

INTERRACIAL MARRIAGE AND MARITAL DISSOLUTION: CHANGES OVER TIME

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SHORT ABSTRACT

Interracial marriages dissolve at considerably higher rates than endogamous unions: a phenomenon that often serves as signal for the significant barriers to social interaction across race/ethnic groups. Yet, the rise in the prevalence and acceptability of interracial marriages suggests that barriers to interaction across race/ethnic groups are eroding in recent decades, which make us wonder whether marital stability differences between interracial and endogamous unions are also diminishing over time. Using data from the 1995, 2002, and 2006-10 NSFG, I ascertain whether the marital stability differences are diminishing over time. I also investigate the extent to which changing selectivity into interracial unions and shifts in behavioural differences across union type explain these changes. Preliminary results suggest that marital stability differences between interracial and endogamous unions are decreasing over time. These changes are partly due to the declining selectivity in intermarriages and the diminishing behavioural differences between interracial and endogamous unions.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

Interracial marriages dissolve at considerably higher rates than endogamous unions, with 41 percent of interracial couples and 31 percent of endogamous couples ending in dissolution by the 10th year of marriage (Bramlett and Mosher 2002; Bratter and King 2008; Jones 2010; Kreider 2000; Zhang and Van Hook 2009). The higher dissolution rates of interracial marriages has been interpreted as evidence of the salience of the barriers across race/ethnic groups and the challenges confronting couples who cross race/ethnic boundaries (Bratter and King 2008; Zhang and Van Hook 2009).

Prior work on trends in interracial marriages, however, suggests that the barriers to social interaction across race/ethnic groups may be eroding in recent decades (Joyner and Kao 2005; Qian and Lichter 2011). The rate of interracial marriages has increased remarkably in recent decades from 1% in 1970 to 7% in 2005 (Bratter and King 2008; Joyner and Kao 2005; Qian and Lichter 2011). Additionally, the proportion of US adults who deem intermarriage acceptable has increased over this period: 33% in 1986 to 63% in 2012 (Wang 2012).

The rise in the prevalence and acceptability of interracial unions suggests that marital stability differences between interracial and endogamous unions may be declining. Yet, there is little empirical work examining whether this is the case because (1) the majority of existing work describes trends in the prevalence or acceptability of interracial unions and (2) the few studies documenting marital stability differences between interracial and endogamous unions focus on disparities at a single point in time. Evidence of a diminishing gap in marital stability differences between interracial and endogamous unions will further reinforce the view that the barriers to interaction across race/ethnic groups are eroding and that racial tolerance is growing (Lee and Bean 2010; Rosenfeld 2008).

This paper fills this gap in the literature by investigating whether the gap in dissolution rates between interracial and endogamous unions are diminishing over time. Specifically, using data from the 1995, 2002, and 2006-10 cycles of the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), this paper investigates whether disparities in the proportion of endogamous and interracial unions that dissolve within 10 years of marriage has diminished over time. It then assesses the extent to which the changing marital stability differences across the two union types are due to (1) shifts in the selectivity of individuals who intermarry and (2) behavioral shifts (e.g., childlessness, cohabitation as trial marriages) within the context of intermarriages.

The proposed analyses are important for a number of reasons. First, it measures the extent to which the salience of race/ethnic boundaries has eroded over time. Second, marital duration has implications for the number of offspring born in a union; therefore, how much more likely interracial marriages are to disrupt than endogamous unions and changes in marital stability differences over time determine the demographic relevance of multiracial individuals for future populations. Finally, given the negative impact of divorce on individual wellbeing, marital stability differences by union type could be a risk factor giving rise to the disadvantageous position of multiracial infants relative to their mono-racial counterparts, especially mono-racial Whites. The diminishing gap in marital stability differences may also signal a decline in the risk factors generating the disadvantageous positions of multiracial infants.

BACKGROUND

The rise in interracial marriages

The majority of existing work on intermarriage has focused on trends in the prevalence of interracial marriages (Kalmijn 1998; Qian and Lichter 2011; Wang 2012). These studies present consistent evidence of a steady rise in the number of interracial marriages in recent decades, with the proportion of married couples in interracial unions increasing from 1 percent in 1970 to 7 percent in 2005.

Two explanations have been proposed to account for the steady rise in interracial marriages. The first explanation focuses on the expanding opportunity structures to intermarry. The number of intermarriages expanded rapidly following the abolition of anti-miscegenation laws forbidding the marriage between individuals who belong to distinct race/ethnic groups in 1967 from 51,000 in 1960 to 395,000 in 2002 (Qian and Lichter 2007; US Census Bureau 2011). Other structural factors contributing to the rise in intermarriages is the decline in residential, occupational, and educational segregation over the same period of time, which increases the quantity and quality of social interaction across groups (Qian and Lichter 2011). The second explanation deals with changing marital preferences, namely greater tolerance for marriages violating enduring norms favoring endogamous unions. Recent reports from the Pew Foundation point to an increased social acceptance towards interracial unions. Over 80 percent of US adults in 2009 reported that it was “okay” for Whites and Blacks to date each other, which compares to less than half of US adults in 1986 (Taylor et al. 2010). Additionally, nearly two-thirds of US adults in 2010 reported that it would be “fine” for a family member were to marry someone outside of their race/ethnic group, as compared with less than 30 percent of US adults in 1986 (Wang 2012).

The expanding opportunity structures for social interaction and the rise in acceptability of interracial unions also likely means that there will be a decline in the extent to which interracial marriages are more likely to dissolve relative to endogamous unions.

Intermarriage and divorce

A small body of work has explored whether interracial unions are less stable than endogamous unions. These studies find that interracial unions are indeed more likely to dissolve than endogamous unions, suggesting that social boundaries across race/ethnic groups continue to be salient and that there are consequences to violating enduring norms favoring endogamous unions (e.g., Bratter and King 2008; Jones 2009; Krieder 2000; Zhang and Van Hook 2009).

Three explanations have been proposed to account for the higher dissolution rates of interracial marriages relative to endogamous unions. The first explanation, termed the *homogamy perspective*, argues that spouses from similar backgrounds have fewer misunderstandings and less conflict than those from dissimilar backgrounds (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Zhang and Van Hook 2009). In addition to less conflict, couples in endogamous unions also count with greater support from extended kin and families who may be more supportive of endogamous unions because they conform to enduring norms and preferences of spousal choice (Zhang and Van Hook 2009). Marital conflict, coupled with fewer support from extended kin and families, increases the risk for marital dissolution. The second explanation focuses on selectivity into interracial unions, that is, inherent differences between those who select into interracial unions and others who select endogamous unions. Spouses in interracial marriages are individuals who were willing to violate enduring norms in support of endogamous unions. Intermarriages may also attract individuals who are less likely to uphold traditional values regarding families, such as

the commitment to uphold the institution of marriage by foregoing divorce. Indeed, Krieder (2000) finds that interracial marriages are more likely to draw individuals who were not raised Catholic or were raised in single parent families, who display higher risk for marital dissolution. The third explanation focuses on behavioral differences within the context of endogamous and interracial unions. These studies consistently show that couples in interracial unions are less likely to engage in behaviors, which are known to strengthen bonds among married couples. Prior work shows that individuals in interracial unions are less likely to discuss their relationship with family members or friends and are more likely to be childless than those in endogamous unions (Wang et al. 2005; Fu 2008). They also appear to be more likely to begin co-residing as cohabiting partners rather than spouses, which may be a sign of their greater willingness and need for a trial period before finalizing their entry into a marriage with negative sanctions for violating enduring norms about who should marry and who should not (Krieder 2000).

Hypotheses

Drawing from the two bodies of work on interracial marriages, I construct the following hypotheses:

- **H1:** Marital stability differences between endogamous and interracial marriages will diminish over time as intermarriages become more common.
- **H2:** Inherent differences between individuals who select into interracial and endogamous unions will diminish with greater acceptability of interracial unions.
- **H3:** Behavioural differences within the context of interracial and endogamous unions will decrease due to the diminishing selectivity of interracial unions; a rise in the social support from family and friends; and diminishing social consequences of violating the enduring normative preference for endogamous unions.
- **H4:** Marital stability differences between interracial and endogamous unions will partly diminish because intermarriages due to the decreasing selectivity of interracial unions and behavioural differences between interracial and endogamous unions.

Data and Methods

To analyze whether the gap in marital dissolution rates between endogamous and interracial marriages has changed over time, this paper pools data from the 1995, 2002, and 2006-10 National Survey of Family Growth (N=10,847 in 1995; N=7,643 in 2002¹; N=12,279 in 2006-10). The NSFG, which is a repeated cross-sectional survey of women between the ages of 15 and 44, is designed to provide reliable national data on women's marriage, cohabitation, and fertility behavior.

These data are well-suited for the present analysis due to several reasons. First, they are the only cycles of the NSFG to collect reports about the race/ethnic profiles of the respondents and their first husbands. Second, they oversample Hispanics and consequently large numbers of women who intermarried given their higher intermarriage than other groups (Qian and Lichter 2007). Third, they collected information about the dates of separation rather than dates of divorce, which is essential for a study of group disparities in marital disruption given well-established race/ethnic differences in divorce rates following dissolution (Bramlett & Mosher

¹ Due to skipping error in CAPI questionnaire of the 2002 NSFG, there are large amounts of missing data on dates of marital dissolution. I ran sensitivity tests with and without the 2002 NSFG and our findings remained virtually unchanged.

2001; Sweet & Bumpass 1987). Fourth, they asked detailed questions about well-known determinants of union formation and marital dissolution, including respondent's education, age at marriage, nativity status, mother's education, and living arrangements at age 14. Fifth, they collected complete retrospective histories of marriage, cohabitation, and fertility, which can be used to capture behaviour within the context of marital unions (e.g., whether they remained childless throughout the union and whether the union started as a cohabitation). Finally, the three cycles have a similar sampling design, which facilitate analyses of changes over time.

Analytical sample

My analytical sample is restricted to first marriages formed by women who responded to questions about their own and their first husband's race/ethnicity. I do not consider men's union dissolution because 2002 is the first year that the NSFG collected data from men. I focus on first marriages because marital stability differs considerably for first and higher order marriages and the number of remarriages with spouses who intermarried is too small to conduct a separate analysis of differences in marital dissolution across couples in same race and interracial unions. I chose to anchor my sampling to women's first marriages and do not limit my sample to unions where husbands are also in their first marriage because doing so diminishes the subsample of intermarriages considerably.

I imposed several other restrictions to the analytical sample. First, the analytical sample is further restricted to marriages which occur within 20 years of the interview to women between the ages of 15 and 30. This restriction minimizes the potential bias from the age-limited sampling design of the NSFG, which result in the selective inclusion of marriages formed by exceptionally young women in periods more than 20 years prior to the date of interview (Rindfuss and Sweet 1977). The same strategy has been employed in various studies on marital dissolution (e.g., Sweeney and Phillips 2005; Bratter and King 2008). Second, the analytical sample is further restricted to unions comprised of husbands and wives who are non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, or Hispanic, which also ensures that our sample sizes are large enough to obtain reliable estimates. Third, my analytical sample only includes unions that occur between 1975 and 1999. Marriages formed after 1999 are excluded because there is insufficient number of interracial marriages formed after 1999 that remained intact for 7 or more years to obtain reliable estimates of marital disruption. Finally, we include only those data with non-missing data on all covariates.

Together, these sampling restrictions yield a sample size of 9,450 first marriages (8,644 endogamous unions and 806 interracial marriages).

Measures

The dependent variable – *marital dissolution* - is a time varying covariate capturing whether marital dissolution occurred in a given duration year, with disruption being defined as divorce or separation.

There are two independent variables to this study. The first independent variable is *union type*, which is a dichotomous variable distinguishing between women in endogamous unions (i.e., wife and first husbands belong to the same race/ethnic groups) and those in interracial unions (i.e., wife and first husbands belong to distinct race/ethnic groups).

The second independent variable is *period of marriage*, which is a categorical variable classifying all first marriages into three groups: (1) marriages occurring prior to 1986; (2) marriages occurring between 1986 and 1992; and (3) marriages occurring after 1992. These cut-

off points each represent the lowest, middle, and highest tertile in the distribution of the year when the first marriage began².

Selectivity. I measure the selectivity of interracial unions by including the following covariates: *respondent's and husband's age at first marriage* (<20, 20-24, 25-30), *educational attainment* (less than high school, high school graduate, some college, college graduates), *family structure at age 14* (two biological parents vs. others), *mother's education* (less than high school, high school graduate, some college, college graduates), *whether respondent was raised as a Catholic* (yes, no), and *whether husband was previously married* (yes, no). These covariates are all time-fixed.

Behaviors within the context of marital unions. I measure behavioral differences across unions through the inclusion of the following time-varying covariates: *whether childbearing occurred within the context of the union* (yes, no) and *whether the union was preceded by cohabitation* (yes, no).

Finally, all models include controls for *marital duration* (<3, 3-6, 7-10 years).

Analytical strategy

The analysis consists of two parts. In the first part, I use the Kaplan-Meier method to compare the percentage of endogamous and interracial unions which dissolve within 10 years of marriage and to evaluate whether this gap has diminished over time. Next, I compare the social, economic, and demographic characteristics of spouses who select into intermarriages with those of spouses who select in endogamous unions, paying especially close attention to whether differences across the distinct union types has diminished over time. Finally, I ascertain whether behavioural differences between interracial and endogamous unions have been declining over time.

In the second part, I use five additive discrete-time logistic regression models estimating differences in the risk of marital disruption across the distinct union types, with each model specified as follows. Model 1 includes union type, marital duration, and interaction terms between union type and marital duration. Model 2 adds period of marriage and the interaction between union type and period of marriage to establish whether the gap in the risk of marital disruption across the two union types has diminished over time. The remaining models assess the extent to which changes in selectivity into the distinct unions and behavioural differences within intermarriage and endogamous unions engender changes in marital stability differences across the two union types. Model 3 adds covariates measuring the selectivity into the distinct union types into Model 2. Model 4 adds covariates capturing *behaviors within the context of marital unions* into Model 2. Model 5 is the full model.

For the various event history analyses, data is organized into person-year files where marital duration (in years) is the clock of our analyses. Observations are censored at the year of marital disruption in cases where there was union dissolution or at the year of interview in cases where unions remained intact. Combined, these restrictions yield a sample of 68,765 person-year files. I use discrete-time over continuous models (e.g., Cox regression models) because the

² In supplementary analyses not reported here, I used distinct cut-off points to classify first marriages into distinct groups. These analyses yield similar results, with the only difference found in the size and statistical significance of the coefficient for the interaction term between period of marriage and interracial marriage.

present analysis is studying whether marital disruption occurs in the year of observation and a year is too large an interval to argue that marital disruption is being observed continuously.

Four additional analytical steps deserve particular attention. All estimates are weighted using final, post-stratification weights to ensure that the obtained estimates are nationally representative. Second, all estimates are obtained using STATA's svy commands to account for the complex sampling design of the NSFG. Third, the weights are harmonized applying the standards used in the Integrated Fertility Survey Series and all analyses are stratified by survey instrument to ensure that the estimates are unaffected by the small differences in survey design across the three cycles of the NSFG. Finally, Schoenfeld residual tests of proportionality revealed that the proportionality assumption did not hold for analyses comparing the hazard of marital disruption for endogamous and interracial marriages. Therefore, all models include the interaction terms between union type and marital duration.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Table 1 documents differences in the percentage of endogamous and interracial marriages which dissolve within 10 years of marriage. Consistent with prior work and hypothesis 1, I find that marital disruption rates are higher for interracial marriages than they are for endogamous marriages. For example, slightly less than a third of endogamous marriages formed before 1986 end in dissolution by the 10th year, as compared with about half of interracial marriages formed during this time. This pattern of variation is observed consistently across the various marriage periods and is statistically significant at the 5 percent level.

Table 1 goes here.

I then examined whether the gap in rates of marital disruption between interracial marriages and endogamous unions has been diminishing over time. This gap has been indeed diminishing over time, with the decline being most pronounced between marriages contracted prior to 1986 and those contracted in or after 1986. Specifically, marital disruption rates for interracial marriages formed prior to 1986 are 18 percentage points higher than those for endogamous unions formed during the same period of time. This compares with 9 percentage points for unions formed between 1986 and 1992 and 2 percentage points for unions formed between 1993 and 1999. Statistical tests reveal that the decline in the gap in marital disruption rates between marriages formed prior to 1986 and marriages formed between 1986 and 1992 are significant at the 5 percent level. Coupled with earlier findings about the rise in intermarriages, this result suggests that the greater acceptability for interracial unions increases both – (1) the incidence of forming an interracial marriages as well as (2) the stability of interracial marriages.

Preliminary results from our multivariate analyses reveals that the decline in disparities in marital disruption rates over time is largely attributable to diminishing behavioral differences within the context of the two union types. Interracial marriages were more considerably more likely to have been preceded by cohabitation and are more likely to be childless than endogamous unions in the past. However, these behavioral differences, which are well-known risk factors for divorce, are considerably less pronounced across the distinct union types in later periods of marriage.

Socio-demographic differences between spouses who select into the distinct unions account for little of the diminishing gap in marital stability differences between interracial and endogamous unions. This occurs because socio-demographic differences were more pronounced between women who were in interracial marriages and those who were in endogamous unions.

Specifically, until the mid-1980's, women who intermarried were less likely to originate from two parent families and more likely to be college educated than their counterparts in endogamous union. These differences have virtually disappeared over time. The two changes, however, have contrasting effects on the rates of marital disruption, with the decline in the educational advantage of women in interracial marriages increasing the risk for marital disruption and the decline in the likelihood of originate from two parent families decreasing the risk for marital disruption. It appears to be the case that these contrasting effects cancel each other out.

FUTURE STEPS

Given the fact that the risk for divorce and acceptance for interracial unions is known to differ across race/ethnic groups, the next step is to disaggregate the various unions according to the spouse's joint race/ethnic profiles (e.g., mono-racial Whites, White-Black, White-Hispanic) and conduct analogous analyses with the disaggregated groups. These analyses will further inform the extent to which compositional differences of couples in intermarriage – the distribution of spouse's joint race/ethnicity – contributes to the declining marital stability differences between intermarriage and endogamous unions.

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TABLES

Table 1. Kaplan Meier Estimates for Percentages of First Marriages that Remain Intact by Union Type and Period of Marriage

Duration (years)	Before 1986		1986-1992		1993-1999	
	Endogamy	Interracial	Endogamy	Interracial	Endogamy	Interracial
1	0.93	0.88	0.95	0.93	0.95	0.93
2	0.89	0.85	0.90	0.88	0.91	0.90
3	0.85	0.81	0.85	0.85	0.87	0.86
4	0.81	0.78	0.82	0.77	0.84	0.77
5	0.78	0.70	0.79	0.74	0.81	0.75
6	0.76	0.66	0.76	0.71	0.79	0.73
7	0.73	0.63	0.73	0.65	0.77	0.73
8	0.71	0.59	0.70	0.60	0.75	0.73
9	0.70	0.54	0.68	0.59	0.73	0.70
10	0.68	0.50	0.66	0.57	0.72	0.70

Notes: Weighted percentages