

## **Blurring Social Boundaries?: Experiences of Black-White Unions in Rio De Janeiro and Los Angeles**

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For most of U.S. history, romantic relationships between blacks and whites have been taboo and prohibited by the state. However, touting itself as a “racial democracy,” post-abolition Brazil never had legislation prohibiting interracial unions and has often celebrated race mixture, at times even advocating it as social policy. This difference in approaches to interracial mixing has often placed the two countries at extremes in scholarly approaches to race relations. However, there has been little contemporary evidence to understand how and to what extent race relations are different in these two societies. A comparative analysis of interracial marriage, an important site for race mixture, is useful for understanding central differences in race relations in the U.S. and Brazil. Examining the experiences of black-white couples in both countries can provide an understanding of contemporary race relations, attitudes towards race mixture, as well as implications for racial inequality.

Due to the popularity of eugenics among 19<sup>th</sup> century Brazilian elites, interracial unions between blacks and whites were promoted as a way of decreasing the black population (Stepan 1991). They encouraged the notion of whitening in which people of African descent engage in unions with white Brazilians to “cleanse the womb,” producing lighter descendants that would eventually become white (Skidmore 1974). This ideology of whitening had an influence on Brazilian racial ideology in which marrying a lighter-skinned person became an ideal as both a symbol of and means towards upward mobility for the darker-skinned person.

In the 1930’s, Gilberto Freyre praised the large amount of interracial mating that occurred among Brazilians, popularizing the term “racial democracy” to refer to Brazil (Freyre [1933]1986; Hasenbalg 1985). Contrary to the many scholars of the time, Freyre saw interracial mating as the foundation of Brazilian culture, valorizing the mixed race offspring of these unions. In this ideology, race is not an important marker of difference among Brazilians; hence they interact freely across colors on an equal basis.

In contrast, many U.S. sociologists noted how fears of interracial marriage were dominant in maintaining black segregation from whites (Drake and Cayton 1945; Myrdal 1962). For whites, “social equality” did not refer to access to equal quality schools, jobs, and housing—how it was commonly defined by blacks. Instead, social equality was:

*“the prospect of Negroes’ becoming members of white cliques, churches, and voluntary associations, or marrying into their families. The last-mentioned possibility is the most “frightening” because it raises the prospect that Negro men generally may begin to flirt and seek dates with white women (Drake and Cayton 1945: 118, their emphasis).”*

This fear of interracial mixing was the backbone of support for various types of racial segregation. Thus, maintaining segregation was a way of preventing intimacies between black men and white women. Today, whites continue to show less support for black-white marriage

than they do for other types of social-distance, such as friendships with blacks or having a black neighbor person (Bonilla-Silva 2001).

Sociologists assume that interracial marriage demonstrates a blurring of racial boundaries and a lack of social closure between racial groups, particularly in terms of accepting lower status groups (Davis 1941; Gordon 1964; Lieberman and Waters 1988). For this reason, scholars in both societies have examined marriage and dating patterns of different racial and ethnic groups. According to 2000 U.S. census data, all interracial marriages comprise about 6% of all marriages, with black-white pairings the least common for whites. For this reason, U.S. scholars argue that racial boundaries between whites and blacks are stronger than between whites and other groups (Lee et al. 2003).

In Brazil, scholars have relied on Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) census categories to look at marriages between people of different colors. Although there is some controversy surrounding the degree to which these categories capture *emic* understandings of race and color in Brazil (see Harris et al. 1993; Telles 1994), demographers and inequality scholars generally see them as approximating the way color is understood in Brazil, while minimizing ambiguity in classification. Analyzing the marriage patterns of those who self-identify as white, brown<sup>1</sup>, and black, demographers have found that interracial unions make up between 20 and 25% of all marriages. While this is a much higher proportion than in the U.S., the overwhelming majority of unions take place between people of the same color. In addition, when unions do occur across color categories, they are usually between people of proximate colors – between whites and browns or between browns and blacks (Telles 2004). Hence, marriages between blacks and whites--polar opposites—are the unlikeliest of marriages in Brazil.

In the U.S., qualitative studies of black-white couples have largely illuminated the extent of opposition that these couples experience (Childs 2005; Porterfield 1978; Root 2001). They have also demonstrated that many black-white couples avoid predominantly white settings and gained support through their churches and “diverse” friendship circles (Childs 2005). In Brazil, there has been little empirical research on the actual experiences of interracial couples, particularly in terms of their social circles. Nevertheless, similar to Childs’ work in the U.S., Barros’ study of black-white couples in Bahia showed that when family opposition occurs, couples often create their own circle of friends who approve of the relationship. She also found that many couples saw themselves as reproducing the ideal of the mixed-race Brazilian nation through having children of mixed race (Barros 2003).

An understanding of social boundary processes is necessary to understanding race mixture both in Latin America and the U.S. (Telles and Sue 2010). However, neither quantitative nor qualitative work in either society have provided an understanding of whether people involved in interracial couples really experience a blurring of racial boundaries. They fail to illuminate the types of people that comprise couples’ social networks, the types of support that these couples receive, who they receive them from, or their implications for racial inequality. Furthermore, these studies do not place interracial mating in the context of individuals’ lives, so their mate matching and selection processes are absent in our understanding of boundary negotiation.

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<sup>1</sup> *Pardas/os* is the translation of the brown term and is seen as an intermediate racial category used in the Brazilian census to describe those who are of mixed race, including many of indigenous and African as well as African and European ancestry.

Finally, how these experiences may differ by different race-gender combinations or class is not clear.

By looking at the U.S. and Brazil – two societies that have significant populations of people of African descent—I compare and contrast the experiences of black-white couples in both places. For my study, I spent 14 months conducted interviews with 80 individuals in black-white marriages in Rio de Janeiro and Los Angeles. As part of my preliminary analysis using Atlas.ti software, I find that many of the people that I interviewed in both societies did not see themselves as seeking out a person of a particular color. For many of them, an interracial relationship happened as a part of their everyday life. However, many black middle class individuals across genders were and continue to be largely embedded in predominantly white social circles in both cities-- surprising given the amount of racial diversity in both sites. Rather than spending time in both black and white social settings, black-white couples often saw themselves as being involved in white social life. Feelings of social isolation were raced and gendered in both societies.

I also find that for a significant number of people in black-white couples, being with a person of a different color was a part of their process of avoiding same color individuals or seeking out people of other colors. Challenging race-based ideologies in both places, race was an important marker of difference in both societies and was a part of the mate selection processes of some individuals in black-white unions.

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