

The Effects of Marriage and Partner Choice on Intergenerational Relationships

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PAA Extended Abstract

BACKGROUND

The marriage of adult children is a critical turning point in parent-child relationships. With marriage, commitments to family members are renegotiated and re-appraised in light of new members who must be brought into the family fold. Historians argue that marriage historically tended to strengthen parent-child bonds (Coontz, 2005). Yet many family scholars view modern marriage as an institution that increasingly privileges self-fulfillment and a reliance on partners to fulfill emotional and social needs. This in turn has negative consequences for social ties more broadly and ties to parents specifically (Giddens, 1992; Lesthaege, 1995). Thus, it is no surprise that modern marriage is sometimes referred to as “greedy” institution (Coser, 1974; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008).

Recent research partially supports this argument with findings that married offspring spend less time with parents than those who are single, although emotional ties tend not to differ between groups (Musick & Bumpass, 2012; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2008). Yet far less is known about how partners’ traits influence children’s relationships with parents. On the one hand, studies of marital behavior suggest that unions among individuals of similar socioeconomic backgrounds have increased over time (Mare, 1991; Schwartz & Mare, 2005). On the other hand, a countervailing trend also points to the rise in marriages that cross historically salient racial and ethnic boundaries; unions that have grown increasingly common over time (Wang, 2012). Population-level research on intermarriage demonstrates how exogamous unions increase the

heterogeneity of family networks (Goldstein, 1999). Yet how interracial marriage affects those most intimately involved – parents and children – remains largely unknown.

In the research that follows, I use data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to extend previous research on the link between offspring's marriage and intergenerational relationships in three important ways. First, I explore not only how children's marriage is associated with ties to parents, but explicitly ask how children's marital type – whether the respondent marries exogamously or endogamously – affects ties to parents. I use the terms exogamous marriage, intermarriage and interracial marriage interchangeably to define marriages among individuals who marry across the broad race/ethnic categories of non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, Asian, and Hispanic. Second, I also include controls for respondents' relationships with parents prior to marriage. Previous research found that strong parent-child relationships during adolescence lead to early marriage (Thornton, Axinn & Xie, 2000) and certain aspects of parent-child relationships may also select individuals into endogamous rather than exogamous marriages. In the analysis that follows, respondents' relationships with mothers during adolescence are included as controls so that the effects of marriage and intermarriage on parent-child relationships in young adulthood are conceptually separated from earlier parent-child relationships that may lead to marriage and intermarriage in the first place. This provides a stronger assessment of the causal association between marriage and parent-child relationships. Finally, I compare the associations between marriage and intermarriage across a variety of outcomes that capture the strength of parent-child relationships. These measures allow us to understand how marriage and intermarriage influence not only emotional ties between parents and children, for instance, but also how these unions are associated with contact and geographic distance between generations.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

This paper finds that married offspring live neither very close nor very far from mothers compared to those who never married. However, married children do not differ from never married respondents with respect to maternal visits and contact, once geographic distance is accounted for. In addition, these findings suggest no difference in married versus unmarried offspring's emotional ties to mothers.

Differentiating between whether offspring were married to same-race or different-race partners, however, complicates this picture. In fact, results from this study suggest that the majority of findings between married and never married offspring's relationships with mothers are driven by those in endogamous unions. Specifically, children who married within race/ethnic lines were more likely to live near mothers compared to those who never married, although no difference was found between those who married exogamously and those who married endogamously. In addition, individuals who married interracially were less likely to visit mothers frequently compared to those who never married, whereas no difference was detected between those in endogamous unions and those who never married.

Furthermore, race, immigrant status and gender moderate the association between marital type and ties to mothers. With respect to distance, Whites who intermarried were more likely to live near mothers than Asians and African Americans who intermarried, countering expectations of weaker ties among Whites due to loss of race/caste privilege. Children of immigrants who intermarried reported fewer visits with mothers than children of immigrants who do not intermarry. Finally, women who intermarried have less contact with mothers than women who marry within the same race/ethnic boundaries.

Lastly, the specific race of the partner was associated with ties to mothers, but in unpredicted ways. Based on prior qualitative work, I had anticipated little effect of marriage to

Whites on ties to parents, but strong negative effect on ties to parents among those who married African Americans. Yet results from this study demonstrate that marriage to Whites was associated with weaker ties to mothers compared to non-White partners with no effects for Black vs. non-Black partners.

Findings from this study thus generally suggest that married individuals have different ties to mothers than those who are single – ties that are neither strong nor weak. But intermarriage in particular may be associated with weaker ties to parents compared to marriage within race/ethnic boundaries. Yet findings from this work should be interpreted with caution. First, Add Health does not ask information about the partner's parents. Geographic distance from one parent may in fact mean being closer to a partner's parent. Second, this project examines marriages only and does not include other types of unions. Cohabitation may have less impact on parent-child relationships, depending on the social context (Nazio & Saraceno, 2010) and cohabitation with a partner of a different race/ethnic origin than one's own may have fewer consequences for parent-child relationships if parents do not view these unions as permanent (Zantvliet et al., 2012). Cohabiting offspring were excluded from this study, but future research should examine how partner choice affects ties to parents among cohabiting unions given the large share of interracial unions among these couples (Batson, Qian, & Lichter, 2006). Third, these marriages examined here may not be representative of intermarriages in general, which previous studies show tend to occur later in life (Lichter, 1990). For instance, qualitative data from interviews with young adults implies that parental resistance to intermarriage tends to decrease with age (Kasinitz et al., 2008). Thus, an analytical sample that includes marriages after age 30 may find fewer detrimental effects of intermarriage on parent-child relationships. Fourth, this paper only examines one aspect of partner's traits ties to parents. It is likely that partner's

educational background and socioeconomic status, for example, are equally important dimensions that also influence an individual's ties to parents. Fifth, many important predictors of ties to parents, such as parental health, are missing from the analysis presented here because such data on parents at Wave 4 are not included in the survey. Future data collection efforts on parents of AddHealth respondents would be extremely beneficial for assessing intergenerational relationships. Finally, it is likely that the effects of intermarriage are underestimated in this analysis. Respondents who intermarry may have gauged early on that relationships with parents would not be detrimentally affected, or at the very least, could be mended after marriage. Thus, those who do interracially marry may have better ties to parents than would otherwise be expected.

Nonetheless, this paper sheds light on an important and under-researched topic – the consequences of marriage and in particular, intermarriage for parent-child relationships in later life. As population aging continues, older parents may rely more on adult children to provide assistance with everyday activities, assistance that necessitates geographic proximity. Children who marry “out” may not be able to provide parents with such support if they live far away, as findings from this study show. In addition, the most common form of intermarriage – marriage with Whites – also has negative ramifications for ties to parents, especially among immigrants and race/ethnic minorities. Older ethnic minorities whose children intermarry may be especially affected given their precarious social and economic circumstances in later life.

This paper calls into question the common acceptance of intermarriage as an indicator and a mechanism for racial and ethnic integration in diverse social contexts such as the United States (Gordon, 1964). If interracial marriage indeed weakens ties to parents and other members of the family of origin, then marriage may not have the immediate effect of bridging together

race/ethnic groups, even as racial diversity within kinship networks increases. Rather, intermarriage may have much larger negative consequences for the personal lives of those involved, even as it dissipates race/ethnic boundaries at the population level. Future research should explore how parent-child relationships change over time and whether the negative consequences of marriage and intermarriage remain consistent with time.

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