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One Flesh

America Is Experiencing an Unprecedented Increase In Black-White Intermarriage

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In 25 years of teaching, I've only had one person cry in class. A very dark-skinned African-American man in one of my law school courses had snapped at a much lighter-skinned African-American woman who was defending interracial adoption. "You wouldn't understand," he told her. "You're not really black. Your mother is white."

I will always remember the pain on that young woman's face. For years after, I assumed that her family situation was unusual. But then I started noticing that many of my black friends were married to whites. I vowed to learn more about interracial marriage.

Recently, I started an intensive research effort on the subject with economist Timothy S. Sullivan. What follows is a report of what we have learned so far.

A Steady 30-Year Increase

Until the U.S. Supreme Court's 1967 decision in *Loving v. Virginia*, states were constitutionally permitted to ban mixed-race marriages. And many did. More than half of the states had antimiscegenation statutes in 1945; 19 still had them in 1966. A 1965 Gallup Poll found that 42 percent of Northern whites supported such laws, as did 72 percent of Southern whites.

Marriage license records from various Northern cities document a scattering of black-white marriages even before the Civil War, with a small increase after slavery ended. But for more than a hundred years, such marriages remained rare. According to the 1960 census, for example, less than 1 percent of married blacks, male and female, had a white spouse.

Over the next 30 years, however, the census documents a steady increase in the number of black men married to white women and, more recently, an increase in the number of black women married to white men. In those years, the proportion of marriages between black men and white women more than quintupled (rising from 0.8 percent in 1960 to 4.3 percent in 1990); it about doubled for those between black women and white men (rising from 0.8 percent to 1.7 percent).

In 1990, of all marriages in which one or both persons were African-American, about 6 percent were black-white marriages, compared with only 1.7 percent in 1960.

Because these percentages are for all existing marriages, they obscure recent sharp increases in the rate of intermarriage. For the proportion of all marriages involving African-Americans in which one spouse was white to have increased threefold in 30 years, the proportion of new marriages between whites and blacks would have had to increase even more.

New Marriages Between Blacks and Whites

So, what percent of new marriages are interracial? This is not an easy figure to get.

The primary source of information about new marriages comes from data on state marriage licenses collected each year by the National Center for Health Statistics. Unfortunately, these data are of limited usefulness. States are not required to submit the data and, currently, about 40 states and the District of Columbia do so. Moreover, many states have removed questions about race from their marriage licenses, or have made such questions optional. As a result, since 1970, only 32 states have consistently reported race information to the NCHS.

Even this partial information from marriage licenses reveals a rapidly rising rate of new marriages between black men and white women: up from 1.9 percent of all marriages involving a black groom in 1970, to 8.9 percent in 1993. The incidence of black women marrying white men, although not as common, rose even faster, especially after 1980 (from 0.7 percent of all marriages involving a black bride in 1970, to 1.9 percent in 1980, to 3.9 percent in 1993).

These figures, however, must be viewed as the conservative estimates of new black-white marriages, because so many key states are missing from the data. According to the 1990 census, the five states with the most interracial couples (between all races, not just black and white) are California, Florida, Oklahoma, Texas, and Washington. California, for example, had 26 percent of all interracial couples. Of these states, only Florida is included in the NCHS data.

Because of this limitation, we pursued an alternative source of data that, to our knowledge, has not been previously used to study new marriages: the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey. The June CPS regularly includes a fertility and birth expectations supplement; its 1985, 1990, and 1995 surveys also contained a set of marital history questions that enabled us to determine the month and year of marriage. With this data, we constructed a file of new marriages in 1985 and 1990. (The data from 1995 are not yet publicly available.)

Using the June CPS, we estimate that, in 1990, 9.5 percent of black grooms married white brides, compared with the NCHS figure of 7.8 percent. (Because of the small CPS sample size, the figures for black women marrying white men are too unreliable to present.) Our estimate for 1985 (5.6 percent) is about the same as the NCHS figure.

Although the interracial marriage rate for African-American women is climbing faster than that for African-American men, it is still only half their rate. Why?

This is a tricky question to answer, especially in these days of heightened sensitivity to gender and race. M. Belinda Tucker and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, both associated with the University of California-Los Angeles Center for African-American Studies, describe the most common explanation: “Women are more likely to select [a spouse] on the basis of ‘earning capacity’ or ‘ambition,’ while men are more likely to choose on the basis of physical attraction. Although it is possible for a given black male to meet the earnings/ambition standard (despite the lower earnings of black males as a group), black women are less likely to meet the currently valued European standards of beauty (e.g., long blond hair, blue eyes, thin noses.) Earnings potential as a standard of mate selection is simply more colorblind than is physical attractiveness, which in American society continues to display a Eurocentric bias.”

We would add another possible reason for the lower number of black women marrying white men: children. The presence of children lowers a woman’s marriageability, regardless of her race. Having children out of wedlock lowers it further, because she is less likely to receive child support and because it weakens her ability to insist on marriage as a condition for continued cohabitation. The simple fact is that African-American females are more than twice as likely as whites to have had a baby out of wedlock.

First Comes Love, Then Comes Marriage . . .

Another enormously portentous change seems to be occurring along with the rapid growth in interracial marriages. In the past, interracial marriages tended to come later in life, often as second marriages, thus obviating the issue of having children. Now, however, these marriages appear to be more like same-race marriages—with an equal likelihood of producing children. As an unanticipated benefit, our use of the CPS allowed us to examine the timing of interracial marriages and the childbearing expectations of these couples.

First, we found that the proportion of interracial marriages that were the white bride’s first marriage rose sharply. We estimate that, in 1985, 32.9 percent of white women married to a black man were in their second (or higher) marriage. By 1990, this proportion had dropped by a third, to 21.7 percent. For the prior marital status of all white women married to black men to have changed this much, there must have been an even greater increase in first marriages among white women who marry black men.

Second, we found no statistical difference in expected fertility between white women in interracial marriages and those in same-race marriages. Actually, a higher percentage of wives in mixed-race marriages said that they planned to have children (35.4 percent versus 29 percent), although part of this can, no doubt, be explained by their relative youth. (Because the intermarriage rate has increased in recent years, the average age in the total pool of interracial marriages would be expected to fall.) We had a similar finding in our new marriage sample.

These certainly appear to be two massive changes in behavior. But two data points, 1985 and 1990, are too slender a reed upon which to conclude that they are actually happening. We would be more hesitant to report these findings were they not so consistent with the overall growth in interracial marriages, with other data concerning education and employment in such marriages, and, most importantly, with a dramatic increase in the number of mixed-race children.

How many mixed-race children are there? This is also a difficult number to get. Many states no longer require that the parents' race be recorded on birth certificates. Researchers at the Census Bureau used census data on the race of adults in primary families to make an estimate. They found that, in 1990, nearly 2 million children resided in homes where the primary adults were of different races. That is about 4.1 percent of the children who lived in two-parent households, and about double the 1 million such children in 1980, and more than four times the number in 1970. Similarly, of the 3.7 million black children who, in 1990, lived with two parents, 6.5 percent had a non-black parent in the household.

This kind of calculation is, of course, an imperfect gauge. Some children living with parents of different races, for example, are stepchildren or are adopted. On the other hand, mixed-race children living with a divorced or never-married parent are not included in this sample. Thus, although the estimate may be off by as much as 20 percent, it seems clear that there has been a tremendous increase in the number of children being raised by adults of both races.

Change Is in the Air

One should not get carried away with the sharp increase in interracial marriage that we have found. It does not prove that a new morning in race relations has arrived. Even by our estimates, African-Americans are substantially less likely to marry whites than are Hispanics, Asians, or Native Americans, for example. And, of course, we have been presenting a trend that is a percentage of new marriages at a time when there has been a society-wide decline in marriage.

Our findings, however, do suggest that positive change is in the air. If they are correct, either racism (at least on an interpersonal level) has declined, or the relative marriageability of African-Americans has risen, or there is more opportunity for races to mix—or all three. But one thing is clear: The rise in interracial marriages is not consistent with a worsening of these conditions. (There may, however, be something of a distributional effect, with African-Americans at the top of the socioeconomic ladder doing much better than those at the bottom.)

We believe that we have found a strong, unambiguous trend toward integration within American families— at a time when so many public figures are bemoaning a deterioration of race relations and a further separation of the races. Moreover, the sharp increase of earlier marriages between the races has already led to a rising number of children who call themselves “mixed”—and promises even more of these children in the very near future.

As these young people grow up and become more visible in society, they will be an immediate reminder of the growing integration of marriage in this country. And like the young woman in my class, they will also be a new force in the race debate. As one mixed-race student at Brown University said about opposition to interracial dating, “It’s indirectly expressing disapproval for [our] existence.”

Even more than their parents, such young people may be the best hope for the future of American race relations.