Older Mexican Americans and God-Mediated Control:
Exploring the Influence of Pentecostal/ Evangelical Affiliation

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Abstract

A growing number of Mexican Americans are leaving the Catholic Church to join Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations. The purpose of this study is to explore the benefits that are associated with joining Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations. A latent variable model is specified that contains the following core relationships: (1) older Mexican Americans who affiliate with Pentecostal/Evangelical congregations will attend worship services more often; (2) older Mexican Americans who attend church more often will receive more spiritual support from their fellow church members; (3) older Mexican Americans who receive more spiritual support will develop a closer relationship with God; and (4) older Mexican Americans who have a close relationship with God will develop a stronger sense of God-mediated control. Findings from a nationwide survey of older Mexican Americans provide support for each of these linkages.

Key Words: Mexican American, Pentecostal, God control
The growing numbers of Latinos who have left the Catholic Church to join Evangelical/Pentecostal denominations represents one of the more significant events in the history of religious conversions. Some time ago, Greeley (1988) estimated that approximately 60,000 Latinos had already left the Catholic Church, a trend which he calls, “... an ecclesiastical failure of unprecedented proportion” (p. 61; but see Hunt, 1999). Similarly, Espinosa (1999) refers to this exodus as a “religious revolution” (p. 597). It is especially important to note that this trend has continued to the present day (Althoff, 2006). In fact, Espinosa, Elizondo, and Miranda (2003) now report that approximately 28 percent of all Latinos are members of Pentecostal or Charismatic denominations.

Although significant change appears to be sweeping the Latino religious community, there has been little empirical research on the benefits they receive from affiliating with Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations. The purpose of the current study is to develop and test a conceptual model that assesses one way in which older Mexican Americans benefit from affiliating with Evangelical/Pentecostal faith traditions.

In the analyses that follow, Mexican Americans who identify with Evangelical or Pentecostal congregations are placed in the same group. Although it may initially seem that there are significant differences between them, there are two reasons why the two are pooled together in the current study. First, as Woodberry and Smith (1998) argue, “… distinguishing fundamentalists, evangelicals, charismatics, and Pentecostals is complex … They are better understood as loosely connected networks of ministerial, parachurch organizations, schools, seminaries …” (p. 33). In fact, differentiating between the two may be especially difficult in the Mexican American community, as Sanchez Walsh (2003) points out: “The umbrella movement that Pentecostals have often reluctantly called home
is a rather unwieldy network called evangelical Christianity” (p. 2).

Although differentiating between Mexican Americans who affiliate with Pentecostal or Evangelical faith traditions is challenging, it is much easier to distinguish between these faith traditions and Roman Catholicism. As Sanchez Walsh (2003) points out, “… evangelicals define themselves by their willingness to … preach the Gospel to anyone anywhere…” (p. 5). Moreover, in contrast to Roman Catholics, they speak in tongues, engage in faith-based healing practices, and are concerned with prophecy. And perhaps most importantly, Evangelicals and Pentecostals often go through a rather dramatic personal conversion, where they are seized by the Spirit (Vila, 2005).

Turning to the history of the Catholic Church in the Mexican American community provides an important point of departure for understanding the appeal of Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations. Clearly, the Catholic faith is not indigenous to Mexican American culture. Instead, it was something that was brought from Europe over two hundred years ago by Spanish missionaries (Leon, 2004). There are at least five ways to demonstrate the unfortunate consequences of the efforts to spread the Catholic faith among Mexican Americans. First, men of Mexican ancestry were not permitted to become priests until early in the twentieth century (Fernandez, 2007). Second, during the first half of the twentieth century, Anglo members of the clergy viewed many of the religious practices of Mexican Americans, such as maintaining altercitos (i.e., religious altars in the home), as mere superstitions (Burns, 1994). Third, Virgilio Elizondo, who is a major figure in the development of Latino theology, reports the struggles he encountered while becoming a priest in the 1970's: “U.S. Catholicism was ashamed of our Mexican Catholicism, and thus to become good priests .... we had to assume that shame of our own people” (Elizondo, 2010, p. 55). Fourth, Matovina (1991) highlights similar disparagement
of rank-and-file Mexican Americans in the Catholic Church: “... in many instances priests have forbidden use of the Spanish language for worship, even for baptisms, marriages, and funerals when a Spanish speaking presider was available” (p. 440). Fifth, in her study of Mexican American immigrants in Chicago, Althoff (2006) reports that, “... some priests resist incorporating them into their parishes .... “ and they often require that “.... Hispanic worshipers should learn English first ...” (p. 10).

The experiences that Mexican Americans encountered in the Catholic Church clashed sharply with fundamental aspects of their own culture. As many researchers have pointed out, Mexican American culture is highly collectivistic in nature (Goizueta, 2002). Social solidarity and mutual support are key elements of this cultural world view. Coming into the Catholic Church with these cultural expectations but finding the kinds of experiences that are discussed above proved to be a significantly alienating experience for many Mexican Americans. In effect, many failed to find the support they were accustomed to outside the church and as a result, they felt un-welcomed and devalued in their congregations.

If Mexican Americans felt cut off from mutually supportive networks and devalued in the Catholic Church, then perhaps the appeal of Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations may be found by exploring the ways in which they fulfill these needs. Althoff (2006) provides some insight into this issue. She argues that Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations are typical led by indigenous Spanish-speaking clergy, they are free of discrimination, and they address the cultural backgrounds of Mexican Americans, especially as they relate to social solidarity and mutual support. Althoff (2006) goes on to point out that the relatively small size of Pentecostal congregations coupled with the greater personal religious commitment of the fellow church members serves to further reinforce interpersonal bonds. Further evidence of the importance
of community may be found in the work of Sanchez Walsh (2002). She maintains that, “One cannot fathom the growth and depth of Hispanic Pentecostalism and its spirituality without coming to terms with the quest for community” (p. 61).

The discussion that has been provided up to this point suggests that focusing on the close interpersonal ties that are thought to flourish in Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations represents one reason why Mexican Americans have been attracted to these faith traditions. The model that is presented uses these insights as a point of departure for delving more deeply into the psychosocial benefits that arise from affiliating with Pentecostal/Evangelical congregations.

Exploring the Psychosocial Benefits of Involvement in Evangelical/Pentecostal Congregations

Figure 1 contains the latent variable model that is evaluated in this study. Two steps were taken to simplify the presentation of this complex conceptual scheme. First, the elements of the measurement model (i.e., the factor loadings and measurement error terms) are not depicted graphically even though a full measurement model was estimated when this conceptual scheme was evaluated empirically. Second, the relationships among the constructs in Figure 1 were estimated after age, sex, and education were included in the model.

Although a number of relationships are estimated with the model that is depicted in Figure 1, the following linkages capture the theoretical core of this conceptual scheme: (1) older Mexican Americans who are members of Pentecostal or Evangelical congregations attend church more often than older Mexican Americans who do not affiliate with these faith traditions; (2) older Mexican Americans who go to church more often are more likely to receive more spiritual support from the people who worship there (spiritual support is assistance that is provided in
order to bolster the religious beliefs and behaviors of the support recipient); (3) older Mexican Americans who receive more spiritual support from their fellow church members are more likely to feel they have developed a closer relationship with God; and (4) older Mexican Americans who have a closer relationship with God are more likely to feel that God will help them control the things that arise in their lives. The theoretical rationale for each of these core linkages is provided below.

**Pentecostal/Evangelical Affiliation and Church Attendance**

As reported above, Althoff (2006) maintains that Mexican Americans who affiliate with Pentecostal/Evangelical congregations tend to be more committed to their faith than Mexican Americans who identify with other faith traditions. Further evidence of this deep level of commitment may be found in Vila’s (2005) discussion of expectations regarding those who convert to the Evangelical/Pentecostal faiths. More specifically, he points out that, “… fervent commitment to the new faith is expected to permeate all realms of the convert’s life” (Vila, 2005, p. 78). In fact, as Sanchez Walsh (2003) points out, the identification with and commitment to their faith is so strong that, “… Latino Pentecostals subsume their ethnic identity to their religious identify because of perceived biblical mandates which suggest that race and ethnicity are no longer important” (p. 71). Since people who are more committed to their faith are likely to attend church more often, it follows that rates of church attendance should be higher among Pentecostals and Evangelicals than among Mexican Americans who are Catholics or who are members of other Protestant denominations.

**Church-Attendance and Spiritual Support from Church Members**

In order for an individual to receive spiritual support from others they must obviously come into contact with potential support providers. However, it is unlikely that spiritual support
will be exchanged simply because two individuals have come into contact with each other. Instead, spiritual support is more likely to be provided when older Mexican Americans and their potential support providers have a longer history of coming into contact with each other. Developing a sound relationships history may be especially important for the successful delivery of spiritual support. As McFadden, Knepple, and Armstrong (2003) point out, discussing personal spiritual matters is a sensitive issue and as a result, a person may feel put-off or resentful if someone they do not know well attempts to broach these issues with them. As these insights reveal, spiritual support is more likely to successfully take root when both the provider and the recipient feel comfortable in the relationship they have developed. Regular church attendance is an important prerequisite for the development of these close ties. And it if for this reason that it is predicted in Figure 1 that more frequent church attendance will be associated with receiving more spiritual support from others.

_Spiritual Support and Having a Close Personal Relationship with God_

As Stark and Finke (2000) point out in their theory of religion, core religious beliefs (which they call “religious explanations”) are transmitted socially in the church: “An individual’s confidence in religious explanations is strengthened to the extent that others express their confidence in them” (p. 107). Berger (1967) provides an even more emphatic endorsement of this social constructionist view in his classic treatise on religion. He maintains that religious world views, “... are socially constructed and maintained. Their continuing reality, both objective ..... and subjective ... depends upon specific social processes, namely those processes that ongoingly reconstruct and maintain the particular worlds in question” (Berger, 1967, p. 45, emphasis in the original). One goal of the current study is to examine one concrete manifestation of this general principle by exploring the relationship between a particular social process (i.e.,
the provision of spiritual support) and a specific religious belief (i.e., the belief that one has a close personal relationship with God).

Recall that spiritual support is defined as assistance that is intended to instill and shore up the religious beliefs, commitment, and behavior of the recipient in order to help them lead a more religious life. Vila’s (2005) qualitative research with Mexican Americans Pentecostals shows a potentially important focal point of spiritual support in Pentecostal congregations. More specifically, he argued that the Pentecostals in his study felt they were completely transformed by their faith primarily because they formed, “.... a very special relationship with God...” (Vila, 2005, p. 105). So if social processes in the church drive religious beliefs, and spiritual support is one such social process, then perhaps beliefs about one’s relationship with God are maintained by informal spiritual support in a congregation. Consequently, it is hypothesized in Figure 1 that older Mexican Americans who receive more spiritual support from their fellow church members are more likely to report they have developed a close personal relationship with God.

**Having a Close Personal Relationship with God and God-Mediated Control**

Research in social psychology suggests that being embedded in supportive social networks tends to bolster an individual’s sense of personal control (see Krause, 2003, for a review of this research). Although having a close personal relationship with God may convey a number of benefits, a key premise in the model that was devised for the current study is that it may foster a stronger sense of God-mediated control. God mediated control is defined as the belief that people can work together with God to master the things that arise in life. Support for this notion may be found in two sources. First, as Vila (2005) points out, when Mexican Americans accept the Pentecostal faith tradition, they surrender their lives to God. This is important because research by Cole and Pargament (1999) reveals that spiritual surrender (i.e.,
turning one’s life over to God) makes it possible for people to rely on God to help them confront the challenges they face and successfully execute their responsibilities in life. Second, research that was conducted with Pentecostals in Latin America by Levine (1995) indicates that following conversion to this faith tradition, Latinos, “...speak of .... gaining self-control and a sense of how to deal with the world .... a tapping into a charismatic power that energizes men and women in their life as a whole” (p. 161). Viewed more broadly, the work of these researchers suggests that when people believe they have forged a close bond with the creator of the universe they feel that this relationship entitles them to freely draw upon a limitless source of power that they can use to help them control the things that arise in life. The sense of empowerment that Levine (1995) observed in Latino Pentecostal congregations is likely to be a potent antidote to the alienation and subjugation that many experienced in the Catholic Church.

Issues Involving Age

Recall that the sample for the current study consists of older Mexican Americans. Although it is not possible to examine age differences in the model that was developed for this study, it would still be helpful to briefly reflect on why it is important to study the processes that enhance feelings of God-mediated control in samples that are comprised of older people. Some time ago, Rosow (1976) noted that aging is a “roleless role”. Baltes and Smith (1999) elaborate on this issue. They argue that “... relatively speaking, old age is young; therefore neither biological nor cultural evolution has had sufficient opportunity to evolve a full and optimizing scaffolding (architecture) for the later phases of life” (Baltes & Smith, 1999, p.158). More recently, the work of Lazarus and Lazarus (2006) shows that little the plight of older people has not diminished with time. These investigators observe that, “.... the loss of one’s opportunity to sustain a useful function in life ...” is one of the major limitations of growing older. Embedded in
these perspectives is the notion that as people enter late life, they encounter a social and psychological vacuum. Given this situation, it is not difficult to see why older adults may feel they are no longer able to exercise control over the things they encounter in life. In fact, research by Mirowsky (1995) and a number of other investigators suggest that feelings of control decline at an accelerating rate as people move through the life course.

Although the precipitous decline of personal control may initially make it seem as though late life ushers in a period of considerable uncertainty, research by Schulz and Heckhausen (1996) indicates that older adults are resourceful and resilient because they tend to find ways to compensate for the loss of personal control that they encounter. In fact, a recent research by Hayward and Krause (2011) indicates that one way in which older people compensate for the loss of personal control is by relying more strongly on God-mediated control. So if older people are increasingly inclined to rely on God-mediated feelings of control and if conversion to the Pentecostal faith tradition is especially likely to foster this religiously-oriented type of control, then it makes sense to study how feelings of God-mediated control arise among older Mexican Americans who are affiliated with Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations.

Methods

Sample

The population for this study was defined as all Mexican Americans age 66 and over who were retired (i.e., not working for pay), not institutionalized, and who speak either English or Spanish. The sampling frame consisted of all eligible study participants who resided in counties in the following five-state area: Texas, Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. The sampling strategy that was used for the widely-cited Hispanic Established Population for Epidemiological Study (HEPESE) (Markides, 2003) was adopted for the current study (see
Markides 2003 for a detailed discussion of the steps that were followed). All interviews were conducted by Harris Interactive (New York). The interviews were administered face-to-face in the homes of the older study participants. All interviewers were bilingual and study participants were offered to be interviewed in either English or Spanish. The wide majority of interviews (84%) were conducted entirely in Spanish. A total of 1,005 interviews were completed successfully. The response rate was 52%.

Spiritual support from fellow church members figures prominently in the model that is depicted in Figure 1. When this study was being designed, the members of the research team felt that it did not make sense to ask study participants about spiritual support they received in church if they either don’t attend church at all or if they only go to church rarely. Consequently, questions on spiritual support were not administered to older study participants who indicated that they go to church services no more than once or twice a year. After deleting these study participants from the sample, the analyses presented below are based on the responses of 663 older Mexican Americans.

The full information maximum likelihood estimation (FIML) procedure was used to impute missing values in the data. Simulation studies suggest that the FIML procedure is preferable to listwise deletion because the listwise procedure may produce biased estimates (Enders, 2010).

Preliminary analyses reveal that the average age of the older Mexican Americans in this sample was 73.4 years ($SD = 6.2$ years), approximately 39% were older men, and the average number of years of schooling was 6.8 years ($SD = 3.9$ years).

Measures

Table 1 contains the items that were used to measure the core constructs that are depicted
in Figure 1. The procedures that were used to score the responses to these items are provided in the footnotes of this table.

<Insert Table 1 about here>

**Pentecostal/Evangelical Affiliation.** Nine questions were administered to determine the denominational affiliation of all study participants. Then, the comprehensive review of the literature by Smith (1990) was consulted to find out if these specific denominations were Evangelical or Pentecostal. This was possible because Smith (1990) provides classification schemes that were devised by a number of investigators. We included denominations in the Evangelical/Pentecostal category if they were so designated by one of these researchers.

The data suggest that 21.6 percent affiliate with Evangelical/Pentecostal denominations. This is nearly identical to the 22 percent estimate reported by Kelly and Kelly (2005). The data further reveal that 76.7 percent of the older Mexican Americans in this study are Catholic, while the rest (6.8%) affiliate with other Protestant denominations. Based on the theoretical rationale provided earlier, a simply binary variable was created that contrasts Evangelicals/Pentecostals (scored 1) with all others (scored 0).

**Church Attendance.** Attendance at formal worship services was assessed with a widely used indicator from the Fetzer/National Institute on Aging Working Group (1999). This item asks study participants how often they have attended church services in the year prior to the interview. A high score denotes more frequent attendance. The mean is 7.0 ($SD = 1.5$).

**Spiritual Support.** Three indicators were used to assess how often fellow church members provide older study participants with spiritual support. These measures were developed by Krause (2002). A high score on these items represents study participants who receive spiritual support more often. The mean of this brief composite is 6.06 ($SD = 2.7$).
Close Relationship with God. Three items were also used to find out if the older people in this study felt they had developed a close personal relationship with God. The indicators in this brief composite were devised by Krause (2002). A high score stands for study participants who have a closer relationship with God. The mean of the items in this short scale is 10.9 (SD = 1.4).

God-Mediated Control. This construct was measured with three indicators that were developed by Krause (2002). A high score represents older Mexican Americans who are more likely to feel that God helps them control the things they encounter in life. The mean of this brief composite is 10.8 (SD = 1.3).

Demographic Control Variables. As noted earlier, the relationships among the constructs that are depicted in Figure 1 were estimated after the effects of age, sex, and education were included in the model. Age and education are scored continuously in years while sex is represented by a binary variable (1 = men; 0 = women).

Results

The findings from this study are presented below in three sections. Information about issues involving the estimation of the study model is provided first. Following this, data on the reliability of the multiple-item constructs is presented in section two. Finally, the substantive results are reviewed in section three.

Model Estimation Issues

The model depicted in Figure 1 was evaluated with the maximum likelihood estimator in Version 8.80 of the LISREL statistical software program (du Toit & du Toit, 2001). Use of this estimator is based on the assumption that the observed indicators have a multivariate normal distribution. Preliminary tests (not shown here) revealed that this assumption had been violated in the current study. Although there are a number of ways to deal with departures from
multivariate normality, the straightforward approach that is discussed by du Toit and du Toit (2001) was followed here. These investigators report that departures from multivariate normality can be handled by converting the raw scores of the observed indicators to normal scores prior to estimating the model (du Toit & du Toit 2001, p.143). Based on these insights, the analyses presented below are based on observed indicators that have been normalized.

Because the FIML procedure was used to deal with item non-response, the LISREL software program provides only two goodness-of-fit measures. The fist is the full information maximum likelihood chi-square (182.521 with 54 degrees of freedom, $p < .001$). Unfortunately, this statistic is not very useful for the following reason. When a latent variable model is run, a covariance matrix reflecting the relationships among the observed indicators is typically input into the program. Then, when the model is estimated, a second covariance matrix is generated based upon the parameters in the model. If the matrix that is generated from the model fits the matrix that was input into the program, a non-significant chi-square value should emerge. However, a significant chi-square was observed in the current study. Even so, this value is not useful chi square values are nearly always significant when samples are large, such as the sample in the current study. Better insight into the fit of the model to the data is provided by the second goodness-of-fit measure - the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). The RMSEA value for the model in Figure 1 is .060. As Kelloway (1998) suggests, values below .05 indicate a very good fit of the model to the data while values below .10 denote a good fit to the data.

Reliability Estimates

Table 2 contains the factor loadings and measurement error terms that were derived from estimating the study model. These coefficients are important because they provide information
about the reliability of the multiple item study measures. Kline (2005) suggests that items with standardized factor loadings in excess of .600 tend to have reasonably good reliability. As the data in Table 3 indicate, the standardized factor loadings range from .519 to .940. Only one factor loadings fell below .600, and the difference between this estimate (.519) and the desired cut-point score is trivial.

Although the factor loadings and measurement error terms associated with the observed indicators provide useful information about the reliability of each item, it would be helpful to know something about the reliability for the scales as a whole. Fortunately, it is possible to compute these reliability estimates with a formula provided by DeShon (1998). This procedure is based on the factor loadings and measurement error terms in Table 2. Applying the procedures described by DeShon (1998) to these data yield the following reliability estimates for the multiple item constructs in Figure 1: spiritual support (.903), having a close relationship with God (.870), God-mediated control (.810). Taken as a whole, the data presented in this section suggest that the reliability of the multiple item constructs in this study is acceptable.

**Substantive Findings**

The substantive findings from the current study are provided in Table 3. Taken as a whole, these data are consistent with the theoretical rationale that was presented earlier. More specifically, the results suggest that older Mexican Americans who affiliate with Pentecostal/Evangelical congregations attend worship services more often than older Mexican Americans who are members of other denominations (Beta = .253; p < .001). The findings indicate that older Mexican Americans who go to church more often are in turn more likely to report receiving more spiritual support from their coreligionists (Beta = .216; p < .001). The data
in Table 3 further reveal that older Mexican Americans who receive more spiritual support from their fellow church members are more likely to report that they have a close personal relationship with God (Beta = .142; \( p < .001 \)). And consistent with the theoretical rationale that was developed for this study, the results indicate that older Mexican Americans who feel they have a closer relationship with God are more likely to believe that God helps them control the things they encounter in life (Beta = .612; \( p < .001 \)).

Although support was found for the core theoretical relationships in the study model, one additional finding in Table 3 may initially appear to be at odds with the research that was presented above. Recall that Levine (1995) maintained that affiliating with a Pentecostal/Evangelical faith tradition tends to bolster a Latino’s sense of control. However, the data in Table 3 seem to suggest that affiliating with a Pentecostal/Evangelical congregation is not significantly associated with feelings of God-mediated control (Beta = .022; \( n.s. \)). Fortunately, there is a straight forward way bring the study findings in line with the observations of Levine (1995). The results that have been presented so far deal solely with the direct effects in the study model. However, one of the advantages of working with latent variable models arises from the fact that it is possible to obtain estimates of the indirect and total effects that operate through the model, as well. An example will help clarify the meaning of these terms. The model depicted in Figure 1 suggests that affiliating with a Pentecostal/Evangelical congregation is associated with having a close relationship with God and those study participants who have a close relationship with God are in turn more likely to have a stronger sense of God-mediated control. This is an indirect effect. When this indirect effect is summed with the other indirect effects that operate between Pentecostal/Evangelical affiliation and God-mediated control, the resulting total effect
provides a better vantage point for viewing the relationship these two constructs.

Further analyses (not shown in Table 3) that the indirect effects of Pentecostal/Evangelical affiliation on feelings of God-mediated control are statistically significant (Beta = .142; p < .001). When these indirect effects are summed with the direct effect in Table 3, the resulting total effect (Beta = .165; p < .001) suggests that, consistent with the views of Levine (1995), older Mexican Americans who worship in Pentecostal/Evangelical congregations tend to have a stronger sense of God-mediated control than older Mexican Americans who affiliate with other denominations. The fact that approximately 86 percent of the total effect is due to the indirect effects that operate through the model (.142/.165 = .861) reveals that the study model almost completely explains this relationship. More specifically, Pentecostals/Evangelicals tend to have stronger feelings of God-mediated control primarily because they go to church more often, receive more spiritual support from their fellow church members, and tend to report they have a closer relationship with God. This is one reason why the data in Table 3 reveal that nearly half the variance in feelings of God-mediated control (i.e., 42.5%) is explained by the model that was developed for the current study.

Conclusions

Ever since the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish, Mexican Americans have endured centuries of prejudice and discrimination. Research by Carrasco (1990) reveals the shocking results of this unfortunate historical era. He reports that in 1500 there were 25 million indigenous people living in Mexico, but due to factors such as disease and slavery, this population was reduced to 1 million by 1600. Given these data, it easy to see why Leon (2004) refers to the period of colonization as the “Mexican diaspora” (p. 198).

The deleterious consequences of colonization by the Spanish were exacerbated by a
number of subsequent historical events. For example, following the Mexican American War of 1848, the Mexican residents of the newly acquired territories became “... a dominated people, (who were) rendered politically and economically powerless” (Rodriguez, 1994, p. 68).

Unfortunately, a number of Mexican Americans have not been able to find solace from these broad social forces in the Catholic Church. As the research that was reviewed earlier indicates, many continued to find that the second class nature of their social status was reinforced in this religious setting. Given these social circumstances it is not surprising to find that a considerable number of Mexican Americans left the Catholic Church and joined Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations. Anthropological research indicates that many found a way to regain the sense of the sense of control that had been missing in their lives by affiliating with these rapidly growing denominations. But we have been unable to find any empirical studies that help document the potential control-enhancing benefits that Mexican Americans seem to have found in Pentecostal/Evangelical congregations. The purpose of the current study was to fill this gap in the knowledge base by exploring the ways in which affiliation with Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations may bolster and maintain religiously-oriented feelings of control among older Mexican Americans.

The findings from the current study suggest that older Mexican Americans who affiliate with Pentecostal/Evangelical congregations tend to go to church more often than older Mexican Americans who are members of these denominations. The results further reveal that older Mexican Americans who go to church more often tend to receive more spiritual support from the other people who worship there. This is important because the study findings go on to suggest that older Mexican Americans who receive more spiritual support are more likely to report that they have developed a close personal relationship with God. And the data indicate that
developing a close relationship with God is an important prerequisite for bolstering and maintaining a religiously-oriented sense of control (i.e., God-mediated control). The fact that the study model almost entirely explained the relationship between Pentecostal/Evangelical affiliation and God-mediated control suggests that the key pathways that link the two are now in place.

Even so, further research is needed to probe more deeply into the benefits that older Mexican Americans derive from joining Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations. For example, a good deal of the historical background material that was discussed in this study focuses on the prejudice and discrimination that Mexican Americans have encountered in the Catholic Church as well as in American society more generally. Unfortunately, measures of racial/ethnic discrimination and prejudice were not available in the current study. These data are needed so that researchers can see if the enhanced sense of God-mediated control that older Mexican Americans have been able to find in Pentecostal and Evangelical congregations offsets the noxious effects of these deleterious social problems on health and well-being.

In the process of exploring this issue, research should also focus on ways to overcome the limitations in the current study. One is especially important to address. The data for the current study were obtained at a single point in time. As a result, the causal assumptions that are embedded in the study model are based on theoretical considerations alone. Because the data are cross-sectional, one might reasonably argue in favor of a different causal sequence. For example, rather than specifying that more frequent church attendance is associated with receiving more spiritual support, it is possible to instead maintain that people who receive more spiritual support are subsequently more likely to return to the congregation in which it was received. Clearly this as well as other causal assumptions must be addressed with data that have been gathered at more
than one point in time.

The wide majority of studies on religious life in America have focused primarily on whites and African Americans while far less is known about Mexican Americans. This is unfortunate because recent demographic projects suggest that by the year 2050, older Mexican Americans will be the largest group of older adults of color (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). We hope the issues that were raised in the current study and the findings that emerged from the data encourage further research with this largely overlooked group. Max Muller is widely regarded as the founder of comparative religion. In order to show why exposure to different faith traditions is essential, he claimed that, “He who knows one knows none” (as quoted by Hinnells, 2005, p. 14). We believe it is appropriate to modify this classic dictum to say that he who understands religion in only one racial or ethnic group fails to fully understand religion, as well.
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Table 1. Core Study Measures

1. Pentecostal/Evangelical Religious Affiliation

   Binary variable contrasting Pentecostal/Evangelical (scored 1) with all others (scored 0).

2. Frequency of Church Attendance\(^a\)

   How often do you religious services?

3. Spiritual Support\(^b\)

   A. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does
      someone in your congregation share their own religious experiences with you?

   B. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does
      someone in your congregation help you find solutions to your problems in the Bible?

   C. Not counting Bible study groups, prayer groups, or church services, how often does
      someone in your congregation help you lead a better religious life?

4. Close Relationship with God\(^c\)

   A. I have a close, personal relationship with God.

   B. I feel that God is right here with me in everyday life.

   C. When I talk to God, I know He listens to me.

5. God-Mediated Control\(^c\)

   A. I rely on God to help me control my life.

   B. I can succeed with God’s help.

   C. All things are possible when you work together with God.
a This variable is scored in the following manner (coding in parenthesis): never (1), less than once a year (2), about once or twice a year (3), several times a year (4), about once a month (5), 2 to 3 times a month (6), nearly every week (7), every week (8), several times a week (9).

b These items are scored in the following manner: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), agree (3), strongly agree (4).

b These items are scored in the following manner: never (1), once in a while (2), fairly often (3), very often (4).

c These items are scored in the following manner: strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), agree (3), strongly agree (4).
Table 2. Factor Loadings and Measurement Error Terms for Multiple Item Measures

(N = 663)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Factor Loading&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Measurement Error&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Spiritual Support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Share religious experiences&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.884</td>
<td>.280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Find solutions in Bible</td>
<td>.880</td>
<td>.226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Lead better religious life</td>
<td>.879</td>
<td>.227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Close Relationship with God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Close personal relationship</td>
<td>.700</td>
<td>.510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. God right with me</td>
<td>.940</td>
<td>.115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. God listens when I talk</td>
<td>.840</td>
<td>.294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. God-Mediated Control</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. God helps control</td>
<td>.519</td>
<td>.730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Can succeed with God</td>
<td>.858</td>
<td>.265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. All things possible</td>
<td>.914</td>
<td>.164</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> The factor loadings are from the completely standardized solution. The first-listed item for each latent construct was fixed to 1.0 in the unstandardized solution.

<sup>b</sup> Measurement error terms are from the completely standardized solution. All factor loadings and measurement error terms are significant at the .001 level.
c Item content is paraphrased for the purpose of identification. See Table 1 for the complete text of each indicator.
Table 3. The Relationship Religious Affiliation and God-Mediated Control 

\((N = 663)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent</th>
<th>Pentecostal Attendance</th>
<th>Church Attendance</th>
<th>Spiritual Support</th>
<th>Close to God</th>
<th>God-Mediated Control</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.007(^a)</td>
<td>.026</td>
<td>.020</td>
<td>.113**</td>
<td>.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.001)(^b)</td>
<td>(.006)</td>
<td>(.003)</td>
<td>(.008)</td>
<td>(.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>-.066</td>
<td>-.115**</td>
<td>-.128***</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.001)</td>
<td>(-.197)</td>
<td>(-.197)</td>
<td>(-.114)</td>
<td>(.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-.057</td>
<td>.102**</td>
<td>-.036</td>
<td>.062</td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(-.006)</td>
<td>(.036)</td>
<td>(-.007)</td>
<td>(.007)</td>
<td>(.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>.253***</td>
<td>.260***</td>
<td>.114**</td>
<td>.022</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.892)</td>
<td>(.526)</td>
<td>(.121)</td>
<td>(.015)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
<td>.216***</td>
<td>.200***</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.124)</td>
<td>(.060)</td>
<td>(.013)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Support</td>
<td>.142***</td>
<td>-.010</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.074)</td>
<td>(-.003)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close to God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.612***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(.402)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.077</td>
<td>.160</td>
<td>.155</td>
<td>.425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ \text{Multiple } R^2 \]

\(^a\) Standardized regression coefficient

\(^b\) Metric (unstandardized) regression coefficient

\(*) = p < .05; \quad \text{**} = p < .01; \quad \text{***} = p < .001
Figure Caption

Figure 1. A Conceptual Model of Pentecostal/Evangelical Affiliation and God-Mediated Control