

Americans are in favor of interracial marriage until they are asked about their own family

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2014/08/11/americans-are-in-favor-of-interracial-marriage-until-they-are-asked-about-their-own-family/

11/08/2014

Nearly ninety percent of Americans are in favor of marriages between Black and White people, and yet, the rate of interracial marriage remains relatively low at less than 1 percent of all marriages. Using recent General Social Survey Data, [Yanyi K. Djamba](#) and [Sitawa R. Kimuna](#) write that this discrepancy may be because the general interracial marriage opinion questions used in surveys are too broad for understanding how people actually feel about marrying outside one's race. Digging further into the data, they find that only 42 percent of Blacks and 13 percent of Whites strongly favor their close relative marrying someone of the opposite race.



Today, 87 percent of Americans say they approve marriages between Black and White people. However, the responses change dramatically when they are asked more directly about how they feel if one of their close relatives wants to marry outside their race.



Results from our recent research show that more than half (54 percent) of Blacks are in favor of their close relative marrying a White person. The result is lower for Whites, among whom only one-in-four (26 percent) said they were in favor of their close relative marrying a Black person. Such findings show that interracial relations are still unfavorable in the United States. Although the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the 1960s that laws banning interracial sexual relations violate the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, it was only in the last decade that anti-racial marriage laws were definitively struck down in all states, with Alabama being the last state to do so in 2000.

Nonetheless, the number of Black-White marriages remains relatively low, at 558,000 according to the 2010 U.S. Census. This represents less than 1 percent of all marriages in the country. Moreover, according to the U.S. Census data most exogamous (outside the social group) marriages between these two racial groups occur between Black men and White women than between White men and Black women.

In our research, we went beyond general opinion questions and used recent General Social Survey data sets that included questions on how black and white Americans actually feel about their close relative marrying outside their own race. So what factors explain these patterns of Black-White marriages in the U.S.? Both racial specific conditions and individual characteristics are at play. First, in terms of race, Whites are still less likely to support interracial marriage as compared to Blacks. In 2000, 24 percent of Blacks and 11 percent of Whites said they strongly favor their close relative marrying someone of the opposite race. In 2012, the gap remains at 42 percent for Blacks and 13 percent for Whites. These differences are strong between the two races, regardless of marital status or political party affiliation.



Credit: [Vox Efx](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-2.0](#))

Second, there are some individual characteristics that make some people less supportive of Black-White marriage, with specific effects for each race. For example, white men are the most opposed to their close relative marrying a Black person. No significant gender difference was found among Blacks. These results were consistent in the three periods analyzed in our study (2000, 2010, and 2012).

Religious affiliation had some influence on attitudes toward interracial marriage of close relatives among Whites and Blacks in some of the periods considered in our study. In 2000 and 2010, non-Christian Blacks held more unfavorable attitudes toward Black-White marriage than Protestants. No significant religious influence was found among Blacks in 2012. Among Whites, the influence of religion was only significant in the 2000 and 2012 data, years for which Protestants held more unfavorable attitudes toward Black-White marriage than non-Protestant Whites. Such findings suggest that religion has an impact on Black-White relations, with important differences across racial groups.

Ironically, people living in the South reported being in favor of Black-White unions for their close relatives in 2000 more than those living elsewhere in the country. Yet, that region was the last to abolish laws prohibiting marriage between Blacks and Whites. No significant regional differences were observed in 2012.

The argument that education brings about openness and acceptance of diversity was only apparent for Whites in 2000. During that year, more educated Whites were significantly more in favor of Black-White marriage for their close relatives as compared to their less educated counterparts. Similarly, we found some important generational influences on attitudes toward Black-White marriage among Whites in 2000. For the latter, younger respondents were more accepting of interracial marriage than older folks.

The number of Black-White marriages has risen in recent decades, from 51,000 in 1960 to 558,000 in 2010. However, the numbers of such marriages are still relatively tiny relative to same race marriages. Yet, when asked about their general attitudes toward Black-White marriage, 9-in-10 Americans claim they approve of such unions, according to a 2013 report by the [Gallup Poll](#).

The gap between the percentage of Americans who hold a favorable attitude toward Black-White marriage and the percent of actual Black-White marriages suggests that the general interracial marriage opinion questions used in

many surveys are too broad for understanding how people actually feel about marrying outside one's race. More specifically, early surveys usually asked people whether they approve or disapprove of marriage between Blacks and Whites. While such questions provide long trend comparisons, they do not tell us much about the racial intolerance that people harbor when asked how they would feel if one of their relatives were to marry a person outside their own race.

In our study, by assessing how one feels about a relative's marriage to a person of a different race, we were able to provide a better understanding of why current favorable opinions on interracial marriage still do not translate into higher rates of marriages between black and white Americans. In this light, our work offers a more comprehensive picture of racial relations in the U.S. today than did previous research.

This article is based on the paper, "Are Americans Really in Favor of Interracial Marriage? A Closer Look at When They Are Asked about Black-White Marriage for Their Relatives" in the Journal of Black Studies.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/Xd8F5j>

About the authors

Yanyi K. Djamba – *Auburn University at Montgomery*

Yanyi K. Djamba is professor of Sociology at Auburn University at Montgomery. His current research focuses on gender and racial relations, migration, aging, and sexuality and health.



–

Sitawa R. Kimuna – *East Carolina University*

Sitawa R. Kimuna is associate professor of Sociology at East Carolina University. Her areas of research interest include aging, social demography/population dynamics, health in sub-Saharan Africa, race and ethnic relations, and American and global and the social impact of mass media.



- CC BY-NC 3.0 2015 LSE USAPP