

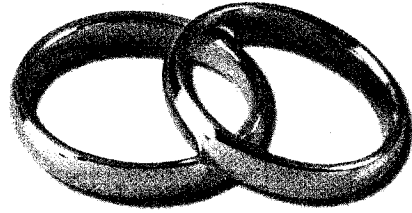
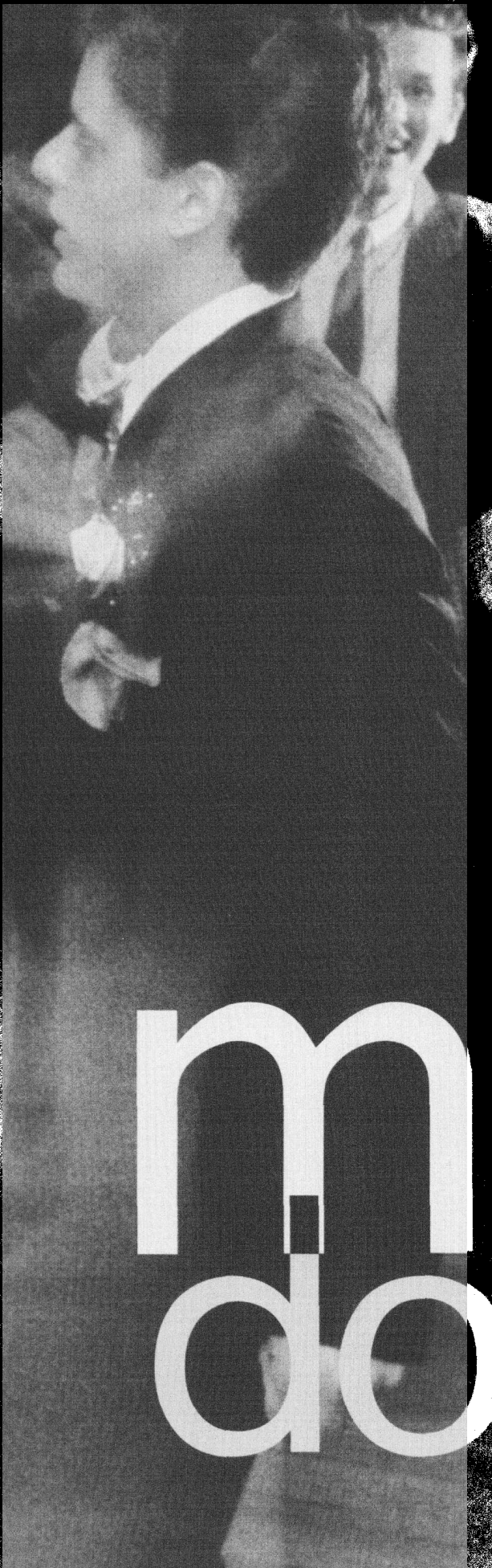
Mixed doubles

Roberto Suro

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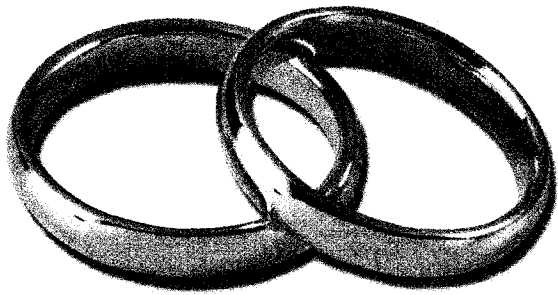




A new analysis of Census Bureau data indicates that interracial and interethnic marriages are on the rise. Some demographers are calling this the beginning of the blend.

■ by roberto suro

m do mixed couples



warms of young people representing a rainbow of racial and ethnic groups are now a regular feature in advertisements for hip, casual clothes and music, and even some glitzy electronics goods. But where the united colors of America appear next may be determined in large measure by how—or if—marketing managers and advertising executives respond to some of the newest and most perplexing data to emerge from the melting pot: The number of married couples who are of different races or ethnic groups has doubled since 1980. And they tend to be upscale, well-educated, and young.

Just when politicians, advertisers, and social scientists had gotten used to the idea of dividing up the American population into a handful of distinct ethnic or racial groups and addressing each specifically, a new trend threatens to rip up niches and shred the conventional wisdom. An analysis of Census Bureau data conducted for *American Demographics* shows that the growth in the number of mixed marriages is breaking down—or at least shifting—age-old barriers. These couples emerge from the statistics as pioneers in a demographic landscape that is being transformed by the first great wave of immigrants made up primarily of non-whites. Trying to understand their impact is an exercise in predicting the future at a time when the foreign-born population is growing at a rate that is nearly four times that of the native-born.

That future will be further defined by the results of the 2000 census, with its expanded list of racial and ethnic categories, which will ratify a wide-

spread understanding that “the country is indelibly changed by this convergence of cultures,” says Gary Berman, CEO of the Market Segment Group, a Miami-based brand consultancy specializing in the multicultural market. Then, Berman says, “It will just be a matter of time before there is a rush to seek opportunities in that change.”

For a preview of what the next census will show about intergroup marriages, *American Demographics* asked William H. Frey, senior fellow of demographic studies at the Milken Institute in Santa Monica and a professor at the State University of New York-Albany, to conduct a computer analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s 1998 Current Population Survey. Frey’s findings—unpublished until now—offer the first detailed glimpse of the scope and characteristics of a phenomena that has the long-term potential to transform the American family and the consumer marketplace.

Fully two-thirds of all Hispanics who have attended some college or have a college degree cross group lines when they marry, and the out-marriage rate is one in three for Hispanics in top income brackets, Frey has found. A fifth of all married Asian women have chosen a spouse of a different race or ethnicity, nearly twice the rate among Asian men overall. Not surprisingly, the Asians most likely to out-marry are those living in areas with relatively small immigrant populations. Meanwhile, Frey’s analysis shows that in populous, trend-setting California, nearly one of every 12 non-Hispanic whites who gets hitched is marrying an Asian or a Hispanic. In contrast, out-marriage rates remain low for blacks, roughly a third of the rates for Hispanics and Asians.

Marrying someone of the same race, the same ethnicity, even the same religion, and marrying them forever were enduring social norms in the United States—until recently. Today, although the inhibitions to unions between

blacks and whites prevail, attitudes toward marriage have shifted profoundly. That is evident in divorce rates and the prevalence of nontraditional households of all sorts. Intergroup marriage is part of this fundamental change in core social structures, and it is more than just a minor symptom. Today, there are nearly 3 million mixed marriages—about 5 percent of all married couples, compared to 3 percent in 1980. And if the large but incalculable number of mixed couples who are cohabiting but not married were added in, the phenomenon would undoubtedly encompass an even bigger slice of the nation’s households.

But the data have a significance that goes far beyond marriage. These intergroup pairings illuminate fundamental trends in relations between

OUT-MARRIAGE BY HISPANICS

TOTAL	16.7%
SEX	
Male	15.6%
Female	17.8%
AGE	
15-24	15.5%
25-34	17.2%
35-44	19.0%
45-54	16.8%
55+	12.6%
EDUCATION	
Some high school	4.9%
High school grad	17.8%
Some college	30.6%
College grad	35.3%
FAMILY INCOME	
Lowest 25%	7.1%
Second 25%	14.1%
Third 25%	23.9%
Top 25%	34.2%
WHERE ARE THEY?	
Northeast	13.4%
Midwest	13.6%
South	32.9%
West	40.1%

Source: William H. Frey, Milken Institute

whites and minorities. More specifically, these couples illustrate some of the slow, underlying changes in American culture and society that are taking place during an era of large-scale immigration. According to Census Bureau estimates, there are some 17 million foreign-born Asians and Hispanics resident in the United States, comprising the fastest-growing segments of the population. Finally, intermarriage touches on some of the most sensitive—and for a politician or advertiser, some of the most precarious— aspects of racial identity and bias.

“This is the beginning point of a blending of the races,” Frey states. “You can expect that in these households racial or ethnic attitudes will soften, that identities will be less distinct, and that there will be an impact on attitudes in the communities sur-

rounding these households. And this trend has real momentum behind it because it is so pronounced among young people.”

Frey's data show that fully 30 percent of married Asians between the ages of 15 and 24 have found a spouse of a different group, and nearly 50 percent of married Asians under the age of 35 are in mixed couples. Outmarriage is also strongly associated with youth among Hispanics, though to slightly lesser extent, with about a third of all married Hispanics under 35 involved in an intergroup marriage. Even among blacks the rate of outmarriage among the young is far high-

er than average, with about 11 percent of the married 15-to-24-year-olds going outside the group, compared to just 5 percent for blacks overall.

“To be able to accept a person of a different race in marriage—to merely be open to the possibility—is very definitely a form of assimilation,” says Wanla Cheng, principal and owner of the Asia Link Consulting Group, a New York City-based marketing research and consulting company. “And it is a very distinct kind of assimilation that we see most clearly among young people, especially well-educated young people who are able to put aside these differences that get so much emphasis in the rest of society.”

Defining the assimilation that takes place in these households, understanding which partners are changing and how, and then designing strategies

OUT-MARRIAGE BY NON-HISPANIC ASIANS

TOTAL	15.0%
SEX	
Male	9.2%
Female	20.0%
AGE	
15-24	30.1%
25-34	18.4%
35-44	15.6%
45-54	15.2%
55+	8.7%
EDUCATION	
Some high school	10.1%
High school grad	17.0%
Some college	18.9%
College grad	13.1%
FAMILY INCOME	
Lowest 25%	9.2%
Second 25%	12.6%
Third 25%	19.8%
Top 25%	15.4%
WHERE ARE THEY?	
Northeast	9.7%
Midwest	9.9%
South	23.8%
West	56.6%

Source: William H. Frey, Milken Institute

OUT-MARRIAGE BY NON-HISPANIC WHITES

TOTAL	3.0%
SEX	
Male	3.3%
Female	2.7%
AGE	
15-24	5.7%
25-34	4.5%
35-44	3.7%
45-54	2.8%
55+	1.5%
EDUCATION	
Some high school	2.3%
High school grad	2.5%
Some college	3.7%
College grad	3.1%
FAMILY INCOME	
Lowest 25%	2.7%
Second 25%	3.2%
Third 25%	3.3%
Top 25%	2.8%
WHERE ARE THEY?	
Northeast	10.9%
Midwest	16.5%
South	32.6%
West	40.0%

Source: William H. Frey, Milken Institute

OUT-MARRIAGE BY NON-HISPANIC BLACKS

TOTAL	5.0%
SEX	
Male	6.6%
Female	3.4%
AGE	
15-24	11.1%
25-34	8.1%
35-44	5.0%
45-54	4.2%
55+	2.3%
EDUCATION	
Some high school	2.9%
High school grad	4.0%
Some college	6.4%
College grad	6.2%
FAMILY INCOME	
Lowest 25%	3.9%
Second 25%	5.3%
Third 25%	5.9%
Top 25%	4.6%
WHERE ARE THEY?	
Northeast	19.3%
Midwest	21.3%
South	40.1%
West	19.3%

Source: William H. Frey, Milken Institute

to address the new tastes and appetites, loom as important challenges. How many marketers and advertisers are taking up the cause?

"Almost no one," says Cheng.

"Many are still at the beginning, just learning the need to communicate with a Spanish or Asian market," says Berman. "Some others have gone farther and are learning to address different sub-groups according to nationality. But only a relatively small number have drilled down to what you might call the third level, where you are dealing with the very dynamic kind of multiculturalism represented by interracial marriages."

When business executives reach that level, they are often required to perform intellectual acrobatics. "A lot of firms have become reliant on niche marketing that divides up the world very simply into Anglos, Asians, Hispanics, and African Americans," says Shelley Yamane, vice president of strategic services at Muse Cordero Chen & Partners, a multicultural advertising agency based in Los Angeles. "But the high degree of intermarriage among the young means you can't just lump people together into those categories anymore. It means that there is a growing audience out there—a desirable audience that doesn't fit neatly in any niche."

For one thing, that audience is almost always half white and half something else, because out-marriage by Hispanics, Asians, and blacks overwhelmingly involves a white spouse, according to Frey's analysis. And even that audience can be very different, depending on which kind of mix you examine.

Among Hispanics, for

example, the rates of intergroup marriage are about the same for men and women, and although the trend is concentrated among the young, there are also significant numbers of older Hispanics in mixed marriages. Among Asians, the trend is much more pronounced among women, while among blacks it is just the opposite: Black men marry women of other races at twice the rate of black females. For Hispanics, the correlation to economic success and education is stronger than for other groups: Hispanics with a college degree and a substantial income are more than five times as likely to out-marry than those who didn't finish high school or who live in poverty. Meanwhile, among both Hispanics and Asians, the native-born are much more likely than immigrants to find a white spouse, with intermarriage rates approaching 30 per-

cent of all native-born married couples. Among immigrants of both groups the prevalence of intermarriage steadily increases with the length of time spent in the United States.

Understanding the geodemographic patterns is no less complicated an endeavor. At first, intergroup marriages appear to be clustered in the obvious places. They are disproportionately concentrated in the states that have disproportionately high Hispanic and Asian populations: California, Texas, Florida, and New York. California, for example, has 11 percent of the nation's married-couple households and 23 percent of the mixed-marriages. But going beyond that rough cut, Frey's data suggest that the geographic patterns are different depending on whether you are looking at the trends among whites or among minorities.

For non-Hispanic whites, the rates of out-marriage as a percentage of the whole are far higher in those states with big Asian and Hispanic populations than in the rest of the country. White-Hispanic marriages, for example, are roughly four to five times as common in California and Texas than in states with relatively smaller Hispanic populations.

To see any significant degree of intermarriage by non-Hispanic whites, says Frey, "It seems there must be a critical mass of a minority population before you get the kind of interaction, especially among young people, that leads to these elevated rates." Frey's data show that in California, for example, 7.5 percent of all married whites under the age of 35 are in intergroup couples, versus 2 percent in low-immigration states.

But for Hispanics and Asians, the geographic trend is

IMMIGRATION INTENSIFIES

Foreign-born residents made up 9.3 percent of the U.S. population in 1998, up from 8.0 percent in 1990.

	7/1/98	4/1/90
TOTAL (IN 000s)		
All Races	25,208	19,840
Percent of total	100	100
HISPANIC ORIGIN (OF ANY RACE)		
Population	10,718	7,995
Percent of total	42.5	40.3
WHITE, NOT HISPANIC		
Population	6,531	6,184
Percent of total	25.9	31.2
BLACK, NOT HISPANIC		
Population	1,733	1,208
Percent of total	6.9	6.1
AMERICAN INDIAN, ESKIMO, AND ALEUT		
Population	42	26
Percent of total	0.2	0.1
ASIAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER, NOT HISPANIC		
Population	6,185	4,428
Percent of total	24.5	22.3

Source: Population Estimates Program, Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau

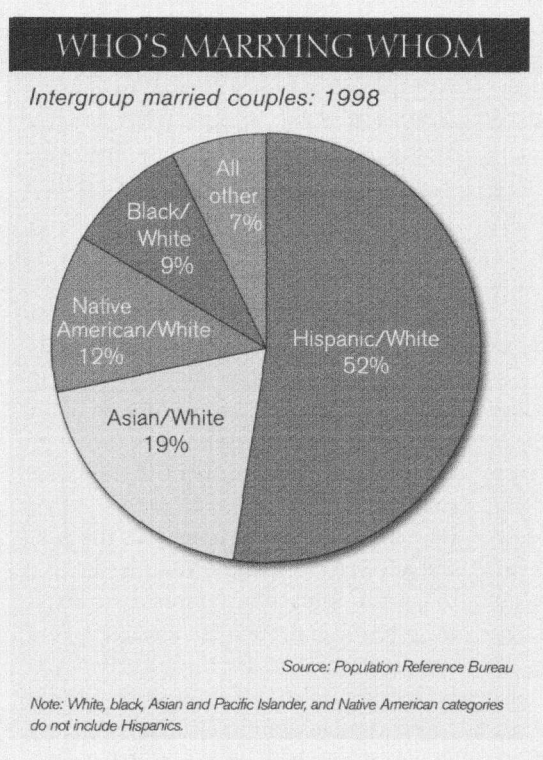
Note: Foreign-born population includes people born outside the United States to non-citizen parents; it does not include their U.S.-born dependents.

'This is such an intimate measure of attitudes toward racial differences that it also suggests a powerful form of assimilation is taking place among the Asians and Hispanics who move up and out of the melting-pot states!' —WILLIAM FREY

reversed. The rate of out-marriage by Hispanics is more than twice as high in the low immigration states as in the states where these populations are concentrated: In California, Texas, Florida, and New York combined, Frey's analysis shows that 12.5 percent of the married Hispanics are in intergroup marriages, while in the rest of the country the rate is 26.5 percent. And the trend is similar for Asians—11.5 percent, versus 19.4 percent. (Among blacks there is no distinct geographic pattern to out-marriage.)

"Availability would seem to be one factor: In states where there are fewer fellow Asians and Hispanics, they are more likely to find a white spouse," Frey explains. "But this is such an intimate measure of attitudes toward racial differences that it also suggests an especially powerful form of assimilation is taking place among the Asians and Hispanics who move up and out of the melting pot states."

ut very little in this age of immigration moves in a straight line. One has to ask who is doing the assimilating and what is the end result, especially if the goal is to understand attitudes, tastes, and habits. Consider the case of Xijuan Wang, who now answers her office phone "Lauren Greenstein." Greenstein, 42, came to the U.S. from China in 1987 on a scholarship to study English literature. While in a graduate program at



Columbia University in New York, she switched to computer science. It was in New York City, at a party in 1995, that she met her future husband, Mark, an attorney.

Now living in the Washington, D.C. area, Greenstein works for a computer network services firm, speaks English fluently, and in many ways might seem entirely assimilated. The conversation around the dinner table is in English, for example. But look at the food and you will find that most of the home-cooked meals are traditional Chinese cuisine. Then follow Mark and Lauren on the many evenings they eat out and you'll see they rarely go to a Chinese restaurant, pursuing eclectic

tastes instead. And ask their baby daughter, almost 2-years-old, her name, and she'll say "Leah," something perfectly American. But her chatter increasingly includes Chinese words learned from her mother and a Chinese babysitter.

"As people marry out, there is a lifestyle change because English is almost always the dominant language of the household and they are more likely to make purchasing decisions based on English-language media," Yamane says. "But you also often see a boomerang effect because people feel disconnected from their past and so there is a strong pull back to the home country or community."

In the Greenstein household, one of the major monthly expenses and a key purchasing decision is the long-distance carrier. "I have to be able to call home a lot, whenever I want, and that costs money," Greenstein says.

But acculturation works both ways. "When you look at how people dress, the food they eat and the music they listen to, particularly in places like California and Florida, even New York, you can see that the non-whites are under less pressure to assimilate, because it is cool to be Latin, it is cool to be Asian," Berman says. "Intermarriage is [also] a sign that assimilation by the dominant white culture is under way. And it is more than just a matter

Enough bias persists in the white population that portrayals of interracial couples could cause a backlash. And even in minority communities there are complex issues.

of tastes. You see it in the way Americans are embracing the family values that are so basic to Asian and Hispanic societies."

Does this all mean we'll soon see advertisements on prime-time, English-language television or in mainstream publications featuring mixed-race couples walking hand-in-hand to their new car? Multicultural marketing experts are unanimously cautious on this point.

"Portraying mixed marriages is a double-edged sword," says Cheng. "This can be a very dangerous subject to address directly in advertising."

Enough bias persists in the white population that portrayals of interracial couples could cause a backlash. And even in minority communities there are complex issues. "Intermarriage is a very delicate matter in Asian communities because there is a strong underlying resentment among many Asian men over the large number of Asian women who go outside the community to find husbands," says Cheng. Moreover, there are large technical hurdles to overcome before messages can be aimed directly at intergroup couples.

"You have to ask, first, whether this

sub-group can be described in enough detail and with enough precision to get an advertiser interested, and then you have to ask whether there are unique media to reach them," says Saul Gitlin, vice president of strategic marketing services at Kang & Lee Advertising, a Young & Rubicam company specializing in the Asian marketplace. "And then you have to show that you have some way to measure results for the effort."

But rather than promote ever-more-specialized advertising aimed at narrowly sliced market niches, the impact of intergroup marriage may be felt in general advertising, according to some marketing executives. "A brand can demonstrate a commitment to multiculturalism in very broad terms," says Berman. And, Gitlin notes, "In the general advertising market, you may be able to have an impact with more diversity at the creative end, such as a greater mix of races in the talent. That might allow you to speak to the different racial groups within a household without explicitly depicting a racially mixed marriage."

Philips Electronics is one brand that has already decided to make a diverse "tribe" of young people an essential part

of its advertising identity. "The best advertising holds a mirror up to society and that is what we are doing," says Elissa Moses, director of global consumer and market intelligence for the Netherlands-based company.

Recent Philips television commercials have used multiethnic groupings of twenty-somethings to promote products like flat-screen TVs. "Young people are the leading edge of interest in, comfort with, and adoption of a whole range of technological products," Moses says. Although Philips had some understanding of the growth in intermarriage rates, the trend was only "tangential" to their effort, Moses says. Instead, Philips commercials are meant to be "emblematic of the emergence of a global culture, in which the dominant characteristic is humanism rather than separatism."

Politically, socially, culturally—as well as commercially—the rapid growth of the Hispanic and Asian populations in recent years has heightened attention to group differences. Over time, intermarriage could prove a powerful counterforce to this emphasis on segmentation. As Gregory Rodriguez, research scholar at the Pepperdine Institute for Public Policy put it recently, "Intermarriage is not only a sign that a person has transcended the ethnic self-segregation of the first years of immigration, it is also the most potent example of how Americans forge a common national experience out of a diverse cultural past." ■

Roberto Suro is a staff writer at The Washington Post and author of How Latino Immigration Is Transforming America (Alfred A. Knopf).

WHERE DOES A TREND BEGIN?

Four immigration magnet states account for nearly half of all intergroup marriages in the U.S.

	Total married couple households	Total intergroup marriages	Percent of total married couple households	Percent of total intergroup marriages
California	6,149,005	644,977	10.5%	23.0%
Florida	2,946,234	194,200	6.6%	6.9%
New York	3,284,664	137,429	4.2%	4.9%
Texas	3,940,198	254,423	6.5%	9.1%
Rest of U.S.	37,996,764	1,572,087	4.1%	56.1%
Total	54,316,865	2,803,116	5.2%	100.0%

Source: William H. Frey, Milken Institute