

Mixed marriages in Australia

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This article is based on the marriage registration collection, which provides data on the birthplaces of brides and grooms and of their parents. Although less than ideal, this information does give some insight into cultural diversity within marriages. The data is limited because it does not include de-facto marriages, and because marriages involving Indigenous people cannot be separately identified. It should also be noted that many aspects of ethnic origin or cultural diversity can not be directly derived from birthplace information, because in some countries there is a mix of different ethnic groups, and because some ethnic groups form part of the population in more than one country.

For this review, all Australians are grouped into one of three categories, according to where they, or their parent(s), were born. They have also been assigned to a particular birthplace group, corresponding to their country of birth or that of their parent(s):

- Overseas-born - people born overseas who have migrated to Australia. Their birthplace group is their country of birth;
- Second-generation - those born in Australia with at least one parent born overseas. Their birthplace group is assigned to the country of birth of their father if both parents were born overseas, or to that of the overseas-born parent if only one was born overseas; and
- Long-time Australians - in the absence of a more suitable term, this category includes those who were born in Australia and whose parents were also born in Australia.

Based on these groupings, this review defines mixed marriages as marriages between people from different birthplace groups. These marriages may or may not be inter-generational. Specifically, such marriages are those of:

- a long-time Australian with an overseas-born or second-generation Australian partner;
- two overseas-born people from different birthplace groups; and
- two second generation people from different birthplace groups;
- an overseas-born person and a second- generation person from different birthplace groups.

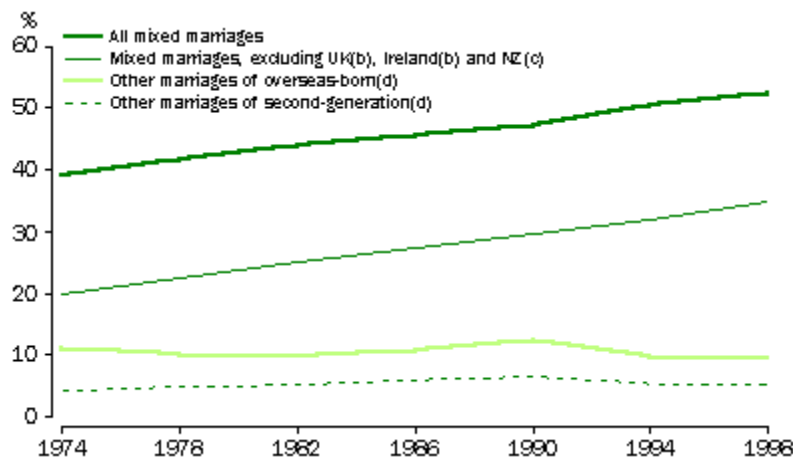
Australia is one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world.¹ Together, its Indigenous peoples and people of many other ethnic origins have provided a rich cultural environment in many ways: through language, religion, the arts, sport and many other beliefs and activities. The extent of cultural diversity has widened since the inception of the post-war immigration program in 1945; between 1945 and 1998, 5.7 million immigrants have made Australia their home.² Most have come from the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland, but, over time, immigrants have come from a wider range of countries, including other European countries and, in more recent decades, New Zealand and parts of Asia and South America. (For more detail on birthplace origins see the Australian Bureau of Statistics publications *Australian Social Trends 1998, Changes in immigration intake*, and *Australian Social Trends 1997, Birthplace of overseas-born Australians*).

There are two dimensions (not necessarily conflicting) to cultural diversity: preservation of cultural identity; and integration with the local community. On the one hand, preservation of cultural identity can enrich a community's tastes and values and expand their collective experiences and knowledge. On the other hand, a high degree of integration can strengthen ties between different groups and foster a sense of belonging. Common perceptions are that people from some cultural backgrounds have a greater propensity to integrate, while others have a strong commitment to preserving their identity, even among their second generation.

One way of viewing the degree of integration of people with different cultural backgrounds into the wider community is through their tendency to marry outside their own religious group (see ABS, *Australian Social Trends 1994, Religion and marriage*). Another, the focus of this article, is the extent of intermarriage between birthplace groups.

Social and demographic characteristics among immigrants differ and affect the extent to which they form mixed marriages (outside their birthplace group - see box) or marriages within their own birthplace group. For example, factors such as the continual supply of immigrants from the same birthplace group (migration flow), their period of residence, age, religion and language all contribute to the opportunity for persons to marry within their own grouping, or to choose a partner of another.

MIXED AND OTHER MARRIAGES IN AUSTRALIA 1974-1998(a)



(a) Mixed and other marriages as a proportion of all registered marriages in each stated year.

(b) Data for UK and Ireland not separately available.

(c) Excludes mixed marriages involving people from these birthplace groups (see box).

(d) Includes overseas-born/second-generation same country marriages.

Source: ABS Unpublished data, Marriage Registrations, 1974-1998 (selected years only).

Trends in mixed marriages

Overall, between 1974-1998, the proportion of marriages in any year in Australia which were mixed marriages has been steadily increasing. In 1974, 39 per cent of all marriages registered in Australia were between people from different birthplace groups. By 1998 this proportion had increased to just over half of all marriages (52 per cent).

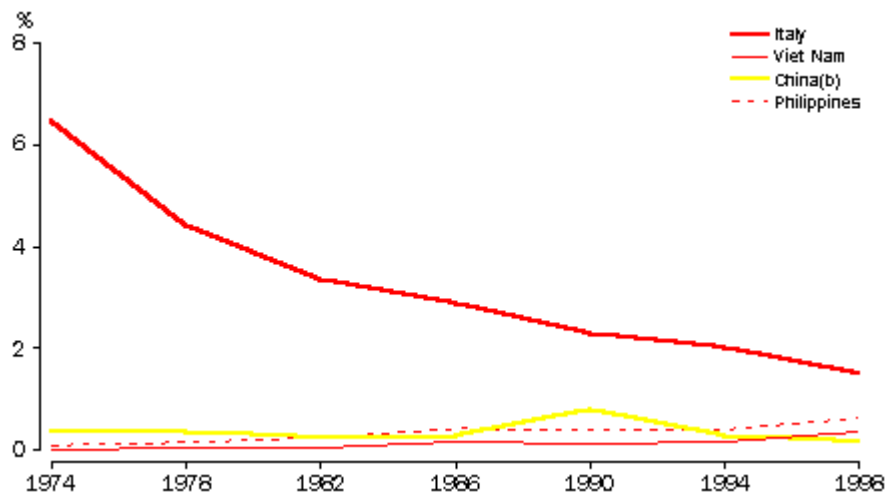
The main birthplace groups contributing to the overall number of mixed marriages were the UK, Ireland and New Zealand, as the great majority of past and present immigrants have come from these countries. Moreover, since Australia's first settlement in 1788, there have been close ties between Australia and the UK and Ireland (and later New Zealand), through a common language and from sharing many traditions, beliefs and practices. In 1974, mixed marriages from these two groups together constituted 25 per cent of all marriages; by 1998 the proportion had increased to 29 per cent.

The rise in mixed marriages has been even and steady throughout the period, even when marriages of people with a UK, Ireland or New Zealand birthplace group are excluded from the calculations. However, the overall trend has masked a number of underlying trends for particular birthplace groups; trends which tend to mirror their different arrival patterns. For example, for brides and grooms born in Italy there were relatively high proportions of marriages to long-time Australians early in the period. In contrast, marriages of brides born in China and Viet Nam (who represent more recent settlers to Australia) to long-time Australians rose towards the end of the period. For China, there was a peak around 1990, possibly associated with the extensions to visas and the granting of residence status for Chinese students in Australia, following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.^{3,4}

Marriages of brides born in the Philippines to long-time Australians rose very sharply from 1978, peaked in 1986, and have remained high, despite a dip in the early 1990s. This was in sharp contrast to marriages of grooms born in the Philippines to long-time Australians.

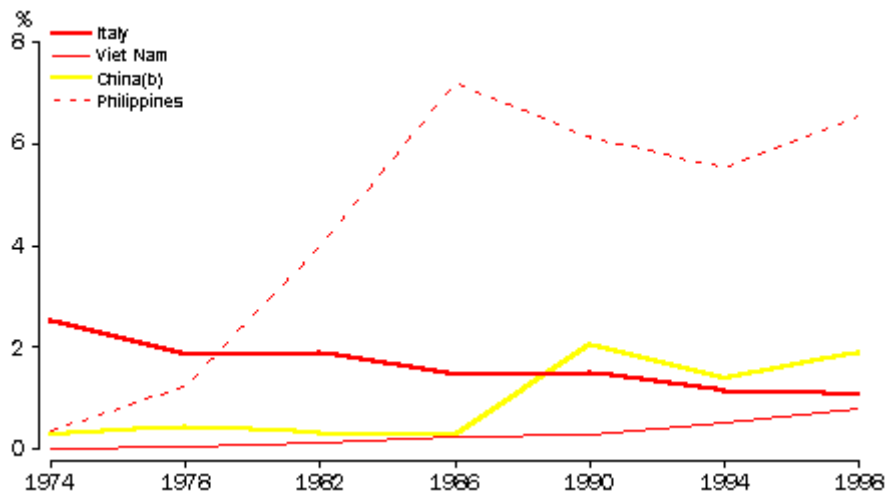
There has also been an increase in marriages between second-generation and long-time Australians, making up 16% of all marriages in 1974, rising to 21% in 1998. These have occurred with the maturing of people whose parents had migrated to Australia during the post-war period. It has been a consistent feature that marriages within the same birthplace group involving only second-generation Australians made up a smaller proportion of marriages than those involving only overseas-born people over the period.

OVERSEAS-BORN GROOMS MARRYING LONG-TIME AUSTRALIANS(a)



(a) As a proportion of all overseas-born grooms marrying long-time Australians.
 (b) Excludes Taiwan.

Source: ABS Unpublished data, Marriage Registrations, 1974-1998 (selected years only).



(a) As a proportion of all overseas-born brides marrying long-time Australians.
 (b) Excludes Taiwan province.

Source: ABS Unpublished data, Marriage Registrations, 1974-1998 (selected years only).

Recent marriage patterns of overseas-born Australians

There were 76,200 brides and 81,400 grooms born overseas in the three-year period 1996-98. Across all of these marriages, around 30 per cent, for both brides and grooms, were between partners in the same birthplace group. The other 70 per cent were mixed marriages, comprising about 30 per cent of marriages with long-time Australians and 40 per cent with other people from a different birthplace group. Overall, overseas-born brides were marginally more likely than overseas-born grooms to have married within their birthplace group.

However, there was large variation among individual birthplace groups in the extent of mixed marriages of overseas-born Australians. For example, there was a strong tendency for people born in the Netherlands to marry a partner who was a long-time Australian (over 40 per cent of brides and grooms in each case).

Brides and grooms born in Viet Nam, Greece, China, Lebanon, Hong Kong and the Former Yugoslav Republic, and grooms born in the Philippines, were the least likely to marry long-time Australians. Brides and grooms born in Viet Nam and China, brides born in Lebanon, and grooms born in the Philippines, were the most likely to have married within their own birthplace group.

There were also strong tendencies for brides born in Italy, Greece, Malaysia and the Former Yugoslav Republic, and grooms born in Italy, Greece, Lebanon and the Former Yugoslav Republic, to form a mixed marriage with a partner who was not a long-time Australian.

For most birthplaces the general patterns were quite similar for brides and grooms, with one notable exception. Nearly one

third (32 per cent) of brides born in the Philippines married long-time Australian grooms. In contrast, only 9 per cent of grooms born in the Philippines married long-time Australians.

Recent marriage patterns of second-generation Australians

There were more marriages of second-generation brides (88,100) and grooms (86,600) than there were of overseas-born people in the same three-year period. Marriage patterns among this group differed from those of overseas-born people. These differences were more marked for some birthplace groups than for others.

A larger proportion of these marriages (80 per cent each of brides and grooms) were mixed marriages than was the case for overseas-born people. These mixed marriages were evenly divided between those marrying long-time Australians and those marrying other people outside their birthplace group.

For nearly every birthplace group listed, second-generation Australians had a greater propensity to marry long-time Australians than did overseas-born Australians. Exceptions were brides from the Philippines, where the proportion was much lower, and brides and grooms from New Zealand, where the proportions were slightly lower. For some birthplace groups, notably Viet Nam, China, the Federal Republic of Germany, India, Hong Kong, Poland, and the Former Yugoslav Republic, this difference was very marked.

In addition, over half of second-generation brides and grooms with at least one parent born in New Zealand, Viet Nam, China, Philippines, India, Malaysia, Hong Kong or Poland, married someone from a different birthplace group other than a long-time Australian. For all of these birthplace groups the proportion doing so was much greater than for the corresponding group of overseas-born people.

In general, second-generation brides and grooms were equally likely to marry within their own birthplace group. The most notable exception was those from the Philippines, where grooms were nearly four times as likely as brides to have done so. Second-generation brides and grooms from the birthplace groups of Italy, Greece, Lebanon and the Former Yugoslav Republic stood out as having the greatest propensity to marry within their birthplace group.

Second-generation brides and grooms from Lebanon, and brides from Viet Nam and the Philippines, were the least likely to marry a long-time Australian partner.

Mixed marriages of Indigenous people

Although it is not possible to identify marriages involving Indigenous people on marriage registration forms, the extent to which Indigenous people have been forming mixed marriages can be obtained using census data. Census data gives information about all couples (including registered and de facto marriages) in Australia. Indigenous people are those who have identified themselves as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin in response to census questions.

In 1991, 57 per cent of all couples involving an Indigenous person were mixed (that is, only one partner was Indigenous). However, the extent of mixed marriages for Indigenous people appears to be increasing. By 1996, this proportion had increased to 64 per cent.

In over half (55 per cent) of all Indigenous couples in 1996, in which only one partner was Indigenous, that partner was the woman.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics www.abs.gov.au

Endnotes

1 Swiss Federal Statistical Office 1998, *Monitoring Multicultural Societies: A Siena Group Report*, SFSO, Neuchatel.

2 Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, home page, <<http://www.immi.gov.au>>, (Accessed 22 March 1999).

3 Birrell, R. 1995, 'Policy implications of recent migration patterns', *People and Place*, vol. 3, no. 4: 32-40.

4 Martin, B.G. 1989, 'China in Crisis. The events of April-June 1989', *Current Issues Paper* no. 1, 1989-90, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra.