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## Impact of socioeconomic status on inter-racial mate selection and divorce

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### Abstract

Four hypotheses about inter-racial marriage are tested, using matched data sets of marriage certificates and divorce records from the state of Hawaii across 14 years. The analysis focuses on the effect of race and socio-economic status, and findings suggest that couples tend to have equal status regardless of their racial origin, but high-status individuals have more choices in selecting a mate across racial groups. When marriages dissolve, inter-racial unions tend to last shorter than intra-racial unions, and high-status individuals are more likely to divorce. In conclusion, high status gives an individual more freedom in choosing a mate and in dissolving a marriage. Status is thus associated with power in making important decisions in family life.

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Mate selection and marital dissolution are both in part affected by economic considerations. Marriage is, among other things, a unit of economic production (Becker, 1965; Grossbard-Shechtman, 1984, 1993; Grossbard-Shechtman & Neideffer, 1997). To form or to dismantle such a union is therefore a decision of economic calculation, in addition to other factors that make up the complexity of a marriage. The economic aspect of a marriage may be displayed more dramatically when inter-racial unions are formed, since exchange of socioeconomic status is often more clearly demonstrated in such marriages (Bankston & Henry, 1999; Blau & Schwartz, 1984; Fu & Heaton, 1997; Gurak & Fitzpatrick, 1982; Qian & Lichter, 2001; Schoen, 1986; Spickard, 1989). Inter-racial marriages are generally considered less stable than intra-racial marriages, but most studies on this difference have only focused on imbedded cultural conflict between such couples. In this paper, I explore the effect of economic status on mate selection and on marital dissolution across

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several racial groups, utilizing longitudinal marriage and divorce data from the state of Hawaii.

Data from Hawaii offer a unique advantage for studying inter-racial mate selection and stability, because intermarriage has been a norm rather than an exception in the islands and a large proportion of all marriages in the state are inter-racial. In addition, Hawaii has a relatively small population with many racial groups, and the commonality of inter-racial unions in the state thus provides valuable data for comparison across many different racial groups.

## 1. Patterns of marriage and divorce in Hawaii

### 1.1. Marriage

High rates of intermarriage are a distinctive demographic characteristic of the people of Hawaii. Historically intermarriage was more common in Hawaii than on the mainland U.S., and its proportion among all marriages has been increasing ever since data on marriage were collected in the late 19th century, approaching 50% during the last decade of the 20th century (Fu & Heaton, 1997, 1999, 2000; HSMDH, 1995–2000; Nordyke, 1989; Schmitt & Rose, 1966). Many factors have contributed to the high rate of exogamy, among which the most important are the relatively small size of the racial groups in the state and a lack of stigma against inter-group unions as found on the mainland U.S. (Fu & Heaton, 1997, 2000). These two factors are somewhat unique to Hawaii, and they have been adequately discussed in the intermarriage literature. Namely, demographic structures such as relative group size, racial heterogeneity and the sex ratio of the marriageable population set constraints on rates of endogamy, independent of individual choices in mate selection (Adams, 1937; Bankston & Henry, 1999; Barnett, 1962; Barron, 1972; Blau, 1977; Blau, Becker, & Fitzpatrick, 1984; Blau, Blum, & Schwartz, 1982; Blau & Schwartz, 1984; Grant & Ogawa, 1993; Grossbard-Shechtman & Fu, 2002; Heaton, 1990; Heer, 1962, 1966; Hollingshead, 1950; Nordyke, 1989; O'Leary, 2001; Thomas, 1972). These constraints largely explain why Hawaii has higher inter-group marriage rates than the rest of the U.S. In addition, these demographic structures have also helped to create an island culture of intermarriage, which in turn encourages inter-group relationships.

On the other hand, the sociopolitical atmosphere of a geographic region exerts influences on individual decisions to marry out of one's group. Hence the stigma against intermarriage varies by region and by time. Intermarriage has increased steadily in the United States in the past half century, partly because American society has become more open and tolerant in race relations (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Kalmijn, 1991; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1990). The trend of increasing inter-racial marriage parallels other social changes such as declining segregation of residence and workplace, and growing extension of civil rights to all groups. The growing degree of assimilation among ethnic groups thus has a positive impact on inter-racial marriage (Blau et al., 1984; Davis, 1982; Hyman & Wright, 1979; Hyman, Wright, & Reed, 1975), and evidence from the most recent censuses supports this trend: there have been proportionately more and more inter-

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