15	5.15
Income	-.03	-.02	1.33	-.06*	-.02	4.22
Education	.02*	.01	3.82	.01	.01	1.24
Gender	.05	.02	1.37	.12*	.07	4.16
Age	-.04*	-.03	3.71	-.01	-.01	1.53
Marital Status	.05	.02	1.43	.04	.03	1.62
North	.03	.03	1.21	.05	.03	1.25
South	.04	.03	1.16	.05	.03	1.28
West	.04	.03	1.18	.02	.03	1.34

Race * Class.
(hierarchical F Test).

R ² Additive Model	.026	.023
R ² (Inclusion of Interaction)	.028	.031
T Ratio	1.84	3.77*

*P < .05, **P < .01.

The results build on those reached in the descriptive analyses, First, an iteration of the ethclass formulation constitutes the most appropriate lens

**Table 3. Joint Effects of Race and Class on Crime Control Attitudes:
Mexicans Raised In the U.S.**

	Middle Class Score	Working Class Score
Mexican	1.3	1.7
White	1.5	1.7

CONCLUSION

Studies of the race/class basis of stratification ideology among middle class segments of minority populations have been beset by two major shortcomings, namely, (1) they have focused on a limited range of minority groups, and, (2) they have focused on a limited range of ideological domains, for example, paying little attention to the crucial domain of crime control. This study addresses these limitations: it assesses the race/class basis of adherence to a classic distinction within the domain of crime control --- “preventive”, i.e., addressing the perceived roots of crime such as bad schools, joblessness, poverty etc., versus “punitive”, i.e., capturing, convicting, and incarcerating criminals, crime control solutions.

The findings from the NES sample indicate that race/class dynamics among the Mexican American middle class are complex, and that immigrant status is a fundamental cleavage that defines how dynamics unfold. In particular, Mexicans raised in the U.S., operate as a “traditional minority group”, namely, similar to African Americans, adopting a posture that is in accord with a liberal iteration of the ethclass perspective: their views are intermediate between the more conservative (i.e., greater support for punitive measures) White middle class and the more liberal (greater support for preventive measures) Mexican American working class. Conversely, privileged Mexicans not raised in the U.S. operate as a “traditional immigrant group”, adhering to race/class dynamics that are in accord with a conservative iteration of the race perspective: they lean more towards supporting preventive measures than more than Whites and this support is identical across class categories.

minority middle class populations. First, we need to know if the complex dynamics found here are also found in other sub-Latino groups such as Puerto Ricans, and Colombians, as well as, for example, Asian and sub-Asian groups, all of whom have also experienced unprecedented socioeconomic differentiation in recent decades. Third, with respect to these analyses, the recognized multidimensionality of the domain of crime control necessitates that these additional dimensions be explored. These dimensions include “the use of force” (how much force by crime control agents is permissible, the “scope” of crime control (the breadth of behavior to be controlled), and “crime control spending” (how much financial commitment the government should make to eradicating crime) (See Wilson and Dunham 2001 for a review of these dimensions). Fourth, in all of these analyses, the role of forms of political and stratification ideology versus, for example, personal experience with agents of crime control will help to further understand the underpinnings of race/class dynamics among privileged minority populations. Overall, these research efforts will how minority status and structural location, two classic stratification factors, shape notions about a crucial ideological domain related to how to address criminality in America.

APPENDIX

Sample Profile

	Whites (N= 1447)	Mexicans Raised in U.S. (N=264)	Mexicans Not Raised In U.S. (N=257)
Age (Years)	38.3	36.4	37.6
Education (Years)	11.7	11.5	11.7
Middle Class (%)	60.4	52.5	54.6
Male (%)	49.5	53.0	52.9

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