

Intermarriage and Assimilation: Levels, Patterns, and Disparities in Levels of Exogamy among Arab Americans

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Marriages between individuals of different groups suggest a weakening of preferences for in-group marriage and of boundaries between them. Intermarriage is therefore often viewed as an index of assimilation into the larger host society (Gordon, 1964; Lieberman and Waters, 1988; Kalmijn, 1998). Intermarriage with the majority population led to the fading of the formerly rigid lines that separated even European-origin groups from each other (Lieberman and Waters, 1988; Pagnini and Morgan, 1990; Qian and Lichter, 2001 and 2007). However, there is much debate and controversy whether more recent waves of immigrants, who come mostly from non-European source regions and are often viewed as racially or ethnically distinct, will follow a similar assimilation path as earlier European ethnics. This study examines patterns of intermarriage for Arab Americans and evaluates how acculturation, cultural and structural factors affect their marital choices. We update the previously limited findings and go further by examining diversity within the broader population that can be appropriately classified as ‘Arab American.’

Background

Between 1990 and 2007-11, the Arab American population doubled in size to 2 million and became more ethnically diverse. Arab Americans continue to have higher levels of educational attainment, higher incomes, and lower age than the general U.S. adult population (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2001; Brittingham and Cruz, 2005; Ajrouch and Jamal 2007). Their generally favorable socio-economic outcomes would appear to suggest an increasingly assimilated ethnic population. Nevertheless, Arab Americans have also been much denigrated as a group, with majority-group suspicions rising dramatically after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Chisti et al., 2003; Jamal and Naber 2008). After more than a decade since the events of 9/11, it is pertinent to ask whether the social integration of Arab Americans has become more difficult as measured by interethnic marriage, that is, marriage to non-Arab persons. We also consider marriage to a person belonging to a different Arab ancestry group.

The economic incorporation and assimilation of non-European ethnic and racial minorities has proceeded more slowly and much less predictably than would be suggested by classical assimilation theory. Many researchers have explored the changing patterns of intermarriage between Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites and between Asian and other Americans (e.g. Hwang et al., 1997; Qian and Lichter, 2007). They have also noted the steady increase in levels of racial intermarriage, although the level of black-white intermarriage remains low and is indicative of the social distance that persists between these groups (Qian and Lichter, 2001 and 2007).

There has been a growth in scholarship about the Arab American population since the events of 9/11, but our literature review suggests that no further studies of Arab American intermarriage have been published since our original evaluation of Arab American intermarriage using nationally representative census data (Kulczycki and Lobo,

2002). Based on 1990 census data, this showed generally high rates of intermarriage for Arab Americans. However, these earlier findings may no longer be applicable due to the doubling in size of this population and its disparagement since 9/11 in the intervening years, which have also seen the continued rapid immigration of ethnically and racially diverse populations. It is important to examine whether previous rates and patterns apply to the recent context. Analysis of the particular situation of Arab Americans may also inform discussion of intermarriage more generally and facilitate cross-cultural testing of existing generalizations and theories concerning intermarriage and assimilation.

In this paper, we update our previous work on Arab American intermarriage and examine whether the levels, patterns and causes of intermarriage among Arab American men and women have changed since 1990. We compare intermarried couples that include an Arab American, as well as a range of Arab American national origin groups, on an array of demographic and socio-economic characteristics. We conduct multivariate analyses of the relative importance of different predictors of ethnic exogamy among Arab Americans, especially the effects of acculturation and integration on the marital choices of Arab Americans. Lastly, we assess the potential significance of intermarriage on the present and future trajectory and identity of the Arab American population, paying particular attention to how intermarried couples identify the ethnicity of their offspring.

Theoretical Perspectives and Hypotheses

People are often thought to select a spouse who is culturally similar, such as a person with similar ancestral or language background. Acculturation variables that could influence endogamy rates include place of birth, partial Arab ancestry, and level of English-language proficiency. For example, recent immigrants in particular are more likely to ascribe to the marriage ideals of their place of origin, and Arab Americans with both parents Arab may have higher odds of having or seeking an Arab spouse than those with parents from difference ethnicities. Strong English language skills are likely to be predictive of higher out-marriage rates due to increased social interaction with native-born persons.

Most people are also assumed to search for potential spouses who are attractive in terms of more socio-economic resources such as better educational levels and earnings (Hwang et al., 1997; Qian and Lichter, 2007). Higher educational attainment also increases the opportunities for ethnic minority individuals to meet members of other groups and for immigrants to adapt more readily to host country conditions. Accordingly, it is generally associated with weaker preference for a potential mate on ascribed characteristics like ethnicity. Given the strong standing of U.S.-born and foreign-born Arabs compared to most Americans in terms of education, occupational skills, and income levels, we hypothesize that Arab Americans, particularly the native-born, are likely to out-marry at high rates.

A further line of reasoning stresses the role of skin color, particularly in societies marked by racial hierarchies. Arabs tend to be of similar skin color as most Americans, so that attitudes toward Arab American intermarriage may be expected to be generally favorable. On the other hand, Somalis and Yemenis tend to be darker-skinned, which leads us to

expect lower out-marriage rates for these ancestry groups in particular. Such potential barriers to assimilation may have been compounded by the fears that many Americans expressed about Arabs in the wake of the events of 9/11.

In addition, we consider the situation of ethnic subgroups in the Arab American population, which has become increasingly heterogeneous. We consider ethnicity for the two major ancestry groups, Lebanese and Syrians (both culturally similar), as well as for nine other selected Arab groups. It is expected that Lebanese and Syrian Americans (accounting for 42% of our sample) are more likely to be exogamous than other Arab groups given that they are disproportionately Christian and have had longer to assimilate. U.S. census and American Community Survey (ACS) data do not include data on religion, which tend to discourage intermarriage, and no other nationally representative datasets exist to assess how religion affects out-marriage among Arab Americans. However, we can still gauge the influence of religion indirectly through studying the marital options of Lebanese and Syrians, the majority of whom descend from earlier Arab immigrant generations that were predominantly Christian.

Persistent patriarchal cultural influences lead us to hypothesize higher out-marriage rates for Arab men. Moreover, a higher sex ratio among other Arab Americans, a characteristic of the higher proportion of men than women among recent Arab immigrants, leads us to expect a similar outcome, because a shortage of marriageable co-ethnics of the opposing sex creates a structural force toward out-marriage. Additionally, Muslim communities tend to prohibit interfaith marriages more strongly for women than for men because when Muslim women marry non-Muslims, their children are considered lost to Islam.

Data and Methods

We use data from the 2007-2011 American Community Survey (ACS) Integrated Public Use Microdata Sample (IPUMS) files (Ruggles et al., 2010). As such, this paper provides the first application of ACS data to the study of Arab Americans and specifically to the analysis of their intermarriage patterns and the influences of acculturation and integration on their marital choices.

We define Arab Americans using the ancestry question. Individuals are defined to have an Arab ancestry if their first or second ancestry is from one of the 22 Arab League member states; overwhelming majorities in all these populations identify themselves as Arabs. Persons were selected if they are either fully or partly Arab (the latter assumes an Arab and a non-Arab ancestry are reported). Couples selected also comprised at least one partner who was either U.S.-born or had arrived in the U.S. before age 18. The ethnic identification of children in married couple households of mixed Arab and other ancestral background is assessed through examining reported first and second ancestries.

The analysis first explores in- and out-marriage rates for Arab men and women by socio-economic characteristics. Logistic regression is then used to analyze the influences of acculturation (including place of birth, partial Arab ancestry, and English language

proficiency), structural assimilation (education, income and occupational skill level) and cultural assimilation (ethnicity/major ancestry group) on the likelihood of out-marriage.

Findings

The unweighted sample size included 16,109 currently married couples who were living together in the same household where at least one partner was of Arab ancestry. This total comprised 10,153 Arab male spouses and 8,600 Arab female spouses. These totals included a small subset of 2,644 couples with both spouses Arab, suggesting relatively high rates of out-marriage. We also note that 44% of males and 31% of females are foreign-born. The proportion of foreign-born men varies from under one-quarter for Lebanese and Syrians to over 60% for all other ancestry groups, and as high as 85% for Algerians, Jordanians, Somalis, and Sudanese. For women, the proportions foreign-born are highest for Algerians and Somalis, but do not exceed 70% for any other group.

Overall, Arab Americans continue to exhibit high rates of intermarriage. In 2007-11, 74% of Arab men and 69% of Arab women had non-Arab spouses. These high rates of intermarriage, however, mask some degree of differentiation across different ancestries. The great majority of Lebanese men and women out-marry (87% and 85% respectively), with Syrians, Algerians and Moroccans also showing high rates. The lowest rates of out-marriage are found among Yemenis and Somalis (below 25% for both sexes). Women exhibit comparable but slightly lower rates of intermarriage across ancestries.

Nativity, English language proficiency, and partial Arab ancestry, are all positively associated with intermarriage. The rates are highest among men; for example, 87% of native-born Arab men out-marry, compared to 58% of the foreign-born, and the differential is even bigger among women. Among both men and women of partial Arab origin, almost everyone (96%) has non-Arab spouses and only 3% are married within the same Arab group. These findings underscore the importance of acculturation factors on Arab intermarriage rates.

Some of the differences in intermarriage rates by ancestries can be explained by the considerable variation in the proportion of foreign-born by major Arab group, a function of their differential history of immigration. The observed gender difference in exogamy is partly a function of the shortage of eligible Arab women in the U.S., which means that many men will marry outside their ethnic group.

Regarding measures of structural assimilation, intermarriage is positively associated with levels of educational attainment, income, and occupational skill levels. Among college graduates, 81% of Arab women had non-Arab spouses, compared to 31% of those with less than high school education. Out-marriage rates also rise with age.

In ongoing work, we are estimating the partial effects of the independent variables by logistic regression. We use age as a control variable in our models, with our initial analyses showing education to be the key measure of structural assimilation included. We expect the multivariate results to be consistent with the bivariate results found thus far. Using earlier 1990 census data, acculturation variables were shown to strongly influence

the likelihood of intermarriage. The analysis found similar determinants of intermarriage for both sexes, but indicators of acculturation were much stronger predictors for women. There were also significant ethnic effects. We anticipate that these may be even stronger now across some Arab ancestry groups, particularly for women.

We will also assess the ethnic identification of the children of intermarried couples. Earlier, we found a high percentage of intermarried parents reported their children's ethnic identification as part-Arab and as non-Arab, but only 11% of this group reported their children as fully Arab, which suggests a diminished Arab ethnic identity. The low share among mixed marriages of those who claim to be Arab may not only point to ethnic options available to Arab Americans; it may also indicate continued prejudice against Arabs more generally. We are examining what has changed two decades later.

Discussion

Assimilation theory posits that the acculturation and socioeconomic integration of newly arrived groups can lead to further assimilation in the form of intermarriage with more established groups. Our provisional findings indicate that Arab Americans generally conform to this pattern, which has characterized the experience of different ethnic groups of European origin in the United States. Acculturation variables significantly influence intermarriage rates, but structural factors are also positively associated with intermarriage.

Contrary to widespread perceptions, and despite the difficult recent experience of this population, Arab Americans are integrating into the social fabric and are continuing to exhibit high rates of intermarriage. This is facilitating the overall assimilation of Arab Americans, although our study also reveals evidence of significant disparities across Arab national-origin groups and by gender.

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