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Catholicism and Intermarriage in the United States

The incidence of interfaith marriages depends upon how religion is measured. In this study, Catholic mixed-marriage rates are examined among a sample of approximately 600 currently married men and women. It is shown that the incidence of intermarriage is substantially lower if current religion is used rather than religious upbringing. It is further shown that the Catholic effect on the odds of intermarrying has declined over time, particularly for men and women born during the 1950s. PROBIT is used to estimate the likelihood that Catholics intermarry.

In recent studies, Lieberson and Waters (1988), Mosher, Williams, and Johnson (1992), and Sander (1992, 1993) have made the point that data on religious upbringing is needed in order to study marriage. The reason for this is that current religion is not an exogenous determinant of marriage. Current religion (and religious activity) might be jointly determined with the marriage. For example, at the time of marriage or thereafter, one spouse might convert to the other spouse's religion. Thus, if current religion is used to estimate variables regarding marriage, the results could be seriously biased. That is, the correlation between current religion and variables regarding marriage could reflect unobserved preferences rather than the effect of religion.

This is the case in many of the studies on the effects of Catholicism and Catholic religious activity on marriage, fertility, and divorce. For example, Sander (1992) showed that if current religion is used, Catholic effects on fertility tend to be inflated because converts to Catholicism tend to have a relatively high preference for having children, while defectors from Catholicism tend to have a relatively low preference for having children. Sander (1993) demonstrated that there are also serious selection bias problems if current religion is used to estimate age at first marriage.

Regarding interfaith marriages, Greeley (1989, 1990) argued that the rate of intermarriages for Catholics has not changed much during the past 50 years. His study used religion at the time of marriage to measure the incidence of mixed marriages. Similarly, Heaton (1990) and Monahan (1973) used current religion to measure the rate of interfaith marriages. But, because current religion is not necessarily independent of decisions about marriage, it does not necessarily follow that the effects of religion on intermarriage have not changed, even though intermarriage rates may have remained relatively constant.

In this article, the effect of a Catholic heritage on the odds of intermarrying is examined. Particular attention is given to how the Catholic population is measured.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

What determines whether Catholics intermarry? Or, more generally, what are the determinants of interfaith marriages? Becker (1991) suggested that religion is a complementary trait that affects the gains from marriage. For this reason, there is

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an incentive to marry someone from the same religion and there is a disincentive to intermarry. One of the costs of a mixed marriage is a higher risk of divorce (Becker, Landes, & Michael, 1977; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). However, Lehrer and Chiswick (1993) showed that the costs of intermarriage (such as a higher risk of divorce) are not that great if there is religious compatibility in the marriage.

In their study of ethnicity, Lieberson and Waters (1988) suggested a useful model for conceptualizing the determinants of intermarriage, proposing four important determinants. First, opportunity affects the odds of intermarriage (for example, Jews are more likely to intermarry in areas where they are less concentrated). The second and third determinants are the disposition of others toward one's group and the disposition of members of one's own group toward other groups. Finally, socioeconomic background also affects the probability of intermarriage.

It is not clear how the attitudes of Catholics and non-Catholics toward intermarriage have changed over time. On the one hand, there is evidence that Catholic effects on family behavior have declined (Sander, 1992, 1993). On the other hand, Greeley (1989, 1990) noted that mixed marriages by Catholics have stayed at a relatively low rate—about 1 in 5. However, because Greeley's measure of intermarriage was based on religion at the time of marriage, as noted above, the effects of religion on intermarriage could have changed. In addition, other background factors that affect intermarriage rates could have changed as well.

Some of the other key background factors that may affect intermarriage rates include schooling, socioeconomic background, and ethnicity (Becker, 1991; Johnson, 1980; Lieberson & Waters, 1988). Schooling and other socioeconomic background variables, such as parents' schooling, may weaken religious attachments and increase contact with members of other religious groups. On the other hand, ethnic attachments might strengthen in-group preferences. For example, Lieberson and Waters (1988) argued that length of time in the United States affects intermarriage rates, with an increase of time in the U.S. tending to increase intermarriage.

Data

The data are taken from the 5 most recent years (1987–1991) of the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS has been undertaken annually since 1972 (excluding 1979 and 1981). For each year of the Survey, a new sample is drawn of approximately 1,500 English-speaking persons 18 years of age or older who live in noninstitutional arrangements in the U.S. The GSS is good data set for this study because it includes data on both religious upbringing and current religion. Because about 1 in every 4 Americans is Catholic, the GSS includes a relatively large number of observations on Catholics and, thus, reliable comparisons can be made. Four birth cohorts are examined: respondents born before 1930 and respondents born during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Men and women who were born after 1959 are excluded from this study because a relatively high percentage had not yet married, creating the possibility of serious selection bias problems in estimating intermarriage rates for younger Catholics. For example, because Catholics with a relatively high preference for a Catholic spouse may postpone marriage relative to other Catholics, the intermarriage rate for younger married Catholics could be biased upward. Furthermore, respondents were selected who were born in the United States and who were living in the U.S. at age 16 so that a sharper focus is given to domestic influences on intermarriage. The sample used in this study comprises about 600 currently married men and women.

Table 1 presents data on Catholic intermarriage rates for Catholics by sex and year of birth. The data are presented for currently married men and women with a Catholic heritage (Catholic upbringing) and a Catholic identification when they were surveyed (Catholic now). The data support Greeley's (1989, 1990) assessment of a relatively low Catholic intermarriage rate if current religion is used. For the Catholic now population, the Catholic rate of intermarriage for men ranges

TABLE 1. INTERMARRIAGE RATES, BY PERCENTAGE, FOR CATHOLICS BY SEX AND YEAR OF BIRTH

	Catholic Upbringing		Catholic Now	
Year of Birth	Men	Women	Men	Women
LT1930	22.4	30.6	8.8	11.9
	(85)	(98)	(91)	(101)
1930s	33.9	39.3	20.0	21.4
	(59)	(56)	(50)	(56)
1940s	38.7	41.9	15.6	18.2
	(106)	(86)	(90)	(88)
1950s	47.9	46.0	25.0	32.5
	(140)	(163)	(120)	(144)

Note: *n* in parentheses.

from about 9% for men born before 1930 to about 25% for men born during the 1950s. For women, the rate of Catholic interfaith marriages ranges from about 12% for women born before the 1930s (LT1930) to about 30% for women born during the 1950s. If religious upbringing is used to measure intermarriage, a different picture is seen. Catholic mixed marriage rates are substantially higher. For men, the rates range from a low of about 22% for men born before 1930 to about 48% for men born during the 1950s. For women with a Catholic heritage, the rates of intermarriage range from about 31% for the cohort born before 1930 to 46% for the 1950s cohort.

Mixed marriage rates differ considerably between the Catholic upbringing and Catholic now populations because of defections from Catholicism and conversions to the Catholic faith. Data in Table 2 indicate that about 84% of the men and 91% of the women with a Catholic upbringing in the LT1930 birth cohort were still Catholic at the time they were surveyed. For the 1950s birth cohort, a smaller percentage retained their Catholic heritage—about 73% and 80% for men and women, respectively. The defection rate from Catholicism thus ranges from about 9% for women born before 1930 to about 27% for men born during the 1950s. Data in Table 2 are also arrayed on the conversion rate to Catholicism. For men, the rate ranges from a low of 2% for the 1930s birth cohort to over 5% for the LT1930 and 1950s cohorts. The rate of conversion for women ranges from about 3% for the LT1930 cohort to over 5% for the 1940s cohort. Because there are about 3 times as many non-Catholics in the population as there are Catholics, the number of converts to Catholicism is relatively substantial. For example, 22% of the Catholics now population in the LT1930 birth cohort for men are converts.

TABLE 2. PERCENTAGES OF CATHOLIC NOW BY RELIGIOUS UPBRINGING, SEX, AND YEAR OF BIRTH

	Catholic Upbringing		Non-Catholic Upbringing	
Year of Birth	Men	Women	Men	Women
LT1930	83.5	90.8	5.4	3.2
	(85)	(98)	(20)	(11)
1930s	78.0	83.9	2.0	4.4
	(59)	(56)	(4)	(9)
1940s	74.5	81.4	3.3	5.5
	(106)	(86)	(10)	(17)
1950s	72.9	79.8	5.4	3.9
	(140)	(163)	(18)	(14)

Note: The data are for currently married men and women. Number of Catholics now in parentheses.

EMPIRICAL MODELS

In the present study, estimates of the odds that Catholics will intermarry are undertaken by sex. Measurement of a mixed marriage is constrained by the data that are available in the General Social Survey and is based on defining intermarriage in two different ways. In the first case, intermarriage is defined as a respondent with a Catholic upbringing being married to someone with a different religious upbringing (including no religious upbringing). In the second case, intermarriage is defined as a respondent with a Catholic identity now (at the time of the survey) being married to someone with a different religious identity.

Dummy variables are created for the four birth cohorts (LT1930, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s). The omitted variable in the estimates is the earliest birth cohort. In all of the estimates, adjustments are also made for respondent's schooling (in years), father's schooling (in years), being black or Hispanic, type of residence at age 16 (rural, town, or small city relative to big cities of 250,000 or more and suburbs of big cities), region at age 16 (relative to North Central), and the survey year (relative to 1991). The coefficients for the survey year dummy variables are not reported because they are of no particular interest and because none were significant at the 5% level.

Two models are estimated for both men and women. In the first model, data on religious upbringing are used. In this model, the analysis is confined to men and women with a Catholic upbringing. The dependent variable in this model takes on a value of 1 if the respondent with a Catholic upbringing is married to someone who does not have a Catholic upbringing. In the second model, data on current religion are used. Only respondents who are currently Catholic are included. The dependent variable in the second model takes on a value of 1 if a respondent who is Catholic now is married to someone who is not Catholic. The second model is estimated to show how the measure of Catholicism affects the results.

Because the dependent variable takes on a value of either 0 or 1, LOGIT or PROBIT are appropriate methodologies for both models. For this study, PROBIT is used. If LOGIT were used, the results should be similar.

TABLE 3. PROBIT ESTIMATES OF INTERMARRIAGE BY CATHOLICS

	Men		Women	
Variable	Catholic Upbringing	Catholic Now	Catholic Upbringing	Catholic Now
D1930s	.24	.23	.21	.45
	(.29)	(.35)	(.26)	(.30)
D1940s	.38	.23	.18	.34
	(.26)	(.31)	(.24)	(.28)
D1950s	.51**	.33	.40*	.81***
	(.26)	(.31)	(.22)	(.26)
Schooling	.01	−.04	.001	−.04
	(.03)	(.03)	(.04)	(.04)
Father's schooling	.05**	.07**	.02	.03
	(.02)	(.03)	(.02)	(.03)
South	.51**	.65**	−.03	.36
	(.25)	(.31)	(.27)	(.29)
West	.17	.62**	−.09	.30
	(.25)	(.29)	(.25)	(.31)
East	−.15	.04	−.45***	−.18
	(.19)	(.24)	(.17)	(.19)
Rural	.67***	.22	−.08	.38
	(.23)	(.31)	(.22)	(.25)
Town	.63***	.46*	.07	.15
	(.20)	(.25)	(.18)	(.21)
Small city	.24	.35	.06	.35
	(.26)	(.31)	(.22)	(.25)
Black	.77	−.20	−3.53	−3.01
	(.53)	(.73)	(17.9)	(10.9)
Hispanic	−.91***	−.69	−.78**	−.69
	(.34)	(.46)	(.39)	(.44)
Intercept	3.19***	3.40***	4.44***	3.70***
	(.52)	(.61)	(.49)	(.57)
n	307	274	325	317

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The estimates of intermarriage by Catholics are presented in Table 3. If intermarriage is defined by religious upbringing, the results for men indicate that the odds of intermarrying are higher for more recent birth cohorts—particularly the 1950s cohort. However, the standard errors of the birth cohort coefficients are relatively large as well. Thus, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The other results for men indicate that father's schooling, and southern, rural, and town residence tend to significantly increase the odds of intermarriage while being Hispanic reduces the likelihood of a mixed married. The estimates of intermarriage by women with a Catholic upbringing indicate that the odds are significantly higher for the 1950s cohort. The coefficients for the 1930s and 1940s cohorts are positive, but they are not highly significant. As was the case for men, the standard errors of the birth cohort coefficients are relatively large, thus suggesting caution in interpretation. The other significant results for women include eastern residence and being Hispanic reducing the odds of intermarriage.

If current religion rather than religious upbringing is used to measure intermarriage, the results are somewhat different. The results under the "Catholic Now" heading in Table 3 are arrayed to show this. As noted above, Catholic effects on intermarriage cannot be discerned from the Catholic now estimates because current religion may be an endogenous variable. These results are presented simply to show that they differ from the Catholic upbringing results.

In Table 4, the odds that men and women with a Catholic upbringing will intermarry are evaluated from the PROBIT estimates. For men, the odds increase over time from .26 for the cohort born before 1930 to .42 for the 1950s birth cohort. For women, the odds initially increase from .32 for the LT1930 cohort to .40 for the 1930s cohort and then remain about constant through the

TABLE 4. EFFECT OF A CATHOLIC UPBRINGING ON THE ODDS OF INTERMARRIAGE BY SEX AND YEAR OF BIRTH

Year of Birth	Men	Women
LT1930	.26	.32
1930s	.32	.40
1940s	.37	.39
1950s	.42	.47

Note: Odds ratios are evaluated at the mean values for the other variables in the estimates.

1940s. For the 1950s cohort, the odds increase to about .47.

CONCLUSIONS

The effect of a Catholic background on intermarriage seems to have declined over time. That is, after adjusting for other background factors, Catholics, particularly those born in the 1950s, have become more likely to intermarry. The view that the Catholic intermarriage rate has not changed is at least partly the result of how interfaith marriages have been measured. If data on religion at the time of marriage or thereafter is used, the rate is biased downward.

One of the shortcomings of this study is that data on the religion of previous spouses were not available and that currently divorced men and women were excluded from the sample. This may create a bias if, as some studies suggest, intermarriage is associated with a higher incidence of divorce. However, the bias in this study is probably downward as well. The reason for this is that the intermarriage rate for never-divorced currently-married men and women with a Catholic upbringing is 2 to 3 percentage points lower than the rate for all currently married men and women with a Catholic upbringing, in the sample used in this study. Future research might explore how divorce affects intermarriage rates.

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