

Changing Marriage Markets and the Availability of Partners: Interracial Marriage, 1990-2000

Zhenchao Qian and Daniel T. Lichter

Extended Abstract

Interracial marriage increased from .7% in 1970 to 2.6% of all marriages in 2000. Whites, African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and American Indians have all experienced varying degrees of increases in interracial marriage (Blackwell and Lichter 2000; Qian and Lichter 2001). Nevertheless, interracial marriage is not evenly distributed in the United States. Among other things, levels of interracial marriage also depend on the concentration of racial minorities in one area. Clearly, the availability of partners of different racial groups is a necessary condition for an interracial marriage. Racial minorities mostly live in large metropolitan areas in the U.S. so studies of interracial marriage at the national level may not give a complete picture of interracial marriage. Harris and Ono (Forthcoming) argued that studying interracial marriage at the national level tends to misinterpret geographical constraints on interracial marriage as evidence of social distance. They concluded that social distance across racial groups is shorter when local racial compositions are taken into account.

Shares of racial minorities in large cities have increased rapidly in the 1990s thanks to the influx of racial minority immigrants into the United States. Changes in racial compositions in U.S. cities may have an important effect on interracial marriage. On the one hand, increases in the share of racial minorities may promote interracial contact and interracial marriage. On the other hand, the increases also reinforce distinctive cultural traditions. Because newly arrived immigrants from Asia or Latin America replenish the demographic supply of potential partners, many natives of the same race and ethnicity may seek immigrant spouses rather than marrying the majority group. From the perspective of the majority group, however, increases in racial minorities provide more opportunities for interracial contact. Thus, how changes in racial composition affect interracial marriage is not entirely clear. Will we observe increasing numbers of marriages between native- and foreign-born racial and ethnic minorities? Or are we going to see an increase in interracial marriage with whites? It is likely that we may see an even sharper divide in interracial marriage between highly educated and less educated racial minorities – Less educated minority natives may be more likely to marry their immigrant counterparts than highly educated minority natives.

We propose to use 1990 and 2000 U.S. census data to examine how marriage market conditions in metropolitan areas affect interracial marriage. Evidently, ethnic and nativity differences in residential patterns necessitate the analysis of metropolitan areas. We will focus on the marriage market conditions in the top 20 most populated metropolitan areas in the United States. We also include Honolulu because it is a diversified area where intermarriage is common, and because Hawaii has been a common study site in previous studies of intermarriage (Fu and Heaton 2000; Labov and Jacobs 1986; Schoen and Thomas 1989).

First, our analyses will compare differences in assortative mating patterns among these metropolitan areas. Second, we examine how structural characteristics in a local marriage market as well as individual characteristics have an impact on differential interracial marriage. In particular, we explore why some racial minority groups have higher levels of interracial marriage than do others. Specifically, we will evaluate whether shortages of potential partners in each racial and ethnic, nativity, and educational classification encourage persons to redefine their pool of eligible partners (Guttentag and Secord 1983) and lead to different assortative mating patterns. Racial and ethnic minorities tend to be constrained greatly by local marriage market conditions because the pool of eligible partners is potentially small. It may especially be true for well-educated racial minorities who are less likely to reside in ethnically segregated neighborhoods than their less-educated counterparts.

Our goal in this paper is to explore how local marriage market conditions affect incorporation of racial minorities (natives and immigrants) into American society through assortative mating. Metropolitan areas (i.e., local marriage markets) provide both opportunities and constraints on marriage and intermarriage among racial and ethnic minorities (South and Messner 1986). We will use hierarchical generalized linear models to identify within- and between-area variations in the likelihood of interracial marriage among natives and immigrants. We will focus on the effects of local marriage market conditions (structural factors such as racial and ethnic, nativity, and educational compositions and group-specific sex ratios in a marriage market) and of individual characteristics (race and ethnicity, nativity, educational attainment, and sex).

The statistical method to carry out this analysis is log-rate models. The models enable us to examine temporal changes and racial and ethnic group variation in assortative mating and marital assimilation (Kalmijn 1998; Qian 1997). This modeling strategy provides measures of social distance among racial and ethnic immigrant groups, and reveals patterns of intermarriage between population groups distinguished by race and ethnicity, nativity, and educational attainment. More importantly, the models taken into account the marginal distributions of the variables under consideration as well as population at risk of marriage (never married populations by race and ethnicity, nativity, and educational attainment).

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