Is Intermarriage a Good Indicator of

Integration?

Miri Song

In this paper I review and examine the assumed link between intermarriage and integration. I focus primarily on literature from the US and Britain. Intermarriage is said to signal a significant lessening of ‘social distance’ between a minority group and the White majority, enabling unions between groups which would previously have been taboo. It is often assumed that intermarriage for ethnic minorities is the ultimate litmus test of integration, but is it? And if there is a link between intermarriage and integration, what is the nature and extent of ‘integration’ achieved by minority groups and by the minority partner? I argue that the link between intermarriage and integration is both more tenuous and more complex than many social scientists have argued, and needs a critical reappraisal, especially in multiethnic societies which are witnessing unprece- dented levels of diversity, both across and within their ethnic minority groups.

Keywords: Intermarriage; Integration; Milton Gordon; Minority; Structural

Assimilation; Social Distance

Introduction

In this paper I examine the assumed link between intermarriage and integration, focusing primarily on literature from the US and Britain, where much of this literature has flourished. Seen in the broader context of group relations, intermarriage is said to signal a significant lessening of ‘social distance’ between a minority group and the White majority, enabling unions between groups which, in the past, would have been taboo. It is often assumed in the social sciences that intermarriage for ethnic minorities is a good indicator of integration, but is this the case? And if there is a link between intermarriage and integration, what is the nature and extent of the ‘integration’ achieved by minority groups and by the individual minority partner?

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In most Western multi-ethnic societies, interracial partnering (dating, cohabitation and marriage) is rising, especially among young people. According to the 2001 England and Wales Census, the percentage of ‘inter-ethnic’ marriages (the term used by the ONS) is now 2 per cent, up from 1.3 per cent in the 1991 Census, though this 2 per cent does not include any cohabiting couples (Office of National Statistics 2001).1 In the USA, interracial marriage rates increased from less than 1 per cent of all marriages in

1970 to nearly 3 per cent in 2000 (Qian 2005).2 Despite this upward trend in the USA,

rates of interracial marriage are still significantly lower than those found in Europe, especially between White and Black people (Model and Fisher 2002; Patterson 2005; Peach 2005). In Britain, about half of British-born Black men with a partner live with a White woman, and about one third of British-born Black women with partners live with a White partner (Berrington 1996; Berthoud 2005). While not as high as White/ Black partnerships, White/Chinese and White/South Asian partnerships (who evidence lower rates of intermarriage than other groups), are generally on the rise in Britain (Berthoud 2005; Muttarak 2007).

Until recently, the literature on interracial marriage has tended to focus specifically

on marriage per se. This focus, however, is problematic, given the significant rise in interracial dating and cohabitation. Other recent work has looked at patterns in multiracial friendships (see Doyle and Kao 2007; Quillian and Campbell 2003). Documentation of the extent of interracial dating and cohabitation is difficult to obtain, and it is almost certain that many studies have underestimated the prevalence of interracial relationships more generally (Joyner and Kao 2005). Yancey’s (2002) recent survey found that more than half of African, Hispanic and Asian American adults have dated someone from a different racial group and, not surprisingly, those who live, or have lived, in integrated neighbourhoods or attended integrated schools have even higher rates (Joyner and Kao 2005; Lee and Bean 2004; Lee and Edmonston 2005).

Why should we be interested in growing rates of interracial relationships? Their

increasing incidence in North America and Europe may suggest significant boundary shifts for various ethnic groups. Because marriage is regarded as a mechanism for the transmission of ethnically specific cultural values and practices to the next generation, intermarriage may fundamentally affect the boundaries and distinctiveness of ethnic minority groups (Barth 1969). Intermarriage is an emotive issue not only because of historically racialised beliefs and ideologies about miscegenation and the plight of the

‘marginal man’ (Stonequist 1937), but also because significant and sustained rates of intermarriage inevitably lead to major demographic changes in society, mainly through the birth of ‘mixed race’ children. If rates of intermarriage continue to rise (such as between Asian Americans and White Americans), then the identifiable ‘monoracial’ populations may decline and be absorbed in the mainstream\*an outcome which may meet with mixed feelings on the part of both the White majority and the minority (Berthoud 2005: 237; Montero 1981).

Attitudes toward interracial marriage have clearly relaxed\*indeed it could be called

‘socially respectable’ in many Western multiethnic societies (see Fang et al. 1998). This growing acceptance of intermarriage is especially evident with generational change, in

which younger people are generally more accepting of intermarriage than older generations (Joyner and Kao 2005).

The growth and relative normalisation of interracial relationships is also regarded by

many (especially US analysts) as evidence of growing ‘integration’. According to Alba and Nee (2003): 90), ‘It [intermarriage] is generally regarded, with justification, as the litmus test of assimilation. A high rate of intermarriage signals that the social distance between the groups involved is small and that individuals of putatively different ethnic backgrounds no longer perceive social and cultural differences significant enough to create a barrier to long-term union’ (my emphasis; see also Gordon 1964; Kalmijn 1998; Lee and Edmonston 2005; Liang and Ito 1999; Spickard 1989).

If we accept that intermarriage signals genuine social acceptance of ‘others’ as

equals, then we may also conclude that this reveals a genuine decrease in ethnic and racial prejudice toward certain minority groups in society. For these reasons, intermarriage is usually regarded as a ‘good’ thing\*an indicator of a minority group’s success and social acceptance. The story tends to stop there, with the implicit view that ‘he or she has made it’ if a minority person intermarries with a White person. These groups will have been successfully ‘incorporated’, and they are not regarded as posing social or political problems for mainstream society.

In this article I critically examine the assumed relationship between intermarriage

and integration (or ‘assimilation’, and its presumed economic/social/cultural consequences). I begin with a review of patterns of intermarriage and the factors shaping it. Second, I problematise what we mean by ‘intermarriage’ and ‘integration’, and assess the extent to which intermarriage is, indeed, a useful indicator of what we call integration. This involves an examination of the nature and depth of so-called integration, as achieved via intermarriage. As I argue below, there are various methodological and theoretical difficulties in establishing the link between inter- marriage and integration, both of which are notoriously difficult to define, as there are multiple ways in which these concepts are theorised and operationalised.

What the Literature on Intermarriage Tells Us

Intermarriage is constrained by a variety of factors, such as the size of groups, segregation, and socioeconomic and cultural barriers (Gordon 1964; Heaton and Jacobson 2000). One can also look at the factors which facilitate intermarriage\* including factors which influence the ‘opportunity structures’ for people of different groups to interact (Beck-Gernsheim 2007). I discuss some, though by no means all, of the variables which influence patterns of interracial partnering.

Nativity and Generational Status

Most studies concerning intermarriage find that the second-generation minority are more likely to intermarry than their immigrant parents\*apparently found to hold true in both North America and Western Europe (see van Niekerk 2006). This is

hardly surprising, given the language and cultural barriers that many immigrants encounter upon arrival. Their opportunities to interact with people outside their own ethnic group are also greatly reduced if their employment and educational experiences are restricted.

According to Kalmijn (1998: 410): ‘The decline of ethnic endogamy has typically

been interpreted from an assimilation perspective: through generational replacement, national origin groups gradually integrate in the host society. Consistent with this perspective, most analyses find that the children of immigrants marry out more often than the immigrants themselves.’ Further down the generational line, even one generational remove can be significant. In a study of Asian Americans in the US, the third-generation minority was even less likely to face familial pressure to in-marry, in comparison with the second generation (Chow 2000). While present evidence strongly suggests that this trend will continue, we should not automatically conclude that intermarriage rates will ineluctably and straightforwardly rise with each successive generation\*certainly diversity within groups can be significant.

Education and Class

In a now-famous study, Robert Merton (1941) employed exchange theory, arguing that educated African Americans tried to maximise their gains through marriage: ethnic minorities who married majority (White) members effectively traded their high socio-economic status (as indicated by educational attainment) for the social status attached to a White marriage partner. According to this theory, minority spouses would possess higher levels of education or occupational status than their White spouses.

Analysts of intermarriage are divided about the relevance of exchange theory for

interracial couples today. Countering Merton’s findings, some contemporary American analysts find that interracial couples have relatively equal educational attainments (Liang and Ito 1999; Qian 2005). These studies also find that college- educated [minority] men and women are more likely to marry interracially than those with less education. However, some analysts suggest that there is partial evidence that exchange processes do actually operate\*though to differing degrees across disparate types of intermarried couples (see Chow 2000; Hwang et al. 1994). In a study of Asian Americans’ spousal preferences, Chow (2000) argues that, for some groups, such as Chinese and Japanese Americans, it would appear that higher education can encourage endogamy, not intermarriage.

Looking at the significance of class for intermarriage, an examination of William

Julius Wilson’s work on class and race (though Wilson did not study intermarriage per se) suggests a somewhat different picture from Merton’s study. Wilson (1978) argued that the growth of the African American middle class signalled the declining significance of race for many middle-class Blacks\*that those with college educations and professional jobs were less likely to encounter overt racism, in comparison with

working-class Black Americans. Both Merton and Wilson predicted that the most advantaged minorities will tend to marry Whites.

However, Merton predicted that less-advantaged Whites were more like to marry

minorities, while Wilson’s thesis suggests that middle-class Whites will be the most likely to enter into marriages with non-White minorities. Based on a study of the gender differentials in intermarriage among 16 race and ethnic groups, Jacobs and Labov (2002) argue that intermarriage is more likely among the middle class, for Whites and for minorities, and that intermarriage (e.g. between White and Black Americans or between White and Asian Americans) does not appear to involve trade- offs of socio-economic status for race or ethnic status (as Merton argued). Spouses tend to marry others with similar educational levels, whether within or outside their group. This view is based on the belief that, because college education promotes greater tolerance for difference and facilitates contact among groups that may not have had previous contact (e.g. in racially segregated neighbourhoods), college and higher education are consistent with higher rates of intermarriage. On the other hand, Heaton and Jacobson (2000) offer less-clear-cut findings about the effect of university attendance on intermarriage.

In Britain, Berthoud (2005) found that mixed relationships for White/Black

Caribbean couples are equally common among those with high and low levels of education, and among those with good and bad employment experiences. More recently, Muttarak (2007) found that higher educational attainment is associated with a higher propensity to intermarry for Chinese and Asian Britons, though this did not apply to Black Britons. It appears that the link between educational attainment and a propensity to intermarry applies more to some types of mixed couple than to others. Clearly, how intermarriage is shaped by educational attainment and class needs more empirical study.

Pool of Potential Co-Ethnic Partners

Rates of intermarriage will vary according to different opportunity structures in meeting co-ethnic potential partners. Not surprisingly, regional differences in ethnic composition are key in shaping opportunities to meet other co-ethnics. Analysts such as Blau (1977) argue that members of an ethnic group are less likely to intermarry if they have a large selection of co-ethnic dating partners. The measurement of intermarriage is related to the size of the relative groups in each country. Because of differences in the population sizes of various groups, comparing rates of inter- marriage across groups can be difficult (Qian 2005). Thus, the larger the group, the greater the chances that members will find marriageable partners of their own race. In the USA, among American-born minorities, intermarriage rates are significant: 9 per cent for African Americans, about 39 per cent for Hispanics, 56 per cent for American Indians, and 59 per cent for Asian Americans (who comprise under 4 per cent of the total US population). According to Qian: ‘Mathematically, one marriage between an Asian American and a white raises the intermarriage rate for Asian Americans much

more than for whites, because whites are so much more numerous. Because of their numbers as well, although just 4 percent of whites are involved in interracial marriages, 92 percent of all interracial marriages include a white partner’ (2005: 34).

Immigration can also influence the number of potential co-ethnic partners one

may find in one’s area (Beck-Gernsheim 2007). In an analysis of Asian Americans, Liang and Ito (1999) found that the Chinese, who comprised the largest Asian group in the New York area, had one of the lowest rates of intermarriage compared with other Asian groups (1999: 887). A key reason\*compared, for instance, with Korean or Japanese Americans\*is that there has been a continuous flow of Chinese immigrants to the US, while there has been a very limited number of Japanese immigrants in the contemporary period. However, I think this emphasis upon a pool of co-ethnic partners who differ by nativity\*a second-generation Chinese American, for example, partnering with a newly arrived Chinese immigrant\*is questionable, given the differences in outlook between new immigrants and their second- or third- generation co-ethnics, some of whom may view new immigrants (even co-ethnic immigrants) as very different to themselves (Pyke and Trang 2003; Tuan 1998).

Residential Integration and Segregation

The degree to which various minority and White neighbourhoods are integrated or segregated is also an important factor shaping rates of intermarriage; related to this is whether people live in a small town or suburb, or in large, diverse, cosmopolitan cities (where different groups have opportunities to interact). But, as Caballero et al. (2008) have found, mixed couples in Britain do not always live in multicultural areas. Even though middle-class African Americans increasingly live in integrated neighbourhoods, they are still much more segregated than other minorities (Qian

2005). But, in addition to discrimination toward Blacks, another reason for their higher segregation is that middle-class Blacks are now so numerous that they can form their own middle-class Black neighbourhoods, while middle-class Hispanic and Asian-American communities are smaller and often divided by national origin and languages (Qian 2005: 35).

The formation of Black middle-class neighbourhoods is notable because residential

‘concentration’, as in ethnic enclaves (good social value), does not necessarily mean segregation, as in ghettoes (bad social value) (Zhou 2005). In other words, being segregated as part of an enclave may provide social capital and an opportunity to find co-ethnic partners.

Gender

Gender differences in the rates of intermarriage can be striking: for instance, for both native- and foreign-born Asian Americans, women are much more likely to intermarry (especially with White men) than their Asian American male counterparts (Liang and Ito 1999). The opposite pattern is shown by African American men, who

partner with White women at much higher rates than African American women (74 per cent of such couples involve a Black husband/White wife\*Qian 2005: 36). In Britain, men demonstrate higher rates of intermarriage than women across all minority groups, with the exception of the British Chinese (Berrington 1996; Coleman 1994).

As discussed earlier, the question of why there are gender imbalances in interracial

partnering is a controversial one (as in Merton’s exchange theory), and there is little agreement on this issue. Asian women may perceive Asian men to be more traditional than most White men (Liang and Ito 1999; Qian 2005). Furthermore, unlike Asian women, Asian men in Western societies have tended to be characterised as sexually undesirable and emasculated. In Britain there has been on-going controversy and debate in the African-Caribbean community, for example in the Black British newspaper The Voice, about the putative mismatch between Black ‘superwomen’ who are highly educated and employed, and the large number of Black men who are unemployed or in poorly paying jobs (Song and Edwards 1997). I think, however, that this analysis is limited, as marriage choices are not easily reducible to a calculated benefit/cost analysis.

Examining the Link between Intermarriage and Integration

How Intermarriage is Theorised

Even though intermarriage can entail the transcending of racial, ethnic and religious boundaries, the often immediate visible recognition of phenotypical differences between partners\*though subjective\*makes interracial marriage a social phenom- enon which often arouses societal interest, hostility and curiosity, especially given the historical and current obsession with ‘mixing’ and the offspring of such ‘mixed’ unions in Western, multi-ethnic societies.3

As such, most recent studies of intermarriage in the US have focused on what

analysts regard as interracial relationships\*for instance, between Asian Americans and White Americans\*as opposed to ethnic and religious intermarriage, such as between Jews and Gentiles (see Ellman 1987; Judd 1990 for examples of the latter). But because racial, ethnic and religious intermarriage may coincide, it can be difficult to distinguish between them. The historical variability of racial boundaries, in which the boundaries of Whiteness could change, precludes a neat distinction beteen ethnic and racial groups. Jews, of course, were regarded (not only in Nazi Germany) as a

‘race’ for much of the twentieth century in both the US and Britain (Cohen 1996; Gilman 1991), but secular Jews with a White appearance have effectively joined the White mainstream. Their widespread unions with White non-Jews are no longer regarded, either by the state or by the wider society, as a form of intermarriage which transgresses a major boundary.

The criteria by which a union is counted as ‘intermarriage’ can vary across states.

The US Census Bureau does not regard a marriage between a Japanese American and

an Indian [South Asian] American as intermarriage, but a union in Britain [between a Japanese- and an Indian-origin couple] would count as such. While the marriage of a Turkish Muslim (or Muslim Turk) with a White ‘native’ may constitute intermarriage in one country, it may not in another. Working backwards from this, are Turkish Muslims ‘merely’ an ethnic group, or both an ethnic and a racial group? Such questions abound. The status of certain minority groups is not always clear, and their categorisation as constituting intermarriage (or not) can often seem arbitrary.

Therefore, if the boundaries between groups are in flux and are fundamentally messy, how are we to know which marriages count as incidents of intermarriage?4 As

noted by numerous scholars of ‘race’, ethnic and racial categories are socially constructed, and the arbitrariness and changeability of their boundaries is historically documented (see Cornell and Hartmann 1998; Steinberg 1981). As such, the putative link between intermarriage and integration rests on an often inconsistent and societally specific understanding of which types of marriage/union count (or do not count) in national enumerations of intermarriage.

Studies across countries lack a standardisation of methods in recording and

describing patterns of intermarriage. It is difficult to obtain comparable cross- national data about intermarriage in Europe; much of the European data concerns the nationality or country of birth of marriage partners, rather than their ethnicity or race (though ethnicity may be inferred in some cases). In France, it is difficult to get precise information about intermarriage because official statistics only provide information about weddings between foreigners and nationals. There is no measure of exogamy on the French-born generations because it is illegal to differentiate people according to religious or ethnic origin (Cesari 2003). Most studies of intermarriage do not address the inherently messy business of deciding when intermarriage has (and has not) occurred, but tend to dive into an examination of the differential rates of intermarriage exhibited by some minority groups over others. But if there are methodological and theoretical difficulties with the term ‘intermarriage’, the concept of ‘integration’ is equally slippery and vague.

How Integration is Theorised

Many scholars (amongst whom Alba and Nee 2003; Gordon 1964; Warner and Srole

1945) argue that intermarriage is a good indicator of ‘integration’; But what, exactly, is the relationship between these two variables? In most cases, analysts talk of integration as the outcome of intermarriage. But in some cases, intermarriage can be seen as the outcome of integration; for example, ‘intermarriage is proceeding faster than might be expected in immigrant populations which seemed in economic terms to be imperfectly integrated. Up to 40% of West Indians born in the UK, for example, appear to have white partners as do high proportions of young Maghrebians in France’ (Coleman 1994: 107).

Most analysts do not clearly define ‘integration’, and some use it synonymously

with the term ‘assimilation’ (Favell 2001). Alba and Nee (2003: 11) use the term

‘assimilation’, rather than integration: ‘Consequently, we define assimilation as the decline of an ethnic distinction and its corollary cultural and social differences’. Like them, Patterson (2005) and Peach (2005) use the term ‘integration’ to mean social integration, and imply that intermarriage means an overall acceptance into the mainstream. This definition is clearly about social and cultural assimilation\* what Gordon (1964) would call ‘acculturation’\*and makes no assumptions about upward economic mobility.

Milton Gordon’s (1964) book Assimilation in American Life develops an explicit

link between the process of ‘assimilation’ and intermarriage. While this study is dated, and largely focused on European immigrants to the USA (plus ‘negroes’ and Puerto Ricans), his model is useful in examining the putative link between

‘assimilation’ and intermarriage. He argues that intermarriage is the inevitable

outcome of what he calls ‘structural assimilation’.

Gordon saw many stages in the assimilation process; the first three steps or sub- processes are set out below:

. cultural assimilation or ‘acculturation’\*a change of cultural patterns to those of the host society;

. structural assimilation\*large-scale entrance into the cliques, clubs and institu- tions of the host society, on a primary group level;

. marital assimilation\*large-scale intermarriage.

Gordon states: ‘As we examine the array of assimilation variables again, several other relationships suggest themselves. One is the indissoluble connection, in the time order indicated, between structural assimilation and marital assimilation. That is, entrance of the minority group into the social cliques, clubs, and institutions of the core society at the primary group level inevitably will lead to a substantial amount of intermarriage. If children of different ethnic backgrounds belong to the same play-group, later the same adolescent cliques, and at college the same fraternities and sororities; if the parents belong to the same country club and invite each other to their homes for dinner; it is completely unrealistic not to expect these children, now grown, to love and to marry each other, blithely oblivious to previous ethnic extraction’ (1964: 80).

He continues: ‘Once structural assimilation has occurred, either simultaneously

with or subsequent to acculturation, all of the other types of assimilation will naturally follow. .. . Structural assimilation, then, rather than acculturation, is seen to be the keystone of the arch of assimilation. The price of such assimilation, however, is the disappearance of the ethnic group as a separate entity and the evaporation of its distinctive values’ (1964: 81). In Gordon’s model, economic integration is subsumed within his term ‘structural assimilation’, and is assumed to precede marital assimilation. But does structural assimilation necessarily lead to intermarriage, as Gordon claims? And does intermarriage really signal true social acceptance?

Some groups have clearly not achieved structural assimilation as defined by Gordon. In the USA, many African Americans demonstrate a combination of poverty, residential segregation, and low levels of intermarriage with Whites (Loury et al. 2005: 13). In this case, a low rate of intermarriage corresponds to a lack of

‘structural assimilation’. By comparison, Black Britons in the UK are culturally assimilated (like African Americans) and relatively residentially integrated (unlike African Americans)\*yet a significant proportion of them are imperfectly, or not at all, economically integrated. By Gordon’s criteria, this group has achieved a form of

‘structural assimilation’ into White working-class institutions, schools and neigh- bourhoods, given the high levels of Black/White interaction and cultural melding in many working-class metropolitan areas (Alexander 1996; Back 1995; Hewitt 1986). And unlike African Americans, Black Britons are highly intermarried with White Britons. So this British case appears to support a revised version of Gordon’s linear model\*one which would recognise the possibility of White and minority working- class sectors melding, rather than a one-way incorporation into a (usually implicit) middle-class sector of the White mainstream.

To move forward, we need to disaggregate social integration (acculturation and

implied social acceptance) from economic integration, although the boundaries between the two are in practice often blurred. Furthermore, the US society Gordon was writing about in the early 1960s has undergone so much change that the broad tenets of his theory need revisiting in light of much new evidence about the so-called

‘second generation’, both in the US and in Europe (Thomson and Crul 2007).

The Retention of Ethnic Difference and Barriers to ‘Integration’

Gordon (1964) assumes that structural assimilation will either accompany or follow cultural assimilation (‘acculturation’) but, as argued in ‘segmented assimilation’ theory (Portes and Zhou 1993), acculturation and upward economic mobility can be de-coupled. One can achieve upward mobility on the basis of limited acculturation (the deliberate retention of ethnic traits, practices and ties). Portes and Zhou (1993) make no assumption that those minorities who selectively assimilate will inter- marry\*if anything, it seems implicit that such ethnic minorities will be steered toward endogamy, and that this would not be regarded as a barrier to economic integration.

It is also often implied that intermarriage leads to fuller integration for the

minority spouse. This argument, though, is largely speculative, and simply assumes a kind of wholesale cultural assimilation of the minority spouse into the White mainstream. In contrast with theories of assimilation, as exemplified by Gordon (1964), ethnic competition theorists (see Olzak 1992) would argue that assimilation, as indicated by intermarriage with a White person, does not necessarily indicate the loss of the minority spouse’s ethnic minority identity. In fact, these theorists would claim that their racial awareness may be heightened because of their direct contact with members of the mainstream society.

So while intermarriage may be said to herald a form of structural assimilation in terms of one’s status and formal inclusion in certain families and social networks and institutions, we cannot assume that minority individuals (or couples) who have intermarried necessarily feel welcomed, or that they ‘belong’, in many mainstream settings. Nor should we assume that an interracial partnership is automatically devoid of prejudice or racism within the couple relationship or the wider family network (or indeed the wider society). In the case of Asian Americans, who are regarded as the typical case of successful assimilation via intermarriage, Chow cogently observes: ‘the assumption of successful assimilation is problematic if only because of actual and perceived inequalities in a society that privileges Euro-Americans and Euro-American culture’ (2000: 25). Many Asian Americans (and presumably other minority people who have a White partner) are still highly conscious of a structural context of racial inequality, in which Asian Americans are depicted as not only a ‘model minority’, but also as foreign and socially inferior (Kim 1999). So, despite the many proclamations by analysts and pundits about the ‘successful’ and seemingly ‘integrated’ experiences of Asian Americans, some may still feel that they are racialised and regarded as foreign, including those who intermarry with Whites (Song 2001). Similarly, in Britain, success\*notably in education and the labour market\*for high-achieving minorities like the British Chinese does not necessarily signal social integration, political empowerment and social acceptance (Parker and Song 2007).

Another way in which intermarriage should not automatically be regarded as the

‘you have made it’ litmus test is this: just as marriage into a White mainstream family does not guarantee a warm welcome and social acceptance, the experiences of ‘mixed race’ offspring may be highly variable, with some experiencing their mixedness in predominantly positive ways, while others may perceive prejudice and various barriers because of their mixed ancestry (Song 2007). In that sense, then, the rose tint should be removed on arguments alleging that intermarriage straightforwardly signals integration. Can a minority spouse be fully ‘integrated’ if his or her own

‘mixed’ child were to experience discrimination and marginalisation?

The dynamics of interracial partnering and families, not to mention the broader social and political landscape, have changed a great deal since the early formulation of assimilation theory (Killian 2001). Intermarriage (with White people) is assumed to mean a loss of cultural distinctiveness by the minority group. However, this assumption needs to be examined and problematised. For instance, a study of Native American/non-Native American marriages showed that, in many cases, the ‘non- Indian’ partner experienced a resocialisation into the Native American sub-society with exposure to ‘Indian’ norms and meanings (Steele 1975 in Jarvenpa 1988: 37). Some couples may practice a hybrid family culture (Caballero 2007; Luke and Luke

1998), with a principled commitment to valuing both heritages; in some cases, the culture of the minority spouse may even be dominant (at least in the home).

Conversely, low rates of intermarriage have often been interpreted as an indicator

of the maintenance of strong ethnic identities (see Nelson and Tienda 1988). Minority intermarriage with White people cannot be simplistically assumed to result

in a gradual demise of the minority culture (Song 2003)\*rather, increasing rates of intermarriage with Whites may result in a growing cultural hybridity which gradually reshapes ‘the mainstream’, so that increasingly, the ‘mainstream’ culture and society are plural and culturally diverse (Alba and Nee 2003: 11). The whole notion of assimilation or integration and the idea of entering a singular mainstream society are themselves problematic. According to Mary Waters (1999: 799), contemporary immigrants do not enter a society that ‘assumes an undifferentiated monolithic American culture, but rather a consciously pluralistic society in which a variety of subcultures and racial and ethnic identities coexist’.5

Straight-line assimilation also suggests an uncomplicated, generational dimen-

sion to integration, with the assumption that a couple’s ‘mixed race’ offspring will possess a diluted sense of the minority spouse’s ethnicity and culture. Because intermarriage is believed to decrease the significance of cultural distinctiveness in future generations, the children of such unions are predicted to be less likely to identify themselves with a single ethnic or racial group (see Harris and Sim 2002). Further empirical work is needed to fully answer this question. I would argue that the possible emergence of ‘melting-pot’, or hybrid cultures and identities, both for contemporary interracial couples and for their offspring, is still largely overlooked, despite some recent evidence to this effect (Saenz et al. 1995). The relevance of traditional theories of integration for such couples and families\*based on the notion of a minority person integrating into White mainstream culture\*may be limited therefore and, in some cases, inaccurate.

Concluding Thoughts: Ongoing Debates and Future Research

The political context in which debates about ‘integration’ have occurred has changed considerably in many European societies in the last ten years. Increasingly, there is concern to achieve social as well as economic integration. Most European countries have adopted a wide variety of policies which are aimed at some form of

‘integration’, whether through citizenship regimes or multicultural policies in schools. The term integration, of course, has many meanings. At a minimum, most policies aimed at economic (albeit sometimes limited) integration are designed to ensure that barriers to the participation of immigrants and foreigners in the economic life of the ‘host’ society are removed (Coleman 1994). In practice, these kinds of policy target access to housing, employment, education and protection from racial discrimination. Increasingly, however, states are concerned to achieve social integration, and the onus on minorities to ‘integrate’ is being made increasingly explicit: citizenship tests, expectations to learn the dominant language, and state restrictions on certain forms of symbolic difference, such as the wearing of the veil in French schools. Yet intermarriage may, in reality, be a degree of integration which engenders deep ambivalence and concern for some sectors of society, including minority groups themselves.

I have argued that the link between intermarriage and integration is both more tenuous and more complex than many social scientists have posited. The link between the two, as laid out in some important texts (and now accepted as a kind of orthodoxy), needs a critical reappraisal. We should be careful about interpreting high rates of intermarriage (with Whites) as an indicator of a minority group’s ‘success’ and inclusion. It seems that intermarriage, while revealing the declining social distance between the majority and certain minority groups, can also entail a complex co-mingling of economic and social integration and marginalisation.

Rising rates of intermarriage (however this may be defined) across many Western

societies are important for some analysts because they suggest that racial boundaries are weakening and that there is a declining significance of race for certain groups. As argued above, such a sanguine and straightforward generalisation must be tempered by the realisation that intermarriage per se does not ensure wholesale social acceptance. Furthermore, experiences of intermarriage will vary across and within different groups according to class, gender and region. For example, being in a Black/ White relationship in the Deep South of the USA will differ considerably from the experiences of a Black/White couple in New York City, just as a Pakistani/English couple in a small English village may have a very different experience from a similar couple in West London. Thus, the specific ways in which intermarriage may or may not engender forms of integration must be explored in relation to different kinds of

‘mixed’ relationship in specific locations.

For some analysts in the US, rising rates of intermarriage suggest a more sinister outcome. For instance, Lee and Bean (2004) argue that, in the US, a new sort of colour line is emerging. Rather than the previous centuries-old White/Black colour line, the increasing evidence of Asian and Latino incorporation into mainstream US society (in part indicated by their high rates of intermarriage) suggests that they are regarded as acceptable marriage partners by many White Americans: ‘In a black/ nonblack divide, Latinos and Asians fall into the nonblack category’ (2004: 237). Thus, intermarriage in the US context suggests the enlargement of the ‘White’ category, leaving Black people in the most racially stigmatised position (see Bonilla- Silva 2004; Gans 1999; Twine and Gallagher 2008).

If such differential rates of intermarriage continue in the US, then interracial

partnering could open doors for some groups, while creating barriers to both economic and social integration for those who do not intermarry with Whites. However, following my earlier argument, these scholars may put too much store by what interracial relationships (with Whites) afford in terms of privilege and social acceptance into the (still predominantly) White mainstream\*especially in relation- ships with working-class White people. In comparison to the US, Black/White intermarriage is much higher\*and appears not to have the same kind of stigma\*in Britain and probably in many other European countries. Across Britain, there is much evidence of the changeability and instability of existing group boundaries, as well as the cultures of ‘conviviality’ that transcend Black and White divides (Gilroy 2004)\* though manifestations of racisms are not merely relics of the past (see Back 1995).

Given the relatively high rates of intermarriage for Black, Chinese, and non-Muslim Asian Britons (with White Britons), a parallel distinction may be emerging in the UK and Europe between Muslims and non-Muslims\*certainly, the main boundary of note in Britain and Europe concerns Muslims and non-Muslims, not Blacks and Whites (Alba 2005; Alexander 2000; Modood 1996).

In highlighting the possible political and social implications of interracial

partnering with Whites, we must not overlook other types of interracial or interethnic relationships, including the union of two different minority individuals

\* for example between Asian and Black people (Mahtani and Moreno 2001). The growth of interethnic marriages, in which Korean Americans may, for example, marry Chinese Americans, is also likely to be of growing importance (Tuan 1998). There is some evidence that second- and third-generation Asian Americans feel a great deal of commonality with one another, based on their common racialisation (and treatment) as ‘Asian’ in the wider society (Kibria 1997). In Britain, it may be that second- generation Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani Britons may intermarry, if their common sense of being second-generation Asian overrides their different ethnic backgrounds. Of course, intermarriage across religious lines\*for instance, between Hindus and Muslims\*may be an inhibiting factor.

If interethnic unions occur in significant numbers, are we then to conclude that

second- or third-generation Asian Americans or British Asians who are interethni- cally married (and largely ‘assimilated’ into mainstream culture) are not ‘integrated’ (because they do not have a White partner)? This seems rather nonsensical. Older theorists of assimilation like Gordon, and also more recent analysts (Alba and Nee

2003; Lee and Bean 2004) tend to assume that integration, via intermarriage, occurs through intermarriage with a White person. So we need to develop understandings of both interracial partnering and integration which are much more complex, such that the two concepts are not ineluctably linked, with one automatically following the other. In addition to examining different types of intermarriage, we need to differentiate between forms of economic and social integration.

In addition to the methodological and theoretical messiness of determining which

unions are intermarriages and which are not, future studies of intermarriage must grapple with another methodological difficulty in relation to ‘mixed-race’ people: just as it is arbitrary to class some unions as intermarriage, and others not, how should we classify the marriages of ‘mixed-race’ people (the offspring of intermarriages)? Is it an intermarriage if, for instance, a ‘mixed’ Chinese/English person marries a White person, or would this count as a marriage between two members of the majority society? If this same ‘mixed’ person married someone who was ‘purely’ of Chinese heritage, would this, then, count as intermarriage? Related to the emerging complexity of classifying ‘mixed-race’ people and their unions, growing ‘super- diversity’ (Vertovec 2007) more generally will pose methodological challenges for any theoretical claims which automatically link intermarriage and integration. What we mean by ‘integration’ itself will need far more fine-tuning, with the increasingly

multiple pathways followed by numerous groups and subgroups within multi-ethnic

Western societies.

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Notes

[1] In the 2001 British Census, ‘inter-ethnic’ marriages are those between people from ‘different aggregate groups, where the ethnic group categories are: White, Mixed, Asian [meaning South Asian], Black, Chinese, Other ethnic group\*for example, a White Briton married to someone from a non-White ethnic group or a Pakistani married to a non-Asian (Office of National Statistics 2001). So a Pakistani marrying an Indian would not be inter-marrying by this definition. It is interesting, too, that the British Census employs the term ‘inter-ethnic’, but uses what I would call racial categories (such as White, Black, Asian), with the exception of the category ‘Chinese’.

[2] The US Bureau of the Census identifies the following types of interracial marriage: ‘Black/

White’, ‘American Indian/White’, ‘Asian and Pacific Islander/White’, ‘Other race/White’,

‘Other race/specified race’. The Census Bureau does not count unions between groups which are deemed to be within the same broad category, such as between a Japanese American and an Indian [South Asian] American. Nor is Hispanic origin taken into account in enumerations of interracial marriage (US Bureau of the Census 1998).

[3] I recognise that ethnic and religious differences between partners can also be regarded as

hugely problematic in the ‘West’ and in other parts of the world, such as in the Middle East or the former Yugoslavia.

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[5] I would again like to thank an anonymous JEMS reviewer for this valuable suggestion.

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