Ethnic Intermarriage

Delia Furtado, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, USA

Abstract

Ethnic intermarriage is often used as measure of social distance between ethnic groups. This article presents statistics on the prevalence of intermarriage and reviews theories of marriage which might be helpful when interpreting these statistics. After a review of the empirical literature on the determinants of interethnic marriage, the article ends with a discussion of its consequences both for those directly involved and for society as a whole.

Ethnic intermarriage occurs when people from two different ethnic groups marry each other. While ethnicity is always used to describe people with similar cultural attributes (such as language, cuisine, and dress), because it is socially defined, the notion of ethnicity can differ across societies. This article will focus on the determinants and consequences of ethnic intermarriage in the US, but the issues discussed are applicable in many contexts.

Significance of Ethnic Intermarriage

Intermarriage rates are often used to measure social distances between groups. These marriages typically only occur in large numbers after a minority group has adopted the cultural patterns of the mainstream. Not only are they reflective of assimilation and ethnic acceptance among those in the marriage, but also they generate interethnic commingling among family members, friends, and broader social networks which in turn results in further assimilation and acceptance. In contrast, marriage within ethnicity, or ethnic endogamy, simplifies the transmission of ethnic traits to new generations and in this way perpetuates the distinctions between ethnic groups.

Given the view of interethnic marriage as the final stage of assimilation (Gordon, 1964), analyses of marriage patterns can offer insights into whether today's immigrants are integrating as rapidly as those in the past, whether some groups assimilate faster than others, and to which segments of the host society immigrants and their descendants assimilate.

Prevalence of Intermarriage

According to a recent Pew Research Center report (Wang, 2012), 6.8% of all new marriages in the US in 1980 involved people of different races or ethnicities while the corresponding figure in 2010 was 15. The report defines out-marriage as a marriage between people from different racial groups or a marriage between a Hispanic and non-Hispanic regardless of race. Among the 2010 newlyweds, whites had the lowest rate of out-marriage (9%) followed by blacks (17%), Hispanics (26%), and Asians (28%). There were no meaningful gender differences in intermarriage tendencies for whites and Hispanics, but black males were significantly more likely to marry outside of their race than black females and Asian females were more likely to out-marry than Asian males (Wang, 2012).

While statistics based on this very broad race–ethnicity-based conception of intermarriage are certainly informative, they can mask interesting patterns that surface when using country of origin or ancestry to measure ethnicity. Table 1 shows endogamy rates by nativity and year for the 20 most populous ancestries in the US in 1980. Statistics are computed using the 1980 Census and 2008–10 American Community Surveys. A marriage is considered endogamous if the first self-reported ancestries of the spouses match. As can be seen in the table, the foreign born have significantly higher endogamy rates than the native born. This pattern is consistent with the notion that immigrants are less assimilated and so are likely to have less in common with potential spouses of different ancestries. However, since many of the foreign born may have

Table 1 Endogamy rates by ancestry, year, and nativity

	1980		*2008–10*	
	Native born	*Foreign born*	*Native born*	*Foreign born*
Danish	7.8	30.1	5.6	24.0
Dutch	18.3	46.6	15.4	26.4
English	53.1	44.8	36.7	30.9
French	21.5	35.4	16.0	23.1
German	40.7	47.3	36.9	33.8
Greek	28.8	79.2	17.2	66.5
Irish	30.5	48.3	26.0	35.9
Italian	39.6	76.6	26.0	55.6
Norwegian	21.7	39.6	16.4	19.4
Portuguese	30.6	82.9	17.4	68.7
Swedish	12.6	36.6	8.5	19.0
Czechoslovakian	20.8	45.1	9.9	31.6
Hungarian	11.3	51.4	6.6	42.8
Polish	30.0	59.8	16.6	70.5
Russian	40.3	57.0	24.0	63.1
Mexican	73.2	84.2	61.8	86.8
Puerto Rican	52.6	76.2	38.8	65.1
Spanish	37.5	59.3	24.7	53.3
Chinese	57.9	87.2	41.3	84.7
Japanese	74.2	50.1	42.3	45.4

Notes: Endogamy rates computed using data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata 5% state sample of the 1980 Census along with the 2008–10 American Community Surveys.

 http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.31097-2

arrived in the US already married, this result might also be explained by their not having the opportunity to marry outside of their ethnicity. The table also shows that, except for the foreign born in three ethnic groups, endogamy rates were lower in 2008–10 than they were in 1980, a trend consistent with recent findings of increasing acceptance of intermarriage (Wang, 2012). Perhaps most noteworthy in the table is the considerable degree of heterogeneity in endogamy rates across ancestries. In order to properly interpret these relationships, it is useful to consider what drives marriage decisions.

Theories of Marriage

Social exchange theory was the first framework developed for understanding intermarriage decisions (Davis, 1941; Merton, 1941). It implies that if whites face higher social costs of interracial, black–white marriage, as compared to blacks, then the white spouse must be compensated for such marriages to actually occur. This compensation might often come in the form of higher socioeconomic status of the black spouse.

Empirical analyses of social exchange yield mixed results. Because taboos against interracial marriage have diminished greatly through the years (Wang, 2012), some of the discrepancies across studies are due to differences in when the study was conducted. However, even when using the same data source, researchers arrive at divergent conclusions because of differences in empirical approach (Gullickson and Fu, 2010; Kalmijn, 2010; Rosenfeld, 2005, 2010). Regardless of methodology, the degree of empirical support for social exchange theory differs across racial groups (Fryer, 2007; Qian, 1999).

The theory of marriage developed by Gary Becker (1973) predicts exchange on some characteristics but matching on others. He conceptualized households as small firms producing 'commodities' such as children, health, companionship, food, and clean clothes. Since these commodities typically require money and time to produce, the model implies exchanges between high-wage men who specialize in the labor market and low-wage women who specialize in domestic skills. The theory also implies matching on characteristics when these matches would make the couple more efficient at producing commodities. For example, spouses with the same ethnic background can more efficiently 'produce' children with ethnic traits.

David Lam's theory of marriage (1988) focuses on couples' joint consumption, as opposed to production, of household goods. The theory predicts that optimal matches are made based on similar demands for household public goods. Because many of the goods shared among family members are ethnicity-based (ethnic traits in children as well as ethnic meals and vacations to the home land), then it is optimal for individuals with similar demands for these goods to marry. Given the emergence of labor-saving household technologies such as microwaves and dishwashers as well as a functioning service industry that enables families to outsource many household activities, today's couples seem to form family based more on consumption complementarities of the type proposed by Lam than on production complementarities proposed by Becker (Stevenson and Wolfers, 2007). Nevertheless, all three marriage models either directly imply or are consistent with high rates of ethnic endogamy and can provide insights into the types of people that are most likely to intermarry.

Determinants of Ethnic Intermarriage

As there is no clear way to measure ethnicity in a US context, empirical studies of ethnic endogamy use several different measures. Most research is limited to the variables available in the large population-representative surveys (Census and Current Population Survey (CPS)): race, Hispanic ethnicity, ancestry, country of birth, and parents' countries of birth. More detailed country of origin information for people that have been in the US for several generations is also available for some Asians and Hispanics. While the variety of ways ethnicity can be defined can make detailed comparisons between studies difficult, the distinctions are not generally very important given the correlations between categories. For example, immigrants born in Japan or second-generation immigrants with Japanese parents typically list a Japanese ancestry. That said, to err in the side of caution, the discussion below focuses on the drivers of intermarriage that tend to be robust across studies.

The determinants of ethnic intermarriage can be separated into three main categories: ethnic preferences, preferences for characteristics which are correlated with ethnicity, and marriage market characteristics.

Ethnic Preferences

Both the Becker and Lam theories of marriage predict that people who are more connected to their ethnic backgrounds are more likely to marry within their ethnicities. By exchange theory, those who are less integrated may need to be more highly compensated before agreeing to out-marry. It should not be surprising, therefore, that immigrants who arrive in the US at an older age or have been in the country for less time are more likely to choose a same-ethnicity spouse (Qian et al., 2012; Chiswick and Houseworth, 2011). Similarly, immigrants who are less fluent in English are more likely to marry endogamously (Bleakley and Chin, 2010).

Ethnic preferences also play a role for second- and later generation immigrants. While the native born are typically fluent in English, their marriage decisions often depend on whether English is their mother tongue (Stevens and Swicegood, 1987). Regardless of language ability, US-born children of immigrants can be sensitive to their parents' preferences for their spouses. This is consistent with the evidence that ethnic endogamy is more prevalent among those marrying young (Chiswick and Houseworth, 2011) and those from countries with traditions of marrying young (Kalmijn and van Tubergen, 2010) but less prevalent among those marrying for the second and third times (Chiswick and Houseworth, 2011).

In addition to early life experiences, acceptance of different cultures might result from events and experiences occurring later on in life. Participation in the Armed Forces may broaden people's worldview as a result of being stationed overseas or sharing barracks with Americans of different ethnicities within

the US (Fryer, 2007). Military experience is indeed positively correlated with out-marriage (Furtado and Theodoropoulos, 2011; Chiswick and Houseworth, 2011).

Education may also give rise to a more worldly view which might make people more comfortable sharing a home with someone with different cultural attributes. While the highly educated tend to be less prejudiced toward ethnic and racial minorities (Hello et al., 2002), researchers have found conflicting evidence on the relationship between education and the strength of ethnic identity (Duncan and Trejo, 2011; Feliciano, 2009). After accounting for other mechanisms through which schooling affects marriage, researchers using data from recent years provide evidence that education decreases preferences for ethnic endogamy (Furtado and Theodoropoulos, 2011; Kalmijn, 2012), but Furtado (2012) does not find any evidence of this relationship using 1970 data.

Preferences for Related Characteristics

High rates of ethnic endogamy may not be driven by ethnic preferences per se, but by preferences for other characteristics that are correlated with ethnicity. For example, given the large role played by family in the rituals and practices of many religions, it may not be surprising that religious homogamy rates are quite high (Sherkat, 2004). Preferences for a spouse with the same religion can ultimately result in high rates of ethnic endogamy given the strong relationship between ethnicity and religion. It may be challenging, for example, for a Hindu spouse-searcher to find a non-Indian Hindu.

It is difficult to analyze the role of religion in interethnic marriage decisions because of the lack of information on religion in most nationally representative surveys in the US. However, the percentage of the country of origin that is, Christian has been found to decrease endogamy among childhood arriving immigrants and the native-born children of immigrants in the US (Kalmijn and van Tubergen, 2010). Using data from Sweden, Dribe and Lundh (2011) provide evidence that several cultural factors, including religion, play a role in explaining endogamy rates.

While religious homogamy is generally decreasing (Sherkat, 2004), assortative matching on education has increased since the 1960s (see Schwartz and Mare, 2005, for a discussion of potential explanations). Given the importance of matching on education and the variation in average schooling levels across ethnic groups, individuals with education levels that are typical within their ethnic group may end up marrying endogamously simply because it is relatively easy to meet a coethnic with a similar level education. On the other hand, ethnics with education levels that deviate from the norm within their ethnicity are likely to find it more difficult to find a same-ethnicity and same-education spouse and so compromises must be made.

Several studies have found that the closer a person's own education is to his ethnic group's average, the more likely he is to marry endogamously (Chiswick and Houseworth, 2011; Kalmijn and van Tubergen, 2010). Furtado (2012) and Furtado and Theodoropoulos (2011) show that an increase in schooling leads to a decrease in the probability of marriage within ethnicity for people in low-education groups but an increase for those in education ethnicities. Consistent with this evidence, Kalmijn (2012) shows that education increases out-marriage most in low-education groups and least in high-education groups. Interestingly, he never finds that education increases endogamy, not even in the most highly educated groups. He hypothesizes that, as discussed above, education tends to decrease in-group preferences so that while the highly educated members of high-education groups have access to same-education, same-ethnicity spouses, they may not value ethnic endogamy to the same degree as those with less education.

Schooling may also affect marriage patterns via the preferences of marriage-market participants who do not identify with any particular ethnic background. For example, it may be that, as predicted by exchange theory, people are only willing to marry ethnic minorities, especially those with strong ethnic attachments, if they are compensated in the form of a spouse's higher education (Gullickson and Fu, 2010). It may also be that ultimate marriage patterns are driven by the majority population's perceptions of ethnic minorities, perceptions that are likely to be influenced by average schooling levels of the ethnic group. Kalmijn (2012) finds that, conditional on a person's own education, belonging to a group with a higher average education is associated with an increase in the likelihood of out-marriage. He interprets this result as evidence of the importance of natives' perceptions of a person's ethnic group.

Marriage Market Characteristics

Besides preferences, intermarriage patterns are driven by opportunities to meet people from different ethnic groups. It is certainly easier for a person belonging to a large ethnic group to find an attractive match within ethnicity. Indeed, whites, the majority race in the US, have higher racial endogamy rates than any other group despite the fact that when racial minorities out-marry they typically marry whites (Wang, 2012). Opportunities to meet same-ethnicity mates are also driven by residential segregation patterns. The decline in Hispanic intermarriage in the 1990s can be explained partially by increases in Hispanic residential segregation (Lichter et al., 2007).

In order to take into account both the size of the ethnic group and residential segregation, studies typically look at the impact of the proportion of a person's neighborhood or city that is of the same ethnicity. Studies consistently find a strong association between this variable and the probability of in-marriage (Chiswick and Houseworth, 2011; Kalmijn and van Tubergen, 2010), but caution is required when interpreting this result since people with stronger preferences for endogamy are likely to choose to live around coethnics. In addition, residential segregation can reinforce group solidarity and ethnic identity (Lichter et al., 2007). Regardless of what exactly drives the relationship between ethnic group size and endogamy, it is important to keep in mind the distinction between opportunity and preferences when interpreting changing endogamy rates over time or comparing endogamy rates across ethnic groups.

Another marriage market characteristic that drives intermarriage patterns is sex ratios. Males in groups with larger male to female ratios in the US are likely to find it more difficult to

meet suitable same-ethnicity spouses whereas the opposite would be true for females in these groups. Sex ratios have been found to predict interethnic marriage for both first- and second-generation immigrants (Angrist, 2002; Chiswick and Houseworth, 2011), but this relationship is not as robust as that of between ethnic group size and endogamy as some studies find no effect (Kalmijn and van Tubergen, 2010).

Variation in the availability of same-ethnicity potential spouses may also arise from changes in the flow of new immigrants to the US. A steady immigrant inflow from Mexico in the past century provides many potential same-ethnicity partners for Mexicans of all generations (Lichter et al., 2007). New immigrants also help sustain institutions, such as churches and newspapers, which facilitate social interactions within ethnicity. Stevens and Swicegood (1987) find that belonging to an ethnic group with many non-English speakers, either because of a large number of immigrants in the group or because second- and later generations continue to speak their origin language, increases endogamy rates even among people whose first language is English. They attribute this result to the role of language in shaping socialization experiences and ethnic identification regardless of one's own preferred language.

Consequences of Intermarriage

Interethnic marriage patterns are often used as measures of assimilation not only because more assimilated groups are more likely to intermarry but also because intermarriage results in further integration. While it is true that those with better English-speaking skills are more likely to marry outside of ethnicity, sharing a household with a native English speaker is likely to further improve a person's English proficiency. In a similar way, immigrants married to natives are likely to learn more about US customs and traditions.

Intermarriage affects those directly involved in the marriage as well as the communities surrounding these marriages. Children of intermarried couples are less likely to identify with an ancestry (Duncan and Trejo, 2011). Moreover, an intercultural marriage typically brings together two sets of families, friends, and acquaintances that most likely have different cultural attributes. This ethnic commingling breaks down barriers between ethnic groups.

Several studies have found a positive relationship between marriage to a native and wages of immigrants in several different countries (Meng and Gregory, 2005, for Australia; Meng and Meurs, 2009, for France; Kantarevic, 2004, for the US, Çelikaksoy, 2007, for Denmark). Since the natives that immigrants marry are most often from different ethnicities (Furtado and Theodoropoulos, 2010), we can think about these marriages as interethnic. Furtado and Theodoropoulos (2010) find that immigrants arriving in the US before age 19 are more likely to be employed if they are married to a native than if they are married to another immigrant.

The problem with interpreting these relationships is that it is unclear whether marriage decisions directly affect worker productivity and job matching or, as discussed in the previous section, whether productive immigrants with better networks are more likely to marry natives. Studies that have taken steps to correct for this by focusing on people compelled to outmarry as a result of marriage market conditions instead of personal preferences have generally continued to find positive effects of marrying a native (Meng and Gregory, 2005; Furtado and Theodoropoulos, 2010). Furtado and Theodoropoulos (2010) examine the mechanisms through which marriage to a native increases employment rates of immigrants. They find little to no evidence that the returns to marrying a native are driven by undocumented immigrants' gaining the right to work legally in the US but provide several pieces of evidence suggesting that connections to native social networks play an important role for all childhood immigrants.

Intermarriage patterns also have important implications for the interpretation of the most commonly used measures of intergenerational assimilation in the US. While the CPS asks questions about parents' countries of birth, 1970 was the last time the Census asked for this information. No national survey asks for grandparents' countries of birth. Thus, when attempting to measure intergenerational assimilation beyond the second generation, researchers typically rely on self-reports of ancestry or ethnic background. This may result in biased estimates of intergenerational mobility, especially among descendants of mixed marriages, if the likelihood of identifying with a particular ancestry is associated with a person's education and labor market success. Duncan and Trejo (2011) present evidence that high-skilled Mexicans are less likely, relative to low-skilled Mexicans, to marry other Mexicans and that children of these mixed marriages are less likely to identify as Mexican. These two facts, in conjunction with intergenerational transmission of skill, imply that Mexicans in third and higher generations will be more likely to self-report Mexican ancestry if they are low skilled. This is exactly what they find in the data suggesting that the commonly constructed estimates of intergenerational assimilation for Mexicans are too low.

Conclusion

As argued throughout this article, interethnic marriage rates can be interpreted as a measure of social distance between groups. Not only is intermarriage more likely when groups are more integrated into mainstream society, but marriage further integrates ethnic groups. In fact, intermarriage has been referred to as the spoon that stirs the ethnic melting pot (Lichter et al., 2007).

Recent statistics suggest that intermarriage rates, although increasing, are still quite low. Perhaps even more interesting is the variation across ethnic groups in the likelihood of intermarriage. While it may be tempting to interpret changes over time and differences across groups solely in terms of preferences, the literature suggests that many structural factors drive endogamy rates. Regardless of the causes of intermarriage, a union of two people with different ethnic backgrounds begets many social interactions between the couple's social circles resulting in further breakdowns of ethnic barriers. Children of interethnic marriages tend to have weaker ethnic identities and are themselves more likely to marry outside of ethnicity. Thus, further analysis of the causes and consequences of ethnic intermarriage is certainly warranted given its role as

a barometer of current levels of assimilation and ethnic relations as well as a forecaster of future levels of immigrant integration.

See also: Ancestors, Anthropology of; Assimilation of Immigrants; Assortative Mating in the Marriage Market; Ethnic Conflict, Geography of; Ethnic Identity and Ethnicity in Archaeology; Ethnic Identity, Psychology of; Ethnicity and Ethnic Groups: Historical Aspects; Immigration Policy; Immigration, Citizenship, and Integration: Social Work Connections; Immigration: Political Aspects; Marriage; Migration: Cultural Aspects.

Bibliography

Angrist, J., 2002. How do sex ratios affect marriage and labor markets? Evidence from America's second generation. The Quarterly Journal of Economics 117, 997–1038.

Becker, G.S., 1973. A theory of marriage: part I. Journal of Political Economy 81, 813–846.

Bleakley, H., Chin, A., 2010. Age at arrival, English proficiency, and social assimilation among U.S. immigrants. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics 2, 165–192.

Chiswick, B., Houseworth, C., 2011. Ethnic intermarriage among immigrants: human capital and assortative mating. Review of Economics of the Household 9, 149–180.

Çelikaksoy, A., 2007. A wage premium or penalty: an analysis of endogamous marriage effects among the children of immigrants. Danish Journal of Economics (Nationaløkonomisk Tidsskrift) 145, 288–311.

Davis, K., 1941. Intermarriage in caste societies. American Anthropologist 43, 376–395.

Dribe, M., Lundh, C., 2011. Cultural dissimilarity and intermarriage: a longitudinal study of immigrants in Sweden 1990–2005. International Migration Review 45, 297–324.

Duncan, B., Trejo, S.J., 2011. Intermarriage and the intergenerational transmission of ethnic identity and human capital for Mexican Americans. Journal of Labor Economics 29, 195–227.

Feliciano, C., 2009. Education and ethnic identity formation among children of Latin American and Caribbean immigrants. Sociological Perspectives 52, 135–158.

Furtado, D., 2012. Human capital and interethnic marriage decisions. Economic Inquiry 50, 82–93.

Furtado, D., Theodoropoulos, N., 2010. Why does intermarriage increase immigrant employment? The role of networks. B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy 10. Article 101.

Furtado, D., Theodoropoulos, N., 2011. Interethnic marriage: a choice between ethnic and educational similarities. Journal of Population Economics 24, 1257–1279.

Fryer, R.G., 2007. Guess who's been coming to dinner? Trends in interracial marriage over the 20th century. Journal of Economic Perspectives 21, 71–90.

Gordon, M.M., 1964. Assimilation in American Life. Oxford University Press, New York.

Gullickson, A., 2006. Education and black/white interracial marriage. Demography 43, 673–689.

Gullickson, A., Fu, V.K., 2010. Comment: an endorsement of exchange theory in mate selection. American Journal of Sociology 115, 1243–1251.

Hello, E., Scheepers, P., Gijsberts, M., 2002. Education and ethnic prejudice in Europe: explanations for cross-national variances in the educational effect on ethnic prejudice. Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research 46, 5–24.

Kalmijn, M., 1998. Intermarriage and homogamy: causes, patterns, trends. Annual Review of Sociology 24, 395–421.

Kalmijn, M., 2010. Educational inequality, homogamy and status exchange in black-white intermarriage: a comment on Rosenfeld's critique. American Journal of Sociology 115, 1252–1263.

Kalmijn, M., 2012. The educational gradient in intermarriage: a comparative analysis of immigrant groups in the United States. Social Forces 91, 453–476.

Kalmijn, M., van Tubergen, F., 2010. A comparative perspective on intermarriage: explaining differences in marriage choices among national origin groups in the United States. Demography 47, 459–479.

Kantarevic, J., 2004. Interethnic Marriages and Economic Assimilation of Immigrants. IZA Discussion Papers 1142. Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA).

Lam, D., 1988. Marriage markets and assortative mating with household public goods: theoretical results and empirical implications. Journal of Human Resources 23, 462–487.

Lichter, D.T., Brown, J.B., Qian, Z., Carmalt, J.M., 2007. Marital assimilation among Hispanics? Evidence of declining cultural and economic incorporation? Social Science Quarterly 88, 745–765.

Meng, X., Gregory, R.G., 2005. Intermarriage and the economic assimilation of immigrants. Journal of Labor Economics 23, 135–176.

Meng, X., Meurs, D., 2009. Intermarriage, language, and economic assimilation process: a case study of France. International Journal of Manpower 30, 127–144.

Merton, R.K., 1941. Intermarriage and social structure: fact and theory. Psychiatry 4, 361–374.

Qian, Z., 1999. Who intermarries? Education, nativity, region, and interracial marriage, 1980 and 1990. Journal of Comparative Family Studies 30, 579–597.

Qian, Z., Glick, J., Baston, C., 2012. Crossing racial, ethnic, and nativity boundaries: ethnic differences in marriage and cohabitation. Demography 49, 651–675.

Rosenfeld, M.J., 2005. A critique of exchange theory in mate selection. American Journal of Sociology 110, 1284–1325.

Rosenfeld, M.J., 2010. Still weak support for status-caste exchange: a reply to critics. American Journal of Sociology 115, 1264–1276.

Sherkat, D.E., 2004. Religious intermarriage in the United States: trends, patterns, and predictors. Social Science Research 33, 606–625.

Schwartz, C.R., Mare, R.D., 2005. Trends in educational assortative marriage from 1940 to 2003. Demography 42, 621–646.

Stevenson, B., Wolfers, J., 2007. Marriage and divorce: changes and their driving forces. Journal of Economic Perspectives 21 (2), 27–52.

Stevens, G., Swicegood, G., 1987. The linguistic context of ethnic endogamy. American Sociological Review 52, 73–82.

Wang, W., 2012. The Rise of Intermarriage: Rates, Characteristics Vary by Race and Gender. Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends, Washington, DC.