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The Ties That Bind: The Relationship Between Cultural Sharing, Ethnic Identity, and
Relationship Satisfaction for Same and Mixed-Ethnicity Dating Couples

Jenny M. Ortega

University of California, Los Angeles

Abstract

The United States has experienced an overwhelming change in its ethnic population resulting in an increase of interracial coupling. Limited research has reported conflicting findings of differences in ethnic identification for people in same-ethnicity relationships and mixed-ethnicity relationships (Shibazaki & Brennan, 1998 and Gurung & Duong, 2002). Previous research is expanded by comparing the two groups in terms of relationship satisfaction, ethnic identification, and cultural sharing. These data include 31 minorities in same-ethnicity relationships and 33 minorities in mixed-ethnicity relationships taken from a larger data set of 185 undergraduate students surveyed at two diverse campuses, Cal Poly Pomona and UCLA. In contrast to previous findings, members of same-ethnicity relationships reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction than did members of mixed-ethnicity relationships. Though the two groups did not differ on cultural sharing, members of same-ethnicity relationships did report higher levels of ethnic identification than reported by members of mixed-ethnicity relationships.

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While the cultural face of the United States continues to change, so does the frequency of individuals entering into mixed-ethnicity relationships. For example, 310,000 marriages occurred between individuals of different ethnic groups in 1970 and drastically increased to 1.3 million intermarriages by 1994 (Saluter, 1996). This increase in interethnic relationships is not only seen in terms of marriage, but is also quite often reflected at a much higher frequency for the dating population. We see this phenomenon occurring in diverse areas of our country, such as Southern California. A 1989 study of outdating rates among African, Latino, and Caucasian residents in Southern California found that 70% of African Americans, 68% of Latinos, and 60% of Caucasians had outdated at least once (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995).

Though Southern California is unique in its cultural diversity when compared to the rest of the United States, we can only expect other areas of the country will soon catch up as the number of immigrants continues to rise. From previous research, it has been found that when individuals are presented with neutral stimuli they begin to like the objects more with repeated exposure (Saegert, Swap, & Zajone, 1973). Therefore, it is quite possible that many people will have repeated contact with individuals from various ethnic backgrounds, which may lead them to enter into inter-ethnic dating relationships over time. As a result, it is essential to study this topic in order to understand aspects of mixed-ethnicity dating that affect many couple-members both presently and possibly in the future.

Thus, we are led to the question very few researchers have examined: do mixed-ethnicity relationships truly differ from same-ethnicity relationships? This question continues to intrigue the public because it raises a number of issues essential to relationships: the level of happiness

and commitment enjoyed in the relationship, the types of activities shared as a couple, and the success of the relationship as challenges arise. For example, a mixed-ethnicity relationship subject to ethnic differences may experience a greater amount of stress on the relationship due to racial discrimination from the public or opposition from family members. Individuals in mixed-ethnicity relationships might also feel culturally misunderstood by their partner and alienated by their own ethnic group, leading to less relationship satisfaction overall.

One of the most compelling reasons for studying mixed-ethnicity dating is found in the fact that very little research has been conducted to understand how the unique challenges faced by mixed-ethnicity couples affect this type of relationship. Of the limited research in this area, attention has mainly been given to understanding motives for entering mixed-ethnicity relationships (Porterfield, 1982; Davidson, 1992), outsiders' attitudes towards the relationship (Todd, Mckinney, Harris, Chadderton, & Small, 1992), and personality attributes of those entering into mixed-ethnicity relationships (Ahern, Cole, Johnson, & Wong, 1981).

When we turn to studies that directly compare mixed-ethnicity relationships to same-ethnicity relationships, we find only two studies have chosen to focus on the differences between these two groups. One study by Shibazaki and Brennan (1998) compared differences between 44 participants in a mixed-ethnicity relationship and 56 participants in a same-ethnicity relationship. These two groups were not found to be significantly different on measures of relationship satisfaction. This finding was also supported by Gurung and Duong (2002), whose sample of dating couples was taken from a large, ethnically diverse university. Gurung and Duong (2002) also found no differences between the two groups on levels of commitment.

The findings of both studies are important in understanding the relationship quality of those in mixed-ethnicity relationships. Because those in mixed-ethnicity relationships are

thought to experience a greater degree of societal pressures and cultural differences, many would expect this type of relationship to ultimately suffer in relationship satisfaction. However, the previously mentioned findings show this is not necessarily the case. Individuals in mixed-ethnicity relationships are just as satisfied in their relationship, as those in same-ethnicity relationships.

Though both findings supported similarities in relationship satisfaction for both groups, they differed on findings of ethnic identity. Participants were asked, “To what extent do you identify with others of your same racial or ethnic group?” Those in same-ethnicity relationships reported higher levels of ethnic identification than those in mixed-ethnicity relationships (Shibazaki & Brennan, 1998). However Gurung and Duong (2002), using the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992), did not find statistically significant differences in levels of ethnic identification between same-ethnicity and mixed-ethnicity relationships. These mixed findings are possibly due to a number of factors, such as the way in which ethnic identity was measured or the result of committed individuals in mixed-ethnicity relationships identifying less with their ethnicity. This discrepancy points to the need for continued research.

The purpose of the present study was to compare two types of dating relationships, same-ethnicity relationships and mixed-ethnicity relationships, on a number of relationship variables. Building upon the previous studies comparing these two groups, I focused on relationship satisfaction and ethnic identification.

Relationship satisfaction was measured by how happy the individual was in the relationship and how committed the individual was to maintaining the relationship, with higher scores indicating a greater degree of relationship satisfaction. Ethnic identification was assessed by measuring how much the individual identified with his or her own ethnic group. I also chose

to look at differences between the two groups on a third variable, cultural sharing. This variable was used to assess how frequently couple members shared cultural activities and was included to give a fuller picture of each type of relationship. Differences between groups on related questions were also examined. These included questions about outsiders' and partners' views towards the relationship, statements of disapproval for interethnic dating and marriage, and measures of cognitive centrality. This last measure, cognitive centrality, focuses on how central the relationship is to the individual's thinking.

As a result of the limited research regarding this topic, I have chosen to look at this topic in an exploratory manner. Therefore, I expect that there will not be differences for relationship satisfaction between same-ethnicity and mixed-ethnicity dating couples. However, I do expect differences between these two groups for variables of ethnic identification, cultural sharing, and the related questions mentioned previously. Based on the conflicting findings from the few studies that have also compared these two types of relationships, I have chosen not to make any specific predictions about the directionality of the differences between these groups. For example, though I do expect the two groups to differ on ethnic identification, I have chosen not to make specific predictions as to which group will have a higher level of ethnic identification. Past studies have not offered a strong foundation upon which to make these predictions.

Method

Participants

Sixty-four undergraduates, women, from the ethnically diverse campuses of Cal Poly Pomona and the University of California, Los Angeles participated in this study. Of these, 31 participants were involved in same-ethnicity relationships, while 33 were involved in mixed-ethnicity relationships. All participants were taken from a larger data set of 185 undergraduate

students surveyed in upper-division psychology courses at the two campuses. Participants were informed they would be describing various aspects of their life and were given a number of measures to mask the true intent of the experiment.

The duration of the relationships ranged from 3 months to 2 years ($M=3.51$, $SD= 3.61$) and the ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 53 years ($M=23$, $SD=4.50$). Ethnicity was self-reported with the sample comprised of 7.8% African-American, 40.6% Latino, 42.2% Asian, and 9.4% Middle-Eastern.

Participants included in the sample had to satisfy a number of criteria. All participants were monoethnic (belonging to only one ethnic group, therefore not biracial), minority (Caucasians were not included in the sample), female, and currently involved in a same or mixed-ethnicity relationship for a duration of three months or more. With the exception of the gender of the participants, this criterion was chosen to effectively measure the variables being assessed.

For example, as of now, standard measures of ethnic identity have been only designed for people of one ethnicity. Including biracial participants would not allow us to correctly measure the population for which these current measures of ethnic identification were intended. Caucasians were also not included in the sample because though they may not be opposed to answering questions on ethnic identification, their responses and understanding of ethnic identification may differ significantly from the responses of minorities. For example, they may not easily identify with an ethnic group or have a clear understanding of what cultural practices their ethnic group participates in and instead answer based on American identity. This is seen in research by Helms (1995) in which Caucasian ethnic identity was thought to be the degree to which one is aware that race is an important part of American daily affairs. However, this is

quite different than the ethnic identity of minorities whose ethnic identity is the degree to which one feels part of and connected to one's ethnic group (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989; Cross, 1978; Phinney, 1990; Sue & Sue, 1990). Therefore, because these minorities and Caucasians may hold a distinctly different understanding of ethnic identification, they should be analyzed separately from each other.

In terms of gender, only female participants were included because an uneven distribution between male and female participants was found in the original sample. Therefore, only 7 male participants were in the sample, which was much smaller than the 64 female participants overall. In the future, a sample which includes a more even distribution of gender would be ideal and prevent gender bias.

Participants were placed into the same-ethnicity or mixed-ethnicity relationship category by comparing their self-reported ethnicity with the reported ethnicity of their partner. The mixed-ethnicity category was identified by participants dating an individual of a different ethnic group than their own, for example, a Chinese woman dating a Japanese man or a Caucasian man. The same-ethnicity category was identified by participants dating an individual belonging to their own ethnic group. Therefore, a Chinese woman dating a Chinese man would be included in this category.

Measures

Relationship Satisfaction Measures. Relationship satisfaction was measured by two items related to happiness and commitment, adapted from the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988). The happiness item asked, 'How happy are you with the relationship?' The scale was a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (Not at all happy) to 7 (Very happy). The commitment item asked, 'How committed are you to maintaining this relationship?' This

scale was a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (Not at all committed) to 7 (Not very committed).

Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure. This measure (Phinney, 1992) included 14 items taken from four subscales ($\alpha = .85, .89$). Participants answered based on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Examples of items include, 'I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means to me' and 'I really have not spent much time trying to learn more about the culture and history of my ethnic group.'

Culture in the Relationship Scale. This measure consisted of 5 items based on a 7-point Likert scale adapted from the previous measure. This scale ranged from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). This scale was used to assess how frequently couple members shared cultural activities and was adapted from the Phinney (1992) scale by my collaborator, Karen Cheng. One example includes, 'My partner and I participate together in cultural practices of my ethnic group, such as special food, music or customs.'

Related Relationship Measures. Related questions pertaining to relationship matters were also assessed. Two items were included regarding others' views towards the relationship. Both items were based on a 7-point Likert scale. One item asked, "How do you think others feel about your relationship?" and the second item asked, "How does your partner feel about your ethnic group?" Both ranged from 1 (Very negative) to 7 (very positive). Statements regarding interethnic dating were also included. One item stated, "Interethnic dating should be avoided," while another stated, "Interethnic marriage should be avoided." Both were based on a 7 point Likert scale and ranged from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Finally, participants answered a 4 item scale related to cognitive centrality. This scale assessed how central the relationship was to the participant's thinking. Each item was based on a 7 point Likert scale.

One example includes, “How much time do you spend thinking about this relationship.” The scale ranged from 1 (Not much at all) to 7 (A lot of time).

Results

Using an independent samples *t*-test, the results were analyzed holding $\alpha = .05$ constant across all conditions. The independent samples *t*-test revealed a marginally significant main effect of type of relationship on happiness, as seen in Figure 1. Surprisingly, those in same-ethnicity relationships reported lower levels of happiness ($M = 5.7, SD = 1.17$) than those in mixed-ethnicity relationships ($M = 6.2, SD = 6.18$), $t(62) = -1.90, p = .06$. The effect of commitment was not found to be statistically significant, $t(62) = .311, p = .76$.

However, those in same-ethnicity relationships reported higher levels of ethnic identification ($M = 5.4, SD = 1.00$) than did members of mixed-ethnicity relationships ($M = 4.7, SD = 1.18$), $t(62) = 2.51, p < .05$. Thus, as seen in Figure 2, a highly significant main effect of relationship type on level of ethnic identification was in fact found. Finally, both groups also differed on views towards interethnic dating and marriage. Participants in same-ethnicity relationships agreed with the statement, “Interethnic dating should be avoided” ($M = 2.0, SD = 1.50$), to a higher degree than participants in the mixed-ethnicity relationship category ($M = 1.3, SD = 1.50$), $t(62) = 2.32, p < .05$. Participants in same-ethnicity relationships also agreed with the statement, “Interethnic marriage should be avoided” ($M = 2.10, SD = 1.53$) to a higher degree than participants in mixed-ethnicity relationships, ($M = 1.4, SD = 1.03$), $t(62) = 2.07, p < .05$. This is seen in Figure 3.

Effects for the length of time partners were together were tested using regression analysis, however no effects were found. Length of relationship did not account for a significant amount of variance for any variables.

Discussion

In order to fully understand same-ethnicity relationships and mixed-ethnicity relationships, we must take note of exactly how these two groups differ and the reasoning behind these differences. Surprisingly, those in mixed-ethnicity relationships reported higher levels of happiness than those in same-ethnicity relationships. This is contradictory to the findings of previous studies, which found no differences between groups on this measure. However, it is also essential to remember these findings were only marginally significant.

One possible explanation may be due to the fact that individuals in a mixed-ethnicity relationship automatically work harder on communicating and understanding each other in their relationship due to cultural differences that cannot be ignored. Past research has pointed to a greater likelihood of couples staying together the more frequently partners communicate (Parks & Adelman, 1983). Therefore, mixed-ethnicity couples may experience some higher levels of happiness if they are attempting to communicate more and feel as if their relationship is likely to stay together. This is only one possible explanation that needs to be further explored.

Another important explanation is found in the way relationship satisfaction was measured. Though the participants were asked about their happiness and level of commitment, these two items may not fully measure relationship satisfaction. For example, participants were not asked how happy they were about the communication in their relationship or how happy they were with the time they spend together. Measuring happiness with a number of different items would be a more accurate measure of this variable overall, since happiness may be seen in a number of ways for a number of individuals. This is also true of commitment, which was measured by only one item.

Findings of differences between groups concerning views towards interethnic dating and marriage are in line with expectations. Individuals in mixed-ethnicity relationships are involved in these types of relationships, so they would be likely to support the type of relationship to which they belong. It is not unusual to expect that individuals in a mixed-ethnicity dating relationship would disagree that interethnic dating or marriage should be avoided to a higher degree than would those in same-ethnicity relationships. Findings for ethnic identification, in which those in mixed-ethnicity relationships reported lower levels of ethnic-identification than those in same-ethnicity dating relationships, supported previous findings reported by Gurung and Duong (1999). This finding is especially important in understanding the ethnic identification of those involved in these different types of relationships because past findings have conflicted.

Both Shibazaki and Brennan (1998) and Gurung and Duong (2002) included a large number of Caucasians in their sample, possibly giving them less accurate results for ethnic identification. As previously mentioned, minorities hold different views of ethnic identification than Caucasian participants (Helms, 1995; Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1989; Cross, 1978; Sue & Sue, 1990.). In Shibazaki and Brennan's sample, over half of the participants were Caucasian. Approximately a third of Gurung and Duong's sample were Caucasian. With such a large number of Caucasians present in each study, it is difficult to generalize findings to minorities based on current measures of ethnic identification. Therefore, to measure ethnic identification accurately, one must account for the difference in ethnic identification held by both groups and analyze them separately. By analyzing minorities separately from Caucasians, this study has attempted to measure ethnic identification more definitively.

In order to further future research, a number of limitations for this study must be addressed. For example, a larger sample size would give more robust findings. A larger sample

size would also have allowed for a more equal distribution of both genders, so men could be included in the sample. This would prevent gender bias while increasing generalizability to the population. Another direction for future research includes surveying both members of each type of couple. It would be interesting to see the relationship from both couple members' perspectives. This would also offer a more accurate report of the relationship, since one member of the couple may not necessarily hold the same opinions as the other member of the couple.

Sampling from the general married population rather than the dating college population is also a future direction for this type of research. Married couples who are in mixed-ethnicity relationships may have possibly endured more from society and for a longer period of time. Thus, they may offer different insight into variables, such as happiness and commitment.

Overall, future research must continue to build upon studies that directly examine the relationship quality of same-ethnicity relationships and mixed-ethnicity relationships, rather than just comparing "outsider and insider perspectives" of these types of relationships. Studying certain ethnic groups separately from other ethnic groups may also give a more accurate picture of differences between relationships. For example, Asians in same-ethnicity relationships would be compared to Asians in mixed-ethnicity relationships.

Finally, a number of other variables should be introduced in examining the quality of these relationships. For example, asking the participants how others feel about their relationship could be further qualified by asking how the public, participant's family, or friends feel about the relationship. This gives a stronger sense of the way the relationship is affected by different people in the participant's life. Ultimately, this is a question that continues to intrigue the general public and deserves further investigation.

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Figure 1. Happiness as a function of type of relationship.

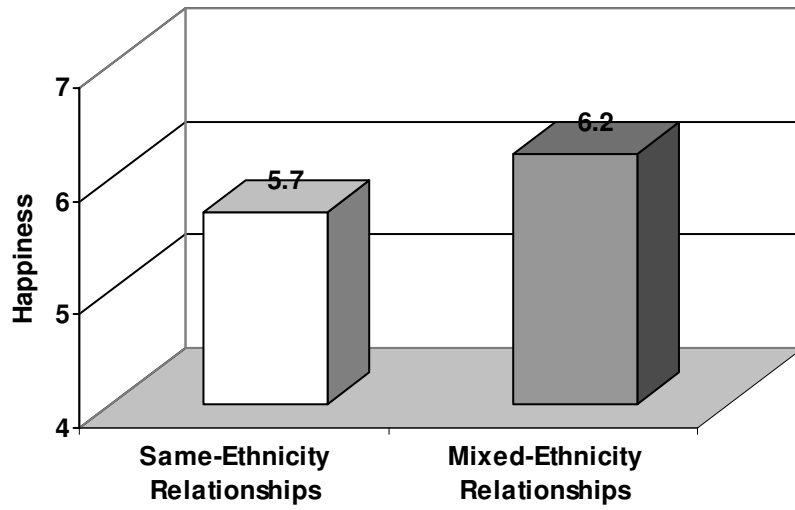


Figure 2. Ethnic Identity as a function of type of relationship.

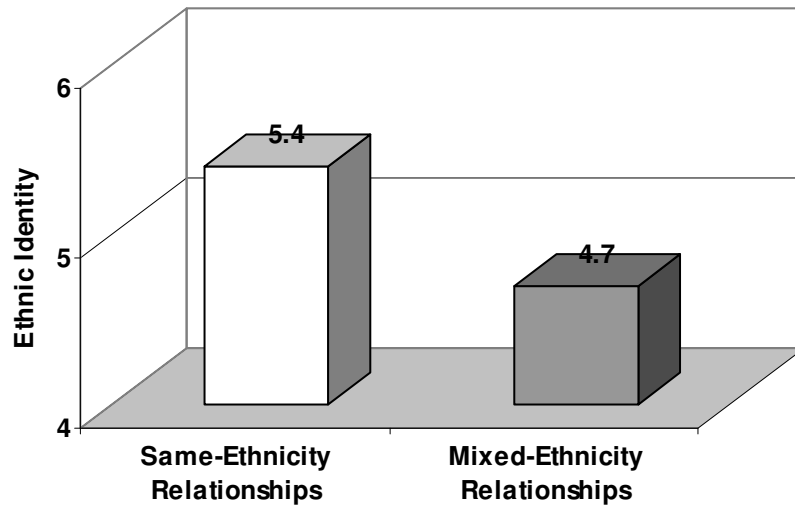


Figure 3. Interethnic dating/marriage views as a function of type of relationship.

