

Intermarriage among Arabs in the United States: Patterns, Causes and Significances

(by Andrzej Kulczycki and A. Peter Lobo)

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Intermarriage is an important indicator of assimilation and identification and may be considered a force of integration (Gordon, 1964; Lieberman and Waters, 1988; Kalmijn, 1998). Marriages between individuals of different groups reflect frequent social interaction and social acceptance between social groups, whereas endogamy is believed to mirror and reproduce group divisions, social distance, and unequal power distributions in ethnically and racially diverse societies. Intermarriage with the majority population is typically viewed as the last stage of the assimilation process (Qian and Lichter, 2001 and 2007; Oropesa and Lansdale, 2004), although there is dispute whether the socio-cultural adjustments and experiences of more recent immigrant waves mirror those of earlier European ethnics (Alba and Nee, 2003; Hirschman, 2005). In this paper, we study Arab American intermarriage and the effects of acculturation and integration on the marital choices of Arab Americans. We also provide limited comparisons with our earlier findings based on 1990 census data (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2002).

The Arab American population grew in size two-and-half times over 1980-2006 to 1.8 million (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2008). It has also become increasingly diverse in terms of ethnic composition. Arab Americans continue to be younger, more educated, and earn higher incomes than the U.S. adult population (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2008). These and other findings (Read 2004; Ajrouch and Jamal 2007) suggest an increasingly assimilated ethnic population. However, Arab Americans are also viewed as suspect as a result of their origin and have been the subject of strong negative stereotypes that have increased since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Human Rights Watch, 2002; Chisti et al., 2003; Jamal and Naber 2008). This makes it all the more timely to study this population a decade after the events of 9/11 and their aftermath on Arab Americans. It also makes it all the more important to better inform knowledge and debate about this much misunderstood and stigmatized group.

In addition, despite a recent rise in scholarship about the Arab American population, our literature review suggest that no further studies of Arab American intermarriage have been published by students of ethnicity, migration, assimilation, and marriage since we published our first study on the topic. This also remains the only study of Arab American intermarriage to use nationally representative census data (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2002). It is important to examine whether previous patterns apply to the recent context.

Most studies on intermarriage have been conducted in the U.S., which remains by far the largest recipient of international migrants among more affluent and traditional immigrant-receiving countries. The average odds of in-marriage fell in the U.S. during the twentieth century, particularly among Whites (Lieberman and Waters, 1988; Pagnini and Morgan, 1990). Although it has risen, the level of black-white intermarriage remains low and is indicative of the social distance that persists between these groups (Kalmijn, 1993; Qian, 1997; Qian and Lichter, 2007). Many scholars have documented the changing patterns of intermarriage between Hispanics and non-Hispanic Whites (Oropesa and Lansdale, 2004) as well as between Asian and other Americans (Hwang et al., 1997). Analysis of the particular situation of Arab Americans may also inform discussion of intermarriage more generally and facilitate cross-cultural testing of existing generalizations and theories concerning intermarriage and assimilation.

In this paper, we update our previous work on Arab American intermarriage and examine whether the patterns and causes of intermarriage among Arab American men and women have changed since 1990. We compare intermarried couples that include an Arab American, as well as

Lebanese and Syrians (two of the largest Arab American national origin groups), on an array of demographic and socio-economic characteristics. We conduct multivariate analyses of the relative importance of different predictors of ethnic exogamy among Arab Americans, especially the effects of acculturation and integration on the marital choices of Arab Americans. Lastly, we assess the potential significance of intermarriage on the present and future trajectory and identity of the Arab American population, paying particular attention to how intermarried couples identify the ethnicity of their offspring.

Theoretical Considerations

Ideas on ethnic intermarriage are informed by general notions on preferences, opportunities, and third parties. Prevailing research tends to assume that people search for marriage candidates who are attractive in terms of more socio-economic resources. Unmarried persons who are well educated, hold more prestigious jobs and command higher incomes, are assumed to be in more demand as potential spouses (Hwang et al., 1995; Qian et al., 2001). The strong standing of U.S.-born and foreign-born Arabs compared to most Americans in terms of education, occupational skills and positions held, and income levels, would lead us to hypothesize that, in accordance with the basic assimilation hypothesis, Arab Americans are likely to out-marry at high rates. In addition, higher educational attainment increases the opportunities for ethnic minority individuals to meet members of other groups and is generally associated with weaker preference for a potential mate on ascribed characteristics like ethnicity. Arab Americans tend to have higher levels of education than most native-born Americans (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2001; 2008), so we might expect that relatively well educated Arab immigrants and US-born Arabs are more likely to participate in settings in which they are likely to interact with non-Arabs. This leads us to predict high overall rates of out-migration among Arab Americans, especially the native-born.

Another line of reasoning stresses the role of skin color, particularly in societies marked by racial hierarchies. Except for Somalis and Yemenis who may be darker-skinned, Arabs tend to be of similar skin color as most Americans, so that attitudes toward Arab American intermarriage may be expected to be generally favorable. Research also tends to assume that people prefer someone who is culturally similar, such as a person with a similar ancestral or language background. Foreign birth may be associated with endogamy because recent immigrants in particular are more likely to ascribe to the marriage ideals of their place of origin. Likewise, Arab Americans with both parents Arab may have higher odds of having or seeking an Arab spouse than those with parents from different ethnicities. We also consider language background and acquisition. When immigrants do not speak the host language well, they tend to have few opportunities of social interaction with natives and exhibit greater cultural distance from them. Hence, strong English language skills are likely to be predictive of higher outmarriage rates.

We also consider ethnic subgroups in the Arab population, which our research has shown to be increasingly heterogeneous. We consider ethnicity for the two major ancestry groups, Lebanese and Syrians (both culturally similar), and for all other Arab Americans. It is expected that Lebanese and Syrian Americans are more likely to be exogamous than other Arab groups, who have a disproportionately higher share of recent immigrants and are more likely to be Muslim. Also, in Muslim communities, interfaith marriages tend to be more strongly prohibited for women than for men because when Muslim women marry non-Muslims, their children are considered lost to Islam. This factor, along with patriarchal cultural influences, leads us to expect higher outmarriage rates for Arab men. Moreover, a higher sex ratio among other Arab Americans, a characteristic of the higher proportion of men than women among recent Arab immigrants, leads us to expect a similar outcome, because a shortage of marriageable co-ethnics of the opposing sex creates a structural force toward outmarriage (Blau and Schwartz, 1984).

Religions tend to discourage intermarriage, but US census and American Community Survey (ACS) data do not include data on religion, and no other nationally representative datasets exist to assess how religion affects out-marriage among Arab Americans. We therefore cannot look directly at the religious factor, but we may still gauge its influence indirectly. This is because the great majority of earlier Arab immigrants were descendants of Christian Lebanese and Syrians; these two groups account for 42% of our sample and, as stated above, are sufficiently large to allow for sub-group analysis. It is thought likely that Arab Americans who are Christian are more likely to out-marry than those who are Muslim.

Data and Methods

We define Arab Americans by ancestry and country of birth. We define “Arab” to include all 22 Arab League member states; overwhelming majorities in all these populations identify themselves as Arabs. Arabs selected could be either fully or partly Arab (the latter assumes an Arab and a non-Arab ancestry are reported). Couples selected also comprised at least one partner who was either U.S.-born or had arrived in the U.S. before age 18. This effectively removes the foreign married (whose inclusion would have considerably deflated intermarriage rates and invalidated comparisons between groups) and lets us focus on persons presumably living in the U.S. when the decision to marry was made. Neither census nor ACS data provide prior marital histories, so our focus is on currently married couples (which may result in an underreporting of marital exogamy among Arab Americans). The ethnic identification of children in married couple households of mixed Arab and other ancestral background is assessed through examining reported first and second ancestries.

We use data from the 2007-2011 American Community Survey (ACS) to examine patterns of intermarriage among Arab Americans and the influences of acculturation and integration on their marital choices. As such, this paper also provides a novel application of ACS data to the study of Arab Americans. In our earlier work based on the 1990 U.S. Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data, we used an unweighted sample size of 6,837 Arab men and 5,399 Arab women. We anticipate a lower but still adequate sample size for the present study due to the difference in overall size between PUMS and ACS sample sizes.

The first step of our analysis will consist of examination of in- and out-marriage rates for Arab men and women by socio-economic characteristics. Next, we employ logistic regression to analyze the influences of acculturation (including place of birth, partial Arab ancestry, and English language proficiency), structural assimilation (education, income and occupational skill level) and cultural assimilation (ethnicity/major ancestry group) on the likelihood of out-marriage.

Findings and Discussion

We first describe patterns of outmarriage and variations by gender and nativity, and to the extent possible, interethnic marriage for the 2 largest Arab groups (Lebanese and Syrians). Our preliminary analysis of an earlier round of ACS data suggest that previous patterns remain essentially intact. This is significant, given the events of 9/11 and its aftermath, although many of the couples in our dataset could have married earlier. However, Arab Americans continue to have high intermarriage rates and men and the native-born are more likely to be outmarried. We analyze these initial findings further with the 2007-2011 ACS data that are about to be released by the U.S. census Bureau.

In our previous research using 1990 census data, we showed that over 80% of U.S.-born Arabs had non-Arab spouses, which points to a diminishing ethnic identification. In addition, four out of five Arab men and nearly three out of four Arab women married non-Arab spouses after they came to the U.S. (Kulczycki and Lobo, 2002). The difference in the figures for men and women may be the result of several factors, including a shortage of eligible Arab women in the US at that time. Such high rates of intermarriage would be expected to continue into the present, but given the passage of time and the tortured recent experience of this population, it is by no means certain if this expectation is realized. Our earlier multivariate results suggested that cultural and structural assimilation is facilitating intermarriage, with indicators of acculturation being the strongest predictors, especially for women. These findings also need to be re-assessed.

Among Arab Americans of part Arab origin, we earlier found high rates of outmarriage among both men and women. We will re-assess this earlier finding using our most recent data. We will also provide limited comparisons with our earlier findings based on 1990 census data and with the few studies of intermarriage conducted among Arabs living in Europe (e.g. Kalmijn and van Tubergen, 2006). We conclude by discussing the impacts of Arab intermarriage for the ethnic identity of children of such couples, the role of intermarriage as an indicator of intergroup relations, and offer some reflections on the utility of ACS data for intermarriage analyses.

This research will question existing assumptions about immigrants to the U.S. and shed new light on the assimilation experience of small immigrant groups in the U.S. Our earlier research showed that contrary to what most people may think, immigrants from the Middle East do integrate into the social fabric and do so, for the most part, relatively quickly, within a generation or two. The present study will highlight new patterns, trends, causes and differentials, providing insight into the new realities of intermarriage and inter-group assimilation.

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