

# Family Member Acceptance of Black-White Marriages: The Impact of Age, Gender, Race, and Socioeconomic Status

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## **Abstract**

*This research effort examined support levels associated with Black/White interracial marriage. Differences in support for Black/White marriages between Black and White family members along with other variables that influence support attitudes was explored. Age, gender, family income, marital status, and residence were used as control variables. Information from the General Social Survey conducted in 2014 was used to focus the analytical process. The theoretical hypothesis posited that assimilation is differential and more problematic for those racial groups whose members are perceived to have darker skin color. Colorism was used to reinforce the hypothetical assertion. The study results showed that potential support with respect to a family member choosing to marry someone outside of his or her racial group was influenced by race and gender. Black respondents were more likely to support a family member who chose to marry a White spouse. Women were more likely to support a family member marrying someone of a different race in comparison to men. Differential assimilation and colorism were identified as factors influencing the variation in interracial marriage acceptance.*

## **Keywords**

*colorism, culture, differential assimilation, interracial marriage, racial discrimination, racial prejudice, and social acceptance*

## **1. Introduction**

Interracial marriages (unions comprised of two individuals from different racial groups) and their acceptance in American society continue to be problematic. According to the most recent information from the United States Bureau of the Census, roughly 7% of all marriages are interracial (United States Census Bureau, 2012). Some sociologists have suggested that these types of unions provide social scientists with insight into the *true* nature of American race relations (Yancey & Lewis, 2008). Certainly, the analysis of interracial marriage is an important tool for enhancing scientific understanding of race relations dynamics.

The overall purpose of this research effort is to examine support levels associated with Black/White

interracial marriage. More specifically, support from a family member when he or she chooses to marry a person from a different racial group is explored. This study looks at differences in support for Black/White marriages between Black and White family members along with other variables that may influence support attitudes. These control variables include age, gender, family income, marital status, and residence. Information from the General Social Survey conducted in 2014 is used to focus the analytical process (Smith, Marsden, & Hout, 2015).

## 2. Literature Review

Overall opposition to Black/White interracial marriage has declined over last 40 years. Most research has shown that support for laws restricting interracial marriage between Blacks and Whites has consistently decreased (Garcia, Lewis, & Ford-Robertson, 2015). Attitudes toward interracial marriage have changed dramatically and the American public, at least philosophically, does not support any type of laws which restrict marriage between members of different racial groups. A national random sample of American adults, when queried about restrictive statutes, shows an overwhelming increase in the percentage of individuals who do not favor laws against interracial marriage. Table 1 points out that roughly one-third of respondents in 1972 favored laws against interracial marriage. That percentage dropped to slightly under 10% in 2002 illustrating that Americans strongly approve the notion of interracial marriage (Yancey & Lewis, 2008).

**Table 1. Percentage of Individuals Favoring Laws against Marriage between Blacks and Whites, 1972, 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2002\***

Item	1972	1980	1990	2000	2002
Yes	36.3	28.9	17.9	9.5	9.9
No	63.2	71.1	82.1	90.5	90.1
Total	100.0 (1,301)	100.0 (1429)	100.0 (884)	100.0 (1703)	100.0 (929)

\* Information comes from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) longitudinal study of the American adult population.

Approval of interracial marriages is linked to age and racial background. Responses obtained from a demographic trends study suggests that older individuals, irrespective of race, tended to oppose interracial marriages while younger individuals were much more accepting of interracial marriages. In addition, Whites were more likely to oppose interracial unions in comparison with other racial minority members (Passel et al., 2010). Finally, approval of Black/White marriages seemed to vary by region with the highest level of approval in the West (93%) and lowest in the South (83%) (Newport, 2013). Regional variations in interracial marriage patterns were observed as well. They were more likely to occur in the West. About 11% of all marriages in the West were interracial in comparison to 5% in the Northeast, 4%

in the Midwest, and 6% in the South (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012).

The perception of social distance appears to impact interracial marriage acceptance. Bogardus's (1947) groundbreaking research implies that the greater the perceived distance between racial or ethnic groups, the more prejudiced individuals tend to be toward the target group. His early studies demonstrated that Americans generally saw greater social distance between themselves and immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. The distance between Americans and immigrants from Northern and Western Europe was perceived as much smaller. Therefore, acceptance and assimilation of Northern and Western European immigrants were much easier. From a contemporary standpoint, colorism can be linked to social distance. Colorism is a very specific form of racial discrimination based on the perceived shade of one's skin color. Individuals may be unfairly treated, collectively, because of their perceived membership in a specific ethnic or racial group (Harrison & Thomas, 2009). Colorism has roots in European colonialism, the plantation system which employed slavery of Black Americans, and the early class hierarchies of Asia. Despite its disparate roots, colorism in the United States is broadly maintained by a system of White racism and privilege (Hunter, 2007). Colorism can be extended to variations in acceptance of interracial marriage.

Intermarriage can be an indicator of social distance between groups. The consistently lower percentage of Black/White marriages relative to other interracial marriage combinations suggests that group boundaries are strongest between Whites and Blacks (Qian & Lichter, 2007). Certainly, this is reflected by racial variations in attitudes toward intermarriage as Blacks are the most accepting of intermarriage and Whites are least accepting. Furthermore, Blacks are much more likely to report having a family member who is in an interracial marriage relative to Whites (Passel, Taylor, & Wang, 2010).

Bogardus (1947) suggests that social distance often creates an in-group and out-group dynamic between racial or ethnic groups. This dynamic may be moderated to some extent by socio-economic status. The perceived distance may be relatively small for an out-group that is very similar in terms of socio-economic status irrespective of the physical differences. The in-group and out-group dynamic can be extended to social distance issues related to interracial marriages, as the type of racial group member involved in an interracial marriage may impact one's perception of social distance between the groups involved and affect the social acceptance of the union.

Although there has been substantial research associated with legal aspects of interracial marriage, there is less information regarding personal support for family member involvement in interracial unions. The role of stereotypes and racial attitudes have not been examined thoroughly utilizing nationally representative samples. Goleiowska (2007) found that White individuals who harbored negative racial attitudes toward Blacks and felt that government intruded too much in establishing non-racial discrimination structure in society were more opposed to Black/White unions. Her research demonstrated these racial attitudes were linked to psychological and contextual variables. Additionally, the study illustrated that the classic demographic factors (age, personal and family income, and

educational attainment) had very little influence on attitudes toward Black/White marriages.

Another representative national survey found that 29% of White respondents do not support Black/White interracial dating or marriage while 31% support these two types of relationships. Whites were found to be more supportive of interracial dating but less supportive of interracial marriage or having children from an interracial relationship. From a gender perspective, White women were likely to approve of interracial relationships in comparison to White men. It appears that positive racial attitudes toward interracial relationships do not translate into high rates of actual interracial cohabitation or marriage (Herman & Campbell, 2011).

### **3. Theoretical Discussion and Hypothesis Derivation**

The social definition of skin-color, the primary objectification of racial group membership, plays an important role in determining the degree of assimilation allowed at both the group and individual level. Typically, in the United States, benefits and social status tend to vary by race with higher societal benefits and status accorded to lighter skinned racial groups and lesser societal benefits and status given to darker skinned racial groups. Sociologists define this process as “color grading” (Geschwender, 1978). It follows that racism and discrimination will be more intense against those individuals who are members of darker skin color racial groups (Francis, 1976). Therefore, in the United States, Blacks tend to encounter more racial discrimination than their Hispanic or Asian American counterparts despite the overall pace of assimilation (Yancey & Lewis, 2008).

Merton (1941) used a form of exchange theory to examine differentials associated with interracial marriages. His social science perspective suggests a hierarchy of status among different racial groups in the United States creates a racial caste system. It places individuals with darker skin color in a lower caste relative to those who are lighter. A member of a lower caste will marry a member of the higher caste if they have other assets to trade for the privilege of “marrying up”. An important research study by Fu (2001) determined in Black/White interracial marriages, White women married to Black men had less educational attainment in comparison to White women married to White men. He also discovered that Black women married to Black men had less education than Black women married to White men.

It can be extended that members of the lower racial castes should be more accepting of interracial dating and marriage patterns and there is empirical support for this assertion. Evidence indicates that Blacks had more favorable attitudes toward interracial marriages than Whites (Aldridge, 1978; Sones, 1988; Spickard, 1989). Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1990) also found that White partners of Black/White marriages tend to encounter ostracism from friends and relatives within their community more frequently than their Black spouses. Lewis (1994) found that Mexican-American/White unions experience more social and family acceptance in comparison to Black/White unions.

Traditional assimilation theory does not adequately address variation in rates of absorption exhibited by different racially under-represented groups. However, this disparate process can be understood through

differential assimilation deduced from classical assimilation. The basic assumption underlying this approach is rates of absorption vary between racially under-represented groups. In fact, some groups may not achieve assimilation at all. Moreover, criteria for successful assimilation into the dominant culture may change over time.

The historical classification of racial groups in the United States illustrates *differential assimilation*. During most of the 20th Century, groups were dichotomized into White and non-White categories. European ethnic groups, which were characterized as White, faced relatively few barriers to assimilation. Conversely, non-White groups had to navigate formidable hurdles in the process. It should be noted that Blacks comprised the overwhelming majority of those labeled as non-White. Additionally, this category included Hispanics, Asians, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans (Lewis & Ford-Robertson, 2010).

The original racial dichotomy has changed and now entails two very different categories, Black and non-Black. Many racial and ethnic groups labeled as non-White have moved into the non-Black category. As a result, blacks have demonstrated little to no social movement. Individuals recognized as non-Blacks should face fewer assimilation barriers. Related to the original dichotomy, African Americans make up the vast majority of individuals identified as Black and, therefore, should continue to experience significant resistance relative to the assimilation process (Lewis & Ford-Robertson, 2010).

Differential assimilation provides an excellent theoretical approach for examining varying aspects of interracial marriage. It is used to determine if there are trends associated with interracial marriage that are related to the racial composition of the couple (i.e., Black/White, Hispanic/White, Asian/White, etc.). Additionally, differential assimilation can be employed to determine if color grading impacts societal acceptance of interracial unions (Lewis & Ford-Robertson, 2010).

The general research hypothesis posits assimilation is differential and more problematic for those racial groups whose members are perceived as being darker with respect to skin color. As a result, potential Black/White interracial marriages should receive less family support from White family members in comparison to Black family members. Other factors such as gender, family income, and educational attainment of the family member should have little to no impact on level of support or opposition.

## **4. Method**

### *4.1 Data*

The data used to examine acceptance of marriage partners by close family members were obtained from the General Social Survey 2014 file. These data provide a great deal of information on core demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal questions including those related to interracial marriage (Smith, Marsden, & Hout, 2015). Analyses were conducted using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

#### 4.2 Methods

This study employed multiple linear regression analysis utilizing a number of research variables. The sociological theory discussed earlier provided the foundation for the statistical analysis.

*Dependent Variables.* The database included two variables related to perceptions of acceptance of marriage partners by close family members. These were used as dependent variables and how respondents were queried is displayed below.

Question 1. "Do you favor a close relative marrying a White person?"

Question 2. "Do you favor a close relative marrying a Black person?"

The response categories to each item were 1=strongly favor, 2=favor, 3=neither favor or oppose, 4=oppose, and 5=strongly oppose.

*Independent Variables.* The analysis considered seven possible predictors to one's attitudes regarding a close relative marrying a person from different racial group. These include race (dummied into two categories; 0=White, 1=Black), gender (dummied into two categories; 0=men, 1=women), marital status (0=not married, 1=married), age (spanning 18-89 years of age), highest years of formal education completed (ranging from 0-20 years), city residence size, and annual family income.

Five multiple binary logistic regression models, guided by our theoretical underpinnings, were created for responses linked to marrying outside of one's racial group. It should be noted that these dependent (response) variables were measured as categorical variables. These were collapsed into two categories (not favor=0 and favor=1) to facilitate the predictive nature of binary logistic regression analysis.

#### 5. Results

The random sample is a representative reflection of the adult population in the United States. Table 2 displays three categorical predictor variables. The gender distribution shows that approximately 56% of the sample was comprised of women. With respect to race, nearly 83% were White with 17% Black. Lastly, the marital status distribution points out that 44% of the sample were currently married. Another 27% indicated they have never been married.

This study utilized four numerical predictor variables as well. Table 2 points out that the average age of the respondents was about 50 years and the average educational attainment was nearly 14 years of formal schooling. The average annual family income was roughly \$33,400. It is important to note that the standard error of the mean for each of these variables is relatively small indicating a normal distribution of the attribute categories that comprise them.

**Table 2. Summary of Study Predictor Variables Associated with Acceptance of a Family Member's Choice of Marriage Partner, 2014**

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error of the Mean	Percent	Number
<b>Gender</b>					
Male				44.4	667
Female				55.6	834
<b>Race</b>					
White				82.5	1238
Black				17.5	263
<b>Marital Status</b>					
Married				44.0	660
Widowed				8.9	133
Divorced				17.3	260
Separated				2.93	43
Never Married				26.9	403
<b>Age</b>	49.59	17.50	.452		1498
<b>Educational Attainment</b>	13.85	2.90	.075		1501
<b>Family Income</b>	33389.80	33863.12	910.58		1383
<b>Size of City of Residence</b>	355.47	30.744	30.74		1501
<b>Close Relative Marrying Outside Race</b>					
Favor				33.2	499
Neither Favor or Oppose				52.3	785
Oppose				14.5	217

To accomplish the initial statistical analysis, the two response variables associated with attitudes toward acceptance of a family member's choice of marriage partner were recoded into one variable. The five attribute categories were collapsed into three; favor, neither favor or oppose, and oppose. Table 2 shows that 33% of the participants stated they would favor a close family member's choice to marry someone of another racial group. About 15% indicated they would not favor a close family member choosing to marry outside of the racial group. Slightly half of the respondents provided answers that they would neither favor nor oppose a close relative marrying outside of the racial group.

The attitude regarding supporting a family member choosing to marry a spouse from a different racial group was controlled for race using crosstabulation analysis. The resulting chi-square distribution was determined to be statistically significant (see Table 3). Nearly 51% of Black respondents indicated they

would favor the choice of a family member to marry a White spouse. In comparison, only 30% of White respondents said they would favor the choice of a family member to marry a Black spouse. In addition, 54% of White respondents said they would neither favor nor oppose the potential union and 16% would oppose a marriage involving a Black spouse. Only 5% of Black participants stated they would oppose a family member choosing to marry a White partner.

**Table 3. Attitudes toward Acceptance of a Family Member's Choice to Marry Interracially, 2014\*\*\***

<b>Item</b>	<b>White %</b>	<b>Black %</b>
<b>Oppose</b>	16.4	5.3
<b>Neither Favor or Oppose</b>	54.0	44.1
<b>Favor</b>	29.6	50.6
<b>Total</b>	100.0 (1238)	100.0 (263)

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The potential multiple variable effects on attitudes toward family member choice of a marriage partner were explored. Table 4 summarizes the findings. In the overall model, seven predictor variables were introduced into a binary logistic multiple regression equation. Race and gender were found to be the only variables that impact attitudes related to family choice of a spouse. Black respondents were nearly 2½ times more likely to support a family member choosing to marry interracially in comparison to their White counterparts. Additionally, women were slightly more likely to support a family member choosing to marry across racial lines in comparison to men. Marital status, family income, city size, educational attainment, and age of the respondent were not statistically related to the response variable. The overall model explained 4.5% of the change in family member choice of marrying interracially.

Racial background was used to split the overall logistic regression model into two models; one controlling for White respondents, and the other controlling for Black respondents. For the White respondent model, a weak relationship was found between family member choice and age. Older White respondents less were likely to be supportive of members who decides to marry a Black spouse. It was determined that spouse choice was not related to gender, marital status, family income, city size, and educational attainment. For the Black respondent model, no relationships were found between the six predictor variables and family member spouse choice. Therefore, gender, marital status, family income, city size, educational attainment, and age exhibited no statistical relationships with a family member choosing to marry a White spouse (see Table 4). These findings suggest that race is the most important predictor variable relative to family member spouse choice.

Gender was used to separate the overall logistic regression model into two models; one controlling for men, and the other controlling for women. For men, the only independent variable related to



perceptions of family member choice to marry a spouse of another race is race. Black men are two times more likely to support a family member who decides to marry a White spouse in comparison to White men supporting a family member deciding to marry a Black spouse. A similar relationship was found among women. Black women were nearly 2½ times more likely to support a family member who decides to marry interracial in comparison to White women (see Table 4). These findings demonstrate that race is the most important predictor variable with respect to family member spouse choice.

**Table 4. Binary Logistic Multiple Regression Model Summarizing Attitudes toward Acceptance of a Family Member's Choice to Marry Interracially, 2014**

Variables in Model	Overall		White		Black		Men		Women	
	B	Exp (B)	B	Exp (B)	b	Exp (B)	b	Exp (B)	B	Exp (B)
<b>Race</b>	.866***	2.377					.800**	2.225	.876***	2.401
<b>Gender</b>	.222*	1.249	.204	1.227	.431	1.539				
<b>Marital Status</b>	-.075	.927	-.199	.819	.582	1.789	-.027	.973	-.099	.906
<b>Family Income</b>	.000	1.000	.000	1.000	.000	1.000	.000	1.000	.000	1.000
<b>City Size</b>	.000	1.000	.000	1.000	.000*	1.000	.000	1.000	.000	1.000
<b>Educational Attainment</b>	.010	1.010	.006	1.006	.007	1.007	-.013	.987	.024	1.024
<b>Age</b>	-.004	.996	-.008*	.992	.013	1.013	-.003	.997	-.006	.994
<b>Constant</b>	-.892*	.410	-.615	.541	-.956	.386	-.751	.472	-.717	.488
<b>Hosmer/Lemeshow Test (<math>X^2</math>)</b>	2.575		4.778		7.894		14.837		4.184	
<b>Nagelkerke R Square</b>	.045		.012		.075		.025		.054	

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## 6. Discussion

The theoretical hypothesis, employed by this this research effort, which posits assimilation is differential and more problematic for those racial groups whose members are perceived to have darker skin color was supported by the research findings. The study results showed that potential support with respect to a family member choosing to marry someone outside of his or her racial group was influenced primarily by race and gender. Black respondents were more likely to support a family member who chose to marry a White spouse. Women were more likely to support a family member marrying someone of a different race in comparison to men. When controlling for gender, Black men and Black women were more supportive in comparison to their White counterparts.

Race was strongest predictor variable, followed by gender. Other predictor variables including marital status, family income, city size, educational attainment, and age of the respondent had little to no impact on survey participant perceptions. This research demonstrates, indirectly, that culture in the United States is heavily influenced by race relations. The social etiquette related to intergroup relationship is used to maintain a certain degree of separation between racial groups. The findings support Bogardus's (1947) contention that social distance exists between dominant and subordinate racial groups within American society.

The findings support that contention that White respondents were less likely to support Black/White marriages in comparison to Black counterparts. Although not measured directly, the findings supported the idea that colorism operates in how Black/White marriages are perceived by family members. White family members were much less supportive of Black/White marriages and the perception of skin-color appears to impact this lack of support among Whites. Colorism was much less apparent among Blacks and they tended to be more supportive of a family member's decision to marry a White spouse.

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