

Black/White Dating Online: Interracial Courtship in the 21st Century

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We analyzed personal profiles and records of communication for more than a million nationwide users of a major online dating site. White more than Black, women more than men, and old more than young users stated a preference for a same-race partner. Overall, Blacks, especially Black men, proved more open to cross-race dating than did Whites. More than 80% of the contacts initiated by Whites were to Whites, with only 3% to Blacks. This sharp difference held for men and women and even for those who stated no racial or ethnic preference in their profiles. Blacks were 10 times more likely to contact Whites than Whites were to contact Blacks. Reciprocations to messages showed the same trends, but more moderately.

Keywords: interracial dating, interethnic courtship, online dating, interpersonal attraction, intergroup relations

At two in the morning on July 11, 1958, the bedroom of Richard and Mildred Loving, a married couple of mixed race, was entered by a Virginia sheriff and two deputies who arrested them for violation of the state's Racial Integrity Act. Nine years later, the Supreme Court ruled that antiscegenation laws were unconstitutional. The ruling came three centuries after the first antiscegenation statute was enacted in the United States. Despite being unenforceable, antiscegenation legislation was not finally removed from the books of all 50 states until 2000 when, by a vote of 59% to 41%, it was repealed in Alabama. Clearly, throughout the country's history, interracial couples have had to contend with a less than friendly environment. Recent evidence indicates, however, that in the past four decades there has been a marked change in attitudes toward marriage between a Black and a White person. Gallup Poll data collected in

1968 showed that 73% of Americans disapproved of interracial marriage, while 20% approved. The corresponding percentages in 2007 were 17% and 77%, a complete reversal (Carroll, 2007). The percentage of Black respondents approving has been consistently higher than the percentage not approving, but the percentages moved from 56% approving versus 33% against in 1968 to 85% versus 10% in 2007. In all groups (White, Black, and Hispanic), the percent approving is a function of age; nevertheless, in the most recent poll, more than two thirds of those aged >50 years approved (Jones, 2011). The change in attitude has been paralleled by a change in behavior. During the same 40-year period, the prevalence of Black–White marriages increased more than fivefold. Still, <1% of all marriages in the United States are between a White and a Black person (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), a rate well below what would be expected by chance. Even among newlyweds in 2008, a group that is on average considerably younger than the general population, the percentage of Black–White marriages did not reach 2% (Passel, Wang, & Taylor, 2010).

It is not surprising that the rate of Black–White intermarriage remains so low despite the changes in law and attitude, for marriage between a White and a Black person has long been a special case in the United States. Only nine

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states, including Hawaii and Alaska, have never had an antimiscegenation law and it was not until 1957 that more than half the states were without one. Although the legal impediments have been removed, those stemming from stereotypes and prejudice remain in force. The data on racial intermarriage reviewed by Lee and Edmonston (2005) suggest, they write, that “social norms against White–Black marriage were much stronger than norms against marriages among the other groups” (p. 13). The research literature on interpersonal attraction would likewise lead to the expectation that romantic relationships between Blacks and Whites would be rare. It is well established that proximity and similarity are positively associated with attraction and liking (Berscheid & Reis, 1998; Fiske, 2004). Both are likely to be substantially greater within than between ethnic/racial groups, and with respect to marriage in the United States, homogamy is the rule (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004; Passel, Wang, & Taylor, 2010; Rosenfeld, 2008).

Intermarriage and the courtship that precedes it are central elements in the processes of assimilation by minority groups. “Theorists,” writes Rosenfeld (2002), “have used measures of intermarriage as the most basic measuring stick for the social distance between groups and with good reason” (p. 152). Similarly, Kalmijn and Van Tubergen (2010) describe intermarriage as “an indicator of the degree to which different groups in society accept each other as equals” (p. 459). By that standard, it is clear that to date there has been only limited progress in the assimilation of African Americans. But, plainly, attitudes are changing and so too, thanks to the Internet, is the social environment in which courtship takes place. Various forms of social networking that scarcely existed a decade ago are now easily accessible to anyone with an Internet-connected computer or a smart phone (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010). Increasingly, as the use of online dating services grows, people whose paths would never have crossed offline now regularly meet and have meaningful exchange in the virtual world. Segregation—in housing, religious worship, employment, and so forth—has not gone away, but the restrictions it imposes on the dating/marriage market can be evaded online.

It is, of course, too early to know whether the change in possibilities will result in a change of

actualities, but the study of patterns of online dating can provide more detailed information about interracial courtship than has hitherto been available. Studies of online dating have an important advantage over prior studies that have largely relied on self-report measures, in that they allow researchers to focus on actual courting behavior, potentially consequential behavior, rather than on what participants say they have done or would be willing to do. What makes online dating behavior particularly interesting is the freedom of choice available to daters—they are free to state preferences and to contact and reply to whom they wish in near anonymity and with no direct intrusion of third parties. Thus, the data collected from online dating sites can make a distinctive contribution to the understanding of intergroup relations and minority group assimilation in contemporary American society.

Although in its early stages, a literature on the role of race and ethnicity in online dating has begun to accumulate. Studies by Feliciano, Robnett, and Komaie, 2009; Robnett and Feliciano (2011), and Feliciano, Lee, and Robnett (2011) made use of a large sample of profiles collected in four urban areas from heterosexual users (age 18–50 years) of a major online dating site. They reported findings regarding stated racial/ethnic preferences of White, Hispanic, African American, and Asian men and women. Their results show that preferences vary as a function of ethnicity and gender and their interaction. Women and Whites more than men and African Americans indicated a preference for partners of their own race, and members of minority groups were more open to dating Whites than Whites were to dating them. The overall pattern of results suggests in their view that the Black–White boundary is more “rigid” (Feliciano, Lee, & Robnett, 2011, p. 205) than that between other groups. Findings consistent with these were reported by Yancey (2007b, 2009), who downloaded about a thousand online profiles from locations across the nation, and by Sweeney and Borden (2009) in a sample of young (aged 21–30 years) online daters in Atlanta. Note that in these studies, the dependent variable of interest was the stated racial/ethnic preference(s) of participants. Statements of preference, however, may or may not be in accord with preferences as revealed in contact behavior, that is, decisions about whom to con-

tact and to whom to reply when contacted are not necessarily consistent with what users state their preferences to be. There are, to date, only a few studies that have analyzed contact data, but those that do confirm the importance of race and gender in online dating. The online dating service OkCupid (Rudder, 2009) reported on its blog that among its users, patterns of responding to messages depended on the race/ethnicity of the sender and the recipient. For example, White women were more likely to respond to White men than to men of any other race/ethnicity on the site. A study by Hitsch, Hortagsu, and Ariely (2010) conducted in 2003 in two urban areas demonstrated same-race preferences for men and, more strongly, for women. There was, however, an inconsistency between stated and revealed preferences for women: Women who stated no preference in regard to race/ethnicity nevertheless revealed in their behavior a strong same-race/ethnicity preference. Finally, Fisman, Iyengar, Kamenica, and Simonson (2008) in a study of speed dating likewise provided evidence of a preference for one's own race/ethnicity that was stronger in women than in men. The observed gender differences in these studies are consistent with evolutionary theory, which predicts that women will be more selective in choosing a mate than will men (Buss, 2005; Trivers, 1972).

Together, the above studies suggest that (1) individuals' decisions about who interests them as a potential date are strongly influenced by considerations of race/ethnicity, and (2) what individuals say they want can differ from what their behavior reveals about their preferences. This distinction between stated and revealed preferences will be of central concern in the current research. Since the classic studies of LaPiere (1934), the discrepancy between attitudes and behavior has been amply documented in the social psychological literature (Fiske, 2004; Kraus, 1995; Wicker, 1969). With respect to online dating, it is what participants say they are interested in that has been most readily accessible to researchers. As yet, we know little about what they actually do, about what choices they make when initiating contacts and when responding to contacts they have received. The particular strength of the data set we analyzed is that we have available for each participant information on both stated preferences and on two forms of revealed preference, contacts initiated

and contacts reciprocated. Results for each form of preference are important in their own right, but to have all three available permits an examination of the consistencies and inconsistencies among them. Will, for example, the widespread acceptance of interracial dating and marriage by young people documented in recent attitude surveys (Jones, 2011; Keeter & Taylor, 2011) be manifest in their stated and in their revealed preferences online?

The goal of the current research was to further our knowledge of interracial dating by examining concurrently the stated and revealed preferences of Black and White users of a major online dating site. The study is based on a nationwide sample of more than a million participants who were seeking a date with a member of the opposite sex. Whites predominated in the sample, but there was substantial representation as well of other racial/ethnic groups, including Blacks. Given the historical significance of relations between White and Black people in the United States and the marked changes, legal and attitudinal, they have undergone in the last half century, it is on Black-White dating that we will focus this initial report. The major questions to be addressed follow:

1. To what extent do Black and White daters state an interest in dating (a) members of their own race, and (b) members of a race/ethnicity other than their own?
2. To what extent do Black and White daters initiate contact with persons of their own race and of a race/ethnicity other than their own? In particular, what are the relative rates of Black-Black, Black-White, White-White, and White-Black contacts initiated by participants?
3. To what extent do Black and White daters reciprocate contacts they have received online from Black and from White persons?
4. For each of the questions (1), (2) and (3), do the results vary as a function of the age and gender of the participant?

Note that by comparing the answer to the first question to the answers to questions 2 and 3 we can reach some conclusions about the consis-

tency of stated preferences and preferences as revealed by actual behavior.

We predicted on empirical and theoretical grounds that greater stated and revealed preferences for same-race partners will be found (a) for White than for Black participants, (b) for women than for men, and (c) for older than for younger online daters.

Method

We collected online dating profiles and records of messages exchanged among the owners of those profiles from a major American online dating site from February 2009 to February 2010. Through a cooperative agreement with the dating site, the researchers obtained permission to parse, store, and aggregate profile contents and message records on a secure server made available by the dating site. The records were linked by anonymous ID numbers, which we used to record sender ID number, recipient ID number, date, and time for exchanged messages. At no time were the contents of any messages available to the researchers.

The profiles contained demographic characteristics, including age, sex, race, religion, education, and so forth, both sought and offered, that is, profile owners described their own characteristics and those desired in an ideal mate. For each characteristic, online daters could pick only one value for themselves (i.e., choose one race/ethnicity from a list) but they could specify more than one value that would be acceptable in an ideal mate (i.e., they could select one or several races/ethnicities and could also select none from the list). Profiles also included other information not analyzed in the present work, including photos and textual self-descriptions written by the profile owners (see Fiore, Shaw Taylor, Mendelsohn, & Hearst, 2008).

Sample Characteristics

We report data for Black and White heterosexual users of the site. The sample comprised more than one million users. The mean age of the users in this sample was 40.5 years, and the median was 40 years. Whites constituted 72% and Blacks 12% of the site's heterosexual users; the remaining 16% of users were of other races or ethnicities, of which the most prevalent group was Hispanic/Latino (7%).

In the Results section, all data are organized according to the race (Black vs. White), gender, and age (young: 20–39 years, middle: 40–59 years, or old: ≥ 60 years) of the online daters in our sample.

Variables of Interest

From the data to which we were granted access on the site logs, we report the following:

Race. As part of their personal profile, users indicated their own racial/ethnic identification by selecting one from among a list of labels provided by the site. For this article, we selected only those who self-identified as African American/Black or Caucasian/White.

Stated preferences. Users also specified in their profiles the race(s)/ethnicity(ies) of their ideal matches. We divided users into four possible categories based on their selections: (1) those who specified only their own race (*only same*); (2) those who specified only a group or groups other than their own (*only different*); (3) those who specified more than one race or ethnicity, including their own (*same and other*); and (4) those who indicated no preferences (*any*). *Any* was the default; users who did not specify a preference were automatically assigned this label. Note that stated preferences are based on the entire array of racial/ethnic categories in the profiles, so White users who are categorized as *only different* might have indicated interest in any number of non-White races/ethnicities, and *mutatis mutandis* for Black users.

Contacts initiated. We used the site's messaging records in conjunction with the personal profiles to extract data on the racial/ethnic identification of each unique person with whom a given user initiated contact. Then we simply counted the number of times a Black or White user sent an initial message to a Black or White recipient. This count included only the first message sent by a user to a recipient, not any replies or subsequent messages. We then aggregated the data across all users in each Race \times Gender \times Age \times Stated Preference category. The data reported below are presented as percentages, that is, the percent of all the contacts initiated by users in a Race \times Gender \times Age \times Stated Preference category that went to Black and to White recipients. This measure allowed us to examine, for example, whether young

Black women whose stated preference was *any* initiated contacts (i.e., sent unsolicited messages) to Black men more or less often than they initiated contacts to White men.

Messages reciprocated. We also used the site's messaging records to calculate the percentage of contacts received from Black and from White users to which users replied. Rates of reciprocation were obtained for each Race \times Gender \times Age \times Stated Preference subgroup of users. Counts of contacts reciprocated, as for contacts received, were based only on the first contact between users; subsequent messaging was not included in the totals. This measure allowed us to determine whether, for example, young Black males whose stated preference was *only others* replied more or less often to Black than to White users who contacted them.

Results

The results for stated and revealed preferences are shown in Tables 1–3. Note that in the text, the term “cross-race” refers specifically to contacts between White and Black participants.

Stated Preferences

We begin the presentation of results by showing in Table 1 the distribution of stated preferences for a potential partner's race or ethnicity. To orient readers to the table, the entry in the upper left cell shows that 21% of White men aged 20 to 39 years stated a preference for *only same*. Note that for each Race \times Gender \times Age group, for example, young White males, the percentages summed across preference categories total to 100%.

We conducted a series of chi-square analyses on the data presented in Table 1. The first, and most general, evaluated a 4 \times 4 contingency table in which one dimension consisted of the four gender by race/ethnicity groups (Black females, White males, etc.) and the second of the four categories of stated preference (only same, only different, etc.). A χ^2 of 135,799 ($df = 4$, $p < .001$) was obtained. Subsequent tests likewise yielded large χ^2 s. In all the comparisons that follow in the text below, differences were significant at $p < .001$ or beyond. We found gender, Black–White, and age differences. Women (48%) more than men (20%) stated a preference for a partner of the same race/

Table 1
Stated Preferences (in Percents)

Stated preference	Age	White males	White females	Black males	Black females
Only same	Young	21	43	8	32
	Middle	21	53	12	41
	Old	29	63	13	40
	Across age	21	50	10	36
	Across age and gender		32		19
Same and other	Young	26	19	25	31
	Middle	33	22	30	31
	Old	35	20	29	32
	Across age	30	21	27	31
	Across age and gender		26		28
Only different	Young	01	03	06	04
	Middle	02	02	08	03
	Old	01	00	08	02
	Across age	01	02	07	04
	Across age and gender		02		06
Any	Young	53	35	60	34
	Middle	45	24	51	24
	Old	35	17	50	26
	Across age	48	28	56	30
	Across age and gender		40		46

Note. Young = 20–39 years, Middle = 40–59 years, Old = ≥ 60 years. For each Race \times Gender \times Age group, for example, young White males, the percentages summed across stated preference categories total to 100%.

Table 2
Percent of Contacts Initiated by Black and White Users to Black and White Recipients

Stated preference of initiator	Age of initiator	White male initiators		White female initiators		Black male initiators		Black female initiators	
		White recip.	Black recip.	White recip.	Black recip.	White recip.	Black recip.	White recip.	Black recip.
Only same	Young	95	01	97	01	07	85	03	94
	Middle	95	01	98	00	07	87	03	94
	Old	97	00	98	00	07	86	06	92
	<i>Across age</i>	95	01	98	01	07	86	04	94
Same and other	Young	84	01	85	06	25	54	14	76
	Middle	84	01	90	04	26	54	14	79
	Old	88	01	95	01	33	54	26	68
	<i>Across age</i>	84	01	89	04	26	54	15	77
Only different	Young	19	19	13	72	66	07	79	08
	Middle	22	18	14	74	72	06	77	09
	Old	24	09	46	42	82	06	80	15
	<i>Across age</i>	21	18	14	71	70	06	78	09
Any	Young	80	03	81	08	45	31	43	44
	Middle	80	04	89	05	49	29	31	61
	Old	86	03	94	03	56	27	52	41
	<i>Across age</i>	80	04	84	07	47	30	40	49
	<i>Across age and pref.</i>	83	03	90	05	40	39	22	70

Note. "Recip." = recipients. All percents were calculated within cell: The denominators were the total number of contacts initiated by each Gender \times Age \times Stated preference group and the numerators were the number of those contacts that were directed to White or Black recipients. Columns in bold type show same-race contacts. Values in the bottom row show the overall proportions of White and Black men's and women's contacts that were sent to White and Black recipients, collapsing across age and stated preference. Collapsing across gender as well, 85% of the contacts initiated by White participants were to Whites and 3% were to Blacks; 39% of the contacts initiated by Black participants were to Whites and 48% were to Blacks.

ethnicity, so, too, did Whites (32%) more than Blacks (19%) and older more than younger participants (young = 27%, middle = 32%, and old = 43%).¹ Just 2% of White users stated a preference for *only different*. Though still low, the percentage was higher for Blacks (6%), particularly for Black men, whose percentage (7%) was higher than that for Black women (4%). The difference between genders for White users, though statistically significant, was <1%. A higher percentage of Black (46%) than White (40%) users, of men (49%) than women (28%), and of young than old users (young = 47%, middle = 37%, old = 27%) were in the category *any*.

In sum, Whites more than Blacks and women more than men stated a preference for a partner of their own race/ethnicity. Black males were least selective in the sense that the majority of them stated no preference in regard to the race/ethnicity of a potential partner. White females, half of whom sought a partner of their own race/ethnicity, were the most selective of the four Race \times Gender groups.

Contacts Initiated

With the second table, we move from preferences as stated to preferences as revealed in behavior. Table 2 shows the percent of contacts initiated to Black and to White recipients by people seeking a date. The table is organized by stated preference, age, race/ethnicity, and gender of the user who initiated the contact. Thus, for example, the entries in the two upper left cells indicate that 95% of the contacts initiated by young White males whose stated preference was for *only same* were to White women and 1% to Black women.

The most striking feature of the table is the difference between the behavior of the White and the Black users. An overwhelming majority (85% for females and males combined) of the

¹ When males did indicate an interest in a partner of the same race/ethnicity, it was less likely to be their only choice than one of multiple possibilities. The reverse was the case for females. This gender difference held for both Blacks and Whites and at all ages.

Table 3
Percent of Contacts Reciprocated by Black and White Recipients to Black and White Initiators

Stated preference of initiator	Age of initiator	White male initiators		White female initiators		Black male initiators		Black female initiators	
		White recip.	Black recip.	White recip.	Black recip.	White recip.	Black recip.	White recip.	Black recip.
Only same	Young	20	10	13	07	14	24	08	15
	Middle	24	15	18	11	15	24	10	21
	Old	27	18	28	13	13	26	15	27
	<i>Across age</i>	23	13	16	09	15	24	09	17
Same and other	Young	20	14	14	13	21	21	13	15
	Middle	24	18	20	17	23	24	18	22
	Old	26	21	30	19	32	30	23	30
	<i>Across age</i>	23	17	18	15	22	23	15	17
Only different	Young	15	32	06	21	28	11	22	9
	Middle	17	29	09	27	31	15	26	13
	Old	17	31	23	35	42	28	17	19
	<i>Across age</i>	16	30	08	23	30	14	23	10
Any	Young	20	16	21	18	25	20	21	16
	Middle	24	23	19	15	28	22	21	20
	Old	27	25	29	19	31	23	28	28
	<i>Across age</i>	23	20	21	17	26	21	21	17
	<i>Across age and pref.</i>	23	19	18	16	25	22	17	17

Note. "Recip." = recipients. All percents are calculated within cell by dividing the number of reciprocations by the number of contacts received for each subgroup. Columns in bold type show reciprocations to same-race senders. Values in the bottom row show the overall reciprocation rates for White and Black men and women to White and Black initiators, collapsing across age and stated preference. Collapsing across gender as well, White participants reciprocated 19% of the contacts received from Whites and 16 percent of the contacts received from Blacks; Black participants reciprocated 20% of the contacts received from Whites and 19% of the contacts received from Blacks.

contacts initiated by Whites were to Whites and a correspondingly small percent (3%) were to Blacks. In contrast, fewer than half (45%) the contacts initiated by Blacks were to other Blacks, and the percent of cross-race (Black to White) contacts was 37%. Blacks, that is, were >10 times as likely to contact a White person as Whites were to contact a Black person. A $2 \times 2 \chi^2$ analysis in which the first dimension was the race/ethnicity (Black/White) of the user initiating the message and the second was the race/ethnicity (Black/White) of the recipient of the contact produced $\chi^2 = 3,050,466$, $p < .001$. Chi-squares of great magnitude were obtained in separate analyses of the data of the men and of the women in the sample, as they were for all of the comparisons cited in the text. Note that because in the calculation of the chi-squares, the expected cell frequencies were based on the marginal values, the greater representation of Whites than Blacks in the sample was taken into account by these analyses. This is a point of importance because there is a plausible, but incorrect, explanation of the dif-

ferences between Black and White users based on the composition of the sample. If, that is, contacts had been made on a random basis, White-to-White contacts would necessarily have predominated and White-to-Black contacts would have been relatively uncommon. By the same token, however, Black-to-White contacts would have been far more frequent than Black-to-Black contacts, and that was not the case. Further, a comparison of obtained and expected frequencies within cells shows that the number of messages sent by White users to White recipients was above the expected values, and the number sent to Black recipients well below the expected values. Black users sent fewer messages than expected to White recipients and more than expected to Black recipients. While the distribution of ethnic groups and the differing range of opportunities available to Black and White users in the sample probably figure to some degree in the revealed preferences reported above, they cannot serve as an adequate explanation of the findings.

Twelve percent of the contacts initiated by White and 19% by Black users were to members of races or ethnicities other than Black or White (hereafter referred to as "other"). Here, too, there was a difference in the behavior of White and Black users. When White users did initiate a contact to someone not of their own race, it was more often to another (12%) than to a Black person (3%), but when Black users did so, chances were about two to one that it would be to a White person. The direction of the difference was the same across genders for both Black and White participants, but the effect was far stronger for White males than for White females.

For both Blacks and Whites, the percentages shown in Table 2 vary as a function of gender and age, but they do not vary in the same direction. For Black women, same-race contacts exceeded cross-race contacts (70% vs. 22%); there was scarcely any difference for Black men (39% vs. 40%). Among Whites, the strong preponderance of same-race to cross-race contacts held for both genders. With respect to age, the percentage of same-race contacts was higher for old (91%) than for young (84%) Whites, but among Black participants, same-race contacts were higher for young (44%) than old (42%) users, and younger Blacks were more likely to initiate contact to a same- than to a cross-race recipient.

Inspection of Table 2 shows that patterns of revealed preferences varied across the four categories of stated preference. Users whose stated preference was for *same only* were true to their word. In this group of online daters, the percentage of same-race contacts initiated by White women was 98%, by White men 95%, by Black women 94%, and by Black men 86%. Users whose stated preference was for *different only* were likewise true to their word. In this group, cross-race (Black-White) contacts were the choice of Black females (78%), White females (72%), and Black males (70%), but not of White males (18%) who instead initiated the majority (61%) of their contacts to members of races or ethnicities other than Black or White.

Of the four categories of stated preference, the greatest interest, we think, attaches to the behavior of the users in the category *any*, the users who, in effect, indicated an indifference to race. Although they gave no stated preference(s), White users in this category revealed in

their behavior a strong preference for members of their own race. The percentages of same-race contacts were 84% for women and 80% for men, and cross-race contacts were, respectively, 7% and 4%. The percentages of same- and cross-race contacts initiated by Blacks who specified *any* were not nearly as discrepant. Black women were more likely to contact a Black than a White man (49% vs. 40%), but for Black men cross-race contacts were more frequent than same-race contacts (47% vs. 30%). Overall in the category *any*, Black users were seven times more likely to contact a White person than White users were to contact a Black person.

To evaluate these differences, we formed a 4×2 contingency table in which one dimension was the race/ethnicity by gender group (Black female, etc.) of the user who initiated the contact and the second was the classification of the recipient of the contact as same- or cross-race. The analysis of the frequency data in the table produced a χ^2 of greater than one million, $p < .0001$. A comparison of the expected and obtained frequencies within cells shows that cross-race contacts were lower than expected for White and higher than expected for Black participants, while same-race contacts were higher than expected for White and lower than expected for Black participants. This pattern of results was the case for both genders in both racial/ethnic groups.

Inspection of Table 2 makes it clear that the disinclination of Whites to contact members of other races or ethnicities, in particular Blacks, was true at all ages, including among young users. Summing across categories of stated preference and gender, 4% of the contacts initiated by younger White users were to Black recipients. This is higher than the percent initiated by older users, but by only 2%.

The analyses of the data on contacts initiated leads to these conclusions: In the sample as a whole, same-race contacts predominated, but with marked differences between the behavior of White and Black users. The probability of initiating a cross-race contact was substantially greater for Blacks than for Whites. Further, whereas White men and White women behaved in a similar fashion, Black men and women did not. A distinct majority of Black women favored same- over cross-race contacts, while, in contrast, Black men favored cross- over

same-race contacts by a small margin. There are sound empirical grounds for having confidence that these conclusions are not an artifact of the preponderance of White users and profiles in the population under study.

Messages Reciprocated

In Table 3, we present a second and equally important measure of revealed preferences—reciprocation data. Initiating a contact is, in effect, an invitation to which one may or may not receive a response; the communication is unidirectional. It is with a reciprocation that the communication becomes personalized and bidirectional, that a relationship, whatever its duration, has begun. Thus, this second measure of revealed preferences builds on the first, contacts initiated, in that it indexes behavior at a different, subsequent stage of the relationship. It is a point of some interest, consequently, whether the patterns of White–Black reciprocation differ in any important ways from the pattern observed for the data on the initiation of contact. Table 3 shows the percent of contacts received by users to which they responded. The entry in the upper left cell, for example, indicates that young White males who stated a preference for *only same* reciprocated 20% of the contacts initiated to them by White women. Note that because of the way this measure was derived, that is, as a percentage of messages received, differences in the representation of Whites and Blacks in the study population could not have affected its calculation.

Before examining the data entered in Table 3, it is useful to establish a point of reference: the rate of reciprocation in the population as a whole was 0.19. Two general results should also be noted. First, women reciprocated contacts at a lower rate than men (17% vs. 23%) and second, rates of reciprocation increased with age (young = 17%, middle = 19%, and old = 27%), the rate rising more sharply for women than for men. These results held for both Black and White users. Black men were a bit more likely than White men to reply to a contact (24% vs. 23%) but the rates of Black and White women differed by a negligible 0.1%.

The analysis of the first measure of revealed preferences, contacts initiated, showed that White users by a large margin preferred a partner of their own race to a partner of a race or

ethnicity other than their own; White-to-Black contacts, in particular, were rare. Black users by a smaller margin were also more likely to contact someone of their own than of another ethnicity, but cross-race (Black to White) contacts were much more probable for Black than for White users. The reciprocation data parallel the initiation data for White participants. They reciprocated 19% of the messages received from Whites and 16% of the messages received from Blacks. The difference between proportions was significant at $z = 59.66, p < .001$. Unless otherwise noted, large, highly significant z scores were obtained for all the comparisons that follow. The two measures of revealed preference, contacts initiated and contacts reciprocated, did not, as they did for Whites, vary in the same direction for Blacks: in contrast to their behavior in the initiation of contacts (same race > cross race), Black users reciprocated a higher percent of the messages received from Whites (20%) than from Blacks (19%). This result was due to Black men, who reciprocated 25% of the messages from White and 22% of the messages from Black women; the difference between same- and cross-race reciprocations for Black women was miniscule and statistically insignificant. The finding that cross-race reciprocations were more probable for Blacks (19%) than for Whites (16%), a finding that holds for both genders, is consistent in direction with the data on the initiation of contacts. Although there was consistency in direction across the two measures, a comparison of Table 3 to Table 2 shows that the effect was stronger for contacts initiated than for contacts reciprocated: Whites were 26.5 times more likely to contact a White than a Black person, but only 1.2 times more likely to reciprocate to a White than to a Black person. Black users not only reciprocated to Whites more than Whites did to Blacks, they also reciprocated more to others (20%) than did Whites (17%). Here, too, the direction of difference is the same for reciprocations as for initiations and the effect is less strong for the former than for the latter.

Inspection of Table 3 shows that reciprocations were to some extent a function of stated preferences. Users who stated a preference for *same only* or *different only* were, as with contacts initiated, true to their word, and this was the case for Blacks and for Whites of both genders and at all ages. Again, the behavior of

the users who indicated an indifference to the race or ethnicity of a partner is of particular interest. For White users of both genders whose stated preference was *any*, same-race exceeded cross-race reciprocations, including for the young. That is consistent with the data for contacts initiated, though the differences were more moderate in the reciprocation than in the contact data. There was less consistency between the two measures of revealed preference for Blacks of either gender whose stated preference category was *any*. Black women reciprocated more to Whites (21%) than to others (19%) and least to Blacks (17%) even though they initiated contacts more to Blacks than to Whites and least to others. In one important regard, the pattern of reciprocations for Black men, other (29%) greater than White (26%) greater than Black (21%), does resemble the pattern of contacts initiated: On both measures the percent for cross-race was greater than the percent for same-race.

To summarize, on both measures of revealed preference, Black users showed more interest in cross-race dating than did White users. This was the case for men and women, for the young and even for those (in the category *any*) whose stated preferences indicated an indifference to a partner's ethnicity. The size of the differences between White and Black participants was much greater in the initiation than in the reciprocation data.

Discussion

The primary source of systematic quantitative data on romantic relationships between Blacks and Whites in the United States has been the decennial reports of the U.S. Census Bureau. By their nature, Census data are informative about the later stages of relationship formation, marriage, and/or cohabitation, but are mute with respect to the events that preceded them. A number of researchers have pointed out that marriage and dating differ in several ways, of which the most important is that dating does not entail the serious and public commitment that marriage does (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004; Garcia & Rivera, 1999; Liu, Campbell, & Condie, 1995; McClintock, 2010; Sweeney & Borden, 2009; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995; Wilson, McIntosh, & Insana, 2007; Yancey, 2002). There is a literature, not an extensive one, on

interethnic dating that is based primarily on retrospection and self-report. The samples in these studies are typically of modest size, narrowly localized, and limited to young people. They do suggest that ethnocentrism is characteristic of dating, but that interethnic dating is not uncommon, especially among men; there is little specifically about Black/White dating (Clark-Ibanez & Felmler, 2004; Firmin & Firebaugh, 2008; Knox, Zusman, Buffington, & Hemphill, 2000; Levin, Taylor, & Caudle, 2007; Liu et al., 1995; Martin, Bradford, Drzewiecka, & Chitgopekar, 2003; McClintock, 2010; Todd, McKinney, Harris, Chadderton, & Small, 1992; Yancey & Yancey, 1998). The increasingly widespread use of online dating services, however, has provided a new source of data that can, as in this study, be used to substantially expand our knowledge of interracial courtship.

To establish context, we should briefly review the main findings in regard to patterns of interracial and interethnic marriage by Whites and Blacks. Blacks are more likely than Whites to be married to a spouse of a different race or ethnicity (U. S. Census, cited in Lee & Edmonston, 2005), and the recent Pew Research Center report previously cited (Passel, Wang, & Taylor, 2010) indicates that this historical trend continues to be the case. Rates of intermarriage for White men and women are nearly the same, but there is an important gender difference among Blacks; Black men are much more likely than Black women to be married to someone of a race or ethnicity not their own. And with respect specifically to Black/White marriages, the ratio of Black husband/White wife to White husband/Black wife couples approaches two to one (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Though marriage could perhaps be regarded as the ultimate measure of revealed preference, marriage as it is currently practiced in the United States depends on a joint decision, the coming together of two chains of preference that play out sequentially and interactively. The links in the chain are of many kinds—physical appearance, education, religion, and so forth—and, as our data show, race. The sequence begins with decisions about the characteristics of the partner sought, represented in this study by the statements of racial and ethnic preferences in the profiles posted by the users. The predictions that Whites more than Blacks,

women more than men, and older more than younger users would show a preference for dating partners of their own race were confirmed by the results for stated preferences.² The predictions were based on the census data, results of the available studies of interethnic dating, and the well-established finding in the evolutionary literature that women are more selective than men in their choice of a mate (Buss, 2005; Trivers, 1972).

The predictions were confirmed as well by the results for the first measure of revealed preferences, contacts initiated. The direction of the differences between White and Black users is not at all surprising. It is, rather, the magnitude of the differences that is impressive. A White contacting a Black was a low probability event—just 3 of a 100 contacts initiated by Whites were to Blacks, though Blacks constituted 12% of the sample. In contrast, more than a third of the contacts initiated by Blacks went to Whites. Those are not minor effects. Evidently, Whites are just not interested in dating Blacks. The data reveal that this was true at all age levels. That members of the generation that came to maturity after the successes of the civil rights movement and after the demise of anti-miscegenation laws were so little different in their preferences (both stated and revealed) from the generations that preceded them was not necessarily expectable. Whatever surveys may show about the attitudes of millennials and members of Generation X (Jones, 2011; Keeter & Taylor, 2011), the evidence from both marriage and online data suggest that in contrast to what they say, they are like their predecessors in what they do.

What about users who stated no racial or ethnic preferences? Was their stated indifference to race and ethnicity reflected in their behavior? The answer for Whites is that it was not, for even among those who specified no preference, contacts to Whites predominated greatly and contacts to Blacks were at a low level irrespective of age. In contrast, a majority of the contacts initiated by Black users in the category *any* were to members of races or ethnicities other than their own, including Whites. Finally, it should be noted that the gender differences among Black users—men being less likely than women to initiate same-race contacts—are consistent with the marriage data summarized above.

White users not only initiated a higher percentage of their contacts to members of their own race, they were also more likely to reciprocate a contact from a White than from a Black initiator. The difference in the rates of same- and cross-race reciprocations was not, however, nearly as extreme as the difference obtained for contacts initiated. Black users, in fact, were as a group more likely to reciprocate a message from a White person than from a Black person, though this overall effect was due to the males. White users who stated an indifference to race and ethnicity nevertheless reciprocated at a higher rate to Whites than to Blacks or others, but Blacks, both male and female whose stated preference was *any* reciprocated at a higher rate to Whites and others than to Blacks. This was for the women a reversal of the pattern for messages initiated.

For those who believe that increased rates of intermarriage would be a social gain, an important step in overcoming centuries of racism, the results of this study bring both encouraging and discouraging news. A substantial percentage of Blacks, it is clear, was open to and interested in romantic relationships with Whites. Whites, however, both in their stated and revealed preferences did not show a comparable interest in dating Blacks. True, their reluctance to initiate contacts to Blacks was more extreme than their reciprocation behavior, which though also favoring Whites over Blacks did so at a more moderate level. One might have assumed from examining the initiation data that the probability of a White user reciprocating a contact from a Black person would be low but that proved not to be the case. There is, it seems, an important psychological difference between deciding to initiate a cross-race contact and deciding whether or not to respond to one: The former requires actively crossing a boundary, but the latter does not, for the boundary has already been crossed. Instead of the potentially inhibiting uncertainty about how a cross-race message will be received, it is clear that a cross-race relationship, specifically with you, the recipient, is of interest to the person who made the contact. To step across the boundary, that is, is

² Note in this regard that a significantly higher percent of men than women indicated an indifference to the ethnicity of a partner, that is, were in the category *any*.

more difficult than to respond to someone who has already done so. Nevertheless, because users received many more same-race than interracial contacts, when both contacts received and rates of reciprocation were taken into account, we found that the percentage of all reciprocations by Whites that went to Blacks was about 5%. The percent of reciprocations from Blacks to Whites was about 30%, and, overall, just 7% of reciprocations involved a Black/White pair.

The direction of the major difference between Black and White users—Whites more than Blacks were interested in dating members of their own race—was found for all three of the measures of preference. At the same time, there were discrepancies among the measures both in magnitude and direction that raise an important methodological point for studies of dating, namely that stated preferences, contacts initiated, and contacts reciprocated are related but not interchangeable measures. For example, young White individuals who stated an indifference to the race or ethnicity of a partner were, in fact, highly selective in their revealed preferences; 85% of the contacts they initiated were to Whites and 3% to Blacks. Were they hypocritical, alert to the realities of the social world, striving for political correctness, attempting an optimizing strategy of self-presentation? Our data do not permit us to choose among those alternatives, but the disparity between what was said and what was done make predictions about the future difficult. Judging from their stated preferences, the younger generation will be a bit more open to intermarriage than their predecessors. Judging from their behavior, change is likely to be a slow process.

Because, as we have seen, preferences vary as a function of race, age, and gender and different measures of preference do not necessarily yield the same results, it is difficult to compare our findings with those of studies that do not take account of those distinctions. Is there, for example, a same-race preference, stronger in women than in men, as suggested by some previous research? In our data, yes and no. Whites initiated a large majority of their contacts to members of their own race, but with only a minor difference between men and women. Black men, however, initiated a higher percentage of their contacts to Whites than to Blacks. Meanwhile, a majority of young men and a third of young women stated no racial or

ethnic preferences, while older users, women more than men, did state a same-race preference. There is a devil lurking in the details. It is, perhaps for that reason, that our findings do not support the conclusions about the dating behavior of White and Black users published on the OkCupid blog. The dismal portrait of the situation of Black women presented by OkCupid, for example, “every race—including other Blacks—singles them out for the cold shoulder” (Rudder, 2009, italics original), has received a good deal of public notice (see, e.g., Coates, 2010). But our data paint a different picture; more than half the reciprocations of Black men were to Black women, and that was true in all age groups. That White men show little interest in dating Black women is not a point of contention.

Generalizability

Access to the Internet has continued to rise among all social groups in the past several years (Jones & Fox, 2009; Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010) and social networking has become a commonplace. Online dating is now a well-established mode of finding a romantic partner (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012); testimony to its role in the formation of long-term relationships is plentiful. Rosenfeld and Thomas report that in 2010, 21% of heterosexual partners in their sample met on the Internet, a percentage approaching that of the leader, met through friends. This is all to say that it is increasingly reasonable to have confidence in the generalizability to offline behavior of findings from a large sample of users of an online dating site such as ours. We must acknowledge some problems, however. As we pointed out, the findings of the present study are not always in agreement with the findings of other studies of online dating sites. That is, in part, because of differences in methodology and sampling, but undoubtedly differences among online sites also contribute. Some sites cater to specific populations, some attempt to use a matching algorithm to pair users or to assess compatibility. On almost every dating site, the pool of profiles the site makes most readily visible to a user is at least somewhat influenced by the user’s stated preferences. This may make exposure to out-group mem-

bers less likely unless the user explicitly seeks it. Some, like eHarmony, present only the top matches as determined by the site, not allowing users to search freely for other profiles. The site from which our data come included both searching and matching functionality but put little emphasis on metrics of compatibility and did not constrain users from freely searching or browsing profiles. Thus, relative to other sites, it provides a service that is more like an open market for potential dating partners than a guided tour of the possibilities. Moreover, the sample is nationwide, with no restrictions of city, state, or region. Still, the question remains of the extent to which our results can be generalized to offline behavior. A direct empirical comparison between dating online and in the flesh might be useful, but note that in their overall outlines our preference data, stated and revealed, are similar to the census data on Black/White marriage and cohabitation and to the available data from offline studies of interracial dating. All show, for example, that Blacks, men especially, are far more willing than Whites to form interracial romantic relationships. The similarity of the findings across these three sources of data gives reason to believe that the results of the present study of online dating are informative about the contemporary state of interracial courtship more generally.

The observed similarity between online and offline behavior has another important implication. We pointed out in the introduction that because of segregation, the proximity of Whites and Blacks is sharply limited, but that in the social environment of the Internet, segregation, at least in its physical sense, is not a factor. To find, then, that the patterning of romantic relationships between Whites and Blacks is so similar in these two different social environments suggests that, in effect, segregation is as much a psychological phenomenon, a state of mind, as it is a physical reality.

Theoretical Implications

Despite the recognition that there are important differences between dating and marriage, it remains the case, as Tucker and Mitchell-Kerman observed in 1995, that we lack theories

of interracial/ethnic dating as such. Instead, the theoretical questions and approaches characteristic of studies of interracial dating have been imported from the literature on interracial marriage. That theorizing has generally followed an exchange approach to the explanation of intermarriage. The core assumption of exchange approaches is that during courtship members of each race trade resources (power, money, good looks, education, etc.) in an effort to maintain and enhance social position. However, the validity of this assumption and its empirical standing have recently been questioned by researchers. Rosenfeld (2005, 2010) argues that the predominant exchange-based interpretive framework, status-exchange theory (Davis, 1941; Merton, 1941), is not empirically well-supported. But it does seem to be the case that in a structural sense, Blacks profit more from an interracial relationship than do Whites. Robnett and Felciano (2011) observe, "Whites . . . have little to gain by dating minorities unless the latter can elevate their economic status" (p. 808), which given the income and educational disparities in the United States, they are unlikely to do on average. It is not clear, then, just what is being exchanged for the higher status of Whites. And it is likewise puzzling, given the evidence that Black women are having difficulty finding suitable mates of their own race (Banks, 2011; Dixon, 2009), that it is Black men rather than Black women who show the stronger preference for interracial dating (and marriage). Theoretically, the gender experiencing a shortage of marriageable in-group members should be more, not less, inclined toward outmarriage (Blau & Schwartz, 1984; Craig-Henderson, 2006; Kalmijn & Van Tubergen, 2010).

Yancey (2009) takes the position that since African Americans "are not allowed to participate in the majority culture" (p. 121), their alienation leads to a rejection of dating exogenously. However, our data, particularly the reciprocation data, do not confirm his argument. To the extent that assimilation theory (like Gordon, 1964) assumes that "assimilation is inevitable for all minority groups, regardless of whether minorities are racially or ethnically defined" (Qian, 2002, p. 44), it, too, is not well supported by our data or by others' evidence on Black/White marriage or dating. Perhaps that should not be surprising. Studies of assimilation

have, until recently, focused primarily on immigrants of European origin. The ancestors of African Americans, however, did not come to this country voluntarily to seek freedom or economic improvement. Our current conceptions of assimilation may be of limited relevance to a population originally enslaved, chronically denigrated, and for most of its history systematically excluded from political and economic power. If the formation of intimate relationships is a key marker of assimilation, the evidence suggests that the “inevitable” is not yet happening with respect to revealed preferences, even though attitudes and stated preferences have clearly become more inclusive. In sum, we conclude that there is not a good fit between the data and extant theories of interracial dating. Robnett and Felciano (2011) reach a similar conclusion and point to “the need for better understanding of the ways in which racialized masculinities and femininities are constructed (p. 819)”.

Whatever the state of the theoretical literature on interracial dating, empirically one finding stands out: A substantial percentage of Black daters are open to a relationship with someone of a different race or ethnicity, but the great majority of White daters are not. Perhaps “with little to gain” and a good deal to risk in the reaction of third parties (Kalmijn, 1998), particularly family and friends (Bratter & King, 2008; Childs, 2005; Craig-Henderson, 2006; Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000; Lehmler & Agnew, 2006; Levin et al., 2007; Lewis, 1994; Miller, Olson, & Fazio, 2004; Troy, Lewis-Smith, & Laurenceau, 2006; Wang, Kao, & Joyner, 2006; Yancey, 2007a), endogamy is much the easier course for a White person to follow. But the question of why Whites, even as their stated preferences become more open, are unwilling to venture away from a partner of their own race, particularly to a Black person, is not one about which we have much empirical information. Theories of social identity, in-group favoritism, and racism (e.g., Devine, 1989; Dovidio, 2001; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971) might well be relevant but there is to date little application of such theories to courtship behavior. A desire to maintain the power and status relationships that work to their advantage (Fang, Sidanius, & Pratto,

1998) may play a role as well. A better understanding of the revealed preferences of Whites is, however, a matter of some importance because the dominant group in society is effectively the gatekeeper whose choices can promote or impede intermarriage. Assimilation requires the cooperation of what is conventionally called in the assimilation literature the “host society,” and that has not been forthcoming. Despite the changes in the law and in attitudes during the past half century, it would be premature to conclude that we have entered the postracial era; if our data are any indication, it appears that waiting for its arrival will take some patience.

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