

**Parent-child Relationships and Young Adults' Partner Choice**  
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**Short Abstract**

In racially stratified countries such as the United States, the societal benefits of intermarriage - as a mechanism that decreases the social distance between groups - are emphasized. Although individual characteristics and structural contexts in part determine who marries whom, previous work pays little attention to the role of family and in particular, parental barriers to intermarriage. In addition, few studies have examined the consequences of intermarriage for parent-child relationships. This study addresses two related questions. First, how do relationships with parents during adolescence affect who young adults marry? Second, how does partner choice affect parent-child relationships after marriage? For both of these questions, does the link between parent-child relationships and partner choice differ for children of immigrants compared to those of native-born parents? Findings from this paper shed light on the link between young adults' partner choice and parent-child relationships as the U.S. population increases in race-ethnic diversity.

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## **Extended Abstract**

### **1. Background**

In the United States, intermarriage serves as both an indicator and a mechanism for the decrease in social distance between groups. Individual characteristics (Johnson 1988; Paganini and Morgan 1991; Qian and Lichter 2007; Schwartz and Mare 2005) and structural contexts (Mare 1991) play important roles in determining who marries whom. Yet beyond individual and structural determinants, third parties, defined as institutions or individuals outside of the couple, may also influence who individuals marry (Goode 1964; Kalmijn 1998).

In the United States historically, parents largely fulfilled this role. Although much emphasis has since been placed on the family's waning influence on children's romantic relationships (Rosenfeld and Kim 2005), parents may continue to shape whom young adults choose to marry. Previous research suggests that offspring who want to maintain close ties to the family of origin may prefer endogamous unions. For example, in-depth interviews with native-born African American and White college students suggested that a main deterrent to initiating exogamous relationships was fear of upsetting or being disowned by parents (Harris and Kalbfleish 2000). First and second-generation immigrants in particular, compared to native-born individuals with native-born parents, may feel more obligated to marry within the race/ethnic group in order to preserve ethnic and linguistic continuity across generations (Kasinitz et al., 2008).

In addition, offspring's partner's choice, regardless of whether it conforms to parental expectations, may also affect their relationships with parents. Previous research suggests that exogamous unions in particular may suffer from a lack of third party support compared to endogamous unions. For example, among intermarried couples, marriages tend to be shorter in duration (Jones 2010), more prone to marital stress and conflict (Fusco 2010) and more likely to end in divorce than endogamous marriages (Bratter and King 2008; Zhang and Van Hook 2009). For the children of immigrants, exogamous unions may disrupt ties to parents in later life due to cultural or linguistic differences between the partner and parents. Although previous research tends to emphasize the societal benefits of race/ethnic intermarriage, very little research has examined the consequences of intermarriage for parent-child relationships.

### **2. Research Questions**

Based on previous research, this paper asks two main research questions. First, how do relationships with parents during adolescence affect who young adults marry? Second, how does partner choice affect parent-child relationships after the marriage? For both of these questions, does the link between parent-child relationships and partner choice differ for children of immigrants compared to those with native-born parents?

### **3. Data and Measures**

To address these questions, I use data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (AddHealth). AddHealth is a longitudinal study of a nationally representative sample of adolescents in grades 7-12 in the United States during the 1994-95 school year. The Add Health cohort was followed into young adulthood with three additional in-home interviews in 1996,

2002 and most recently in 2008/9, when individuals were between the ages of 24 and 32. The first wave consisted of approximately 20,745 adolescents with oversamples of Chinese- Cuban- and Puerto-Rican- origin adolescents.

Add Health combines longitudinal survey data on respondents' social, economic, psychological and physical well-being with contextual data on parents, family, neighborhood, community, school, friendships, peer groups, and romantic relationships. In this way, the data provide a unique opportunity to track individuals during and following adolescence, a critical period in the life course. Crucial for this study is that current romantic relationships and questions regarding parent-child relationships were asked in each wave, making it possible to assess the effect of these relationships on one another over time.

*Measuring Intergenerational Relationships* In the first part of the analysis, the quality of parent-child relationships are an independent variable; in the second half; they are a dependent variable. To address the first question of whether differences in intergenerational ties select individuals into exogamous or endogamous unions, I rely on measures of parent-child relationships taken in the first wave of data collection in 1994-5. These include questions regarding affective ties to parents, time spent with parents and communication with parents.<sup>1</sup> In the second part of the analysis, I examine how intergenerational ties are shaped by the type of union offspring enter into. The nature of these questions differs slightly from those of earlier waves given that the majority of adolescents no longer live with a parent. However, respondents were asked to report on general contact with parents and affective ties to parents.<sup>2</sup>

*Measuring Union Type* I consider first marriages only, as the vast majority (>95%) of respondents have been married only once. By 2008/09, approximately one quarter of the original study participants have married at least once (~5,000 marriages). Individuals are assigned values depending on whether they 1) endogamously marry, 2) exogamously marry, 3) or remain single. I distinguish between exogamous unions, which are defined as unions where individuals in the relationship belong to different race-ethnic categories, from endogamous unions, defined as relationships that do not transgress race-ethnic boundaries. I rely on race-ethnic categories that are commonly employed in socio-demographic studies in the United States. These categories include non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black, non-Hispanic Asian and Pacific Islander,

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<sup>1</sup> Affective ties to parents in this case refer specifically to emotional closeness to mother/fathers. Respondents were asked whether they were 1) Not at all, 2) Very Little, 3) Somewhat, 4) Quite a bit or 5) Very close to parents. Time spent with parents includes whether the respondent 1) went shopping with a mother/father, 2) played a sport with a mother/father, 3) went to church or a religious event with a mother/father, 4) went to a museum, movie, play or sporting event with a mother/father, and 5) whether the respondent worked on a school project with a mother/father in the previous 4 weeks. Respondents were asked to respond 1) yes or 2) no. Communication with parents include how often the respondent discussed the following topics with their mother/father in the previous 4 weeks: 1) someone they were dating, or a party they went to, 2) a personal problem the respondent was having, 3) school work or grades, and 4) other things the respondent was doing in school. Respondents were asked to respond 1) yes or 2) no.

<sup>2</sup> Contact with parents is measured in three ways: respondents were asked 1) how far they lived from their mother/father, 2) how often they visited their mother/father and 3) how often they spoke to, wrote to or emailed their mothers/fathers. In addition, two questions of affective ties were included where the respondent was asked whether 1) s/he was satisfied with the way s/he communicated with her/his mother/father "figure" and 2) how close s/he feels to the mother/father "figure".

Hispanic (of any race) and Other. I exclude mixed raced, non-Hispanic individuals from the study because of conceptual ambiguity that arises when classifying these individuals into endogamous vs. exogamous unions. Although an analysis that disaggregates individuals by parental country of origin is preferable, data limitations will not support this. However, previous research shows that at least with respect to intermarriage, pan-racial categories are indeed meaningful as high rates of marriage within these categories but across national origin lines are quite frequent (Rosenfeld 2001; Waters and Jimenez 2005: p.110). Thus for the purposes of my analysis this definition captures the relevant boundary-crossing process of exogamy.

#### **4. Preliminary Results**

Results from preliminary analyses suggest that emotional closeness to parents during adolescence may affect whom one marries. In particular, the effect of being close to parents decreases the likelihood of entry into exogamous unions, but does not affect entry into endogamous unions, compared to remaining single. Additional analyses suggest that the relationship between intergenerational ties and union type did not vary by immigrant status or gender, but differences did emerge when race/ethnic interactions were included.

As next steps, I plan to examine how other measures of parent-child ties, such as time spent with parents and communication with parents, also affect whom young adults marry. I will then move on to the second part of the analysis to assess whether offspring's partner choice also influences contact and affective ties to parents, after controlling for parent-child relationships in earlier waves. Because the data files for the analysis are already constructed, I plan have a full paper ready in time for the PAA 2012 meetings this spring.

#### **5. Conclusion**

As a mechanism that decreases the social distance between groups, intermarriage may be especially important in ethnically and racially stratified contexts such as the United States. Yet prior work has not paid adequate attention to the barriers to intermarriage that may occur at the family level and in particular, from parents. In addition, very little research has examined the consequences of intermarriage for parent-child relationships. Findings from this paper shed light on the link between young adults' partner choice and parent-child relationships as the U.S. population increases in ethnic and racial diversity.

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