# Interracial Marriage and Rational Choice Theory

From the birth of slavery in the United States to the end of the Civil Rights era, miscegenation was forbidden in many states. It was only after the case of *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967, when the United States Supreme Court legalized interracial marriage, that the union of persons of different races and ethnicities became more prevalent throughout the nation. Following nearly 200 years of racial tensions, there has been a steady increase in the percent of newlyweds who are intermarried. Rational choice theory holds that this phenomenon can be explained by subjective, individual motivations derived from conscious thought. Taking a more refined stance, game theory maintains that interracial marriages stem from the iterated contemplation of the future outcomes of present decisions. From an alternative viewpoint, social exchange theory claims that intermarriages are carried out as a joint trade of social goods. Utilizing these perspectives, I argue that the growth in number of people who marry someone of a different race or ethnicity is justified by the recognition of a broader choice set, the accessibility of something desirable that a person would not have had if otherwise confined to their own racial or ethnic group, and the opportunity to emulate another individual's character that a person idealizes. To demonstrate my argument, first I analyze the change in acceptance rates of out-marriage to other racial or ethnic groups. Then I proceed to walk through a hypothetical game scenario where deciding on a potential partner is the question at hand. Finally, I describe the interaction between interracial partners and discuss what each has to offer in the relationship.

Intermarriage experienced its initial period of proliferation when the public's opinion on the matter showed signs of more widespread support across the United States. Prior to 1967, applying the principles of rational choice theory to the concept of marriage would have revealed that at the most general level, a person had two options in their choice set: to marry within their racial and ethnic group or to not marry at all. However, with society's complex nature and the limits of human cognition, it is seemingly impossible for a person to know all of their potential options. That being said, rational choice theorists would argue that choosing to marry within one's racial or ethnic group was merely satisficing, or settling for the option that was good enough. In particular, David Hume believed that "if individuals act in certain ways, it is because of their habitual experience, not because it is ultimately rational for them to believe as they do" (Hume 1994). Based on this, I maintain that people chose monoracial relationships because it was what they were accustomed to. Change only came when miscegenation was decriminalized, and people were faced with a new option: to marry outside of their racial or ethnic group. In 1967, 3 percent of newlyweds in the United States were intermarried. By 2015, the number had reached 17 percent (Livingston and Brown 2017). I claim that this trend can be explained through an analysis of the calculations an individual performs on their newly diversified choice set. During their decision-making process, one may reason that the costs of partaking in an interracial relationship include handling society's disapproval, bearing the weight of the stigma it entails, and living with incompatible cultures. On the other hand, the benefits may include increasing one's cultural awareness, disputing discrimination, and attracting additional attention. Despite these attributes

remaining consistent over time, in earlier years, the costs provoked more profound negative reactions from society. For instance, in 1990, 63 percent of non-blacks said they would oppose a relative marrying a black person (Livingston and Brown 2017). This mentality, along with the expectation of heavy opposition, encouraged people to avoid the risk of pursuing an interracial marriage, therefore explaining the low rate. In contrast, when society became more open-minded to the idea, as characterized by the notable drop in 2017 to 14 percent of non-blacks saying they would oppose a relative marrying a black person (Livingston and Brown 2017), a significantly larger portion of the population opted to take the risk and proceed with an interracial marriage. Due to the immediate arrival of the aforementioned costs, many of these couples assumed a low discount rate; they would undergo the preliminary sacrifices in order to obtain a reward in the long-run. The increased intermarriage rate therefore resulted from the individual's decision that not only did the benefits outweigh the costs, but the choice maximized their net benefit. Although this is a relatively technical application of rational choice theory, considering it has its foundations in economics and politics, its sub-theories incorporate a social aspect that is capable of providing further explanations of this phenomenon.

Marrying out of one's racial or ethnic group offers many personal benefits to the individual that may not have been plausible had they confined themselves to a monoracial relationship. Deliberating marriage options with this mindset can be described using game theory, which explains the strategic decision-making tactics used when handling situations where the outcome of one's choices depends on the choices of

the other participant. John Thibaut and Harold Kelley claimed that "the possible course of a social interaction could be predicted through the analysis of aspects of power in an encounter" (Wikipedia 2019). They believed that it was crucial for the actor to know what they, as well as the other actor, were going to do in the interaction. When applied to people considering marriage, an iterated game begins, characterized by a self-interested individual thinking into the future to deliberate the costs and benefits of potential outcomes that could stem from their current choice. Each potential partner acts as a player with their own personal goals. For instance, one may strive to gain exposure to a new culture, develop a more open mind, and strengthen their understanding of their own beliefs. On the other hand, one may intend to stick to their roots and stay in their comfort zone. The key is that both partners are restricted by one another. If both partners' goals are consistent, with the former mindset, they will partake in an interracial marriage, whereas, with the latter mindset, they will incur a monoracial marriage. If both partners' goals are inconsistent, they will be incompatible. Despite one's potential partner offering more than their counterpart in one's own racial or ethnic group, one might want more than the potential partner can provide, therefore the relationship will not follow through. This brings forth the options of correspondence and non-correspondence game theory. It is logical to assume that cooperation is the better solution, considering it will result in the birth of a marriage regardless of whether the partners have common goals for the union. However, noncooperation, which explores the way self-interested actors interact in strategic situations, is oftentimes more tempting to the individual because it ensures they get the result they initially anticipated. I argue that by acting in their best interest and

defecting, the partner that seeks to be in an interracial marriage retains the opportunity to fulfill their desires. In other words, their current decision to not marry within their own racial or ethnic group impacts their future choices, which will ultimately allow them to pursue their goal of increased cultural- and self-awareness. A greater number of individuals in the United States choosing to do just this explains the country's steady increase in intermarriage.

Once in a relationship, partners are encouraged to take after one another, especially regarding character traits that they find appealing. As aforementioned, miscegenation inspires partners to explore new perspectives, which in turn increases the pool of potential attributes to adopt. This is best described by social exchange theory, which explains social stability as a process of negotiated exchanges between parties. It expands the breadth of a person's preferences to include not only materialistic desires, but also status, prestige, and reputation. In 2015, 83 percent of newlywed intermarried couples in the United States included one white spouse and one Hispanic, Asian, multiracial, black, or American Indian spouse (Livingston and Brown 2017). According to George Homans, who pioneered social exchange theory, "a man whose superior status is so firmly established may allow his inferiors 'social' access to him…Association with him can bring up the apparent status of others and thus reward them, and accordingly he has gained a new way of earning their esteem to add to those he commands already" (1994). I argue that in the case of intermarriage, the spouse of the minority racial or ethnic group is the inferior while the white spouse is the superior. The inferior partner values the superior partner's character because they are a certain type of person, such that the inferior

considers this type ideal and seeks to imitate it. The superior partner then maintains a sense of control over the inferior partner. From this type of relationship comes the concept of power and dependence, whose foundation is built around the idea that "A depends upon B if he aspires to goals or gratifications whose achievement is facilitated by appropriate actions on B's part…Thus, the power to influence the other resides in control over the things he values" (Emerson 1962). I believe that by representing what the inferior partner idealizes, whether it be in terms of physical appearance, possible opportunities, or perception in society, the superior partner asserts power in the relationship, leaving the other to submit to being dependent. As Homans said, the two parties involved had something to trade, and through their mutual exchange of social goods, each spouse would achieve a better experience. This desirable outlook, which is notably unique to interracial couples, is another explanation for the increase in intermarriage rates across the nation.

Social exchange theory also accounts for interracial marriages between spouses of equal position. Homans states that "[equals] can exchange rewards on even terms and thus escape the costs of inferiority" (1994). He adds that only when an individual interacts with their equal can they be themselves, "free of judging or being judged" (Homans 1994). In 2015, 74 percent of newlyweds in the United States who were intermarried were of a minority racial or ethnic group and 37 percent of newlyweds ages 25 and older who were intermarried had some college education. In the same year, of the population ages 25 and older, 70 percent of Asian people, 60 percent of white people, 53 percent of black people, and 37 percent of Hispanic people had obtained some college

education (Ryan and Bauman 2016). Based on these statistics, I argue that more white people were marrying college educated minorities because they were now of equal or higher status. By obtaining a degree, the partner who would have otherwise been inferior now had more opportunities to succeed financially and progress in the social ladder. In this case, the ideals of both partners balanced out due to their equivalent standing and contributions to the relationship, thus, it was more attractive to those considering marriage. This offers an additional explanation as to the rise in interracial marriage rates in the United States.

Despite the parsimonious and neutral nature of these theories, all three fail to recognize the simple explanations of the phenomenon that are not based on self-interest. Instead of individuals choosing a certain type of relationship based solely on their analysis of its costs and benefits, some may say it is merely the outcome of spontaneous actions. This rationale goes against rational choice theorists' belief that people consciously act in their best self-interest. Regarding game theory's perspective, some may argue that people in committed relationships do not see each other as just another factor to account for. They are not continuously seeking chances to exploit the other person, nor are they on guard against being taken advantage of. Instead, they actively consider each other's interests, therefore making them more likely to cooperate. This contradicts Thibaut and Kelley's idea that interracial marriages implement non-correspondence game theory. Finally, critics of social exchange theory take issue with the assumption that individuals are innately selfish and ready to terminate relationships. Instead, they offer an alternative perception of humans that establishes them as being

cognizant of social aspects of the relationship, such as communication and shared interests. I accept that all of these counterarguments are plausible, but I maintain that even in these cases, the individual is consciously considering their options and ultimately deciding in their own best interest.

Utilizing the rational choice perspective, I presented the rise in intermarriage in the United States as the result of individuals consistently making self-serving decisions. Following the legalization of miscegenation, the option to marry outside of one's own racial or ethnic group was included in people's choice set. The general public became more supportive of this union, therefore lessening the stigma associated with it and making it more appealing to those considering marriage. I went on to incorporate game theory in my proposition that interracial marriage rates increased due to partners walking through an iterated game prior to deciding on the type of marriage they wanted to partake in. In doing so, they envisioned their future to assist them in determining what current choices would lead them in the direction they wanted to follow. For those who were interested in marrying outside of their racial or ethnic group, they went through the rounds and weighed the costs and benefits of each path before choosing to defect from the traditional ways. Lastly, I applied social exchange theory to describe how partners in an interracial marriage interacted with one another. Homans offered two different states a relationship could assume and declared that "the tendency of one option to get the better of the other depends on the degree to which the relative status of the two parties is established" (1994). I used this mindset to detail how power and dependence, or lack thereof, played a crucial role in the birth of new intermarriages. In the long run, by

acknowledging the rise in interracial marriages and understanding its causes, we can proceed with further studies that analyze the phenomenon's effects on society. For instance, we can examine divorce rates to understand changes in the lifespans of relationships as a result of increased intermarriages. In addition, we can explore crime rates to establish a correlation between their changes and the influence of the majority's culture on the minority's actions, or vice versa. Furthermore, we can study mixed-race children and their role in society. And as the rate of interracial marriages continues to rise throughout the United States, new impacts on our lives will certainly reveal themselves.

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