

Inter-ethnic partnering in Australia: evidence from 2021 census

Background

The integration of migrants and their descendants into host societies is an issue of major interest among government representatives, policy makers and the general public. Reflecting on the current situation in the US and Europe, Rodriguez-Garcia (2015:9) observes that ‘...fostering the integration of immigrants and social cohesion is one of the greatest challenges that modern societies face’. Mixed marriages between members of different groups can function as a linking element in a society and thereby promote integration and social cohesion. Mixed partnering also contributes to transformative socio-demographic changes and spatial integration (Massey & Denton 1985; Edgar 2014; Fozdar & Perkins 2014; Fozdar & McGavin 2017; Tindale & Klocker 2017).

Cultural diversity in Australia has increased since the turn of this century. While an overwhelming majority of Australians support this diversity, a significant minority are concerned about socio-political impacts of migrants and/or cultural diversity (Markus 2018). At least two in five Australians believe that many ‘migrants do not integrate into society or share Australian values’ (Aston 2016; Kenny & Koziol 2016). Of all the markers and means of integration (Ager & Strang 2008), the ‘ultimate litmus test of integration’ is intermarriage with members of the host society (Gordon 1964; Kalmijn 1993; Song 2009; Alba & Foner 2015), as this enables crossing, blurring and shifting of group boundaries (Lucassen & Laarman 2009; Quian & Lichter 2007; Price & Zubrzycki 1962). That is, intermarriage signifies the weakening of group boundaries and barriers to social interaction and intimacy and thereby promotes social integration.

Despite its socio-political significance, a systematic examination and understanding of ethnic intermarriage or partnering is limited in Australia (e.g. Luke & Luke 1998; Khoo et al. 2009; Owen 2002; Tindale & Klocker 2017). In contrast, there is a sound body of knowledge on intermarriage and integration in other high immigrant and culturally diverse western countries such as the US and UK (e.g. Bohra-Mishra & Massey 2015; Rodriguez-Garcia 2015; Song 2009, 2015). However, the relevance of this knowledge for Australia is limited given its unique migration history, ethnic composition and historical experiences of successive waves of migrants and their descendants.

Theory

Intermarriage is usually studied within the broader framework of ‘assimilation’ theory. This theory holds that persons/groups are incorporated into the mainstream through a process of ‘interpenetration and fusion’, and this is best manifested through inter-marriage (Gordon 1964). While this theory was helpful to explain the integration of early European migrants to the US, it is of limited value in explaining the integration of migrants and their descendants of distinct physical features and visibility (Alba & Nee 2003). The ‘new or modern assimilation’ theory addresses this by incorporating context/society specific institutional factors (historical discrimination and stigmatisation, settlement policies and programs, local history), demographic changes (large scale immigration of non-European ethnic groups) and heterogeneity within ethnic/national/religious groups and the lived experiences of families and individuals (Luke & Luke 1998; Owen 2002; Perkins 2004; Qian & Licher 2007; Song 2009; Aspinall & Song 2015; Lichter et al. 2015; Fozdar & McGavin 2017; Tindale & Klocker 2017).

Informed by the classical and modern integration/assimilation theories, research on intermarriage is generally guided by two core sets of explanatory factors: preference and opportunity (Kalmijn 1993, 1998; Qian & Lichter 2007). The preference for and occurrence of intermarriage is influenced by cultural and socio-economic factors and by such institutions as the family, religious community and host society (Luke & Luke 1998; Owen 2002; Blau et al. 1982; Biddle 2013; Aspinall & Song 2015; Fozdar & McGavin 2017; Tindale et al. 2014; Tindale & Klocker 2017). Simultaneously, the desire or preference for intermarriage is also conditioned by opportunity structures. The likelihood of encountering potential partners across ethnic/religious boundaries is dependent on the absolute/relative size and gender balance of one's own group, referred to as 'demographic opportunity'. Opportunity for interethnic partnering is also dependent on residential location (e.g. rural vs urban) and cultural diversity in residential neighbourhoods, workplaces and other social spaces that condition cross cultural contact (Qian & Lichter 2007; Tindale et al. 2014; Tindale & Klocker 2017). This paper uses the broader opportunity vs preference framework to understand interethnic marriages in Australia.

Data and Method

The paper uses customised cross tabulated data on intercultural partnering from the 2021 Australian census. Ethnicity is measured at high level aggregation and includes 7 groups: Anglo-Celtic (Northern and Western European), Australian Aboriginal people, South and Eastern European, North Africa and Middle Eastern, Indian, Chinese, and South East Asian. We use log-linear models to examine the association between ethnicity and partnerships. Partnering includes both legal marriages and cohabitation. Analysis is conducted by generation.

Findings

Preliminary findings indicate that there are significant variations in the level of intercultural partnering in Australia. The highest likelihood of intermarriage with people of Anglo-Celtic background is found for Aboriginal Australians, Southern/Eastern European ancestry groups, North African/Middle Eastern ancestries, South East Asian and finally Chinese and Indians. The likelihood increases significantly from first to 2nd generation migrants, and it does so exponentially for the Indians and Chinese.