

Black-white marriages increased rapidly since 1980, study finds

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A new study of interracial marriages in the United States since the 1980s suggests that the racial boundary between blacks and whites continues to break down – but is not yet close to disappearing.

Marriages between African Americans and whites increased rapidly between 1980 and 2008, outpacing the rate of unions between whites and other ethnic and racial groups, including Latinos, Asian Americans and American Indians.

Still, the total number of marriages between blacks and whites continues to be much smaller than those between whites and other racial and ethnic groups.

"The number of marriages between whites and African Americans is undeniably increasing rapidly, but it is still a small number," said Zhenchao Qian, lead author of the study and professor of sociology at Ohio State University.

In 1980, only 5 percent of black men married a white woman, but that increased to 14 percent in 2008. Still, by comparison, 38 percent of Asian American men and Hispanic men married a white woman in 2008.

"Our results point to better race relations in 2008 than 1980, but we still have a way to go," Qian said. "The racial boundary is blurred, but it is still there."

Qian conducted the study with Daniel Lichter, professor of policy analysis and management and sociology at Cornell University. Their results appear in the October 2011 issue of the *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

One of the strengths of this new study is that it uses data on new marriages begun each year between 1980 and 2008. That allows the researchers to see how marriages are reacting to current social conditions, according to Qian. Most studies use data on all marriages – including couples who married decades ago, when their marriage market was very different from that of today.

The study uses data from the 2008 American Community Survey, which is an ongoing survey of American households conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. The survey includes about 3 million people a year. The researchers also use data from the 1980 U.S. census.

Understanding changes in interracial marriages is complex because it involves two different factors: the marriage market of who is available to marry and also individuals' choices about who they would be willing to marry.

Those two factors tell somewhat different stories, Qian said.

Overall, while marriages between blacks and whites showed large increases between 1980 and 2008, there was only a slight increase in marriages between whites and Hispanics. This period also marked the end of the long-term rise in marriages between whites and Asians.

Much of this can be explained by large increases in immigration of Hispanics and Asians into the United States, the study revealed.

This has meant that Hispanics and Asians living in the United States now

have a larger pool of potential marriage partners from their own racial and ethnic groups. Indeed, results showed that marriages between U.S. born and foreign born Asians and Hispanics increased rapidly between 2000 and 2008.

"With the enormous growth of the immigrant population, Asians and Hispanics now have more opportunities than ever to find a marital partner who shares the same cultural background. Such marriages reinforce their cultural identity," Lichter said.

However, when the researchers calculated what would have happened if the size and characteristics of minority populations hadn't changed between 1980 and 2008, they found intermarriage rates would have actually increased rather than decreased or stayed the same.

"That suggests that any evidence of a retreat from interracial marriages is mostly a reflection of changing marital market opportunities, rather than changes in whom people are willing to marry," Lichter said.

But Lichter noted that the experience of blacks living in the United States was different from that of Latinos and Asians.

"There wasn't a great increase in black immigrants into the United States, so the rise in black-white intermarriages really suggests greater racial tolerance and a new openness to marrying outside one's own race. This suggests a weakening of the racial boundaries."

One noticeable change was the role of education in interracial marriages. For many years, highly educated Hispanics and Asian Americans have been more likely than their less educated counterparts to marry whites. But that was never true for blacks.

"It used to be that race trumped everything, including education, when it

came to marriage between blacks and whites," Qian said.

"But that is changing. For the first time, we found that highly educated blacks and whites were more likely to intermarry. That is very significant and is another sign that racial boundaries are blurring."

The study also examined trends in biracial and cohabiting Americans.

The study found that people who classified themselves as white-Asian or white-American Indian were more likely to marry whites than Asians or American Indians.

"The rise in America's multiracial population blurs racial boundaries," Lichter said.

However, black-white biracial people are still more likely to marry blacks than whites.

In general, the results were similar in cohabiting couples as they were in married couples. However, interracial couples were slightly more likely to be in cohabiting unions than they were to be married, according to the findings.

Qian said the study suggests that, when it comes to marriage, "ethnic and racial boundaries are being crossed, especially among men and women with college education."

But the increasing immigrant population also means that many minorities in the United States, particularly Asian Americans and Hispanics, will have a greater opportunity than ever to marry within their ethnic or racial groups, he said.

Provided by Wiley

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