

Does Intra-Couple Socioeconomic Similarity Promote Interracial Marriage? The Military as an Equalizing Context

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Although interracial marriages still comprise less than ten percent of all marriages in the U.S., the percentage of Americans who marry interracially has increased steadily since the mid-20th century. (See Figure 1.) This trend has been attributed to a combination of educational, economic and civil rights gains among African-Americans, secular and cohort succession changes to social norms, and an influx of Asian and Hispanic immigrants who have increased the numbers of non-Whites in the U.S. marriage market. Interracial marriage is more common among military veterans than in the general population, and has increased at a faster rate among veterans than non-veterans from the 1960s to the present (See Figure 2). Using a combination of data from the Current Population Survey and the American Community Survey to examine interracial marriages between non-Hispanic Whites and people of color (defined as African-Americans, Asians and Hispanics), this paper will attempt to explain the higher rates and quicker increase of interracial marriage among veterans by testing whether the three major theories of interracial marriage hold more or less true for veteran vs. civilian interracial couples.

Status exchange theory posits that the non-White partner in an interracial marriage will have socioeconomic resources of higher status than the White partner that they “exchange” for the White partner’s racial status. Structural assimilation theory argues that Whites are more likely to marry non-White spouses to whom they are closely matched on socioeconomic characteristics. Marriage market theory states that people of different races and ethnicities are more likely to marry one another when they come into contact on equal footing in a shared structural setting.

Since Executive Order 9981 in 1948, the military has led the way in working toward racial integration and equity. As an employer, the military is seen as less discriminatory than employers in the civilian labor market, and as a result, the proportion of veterans of color is greater than the share of minorities in the general population. The military serves as source of stable, well-paying employment in a context in which criteria for advancement are clearly formalized, and explicit policies and norms with respect to race have grown increasingly egalitarian with time. For this reason, there may be smaller gaps between the socioeconomic characteristics of veterans of color and their White veteran peers, compared with the racial gaps in SES among those in the civilian labor force. This may mean that patterns of status exchange and homogamy differ between interracial marriages between civilians and interracial marriages that include at least one veteran. Furthermore, the military brings together same-aged Whites and people of color in the context of shared group experiences and pro-marriage norms, and as such may function as a marriage market that is particularly conducive to marriages between Whites and non-Whites.

Using educational attainment as a focal independent variable standing in for socioeconomic status, we will compare interracial marriages in which at least one spouse is a veteran to interracial marriages in which both spouses are civilians, looking at both recent marriages and marriages of longer duration. We will test whether interracial couples including one veteran are more or less likely than civilian interracial couples to show patterns of status exchange and structural assimilation, and whether and how these patterns change with time. We

will also test whether the military’s apparent function as marriage market for interracial couples has increased as it has become increasingly non-discriminatory in its policies. Preliminary descriptive results (Table 1) show patterns in which, in veteran interracial couples, the White spouse is more likely to have lower educational attainment than the spouse of color, vs. interracial couples in which both spouses are civilians. This suggests that by creating socioeconomic advancement for its members of color, the military may alter the patterns of status exchange that may occur between interracial couples in the civilian population. Further results will more fully explore differences and similarities between veteran and non-veteran couples, and offer an account of how existing theories of interracial marriage can be adapted to explain the unique military context.

Figure 1

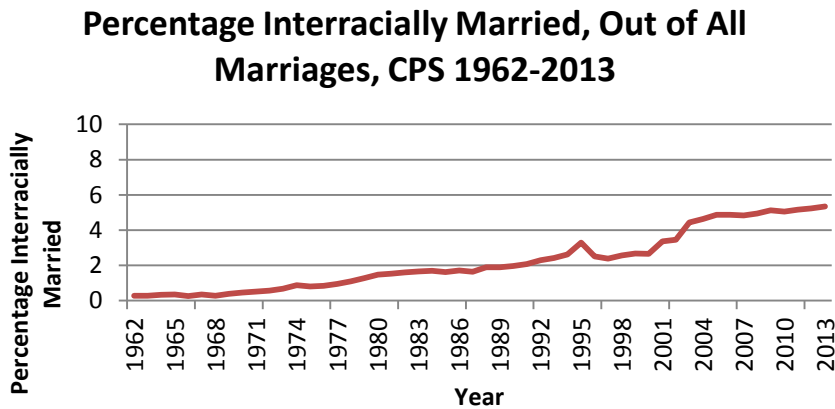


Figure 2

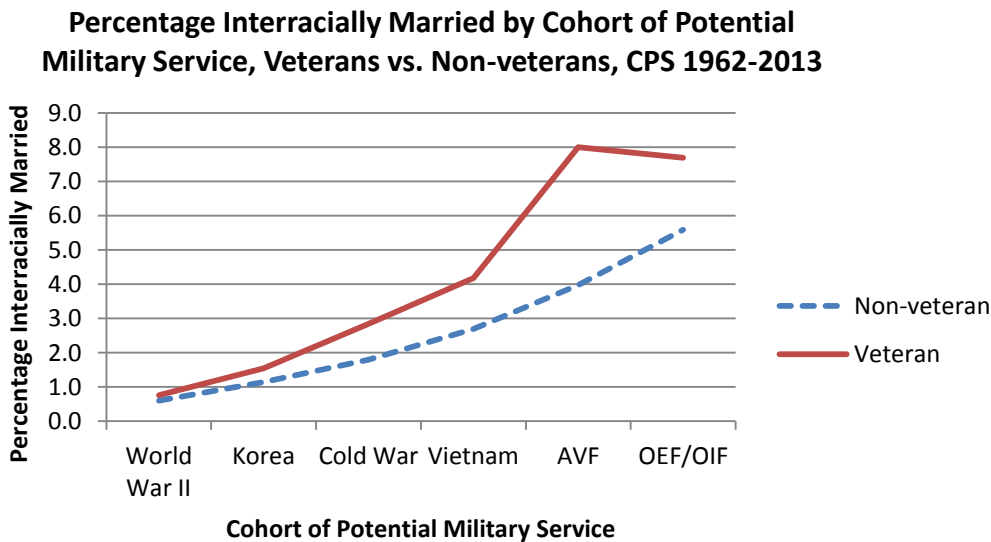


Table 1
Educational Attainment among Interracially-Married Couples, by Cohort of Potential Military Service and Veteran Status, CPS 1962-2013

	All Years			World War II Cohort			Korean War Cohort			Cold War Cohort		
	All	Both non-veterans	One spouse is a veteran	All	Both non-veterans	One spouse is a veteran	All	Both non-veterans	One spouse is a veteran	All	Both non-veterans	One spouse is a veteran
Spouses have equal educational attainment	62.5	62.1	63.0	72.0	72.4	71.4	64.0	63.5	64.8	60.8	59.2	65.0
Spouse of color has higher educational attainment	13.8	14.6	10.8	8.9	10.5	6.7	13.8	16.6	8.8	15.5	17.3	10.8
Spouse of color has lower educational attainment	23.7	23.3	26.2	19.1	17.1	21.9	22.2	19.9	26.4	23.7	23.5	24.2
	Vietnam War Cohort			All-Volunteer Force Cohort			OEF/OIF Cohort					
	All	Both non-veterans	One spouse is a veteran	All	Both non-veterans	One spouse is a veteran	All	Both non-veterans	One spouse is a veteran			
Spouses have equal educational attainment	60.1	59.9	60.9	62.3	62.5	59.7	64.8	64.9	62.1			
Spouse of color has higher educational attainment	15.9	17.0	11.4	13.3	13.4	12.4	12.5	12.5	13.8			
Spouse of color has lower educational attainment	23.9	23.1	27.7	24.4	24.1	27.9	22.7	22.6	24.1			