



## ‘What about the couple?’ Interracial marriage and psychological distress <sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

We explore the association between racial composition of couples—that is, whether they are interracial or homogamous—and the psychological distress of their members, as measured in a screening scale for non-specific psychological distress. We use a pooled 1997–2001 National Health Interview Survey sample of the married and cohabiting population of the United States. We compare the odds of distress for interracial vs. same race married/cohabiting adults. There are several key findings. Interracial marriage is associated with increases in severe distress for Native American men, white women, and for Hispanic men and women married to non-white spouses, compared to endogamous members of the same groups. Higher rates of distress are observed for intermarried persons with African American or Native American husbands or wives, and for women with Hispanic husbands. Lower socioeconomic status explains approximately half of the increased distress experienced by white women, while higher socioeconomic status partially suppresses increases in distress for Hispanic men and women.

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## 1. Interracial marriages and psychological health: conventional wisdom vs. contemporary understanding

Are there adverse mental health consequences of being a spouse or a partner in a relationship that crosses racial or ethnic boundaries? The fact that partners in inter-group relationships can experience intense disapproval and social pressure from members of both groups has been a resonant dramatic theme from *Medea* and *Othello* to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *Jungle Fever*. Early academic studies of inter-group relations in the United States suggested that the strain of this marginalization would take its toll on the psychological health of persons in relationships that crossed racial and ethnic boundaries (Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1935). This same point was re-iterated in scholarly studies of interracial marriages as late as the 1980s (Porterfield, 1982).

It is not clear today that this conventional wisdom is true for at least three reasons. First, social norms governing inter-group relations are in flux. Second, interracial and interethnic marriages are becoming more prevalent, and more diverse in racial and ethnic composition. Third, recent studies of the psychological health of individuals in multiracial circumstances raise questions about both the assumption that such experiences are always stressful, and the assumption that this stress is internalized as psychological distress (Root, 1996; Stephan and Stephen, 1991).

The majority of evidence about the consequences for psychological health of persons in mixed marriages has come from small clinical or convenience samples, but none to our knowledge employs a sizable population-based sample of intermarried persons. To address this gap in the literature, we explore the association between racial and ethnic composition of couples, specifically racial difference vs. sameness, and psychological distress in a range that indicates a risk for an affective disorder. We use a five-year pool of data from the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). Since 1997, the NHIS survey has included a screening instrument for non-specific psychological distress (Kessler et al., 2002). Because of the size of the multi-year NHIS data pool, we are able to investigate the prevalence of indications of psychological distress for a representative sample of persons who participate in marital or cohabiting unions that span racial or ethnic boundaries, and compare this to the prevalence of distress for persons from the same racial or ethnic group whose partner is a member of the same group.

We begin by posing two questions about the prevalence and correlates of psychological distress for persons in interracial unions. First, should we expect interracial relationships to be distressing at the turn of the twenty-first century? If so, what are the social and demographic characteristics that are most associated with increased distress? We address each of these questions below.

### 1.1. Are interracial marriages still distressing?

Scholars writing early in the twentieth century suggested that persons in inter-racial marriages were subject to conflicting social and cultural obligations leading to discrimination, lack of social support from family members, and, consequently, psychological disorganization and distress (Adams, 1969; Park, 1928; Stonequist, 1935). The broader context for these ideas lies in the legal history of interracial marriages. Anti-miscegenation laws, or those laws that explicitly forbade interracial marriage, remained on the books in several states until the Supreme Court decision *Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, declared

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