



Debi Cooper, New Hope, Redwood City, California.  
April 20, 1996.

## "IT'S HER BODY; IT'S DEFINITELY HER RIGHT": CHICANAS/LATINAS AND ABORTION

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*"God, this is so touchy—it's so difficult! But, it's her body; it's definitely her right. If she doesn't want to carry the baby, she shouldn't have to."*

*Professional/Managerial, age, 37*

Abortion is one of the most controversial social issues in American society; it calls into question normative values surrounding gender, sexuality, and reproduction. The debate on abortion underscores the contradiction between normative expectations and the changing realities of women's lives, and provides a symbolic focus for both reaffirmation and challenge to traditional cultural values.

The discourse on abortion, while rich and varied, rarely integrates the concerns of racial-ethnic women. This absence is particularly pronounced for Chicanas and Latinas,<sup>2</sup> women whose interpretations of the meanings of gender and reproduction are intertwined with their historical marginality in American society. Chicana/Latina absence from the literature reflects one or more of the following: (1) the lack of data on their attitudes toward abortion and gender ideology, (2) their lack of representation in the ranks of pro-choice or pro-life activists, and (3) the ill-articulated "sense" among abortion activists, researchers, and society-at-large, that Chicanas and Latinas are not "interested" in reproductive rights issues or unusually resistant to gender role change because of their Catholicism and cultural norms defining motherhood as women's primary role. Such propositions are based on a unidimensional understanding of Catholicism and familism (family solidarity) often associated with Chicano and Latino cultures. These suppositions, untested and problematic, beg for further analysis particularly since Hispanic women are, by some accounts, 60 percent more likely to have an abortion than non

Hispanic women (Smith 1989).

This paper presents new data on Chicana/Latina attitudes toward abortion from a 1989/1990 mail survey of 152 Chicana white collar workers in Northern California and follow-up in-depth interviews with 35 women in 1990/1991. Our data analysis reveals virtually all informants support either legal abortion on demand [pro-choice] or under certain conditions [conditional choice] (43.4 percent and 48.7 percent, respectively). Only 5.9 percent of our respondents did not favor legal abortion. These attitudes demonstrate considerably higher support of legalized abortion than women-in-general surveyed in the same year (Gallup Poll, April 1990).<sup>3</sup> The high level of support for legal abortion persists despite Chicanas/Latinas' membership in the Catholic Church or their belief in the "sacred nature of families."

Our analysis concentrates on distinguishing attitudinal variations between women who are pro-choice and women who are conditional choice. As predicted by prior research on women, we find that education, occupation, church attendance, and leanings toward feminism help explain differences in abortion attitudes. Our qualitative data enhances these findings by conveying a sense of the continual struggle among Chicanas and Latinas over the meanings of gender in their lives. We argue that Chicanas' and Latinas' attitudes toward abortion reflect tensions associated with changing conceptions of gender in their communities and the society-at-large. Women desire to strike a balance between traditional cultural patterns anchored in Catholicism (e.g., compulsory motherhood, familism) and more egalitarian (e.g., "feminist") notions of gender. Our findings offer potentially rich contributions to theoretical formulations on gender and political consciousness among women workers.

Our paper begins with a literature review that contextualizes the meanings of abortion among Chicanas/Latinas and in the community-at-large. We follow this by presenting both the pro-choice and conditional choice views of women interviewed for this study. We conclude by offering an analysis of the ways in which gender is a social construction constantly undergoing change and revision within the community.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Few studies exist that focus on Chicana/Latina's attitudes towards "feminist issues" and/or abortion. A telephone survey of 321 randomly-selected Latinas commissioned by the National Council of Negro Women (1991) found that 25 percent of the respondents believed abortion should be "illegal all the time"—a figure much higher than that of women from non-Hispanic backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Darabi, Namerow, and Philliber's (1983) analysis of data from the National Opinion Research in 1972 and 1980 did not find significant differences in support for legal abortion between Mexican American and Anglo American men and women when religion, number of siblings, and age at marriage were controlled. Rosenhouse-Person and Sabagh's study (1983) of abortion attitudes among Mexican American and Mexican immigrant Catholic women found no significant differences between both groups when socio-economic status was controlled.

Hayes-Bautista and Hurtado's 1992 study of 1,200 randomly-selected U.S.-and foreign-born Latinas and Latinos residing in California ascertained that over two-thirds of the respondents agreed that women should have a right to a legal abortion. Analysis of the data on the basis of gender and nativity revealed that foreign-born females expressed the strongest support for legal abortion followed by U.S.-born females, foreign-born males. U.S.-born Latino males reported the lowest levels of support for legal abortion. Their sample was 85 percent Catholic and 65 percent immigrant.

These studies highlight the diversity of views among Chicanas and Latinas regarding abortion. What these studies suggest, moreover, is the important role religion and culture play on women's attitudes toward reproductive rights and abortion. Research on Chicano and Latino ethnicity emphasize the role of Catholicism and Catholic rituals (e.g., baptisms, quinceañeras, weddings) play in maintaining these ethnic communities. (Williams, 1990; Segura and Pierce, 1993; Davalos, 1997) Chicano/Latino culture evidence high levels of symbolic and real attach-

ment to Roman Catholic theology and practice. Pictures and/or statues of the Virgen de Guadalupe (the patron saint of Mexico) are often found in Chicano homes. Catholic rituals affirm the primacy of "la familia" and primary responsibility for nurturing and taking care of others. Both individuals and institutions in the community are held accountable for these conceptualizations of the "essential" Chicana/Latina nature.

Retribution for violating idealized notions of Chicana/Latina femininity is swift and intense. One example of the activation of the mechanisms of accountability within Chicano/Latino communities is the Rachel Vargas case. Vargas, an administrator at the Reproductive Services Clinic in Corpus Christi, Texas was excommunicated [expelled from the Church] by Bishop Rene Gracida on June 1, 1990, due to her public expression of pro-choice attitudes on abortion. Vargas believes that her excommunication was a political act designed to intimidate Latinas with pro-choice sentiments who may have been considering defying the precepts of the Catholic Church. Despite her excommunication, Vargas considers herself a Catholic with the right to contest both the dogma and sanctions of the Church regarding reproductive rights. She averred that Bishop Gracida "made a mistake in picking on a woman like myself, who has the strength and the determination to fight back and say no, I will not allow you to intimidate me and I will not allow you to kick me out of the church."

Fear of social sanctions attached to opposing the Catholic Church's stance on abortion has swayed many Chicano/Latino organizations into silence regarding abortion.<sup>5</sup> Ray Silva, Executive Director of El Paso's Planned Parenthood office said, "Hispanic national organizations have been pretty wimpy in taking a public stance on abortion." Strengthening their silence is a vague sense that most Chicanos/Latinos do not support abortion. In explaining why his organization does not publicly address the abortion issue, Charles Kamesaki, Vice President of National Council of La Raza said: "We have a responsibility to represent the whole community, not just positions that we might agree with." (Hispanic Link, 1989: 2,4).

The sense that Chicanas/os are anti-abortion tends to be reinforced by relying on narrow interpretations of sociodemographic profiles. In general low educational attainment and low income are correlated to more conservative attitudes on gender role ideology and abortion. By extension, Chicanas and Latinas as members of groups concentrated in low-status occupations with low levels of education are thus assumed to hold high levels of anti-abortion sentiments. Bolstering this view is the conspicuous "absence" of Chicanas and Latinas from large, public forums and rallies on reproductive rights. This absence is not necessarily by choice, however. For example, at a major, five-hour pro-choice "Mobilization for Women," organized by NOW on November 12, 1989 at the Lincoln Memorial, only one Latina, Irma Maldonado (president of the Mexican American Women's National Association) was invited to speak. However, as time dragged on, the rally's organizers tried to remove her from the scroll of invited speakers to "speed up" the event (Hispanic Link Weekly Report, November 27, 1989).

Despite the complexity of the issue, the reluctance of many Chicano/Latino organizations to publicly support reproductive rights, and the imaging of Chicanas and Latinas as anti-abortion Catholics, several Chicana/Latina organizations have actively promoted a pro-choice stance. Among them are MALCS (Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social), the Mexican American Women's National Association, National Cuban Women's Association, Latinas for Reproductive Choice, and Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional, Inc. (the largest Latina organization), with 23 chapters in the U.S. (Comisión Femenil Annual Report, p.3). Leaders and members of these organizations articulate their pro-choice positions in words that both confront Chicano/Latino opposition to women's rights and challenge society's monolithic perspective on Chicana/Latina views on reproductive rights.

At a press conference in Oakland, California held on October 3, 1990, a group of women including the aforementioned Rachel Vargas, announced the formation of Latinas for Reproductive Choice on the anniversary of the death of Rosie Jimenez,



who died twenty-three years ago from an illegal abortion. Luz Alvarez-Martinez, director of the National Latina Health Organization said that Jimenez "died because she did not have all the reproductive choices available to her, simply because she was a poor Chicana woman" (San Francisco Examiner, October 4, 1990).

The founding statement of Latinas for Reproductive Choice articulated a strong commitment to: (1) break the silence on reproductive rights issues within the Latino community and provide a platform for open discussion; (2) debunk the myths that surround Latinas through public education; and (3) include Latinas in the national reproductive rights debate by promoting Latinas on the boards of the traditional reproductive rights groups.<sup>6</sup>

This public statement from Latinas for Reproductive Choice simultaneously acknowledges and challenges the "code of silence" in the Chicano/Latino community regarding abortion as well as the marginalization of women's voices and needs within society-at-large. The statement also calls attention to the dilemmas Chicanas and Latinas encounter in "taking a stand" on abortion. That is, advocating a pro-choice position challenges traditional conceptualizations of gender in their ethnic communities and in society-at-large. Moreover, for Chicanas and Latinas as members of historically and socially distinct groups whose cultural traditions are often denigrated and denied, asserting a pro-choice position can be interpreted as an "individualistic" stance antithetical to the collective and familistic ethos traditionally associated with this community (Griswold del Castillo, 1987; Segura and Pesquera, 1992, Segura and Pierce, 1993). For Chicanas and Latinas such individualism dramatically posits a sense of personal (e.g., "body") empowerment against the dialectic of cultural-ethnic unity and maintenance.

Within Chicano/Latino cultures, motherhood is often eulogized as part of a distinct cultural heritage under assault by outside social pressures (Melville, 1980; Mirande and Enriquez, 1979; Baca Zinn, 1982, 1975; Segura, 1989). Motherhood cast as a social and political act mitigates against a forceful challenge to traditional notions of gender and womanhood as well as repro-

ductive rights. The politics of race-ethnicity coupled with Catholicism (either symbolic or real) points to the complex layering of normative and ideological constructs that inform Chicana/Latina attitudes toward abortion as the following section illustrates.

## METHOD AND SAMPLE

In Fall 1989/Winter 1990, we administered a 20-page questionnaire on "women and work issues" to all Hispanic-identified women employed at a large public university in California. Using a battery of closed-ended questions, the mail survey examined three broad sets of concerns: (1) attitudes toward work including perceived barriers to job access, retention, and promotion; (2) "ethnicity" and the extent to which respondents feel comfortable with different ethnic labels including "Chicana/o," "Hispanic," "Mexican," and "Latina/o;" (3) their views on gender ideology, feminist agenda items, abortion, and feminists. 152 women answered the survey for a response rate of 48.7 percent. In addition, we interviewed 35 women randomly-selected from the survey respondents. This paper analyzes the survey and interview data on women's attitudes toward abortion.

Most of the respondents are of Mexican descent (75 percent) with the rest either of Latin American or Spanish origin. All but 15 women were born in the United States. Sixty percent of the respondents are bilingual in Spanish and English. All but 3 women received high school diplomas; 118 have education beyond high school; 43 have a college diploma or above. Their educational levels are much higher than the California norm for Chicanos/Latinos (11th grade). Ninety-four women (61.8 percent) are presently married/partnered: 45.8 percent (n=43) are married to Mexican/Chicano men, 10.6 percent (n=10) are married to "other Hispanic" men, and 40.4 percent (n=38) have non-Hispanic husbands. Three women declined to state their husband's ethnicity. The respondents' ages range from 20 to 60 years old, with an average age of 36.5 years. One hundred and eleven women have children. The mean number of children is 2.1.

Of the 152 respondents, 41.4 percent (n=63) work in

John we classified as "lower-level clerical"; 28.9 percent (n=44) are "upper-level clerical workers"; 5.9 percent are "technical aides and service workers" (n=9), while 19.7 percent are "professional/managerial workers" (n=30).<sup>7</sup> Six women declined to provide information on their occupations. The mean income of the respondents is \$23,288 annually.<sup>8</sup>

The informants' average incomes fall above those of many women workers.<sup>9</sup> In this regard we are able to explore the attitudes toward abortion among Chicanas and Latinas in the more privileged tiers of the working class. It is important to note, however, that the form and contours these attitudes take among this group of women will likely differ from other Chicanas/Latinas who work in jobs with lower incomes and have lower levels of education which may correspond to less support for abortion.

One advantage of the current analysis is that it provides a point of departure from which theoretical and empirical work can evolve. Our long term goal is to develop an understanding of Chicana/Latina consciousness as racial-ethnic women and as workers. We are interested in how different facets of their experience in the family, in the workplace, and in the community inform their political consciousness.

## OVERALL ATTITUDES TOWARDS ABORTION

Of the 152 women who answered the survey, 9 women do not support women's right to a legal abortion [*Anti-Choice*] (5.9%), 74 women support this right under "certain conditions" [*Conditional Choice*] (48.7%), and 66 women support abortion under any circumstances [*Pro-choice*] (43.4%).<sup>10</sup> This sample is considerably more pro-choice than women polled by Gallup in April of the same year (1990).<sup>11</sup>

Among the survey respondents, *Pro-choice* women are twice as likely as those who take a *Conditional Choice* stance to express their opinion on abortion through active measures such as writing letters to public officials, (29.7 percent and 12.9 percent, respectively). This active orientation is considerably higher than the national profiles reported by the Gallup Poll (5 percent) and challenges stereotyped notions of Chicanas/Latinas as apo-

litical.

With respect to the influence of religious preference on abortion attitudes, research indicates that Jews and mainstream Protestants are more likely than Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants to support abortion rights (Baker, Epstein & Forth, 1981; Legge, 1983). The difference in attitudes between Catholics and mainstream Protestants, however, is small. Moreover, Catholic women have a higher rate of abortion than either Protestants and Jews. Among the Catholic Chicana/Latina informants in our study, 54.5 percent indicate a *Conditional* abortion stance whereas 41.6 percent are *Pro-choice*. The few respondents who report being fundamentalist Christians favor *Conditional* abortion (60 percent) or are anti-choice (30 percent). The nine Protestant respondents are mostly pro-choice (77.8%).

More important than religious denomination to abortion attitudes is level of religiosity as measured by church attendance. Among our informants, women who attend church services on a regular basis are twice as likely to report themselves as favoring conditional abortion than to be pro-choice. Chicanas/Latinas who never attend church are twice as likely to be pro-choice.

Feminist orientations also influence abortion attitudes. *Pro-choice* women report more willingness to join a feminist organization and call themselves feminists than women who advocate a *Conditional* abortion position.

Also consistent with national studies on abortion, the more highly educated a woman is, the more likely she will favor a *Pro-choice* position. Thirty-five percent of the *Pro-choice* women and twenty-two percent of the *Conditional Choice* women have a college degree or higher. On the other hand, when we looked at women's occupations, we found that professional and technical aid and service workers tend to be *Pro-choice* (62.1 percent and 66.7 percent, respectively). Women in both upper and lower clerical occupations preferred a *Conditional Choice* position (58.1 percent and 59.7 percent, respectively). The high support for a pro-choice position among professional women is a predictable given the strong association between high levels of

education and liberal abortion attitudes. More surprising is the strong pro-choice attitudes among less well-educated technical and/service workers. This suggests that the influence of education is not linear but could be mitigated by several factors including work environment, family religiosity and social networks. The preference for *Conditional Choice* among women in both clerical sectors also requires further analysis of these factors.

The following section based on qualitative data explores Chicana/Latina attitudes towards abortion, and the relationship between religious and cultural norms in their position on abortion and their public expressions on the abortion debate.

**PRO-CHOICE CHICANAS/LATINAS:** "I think it's every woman's right to choose..."

Chicanas/Latinas who advocate a *Pro-choice* position tend to express themselves succinctly and with minimal ambivalence (e.g. "I think it's a woman's body and she should not be forced to do something against her will"). When asked to elaborate on their views, however, about half of the women revealed a complex reflective process. Some women discuss abortion vis-à-vis larger questions of "morality", or Catholic Church dogma, or personalize the issue (whether or not they would have an abortion). Generally, however, *Pro-choice* Chicanas/Latinas frame their position within a "woman-centered" legalistic framework centered on the question of woman's legal rights and their rights of self-determination:

*I think that it's not the government's place to decide what a woman should do with her body. As far as while the child is in the womb, it cannot live without the mother host and if the mother does not feel like she can bring it to term and then take care of it afterwards, then who is the government to say, "No, you must do that!" That's just totally ridiculous. I think it's every woman's right to choose to make that*

*decision for herself.*

*Upper Clerical, age 22*

Similar to this informant, Chicanas/Latinas in this study assign agency to the individual woman; only she has the right to determine the outcome of "her" pregnancy.

Other women discuss their perspectives on abortion as inexorably bound to the "situation." They posit a relational morality—one that reflects a need to take into account each women's unique situation:

*I think that's a woman's right. It depends on her situation. Every woman's situation is different, and I feel it's a woman's right even though I've been brought up Catholic, I know that stigma but I feel that there have been some instances where some women can't possibly bring up a child. And if they feel that abortion is right in their situation, that's their right.*

*Professional, age 37*

This informant's moral reasoning reveals considerable ambivalence about abortion due to her socialization in the Catholic Church. Women often resolve this contradiction by distancing themselves from the moral issue involved (e.g. the "life" of the fetus) in favor of a legalistic stance that affirms the primacy of women's individual rights. This resolution is not easy, however, as the following informant indicates:

*I guess I have mixed feeling because I was born and raised Catholic. That was always considered a moral issue but I feel, depending on the circumstances the woman should have a choice. I still have some reservation even though I'm Pro-choice. I'm Pro-choice from a legal, point of view. I'm not saying that I think it's right morally, but women should have*



*the choice to decide for themselves.*

*Upper Clerical, age 34*

Many of the *Pro-choice* informants sidestep the moral issue. Their position is consistent with that of the organization, Catholics for *Pro-choice*: "...there is no Church teaching on the legality of abortion," and "The public struggle over abortion is not a spiritual or dogmatic struggle, but a struggle for political control (i.e., who will triumph in the public arena)" (Evans, .6).

Other informants seek to "manage" the tension between their religious upbringing and their *Pro-choice* sentiments by arguing that Chicano/Latino attachment to Catholicism is largely symbolic. That is, Catholicism is a part of Chicano/Latino culture whose authority is honorific rather than absolute:

*I think everybody is Catholic—ninety percent, but I'm not thoroughly convinced that they are truly believers. They do go to Church, but they do it as a social, you know, culture thing. You [really] don't talk about sex and abortion. I think it's [seen as] private and shameful.*

*Professional, age 31*

Numerous informants argued that a public discussion on abortion was "taboo" because it violated gender expectations of modesty and motherhood as well as Catholicism. As one informant said:

*I think we are supposed to be quiet about sexuality and that kind of stuff. We are supposed to suppress our view about that... Yes, we discuss that among my friends, about being more vocal, about expressing our feelings, our views.*

*Lower clerical, age 32*

They discussed how abortion rights contradict the pri-

macy assigned to *la familia* [family] and the idealized "mother" image in Chicano/Mexican culture:

*I think most Latin families culturally [they] are always big families. Usually what they [woman] do is get married, have babies and take care of their families, that's usually what they do. That really influences their opinion on things like abortion. Yeah, they might have a harder time believing in their own individuality and the right to choose these things, just because of culture.*

*Technical Aid and Service, age 24*

Research on Chicano/Latino families indicates that women are revered for their roles as ministering mothers (Mirande and Enriquez, 1979). Baca Zinn (1975) adds that while Chicano families may be patriarchal they are female-centered with women having a degree of control over the domestic sphere as wives/mothers. Melville argues, moreover, that "...the moral strength of Mexican American women lies in their self-identification as members of the Familia de la Raza. Within the Family, they believe they have a uniquely female role to fill. It is a role of the mother who nurtures and sustains her children, a role of power based on love...female power can never mean the rejection of motherhood and the capacity to nurture but rather in its fulfillment in all aspects of social life" (Melville, 1980:8).

Many respondents remark that sexuality and abortion are not discussed. Their perceptions mirror those expressed by Chicano/Latino public figures who often avoid taking a *Pro-choice* stand because of religions and cultural norms.

*Pro-choice* Chicanas/Latinas are acutely aware that their attitudes violate religious and cultural tenets. Chicano/Latino culture idealizes family solidarity which includes children and extended kin. Catholicism, often symbolic of the familism inherent in the culture, produces a social environment hostile to *Pro-Choice* positions. The result of this is a silencing of women's

voices:

*Maybe in certain circles they could talk, I think among women. But publicly or maybe in front of other men or their husbands, they may not. I think the majority of them would probably be very careful of when they voice their opinion.*

*Professional, age 37*

In general, *Pro-choice* Chicanas/Latinas feel they contradict cultural and religious principles deeply rooted in the Chicano/Latino community. They justify their position, however, by evoking a "woman-centered" standpoint. That is, they assign primacy to the right of each woman to "choose", and secondary status to the ideology of familism—particularly compulsory motherhood—and religious dogma that relegates abortion to the domain of moral depravity or "sin." Rather, *Pro-choice* Chicanas/Latinas contest these strictures by arguing that women are the appropriate foundation for an alternative morality. Chicana/Latina workers also conveyed a strong sense of trust that women who elect to have abortions do so only after considerable deliberation, rendering their choice worthy of respect.

**CONDITIONAL CHOICE CHICANAS/LATINAS:** "Bouncing back and forth".

Women who selected a *Conditional Choice* position were more likely than *Pro-choice* women to express greater difficulty in reconciling differences between the moral questions of life as postulated by the Catholic Church and their "sense" that there are times when women "need" to have abortions. They also tended to personalize the issues of abortion to a much greater degree than *Pro-choice* women. That is, when asked to discuss their views on abortion, they reshaped the discussion to center on whether or not they would have an abortion as well as expressing a more generalized view.

*Conditional Choice* informants in general state that religion is very important in their lives and are more likely to attend church on a regular basis than *Pro-choice* women. Consequently, their stance on abortion is more rooted in the Catholic Church's position on the sanctity of the embryo's life and as a result, the act of abortion constitutes a sin. Nonetheless, *Conditional Choice* Chicanas/Latinas deviated from the Catholic Church's position. Many expressed the opinion that it is not the Catholic Church who would ultimately judge action, but God. The religion's conceptualization of an individual relationship with God, subverts the Church's official position.

The following informant, like other *Conditional Choice* proponents in our study, is critical of the Church's inflexibility on abortion and reproductive rights, and discusses her religiosity in terms of a personal relationship with God.

*I think it's definitely her right. It's her decision she has to make and basically her conscious she has to deal with. Nobody is going to deal with it but her and she should definitely have the choice. To me it's personally wrong to kill a life and I believe that from conception on, there is a life. For me I would have to answer to God and nobody else. And it's not that I would have to answer to the church; it's to God. Just my relationship with him. I don't think that they would say, "NO, I won't do it because the church says not to."*

*Upper Clerical, age 35*

Some *Conditional Choice* proponents express their attachment to Catholicism as rooted in a symbolic cultural quasi-religious configuration while also affirming that it is ultimately the individual woman who is responsible for the decision.

*I definitely feel that they have the right, I know I would never get an abortion, but it's still a*



*person's right to say yes or no she's the one that's going to be carrying it; it's her body; it's her right. I don't say I'm a Catholic. I believe in God. I go to Catholic Church. If I change my mother-in-law would have a fit, because they are very religious folk and it would just be because of pressure. I like being a Catholic, but I don't have to do everything that they say.*

*Lower Clerical, age 31*

Women who hold a *Conditional Choice* position articulate a more acute moral dilemma than *Pro-choice* proponents. The majority stated that abortion was not an option they would consider for themselves. Similar to some of the *Pro-choice* proponents, they consider abortion as morally wrong, yet, they affirm women's "right to their own body."

*Conditional Choice* women also discuss their position on abortion as one "in process," or one that has been changing and may continue to change. For many of the *Conditional Choice* women, this position is uncomfortable. Many women indicate they changed their views on abortion as they became more familiar with the issue. Others feel that employment led them to move from an anti-abortion view to one of *Conditional Choice*. For example:

*Yes, I can say that now. I wouldn't have been able to say that ten years ago. But working at the Health Center, we do a lot of counseling. In fact, we have funds that pay for abortions. At first when I started to do the paperwork for the abortion, because we do referrals, I felt very guilty. I felt like I had to go to confession or something because I was doing this paperwork and playing a part in killing these babies, and how could I do this, my God! [She said this in a whisper and excited voice.] But*

*I had to finally separate from that and say everybody has a right to their own body; everybody has a right to make a decision about themselves, for themselves, and maybe I wouldn't choose to do this for myself, but I'm not going to judge them for what they want to do. Because everybody has their own life and circumstances surrounding them, that for whatever reason it wouldn't be a good idea to continue the pregnancy. So I try not to personalize it, when I do counseling. I've, been able to separate myself. I couldn't have said this a couple of years ago, but I've distanced myself from the church. I'm not proud of that because I still feel that the religion is ingrained in me, it's part of me, and I will always be a catholic, even though I don't attend regularly...*

*Lower Clerical, age 41*

Similar to the above informant, women who espoused a *Conditional Choice* position indicated that the issue was complex and discussed how they arrived at their position through an evaluative process. Their moral reasoning included juxtaposing religious principles on the sanctity of life and their concern to take into account each woman's individual circumstance and her legal right to choice.

*I use to be pro life and then I went the other way and thought gee, I have to think of the woman and her point of view...So I'm bouncing back and forth. It just really depends on the circumstances, but now I'm starting to think more towards choice.*

*Upper Clerical, age 24*

This informant's words convey the moral dilemma confronting Chicanas/Latinas who need to reconcile their attachment to reli-

glorious principles, primarily Catholicism, and their commitment to women's rights to self-determination.

Other Chicanas focused not only on employment or the Church, but on cultural values, particularly the contradiction of abortion to the primacy assigned to *la familia* [family] and the idealized "mother" image in Chicano/Mexican culture. For example:

*In order to be valued we have to be wives and mothers first. That cultural pressure is the most difficult to overcome.*

*Professional, age 35*

Chicanas like this informant indicate that to arrive at a conditional choice position involves confronting cultural values and norms. They have difficulty affirming individual rights wholeheartedly probably because this contradicts their socialization to the principle that women should "serve and nurture" the family and the community.

Institutions within the Chicano community that seek to hold women accountable to a familistic ideology rooted in women's primacy as mothers include the family, kin networks, and the Church. One mechanism of social control is fear. Similar to *Pro-choice* proponents, *Conditional Choice* women sympathetic to abortion often maintain silence on the issue out of fear. For example:

*I'm Catholic. I'm supposed to say that I don't think that people should have an abortion, but I think that a woman has to make the decision on her own.*

*Lower Clerical, age 46*

and:

*The Catholic Church is still against abortion, so for someone who's a practicing Catholic to say—me for instance—to say that I think we should be pro-abortion. Right [ironic emphasis]. They're not going to like that*

*Lower Clerical, age 36*

The church (through real conviction or symbolic attachment) and cultural values of family influence women's beliefs on individual reproductive rights and contribute to the silencing of women's voices regarding abortion. Their perceptions of community sanctions and fears mirror those expressed by Chicano/Latino public figures, many of whom fear taking a stand on abortion because of religious beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

Chicanas/Latinas in our study support a women's legal right to abortion. Those who espouse a *Conditional Choice* position express considerable ambivalence in their views. Although they agree with the Catholic Church's position that abortion ends a life, they, nonetheless, affirm women's right to choice. This seemingly contradictory position is often mediated by a belief that individual actions are judged by God, and not the Catholic Church. Thus, women who consider themselves practicing Catholics reconcile this contradiction by controverting the Church's claim on their loyalties.

*Pro-choice* advocates are more likely to state that although they were raised Catholic, religion is either not important or, if they state that it is important, they display a "symbolic" attachment; that is, they participate in important life-cycle Catholic rituals such as Baptism and Marriage, but rarely attend mass. For these proponents, Catholicism is often symbolic and esteemed as part of Chicano/Latino culture. These women accept the contradiction between their views and the Church's position and assign primacy to women's individual rights. This acceptance is important because it demonstrates that one's attitudes or consciousness does not need to lie on a unilineal continuum.

How these women reconcile conflicting claims speaks to a contestation over the meaning of gender and ethnicity in the Chicana/o community. Women in this study know that their beliefs challenge traditional and esteemed constructions of gender and ethnicity. Despite this, they are in varying degrees engaged

In struggle over these meanings—a struggle that expands Chicana/Latinas identity and culture.

Their attitudes toward abortion reveal tensions associated with women's desire to strike a balance between traditional cultural patterns anchored in Catholicism (e.g., compulsory motherhood, familism) and more egalitarian (e.g., "feminist") notions of gender.

### Endnotes

1 Authors names are listed randomly. Our research has been supported by grants from the Academic Senates of the University of California at Davis and at Santa Barbara. Dr. Pesquera acknowledges the support of a Humanist-in-Residence Rockefeller Fellowship at the University of Arizona, Tucson and Dr. Segura acknowledges the support of a Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of California, Los Angeles.

2 In this paper, the terms, "Chicana" and "Chicano" refer respectively to a woman and to a man of Mexican descent residing in the United States without distinguishing immigrant status. "Chicano" also refers generically to the category of persons (male and female) who claim Mexican heritage (e.g., the "Chicano" community). These labels offer an alternative to the more common ethnic identifiers, "Mexican" and "Mexican American."

The terms, "Latina" and "Latino" refer respectively to a woman and a man claiming heritage from a Latin American country. We note that much of the research on Chicanas/os and Latinas/os uses both sets of labels interchangeably. Indeed there is considerable overlap between the terminology. However, our paper makes this distinction because our respondents were quite clear in their own ethnic designation.

Readers interested in the history and significance of different labels used by the Mexican origin population are referred to: Portes, Alejandro and Cynthia Truelove, 1987, "Making Sense of Diversity: Recent Research on Hispanic Minorities in the United States." *Annual Review of Sociology* 13:359-385; John A. García, 1981, "'Yo Soy Mexicano...': Self-Identity And Socio-Demographic Correlates." *Social Science Quarterly* 62:88-98; and Fernando Penalosa, 1970, "Toward an Operational Definition of the Mexican American." *Aztlán, Chicano Journal of the Social Sciences and Arts* 1:1-12.

3 According to the April 1990 Gallup Poll, 13 percent of American women in general felt abortion should be illegal, 50 percent felt it could be legal depending on the circumstance while 32 percent favored legal abortion under any circumstance.

To get a sense of the differences and similarities between survey respondents and all American women regarding acceptable conditions for legal abortion, we present the following figures:

Gallup Poll Respondents	Chicana/Latina Survey
Percent Approving Legal Abortion for:	
Rape/Incest	81% 87%
Maternal danger	93% 86.5%
Baby deformity	56% 68.9%
Can't afford child	15% 23%

4 This survey found that 16 percent of African Americans believed abortion should be "illegal all the time" vis-à-vis 13 percent of Asian Americans and 16 percent of Native Americans (Table 36, p. 60).

5 On June 2, 1989, Archbishop Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles issued a policy statement—"The Truth That Makes Us All Free" distributed to Catholic legislators in California. Mahoney states that: "It seems clear to me that Catholic office holders...have a positive moral obligation...to work for an America in which the abortion liberty has been repealed, in our culture and in our laws." and: "All our Catholic people, and I, expect our Catholic public officials...to protect all human life, from the moment of conception until natural death, and we expect them to support legislation which guarantees, supports, and safeguards that right to life." (*Conscience* July/August 1989:11-12)

6 October 3, 1990, press conference handout titled, "Latinas for Reproductive Choice Statement."

7 These occupational categories were derived in consultation with the personnel manual of the research site and two personnel analysts. In general, Lower Clerical occupations (levels 1-3 in this organization) are non-supervisory. Upper Clerical occupations (levels 4-6) are often supervisory. Professional Occupations include Managers of Academic and Staff units as well as a variety of specialized jobs that are mainly administrative (e.g., Counselor, Personnel Analyst) or scientific (Staff Research Associate). Service and Technicians tended to be lower paid workers in laboratories (Laboratory helper) or custodians. One important limitation of this case study is that relatively few women in the latter category answered the survey (n=9) or answered our call for an oral interview.

8 These figures obscure the income range of the respondents. Fourteen women earned less than \$15,000; 33 earned between \$15,000-\$19,999; 57 earned between \$20,000-\$24,999; 21 earned between \$25,000-\$29,999; 13 earned between \$30,000-\$34,999; 11 earned more than \$35,000.



9 National median incomes in 1989, for white female full time workers was \$19,873 and for Hispanic females was \$16,006 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991a).

10 We use the term, "anti-choice" rather than the more commonly used "pro-life" label because it is more accurate to the sentiments expressed by survey informants. That is, women who supported abortion did not view themselves as "anti-life" which is implied by the "pro-life" designation. Moreover, women who opposed abortion did not discuss pro-choice women as "anti-life" but rather focused on their personal beliefs on the issue. In addition, we feel strongly that the labels used in the discourse on abortion seek to dichotomize an issue in ways that misrepresent women's multidimensionality.

11 See footnote #3.

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