



2015

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### Recommended Citation

(2015) "Perceptions of Interracial Marriage Through the Eyes of Individualistic and Collectivist Cultures," *Intuition: The BYU Undergraduate Journal of Psychology*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/intuition/vol10/iss2/6>

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# Perceptions of Interracial Marriage Through the Eyes of Individualistic and Collectivist Cultures

by Stephanie R. Herzog, Samuel Major, Sunny Cho,  
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## Author Note

We thank Dr. Mikle South and Dr. Gregory Busath for aiding in the development of the IMAM by providing feedback and suggestions in regards to the IMAM psychometrics and its validity and reliability.

*Recent increases in immigration and globalization show dramatically augmented numbers of interracial marriages, especially in the United States. This study examined the unique effects of ethnicity on attitudes towards interracial marriages, particularly those with a collectivist (Eastern) and individualistic (Western) cultural background. A combined sample of 171 Caucasian and Asian college students responded to the Interracial Marriage Attitude Measure (IMAM) to measure acceptance rates of interracial relationships. Findings suggest that race is an effective predictor of attitude, and Asians were significantly less favorable towards interracial marriages than Caucasians. The results supported our hypothesis that Asian collectivist societies feel more strongly about keeping to traditional ideas than American individualist societies. These findings may be useful to clinical and counseling psychologists in providing therapy to interracial couples.*

**B**BC's television show *Doctor Who* is popular due to its recent widespread fame in America. This current popularity is attributed to its fascinating storylines, intriguing characters, and heroic fanaticism. However, this show not only presents well the stories of the lonely time traveler, but it is helpful in revealing a popular and rising trend in not only the United States, but the world: increased promotion of interracial relationships. For example, when the Doctor meets his first companion, Rose, she is dating a man of a different race. *Doctor Who* is not the only media icon where this trend appears: *Big Bang Theory*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Lost*, *ER*, *Scrubs*, and *Psych* are other examples. As observed by Lewis and Ford-Robertson (2010), "the American society is undergoing unprecedented cultural changes in the 21st century," and one cannot ignore the "tremendous increase in interracial dating and marriage over the past several decades" (p. 405). This increase in interracial relationships has brought forth a question we asked regarding this movement: What cultures are affected by this movement? Are just Western cultures influenced, or are Eastern cultures influenced as well? In addition, we asked what influential factors continue to affect individuals' beliefs and attitudes about interracial romantic relationships.

Researchers have suggested that immigration is the reason for the noticeable increase in the frequency of encounters with non-native Americans in our daily lives (Jacobson & Heaton, 2008). The increase in cross-cultural interaction in the U.S. has led to a steady increase in interracial marriages in the United States, despite the many differences between ethnicities (Lewis & Ford-Robertson,

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2010). When studying the association between social settings and interracial marriages, Johnson and Jacobson (2005) found that approval had a significantly larger influence on inclination than other potential factors. In other words, marriage is not just a matter between the two individuals but also is bidirectionally influenced by the individuals' cultural ecosystems, such as their family or society. Therefore, it would make sense that if the society or culture from which an individual comes is more approving of interracial marriage, then interracial marriage would occur more frequently.

As the trend of interracial marriages has increased, researchers have studied factors, both cultural and social, that affect interracial relationships. Such factors include interracial physical attraction, cross-cultural dating traits, and the influences of individualism and collectivism on socio-sexuality (Fong & Aaron, 2010; Wilkins, Chan, & Kaiser, 2011). Although many studies have established significant relationships of collectivist and individualist dimensions with attitudes, values, and behaviors (Bornstein et al., 2007; Fong & Aaron, 2010), much of what has been done has examined very specific factors or has focused on attraction interracially. These studies have not specifically addressed how well interracial marriages are accepted among cultures, and the general extent to which an individual's social origin affects how he or she will view interracial relationships.

Inspired by the results of previous studies, the purpose of this study is to examine the influence of social origin on acceptance of interracial marriage. For the purpose of the study, we defined social origin as being the type of social background in which an indi-

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vidual was raised in regards to decision-making concerning relationships. We examined two specific types of social origin: individualism and collectivism. Individualism is a culture where there is an emphasis on advocating the liberty, rights, or action of the individual. In the context of relationships, individualism advocates that every person has the right to choose whom they want to have a relationship with, independent of familial or social pressures. For this study, we have chosen a sample of Caucasians from a large university campus to represent this type of social origin. The second social origin is collectivism, a culture where emphasis is placed on familial and community interactions. This culture makes choices in regards to marriage based on family and social pressures. We have chosen a sample of Asian students from a large university campus to represent this social origin. Acceptance rates are defined as the extent to which individuals approve of or assent to interracial relationships.

In establishing a meaningful correlation between social origin and acceptance, we hope to add to the general body of knowledge concerning the subject of interracial marriage. We are also attempting to see if all of the factors already identified in previous research can be condensed into the larger factor of social origin. This work can be used to aid researchers, social workers, and psychologists alike.

We propose two hypotheses: first, we hypothesize that the participants from the collectivist (Asian) group will have significantly lower acceptance with very little variance within the group; second, we anticipate similar variance levels from the individualist (Cauca-

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sian) group, but with significantly higher acceptance of interracial marriage. The difference in acceptance would point to the conclusion that social origin plays a significant role in an individual's acceptance of interracial marriage and relationships.

### Method

#### Participants

We recruited a convenience sample of 187 participants. Participants who reported ethnicities other than Caucasian or Asian or who did not complete the questionnaire were not included in our analysis, which left 171 final participants (70 males and 101 females) of either Caucasian ( $n=88$ ) or Asian ( $n=83$ ) race. The specific country of origin was not taken into account for either race as specific variables in the statistical analysis. Participants were mostly college students within the age range of 18-30 years, with a mean age of 21.7 years and a standard deviation of 2.1 years. Of our participants, 61 were international students currently attending school in the United States; 109 were US citizens; 1 participant did not report citizenship information. Twenty-three participants reported they were first-generation American, and 89 reported to be multi-generation American. Slight discrepancies between totals are the result of reporting errors on the part of the participants and researchers.

#### Measures

We created the Interracial Marriage Attitude Measure (IMAM) for this study (see Appendix). The questions were developed based on previous research (Kim, 2011; Wilkins et al., 2011). This measure was also given to two professors from the BYU Psychology department, one of whom is considered an expert on the development of

psychological tests, who rated it for face validity. Both found it to be valid. This questionnaire has eight demographic items and twelve items about interracial marriage. Before administration, we discarded two items (5 and 8) from our original questionnaire to increase reliability, so our final questionnaire had 10 items in a five-point Likert scale format (1-*strongly disagree*, 2-*slightly disagree*, 3-*neutral*, 4-*slightly agree*, and 5-*strongly agree*). The higher the total score (out of 50) on the IMAM, the more accepting a person is of interracial marriage.

#### Procedure

Over a two week period, we distributed the questionnaires to 187 students at two local universities and in student apartment complexes surrounding those universities. We assigned our Asian researchers to collect from the Asian population and the Caucasian researchers to collect from the Caucasian population. Each participant was given a consent form to read and sign (if they agreed to participate in the study) and the IMAM. Both the consent form and the questionnaire were collected after the participant had finished their responses. Each questionnaire was assigned an ID number to protect the confidentiality of the participants and this ID number was used in place of names from the point of administering the questionnaire until the study was complete. All hard copy data was shredded to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

#### Data Analysis

The post-administration statistical analyses were run in SPSS using a one-way ANOVA to test the effects of culture on the overall

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attitudes toward accepting interracial marriage. We also calculated a Cronbach's alpha to assess the reliability of our measure.

### Results

The internal consistency (calculated using Cronbach's alpha) for the IMAM was .87, demonstrating excellent reliability for the measure. Using a one-way ANOVA, we compared racial differences between Asians and Caucasians in acceptance of interracial marriage attitudes as calculated from the IMAM measure. Asians expressed lower levels of acceptance of interracial marriages than Caucasians  $F(1, 169)=27.83, p<.001$ , with a moderate to large effect size ( $\eta^2=.14$ ). The mean IMAM score for Caucasians was  $m=42.2$  and  $m=36.6$  for Asians, with a standard deviation of  $s=5.9$  for Caucasians and  $s=7.8$  for Asians (see Figure 1).

### Discussion

As indicated by our results, we have shown a strong relationship between social origin and interracial marriage acceptance. Using the scores of the IMAM, we were able to gather quantitative support for our hypothesis—(1) the collectivist group had lower acceptance compared to the individualist group. Additionally we predicted both groups would have little variance within the group. However, the relatively large standard deviation, particularly for the Asian sample, suggests that maybe those foreign born are more collectivist relative to those born in the US. Nevertheless, the results of our research have provided evidence that social origin does impact individuals' acceptance of interracial marriage.

The large sample size and nearly even distribution of Caucasian to Asian participants in our sample adds strength to our study and

helps minimize potential biased results of the IMAM. Also, the use of researchers collecting data from those of their same ethnicity also provided strength by decreasing potential barriers caused by stereotype threats that may have factored into how participants chose to answer the questions on the IMAM. The excellent internal reliability of the IMAM is also a strength that contributed to such strong results.

However, our study is limited in that we did not take into account whether the samples representing each culture were foreign-born or born in the United States. In other words, we assumed that the culture is very similar for foreign-born Asians and Caucasians and locally born Caucasians and Asians. Therefore, further research exploring these variables should be done in order to increase the validity of our findings and show increased support for the importance of social origin on acceptance of interracial marriage. As our study used a convenience sample, it would be ideal to repeat the study with a more randomized sample. In addition, using an electronic version of the IMAM may prove to be more useful than distributing paper copies.

Our findings add to the theory pool of factors that influence the development and sustaining of interracial romantic relationships. Our research backs up similar findings from Bornstein et al. (2007) and Fong and Aaron (2010) on the established and important relationship of culture (or, in our case, social origin) on attitudes and behaviors. Similar to the findings of Jacobson and Johnson (2005), our study implies the importance of cultural approval on one's in-

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clination towards interracial marriage, with an emphasis on one's social origin.

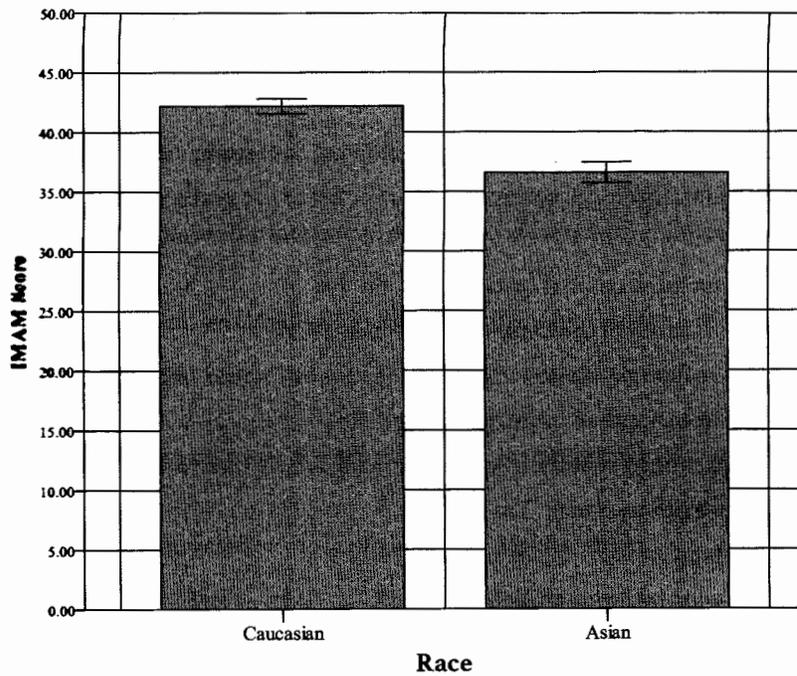
The information that stems from this study can be used to aid future research on this and similar topics regarding interracial marriage. The results of our study, as well as the IMAM, may also be helpful for clinicians in the field who work with interracial couples and families. Knowledge gained through the use of the IMAM about the impact of social origin on acceptance could generate ideas and potentially provide actionable feedback to clinicians who are counseling interracial couples.

In conclusion, our research and the IMAM provide further evidence of the importance of understanding cultural and social influences on the development of interracial relationships. While our study has helped answer the questions we initially asked, it has also prompted many more. For instance, it would be interesting to look further into the potential reasons behind such a high standard deviation of scores for the Asian sample in future research studies, or to look at specific countries of origin and the response of IMAM scores, particularly the variance of scores within a particular racial group. Moreover, continual use of the IMAM in further research with both larger and more diverse samples (such as different age groups or ethnicities) would increase the reliability and validity of our measure, allowing for an enlarged generalization to the ever-expanding, culturally diverse population of the United States.

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*Figure 1.* Average Interracial Marriage Attitudes Measure scores for Caucasian and Asian students. Error bars indicate  $\pm 1$  standard error.

**Appendix**

*Interracial Marriage Attitude Measure*

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions:** Please answer the following questions about your demographics. Circle the correct response or fill in the space provided.

Are you an international student? Yes or No

Are you a citizen of the United States? Yes or No

Are you a first-generation American (you were raised here but *both* parents are from another country)? Yes or No

Are you a multi-generation American (your family has lived in the U.S. for *at least two generations*)? Yes or No

What is your gender? Male or Female

What is your religious affiliation, if any? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your race/ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_

How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions:** Please rate how much you agree with each statement described below. Circle the corresponding number that best describes what you think or how you feel.

1 = Strongly Agree      2 = Slightly Agree      3 = Neutral  
4 = Slightly Disagree      5 = Strongly Disagree

My family does not accept interracial marriages

1      2      3      4      5

My religion does not accept interracial marriages

1      2      3      4      5

I feel comfortable dating someone of a different race/ethnicity.

1      2      3      4      5

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### *Interracial Marriage Attitude Measure, contd.*

**I would marry someone of a different race/ethnicity.**

**1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**

**My family would approve of me marrying someone of a different race/ethnicity.**

**1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**

**I think it's acceptable for interracial couples to raise mixed children.**

**1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**

**I have friends that are involved in relationships with someone of a different race/ethnicity.**

**1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**

**I enjoy being around those friends who are in an interracial relationship.**

**1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**

**I'm physically attracted to those of a different race/ethnicity.**

**1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**

**My friends would approve of my being in a relationship with someone of a different race/ethnicity.**

**1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**

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2012