Declining racial stratification in marriage choices? Trends in Black-White Status Exchange in the US 1980-2010.

Extended Abstract

Florencia Torche and Peter Rich
Department of Sociology
New York University

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Abstract

The status exchange hypothesis suggests that in black-white marriages one spouse's educational status is traded for the other spouse's racial status. Exchange is claimed to emerge from strong social and economic barriers between racial groups. If so, then exchange should decline as interracial marriage becomes more prevalent. We examine trends in status exchange among black-white marriages between 1980 and 2010, a period over which these unions have increased from 0.4% to 2.3% of all young couples in the US. Contrary to our expectation, status exchange has not declined and it may have increased as interracial couples become more prevalent. Trends over time are the product of two forces: Exchange increases across cohorts but it declines as cohorts age and experience late marriage and remarriage.

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Introduction. Patterns of marriage formation provide important information about social boundaries. Because marriage is an intimate, long-term relationship, people tend to choose spouses that are similar to themselves in a wide variety of attributes, including social background, education, beauty, religion, and race/ethnicity. The reasons for homogamy are multiple, and they include individual preferences, selective exposure, and the influence of third parties (Blossfeld and Timm 2003; Epstein and Guttman 1984; Kalmijn 1998). Homogamy is the most important force in marriage markets, and the weakening of socioeconomic or racial boundaries in intermarriage ("heterogamy") is seen a powerful signal of integration and equality between groups (Alba 1995).

But heterogamy can occur in situations that do not indicate weakening of socioeconomic or racial boundaries. One of such situations is status exchange. The exchange hypothesis states that in status-discrepant marriages, spouses trade different sources of status advantage that make the union beneficial for both of them. The paradigmatic type of exchange in the US is presumed to occur in black-white marriages in which highly-educated black spouse would trade their educational status for the benefits associated with the racial status of a white spouse (Davis 1941; Merton 1941). As a result, black-white unions are more likely than racially endogamous unions to involve a black partner with higher education than the white partner. Given the traditional gender division of labor in society, education is claimed to be a more valuable attribute on the marriage market for a man than for a woman. As a result, the most prevalent form of exchange is expected to be the case where the male spouse trades his educational status for the racial status of the female spouse.

Most research finds evidence of status exchange in black male-white female intermarriage in the US (Fu 2001; Gullickson 2006; Hou and Myles 2013; Kalmijn 1993; Qian 1997), although at least one study finds no evidence of exchange (Rosenfeld 2005). Studies that extend the question about race-education exchange to other countries have found no evidence of exchange in Canada (Hou and Myles 2013) or the Netherlands (Kalmijn and van Tubergen 2006). This suggests that status exchange

may be restricted to black/white marriage in the US, stemming from the unusually strong racial boundaries and inequality historically developed in this country (Kalmijn 2010), while other forms of exchange may be more relevant in other national contexts (Choi et al. 2012)

Black-white intermarriage has indeed been historically very uncommon in the US, due to legal and social barriers. However, it has increased substantially in the last three decades. As shown in Figure 1, the odds of black-white intermarriage increased from .000048 for couples 25-34 years old in 1980 to .0021 in 2010. If in 1980 black-white couples were 0.4% of all young couples, by 2010 they represented 2.3% of all young couples. Although still a small proportion, black-white couples are much more visible than in the past. This increase is claimed to reflect a weakening of the social barriers separating blacks and whites and, possibly, growing racial integration.

If status exchange indeed emerges from strong racial barriers, then the recent increase in racial intermarriage may have induced a decline in status exchange. This study contributes to the literature on racial stratification in union formation by examining status exchange trends over time. We evaluate change between 1980 and 2010 in the US and address two questions. First, has status exchange weakened as interracial marriages have become more prevalent? If it has, is the change in status exchange driven by cohort replacement or by life-course (age) effects?

Cohort replacement could explain increase in racial intermarriage in the US to the extent that younger cohorts have been exposed to relevant events in their formative years –including the advance of Civil Rights and educational expansion— claimed to reduce barriers among racial groups. However, change in marriage patterns is not just a cohort phenomenon. The normative marriage age has increased substantially, and some marriages get dissolved and re-established later in the individual life-cycle. Late marriage, as well as marriage dissolution and remarriage will alter the intermarriage patterns of each cohort as they age. For example, if people who marry later or who remarry are more likely to establish racially exogamous unions (Porterfield 1982; Qian and Lichter 2013) then the odds of racial intermarriage will increase as a cohort ages. But if racially exogamous couples are more likely to be dissolved, then for each specific cohort, the odds of racial intermarriage

will decrease as a cohort ages (Bratter and King 2008; Heaton 2002). Evaluation of status exchange trends over time requires, then, disentangling cohort and life-cycle dimensions of change.

Data: We analyze representative samples of all heterosexual married couples in the United States in 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2007-11 (which we call 2010 for simplicity). We use "long-form" responses from the 1980, 1990 and 2000 decennial censuses available in microform from IPUMS-USA. The long form respondents represent a 5% cross-sectional sample of the U.S. population at each time of collection. The long form was discontinued after 2000 and replaced by the American Community Survey (ACS). We use the pooled 2007-2011 micro-level ACS dataset. This pooled dataset combines and weights five annual cross-sectional samples (1% per year) of the U.S. population, and is the closest approximation available to the 5% long-form samples in previous years (see Ruggles et al. 2010). We identify heterosexual marriages and exclude any records in which the responses on age, sex, marital status or householder relationship by either husband or wife were reallocated by the Census Bureau in post-collection procedures. Year of birth for each respondent is derived by subtracting age from the year of data collection. Our analysis distinguishing four 10-year birth cohorts based on the husband's year of birth (born 1946-1955, 1956-1965, 1966-1975, 1976-1985).

We classify each spouse into one of three levels of educational attainment: (1) a high school degree or less, (2) some college, and (3) a bachelor's or advanced degree. We only include white and black racial groups, and do not distinguish by Hispanic identification, in order to maintain adequate sample sizes. We include four types of couples according to their racial composition: white male & white female (WW), white male & black female (WB), black male & white female (BW), and black male & black female (BB).

Methods: We produce a contingency table by cross-classifying spouse 1's race (white, black) by spouse 2's race by spouse 1's educational attainment (High school or less, some college, BA or advanced degree) by spouse 2's educational attainment by birth cohort (1946-55, 1956-65, 1966-75, 1976-85) by year of observation (1980, 1990, 2000, 2010) by couple's racial composition (black husband/black wife, black husband/white wife, white husband/black wife, white husband/white wife). Several log-linear models are used to evaluate status exchange.

Initial assessment of status exchange is based on the hypergamy ratio, as devised by Kalmijn (1993, 2010). First, a log-linear model of quasi symmetry (QS) is fitted to model educational assortative mating for each type of couple. The QS model adjusts for any differences in marginal distribution of education across gender and racial group and assumes that the association between the spouses' education that remains is symmetrical, i.e. identical regardless of the race of the spouses. Second, the quotient of black educational hypogamy (proportion of black spouses who have higher educational attainment than their white spouse) over black educational hypergamy is obtained for interracial marriages. Third, the hypergamy ratio is calculated by dividing such quotient based on observed frequencies by the quotient obtained from expected frequencies under the quasi-symmetry model. If interracial marriages depart from symmetrical association due to status exchange, the hypergamy ratio will depart from 1. If, as predicted by the status exchange hypothesis, black husbands married to white wives are more likely to be educationally hypogamous than predicted by a symmetric association model, then the hypergamy ratio would be higher than 1. In the case of racially endogamous couples, the hypergamy ratio captures the excess educational hypogamy of the male spouse. We expect hypergamy ratios higher than 1 for interracial couples, indicating status exchange, and hypergamy ratios close to 1 among racially-endogamous couples, indicating a symmetrical pattern of educational association between spouses.

The hypergamy ratio provides a straightforward summary measure of status exchange but it conflates increases in black hypogamy and reductions of black hypergamy in the same statistic. Furthermore, it does not distinguish between two dimensions of exchange which result in an excess of black hypergamy in interracial marriages. The first dimension is a differential propensity to marry exogamously as education increases ("market exchange"). If both education and whiteness are valuable resources in the marriage market, then individuals with higher education will have better access to lighter partners and lighter individuals will have better access to more educated partners (Fu 2001). As a result, blacks will be increasingly likely to marry whites as their education increases while whites will be decreasingly likely to marry blacks as their education increases. A by-product of this process is an excess of black hypogamy. The second dimension is a direct transaction of racial by educational status between the spouses ("dyadic exchange"). Both dimensions of exchange reflect that

in racially-stratified societies lightness is considered a source of status, but the former does not require, nor it predicts a direct transaction between spouses. We use log-linear models to distinguish market from dyadic exchange, following Gullickson (2006) and Torche and Gullickson (2013).

Preliminary Results. Figures 2 offer trends in the hypergamy ratio between 1980 and 2010 for each type of couple. Hypergamy ratios of 1 indicate absence of status exchange and values greater than 1 provide stronger evidence for status exchange among interracial couples. We distinguish cohort from life-cycle dimensions of change by plotting trends across time for each cohort. Four 10-year cohorts born between 1946 and 1985 are observed. Given the 1980-2010 observation period, the 1946-55 and 1956-65 cohorts are observed three times, the 1966-75 cohort is observed twice and the 1976-85 cohort is observed only once in 2010.

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 offer the hypergamy ratio for racially endogamous couples. As expected, they show values consistently close to unity across cohorts and periods indicating that educational asymmetry among same-race couples. Figure 2.3 evaluates trends among white male-black female married couples, which make up about 30% of interracial couples. There is some indication of status exchange among these couples, with hypergamy ratios larger than 1. For example, the hypergamy ratio for the 1946-55 cohort observed in 1980 is 1.34, indicating that black wives in interracial marriages are 34% more likely to be educationally hypogamous than expected under a quasi-symmetry model. Levels of status exchange are moderate and exchange appears to decline both across cohorts, and over time within cohort.

The story is different for black male-white female couples, which are the large majority of interracial couples in the US. As shown in Figure 2.4, hypergamy ratios consistently higher than unity indicate that status exchange is substantial and has not declined over time. Stability in status exchange is the result of two factors. On the one hand exchange tends to decline as cohorts age. This suggests that race/education exchange is less likely among those who marry late or who remarry. On the other hand, exchange has not declined –and it may have even increased— across cohorts. In general, younger cohorts show more exchange than older ones when observed at the same age. The exception is the youngest cohort born between 1976 and 1985, which displays lower levels of

exchange than its predecessors at the same life-cycle stage. If the pattern of declining exchange applies to this cohort as it ages, a decline in status exchange may be observed. To date, however, no clear indication of declining exchange among black man/white woman exists, in spite of the substantial increase in racial intermarriage.

This finding suggests that race continues a powerful source of stratification in the US marriage market even as interracial marriage becomes more prevalent. It also invites further elucidation of the factors driving the persistence in status exchange, which we will undertake by means of a set of log-linear models to distinguish "market" from "dyadic" dimensions of exchange.

Figure 1. Odds of Black/White Intermarriage

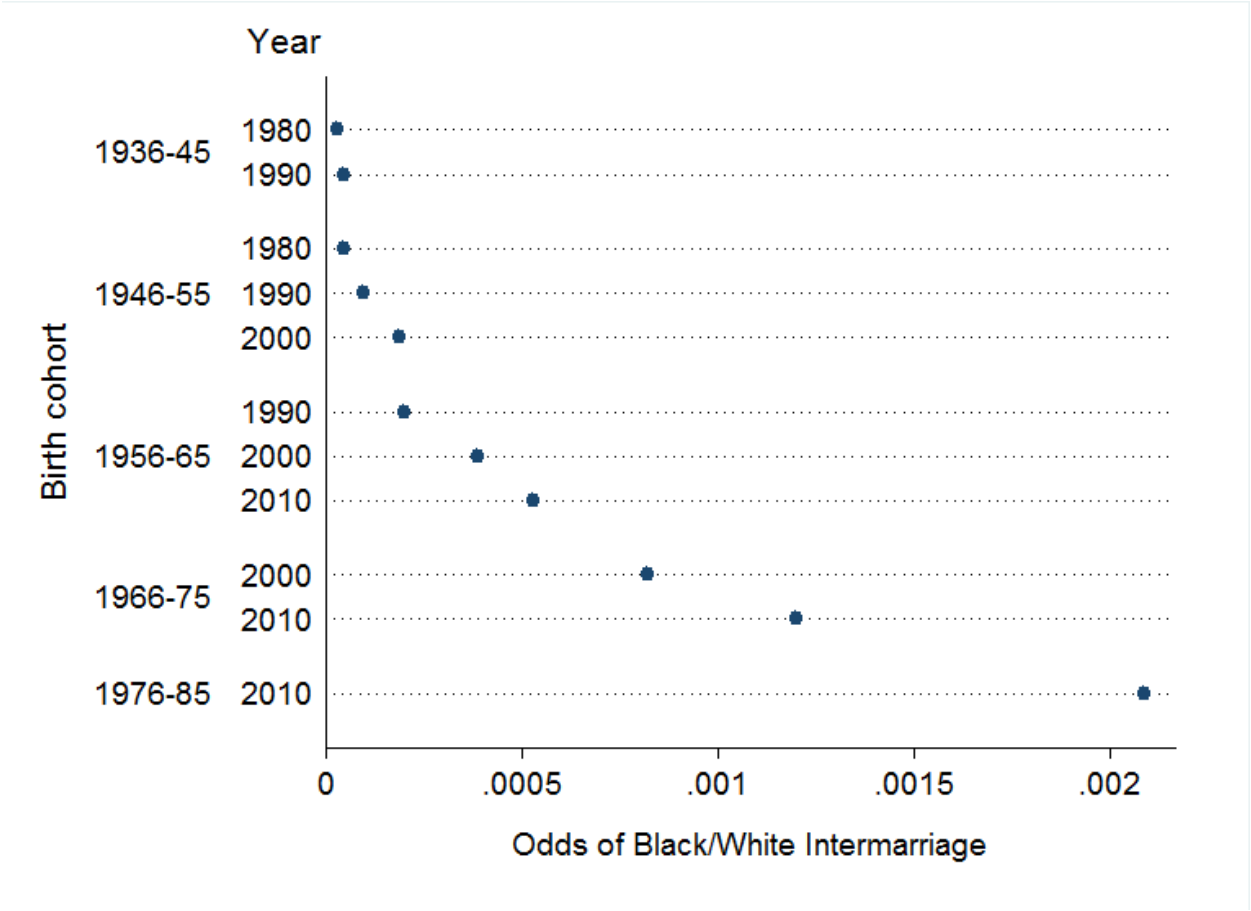


Fig. 2.1. Status Exchange Black Male/Black Female married couples by birth cohort and year.

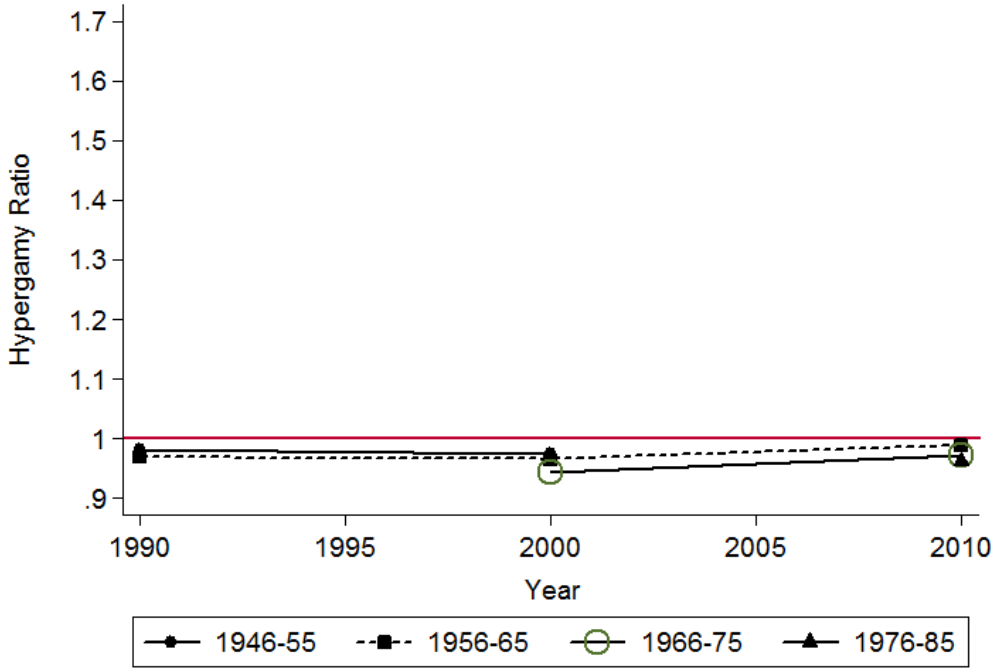


Fig. 2.2. Status Exchange White Male/White Female married couples by birth cohort and year.

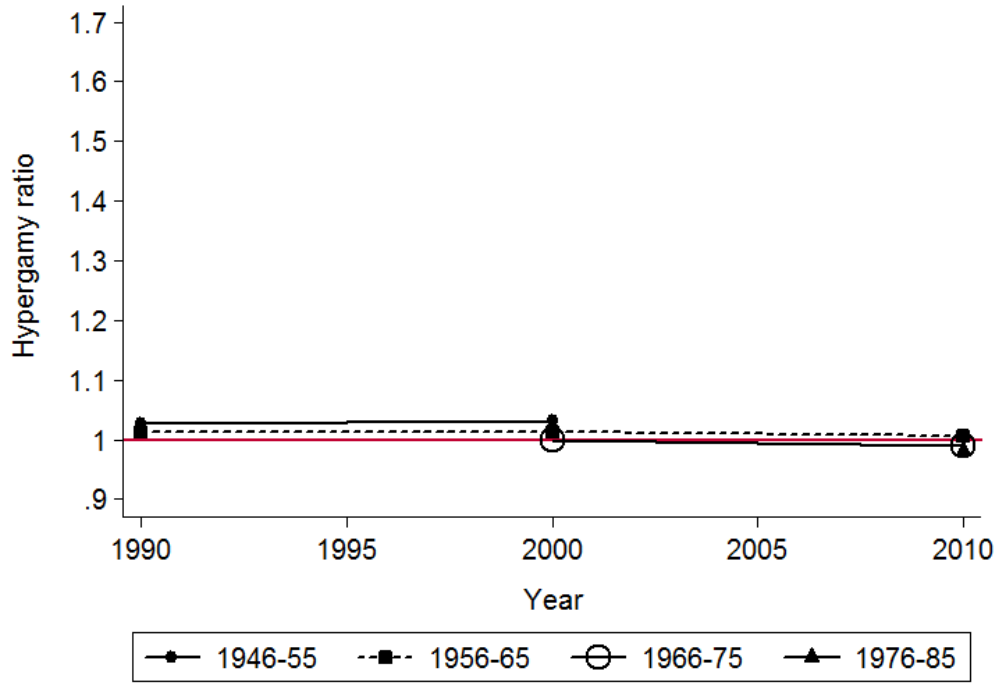


Fig. 2.3. Status Exchange White Male/Black Female married couples by birth cohort and year.

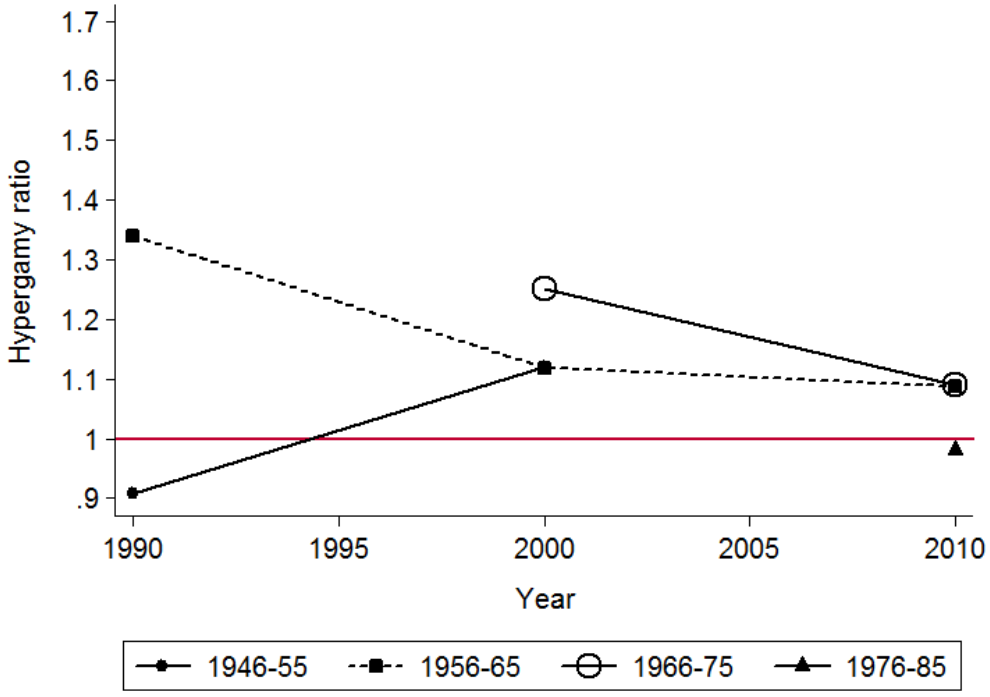
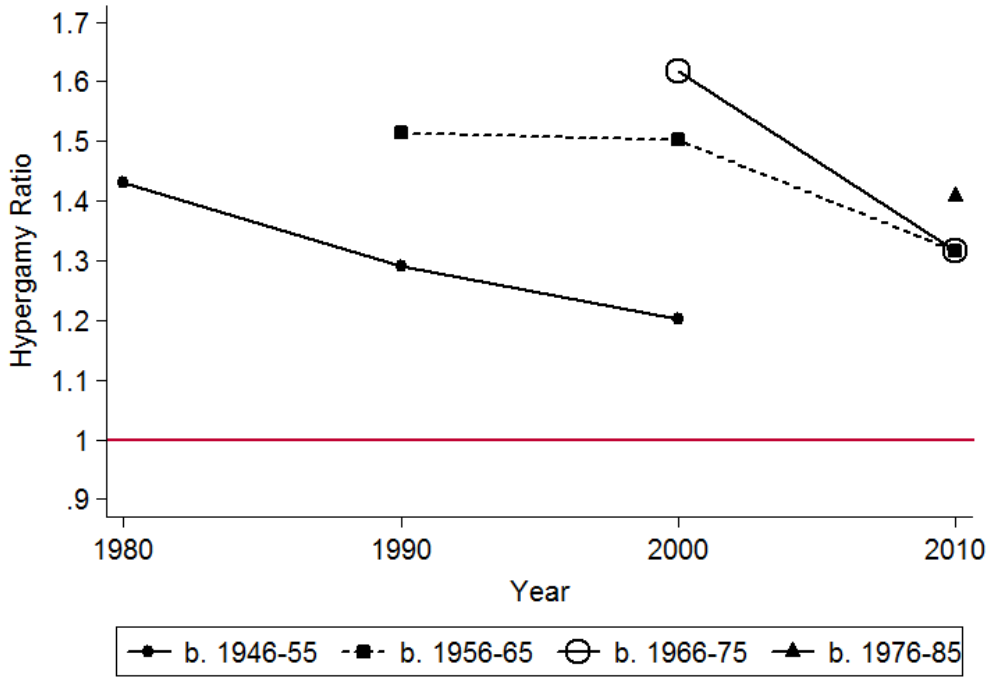


Fig. 2.4. Status Exchange Black Male/White Female married couples by birth cohort and year.



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