Interracial marriage represents a form of exogamy—that is, out-group marriage, in which two people from different racial groups marry. For instance, marriage between an Asian American individual and a European American individual is considered an interracial marriage. For a long time, de jure and de facto restrictions on intermarriage prevented people from engaging in interracial relationships. In the United States, antimiscegenation laws forbidding interracial marriage between blacks and whites go back as far as the 1600s. Interracial marriages were also forbidden between Asian immigrants and U.S. citizens. The 1967 Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court, which declared antimiscegenation laws unconstitutional, ushered in an era of growing social acceptance of interracial unions, which in turn led to an increase in the number of interracial relationships. In the last decade alone, there has been a 28 percent increase in the number of interracial marriages in the United States. Interracial marriages are especially prevalent in the west and less common in the northeast, Midwest, and south. The highest rates of intermarriage have been observed among Asians and Latinos in the last decade.

Several mate selection theories such as the caste and exchange theory, structural theory, accessibility hypothesis, and racial motivation theory have been used to explain why individuals choose to select a mate outside their racial group. In addition, research has identified race, age, marital status, nativity status, educational level, phenotype, and residential location as predictors of interracial marriage choice. The number of multiracial children, that is, children born to interracial couples, has also grown considerably in recent decades. These children are generally well adjusted, although some experience difficulties associated with social challenges.

History of Interracial Marriages

Prior to slavery, sexual relations between black and white indentured servants were not uncommon. During slavery, interracial sexual relations frequently occurred between black slaves and free white women. Initially these sexual liaisons were encouraged because children produced by such unions were also considered property of the slaveholder. However, as sexual relationships between white women and black slaves increased, laws were introduced to prevent the spread of interracial marriages. Just 10 years after transporting the first few African slaves to the colony, in 1630 the Virginia Assembly ordered the whipping of a white man for lying with an African slave woman.

Numerous other laws restricting and prohibiting interracial marriages between blacks and whites followed this order. In 1662, Virginia passed a law against interracial sexual relations and about 30 years later the first statutory prohibition of interracial marriage between blacks and whites was enacted. Throughout the following decades, a series of laws ensued raising the fine and the severity of punishment for interracial marriages. In 1818, Virginia expanded antimiscegenation laws to marriages of Virginians who married blacks out of state. The purpose of this law was to prevent Virginians from marrying interracially outside the state and then returning to Virginia.

Scholars have argued that the deconstruction of legal barriers, for example, 1954’s Brown v. Board of Education and the 1964 and 1965 Civil Rights Acts, contributed to the gradual increase in the number...
of interracial marriages in the United States. Namely, they facilitated integration between African Americans and European Americans in social settings such as education and work. As such, these policies also paved the way for the landmark ruling in the *Loving v. Virginia* case, which in effect legalized interracial marriages. The legal case involved Mildred Jeter, a black American woman, and Richard Loving, a white American man, who married in 1958 in Washington, D.C., where interracial marriages were legal at the time. Upon their marriage, they returned to Virginia, where they were arrested. They were given a choice between a one- to three-year prison sentence and banishment from Virginia for violating the state’s antimiscegenation law. The couple moved to Washington, D.C., where they experienced much hardship as a result of discrimination. Their legal case was taken up by two lawyers who agreed to represent them pro bono. After nine years of legal battling, their case reached the U.S. Supreme Court.

In 1967, Virginia’s antimiscegenation law prohibiting interracial marriage with the exception of persons who had only one-sixteenth or less Indian blood was overruled by the Supreme Court. This historical decision set a legal precedent for repealing antimiscegenation laws throughout the United States. Though legally no longer enforceable, antimiscegenation clauses were part of the state constitutions in South Carolina until 1998 and Alabama until 2000.

**Interracial Marriages Today**

Since the legalization of interracial marriages, public attitudes toward interracial relationships have become more accepting, which has contributed to the growing number of such unions. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, there has been a 28 percent increase in interracial marriages in the last decade (from 7 percent in 2000 to 10 percent in 2010). There is considerable regional variation in interracial marriage rates. Marriage between two people of different racial backgrounds is particularly prevalent in the west, where 11 percent of marriages are interracial. They are much less common in the Midwest, northeast, and the south, where only 4 to 6 percent of marriages occur between people of different races. The highest rates of interracial marriage are found in the ethno-racially diverse Hawai’i, where 37 percent of all marriages are between people of different races. Alaska and Oklahoma are also home to a high number of interracially married couples (28 percent). Demographers attribute the high interracial marriage rates to the presence of relatively large Native populations found in these states.

Research also suggests that people who are Asian, Native American, or Hispanic, native born rather than immigrant, young, highly educated, have a light skin complexion, or reside in urban areas are particularly likely to date and marry outside their race. According to Wendy Wang at the Pew Research Center, the highest rates of racial out-marriage occur among Asians and Hispanics (25 percent). Intermarriage rates vary considerably by nativity status within and across these two groups. Among Hispanics, the native born are more likely to out-marry relative to immigrants (36 percent versus 14 percent). However, this disparity is much smaller among Asians (37 percent versus 24 percent). Unlike Asian and Hispanic Americans, a smaller proportion of black Americans is married across racial lines (about 17 percent). Interracial marriages occur at even smaller rates among white Americans; only one out of 10 white Americans is in an interracial marriage.

Between 2000 and 2010, interracial marriage rates actually declined among Asian Americans, whereas they increased among black Americans. The Pew Research Center also reported that white–Hispanic couples accounted for 43 percent, white–Asian couples made up 14 percent, and white–black couples made up 12 percent of all interracial or interethnic marriages in 2010. It is notable that gender
differences in interracial marriage rates can be observed among Asian and black Americans. Among black Americans, men are more likely to out-marry than women. The opposite pattern is found among Asian Americans.

Theories of Interracial Mate Selection

Several theories of mate selection have been put forth to explain why individuals choose a partner outside their race. Based on the classic mate selection theory of social exchange, most theories have focused on the exchange of relationship assets unique to cross-racial partners. Theories such as the caste and exchange theory, the accessibility hypothesis, racial motivation theory, and structural theory have been proposed to explain cross-race mate selection. It is important to note that many of these theories have been developed to understand interracial partner choice among black Americans and white Americans.

Caste and exchange theory/hypogamy. According to social exchange theory, individuals select their mates based on an exchange of personal assets that each partner brings to the relationship. As an extension of the social exchange theory, the caste and exchange theory proposes that U.S. society is structured based on the caste system of race. Within this caste system, black Americans belong to an inferior caste. Thus, when they engage in an interracial relationship, they seek a higher racial status from being with a white person. In exchange for the higher racial position, they have to offer relationship assets that their white partner will find attractive, such as higher economic or occupational status or their physical beauty. Their European American partner in turn brings a superior racial status in society. This caste and exchange theory is also known as status hypogamy or hypergamy. According to the hypogamy theory, white women usually marry down in terms of their racial status when they marry black men. However, in terms of their economic or occupational status, white women tend to experience a status hypergamy, that is, they tend to marry up when marrying black men who are more educated and economically more advanced than they are.

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An interracial couple in England in the early 1900s. The United States had laws against interracial marriage for much of its history, some of which were still part of state constitutions until the 21st century.

Accessibility hypothesis. According to the accessibility hypothesis, black men choose to engage in relationships with white women because of their increased accessibility. Certainly during slavery and even up to the 1960s, white women were forbidden fruit for African American men who, therefore, did not have social access to these women. It was not until the social climate became more tolerant toward interracial unions that black men gained greater access to white women. Even today, in some regions of the United States, couples consisting of a black man and a white woman may experience social disapproval ranging from stares to verbal or physical harassment.

Racial motivation theory. Racial motivation theory proposes that individuals who opt to be in an interracial relationship exchange racially based relationship assets. In other words, individuals in an interracial relationship are attracted to their partner because of his or her different racial background. Usually, but not exclusively, physical characteristics such as skin color, body structure, hair, or facial features are the relationship assets that individuals find attractive in a person of another race. In addition to being attracted to a person with different physical appearance, often individuals choose a mate across racial lines out of rebellion toward their parents.

Structural theory. Structural theory proposes that interracial couples choose their mates for the same reasons as same-race couples. Individuals who become part of an interracial relationship do so because
they meet, discover that they have similar interests and values, and that they can relate to each other based on these commonalities. Consequently, love and a romantic relationship between interracial partners develop out of attraction based on compatibility instead of attraction based on racial difference.

**Children of Interracial Marriages**

There has been a considerable growth in the number of children born to interracial couples. In fact, multiracial individuals were one of the fastest growing racial subgroups in the last decade. Those under age 18 accounted for a considerable proportion of the multiracial population. Historically, multiracial children were relegated to the lower-status parent’s racial group. For instance, the one-drop rule classified black-white biracial children automatically as black. Since the 1990s, multiracial people have garnered increasing social acceptance, which culminated in the 2000 U.S. Census “check all that apply” allowance in response to the race question. This public recognition of the multiracial experience along with election of the first black-white biracial U.S. president have enhanced social acceptance of multiracial people.

Recent research suggests that contemporary multiracial youth have more freedom in how they identify racially. Today their racial identity options include monoracial minority, white, biracial, situational, or aracial. These identities are fluid and may vary across context and over time. A host of child, family, and contextual influences have been identified in the literature as important predictors of multiracial youth's racial identification. These include, but are not limited to, child gender, age, race, parents’ education, family socioeconomic status, and the type (public versus private) and ethno-racial composition of the school, as well as families’ residential location.

Recent research also suggests that racial identification has developmental consequences for multiracial youth. Instead of an ideal racial identity, however, studies indicate that the implications of racial identification for youth adjustment depend on the complex interplay of identity choice, youth and family characteristics, and the specific social ecology in which multiracial youth live. Multiracial youth who feel unaccepted by their social environment or perceive their chosen racial identity to be questioned or denied may experience adjustment difficulties. Despite some social challenges, multiracial youth are also thought to be more tolerant toward diversity and exhibit cognitive flexibility and bicultural competence.

See Also: Life Course Perspective; Miscegenation; Multiracial Families; Urban Families

Further Readings

- Qian, Zhenchao; Daniel T. Lichter. “Changing Patterns of Interracial Marriage in a Multiracial Society”.

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