Interfaith Couples and Relationship Stability

By
David McClendon
Pew Research Center

The widespread prevalence and acceptance of religious intermarriage in the United States have led many to assume that Americans are more tolerant of religious differences between romantic partners. Yet, research continues to find that interfaith couples have lower relationship quality and are at higher risk of divorce. In this study, I incorporate family diversity into the study of interfaith relationships by comparing married, cohabiting, and same-sex couples. Using the 2009-2013 How Couples Meet and Stay Together survey, I describe the prevalence of interfaith relationships among married, cohabiting, and male and female same-sex couples and use event history methods to compare the association between religious heterogamy and union dissolution across all four couple types. Results reveal important differences between married and non-traditional couples, both in rates of religious heterogamy and its consequences for relationship stability, that refine our understanding of interfaith relationships and the social changes around religion and family.

Of the changes in partnering behavior in the United States over the course of the twentieth century, the rise of religious intermarriage has been among the most striking. Crossing religious boundaries to find a spouse used to be relatively rare; when it did occur, religious conversion of one partner prior to marriage was typically required. But today, over half of all marriages are between partners from different religious upbringings and 40% are between partners who maintain separate religious identities (i.e., no conversion or disaffiliation) (Kalmijn 1991; Kennedy 1943; Glenn 1982; Lehrer 1998; Putnam and Campbell 2010). Changes in behavior have been accompanied by shifts in attitudes. Americans are increasingly accepting of intermarriage for themselves and their children: some 80% of young adults do not consider shared religious beliefs to be essential to a successful marriage and less than a third of parents say it is very important to them for their children to marry someone of the same faith (NSYR 2008; Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Some scholars see the normalization of interreligious or "interfaith" marriage as a positive development. Like interracial marriage, interreligious marriage is an important indicator that social boundaries that once divided society are weakening and that young people have gained greater independence over their partnering decisions (Putnam and Campbell 2010; Rosenfeld 2009). And also like interracial marriage, interreligious marriage has the potential to foster greater social tolerance as more Americans share intimate, familial contact with people who have different beliefs and practices than themselves.

But others warn that interfaith marriage may have unforeseen consequences for couples, especially when it comes to relationship quality and stability (Riley 2013). A small but consistent body of research in the U.S. continues to find that couples who "pray together" are more likely to "stay together": interreligious marriages report lower relationship quality and have a higher risk of divorce, on average, compared to marriages in which partners share the same religious identity and level of religious commitment (Lehrer and Chiswick 1993; Mahoney 2001; Vaaler et al.

2009; Ellison, Burdette, and Wilcox 2010; Wolfinger and Wilcox 2008). Not only is this surprising, given the widespread prevalence and acceptance of religious intermarriage in the general public, but it suggests that social change has been more limited than previously thought. Today's young adults may be more tolerant of religious differences when choosing a partner, but many couples still appear to face challenges when it comes to negotiating and navigating religious differences during marriage.

In this paper, I further our understanding of interfaith marriage and relationship stability by adopting a family diversity perspective. Previous research on interfaith relationships has been confined to married different-sex couples (I use the term "different-sex" rather than "heterosexual" throughout the paper), largely due to data constraints. Yet, married couples represent a smaller share of all romantic unions in today's family system as cohabitation has become more popular and accepted among not just young adults but older adults as well (Manning et al. 2013; Brown and Wright 2015). In addition, same-sex couples have gained wider social and legal recognition in recent decades, generating greater interest among social scientists in relationship dynamics among gays and lesbians.

How might religious differences matter in these nontraditional romantic unions? Cohabitors and same-sex couples are often portrayed as being the vanguard of social change, more egalitarian in terms of gender roles and more accepting of social difference than traditional married couples (Schwartz and Graf 2009). Same-sex couples also tend to have tighter dating markets and are more likely to rely on nontraditional methods to find potential partners, which may require them to be more tolerant of religious differences (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Together, this suggests that religious heterogamy—being interfaith—may be less consequential for relationship stability among cohabitors and same-sex couples compared to married couples.

To examine the consequences of religious heterogamy for union stability among married, cohabiting, and same-sex unions, I analyze data from the 2009 How Couples Meet and Stay Together Study (HCMST), nationally representative longitudinal survey of American couples. The HCMST data has a number of advantages that make it ideal for this analysis. First, it has an oversample of same-sex couples and uses multiple indicators to identify respondents in same-sex relationships, including same-sex attraction (for more on the challenges in identifying same-sex couples in surveys, see Gates and Ost 2004, and for details on HCMST's procedure see http://data.stanford.edu/hcmst). In addition to different-sex married and cohabiting couples, the sample also includes different-sex and same-sex daters. However, given the greater volatility of such relationships, I restrict my analysis to couples that are currently living together and/or married. In total, my analysis includes 1,779 married different-sex (DS) couples, 260 cohabiting DS couples, 176 male same-sex (SS) couples, and 182 female SS couples.

Another key feature is that the HCMST followed up with respondents in 2010, 2011, and 2013 and asked whether the relationship observed in 2009 was still intact. This longitudinal, prospective design allows me to use event history methods to model the association between individual and couple characteristics and risk of union dissolution. Finally, the HCMST asked respondents about their own and their partner's religious affiliation, as well as race-ethnicity, educational attainment, and political party affiliation.

I start my analysis by comparing the prevalence of interreligious relationships—defined as couples in which respondents report having a different religious affiliation from their partner—across my four couple types. This basic description is an important contribution, in and of itself, because no study has been able to examine religious differences among same-sex couples. Figure 1 shows the weighted percentages of couples that are interfaith in each couple type. Similar to previous estimates for the U.S. population, some 39% of married DS couples in 2009 did not share the same religious affiliation. But interfaith relationships were even more common for DS cohabitors (59%) and female and male SS couples (65% and 73%).

In an ancillary analysis, which I will include in the full draft, I found that religious differences were an important factor behind the greater prevalence of interfaith relationship among nontraditional couples. Married respondents were more likely to be affiliated with conservative religious groups (namely, evangelical Protestants), who have much lower rates of interreligious marriage. In contrast, SS couples and DS cohabitors were more likely to affiliate with liberal religious denominations or say that they had no religious affiliation compared to married couples.[1] Men and women in same-sex relationships are also more likely cross race-ethnic lines and use non-traditional ways to find a partner (e.g., the internet vs. family and friends), both of which increase the likelihood of being interfaith.

Next, to understand the potential consequences of interfaith relationships for relationship stability across the four couple types, I used event history methods to model the association between individual and couple characteristics and the risk of union dissolution. Using dates of union dissolution from the follow-up waves, I created an event history couple-year data file starting in 2009 and ending in the year of union dissolution (divorce or break-up) or else year of last interview (right-censored; 2013 for most couples). Individual and couple characteristics, including being interfaith, are measured in 2009 and do not vary across waves (HCMST only asked these questions once). I used dummy variables to measure time (in years) to allow the risk of union dissolution to vary non-parametrically (Allison 2009).

Table 1 shows results from logistic regression event history models predicting union dissolution. Model 1 estimates the main effect of religious heterogamy for all couples, controlling for couple type, year, and sample selection variables (age, age-squared, relationship duration, relationship duration squared, urban residence, internet access, and recruiting method; *see* Rosenfeld 2014). Overall, interfaith couples had a 32% higher annual odds of breaking up over the four-year observation period compared to same-faith couples (exp(0.283)=1.32), although the difference was only marginally significant with controls (p-value=0.076).

Model 2 includes interaction terms between religious heterogamy and couple type that allow the effect of religious heterogamy on the risk of union dissolution to differ for married, cohabiting, and same-sex couples. The coefficient for religious heterogamy indicates that, among DS marriages (the reference category), interfaith couples had a significantly higher risk of divorce relative to same-faith couples (82% greater odds; exp(0.601)=1.82). This positive association

[1] One key shorting is a lack of measures on respondents' and their partners' level of religiosity, e.g., frequency of church attendance. As other research has shown, religious affiliation differences between partners are more salient and consequential for relationship quality and stability when there is also a mismatch in religious commitment (Vaaler et al. 2007).

among DS married couples is also true of female SS couples. But the interaction terms indicate that religious heterogamy operates differently for DS cohabitors and male SS couples: for these couples, being interfaith is not associated with a higher risk of breaking up. In fact, in the case of male SS couples, interfaith unions are actually *less* likely to split up compared to those that share the same religion.

Models 3-5 introduce a series of control variables to test the robustness of the results. Model 3 controls for demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of respondents associated with union stability, non-traditional couples, and religious heterogamy, including gender, race-ethnicity, educational attainment, household income, religious tradition, political party affiliation (republican, democrat, independent/other), children in the household, and whether respondent was previously married. While many of the variables were significantly associated with union stability, the main results from model 2 hold. Model 4 controls for couple-level characteristics, including whether the couple is heterogamous in terms of race-ethnicity, educational attainment, or political affiliation. The main results were unchanged after these controls; in fact, none of the other measures of couple heterogamy were significantly associated with union dissolution (interaction terms with couple type were also not significant).

Finally, model 5 includes a measure of relationship quality at wave 1 ("Very Poor" to "Excellent", 1-5). Unsurprisingly, relationship quality in wave 1 was protective against union dissolution in subsequent waves. Moreover, after controlling for relationship quality, the effect of religious heterogamy for married couples is reduced and no longer statistically significant. This suggests that poorer relationship quality among interfaith married couples compared to same-faith couples at baseline helps explains their higher risk of divorce in the following years. More work will be done in the full draft to unpack this potential mediating mechanism.

Figure 2 summarizes the main findings with predicted probabilities of the 4-year annual risk of union dissolution. Again, with controls, religious heterogamy is only associated with an increased risk of union dissolution for different-sex married couples and female same-sex couples, not for different-sex cohabitors of male same-sex couples.

These preliminary results suggest this study's potential to broaden social-scientific knowledge about interfaith couples and refine our understanding of the social changes around religion and family relationships. One key finding is that family diversity and religious diversity within families appear to go hand in hand. While some 40% of married DS couples remain interfaith and hold on to separate religious identities, nontraditional couples are even more likely to do so. In an age of increasing political and religious polarization, trends in interfaith coupling suggest that family relationships may help bridge the partisan divide and build more trust between social groups—particularly, between religious and secular Americans.

The results for married different-sex couples confirm findings from previous analyses. Even in 2009, religious differences between spouses appear to increase the risk of divorce. While religious intermarriage has become more common, it is possible that interfaith couples still encounter unexpected conflicts as they begin making decisions about children and interact more frequently with parents and extended family. In addition, interfaith couples may miss out on the benefits of shared religious beliefs and practices (e.g, closer marital bonds and social support of a

religious community) that many religiously homophilous couples enjoy. Furthermore, compared to less traditional family forms, marriage remains a more conservative institution with clearer normative expectations about partner behavior. Regardless, more work needs to be done to understand interfaith couples. What are the challenges these couples face that strain their unions? Is it really about religious differences or do those represent a much broader cultural divide between partners that generates instability?

One of the most interesting and unexpected findings is that religious heterogamy is also associated with dissolution for female same-sex couples. Why might female same-sex couples differ in this way from their male counterparts? One potential explanation is gender differences in religiosity and family relationships. Research on the general population typically finds that women are more religious than men and tend to be closer to their family of origin. Perhaps religious differences lead to more problems for female same-sex couples, as both partners try to negotiate their romantic and family-of-origin ties. There may also be important differences between married and cohabiting same-sex couples, particularly in the coming years, but unfortunately there were too few married same-sex couples in the HCMST data to permit separate analysis.

Figure 1. Percentage of couples that is interfaith by couple type. HCMST 2009.

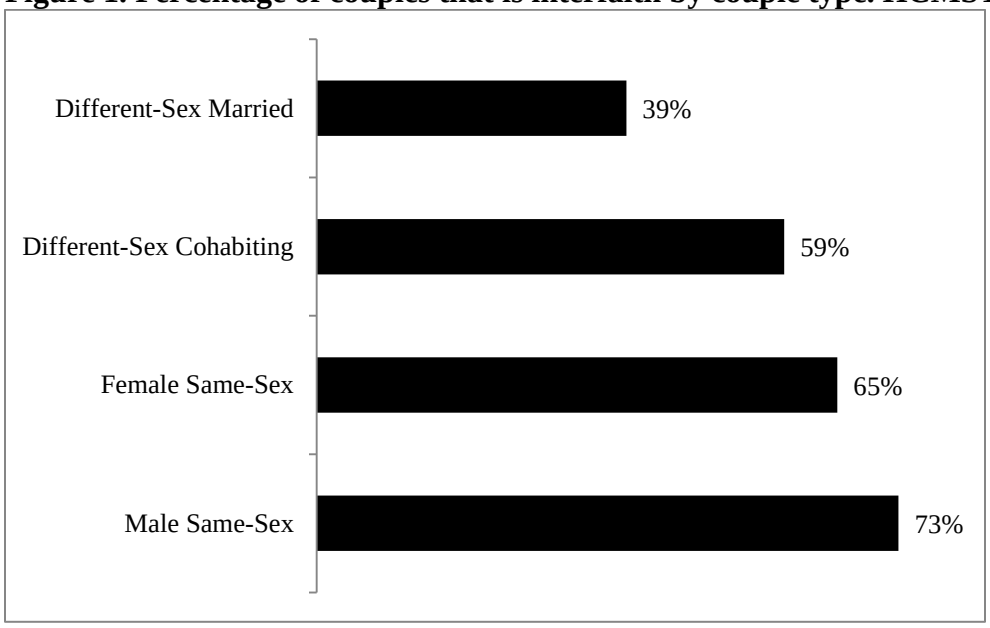

Figure 2. Predicted probabilities of union dissolution, 2009-2013, from Model 4. Covariates held at mean values.

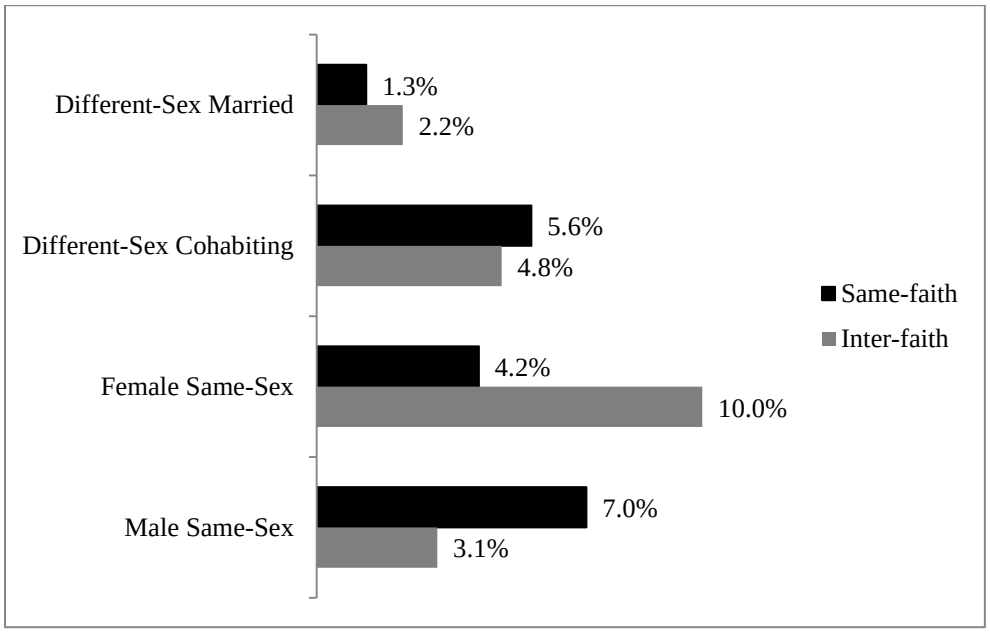

Table 1. Coefficients from logistic regression event history models predicting union dissolution. HCMST survey 2009-2013.

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Interfaith (vs. same-faith)	0.283+	(0.16)	0.601*	(0.23)	0.560*	(0.24)	0.553*	(0.24)	0.355	(0.25)
Relationship type (ref: different-sex married)										
Different-sex cohabiting	1.131***	(0.20)	1.572***	(0.29)	1.490***	(0.30)	1.477***	(0.30)	1.330***	(0.31)
Male same-sex couple	0.742*	(0.36)	1.460**	(0.46)	1.670***	(0.49)	1.708***	(0.49)	1.527**	(0.51)
Female same-sex couple	1.069**	(0.34)	0.837+	(0.49)	1.191*	(0.53)	1.192*	(0.53)	1.124*	(0.54)
Interaction terms										
DS cohabiting * Interfaith			-0.764*	(0.37)	-0.732+	(0.38)	-0.706+	(0.38)	-0.555	(0.39)
Male SS * Interfaith			-1.189*	(0.53)	-1.355*	(0.55)	-1.369*	(0.55)	-1.049+	(0.57)
Female SS * Interfaith			0.278	(0.52)	0.283	(0.53)	0.328	(0.53)	0.490	(0.55)
Constant	-6.346***	(1.04)	-6.470***	(1.05)	-3.987*	(1.56)	-4.278**	(1.58)	-0.371	(1.67)
N Couple-years	8868		8868		8868		8868		8868	
Weight variables	Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes		Yes	
Respondent characteristics	No		No		Yes		Yes		Yes	
Couple characteristics	No		No		No		Yes		Yes	
Relationship quality	No		No		No		No		Yes	

Note: "Weight variables" include age, age-squared, relationship duration, relationship duration squared, urban residence, internet access, and recruiting method. "Respondent characteristics" include gender, race-ethnicity, educational attainment, household income, religious tradition, political party affiliation (republican, democrat, independent/other), children in the household, and whether respondent was previously married. "Couple characteristics" include whether the couple is heterogamous in terms of race-ethnicity, educational attainment, and political party affiliation.

† p<0.1 * p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001