

Racial Intermarriage and Divorce in the United States*

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Abstract

In recent decades scholars have devoted substantial attention to racial and ethnic intermarriage in the United States. Although increases in intermarriage have been celebrated as evidence that racial and ethnic boundaries are weakening, relatively little research has investigated sequelae of intermarriage to determine if this interpretation is justified. If interracial couples marry only to rapidly divorce, this calls into question conclusions drawn from observed increases in intermarriage. This study analyzes data from the 1995 and 2002 Cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth to investigate marital disruption differences between interracial and same-race couples. We will provide basic descriptive statistics on the divorce rates of same-race and interracial couples and then model disruption to estimate the effect of interracial marriage.

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Introduction

In recent decades scholars have devoted much attention to the incidence of racial and ethnic intermarriage in the United States. Studies have focused on European ancestry groups (Lieberson and Waters 1988), Blacks (Kalmijn 1993; Schoen and Cheng 2006), Latinos (Gilbertson et al. 1996; Qian and Cobas 2004), and Asians (Liang and Ito 1999; Qian et al. 2001), examining differences over time (Schoen and Wooldredge 1989; Kalmijn 1993; Qian 1997), by gender (Jacobs and Labov 2002), education (Fu 2001; Hwang et al. 1995; Rosenfeld 2005; Gullickson 2006a), and nativity (Qian and Lichter 2001).

These studies are important because they describe the salience of race and ethnicity in the U.S. Researchers assume that interracial couples who engage in a relationship as intimate and enduring as marriage must have transcended the racial boundary between them. Thus, increasing intermarriage has been celebrated as evidence that racial and ethnic boundaries are weakening. Furthermore, intermarriage is regarded as an engine of social change (Kalmijn 1998), as children of interracial couples are less likely to identify with a single group, and by their very existence challenge racial boundaries.

Relatively little research has directly investigated the consequences of intermarriage that are used to justify its theoretical importance. Two recent studies investigated differential marital quality (Chan and Smith 2001) and differential marital duration (Kalmijn et al. 2005), but most studies of divorce use data from twenty or more years ago (Rankin and Maneker 1987; Ho and Johnson 1990; Schwertfeger 1982; Monahan 1966, 1970, 1971; Cheng and Yamamura 1957;

Jones 1994, 1996). No research has investigated divorce differentials between interracial and same-race couples in the U.S. using recent national data and modern statistical techniques.

Divorce patterns have direct implications for conclusions drawn from intermarriage. If interracial couples truly have transcended racial boundaries, their marital behavior should approximate that of endogamous couples. On the other hand, if interracial couples marry only to rapidly divorce, this calls into question the conventional interpretation of intermarriage incidence as an indicator of the strength of group boundaries. Conceptually, the question of differential divorce sheds light on the relative importance of kin relationships and racial or ethnic identities. The absence of differentials would suggest that marriage as a form of kinship transcends racial or ethnic distinctions, whereas their existence would be evidence that racial or ethnic boundaries affect even a relationship as intimate as marriage.

U.S. racial and ethnic boundaries have long held the attention of social scientists. Because the U.S. is an immigrant nation, the integration of newcomers and their effects on U.S. society are of great interest. Attention has heightened especially in recent years as the foreign born have grown to 12 percent of the population (Larsen 2004). Whether immigrants and their descendants become incorporated into the national community or remain separate and distinct has been a question of enduring interest. As the most highly differentiated racial group in U.S. society, Blacks have also been of continuous interest. Although Black/White gaps in education and earnings have narrowed since the 1960s Civil Rights Movement (Smith 2000), disparities still exist and high levels of residential segregation suggest enduring social differentiation (Iceland et al. 2002). Substantial increases in Black/White intermarriage in recent decades (Gullickson 2006b) have been hailed as reasons for optimism, but whether this is justified remains to be seen.

This research pools data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) Cycles 5 and 6 (Kelly et al. 1997; Groves et al. 2005) to investigate marital disruption differences between interracial and same-race couples. These data were collected in 1995 and 2002 and provide up to date information on the stability of recent intermarriages. We provide basic descriptive statistics on the divorce rates of same-race and interracial couples and then model disruption to estimate the effect of interracial marriage. The seven year gap between surveys also allows us to examine period changes in the divorce rates of interracial couples (previous administrations of the NSFG do not contain adequate data on spouse's race or ethnicity).

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