RELIGIOUS INTERMARRIAGE AND CONVERSION IN THE UNITED STATES:

PATTERNS AND CHANGES OVER TIME

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ABSTRACT

Marital heterogamy has increased in the U.S. and other countries. This study of religion and marriage introduces three innovations: First, we examine both religious conversion for marriage and religious intermarriage. Second, we compare intermarriage and conversion in both first marriages and higher order marriages. Finally, we distinguish religious groups much more finely than most previous studies. The National Survey of Families and Households is used to explore the characteristics associated with religious intermarriage, homogamy and conversion. The findings show an increase in the percentage of religious intermarriages, from about 20% of all first marriages before 1950, to about 40% of first marriages in the mid-1980s, and a slight decrease in marriages that involve a religious conversion. In all marriage cohorts, intermarriage is more common in higher order marriages than first marriages and conversion is more common in first marriages than in higher order marriages.

INTRODUCTION

America is a religious nation. The vast majority of Americans, when asked, profess a belief in G-d and affirm that religion is at least "fairly important" in their lives (Myers 2000):285); about three-fifths of the population reports membership in a religious organization and 45% state that they attend religious services at least monthly (Sherkat and Ellison 1999). At the same time, fairly dated studies report that between 25% and 32% of American adults switch religions, and about 40% of these switches are related to marriage (Newport 1979). Most American adults are currently married and almost all will marry at some time in their lives. And marriage and a happy family life are almost universal goals for young adults.

A good deal of religious practice and religious observance takes place within the family or jointly with family members. Parents may take their children to church, say grace at meals or prayers at bedtime. Spouses may attend services together or pray together at home (Schmidt forthcoming). Almost all established religions encourage marriage and parenthood, and provide both guidance and support in these key tasks of adulthood. So it is no surprise that married adults and parents of school-aged children are more likely to belong to and participate in religious organizations (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy et al. 1995).

In this study we use the National Survey of Families and Households to explore the social and demographic characteristics associated with religious intermarriage, homogamy and conversion. We examine changes across marriages cohorts in the chances of in-marriage, intermarriage and conversion and explore changes over time in the impact of religious denomination while growing up on marital homogamy.

BACKGROUND

Lehrer and Chiswick (1993) argue that religion is a complementary trait within marriages, so that religious denomination and religiosity affect many activities that spouses engage in and many choices that they make. Religion may affect how people spend their time and with whom, how they spend their money, whether they have children and how many, how those children are raised and educated, and even where the family lives. So, spouses who agree on the role that religion will play in their lives, and who share a religious affiliation will, according to Lehrer and Chiswick (Lehrer and Chiswick 1993) have a much more efficient household and one with less conflict than spouses who differ in their religion and religiosity. Lehrer and Chiswick find that marriages in which one partner converted to create a religiously homogamous union were at least as stable as unions where both partners had the same religion before marriage, suggesting that stability is affected more by compatibility during marriage than similarity in religious upbringing (Lehrer and Chiswick 1993).

Clearly, marrying someone of the same religion depends on the importance of and the opportunities for doing so. Lehrer and Chiswick (1993) argue that religions differ in their level of exclusivity or inclusivity, which they call "exclusivist and ecumenical. Ecumenical religious groups require very little specialized training, education or commitment to join them and place little emphasis on group boundaries. These include Unitarian and Mainline Protestant Christian denominations. At the other extreme, exclusivist religion groups draw membership boundaries sharply and patrol these carefully. Exclusivist groups may prohibit out-marriage and require substantial knowledge and commitment of converts. These groups also differ in the importance of

religious faith and religious practice in family life. Lehrer and Chiswick (1993) use the exclusivist-ecumenical distinction to divide Protestant religious groups into two categories: Ecumenical Protestant (corresponding to Mainline denominations) and Exclusivist Protestant (corresponding to Evangelical denominations). Religious in-marriage is, we expect, more likely for those raised in Evangelical Protestant denominations than for those raised in ecumenical denominations.

It is less clear how being raised in an ecumenical vs. exclusivist Protestant religion will affect conversion in connection with marriage. Ecumenical religious groups welcome outsiders, offering a relatively quick and easy conversion process. At the same time, these groups are more tolerant of religious differences and intermarriage, reducing pressures for conversion and the lowering the costs of intermarriage.

Those who state when asked that they were raised in no religion constitute a distinct category. This group probably consists of those raised in families who are ethically and morally atheists or agnostics, and those raised in families in which any specific religion was absent, possibly because the parents had themselves intermarried. These people might be *more* likely to intermarry, since they have few religious beliefs to conflict with those of a potential spouse. If they object to religious practice, however, they may be unappealing mates to those who desire this in their family. One might guess that those raised with no religion would be more likely than others to convert, offering a blank slate, so to speak, on which religious values and practices could be written at marriage.

At the same time that members of various religious groups face differing costs and benefits of in-marriage vs. intermarriage, they also face different opportunities to do so.

All else equal, members of large religious groups and those that are widely dispersed, are more likely to marry someone of the same religious background even if they place no importance on doing so, just because of the distribution of characteristics of available mates (Waite and Friedman 1997).

A sizeable body of research points to the decline of religious homogamy. Kalmijn (1991) shows that intermarriage between people with a Protestant background and a Catholic background increased dramatically between the 1920s and the 1980s. At the same time, mate choice became more homogeneous on education, especially among those with the highest levels of schooling. Waite and Friedman (1997) show, as for other religious groups, substantial increases in the likelihood of intermarriage among Jews between the 1920s and 1980.

As we argued above, the broad Protestant-Catholic distinction hides a great deal of variation in characteristics of religious groups that we expect to affect the chances of in-marriage and intermarriage. We hypothesize that intermarriage increased more quickly among those raised in Ecumenical Protestant denominations than among those raised in Evangelical denominations, because of differences in the much greater important of religious belief and practice to family life in the latter.

Demographers and economists have argued that early age at marriage is indicative of a truncated search for a partner, and an inferior match, factors that are later associated with marital dissolution. In this study we examine the relationship between age at marriage and religious homogamy. Perhaps earlier marriages are more affected by parental preferences than marriages at later ages, and thus are more religiously homogamous. Religious institutions provide educational and social services that families

utilize in different stages of their lives, yet these services tend to target 'conventional' families (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy et al. 1995). Churches may provide social activities for single men and women, with the explicit intent of serving as marriage markets. These activities may be geared to specific, conventional age groups, and may exclude older never-married and previously-married and single-parent members, who then conduct their search for partners in religiously mixed environments.

This study of religion and marriage is innovative in a number of ways. First while most studies of religious homogamy focus only on intermarriage, we also examine conversion in connection with marriage. Second, while most studies focus on first marriages, we compare first marriages with higher order marriages. Third, we distinguish religious groups much more finely than most previous studies, which tend to either use a crude Protestant-Catholic distinction (Kalmijn, 1991) or focus on only one religious group (Waite and Friedman, 1997).

DATA, MEASURES AND METHODS

In this study we use the first wave of the national Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) carried out in 1987 – 1988. [1] This data set is appropriate for the study of religious intermarriage for two main reasons. First, it has detailed information on religion and conversion of both spouses, and second, it has this information for all first marriages, not just marriages at time of survey, so our results are not biased towards

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[1] The survey was designed by Bumpass and Sweet, Center for Demography and Ecology, University of Wisconsin, the field work was carried out by the Institute for Survey Research, Temple University.

surviving marriages. Information on spouses was collected from the spouse in current

marriages, and was reported by the respondent if the marriage had ended (by death or

divorce) or if the spouse was not present.

In our analyses we distinguish between first marriages and higher-order marriages.

We consider a marriage to be a first marriage if it is the first marriage for both the

respondent and the spouse, and as a higher-order marriage if either the respondent or the

spouse had been previously married. [2]

The sample includes all respondents who were ever married at wave 1. We

excluded Asians and Native Americans due to small sample size. We also excluded

people married outside the U.S because the availability of coreligionists differs by

country, and the mechanisms of assortative mating by religion are culturally specific and

may differ by country.

VARIABLES

Table 1 shows the operational definitions of variables in the analyses. The

dependent variable has three categories, distinguishing whether the spouses had the same

religion (religious homogamy), whether they had different religions (religious

intermarriage), and whether one spouse converted for the marriage (conversion).

- Table 1 about here -

The independent variables include respondent's religion, age at marriage,

education at marriage, year of marriage, race and gender.

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[2] This is different from other studies that look at marriage parity of respondent only (e.g., Lehrer &

Chiswick (1993)).

We distinguish between six religious categories, based on the classification developed by Lehrer and Chiswick (1993). The categories are as follows: No religion, Catholic, Jewish, Mainline Protestant (Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Unitarians), Conservative Protestants (Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, Christian Scientists and other fundamentalists) and Mormons. Other religions were excluded from the analyses because the sample sizes were too small to enable comparison, and the religions were too diverse to justify collapsing into one category.

We divided age at marriage into 3 categories, by frequency, separately for men and women. For women, age at first marriage has three categories: before age 18, between ages 18 and 21 (reference category in regressions) and after age 21. For men, the three categories of age at first marriage were defined as follows: before age 21, between ages 21 and 24 (reference category), and after age 24. The distribution of age at higher order marriages is wider than age at first marriage, and is reflected in the definitions of the categories. For women in higher order marriages the categories are: before age 23, between 23 and 31 (reference category in regressions), and after age 31. For men the categories are before age 27, between age 27 and 35, and after age 35.

Education at time of marriage was coded in years and collapsed into four categories. We rounded the number of years to correspond with degree or diploma at time of marriage, as follows: less than high school (less than 12 years of education and no diploma), high school (12 years or diploma), tertiary (12 – 15 years no degree), academic (at least 16 years of education or academic degree).

We distinguish between five marriage cohorts in our analyses, by year of marriage, as follows: before 1950, 1950 – 1960, 1960 – 1970, 1970 – 1980 (reference category in regressions), 1980 – 1988.

We distinguish between three racial and ethnic groups, Whites, African-Americans and Hispanic. Finally, we include a dummy variable for gender.

METHODS

The analysis has three stages. The first stage is primarily descriptive. We compare means and percentage distributions of characteristics of marriages by religious homogamy, intermarriage and religious conversion, separately for first and higher order marriages. Next, we conduct a multi-variate analyses examining the odds of religious homogamy, intermarriage and conversion. Finally, we will look at changes over time and we will test for interactions by religion, to answer the question whether the mechanisms leading to religious intermarriage and conversion differ by religion.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows means and percentage distribution of the variables in the analyses, by marriage order. The most important finding is that religious intermarriage is more prevalent in higher order marriages than in first marriages. Almost half (47%) of all higher order marriages involve spouses from different religious categories, compared to less than a third of all first marriages (28%). Less than a fifth (16%) of all first marriages involve a conversion of one spouse, compared to 9% of higher order marriages.

- Table 2 about here -

The religious composition of first and higher order marriages is about the same, suggesting that members of all religious categories enter higher order marriages at about

the same rate. About one thirst of all respondents are Mainline Protestant, another third are Conservative Protestants and a quarter of the respondents are Catholics.   Four percent of respondents claim to have been raised with no religion, two percent are Jewish and two percent are Mormons.

The racial composition of first and higher order marriages differs slightly, suggesting that whites tend to remarry more than African Americans and Hispanics. The great majority of respondents are white (80% of first marriages, 82% of higher order marriages), followed by African Americans (15% of respondents in first marriages, 13% of respondents in higher order marriages) and a small minority of respondents are Hispanic (5% of first marriages, 4% of higher order marriages).

The mean age at marriage is substantially higher in higher order marriages (31) than in first marriages (21). The standard deviation is larger in higher order marriages (11 years), compared to first marriages (4 years), suggesting that there is wider variation in the timing of higher order marriages compared to first marriages. The difference in education at marriage for first marriages and higher order marriages is not large (11.6 years of education vs. 12.3 years). This may reflect respondents' tendency to time their first marriage after completing their education, and not to increase their education substantially after marriage.

The incidents of first and higher order marriages differs by marriage cohort, reflecting the rise in divorce and remarriage. While only 18% of first marriages occurred in the most recent period (1980 – 1988), almost half of the higher order marriages occurred in this period. While one quarter of first marriages took place before 1950, only 9% of higher order marriages took place in this earliest period under investigation.

Figure 1 shows trends in intermarriage and conversion, for first and higher order marriages. The main finding is that there is an increase in the percentage of religious intermarriages, with time, and a slight decrease in marriages that involve a religious conversion. The chart also depicts two important differences between first and higher order marriages. First, intermarriage is more common in higher order marriages than first marriages in all periods under investigation. Second, conversion for marriage is more common in first marriages than in higher order marriages in all marriage cohorts.

- Figure 1 about here -

FIRST MARRIAGES

Table 3 shows regression coefficients predicting the odds of intermarriage or conversion vs. marring a co-religionist in first marriages. The religion in which people were raised is important in predicting the odds of intermarriage and conversion in first marriages. People who were raised with no religion have higher odds of intermarriage than people who were raised Mainline Protestant (the omitted category). Members of all other religions (Catholics, Jews, Conservative Protestants and Mormons) have lower odds of intermarriage in first marriages, and these results are all statistically significant at the .01 level. Members of all religions, including those with no religion have lower odds than Mainline Protestants of converting for marriage.

- Table 3 about here -

Age at marriage predicts intermarriage, but does not predict conversion in first marriages. People who marry later have lower odds of intermarriage than people marrying at the youngest ages. This may suggest a truncated search for a partner

(economists would say maybe due to an unplanned pregnancy or something else). The effect is only significant for those marrying at a middle age compared to those marrying at the youngest age.

The effect of race is statistically significant in predicting both intermarriage and conversion in first marriages. Blacks and Hispanics have lower odds than whites of either intermarriage or conversion. These differences may follow from the relationship between race/ethnicity and religion. Hispanics are predominantly Catholic and Blacks conservative Protestant. These religions have lower odds of conversion and intermarriage than Mainline Protestants, who are mostly white.

A period effect is also evident for intermarriage, but not for conversion. Marriages that occurred in earlier years have lower odds of intermarriage than marriages in 1970 – 79 (the omitted category), and most recent marriages (1980 – 1988) have higher odds of intermarriage. This suggests that a shift has taken place toward marriages that start out as religiously heterogamous and remain that way. Conversion is no less common, but in-marriage has fallen and intermarriage has increased. Clearly, some of those who in earlier cohorts would have converted to make their marriages homogamous on this dimension, or to make their spouse or in-laws happy, no long feel the need to do so.

Education at time of marriage has no effect on intermarriage, although it may affect religious intermarriage through its affect on age at marriage. People who had not completed high school before marriage have lower odds of converting for marriage than those with a high school diploma. We suspect that this results from the relationship between education and religious affiliation. People with no religious affiliation and

Conservative Protestants are over-represented in the 'less than high-school' category, and they also have lower odds of converting than Mainline Protestants.

Finally, and surprisingly, women have higher odds of intermarrying and converting for marriage than men, net of all the variables in the equations. [3]

SECOND MARRIAGES

Table 4 shows regression coefficients predicting the odds of intermarriage or conversion vs. marring a co-religionist in higher order marriages. The results for higher order marriages differ substantially from the results for first marriages. With the exception of people raised with no religion, who have higher odds of intermarriage in second marriages than Mainline Protestants, the effect of religion is not statistically significant. Conservative Protestants have lower odds of converting than Mainline Protestants; all other effects of religion are not statistically significant.

- Table 4 about here -

Age at second marriage does increase the odds of intermarriage; those marrying the oldest ages have higher odds of intermarriage than those marrying at younger ages. This suggests a marriage market effect, with a shortage of religiously-compatible mates among the limited pool available to those previously married. But there is no effect of age at marriage on odds of conversion.

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[3] This gender difference is reduced, but not eliminated entirely when using the same categories of age at marriage for men and women.

In second and later marriages Hispanics have lower odds of intermarriage than mainline Protestants. There is no difference between racial groups in the odds of conversion in second marriages.

There is a period effect on odds of intermarriage (but not conversion) in second marriages. Marriages before 1959 have lower odds of being intermarriages than marriages between 1970 and 1979.

Education has no effect on intermarriage or conversion at second marriage. One explanation could be that education may be a good predictor of remarriage, and this selection may offset any effect there may be on the match. Education had little effect in first marriages too, perhaps because other variables are stealing the effect of education – for example, age at marriage, religion and race are all related to education.

Finally, women have higher odds than men of intermarrying, but not of converting, in second marriages.

Table 1 Operational Definition of Variables in the Analyses

Variable name	Variable definition
Dependent Variable	
Intermarriage	0 = religious homogamy (reference) 1 = religious intermarriage 2 = religious conversion for marriage
Respondent's religion	Set of 6 binary variables: No religion, Catholic, Jewish, Mainline Protestant (reference in regressions), Conservative Protestants, Mormons.
Respondent's age at marriage	Defined by distribution, separately for men and women, in first and higher order marriages. First marriage, women: before age 18 (reference category), 18 – 21, after age 21. First marriage, men: before age 21 (reference), 21 – 24, after age 24. Higher order marriages women: before age 23 (reference), 23 – 31, after age 31. Higher order marriages men: before age 27 (reference), 27 -35, after age 35.
Respondent's race	Set of 3 binary variables: While, African American, Hispanic.
Respondent's education at marriage	Set of 4 binary variables: less than high school diploma, high school, more than high school, but no academic diploma, academic education.
Marriage cohort	Set of 5 binary variables by year of marriage: before 1950, 1950 – 1959, 1960-1969, 1970-1979 (reference), 1980 – 1988.
Respondent gender	0 = male, 1 = female.

Table 2 Means and Percentage Distribution of Variables in the Analyses, by

Marriage Parity

	1st Marriages	Higher Order Marriages
Dependent Variable		
Religious intermarriage	28%	47%
Conversion	16	9
Respondent's religion		
No Religion	4%	4%
Catholic	25	23
Jewish	2	2
Mainline Protestant	33	34
Conservative Protestant	34	35
Mormon	2	2
Mean age at marriage	21.3	30.8
	(4.0)	(10.8)
Respondent's race		
White	80%	82%
African American	15	13
Hispanic	5	4
Respondent's education at marriage	11.6	12.3
	(3.4)	(3.2)
Marriage cohort		
Before 1950	25%	9%
1950 – 1960	14	8
1960-1970	19	13
1970-1980	25	26
1980-1988	18	49
Respondent gender	60%	58%
% female		
N	7324	2291

Table 3 Regression Coefficients (Standard Errors) Predicting the Log Odds of
Intermarriage and Conversion in First Marriages.

	Intermarriage vs. Religious Homogamy	Conversion vs. Religious Homogamy
Respondent's Religion Raised		
No Religion	0.536 ** (.142)	-0.492 * (.222)
Catholic	-0.479 ** (.077)	-0.610 ** (.091)
Jewish	-0.898 ** (.227)	-1.848 ** (.354)
Conservative Protestant	-0.482 ** (.072)	-0.612 ** (.086)
Mormon	-0.918 ** (.196)	-1.391 ** (.272)
Respondent's Age at Marriage		
Age Category 2	-0.199 ** (.071)	0.064 (.086)
Age Category 3	-0.72 (.079)	-0.052 (.098)
Respondent's Race/Ethnicity		
Black	-.191 * (.084)	-0.572 ** (.115)
Hispanic	-0.705 ** (.144)	-1.180 ** (.232)
Year of Marriage		
Before 1950	-0.747 ** (.086)	0.013 (.102)
1950 – 1960	-0.301 ** (.095)	0.190 (.116)
1960 – 1970	-0.126 (.084)	0.258 * (.104)
1980 – 1988	0.182 (.083)	0.085 (.110)
Respondent's Education		
Less than High School	-0.022 (.071)	-0.433 ** (.091)
Tertiary	-0.144 (.085)	0.140 (.095)
Academic	-0.023 (.103)	0.166 (.121)
Respondent Female	0.196 ** (.058)	0.146 * (.071)

Constant	-0.321	-0.948
N	7258	

Notes: Reference category for religion is Mainline Protestant. Reference category for age at marriage is youngest age category. Reference category for race/ethnicity is white. Reference category for year of marriage is 1970 – 1980. Reference category for education is high school. * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Table 4 Regression Coefficients (Standard Errors) Predicting the Log Odds of Intermarriage and Conversion in Higher Order Marriages.

	Intermarriage vs. Religious Homogamy	Conversion vs. Religious Homogamy
Respondent's Religion Raised		
No Religion	0.723 ** (.242)	-0.877 (.621)
Catholic	0.225 (.128)	-0.020 (.208)
Jewish	-0.250 (.332)	-1.299 (.757)
Conservative Protestant	-0.107 (.113)	-0.607 ** (.198)
Mormon	-0.284 (.321)	-0.747 (.628)
Respondent's Age at Marriage		
Age Category 2	0.132 (.113)	0.232 (.192)
Age Category 3	0.245 * (.115)	0.193 (.204)
Respondent's Race/Ethnicity		
Black	0.057 (.139)	-0.028 (.249)
Hispanic	-0.581 * (.236)	-0.310 (.399)
Year of Marriage		
Before 1950	-0.498 ** (.185)	0.201 (.279)
1950 – 1960	-0.528 ** (.192)	0.123 (.284)
1960 – 1970	-0.171 (.154)	-0.018 (.256)
1980 – 1988	0.101 (.112)	-0.339 (.200)
Respondent's Education		
Less than High School	0.044 (.118)	-0.114 (.208)
Tertiary	-0.044 (.126)	-0.158 (.225)
Academic	0.197 (.145)	0.434 (.233)
Respondent Female	0.288 ** (.092)	0.246 (.160)

Constant	-0.516	-1.762
N	2268	

Notes: Reference category for religion is Mainline Protestant. Reference category for age at marriage is youngest age category. Reference category for race/ethnicity is white. Reference category for year of marriage is 1970 – 1980. Reference category for education is high school. * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

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Figure 1 Intermarriage and Conversion by Marriage Order and Marriage Cohort.