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# Trends in interracial unions in Brazil between 2002 and 2022: anything new?

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Using data from the *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios* for the years 2002, 2007, 2012, 2017, and 2022, this study analyzes the overall patterns of interracial unions in Brazil, considering regional differences and educational distance between partners. The objective is to analyze whether patterns of interracial unions have changed or remained consistent in a context of significant changes in racial relations, including the valorization of Black culture and the implementation of affirmative action policies. The findings indicate a stabilization in these rates during this period (about 30%) with no evidence of an increasing trend. However, important differences emerge when considering specific racial combinations, such as a rise in brown and black homogamy rates. Regional differences highlight the impact of local racial distribution and local specificities of racial classification and racial tolerance. Additionally, the data also provide evidence supporting the status exchange hypothesis, where the darker-skinned partner tends to have a higher educational level. However, this finding may not necessarily indicate an intentional trade but rather reflect how marital preferences operate and has been changing. These results are preliminary and descriptive, intended to generate hypotheses and underscore the need for further research on this topic.

Keywords: Interracial unions. Racial relations. Brazil.

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#### Introduction

Brazil is recognized for its high rates of interracial unions; however, this indicator does not necessarily reflect a racially blind society (Telles, 2004). Interracial couples are not fully accepted in society and often face racism from family, friends, and in public spaces (Schucman, 2018; Osuji, 2019; Tomás, 2024). Moreover, racial homogamy is generally preferred in the country, historically being stronger among Whites (Telles, 2004; Petruccelli, 2001; Longo, 2011). However, racial discussions in Brazilian society have gained prominence, shifting from a whitening perspective to a more diverse and inclusive one. We are currently living in a period where affirmative actions have been changing the life trajectories of many Black and Brown people, and we are also witnessing an increasing number of individuals self-identifying as Brown or Black (IBGE, 2023). Despite this progress, racial inequality persists, and racism remains pervasive across various aspects of life.

Racial relations in Brazil can be classified in two ways: vertical, which relates to social inequalities, such as racial disparities in the labor market, education, and health; and horizontal, which relates to the dynamics of social life, including friendships, family, and intimate relationships (Telles, 2004). In this context, I analyze interracial unions as a means of investigating the dynamics of horizontal racial relations between 2002 and 2022. During this period, significant events have occurred, such as *the Lei das Cotas* (2012), the surpassing of the Black and Brown population over the White population in the 2022 Census, and legislation mandating the inclusion of racial and ethnic discussions in elementary to high school curricula (2003). Therefore, it is important to examine whether these changes have affected intimate relationships, which are considered the ultimate step in overcoming racial barriers.

In this sense, the research aims to investigate patterns of interracial unions over the last twenty years and to examine what is happening when looking at specific racial pairings. Moreover, I question whether older explanations remain relevant for explaining this phenomenon. I focus on regional differences, following Telles (1993, 2004) and Tomás (2017), as well as on the educational differences between partners, known as the status exchange hypothesis (Davis, 1941; Merton, 1941). Specifically, I ask whether:

- in these 20 years, there has been an increase in interracial unions due to the higher acceptability of these types of unions in the country, influenced by racial changes and discussions in society;
- 2. in these 20 years, there has been an increase in Black and Brown homogamy rates due to the growing valorization of Blackness and changes in racial self-identification;
- 3. geographical differences remain important in Brazil, given the differences in tolerance and racial distribution;
- 4. schooling patterns observed among interracial unions have changed due to the increased education levels, especially among women.

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## Data

The data are drawn from the annual *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios* (PNAD) for the years 2002, 2007, and 2012, as well as from the annual *Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios Contínua* (PNAD Contínua) for the years 2017 and 2022. I analyzed couples who lived together as the head of the household and their partner, regardless of whether they were in a formal union or cohabiting, since marital status information is not available in the datasets. The age range for both partners is between 20 and 34 years old. Spouses in this age range are more likely to be in their first marriage, reducing the potential effects of characteristics associated with second or higher-order marriages (Mare, 1991; Kalmijn, 1998; Qian, 1997). However, this is not a consensus in the literature; Blackwell and Lichter (2004) did not find substantive differences in terms of racial assortative mating between higher-order and first marriages. I considered Black, Brown, and White individuals, and defined mixed unions as any combination among these three categories. All analyses accounted for the complex stratified sample design.

It is worth noting that, while the questions about race are consistent across both surveys, their sampling designs differ in important ways. PNAD Contínua uses a larger sample and provides better coverage of metropolitan areas. Both employ multi-stage cluster sampling, but their cluster definitions vary. These differences may limit the comparability of data over time, emphasizing the need to validate trends with additional data sources. One possible approach is to use the 2022 Census data, once available, to confirm the patterns.

## **Results and discussion**

In this research note, I focused on a descriptive analysis to briefly discuss the four specific objectives presented above. The purpose of this discussion is to provide evidence for each objective and to encourage further investigation.

## Objectives 1 and 2

The interracial union rate among couples aged 20 to 24 years old was 28.85% in 2002. This rate experienced a slight increase to 35.90% in 2007, but then remained relatively stable: 32.48% in 2012, 32.85% in 2017, and 33.52% in 2022. Thus, there is no evidence of an increasing trend in interracial unions. As already noted, caution is needed when interpreting results due to sampling differences between PNAD and PNAD Contínua. Thus,

these observations may be best understood as indicating stability in interracial unions over the analyzed period. In this context, other sources (Telles, 2004; Ribeiro; Silva, 2009; Beltrão; Sugahara; Teixeira, 2012) show that intermarriage in Brazil increased steadily from 1960 to 2000 and has remained stable at around 30% since the early 2000s.

Graph 1 illustrates the patterns for each couple based on the gender-race combination. The most common interracial couples are formed by a Brown man and a White woman (represented by the red line in the graph). However, over time, the proportion of couples formed by a White man and a Brown woman has become nearly equal. It is worth highlighting that in 2002 same-race White couples were the most common (36.68%), however, starting in 2012 couples with both partners identifying as Brown became the most prevalent group (33.97%) (Graph 1). Therefore, while the overall interracial union rate remained stable from 2012 to 2022, there was an increase in Black and Brown homogamy between 2002 and 2022, rising from 2.52% to 4.92% and from 28.95% to 33.97%, respectively. Additionally, there was a decrease in White endogamy, from 39.68% in 2002 to 26.46% in 2022. Other important changes include a slight decrease in White-Brown couples (from 22.92% to 20.22%) and an increase in Black couples (from 2.85% to 6.25%). These changes over a decade indicate an increase in Black and Brown homogamy, as stated in objective two, with Brown-Brown couples becoming more common than White-White couples.

Since the overall racial homogamy and heterogamy rates remained steady over time, and the observed changes are related to specific racial combinations, one possible explanation for these shifts is racial self-reclassification. It is known that racial classification is associated with various factors, particularly income, education, and the political environment (Bailey, 2008; Schwarzman, 2007; Silveira; Tomás, 2019), and that people may change their racial classification over time (Muniz *et al.*, 2023). It is important to emphasize that this period was marked by significant shifts in racial relations, which intensified public debate, including the impact of affirmative action policies and the Black movement's efforts to promote Black cultural pride.

Another possible explanation is that, within this context of social transformation and heightened racial awareness, individuals may have shifted their marital preferences, resulting in an increase in Black and Brown homogamy. This raises the question of whether the apparent stability in interracial union rates truly reflects a lack of impact from broader societal shifts in racial awareness. Differences among racial groups could offer valuable insights into these changes. While one might expect higher rates of intermarriage due to increasing acceptance and racial tolerance in Brazilian society, the effect may instead be a shift in how Black and Brown individuals select partners and how their communities become more cohesive. This shift is particularly relevant given the historical influence of "whitening" ideals on mate selection. Further research is needed to clarify these results and test both hypotheses, especially since interracial unions are often viewed as a means of crossing racial boundaries and as part of an assimilation process.



GRAPH 1 Proportion of unions considering partners' race

Source: IBGE. PNAD, 2002, 2007, 2012. PNAD Contínua 2017, 2022.

#### **Objective 3 – Regional differences**

There are two main hypotheses to explain regional differences in interracial union rates. The first is associated with regional variations in racial tolerance. As reviewed by Telles (2004), some authors have found that racial tolerance is greater in the North than in the South (e.g., Frazier, 1942; Azevedo, 1996). Other researchers have argued that intermarriage is undesirable across all regions of Brazil (e.g., Degler, 1986). The second explanation relates to local racial distribution. Telles (1993, 2004) and Tomás (2017) have shown that local racial distribution partially explains the differences in interracial union rates, but not entirely.

Overall, the South region has the lowest rates of interracial unions, at about 17.7% in 2002 and 22.48% in 2022. The Midwest and Southeast regions had the highest rates in 2022, at approximately 38% and 37%, respectively. Between 2002 and 2022, there was a slight increase in the Northeast (from 32.65% to 34.54%) and a decrease in the North (from 35.65% to 28.98%), which had the second-highest rate in 2002. There are important regional differences when considering specific racial pairings (Graph 2). White-White couples are most prevalent in the South and Southeast regions, while Brown-Brown couples have higher rates in the other three regions.

In addition to differences in the overall levels of interracial union rates, distinct trends are observed across regions. For instance, in the Northeast, the percentage of couples formed by a White woman and a Black man increased over time, while it decreased in the South and North regions. Another example is the stability in the rates of couples formed by a White man and a Brown woman in the South, compared to a decline in the North and a slight increase in the Southeast.

The differences in the levels of interracial union rates among regions may indicate the influence of racial distribution. For example, in the case of White-White couples, the higher prevalence of White individuals in the South likely contributes to the greater number of such couples in this region. However, there are also differences in the patterns of racial homogamy and heterogamy, which can be explained by local specificities in racial classification (both self-identification and classification by others) and local racial tolerance. One example is the trend of couples formed by a Black man and a White woman, which declined in the South but increased in the Northeast. Another example is the case of Black-Black couples, which increased in the North and Northeast regions, with a slight increase in the Midwest. Additionally, the impact of differing sampling plans cannot be overlooked, particularly given PNAD Contínua's improved coverage of metropolitan areas, where higher intermarriage rates are often observed. Regional differences in intermarriage rates have also been well-documented in the literature (Telles, 1993; Tomás, 2017).



Source: IBGE. PNAD, 2002, 2007, 2012. PNAD Contínua 2017, 2022.

#### Objective 4: The role of education

Education has often been treated as a measure of status exchange in the marriage market. The status exchange theory, formulated by Davis (1941) and Merton (1941), argues that for a Black or Brown partner to marry a White partner, they would need to trade a characteristic with higher status, such as having a higher educational level than their White partner. The Brazilian literature provides mixed evidence for this framework. Silva (1987) found no consistent findings to support the status exchange hypothesis through education, suggesting that this trade-off only works in the case of White men marrying Black, not Brown, women. Telles (2004) found evidence of an educational advantage, measured by years of schooling, for the darker-skinned partner, except in cases where White women married Brown men. Ribeiro and Silva (2009) analyzed the relationship between race and education in marital preferences and found that the increase in interracial marriage between 1960 and 2000 was independent of the rise in educational levels, indicating that education and race form distinct marriage markets. Other scholars have proposed additional trade-offs within interracial couples, such as beauty/sexuality (Burdick, 1998); religion (Longo, 2011); and unpaid housework (Grossbard-Shechtman, 1981, 1984; Tomás, 2012).

First, I analyzed the proportion of couples where both partners have the same level of education, where men have higher education than women, and where women have higher education than men, for each type of couple considering gender-race combinations. The results show that educational homogamy is prevalent for both interracial and same-race couples. The only pattern that stands out is for couples formed by a Black man and a White woman. From 2007 onwards, among Black man and White woman couples there was an increase in the proportion of couples with the same level of education, and a decrease in the proportion of couples with the same level of education than the woman. This change was likely due to the increase in education attainment within the Black population, although the same pattern is not observed among couples formed by a White man and a Black woman.

Another way to analyze this objective is by examining years of schooling, as presented in Table 1. There is evidence that Black women in relationships with White men tend to have higher education levels than Black women in relationships with Black or Brown men in 2022. This contrasts with the situation in 2002, when there was no significant difference in years of schooling between Black women in relationships with White or Black men. White women in relationships with Black or Brown partners tend to have lower education levels than White women in relationships with White men.

While some authors might interpret these findings as evidence supporting the status exchange hypothesis, it is important to consider an alternative interpretation. The higher education levels among Black partners may reflect marriage market dynamics, where Whites are the most preferred group. Thus, individuals with higher education levels are more likely to pair with similarly educated Whites first. Black individuals who form relationships with White partners may have had greater access to White spaces and higher education, while less-educated Black individuals, who are less preferred in the marriage market, are less likely to form such unions. Therefore, differences in partners' years of schooling may simply indicate how the marriage market operates, rather than suggesting a specific exchange between partners. Additionally, changes such as the observed differences in education among Black women in relationships with White men may also reflect the overall increase in educational attainment within the Black population.

A) Worr	nen's years o	f schooling ·	- 2002		B) Wom	en's years o	fschooling	- 2022	
		Women					Women		
		White	Brown	Black			White	Brown	Black
	White	9.79	8.04	7.39		White	13.17	11.98	12.19
Men	Brown	7.84	7.91	8.03	Men	Brown	11.74	11.18	11.61
	Black	8.61	7.29	7.96		Black	12.00	11.26	11.36
C) Men'	's years of sc	hooling – 2	002 Women		D) Men'	s years of so	hooling – 2	022 Women	
C) Men'	's years of sc	hooling – 2  White		Black	D) Men'	s years of sc	hooling – 2  White		Black
C) Men'	's years of sc White		Women	<b>Black</b> 6.45	D) Men'	s years of so White		Women	<b>Black</b> 11.94
C) Men' Men	,	White	Women Brown		D) Men		White	Women Brown	

#### TABLE 1 Education level comparison by partners' race Brazil – 2002-2022

Source: IBGE. PNAD, 2002 e PNADC 2022.

## **Discussion and final remarks**

The preliminary results reveal a dual dynamic. On one hand, certain interracial characteristics have changed over time, such as the increase in Brown and Black homogamy rates. On the other hand, the findings also reinforce previous discussions, including regional differences and the tendency for the darker-skinned partner to have higher educational levels. However, it is important to highlight that Brazilian society has been experiencing significant transformations in racial relations, and therefore, traditional discussions may require different approaches.

It is crucial to consider the overall rise in educational attainment, the implementation of affirmative action policies, and the influence of the Black movement in promoting the valorization of Black culture, all of which may lead to changes in racial classification (both self-identification and classification by others), individuals' racial marital preferences, and regional racial tolerance that may better explain the emerging and previous patterns in interracial unions. Consequently, further research is essential for a deeper understanding of racial dynamics in partner choice within this new context, challenging outdated explanations for persistent issues. Future research should consider incorporating additional analytical tools, such as standardization, log-linear modeling, and multivariate analysis, to better assess observed patterns and test the proposed hypotheses.

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#### Resumo

#### Tendências das uniões inter-raciais no Brasil entre 2002 e 2022: o que há de novo?

Usando dados da Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios de 2002, 2007, 2012, 2017 e 2022, o estudo analisa o padrão geral das uniões inter-raciais no Brasil, considerando diferenças regionais e a distância educacional entre os parceiros. O objetivo é analisar se os padrões de uniões inter-raciais mudaram ou permaneceram os mesmos em um contexto de muitas mudanças nas relações raciais, como a valorização da cultura negra e as ações afirmativas. O resultado geral demonstra que houve um aumento nas taxas de uniões inter-raciais até 2002, sendo que após esse período as taxas se mantiveram estáveis. Existem diferenças importantes nas taxas quando se consideram combinações raciais específicas, como o aumento da homogamia de pardos e de pretos. As diferenças regionais indicam o efeito da distribuição racial local e das diferenças regionais com relação à classificação racial e à tolerância racial. Os dados também apresentam evidências que corroboram a hipótese de troca de *status*, na qual o parceiro de cor mais escura tende a ter um nível educacional mais alto. No entanto, ressalta-se que isso pode não indicar uma troca intencional, mas sim um resultado de como as preferências matrimoniais funcionam. Os resultados são preliminares e descritivos, podendo apenas levantar algumas hipóteses e reafirmar a necessidade de mais pesquisas sobre o tema.

Palavras-chave: Uniões inter-raciais. Relações raciais. Brasil.

#### Resumen

#### Tendencias de las uniones interraciales en Brasil entre 2002 y 2022: ¿qué hay de nuevo?

A partir de datos de la Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios de 2002, 2007, 2012, 2017 y 2022, este estudio explora los patrones generales de las uniones interraciales en Brasil, teniendo en cuenta las diferencias regionales y la distancia en el nivel de educación dentro de las parejas. El objetivo es analizar si los patrones de uniones interraciales han cambiado o se han mantenido consistentes en un contexto de cambios significativos en las relaciones raciales, como la valorización de la cultura negra y la implementación de acciones afirmativas. Los resultados indican una estabilización de estas tasas durante este período (cerca de 30 %) y no muestran evidencia de una tendencia creciente en las uniones interraciales Hay diferencias notables al considerar combinaciones raciales específicas como el aumento de las tasas de homogamia entre individuos afrodescendientes. Las diferencias regionales destacan el impacto de la distribución racial y las especificidades locales de la clasificación y la tolerancia racial. Los datos también proporcionan evidencia que apoya la hipótesis del intercambio de estatus, según la cual el integrante de la pareja de piel más oscura tiende a tener un nivel educativo más alto. Sin embargo, esto no indica necesariamente un intercambio intencional, sino que refleja cómo funcionan las preferencias matrimoniales. Estos resultados son preliminares y descriptivos, y sirven para generar hipótesis y subrayar la necesidad de más investigaciones sobre el tema.

Palabras clave: Uniones interraciales. Relaciones raciales. Brasil.

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