

Mate Selection of New Legal Immigrants: Race, Skin Color, and Education

Previous research on union formation of immigrants focus on young immigrants growing up in the United States. Little is known about immigrants who came to the U.S. as spouses of U.S. citizens. These immigrants account for one third of adults admitted to legal permanent residence every year. Who are they married to? Do the mate selection patterns differ if their U.S. citizen spouses are native born or foreign born, male or female? In this paper, we use data from New Immigrant Survey to examine these questions, with an emphasis on the main and joint effects of race, skin color, and education on assortative mating patterns among U.S. citizen-immigrant couples. We hypothesize that naturalized U.S. citizen-immigrant couples are similar in race and skin color, but are dissimilar in educational attainment. U.S.-born citizen-immigrant couples, on the other hand, are expected to have similar levels of educational attainment, but different racial and skin color combinations.

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Extended Abstract

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Previous research on union formation of immigrants focuses on young immigrants growing up in the United States. These immigrants, mostly from Asia and Latin America, tend to have strong endogamy, i.e., marrying people of the same nativity and ethnicity. As a result, immigration has lowered aggregate levels of intermarriage with whites (Qian and Lichter 2007). Yet, immigrants are diverse. One third of adults admitted to legal permanent residence every year are admitted as the spouse of U.S. citizens (Jasso 2007). About half are sponsored by native-born U.S. citizens, and the other half by previous immigrants who have naturalized. These immigrants who are married to U.S. citizens become quickly eligible for naturalization and have greater access to social networks and resources in the United States (Bean and Stevens 2003). Their assortative mating patterns help understand the integration processes of this important segment of the immigrant populations.

Race, skin color, and educational attainment are important dimensions in assortative mating. The research on race and educational assortative mating is numerous and their significance is well established (Kalmijn 1991; Mare 1991; Qian 1997). Skin color is likely to play a significant role, especially for Latinos. Latinos identified as white are much more likely to marry non-Latino whites than Latinos identified as any of the other races (Qian and Cobas 2004). Skin color is a good measure of stratification among African Americans, a more consequential predictor of occupation and income than background characteristics such as parents' socioeconomic status (Keith and Herring 1991).

Immigrants being sponsored by their citizen spouses are more likely to cross racial boundaries if their spouses are native born. This is due to the fact that native born citizens are more likely to be white. This could happen in two ways. First, the couples met when immigrants were in the U.S. with other visa types; Immigrants adjusted to legal permanent resident when they married. They tend to be educationally homogamous because of contact opportunities. Second, native-born U.S. citizens married foreign nationals overseas who immigrated to the U.S. as legal permanent resident. They may be educationally heterogamous because status exchange is likely to take place.

Immigrants being sponsored by naturalized U.S. citizens are likely to be in marriages that are racially endogamous. The couples are likely to share the same national origin. Some of these marriages are likely to have occurred in home countries before naturalization. Educational pairing may have followed the patterns of their home countries. And some may have married

¹ Authors' name order is randomized.

after naturalization. Skin color of immigrants may be lighter because of “elevated” status of the spouse sponsors.

In summary, we hypothesize that naturalized U.S. citizen-immigrant couples are similar in race and skin color, but are dissimilar in educational attainment. U.S.-born citizen-immigrant couples, on the other hand, are expected to have similar levels of educational attainment, but different racial and skin color combinations. We use New Immigrant Survey in this paper. We follow Jasso (2007) to examine mate selection patterns of eight types of married couples: 1) native-born U.S. citizen women and their immigrant husbands; 2) native-born U.S. citizen men and their immigrant wives; 3) foreign-born U.S. citizen women and their immigrant husbands; and 4) foreign-born U.S. citizen men and their immigrant wives. These four types are further classified by whether the husband or the wife is a sponsor.

New Immigrant Survey is a longitudinal study of immigrants admitted to legal permanent residence. We use the first round of the 2003 cohort. The sampling frame consists of all new legal permanent residents whose records were compiled in the 7-month period May-November 2003 (Jasso 2007). NIS has three samples: the Adult Sample, the spouse of the main sampled immigrants, and a sample of the immigrant’s biological children aged 8-12. We merge the adult sample with the spouse sample. The sample size is about 4,344.

Jasso (2007) has examined skin color patterns among these couples. Interviewers evaluate skin color of both husbands and wives. She demonstrates that foreign-born sponsors are darker than native-born sponsors and female immigrants are lighter than male immigrants (See Table 11).

Table 11. Summary Characteristics of Spouses’ Skin Color and Skin-Color Difference in Marriages Formed by U.S. Citizen Sponsors and Their Immigrant Spouses

| Sponsor Characteristics | Husbands | Wives | Skin-Color Difference | N |
|-----------------------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------------|-----|
| Sponsor Male Native-Born | 2.92 (2.21) | 3.53 (2.08) | .609 (1.95) | 133 |
| Sponsor Male Foreign-Born | 3.94 (1.92) | 3.69 (1.91) | -.253 (1.42) | 194 |
| Sponsor Female Native-Born | 4.62 (2.24) | 3.08 (2.10) | 1.54 (2.37) | 102 |
| Sponsor Female Foreign-Born | 4.27 (2.30) | 3.95 (2.31) | .318 (.167) | 107 |

Notes: Skin color is measured by the interviewer on an 11-point scale. Skin-color difference is defined as the immigrant’s skin color minus the sponsor’s skin color. Standard deviations in parentheses beneath arithmetic means. The average skin-color difference across all couples is .416 and the standard deviation is 1.92.

Our analysis is divided in two stages. First, we analyze the sample where couples' skin color scales are available. There are only 536 spouse-of-U.S.-citizen couples with skin color scores. This analysis will follow Jasso(2007)'s work to explore how skin color interacts with sponsor's gender and citizen status. Our second analysis will focus on race and educational assortative mating. This analysis will expand to the full sample. We will fit log-linear models that compare the likelihood of marriage by race and educational pairing for each type of married couples. This analysis will shed light on how social boundaries are defined among different types of married couples.

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