

breaking the last taboo: interracial marriage in america

Interracial marriages are becoming more common, but skin color still matters in America. As minorities—especially Asian and Hispanic Americans—move up the ladder and integrate neighborhoods, they increasingly marry whites. Still, strong racial identities and lingering prejudice, particularly toward African Americans, limit this most intimate form of integration.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner, a movie about a white couple's reaction when their daughter falls in love with a black man, caused a public stir in 1967. That the African-American character was a successful doctor did little to lower the anxieties of white audiences. Now, almost four decades later, the public hardly reacts at all to interracial relationships. Both Hollywood movies and TV shows, including *Die Another Day*, *Made in America*, *ER*, *The West Wing*, and *Friends*, regularly portray interracial romance.

What has changed? In the same year that Sidney Poitier startled Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn, the Supreme Court ruled, in *Loving v. Virginia*, that laws forbidding people of different races to marry were unconstitutional. The civil rights movement helped remove other blatant legal barriers to the integration of racial minorities and fostered the growth of minority middle classes. As racial minorities advanced, public opinion against interracial marriage declined, and rates of interracial marriage grew rapidly.

Between 1970 and 2000, black-white marriages grew more than fivefold from 65 to 363 thousand, and marriages between whites and members of other races grew almost fivefold from 233 thousand to 1.1 million. Proportionately, interracial marriages remain rare, but their rates increased from less than 1 percent of all marriages in 1970 to nearly 3 percent in 2000. This trend shows that the "social distance" between racial groups has narrowed significantly, although not nearly as much as the social distance between religious groups. Interfaith marriages have become common in recent generations. That marriages across racial boundaries remain much rarer than cross-religion marriages reflects the greater prominence of race in America. While the interracial marriage taboo seems to be gradually breaking down, at least for certain groups, intermarriage in the United States will not soon match the level of intermarriage that European immigrant groups have achieved over the past century.

public attitudes

Americans have become generally more accepting of other races in recent decades, probably as a result of receiving more education and meeting more people of other races. Americans increasingly work and go to school with people from many groups. As racial gaps in income narrow, more members of racial minorities can afford to live in neighborhoods that had previously been white. Neighbors have opportunities to reduce stereotypes and establish friendships. Tolerance also grows as generations pass; elderly people with racist attitudes die and are replaced by younger, more tolerant people. The general softening of racial antagonisms has also improved attitudes toward interracial marriage.

In 1958, a national survey asked Americans for the first time about their opinions of interracial marriage. Only 4 percent of whites approved of intermarriage with blacks. Almost 40 years later, in 1997, 67 percent of whites approved of such intermarriages. Blacks have been much more accepting; by 1997, 83 percent approved of intermarriage. Whites' support for interracial marriage—which may to some extent only reflect respondents' sense of what they should tell interviewers—lags far behind their support of interracial schools (96 percent), housing (86 percent), and jobs (97 percent). Many white Americans apparently remain uneasy about interracial intimacy generally, and most disapprove of interracial relationships in their own families. Still, such relationships are on the increase.

interracial dating

According to a recent survey reported by George Yancey, more than one-half of African-, Hispanic-, and Asian-American adults have dated someone from a different racial group, and even more of those who have lived in integrated neighborhoods or attended integrated schools have done so. Most dates, of course, are casual and do not lead to serious

commitments, and this is especially true for interracial dating. Analyzing data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Kara Joyner and Grace Kao find that 71 percent of white adolescents with white boyfriends or girlfriends have introduced them to their families, but only 57 percent of those with nonwhite friends have done so. Similarly, 63 percent of black adolescents with black boyfriends or girlfriends have introduced them to their families, but only 52 percent of those with nonblack friends have done so. Data from another national survey show similar patterns for young adults aged 18–29 (61 percent versus 51 percent introducing for whites, and 70 percent versus 47 percent for blacks).

While resistance to interracial relationships in principle has generally declined, opposition remains high among the families of those so involved. Interracial couples express concern about potential crises when their families become aware of such relationships. Their parents, especially white parents, worry about what those outside the family might think and fear that their reputations in the community will suffer. Maria Root notes that parents actively discourage interracial romance, often pointing to other peoples' prejudice—not their own—and expressing concern for their child's well being: "Marriage is hard enough; why make it more difficult?"

White wives get more than their "share" of well-educated black husbands.

The dating and the parental reservations reveal a generation gap: Young men and women today are more open to interracial relationships than their parents are. This gap may be due simply to youthful experimentation; youngsters tend to push boundaries. As people age, they gradually learn to conform. Kara Joyner and Grace Kao find that interracial dating is most common among teenagers but becomes infrequent for people approaching 30. They attribute this shift to the increasing importance of family and friends—and their possible disapproval—as we age. When people are ready to be "serious," they tend to fall in love with people who are just like themselves.

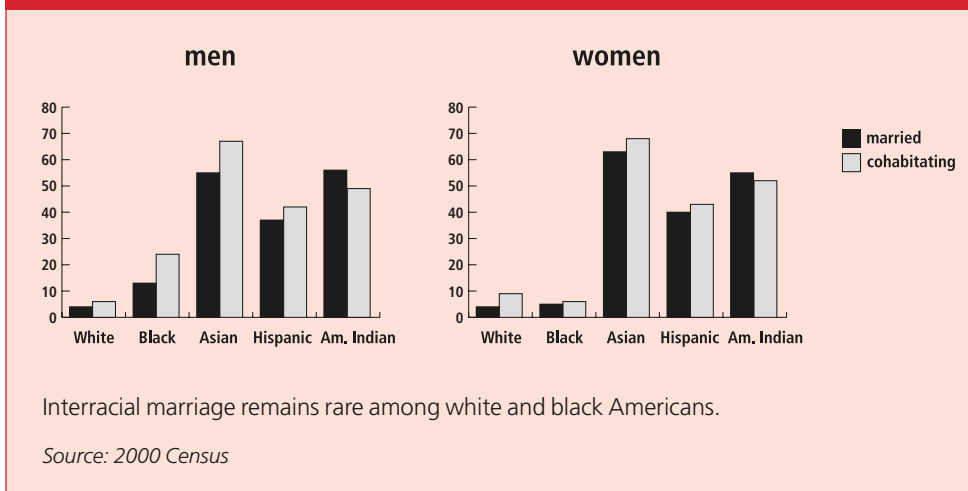
interracial cohabitation and marriage

Who pairs up with whom depends partly on the size of the different racial groups in the United States. The larger the group, the more likely members are to find marriageable partners of their own race. The U.S. Census Bureau classifies race into four major categories: whites, African Americans, Asian Americans and American Indians. Hispanics can belong to any of the four racial groups. (On racial classification, see Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean, "Beyond Black and White: Remaking Race in America," *Contexts*, Summer 2003.) Whites form the largest group, about 70 percent of the population, and just 4 percent of married whites aged 20–34 in 2000 had nonwhite spouses.

The interracial marriage rates are much higher for American-born racial minorities: 9 percent for African Americans, about 39 percent for Hispanics, 56 percent for American Indians, and 59 percent for Asian Americans (who account for less than 4 percent of the total population). Mathematically, one marriage between an Asian American and a white raises the intermarriage rate for Asian Americans much more than for whites, because whites are so much more numerous. Because of

their numbers as well, although just 4 percent of whites are involved in interracial marriages, 92 percent of all interracial marriages include a white partner. About half of the remain-

percentage of americans in couples married to (dark bars) or cohabiting with (light bars) someone of a different race



Zhenchao Qian has published on topics related to union formation, mate selection, interracial cohabitation and marriage, and racial identification of biracial children.

ing 8 percent are black-Hispanic couples. Racial minorities have more opportunities to meet whites in schools, workplaces, and neighborhoods than to meet members of other minority groups.

Some interracial couples contemplating marriage avoid family complications by just living together. In 2000, 4 percent of married white women had nonwhite husbands, but 9 percent of white women who were cohabiting had nonwhite partners (see figure). Similarly, 13 percent of married black men had nonblack spouses, but 24 percent of cohabiting black men lived with nonblack partners. Hispanics and Asian Americans showed the same tendency; only American Indians showed the opposite pattern. Black-white combinations are particularly notable. Black-white pairings accounted for 26 percent of all cohabiting couples but only 14 percent of all interracial marriages. They are more likely to cohabit than other minority-white couples, but they are also less likely to marry. The long history of the ban on interracial marriage in the United States, especially black-white marriage, apparently still affects black-white relationships today.

Given differences in population size, comparing rates of intermarriage across groups can be difficult. Nevertheless, statistical models used by social scientists can account for group size, determine whether members of any group are marrying out more or less often than one would expect given their numbers, and then discover what else affects intermarriage. Results show that the lighter the skin color, the higher the rate of intermarriage with white Americans. Hispanics who label themselves as racially "white" are most likely to marry non-Hispanic whites. Asian Americans and American Indians are next in their levels of marriage with whites. Hispanics who do not consider themselves racially white have low rates of intermarriage with whites. African Americans are least likely of all racial minorities to marry whites. Darker skin in America is associated with discrimination, lower educational attainment, lower income, and segregation. Even among African Americans, those of lighter tone tend to experience less discrimination.

race and education

Most married couples have similar levels of education, which typically indicates that they are also somewhat similar in social position, background, and values. Most interracial couples also have relatively equal educational attainments. However, when interracial couples do differ in their education, a hierarchy of color is apparent. The darker the skin color of racial minorities, the more likely they are to have married whites "below" them, that is, with less education than themselves. Six of ten African Americans who marry whites with different levels of education marry whites less educated than themselves. Hispanics also tend to marry whites less educated than themselves, but Asian Americans marry whites at about the same educational level.

Highly educated minority members often attend integrated colleges, and their workplaces and neighborhoods are integrated. Although they often develop a strong sense of their group identity in such environments, they also find substantial opportunities for interracial contact, friendship, romance, and marriage.

College-educated men and women are more likely to marry interracially than those with less education. The fact that Asian Americans attend college at unusually high rates helps explain their high level of intermarriage with whites. The major exceptions to the interracial influence of higher education are African Americans.

Although middle-class African Americans increasingly live in integrated neighborhoods, they are still much more segregated than other minorities. Well-educated African Americans are less likely to live next to whites than are well educated Hispanics and Asian Americans. One reason is that middle-class black Americans are so numerous that they can form their own middle-class black neighborhoods, while middle-class Hispanic and Asian-American communities are smaller and often fractured by differences in national origin and language. In addition, studies show clearly that whites resist having black neighbors much more than they resist having Hispanic or Asian American neighbors. (On residential segregation, see "Fences



Cartoonbank

"I don't hate him because he's black. I hate him because he's my husband."

and Neighbors: Segregation in 21st-Century America," *Contexts*, Spring 2005.)

Residential and school segregation on top of a long and relentless history of racial discrimination and inequality reduce African Americans' opportunities for interracial contact and marriage. The geographic distance between blacks and whites is in many ways rooted in the historical separation between the two groups. In contrast, the distance of Hispanics and Asian Americans from whites has more to do with their current economic circumstances; as those improve,

they come nearer to whites geographically, socially, and matrimonially.

a man and a woman

Black-white couples show a definite pattern: 74 percent involve a black husband and a white wife. Asian American-white couples lean the other way; 58 percent involve an Asian-American wife. Sex balances are roughly even for couples that include a white and a Hispanic (53 percent involve a Hispanic husband) or a white and an American Indian (49 percent involve Indian husbands).

Tiger Woods' mother, Kultida Woods, at a press conference in her native Thailand.

I mentioned before that most black-white couples have similar educations; nonetheless, white women who marry black men "marry up" more often than those who marry white men. This is especially striking because the pool of highly educated white men greatly outnumbers the pool of highly educated black men. More than half of black husbands of white women have at least some college education, but only two-fifths of black husbands of black women do. In that sense, white wives get more than their "share" of well-educated black husbands. This further reduces the chances that black women, especially highly educated black women, will marry, because they often face shortages of marriageable men. African-American women often resent this. Interviewed by Maria Root, one black man in such a relationship reported being accused of "selling out" and "dissing his black sisters."

Half a century ago, Robert Merton proposed a "status exchange" theory to explain the high proportion of marriages

between black men and white women. He suggested that men with high economic or professional status who carry the stigma of being black in a racial caste society "trade" their social position for whiteness by marriage. On the other hand, some social scientists argue that racialized sexual images also encourage marriages between white women and black men. Throughout Europe and the West, people have long seen fair skin tone as a desirable feminine characteristic, and African Americans share those perceptions. For example, Mark Hill found that black interviewers participating in a national survey of African Americans rated black women interviewees with lighter skin as more attractive than those with darker skin. But they did not consider male interviewees with light skin any more attractive than darker-skinned men.

Asian Americans show a different pattern; in most of their marriages with whites, the husband is white. Although Asian-American men are typically more educated than white men, in the mixed couples, white husbands usually have more education than their Asian-American wives. As with white wives of black men, the wives have "married up" educationally. Some speculate that Asian-American women tend to marry white men because they perceive Asian-American men to be rigidly traditional on sex roles and white men as more nurturing and expressive. The emphasis in Asian cultures on the male line of descent may pressure Asian-American men to carry on the lineage by marrying "one of their own." But what attracts white men to Asian-American women? Some scholars suggest that it is the widespread image of Asian women as submissive and hyper-feminine (the "Madame Butterfly" icon).

the future of interracial marriage

Rates of interracial marriage in the future will respond to some conflicting forces: the weakening of barriers between groups; increasing numbers of Hispanics and Asians in the nation; and possible rising ethnic consciousness. The continued progress of racial minorities in residential integration and economic achievement promotes contact between members of different races as equals. The color line, however, probably will not disappear. Marriage between African Americans and whites is likely to remain rare. Stubborn economic differences may be part of the reason for the persistence of this barrier, but cultural experiences also play a role. In recent years, the middle-class African-American population has grown, yet the persistence of residential segregation reduces the opportunities for contact between blacks and whites. African Americans also maintain a strong racial identity compared to that of other minorities. In the 1990 census, for example, less than 25 percent of children born to a black-white couple were identified by their parents as white—a much lower percentage than for



Photo by AP/Charles Dharapak

other biracial children. In the 2000 census, blacks identified themselves or their children as multiracial much less often than did other racial minorities. The stronger racial identities of African Americans, forged by persistent inequality, discrimination, and residential isolation, along with continued white resistance, will hold down the increase in marriages across the black-white divide.

Increases in the relatively high marriage rates of Hispanics and Asian Americans with whites may slow as new immigrants keep arriving from their homelands. Immigration expands the marriage pools for the native-born, who are more able to find spouses in their own racial or ethnic groups. These pools are expanded further by the way the wider society categorizes Hispanics and Asian Americans. They distinguish among themselves by national origin (Cuban versus Mexican or Thai versus Chinese), but whites tend to lump them into two large groups. Common experiences of being identified as the same, along with anti-Latino and anti-Asian prejudice and discrimination, help create a sense of pan-ethnic identity. This in turn inhibits marriage with whites, fosters solidarity within the larger group, and increases marriage rates between varieties of Hispanics and Asian Americans. Interethnic marriage is frequent among American-born Asians despite small group sizes and limited opportunities for contact. For example, in 1990, 18 percent of Chinese-Americans and 15 percent of Japanese-Americans aged 20–34 married spouses of other Asian ethnic groups (compared to 39 percent and 47 percent who married whites).

Many people view the increasing number of interracial marriages as a sign that racial taboos are crumbling and that the distances between racial groups in American society are shrinking. However, marriages across racial boundaries remain rarer than those that cross religious, educational, or age lines. The puzzle is whether interracial marriages will develop as marriages between people of different nationalities did among European immigrants and their descendants in the early 20th century. Diverse in many ways when they entered the country, these 20th-century European Americans, such as Italians, Poles, and Greeks, reached the economic level of earlier immigrants within a couple genera-

tions. Their success blurred ethnic boundaries and increased the rate of interethnic marriage. Many of their descendants now define themselves simply as white despite their diverse national origins. For most white Americans, ethnic identities have become largely symbolic.

Similar trends for interracial marriages are unlikely in the near future. The experiences of European Americans show the importance of equal economic achievement in dissolving barriers, so what happens economically to recent immigrants and African Americans will be important. Even then, the low levels of interracial marriage for middle-class African Americans suggest that this particular color line will persist as a barrier to marriage. And the continuing influx of Asian and Latino immigrants may reinforce those groups' barriers to intermarriage.

recommended resources

Zhenchao Qian. "Breaking the Racial Barriers: Variations in Interracial Marriage between 1980 and 1990." *Demography* 34 (1997): 478–500. An overview of changes in interracial marriage by sex and educational attainment for native-born whites, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans.

Zhenchao Qian and Daniel T. Lichter. "Measuring Marital Assimilation: Intermarriage among Natives and Immigrants." *Social Science Research* 30 (2001): 289–312. A comparison of interracial marriages between natives and immigrants, showing how immigration may slow down the increases in interracial marriage.

Maria P. P. Root. *Love's Revolution: Interracial Marriage* (Temple University Press, 2001). Presents in-depth interviews with interracial couples.

Howard Schuman, Charlotte Steeh, Lawrence Bobo, and Maria Krysan. *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretation* (Harvard University Press, 1997). Using national poll data since 1942, the authors paint a changing picture of racial attitudes for whites and blacks.

George Yancey. "Who Dates Interracially: An Examination of the Characteristics of Those Who Have Dated Interracially." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 33 (2002): 179–90. A report on the dating practices of different racial groups.

Percent of high school students who report carrying a weapon, African-American	15.2
Percent of high school students who report carrying a weapon, Hispanic	16.5
Percent of high school students who report carrying a weapon, White	17.9