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# Religious Homogamy and Marital Happiness

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## Abstract

Data from a representative sample of 1,070 married Protestants and Catholics were used to examine the relationship between religious homogamy and marital happiness. Although couples may vary in the extent to which they share religious views (e.g., beliefs, values), previous research has treated religious homogamy as a dichotomy; a couple is either homogamous or it is not. A partial explanation for this is that few studies have gone beyond the broad divisions of Protestant, Catholic, and Jew. In the present study religious bodies were classified on the basis of doctrine and ritual, yielding six categories: Baptist, Calvinist, Catholic, fundamentalist, Lutheran, and Methodist. These categories were then used to develop a measure of estimated "religious distance" or degrees of heterogamy. This measure was used to test the hypothesis that the larger the religious distance or disparity, the greater the likelihood of unhappiness with the marriage. The hypothesis was supported by the data.

It is well established that Americans tend to marry endogamously with respect to social and cultural characteristics. Although some of this is accounted for by demographic factors and geographic propinquity, it is clear that group values and norms tend to promote homogamy and discourage heterogamy. Constraints regarding interracial marriage appear strongest, followed, respectively, by those related to religion, social class, and ethnicity (cf. Moss, Apolonio, and Jensen, 1971; Leslie and Korman, 1985).

One of the important underlying assumptions for encouraging marital homogamy is the belief that persons sharing similar characteristics (e.g., social status, values, norms, beliefs) will adjust more easily to one another. In other words, sociocultural homogamy promote harmony, whereas heterogamy increases the chances of discord and unhappiness. Sociological and social-psychological theories of love and mate selection are generally consistent with this proposition (cf. Coombs, 1966; Murstein, 1970; Reiss, 1980).

The present study examines the relationship between religious homogamy and marital happiness. More specifically, the study examines intra- and interfaith marriages among six religious bodies. Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church are classified on the basis of doctrine and ritual. These categories are used to develop a measure of estimated "religious distance" or degrees of heterogamy. This procedure is used to test the hypothesis, derived from the theoretical reasoning discussed above, that the larger the religious disparity in marriage, the greater the likelihood of unhappiness with the marriage.

### **Development of the Research Strategy**

Nearly all of the studies dealing with the relationship between inter- and intrafaith marriages and marital success have classified marriages as homogamous or heterogamous on the basis of the familiar trichotomy of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Using these categories as indices introduces at least two possibly unwarranted assumptions. First, religious similarity is presumably a matter of degree. Thus reducing homogamy/heterogamy to an either/or dichotomy introduces the implicit assumption that all Protestants, regardless of denomination, are the same.<sup>1</sup> Second, limiting classification to these categories assumes that all interfaith marriages are equally heterogamous; for example, the measurement model ignores the possibility that Catholics may have more in common religiously with Episcopalians than with Baptists. Thus measuring homogamy and heterogamy solely on the basis of the categories of Protestant, Catholic, and Jew risks obscuring relevant value differences both within and between the three major religious traditions in the United States.

Findings from studies using the categories of Protestant, Catholic, and Jew generally support the hypothesis that religiously homogamous marriages are somewhat more successful than interfaith marriages. The most frequently used measure of marital success has been marital stability, as indexed by divorce or survival rates (cf. Landis, 1949; Monahan and Kephart, 1954; Burchinal and Chancellor, 1963; Christensen and Barber, 1967; Bumpass and Sweet, 1972). Studies using marital happiness as an indicator of marital success have reached similar conclusions.

Alston, McIntosh, and Wright (1976) report a higher level of marital happiness among persons in religiously homogamous marriages, as does Glenn (1982) for males, but not females.

Although there are differences in opinion as to whether Protestant denominations are sufficiently different from one another to affect adjustment in interdenominational marriages (cf. Glenn, 1982; Greeley, 1970), there are surprisingly few studies that can be brought to bear on the issue.<sup>2</sup> Using somewhat different denominational groupings, Burchinal and Chancellor (1963) and Bumpass and Sweet (1972) have examined marriage survival rates between homogamous and denominationally mixed Protestant marriages. There is little support for the hypothesis that intradenominational marriages will have higher survival rates than marriages crossing denominational lines; however, some mixed-marriage combinations were found to be less stable than comparable homogamous marriages. It should be pointed out, however, that neither study included all of the major Protestant denominations in American society, much less the smaller groups. Furthermore, the distinctions that are made appear to be based simply on the fact that each category represents a social aggregate with a name, for example, Baptist or Methodist. No attempt is made to specify how these denominations differ from one another.

While there is little empirical evidence one way or the other, theoretically, it seems possible that some of the differences among Protestant denominations such as differences in doctrine, ritual, and church polity, could be sufficiently important to create difficulties in interdenominational marriages. Furthermore, some Protestant denominations are quite similar to each other with respect to these characteristics, whereas they are quite different from other denominations. In other words, Protestant denominations are not equidistant on all dimensions. This being the case, it is appropriate to classify denominations on the basis of theoretically important dimensions and then to develop interval or at least ordinal scales representing the degree of heterogamy of each pair of denominations along these dimensions. This research strategy permits testing the study hypothesis as stated in continuous form: The larger the religious disparity in marriage, the greater the likelihood of unhappiness with the marriage.

## Methods

### The Sample

Data for the present study are from 276 married Catholics and 794 married Protestants interviewed in a 1981 representative sample of adults 18 years of age or older residing in Nebraska.<sup>3</sup> There were not enough Jewish respondents in the sample to include this group. Cases deleted from the original sample of 1,890 for the present study include 476 unmarried respondents, the remainder being persons belonging to or married to members of religious bodies other than Catholic or Protestant or who did not provide information on all of the variables used in the present study.

### Measures of the Independent Variable

In addition to using the categories of Protestant and Catholic, we placed Protestant denominations into one of five groups: Lutherans, Calvinists, Baptists, Methodists, and fundamentalists.<sup>4</sup> These categories were derived from the works of Niebuhr (1929), Seeberg (1961), and Johnson (1980) and are based upon important distinctions in doctrine. Some of the major differences can be summarized as follows. The Lutheran group is composed of members of reformed bodies as well as Lutherans because these groups are doctrinally similar, if not identical. Essentially, the Lutheran doctrine differs from other groups by the belief in justification by faith alone, that the word of God is the primary means of grace, and in the priesthood of all believers. The Calvinist category is made up of Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and the United Church of Christ. Although these denominations differ in their church polity, all hold to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and the legalistic interpretation of the scriptures. Baptists, along with the Disciples of Christ, accept the doctrine that those who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved (Arminianism) and the requirement of adult baptism by immersion. Almost all Baptists in Nebraska belong to the American Baptist Convention, which is nonfundamentalist. The United Brethren and the Salvation Army are included in the

category. Methodists combine Calvinism and Arminianism. The fundamentalist category is composed of such groups as Seventh Day Adventists and Pentecostals.<sup>5</sup>

While the comparison of homogamous and heterogamous marriages among doctrinally different Protestants provides considerably more detail than simply placing all Protestants into a single category, it still does not allow for degrees of difference among doctrinal groups. To do this, we developed a measure that would allow us to compare levels of marital happiness between inter- and intrafaith marriages taking estimated degrees of difference or "religious distance" into account. The procedure is derived from Rokeach (1960). He reports finding that people from different denominations are able to rank other denominations in terms of perceived similarity. The ratings assigned by individuals in different denominations are consistent with one another; when combined, they form a continuum that Johnson (1980) refers to as "R-order." This measure has been found to correlate highly with religious doctrine and ritual. That is, the distinction underlying R-order appears to include the more visible or dominant aspects of religious groups, those that can be easily perceived or understood. Coombs (1964), for example, discusses R-order with respect to the visible formalism of religious services. Included here are the basic high-church versus low-church dichotomy, the extent to which the order of service is prescribed and written down beforehand, the use of clerical vestments, the degree of congregational participation, and the extent of emotional release during the service.

R-order has been found to be strongly associated with social distance between denominations (as measured by Bogardus-type scales), rates of switching from one denomination to another, and especially, rates of religious intermarriage. Thus Johnson (1980) calculates R-order directly from marital selection tables and, despite a somewhat elaborate methodology, arrives at essentially the same ordering as Rokeach (1960), who simple-weighted his data to compensate for size differentials.

The strategy used in the present study is a compromise between the approaches used by Rokeach (1960) and Johnson (1980). Interaction studies involving intergroup sociometric choice (cf. Thomas, 1951; Boggs, 1965) have firmly established that the opportunity for interaction is proportional to the product of the sizes of the two groups. In-group

choice, however, tends to occur more often than would be expected solely on the basis of chance. The pattern of choices can be adequately modeled by Goodman's (1969a, 1969b) model of quasi-independence or quasi-perfect mobility (cf. Newport, 1979; Kluegel, 1980).<sup>6</sup> Although Goodman's (1969a, 1969b) model was developed to analyze intergenerational occupational mobility, mate selection tables have identical mathematical properties. Thus the mobility ratios from the model of quasi-independence in a mate-selection table represent the extent to which marriages between persons in each pair of religions exceed or fall short of the number expected by chance with religious group sizes taken into account.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, theoretically, they should represent the perceived similarity or distance between religious groups. Interfaith marriages between people affiliated with religions perceived as doctrinally and ritually similar should be both more common and less problematic than interfaith marriages perceived as being more dissimilar or religiously distant.

### **Control Variables**

Previous research has found that persons in interfaith marriages differ from those in intrafaith marriages in ways other than their religious heterogamy. Some of these extrareligious differences, in turn, have been found to account for portions of the originally observed difference in marital stability between inter- and intrafaith marriages. Given the possibility of a spurious relationship between interfaith marriage and marital happiness, or of interactions among variables requiring a qualification of the relationship, a number of control variables were included in the analysis, and possible interactions were examined.

The following variables were included as controls (all pertain to the respondent unless indicated otherwise): age and age at present marriage, religiosity (whether attended religious services the week before the interview), socioeconomic status (family income and respondent's education), gender, previous marital status (whether and how many times married, up to three or more before the current marriage), presence of children in the household, wife's employment status, discrepancies between the husband and wife in education and age, and whether religious homogamy was achieved by conversion.<sup>8</sup>

## The Dependent Variable

Although most studies of religious homogamy and heterogamy have used divorce or survival rates as the dependent variable, we know that a couple's remaining together is not necessarily equivalent to marital success. For example, norms forbidding or discouraging divorce, or the belief that divorce will be harmful for the children, can prevent people from exercising this option no matter how dissatisfied they may be with their marriages. Furthermore, as Booth, Johnson, and Edwards (1983) suggest, divorce is a measure of the consequences of marital failure, not of the instability or unhappiness that caused it.

In the present study marital success is measured by the question, "Taking all things together, how would you describe your marriage?" Mean happiness is computed by scoring the possible responses: not too happy, 1; pretty happy, 2; and very happy, 3.

Generally, a single-item index is less desirable than a measure based upon a multiple-item scale. Happiness with one's marriage, for example, is only one aspect of what we generally mean by the broader concept of marital success or adjustment.<sup>9</sup> Marital happiness, as measured in the current study, however, has a correlation of .70 with a frequently used and well-established 11-item scale of marital stability (cf. Booth, Johnson, and Edwards, 1983; White and Booth, 1985; Johnson et al., 1986).<sup>10</sup>

Another caution with respect to our measure of marital happiness relates to the issue that cross-sectional data on marital happiness do not include persons who have already divorced and thus these cases do not contribute to the unhappiness in the currently married population. As Glenn (1982) points out, however, a negative association of a variable with marital happiness, after controlling for the most likely sources of spuriousness, indicates probable negative effects on marital success.

## Findings

### Catholics And Protestants

On the basis of previous research concerning interfaith marriages between Protestants and Catholics, the finding in this initial analysis



was a surprise. We had expected to find at least a moderate difference in the level of happiness reported by individuals in religiously homogamous marriages compared to those who had married across Protestant or Catholic boundaries. Using multiple classification analysis (MCA), after controlling for the other variables in the analysis, we found that Catholics married to Catholics have a marital happiness of 2.59 while Catholics married to Protestants have a score of 2.67. Homogamously married Protestants have an average happiness of 2.63, while those married to Catholics have a scarcely different score of 2.60. The overall difference in marital happiness between homogamous and heterogamous marriages is not statistically significant nor are there any consistent patterns of relationship or significant interactions using an alpha of .05. The lack of significance cannot be accounted for by the introduction of the control variables since the unadjusted means varied from each other only slightly more than after adjustment. It also seems unlikely that Nebraskans are significantly different from other Americans. There is the possibility, however, that these religious bodies have become more like one another. Some recent studies have found considerable social, cultural, and demographic convergence between Protestants and Catholics (cf. Bahr and Chadwick, 1985; Alwin, 1986), and Thornton (1985) presents the case that changes in family structure and behavior have led to substantial modifications in the teachings and policies of the Protestant and Catholic churches. With reference to Glenn's (1982) suggestion that Catholics differ from Protestants by their having been victims of prejudice and discrimination, to the extent that there has been a decline in anti-Catholicism, it is possible that an increasingly large number of Catholics are less sensitive to this issue.

### **Doctrinally Different Protestants**

Table 1 shows the adjusted (by means of MCA) differences in marital happiness between intra- and interfaith marriages among Protestants classified according to religious doctrine. The overall relationship is statistically significant at the .06 level, according to a one-tailed test.

Some of the heterogamous categories contain very few cases, due, of course, to the strong tendency for persons to either marry homogamously

or achieve it through switching. It is interesting to note, in this regard, that among the 690 doctrinally homogamous marriages, 404 or 58.5% are homogamous through switching. However, these marriages are not statistically significantly different in their level of happiness from those who had the same doctrinal affiliation when they married. This is consistent with Brinkerhoff and MacKie's (1985) finding that current religious identity is more strongly correlated with gender attitudes than childhood affiliation. Presumably, current religious identity is more highly correlated with other relevant attitudes as well.

There is a consistent pattern throughout Table 1, whereby persons in intradoctrinal marriages have a higher level of happiness than those in doctrinally heterogamous marriages.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the doctrinally homogamous category with the lowest mean happiness, Methodists, has a higher score than the happiest of the heterogamous groups, Baptists married to other Protestants.

### **R-Order or Estimated Religious Distance**

Rokeach's (1960) measurement of R-order was a simple aggregated rank ordering of how similar respondents thought other denominations were to their own. Respondents were not told what criteria to use but were allowed to rely on their own perceptions. Nonetheless, the rank ordering produced through this approach has been found to correlate very highly (.90 or above) with behavioral measures of religious distance such as switching affiliations from one denomination to another and rates of intermarriage. Given this relationship, following Johnson (1980), we are able to estimate perceived religious distance directly from patterns of marital selection in the study sample. We begin with the religious bodies categorized by doctrinal differences and are now able to include Catholics as a doctrinal group. Doctrinally, the Roman Catholic Church is distinguished from Protestantism by its belief in the infallibility of the Pope and in the effectiveness of the sacraments. Unlike Protestantism, it holds to the view that the Church is the embodiment of Christ on Earth and speaks with His authority (cf. Niebuhr, 1929; Seeberg, 1961). If Protestant groups perceive Catholicism as more distant than other Protestant denominations, this will be reflected in the R-order. The figures in Table 2 show the estimated religious distances between pairs of doctrinal categories. The mea-

**Table 1**  
Mean Marital Happiness in Religiously Homogamous and  
Heterogamous Marriages Among Protestants

Intra- and Interfaith Marriages by Doctrinal Categories	number	Unadjusted Mean Happiness <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted Mean Happiness
Baptist married to:			
Baptist	47	2.77	2.78
Other Protestant	8	2.50	2.54
Calvinist married to:			
Calvinist	124	2.66	2.64
Other Protestant	19	2.53	2.52
Fundamentalist married to:			
Fundamentalist	69	2.61	2.61
Other Protestant	8	2.38	2.46
Lutheran married to:			
Lutheran	256	2.65	2.66
Other Protestant	18	2.50	2.49
Methodist married to:			
Methodist	196	2.59	2.58
Other Protestant	31	2.42	2.45

Grand Mean = 2.62, Eta = .14, Beta = .14,  $p < .06$ , one-tailed test.

1. Comparisons are persons married homogamously within a doctrinal category with those married to Protestants belonging to religious bodies in the other doctrinal categories included in the analysis.
2. The unadjusted means are mean happiness scores before controlling for other variables.
3. The adjusted means are mean happiness scores after controlling for age at interview and at current marriage, church attendance, family income, education, gender, number of previous marriages, presence of children in the household, the extent of husband-wife difference in education and age, wife's employment status, and religious switching to achieve homogamy.

sure of distance is the expected frequency of intermarriage under quasi-independence divided by the observed frequency. Religiously homogamous (intracategory) marriages receive a distance score of zero. A score of 1.00 indicates that the two religious groups in question intermarry at a rate expected by chance, when group size is controlled. Thus, scores estimate degrees of perceived affinity between groups, with those below 1.00 having a lower distance than would be expected by chance, and those above 1.00 having a distance beyond that which would be expected if the religious distance were perceived as inconsequential or irrelevant.

**Table 2**  
R-Order Matrix of Religious Similarity

Religious Body	Estimated Religious Distance <sup>1</sup>				
Catholic Distance	Lutheran (.89)	Calvinist (.98)	Methodist (1.04)	Baptist (1.04)	Fundamentalist (3.22)
Lutheran Distance	Fundamentalist (.88)	Catholic (.89)	Methodist (.90)	Baptist (1.18)	Calvinist (2.15)
Methodist Distance	Fundamentalist (.77)	Calvinist (.80)	Lutheran (.90)	Baptist (.93)	Catholic (1.04)
Calvinist Distance	Baptist (.65)	Methodist (.80)	Catholic (.98)	Lutheran (2.15)	Fundamentalist (2.19)
Baptist Distance	Calvinist (.65)	Fundamentalist (.83)	Methodist (.93)	Catholic (1.04)	Lutheran (1.18)
Fundamentalist Distance	Methodist (.77)	Baptist (.83)	Lutheran (.88)	Calvinist (2.19)	Catholic (3.22)

1. A distance score of .00 = religious homogamy; 1.00 equals expected by chance, given relative group sizes. N = 1,052.

The rankings shown in Table 2 are quite consistent with those found by Rokeach (1960) and Johnson (1980). The few discrepancies are consistent with what would be expected considering the composition of certain religious groups in Nebraska. For Catholics, the only difference from the previous rankings is that Lutherans, rather than Episcopalians, are ranked as most similar. We have combined Presbyterians and Episcopalians on the basis of doctrinal similarities into a single Calvinist category, which stands in the same position relative to Catholics as Presbyterians do in previous research. Also, nationally, Lutherans might not be expected to rank fundamentalists as the most similar category, but a considerable number of Nebraska Lutherans are members of the Missouri Synod, a group considerably closer to fundamentalist doctrine than are other Lutheran synods. Other relationships are consistent with previous research. Catholics and fundamentalists are least likely to marry each other and thus stand at a high level of estimated religious distance, a score of 3.22. Among Lutherans who marry heterogamously, the only people who appear to be avoided are the Baptists and Calvinists. The Calvinists, in turn,

are quite unlikely to marry either Lutherans or fundamentalists but have a very small estimated distance from Baptists. The finding that the estimated religious distance measure in the present study essentially reproduces other research based upon respondent perception gives us considerable confidence in the validity of measuring distance by marital selection.

Our method of measuring R-order treats it as a quasi-ratio scale. This scale is treated, through MCA, as a covariate equivalent to an interval or ratio-scale variable in dummy variable regression. Analysis yields a *t* score equal to  $-1.964$  and a probability of  $.025$  according to a one-tailed test. In multiple regression analysis, the beta for R-order is  $-.06$ . The association between R-order and marital happiness is not especially strong, but one would not expect it to be, given that many factors are associated with how one feels about his or her marriage. Nevertheless, the association is statistically significant, thus indicating that religious homogamy does play a part in marital happiness; that is, the larger the estimated religious distance, the greater the marital unhappiness.

### Summary and Conclusions

From the knowledge that sociocultural homogamy enhances or facilitates marital success, and that religious values, norms, and beliefs are centrally important to many people, it follows that, for these people, religious homogamy would play a significant part in the success of their marriages. It also would be expected that religious heterogamy would detract from or hinder their marital success. Using a representative sample of 1,070 married Protestants and Catholics living in Nebraska, we tested this proposition by comparing inter- and intrafaith marriages among doctrinally and ritually different religious bodies. Marital happiness was used as an index of marital success.

A comparison between Catholics and Protestants married homogamously with the various heterogamous combinations among these categories showed no significant differences. On the other hand, Protestants married homogamously within each of five doctrinally different categories (Baptist, Calvinist, fundamentalist, Lutheran, Methodist) were found to be happier with their marriages than were those married across doctrines ( $p < .06$ ). The pattern of difference is consistent; the homoga-

mously married couples in each doctrinal category have a higher happiness score than those married to other Protestants.

Although doctrinal groups are different from one another, the extent of differences varies, that is, the intervals between categories are not equidistant. An estimate of perceived religious differences was developed using interfaith marriage rates. This procedure allows for the differences in population size among the categories, and any religious group may be included in the ranking, given a sufficient number of cases. Using this measure, statistical analysis of the data indicates that the association is significant ( $p < .025$ ) such that we may conclude that the greater the extent of religious heterogamy, the lower marital happiness is likely to be.

Many questions concerning the impact of religion and religious differences on marital success remain unanswered. However, the findings from this study suggest that differences in religious doctrine and ritual can affect marital success and that continued research in this area will be worthwhile.

## Notes

1. Similar points could be made about both Jews and Catholics. For example, Jews could be subdivided into the categories of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, and there are some religious differences among Catholics by ethnicity, for example, Irish, Italian, and Polish (cf. Greeley, 1970).

2. Glenn (1982) says he finds the suggestion that interdenominational marriages can involve differences in belief greater than those in many Protestant-Catholic marriages "not totally convincing." He recognizes the existence of religious differences among Protestants but suggests that many of these differences span denominational lines. As will be discussed, Glenn's point about differences crossing denominational boundaries is well taken, but this does not preclude some relevant differences among denominations.

3. Detailed information regarding the sample and sampling procedure is available upon request.

4. A total of 18 Protestants were deleted from this analysis because they either belonged to or were married to persons in denominations that did not fit into any of the categories being used, for example, Mennonites, Amish, or no denominational affiliation.

5. The larger, established denominations continue to include some fundamentalist factions, for example, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Lutheran Missouri Synod. Our data did not provide sufficient information to code such persons as fundamentalists. However, through an independent source on the distribution of religious groups in the state, we know that a very large majority of Baptists in the study sample are likely to be American Baptists (not fundamentalists), while a considerable majority of the Lutherans are probably

members of the Missouri Synod.

6. This model allows for status inheritance by assuming that offspring have a higher probability of being in the same occupational category as their parents than of being either upwardly or downwardly mobile. But it also assumes that the distribution of *mobile individuals* is random given the marginal distribution of parents' and children's occupations. In essence, the model of quasi-independence computes expected frequencies, mobility ratios (observed divided by expected frequencies), and chi-square over a table in which the cells in the main diagonal are blanked out by setting all diagonal cells equal to zero.

7. In the same manner as mobility tables, "marriage market" tables do not provide a perfect representation of opportunity structures. It is assumed that the opportunities available to respondents at the time and place they married can be modeled on the basis of the sample estimate of the present distribution of religions. If that distribution has changed over time, some inaccuracy is introduced. Furthermore, it also is possible that persons who married outside the state did so in the context of a religious preference mix different from the one in Nebraska.

8. About conversion, Greeley (1970) finds that compared to Catholics and Jews, who typically achieve homogamy by marrying persons of their own faith, Protestants are somewhat more likely to marry across denominational boundaries and then achieve homogamy through one of the spouses changing from one religion to another. This raises the interesting question of whether the likelihood of marital success is different between homogamous marriages among people reared in a given faith and those in homogamous marriages accomplished through switching.

9. Two other measures of marital success were examined; whether the respondent had any current problems in the marriage and if he/she had considered divorce within the past two years. The findings, using these dependent variables, are similar. However, marital happiness was chosen for discussion both because of its high correlation with multiple-item scales and its comparability with previous studies.

10. From personal communication with Lynn White.

11. The probability of all five of the comparisons being in the expected direction by chance is .031.

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