Black-White Interracial Marriage Trends, 1850-2000

Aaron Gullickson[*]

Sociology Department

Columbia University

January 31, 2006

Abstract

This article traces the trend in black/white interracial marriage between 1850-2000, using microlevel Census samples. The results show that the frequency of interracial marriage has been highly responsive to the dynamic nature of broader race relations. The growth of the Jim Crow racial state in the South and segregation in the North led to a drastic decline in the frequency of interracial marriage from 1880 to 1930. The frequency of interracial marriage increased with the waning of this system between 1930 and 1940, but only began to increase at a steady and rapid rate in the Post Civil Rights era. When disaggregated by region, the results suggest a process of "latent" racism in the non-South, and one of unequal gender suppression in the South. Results by nativity and education are also discussed.

Introduction

The study of interracial marriage has experienced a Renaissance in the last thirty years. The topic of interracial marriage has always been of interest to social scientists, but the rarity of the event proved a serious barrier to empirical study for most of the last century. The sparsity of data largely limited scholarly work to impressionistic accounts and theoretical arguments, infrequently interspersed with small, geographically-specific data samples. The rapid increase in the frequency of interracial marriage since the 1960s and the increasing sophistication of data collection and analysis are largely responsible for the renewal of interest in the topic. This recent scholarship has vastly improved our knowledge of interracial marriage in the period since 1960. However, there has

1

been little effort to place this research within a larger historical context, despite the recent advent of microlevel Census data dating back as far as 1850. In fact, to date, no study has attempted to establish the trend outside of the period since 1960. Although rare, interracial marriages have always existed, and understanding the historical trend provides insight into the ebb and flow of a broader openness to interracial contact. The larger historical record may also help address unresolved issues in the study of interracial marriage today.

This article makes use of historical Census data to track the trend in black/white interracial marriage from 1850-2000. I also examine differences in this trend by region, nativity, and education. Because of the need for an overview of this trend, I restrict myself to a broad level of generality, even though each of these topics is worthy of more extensive and detailed analysis. The results lead to several important insights and indicate potential for future research which has up until now been ignored.

Background

The History of Interracial Sex

Interracial marriage is only one of many possible forms of interracial union formation. Historically, the surreptitious and fleeting nature of interracial sex has made the connection between interracial families and interracial marriage somewhat loose.[1] Because interracial marriages are some subset of all interracial sexual unions, an overview of the broader trend in interracial sex will help place interracial marriage in historical context. Figure 1 gives a stylistic representation of the most likely trend in interracial sexual contact from the colonial period to the present, based on the work of a large number of historians.
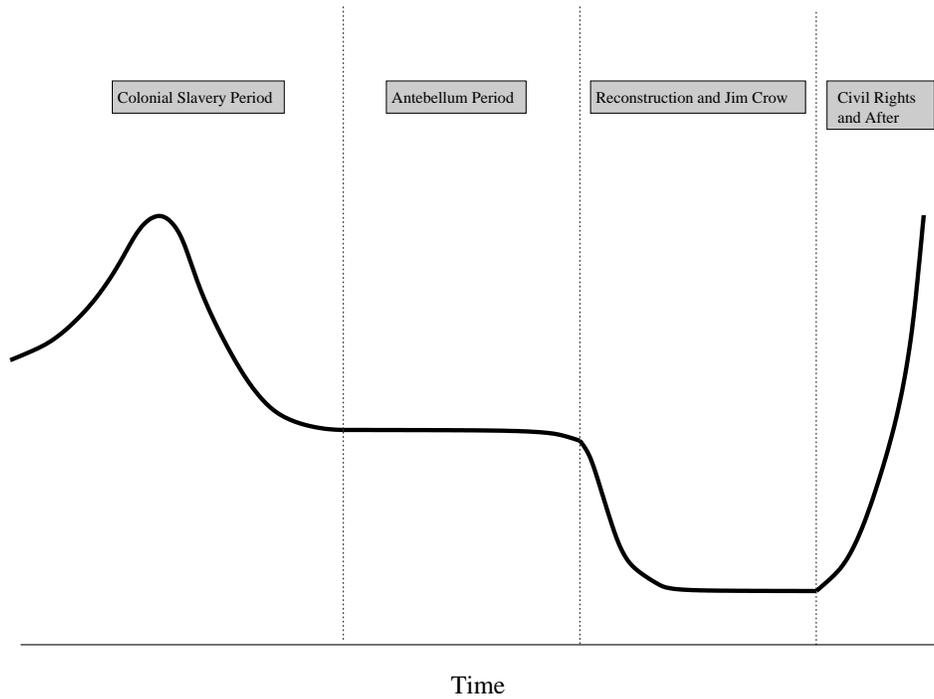
Interracial sexual contact likely peaked sometime during the early colonial period when white indentured servants and black slaves were in close contact in large numbers. The practice of keeping white indentured servants was on the decline and African slavery was on the rise, leading to a transitional period in which the two groups often lived and worked in close quarters. This interracial exposure at a time when folk ideologies of racial difference were still in their infancy probably produced the highest level of interracial sexual contact ever observed in this country. As Edmund S. Morgan notes, "It was common, for example, for servants and slaves to run away together, steal hogs together, get drunk together. It was not uncommon for them to make love together."[2]

---

[1] By "interracial families," I mean kin networks that cross racial boundaries, even if some kin relations are not fully acknowledged.

[2] Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, second edition, [1980] 1995, pp. 38-39; James Hugo Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia*

Figure 1: Stylistic depiction of interracial sexual contact across United States history

| Colonial Slavery Period | Antebellum Period | Reconstruction and Jim Crow | Civil Rights and After |

Time

The rise of interracial sex led white elites to create anti-miscegenation statutes in an effort to define boundaries between white servants and black slaves, whom slave-owners feared might band together in open rebellion. The children from such unions also posed a potential problem for the emerging racial system as elites grappled with a classification of people that would reinforce the institution of slavery. Efforts to reduce the level of interracial sex were assisted by a decline in the practice of white indentured servanthood which increased the segregation of black slaves from white laborers.[3]

Some interracial sexual contact persisted, however, both on and off the plantation. On the plantation, interracial sex occurred between frequently unwilling black female slaves and white male slave-owners and overseers. Off the plantation, we have considerably less information about

and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860, The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1970, pp. 186-190; Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 1975, pp. 327.

[3]Audrey Smedley, *Race in North America: Origin and Evolution of a Worldview*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1999, pp. 103-104; Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860* op. cit., p. 186; Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* op. cit., pp. 327-337.

interracial activities, but clearly, interracial unions must have been less coercive outside of the slavery institution. Historical evidence suggests that local white communities were surprisingly tolerant of interracial unions between whites and free blacks in the Ante-bellum period, despite legal prohibitions in many areas.[4]

With the end of slavery, whites were given new incentive to police the color line. Prior to Emancipation, mixed-race children on plantations were not a significant concern because they were slaves irrespective of parentage. Off the plantation, the small size of the free black population made mixed race children a minor issue. After Emancipation, miscegenation threatened an emerging biracial order that demanded an end to interracial sex and its ambiguous product. Whites in the South responded to the imperatives of this new system with an almost paranoid zeal, although concern focused heavily on the "purity" of white women, while white men were apparently given more leeway to engage in sexual relations with black women.[5]

It is widely believed that the frequency of interracial sexual relations declined after Emancipation in the face of growing white supremacy, extralegal violence, and racial segregation. The exact timing of this decline is uncertain, but most scholars have assumed that it began shortly after Emancipation due to the increased physical and social distance between blacks and whites.[6]

Black/white sexual relations were apparently at an all time low by the early twentieth century. Jim Crow was firmly established in the South and a less formal system of residential segregation was established elsewhere. By the second half of the twentieth century, interracial marriage began to increase in frequency and interracial sex overall presumably followed a similar pattern. This growth no doubt corresponds to the transformation of the racial state during the Civil Rights period.

---

[4]Gary B. Mills, "Miscegenation and the free negro in antebellum "angle" Alabama: A reexamination of southern race relations", *The Journal of American History*, 68(1):16–34, 1981;Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1997.

[5]Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* op. cit., pp. 336; Johnston, *Race Relations in Virginia and Miscegenation in the South, 1776-1860* op. cit., pp. 183; Hodes, *White Women, Black Men* op. cit.

[6]See Williamson, *New People* op. cit., pp. 88-91; Randall Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption*, Pantheon Books, New York, 2003, p. 70; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, Harper and Row, New York, 1988, pp. 85-86; and Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery*, Vintage Books, New York, 1980, p. 266. For a different interpretation of the immediate Post-bellum period but support for the overall decline, see Louis Wirth and Herbert Goldhammer, *The Hybrid and the Problem of Miscegenation*, in: Otto Klineberg, (ed.), *Characteristics of the American Negro*, pp. 253–369. Harper and Brothers, 1944, p. 272-275. Aside from numerous impressionistic accounts, the only evidence of a decline comes from two non-representative collections of black genealogies from the early twentieth century in which the amount of interracial mixing had declined across generations. See Melville J. Herskovits, *The American Negro: A Study in Racial Crossing*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1928, p. 30; Caroline Bond Day, *A Study of Some Negro-White Families in the United States*, Negro Universities Press, Westport, CN, [1932]1970.

4

Interracial Marriage

Interracial sex has occurred in a variety of guises including rape, commercial exchanges, chance encounters, extramarital affairs, and long-term coresident relationships. Because of the social taboos associated with it, most interracial sex has likely occurred outside of marriage. Nonetheless, interracial marriage is the most stable and legitimate form of union, and therefore it is a better marker of the social distance between groups than more fleeting sexual encounters.

Interracial marriage was, of course, essentially impossible for the slave population, and thus my analysis of interracial marriage only applies to the free black population in the years prior to Emancipation. Even among the free population before and after Emancipation, long-term interracial unions frequently occurred outside of legally defined marriage because anti-miscegenation laws made such marriages nearly impossible. Nonetheless, many mixed-race couples simply lived as husband and wife without the consent of the state. Consider, for example, the words of a black woman living with a white man in a Mississippi town of the 1930s:

> A few words of marriage ceremony what do they mean? I feel I'm living a great deal more decently with a union based on love than some who are married before the law. And I don't feel that I've heaped any disgrace on Jim [her son]. He's got a dad and a good one who is doing everything possible to be a good dad to him. And we live in our little shack, happily, and according to my standards, decently.[7]

For all intents and purposes, this family lived as any other married family of the time period. Since my interest is in de facto rather than de jure marriage, I include such common-law marriages in the broad conceptualization of marriage used here.

Because of my interest in analyzing trends across time, a key question is how the relationship between interracial marriage and other forms of interracial sex may have changed over time. The factors that reduced or increased interracial marriage over time may have had a similar effect on other forms of interracial sex, in which case interracial sex and marriage would follow similar patterns over time. On the other hand, reductions and increases in interracial marriage may have been accomplished purely by shifts from more to less legitimate forms of union and vice-versa in which case the overall level of interracial sex may not have changed at all. The data are not available to fully answer this question, but I will discuss the plausibility of several scenarios in my discussion of the results.

Before pursuing this issue, however, I need to establish the actual trend in interracial marriage. No research has explored the trend in the nineteenth century. Studies from the first half of the

---

[7]Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner and Mary R. Gardner, *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1941, pp. 33-34.

twentieth century have suggested a decline over this time period in the frequency of interracial marriage, although the evidence is either largely impressionistic or based on small geographically-specific samples. Since 1960, the frequency of interracial marriage has increased at a constant exponential rate.[8]

In addition to the overall trend, there are other questions that can be addressed by examining the trend among particular sub-populations. First, the South and non-South differ considerably in terms of both racial composition and race relations. The smaller relative size of the black population and a less rigid caste system in the non-South may have contributed to a higher frequency of interracial marriage. On the other hand, research on segregation has revealed that despite a less formalized racial state, de facto racism in the non-South was similar once blacks were a large enough demographic group for whites to take notice.[9] In this case, there might not be much underlying difference in interracial marriage once compositional differences between the two regions are factored out.

Second, while we know that intermarriage between white natives and immigrants has played an important role in the assimilation of immigrant groups throughout US history, we are less knowledgeable about the role that intermarriage between blacks and immigrants has played. On the one hand, immigrants may be more open to interracial marriage because immigrants are less knowledgeable than natives about the U.S. racial hierarchy and because the initial isolation of immigrant groups from white natives makes them the potential allies and neighbors of blacks. On the other hand, immigrant groups have often emphasized their distinction from blacks as a way of gaining social honor for their ethnic group within the complex ethno-racial prestige hierarchy of the United States.[10] Therefore, the relationship between immigrant status and interracial marriage may be a dynamic one depending upon the composition and age of immigrant enclaves.

Finally, I can examine how the education of both blacks and whites affects their likelihood of interracial marriage. Perhaps the most frequently asked question about interracial marriage is just what "class" of people intermarry. Two major theories make somewhat contradictory predictions. According to status exchange theory, high-status blacks will exchange their status for the racial

---

[8]For a largely impressionistic account, see St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, revised and enlarged edition, 1993 [1945], pp. 136-137. For a compilation of early studies, see Wirth et al., *The Hybrid and the Problem of Miscegenation* op. cit., pp. 276-282. For the post-Civil Rights period, see Matthijs Kalmijn, "Trends in black/white intermarriage", *Social Forces*, 72(1):119–146, 1993.

[9]See Stanley Lieberson, *A Piece of the Pie: Blacks and White Immigrants since 1880*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1980.

[10]*ibid.*; Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, Routledge Press, New York, 1995; David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Verso, revised edition, 1998 [1991], pp. 133-156.

status of a white spouse, while a white spouse will exchange their racial status for the high status of a black spouse on other characteristics.[11] In this situation, blacks will be a positively selected group, while whites will be a negatively selected group. According to structural assimilation theory, on the other hand, education should increase all groups' willingness to cross racial lines by breaking down group barriers and promoting greater universalism.[12] In this case, both blacks and whites should be positively selected by education into interracial marriage. By examining differences in the likelihood of interracial marriage by education over time, I can address these potential theories.

While these theories may prove useful for the latter part of the study period, the rare and taboo nature of interracial marriage in the early period may make these theories inapplicable. It was commonly accepted for most of the time period under study that whites who intermarried were misfits and loners who typically came from lower-class backgrounds.[13] The same was not necessarily true for blacks, for whom interracial marriage apparently led to less ostracization.[14] By examining the educational characteristics of interracial couples in the early period, I can sort out the evidence for and against these claims.

Data and Measures

Data

Data come primarily from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) at the University of Minnesota. The IPUMS contains samples of each decennial Census from 1850 to 2000. Most of these samples are 1% random samples of the U.S. population, although I use 5% samples for the

---

[11]Robert K. Merton, "Intermarriage and the social structure: Fact and theory", *Psychiatry*, 4(3):361–374, 1941; Kingsley Davis, "Intermarriage in caste societies", *American Anthropologist*, 43:376–395, 1941.

[12]See Milton M. Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1964; Herbert H. Hyman and Paul B. Sheatsley, "Attitudes toward desegregation", *Scientific American*, 211:16–23, 1964;Gertrude J. Selznick and Stephen Steinberg, *The Tenacity of Prejudice*, Harper and Row, New York, 1969; Harold E. Quinley and Charles Y. Glock, *Anti-Semitism in America*, Free Press, New York, 1979, p. 188; Herbert H. Hyman and Charles R. Wright, *Education's Lasting Influence on Values*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, pp. 61; John G. Condran, "Changes in white attitudes toward blacks: 1963-1977", *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 43(4):463–476, 1979; Andrew M. Greeley and Paul B. Sheatsley, "Attitudes toward racial integration", *Scientific American*, 225:13–19, 1971; Garth D. Taylor, Paul B. Sheatsley and Andrew M. Greeley, "Attitudes toward racial integration", *Scientific American*, 238:42–49, 1978; and Stanley Lieberson and Mary C. Waters, *From Many Strands: Ethnic and Racial Groups in Contemporary America*, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1988.

[13]Davis et al., *Deep South* op. cit., pp. 29-30; Edward Byron Reuter, *The Mulatto in the United States*, University Press of the Pacific, Honolulu, 2004 [1918], pp. 136-137. For a criticism of this argument, see W.E. Burghart Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, Number 14 in Series in Political Economy and Public Law. Publications of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1899, pp. 366-367.

[14]Davis et al., *Deep South* op. cit., pp. 36.

three latest Census years.[15]

For the 1880 Census, I use the full count data made available through the North Atlantic Population Project (NAPP), which vastly improves the accuracy of my measures for this particular date.[16] However, the NAPP data do not include information on literacy, so the educational analysis I conduct later will be restricted to the 1880 1% sample rather than the full count data.

I identify marriages by using the relationship of each member of a household to the head of household. There are some differences across the Census years in terms of how such a relationship is determined. Up until 1880, the Census did not explicitly collect information on the relationship of each member to the head of household. For these early Census years, the IPUMS provides imputed relationships based on the location of names listed on the household registers.

In all other Census years, a spousal relationship was either inferred by the enumerator or the respondents stated they were married. Because marriage licenses were never required, the spousal relationships in the Census record individuals who either claimed to be or were classified by an enumerator as living in a de facto "marriage-like" relationship. This legal ambiguity is in fact a benefit in the case of interracial marriage because of the difficulty in legalizing such unions in many areas of the country for most of the time period. However, changes in the meaning of marriage over time and in the way data were collected could potentially create some inconsistencies across time.

I limit the dataset to marriages between individuals identified as white or black. Unlike most research on black/white marriage I do not exclude individuals who are identified as Hispanic. Although the IPUMS project has attempted to identify Spanish surnames in years where these names are available, a specific item identifying Hispanics only first appears on the 1970 Census. Thus, an exclusion of Hispanics would create some inconsistencies across years. More importantly, excluding Hispanics implies a racialization of Hispanicity that ignores potential similarities between Hispanics and earlier immigrant groups.[17]

For similar reasons, I do not exclude immigrants from the sample. I want to measure the overall level of interracial marriage, and immigration may play a role in this trend. Rather than excluding

---

[15]Steven Ruggles and Matthew Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 2.0*, Historical Census Projects, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 1997. The IPUMS also provides oversamples of the black population for some years. However, many of these oversamples were collected by oversampling black heads of household, which will distort the results by gender. Therefore, I do not use any of the black oversamples here.

[16]North Atlantic Population Project, *NAPP: Complete Count Microdata*, The North Atlantic Population Project and the Minnesota Population Center, Minneapolis, MN, preliminary version NAPP 0.2 [computer files] edition, 2005

[17]By excluding the "other" category, I do lose many Hispanic individuals in more recent years when Hispanics dominate this category. In the 2000 Census, I must also address the fact that individuals can identify with more than one race. I follow a "one-drop rule" in which whites are classified as white-only respondents, while blacks are classified as anyone answering black in combination with any other response. This algorithm seems more in keeping with common practice than any other method.

immigrants altogether, I will examine differences by nativity status in addition to the overall trend.

Table 1 gives the number of unions for certain age groups of the husband and for certain durations of marriage. In the 1850 and 1860 Census years, I only have information on the free black population. Samples identified with a W are weighted samples. For these samples, household weights are used to produce representative statistics.[18]

Census counts of marriage are potentially problematic because they measure the stock of current marriages in a given year rather than the count of new marriages contracted in that year. Thus, measures of association may be affected by union attrition or patterns which prevailed in the past. The severity of this problem can be reduced by looking at marriages of a relatively short duration. The last column in Table 1 gives the number of unions that were less than ten years in duration, and therefore must have been formed in the decade since the previous Census. However, information on marital duration is only available for eight of the fifteen Census years. In order to look at trends across all Census years I must use a birth cohort restriction rather than a marriage cohort restriction. By restricting the sample to marriages where the husband is between the ages of 20 and 30, I can reduce the effects of marital attrition and changing patterns over time, because most of these marriages must have been recently contracted. However, because age at marriage is shifting over time, this method could distort the overall trend. A sensitivity analysis, however, indicated that the results are fairly robust across birth cohorts and the 0-10 year marriage cohort.[19]

In terms of the overall trend, the large sample sizes give me a fairly high degree of precision even when the number of interracial couples is small. My precision diminishes, however, once I disaggregate the trend across another dimension because I am implicitly making a comparison within the interracial group. To address this problem, I use an overlapping birth cohorts approach. Except in the case of education, I use marriages where the husband was 20-40 years of age for all disaggregated analysis. This method improves the precision of my disaggregated results because it increases the number of interracial unions, but it also increases the risk of bias because unions among older couples are more likely to be affected by attrition and historical patterns prior to the last ten years.

Beginning in 1940, the Census recorded the education of each respondent. When I analyze this educational data, I use only unions where the husband is 25-35 years of age because a younger age restriction is likely to include a considerable number of individuals who have not yet completed the schooling process. In the 1950 Census, educational characteristics were only recorded for one sample-line individual in each household. It is impossible to disaggregate sample-line characteristics because by definition they will never be provided for both spouses. Therefore, the 1950 Census is

---

[18]I use the weighting technique described in Clifford C. Clogg and Scott R. Eliason, "Some common problems in log-linear analysis", *Sociological Methods and Research*, 16(1):8–44, 1987, pp. 21-28.

[19]This sensitivity analysis is not shown here, but is available from the author upon request.

Table 1: Total size of each Census sample and the number of interracial unions in each sample

| | By birth cohort of the husband | | | | | | Marital cohort | |
| | 20-30 years old | | 20-40 years old | | 25-35 years old | | 0-10 years | |
	Total	Interracial	Total	Interracial	Total	Interracial	Total	Interracial
1850 1% sample (free population)	6775	4	16,628	8				
1860 1% sample (free population)	9559	5	24,017	16				
1870 1% sample	12,908	27	31,393	58				
1880								
1% sample	16,780	26	41,161	45				
Full Count	1,504,909	1655	3,808,334	3932				
1900 1% sample	23,966	11	62,082	38			51,141	42
1910 0.4% sample	12,524	25	31,554	58			27,020	62
1920 1% sample	35,969	14	93,495	50				
1930 0.2% sample	8490	2	21,946	5			19,553	9
1940 1% sample (W)	46,768	98	120,630	227	69,223	123	26,648	55
1950 1% sample (W)	73,528	107	180,391	247	102,581	138	96,622	152
1960 1% sample	60,643	80	158,531	225	85,639	113	95,317	158
1970 1% sample (Form 1)	76,618	189	165,380	346	91,492	193	104,339	297
1980 5% sample	386,632	1746	932,265	3708	549,143	2232	532,055	2699
1990 5% sample (W)	285,868	2310	899,834	6168	517,412	3657		
2000 5% sample (W)	203,018	3570	733,414	10,322	385,844	5936		

Table 2: Two-by-two table of husband's race by wife's race

Husband's Group	Wife's Group	
	Group A	Group B
Group A	F_{aa}	F_{ab}
Group B	F_{ba}	F_{bb}

excluded from the educational analysis.

Measures

I use both the outmarriage ratio and the odds ratio to measure the frequency of interracial marriage over time. I use both measures because they each capture a different aspect of the phenomenon. Both of these measures are calculated from the cross-tabulation of the husband's and wife's group membership, as shown in Table 2.

The outmarriage ratio of group B to group A (which I denote as γ_{ba}) is the ratio of the number of intergroup marriages involving a B member to the number of endogamous marriages among B members.[20] Mathematically,

$$\gamma_{ba} = \frac{F_{ab} + F_{ba}}{F_{bb}} \tag{1}$$

The outmarriage ratio has two characteristics which are generally seen as limitations. First, the measure is not symmetric, meaning that the outmarriage ratio of group B to group A will typically be different than the outmarriage ratio of group A to group B ($\gamma_{ba} \neq \gamma_{ab}$). The smaller group overall will have a larger outmarriage ratio, although this difference reflects nothing about differential propensities by group. Second, the outmarriage ratio is not resistant to compositional changes between group A and group B. If group B grows in size relative to group A, then its outmarriage ratio will decline simply because there are more potential matches available within group B, while the outmarriage ratio for group A will increase for similar reasons. Once again, this change does not reflect any underlying change in propensity.

In order to handle these limitations, a second method has become more popular in recent years. This method is based on the odds ratio resulting from Table 2. Formally,

$$\theta = \frac{F_{aa}/F_{ab}}{F_{ba}/F_{bb}} = \frac{F_{aa}F_{bb}}{F_{ba}F_{ab}} \tag{2}$$

---

[20]The outmarriage "rate" is usually measured as the proportion of outmarriages, rather than the ratio of outmarriages to endogamous marriages. However, to be more consistent with the odds ratio, I treat it as a ratio.

The θ parameter gives the ratio of the odds of an A husband having an A wife rather than a B wife relative to those same odds for a B husband. High positive values of θ indicate high group endogamy.

I use the inverse of θ so that the directionality of the measure is consistent with the directionality of the outmarriage ratio. My measure, λ, is given by:

$$\lambda = \frac{F_{ba}/F_{bb}}{F_{aa}/F_{ab}} = \frac{F_{ba}F_{ab}}{F_{aa}F_{bb}} = 1/\theta \tag{3}$$

Higher values of λ indicate lower levels of group endogamy.

The odds ratio has several nice properties which are considered improvements over the outmarriage ratio. First, only one odds ratio exists between any two groups. The odds ratio simply measures the mutual propensity between the two groups. Second, the odds ratio is insensitive to changes in group composition. Therefore, changes in the relative size of the groups will not affect the underlying propensity.

In many cases, these properties are advantages, but the odds ratio is not in any absolute sense superior to the outmarriage ratio. The two parameters simply measure different aspects of the same process. The appropriate analogy would be to the dissimilarity index and P^* measures used in the study of residential segregation. The compositionally-insensitive dissimilarity index measures how the neighborhood distribution of groups differs from what we would expect by random chance, while the compositionally-sensitive P^* index measures people's face-to-face experiences with intergroup contact. The distinction between the two measures is one between underlying propensities and lived experience. The relationship between the odds ratio and the outmarriage ratio is perfectly analogous.

Analysis

Overall Trend

Figure 2 shows the trend in both the outmarriage ratio for blacks and the odds ratio from 1850-2000. In order to effectively show differences across time, I use the natural log of both measures in all figures.

In general, the two measures produce similar trend lines. With the exception of one period, they always move in the same direction over time. The one exception is telling, however. Between 1860 and 1870, the outmarriage ratio declined significantly while the odds ratio increased slightly. It was of course during this period that Emancipation greatly swelled the number of free blacks living in the United States, thus leading to a significant change in group composition. The outmarriage ratio

Figure 2: Trends in the outmarriage ratio and odds ratio of interracial marriage on the log scale, marriages where husband is 20-30 years of age, United States Census 1850-2000
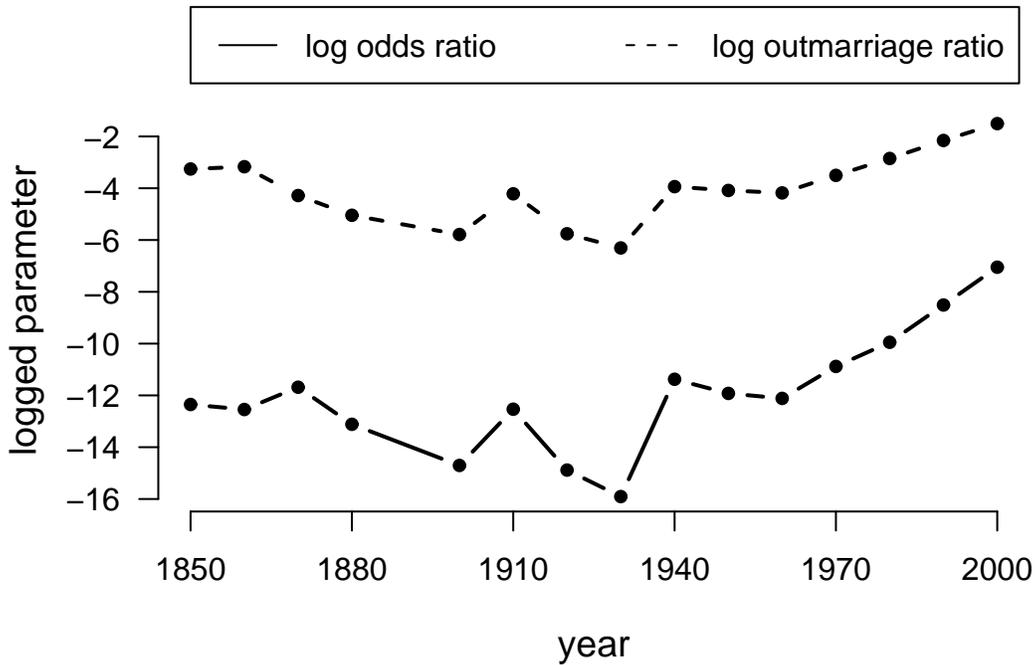
declined simply because the larger size of the black population made it easier for blacks to find black marriage partners of the opposite sex. But the underlying propensity to cross the color line in matrimony apparently did not decline and may have actually increased slightly.

As I noted previously, historians have suggested an increasing social distance between blacks and whites after Emancipation. With respect to interracial marriage, however, this decline was purely driven by the large compositional change in the number of free blacks, and in fact there is little evidence that social distance, as measured by the odds ratio, declined. Declines in social distance occurred later between 1870 and 1880 amid growing white resistance to and ultimately the collapse of Reconstruction. This is not to say that relations between blacks and whites were not frequently acrimonious and sometimes violent during this period, but it does suggest that the political climate of Reconstruction offered some protection to interracial couples.

The trend in the odds ratio can be divided into periods that correspond to major eras in America's history of race relations. During slavery and Reconstruction, interracial marriage between whites and free blacks, while less common than today, was not as rare as might be expected. However,

as the Jim Crow system became ascendant in the 1880s and 1890s, the odds of interracial marriage declined dramatically, and except for a noticeable deviation in 1910 remained low until the twilight of the Jim Crow system in 1940 when they increased significantly. During the Civil Rights era from 1940 to 1970, the odds of interracial marriage were relatively constant and may have even declined slightly, possibly due to increased racial antagonism in the period as blacks openly challenged white supremacy. In the post-Civil Rights era, the odds of interracial marriage have increased rapidly at an almost constant exponential rate.

The year 1910 is a clear outlier in the overall trend. As I will show below, the 1910 Census is not only an outlier in the overall trend, but it is also an outlier for most of the sub-groups examined. It is tempting to think that the relative number of immigrants between 1900 and 1910 and the beginning of the black migration to the North might have played a role in this deviation, but, as I will show, the increase in the odds ratio is driven by illiterate, native-born, southern women marrying black men. The intensity of racial antagonism in the South momentarily subsided in the decade between 1900 and 1910. The frequency of lynching was on the decline, and with almost universal black disfranchisement and legalized segregation, the goals of the Redemption had largely been achieved.[21] The next decade, however, witnessed the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, an upsurge in lynchings, the search for the Great White Hope, and the film *The Birth of a Nation*. It is possible that the relatively peaceful lull in race relations between 1900 and 1910 led to an increase in interracial marriage. However, the small size of the 1910 Census sample (0.4%) suggests that the deviation may purely be the result of statistical noise. In most of the results that follow, I will not discuss the 1910 Census deviation in detail. The planned 1% sample of this Census by IPUMS may help resolve this question in the future.

The results shown in Figure 2 are based on sample data and thus sampling variability creates uncertainty in the measured statistics. Figure 3 shows the 95% confidence interval around each point estimate of the odds ratio. In the small samples prior to 1880, the uncertainty is quite large, meaning that conclusions about this time period must be tentative. After 1870, the overall decline in interracial marriage is clearly not a result of statistical noise. The overlap of the 1900 and 1910 confidence intervals, on the other hand, indicates that the 1910 deviation may indeed be a result of random chance. Beginning in 1940, the confidence in the point estimates increases considerably.

Sex Ratio

Interracial marriages today are disproportionately likely among black men and white women (BM/WF), but this has not always been the case. The upper panel of Figure 4 shows the trend in the proportion

---

[21]Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1995, pp. 29-32.

14

Figure 3: Odds ratio of interracial marriage on the log scale with 95% confidence intervals, marriages where the husband is 20-30 years of age, United States Census 1850-2000
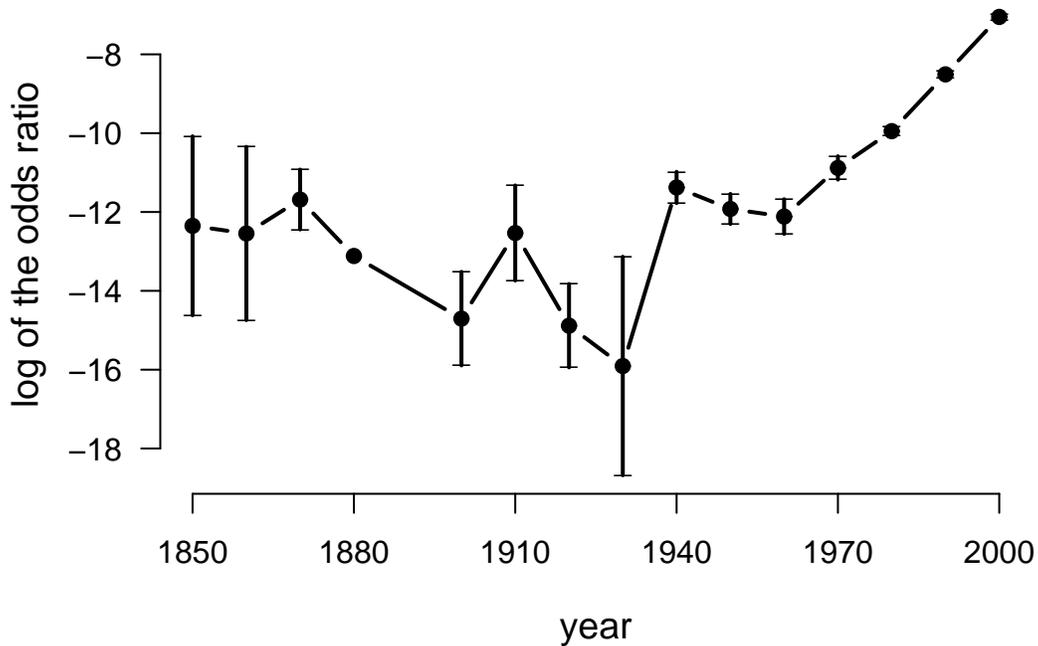
of interracial unions involving a black man and a white woman.

As the figure shows, this proportion is not statistically distinguishable from gender parity (50%) in the early period, although in 1880 BM/WF unions are about 60% of the total and there is a significant upward deviation in 1910. Statistical significance notwithstanding, the results from 1850 until 1920 suggest that BM/WF unions were somewhat more common than WM/BF unions. Between 1940 and 1960, the results suggest something close to gender parity. After 1960, the sex ratio turned in favor of BM/WF unions again, reaching a high of around 80% in 1980 before stabilizing at around 70% in the last two Census years.

The pattern across regions shown in the lower panel of Figure 4 reveals an important difference between the South and the non-South.[22] From 1860 to 1920, BM/WF unions were consistently more likely in the non-South than the South. In the non-South, the majority of interracial marriages

---

[22] 1850 and 1930 are excluded from this figure due to data sparseness. I use the Census definition of the South which includes the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia, as well as the District of Columbia.

15

involved black men and white women, while in the South there was greater gender balance. In 1940 and 1950, the two regions briefly converge at gender parity, before eventually favoring BM/WF unions again, although the rise in the South is delayed until after 1970.

As I noted previously, the policing of the color line in the South has always focused heavily on the sexual purity of white women, and has been less attentive to the role of white men in perpetrating miscegenation. The regional difference in the early period and during the Civil Rights period is likely explained by the greater suppression of black male/white female unions in the South. These results are consistent with ethnographic accounts from the 1930s that found black males in the South and black females in the non-South were the most likely members of their respective black communities to voice competition-based opposition to interracial marriage.[23]

If suppression was the only method of achieving gender balance in the South, then these results suggest an underlying greater affinity between black men and white women than between black women and white men across time and space. Numerous theories explaining this affinity all posit a relationship to traditional gender roles and gender power. It is argued, for example, that white men may face less pressure to legitimate non-marital sexual unions because they are at the apex of the gender-race hierarchy. White men may also pay a higher labor market penalty for interracial marriage than black men. Some scholars have also argued that the disparity may be related to the traditional role of the man in initiating courtship rituals. According to status exchange theory, women's economic potential is less valued on the marriage market, and therefore high-status black men have a more exchangeable commodity than black women.[24] However, the data are not consistent with any of these gender role/power arguments because the deterioration of traditional roles and an increase in women's labor force participation should have created greater gender parity since 1960, when in fact the trend moved in the opposite direction. An alternative hypothesis is that the disparity is related to the masculine, sexualized image of both black men and women.[25]

Disaggregating the Overall Trend

Regional Differences

Figure 5 compares the trend in both the odds ratio and the outmarriage ratio between the South and the non-South.[26] There are important compositional differences between the two regions that

---

[23]Davis et al., *Deep South* op. cit., pp. 37-38; Drake et al., *Black Metropolis* op. cit., pp. 133-134.

[24]Merton, *Intermarriage and the Social Structure* op. cit., p. 374; Drake et al., *Black Metropolis* op. cit., p. 137; Wirth et al., *The Hybrid and the Problem of Miscegenation* op. cit., p. 284; Merton, *Intermarriage and the Social Structure* op. cit., pp. 372-373; Davis, *Intermarriage in Caste Societies* op. cit., p. 389.

[25]Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, The University of North Carolina Press, Williamsburg, 1968.

[26]See ff. 22 for information on how the regions were defined.

create differences in the outmarriage ratio. The black population has always been relatively larger in the South and black migration to the non-South did not begin in earnest until after 1910. Because of the smaller size of the black population in the non-South, blacks in this region should have higher outmarriage ratios for basic compositional reasons.

Figure 5 does indeed indicate that black outmarriage ratios have been higher in the non-South throughout this period. Yet, these higher levels of outmarriage only consistently reflect less underlying social distance, as measured by the odds ratio, in the post-Civil Rights era. Furthermore, the difference between the two regions in this era is largely driven by the "head start" of the non-South between 1960 and 1970. During this period, the odds ratio in the non-South increased significantly, while the odds ratio in the South actually declined. This brief divergence of trends reflects regionally-specific reactions to the events of the Civil Rights period. Since 1970, however, the odds ratios in the two regions have been slowly converging.

In the very early period from 1850-1880, the odds ratios of the two regions are largely indistinguishable. The development of the Jim Crow state in the South led to an earlier decline in the odds ratio there than in the non-South which experienced a gradual decline after 1900 and a large decline only between 1920 and 1930.

The decline of the odds ratio from 1900 to 1930 coincides with the initial stages of the black Great Migration to Northern cities. Stanley Lieberson has argued that as blacks moved North, the overall segregation and isolation of blacks had to increase in order for whites to maintain their existing marginal levels of interracial contact.[27] Thus, Northern whites' racism was "latent" until blacks were a noticeable demographic concern. The interracial marriage pattern shown here suggests a similar phenomenon. Holding underlying propensities constant, the relative growth of the black population in the non-South from 1910 to 1930 should have increased the white outmarriage ratio for compositional reasons alone. However, the white outmarriage ratio actually declined somewhat over this period. This decline in the outmarriage ratio was accomplished by a dramatic decline in the odds ratio between the two groups over this time period. In order for whites to maintain their same small and insignificant experience of interracial marriage, the underlying social distance between blacks and whites in the non-South had to increase.

Native vs. Foreign Born

I do not have enough cases in the early years of the study period to disaggregate immigrants by country of origin, so I simply distinguish between natives and immigrants. In five Census years, I also have the ability to distinguish a second generation population made up of the children of

---

[27]Lieberson, *A Piece of the Pie* op. cit., pp. 284-290.

immigrants.[28]

Because immigrants have a natural tendency to marry other immigrants, often times in the country of origin, measuring openness to interracial marriage requires more sophisticated modeling than I have used up to this point. I begin with a four-dimensional table of frequencies (F_{ijkl}) which gives husband's race (i) by wife's race (j) by husband's nativity (k) by wife's nativity (l). Using a log-linear model, I can assess the openness of immigrants toward interracial marriage with the following model:

$$\log(F_{ijkl}) = \lambda + \lambda_i + \lambda_j + \lambda_k + \lambda_l + \lambda_{ij} + \lambda_{kl} + \lambda_{ik} + \lambda_{jl} + \beta x \tag{4}$$

This model fits the marginal distributions of husband's and wife's race (λ_i, λ_j) and husband's and wife's nativity (λ_k, λ_l), racial endogamy (λ_{ij}), immigrant endogamy (λ_{kl}), and the different marginal distributions of nativity by race ($\lambda_{ik}, \lambda_{jl}$). The key variable, x, is an indicator variable signaling that the union is interracial in origin and the white spouse is an immigrant.

The β parameter gives the log-odds ratio of an interracial marriage for white immigrants relative to white natives. If β is positive, it indicates greater affinity between white immigrants and blacks than between white natives and blacks. The upper panel of Figure 6 shows the value of β for each Census year.

In general the estimated parameter is greater than zero and statistically distinguishable from zero, indicating that white immigrants have generally been more likely to marry across racial lines than have white natives once immigrant endogamy is factored out. The strength of this affinity has been highly variable, however.

The bottom panel of Figure 6 demonstrates that this variability is more the result of changes among native whites than changes among immigrants. Immigrants were more resistant to the decline in interracial marriage in the early period than natives. They were also quicker to increase rates of interracial marriage after 1960, but since that time immigrants and natives have been converging in terms of the odds ratio. It should be noted that these results are quite similar to the results by region, and immigrants have historically been disproportionately located in the non-South. Unfortunately, the small size of the early samples makes disaggregation by both region and nativity difficult.

Figure 4 shows the strength of affinity by the first and second generation, where data on the second generation are available. Affinity is calculated as for equation (4), except that nativity is now divided into three categories, and I include a second β term measuring affinity between the second generation of immigrants and blacks.

---

[28]These censuses are 1880, 1900, 1910, 1920, and 1960. I have information on the second generation in 1930 as well, but too few interracial marriages to make a comparison. I record an individual as second generation if either one of their parents was an immigrant.

Except for 1910, both immigrants and the second generation are more likely than native-born individuals to be in an interracial marriage once immigrant endogamy is controlled, although the results for the second generation are only statistically distinguishable from zero in the full-count 1880 data. The affinity between the second generation and blacks is weaker than the affinity between immigrants and blacks in all cases. This finding suggests a generational learning curve. As immigrants become more assimilated across generations, they adopt native whites' resistance to interracial marriage. It should be noted, of course, that the second generation has typically been upwardly mobile in terms of class, and to some extent this mobility may explain differences, although the relationship between class and interracial marriage is uncertain. I now turn to this issue in the case of education.

Education

I now address the question of how education affects the likelihood of interracial marriage. In order to examine this issue, I model the change in the log-odds of interracial marriage across adjacent educational categories. I exclude both 1850 and 1930 from this analysis because I have too few interracial couples in these two Census years to sustain an analysis. The 1950 Census year is also excluded because of the sample line issue discussed earlier. From 1860-1920, I use the boundary between literate and non-literate individuals, and from 1940-2000, I use three boundaries: less than high school/high school, high school/some college, and some college/college or more.

In order to effectively measure the change in these log-odds, I need to control for the general pattern of educational assortative mating and the marginal distribution of education by racial group. Therefore, I use a log-linear model to estimate the relevant parameters. When education is separated into four categories, the model is:

$$log(F_{ijkl}) = \lambda + \lambda_i + \lambda_j + \lambda_k + \lambda_l + \lambda_{ij} + \lambda_{ik} + \lambda_{jl} + \lambda_{kl} + \sum_{p=1}^{3} \eta_p x_{pij} + \sum_{q=1}^{3} \delta_q y_{qij} \qquad (5)$$

Where F_{ijkl} is the frequency of unions by husband's race (i) (1=white, 2=black), wife's race (j), husband's education (k), and wife's education (l). When $i = j$ (racial endogamy), both x_{pij} and y_{qij} equal zero. When $i = 2$ and $j = 1$ (BM/WF),

$$x_{pij} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } k > p \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad y_{qij} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } l > q \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

When $i = 1$ and $j = 2$ (WM/BF),

$$x_{pij} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } l > p \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases} \quad y_{qij} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } k > q \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Essentially, x_{pij} and y_{qij} are dummy variables indicating whether the eduction of the black or white spouse in an interracial marriage, respectively, is above a certain level.

The relevant odds ratios for these models are the odds ratios of interracial marriage between adjacent educational categories for black men, black women, white men, and white women. From 1860-1920, this model simplifies to the single odds ratio of interracial marriage between literate and illiterate individuals.

The results for black male/white female (BM/WF) unions are shown in Figure 8. The results consistently show that black men's likelihood of an interracial marriage increased with education throughout the period, although only the 1870 result for the early period is statistically distinguishable from zero. The specific boundary that played an important role for black men also shifts over time. In 1940, the most crucial boundary was between less than high school and high school, but the importance of this boundary declines over time, while the importance of the boundary between high school graduation and college attendance grows. This shift likely reflects the changing relevance of these boundaries in the larger society due to the educational upgrading of the population and the labor force.

The selectivity of white women is less clear over the period. The results for literacy in the early period are completely inconclusive except for the strong negative selectivity in 1910. In the latter period, there is a suggestion of negative selectivity from 1970 onward, particularly at the less than high school/high school boundary. Overall, the strong positive selectivity of black men and the somewhat negative selectivity of white women are more consistent with status exchange theory than with structural assimilation theory for the later period.[29]

For WM/BF unions, whose results are shown in Figure 9, there is little evidence of any selectivity. Most of the parameters are statistically indistinguishable from zero, and tend to be positive as frequently as they are negative for both white men and black women. The results do suggest some positive selectivity of black women in the period from 1940 to 2000, particularly in 1990 and 2000, where the high school/some college boundary appears to play a similar role for both black women and black men. The results for white men, however, indicate little selectivity in either direction.

In the early period, the lack of statistical power makes reaching a conclusion about the characteristics of white spouses difficult. There is some suggestion that white men in interracial marriages are particularly likely to be illiterate, but the results are only statistically distinguishable from zero in 1910. Except for similar 1910 results, the results for white women indicate no selectivity

---

[29]To truly test status exchange theory, one should explicitly control for the joint distribution of education between spouses. The sparsity of the data here prevent that sort of analysis for the entire time period, and such methods also tend to de-emphasize the observed selectivity which is the focus of this largely descriptive article. For an example of this technique on data from 1980-2000, see Aaron Gullickson, "Education and black/white interracial marriage", 2005, unpublished manuscript.

whatsoever in the early period.

It should be noted that these results are based on controlling for educational homogamy and educational distributions by race. Historical observers frequently noted that interracial marriages were particularly common among the poor or working classes, particularly in the early period of this study. While this may be true, it does not necessarily reflect greater affinities, but rather the fact that the class distributions of blacks and, to a lesser extent, whites have historically been concentrated in these lower ranks.

Conclusions

The foregoing analysis was an attempt to paint a broad picture of the trend in interracial marriage from 1850 to 2000. The overall results suggest a trend that roughly corresponds to the dynamism in race relations over the period. Interracial marriages were uncommon, but not necessarily rare, prior to the end of Reconstruction. While the increase in the size of the free black population due to Emancipation reduced the visibility of interracial marriage among blacks, declines in the underlying propensity to intermarry only occurred after the end of Reconstruction. White policing of the color line in the South and "latent" racism in the non-South contributed to a drastic overall decline in both the odds ratio and the outmarriage ratio between 1880 and 1930, although there may have been an upward spike between 1900 and 1910. This decline was delayed in the non-South until black migration out of the South increased the relative size of the black population after 1910. With the atrophy of the Jim Crow state after 1930, the frequency of interracial marriage increased briefly before stabilizing in the Civil Rights period. With the twilight of the Civil Rights era, the frequency of the interracial marriage began to increase at a steady exponential rate. This growth began after 1960 in the non-South and after 1970 in the South.

For most of the period, marriages were more likely between black men and white women than white men and black women. In the early period this gender disparity is only observed in the non-South, likely due to the suppression of black male/white female unions in the South. After a brief period of gender parity in the 1940s and 1950s, both regions experienced a return to a surplus of BM/WF unions. This pattern is completely inconsistent with almost every theory of the gender disparity because these theories are all based on traditional gender roles and the assumption of male dominance. Yet, it is precisely when traditional roles and male dominance are weakened after 1960, that the trend moves away from gender parity. Clearly, we must rethink our understanding of this issue.

The results for nativity and education both suggest interesting avenues for further research. The nativity results are suggestive, but the inability to identify particular immigrant groups limits the

usefulness of the results. Hopefully, more specific and detailed research on particular groups can develop the results here considerably. The education results are supportive of a process of status exchange among BM/WF unions at least in the later period, but there is little evidence of any educational selectivity among WM/BF unions.

Perhaps the most important finding of this research is the dramatic decline in the odds of interracial marriage between 1880 and 1930. It is natural to wonder whether this decline reflects a decline in interracial sex overall. Three scenarios are possible. First, this decline may reflect no change in interracial sex overall, which implies that potential marriages in this period were pushed into less legitimate forms of sexual contact. Second, there could be no relationship between the pattern of interracial sex outside of marriage and interracial sex within marriage, in which case the decline in interracial marriage led to an overall decline in interracial sex, but no change in illegitimate forms of interracial sexual contact. Third, the policing of the color line in this period may have reduced the frequency of all forms of interracial sex, in which case the decline in interracial sex would be even more dramatic than the decline in interracial marriage. It is also possible that the observed decline is driven by a change in the willingness of enumerators and respondents to report a marriage because of fear of reprisal.

The first scenario seems somewhat unlikely, because it suggests a complementary nature to diverse forms of sexual contact which are likely not exchangeable. Between the second and third scenario, historical accounts suggest that the decline in interracial marriage reflected a decline in both legitimate and illegitimate interracial sexual contact. Regardless of which scenario is closer to the truth, both of these scenarios suggest a decline in interracial fertility. Thus, the production of "new" multiracial individuals likely declined between 1880 and 1940. This decline has led to a multiple-generation hiatus of "interraciality" from the genealogies of individuals identified as black and white today. It is only in the last thirty years that the production of "new" multiracial individuals has renewed. Understanding the historical break between these new multiracials and an older formation is critical to studies of black/white multiraciality in general.

Acknowledgements

Figure 4: Proportion of interracial marriages involving a black man and white woman overall (with 95% confidence intervals) and across the South (s) and non-South (n), marriages where the husband is 20-40 years of age, United States Census 1850-2000
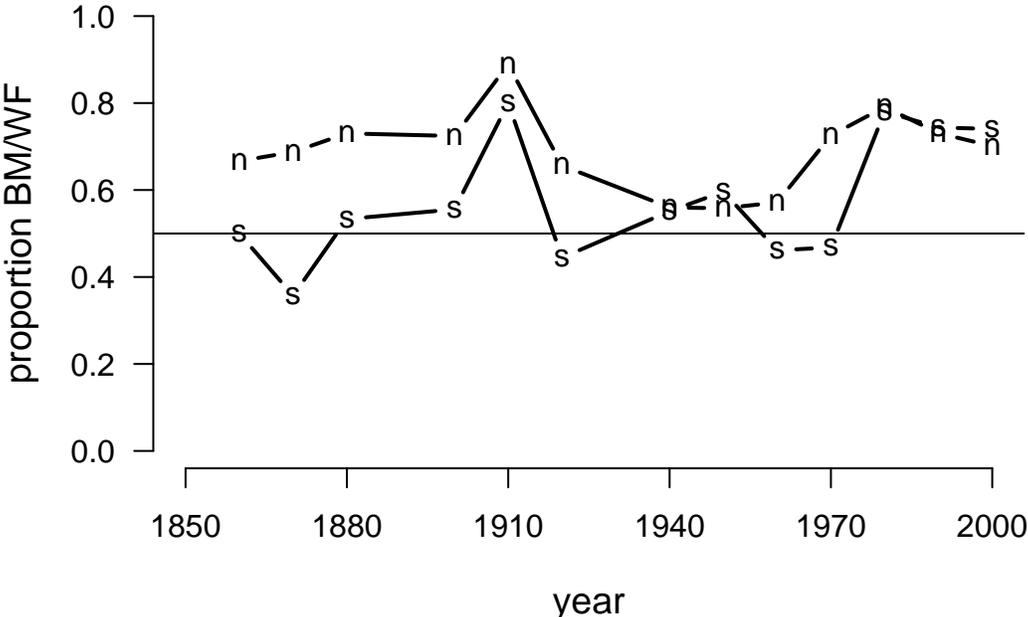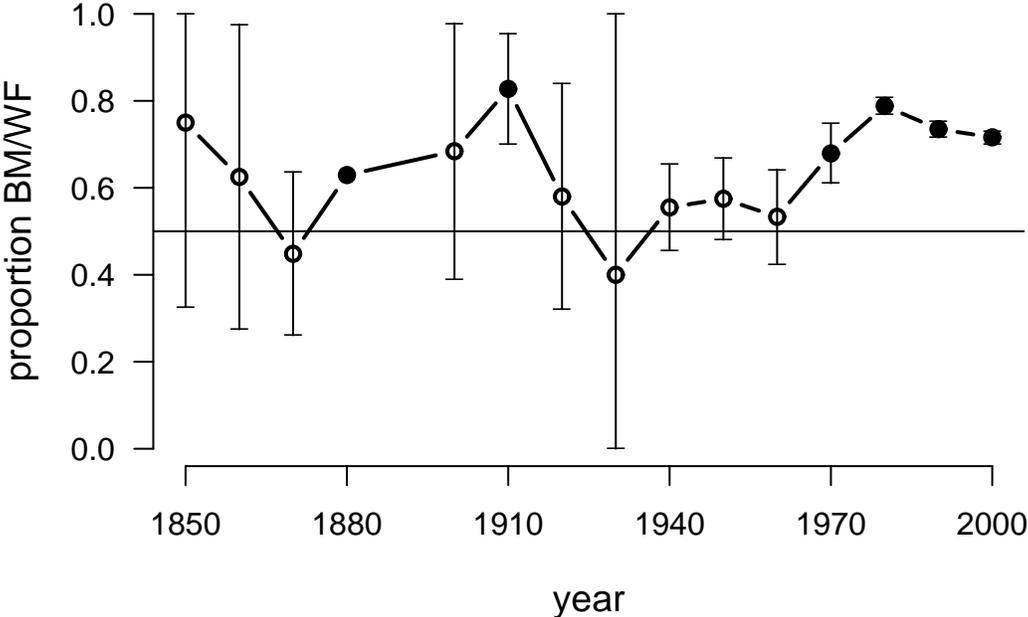
Figure 5: Outmarriage ratio and the odds ratio of interracial marriage for the South (s) and non-South (n), marriages where the husband is 20-40 years of age, United States Census 1850-2000
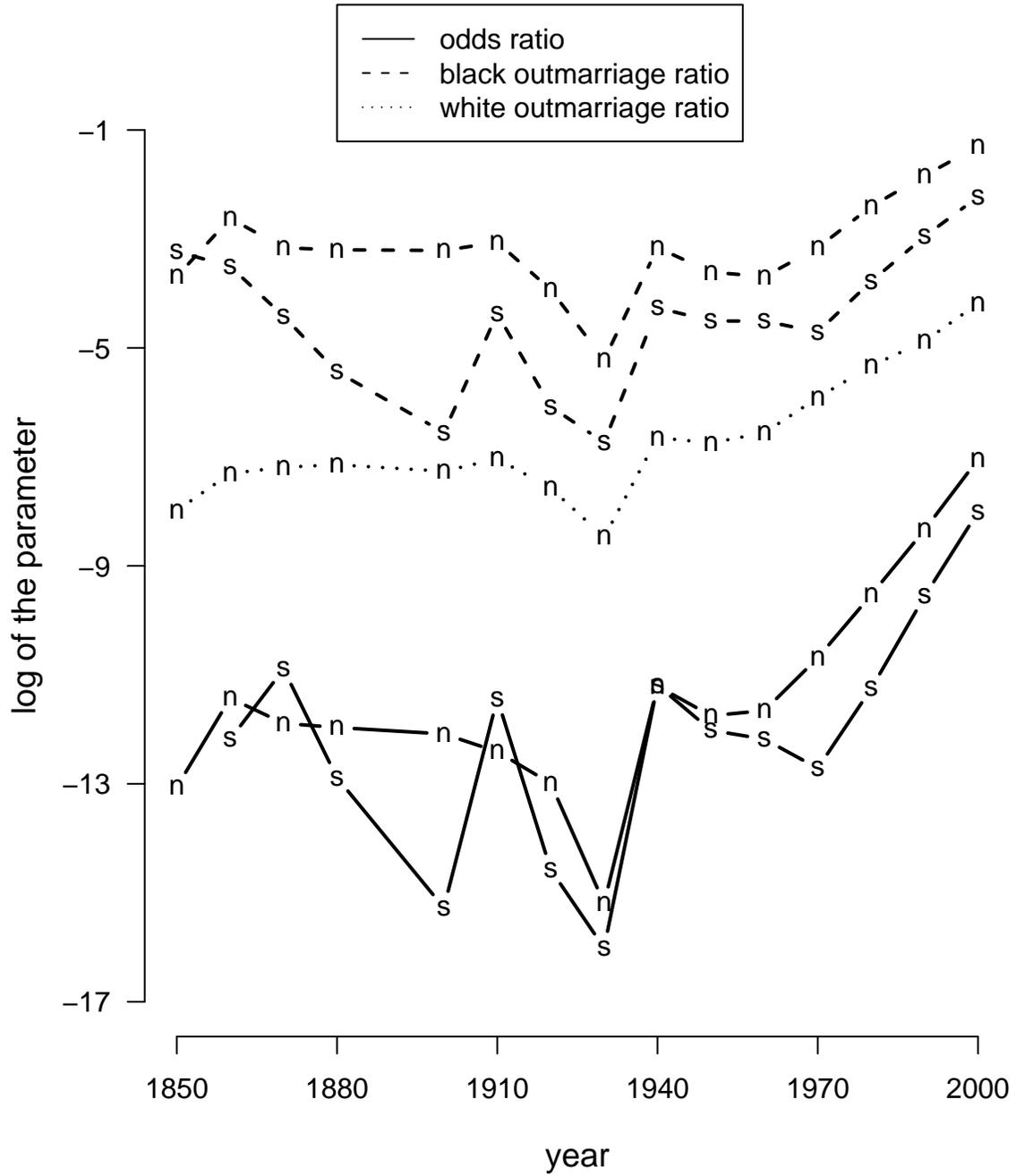
Figure 6: Log-odds ratio of interracial marriage for immigrants vs. natives and comparison of the odds ratio of interracial marriage between immigrants and natives, controlling for immigrant endogamy, marriages where the husband is 20-40 years of age, United States Census 1850-2000
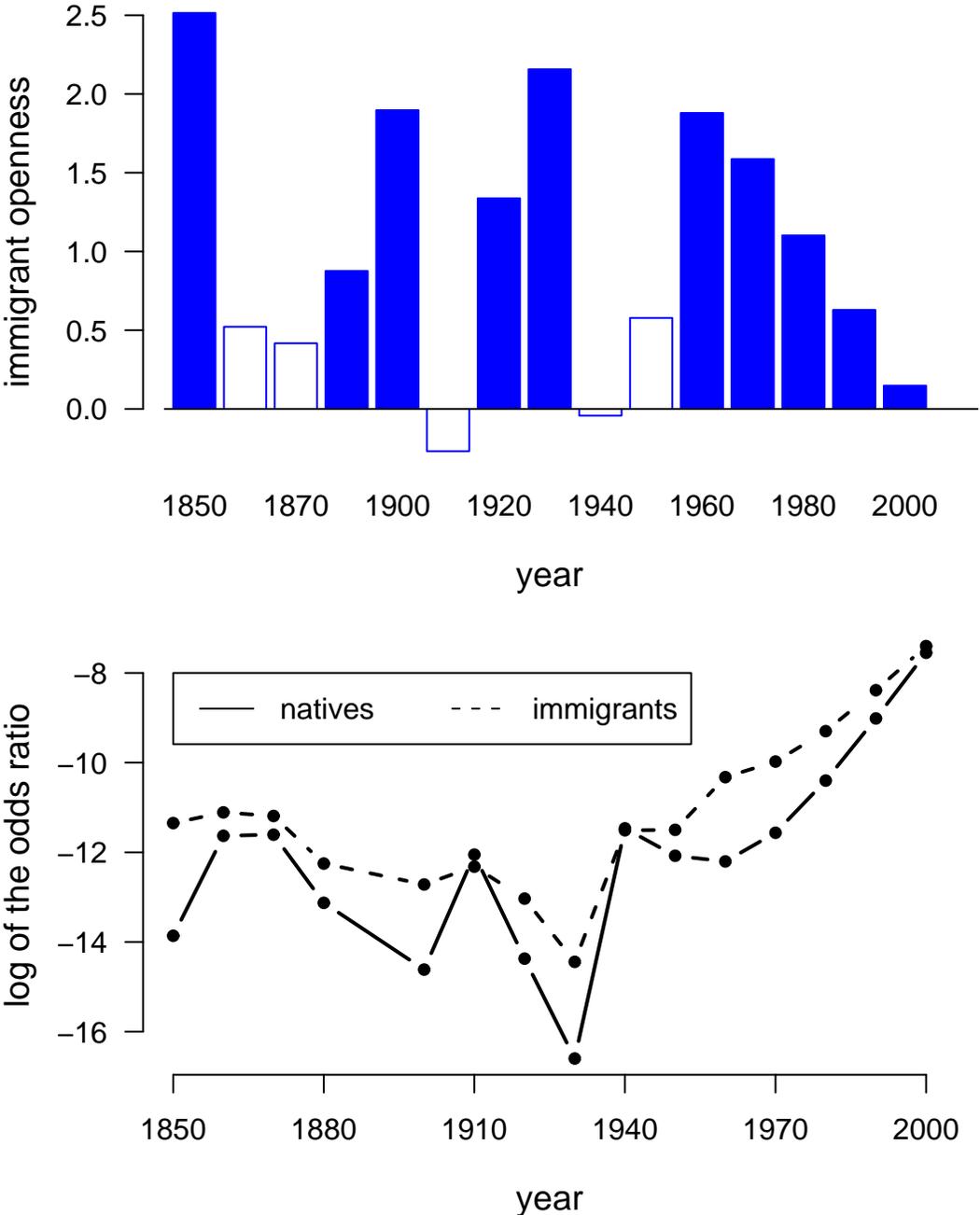
Figure 7: Log-odds ratio of interracial marriage for first and second generation immigrants vs. natives, controlling for immigrant endogamy, marriages where the husband is 20-40 years of age, United States Census 1850-2000 (open bars indicate results are not statistically significant at 5% level)
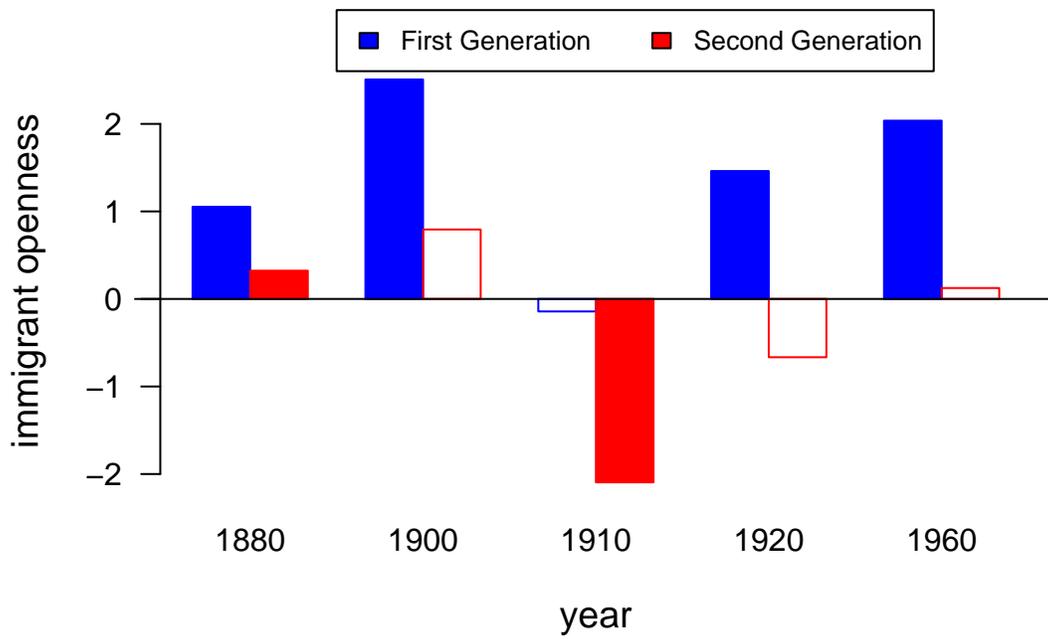
Figure 8: Log-odds ratio of BM/WF interracial marriage across educational boundaries in marriages where husband is 20-40 years of age from 1860-1920 and 25-35 years of age from 1940-2000, United States Census 1860-2000 (open bars indicate results are not statistically significant at 5% level)
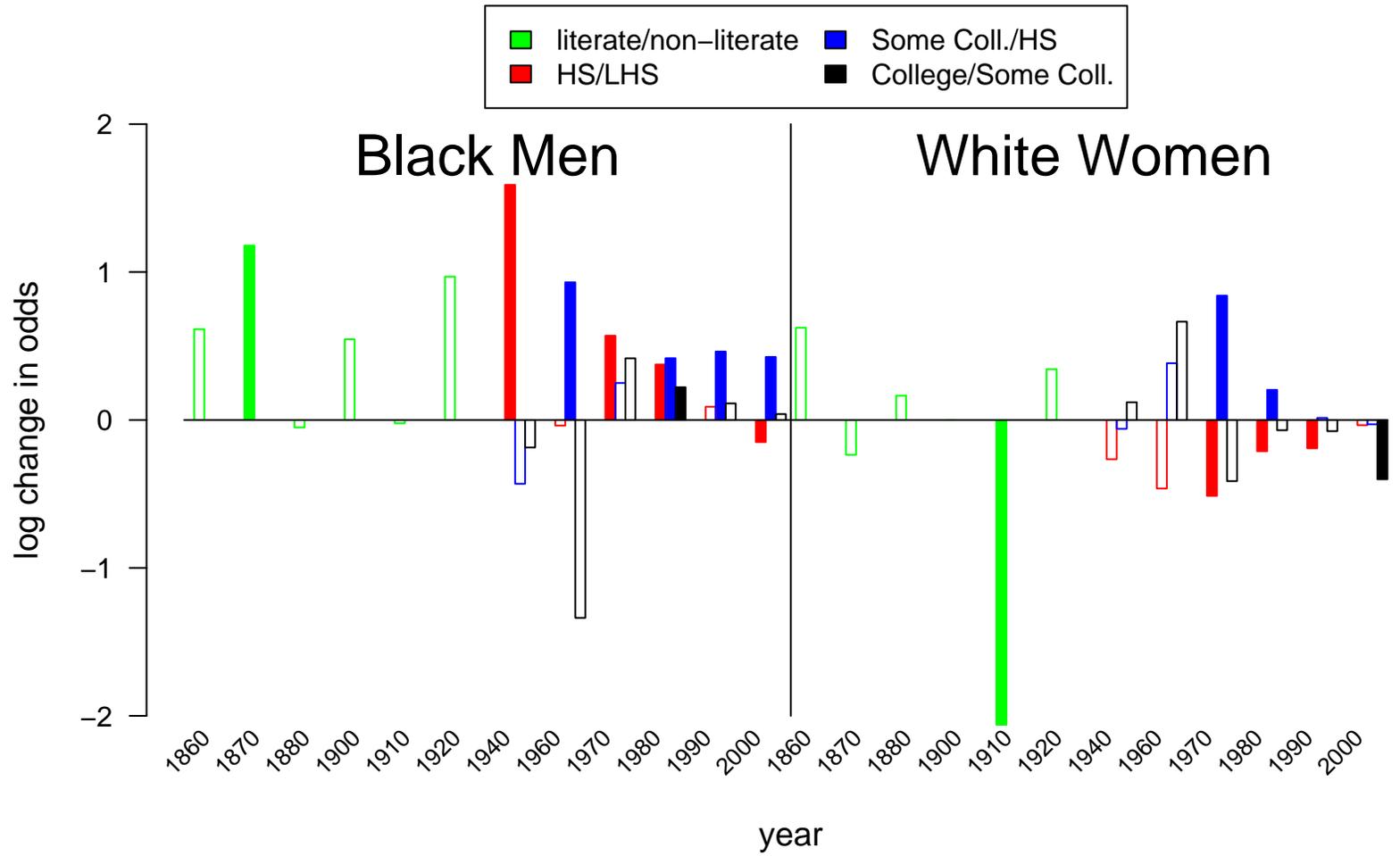
Figure 9: Log-odds ratio of WM/BF interracial marriage across educational boundaries in marriages where husband is 20-40 years of age from 1860-1920 and 25-35 years of age from 1940-2000, United States Census 1860-2000 (open bars indicate results are not statistically significant at 5% level)