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The Interracial Generation: From Mixed Marriages, the Offspring of Hope

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"One [court] case has allowed me to stand here, physically, as a human being," said the young African American woman who had just received the Cooley award for scholarship and community service—among the highest honors given at this year's George Washington University Law School graduation ceremony. Many of the graduating law students readied themselves for a defense of affirmative action. But they were in for a surprise.

"I'm the product of an interracial marriage," said the newly minted lawyer, Kimberly Anglin, and the case she referred to was *Loving v. Virginia*, the 1967 Supreme Court decision that allowed her father and mother to marry.

Kimberly Anglin is the product of a largely unnoticed development in race relations: the sharp growth in black-white marriages and the concomitant increase in the number of mixed-race children. Until the *Loving* case, states were constitutionally permitted to ban mixed-race marriages. And many did.

Since then, the number of interracial marriages has steadily increased. According to the Census Bureau, between 1960 and 1990, black-white marriages have more than tripled, from 1.7 percent to 6 percent of all marriages involving African Americans. The proportion of black men married to white women has increased even more, quintupling over the same period.

If you look just at new marriages, the trend is even clearer. About 9 percent of black men who tied the knot in 1993 married white women, according to marriage certificate data. For African American women who married that same year, the rate was slightly less than half that, but it is climbing faster. Moreover, our calculations from recent Census Bureau data show that the figures might actually be higher—10 percent and 5 percent, respectively.

Along with the rapid growth in interracial marriages, an enormously portentous change in their character also seems to be occurring. In the past, interracial marriages tended to come later in life, often as second marriages, thus averting the issue of having children. Now, however, these couples more closely mirror same-race marriages—with an equal likelihood of producing children.

There is no way to tell definitively how many mixed-race children there are since many states no longer require that the parents' race be recorded on birth certificates. But census researchers estimate that, in 1990, nearly 2 million children resided in homes where the male and female household heads were of different races. That is about 4.1 percent of the children who lived in two-parent households—about double the 1 million such children in 1980, and more than four times the number in 1970. Similarly, of the 3.7 million black children who, in 1990, lived with two parents, 6.5 percent had a non-black parent in the household.

This kind of calculation is, of course, an imperfect way to gauge the number of mixed-race children because some children living with parents of different races may be adopted or may be stepchildren. But it seems clear that there has been a tremendous increase in the number of children being raised by adults of both races.

None of this signals a new morning in race relations. By our estimates, African Americans are substantially less likely to marry whites than are Hispanics, Asians or Native Americans, for example. Still, our findings suggest that positive change is in the air: It could mean that racism (at least on an interpersonal level) is declining, or that the relative "marriageability" of African Americans is rising as blacks make educational and economic gains, or that the races have more opportunity to mix—or a combination of the three. One thing is clear: The rise in interracial marriages is not consistent with the proposition that race relations are worsening.

There seems to be a strong, unambiguous trend toward integration within some American families—at a time when so many public figures are bemoaning a deterioration of race relations and a further separation of the races. Moreover, the sharp increase of earlier marriages between the races has already led to a rising number of children who call themselves "mixed"—and promises even more of these children in the very near future.

As these young people grow up and become more visible in society, they will become a new force in the race debate. It's already happening. One of us had a student, a light-skinned African American woman, who was the daughter of an interracial couple. One day in class, she delivered a defense of interracial adoptions during a discussion of that touchy issue. Another student, a dark-skinned African American man, snapped at her: "You wouldn't understand; you're not really black. Your mother is white."

The sting of the remark was evident in the look on her face. But she held her ground, dogged in her determination to stand up for herself and her parents' decision to marry and have children. Such young people, perhaps even more than their parents, may be the hope for the future of American race relations.

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