Family Intolerance Is a Major Obstacle for Interracial Marriages

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Although interracial marriage has become more accepted in American society, hesitancy and resistance still exist within families of all races. Many parents are reluctant about their children marrying outside their race because they fear that the interracial couple—and any future children—will fall prey to harsh or perhaps dangerous bigotry. Other parents are more concerned with furthering the “purity” of their family heritage, in which religious and cultural affiliations are privileged. Sometimes an interracial union can overcome family opposition: other times it may deepen racial boundaries. Regardless, the prevalence of race mixing in the United States is forcing everyone to confront stereotypes and perhaps will engender new discussions about race and diversity.

With at least three million people in the United States in interracial marriages, racially mixed marriage is no longer a rarity. And with one degree of separation—all the family members of these couples—it touches many millions more. Allowing a second degree of separation—friends, coworkers, acquaintances—intermarriage likely affects most people in the country. Younger people, on average, are far more open to intermarriage than those who grew up in an era of segregation. This trend is a major gain for tolerance and pluralism in America, and families that successfully navigate the challenge of interracial marriage often become more open generally. But large pockets of discrimination continue to exist.

Earlier in [the twentieth] century, segregationists expressed concern that civil rights would ultimately lead to greater acceptance of intermarriage. And in a sense, they were right. With more interracial contact has come less fear and more acceptance of the racial "other," and the ultimate form of acceptance is personal love and the marriage bond.

A 1997 Gallup poll found the highest approval rating of interracial marriage ever by both black (77 percent) and white (61 percent) Americans. The National Opinion Research Center (NORC) also has found increased acceptance. By 1994, when people were asked, "Would you favor a law against racial intermarriage?" 84.9 percent of 1,626 white Americans answered in the negative. Even more black Americans—96.8 percent of the 258 polled—also answered no.

**Fear of Contamination**

Nevertheless, interracial marriage can create deep conflict within families. Opposition reflects not just bigotry. It can reflect fears about loss of valued traditions, and concerns that children and grandchildren will suffer society's lingering prejudice. A NORC poll in 1990 asked Jews, blacks, Asians, and Hispanics how they would feel about a close relative marrying someone from outside their racial or ethnic group. Blacks were most strongly opposed, with 57.5 percent of 1,362 respondents against it; next came Asian Americans at 42.4 percent; then Hispanic Americans at 40.4 percent. Jews were the least opposed, at 16.3 percent, but also had the largest response neither favoring nor opposing intermarriage of a close relative (63.1 percent). Just over 46 percent of Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans were neutral on the question. These data show that despite the increasing acceptance of intermarriage in this country, people are not necessarily pleased when it becomes personal. Families remain highly protective of their most significant "product": future generations.

In their book Multiracial Couples: Black and White Voices, Paul C. Rosenblatt, Terry A. Karis, and Richard D. Powell suggest that disowning interracially married family members may be a way of disowning racially different in-laws. Through denouncement, families attempt to avoid possible contamination by an undesirable status or stigma. The NORC data and my own interviews indicate that people of all races sometimes fear contamination, though for different reasons. Whites may fear loss of privileged status for their children and grandchildren, while people of color may fear loss of cultural identity.

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If the couple has children, as most couples do, the children have a blood tie to both clans, which strengthens—and complicates—the links immeasurably. Parents who resisted the intermarriage of a child may soften their opposition when grandchildren come. Or their resentment may harden because of the embarrassment of a blood relation who is
a mixed-race child. Late marriages (those that occur past child-bearing age) may receive less opposition for this reason.

Open and Closed Families

My attempts to answer the question "what differentiates those families who can welcome someone racially different from those families who cannot?" led me to think about families as open or closed systems of relationships. Open families most resemble an individualistic society in which interdependence is maintained and intermarriage is acceptable. Families that I term "pseudo-open" may encourage interracial or interethnic friendships and be fine with interracial dating, but they oppose interracial marriage. Other families are "pseudo-closed"; they are sometimes able to grow over time to greater acceptance of an interracial marriage—but this often takes years, and sometimes the birth or death of a family member. Closed systems typically correspond with monarchical family models, show less tolerance of individual deviation, and see race as a critical piece of the image or product and property of the family.

The hallmark of closed families is the rigidity of rules maintaining distance between "us" and "them." These families, while seemingly democratic in times of peace and harmony, tend to become monarchical in the disowning process, directing other family members' behavior toward the banished member. Communication moves in a single direction from the decision makers to the lower-ranking members—that is, from parents to children. The flow of communication may not change even when children are grown and well into their adult years. Cultural, ethnic, or religious traditions are often key parts of identity and help determine the boundaries that mark in-group and out-group status.

One immigrant group that has recently had great difficulty breaking closed ranks are adult children of South Asian families. Many were born or raised from an early age in the United States and are very Americanized. Intermarriage naturally emerges as a possibility for this generation, but their parents often insist that they marry someone culturally similar who has similar class standing. Some parents have hired private investigators to find out whether their children are having secret relationships; and some try to arrange marriages or place newspaper ads for suitable spouses for their children. They are often openly rude to girlfriends and boyfriends who are not of the "correct" racial, cultural, and class background.

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Marking and Perpetuating Racial Boundaries

Much of this rigidity stems from unchallenged prejudices or unrealistic expectations. In a culturally and racially diverse nation with tremendous, geographic mobility, educational opportunities away from home, and integrated workplaces, it is unrealistic not to consider the possibility that a son, daughter, grandson, granddaughter, niece, or nephew will fall in love with a member of an "out" group.

Until it comes to crossing the color line, closed families are not necessarily dysfunctional families which are unstable and chaotic, lack the capacity to nurture, and can be abusive. But they do tend to have certain rigidities, fears, and prejudices that are not easily changed by facts or experience. Their ability to act lovingly in the face of these feelings is limited or nonexistent. Interracial dating is explicitly forbidden. Closed families do not always engage in overt forms of racial discrimination, but they usually do their best to pass on a way of thinking that perpetuates the borders between the races, a way of thinking that forecloses critical thinking about race.

Disowning the Other

Often the prospect of an interracial marriage takes on mythical proportions and the partnership is seen as an act of blatant disloyalty, even as an act of war. Filial piety is assumed; sons and daughters are indebted to their parents and must repay them for their sacrifices. Marrying the right partner is a filial obligation. The children of these families are caught in a horrible bind: sacrifice their own needs and desires or alienate their parents, perhaps permanently.

Closed families have narrow criteria for whom they will accept as one of the clan. They will open their ranks only to persons who guarantee betterment of the family position. Regardless of how a family becomes closed, the opportunities for growth and change are limited. In an extreme example of a closed family, Randall, an African American in his mid-forties, spoke about his ex-mother-in-law's inability to see him as a person.
My daughter and my son are black and white. To make it brief, my wife called her mother in California one Christmas day and put our daughter on to talk to grandmother. She didn't say a word to our daughter and my wife gets back on the phone and her mother says, "What the hell is the matter with you? I don't want a nigger in my family!" And this is her grandchild!

Such behavior is not limited to parents and grandparents. Sometimes adult children disown their parents, as in the case of Linda, who married a white man years after being widowed by her Filipino husband. "My [Filipina] daughter really disowned me for several years," she said. "It is only this Christmas that we got a card. But in the card she didn't mention anything about having feelings against us or for us. She just sent the card to me."

**One Avenue to Challenge Stereotypes**

In his 1944 study of race relations, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal echoed W.E.B. DuBois's observation half a century earlier that the color line would be the problem of the twentieth century in the United States. Today, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, Jim Crow laws and other legal barriers are gone but not forgotten and we still struggle with race.

I doubt that intermarriage is the solution to all of America's race problems; nor is it necessary for all or even most Americans to intermarry. But it does provide one avenue for the challenging of stereotypes, particularly when it involves an extended kinship network of different race and mixed-race kin. It is an opportunity to move into a different dialogue about race, a dialogue in which the voices of multiracial adult children and women and people of color can also be heard. And beyond its benefits to racial tolerance, interracial marriage demands democracy, openness, and tolerance within families.