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Boundary crossing in first marriage and remarriage

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ABSTRACT

Owing to secular increases in divorce rates, remarriage has become a prevalent feature of American family life; yet, research about mate selection behavior in higher order marriages remains limited. Using log-linear methods to recent data from the 2008–2014 American Community Survey, we compare racial and ethnic sorting behavior in first and subsequent marriages. The two most frequently crossed boundaries – those involving White-Asian and White-Hispanic couples – are more permeable in remarriages than in first marriages. Boundaries that are crossed with less frequency – those between minority groups and the White-Black boundary—are less permeable in remarriages than in first marriages. Collectively, these findings suggest that racial and ethnic sorting processes in remarriage may reify existing social distances between pan-ethnic groups. Racial and ethnic variations in how the relative permeability of boundary changes between first and higher-order marriages underscore the importance of considering a broad array of interracial pairings when assessing the ways in which changes in family structure and marital sorting behavior promote integration.

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1. Introduction

Interracial marriage rates are often used as a barometer of social distance because intimate unions are presumed to involve equal status partnerships that are devoid of prejudice and discrimination (Kalmijn, 1998; Qian and Lichter, 2007; Rodriguez-Garcia, 2015; Schwartz, 2013; Waters and Gerstein Pineau, 2015). In the United States, the share of new marriages involving spouses from distinct ethno-racial groups doubled between 1980 and 2010, rising from 7 percent to 15 percent (Wang et al., 2012). Some marriage researchers claim that this trend signals weakened ethno-racial barriers to social interaction and intimacy (Lee and Bean, 2010; Qian and Lichter, 2007). Citing evidence that interracial unions dissolve at higher rates than endogamous marriages, others argue that inferences about lower prejudice and social distance are premature (Kreider, 2000; Lichter et al., 2007; Zhang and Van Hook, 2009). Although social barriers to interracial marriages may have weakened over time, higher dissolution rates of these unions indicate that interracial couples still face formidable challenges (Bratter and King, 2008; Zhang and Van Hook, 2009).

The higher frailty of exogamous unions and the dramatic rise in divorce and remarriage rates over the past half century are well-documented (Kennedy and Ruggles, 2014; Livingston, 2014; Wang et al., 2012; Zhang and Van Hook, 2009), but there is limited research comparing racial and ethnic sorting behavior in first and subsequent marriages. The few studies on this topic indicate that exogamy rates have been traditionally higher in remarriages than in first marriages (Aguirre et al., 1995; Fu,

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2010; Murguía, 1982; Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan, 1990); but there is recent evidence that these differences may have narrowed over time (Fu, 2010). Whether or not the convergence in intermarriage rates between first and higher order marriages continued after the 1990s is highly uncertain because after 1995 large surveys (e.g., decennial census) suitable for analyzing sorting behavior ceased collecting information about marriage timing and order.

Two offsetting trends yield competing predictions about differences in exogamy levels in first and subsequent marriages since 1995. On the one hand, the dramatic rise in remarriage over the past two decades may have blurred differences in sorting behavior between first and higher order unions both by reducing variation in candidates eligible for first and subsequent marriages and by diluting the salience of normative differences governing mate selection in first and higher order unions (Aguirre et al., 1995; Cherlin, 1978, 2004; Sweeney, 2010). On the other hand, high immigration rates from Latin America and Asia may have increased differences in exogamy levels between first and subsequent marriages by replenishing the pool of co-ethnic partners and thus fomenting opportunities for endogamous pairings (Qian and Lichter, 2011a; Lichter et al., 2007). Because the pressure to form same race marriages is greater for first marriages than it is for remarriages (Dean and Gurak, 1978; Fu, 2010), the retreat from intermarriages may have been greater in first marriages than in remarriages.

Using annual micro-data files from the 2008–2014 American Community Surveys (ACS), which record both the year of last marriage and number of times married, we examine differences in the permeability of specific ethno-racial boundaries between first- and higher order marriages. Moreover, unlike prior research that examines intermarriage patterns for the stock of all marriages or focuses on intermarriages involving a White spouse (Aguirre et al., 1995; Fu, 2010; Harris and Ono, 2005; Jacobs and Furstenberg, 1986), we consider new marriages across a broad array of racial and ethnic lines, including those only involving minorities. Given prior research showing educational and nativity variations in coupling behavior (Qian and Lichter, 2007), our empirical analysis of differences in intermarriage between first and higher order marriages also considers whether and how much wife's education and nativity status influences the permeability of specific ethno-racial boundaries as well as differences in the permeability of these boundaries in first and subsequent marriages.

Our research contributes to the intermarriage literature in two important ways. First, a study of sorting behavior in first and higher order marriages across a broad array of racial and ethnic lines provides a clear picture of social distance across racial and ethnic groups. Considering broad array of interracial pairings, including those only involving minorities, is important as the United States becomes more diverse along ethnic and racial lines (Frey, 2015) and intermarriages involving only minorities are increasing in number¹ (Wang et al., 2012). Second, by questioning whether and how the social norms governing partner selection in first marriages carry over to remarriages, our empirical analyses also address whether the changing institution of marriage – rising divorce and remarriage rates-blurs or reifies racial and ethnic boundaries in coupling behavior.

Throughout, we use the term *intermarriage* and *exogamy* to refer to marriages involving spouses from distinct pan-ethnic groups; *same race marriages* and *endogamy* to refer to marriages involving spouses from the same pan-ethnic group. The ACS samples do not permit further disaggregation by national origins.

2. Background

2.1. Determinants of mate choice

Intermarriage patterns emerge from the interplay of several social forces: (1) personal traits that render partners more or less appealing; (2) social desirability of pan-ethnic groups; (3) third party influences over spousal choice; and (4) availability of potential partners in local marriage markets (Kalmijn, 1998; Lichter et al., 2007; Schwartz, 2013).

In the main, two sets of circumstances govern the desirability of potential spouses: these include resources that prospective partners can bring to unions and social norms about their group's desirability as partners (Becker, 1981; Kalmijn, 1998). Prospective spouses typically prefer partners with similar values, class background, and cultural preferences that facilitate interpersonal relations and smooth integration with partners' relatives (Kalmijn, 1998; Schwartz, 2013). Preferences for spouses with similar cultural backgrounds are conducive to partnering behavior within one's own national-origin and pan-ethnic groups (Kalmijn, 1998; Rosenfeld, 2001; Qian and Lichter, 2007; Schwartz, 2013). Prior research invokes socio-economic assimilation and acculturation to US norms to explain higher intermarriage rates among the US-born relative to their foreign-born counterparts (Qian and Lichter, 2007).

That singles strive to optimize their economic wellbeing by choosing mates who can bring ample economic resources and social status to the union not only increases competition for well-heeled mates, but also generates socioeconomic homogamy in partnering behavior (Becker, 1981; Kalmijn, 1998; Mare, 1991; Schwartz, 2013). Intermarriage is sometimes the byproduct of the socioeconomic sorting process when high-status mates cross ethnic and racial boundaries to maintain class homogamy, or when high status minorities “exchange” their high socioeconomic status to integrate into the mainstream society by marrying a White spouse (Alba and Nee, 2003; Blackwell and Lichter, 2000; Choi et al., 2012; Fu, 2001; Kalmijn, 1993; Qian and Lichter, 2007). Furthermore, among immigrants and members of racial and ethnic minority groups, educational and economic mobility broadens opportunities for interaction with members of other groups and foments intermarriage (Gullickson, 2006; Qian and Lichter, 2007).

¹ In 2010, 30 percent of all intermarriages involved only minority partners (Wang et al., 2012).

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