Social Support for Intermarried Couples

In recent decades, the number of married people who choose their mates outside their own racial or ethnic groups has increased in the United States. For example, between 41% and 52% of Jewish couples have chosen non-Jewish partners; more than 40% of Hispanics have married people outside of their ethnic group since the 1960s. This intermarriage trend challenges the norm of endogamy, the preference of choosing mates in similar racial, ethnic, and socio-cultural groups. Since this norm is a strong norm in families, many intermarried couples confront disapproval or rejection of their marriages by relatives, friends, and communities. This disapproval or outright rejection decreases the nourishing flow of social support that couples normally use as a buffer in hard times. Intermarried couples may also experience other challenges in their social environments such as ethnic stereotypes or historical conflicts between racial groups.

Although previous research has indicated that support from significant others such as relatives and friends is crucial for sustainable intermarried couple relationships, studies have rarely focused on how individual spouses within couples perceived social support. For example, the association between types of intermarriage (e.g., interracial marriage, interethnic marriage, and international marriage) and couples’ perceived social support has not yet been investigated. Furthermore, methodologically, the literature on intermarried couple relationships is primarily qualitative. Previous qualitative research has revealed that the spouse from the host or majority group was more likely to take control in the couple relationship due to the social support they received from their relatives. However, thorough analyses of perceived social support patterns on both individual- and couple-level are needed to determine if it is intermarriage alone or the interrelationship between intermarriage and individual spouse’s group of origin which influences spousal perception of social support.

The purpose of this study is to explore how intermarried individuals and couples perceive social support. To investigate how intermarried couples perceive social support, the sequential transformative mixed method will be used. The perspective of cultural and structural determinants of intermarriage will be used as a conceptual framework.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, an intermarried couple refers to a union of two people from different racial, ethnic groups, or nations. The contextual determinants of intermarriage that Kalmijn and van Tubergen developed (2010) will be used as a conceptual framework.

Kalmijn and van Tubergen (2010) argue that one’s choice of intermarriage is explained by two contextual determinant types: (a) cultural and (b) structural. Cultural determinants are related to norms, values, and preferences in intermarriage. Individual preferences and the third party’s influence (e.g., parental approval) on intermarriage constitute the cultural determinants. Structural determinants are the structural chances of intermarriage due to size and residential segregation of a racial or ethnic group. These two determinants are not always exclusive from each other. For example, an ethnic group may have a weaker preference of endogamy due to the small population of the group within a community. In addition, a racial group might live in a segregated region because the people of the group have strong homogeneous norms.

Kalmijn and van Tubergen tested this conceptual framework of the contextual determinants of intermarriage using 94 national-origin groups in the United States. They found that the cultural and structural determinants explained more variances than individual variables in intermarriage. This finding suggests that context needs to be considered in the studies of intermarriage.

Based on the purpose of this study, social support is defined as “the relative presence or absence of psychosocial support from significant others” (Kaplan, Cassel, & Gore, 1977, p. 50-51). The conceptual framework of the contextual determinants of intermarriage which Kalmijn and van Tubergen developed does not focus on the explanation of social support for intermarried couples directly. However, when we consider that the violation of endogamy rule is prohibited in racial and ethnic groups because intermarriage can threaten homogeneous group identity and internal cohesion, the contextual determinants may work as a basis of social support which extended families and friends are willing to or reluctant to give to intermarried couples. Thus, this conceptual framework will guide this study to explain social support for intermarried couples.
Structure of the Study

This study includes a two-phase sequential transformative mixed method design: (a) qualitative study of social support for intermarried couples using semi-structured interviews, and (b) quantitative study of social support for intermarried couples using secondary data analyses. Hanson and his colleagues (2005) argue that mixed methods investigation is an appropriate research design when a research proposes to (a) identify the validity of existing instruments or (b) expand the results from either qualitative or quantitative data to the results drawn by the other one. In the current study, mixed methods will be used for both purposes.

Since this study will use secondary data (Integrated Health Interview Series 2001, IHIS, Minnesota Population Center & State Health Access Data Assistance Center, 2010), results from qualitative data will influence the variable selection for the quantitative analysis. To be specific, there is no empirical evidence that social support variables in the IHIS 2001 data have validity as an index; furthermore, evidence is needed to establish whether they are adequate to explore social support for intermarried couples. Thus, I will check the validity of the social support index using semi-structured qualitative interviews as a preliminary study. The results drawn from these qualitative data will be used to expand the results of the quantitative data by comparison with the results from the qualitative couple interviews. Table 1 shows the procedures of this study.

Table 1. Research Procedures

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Phase I: Qualitative Study

The quantitative data which will be used for this study is from IHIS 2001. The IHIS 2001 has ten items under the social support variable section. The contents of the items are a mixture of social integration, satisfaction with social support, social embeddedness, and life satisfaction. Since the source of the social support items in the IHIS 2001 is unclear, it is hard to expect that the items would be valid to examine social support for intermarried couples. Thus, the phase I study will use interviews of intermarried couples to elicit the essential components of social support. Specific research questions are as follows:

Question 1: What are the most essential components of social support?
Question 2: How does that social support help them?

In this phase I study, about ten intermarried couples will be interviewed using semi-structured interview. A list of preliminary questions will be prepared reflecting the questionnaire from IHIS 2001. Before starting data collection, the approval from the IRB from the University of Minnesota will be obtained.
Phase II: Quantitative Study

The purpose of the phase II study is to investigate the social support for intermarried individuals and couples and to examine contextual determinants of the social support. Research questions are as follows:

Question 1: How do intermarried individuals perceive social support from their relatives and friends?
Question 2: Are there differences in the perceived social support due to the types of intermarriage?
Question 3: Do spouses perceive social support at different levels due to their origins of race, ethnicity, and nationality?
Question 4: What are the cultural and structural determinants of social support for intermarried individuals and couples?

The IHIS data of 2001 provides information on perceived social support and characteristics of both spouses, including race, ethnicity, citizenship, age, education, employment status, and personal income. It will allow me to examine the research questions using a nationally representative data set. Using demographic variables from the IHIS, it is available to combine various intermarriage types. Since it is household-based, a couple-level analysis is possible. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) will be used for analysis, which allows me (a) to facilitate couple-level analysis, and (b) to construct latent variables with multiple indicators (e.g., cultural and structural determinants) using variables from the IHIS data.

Expected Outcomes

It is expected to gain in-depth understandings of social support for intermarried couples by investigating the social support using sequential transformative mixed methods. It is important to understand social support for intermarried couples because social support plays a role as a stress buffer under adversity.

Selection Criteria for the fellowship/award

Mary Ellen McFarland Assistantship.

- **Potential contribution of assistantship to student’s scholarly development and productivity:** This study is planned for my dissertation so it will help me to complete my Ph. D degree. Since my academic interest as a family social science professional is intercultural couple and family relationships, this study will help me to achieve scholarly development in that content area.
- **Potential contribution to student’s degree completion:** Since this study is for my dissertation, getting the assistantship or the fellowship will assist me to complete my dissertation study. The receipt of the award would help me complete my dissertation in a more timely manner because I would be able to devote all my time to the work of the dissertation.
- **Student’s overall professional promise:** I have engaged in many research projects in the family field as a research assistant. I have presented three times at the NCFR and volunteered as a reviewer for the NCFR 73rd conference. I have three journal articles in progress with faculty in our department.
- **Importance of proposal to family field:** The topic of this study is important to the family field because social support for intermarried couples has rarely been investigated in spite of the increase of intermarriage and the role of social support as a stress buffer.
- **Extent to which the faculty member is available to guide, supervise, and to work with:** Dr. X will guide me in conducting this study by giving her suggestions about research methodology. In addition, her insights into social support studies will help me to conduct this study conceptually.
- **Career goals:** This study is beneficial for my career goal which is becoming a faculty member at a research institute. It will give me a research experience using mixed methods.
- **Full time student:** I am a full time Ph. D student with no incompletes.

M. Janice Hogan Fellowship.

- **Anticipated benefit to the student and the family field:** This study is beneficial for me because it will help me to complete my dissertation in a more timely manner. It is also beneficial for the family field because social support for intermarried couples is an important but rarely investigated issue in the family field. The expected outcome of this study will expand the understanding of intermarried couples.

Citations and reference list will be provided if requested.