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# THE RATES, PATTERNS AND REASONS FOR FORMING HETEROSEXUAL INTERRACIAL DATING RELATIONSHIPS AMONG ASIAN AMERICANS

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## ABSTRACT

Interracial relationships are a subject of intense popularity and controversy within the Asian American community. Asian Americans are the group with the highest interracial marriage rate in the nation, yet little is known about their dating practices. As one of the first empirical investigations of interracial dating rates among Asian Americans, this study seeks to examine the rates and patterns of interracial dating and to explain reasons for forming interracial unions. Based on a sample of 559 Asian and white students, the data suggest that studying dating patterns is an important step towards understanding and predicting intermarriage. Many similarities were found between marriage and dating patterns. However, in contrast to the outmarriage literature, no sex differences were found in outdating rates and acculturation did not predict interracial dating. Propinquity was found to be the strongest predictor of interracial dating, while ethnic and sex differences in attractiveness were also important predictors.

KEY WORDS • Asian American • dating • interracial

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Interracial relationships are a topic of intense popularity within the Asian American community. The issue of interracial dating and marriage can be found in Asian American newspapers and magazines (e.g. *Asian Week*, *Transpacific Magazine*), as the topic of workshops and keynote speeches at

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conferences on college campuses and in the community, as the focus of classroom lectures, and peppered throughout informal conversations. Moreover, the subject of interracial relationships has been a controversial issue for many Asian Americans. Some people are concerned that distinct Asian groups will cease to exist within a couple of generations, especially Japanese Americans, who have an exceptionally high outmarriage rate. Others express alarm that Asian American men will be left in bachelorhood as more and more Asian American women outmarry. The salience of this issue has increased as growing numbers of Asian Americans enter into interracial unions. Though interracial marriages have increased for all groups, it is Asian Americans who have the highest interracial marriage rates in the nation. According to 1980 census data, 23 percent of Asian Americans, 13 percent of Latinos, 2 percent of African Americans, and 1 percent of white Americans were in interracial marriages nationally (Lee & Yamanaka, 1990). Despite the fact that Asian Americans have the highest outmarriage rates in the nation and the abundance of strongly opinionated anecdotal and community folklore surrounding interracial unions, there is surprisingly little empirical research on rates of interracial dating and on reasons why people enter into such unions.

The significant rise in the Asian American population since the 1965 Immigration Act eliminated the national origins quota system, the banning of anti-miscegenation laws by the US Supreme Court in 1967, and the nation's increasingly liberal attitudes towards race relations contributed to the sharp rise in the current rates of outmarriage. The fact that Asian Americans are outmarrying at relatively high rates has been shown by the convergence of results from several studies using various methods of data collection and geographic areas. Throughout the nation, 25 percent of Asian Americans were intermarried in 1980 — based on US census data (Lee & Yamanaka, 1990). In California, 20 percent of Asian Americans were intermarried in 1980 — based on US census data (Shinagawa & Pang, 1988). In Los Angeles County in 1989, 39 percent of Asian Americans had married outside their ethnic group according to marriage licenses (Kitano et al., in press). Despite the clear documentation of marital patterns, there is a paucity of data on Asian American interracial dating. One study examined various Asian American groups' participation in outdating in Hawaii but did not examine the ethnicity of dating partners (Johnson & Ogasawara, 1988) and other studies investigated Asian American attitudes toward interracial dating (Brooks et al., 1973; Liu et al., 1995; Weiss, 1970). However, the majority of studies on interracial dating focus on African Americans and other groups, but do not include an Asian American sample (e.g. Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Thus, the present study adds to the literature by empirically investigating the rates of interracial dating, ethnicity of partners, and the relationship between dating and marriage among the group with the highest interracial marriage rates.

Under the Asian American umbrella, there are ethnic and sex differences in outmarriage rates. Note that outmarriage or intermarriage refers to marriages outside one's specific ethnic group (e.g. Chinese with non-

Chinese); these marriages can be interethnic (Chinese-Korean) or interracial (Chinese-white) unions. Japanese Americans have been found to outmarry most frequently (e.g. Kitano et al., in press; Lee & Yamanaka, 1990). For example, in 1989 in Los Angeles County, where partners from a variety of ethnic backgrounds are available, 52 percent of Japanese Americans were outmarried, compared to 41 percent of Filipinos, 34 percent of Chinese, 27 percent of Vietnamese, and 11 percent of Koreans (Kitano et al., in press). When outmarrying, Asian Americans, like other ethnic groups, marry White Americans more than members of other groups (Kitano et al., in press; Lee & Yamanaka, 1990; Shinagawa & Pang, 1988). Asian Americans also preferred dating whites over other non-Asian groups (Liu et al., 1995), suggesting that dating parallels marriage in this respect. Furthermore, this pattern of marrying white partners seems to be accentuated by sex. Asian women marry white partners at higher rates than do Asian men (Lee & Yamanaka, 1990). Moreover, Asian American women have been outmarrying at higher rates than Asian American men since the 1940s (Kitano et al., in press; Lee & Yamanaka, 1990; Shinagawa & Pang, 1988). This sex difference holds for each specific Asian group (e.g. Chinese, Korean) and for Asian Americans collectively. For example, based on marriage license data in Los Angeles from 1975 to 1989, Asian American women uniformly accounted for the majority (54-80%) of Asian American outmarriages (Kitano et al., in press). There is one significant exception to this sex pattern: in an empirical study on rates of outdating among Asian Americans, Johnson & Ogasawara (1988) found that in Hawaii males were more likely to outdate than females. This finding is inconsistent with the outmarriage rates in Hawaii; from 1980 to 1989, Asian American women outmarried more frequently than Asian American men (Kitano et al., in press). Clearly, more empirical studies are needed to determine sex differences in outdating as well as the actual rate of outdating among Asian Americans.

The data that are available on the relationship between interracial dating and interracial marriage rates suggest that the rate of interracial unions are inversely related to the level of involvement. In other words, people are more likely to date interracially than to marry interracially. An empirical study of outdating rates among African, Latino, and white residents in Southern California in 1989 found that 70 percent of African Americans, 68 percent of Latinos, and 60 percent of whites had outdated at least once (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). In terms of marriage, in California 13 percent of African Americans, 29 percent of Mexicans, and 10 percent of whites were outmarried in 1980 (Shinagawa & Pang, 1988). Not surprisingly, outdating rates are considerably higher than outmarriage rates.

In sum, the study's first goal is to understand the rates and patterns of interracial dating among Asian Americans and to examine the relationship between interracial dating and interracial marriage. It is hypothesized that ethnicity and sex will affect outmarriage and outdating in similar ways; in particular, when outdating, Asian Americans will mostly date whites, and Asian American women will outdate more than Asian American men. It is

also hypothesized that the rate of interracial unions will be inversely related to the level of involvement.

The study's second goal is to understand people's reasons for deciding to outdate during the initial phase when people evaluate their desire for a potential partner and form first impressions. It is important to note that the reasons people enter into interracial relationships may not differ substantially from the reasons people enter into intraracial relationships. In fact, in the US, the most common reason for becoming a couple — in any type of relationship — is being in love (Kitano et al., in press). Nevertheless, the fact that race is extremely salient in our society (Jones, 1991) suggests that we cannot pretend to be colorblind. I am proposing that race and culture influence who people consider attractive, who they choose to like and love, who they exclude as partners, and the ways in which they are compatible.

Kelley (1996 unpub) proposes that relationship formation is a function of both external opportunities and constraints as well as individual preferences and choices. In the present study, propinquity and acculturation are used to examine external opportunities and constraints in establishing interracial relationships; and interpersonal attributes such as attractiveness and caring are used to examine individual preferences and choices. It should be noted that studies on relationship formation have addressed two other factors: similarity and hypergamy. The similarity theory posits that individuals who have similar attitudes are more likely to form relationships, reflecting the adage, birds of a feather flock together. For example, in the laboratory and in a dating situation, Byrne and colleagues found that, following just one interaction, subjects reported greater liking for those perceived to have similar attitudes to the subject (Byrne, 1997). Expanding on Byrne's earlier ideas and methodology, Rosenbaum (1986) found that it is not similarity that leads to attraction, but rather that dissimilarity leads to repulsion. Hypergamy theory, which explains intermarriage as a function of the inequalities that exist within a stratified society, posits that individuals enter relationships that enhance their social status by exchanging various forms of status (Davis, 1941). For example, a man may exchange his wealth for a woman's beauty, or a person of color may exchange his or her educational status or physical attractiveness for the white partner's racial status (Fujino, 1991; Monahan, 1976; Murstein et al., 1989). Because the present study examined individuals and not couples, making it difficult to assess whether each partner's characteristics are similar or were exchanged in a way that enhances social status, neither similarity nor hypergamy theories were examined.

*Propinquity* or the physical distance between ethnic groups functions to expand or limit external opportunities through the availability of partners from various ethnic backgrounds. In addition to the obvious thesis that physical closeness and availability increases the chances of meeting, studies indicate that propinquity is related to attraction. People tend to like others with whom they have repeated interactions and close proximity. The 'mere exposure' effect asserts that individuals presented with neutral stimuli

begin to like the objects more with repeated exposure (Saegert et al., 1973). Festinger et al. (1950) found that residents of a large apartment building who lived on the same floor were more likely to be friends with one another than residents living on different floors. Blau (1977) proposed the sociological theory of relative group size which corresponds with the psychological concept of propinquity. Empirical studies have found that relative group size is inversely related to outmarriage rate (Fugita & O'Brien, 1991). When Asians compose a small percentage of the overall population, they are more likely to outmarry.

*Acculturation* also serves as an external factor influencing one's opportunities to form interracial unions. Assimilation theory posits that intermarriage is the ultimate symbol of a minority group's absorption into dominant society (Gordon, 1964). Because the idea of assimilation has been used negatively to connote the loss of cultural or ethnic identity, the term acculturation is preferred to refer to the process of integrating into the dominant society without necessarily losing aspects of one's ethnic culture. Generational status, used as a marker for acculturation, has been found to be directly related to outmarriage rates (Fugita & O'Brien, 1991; Kitano et al., in press; Lee & Yamanaka, 1990). Kitano et al. (in press) found that among each of the five Asian American groups studied (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese), the third or higher generation outmarried more than the second generation, which in turn outmarried more than the first generation or immigrant group. Lee & Yamanaka (1990) also found that, with the exception of Japanese American women, American-born Asian (Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese) women and men outmarried at much higher rates than their foreign-born counterparts. The relatively high rate of outmarriage among foreign-born Japanese American women can be explained by the American military occupation of Japan following World War II and the subsequent immigration of Japanese war brides.

Once external factors permit the possibility of establishing interracial relationships, individual preferences and choices influence the likelihood of dating. *Physical attractiveness* is perhaps the most influential factor affecting initial liking in any type of relationship (Critelli & Waid, 1980). Not only is physical beauty extremely salient and readily evaluated early on, it is also important because other positive characteristics such as being sensitive, sociable, interesting, strong, and exciting are imputed to physically attractive people (Dion et al., 1972).

Moreover, both sex and race have been found to influence the evaluation and salience of attractiveness. Coombs & Kenkel (1966) found that attractiveness as a criterion for mate selection was more important for men selecting female partners than for women choosing male partners. Race also matters. In two analogous studies, Bernstein et al. (1982) examined the ratings of attractiveness by Chinese Americans and whites and then by African Americans and whites. They found that whites reported higher attractiveness ratings for the pictures of whites in both studies. Chinese students rated the Chinese and whites pictures as equally attractive.

African American subjects rated whites as more attractive than their own group, but to a lesser extent than did white subjects. Another study found that white subjects rated their own group as most attractive, African Americans rated whites as second most attractive following their own group, and Asian Americans and Latinos rated whites as more attractive than their own groups (Liu et al., 1995). Fujino (1993) found that both Asian American and white subjects rated whites as more attractive than Asians. These studies suggest that different standards of beauty exist for different cultures, and most significant, the European standard predominates.

Race and sex may also contribute to initial attraction and liking in other ways. Race and sex-based media representations or stereotypes of Asian Americans are thought to influence other people's choices to date or not date Asian Americans. Asian American men have been represented as demasculinized and asexual as well as highly successful economically. Asian American women have been represented in the media as either the submissive, exotic lotus blossom or the sexually manipulative dragon lady (Tajima, 1989). The present research seeks to examine how these media representations influence the decisions people make about interracial dating. In sum, it is hypothesized that having fewer Asian Americans in one's neighborhood, having one's family reside in the US for more generations, placing a greater value on physical attractiveness in selecting one's partners, viewing Asian Americans as less attractive, and viewing Asian Americans according to western stereotypes will be associated with greater interracial dating.

The present study adds to the literature on interracial relationships in three ways. First, based on the premise that dating is a precursor to marriage, shedding light on interracial dating patterns is a preliminary step towards understanding and predicting intermarriage patterns. The significance of the high rate of intermarriage among Asian Americans lies in its implications for marital relations and family life, mate availability (given sex differences in outmarriage), the continuance of cultural groups, and race relations in the US. Second, the study moves beyond the typical information on outmarriage rates and examines reasons for dating outside one's own ethnic group. Third, the study uses empirical data to examine a socially relevant and controversial issue, which can help to lend clarity to the abundance of strongly opinionated anecdotal and community folklore surrounding interracial unions.

### **Method**

This research investigated the dating patterns of college students at a large metropolitan university. College students provide an appropriate sample because people begin to seriously date and regularly form life-long partnerships in young adulthood. The ethnic diversity at the University of California at Los Angeles also allows for the possibility of dating people from various ethnic backgrounds. Thus, individuals are not necessarily constrained in their dating by the availability of partners or by parental demands.



Participants were 559 undergraduate students who had never been married and identified as heterosexual and monoracial, including 94 Chinese American women, 88 Chinese American men, 69 Japanese American women, 57 Japanese American men, 159 white American women, and 92 white American men. The participants, whose average age was 19.8 years, had had an average of 4.2 significant others. About 54 percent of the Chinese, 20 percent of Japanese, and 8 percent of white subjects were immigrants. Subjects generally came from families with above-average socioeconomic status (SES). The Nam-Powers (Miller, 1991) SES scores (0–100), derived from median education, median income, and occupation for women and men in the civilian labor force in 1980, yielded a mean SES score of 78 for fathers and 51 for mothers. On average, fathers had graduated from college and mothers had attended college.

Subjects spent about 45 minutes completing the questionnaire.

Subjects provided demographic information, including ethnicity, sex, age, marital status, sexual orientation, birthplace of self and parents, mother's and father's educational and occupational backgrounds. Subjects also reported the proportion of Chinese, Japanese, and whites in the high school they attended and in their hometown community. Because Asians usually date whites when dating interracially, a variable called interracial propinquity was created to represent the proportion of whites in one's community.

Subjects reported the number of significant relationships (operationally defined as an exclusive, girlfriend/boyfriend relationship that lasts at least 2 months) they had with partners of various ethnic backgrounds. They also indicated the degree to which they prefer to date and to marry partners from specific ethnic groups using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Participants also identified all ethnic groups they would *not* consider for a significant dating partner and for a marriage partner. Participants indicated their perceptions as to the ethnic backgrounds of partners their parents prefer they date as well as the ones of which their parents disapprove.

The questionnaire assessed the extent of liberal attitudes towards the rights and roles of women with the Attitude Towards Women Scale (AWS; Spence et al., 1973). The AWS short form consists of 25 items, rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 'disagree strongly' to 'agree strongly', that tap into six theme areas: (1) vocational, educational, and intellectual roles; (2) freedom and independence; (3) dating, courtship and etiquette; (4) drinking, swearing, and jokes; (5) sexual behavior; and (6) marital relations and obligations. The AWS short form has been found to have high internal-consistency reliability (coefficient alpha above .80 for various populations) and high validity (Beere, 1990). In a review of measures, Beere (1990) states that the AWS, used in 371 published studies, is the most commonly used measure of attitudes toward women.

The author developed the Attributional Relationship Scale to measure: (1) characteristics desired in significant others and (2) characteristics imputed to members of the opposite sex. Past studies of qualities desired in potential mates (Buss & Barnes, 1986) and of personality characteristics (Wiggins, 1979) were reviewed and items were selected to emphasize ethnic concerns, women's issues, and power relations. The 30 items cover areas such as attractiveness (physically attractive, cute), sexual expectations (sexually exciting), personality characteristics (considerate, nurturing), and socioeconomic status (high income potential). For the characteristics desired in significant others, Valued Attri-

butes, subjects indicated the importance of each attribute on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 'extremely undesirable' to 'extremely desirable'.

For the characteristics imputed to others, Imputed Attributes, the same 30 attributes were presented to examine subjects' perceptions of Chinese members of the opposite sex by ethnic group. The instructions to the female subjects were: 'Imagine that there are 100 Chinese American men in the room. How many of these 100 men do you think possess each of the following characteristics?'. Subjects indicated the number (from 0 to 100) of individuals they perceived to possess each attribute. The same procedure was used to assess the attributes imputed to white Americans and Japanese Americans. Because it was fairly obvious that subjects were asked to compare ethnic groups, the three ethnic groups were listed on the same page in the following order: Chinese American, white American, Japanese American. Male subjects rated Chinese American, white American, and Japanese American women in an analogous manner.

Subjects were recruited from two sources: psychology courses and the registrar's listing of university students. Of the 319 (57%) from psychology courses, the majority came from introductory courses for which participation was one means to fulfill a course requirement and a few students from upper division psychology courses participated for extra credit. To ensure an adequate number of Asian Americans, 237 subjects (43%) were also recruited from the university's listing of Chinese American, Japanese American, and white American students. These randomly selected subjects were contacted by telephone and invited to participate in a study examining 'heterosexual college dating' and received a \$5.00 UCLA gift certificate for participating. Of the 405 individuals contacted and eligible to participate, 317 subjects agreed to participate and 239 completed the questionnaire. For each ethnic/sex group, a *t*-test analysis found no significant differences between samples, at the  $p < .001$  criterion controlling for type I experimentwise error rate, on any of the variables: age, parental SES, parental education, generation, total number of significant others, and rate of interracial dating. Thus, a decision was made to combine the two samples.

Principal components factor analysis with varimax rotation was used to determine the major factors underlying the 30 interpersonal characteristics of the Attributional Relationship Scale. First, factor analyses were performed separately on the Imputed Attribute and Valued Attribute scales to determine the number of factors to use. The Scree Procedure indicated a 3-factor solution. Factor analyses with varimax rotation, with the number of factors set to three, were then performed to determine the underlying factor structure. Again, analyses were run separately for the scales. Variables with eigenvalues greater than or equal to .30 were included on the factor, and yielded very similar factor patterns for each scale. Two attributes ('quiet' and 'expresses her/his feelings') did not consistently load on a single factor and were excluded. Because the attributes imputed to Chinese and Japanese were highly comparable, the two scales were combined by taking the average of Chinese and Japanese scores for each of the 30 attributes. Note that the data suggest that there were no effects for the order in which subjects rated the three ethnic groups. If there was an order effect, the Chinese members of the opposite sex would consistently be rated highest (or lowest), followed by whites and then Japanese in descending (or ascending) order. What the data show is that the Chinese and Japanese were consistently given similar ratings, both of which

were different from the ratings given to whites. This suggests that the subjects were indeed responding to the ethnic backgrounds listed. The 3-factor solution explained 47 percent of the observed variance for the Imputed Attribute scale and 32 percent of the observed variance for the Valued Attribute scale.

The first factor, labeled *Attractiveness*, explained 22 percent of the observed variance for Imputed Attributes and 19 percent for Valued Attributes scales. This factor consists of 11 items: sexually exciting, physically affectionate, physically attractive, outgoing/sociable, romantic, good sense of humor, exotic, equal sex roles, strong personality, easy going, cute. This factor exhibited a coefficient alpha reliability of .87 for Imputed Attributes and .76 for Valued Attributes.

The second factor, *Power*, accounted for 16 percent of the observed variance for Imputed Attributes and 8 percent for Valued Attributes. It consists of 8 attributes (masculine, high status occupation potential, high income potential, ambitious, college graduate potential, dominant, independent, and feminine), including a negative eigenvalue for feminine which was reverse-coded in further analyses. This factor represents three aspects of power (dominance, SES, and sex status), and displayed a coefficient alpha reliability of .88 for Imputed Attributes and .80 for Valued Attributes.

The third factor, *Caring*, explains 9 percent and 5 percent of the observed variance for Imputed Attributes and Valued Attributes, respectively. The factor consisted of nine attributes: considerate, polite, reliable, humble, obedient, sensitive to my feelings, nurturing, domestic, traditional sex roles. The reliability for this factor was .82 for Imputed Attributes and .68 for Valued Attributes.

## Results

The study's first goal is to examine the rates and patterns of outdating by ethnicity and sex, and the relationship between the interracial dating and marriage. The second goal is to examine factors associated with forming interracial dating relationships.

There are two methods for assessing outdating. One method is to examine the percentage of subjects who have had at least one partner from a particular ethnic group. This percentage shows whether the subjects have *ever* dated a person from a specific ethnic group, but does not provide information about the *extent* of dating. The second method is to examine the percentage of dating to partners from various ethnic backgrounds, that is, the number of partners from a specific group divided by the total number of partners. This study uses both methods. Table 1 shows the percentage of subjects who have had at least one partner from the indicated ethnic group. Among subjects who have dated, 69.2 percent of Chinese American women, 75.3 percent of Chinese American men, 85.7 percent of Japanese American women, 86.5 percent of Japanese American men, 52.6 percent of white American women, and 62.5 percent of white American men have dated someone outside their specific ethnic group. Two-way analysis of variance indicate that ethnic differences exist ( $F = 15.74$ ,  $p \leq .0001$ ); Japanese Americans are more likely to outdate than Chinese Americans, who in turn are more likely to outdate than white Americans. No sex main effect or ethnic-by-sex interaction effect was found. Table 2 shows the extent of dating to partners of various ethnic backgrounds among those who have dated. Ethnic differences in outdating were found based on a two-way

**TABLE 1**  
**Percentage of subjects with at least one dating partner from the indicated ethnic group**

Subject	Ethnicity of dating partner					
	Chinese	Japanese	Other Asian	African	Latino	White
<i>Women</i>						
Chinese	58.5	— <sup>a</sup>	27.7	2.1	10.6	41.5
Japanese	— <sup>b</sup>	53.6	47.8	7.2	20.3	60.9
White	5.7	6.3	7.5	13.8	27.0	95.6
<i>Men</i>						
Chinese	58.0	— <sup>a</sup>	42.0	3.4	13.6	34.1
Japanese	— <sup>b</sup>	64.9	59.6	1.8	5.3	42.1
White	8.7	10.9	23.9	3.3	32.6	91.3

<sup>a</sup> For Chinese subjects, dating Japanese is included in dating Other Asians.

<sup>b</sup> For Japanese subjects, dating Chinese is included in dating Other Asians.

**TABLE 2**  
**Rate of dating various ethnic partners by ethnicity and sex**

Subject	Ethnicity of dating partner					
	Chinese	Japanese	Other Asian	African	Latino	White
<i>Women</i>						
Chinese	47.5	— <sup>a</sup>	15.7	0.5	3.9	28.5
Japanese	— <sup>b</sup>	33.1	22.6	1.5	5.4	32.0
White	1.7	1.1	1.5	3.5	6.8	80.8
<i>Men</i>						
Chinese	44.1	— <sup>a</sup>	25.1	0.7	4.2	20.4
Japanese	— <sup>b</sup>	40.2	30.5	1.0	1.4	22.8
White	2.2	2.2	7.8	0.6	9.3	74.3

*Note:* The figures refer to the number of partners in each ethnic group divided by the total number of partners. The figures do not total 100% because subjects reported a small percentage of dating 'other', a category on the questionnaire representing any group not included in one of the above six ethnic groupings.

<sup>a</sup> For Chinese subjects, dating Japanese is included in dating Other Asians.

<sup>b</sup> For Japanese subjects, dating Chinese is included in dating Other Asians.

analysis of variance ( $F = 60.6, p \leq .0001$ ). Japanese (64%) and Chinese (54%) had similar percentages of outdating partners, and both Asian groups had a higher percentage of outdating partners than did whites (22%). No sex main effect or ethnic-by-sex interaction effect were found. Tables 1 and 2 show that all groups are mostly likely to date endogenously to members of their own ethnic group. However, when outdating, Asian Americans most often dated Asians or whites and rarely dated African Americans. Asian American women most often dated white men, and Asian American men most often dated women from other Asian groups. It should be noted that the vast majority of subjects have had at least one serious dating partner.

In addition to behavioral indices, the study also examined participants' attitudes, expressed as their preference for or exclusion of various ethnic groups

**TABLE 3**  
**Examination of differences in degree of preferences for and exclusion of various ethnic groups as a function of level of involvement in relationship**

	Asian American women		Asian American men	
	Dating partner	Marriage partner	Dating partner	Marriage partner
<i>Preference for ethnic groups as partners<sup>a</sup></i>				
Own Asian	4.07	4.12*	4.36	4.37*
Other Asian	3.04	2.91*	3.50	3.35*
White	3.40	3.29*	3.40	3.17*
Latino	2.26	2.08*	2.55	2.31*
African	1.89	1.77*	1.91	1.71*
<i>Exclusion of ethnic groups as partners<sup>b</sup></i>				
Own Asian	1.8	1.8	1.4	1.4
Other Asian	14.1	26.4*	6.2	11.0
White	8.0	11.7	5.5	14.5
Latino	32.5	53.4*	23.4	40.7*
African	46.0	67.5*	39.3	60.0*

<sup>a</sup> Degree of preference for various ethnic groups based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly do not prefer' to 'strongly prefer'. \* Significant difference between preference for group as a dating and marriage partner using pairwise *t*-test analysis at  $p < .0001$  significance criteria.

<sup>b</sup> Percentage of subjects who would exclude ethnic group as a partner. \* Significant difference between excluding group as a dating and marriage partner using test for significance of difference between two proportions at  $p < .01$  significance criteria to control for simultaneous alpha rate.

(see Table 3). Asian American women reported a preference for dating and marrying their own Asian group, followed by whites, other Asians, Latinos, and Africans. Their pattern for excluding members of ethnic groups as dating and marriage partners followed in reverse order; they excluded African partners the most, followed by Latinos, other Asians, whites, and their own Asian group. The attitudes of Asian American men followed a similar pattern, except they were more likely to prefer other Asian partners over whites and to exclude whites more than other Asians.

Because none of the subjects was married, comparisons between actual dating behavior and marriage could not be made. However, the data allow for an examination of the relationship between level of involvement and interracial rates in terms of preferences for and exclusion of ethnic partners. Table 3 shows the degree of preference for both dating and marriage partners from one's own Asian American group, other Asian American groups, whites, Latinos, and African Americans. Pairwise *t*-test analyses indicate a significance difference at  $p < .0001$  between preference for dating and for marriage to various ethnic partners. Among Asian women and men, the strength of their preference for marrying their own group is significantly stronger than their preference for dating their own group. For the other four groups, the reverse is true: the strength of their desire to date those groups is significantly stronger than their preference for marrying those groups. Thus, as hypothesized, the data suggest that preference for interracial relationships decreases as the level of involvement increases.

Table 3 also shows the percentage of Asian American participants who

excluded people from various ethnic groups as dating and marriage partners. Test for significance of difference between two proportions,  $p \leq .01$  significance criteria to control for simultaneous alpha rate, indicated that Asian American women were significantly more likely to exclude other Asians, Latinos, and Africans as marriage partners than as dating partners. Asian American men were significantly more likely to exclude Latino and African women as marriage partners than as dating partners. The data support the hypothesis with a caveat: when about 20 percent or more of participants exclude particular groups, Asian American subjects are significantly more likely to exclude these groups as marriage partners than as dating partners.

The major purpose of the study was to determine the predictors of interracial dating. *T*-tests for independent samples were performed,  $p < .001$  to control for type I error rate, to determine significant differences on a number of demographic and social indicators between those who have dated whites and those whose dating has excluded white partners. Because the pattern of variables was hypothesized to differ for women and men, analyses were run separately by sex. As shown in Table 4, compared to Asian Americans who have dated but not to white partners, Asian American men dating whites were more likely to have a higher proportion of whites in their high school and hometown communities,  $t(124) = 4.78, p < .0001$ . Asian American women who have dated whites were more likely to have more liberal attitudes towards the rights and roles of women in society,  $t(140) = 3.91, p < .0001$ , to have more whites in their high school and hometown communities,  $t(140) = 4.42,$

**TABLE 4**  
Examination of differences between Asian Americans whose dating included white partners and whose dating excluded white partners, by sex

Variables	Asian American women		Asian American men	
	Date whites	Do not date whites	Date whites	Do not date whites
Age	19.81	20.25	19.76	19.95
Parental occupation	78.71	77.53	82.83	73.77
Parental education	6.20	5.85	5.88	5.62
Parental interracial preference	.38	.15	.37	.17
Parental interracial exclusion	.17	.38	.24	.41
Liberal attitudes towards women	60.69	54.85*	52.62	51.54
Generation	1.95	1.53*	2.00	1.76
Interracial propinquity	.70	.49*	.72	.51*
Valued attributes				
Attractiveness	5.35	4.95*	5.37	5.16
Power	5.62	5.60	4.18	3.99
Caring	5.13	5.24	4.89	4.93
Attributes Imputed to Asians				
Attractiveness	33.13	36.85	38.67	41.08
Power	67.82	66.66	41.52	40.83
Caring	51.09	49.10	61.34	56.66

\* Significant difference between those who date whites and those who have not using independent *t*-test analyses at  $p \leq .001$  significance criteria to control for simultaneous alpha rate. Tests apply to Asian women and men separately.

$p < .0001$ , and to place a higher value on attractiveness in partners,  $t(140) = 5.34$ ,  $p < .0001$ , compared to those whose dating did not include white partners. Asian American women who dated white partners also had families living in the US for more generations, compared to those whose dating did not include white partners,  $t(140) = 3.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ; 41 percent of first-generation Asian American females had had at least one significant dating relationship with a white male, as had 65 percent of second-generation women and 77 percent of third- or higher-generation women. Using tests for significance of difference between two proportions,  $p < .01$  to control for simultaneous alpha rate, the first-generation women did outdate less than subsequent generations. The outdating rates among later generations did not differ significantly from each other.

The second and more important analysis involved the use of logistic regression models to determine the variables predicting interracial dating to white partners after controlling for the effects of other variables (Table 5). The same variables assessed in Table 4 were entered as predictor variables in the regression model. Again, based on the hypothesis that factors predicting outdating would vary by sex, the analyses were run separately for women and men. Among Asian American women, growing up in a community and high school with a high percentage of whites was, by far, the strongest predictor of interracial dating. In addition, the more women valued attractiveness and the

**TABLE 5**  
Odds ratios for variables predicting heterosexual dating to white Americans  
by Asian American women and men

Predictor variables	Interracial dating of white Americans	
	By Asian American women	By Asian American men
Age	1.00	.97
Parental occupation	.99	1.03
Parental education	1.26	.80
Ethnicity <sup>a</sup> (Japanese)	1.39	.88
Parental interracial preference	2.75	2.34
Parental interracial exclusion	.51	.77
Liberal attitudes towards women	.99	1.03
Generation <sup>b</sup>		
Second	1.29	1.10
Third or higher	1.41	1.29
Interracial propinquity	22.01**	51.63***
Valued attributes		
Attractiveness	3.80***	1.04
Power	.92	2.68*
Caring	.42**	.78
Attributes Imputed to Asians		
Attractiveness	.37**	.52*
Power	1.94	.85
Caring	2.07	2.08*

\*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

<sup>a</sup> Baseline = Chinese.

<sup>b</sup> Baseline = first generation.

less they valued caring in partners, the more likely they were to participate in interracial relationships. Also, the less women viewed Asian American men as attractive, the more likely they were to date white men. Note that the effects of generational status and attitudes towards women did not emerge after controlling for the effect of other variables. For Asian American men, interracial propinquity was also the strongest predictor of interracial dating to whites. The more Asian men valued power in their partners, the more likely they were to date white women. Also, the more Asian American men viewed Asian American women as less attractive and as more caring, the more they engaged in interracial relationships with white partners.

### Discussion

The present study sought to accomplish two objectives: (1) to examine the rates and patterns of interracial dating among the group with the highest outmarriage rate as well as to assess the relationship between interracial dating and marriage, and (2) to determine the factors associated with forming interracial dating relationships.

The effects of sex and ethnicity on the patterning of interracial unions was hypothesized to be similar for dating and marriage relationships. The effects of sex were surprising. The marriage literature consistently found that Asian American women outmarry at higher rates than Asian American men. In contrast, the present study found that Asian American women and men outdate at similar rates. This finding on the lack of sex differences in outdating counters a sentiment resentfully made by some Asian American men — that they are unable to find dating partners because so many Asian American women are dating white men. Based on the results of this study, at the average age of 20, Asian American men were just as likely as their female counterparts to outdate; more than 75 percent of Chinese and Japanese men have outdated. The study did find that a higher percentage of Asian women have had serious dating relationships with whites compared to their male counterparts (who tend to date women from other Asian groups when outdating); however, this does not mean that Asian men rarely date white women. The present study found that 34 percent of Chinese American men and 42 percent of Japanese American men had at least one white girlfriend (Table 1), and that 20 percent of Asian men's girlfriends were white women (Table 2). This finding on outdating among Asian men becomes more interesting given that based on probability figures alone, there is a greater likelihood to have more Asian female-white male unions than the reverse. Because Asian Americans comprise a numeric minority of the US population and because men, rather than women, usually initiate dates, there are more white men available to ask out Asian women than Asian men available to ask out white women.

A methodological difference between the marriage research and the present study may also explain the sex finding. Despite the possible diversity of previous partners, the marriage data only assess the ethnicity of



the current partner. In contrast, this study explores the ethnicity of all previous and current dating partners. Thus, it is possible that while Asian American women do not outdate any more than their male counterparts, the Asian women eventually marry spouses from other ethnic groups more often than do Asian men. Within the Asian American community, there is some speculation that parents exert more pressure on sons than on daughters to inmarry. Under patriarchal family structures, daughters are viewed as leaving their family of origin when they marry, whereas sons, along with their wives, stay within their family of origin. Thus, sons are viewed as being more responsible for carrying on the family name and lineage. If this is true, then Asian men may participate in interracial dating but usually marry intrracially.

In terms of ethnic effects, Asian Americans tend to date and marry partners from similar ethnic groups. While Asian Americans date endogenously to members of their own specific ethnic group most often, when outdating, they usually date Asians from other ethnic groups or white Americans, and rarely date African Americans. There was one discrepancy from the intermarriage literature which consistently show that Japanese outmarry more than Chinese. When examining whether the subjects have ever dated outside their specific ethnic group, Japanese were found to outdate more than Chinese. However, when examining the *extent* of dating of outdating, the two groups were found to outdate at similar rates. It is possible for more Japanese Americans to have dated at least one partner outside their ethnic group and for both groups to have similar outdating rates because a higher percentage of Japanese (91%) have had significant dating relationships than Chinese have (83%).

The data also suggests that Asian Americans, like other groups, date outside their own ethnic group more often than they marry outside their ethnic group. In the present study, 69 percent of Chinese women, 86 percent of Japanese women, 75 percent of Chinese men, and 87 percent of Japanese men have *outdated*. This compares to 39 percent of Chinese women, 55 percent of Japanese women, 27 percent of Chinese men, and 46 percent of Japanese men found to *outmarry* in 1989 in Los Angeles County (Fujino, 1991). This study's findings on attitudes about who one prefers to date and marry as well as who one excludes as a partner corroborate the data on interracial rates. Though the magnitude of difference is small, Asian American women and men prefer to marry their own Asian group significantly more than they prefer to date them. In contrast, Asian Americans prefer to date all other groups (other Asians, whites, Latinos, and Africans) more than they prefer to marry them. With respect to the ethnic groups subjects excluded as dating or marriage partners, there is no significant difference by level of involvement when the rates of exclusion are low (e.g. to own Asian groups and whites). However, when about 20 percent or more of participants exclude particular groups (e.g. Latinos and Africans), then subjects are significantly more likely to exclude those groups as marriage partners than as dating partners. Thus, the three sources of data (rates, preferences, exclusionary information) converge to

support the hypothesis that people's attitudes reflect a bias towards lower participation in interracial and interethnic relationships as the level of involvement in the relationship increases.

The second goal of the study was to examine the factors associated with entering into interracial dating relationships, namely to study the effects of propinquity, attractiveness, and acculturation on interracial dating. Propinquity was found to be, by far, the strongest predictor of interracial dating relationships with white partners. This confirms the seemingly obvious notion that Asian Americans who have grown up in communities with a higher proportion of whites had more white partners available and thus were much more likely to date whites. However, other analyses also found propinquity to be a strong predictor of interracial dating even after subjects entered college. Given that UCLA has a multiracial population, at least including significant numbers of Asians and whites, participants' dating patterns at college were not determined solely by the availability of certain ethnic groups. The results on dating preferences and exclusionary attitudes also support the finding that Asians *prefer* to date Asian and white partners. This suggests that interracial interactions before entering college have an influence on who one likes (Festinger et al., 1950; Saegert et al., 1973) as well as on what characteristics one finds attractive in dating partners. This finding is interesting because individuals commonly assume they select their dating partners based on personal factors such as 'she was cute' or 'we just got along'. Individuals are not always aware of the ways their choices are influenced by external or structural factors.

Some examples of the way dating choices are influenced by external factors fall in the areas of attractiveness and caring. The results show that male and female subjects who viewed Asian Americans as less attractive were more likely to date whites. In addition, the more Asian women valued attractiveness in partners, the more they dated whites. Though they sound intuitively obvious, these findings are shaped by race because the criteria for evaluating attractiveness are culturally determined. Several studies have found that Asian American and white subjects rated whites as more attractive than Asians (Bernstein et al., 1982; Liu et al., 1995), suggesting that in the US and elsewhere, European standards of beauty predominate. In terms of caring, Fujino (1993) found that Asian and white male subjects perceived Asian American women in a manner similar to the stereotype of the passive and subservient lotus blossom (Tajima, 1989). The present study found that the more Asian American men impute the attributes of obedience and politeness to Asian American women, the more likely they were to date white women (see the attribute *Caring* in Table 5). Perhaps one way Asian American students deal with ethnic stereotyping is by repudiating these images. When Asian American men view Asian women as 'lotus blossoms', they then reject these women as dating partners. Similarly, the more Asian women and men appropriate the European standards of beauty, the more they reject Asians as dating partners. I am suggesting that attributes such as attractiveness and caring are not simply race or sex neutral; rather, the standards for determining beauty and the

stereotypes of groups are shaped by race and sex-based media representations. Alternatively, there may be a third factor, such as ethnic identity, that can explain the relationship between viewing Asian women as 'lotus blossoms' and interracial dating. It may be that Asian American men who identify weakly with their ethnic group are the ones who adopt western perspectives of Asian American women and date white women. It would be interesting for future studies to explore how within-group differences in ethnic identity affect the degree to which Asian Americans adopt western perceptions of Asian American men and women and how these perceptions influence interracial dating.

Past studies on intermarriages have consistently shown that acculturation or assimilation is related to the presence of interracial unions. For example, first-generation Asian Americans were less likely to outmarry than were subsequent generations, even after controlling for the effects of other variables (Kitano et al., in press). In contrast, the present study did not find these striking generational differences in interracial dating relationships of Asian American women or men. It is possible that methodological differences between this study and marriage studies contribute to the discrepancy in findings. The intermarriage studies examined differences in generational status in outmarriage rates, which include interethnic (e.g. Chinese-Japanese) and interracial (e.g. Chinese-white) unions. The present study assessed differences in interracial dating rates to white Americans. In addition, the smaller sample size of the present study ( $N = 559$ ) as compared to the studies on intermarriage (e.g. Kitano et al., in press) had a sample of 6281 subjects) may explain the lack of statistically significant differences by generational status found in rates of outdating.

However, if the present findings are valid, then they suggest that at college campuses in large, multiracial metropolitan areas, substantial numbers of Asian American immigrants are also participating in interracial dating. The experience of living away from the demand for intraethnic relationships imposed by one's parents or ethnic community may enable the college student to explore dating to partners from various ethnic backgrounds. Note that parental preferences for or exclusion of interracial dating did not affect the participants' dating behaviors (see Tables 4 and 5). Perhaps, being socialized in American society for at least a few years has an impact on choices of date. Finally, it is possible that Asian American immigrant college students date people from other ethnic backgrounds, but then tend to marry someone from their specific Asian group. Whatever the reasons, it does appear that generational status has less of an impact on interracial dating than on outmarriage.

There are several limitations of the present study. First, the study assessed a subset of the Asian American community; namely individuals who, because they are attending an elite university, tend to be young, English proficient, and have a higher socioeconomic background. And only Chinese and Japanese students were sampled in recognition of the heterogeneity of Asian America; the study was designed to empirically investigate the characteristics imputed to Chinese and Japanese, without assum-

ing that subjects would view all Asian Americans in a similar way. Clearly the results of this study cannot generalize to the entire Asian American community. At the same time, the findings are important because college students are at an age where dating and forming intimate relationships are important developmental tasks. Moreover, studying Asian Americans in a multicultural college setting is meaningful because it reflects the increasing diversity found in large US cities and allows for the possibility of dating people from different ethnic backgrounds. A second limitation is that the unit of analysis is the individual rather than the couple. By not studying couples, certain theories of relationship formation such as similarity or hypergamy could not be tested directly. However, one of the main objectives of the study was to determine the rate of interracial dating which can be assessed most effectively by surveying individuals and not interracial couples (Cretser & Leon, 1982; Shinagawa & Pang, 1988). A third limitation is that the study employed survey methods rather than indepth interviews. Interviews could have yielded interesting information about the respondents' reasons for outdating. However, the strength of using quantitative methods lies in the large number of subjects included in the study. The larger sample permits the use of analyses like multiple regressions which control for the effects of other variables and for sex and ethnic comparisons to be made with a sizable number of subjects in each ethnic/sex group. Perhaps future studies can employ a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to better illuminate the reasons for forming interracial unions and to explore interactions within interracial relationships.

In conclusion, this study's findings on rates, patterns, and reasons for forming interracial dating relationships are an important preliminary step toward understanding and predicting intermarriage patterns, especially because the association between interracial dating and marriage appears to be fairly strong. Given that this study is one of the first empirical investigations on rates of interracial dating among the group that outmarries the most and given the general paucity of research on interracial dating, there is a need to better understand the patterns of interracial dating and reasons for entering into such relationships. It is hoped that this study will spark further research on a topic that touches some of the most intimate areas of our lives — our personal relationships — and shapes the formation of future Asian American communities.

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Volume 14 Number 6 December 1997

# SUMMARY OF CONTENTS

■ *Debra Umberson & Toni Terling* Meaning of relationships ■ *David Morgan, Paula Carder & Margaret Neal* Value of similar others ■ *Duncan Cramer, Scott Henderson & Ruth Scott* Mental health and support ■ *Yvan Lussier, Stéphane Sabourin & Chantal Turgeon* Attachment and coping strategies ■ *Todd K. Shackelford & David M. Buss* Infidelity and anticipated dissolution ■ *Diane C. Fujino* Interracial dating ■ *Jennifer Katz, Page Anderson & Steven R.H. Beach* Self-verification and self-enhancement ■ **Brief articles** *Annette L. Folwell, Leeva C. Chung, Jo Anna Grant, Jon F. Nussbaum & Lisa Sparks Bethea* Sibling relationships ■ *Frits Boer, P. Michiel Westenberg, Susan M. McHale, Kimberly A. Updegraff & Clare M. Stocker* Sibling Relationship Inventory ■ **Index to Volume 14**



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