

The Impact of Age, Gender, Race, and Socioeconomic Indicators of Perceptions of Accepting Racially Diverse Members in the Family

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Abstract

This article explores the level of support when a family member chooses to marry a person from a different racial group. It investigates the role that race of the spouse plays along with selected demographic variables with respect to influencing marriage support attitudes. The differential assimilation hypothesis is employed as the theoretical foundation for guiding the statistical analysis. Information from the General Social Survey conducted in 2012 is used in the analytical. The findings demonstrated that when individuals decide to marry outside of their racial group, the racial background of the spouse has a major impact on family member acceptance. It was found that potential spouses from darker-skinned racial groups received less support for the union from family members. This research effort clearly highlighted color-grading as a social phenomenon and demonstrated the importance American society continues to place race and its role in social stratification.

Keywords

assimilation, culture, interracial marriage, prejudice, racial discrimination, family member acceptance

1. Introduction

Interracial marriages (unions comprised of two individuals from different racial groups) and their acceptance in American society continue to be problematic. According to the most recent information from the United States Bureau of the Census, roughly 7% of all marriages are interracial (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Some sociologists have suggested that these types of unions provide social scientists with insight into the *true* nature of American race relations (Yancey & Lewis, 2008). Certainly, the analysis of interracial marriage is an important tool for enhancing scientific understanding of race relations dynamics.

The overall purpose of this research effort is to explore the level of support when a family member chooses to marry a person from a different racial group. More specifically, this study examines if the race of the spouse along with other variables influence support attitudes. These control variables

include age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, marital status, and size of city in which the respondent resides. Information from the General Social Survey conducted in 2012 is used to focus the analytical process (GSS, 2013).

2. Current Literature

The literature is replete with research on the nature of interracial relationships in the United States and the factors affecting them. Over the past decades, particularly during the swift advancement of the Civil Rights era and the repeal of Jim Crow laws of the 1950's through the present day, there has been an explosion of continuing intellectual enquiry into the growing impact of actual and perceived attributes of possible variables affecting the nature of interracial interactions. Of particular note is the area of what might be called personal, even intimate, interracial relationships. Not surprisingly, within the American culture and its history of slavery and follow-on separation among the races and various ethnic groups, there is deep interest in the nature of the resulting and continual effects of relevant history on such relationships. This is particularly true regarding the continually advancing nature of more intimate relationships among Blacks and Whites, ranging from dating, cohabitation, and marriage.

Within this pervasive construct is the notion that certain permeating attributes of interracial social interaction are useful in analyzing the primary underlying aspects of the relative propensity toward, or contraindication of these intimate interracial relationships. For example, Herman and Campbell (2012) found that perceived stigmas associated with the advisability, or lack thereof, regarding interracial childbearing found no basis to “folk arguments against interracial marriage” based on childbearing—that attitudes toward interracial marriage are independent of childbearing concerns. Yet such folk logic persists.

But this is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of the viability of the assimilation of people of various race and ethnicity in the direction of, or away from, intimate interracial relationships. Many scholars have studied extensively such factors as age, religion, gender, marital status, levels of social contact, region of residence, education levels, family pressures, financial resources, professional potential, and countless other variables affecting or in some way bearing on the efficacy of such relationships (Perry, 2014; Johnson & Jacobson, 2005, 2006; Childs, 2002; Golebiowska, 2007). Some of these studies address differentiation *within* specific racial and ethnic groups, e.g., skin color, prominence of other physical features, etc., and their effects on the feasibility and sustainability of intimate interracial relationships (Herman & Campbell, 2012).

Particularly interesting in terms of possible predictive variables affecting attitudes toward intimate interracial relationships are the pressures that family members—no matter the racial or ethnic groups—bring to the table for individuals contemplating such relationships. Djamba and Kimuna (2014) found that, even in this current, presumably more racially enlightened and sophisticated current environment, such family pressures include underlying mitigating factors such as religious orientation,

closeness of family relatives to those contemplating interracial relationships, and the like. They conclude "... that many Americans are not ready for Black-White marriage in their own families". This is supported by Herman and Campbell (2012), who found that even in light of studies showing that Black women and White women are generally more conservative than Black and White men regarding interracial marriage, this is mitigated, even disguised, by their finding that such conservatism tends to become much more liberal in nature when such relationships are engaged in by others; thus, the authors' title, "I wouldn't, but you can".

In an especially ambitious study regarding the influence of family members on the acceptance or rejection of the interracial marriage of a close family member to a Black person, Golebiowska (2007) examined no fewer than 15 "theoretically relevant predictors". Her analysis found that four of these—age, stereotyping of Blacks as a group, region of residence, and principled support for nondiscrimination—were the most influential "predictors of variation in Whites' attitudes toward interracial marriage".

In examining the nature of interracial marriage as an important aspect of the assimilation of Blacks and other racial and ethnic minorities into what they describe as the "White middle-class American value system", Lewis and Ford-Robertson (2010) assert that the traditional model of the assimilation process as inadequate in terms of accommodating the positive aspects of "indigenous cultures and value systems". Many sociologists now appreciate the dynamics of differential cultural assimilation in terms of the varying pace of racial and ethnic minorities with diverse demographic, physical, social, professional, family, and religious attributes and pressures.

Clearly, with the preponderance of academic enquiry regarding interracial marriage in America revolving around Black/White unions, White/non-Black unions have not received such in-depth examination. Given the historical prominence of Black/White relationships in United States—from slavery, through struggles for racial integration and equity, today's lingering Black/White racism under the guise of "social progress"—the trials and tribulations of other races and ethnicities usually take somewhat of a back seat in terms of media and sociological attention. More contemporary investigations, particularly regarding Hispanic/White and Asian/White, appear to be on the upswing.

Vasquez (2014) makes a strong case challenging the traditional construct that social, cultural, and national assimilation is the inevitable "whitening" and the loss of race and ethnic identification as they are absorbed into the non-Hispanic White segment of our society (Note 1). Rather, she found biculturalism to be the ultimate product of racial/ethnic assimilation. Within the context of non-Hispanic/White intermarriages, she concluded that there is a strong gender-based aspect of successful biculturalism, with the female partner—whether Latina or non-Hispanic White—who usually takes the lead in successfully melding the two cultures.

Chen and Takeuchi (2011) came to somewhat supporting conclusions regarding the traditional view of racial and ethnic assimilation as a process toward the culturally dominate segment of society, at least insofar as what they describe as conventional perceptions of Asian women's intermarriage motivation

for higher social standing. Their study led them to conclude that, for Asian women, “...marital assimilation leads to identificational assimilation and counters the hypothesis that intermarriage leads to higher social standing”.

3. Theoretical Discussion and Hypothesis Derivation

The social definition of skin-color, the primary objectification of racial group membership, plays an important role in determining the degree of assimilation allowed at both the group and individual level. Typically in the United States, benefits and social status tend to vary by race with higher societal benefits and status accorded to lighter skinned racial groups and lesser societal benefits and status given to darker skinned racial groups. Sociologists define this process as “color grading” (Geschwender, 1978). It follows that racism and discrimination will be more intense against those individuals who are members of darker skin color racial groups (Francis, 1976). Therefore, in the United States, blacks tend to encounter more racial discrimination than their Hispanic or Asian American counterparts despite the overall pace of assimilation (Yancey & Lewis, 2008).

Merton (1941) used a form of exchange theory to examine differentials associated with interracial marriages. His social science perspective suggests a hierarchy of status among different racial groups in the United States creates a racial caste system. It places individuals with darker skin color in a lower caste relative to those who are lighter. A member of a lower caste will marry a member of the higher caste if they have other assets to trade for the privilege of “marrying up”. An important research study by Fu (2001) determined in Black/White interracial marriages, White women married to Black men had less educational attainment in comparison to white women married to White men. He also discovered that Black women married to Black men had less education than Black women married to White men.

It can be extended that members of the lower racial castes should be more accepting of interracial dating and marriage patterns and there is empirical support for this assertion. Evidence indicates that Blacks had more favorable attitudes toward interracial marriages than Whites (Aldridge, 1978; Sones, 1988; Spickard, 1989). Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1990) also found that White partners of Black/White marriages tend to encounter ostracism from friends and relatives within their community more frequently than their Black spouses. Lewis (1994) found that Mexican-American/White unions experience more social and family acceptance in comparison to Black/White unions.

Traditional assimilation theory does not adequately address variation in rates of absorption exhibited by different racially under-represented groups. However, this disparate process can be understood through differential assimilation deduced from classical assimilation. The basic assumption underlying this approach is rates of absorption vary between racially under-represented groups. In fact, some groups may not achieve assimilation at all. Moreover, criteria for successful assimilation into the dominant culture may change over time.

The historical classification of racial groups in the United States illustrates *differential assimilation*. During most of the 20th Century, groups were dichotomized into White and non-White categories.

European ethnic groups, which were characterized as White, faced relatively few barriers to assimilation. Conversely, non-White groups had to navigate formidable hurdles in the process. It should be noted that Blacks comprised the overwhelming majority of those labeled as non-White. Additionally, this category included Hispanics, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans (Lewis & Ford-Robertson, 2010).

The original racial dichotomy has changed and now entails two very different categories, Black and non-Black. Many racial and ethnic groups labeled as non-White have moved into the non-Black category. As a result, blacks have demonstrated little to no social movement. Individuals recognized as non-Blacks should face fewer assimilation barriers. Related to the original dichotomy, African Americans make up the vast majority of individuals identified as Black and, therefore, should continue to experience significant resistance relative to the assimilation process (Lewis & Ford-Robertson, 2010).

Differential assimilation provides an excellent theoretical approach for examining varying aspects of interracial marriage. It is used to determine if there are trends associated with interracial marriage that are related to the racial composition of the couple (i.e., Black/White, Hispanic/white, Asian/white, etc.). Additionally, differential assimilation can be employed to determine if color grading impacts societal acceptance of interracial unions (Lewis & Ford-Robertson, 2010).

Our general research hypothesis posits assimilation is differential and more problematic for those racial groups whose members are perceived as being darker with respect to skin color. As a result, interracial marriages involving a Black spouse will receive less family support in comparison to interracial marriages without a Black spouse.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Data

The data used to examine acceptance of marriage partners by close family members were obtained from the General Social Survey 2012 file (Smith, 2013). These data provide a great deal of information on core demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal questions including those related to interracial marriage (GSS, 2013). Analyses were conducted using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

4.2 Methods

This study employed multiple linear regression analysis utilizing a number of research variables. The sociological theory discussed earlier provided the foundation for the statistical analysis.

Dependent Variables. The database included four variables related to perceptions of acceptance of marriage partners by close family members. These were used as dependent variables and how respondents were queried is displayed below.

Question 1. "Do you favor a close relative marrying a White person?"

Question 2. "Do you favor a close relative marrying a Hispanic person?"

Question 3. "Do you favor a close relative marrying an Asian person?"

Question 4. "Do you favor a close relative marrying a Black person?"

The response categories to each item were 1 = strongly favor, 2 = favor, 3 = neither favor or oppose, 4 = oppose, and 5 = strongly oppose.

Independent Variables. The analysis considered five possible correlates to one's attitudes regarding a close relative marrying a person from different racial group. These include race (dummied into two categories; 0 = White, 1 = minority), gender (dummied into two categories; 0 = men, 1 = women), age (spanning 18-89 years of age), highest years of formal education completed (ranging from 0-20 years), and annual personal income (respondent income in constant dollars, \$486.00-\$235,707.00).

Four multiple linear regression models, guided by our theoretical underpinnings, were created for responses linked to marrying a White person, Hispanic person, Asian person, or a Black person. It should be noted that these dependent variables were measured as categorical variables. The researchers assumed equal distance between the Lickert-scale attributes comprising the variables allowing the use of multiple linear regression analysis. This approach is often used by social scientists to use predictive statistical analysis.

5. Findings

The random sample is a representative reflection of the adult population in the United States. Table 1 displays three categorical predictor variables. The gender distribution shows that approximately 55% of the sample was comprised of women. With respect to race, nearly three-quarters of the respondents were White with slightly over 15% Black and the remaining 9% other (includes Hispanics and Asian Americans). Lastly, the marital status distribution illustrates that 48% of the sample were currently married. Another 28% indicated they have never been married.

This study utilized five numerical predictor variables. Table 1 points out that the average age of the respondents was about 47 years and the average educational attainment was nearly 14 years of formal schooling. The average annual personal income was roughly \$26,500 and the average family income was approximately \$34,400 annually. The mean size of the city in which the respondents currently resided was 34,700. It is important to note that the standard error of the mean for each of these variables is relatively small indicating a normal distribution of the attribute categories.

Table 1. Summary of Study Predictor Variables Associated with Acceptance of a Family Member's Choice of Marriage Partner, 2012

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of the Mean	Percent	Number
Gender					
Male				45.5	590
Female				54.5	706
Race					
White				75.4	977
Black				15.5	201
Other				9.1	118
Marital Status					
Married				44.8	580
Widowed				8.3	108
Divorced				15.9	206
Separated				3.3	43
Never Married				27.7	359
Age	47.58	17.69	0.492		1294
Educational	13.57	3.063	0.085		1294
Attainment					
Personal Income	\$26,483.57	\$55,876.90	\$2,017.60		767
Family Income	\$34,351.55	\$40,082.18	\$1,175.84		1162
City Size	34,710	122,072	3390.9		1296

To accomplish the initial statistical analysis, each variable related to attitudes toward acceptance of a family member's choice of marriage partner was controlled. For instance, only racial minority respondents who answered the query associated with choosing to marry an individual who is White were used. Only White and other (Hispanic and Asian) respondents who answered the question regarding choosing to marry an individual who is Black were employed in the analysis. Table 2 shows that 49% of the participants stated they favored a family member's choice to marry someone White. Additionally, approximately 31% indicated they favored a family member's choice to marry someone Asian and about 33% had similar responses for a family member marrying someone Hispanic. For choosing to marry someone Black, only 27% said they favored the decision.

Table 2. Summary of Attitudes toward Acceptance of a Family Member's Choice of Marriage Partner, 2012*

Item	Strongly Favor %	Favor %	Neither Favor or Oppose %	Oppose %	Strongly Oppose %	Total %	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of the Mean
Close Relative Marrying White	32.6	14.4	48.3	3.1	1.6	100.0 (178)	2.09	0.978	.078
Close Relative Marrying Asian	15.8	15.4	55.9	8.9	4.1	100.0 (970)	2.70	0.031	.079
Close Relative Marrying Hispanic	17.6	15.5	54.7	7.6	4.6	100.0 (1107)	2.66	1.003	.030
Close Relative Marrying Black	13.4	13.3	54.0	9.9	9.4	100.0 (1090)	2.89	1.063	.032

*Each item category includes only the responses that would constitute an interracial marriage.

Each acceptance attitude regarding a potential marriage partner choice by a family member was used in a linear regression model with a selected number of independent variables. Included as independent variables were age, educational attainment, personal income, family income, size of city in which the respondent resides, marital status, gender, and race. Table 3 displays that each of the four models were statistically significant based on the F-test (ANOVA). Therefore, at least one of the independent variables in each model had an influence on acceptance perception variation.

Model 1 indicates that four variables impacted the attitude among racial minorities regarding a family member marrying someone White (see Table 3). Individuals with higher personal income tended to support a family member marrying White more than those with lower personal income. Family members from more populated areas and higher family income were less supportive of a family member marrying someone who is White. Lastly, the findings suggest that Asians and Hispanics were more supportive of family members marrying someone White in comparison to Blacks. This model

explained about 13% of the variation in attitudes toward supporting a family member's choice of a White marriage partner.

Model 2 examines attitudes with respect to a family member selecting an Asian individual as a spouse (see Table 3). Race was determined to influence acceptance of family member marriage partner choice. Black individuals were more supportive of a family member marrying someone Asian in comparison to Whites. This research found a weak relationship between educational attainment and acceptance. Individuals with higher educational attainment tended to be more supportive of family member choice. This model explained roughly 5% of the variation in the support variable.

Model 3 explored the variable impact on attitudes toward supporting a family member's choice of a Hispanic marriage partner (see Table 3). Race of the respondent is the only independent variable that influences support. Black individuals were more likely to say they would support a family member's choice to have a Hispanic marriage partner in comparison to Whites. The model explains nearly 3% of the variation in the support variable.

Model 4 examined the variable impact on attitudes toward supporting a family member's choice of a Black marriage partner (see Table 3). Age and educational attainment influenced the dependent variable. The remaining variables in the model did not have a direct influence. Older individuals were less likely to support a family member choosing a Black spouse. Additionally, individuals with higher educational attainment were more likely to support a family member's spouse choice. The influence of age and educational attainment on support of family member's choice of a Black spouse was consistent across racial categories (White and non-Black racial minorities).

Although race was not found to have a direct impact on support of family member's choice of a Black spouse, it probably operates through age and educational attainment. White respondents were generally older in comparison to Hispanics and Asians. Additionally, Whites had higher educational attainment than Hispanics.

Table 3. Comparison of Four Linear Multiple Regression Models Summarizing Attitudes toward Acceptance of a Family Member's Choice of Marriage Partner, 2012

Variables in Model	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	White Partner	Asian Partner	Hispanic Partner	Black Partner
F-test	3.48***	4.48***	2.46*	2.36**
Number of respondents	192	662	630	629
Y-intercept (a)	.793	3.29	3.09	3.08
	<u>Beta</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>Beta</u>
Age	.115	.073	.060	.105**
Educational Attainment	-.003	-.083*	-.074	-.100*

Personal Income	-.170*	.030	.015	.013
Family Income	.235**	.027	.052	.017
City Size	.206**	.068	.057	-.012
Marital Status	-.001	-.059	-.062	-.046
Gender	.082	-.012	-.029	-.069
Race	.165***	-.165**	-.106**	-.023
R	.364	.228	.175	.172
R²	.132	.052	.031	.030

*p < .05, **p < .01, *** p < .001.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The study findings demonstrated that when individuals decide to marry outside of their racial group, the racial background of the spouse has a major impact on family member acceptance. Our results generally supported the differential assimilation hypothesis assertion that potential spouses from darker-skinned racial groups received less support for the union from family members. When queried about acceptance, support for a family member marrying outside their racial group illustrated the social phenomenon of color-grading. Support was strongest for choosing a White spouse and weakest for selecting a Black spouse. This finding clearly demonstrates the importance American society places on the social meaning of race and its role in social stratification.

The findings suggest that racial minorities are the most accepting of family member decision to marry someone of another race in comparison to their White counterparts. If the spouse is White, racial minorities from higher personal income categories were the most supportive. Those from smaller cities and lower family income were supportive as well. In contrast, racial minority group members who live in larger cities, where geographic segregation often occurs, may not come in contact with Whites as much leading to less supportive behavior regarding family member spouse choice. Additionally, minority families with higher incomes may feel that their members have an obligation to marry within their racial group. It should be noted that Blacks are more supportive than all other groups when a family member chooses to marry interracial (this includes potential spouses who are White well as a racial minority who is not Black).

When queried about a Black spouse, White and non-Black racial minority respondents were generally not supportive. Age and education were found to impact this relationship to some extent. Older individuals and those with lower educational attainment tended to say they would be less supportive if a family member married someone Black. On the other hand, younger respondents and individuals with higher educational attainment were more likely to be supportive.

Overall, this research endeavor demonstrated that color grading operates regarding support of family members who choose to marry interracial. When a Black spouse is involved, family members tended to be less supportive of the union. In contrast, when a White spouse is involved, family members

showed support for the marriage. This illustrates the dynamics of the differential assimilation hypothesis.

7. Suggestions for Future Research

In terms of further studies regarding racially and ethnically themed research, it is starkly apparent that the current nature of sociologic enquiry based on demographic, census, and other modes of data collection is undergoing a transformation that is affecting the viability of the organization and categorization of data on racial and ethnic identification. Simply put, the increasingly less relevant sociological boundaries packaged conveniently—even if sometimes confusingly and unevenly—under labels such as “Black”, “White”, “Asian”, “Indian”, “Hispanic”, and the like are on the looming threshold of following the obsolescence of such previous racial categories as “Negroid”, “Caucasian”, and “Oriental”.

It is long past time to better accommodate nomenclature recognizing the long inept inference of “purity” in the depiction of racial and ethnic categories, no matter how distressing such convention might cause some members of today’s racial groupings. Even the concepts of “biracial” and “bicultural” are at a stage of irrelevance—“mixed races” and “multiculturalism” portend our sociological future in categorizing this aspect of human characterization. It is time that we as social scientists keep pace with these changes.

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Note

Note 1. Vasquez (2014), in a footnote in her article, alludes to apparent confliction within the Latino/Hispanic community regarding whether or not its members consider themselves White (as opposed to some other shade of "White", i.e., Anglo, Spanish, etc.). Even with the heavy race mixing with centuries of Black Moors' occupation of what is now modern-day Spain, and with the centuries-old, extensive non-White indigenous populations of Mexico and Central and South America, she concludes her footnote with, In this use of terminology, I am not intending to claim that "Latinos/Hispanics are not racially white, but instead, that they are ethnically dissimilar from non-Hispanic whites".