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# Interethnic Marriages in the United States: An In-Depth Look at Marital Challenges

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INTERETHNIC MARRIAGES IN THE UNITED STATES:  
AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT MARITAL CHALLENGES

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## **Thesis Summary**

As ethnic diversity increases in the United States, interethnic marriages are becoming increasingly prevalent. Despite their increasing rates, interethnic unions experience lower levels of relationship quality and are at a higher risk of divorce than same-ethnic unions. Other factors that influence marital outcomes include age at marriage, education, religion, and parental divorce. However, factors that influence specifically interethnic marriages include internal stressors, such as conflicting values and relationship expectations, and external stressors, such as a lack of social support and/or legal barriers. The best theoretical framework for studying interethnic unions is interdependence theory because it analyzes these factors and their effects on relationships on a more in-depth level than the other proposed theories. As such, a study design that illustrates the application of interdependence theory is proposed here to fill in the gap in our understanding of interethnic (specifically international) marriages in the literature.

# Interethnic Marriages in the United States: An In-Depth Look at Marital Challenges

## Introduction

In recent decades, the United States has seen significant increases in ethnic diversity. Mostly from Latin America and Asia, nearly 59 million immigrants have come to this country in the past 50 years, and today, 14% of the U.S. population is foreign born compared to only 5% in 1965 (Cohn and Caumont 2016). New Asian and Hispanic immigration is projected to contribute to the largest population increase in the U.S. over the next 50 years, and as a result, it is also predicted that by the year 2055, the U.S. will not have a single ethnic majority (Cohn and Caumont 2016).<sup>1</sup> With a changing demographic scene, it is reasonable to infer that heterogamous marriages, specifically interethnic ones, will be increasingly prevalent, continuing an increasing trend from the past few decades.

Interethnic (or more accurately, interracial) marriages were illegal in some states in the U.S. until the *Loving v. Virginia* case in 1967, when anti-“miscegenation” laws (i.e. laws against the mixing of races) were ruled unconstitutional. At the time, such unions made up less than 1% of the total number of new marriages. In 1980, interethnic marriages made up 6.7% of all new marriages (Wang 2012). Since then, such occurrences have continued to increase, making up 14.6% of new marriages in 2008 (Gaines, Clark, and Afful 2015) and 17% of new marriages in 2015 (Livingston and Brown 2017).

Another important clarification to make here is that in this context, interracial unions are considered a *subset* of interethnic unions. The term *race* here refers to inherited biological traits deemed by society to be socially significant (Aguirre and Turner 2009). The term *ethnicity* here refers to, “when a subpopulation of individuals reveals, or is perceived to reveal, shared historical experiences as well as unique organizational, behavioral, and cultural characteristics” (2009:3). Examples of racial differences include skin color, facial features, and stature, while examples of ethnicity include country of origin, religion, family practices, interpersonal style, language, beliefs, and values (Aguirre and Turner 2009:2-3). Because racial differences between people are trivial from a biological standpoint<sup>2</sup>, ethnic differences are a more appropriate way to group people in order to study how their perceived differences influence how they are treated by society. Thus, moving forward, the term *interethnic* also refers to *interracial* unions.

Despite increasing rates of interethnic marriage, these couples experience lower levels of relationship quality and are at a higher risk of divorce than same-ethnic couples (Wang et. al. 2012, Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008). Ethnic heterogamy resulting in different relationship and marital outcomes calls into question the causes of these disparities. Since these relationships have been established as less stable and of lower quality than same-ethnic unions, I want to examine why this is the case, especially as these unions (and multiethnic offspring<sup>3</sup>) are becoming increasingly common.

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<sup>1</sup> By the year 2065, whites are projected to be 46% of the population, Hispanics 24%, Asians 14%, blacks 13%, and all others 3%.

<sup>2</sup> Boundaries between groups are blurry and indistinct (e.g. where does “black” end and “white” begin?). Furthermore, the physical characteristics that make people distinctive are only a few alleles on genes that are not determinative of biological functions.

<sup>3</sup> As the U.S. becomes more ethnically diverse and interethnic marriage becomes more common, there has been an increase in the number of multi-ethnic babies. One-in-seven, or 14%, of U.S. infants were multiethnic in 2015, a nearly threefold increase from 1980 (5%) (Livingston 2017).

While interethnic marriages made up 17% of new marriages in 2015 (Livingston and Brown 2017), the frequency of interethnic marriage is continuously increasing. Asian and Hispanic ethnic groups were the most likely to intermarry with 25.7% of newlywed Hispanics and 27.7% of newlywed Asians intermarrying in 2010 (Wang et. al. 2012). Black newlyweds followed at 17.1%, and white newlyweds were the least likely to intermarry at 9.4%. Although whites were the least likely to intermarry, marriages between a white individual and a minority individual were the most common (as whites were the current ethnic majority) while intermarriages between two minority individuals were significantly less likely. White/Hispanic was the most common ethnic pairing among newlywed intermarried couples (42%), followed by white/Asian (15%), white/multiracial (12%), and white/black (11%) (Wang et. al. 2012).

Some sociologists speculate that interethnic marriage is an indicator of the permeability of boundaries between ethnic groups where high rates of intermarriage suggest high permeability and low rates low permeability (Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008, Afful, Clark, and Gaines 2015). Thus, the comparatively low rate of intermarriage between whites and blacks indicates the least amount of permeability (greatest social distance) between these two ethnic groups. However, it is also important to understand the quality and stability of these unions to understand in greater detail to what extent intermarriage represents openness between these two groups (Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008). If white/Hispanic is the most common ethnic pairing, but these couples are facing obstacles as a result of different ethnic backgrounds (e.g. a lack of mutual understanding and/or societal rejection), then the social distance between these two groups might be greater than intermarriage rates indicate. Thus, it is important to understand how these couples are faring and how their divorce rates compare to same-ethnic marriages in order to know if these marriage rates do in fact reflect greater social patterns.

In this thesis, I want to examine why interethnic marriages are less stable and of lower quality than same-ethnic unions. I intend to do so by first establishing variables that put all marriages at a higher risk of divorce. These factors are important to understand so that the role that ethnicity plays in marital outcomes can be differentiated from other influences (e.g. age, education, religiosity, and parental divorce). I will then go into more depth regarding interethnic couples and the challenges that are specific to them. External stressors, such as family rejection, residential challenges, and societal disapproval, and internal stressors, such as different attitudes and values, are specifically relevant to interethnic couples.

Following the assessment of the literature, I then propose a study design, providing a direct means by which to further understand this topic. My design includes necessary background information, information regarding how to identify and gain access to the sample population, suggested means by which to conduct the research, anticipated complications with suggested resolutions, and means of recording observations.

## **Divorce Risk Factors (All Marriages)**

### ***An Overview of Divorce Risk Factors***

Many of the risk factors for marital dissolution overlap in some way. For example, if two people marry very young (under age 20), it is highly unlikely that either of them has a bachelor's degree or higher at the time of marriage. Additionally, if an individual's parents have high levels of religiosity, there is an increased likelihood that that individual grew up in a two-parent, intact household as higher levels of religiosity decrease the likelihood of divorce (Amato and Hohmann-Marriott 2007). Thus, although these variables are discussed independently, they are all *interconnected*. That being said, researchers that look at these variables independently understand this overlap and take its effect into account when analyzing their data.

In addition to various external factors, differences in characteristics between married partners can cause marital difficulties. In sociology, homogamy refers to marrying within one's sociocultural group, usually defined by ethnicity, age, religion, socioeconomic status, and/or education (likes marrying likes). Heterogamy refers to marrying outside one's sociocultural group, as defined by any given set of criteria. Many studies have shown that heterogamous marriages (whether due to differences in religion, education, age, ethnicity, or something else) have more stress factors which lead to an increased likelihood of divorce (Lehrer 2006). These factors (religion, ethnicity, age, education, etc.) are relevant to the activities and decisions that the husband and wife execute together, as a couple. Thus, when spouses differ significantly in one or more ways, gains from marriage are lower and divorce is more likely.

### ***Age at Marriage***

Marrying at a young age, especially under age 20, significantly increases the likelihood of divorce (Bumpass and Martin 1989, DaVanzo and Rahman 1993, Amato and Rogers 1997). Bumpass and Martin (1989) found the presence of an inverse relationship between age at marriage and divorce risk, with teenagers twice as likely to separate as those who married after age 22. However, Lehrer (2006) questioned this linear relationship. Lehrer acknowledged that while there was a higher risk of divorce for those who married young (e.g. as teenagers), this trend did not remain constant as people aged.

Lehrer introduced two contradicting theories to explain why this finding (as age increased, the likelihood of divorce decreased) was only true up to a certain age. One such theory was called the "Learning Effect," which stated that a person who entered marriage at a later age had a greater understanding of foregone gains (knew what was given up in order to become part of the union). Thus, as people aged, they were less likely to terminate the marriage, even if it was imperfect, because they had more experience as a single adult prior to being wed. Her second theory was called the "Poor-Match Effect," which stated that as people aged, they lowered their expectations and settled for a suboptimal match ("suboptimal" defined as someone who differed substantially in religion, ethnicity, age, and/or education), resulting in a union with few gains and an increased likelihood of marital dissolution. This effect was suggested to be especially true for women since their ability to produce offspring declined at a younger age.

Lehrer found that both theories were supported. The poor-match effect was present as older women married younger men and men of different religious and/or educational backgrounds. However, the learning effect was also present and initially more dominant (marriages were more stable as age increased for women up until their late-twenties). As women entered their early thirties, the influence of the poor-match effect "caught up" to that of the learning effect, each counteracting the other. Thus, further increases in age at marriage (beyond late twenties) had no significant impact on marital outcomes. Although an older age at marriage did initially decrease the likelihood of divorce (especially being at least 22 years of age), this risk only continued to decrease until around age 30, at which point the risk of divorce stabilized (no longer decreased as age increased).

After examining the available literature on the subject, it was apparent that marrying at a young age, especially under age 22, did increase the likelihood of divorce. This relationship, however, was only negative until around age 30, at which point further increases in age at marriage had little to no effect on divorce risk. As previously discussed, these factors were all interconnected, so age at marriage influenced and was influenced by other factors (e.g. education, parental divorce). Despite these influences, age at marriage had an independent effect on divorce risk.

## **Education**

Higher levels of educational attainment at the time of marriage decrease the likelihood of divorce, just as an older age at marriage initially decreases divorce risk (Bramlett and Mosher 2002, Amato 2010, Aughinbaugh, Robles, and Sun 2013). More specifically, Bramlett and Mosher (2002) found that less education was associated with a greater probability of divorce. They also found that higher educational attainment correlated with a higher family income, both of which decreased divorce risk. These findings were consistent with those of Amato (2010), who cited that having a low level of education, being poor, and experiencing unemployment are all major risk factors for divorce.

Aughinbaugh, Robles, and Sun (2013) found that college graduates were more likely to ever marry (81% compared to 89%) and less likely to divorce. The first-marriage divorce rate of high school graduates (regardless of whether they had some college or not) was nearly 20 percentage points higher compared to the divorce rate of those with a bachelor's degree. The gap was closer to 30 percentage points when comparing the bachelor's degree group to the group with less than a high school diploma. These researchers also found that while more education decreased the likelihood of marital dissolution for both men and women, the gradient was steeper for men.

Additionally, there was also a strong correlation found between age at marriage and educational attainment. Early marriage (i.e. before age 18) was found to be more likely among women with less than a high school education (Bramlett and Mosher 2002). College graduates were found to marry at older ages (2.1 year average age difference) compared to those without a degree (Aughinbaugh, Robles, and Sun 2013). These findings were a revealing example of how these factors were interconnected and how they influenced each other in addition to independently influencing divorce risk. Being more educated correlated to an older age at marriage, both factors that decreased the likelihood of marital dissolution.

## **Religion**

High levels of religiosity were another factor found to decrease the probability of divorce, although different researchers speculated on why this was the case (Teachman 2002, Amato and Hohmann-Marriott 2007, Vaaler, Ellison, and Powers 2009). Amato (2010) argued that a low level of commitment increased divorce risk, and Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) suggested that high levels of religiosity increased the level of commitment between partners due to their religious values. Thus, even if a couple was in a high-stress marriage, they chose to remain married because divorce was against their religious beliefs. Amato and Hohmann-Marriott supported their claim by pointing out that the divorce rate increased from 1960 to 1980 at the same time that religious influence declined. As people's confidence in religious answers, trust in religious authorities, and amount of time spent praying and/or reading religious materials decreased, their beliefs about the sacred nature of marriage and the importance of this religious commitment also diminished.

In complementary findings, Vaaler, Ellison, and Powers (2009) found that more religious couples enjoyed higher marital satisfaction, faced a lower likelihood of domestic violence, and perceived fewer attractive options outside the marriage. Thus, people who were more religious were less prone to divorce due to improved marital quality and more dependency on their spouses.

Similar factors were measured for both of these studies. Amato and Hohmann-Marriott (2007) measured religiosity based on if the couple's wedding ceremony was religious or secular and if at least one spouse attended weekly religious services. Vaaler, Ellison, and Powers (2009) looked at these attributes in addition to measuring the degree of theological conservatism of each of the spouses and the level and type of religious divergence between

them. Both studies found that high levels of religiosity decreased the likelihood of divorce; however, Vaaler, Ellison, and Powers found that this was especially true when both partners regularly attended religious services as opposed to just one partner.

Religious divergence played an interesting role in that divorce risk decreased as long as both partners regularly attended services (even at different religious organizations). However, when one partner attended services more often than the other, then divorce was more likely, especially if the services attended took place at an exclusivist organization. This finding was an example of the influence of heterogamy within a relationship. In this instance, heterogamy between partners was illustrated by different levels of religiosity (rather than different religious beliefs). This heterogamy (i.e. difference in religious service attendance) increased divorce risk.

In summary, high levels of religiosity decreased divorce risk, especially when both partners regularly attended services. Although religiosity could influence and be influenced by other factors (e.g. age at marriage, education, parental divorce), high levels of religiosity played an independent role in improving marital outcomes.

### ***Parental Divorce***

The overlap of these variables (age at marriage, education, religion, parental divorce) is especially illustrated when studying parental divorce. The children of married parents were found to have higher relative educational gains (than the children of divorced parents) when their level of educational attainment was compared to that of their mothers (Keith and Finlay 1988). Additionally, children of remarried or divorced mothers had an earlier average age at marriage (Keith and Finlay 1988). These findings tied into the previous discussion: being more educated correlated to an older age at marriage, both factors that correlated to growing up in a household with two continuously married parents. All of these factors (more education, an older age at marriage, married parents) decreased the likelihood of marital dissolution (Keith and Finlay 1988, White 1990, Bramlett and Mosher 2002, Aughinbaugh, Robles, and Sun 2013).

Although having divorced parents was generally found to increase offspring divorce risk (White 1990, Amato and DeBoer 2001), one study found this influence to vary by sex and social class background (Keith and Finlay 1988). For daughters, the propensity to ever marry did not differ by parents' marital status; however, parental divorce increased the probability of divorce for their daughter(s). For sons, the probability of ever marrying was lower, and of ever divorcing higher, for those with a lower social class background. For sons of higher status backgrounds, parental divorce had no effect.

The relationship between parental divorce and offspring divorce risk was further examined by Amato and DeBoer (2001). These researchers compared the divorce risk of the offspring of maritally distressed parents (who remained married) to that of the offspring of divorced parents. Within the divorced parents group, they also compared high and low levels of discord prior to marital dissolution to see if the effects on offspring differed. Amato and DeBoer found that coming from a divorced family of origin increased the probability of marital dissolution of the offspring, even after controlling for many variables, which means the relationship was likely causal. They found that even in marriages with high levels of discord, it was the termination of the parents' marriage, rather than the presence of interpersonal conflict, which predicted offspring marital instability. Consistent with this finding, it was found that parental marital discord (in the absence of parental divorce) was not linked with divorce among offspring. They also found that low levels (rather than high levels) of marital distress prior to parental divorce were more likely to increase the divorce risk of the offspring. The proposed explanation for this finding was that parents illustrated to their offspring that the marital promise could be broken, even if the marriage was not seriously troubled. By contrast, high-distress, intact marriages demonstrated to their offspring that the marital contract could remain unbroken despite interpersonal conflict.

Parental divorce was yet another illustration of the interconnectedness of all of these factors. Despite their overlap, these factors (parental divorce, religion, education, and age at marriage) all had an independent effect on marital outcomes.

## **Interethnic Marriages**

### ***Inconsistencies in the Literature***

Before discussing factors specifically relevant to interethnic marriages, it is important to recognize problems with research on this population. To begin with, interethnic (or more accurately, interracial) marriages only became legal in all states in the U.S. in 1967, which means we have limited data on a small group. Beyond that, however, although interethnic unions became nationally legal in 1967, several research studies conducted on the quality of these relationships shortly thereafter held onto the bias that these relationships were destined to fail (White and Parham 1990, Porterfield 1978, Spickard 1989). Gaines (1997) pointed this out in his discussion of appropriate (and inappropriate) research models used to depict the behavior of interethnic spouses. His frustration pushed him to criticize social scientists on this issue, saying that “intellectual blinders” had prevented researchers from recognizing the potential functionality of these relationships (1997:361). As interethnic marriages become more commonplace, the hope is that this bias will decrease in the near future, preventing influence on future studies.

In addition to issues of bias in the research on interethnic relationships, divorce rates, especially as they pertain to well-defined ethnic groups, were difficult to ascertain. These rates were measured at the state (not the federal) level and did not take separations (involving no legal action) into account (Amato 2010). In addition to these discrepancies, some studies looked at the likelihood of divorce for newly-formed marriages, while others used the rate of divorce per 1,000 people. Still other studies looked at only first marriages and did not take second or higher order marriages into account. The classification of people by ethnic group was also a complicated task, especially with the increasing number of multi-ethnic individuals. Beginning with the 2000 census administered by the U.S. Census Bureau, individuals were allowed to identify with more than one “racial” group (although, as previously argued, ethnicity is the more appropriate label). For this census, individuals were first classified by ethnicity (Hispanic or non-Hispanic) and then race (white, black, Asian, American Indian, multiracial, or other). Hispanics could be of any race and were classified as simply “Hispanic” (as opposed to Hispanic-white or Hispanic-black). Although they could give both their race and ethnicity, their ethnicity (rather than being considered multi-ethnic) was how they were categorized. This categorization scheme may explain why white/Hispanic was the most common interethnic pairing as “Hispanic” could be an individual of any “race” who also considered him or herself to be ethnically Hispanic (although, as previously discussed, race is a social construct, and ethnicity is really a more accurate way of grouping individuals). Thus, moving forward, it is important to take these dilemmas into account when examining divorce rates for interethnic marriages.

Once these discrepancies are taken into account, a researcher can look more objectively at the divorce rate of interethnic unions. Based on the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, one study found that within ten years of marriage, interethnic couples had a 41% chance of divorce compared to a 31% chance for same-ethnic couples (Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008). A later study found that this pattern reflects some, but not all types of interethnic unions (Wang et. al. 2012). Interethnic marriages found to be the most vulnerable were those between white females and non-white males when compared to white/white couples. There was little to no difference regarding white male/non-white female couples, and white male/black female couples were found to be substantially less likely to divorce than

white/white couples (Wang et. al. 2012). Another study found that interethnic marriages were less stable than same-ethnic marriages, but the likelihood of marital dissolution depended on the ethnicity of the partners (Wang et. al. 2012).<sup>4</sup> These conflicting findings reflect the complexity of discerning the divorce rates of interethnic marriages.

All of this data, including biases against interethnic marriages, the convoluted task of determining divorce rates, and the inconsistent evidence regarding the stability of interethnic marriages, points to one simple conclusion: more research needs to be conducted on these types of unions. How do interethnic marriages differ and how are they similar to same-ethnic unions? What are some examples of interpersonal and contextual factors that specifically affect these relationships? I will now summarize the little we know about interethnic unions and then propose a new research model to further extend our understanding.

### ***Factors That Influence Marital Outcomes***

In one of the few articles to examine interethnic and same-ethnic relationships, Hohmann-Marriott and Amato (2008) attempted to explain *why* interethnic couples experienced lower relationship quality and higher rates of divorce. In this article, these researchers pointed out that the literature discussing the quality of these relationships was inconsistent, but then found that interethnic couples did indeed report lower quality relationships than same-ethnic couples. “Both women and men in interethnic unions express less satisfaction with their relationships, more conflict, and greater expectations that their unions will end [when compared to women and men in same-ethnic unions],” (2008:848). These researchers proposed that fewer shared values (i.e. an internal marital stressor) and weaker social support (i.e. an external marital stressor) contributed to less satisfaction in interethnic marriages, reflecting patterns found in other studies as well.

#### ***Internal Stressors***

One group of factors that distinguished interethnic from same-ethnic couples was internal stressors. These factors were problems that formed *within* the relationship as a result of individuals having two different ethnic backgrounds. When partners came from different backgrounds, they found it difficult to find common ground within their relationship, or had fewer shared values (Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008). Some examples of internal stressors included language barriers, differences in sexual scripts, and/or conflicting childrearing perspectives (Laurenceau, Lewis-Smith, and Troy 2006).

Internal stressors were especially relevant to interethnic marriages because conflicting values and relationship expectations were more likely between individuals from two different cultural backgrounds (Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008). “People prefer to marry someone who has similar cultural resources because this enables them to develop a common lifestyle in marriage that produces social confirmation and affection,” (Kalmijn 1998:400). Joint activities, such as raising children, purchasing a house, and spending leisure time, became more complicated with cultural differences between spouses, given the potential for conflicting preferences. Mutual understanding (such as agreeing upon the meaning of family) was important to develop during the formation of a relationship (Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008). However, if partners had different perspectives, events and situations were interpreted differently, leading to more misunderstandings. These mishaps led to increased stress and conflict within the relationship, diminishing relationship quality (Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008). Indeed, discordance, as a result of different attitudes and values, decreased the quality of marriages (Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008). These internal stressors, or sources of

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<sup>4</sup> Black/white marriages were the least stable, followed by Hispanic/white. White/Asian marriages were found to be more stable than white/white unions.

conflict within interethnic relationships, indicated why these couples were at a higher risk of divorce than same-ethnic unions.

### *External Stressors*

In contrast to internal stressors, external discord was caused by external pressures and/or stereotypes that were placed on the couple rather than conflict between spouses (i.e. conflict between the couple and external sources rather than conflict between partners). Examples of societal external stressors included stares from others, mistreatment by personnel (e.g. at restaurants and hotels), and direct acts of discrimination (e.g. obscene phone calls, hate mail, and vandalized property) (Laurenceau, Lewis-Smith, and Troy 2006).

Another type of external stress was a lack of social support resulting from negative biases held by close friends and family. Poor relationships with parents and in-laws, who likely held previous biases against specific ethnic groups, especially caused strain on marriages (Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008). Even if people claimed to not be prejudiced against an ethnic group, their tone changed when their son or daughter was involved in a romantic relationship with a member of that group. According to Hohmann-Marriott and Amato (2008), interethnic relationships were more difficult to sustain due to family disapproval resulting from marrying across ethnic boundaries.<sup>5</sup> Friends and family members disapproving of interethnic relationships, or a lack of social support, affected relationships negatively, resulting in less relationship satisfaction and less commitment by partners to the relationship (Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008).

Looking at external stressors from the macro- rather than the micro-level, Kalmijn (1998) stated that the family unit, the church, and the state were all third parties that sanctioned intermarriage (although society [how couples were treated by the general public] was another influential factor). The influence of the family was limited as family members gave advice/opinions and withdrew support following marriage, but were unable to otherwise decide for the couple. Some churches forbade interfaith marriages, while others allowed it with the stipulation that the children were raised within that church (and could not practice multiple religions). Churches had slightly more influence as a church could refuse to marry a couple, and thus, the couple was viewed as unmarried within that religious context.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to family and religion, the state had the most influence on interethnic marriages, as interracial unions were illegal in some states in the United States until 1967, and thus, those that broke the law could be imprisoned or otherwise punished. Prior to its legalization, this barrier to interethnic marriage was the strongest deterrent as both partners had to deem the relationship worthy of breaking the law and facing possible legal consequences in addition to ridicule and/or disapproval from those who supported the laws. If partners were constantly questioning the value of their relationship, especially if its value was decreased by external factors, then the resulting stress on the relationship likely caused spouses to divorce (or couples to break up) as a result of significantly decreased relationship quality.

Both internal and external stressors illustrated factors that were unique to interethnic relationships. Having different attitudes and values (which was more likely between people with two different cultural backgrounds) and external obstacles (such as family disapproval or laws

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<sup>5</sup> This type of strain on interethnic relationships ties into my previous discussion about whether interethnic marriage rates reflect social distances between ethnic groups. Based on this finding, interethnic marriage rates did not accurately reflect the permeability of boundaries between groups. Although individuals of different groups permeated the social boundary, the quality of their relationship was diminished because the boundary was still considered impassable by their friends and families. Thus, although intermarriage was occurring between ethnic groups, their rates did not reflect greater social patterns.

<sup>6</sup> This is an example of how an individual's social network can be diminished following marriage. Being viewed as unmarried by a church and its congregation might also cause an individual to question his or her religious identity, which really puts the value of the marriage under scrutiny.

against interethnic marriage), especially those that diminished social networks, resulted in more strain on relationships and diminished relationship quality. Not only have researchers in the field explained differences in interethnic and same-ethnic relationships, but they have also used theoretical traditions to further explain these findings.

### ***Theoretical Foundations***

There were several competing theories that attempted to explain why interethnic unions were at a higher risk of divorce and experienced a lower level of relationship quality than same-ethnic unions: equity theory, resource exchange theory, and interdependence theory. While all of these theories could have applied to any type of marriage, theorists used components of these theories to specifically examine marital outcomes in interethnic couples, with varying levels of success.

Equity theory (Laurenceau, Lewis-Smith, and Troy 2006) argued that a balance of outcomes (contributions) within a relationship was necessary for satisfaction and commitment. Thus, when individuals were under or over benefited, the result was dissatisfaction and distress between partners. In this study, these researchers theorized that as a result of unique challenges and obstacles (internal and external stressors), interethnic partners might have found it difficult to equally contribute to a relationship. For example, family opposition might have been seen as a negative factor that one or both partners had to combat (each within their own families) in order to maintain a positive relationship. Thus, if one partner was viewed as not contributing as much (i.e. reacted positively or indifferently toward these negative sentiments), the other partner might have felt under benefited as a result (i.e. felt like he or she contributed more than his or her partner). This study, however, concluded that interethnic and same-ethnic couples were similarly likely to perceive being under or over benefited, and thus other theories more accurately described interethnic unions and their specific challenges.

Resource exchange theory was also used to try to explain the differences between same-ethnic and interethnic couples. Interpersonal resource exchange theory argued that affection and respect (intangible resources) were reciprocated in personal relationships while money, goods, services and information (tangible resources) were reciprocated in both impersonal and personal relationships (Gaines, Gurung, Lin, and Pouli 2006). These researchers stated that ethnicity influenced interpersonal behavior due to individual differences, which expanded on the internal stressors previously discussed. People from two different cultural backgrounds were more likely to have different attitudes and values, attributes that influenced interpersonal behavior (i.e. made it more difficult for interethnic couples to exchange affection and respect). Thus, in this context, it was predicted that the unique internal stressors of interethnic relationships limited the ability of these couples to exchange intangible resources when compared to same-ethnic couples. However, these researchers found interpersonal resource exchange (i.e. the reciprocation of affection and respect) to be common in all types of romantic relationships, regardless of the ethnicities of the partners. Despite internal stressors decreasing relationship quality, interethnic partners were still able to reciprocate affection and respect in their relationships. Thus, a different theoretical framework was needed to explain the gap in relationship quality between interethnic and same-ethnic unions.

In contrast, interdependence theory had more success in explaining the cause of this gap. This theory specified three critical components of interpersonal relationships: the comparison level (costs and rewards) of the current relationship measured against the comparison level for alternatives (Laurenceau, Lewis-Smith, and Troy 2006); individuals foregoing short-term, selfish behaviors in order to maintain long-term relationships (Gaines, Gurung, Lin, and Pouli 2006); and “the mutual influence that relationship partners exert upon each other’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior” (Gaines, Clark, and Afful 2015:653). Although the first two components described aspects of personal relationships that applied equally to

interethnic and same-ethnic relationships, the third component was the most relevant to interethnic relationships. Gaines, Clark, and Afful (2015) elaborated on this component, explaining that the needs, thoughts, and motives of two individuals shaped their interaction, depending on the context of the specific social situation.

As it applied to interethnic marriage, these researchers described interdependence theory as a means by which increased attention could be paid to the mutual influence of attitudes and behavior among people who married across ethnic lines. For example, the needs, thoughts, and motives of an individual were influenced by that person's ethnicity (referring to how culture influences attitudes and values). When two partners were unaware of their internal stressors (i.e. individual characteristics that caused conflict between them), these needs, thoughts, and motives went unnoticed and were thus left unaddressed. Between same-ethnic partners who held similar values and attitudes, perhaps these needs, thoughts, and motives could be left undiscussed because their similar ethnic backgrounds led the couple to have more in common without the discussion of differences. However, in interethnic relationships, because these individuals were more likely to have conflicting values and different relationship expectations, these differences required more attention in order for partners to better understand the mutual influence they had on each other. Once this mutual influence was understood, partners had a better understanding of the causes of their marital challenges and could move forward to appropriately address these challenges.

Similarly, the negative attitudes of outsiders could be attenuated through the application of interdependence theory. Once the needs, thoughts, and motives of two individuals were made known, this information could then be used to analyze the causes of unresolved conflict between them. For example, people claimed to not be prejudiced against an ethnic group, but they changed their tone when a son or a daughter was involved in a romantic relationship with someone of a different ethnicity. If this outsider had taken the time to learn about the motives of the family member and the ethnic identity of the new spouse, he or she might have become more accepting, or at least more empathetic, toward the married couple. Even if some points of conflict were left unresolved, increased understanding between the two parties would have been a step toward mutual acceptance as well as a means of decreasing external stress on the interethnic couple.

As interethnic marriages become increasingly common, it is important to have a better understanding of these internal and external stressors so that they can be properly addressed. As such, interdependence theory is the best framework for future studies as it analyzes these factors on a more in-depth level than the other suggested theories.

## **Research Proposal**

### ***Background Information***

The available literature on interethnic couples is sparse and inconsistent. In addition, what we do know is based on studies that measure interethnic couples in various ways, making findings less generalizable than would be desirable. One particular subset of interethnic couples about which we know even less is *international* couples (Gaines et al. 2006). This oversight is perhaps due to a lack of a country of origin question on the U.S. Census (Gaines et al. 2006), making it difficult to measure the rates of these marriages. Compared to other interethnic (especially international) relationships, interracial relationships have received greater scrutiny in the literature (Gaines et al. 2006), perhaps due to the urgency of race relations as a social problem in the United States. Indeed, anti-“miscegenation” laws prohibited marriages where partners were of two different races, but did not outlaw international marriages per se, so long

as the individuals were of the same race.<sup>7</sup> I am proposing a research project to be conducted at the University of South Carolina in order to fill in this gap in our understanding of international marriages in the literature.

Despite the fact that international marriages currently comprise a small percentage of all marriages, international marriage rates will likely increase in the near future, in part because of the increase in Asian and Hispanic immigration to the United States. Additionally, modern technology and advancements resulting in globalization are facilitating romantic relationships between people of different birth countries. International couples may also be facing unique internal and external challenges, such as language barriers, the challenges imposed by long-distance, and the difficulty of leaving home countries. These circumstances illustrate why it is essential for more research to be conducted on this population, especially as there is currently very little or none available.

I propose a qualitative study to learn more about these couples and to pave the way for future, quantitative research. A quantitative study at this stage would not contribute to the formation of hypotheses about these relationships, which is what is currently needed. Instead, I am suggesting the use of semistructured interviews and open-ended surveys for more open-ended analysis. It would be ideal to do a longitudinal study, interviewing the same couples multiple times over the course of years, but as a senior undergraduate student, I have limited available time and resources.

### **Study Design**

Since international couples are uncommon, I will use respondent-driven sampling (Heckathorn 1997) to find married couples with one American-born and one foreign-born partner. One location to find spouses will be at the University of South Carolina. Since there is a concentration of foreign-born people (international students) at the university, I will start here in hopes of finding people who know of or are involved in international relationships. I will approach students at the Maxcy House, International Student Services (the Close Hipp Building), and the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs. I will also approach the sociology classes at the university. Although they may or may not know or be a part of an international relationship, sociology students might be more likely to participate or inform others as they have a better understanding of the importance of sociological research.

Additional places to find participants will be at local religious organizations, places such as the Islamic Center of Columbia, Beth Shalom Synagogue, St. Peter's Catholic Church, and Main Street United Methodist Church. However, there is a risk of bias occurring as a result of religious affiliation. For example, if I am studying international couples, but the overwhelming majority of my participants are Muslim, international couples, I might find stressors for Muslim couples in the United States rather than the effects of different nationalities between partners. I intend to decrease or eliminate the presence of this bias by approaching different religious denominations. Religion is also a place where international partners can find common ground, despite being born in different nations. Thus, these congregations are possibly more likely places to find international couples than the general public. I can approach people at these

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<sup>7</sup> As previously discussed, ethnicity is a more appropriate way of grouping individuals as racial differences between people are trivial from a biological standpoint. With this point in mind, it is important to note that racial differences (which are deemed by *society* to be significant) are still used today to distinguish between groups of people. Even though people from two different countries might have two different ethnic identities, society might consider them to be of the same *race* due to biological similarities (e.g. skin color, facial features, or stature). Conversely, society might consider race to be the largest distinguishing factor between two partners, even if the couple considers their ethnic backgrounds (different nationalities) the greatest source of heterogamy.

locations by speaking with whoever is in charge of the congregation and making an announcement before or after services.

Even after planning research strategies, possible complications can occur that obstruct research or skew results. One possible complication is obtaining a non-biased sample of the population. Through the use of respondent-driven sampling, bias can be decreased through the use of a dual incentive system (Heckathorn 1997). Using this sampling method, there is a primary reward for participating and a secondary reward for recruiting others into the study. The sample is then weighed to compensate for non-random recruitment patterns, providing unbiased population estimates and insight into the precision of these estimates (Heckathorn 1997).

Regarding sample size, it is important to note that this is a qualitative study designed to give us more insight into the circumstances of international couples. As a senior undergraduate student, I have limited available time and resources that also play a role in determining how many couples to survey and to interview. Thus, I have decided to survey approximately 50 couples and to interview approximately 25 couples with the objective of having attainable numbers that still provide valuable insight. Depending on the results of this study, future researchers can decide if a larger sample size is needed in order to provide more in-depth information on international couples. Before conducting the study with this sample population, I will also pretest the survey and interview questions with a small number of test subjects to make sure the questions are clear and understandable. Thus, if any of the questions are ambiguous, I can modify them before conducting the study with the larger sample population.

As previously discussed, I want to distribute the anonymous survey to approximately 50 international married couples (or 100 individuals). If I meet couples where one spouse does not wish to participate, I will still collect the data from the other spouse who does participate, but will keep his or her data separate from the other couple data and will not count his or her input into the total goal of 50 couples. (Thus, the 50 couples denotes married couples where both spouses participate.) The anonymous survey will consist of 12 closed- and 2 open-ended questions. An example survey is as follows:

Circle one response as you feel it pertains to you and your spouse. For research purposes, partners need to fill out this survey individually.

### Internal Stressors

1. How often do you and your spouse find it difficult to communicate due to a language barrier?

Never (0 times per year)      Rarely ( $\approx$  3 times per year)      Sometimes ( $\approx$  3 times per month)

Often ( $\approx$  3 times per week)

All the time ( $\geq$  1 time per day)\*

\*These time frames for all the time, often, sometimes, rarely, and never also apply to questions 2-7.

2. How often does miscommunication happen between you and your spouse?

Never

Rarely

Sometimes

Often

All the time

3. How often do you and your spouse disagree on how to spend your leisure time together?

Never

Rarely

Sometimes

Often

All the time



No Challenge at All

Extremely Challenging

12. On a scale of 1-10, how challenging was it for you and your spouse to marry, possibly due to familial, social, religious, legal, or other obstacles?

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

No Challenge at All

Extremely Challenging

### General Questions

13. In your opinion, what are some additional challenges, if any, faced by you and your spouse as a result of being from two different countries?

14. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you, and have a nice day.

The interviews will be roughly half an hour, and recorded so that I can transcribe the conversations for further analysis. They will be semi-structured; I will have a list of 6 open-ended questions to ask, but I will also be willing to go on interesting detours. My goal is to conduct a semi-structured interview with 25 couples. I would prefer to interview partners individually and will offer an additional incentive for individual interviews. However, if couples feel uncomfortable or prefer to be interviewed together, I will also allow this format, decreasing the amount of the incentive. I will also take into account if partners were interviewed individually or together when analyzing the data. Similar to the survey, I will still collect data from one spouse if only one spouse wishes to be interviewed. However, I will keep the data separate from the other data collected and will not count an interview with one partner toward the total goal of interviewing 25 couples. Some example interview questions are:

### Internal Stressors

1. Do you and your spouse have problems communicating as a result of language barriers or other obstacles? If so, how do these miscommunications affect your relationship?
2. Do you and your spouse have different opinions regarding marital roles? Do one or both of you work full-time? How do you share household roles (e.g. taking care of children, cooking, cleaning, etc.)?
3. Do you and your spouse have similar priorities about how money and/or time should be spent (i.e. agree on what is most important)? How do you like to spend your leisure time together? If your priorities differ, how do you and your spouse come to a resolution?

### External Stressors

4. How did your families and close friends react when you told them you were getting married to someone from a different country? Did their opinions change over time?
5. Did you encounter any religious or social resistance before or after you married? Was your religious organization accepting of your union? How did your friends, colleagues, teammates, and/or classmates react to your marriage?

6. Were there any legal barriers that you had to overcome before or after you were married in order to live in the same country? How difficult was the process? Have all legal questions since been resolved?

As outlined in the examples, these questions are asking specifically about the internal and external stressors that affect interethnic unions. By pointing out possible internal and external stressors, I, as a researcher, am drawing attention to the needs, thoughts, and motives of individual partners and investigating how these attributes shape interaction between spouses. Thus, these questions illustrate the application of interdependence theory as they explore “the mutual influence that relationship partners exert upon each other’s thoughts, feelings, and behavior” (Gaines, Clark, and Afful 2015:653). More specifically, questions about problems communicating and differences in regards to priorities, preferences, values, and relationship expectations examine how these internal stressors affect international relationships. As Hohmann-Marriott and Amato (2008) observed, discordance, as a result of different attitudes and values, decreases relationship quality. These questions aim to detect the presence of these differences and to understand in more detail how these factors affect relationships.

Similarly, questions about external stressors analyze the presence of these factors and their effect on international unions, especially regarding social networks. Six of the eight external stressor questions on the example survey ask about how an individual’s international relationship affected or was affected by outside relationships (i.e. relationships with parents, siblings, extended family, the spouse’s family, friends, and acquaintances). It is important to ask these questions because a lack of social support leads to less relationship satisfaction and less commitment by partners to the relationship (Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008). The example questions about legal barriers investigate additional external stressors. Legal barriers can be difficult to overcome, putting stress on a relationship due to the time, money, and effort required to surpass these obstacles. Depending on their rigidity, legal barriers can also cause outsiders to question their support of a relationship, possibly further diminishing social networks (and therefore, relationship satisfaction). All of these factors tie into interdependence theory because they further our understanding of how these needs, thoughts, and motives shape interactions between partners and between the married couple and people external to the relationship.

## Conclusion

It is evident that we need to conduct more research on interethnic relationships in order to improve our understanding of these unions. Specifically, there have been very few, or no, studies conducted on *international* unions and their specific challenges. In order to better understand these relationships and to discover their unique stressors, we need to use interdependence theory as it is currently the best framework for studying interethnic unions. The study design proposed here, including the interview and survey questions, illustrates an example of the application of interdependence theory. Through the execution of this study, we can understand more in-depth the factors that affect specifically international unions, which will give us more insight into why interethnic relationships in general experience lower levels of quality and are at a higher risk of divorce. Although international unions are a subset of all interethnic relationships, there is currently a dearth in the literature on this subject that needs to be addressed because international marriage rates will likely increase in the near future as a result of globalization and increasing rates of Asian and Hispanic immigration to the United States. This qualitative study proposal is the best way to move forward to begin filling in the gap in our understanding of international marriages in the literature.

Of all of the theoretical frameworks that were proposed, interdependence theory was the most appropriate for studying interethnic unions because it had the most success in explaining

the gap in relationship quality between interethnic and same-ethnic unions. While the other proposed theories described aspects of personal relationships that applied equally to interethnic and same-ethnic unions, interdependence theory specified what separated one type of union from the other (unique internal and external stressors) and described how to address the gap in relationship quality (by increasing attention paid to the mutual influence of attitudes and behavior). Thus, this was the theoretical framework I used in my study design.

It is also important to note here that determining the relationship quality and divorce rates of interethnic versus same-ethnic unions proved to be a complicated task. Inconsistent evidence regarding the stability of these marriages, unclear methods of measuring divorce, and biases against interethnic marriages were all factors that illustrated the need for more research on these types of relationships. Despite the inconsistent evidence, the overall consensus was that these couples experienced lower levels of relationship quality and were at a higher risk of divorce than same-ethnic couples (Wang et. al. 2012, Hohmann-Marriott and Amato 2008). The proposed explanation for this gap in relationship quality and marital outcomes was that these couples were facing unique internal and external stressors that differentiated them from same-ethnic unions (referring to the same factors that were addressed by interdependence theory). Internal stressors, such as conflicting values and relationship expectations, and external stressors, such as a lack of social support and/or legal barriers, were factors that were specifically relevant to interethnic unions.

Although these unique factors were essential to understanding the dynamics of interethnic marriages, it was also important to differentiate them from attributes that made all marriages more likely to end in divorce. It was found that parental divorce, religion, education, and age at marriage all correlated to one another in addition to independently affecting marital outcomes. Being more educated correlated to an older age at marriage, both factors that correlated to growing up in a household with two continuously married parents. A higher level of educational attainment, an older age at marriage (up to age 30), higher levels of religiosity (especially regular attendance of religious services), and having married parents all decreased divorce risk.

In closing, interethnic marriages will continue to be a growing presence in the United States as our country becomes more ethnically diverse. Since these relationships have been established as less stable and of lower quality than same-ethnic marriages, it is imperative that we investigate more into why this is the case and what can be done to address this issue. This research is important for the marital outcomes of these unions as well as the outcomes of their multiethnic offspring as the United States continues to change and evolve.

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