LOVE ISN'T ALWAYS BLACK AND WHITE:

UNDERSTANDING BLACK-WHITE INTERRACIAL COUPLES,

THEIR CHALLENGES, AND THEIR DYADIC COMMUNICATION

A Dissertation

by

MISTY MICHELLE WILSON

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2008

Major Subject: Communication

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Chair of Committee,	Antonio La Pastina
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ABSTRACT

Love Isn't Always Black and White: Understanding Black-White Interracial Couples,

Their Challenges, and Their Dyadic Communication. (May 2008)

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While a great deal of sociological and psychological research has been done on black-white interracial couples and the challenges they have faced in past eras, the communication between the partners remains largely under-explored and under-theorized. The purpose of this dissertation is two-fold. First, this dissertation seeks to understand what challenges interracial couples face today. Second, this dissertation also explores the communication surrounding these challenges, communication both within the couple and communication between the couple and their social networks.

To explore these challenges and the resulting communication, 14 black-white interracial couples were interviewed in depth. Results showed that interracial couples often still face messages of disapproval from their families. Black families and white families sometimes disapproved for similar reasons; however, black families and white families had several concerns that were markedly different from each other and were tied to the history of race relations in the US.

Further, results showed that partners in interracial relationship underwent identity transformations as they learned to navigate an intimate relationship with a "racial other." Whites reported learning the most. Because of their privileged position in society, whites life situations had never had necessitated that they learn about the black co-culture. The black partners also reported seeing the white community differently by understanding the nuances of racism at a deeper level because of their "outsider within" position in white families.

Finally, results suggested that couples grapple with balancing the dialectic between embracing race in the relationship and rejecting race in the relationship. Couples reject race, arguing that other differences are more important to their relationship. Couples embrace race when they talk about issues of identity such as their individual identities, their identity as a couple, and—when they had children-- their identity as a family. Further analysis demonstrate two different strategies couples use to manage the embracing race-rejecting race dialectic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Antonio LaPastina, for his continual support and encouragement. Thank you for always picking up the phone when I called. Perhaps you were hiding, but if so, I never suspected it. Whether I was proud of myself, completely beside myself, frustrated with myself, at a loss for how to continue, or all of the above, you were there. Amazingly, I always hung up the phone feeling like I could do this. I will always consider you a friend.

Thank you, also, to members of my committee, Drs. Barbara Sharf, Rick Street, and Carolyn Clark, without whom I could never have written this dissertation. Barbara, thanks for getting me started on this journey. Also, thanks for being my healthcare advocate when I had my many bizarre health episodes. (Remember when I called to tell you my face was paralyzed due to stress? Ha.) Thanks also for sharing Toby stories and listening to Madeline stories. Ranger Rick, thank you for advice when I just popped in your office and asked out-of-context dissertation questions, expecting immediate answers. Come to think of it, given the spatial arrangement of your office, you were trapped, but no matter... I truly admire your patient guidance and leadership skills. Carolyn, you are such a role model for me. You have a remarkable gift for asking thoughtful hard questions and then helping me answer them. I have found myself in recent months as a new professor trying to emulate how you interact with students. Dorsey, although you are not an official committee member, I am tremendously grateful for the conversations we had that helped me process this study and my life. Thanks.

Thanks to my wonderful friends! Ravi, thanks for being you. I am thankful that our paths crossed. The intercultural moments in our friendship have taught me more than anything else ever could have. Thanks for being supportive, for listening to me, for teaching to me that real friends need not say "I'm sorry" or "Thank you." [Note the irony here.] Jen, thanks for the daily phone calls. They have really kept me going. Thanks for teaching me how to be real and embrace life's messiness. Laurie, thanks for calmly saying, "Yes, you can," when I run into your office and yell, "I can't do this." It's simple, but it works. David, thanks for being there from my Masters through my Doctorate and believing in me every step of the journey. Ron, you may never read this, but I would be remiss without thanking you for everything. Thanks also to my family. You supported me and helped me reach my dream. Thanks for not killing me when I quit my job and went back to graduate school. Finally, you can announce to the guys at work and the ladies at the local beauty parlor that "She's not in school anymore!" Ha.

Miss Madeline! What a delight you are to me! You are truly my little buddy. Without your furry, four-legged self, I would surely have lost my sanity. Dogs are, indeed, the best teachers of unconditional love. Thanks for always being excited to see me. Even when I neglected playing with you and typed relentlessly at my computer, you never ceased to lay Purple Tiger at my feet and patiently wait. You have taught me invaluable lessons over the last 3 years: 1) Sometimes, you MUST growl at mean people. 2) Let NO ONE, not even your best friend, near your food. Food is more important than anything else in life, especially when it's fried. 3) Sometimes, one just needs to play with one's whole heart, mind, and body. If you break something, oh well.

Thanks to the couples who allowed me to enter their lives. Your candor and self-disclosure made this project so much fun and so meaningful to me. You taught me so much. Last, I would like to thank "The Presence." I am not sure what the Presence is, but I most definitely feel that my life has been somehow guided. I am starting to trust life's way of unfolding, whatever that means.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In 2002, Sony Pictures produced *Guess Who,* a remake of the 1967 classic *Guess*

Who's Coming to Dinner (Columbia Pictures). In the remake, a black woman named

Theresa is engaged to a white man named Simon. Theresa is taking Simon to meet her

parents for the first time. On the cab ride to her parent's home, the following

conversation [abridged here] ensues among Theresa, Simon, and their cab driver, who

happens to be black:

Simon: [Nervously] Did you tell them?

Theresa: Tell them what?

Simon: Did you tell them, that I'm, uh, um, uh, you know… 'pigment-
challenged?' White?

Theresa: You're white? You're white?!!! Stop the car! [She then laughs
hysterically.]

Simon: So, did you tell them?

Theresa: I only tell them things that matter. I didn't mention it because I don't
think it's going to matter.

Cab Driver: Oh, it's gonna matter. It's gonna matter.

Black-white interracial couples are somewhat of a rarity in the US.   For

example, in the 2000 census, 2,669,558 interracial marriages were reported. However,

black-white marriages only account for 335,308 or about twelve percent of those

marriages (www.census.gov). Most of the states in the US at one time had laws banning

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This dissertation follows the style of *The Howard Journal of Communications*.

black-white marriage (Newbeck, 2004). Though the laws are gone (the last one repudiated in Alabama in 2000), the taboo surrounding black-white romantic relationships persists (Ex. Foeman & Nance, 2002; Kennedy, 2003; Luke, 1994; Rosenblatt et al, 1995).

Black-white romance seemingly evokes certain race-related tensions within the relationship. The excerpt I opened with illustrates several tensions. Individuals in the black-white couple sometimes experience challenges with one or both of the couple's families (Craig-Henderson, 2006; Rosenblatt et al., 1995). Simon is extremely nervous about meeting Theresa's family because he is white and they are not. He does not know how this black family will feel about his relationship with their daughter, particularly about his becoming their son-in-law. The cab driver affirms Simon's fears by stating, "Yes, the fact that you're white is going to matter to her family." The cab driver's comment also attests to a larger challenge interracial couples can face, challenges with the larger racial community. Considerable opposition to interracial couples exists in both the white and black communities (Rosenblatt et al, 1995). The cab driver's comment reflects the current sentiment of a large percentage of African-Americans and whites who say, "Yes, race still matters." Simon and Theresa's conversation also highlights the issue of race just between the two people in the couple. For Simon, who is white, race has probably only recently become a salient facet of his identity because of the invisible nature of whiteness in the U.S. Theresa, however, states that his whiteness is "not important." People in interracial relationships often wrestle with issues of their

identity related to their race and ethnicity (Foeman & Nance, 2002; Luke, 1994; Rosenblatt et al., 1995).

Noticing these challenges in popular culture, scholarly literature, and personal experience has led me to specific questions about interracial relationships. The two overarching questions that guide this dissertation are: 1) What race-related challenges do interracial couples face in their relationship, and 2) How do these couples communicate about and negotiate these challenges. Specifically, I will look at how interracial couples navigate challenges involving their families, their race communities, and their identities. In this introductory chapter, I will first consider the rationale for the study. Second, I will review the existing literature on interracial couples and then articulate more specific research questions. Next, I will define the key concepts of my study. Finally, I will conclude with the theoretical frameworks that guide my inquiry. Now, I turn to the rationale for this study.

Rationale for the Study

Many types of interracial relationships exist. By that, I mean that the term "interracial couple" represents a myriad of race and ethnicity combinations, such as Hispanic/African, White/Native American, Asian/African-American; the list could go on. In this particular study, I am choosing to focus on white and black couples. I am choosing this narrow focus on black-white relationships for two main reasons: Because of 1) the increasing prevalence of these bi-racial relationships in American society and 2) the social taboos still surrounding these relationships.

Black-white relationships are steadily increasing in number in the US (www.census.gov). Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1990) reported that interracial marrying between blacks and whites rose right after the Emancipation, peaked around 1900, and declined until 1940. From 1940 until now, the rate of interracial marriage has been steadily climbing. Statistics corroborate Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan's reports. In 1980, census data reported 121,000. In the 2000 Census, that number has more than doubled to over 330,000 (www.census.gov). The most common black-white couple is the black male and white female with 239,477 marriages reported in the 2000 census, as opposed to the 95,831 white male and black female marriages. However, trends show that the white male-black female number is on the rise (www.census.gov). Also, we must remember that the Census number only includes married couples. It does not reflect the large number of dating and co-habiting couples (Foeman & Nance, 2002).

Interestingly enough, although black-white marriage has been on the rise, it is still the smallest category of interracial marriage (Feagin 2001; Staples, 1999).   Staples (1999) writes that "only between blacks and whites has intermarriage remained such a rare practice as to still be regarded as socially deviant behavior" (p. 129). Many researchers argue that marriages are microcosms of the larger society and can be used as a measurement tool for race relations (Gordon, 1964; Lewis, Yancey & Bletzer 1997). Sociologists say that the relatively low number of black-white intermarriages is indicative of the strained relationship between the black and white communities (Feagin, 2001; Staples, 1999). These researchers compare black-white relations with other ethnic relations such as Asian-White and Native American-White relations. While in other

groups researchers argue that intermarriage is no longer a novelty, this is not the case with black-white relationships. In this respect, considering black-white marriages can give scholars insights into race relations on both micro and macro scales. We can surmise that black-white relations, while better than in the past, still have a long way to go.

Perhaps a more pressing reason than the numbers for specifically considering black-white couples is the taboo resulting from the long history of black-white race relations in the US. If we look at the history of race relations in the United States, no two groups have been more dichotomized than whites and blacks. Researchers (Feagin, 2001; Foeman & Nance, 1999) have suggested that people have a race continuum in their minds. On this continuum, they place blacks at one end and whites at the other. Porterfield (1982) writes that "no other mixture touches off such widespread condemnation as black-white mixing" (p. 17). Feagin (2001) aptly writes that

> white-on-black oppression is in several respects the archetype of racial oppression in North America…African Americans were the only racial group specifically singled out several times in the US Constitution for subordination within the new nation. …A few decades later, white-on-black oppression would be central to the bloodiest war in U.S. history, the Civil War. Within American society, African Americans have been dominated and exploited in much larger numbers than has any other group. Over nearly four centuries, tens of millions of African Americans have had their labor and wealth regularly taken from them. In contrast to other groups, their original languages, cultures, and family ties

were substantially obliterated by their being torn from Africa, and the oppression

faced under slavery and segregation was extremely dehumanized, racialized, and

systematic. No other racially oppressed group has been so central to the internal

economic, political, and cultural structure and evolution of American society—or

to the often obsessively racist ideology developed by white Americans over

many generations (p. 3).

Popular culture attests to the taboo nature of black-white romantic relationships.

The central plot of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the 1967 classic, centers on how a

black man and white woman who fall in love with each other deal with the disapproval

of both of their families. The recent remake of this film, *Guess Who*, the movie from

which this paper's opening excerpt came, also has as its central plot how a white man

and black woman convince the woman's father to respect and appreciate their

relationship. (We also see evidence of the shift in focus to the more typical white male-

black female relationships when comparing these two films.) Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever*

(1991) also had as its central plot an affair between a white woman and black man and

how the existing racial tensions between the black and white communities negatively

impact the relationship. Indeed, some movies that depict interracial couples that are not

black-white (i.e. Hitch) do have as their central plot the development of these

relationships. However, more importantly, some do not (i.e. Training Day). However,

movies that star black-white couples *always* have the development of tensions in the

relationship as the central plot. The two cannot star romantically opposite each other in

a film and not become "the story itself." Now that I have considered the rationale for

studying black-white couples, including the statistical rarity, the persistent social taboos, and the popular culture attestations, I turn to a review of the literature.

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

The History of Interracial Relations

Researchers of interracial couples, arguably, cannot fully understand these relationships without considering their historical context. The ideas and narratives that guide our notions about black-white relationships date back to slavery. A look at history reveals narratives that surround both black male-white female and white male-black female relationships.

Slavery

Staples (1999) describes interracial relationships in the early days of slavery. Black men far outnumbered black women because men were more valuable for hard labor. Thus, a majority of the imported slaves were men. As a result of the disproportionate numbers, black male slaves and white female indentured servants had a fairly high rate of sexual relations. Relations between black slaves and white free women were fairly high as well. Originally, this relationship between the black slaves and the white free women was seen as profitable because any children that resulted would automatically be slaves. However, after a while, both of these types of relationships became so frequent that laws were passed against them (Feagin, 2001; Newman, 2004; Staples, 1999). According to Staples (1999) these laws, known as anti-miscegenation laws, reflected the assumption that white woman were "sexually pure," and were seen as "forbidden fruit."

A definite double standard existed when it came to black male-white female relationships and white male-black female relationships (Feagin, 2001; Staples 1999). White plantation owners routinely forced themselves on female black slaves without regard for the black female's person or womanhood. Cash (1960) and Dollard (1957) relay how white men were known to comment on exploiting black female's sexuality while protecting the white woman's sexuality. Literature conveys to us that many Southern men had their first sexual experience with a black female slave (Staples, 1999). The joke among many Southern white men was that "until they were married, they did not know that white women were capable of sexual intercourse" (Cash, 1960; Dollard 1957). The double standard that existed makes sense when we consider a comment by Staples (1999): "Interracial sex became a prerogative of the white man, a symbol of his authority and power. Relations between a white woman and a black man were an affront to the white man's power" (p. 130). For many whites, the taboo or fear of interracial relationships between blacks and whites comes from a fear of de-purifying the white race. (Feagin 2001; Staples 1999). Feagin (2001) quotes Benjamin Franklin saying "[W]hite amalgamation with the other color produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent" (p. 77).

Anti-miscegenation Laws

Although the rate of intermarriage between blacks and whites rose after the Emancipation, anti-miscegenation laws remained in effect (Newman, 2004). In fact, at one time or another in our nation's history, 40 out of the 50 states had laws banning

black-white marriage (Newman, 2004). Although numerous cases of the "crime" of

interracial marriage were tried in courts of law, one case in particular set the legal

precedent for the nation. According to Newman (2004), Richard Loving and Mildred

Jeter were Virginia citizens who fell in love with each other. He was white, and she was

black. Knowing Virginia's anti-miscegenation laws, the couple left Virginia to be

married in Washington, D.C. However, Virginia was home to the Lovings, so they

decided to return. It was only a matter of time before they were arrested. The Lovings

fought Virginia and lost. Virginia's Supreme Court Judge stated

> Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay, and red, and he
>
> placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his
>
> arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages.   (Newbeck, 2004, p.
>
> 144)

The Lovings then took their case to the Supreme Court.   In the 1967 Supreme Court

case *Loving vs. Virginia*, the Supreme Court ruled state bans on black-white

intermarriage unconstitutional.[1]

This court case came during the tumultuous civil rights era. Because of the High

Court's ruling and the many victories for people of color during the civil rights

movement, black-white interracial marriages surged in number, rising from 51,000 in

1960 to 121,000 by 1980 (www.census.gov). Further, more blacks were entering

colleges and universities. More were entering jobs and areas that before had been denied

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[1] For an excellent discussion of this court case, see *Virginia Hasn't Always Been for Lovers* (Newman, 2004).

them. All of this movement led to more interactions, more dating, and more interracial marriages (Staples, 1999).

Lingering Effects of Slavery and Anti-Miscengenation Laws

Although the number of interracial relationships has steadily increased, we must remember that formal laws are not the only—or even the most powerful—rules that govern people's actions. Staples (1999) explains:

> Legal prohibitions were not the only deterrent to biracial unions. This country's history is replete with acts of terror and intimidation of interracial couples who violated the society's taboos on miscegenation. While blacks and whites came together in love and marriage over the years, it was generally at a high cost that ranged from death to social ostracism. (p. 132)

So, while the anti-miscegenation laws are gone, the aftermath of their existence cannot be denied even now. For example, only in the year 2000 did Alabama revise its state constitution which still forbade the state legislature from legitimizing interracial marriages. Further, a high school principal in 1994 in Wedowee, Alabama, threatened the student body that their prom would be shut down if any interracial couples arrived at the party. The formal laws are gone, but the informal laws are not.

The Academy and Interracial Relationships

The effects of the history of interracial relationships can be seen not only in society as a whole, but in the scholarship about interracial relationships. Much of the research that has been done has focused on trying to measure people's attitudes toward interracial relationships and determining the motivations of those who decide to be in an

interracial relationship. The amount of literature focused on the actual relationships themselves is much smaller in comparison.

Attitudes Toward Interracial Marriage

Scholars have spent a great deal of energy measuring attitudes about interracial relationships. Researchers have tried to isolate factors such as age, location, gender, race, and education to see what effect these factors have on attitudes people hold toward black-white couples.

Some researchers argue that location can affect attitudes toward interracial relationships. Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan (1990) found that, in general, people from northern states are more accepting than people in southern states. Although blacks are most concentrated in the South, fewer interracial relationships occur there (Kalmijn, 1993). Kalmijn (1993) has argued that an inverse relationship exists between number of blacks and number of interracial relationships; that is, the higher the population of blacks in a particular location, the lower the number of interracial relationships. Therefore, many scholars argue that fewer interracial pairings occur in the South due to historical attitudes and, perhaps, greater opportunities among blacks for dating people of the same race (Kalmijn, 1993; Staples, 1999).

Several researchers have also considered the effect of age on attitudes toward interracial couples. The results have been mixed. A survey of 620 college students showed that almost 25% of them had dated interracially in the past, and almost 50% were open to an interracial relationship (Knox et al, 2000). Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan (1990) found that the average age at marriage of those in interracial marriages is higher

than the national average. This fact might lead one to conclude that the older and more mature one gets, the more accepting one might be of interracial partners. However, a study by Joyner and Kao (2005) showed just the opposite. They found that individuals are decreasingly likely to be in an interracial relationship between the ages of 18 and 35. They suggest that adolescents tend to date more interracially, but with the onset of young adulthood and the desire to marry, individuals start dating more "realistically," in their minds, which often means dating someone of the same race. Clearly, research data on the effects of age on interracial dating are mixed.

Besides age and location, many researchers have tried to determine the role of gender in attitude formation about interracial relationships. Interestingly, most of the research does not consider gender and race separately, but rather in tandem. Most of the statistics point to the fact that blacks on the whole are more approving of interracial relationship than are whites (Kalmijn, 1993; Rosenblatt, 1995). The Pew Research Center reports that 82 percent of blacks approved of interracial relationships, while only 70 percent of whites approved (www.people-press.org). If we break the larger categories of blacks and whites down to include gender categories, we can glean more information. Zebroski (1999) asked individuals involved in interracial relationships to report who they perceived as being supportive versus not supportive of their relationships. The researchers gave the individuals the choices of white males, white females, black males, and black females. The researchers found that white males were perceived to be most disapproving of white-black relationships followed by black Females, then black males. White females were perceived to approve most.

Motivations for Entering an Interracial Relationship

While we as a country have been intrigued with measuring how people are feeling about interracial relationships, one area captivates us even more: What motivates people to be in an interracial relationship? Much of the earlier literature from the 60's and 70s focused on why people would want to get involved in an interracial relationship. Several categories of motivations emerge when reviewing the literature: Black sexual acting out, black status seeking, and white neurotic acting out.

One of the ideas scholars formed about why people are motivated to form interracial relationships emerges from the myth of black hypersexuality. Society has long perpetuated the myth that blacks have an unusually strong sex drive (Foeman & Nance, 1999; Yancey, 2003). Staples (1999) says this myth draws on the slave-trade narrative of blacks as beast-like and animalistic. In fact, this narrative/myth is so widespread that we have the term "jungle fever." Yancey (2003) defines "jungle fever" as "a stereotype that individuals who enter interracial relationships [do so] out of a desire to experience sex with someone of a different race" (p. 153). Spike Lee's movie entitled *Jungle Fever* (1991) capitalizes on this myth. Lee's plot involves a black man and a white Italian-American woman "testing the other race" to see what the sexual experience is like and talking about it with friends. Interestingly, Yancey's (2003) research indicated that the sexual attitudes of those he interviewed showed no support for this stereotype. Further, other research suggests that interracial couples in long-term relationships do not have unusual sexual attraction or unusual sexual relations (Porterfield, 1982).

A second motivation myth is the status marrying myth. Status marrying myth is an exchange-type theory that suggests that blacks marry whites to move up in social status, with respect to race, and poorer whites marry richer blacks to move up in socioeconomic status (Foeman & Nance, 1999; Kouri & Lasswell, 1993). Some scholars (like Kalmijn, 1993) contend that statistics prove that black men who marry white women usually marry down in socioeconomic status. They, therefore, are trading their socioeconomic status for the white women's higher racial status. Spaights and Dixon (1984) argue that black women who marry White men do so mostly for social and economic gain, to exploit them. Foeman and Nance (1999) argue that perhaps this theory is true in some cases; however much evidence indicates that the ideas underlying the status-marrying hypothesis are more complex and evolving than previously thought. For example, a large body of research exists that proposes that

"as social exposure, social equity, and social acceptability increase, the likelihood of intermarriage increases as well…These factors indicate that other variables are more important than simple social-economic exchange, and that greater equity rather than disparity increases the likelihood of interracial coupling." (Foeman & Nance, 1999, p. 544).

A third motivational myth is the myth of white neuroticism. Many researchers hold that whites enter into interracial relationships in order to act out, punish parents, or make a social statement. One can easily see this assumption applied by looking at counseling literature from the 60s, 70s, and 80s. Hullum (1982) suggests that those in an interracial marriage desire to give their parents pain or desire self-degradation. Spaights

and Dixon (1984) argue that interracial couples are self-haters who are insecure. Spaights and Dixon (1984) further suggest that people in interracial couples are trying to make a social statement by asserting their "liberal-ness" when getting into an interracial relationship.

Foeman and Nance (1999) rightly question the research behind these motivation myths:

> Theorists begin with the assumption that interracial couples suffer from disturbance, then select couples who are disturbed and conclude that interracial relationships are marked by disturbance. In addition to the fact that such arguments are tautological, the implication is that the problems of interracial couples are insurmountable and that interracial relationships are, by definition, unstable. (p. 545)

Much of the recent counseling literature also has begun taking a critical look at the inherent biases in much of the marital counseling literature that deals with interracial marriages and families. Davidson (1992) holds that therapists who are counseling interracial couples must understand the inherently racist biases that belie much of the research on these couples, and they must understand the couples' uniqueness and the importance of our socio-historical context to these relationships.

Communication in Interracial Relationships

Most of the research on interracial couples has dealt primarily with the attitudes of people toward these couples and the motivations of people who comprise these couples. A paucity of research exists on the couples themselves. A few researchers

have begun to theorize about the communication within the relationships (Dunleavy, 2004; Foeman & Nance, 1999; Foeman and Nance 2002; Gaines et al, 1999). Much of the extant research focuses on the challenges the couples face both individually with each other and as a couple in society at large.

Challenges in Interracial Relationships

When considering communication in a relationship, one inevitably must begin considering the content of the communication. In other words, what are couples talking about? As in all relationships, interracial couples are not without challenges in their relationships. Because of the often volatile context in which these relationships occur, some of the communication in the relationships revolves around the challenges with which interracial couples, specifically, are faced. Many of the challenges in interracial couples deal with the issues of family approval, children, community, and identity. A brief look at some of these challenges will help us gain a better feel for interracial communication. At this point, I must state that considering each of the issue categories separately is impossible. These challenges, just like the relationships themselves, are complex and intertwined. Talking about the challenges as if they were mutually exclusive categories would be naïve. That being said, I will attempt to talk about the challenges, embracing their overlapping nature.

Challenges with the Family

For many couples, the approval or lack thereof of both immediate and extended family members presents a challenge through which the couple must work (Rosenblatt, 1995). Individuals in an interracial relationship must decide how to inform their parents

that they are dating a white/black person (Foeman & Nance, 2002; Rosenblatt, 1995). Then, couples must decide on how to introduce their significant others to family members. Rosenblatt et al. (1995) found that the introduction could be extremely stressful for everyone involved. The introduction seems to make real the point that not only is a member of the family dating someone of another race, but someone of another race might become a part of the family.

Various researchers have considered the relationship between individuals in an interracial couple and their parents (Foeman & Nance, 2003; Hibbler & Shinew 2002; Rosenblatt, 1995). Interestingly, these individuals report that often parents who disapprove of interracial relationships have taught their children repeatedly and consistently that race does not matter, that "all people are created equal." However, race becomes the central issue when children move from being friends with someone of another race to being romantically involved with someone of another race (Rosenblatt et al., 1995). Parents often give some of the following reasons for their "in-this-case disapproval," which include these: "You're not thinking of the children." or "You're not thinking of how society will treat you and your kids" (Rosenblatt et al., 1995).

In addition to the reactions from the immediate family of parents and siblings, couples also deal with the responses of extended families. One particular study suggested that often parents' approval is tied to the perception of approval/disapproval of the extended family (Rosenblatt et al., 1995). Parents of children in an interracial relationship sometimes face discrimination themselves from disapproving family members. The researchers also noted that parents can sometimes attribute comments

and reactions to family members. One father told his daughter "I am glad that my own parents are dead so that they don't have to see the shame that you've brought to me" (Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 66). Interracial couples must learn how to deal with the challenges that immediate and extended families inflict on their relationship.

Challenges with the Race Community.

Family challenges are not the only challenges interracial couples face. Interracial couples must also learn how to deal with their larger racial communities (Rosenblatt, 1995). For some people, dating someone of another race is seen as being a traitor. This is evidenced by the use of terms such as "wigger" [white + n***er, referring to a white person who is tied to the black community], a "n*****-lover," or "Uncle Tom" [referring to blacks who betray the Black community] (Foeman & Nance, 2002, p. 240). So, the question arises in my mind, why is someone perceived as a traitor for dating outside one's race?

Many blacks in an interracial relationship have expressed the problems that other members of the Black community have with their relationship. Black women, in particular, feel that the black Male-white Female relationships are an assault on black womanhood (Jones, 1999; Rosenblatt, 1995). In a study of these challenges, one black male spoke about this reaction from black women with researchers:

> That is part of the psychological issue for black women as a whole. I think that
> for black women, I talk with some about the issue, that's exactly what it
> represents for them when they see, especially a black man who they know and
> care about with a white woman. It just feels like you've rejected black

femininity in favor of not only a white standard of beauty but also, on a deeper

level, that you have, by embracing a white woman, embraced white women and

womanhood, you know, as opposed to black womanhood. And so they can

personalize on some level every time they see a black man with a white woman."

(Rosenblatt, 1995, p. 149)

In one case study, a white woman married to a black man said she received three major

messages from the Black community: 1) A black man belongs with a black woman; 2)

A black woman will treat a black man better than a white woman; and 3) The children

will be viewed by everyone as black and should have a black mother (Watts &

Henriksen, 1999).

Of course, sentiments are similar in the white community and, as previously

stated, disapproval tends to be stronger and more widespread than in the Black

community. In the case study above, the white woman stated she also received

messages from her own white racial community: 1) Black men marry white women as

status symbols or to get ahead; 2) The interracial marriage will not work and he will

leave you for someone else; 3) There is something psychologically wrong with a white

woman who marries a black man; and 4) White women who marry black men must hate

their parents (Watts & Henriksen, 1999). Foeman and Nance (2002) relay a story of a

white woman talking with her father. The father said to her that he had heard the phrase,

"Once you go black, you don't go back." He then told his daughter, "That's because we

won't take you back!"

Challenges with Identity

Such challenges with family and community can cause a great deal of dissonance in one's identity. These challenges begin occurring from the beginning of the relationships. Many individuals begin questioning themselves during the attraction phase (Foeman & Nance, 2002). "Why am I attracted to this individual? Is there something wrong with me?" When couples decide to officially begin dating, many people report having a "coming out" experience similar to the "coming out" of a gay or lesbian individual where they announce to family and friends that their significant other is, in fact, of another race (Foeman & Nance, 2002). All of these changes affect the person's identity, and both partners must learn to negotiate the dissonance.

When the relationship deepens and grows more intimate, the individuals' racial identities shift and take on many nuances that before had never come to light. Many blacks in interracial couples talk about the dissonance they feel for "sleeping with the enemy." One black woman discussed her dilemma of having a real disdain for white women and now having a half-white daughter (Foeman & Nance, 2002, p. 243). Blacks also mention the challenges they face when others in the Black community accuse them of "not being as committed to the battle" [referring to the battle for racial equality] or of being "less black." In a study of 21 black-white couples, none of the black individuals talk at all about giving up their black identity; however, they did discuss that members of the African-American community were sometimes critical of them in race discussions (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Whites in interracial relationships, specifically, undergo identity transformations (Foeman & Nance, 1999; Foeman & Nance, 2002). Many whites, similar to blacks, experience tension produced from the attacks of the larger white community. Sometimes, whites feel forced to declare an allegiance to one race or another (Luke, 1994). However, that allegiance can only take whites so far, given their skin color. Although whites can live and interact in the black community, they can never live the black experience because they are not black. Often people feel caught between two worlds. Luke (1994) looked specifically at the identity challenges of white women in interracial relationships. She writes about these women's stresses from having a foot in each racial world, black and white:

> Several of the women I have talked to…identify first and foremost with the culture of their partners even though their connection to that heritage is acquired, of shorter duration, and, therefore, in many ways weaker than the connections to the dominant white culture into which she was born. In Jane's words: "I just have very little in common with white folk in outlook and the way we live our life." The reason for this shift in cultural/racial allegiance is simple: The racism which positions her children, her partner and herself as different, as outsider, inferior, and unwanted stems from her culture and race. In Wilson's transcripts and some which she reviews from studies conducted in the 1960s, the women repeatedly referred to "Us" as her partner's people, and "Them" as the white community. This shift in racial allegiance from one culture to the other

nonetheless does not eradicate the kind of "double life" most of these white

women lead in white culture. (p. 7)

Perhaps one of the most interesting questions of identity encompasses an

interracial couple's own immediate family. Although labels are changing, the need for

racial categorizations in the U.S. persists. Children of interracial couples often endure

their own identity challenges as they decide who and what they are. Some experts argue

that the one drop rule is on its way out (Jones, 1999). (The "one drop rule" refers to the

historical legislations in various states that offered alleged guidelines for determining

who was a Negro and who was not. Often if someone had even "one drop of Negro

blood" in his or her family tree, they were considered a Negro, and most often

considered a slave (Newman, 2004).) Others argue that the label "biracial" is an assault

on Africanity (Jones, 1999). The argument here is that by diluting the label "black,"

you are diluting the numbers, the voice, and the power of the black community. Many

parents feel tensions as children choose who they are (Foeman & Nance, 2002; Watts &

Henriksen, 1999). One white mother expressed real sadness about her two children

potentially considering themselves black instead of bi-racial because she felt as if her

white identity were being completely ignored (Watts & Henriksen, 1999). So, not only

must parents help their children discover themselves, but as the children go through this

process, parents also revisit aspects of their own racial awareness and identity.

In sum, the extant literature on interracial couples largely takes either a

sociological or psychological perspective. Scholars have considered the history of these

relationships, others' perceptions of these relationship, and partners' motivations for

entering these relationships. Scholars have recently begun considering the actual

relationship itself, trying to better understand the experiences of interracial couples.

Now that we have an understanding of the literature, I turn to the specific questions of

this study. Further, as I introduce the questions, I also will define key concepts in those

questions.

Research Questions

Based on this literature, I have formulated several more specific research

questions. Recall, the overarching question I have in this study is two-part: 1) What

race-related challenges do interracial couples face in their relationship, and 2) how do

these couples communicate about and negotiate these challenges?

To better understand my questions, we should first understand how I am

conceptualizing the central construct of this study: race. Just like the words "culture"

and "family," the term "race "is difficult to define. Spickard (1992) says that "race is a

type of categorization applied to individuals and groups, constructed (and maintained as

a construction) through sociocultural processes" (p. 18). In a study of challenges that

interracial couples face, Rosenblatt et al. (1995) write that:

> The social construction of race involves physical distinctions assumed to have a
>
> biological reality and to be unambiguously distinguishable in all people. The
>
> social construction of race also involves distinctions based on the geographical
>
> origins of one's ancestors. (p. 8)

These definitions make three key points. First, Spickard. (1992) concedes that race is a way of categorizing people, often oversimplifying a person's identity.[2] Second, Rosenblatt et al. (1995) understand that race is, indeed, socially constructed through cultural processes. Third, they point out that race is tied to a person's ancestry, often their group's country of origin (Rosenblatt et al., 1995).

For this study, I am adapting Rosenblatt et al. (1995) and Spickard's (1992) definition of race in one major way. Rosenblatt et al. (1995) are sociologists and, therefore, focus on the larger sociocultural processes. However, as a communication scholar, I am concerned with the role of communication in these socio-cultural processes, both at the macro and micro levels. As a result, my definition includes both a consideration of the larger socio-cultural processes and the interpersonal communication processes that help to socially construct a person's racial identity. So, for this study, I am defining race as "a type of categorization applied to individuals and groups which is socially constructed through both sociocultural processes and communication with others. This social construction of race involves physical characteristics and assumed geographical origins and/or ancestry." In this study, race will be operationalized as either white or black. (We will discuss this more in-depth when we discuss participants in the Methods Chapter.)

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[2] A major problem with racial categorizations is that they work on the assumption that race is biological and distinguishable. Over time, this has led to rationalized racism. Rosenblatt (1995) et al. concede the point that in talking and researching questions of race, we researchers of racial issues inadvertently perpetuate this system of racial categorization by using the construct of race to discuss issues of race. I, too, feel this dissonance as I propose this study and want to make clear that I oppose racist uses of this categorization system and people who use it to act in racist ways.

Specifically, I want to focus a question on each of the challenges I discovered in my literature review. This leads me to three more specific sets of questions. The first set of questions delves into the challenges surrounding interracial couples and their families:

1a. What race-related challenges do interracial couples face with both their immediate and extended families?

1b. How do they negotiate these challenges?

Family is another term that is difficult to define. Certainly sociological experts have continuously adapted their definitions of families. Nass and McDonald (1982) define family "as a social group having specified roles and statuses with ties of blood, marriage, or adoption who usually share a common residence and cooperate economically" (p. 5). Other scholars reject the rigidity of this type of definition of family and give a more postmodern spin on the family. Bochner (1976, p. 382) defines family as "an organized, naturally occurring relational interaction system, usually occupying a common living space over an extended time period, and possessing a confluence of interpersonal images which evolve through the exchange of messages over time."

Because I am interested in this study in finding out the challenges in the couples' immediate and extended families, I want to give a very practical definition of what I mean when I say family. Drawing from the work of Satir, a scholar on family structures, I am defining immediate family as the individual's family of origin, the family in which a person is raised. (Satir, 1972) Because so many couples are blended following divorce, separation, death of a parent, a person might have more than one immediate

family. The extended family refers to the relatives, typically aunts, uncles, and cousins (Satir, 1972). Many people include close family friends as surrogate family. So, if an individual in an interracial couple considers a close family friend to be family, then the friend is indeed family. The reaction of this "family friend" would be perceived by the individual in the interracial couple as a reaction from a family member.

The second set of research questions considers the challenges interracial couples experience with their larger race community and how they deal with these challenges. The specific questions are

2a. What race-related challenges do interracial couples face with their larger race community?

2b. How do they negotiate these challenges?

In this particular set of questions, it is important to realize what I mean by the term race community. Many people refer to this concept as one's racial group. However, I feel that the word "community" better captures the communicative nature of these groups. Blacks, in particular, function as a collective co-culture in the US. Often I have heard African-Americans refer to their racial group as the Black community. In this study, all of the people whom the individuals consider to be of the same race as themselves constitute their race community. More specifically, anyone and all whom the black spouse considers to be black are members of that spouse's racial community. Similarly, anyone and all whom the white spouse considers to be white are members of the white spouse's racial community.

The third set of research questions center on the identities of the individuals in the interracial couple. Specifically, I am asking

3a. What race-related challenges do interracial couples feel regarding their individual identities?

3b. How do they negotiate these challenges?

For these questions, we must understand the concept of identity. Identity is a concept that has been defined in specific ways by specific disciplines. Particularly in early days of psychology, identity was seen as a static set of characteristics that compromised a person's self-concept. In the field of communication, our concept of identity emphasizes that identity is dynamic because it is communicatively constructed in a social world. Schlenker (1985) defined identity as "a theory of self that is formed and maintained through actual or imagined interpersonal agreement about what self is like" (p. 67). Collier (2006) sees identity as different facets of the self that are co-created through interactions with others. She says that people internalize identities that others ascribe to them, which shows how essential communication is to forming and re-forming people's identities.

The question is how I will define identity for this study. For this, a simple definition of identity that combines the above definitions will suffice. This definition should include two major elements: 1) identity is subjective and 2) identity is communicatively constructed. I am conceptualizing identity as "a person's subjective description of who he or she is which is created and re-created through interactions with others."

When I move beyond understanding how I define identity, I must ask how I think my interviewees will operationalize identity. Because identity is created and maintained through communication in a social world, I can expect that I will hear my interviewees talk about how they present themselves in different contexts. Leeds-Hurwitz (1995) writes that "identity is a subtle thing, which can be highlighted, deemphasized, or changed through specific use of language and behavior at particular moments in social interaction" (p. 8). Our identities shift in response to the context in which we are interacting, and so dependent on the context, the salience of different facets of our lives fluctuate. I will be able to see identity talked about in the following ways, among others: 1) Roles (student, mother, nurse) 2) Goals 3) Personal Qualities, including personality and physical characteristics 4) Accomplishments 5) Group/cultural membership, 6) Appearance (Guerrero et al. 2001, p. 34) Now that I have laid out my research questions and defined the key concepts of this study, I turn my attention to the theoretical perspectives that guide my inquiry.

<div align="center">Theoretical Considerations</div>

Rather than using one theoretical lens, I found three particular theories whose tenets and assumptions meshed with both the existing literature and my data. First, Foeman and Nance's (1999) theory on interracial relationship is the most topic-specific theory. It helps us understand the specific stages interracial couples go through with a focus on changes in identity. Second, Standpoint Theory (Orbe, 1998) helps scholars consider how a person's experience or "place" in the material and social world affects how that person sees and processes that world. This theory is useful because of its

critical lens which helps us take a critical look at racial disparities and how they affect interpersonal relationships. Finally, Relational Dialectics (Baxter, 1988 & 1996) is useful for unpacking everyday conversations and the communicative creation and re-creation of relationships. Now that we have considered each theory's role in this study, I will discuss each theory in more detail.

Foeman & Nance's Stage-Development Theory for Interracial Couples

Various researchers have attempted to develop a theory of stage development for interracial relationships. Research on this theory of relationship development has begun to look at the communication in this model's respective stages. Foeman and Nance (1999 & 2002) set out a theoretical framework that attempts to capture some past theories of interracial relationship stage development, as well as some new theories of interracial families. These researchers argue that interracial couples go through four major stages of relational development: racial awareness, coping, identity emergence, and maintenance. I will briefly explain each stage.

According to Foeman and Nance (2002), the first stage that interracial couples experience together is likely to be the racial awareness stage. Partners become aware of their own respective races, their partner's race, their collective racial group, and their partners' groups. In this stage, each partner becomes acutely aware of his or her own racial background. Two key components of the racial awareness stage are attraction and sensitivity. Partners in an interracial relationship begin communicating about attraction. Although this attraction might not be that different from attraction between intraracial couples, the social context complicates simple statements. For example, couples must

think through statements such as "I love your full lips," or "I love your creamy skin." A second component of racial awareness is sensitivity. Sensitivity involves becoming aware of one's partner's racial place. As Foeman and Nance (1999) state, "Racial place is the way that members of a racial group are treated in society, what is seen as their natural role and profile" (p. 550). During this sub phase, partners learn new ways of understanding the other race both through explicit conversations about race and through the goings on of everyday life.

The second stage of Foeman and Nance's (2002) model is coping. During this stage, couples learn how to deal with racial issues, both as reactive and proactive measures. In this phase, sometimes couples have to learn how to buffer themselves from racism. They choose where to go for support and social settings to avoid. In addition to buffering, couples learn how to negotiate racist incidents using de-escalation techniques such as humor. The third stage is identity emergence. During this stage, the couple begins to rethink both their individual identities and their identity as a couple. They also begin to reframe what outsiders say in a way that builds the relationship rather than hurts it. Maintenance is the fourth stage of Foeman and Nance's (2002) model. During this stage, couples live day-to-day life, often without giving consideration to race.

<div align="center">Standpoint Theory</div>

Standpoint theory posits that "people's experiences, knowledge, and communication behaviors are shaped in large part by the social groups to which they belong" (West & Turner, 2004, p. 462). Standpoint theory can be traced back to Hegel who discussed the master-slave relationship (West & Turner, 2004). His stance was that

because of their two widely different social positions, the master's experience of life was very different from the slave's experience of life. Marx also discusses in his theoretical framework how different social positions of the worker versus the ruling class affect life experiences. Since Hegel and Marx, theorists have applied standpoint theory and its tenets to various marginalized groups in society. For example, Hartsock (1997) is credited with Feminist Standpoint Theory, which focuses on the social position of women and a desire to stop sex and gender inequalities.

Orbe (1998) applied standpoint theory to race and culture. He specifically coined the phrase co-culture, which he prefers to minority or sub-group. The terms "minority" and "sub-culture" connote inferiority while co-culture connotes co-existence without inherent hierarchy. Orbe (1998) discusses how non-white racial groups in the US are co-cultures. Co-cultures have different perspectives than whites because of the societal privilege whites hold in the US.

Standpoint theory relies on five specific assumptions (Hartsock, 1997).

1. Material life structures and sets limits on understanding of social relationships.

2. If material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two groups, the understanding of one will represent an inversion of the other.

3. The vision of the ruling group structures the material relations in which all persons are forced to participate.

4. In consequence, the vision available to an oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement.

5. As an engaged vision, the potential understanding of the oppressed, the adoption of a standpoint, makes visible the inhumanity of relations among human beings and increases the opportunities for liberation of oppressed groups.

Embedded in these assumptions are key concepts on which standpoint theory relies. The central concept of Standpoint Theory is the notion of standpoint. Orbe (1998) writes that "a standpoint is not simply a subjective position that is interested in promoting bias, but an acknowledgment of the sense of being engaged within a specific field of experience" (p. 26). Having a standpoint means that a person acknowledges that "From where I stand, here is how I view the world and its working systems." This results in what Haraway refers to as "situated knowledge" (West & Turner, 2004). A person's knowledge of their world is nested in their lived experience and circumstances.

Co-cultures are forced participate in the social world on the dominant group's terms. Occasionally, a member of the co-culture will obtain right of entry into the dominant group's world and gain privilege. Collins (1991, 1999) termed this person an outsider within. An outsider within is given a "pass" into privilege. However, the "outsider" often experiences feelings of isolation and prejudice even in this position. He or she sees firsthand the biases and leanings of the dominant group. Various researches have utilized the "outsider within" concept to understand marginalized groups, such as first generation college students (Orbe & Groscurth, 2004), faculty of color on predominantly white campuses (Salazar, 2005), and black graduate students at predominantly white institutions (Daniel, 2007).

Although the "outsider within" construct has been applied to various

organizational settings, the construct has not been applied in interpersonal settings. This

makes sense because the concept's definition is built on understanding societal power

structures, a macro approach to understanding human relations. However, I see merit in

understanding how the "outsider within" works in interpersonal and family

communication. Families are a major societal institution. Although we cannot say

families are a societal organization, most scholars will agree that families are a social

institution. Understanding how socio-political issues of race affect the experiences of

interracial couples will give a better understanding of issues facing the multi-cultural

family.

Another important element of this theory is its consideration of those in the

dominant group who come to understand to a great extent the experience of those in the

oppressed group (Hartsock, 1997). This particular aspect of Standpoint Theory has been

largely neglected in the research (Miller, 2005). However, a few key scholars have

given attention to this. McIntosh (2000) discusses understanding her privilege as a white

academic and the responsibility she has to battle racial inequalities. Others have also

begun to question what causes members of the dominant groups to develop a critical

race approach (Ex. Johnson, 2002). Yet, this field remains wide open for research.

Relational Dialectics

Dialectical Theory has a rich history. Baxter and Montgomery (1988, 1996) are

credited with extending the theory of dialectics to the field of communication,

interpersonal communication in particular. They argue that relationships are best

understood by looking at how people manage day-to-day dialectical tensions in their relationships. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argue that relationships are never stable. Rather, couples are constantly negotiating the push-and-pull of contradictory needs.

Dialectics has four important components. First, the central defining element of the theory of dialectics is the concept of "contradiction" (Rawlins, 1989). A dialectical contradiction is "The coexistence and conflict of interpenetrated opposites" (Rawlins 1989, p. 159). The tensions in dialectics are dependent on each other for their very definition. The nature of these tensions is more easily understood if we contrast the terms "dualism" and "dialectic." A dualism is a set of opposites that cannot coexist, such as hot and cold. If an object is hot, it cannot be cold. However, a dialectic is a set of opposites that coexist and find their meaning in each other, such as intimate and disconnected. Miller (2005) gives the following example:

> In a relationship you can simultaneously desire intimacy and distance. You may
> want a close and intimate relationship with a romantic partner but also seek to be
> your own person. Indeed, to a large extent your desire for each of these is
> defined by your experience of the other. You appreciate and desire intimacy
> because of loneliness and disconnection you have experienced in the past, and
> you want to maintain a separateness because in the past you may have
> experienced a smothering kind of closeness…We define and experience each
> portion of the dialectic through our encounters with the other portion of the
> contradiction. (pp. 197-198.)

A second key component of dialectics is change (Miller, 2005). Change is inherent in dialectics because couples vacillate between the two poles of the dialectic. Because of this vacillation, the relationship evolves. In turn, as the relationship evolves into something different, the way couples manage the dialectic inevitably changes. This again results in the relationship changing, and so on. The relational dialects are constantly re-created and managed in different way.

A third component of dialectics is the notion of totality (Miller, 2005). Multiple dialectics are present in relationships, and these dialectics overlap and influence each other. To understand any one particular dialectic, one must consider the dialectic in relation to the others. The final component of dialectics is praxis (Miller, 2005). Praxis refers to the manner in which couples manage the dialectical tensions in their relationship. As communication scholars, we are concerned with not only what dialectics exist, but also how people manage them.

Internal and External Tensions

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) found in their research that couples had tensions in the relationship itself, and the couple itself had tensions with family, friends, and society. They labeled the tensions in the relationship internal manifestations and the tensions the couple had with others external manifestations. Further, Baxter (1988) also found three categories of dialectical tensions that seemed to characterize most relationships. The integration vs. separation dialectic considers a couple's need to balance independence and dependence. The stability vs. change dialectic involves the couple's management of the ordinary and the unexpected. The last category of dialectic,

expression vs. privacy entails the communication in the relationship. What will the couple share, and what will they keep private?

While Baxter and Montgomery focused on romantic, heterosexual relationships, other scholars have looked for dialectics in other relational contexts. For example, Rawling (1989) considered the dialectics in friendships; Apker, Propp, and Ford (2005) looked at the dialectics nurses face with patients; and Kramer (2004) researched the dialectics that emerged in groups at a community theater.

In addition to looking at dialectics in different contexts, some scholars have looked specifically at dialectics involving culture and race. Martin and Nakayama (1999) took a dialectical approach to Hofstede's cultural dimensions of individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, and power distance. Orbe (2000) looked at the dialectics experienced by black men in organizations finding that black men grappled with tensions such as coping vs. suffering and inclusion vs. opposition.

While people have considered dialectics in other relational contexts, researchers have yet to look at different types of romantic relationships. By that, I mean that scholars need to consider how differences in sexual orientation, social class, and, in this case, race, influence the dialectics in interpersonal relationships.

In summary, this opening chapter has demonstrated that black-white romantic relationships are statistically rare because of persistent taboos. These taboos are remnants of a tumultuous past between the black and white communities that pre-dates slavery and even the formation of the US. These relationships have been studied by scholars with much attention given to the partners' motivations and others' attitudes

toward their relationships. Much of the extant literature comes from sociology and psychology, and, therefore, does not focus on the communication in the relationship itself. Communication scholars are beginning to research these couples' interactions to understand their experiences. I ended the chapter by reviewing theories that can inform my discussion of this study. In the next chapter, I outline the procedures used in this study and introduce the participants.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

"Researchers' choices…derive from their experiences, desires, interests, and opportunities. The story of who we are includes the story of what we study."

Lindlof and Taylor (2002, p. 65)

In order to explore the race-related challenges interracial couples face, I conducted in-depth interviews with interracial couples. In this chapter, I begin by discussing my decision to use in-depth interviews for my method. Next, I detail the data collection procedures and information about the couples I interviewed. Third, I discuss the method I used for data analysis. Finally, I consider issues of trustworthiness and positionality with respect to the data analysis.

Choice of Methodology

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research revels in messiness. Its processes are inductive and emergent. In fact, I would guess that qualitative data has foiled many a researcher's existing schemata and research plan. Lindloff and Taylor (2002) describe it as "somewhat unruly" (p. 66). Although no one would guess it by looking at my office, I like organization. However, I have come to accept that life is characterized first and foremost by messiness. For this reason, I am drawn as a researcher to qualitative research.

I also am drawn to qualitative research because I can delve into my own questions about the social world. Lindloff and Taylor (2002) argue that qualitative researchers "ask questions about the research literature, the world around them, and their

own selves" (p. 67). I have dated interracially, so many of my research questions arose

from a desire to understand my own experiences. Why did everyone in the restaurant

cease conversations when my partner and I were being seated at our table? Why did my

partner not introduce me to his family when we were standing in the same room and had

never before met? Lindloff and Taylor (2002) write that these kinds of experience

spawn research projects. They say that "we problematize experience by noticing gaps

and dislocations in our own explanations. We might sense an incongruity, an irony, a

contradiction, an ambiguity, or a mystery in a situation. Or we find ourselves in a new

situation, one that defies our ability to explain it" (p. 74). Then, we endeavor to find the

answers like I am doing.

In-depth Interviews

Researchers have choices about which methods of inquiry to employ to collect

the data that will best help them answer their research questions. Chase (2005) cautions

researchers to not expect the interviewees to answer their research questions, but, rather,

to encourage interviewees to narrate their lived experience. Then, the researcher can

find the answers in their stories. She writes,

> [T]he stories people tell constitute the empirical material that interviewers need if
>
> they are to understand how people create meanings out of events in their lives.
>
> To think of an interviewee as a narrator is to make a conceptual shift away from
>
> the idea that interviewees have answers to researchers' questions and toward the
>
> idea that interviewees are narrators with stories to tell and voices of their own. (p.
>
> 660)

I chose to do interviews, in particular, because they will allow me to understand the experiences and perspectives of individuals in interracial couples. In fact, Lindloff and Taylor (2002) describe interviews as "storytelling zone[s] par excellence" (p. 173), and I was interested in hearing these stories, narrated by the couples themselves. With the purpose of the interviews in mind, I turn next to the research participants, a.k.a. "the narrators."

Participants

I interviewed 14 couples. The couples were heterosexual, interracial couples wherein one partner was white and one partner was black. In an ideal world, I would have interviewed 7 black male-white female couples and 7 white male-black female couples. However, I thought from the onset that would not be a realistic goal, and this proved to be the case. Black-white interracial couples are statistically rare, and white male/black female couples are even more uncommon than black male-white female couples. Adding that gender constraint on top of the racial constraint would have made finding a feasible sample exceedingly difficult. So for this study, I recruited black-white couples of any race/gender mix. In the end, I had 10 black male/white female couples and 4 white male-black female couples. The age of the interviewees ranged from early 20s to late 50s.

I allowed participants to racially self-identity during the pre-screening. My hesitancy in defining who qualified as black and who qualified as white is tied to my desire not to label or negate in any way someone's racial identity. That being said, I feel I must concede I have a certain discomfort with needing to label at all. However, in

order to address the issues that arise from society's propensity to racially categorize, I was forced to use the racial categories myself to explain these tensions. As Rosenblatt et al. (1995) write,

> We cannot study or write about interracial relationships without knowing where people fall in those sociocultural race categories. We cannot write about problems arising from sociocultural race categories that classify individuals and couples without using those categories. (p. 9)

Individuals answered the question about race in a myriad of ways. The white partners most often identified themselves as white or Caucasian. One man referred to himself as "just a white boy." The black partners referred to themselves mostly as black or African-American. One man referred to himself as Afro-American. Interestingly, two women identified themselves as African-American *and* bi-racial or mixed. Three of the black male partners were from the Caribbean, but only one identified his race as half-Caribbean/half black.

In addition to identifying their race, I also asked individuals to share their ethnicity. White partners sometimes just repeated "white" or "Caucasian" as their ethnicity, too. Others mentioned their backgrounds such as white with some German and English, German/Cajun/Italian. The black partners had a myriad of answers. Many also repeated "black" or African-American for their ethnicity. The mixed women responded to the question about their ethnicity with a long list. The men from the Caribbean pointed out that they were black and not African American. One of these men said, "I am black just like the rest of the world says it." Further, two listed their

countries of origin: Jamaica and Trinidad/Tobago. One black partner responded that he was "born and raised here," here meaning the US.

Initially, I set the criterion that the couples have a relationship tenure of three years. However, I found that the answers from the couples with less relational tenure rich because they were *in the midst* of negotiating challenges whereas couples who had been in their relationships longer were *reflecting* on memorable incidents. As a result, I kept them in my study.   Four of the couples had been in the relationship for 1-5 years. Three couples had a relationship tenure of 6-10 years. Four couples had been together for 11-15 years. Two couples were together 16-20 years, and one couple had been together for 24 years.

I consciously did not use marriage as a criterion. Couples can be married and have an extremely short relationship tenure. Further, cohabiting couples could have been with each other for 20 years, but decided not to marry. I was interested in interviewing couples who had a developed relationship. However, in my sample, thirteen of the fourteen couples were married. The time they had been married ranged from 2 months to 17 years. The couple that was unmarried was engaged to be married two months after the interview. Also, seven of the couples had biological or step-children.

<div align="center">Data Collection: Recruiting and Interviewing</div>

Recruiting

One of my biggest challenges in this study was recruiting couples. I used several methods—some unconventional—to locate willing participants. I started by asking

friends and colleagues who were in interracial couples if they were willing to participate. Further, I informed all friends and colleagues about my study and asked for names of people I could contact. I also contacted several large multiracial churches and asked to make an announcement about my study. No one let me give an announcement, but two churches provided names of contacts who would be interested in being interviewed. In addition to these methods of recruitment, I also asked couples at the end of the interview if they could recommend couples who might be willing to help me, a technique know as snowball sampling (Neuman, 2003).

Perhaps the most unconventional approach I used was a variation on cold call selling. While out in the community at parks and stores, I often noticed interracial couples. I began approaching couples and introducing myself. I informed couples of the study and my desire to speak with interracial couples about their relationship experience. I did have success in persuading a few couples to be interviewed.

Interviewing

The source of my data is 14 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours with most of the interviews lasting around 90 minutes. All interview audio recordings were transcribed yielding 533 single spaced pages.

Once participants had agreed to be interviewed, we determined a time and location for the interview. I interviewed the couple together, not as individuals, so we had to manage a time that worked for all three of us. I met couples at a variety of locations. In an effort to be accommodating, I met couples most times at their homes.

Another common meeting place was my home. I did meet some couples at a coffee shop. The most interesting place I conducted an interview was in a 15-passenger van being driven by the couple's 14 year-old daughter who, I was told, had a learner's permit and needed the practice! The couple, their four other children, and I were her passengers, so we chatted on the way to a birthday party the children were attending.

I began interviews by explicitly stating my purpose. I told couples that the study was being done as a requirement for my PhD program. I further explained that I was interested in better understanding the experience of interracial couples and challenges they faced. I repeated that the interview normally took 1-2 hours but made sure I knew how long couples had allotted in an effort to be respectful of time constraints.

The next step was to talk through the consent form. I explained to the couple that participation was voluntary. I presented the consent form and gave them a chance to read through it. I asked them if they had any questions about the study. When they were ready to proceed, I asked them to sign the form. The consent form included that they consented to be audio-taped. I double-checked this with participants. Upon agreement, I turned on the recorder. All participants agreed to be recorded.

Before I began with my interview schedule of questions, I gathered demographics from the couples. I asked them to identify their gender, age, race, ethnicity, relationship tenure, marital status, and number of children. After gathering these demographics, I began with the interview schedule.

I asked a variety of questions to direct the interview. I wanted to cover specific topics such as family, racial community, and identity in all of the interviews, so, in that

way, my interview guide had structure. Yet, at the same time, I wanted to be able to adapt to the context and the needs of the couple, so I kept the interview semi-structured. I began the interviews with an open-ended question inviting couples to tell me the story of how they first met. This proved to be a wonderful icebreaker as we were all soon laughing about funny shenanigans the interviewees pulled to get the other's attention, such as the old "dropping-the-pen-in-front-of-her-desk" routine. Generally from there we moved to talking about meeting each other's family and the discussions surrounding that event. Next we covered the topic of reactions from different race communities. If the couple had children, we often talked about communication involving their children. After talking about family, community, and children, I began asking more personal questions about racial identity. I followed this up by asking couples what general positives they saw in their relationship. The last question of my interview guide asked couples to give advice to other interracial couples. (See Appendix A for a complete interview guide.) Although this is the typical order in which I covered topics, I allowed the interviewees to guide the topic order. So, in certain instances, I covered the topics in a slightly different order.

Upon completing all of my official questions, I asked the couple two clearinghouse probes "Is there any question you really wanted me to ask that I didn't?" and "Is there anything else you want me to know." Several couples told me more information. In fact, many times during the closing of interviews, interviewees would ask me personal questions about my motivation for the study, if I was dating interracially, and how much longer I had left in school. I welcomed these questions and

answered them honestly. I was happy to share my experiences with them and felt it was

needed, in a sense, because of the level of disclosure and vulnerability I had expected

from them.

I also found that many couples wondered how they compared with other couples.

Several couples apologized for being "bad" examples of interracial relationships because

they did not have any serious problems to tell me. I often led couples through a short

debriefing session sharing a mini-analysis in lay terms of my results thus far and assured

them they were "normal." I shared with them some common misconceptions about

interracial couples to which they said, "Yes! People think that, you know?" I also found

myself sharing with them that I dated interracially and had had similar experiences to

what they had conveyed and so their answers had resonated with me. The closing of the

interviews tended to yield some of the best stories and comments. I left most interviews

feeling that I had made new friends. Further, I found that the conversations during the

closings not only helped the couple process the interview, but it helped me, too, because

I began analyzing the data in those moments.

<div align="center">Data Analysis and Interpretation</div>

Data Management

All interviews were transcribed and sorted into individual computer files. I

transcribed seven interviews and hired a professional medical transcription company to

transcribe the remaining seven interviews. I took care and directed the transcriptionists

to take care in transcribing the laughter, pauses, broken sentences, vocalized pauses, etc.

All of these function to give additional meaning to the discourse, and are, thus, important to consider when analyzing.

Data Analysis

Based on the seven transcripts I transcribed myself, I developed an initial read of the data. I found 16 major themes. After the remaining seven interviews were transcribed, I began reading through each transcript looking for the themes that emerged, a process known as open coding. I began the process of selecting quotations that illustrated the themes I had found. To organize my coding, I created a chart. On the left hand side of the chart, I created a column that listed the couples. On the top of the chart, I created a row of codes. I would write my quotation and the page number on the corresponding box on the chart. I started with my initial codes from my first reading of the transcripts. Then, I systematically worked my way through the interview transcripts assigning codes to relevant quotations. If upon comparing my quotation to my coding categories I could not find a match, I developed a new code. At the end, I had 48 categories (See Appendix B for the complete listing of these codes.)

I then began axial coding to find the relationships between the categories. I created six umbrella categories that helped make sense of the 48 individual codes (family reactions, community responses, identity of individual/couples, children, communication in relationship, and miscellaneous). At this point, my thoughts returned to my original three research questions. My first set of questions centered on challenges interracial couples faced with their families and how they communicated about them. My second set of questions focused on communication surrounding the race-related

challenges couples faced with their race communities. My last set of questions asked

what challenges couples faced with their identities as an interracial couple and how they

communicated about these issues. I found as I analyzed my data that the three categories

of family, race, and identity were not easily teased out into three chapters. In fact, my

analysis yielded three chapters that talked about these categories sometimes separately

and sometimes in tandem. As a result, I split my three analysis chapters up in a way that

matches my findings, both the expected and unexpected.

Chapter III discusses race-related challenges couples experience with their

families. In this chapter, I discuss the messages couples receive from the families and

the communication that surrounds family interactions. In Chapter IV, I discuss both

reactions from the larger racial communities and their effects on the identities of both the

black and white partner. Finally, in Chapter V, I further consider identity by focusing on

how couples manage their dyadic identity in reaction to the messages they receive from

their families and larger society. Now I will discuss how I was reflexive about the

interviewing and interpretation process.

<div style="text-align:center">Evaluating Interpretation</div>

Establishing Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) call researchers to pay close attention to their

trustworthiness. They write that "the basic issue in relation to trustworthiness is simple:

How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of

and inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?" (p. 290). Lincoln

and Guba offer ways to ensure trustworthiness. These ways include triangulation of sources, peer debriefing, and member checks.

In this study, I triangulated my sources. I heard from 28 individuals in interracial relationships about their experiences. I had couples who had been together 1 year and couples who had been together 24 years. In addition to relationship tenure, the voices represented a diverse group with respect to age and ethnicity.

A second way I paid attention to trustworthiness was to engage in peer debriefings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) write that the

> process helps keep the inquirer "honest," exposing him or her to searching
> questions by an experienced protagonist doing his or her best to play the devil's
> advocate. The inquirer's biases are probed, meanings explored, the basis for
> interpretations clarified. All questions are in order during a debriefing, whether
> they pertain to substantive, methodological, legal, ethical, or any other relevant
> matters. The task of the debriefer is to be sure that the investigator is as fully
> aware of his or her posture and process as possible. (p. 308)

Several of my colleagues and professors served as peer debriefers for me. I constantly was in discussion about my interviewing, my analysis, and interpretation. One way this proved to safeguard my study was when I was struggling with my analysis as I worked to see the manifestation of the dialectics Baxter and Montgomery (1996) originally posited in their theory of relational dialectics. As a I worked on this effort, I could not seem to make it work. Two colleagues asked me the simple question, "Are you seeing what the data say, or are you trying to make the data say something they are not saying?"

I soon realized my colleagues were right. I focused again on rereading the data to see what the data said. In this instance, peer debriefing was invaluable.

Last, throughout my interviewing process I performed member checks. As I mentioned before, during the closing of interviews, I often had very candid conversations with couples in which they wanted to know what I had found from others. I began sharing, or as Lincoln and Guba (1985) call it "playing back," previous interviews for the couples (p. 314). Couples shook their heads in agreement and often gave further examples to illustrate the point. This gave me the opportunity to begin my analysis by summarizing themes I heard in my interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Positionality

An explanation of my methodology for this project would not be complete without at least a brief discussion of positionality. I mentioned earlier in this chapter that my personal experiences in interracial relationships drew me to this project. Therefore, it is only fitting that I consider what effect my personal experiences and filters have had on this project. In this section, I will discuss how my experiences affected both my data collection and my data analysis.

Salazar (2005) writes that "in qualitative research, two significant considerations are the inseparability of the knower and the known and the relationship between the positionality of the researcher and quality of the data obtained" (p. 243). I did not go into this project completely naïve about black-white romantic relationships. First, I knew I was white. Also, through my literature review and, probably more importantly, my lived experience, I had learned common assumptions and stereotypes others had

about interracial relationships. I had experienced prejudiced comments and actions from black women who did not approve of my interracial relationship and wanted me to "stay where I belonged." So, I saw clearly how my experiences had shaped my interview questions as I asked about challenges with the larger racial group. I had been told earlier in my life by family members "not to bring a black man home," so I hurt not just *for*, but *with* white partners who had to hide one of the happiest times of their life from disapproving family members. My history enabled me to connect with the couples on an emotional level that I do not think would have been possible if I had not shared similar experiences to the ones they relayed. During interviews, I felt as though I could *really* laugh, *really* cry, and *really* understand. I also think that being white made some individuals, particularly the black partners, over-explain issues of race to me because they assumed I would not have thought about them or would not understand them. Sometimes they were right. Other times, I had to chuckle on the inside as I thought, "I'm not as white as you think I am."

Second, I am hyper-aware that my analysis has a personal bias. My reading of the data flows from the questions I wanted to answer when I began this project. Further, no researcher can separate her life's various cultural influences from how she makes sense of the data she reads. I read the data as a white, middle-class, Midwestern, small town, twenty-something, woman academic with blue-collar roots, all of which influenced which texts jumped out at me. Chase (2005) explains this by saying that researchers themselves are narrators, too, as they interpret the stories they collect from interviewees. They argue

As narrators, then, researchers develop meaning out of, and some sense of order in, the material they studied; they develop their own voice as they construct others' voices and realities; they narrate "results" in ways that are both enabled and constrained by the social resources and circumstances embedded in their disciplines, cultures, and historical moments; and they write or perform their work for particular audiences. (p. 657).

Their Voices

Now I turn to the analysis of the interviews. In the three chapters that follow, I introduce the couples I interviewed. In an effort to help readers get a sense of the dialogue between the partners, many excerpts show the conversation between the partners and me, the interviewer. Also, all of the names of the people and places in this study have been changed to respect the couples' privacy Now, I turn to my results. I begin with considering messages from the families.

CHAPTER III

MESSAGES FROM THE FAMILY

Timothy: Older generations. So, like, I have two living grandmothers; a stepgrandmother and a natural grandmother, and the step-grandmother either was fine with it or didn't feel emboldened to say anything and acted fine with it. The other grandmother, who happens to be about 30 years older—maybe 25 years older—she had a very major problem with it...

Interviewer: How did you learn she had a problem with it?

Alyssa: How did we know? We knew, you know, multiple ways.

Timothy: Oh, I remember this. Okay.

Alyssa: One, because I think your sisters somehow...

Timothy: When we went to Florida...

Alyssa: Oh yeah...[Laughs]

Timothy: We went to Florida on a family trip, okay?

Interviewer: I can feel it coming!

Alyssa: Yeah!

Timothy: We had been dating for a couple years and we went to Florida on a family trip and I was sort of oblivious to the fact that this was what was happening, but then in retrospect I noticed that that's exactly what happened. We had a family picture and Alyssa was in the family picture of....

Alyssa: But I didn't want to be in the family picture because I was not family at the time, and I felt uncomfortable with that.

Timothy: Right. We may have been engaged but maybe not even that yet? We'd been dating for...

Alyssa: And also at this time his parents didn't fully accept me and we were having issues.

Timothy: And so you were in the picture with all the grandkids of whom there were like 12 or 13 grandkids, and, um, they are like, "Granny, get in the picture!" and Granny goes – and she sits on Alyssa's lap, blocking her out of the picture.

Alyssa::   Yeah, so psychodynamically you can figure out what that means. But, yeah, also family, you know, people would come up to me and-- other people in Timothy's family-- aunts who married into the family would say, you know, "Don't listen to what they are saying. WE love you. WE are so happy that you are here." So, after multiple people, you know, came I thought, "Well what IS being said?" you know? So, then it was quite obvious by the people's body language and what they would not say and...what was going on with your grandmother. She would not – we would be in the room together, but she would not look at me. She would not talk.

Interviewer:So there were no comments?

Alyssa: No, not to me, but to Timothy there were, I think, more?

Timothy: Okay, so we went to my sister's high school graduation, right? We traveled from the East Coast so it was, you know, a big flight, and while we were there, Alyssa and I were standing...

Alyssa: Holding hands.

Timothy: At the graduation place holding hands and Granny comes over, and she tries to suggest that I go talk to some girl that she thought I knew from high school who she believes she had seen across the way, who was actually a girl that my brother knew, but-- so I didn't even know this woman. She's like, "I think I saw Angie over there!"

Alyssa: And, in fact, you don't remember this, but she kind of un-did our hands and kind of linked arms with you and separated us. You know, so it was pretty obvious her intention.… But, um, yeah, so she had an issue.

Meeting the family of one's dating partner, both immediate and extended, is an interpersonal encounter that often makes both the family member and partner alike experience some nervousness. Hollywood movies have depicted this phenomenon, creating movies whose plots surround this initial encounter (Meet the Parents, Meet the

Fockers, Shrek II, Guess Who's Coming to Dinner) and the communication leading up

to it. For those in interracial relationships, this initial encounter can be even more nerve-

wracking, particularly in situations where families have voiced disapproval of racially

mixed relationships. Families of origin send a myriad of messages to their son or

daughter who is dating interracially. Though some families send supportive messages

from the onset, many families send messages of concern and disapproval. The story that

opens this chapter illustrates some of the challenges couples can face with a

disapproving family member. Timothy's Granny clearly did not approve of Alyssa or

want her in the family. Granny worked to split the relationship up and to keep Alyssa

from becoming a part of her family, evidenced in her trying to cut Alyssa out of the

picture and introduce Tim to other women.

In this chapter, I will answer my first research question as I examine the

messages interracial couples receive from their families and the resulting challenges

interracial couples face. First, we will briefly consider the marked difference between

approval and disapproval messages and their resonance with couples. Then, we will

consider messages of disapproval more in-depth. I will do this by beginning with

similarities between black and white families' reasons for disapproval. Afterwards, I

will consider the differences between black and white disapproval. I will conclude the

chapter by talking about how these differences create internal conflict for the partners

involved.

Family Approval

On some occasions, one or both families of the individuals in the interracial relationship openly embrace their family member's partner. In these instances, reactions from families were uneventful and of, seemingly, little importance to the couple. As Erin casually noted of her relationship with Ryan, "They were totally fine with it." For Scott and Taylor, the same was true. When I asked about reactions from families, Scott said "It wasn't a big… there wasn't a big thing, I guess." Taylor quickly attested to this, stating, "I don't think it was a big deal to either one of our parents about it," and that was that.

Alyssa and Timothy gave a perfect example of how uneventful approval was for interracial couples even when a "first meeting" was arranged. Alyssa describes the first time that her parents met Tim. Notice that she actually used the word "uneventful" to describe Tim and her parent's first meeting:

> My parents came to visit me at college and we had dinner—I think it was you and Kathleen and my parents? I already told my parents that I like him and so they were kinda there, you know, just to visit me but also the bonus was to scope out this new guy that I was interested in. So, um, I remember you getting along with my parents pretty well. I think, um, we went to Applebee's, had a meal…I think it was *uneventful*…My parents were fine. Well, you know because in my family my last name is English. Even though we consider ourselves African American, we do have, obviously, white people in our family and some by marriage and permission and others not. So, my family also being Christians did

not have a problem with me liking or dating someone of a different race. So, when they met Tim, it was not a big deal to them.

Often when a partner's family had no qualms about the relationship, the partner would explain why they did not. Several partners said, "My family is Christian. We love and accept all people." Other partners said, "We grew up valuing diverse people. All of my friends are from all over the world." Some partners said their parents would probably have been shocked if they had married someone white. Abby grew up in a family where her parents place high value on intercultural friendships. She spoke about how her partner Parker was not only accepted, but fit in very well with her family:

> You know, they really liked Parker. I mean, they—he fit in really well with our family. He would come over and be involved in whatever we were doing. He is musical, and my family is very musical and loves to sing so he would play the piano. So he really fit in immediately with my family and I don't really think--I mean, I know there were no racial issues, and I don't even think they were particularly concerned about, you know, problems that we might face. I mean, I think them just knowing me, you know… I don't think they had any real concerns about that. I don't really think any of my family on either side had any issues with that at all, you know? They love to talk to him because of his accent and, you know, distant relatives who didn't live close by enjoyed talking to Parker, and he's just, you know. He always has a lot to say and is interested in people so, um… Yeah, there really weren't any issues or concerns.

In addition to being musical, Parker is Caribbean. Abby noted during the interview that her family just loved to hear Parker talk both his accent and for his stories. His heritage was not only accepted, but valued. So, as one can see, when families accept their loved one's partner, discussions are relatively uneventful. The problems begin when the messages are ones of disapproval.

<div align="center">Families' Disapproval</div>

Although several of the couples mentioned that one or both families were fine with the couple, several of the couples had faced blatant disapproval from one or both partners' families. Whereas the previous situations indicated "no big deal," the reactions from these couples indicated "big deal." The best indicator of how the family responded to the couple's relationship was the couples' initial response to my question about meeting the family. Consider these three responses:

Reaction #1:

> Interviewer: Replay for me the first time you met each other's families.
>
> Marcus: Oh God.
>
> Becky: [Laughs]
>
> Marcus: Oh God!

Reaction #2:

> Interviewer: Replay for me the first time you met each other's family.
>
> Robert: [Clears throat]
>
> Samantha: Ew.
>
> Robert: [Laughs]

Reaction #3:

> Interviewer: So, the first time when you were boyfriend/girlfriend and you met
>
>   each other's family,
>
> Audrey: Oh God! [Laughs]
>
> Isaac: [Laughs]

These responses indicated to me that I was soon to hear a myriad of war stories about family picnics, holiday gatherings, weddings, and more. That proved to be the case! Now I turn my attention to considering these messages of disapproval in more detail. I begin by considering messages of disapproval that that were shared by both black and white families.

Reasons for Disapproval

On one hand, the black families and white families shared some of the same concerns for their relative in this relationship.

Life Will Be Harder

Both black and white families warned the couples that being in an interracial relationship was going to make marriage even more difficult than it usually is. Parents, in particular, felt that their children were inviting additional race-related problems into their relationships. As Jillian stated, parents told their child in an interracial relationship that they "had no idea what [they] were getting into and what it would be like." Emily's parents told her this also. She replayed their comments for me:

> Emily: [My parents said] "We always stand by…we don't want you to have
>
>   problems because of the choices that you make, and we think that you're putting

yourself in a position where you're dealing with problems that you under other circumstances, you wouldn't have to deal with."

Although various couples reported that parents were concerned about life being harder, few couples mentioned exactly what parents meant. Based on comments from couples, like the one from Samantha, how life would be harder remained largely unarticulated, suggesting that the reason for disapproval involved much more than the parents were willing to admit. Samantha said

> In [my mom's] mind, it would make my life and our lives harder for whatever reason… When did she grow up? In the 60s and 70s, I guess, when I mean it was almost dangerous for white women to be with black men and her main issue was stereotypes and the way we would be treated and looked at as an interracial couple of how it would be harder.

In the first line of Samantha's remark, she makes a telling comment. She cannot put her finger directly on why her mother thought their lives would be harder. She actually says that her mother thought their lives would be harder for "whatever reason." Then, Samantha begins trying to rationally figure out how her mother's upbringing, both time and place, would affect her judgment of their relationship. However, these are all Samantha's inferences. Again, her mother's reasoning remains unarticulated.

"You're Not Thinking of the Kids"

While both black and white families mostly talked in generalities about life being harder, several couples talked about how their families did mention one specific way they thought the couples would be making life harder: bi-racial children. The main

concern families raised to the couple regarding their children was that bi-racial children would be "caught in between" races and, this "in-between-ness" would result in the child becoming the recipient of racism from both the Black and White communities.

> Samantha: "What about the kids?" They always say, "What about the kids? What about the kids? You're just gonna make it so much harder on the kids. Um, and Mom, she's mentioned that….Because they're not white or black. Or because…they'd be mixed. Because the white kids might not accept them, but at the same time, the black kids might not accept them because they're too white or what have you.

Landon's mother echoed this sentiment. She was afraid that the country would regress with respect to race relations and that her son was taking unnecessary risks and, in a sense, gambling with his future and the future of this family.

> Landon: My mom—her reservations are the name callings, um, whether they'll be viewed as whole as either one of the other, who they are going to identify with more, the white culture or the black culture? She's worried about those type of things in the child's mind and how the world perceives the child. You know, if for some reason the world as a whole takes a step back in racial relations, you know, now the child is in a real big bind. Or, you know, if it moves forward then we're all gravy. She's a little more pessimistic in thinking that the world is not ready for all these interracial babies to come shooting forth and what not. So, those are her reservations. Again, I think she's speaking on her past and trying to have it impact the future. So, she's still carrying some of those old ideas.

Interesting to note here is the subtle difference in the concern of Samantha's mom, who is white, and the concern of Landon's mom, who is black. Samantha's mom is concerned that the larger racial group will not accept the child. In other words, the power lies with the group to say, "You are not one of us." However, Landon's mom focuses on the child's response to the group, asking such questions as "With whom will the child identify?" This subtle difference illustrates the difference between the white and black mind. Samantha's mom is concerned that white society will not accept the child. The child will have a race instead of being "just white." However, Landon's mom is concerned that the "black" child will not be able to be a part of a racial community. The child will not have "enough race" to fit in with a specific racial group.

These comments from family members highlight a persistent need for racial categorizations. In the mind of the families, race is a dichotomy—black or white. Feagin (2001) has suggested that people have a race continuum in their minds. On this continuum, blacks are at one end and whites are at the other end. A bi-racial child challenges these racial oversimplifications. For example, Rockquermore & Brunsma (2002) have found that biracial individuals choose to identify in four main ways. In only one of those options, which he termed singular identity, do bi-racial individuals choose to identify as either black or white. In the other three, bi-racial individuals either embrace both identities (border identity & protean identity) or choose not to racially self-identify at all (transcendent identity). When bi-racial children choose to embrace both identities or not racially self-identify, they are challenging the rigid system of racial classifications which is entrenched in US citizens because of our raced society.

At first glance, this particular reason for the family's disapproval, being concerned about the children, appears unselfish; the family asserts that they are only worried about the children. Yet, a deeper consideration of the comments reveals an underlying concern about family identity. In fact, perhaps the concern about the children is more of a concern for themselves. Families must come to terms with the reality that the "other" will not only be marrying into the family, but if the couple decides to have children, the "other" will be their lineage. A white spouse voiced this standpoint as he aptly noted what lies behind the concern for the children:

> Timothy: Yeah, they raised typical concerns like, "It's not about you; it's about the children…" But I think the kids thing may mean more than what people are letting on that it means. I think, you know, they are suggesting that it means the child will have a hard time because of not having a natural group because of homophyly and other things, but what I think they are really saying is—I think people in general are really saying, "I am concerned that our identity and our posterity will be changed and altered irreparably from what we imagined our posterity would be."

To recap, in some instances, white and black families disapprove of the interracial relationships for similar reasons. Families warn their loved ones that they are making life harder on themselves, in general. Specifically, families warn that interracial couples are not thinking of the children. Now that we understand the similar messages of disapproval from black and white families, I turn my attention to the ways in which the black and white families' messages of disapproval differ.

Black and White Families Disapprove for Dissimilar Reasons

White Disapproval

Although the black and white families sometimes voiced similar concerns, white families and black families largely seemed to disapprove for different, distinct reasons that are rooted in our country's racially troubled past.

Interracial Marriages Are Immoral.

White families disapproved of their relative's relationship on the moral claim that mixed relationships are sinful. Throughout history, whites have used religion and morality to prove their political position on issues of race. Pro-slavery advocates used biblical scripture to legitimate their position. More recently during the Civil Rights Era, the Virginia Supreme court judge that upheld Virginia's anti-miscegenation law did so using moral claims, arguing that God himself was against interracial marriages, a fact apparent in his creation design. This idea of interracial relationship being sinful came out as Isaac spoke of his family's disapproval:

Interviewer: Did your family give specific reasons for having a problem with it being a mixed relationship?

Isaac: Oh, I think it was pretty simple. It was uh, you know, you're not supposed to mix. That's just not what you're supposed to do. I mean that's wrong.

Interviewer: It's just the rule. It's a moral wrong?

Isaac: Yeah, Yeah. That ain't what you're supposed to do. It's just not right. So, yeah, there wasn't any more discussion than that. That was it.

A more distressing example came during my interview with Abby and Parker. They told about being the target of a "God-does-not-approve-of-you" church sermon. While sitting in a church service together, the pastor began preaching a sermon that drew attention to them as "unequally yoked," referring to a specific section of New Testament scripture cautioning Christians to not become "unequally yoked" as they endeavored to live for Christ. They described the incident to me:

> Abby: I know when I first was – when we were first dating I was going to church with Parker and it was a black church; you know, predominantly black…and we weren't even married; we were just kind of going out.
>
> Parker: It's crazy.
>
> Abby: There is a text that says about being unequally yoked, but when they talk about that they are really talking about what Parker was talking about earlier about religion, you know, and a believer [with] someone who isn't and how it can be very difficult and, you know, that it's probably better not to enter into that kind of a relationship. But this guy gets up there and he starts preaching about being unequally yoked staring at us, preaching to us, but he was definitely – and he even maybe said something about race…
>
> Parker: He said, um… "A lot of…black people have not learned to learn to know their place."
>
> Abby: Yeah.
>
> Parker: Staring at us and preaching. We were like… [Expression of shock]

Interracial Marriages as Public Disgrace

If we follow this line of reasoning, which is followed by some, that interracial relationships are, indeed, sinful, then we can easily understand how making such relationships public could be troublesome to white families. If the assumption is that interracial relationships are a moral wrong, then it becomes embarrassing that one's adult child is so publicly sinning. Consequently, many white families disapproved out of fear of what others would think about the racial mixing. Two white partners recalled their parents' expressions of shame regarding their decision for a partner. Jillian said, "My folks' response…My mother's response was sort of 'How could you or how could we…how could I do this to them?' and 'What will their friends think?' That was sort of the…That was the predominant response." Becky reiterated that her father expressed a similar concern to her about what the public view of Becky and Marcus's relationship would be, but more importantly to him, what would the public think of him as a parent— that his daughter would make this kind of choice. Becky shared, "I finally got my dad to say why he didn't like it, and his reason was 'Well, what are people gonna think? I live in this community, and it is a small town, and it's a southern town.' Ya know, 'it is a small town,' and I remember just— I yelled, and I said, 'It shouldn't matter. That's such a stupid reason!'"

Perhaps the most poignant example of fearing public shame comes from Samantha and Robert. Samantha and Robert had been friends for several months. They had spent a lot of time at each other's house and eventually began dating. However,

when they were planning to go to prom, a highly public event for high schoolers,

Samantha's mom gave her a mandate.

> Samantha: My mom just flat out said, "You need to find another date 'cause
>
> you're not taking a black man to prom. You're not gonna live the rest of your
>
> life and look back at your high school prom pictures and see that you went with a
>
> black guy…" That's eventually when it came up and when I finally told him,
>
> "Say, look my mom has a problem with this and she won't let me go with you
>
> because you're black."
>
> Interview: What was your reaction to that?
>
> Robert: Mm, I guess I mean, I was pretty surprised that I didn't, um, I never
>
> really been exposed to anything like that and she never treated me like she
>
> thought that way. I mean, I was always over there, ya know, open the
>
> refrigerator if I want or throw my feet up, or you know. She always made me
>
> feel real comfortable, so I was really surprised that, you know, I didn't suspect
>
> that or anything like that.

Because the white family is so concerned about the public's reaction to the

relationship, they become preoccupied with the fact that the partner is black and dismiss

other aspects of the person's identity. Although identities are always multi-faceted, the

racial identity of the black partner eclipsed all other facets of his or her identity. Then

again, other facets of the black partner's identity are often not as visible as the color of

his or her skin. Emily, the white partner in a relationship spoke of her parent's

disapproval of the relationship. Emily's parents argued that they disapproved of the *relationship*, not necessarily of *Keith*, her black husband:

> It wasn't about Keith. [My parents] were always real clear that it was not about Keith the person—that they understood that Keith, the person, was probably a fine man because they trust my judgment. Their concerns were in a general sense relating to how the world would view us and what the corresponding consequences would be as a result of people making decisions, drawing conclusions based on not knowing us.

This disapproval from whites clearly has an inherent contradiction. If the argument is oversimplified, the argument says "It's not about you as a person. It's about you as a black person." Of course, this argument has logical flaws. One's identity cannot be parsed out to include or not include its different elements. In other words, different facets of our identity can become more or less salient at different points; however this does not mean that the less salient facets cease to exist. For example, I can be a woman and a teacher. When I am teaching, my teacher identity is more salient, but at no point do I cease to be a woman. So, the black partner is both a member of the relationship and black. So, while the partner's identity as a wife or husband may be more salient at any given point, the person never stops being black.

One might stop and ask at this point why some white families make this argument. One plausible answer to that question is for many whites, whiteness is not a facet of their identity; they do not racially identify on a daily basis. With the privilege of white skin comes the privilege of *not* having to regularly racially self-identify. So,

whites can pick and choose when to think about their whiteness; they can identify as white on forms and questionnaires and then drop racial identifications and return to "normal" when they go to shop at a department store. People of color do not have that luxury. So, the argument "It's not about you as a person. It's about you as a black person," makes sense in the white mind because whites CAN ignore the racial facet of their own identities and see themselves just as a person, not as a white person. They, then, have the ability to separate other's identity into racial identity and non-racial identity. The argument then becomes "I have no problem with your non-racial identity. I only have a problem with your racial identity." Now that we have considered the reasons why white families disapprove, let us turn our attention toward the black families and how their messages of disapproval differ.

Black Disapproval

White families disapproved on moral claims and concerns about public perception. Black families' disapproval, however, was steeped in the history of the black experience in America. For whites, interracial marriages were just wrong and embarrassing. For blacks, interracial marriages were one more affront to the black community. Black families felt as though the white partner would exploit their relative. Further, they felt, in many cases, that the black partner was "joining the enemy" and forsaking their black community. Audrey captured the distinction between white and black disapproval. She stated:

> Well, I don't think they…it hits [whites] the same way. I don't think it's…I
>
> don't think it's the emotional reaction that white people feel. They feel more of a

disapproval and condemnation, but black people, it conjures up so much more. That's what I think my mother was expressing. And it's all the years of being taken advantage of by white people and now here ya go, and why would you participate in this? Um, and that's why I think the anger is. That here I get just disapproving looks and "Huh"—those kinds of things, but he gets anger looks and ya know like, "Mother fucker" instead of "huh" . Ya know, it's just not the same reaction that he gets, and I and I mean, it's directed to me, too, 'cause they're not happy with me either.

Staples (1999) writes that two meta-narratives regarding interracial relationships have trickled down from slavery and influenced how we see both white male-black female relationships and black male-white female relationships. I now turn my attention to unpacking the disapproval messages from black families in light of these meta-narratives. First, I will consider messages about the white male-black female relationship. Second, I will consider messages about the black male-white female relationship.

Disapproval of White Male-Black Female Relationships

The white male-black female relationship meta-narrative resulted from the morally reprehensible acts of exploitation on the part of white slave owners and slave masters (Staples, 1999). White slave owners raped black women both for sexual enjoyment and for the purpose of creating more slaves. (Because of the one-drop rule, any child of an African-American woman would automatically be a slave.)

The negative connotation of the white male/black female has persisted throughout American history. Some families worried that the black female was being exploited for experimentation purposes. Feagin (2001) reports that blacks were often portrayed as animalistic and savage during slavery. Therefore, sexual relations with them were seen as experimental. This jungle fever concept, the idea of experimenting sexually with another race, lingers in the minds of some African-Americans. Tim and Alyssa talked about the concerns of Alyssa's family:

Timothy: [To Alyssa] You had gotten a warning from your black friends and family members, some more distant family members, that a white man can never really love a black woman. I don't know if you remember that? Like, one of your second cousins had said something about that?

Alyssa: It was not that they could never love it's just where is this heading? Is this person willing to marry you or this more of a type of…

Timothy: Experimentation?

Alyssa: Yes. You know, a way to rebel against their parents or something like that. And that was not my concern.

Audrey's mother was extremely wary of whites because of her previous experiences. When Audrey told her she was dating a white man, her mother was not pleased, even though Audrey's mom was bi-racial herself. In fact, Audrey's mom gave Isaac an "Aunt Jemima" test.

Audrey: My mother's mother came from mixed parents, but she was not at all up for me being in a mixed relationship. She felt like that white men took

advantage of black women, in particular, historically, and she said, "Well, now, this..is this serious or what are his intentions" and she doin' the whole nine yard. I'm like, "Ma, it's just could..he's comin' and I want ya to meet him." And she said, "Don't be bringin' me no greasy-haired, chicken-smellin' white boy." [laughs]

Interviewer: And your mom said this to you?

Audrey: Yes, and so…

Isaac: You should've seen her when we drove up.

Audrey: [Laughs.] She loves him now.

Isaac: It was Aunt Jemima without the wig.

Audrey: Yeah, she's really skinny, but she tied her hair up in

Isaac: She had freakin' pantyhose pulled over her head…

Audrey: pantyhose and made a big bow…

Isaac: …I mean, this is our first meeting, right? This ugly-ass, ugly ass nightgown on.

Interviewer: On purpose?

Audrey: like Aunt Jemima.

Isaac: Oh God, yes.

Audrey: Yeah, she's--she's testin' him out.

Isaac: I was cool.

Audrey: He was.

Besides sexual experimentation, some black families showed concern that the white partner would physically mistreat his black spouse. Again, if we consider the

historical narratives, most relationships between white men and black women were not consensual, but forced. Parents, in particular, were leery of the white partner. Gianna shared her stepfather's concerns:

> Gianna: My stepfather was another one who probably…He had some concerns about it, but he just wanted to make sure, my, one of my brothers wives' sisters married a white guy and he…the marriage broke up, and basically what happened was that he, he's messed up. He basically kind of ended up saying he didn't know what a trouble it was going to be to be married to a black person, and he just wanted out of it, you know. And they had a couple kids and he left her, and my stepfather basically didn't want me to be in that kind of a situation. That was his only concern. That he didn't want somebody…you thought they were real and they weren't really real, kind of a thing…and so his own concern, and he did kind of give him, didn't he kind of give Joseph the third degree or the once over or whatever when you came…finally went to visit them. He asked him a bunch of questions and checked him out. My stepfather was a…he was in the military.
>
> Interviewer: Oh, okay.
>
> Gianna: And um, so he had a lot of life experience, and he was in personnel, as well, so he
>
> had a he..
>
> Interviewer: So, he interviewed [Joseph].
>
> Gianna: He had a lot of personal…

Joseph: He basically gave me a charge. He said, "If you ever [Gianna laughs] hurt her, I'll come after you."

Disapproval of Black Male-White Female Relationships

The second meta-narrative about interracial couples concerned the black male/white female relationships. This narrative began with the idea of a black male slave having a relationship with a white woman who was often the slave owner's relative (wife, daughter, niece, etc.). This relationship had a very different feel from the white male-black female relationships because it was more consensual. Though less hostile in origin than white male-black female relationships, these relationships still often resulted in the black man being beaten or lynched for having such relations with a white woman who was seen as "forbidden fruit."

So, accordingly, a major concern of black families was the safety of their son. As I mentioned, during slavery, black men could be beaten or killed for having a relationship with a white woman. This reality has endured. Take for example the highly publicized case of Emmett Till. In 1955, Emmett Till, a young black teenager was murdered by two white men for whistling at a white woman. Even up until 1967, a black man could be jailed for having a relationship with a white woman in many US states, and many were. However, much more recent events indicated that safety concerns are still justified. For instance, in 2004, a burning cross was left at the house of an interracial couple in Long Island (www.nytimes.com).

Black parents openly expressd fears for their child's safety. This was the concern on the heart of Marcus's dad. Marcus explained:

Marcus: Safety and safety. "Something's gonna happen to you." My dad was like "You're my…" I'm an only child, so I remember one time we were arguin', We were just hard down, just goin' at [it], boom, boom, boom, boom. It's funny…Me and my mom usually argue a lot because we're a lot alike, but me and my dad were arguin', and he says, "Something's gonna happen," That's when he just kinda broke d…He was almost in tears…Well, he was in tears. He's like, "I'm not losin' you. You're the only child I got. I can't afford to lose you. I'm not gonna lose you because of this" type stuff, and he teared up. That's the first time it actually was like, raw emotion kind of fallin' out…That was the big thing for him.

Parker, another black partner, is not from the United States. However, he had been warned by family members to be careful because he lived in the Southern US, and the family had heard about the racial tensions in the South. We can hear the same concern from his family that we heard from Marcus's family:

Parker: Yeah. So, when I told them that – they knew my girlfriend was white they wanted… First of all, they had these preconceived ideas about the South that they are probably going to lynch me or something [Laughs].

Abby: "Be careful!"

Parker: "You have to be careful where you go at night." So, they were very concerned about me…because I was dating Abby.

In addition to safety, black families warned their sons that the white person would mistreat them when "the chips were down." Historically, one frustration the

black community has had with the white community is that whites form interracial alliances when it is convenient for them, but when it becomes inconvenient, they leave. Family members voiced concerns and sometimes angry warnings to the black partner that whites would eventually hurt them.

> Erin: His ex-wife, when we first started dating and they were going through their divorce, his ex-wife said something about, "One day when ya'll get into a fight, I swear she's going to call you the "N" word!" She didn't say "the N word." She said the word.

A more humorous example comes from Paige and Landon. Landon's mother had warned him for years about white women. She did this through a tale she told about cousin Livingston who had been "done wrong" by a white woman. Paige and Landon laughed as they relayed Landon's family's tale of doom:

> Paige: Like your mom said I was going to leave you after so many years.
>
> Landon: Oh yeah! I totally forgot about that! That's right! My cousin – bless his heart – my cousin married this white girl from out East, actually, and he was in – he was an IT in the Army and she ended up leaving him after four years or something like that because she couldn't take it anymore. My aunt was really crushed, and my mom was just pissed. She was so mad! So, whenever we were dating someone, it was always, "Remember Livingston! Remember Livingston! Remember what happened to Livingston!" And so, that's kind of – that's kind of much! [Laughter]

Besides being concerned about their son's safety and the faithfulness and commitment of the white partner, a third concern of African-Americans was that their son belonged with a black woman. Black families often believed that because a white person can never fully understand the black experience, the person could never be as good of a fit for their black child as a black partner would be. Also, black families do not want their son or daughter to choose whiteness over blackness. Choosing a white partner is equated with "not choosing" a black partner. Samantha and Robert discussed this mindset that is common in the black community:

> Robert: As far as like, that's the people that I do notice, really. You know like she said, a lot of Black women, but I mean, I think that's one of those things that black women hate seeing a black man with a white woman and that's…
>
> Interviewer: Why do you think that is?
>
> Robert: Why is that? Like, I guess it's viewed as, I guess in the black community, I mean, it's viewed as like selling out, like you know, you…once you make it, you know, you get yourself a white girl and you know
>
> Samantha: You abandon yours.
>
> Robert: Yeah, you're basically like abandoning the, the uh, you know, your black community.

Messages Received and Role Conflict

As this chapter has illustrated, interracial couples receive a myriad of messages from the families. Receiving these messages can be delightful when families approve. However, when they do not approve, interracial couples face real challenges.

All couples are by definition comprised of two individuals. Although the couple itself is a social entity, I want to stop and consider for a moment the impact of messages on the individuals. One way in particular, disapproving messages affects individuals in interracial couples is that it creates role conflict. Of particular importance here is the concept of inter-role conflict. This particular type of role conflict occurs when a person plays two different roles and those roles have conflicting pressures (Kahn 1964). Individuals in interracial relationships whose families disapprove of the relationship experience inter-role conflict. Most individuals who are married experience some sort of push-and-pull between their family of origin and their family of choice. This tension is amplified when the two families' value systems are seemingly incompatible.

Several individuals whose parents were disapproving of the relationship experienced real anxiety over the inter-role conflict of being a member of their family of origin but also being a member of a new family, their family of choice. Becky, Emily, and Jillian talked about the pull between caring for their families very much, but disapproving of their families' stance on their relationship. Becky said

> It's hard because I didn't feel that way, but that's my family, so I don't wanna. I don't talk about my family, but I don't want to defend their actions either, ya know what I mean? So it's hard for me to look at him and say..their rea…I

mean, their reasons were stupid, but they were still their reasons. And…it was, I think, for them mostly about and that's just their gut, and that's hard to say outloud. You know? 'Cause that's my parents.

The partners talked about how even when they knew that the relationship was right and their values were different from their families, they still struggled with the emotions that the role conflict created. Some partners chose to embrace the conflict and work through it, choosing to maintain both roles and finding a way to negotiate the dissonance created by their conflict. We hear this in Emily's comments.

> Emily: I think that you have to be more committed to a relationship like this if it goes against your family values, at least when you value your family the way that I do…Somehow I needed to, you know, manage the dynamic of still staying in touch with my family. You know, how were we going to kind of manage the emotions of this? And you know, nobody knows how to do that. I mean you really don't know how to do that 'til you're faced with it.

Jillian, however, could not deal with the dissonance caused by the role conflict. She decided that she would honor her relationship with her family of choice and cut ties with her family of origin because of their unwillingness to accept Nathan. She talked about some of the tensions surrounding that decision.

> Jillian: My father had surgery five years ago, and I went up for that. Uh, and I saw them two years ago at a family wedding. But other than that … Before we got married, we went through family counseling to deal with the stepparent, blended family piece moreso than the race piece, but, unfortunately, that

obviously came up. We were going through counseling before I told my parents what was going on, and then we had to deal with it, but…I don't remember talking at length about it [with Nathan]. Other than the first time I went [home again]… When my father needed surgery-it's been longer ago than 5 years-within the first year that we were married, my father was having surgery for cancer, and I handled it poorly and came home and basically said [to Nathan], "My dad's having"…I was very, very close to my father... "My dad's having surgery, and I have to go," and in retrospect, that was very insensitive and not respectful of my marriage and that...It took a toll 'cause it was that sort of complicated, but that was a lesson that I learned. And now I'm loyal to my marriage.

Concluding Thoughts

To summarize this chapter, we have considered the messages that interracial couples receive from their families. Some couples do not experience disapproval; however, a large number of couples still do. The messages from black families and white families have some similarities and some differences. Both black and white families share concerns that the couples will have a harder-than-normal life. They also express concerns about society's reaction to bi-racial children. White families also have concerns about the morality of interracial relationships, sometimes claiming that they are sinful. Because of this, white families feel publicly shamed by their son or daughter's interracial relationship. The black families express concerns about the emotional and physical safety of their children, including how they will be treated and the motivations

the white partner has for being in the relationship. I ended the chapter by briefly

discussing the role conflict that partners face when their role in their family of origin

conflicts with their role in the family of choice. In the next chapter I will focus on how

the partners evolve in the relationship, giving special attention to questions about

identity transformation.

CHAPTER IV

BLACK SCHOOL

Isaac: We'll go to Audrey's family's house or will be there for Christmas, and I might

go three days without seein' a white person. And every once in a while it will just occur

to me, "Shit, I haven't seen a white person in 3 days." [Laughs]

Audrey: But then my cousins from my dad's side show up and then they're whiter than

you are. [Laughs] It's true.

Isaac: Yeah, ya know, then there's that, too.

Audrey: I think black people have more sensitivity to [racial issues] because we are

black in a white world, effectively. Like when he says, he went for days [on vacation]

and realized that he was the only [white person around]— I go for days and I never see

another black person, and that's just a part of my life because that's this town, unless

you pass through the black part of town. So you're wired differently from that

experience because of all the historical implications on the whole black/white question.

So things that I don't think he views as racist or racially seasoned, even if it's not racist

per se, I define very clearly along [those] lines. I don't know if it's not my being black

as much as it is the rest of the world being white. It's very tiring, and I even found

myself the other day sayin', "I am so tired of white people," and then I had to check that

because I'm talkin' about the ones I live with and love. But I do get— it's very wearing.

If you can imagine yourself in another country where you were always the one that was

different and that people had preconcerted notions about you because you're American

and you're white, and they treated you based on their notions that had nothing to do

with you. Go to the Middle East where Americans aren't popular. You know, they're generally smiled at and accommodated, but then when they're backs turned, it's "Ah, they're…"And I feel like that's a representation of probably what if feels like, at least in this community, to be black. I just really get tired of having to educate or accommodate. Ya know, it's one or the other. Either you accommodate ignorance or you're educating their ignorance. Ya know, "Oh, I like you. If more black people were like you, we wouldn't have racial problems." How stupid is that? "If more white people were like you…Hua!" [Makes a slapping gesture], and there you are. It's—that gets tiring, but it doesn't make me not wanna be black. I think that—and I know this is race-centric— but I do feel like I can handle more things because I've had to handle more things, you see…Growing up black in America, you just have to handle more stuff. It's just the idiot at the grocery store that won't give you change for a dollar and will tell you, "Well, we don't have any more change," and you see a white person walk up and they—It's that kind of stuff. You get tired. And you get tired with the stupidity, and it then the nuances that you're kinda goin' "Okay, did you say that?" Okay, it's not overt, but now I've gotta interpret, okay, if that was racist or not. [Laughs] And either way, I'm pissed. [Laughs] And now, I've gotta sweat through it, and so I'm not focusin' on what the thing is. I'm in this whole— so I get tired sometimes of being a black person in white America.

Jillian: What I learned with and through and from Nathan is it really isn't about me because whatever baggage there is and whatever stereotype and whatever judgment

there is, it still boils down to it's about Nathan being Black. So it really, and it doesn't matter how much I try to under—how much I want to say I understand what that means— and I do intellectually—but the reality is it's about Nathan being Black. It's not about me being white, ya know? And that's something we talk to Kevin about all the time is, ya know: It doesn't matter that he's got a white mother and a black father. He will be seen as a person of color forever and always. That's the half that matters. And I think in this relationship, that it's the same thing. The half that matters is the fact that Nathan's black.

In this chapter, I answer research questions two and three as I examine both challenges with racial groups and challenges with identity that individuals in interracial couples experience as a result of both familial and societal messages. I began this chapter with two quotations, one from a white partner and one from a black partner. In them, we see racial awareness in two forms. In Audrey's words, we hear a black woman speak of her tiresome task of lugging through life racial stereotypes others put on her. She bemoans the unwanted chore of having to educate or accommodate the ignorance of white people around her. Jillian, on the other hand, a white partner, speaks of a new level of understanding about her husband's position in society and how it affects their racial identity as a couple and the racial identity of their son. The quotation from Jillian illustrates the transformation that occurs for many white partners as they begin seeing the black side of American life. She remarks that she has learned this new way of thinking from Nathan.

In US society, blacks are a marginalized co-culture, while the white majority sits in a position of power. As Audrey, an African-American, so aptly stated, "[W]e are black in a white world." Many critical theorists discuss this phenomenon, which they often label "white privilege" (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin 2001). McIntosh (2000) writes a candid definition of white privilege.

I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks. (p. 475)

She goes on to give several examples of how whiteness is invisible, indicative of its privilege stating "I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time," and "I can be reasonably sure that if I ask to talk to 'the person in charge,' I will be facing a person of my race" (p. 476).

When individuals form a black-white interracial relationship, white privilege meets marginalized co-culture on an interpersonal level. The black partner is part of a marginalized co-culture. The white partner is a member of the dominant, privileged white culture, which most times had remained invisible to him or her until this relationship. As couples begin to develop their relationship, the differences arising from coming from two different races begin to emerge. Although some of the differences were humorous, cultural differences such as hair care and food, the major differences were nested in understandings of racial identity and racism in the US. While talking

with couples, I began hearing from the white partner about a new level of racial awareness that had resulted from interactions with their black partner. I also learned about the black partner's role in educating their white partners and some "aha" moments from black partners as they saw whiteness from a different vantage point.

So, in this chapter, I will consider the identity shift and resulting racial awareness that many white partners experience as a result of learning from their black partner. I will also consider the identity transformation of black partners. I will begin by briefly reviewing Standpoint Theory and its basic concepts. Next, I will examine the process by which the black partners help white partners transition from racial naiveté to a deeper understanding of both their identity and the identity of their black partner. Finally, I will consider the black partner's expanded understanding of both the black race and the white race as they view whiteness from a new vantage point—the inside.

<div align="center">Standpoint Theory</div>

Standpoint theory posits that "people's experiences, knowledge, and communication behaviors are shaped in large part by the social groups to which they belong" (West & Turner, 2004, p. 462). Orbe (1998) applied standpoint theory to race and culture. He specifically coined the phrase co-culture, which he prefers to minority or sub-group. The terms "minority" and "sub-culture" connote inferiority while co-culture connotes co-existence without inherent hierarchy. Orbe (1998) discusses how non-white racial groups in the US are co-cultures. Co-cultures have different perspectives than whites because of the societal privilege whites hold in the US.

Standpoint theory relies on five specific assumptions (Hartsock, 1997).

1. Material life structures and sets limits on understanding of social relationships.

2. If material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two groups, the understanding of one will represent an inversion of the other.

3. The vision of the ruling group structures the material relations in which all persons are forced to participate.

4. In consequence, the vision available to an oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement.

5. As an engaged vision, the potential understanding of the oppressed, the adoption of a standpoint, makes visible the inhumanity of relations among human beings and increases the opportunities for liberation of oppressed groups.

The central concept of Standpoint Theory is the notion of standpoint. Orbe (1998) writes that "a standpoint is not simply a subjective position that is interested in promoting bias, but an acknowledgment of the sense of being engaged within a specific field of experience" (p. 26). While co-cultures are forced participate in the social world on the dominant group's terms, occasionally, a member of the co-culture will obtain right of entry into the dominant group's world and gain privilege. Collins (1991, 1999) calls this person an outsider within, an outsider who has been given a "pass" into privilege. Understanding standpoint theory will give us a perspective with which to view the identity transformation of white partners. We will begin by considering where white partners began and then shift into the role black partners played in helping them further understand their racial identity.

The Naiveté of White Partners

When a black person and white person decide to develop a relationship together, their individual experiences of the relationship development are markedly different from each other in one main way. The white partner understands what it means to be white in America. No surprise there. The black partner in the relationship understands what it means to be black in America. No surprise there either. However, black partners also understand what it means to be white in America. Standpoint theorists remind us that marginalized groups, such as blacks, are forced to operate on the terms of the dominant group. Therefore, the black partner has already learned how to live, work, and play in a white world from a very young age. For example, at the beginning of this chapter, we heard from Audrey who says, "I go for days and I never see another black person, and that's just a part of my life." Different researchers have addressed this reality, discussing such things as being the only black in the office (Hopson & Orbe, 2007; Salazar, 2005) or being one of very few blacks in their academic discipline (Daniel, 2007).

However, while blacks understand how to navigate in a white world, the reverse is not true. Because of their privilege and the invisible nature of whiteness in the US, most whites have *not* had to live, work, and play in a black world very often if ever. One of the white partners, Isaac, commented, "I've obviously discovered that you can easily ignore a lot of this stuff [racism] if you're with the right kind of people from other segments of the population that don't put it in your face all the time with just who they are." Isaac works with whites and lives in a white community. He openly admitted

during the interview that because Audrey is black and he has that constant reminder, he thinks more about the black community than he otherwise would.

As a result, most of the white partners came into the relationship with a lot of ignorance. In fact, Gianna, a black partner, overtly stated when describing Joseph at the onset of their relationship, "There was naiveté." One white partner talked about his "awareness of his unawareness." Tim was acutely aware at the onset of his relationship with Alyssa of his inability to understand the black experience:

> Tim: I was going to say, the basic problem from my perspective [at the beginning of our relationship] was that I would not be able to understand her experience…the experience of being African American or being black and sort of all the nonverbals that are directed at you. Like, one day she came home from work and she said on the way home from work, some old woman had walked by and clutched her purse more tightly and that hurt your feelings.
>
> Alyssa: Right, I remember that.

Although Tim did not understand the black experience, he was a step ahead of other partners in his acknowledgment of his lack of understanding and knowledge about the black experience.

Black School

The naivete of the white partner became somewhat humorous to the black partners as they watched their white lover learn to navigate a new world—the world of color. A tendency exists for the dominant culture to see co-cultures monolithically. It is not uncommon for whites to think that all black people think or feel a specific way about

any given issue. Becky, a white partner, made this mistake. She was startled to experience racist reactions from some blacks. Marcus laughed and made fun of Becky as she explained her shock:

Becky: Um, I was under the naïve assumption…

Marcus: Dummy

Becky: I was dumb.

Marcus: Dumb.

Becky: I was under the naïve assumption that black people would be more accepting because they had experienced [Marcus starts laughing.] rejection and racism and discrimination, and they would never do that to somebody else, right? And so, I thought we would be more accepted with black people. I was sorely mistaken. Especially black women, um, 'cause I can remember comments being made and, you know, about "What, you don't have enough men to choose from? Now you're…

Marcus: Yeah.

Becky: …you gotta come and take one of ours?" And they would say "take one of our good ones."

Marcus: mm-hmm

Becky: That's not…those are not my words. Those are their words.

Marcus: mm-hmm

One black partner Robert saw this naiveté in his white partner Samantha and enrolled her in his class—Black Class. Robert taught Samantha different words, what to say in

certain situations, and how to interpret some of what was going on in predominantly

black settings.

> Robert: I know I've learned a lot about white people. I KNOW I've taught her a
>
> lot about black people. [Samantha laughs.]…When we were younger, I used to
>
> always tell her that she was taking my class, and I would teach her new words
>
> and [Samantha laughs.]…and stuff like that.
>
> Interviewer: Black class? Is that what you mean?
>
> Robert: Yeah. Yes, I would teach her new words and then when she went to her
>
> university, and…it's in a predominantly black area, and I said "This is, you
>
> know, this is what I've been preparing you for." [He rubs his hands together to
>
> show anticipation.]
>
> [Laughs]
>
> Samantha: The university in and of itself is just in the hood. I mean it's a really
>
> bad area, and I ended up actually working in a law firm with a lot of black
>
> women, and I'd come home and I'd be like, "Rob," and tell him either words I
>
> heard or "Remember what you said about this? Well, I heard that today." You
>
> know, and it was kind of jokin' around. And he still calls me the whitest person
>
> ever.
>
> Robert: Well her her brother said, he said, "Samantha, you do the ditsy white
>
> girl thing so good." And me and him just started dying. It was just…it was just
>
> so fitting 'cause sometimes she can just—like she's never been around a black

person before, and I'm like, "God, you know that's what I been tryin' to teach

you!" But I mean, it's just kinda like a running joke, you know?

On the surface, Robert and Samantha's story about black school is, indeed, humorous.

However, while it may seem that Robert is only teaching Samantha words and a way of

speaking that are often associated with black culture, he is essentially teaching her how

to begin to navigate and function in a black world.

Samantha grew up in the dominant culture. She never had to learn the black co-

culture's slang, culture, traditions, or way of thinking about the world. Robert, on the

other hand, grew up in the black co-culture. A tenet of Standpoint theory says that "the

vision of the ruling group structures the material relations in which all persons are forced

to participate." In other words, the white folks make the rules because they are in

charge. Because of this, Robert had to learn how to navigate both the black culture and

the white culture, while Samantha only had to know how to navigate the white world.

Learning how to switch between two worlds, one white and one black, enabled Robert,

like the other black partners, to understand their white partner's naïveté and act as a

cultural tutor, almost a liaison, for them.

Black Partner As Protector

In addition to showing a desire to teach their white partners about a new culture,

black partners also tried to protect them at the same time. Studies show that blacks still

experience racism far more than whites do (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Feagin, 2001). Keeping

with the statistics, most of the black partners talked about racism they had experienced

as individuals growing up. Understanding the hurt racism causes, the black partners

seek to protect their white partners from those situations. A clear example of this comes from Landon and Paige. Paige talked about a racially-charged incident that had happened at her restaurant. While she was waiting tables, an interracial couple came in to eat. The table next to them began verbally assaulting them. The restaurant manager came in, apologized to the interracial couple, and asked the verbally abusive customers to leave. Paige, then, came home and told Landon about this episode. He showed real sensitivity to Paige and a keen understanding that this was her first time to deal with such overt racism. He discussed the incident in a manner where we can clearly see his taking role of protector.

> Landon: That was her first, as far as I was aware, experience of what could become, you know – the tension between both races or both peoples who feel this would be something that is taboo and not accepted in their world. And, this part of town is – it's a pretty religious area, and so there's not too many, I guess, disgusting looks, but there are certain places I know that we just won't go to. There's no way you can get us to go to Alabama, or South Carolina, or maybe not even Kentucky. But, there are some areas along the south that I would still be reluctant to go to just because whether it's there or not, the possibility that it's a heightened state of alertness that I have to be on in exposing her to that and the repercussions if something were to happen. It's just easier to stay away from it all.

So, as we can see, white partners come into interracial relationships more racially naïve than their black counterparts. The black partners see and understand this lack of

knowledge, often finding it humorous. Moreover, black partners are concerned about protecting their partners from a race-conscious society, which turns out to be impossible. In the next section, we see the next step in racial awareness for white partners.

White Partners Begin Losing Their Ignorance About Racial Issues

Although whites entered the relationship with a societally generated naivete, they soon began losing their ignorance and started gaining more racial awareness.

Black Life: Up Close and Personal

Whites began seeing black life and culture up close and personal. Several white partners relayed humorous experiences about what they experienced as they ventured outside of "white-dom." McIntosh (2000) notes when talking about white privilege that many times the little things that indicate white privilege go unnoticed. For example, when a woman buys nude stockings, the nude color matches the skincolor of white women, not women of color. Standpoint Theory captures this phenomenon. It reminds us that "the dominant group structures material relations, and that the material world gives us insight into social relationships" (Miller, 2005, p. 305). If we consider the stockings example, we see these tenets applied. The dominant group, whites, make decisions about what is defined in stores as "natural skincolor." A critical examination of this definition of normal gives us insight into social relations. One group's skincolor (white) is validated, and the other's (black) is not, thus perpetuating the covert racial hierarchies inherent in societal messages.

While talking with Marcus and Becky, a similar example arose in one of their stories. Becky told of an episode with black hair products.

Becky: I went to his cousin's graduation from college.

Marcus: Oh God. [laughs]

Becky: And I took a shower at the house. [Marcus] wasn't there. We were married at this point.

Marcus: I had a trial. I had a trial.

Becky: And he wasn't with us. I went with his mom and we went to this graduation. Well, his cousin, male cousin lived with him growing up, and always used like Suave shampoo and that kind of stuff, so when we came to visit, JeWann always had stuff in the shower I could use on my hair [Marcus laughs]. Well, I get into the shower, and I take a shower, and I'm thinkin' I really love this shampoo. It's on the thing, and I'm thinking, well, JeWann uses shampoo I can use, so Tina does, too. So, I wash with Isoplus is what it's called. I read it. It didn't say for black hair only. So, I wash my hair, and I'm thinkin', "Man, I can't…It's not it's not comin' out. What's the deal?" And so,..I read…you know when it's soft water, and it feels like your hair's not right?

Marcus: Oh God. [Laughs]

Becky: So, like I rinse and rinse and rinse [Laughs], and I get out and I go to dry my hair and it will not dry. It will not dry. And so, I come out, and I'm like "Ya'll, my hair looks like I have not washed it." I mean it's greasy looking. It's flat. It is so nasty. And it's short. I can't put it in a ponytail at this point. [Marcus laughs hysterically.] And so, uh, Tina comes up and she say, "Well, what did you use to wash your hair?" and I show her and she falls down on the

ground laughing. His mom's on the ground laughing. His aunt…everybody in

the house. They're like, "That is for black hair. It holds moisture, Becky."

Interviewer laughs.

Marcus: She called me and she's like, "Okay, so I used the shampoo, and I don't

know what happened to my hair?" I said, "Whad'd you use?" She said,

"Isoplus." I said, "Isoplus!"

Becky: But I don't know…[Laughs]

Marcus: "Isoplus!!"

Becky: There've been lots of silly things like that, but they're just, ya know,

things I know the answers to now that…I've been wig-shopping, ya know, with

one of my best friends. I'd never been wig-shopping before. What are you wig-

shopping? Yeah, and she's like, "Hey, wanna go wig-shoppin'?" And that was

an experience. You know, horse hair and real hair, and I didn't know any of that.

So,

Marcus: Okay…I don't even care. I don't care. [Laughs]

Becky: I feel more educated.

In this story, Becky says an intriguing line. She says, "I read it [the shampoo

bottle]. It didn't say for black hair only." The reality is shampoo used for whites does

not read "For white hair only." However, the assumption is that a product will be for

whites unless it is otherwise noted. Although this example might seem trite to some—

only a bottle of shampoo—the point is glaringly clear. White privilege includes more

than not dealing with racism at work or school, but it entails the compilation of minute

ways society makes whiteness invisible, even in the way companies label hair care products.

Becky's experience with black hair products and wigs opened her eyes to how much she did not understand and to the reality that she had a lot to learn about her husband's culture. Becky herself notes that she "feels" more educated. For Becky, the process of understanding white privilege and her ignorance about her husband's culture began with something as simple as shampoo.

Another humorous example came from Landon and Paige. Landon teased Paige about cooking very "white." I asked them if race had ever been a part of their conflicts with each other. The following dialogue ensued:

Paige: In cooking! (Laughter)

Landon: White people hate spice! I love spice! (Laughter)

Paige: He'll like open the cupboards and throw 100 different things in a pot and call it a meal.

Landon: You know, that's the British [pointing at Paige]. British can't stand spice.

Paige: He dumps it out and never ever measures.

Landon: British can't stand spice. I LOVE flavor!

Paige: Okay.

Landon: I love flavor.

Paige: You'll have rice and then like a whole thing of…

Landon: Seasoning! [To Paige] That's right, you gotta season the rice! Butter and milk doesn't cut it. You gotta season the rice! In cooking it definitely shows because I really like my seasoning, and Paige went along with it for the first couple months, but now she tones down my seasonings.

Paige: But I have toned mine up.

Landon: Yes, you have. You have brought yourself to a new level, and I'm proud of you! High five! [Turns to wife and gives her a high five.] I am proud of you for that. Thank you for bringing it up.

Interviewer: Okay, so cooking. How did you all talk about that? Was there a point where you were like, "I can't do it anymore. You have singed my taste buds!"

Paige: There was one day where he was at the stove with his pot and like doing craziness, and I was just like, "What are you doing?"

Interviewer: She cracked.

Paige: When I cook sometimes and he adds stuff to it, that really upsets me.

Landon: Yeah, so I learned not to take the Abbado which is the Mexican all-purpose seasoning, or I can only take salt and pepper to the table, but now I understand because from her family there was not much spice. In her family, it's salt and pepper.

Paige: There isn't. Well, with my mom there is, but with my dad, and my sister, and my brother. it is very plain.

Landon: It is salt and pepper, and garlic if you really want to push it, but butter and milk, and that's it!

Paige: We're from Iowa. We're like meat and potatoes.

Landon: Yeah, that is one thing. Man! I have never eaten so much meat and potatoes in my entire life. I did not know where that phrase came from when people would say, "Meat and potatoes!" I'm thinking, "Okay, maybe some pureed mashed potatoes and some little small bits of chicken."

Paige: My mom is more like him.

Landon: I like to cook with her mom.

Paige: But she doesn't cook that way because no one in my family will eat it.

Landon: Yeah, her mom is really black on the inside.

Again, although the topic of food might seem trivial, we see an interesting use of language in this story. Landon and Paige are arguing about how much to season the food. While discussing this issue, Landon refers to not just Paige, but her larger cultural group. He says at different points in the story, "White people hate spice" and "The British can't stand spice." Paige, however, only refers to Landon's obsession with spice. She does not mention a larger cultural group. At first glance, Paige is to be applauded for not stereotyping and saying "All black people over-season their food." However, what I find noteworthy here is that Landon seems to see the bigger picture. He discusses throughout the interview his interactions with whites and his exposure to various cultures. Because of this, Landon has several references to white culture. Paige, on the other hand, talks about her lack of exposure to other cultures throughout the interview.

Paige's only reference to black culture is Landon. This once again highlights how being white in the US gives you the possibility of living in a completely white world, unaware of other races' and cultures' customs—even something as commonplace and ever-present as daily food preparation. Again, as Standpoint theory suggests, the dominant group controls the material world; therefore, members of the dominant group never *have* to learn a different way of living, with regard to race (Orbe, 1998).

Whites Begin Observing Racism Against Partner

Although humorous encounters occurred, the incidents that really accelerated racial awareness for white partners had a very different tone. White partners, some for the first time, began both observing racism against their partners and experiencing racism against themselves. Many whites are cynical and doubtful when they hear black complaints of racism. Common responses from whites are "Blacks always seem to play the race card" or "Racism doesn't exist anymore." Once whites embark on building an intimate relationship with a black partner, they begin seeing firsthand what being black in America often means.

Various scholars have defined racism. Some scholars define racism in terms of interpersonal encounters, for example, someone using a racial epithet or negatively stereotyping someone based on his or her race. Other researchers define racism systemically or institutionally, holding that racism is entrenched in our societal institutions (churches, government, schools, etc.) to the extent that people of color are continually discriminated against in housing, education, the law, and all other societal activities. I find it most helpful to embrace both definitions. Of course, racial jokes and

stereotypes help us know individual racism is still rampant. However, a critical look at the high percentage of minorities that make up both the prison population and home foreclosures in the US makes me argue that systemic racism in the US is an indisputable reality, as well (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Feagin, 2001; Russel, 1998). Now I turn my attention to examples of each type of racism and how these experiences shaped the identities of the people in my study.

White partners began witnessing racist acts directed at their black partner. Isabella experienced a disgusting act of racism toward her partner, her first experience with an overtly racist act. As she told her story, I could hear the disbelief and dismay in her voice:

Cole: [We were in] an open area where you can go sit with your family and watch the water fall.

Interviewer: Almost like a park kind of?

Isabella: Yeah, but with a lot of water features, I guess. We were walking and somebody drove by in a car and opened the window and screamed out, "Nigger!"

Cole: NIGGER! I was like, "Hey, how are you doing?"

Isabella: It was my first real racial experience.

Cole: Isabella was like, "Did he just say what I think he said?" I said, "Yep!"

Isabella: It was just – I mean, I guess the thing that really appalled me was what a coward. He wouldn't have said that if he walked by, but he felt safe in his car. That was the thing that hit me.

Cole: That happened to me before. They always say that driving away, you know, when they feel it's safe. They never come in front of me and say, "What's up, nigger?" or whatever.

Isabella: But that was the first [time for me].

The difference in reactions between Cole and Isabella highlights Isabella's inexperience with overt racism. While she was obviously shocked by this racist display, Cole was not. In fact, Cole coolly stated that this had happened before. We also see in Cole's comment that he has dealt with this enough that he has processed these comments and decided that they were cowardly attacks. He says, "They never come in front of me and say it. They only do it when they feel safe." While Isabella is left somewhat speechless, we see that Cole has already thought through what these incidents will mean to him. In other words, he already has a script.

While Cole and Isabella's experience showed overtly racist slurs (individual racism), Jillian and Nathan reported how Nathan was once mistaken for the moving guy, demonstrating the stereotypes with which many blacks still have to contend (systemic racism).

Jillian: When we moved in, the neighbors thought you were one of the movers.

Nathan: Yeah that's true… these old people who live next door.

Jillian: There's a black man coming to the door. Well, of course, he must be one of the movers.

Nathan: Yes! Because the movers were here, right? So, I must have been a mover.

White partners often began becoming protective of their black partners after they started realizing what their partner faced. Standpoint theorists say, "As an engaged vision, the potential understanding of the oppressed, the adoption of a standpoint, makes visible the inhumanity of relations among human beings and increases the opportunities for liberation of oppressed groups" (Miller, 2005, p. 305). Because white partners began seeing the injustice, several began protecting their black partner from racism as much as was in their control. Some partners did this by deciding where their black partners would be welcome and where they would not be welcome. Then, they consciously avoided settings that would not be welcoming. Ryan talked about how he negotiates his work relationships in this way.

> Ryan: Nothing bothers *me*, what people say. But yeah, I don't want anyone being disrespectful to my wife and treating her poorly and upsetting her. So, so there are some people that I have to stay away from. And there are some, some venues, um, that tend to collect old white faculty that are very conservative. There's lots of things like that around. So I just, you know, I just stay away from them.

A more in-depth example comes from Tim and Alyssa. Tim's Grandma had problems with Alyssa and, thus, with their relationship. Tim, who before dating Alyssa had been nervous about not understanding her, stood by his wife as his grandma tried to convince him to come on a cruise with her and leave Alyssa home. In the following story, Tim clearly told his grandma her racism is wrong, stood by his and Alyssa's

decision to guard their child from racist people, and refused to go on the cruise without his wife.

Tim: It came up again; she had a celebratory vacation that she sponsored for her family, and we said we didn't want to go because we didn't really want to celebrate her and we told her that.

Alyssa: This came about because, um, we don't like – if people have a problem with our family we don't really want to spend time, resources, emotion, you know, celebrating them or just even being around them, and this was around the birth of our son, and before we even got married, I said this to your parents that, "It's okay for you to have some reservations about me, and I can give you time to work through those peripherally, you know. However as soon as we have children, if I get any type of indication that you are treating our children any differently, we will not be around." So…

Tim: I agree with that.

Alyssa: This was our family stance, and so now with the birth of our first son he was supposed to be going on this cruise and I said, "I am not sure I am going to be comfortable going on this cruise." And Granny was paying for it, and so I am thinking, "Do you weigh a free cruise with someone who despises you and ignores you and might treat your son in a horrible fashion with a…"

Tim: We didn't see the free cruise as a big benefit because it was going to cost us our time.

Alyssa: Also, it's just not pleasant being around family that's not really accepting.

Interviewer: Sure.

Alyssa: So, we spoke to your parents about it, and we spoke to Granny about it and…Also, I wasn't big into the spotty medical care you can get on cruises so that if something had happened (Laughter). He was under one at the time. So, we talked to… That was a lot of tension because your mother – Tim's mother wanted us to go to celebrate her mother and she thought, you know, as Christians we should forgive and just be willing to, you know, subject our family to this type of thing…

Tim: My mother, yeah. So, I said, "I agree that we can potentially forgive someone, but I don't think we have to spend our limited resources celebrating them. I don't think that's a requirement."

Alyssa: In honoring her. So, when we spoke to her, we talked about, "We have a perception" - this is the first time we actually spoke to Granny directly about this because this is, you know – We said, "We assume that, you know, you disapproved." And we thought we'd get some, "Oh no! I don't! It's all in your head!" But, she admitted it, which was very, you know, easy for us to go to the next phase, which is, "Therefore we don't necessarily feel comfortable going on this cruise."

Tim: And she was like, "Oh no! You have to go on the cruise!" She wanted everyone to be there to celebrate her so she could look at her life's work all at once.

Alyssa: Yeah (Laughs), all of her life's work and have all the adoration of all of her offspring. So, um, she said, "Well, I would really like you to go, Tim." There was a point where, you know, Tim…

Tim: We were married at the time.

Alyssa: Yeah, obviously. Um, there was – she kind of investigated the idea of could Tim go, but me not go? And we said, "We are a family. We are definitely going to go as a family, but we don't know if we're comfortable."

Tim: Yeah, and you are not the only one who had a problem. In fact, I am the one who had a major problem with going, so.

Alyssa: Right. We talked about, you know, how I feel uncomfortable around her, and that I don't want our children, our child at the time, to feel uncomfortable.

In the cases of Ryan not wanting to put Erin in social settings that would be uncomfortable for her and Tim protecting Alyssa from Granny, we see whites taking a leap toward social justice. First of all, we see that Ryan and Tim understand the situation. They see that their partner is being discriminated against—something they may not have seen or recognized before. Second, we also see from their conversations that they understand why their partner is experiencing the discrimination—racism on the part of others. Last, and perhaps most importantly, the white partners actively work to protect their partners from this discrimination. In the case of Ryan, he chooses to avoid

settings where he would be welcome but his wife would not be. He denies his privilege and takes on the struggle of his black partner. Tim does the same thing as he proudly asserted during the interview the decision not to go on the cruise was predominantly his. Again, he denied the privilege he had of going on the cruise by himself, but rather he embraced the struggle of his black partner and stood up for her.

Whites Begin Experiencing Racism Against Themselves

In addition to observing racism against their partners, white partners soon became the object of racist remarks and behaviors themselves. Many whites are completely shocked and experience a wide array of emotions, such as anger, disbelief, fear, and awe, when they have racist encounters. For many partners, this is the first time they have ever experienced racism. Several couples reported being discriminated against in restaurants. Brian, a black partner, reported that even though he and his wife walk into the restaurant *together*, the maitre'd asks "Are you together?" instead of "How many?" He laughed, but this made Meghan livid! Other couples reported being shouted at or whispered about as they walked publicly together. While in Washington DC, Isaac and Audrey were pelted with verbal abuse as they walked down the street. Audrey reported that others yelled at them, "This isn't what Martin Luther King died for!" or "Goddamn" as she and Isaac walked by. Three other couples reported whispers rather than yells. Three couples said they got the "forks-scraping-plates silence" as they entered restaurants. Samantha stated, "It was the strangest thing. I've never experienced anything like that before." Becky reported being very scared. She also said that after

that, she always thought about where they should be and whether or not it would be safe for her and her family.

The discrimination in public came from a variety of races and ethnicities. As we discussed in Chapter I and III, interracial unions between blacks and whites are still more uncommon and problematic to society than any other interracial union (www.census.gov). Feagin (2001) argues that because of whites' discrimination against blacks and the continual privileging of the white perspective, other cultures have adopted this discrimination. Standpoint theorists attest that the material world controlled by the dominant culture controls social relations (Orbe, 1998). In this sense, the effects of white privilege strongly influence how other co-cultures perceive blacks. Isabella and Cole, both originally from countries outside the US, were surprised to find other co-cultures practicing discriminatory acts towards them. They relayed one specific instance.

> Cole: We were in China Town in New York.
>
> Isabella: Oh yeah.
>
> Cole: We were thinking we want to get some Chinese food! So, we went to China Town. We walked in that restaurant and there was silence. The cook stopped what he was doing.
>
> Isabella: Everybody stopped.
>
> Cole: Everybody stopped as if to say, "What are you all doing in here?" So, we got there, and we sat down and the waiter was rude. So I told Bella, "Let's go." Then we said, "No. Don't let him win. Let's eat our food." So, we ordered and

we sat there and we ate and I left them a cent, a penny, for a tip. When we were

leaving, Isabella went back and took up the penny. Enough of that. It was so

strange. We are thinking, "Okay, she's not Chinese, and I'm not Chinese. Why

are you upset?"

Isabella: And it's another minority coming to this country that should be able to

understand what it is to be a minority.

Cole: They were all Asian.

Isabella: But that was very obvious. They didn't even try to hide it. It was just

so obvious.

One of the most shocking tales of a racist act came from Tim and Alyssa who

experienced housing discrimination. Again, in this story as in the last, we see a landlord

who discriminated not against white or black separately, but against black and white

unions.

Alyssa: I, separate from you, got [the landlord's name] because he was the

owner of a property that I was interested in, and I called him, and I wanted to see

the apartment. So, he had to come and show the apartment to me….And so, I

went and I looked at this apartment, and I thought I liked it, and I was like, "This

is nice!" Hardwood floors and blah, blah, blah. I said to him, "I might be

interested in this apartment," and he quoted me some prices which was very

interesting. He didn't mention certain things like…

Tim: The parking was extra; fifty dollars a month.

Alyssa: He didn't mention the parking, and he didn't mention paying for water and some snow removal, you know? And so I thought, "This is a great price." I said, "Do you mind if I bring my boyfriend back to see this apartment with me?" "No, no, no." We set up a time, and when I came back with Tim we were holding hands, and he saw us, you know…We are walking up the street, and I'm like, "Hi Greg!" I said, "This is my boyfriend." He goes, "You are kidding me, right?" I go, "No, really." He goes, "You are kidding me, right?" I'm like, "No!" He was just very odd the entire time, and then after that meeting, he then said, "Oh, I forgot to tell you, the rent is actually this much and you would have to pay for this and that." It was higher.

Tim: So that would be more of an explicit case of discrimination against the interracial aspect not just the discrimination based on black.

Alyssa: So that was…

Tim: That's weird, yeah.

Alyssa: It was weird. Who knows? Maybe he was just money grabbing.

Tim: Yeah, but there was karma in this case because later his wife kicked him out of the house, and he lived in our backyard.

[Laughter]

Up to this point, we have considered how the white partners' identities have been altered by being in an interracial relationship. We have looked at the naivete white partners had at the beginning and the black response to that naivete. In the last section, we looked at ways whites gained more racial awareness. Whites were exposed to a

culture they had not known before. With this came not only new cultural experiences, but experiences of racism as well. The questions then arises, "How do couples deal with this racism?" Next, we will consider the various ways couples respond to these societal messages about race.

<div align="center">Reactions to Racism from Both Partners</div>

Reactions to the racism were mixed from both partners, really. Some chose to ignore it, while others needed to say something. No real pattern emerged regarding who spoke about it and who did not. This is an important element for us to stop and consider. Critics of standpoint theory argue that the theory paints co-cultures as monolithic (West & Turner, 2004). However, standpoint theorists have responded by arguing that standpoint theory recognizes that all standpoints are unique because we all have different life experiences, personalities, and perspectives (Hartsock, 1983). So even within a given co-culture, a plethora of views exists. In this study, I saw both whites and blacks respond in different way to racism. The one common thread was that blacks were more used to it, although they handled it in different ways.

Blacks Ignore Racism/Whites Become Infuriated

In some couples, the black partners dismiss the racism, basically, saying, "So, what's new?" When I asked Gianna to recall acts of racism, she went so far as to say, "I choose not to hold those memories. It's not worth it to me. I figure people like that are just ignorant." Meanwhile, their white partners became infuriated with the racism. We can see this pattern of the black partner not caring and the white partner becoming irate in Robert and Samantha.

Robert: I have a tendency to kinda blow that stuff off because, I mean, I've had

to deal with that sort of thing for a lot longer, so I mean, it's just—like a lot of

times, I don't even notice stuff like that. I mean, that day, I did, but a lot of

times, you know, she'll say like, "Such and such is looking at us." Or you know,

"I don't know what's so interesting." And I'm not even paying attention to it.

Samantha: 'Cause I get mad. It makes me mad. Sometimes, I'm like, "Ok,

Samantha, you can't deal with ignorance that way." But then sometimes, I…it

just infuriates me sometimes.

Blacks Are Infuriated/Whites Ignore Racism

In other couples, the reverse was true. A second category of couple responses

was comprised of black partners who remained furious while white partners dismissed

the racism. Now, in most cases, white partners did not dismiss the racism as "not there"

or "unimportant." They just chose not to respond to what they called ignorance. Abby

and Parker illustrate this pattern. They told a story of a time when they were grocery

shopping. Another patron in the store looked at them and made a degrading comment

about their bi-racial child.

Parker: Just coming here I realized – I guess I am more sensitive to things like

that than Abby was because she really don't care. I did care. I think I do to a

lesser extent, but you know, I do notice what people say or how they act… If –

they can direct anything towards me that's fine, but towards Johnathan [our son]

or Abby, I really take offense to it… [The man in the grocery store] saw us, and

he pointed to us and said, "Look at that crap!" That was his comment, and I

know he was talking to me. He looked at me, and he looked at Jonathan [our 3-year-old baby], and he said it. I went up to him, and I said, "Who are you talking to? What do you mean by that?" and he said, "Oh, it wasn't you. I was talking about that milk advertisement!" I was like… Anyway, so we talked about that, and you [Abby] said I didn't handle that properly, and that's true. You should just walk away from…

Abby: Well, you didn't do anything to him, and that's fine, but I guess, again, for me it's like what is that – you can't ever change somebody like that, and if it's just going to possibly end in you doing something, you certainly don't want to be the one who ends up in trouble for some stupidity and ignorance that someone else has, you know? I don't want to see you in jail, and Jonathan doesn't need you in jail or arrested for assault or whatever because of somebody else's ignorance, you know? And, you can't do anything about it. You are never going to change that person. So, you know, you just have to… If they don't touch you, let them walk on by. Let them go. It's not worth it. It's not worth it.

Blacks Skillfully Handle Racism

A third way couples dealt with racism lay more in the hands of the black partner. I think this was the case for a specific reason. Some black partners dealt with racism by turning it around on the people staring and making comments and making them feel uncomfortable. This requires a lot of self-confidence and skill. I think some black partners could do this because of their years of experience dealing with racism. Now, they have a mindset and a skill set that allows them to both see and handle the situation

in a different way than their white partners could. For example, Keith talked about his reaction to the n-word.

> Keith: [It's] what I try to tell anybody, "You can call me whatever you want to call me." I grew being called a nigger. [Pause.] I got to a point where I wasn't gonna let what somebody has called me affect me. And so what I'd do, I put it back on them. "What's up brutha?"

Both Cole and Brian talk about how they handle stares and racist attitudes by turning the tables on the racists. Cole talked about the stares people give Isabella and him. He stares back at people in the same way they are staring at him. He says, "I would just keep looking at them until they feel – I wanted them to feel what they are trying to do to me. Or, even if they don't know that's what they are doing, that that's how other people feel." Brian, still yet another black partner, said that he finds humor in the situation because unlike his partner, he does not get angry. He capitalizes on the moment. He said, "A lot of it is that I find it funny because people just generally get nervous, you know, and then in their own way, I guess—I guess in their own way, people believe that me and her should not be together." He goes on to say that once he sees people are uncomfortable, he feels tacit approval to *really* make them squirm. He then matter-of-factly stated to me, "[To me], it's like water off a duck's back…because no one pays my bills. No one goes to work for me, you know. No one handles my basic needs, so I really don't put a lot of stock into what they say, and the other side of the coin is, is I love to see people squirm sometimes. [Laughs]"

In all of these comments, we see a calm self-assurance. Cross (1991) talks about a level of black identity that black Americans reach where they understand who they are. He says that blacks in the US develop their minority identity in a distinct way. They go through distinct phases ranging from pre-encounter, where they have yet to consider race to the last stage of internalization-commitment, where they have processed their racial identity and are committed to the identity they have chosen. These stories portray men who have reached this level of understanding. They know who they are, and all the messages they received are filtered through years of racial identity processing.

In sum, I have discussed how whites undergo changes in identity and the role their black partners play in helping them increase their racial awareness. We also have considered how both the black and white partners respond to the racism they encounter. Now, we should pause to see what the end results are? Are all whites, indeed, changed people? How can we tell? I turn now to the new, or not, identities.

Identity Transformation [or not] of White Partners

Enlightened White Partners

Many of the white partners openly acknowledge that they have learned about a whole new world from their black partners. Isaac told of how he has not only learned from Audrey, but he has learned from all the experiences and relationships he has experienced because Audrey is in his life.

Isaac: Probably what I've gained the most is, not just from this relationship, but from all of the relationships that I've been included in because of people I've known through this relationship, is that it's like if you go to lunch with Audrey

and one of her workmates, a lot of what the conversation will be about is

complaining about things that are wrong with the work environment. If you hang

with a sub-group of the population, you will inevitably hear them complain about

things that have to do with the big picture and how their interface with the big

picture is problematic. And I'm sure that's true the other way around and

regardless of what direction you look. And so, point being, I've become more

aware of how, for example, African-Americans look at, live with, have to deal

with, all the shit that's out there that has, you know. There's no question that

things are better now than they were a hundred years ago, but not as much so as

you would have predicted. And so, I think the thing that's really changed the

most for me is I've seen a lot more different perspectives from the other side than

could ever be apparent to someone who doesn't get more involved. And.you

know, relative to most white folk, I suspect, I'm a bit more enlightened 'cause I

can remember even when I was a kid [attending Civil Rights events]. I was just a

white boy from the suburbs who was "liberal and trying to get exposed to all the

isssues," but I didn't have a freakin' clue back then you know.

Some white partners found such beauty in the black community that they

developed a sense of kinship with the black community. In this extended example, Tim

candidly talked about the transformation of his racial identity as he espoused the view of

the black community and vicariously found strength in the courage he saw in the black

struggle. He also discusses the various ways in which he has grown through his

relationship with Alyssa. He understands politics, children, and racial identity

differently than he did before.

Tim: It gives me a lot of motivation to see, you know, vicariously what her

family is like and what they have accomplished.

Interviewer: Right.

Tim: Like, I don't think I really have an ethnicity that I think about

consciously, but I do know about Alyssa's ethnicity and I am proud of it and I

identify with that aspect; sort of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps and facing

adversity, approaching social change using whatever tools are available to you,

and, even though I know that I am privileged and not subjected to the same pain,

that I do like what her family has accomplished.

Interviewer:vDo you think that it has changed over time? Because of this

relationship do you think thinking about what it means to you to be white and

what it means to you to be black; has that changed since you've been in this

relationship?

Alyssa: Sad to say, I don't think so. (Laughs)

Tim: To me it seems like mine would have had to change because mine goes

from an invisible, "I'm just a regular person" to a, you know, a salient thing that I

am of a different image from my wife besides just the gender thing. So, it's way

more salient now, and also with having a child, you know, to the extent that it

may come up and the people in his community see him a particular way, it's

good to have a sense of how he's being seen and a sense of how he should make

sense of things people say without necessarily creating any self-fulfilling prophecies that he, you know, would be extra sensitive to inequity even beyond the inequity that is there, you know? So, I don't want to create more paranoia than is justified, although paranoia is justified. So, now that I have been thinking about the ethnicity question I would say this one sentence that before I was with you I didn't really have an ethnicity and now I sort of have one.

Alyssa: And you think you are black?

Tim: Yes.

Alyssa: Yes? (Laughter) [To interviewer] We are still interracial.

Tim: I don't think I am certified, nor do I think I feel the pain. I know I don't, but I do have appreciations for certain cultural things.

Alyssa: Right. Do you feel black?

Tim: No.

Alyssa: That's a joke. (Laughter) He's like, "Uh oh!"

Tim: No, but I do appreciate cultural things that were previously invisible, both from my own history, but even moreso from her history.

Interviewer: Okay. In what ways has race been a part of conflicts that you have had with each other?

Alyssa: In perceiving things in the media and interpreting intentions of others. I think I am more readily able to see injustices based on race than you are. I think you need a lot more evidence in order to be convinced still. And, you know, so

we are always balancing am I overly sensitive or am I legitimately picking up on cues that you are missing?

Tim: This was more of an issue early on. Is it things like OJ Simpson trial, and police shooting innocent black men, or police shooting a black man who committed a crime, you know? Like, to what extent are those things, you know, correct or incorrect?

Alyssa: Right, appreciation of law enforcement. If you saw a police you might feel comforted where I feel a little bit on edge.

Tim: Yeah, and so it almost all has to do with the police, actually, that I assume that police try to collect evidence in order to prosecute the person who actually did the crime, and Alyssa does not assume that at all.

Alyssa: I do not make that assumption.

Tim: So, that was early on. But now, I sort of see things more your way that police are in a political system and part of that system includes racial profiling, includes trying to put people in jail who are innocent. So, I do see things more the way she does now only because I have been attuned to it for longer, and I've been watching the news and seeing how things play out. So, I actually probably agree with you much more now than I did before.

Alyssa: Yeah, you do

In Tim, we see how various facets of his identity have shifted as a result of his interracial relationship with Alyssa. First, he states that he now has an ethnicity, his whiteness is no longer invisible to him. Second, he acknowledges that he is not just a

regular person and notes that not only were aspects of her culture invisible to him, but so were elements of *his*. Not only does he see his whiteness now, but he also understands that he used to not see it. In this, we see progress and a new level of racial awarness. Third, Tim has developed an awareness of some of what the black experience involves because he admits that his son will experience racism and understands that caution is warranted in understanding what that will entail. Last, we see Tim recognize systemic racism, racism that is built into societal institutions. He now understands racial profiling and racism that is more covert.

Whites Partners As Political Advocates

Not only did many white partners understand the black partner's perspective more, but a few actually became active in fighting racism.

Interpersonal Advocate.

Tim began having discussions with his family about racist comments that were made.

> Tim: There was one time when I had a sibling visit. [Alyssa and I] weren't living together, but we were always together. Um, and [my sister]was talking about her friend who had run a 5K race and said something about, "It goes through neighborhoods where there aren't any white people," something like this, suggesting that that would be dangerous, and so I talked to my sibling about that. Whether or not there are true tendencies related to race and socioeconomic status and crime, those kinds of statements are not something that a young child

would necessarily understand. So, she should probably censor, you know,

herself from saying anything like that.

Institutional Advocate.

In addition to increasing the family's racial sensitivities, some white partners

actually became political activists for people of color in their place of work. According

to Standpoint Theory, when people begin to understand how debilitating the system is

and garner a new perspective, they realize the inhumanity of the system and begin

working to change it (Miller, 2005). We see this in Becky and Ryan, both educators,

who began advocating for students of color in their educational systems. Both talked

extensively about how being in an interracial relationship with a black partner catapulted

them into advocacy for students of color. First, they talked about how being in the

relationship made them aware of issues that they, beforehand, would not have been

aware.

> Ryan: I've changed quite a bit. When I first got here I was always very skeptical
> about affirmative action policies. Going to the university [I went to], it was a
> competitive school. The way I saw some affirmative action policies tied to
> students, not for a whiter world, but because of the students. It was just done,
> done so poorly. There was no recruiting of students. It was more of just looking
> at who applied and, and bringing people ,and so a lot of people [students of
> color] had trouble when they came in. I was always skeptical of that. And that's
> part of that, this idea that, you know, do you use race in the society thing? And
> that's become, of course, a big thing in the courts. I mean, but, my stance has

definitely changed. Right now I've got one of four grants in the university that is explicitly race-based. I've got a grant to give,—what's the number, twelve?—students, unrepresented minority students, research experience during the summertime to work in my lab.

Becky also attested to the fact that her conversations and eleven years of experience in a relationship with a black spouse had given her an awareness of issues of race that others did not have. She said, "I think it has made me WAY more aware of race issues. I mean, things that I would've said or done that never even would've dawned on me that that was racist, I recognize those things as that. Consequently, and because I'm a very outspoken person—Because it's changed me, it's allowed me to be a person who changes other people." And change people she did! Becky developed a training session for her colleagues at the high school at which she taught. In this session, she trained teachers how to be sensitive to the needs and learning styles of African-American students in order to raise their levels of academic achievement. She admitted being terrified when the eleven black teachers of the school showed up at the training. However, her fears were quickly alleviated when one of the black teachers approached her afterward and thanked her for paving the way.

Un-Enlightened Whites

Perhaps one of the most astounding results I found while talking to couple was that "whiteness" and "white privilege" still existed unchecked and unnoticed in several relationships. One particular area in which I saw this was racial identity. While white partners had learned so much culturally, had witnessed racism, and had experienced

racism themselves, many could still not articulate what it meant to be white. When I asked couples to explain what it meant to them to be white or black, blacks always had an immediate, well-articulated answer. This stood in stark contrast to the white response. Take, for example, the responses from Landon and Paige:

Interviewer: What does it mean to you [Paige] to be white, and what does it mean to you [Landon] to be black?

Paige: In terms of anything?

Interviewer: Yes.

Landon: Answer how you think the question is. Now what do you think of yourself as a white person?

Paige: As a white person? I don't know.

Landon: You never thought about it. Take your time.

Paige: (Laugh) I don't know. It's a really hard question for me because growing up everyone where I lived was white and it's not something you think about I guess. We all come from the same type of family, the same small town, the same… Just…

Landon: What does it mean to be black? I could write an entire dissertation on this.

Landon went on to talk about blackness for several minutes. Paige never could answer the question. Generally, blacks gave well-thought-out answers and whites said, "I'm sorry. I guess I don't understand the question."

In addition to not understanding "whiteness" or even being able to conceptualize whiteness, some white partners still did not see or understand white privilege. Black partners became somewhat frustrated with their white partners when the black partners talked about understanding racism from a black perspective. Whites sometime hold that they experience racism, too. In one instance, Joseph talks about how he had experienced racism. We see Gianna react to his claim that he had been discriminated against, too. She, essentially, rolled her eyes at Joseph's "racism" experience.

> Gianna: He's naïve. I mean he's like you [referring to interviewer]. He's white.
>
> Interviewer laughs.
>
> Gianna: So he has no experience with prejudice.
>
> Joseph: Well, I could have some experience with prejudice. I got beat up by blacks at a basketball game a lot. I mean, that's an experience.
>
> Gianna: But that's just a beating. That's not in terms of…
>
> Joseph: But they did it because I'm white.
>
> Gianna: …because you're white, yeah. Alright, you had a little tiny bit of experience of prejudice. [Laughs]
>
> Joseph: It was a pounding.
>
> Gianna: It's not the same as people looking at you when you walk down the street, pointing and saying, "Mommy, does it wash off?" and stuff like that, you know. I mean, I grew up in Michigan and a lot of the kids I grew up with would, particularly when we moved to Marquette, had never seen the black kids, ya know, and then you had the people who were up there because they didn't wanna

see any. And, you know, it's a whole different thing, and he's basically from the predominant race and I really felt like he didn't know what he was getting into [when we started dating].

During another interview, Isaac and Audrey became irritated with each other at one point. Audrey expressed how irked she was (and still is) that her husband did not understand how race affected a specific episode at the ballpark, while Isaac felt that Audrey was "playing the race card."

Audrey: We were at a baseball game at a ballpark, and there were some guys sitting behind us, four… or five drunk guys, and they were white. And there was a heavy lady sitting down in the…in front of us in the next section. And they were pelting her with ice because she was heavy, which I felt like wasn't a good thing. But I got angry because I felt like, if they had been black guys doin' that—and they were all loud and they were disrupting my ability to enjoy the game. They were harassing the woman. They'd been kicked out. That would have never flown, but white guys just havin' fun bein' loud is okay. And so, I was mad that they were allowed to just behave like this, and nobody was checkin' it. So, I checked it. And by now, I had sat there and worked myself up to being mad-- first of all because they were pelting the lady who kept looking around. I mean, they were throwing ice at her through the whole game, and, of course, [my] guys were kind of oblivious to it but…because they're guys, and it's just ya know, whatever. They're just guys havin' fun. I'm like, they're having fun at other people's expense, and I…

Isaac: I've been lots of ballgames in big cities and never had any problems, ya

know? Go to some little Podunk ballfield and get all this crap goin' on. It had

nothin' to do with the game.

Audrey: He was all about the game.

Isaac: Yeah. I was. I didn't even see anything.

Audrey remained upset that Isaac did not see this incident through the racial lens that she

does. In fact, recall her comments from the opening quote of this chapter. She said,

"Things that I don't think he views as racist or racially seasoned, even if it's not racist

per se, I define very clearly along [those] lines." One of the challenges of being in an

interracial relationship for her is the lack of perception her white partner had of racially-

seasoned situations. Some whites—even ones that *did* understand whiteness like

Isaac—could not understand why their black partner responded to "regular ol' events"

the way they did sometimes. This left the black partner frustrated. If their partner could

not get it, who could? If their partner could not see it, who could?

Up to this point, I have devoted most of my attention to the way in which the

white partner's identity changed while in this relationship. However, the black partners

also experienced identity shifts, although they seem miniscule in comparison to the shift

in white identity. Black partners experienced these changes in identity and

understanding because they became "outsiders within" in white families. One, black

partners began understanding that races are not monolithic. Second, they started

realizing their own racial identity more acutely. Last, they landed in situations that gave

them a different vantage point of whiteness, one that most often reified the realities of

racism. I will now consider each of the aspects in more detail, beginning with why black partners qualify as "outsiders within."

<div align="center">Transformation of Black Identity: Outsiders Within</div>

As a result of living with a white person and interacting within an intimate white circle on numerous occasions, blacks often become outsiders within. An outsider within is a member of the co-culture who has gained access to the dominant culture (Collins 1991, 1999). Some might question at this point why whites are not "outsiders within" in black families. However, if we look at Collins's (1991, 1999) definition and explanations, we see that the definition of the outsider within is contextual, meaning we must look at the societal context of racial hierarchies before we can assign the label of "outsider" to someone. According to Collins (1999), only members of societally marginalized groups,in the case of race, blacks, can become outsiders within. Loosely applying the term without understanding the context "redirect[s] attention away from the social hierarchies of race, class, and gender that create outsider-within social locations in the first place" (p. 86). The black partners fit this understanding of the outsider-within in three main ways: The racism they experience, their feelings of isolation, and the in-depth insights into the workings of the dominant culture that they obtain.

Unintentional and Intentional Racism

First, as I have pointed out in every chapter of this dissertation, black partners experience both unintentional and intentional racism. Couples reported that white family members constantly remind blacks, sometimes on purpose and sometimes not, that they are different from the white family members. Of course, Tim and Alyssa's

stories about Granny blocking Alyssa out of pictures and not wanting her to come on the cruise are overt acts of racism. However, couples also report that unintentional acts of racism occur as well. Marcus and Becky told me a story about a young niece. Becky and Marcus were having a family get-together with Becky's family (the white family). Marcus asked their niece about school. The niece explained small things about reading and recess. Then the little girl said, "All the black kids in my class are bad." Inadvertently, the little girl had discriminated against her uncle Marcus. Imagine the physical setting of this moment. Marcus is sitting in a room filled with thirty white people and one black person, him. He hears this comment. He cannot turn to another black person and sigh a sigh that would be understood. In fact, other than Becky, no one else in the room realized that anything racist had happened: *Outsider within.*

Feelings of Isolation

As we see from the above story, a second way black partners fit the outsiders-within definition their feelings of isolation as they were the only person of color in the room at many all-white functions. Alyssa, in particular, talked about how she felt hyper-aware of her blackness—in a negative way—when she was around Tim's family. Alyssa had never questioned, denied, or ignored her blackness, but she also never experienced it like she did when she dealt with Tim's family and their racism. She said

> I think now I'm thinking about it, because of – because of the response that I
> have gotten from your family, I have realized more acutely that I am black and
> the assumptions that others have about me. But that was true in society before. I
> think what has changed now is like my understanding of family and, thankfully,

his family—they have changed over time. So, as they have changed in their

perception and their behavior towards me, it's allowed me to kind of not be so

acutely aware that I am black when I am with them. So, in that way, I have – it

has changed in our family, but it hasn't necessarily changed the way that I think

of being black in the outer community, if that makes any sense.

A New Vantage Point

A third way that black partners embodied the outsider within persona was

evidenced in their ability to maintain their status as a co-culture member, an outsider,

while still using their insider status and position to learn and understand the dominant

culture at a deeper level than before. Black partners chose to use the position in which

they found themselves to garner more understanding. They turned their marginalized,

assigned societal place into a chosen location (Collins, 1991). Marcus shared that he had

learned so much from watching both families, but the main lesson he learned was that

races are not monolithic. He described how he learned about the variances in white

opinion on black culture, only because he was able to be in intimate relationships with

several whites because of his marriage to Becky. For several other black partners,

seeing the white world from an insider's perspective reified the racism they had

experienced all their lives. Audrey explained:

Really, truly, I see how, I guess, in some ways it clarifies for me the subtleties of

racism because I do-- because we're in an interracial marriage, I see more of the

white life and it's subtle, but it's real. And so I think I'm in a different position to

identify things that are nuances, but the impacts are real nonetheless.

Now, I turn to some concluding thoughts.

Concluding Thoughts

To summarize, in this chapter we have considered the identity transformations of both partners, focusing mainly on the racial education of the white partner. We saw the naïve white partner venture into this interracial relationship and how the black partners understood, guided, and ,at times, guarded this racial innocence. As the relationship developed, whites began losing their naïveté with respect to racial issues. Through humorous episodes of learning about hair and food and tragic episodes of experiencing racism, whites began to be educated on the black experience in the US. Couples responded in a myriad of ways to the stresses of societal racism. In the end, many whites were dramatically changed from the informal education they received from the black partner. These partners understood racism at a deeper level and sometimes became advocates both interpersonally and institutionally. Surprisingly, some white partners were still oblivious to "whiteness" and its privilege. Finally, we discussed the black partners and their positionality in relationship as they become "outsiders within." They see whiteness through a different, more intimate vantage point. In the next chapter, I turn my attention to the manner in which couples manage race in their relationship, as couples grapple with how to both embrace and reject race in their relationships.

CHAPTER V

EMBRACING RACE VS. REJECTING RACE

Tim: To me I guess I would say race is important but secondary. Like you might even say race is secondary but important (Laughs), depending how you want to emphasize it. Because for us race was not any determining factor in our relationship.

Alyssa: It wasn't.

Tim: It was only an aspect of our images and identities that we incorporated into our, you know, into our union.

Alyssa: Right. I think that our relationship, you know, was stronger because we had similar religious backgrounds, similar values, similar education levels, similar aspirations for professional development, and that made it much easier for us to have a relationship even period. Then the fact that we both are not conflict avoidant….The fact that we were interracial— not so much an obstacle. So, if people say, you know, "Being in an interracial relationship is such an obstacle," that doesn't necessarily resonate with me personally because I haven't found that it was any different for me. Like, I think being married period, you know; sharing money, and resources, and time, and a bedroom, and a bathroom to be very difficult, you know? You happen to have white hair in the hairbrush instead of black hair and that's just a difference inside our house, but then outside, we have these other issues where then it comes to personal character and your ability to communicate.

Tim: I think it goes back to these identity hierarchies where, like, first we are Christian, and we have certain values, and then second is other things. But then when it comes to

image, race is very visible, and religion is not that visible. And, so people may perceive that interracial means you are with someone totally different, but for us we're with someone very similar.

In this chapter, I address all three research questions which address the challenges couples face with their families, race communities, and identities. Here, I specifically consider how messages from families and society affect the identity of interracial couples. We begin with this insightful conversation between Tim and Alyssa which illustrates the way in which interracial couples negotiate the racial aspect of their dyadic identity. All couples, interracial or not, deal to some extent with understanding and developing their dyadic identity. Couples' identities and individuals' identities are communicatively constructed. A person's identity is a complex combination of both how a person sees himself or herself and the messages he or she receives from others about who he or she is. Likewise, the messages interracial couples receive influences their identities as individuals and as couples.

Throughout this chapter, I will discuss how interracial couples manage the racial aspect of their identity. To do this, I will use the theory of relational dialectics to examine a dialectic that is specific to interracial couples, the dialectic of embracing race vs. rejecting race. Couples identify themselves as interracial, but they are also quick to identify themselves as normal. Many couples out rightly stated that they forget they are interracial until someone points it out. However, couples also, as we saw in Chapter IV, acknowledge how much they had learned from each other about issues of race, which suggests that they do not fail to notice their racial differences. In this chapter, I will

focus on understanding this tug-of-war between embracing the racial aspect of identity and rejecting the racial aspect of their identity.

Understanding the Dialectic: Embracing Race vs. Rejecting Race

The reasons for which couples embrace race both as individuals within the couple and as the dyad fall into two main categories. As we saw in Chapter IV, couples sometimes experience cultural differences in their relationship that flow from racial differences. These experiences cause the couple to recognize and embrace the role race plays in their relationship, making them fall towards the embracing race pole of this dialectic's continuum. These situations, which occur in the relationship itself, comprise one category of reasons whereby couples embrace race. The second category includes situations whereby the individuals or the couple is forced to embrace race by outside forces. These outside forces often include family members, community members, and larger society. Disapproving messages such as those discussed in Chapter III can cause couples to become acutely aware of their interracial nature. It is important to note here, though, that both disapproving *and* approving from outside forces can force the couple to embrace race because the message is the same: *Race matters*.

At the other pole of this dialectic's continuum is rejecting race. Just as people embrace race for different reasons, people reject race for different reasons. The main reason couples gave for rejecting race in their relationship was that other differences are more much important and can lead to much more conflict than race does. Further, I found that although race was the most salient part of the couple's identity for society, race was often *not* the most salient part of their identity for themselves.

I begin this chapter by briefly reviewing the theory of dialectics. Next, I examine the source of the embracing race-rejecting race dialectic's contradiction by looking at contexts where we see different poles of the dialectic become more and less salient. [Here I make the caveat that numerous other examples could be used here to show this contradiction, and many of these examples will emerge when we consider the praxis strategies couples use to manage this dialectic later in the chapter.] Finally, I will discuss the strategies couples use to manage this dialectic.

Dialectic Theory

Dialectical Theory has a rich history. Baxter and Montgomery (1988) are credited with extending the theory of dialectics to the field of communication, interpersonal communication in particular. They argue that relationships are best understood by looking at how people manage day-to-day dialectical tensions in their relationships. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argue that relationships are never stable. Instead, couples are constantly negotiating the push-and-pull of contradictory needs.

The theory of dialectics has four important components. The central concept of the theory of dialectics is the concept of "contradiction" (Rawlins, 1989). A dialectical contradiction is "The coexistence and conflict of interpenetrated opposites" (Rawlins 1989, p. 159). A second key component of dialectics is change. Change is inherent in dialectics because couples vacillate between the two poles of the dialectic. Because of this vacillation, the relationship evolves. In turn, as the relationship evolves into something different, the way couples manage the dialectic inevitably changes. A third component of dialectics is the notion of totality. Various dialectics are present in

relationships, and these dialectics intertwine and influence each other. To understand any one dialectic, the other dialectics must be considered as well. The final component of dialectics is praxis. Praxis refers to the manner in which couples manage the dialectical tensions in their relationship. As communication scholars, we are concerned with not only what dialectics exist, but also how people manage them. Now that I have reviewed the basics of the theory of dialectics, I will define the embracing race-rejecting race dialectic in detail. First, I will talk about each pole separately. Then, I will talk about the tension between the poles. I begin with embracing race.

Embracing Race

One way in which some of the couples were forced by outside forces to embrace their interracial nature, and thus embrace race, was in how they presented their romantic relationship to disapproving families. Although the partners did not spend much time thinking about race when the two of them were together alone, they were forced to think about race when they realized that they would be introducing each other to their respective families. Although race was not the most salient facet of their identity to each other, it often was the most salient facet for their families. Because of this, many couples in this study chose to hide the relationship from their families early on, identifying themselves as "just friends." When the relationship intensified, couples "came out" about their relationship with each other to their families by acknowledging their love for each other and their identity as an interracial couple.

Hiding Interracial Romance

Various couples discussed how they made efforts to keep their relationship from their families because they did not want to deal with the messages of disapproval that they felt were imminent upon disclosure. How couples hid the relationship had to do with the proximity to the disapproving family. When couples lived far away from the disapproving family, the couple either did not tell the family about the relationship, or they told the family about the relationship, but did not tell them that their partner was of another race. Emily relayed how she had consciously omitted the race component of her relationship with Keith when she talked with her mother. Her mother had known about her relationship with Keith from day one.

> [Keith and I] had been together for six months and my mother…I mean like, my mother knew the weekend that I met him. She knew that. She even had a feeling that this was the person that I was going to marry just based on hearing me talk over the phone, and that's what our conversations had been."

However, Emily had never told her mother that Keith was black.

Other couples that were closer in proximity to their families could not hide that they were in a close relationship with someone of another race. These couples chose to hide the nature of the relationship by framing the relationship as platonic rather than romantic. Some couples joked about how long they insisted to their families that they were "just friends." Becky and Marcus tried this strategy:

Interviewer: So, Becky, you had met his parents before you started dating?

Becky: Before we started dating

Marcus: Yeah.

Becky: But they started to figure out long before we ever told anybody.

Marcus: Yeah.

Becky: We did a lot of stuff together and we hung out a lot together and…

Marcus: Yeah.

Becky: He would be…come home late at night 'cause we'd be out at a restaurant or

Marcus: somethin' like that

Becky: Yeah.

Marcus: They met Becky because she was already around. So, she didn't get a chance… She was there for the daily stuff, and then it was holidays that she didn't come around that much, but like my cousins met her. They knew her. Some of my grandmother's family, my grandmother lived with us, so my grandmother knew her. My grandmother liked her. Her sisters and brothers would come over to visit because [my grandmother] was in a wheelchair, and so they'd come over every now and then…They knew her…They'd all ask, "Well, Marcus, you and Becky are together?" I's like, "No we just friends." They like, "Mmm-hmm. Mm-hmm." So that was the running joke in the family. We couldn't really out ourselves as like this couple because it's always issues and stuff like that.

Becky: Yeah

Marcus: So, it's like the worst-kept secret. So when we finally got married, it was, you know, "Oh well, they just friends. They just friends." That was the whole thing with my family.

[Becky laughs.]

Coming-Out Messages

As the relationship intensified, couples began realizing that they could not keep their relationship a secret any longer. Interestingly, many individuals in interracial relationships reported a "coming out" conversation with their families where they gave their family the news about being involved in an interracial relationship.[3] In this way, couples had to fully embrace the racial identity of their partner. They had to tell their families that they were romantically involved with a partner of a different race. Race became salient. The coming-out conversation for partners took one of two paths. If the couple had hidden the race of the partner, they had to tell the family that their partner was of a different race. If the couple had masqueraded as "just friends," they had to tell the family that they were actually more than friends. In any case, the couples were forced to acknowledge and embrace their interracial nature. Although race was not an issue for them, it was for their families. Their families' anticipated responses compelled couples to craft a coming-out message.

Revealing the Partner's Race

Partners who had hidden the race of their partner came to a specific moment in time when they felt as though they had to tell their family that their partner was of

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[3] For many gays and lesbians, "coming out of the closet" is a common experience where one declares his or her sexual orientation to family and friends.

another race. The conversation was often traumatic for the partner and many times did not go well. Jillian remembers the reaction from her parents and the resulting separation from her family.

> My family…um, when I called to tell them that I was getting married and told my mother that…my parents that [Nathan] was black, they did not approve and could not cope with that, and so we parted ways [Said with hesitation]… We got married 8.5 years ago. Um…My parents still have not met Nathan.

Similarly, Emily described the decision to have the "coming out" conversation and just how traumatic and etched into her memory this conversation is. She could remember every detail of the conversation. Although race was not central to the relationship for Emily or Keith, Emily knew that race would be central to her parents' relationship with Keith.

> Emily: And so, the point came when I said, "Okay, it's time". Before I moved to [a new state] to establish this relationship even further, I need to go [home] and tell my family that you're black. But, unlike Keith I was-. I was the one that was seeking approval…so, I flew [home]. The weekend went as I could have anticipated that it went. Um. It was really bad. It was *really* bad. And, I mean to the point where my mother or father, neither one could drive me back to the airport to put me on the plane to come back…to go back to this black man. And so that was-. [Clears throat.] That was just-. That was tough. That was really tough.
>
> Interviewer: How did you actually tell them?

Emily: Yeah, I remember. I was standing in-. I mean I remember this as if it was yesterday. I was standing in the bedroom that I grew up in, and we were preparing for some party that my parents were having. It was a big cookout. And something came up about Keith, and I had a brush in my hand, and I don't—I don't know why I chose that moment or anything like that, but I just looked at my mother, and I'd had this really close relationship with my mother in my whole life. And I looked at my mother, and as we were talking about Keith, I said, "Mother, Keith is black." And it was as if I told her I was lesbian. I mean it-. There is no di-. There was no difference. And so, it crushed her world, and then we went through the cookout, she not telling dad at all, and then after the cookout, we had to sit down and have a big family discussion, and it came out and-. I mean it was-. It was a real big family-. It was a big family issue. It was a dirty family secret. And so I went back to [Keith].

Revealing Romantic Nature of Relationship

When families were in close proximity to the dating couple or had previously met them under the guise of a platonic relationship, the couple had to reveal their relationship in a different way. Many couples had to explain that their relationship was more than a friendship and was, indeed, a romantic relationship. Tim's family had previously met Alyssa under the guise of being "just friends." Tim recalled the reaction when he told his family that Alyssa was his girlfriend:

Tim: Yes, my parents definitely had a problem. When I called them – I called them on the phone because we lived in different states. So, I called them to tell

them and, you know, they were just silent. I think the dynamic my parents have

with each other is sort of, um, my mother is authorized to react emotionally, and

my father supports her reaction. So, my mom was just silent, and my dad was

concerned [about] how does my mom feel? But, ah, that didn't really get in the

way of my intentions to date Alyssa because I wasn't seeing my parent's

approval as a prerequisite for dating.

Alyssa: But, it was interesting because when they met me and we weren't dating,

they liked me very much. We went out to lunch or something…? They were

fine with us when we were friends, and they came to visit, you know, and I met

your sister, and we hit it off, and your parents commented that they liked me.

Tim: They really liked Alyssa, but they really liked Alyssa as a friend. They

didn't like her as part of the family because…

Alyssa: Marriage partner.

Tim: Cause I think my idea is that it threatened their identity.

One humorous account of coming out occurred between Landon and Paige's

parents. In 2002, Sony Pictures produced *Guess Who*, the story of an interracial couple

and their first experience meeting the girl's parents. Landon decided that this movie

would be of help to him when "coming out" to Paige's parents about their relationship.

So, he rented the movie and took it to his in-laws to watch. Landon remembers his own

reaction during the movie.

Landon: I was so embarrassed. I hadn't seen the movie in a long time and so

when the guy starts putting on the girl's lingerie, I'd do one of these things

[Covers eyes with hands and peeps through fingers]. I'd cover my face, and I'd just pretend like I am sleeping. I was so embarrassed. And so, it must have been around the wedding time her dad mentions to me, "Like that stupid, lame movie you tried to use to introduce us to the idea!" Oh man, it was horrible. It was absolutely horrible! That's gotta be the number one embarrassing thing in my life… So, I thought that would be a good way to subliminally introduce the concept to them if they hadn't already thought about it. I figured that was just the best way to do it. In theory, the concept was good, but (Laughter), but the application needed just a little bit of work.

Paige: You really should have run that one past me. [Laughs]

So, as we can see, many times couples embrace race because family and friends force them to embrace race. However, as we see in the next section, couples lean toward the other pole of the dialectic, rejecting race, in much of their everyday lives.

Rejecting Race

While moments existed when the couples embraced race, couples overwhelmingly reported that other issues in their relationship were more important and impacted their everyday lives more. Tim made an astute observation in the comment that opened this chapter. He pointed out that race is a visible difference to others, whereas many other differences, such as upbringing, are not visible to others. Therefore, it might make sense that to those outside the relationship, race would seem like the most salient difference because it is the most visible. However, the couples unanimously

agreed that the other differences that remained largely invisible to those outside the relationship created more conflict in the relationship than race did.

Couples detailed a long list of differences which had caused them conflict or concern in their relationships. One man said, "I'm cheap and she's not." Another lady responded, "We argue over the speed limit," and, in fact, confessed that they had fought about driving on the way to the interview. One woman argued, "I think it's more northern/southern than it is black/white." Still yet another man said he was more concerned about age than race [He was 11 years older than his wife.] He laughed about not wanting to be old when his son was in high school, jokingly stating, "Shit, man, I'll be old when this kid grows up. I don't wanna be dyin' on the poor son of a bitch." While couples created a long list of "other, not-race-related differences" which raise concerns in their relationships, couples specifically discussed how differences in gender, upbringing, and religion influenced the relationship much more than race did.

Gender Differences

Couples reported that gender caused more conflict than race. Isaac said of Audrey, "Most of her flaws have to do with being a female, not with being black." Audrey quickly quipped back, "And most of yours have to do with being male." Samantha and Robert talked more in detail about their gender differences as they compared communication styles.

Robert: We have way more conflict because male and female things than we do

with race.

Samantha: He's constantly reminding me that "Actually, I'm not a girl. You

cannot turn me into a girl."

Robert: I grew up with all boys and she, for all intents and purposes, grew up,

you know, with all girls.

Samantha: Well, little things like, I mean, when we go shopping, I'll go, "Oh,

isn't this cute?" He's like, "No. I don't think anything's cute. I don't use that

word." Sorry. Is it cool? Is it neat? Is it awesome? "Yeah, it's alright, I guess."

And I'm like, "That's not what I'm looking for."

Upbringing and Culture

In addition to gender difference, another difference to which couples often

pointed was upbringing. Upbringing affects multiple areas of our lives from parenting

differences to everyday chores to gender role expectations.

Disciplining Children

Upbringing affected individuals' views on disciplining children. Samantha and

Robert clearly disagreed about how to discipline kids. As we see in their explanations

and defense to each other, their views of parenting are rooted in their upbringing.

Samantha: We've talked about kids a lot. The main difference is mainly how we

would raise them, little things like disciplining—spanking vs. time-out—and

stuff like that because of how we were raised, which was…

Robert: I mean my dad just, I mean, we just, we got spanked, and I got probably

3 spankings in my whole life because I mean, he got my attention, and so I…I

mean I's like, okay I get it. So, that's why I feel that that would be a good thing

for us to do. I feel like if you do it right, you don't have to do it that many times. So…

Samantha: I think that's a little bit more…it's a little, probably a little too aggressive, a little too hard on the child, I think, so that's one thing that we've talked about, little things like that as far as raising kids.

Culture

A few couples were not just interracial, but they were also international. The individuals in these relationships described how having significantly different social norms caused disagreements for them. Landon and Paige laughed about culture clash, comparing US and Caribbean norms.

Landon: I don't know why, but every single Caribbean that I have spoken with has this type of – is the chores of the house…

Paige: Are you talking about making the bed?

Landon: That's right!

Paige: Oh my goodness. [Laughter]

Landon: I was raised and my brother was raised and so on and so forth that it is a cardinal sin to leave the room with your bed unmade. You cannot – there is an order. It's pray, wash your face, brush your teeth, make your bed, get dressed, eat, chores, and leave. I have been so rigid with that for such a long time that switching to this idea where everything is loosey-goosey, and not so particular, I guess I should say, is a big difference…Yeah, we are still working on that. So, that's an experience.

Learned Gender Roles

Perhaps one of the funniest examples of culture clash came from Abby and Parker. Often different cultures have differing views on gender roles. Abby and Parker laughed about a conversation they had where it became clear to them that they had been brought up in two different households that held very different views on the role of women.

Abby: Jamaican men are more traditional in their expectations, and it's something we talked about before we were ever married. I said, "I am not Jamaican. I am an American. I am an American woman, you know, and there are things I am never going to do like your mom did for your dad." I mean, his mom—he never has had to wash a shirt, iron a shirt, find his toothbrush if it's lost, you know, make a meal, clean the dishes, you know? But, he has other things he does, you know, he worked, but she worked too, you know?

Parker: They have a maid now.

Abby: They had a helper, but still. Those things were done for him, you know? So, that was something that I tried to be very clear about beforehand. I don't mind ironing a shirt for you if I have time, but if I don't have time, you need to iron your shirt, and you are not going to expect me-- that that's my job. So, we talked about those sorts of things, but even with having discussed it and saying, "Yes, I accept that about you…" Or, he had things where he would say, "This is the way I am, and you have to…" so you accept those certain things. But still, you know, you have to work that out once you are married and living together.

Constantly those things… You know, it's the way you grew up. Sometimes it

comes out unconsciously that you think, you know, or he might say, "Well, I

have no shirts to wear! I have nothing ironed!" I'm like, "Yeah?" [Laughter]

Parker: "That's your problem!" [Laughter]

Abby: "You are mad at me because…?" You know? [Laughter]

Religion

The third difference that couples reported being more important to their

relationship than race was religion. Religion became an issue for couples in a variety of

ways. For several couples and their families, coming from two different religions was

more problematic than coming from two different races. Scott noted that his parents told

him that they did not care who he married as long as she was a Christian. In other

words, the importance of religion trumped race for several couples. Keith admitted that

religion was a "much, much bigger" difference to his mother than race. Some partners

experienced disapproval from parents based mainly on religious differences. Cole and

Isabella talked about his parents' concerns about religion:

Cole: I told them she was from Germany and she was white. The only

reservation my parents had at the time – I am a Seventh Day Adventist. We both

are now, but Isabella was not Seventh Day Adventist. She didn't want to have

anything to do with God, and in the Bible [it] says, "Be not unequally yoked with

unbelievers." So, to them, their concern was they didn't want me getting too

involved with her because she didn't believe the things that we believed. It

would pose a problem if we get married. That was the only reservation they had.

In addition to families disapproving of interreligious relationships, couples acknowledged religion as much more important to their relationship itself than race because of the desire for a shared worldview. Some couples felt very strongly about their religious values. Joseph and Gianna talked about how they valued having similar belief systems more than valuing being of the same race. Late in the interview, they even argued that when people blamed troubles on race, they were using race as an excuse that masks the real problem.

> Interviewer: Has race ever been a part of your conflicts with each other?
>
> Joseph: I don't really think so. I think just our inclination towards sin has been the biggest conflict, and that's true of most people. Although, like you, like we talked about, they'll bring up race as a card or as a thing in there, but it really amounts to the same things and stuff. Normal communications problems, selfishness problems on my part, the things we have to overcome because of the sin condition of man are there, and we've had to deal with those in our marriage at times and arguments or misunderstandings or not feeling loved or things like that. I don't think it's really been due to race, just our condition as…
>
> Gianna: The human condition.
>
> Joseph: The human condition
>
> Gianna: I think the advice related to race, I would say, "Get over it." [laughs] Find out who you are as people, who you are as a man and a woman, because those are the differences that you're really overcoming, not race. And if you think that race is a difference that you need to overcome, then you just need to

get out of the relationship 'cause you're gonna use that as an excuse for whatever difficulty you encounter.

Tim and Alyssa expressed frustration with some assumptions people make about their views on religious difference. They felt that people had misconceptions about their values because of misattributions people made about their acceptance of religious difference between partners.

> Alyssa: We have some friends who are in an interfaith marriage, and when they were first telling us how one is Christian and the other is Jewish, they sort of assumed we approved of it because we were different races. So, it's as though barrier crossing or boundary spanning is one construct regardless of the boundary.
>
> Tim: Maybe that is true as far as what MTV propaganda creates, but maybe it's not – but in our case, it wasn't true. So, they were making assumptions about what we would approve of simply because we crossed one boundary.
>
> Alyssa: Yeah, we would have much more difficulty of marrying someone outside of our religion than marrying someone outside of our race.

Religious compatibility is much more important to many couples' relational success than are issues of race.

Up until now, this chapter has looked at how couples both embrace race and reject race somewhat separately. Couples largely embrace race as they respond to messages from their families and society about the racial identity of their partner. Couples largely reject race as they attest to the fact that most of their conflict and

everyday task negotiations are not centered on issues of race. Now, I turn my attention to showing some communication from couples that illustrates more of the interplay between these two poles of the dialectic.

Embracing Race vs. Rejecting Race: Jokes

Many of the couples make racial jokes with each other. In these jokes, we are able to see how couples both embrace their racial identity and reject racial stereotypes. Jokes are generally funny to people because there's a kernel of truth to them. Embedded in racial jokes are racial stereotypes. I found that two types of stereotypes emerged in the jokes that these white and black couples told each other. Couples joked with each other about stereotypical white and black behavior and about stereotypical issues surrounding black-white unions. (Couples generally acknowledge others' discomfort with their jokes, but as Isaac says, people don't "understand that sometimes the opportunities to make racial jokes is part of what's really fun about [being in an interracial relationship].")

Jokes about Stereotypical White-Black Behavior

Couples joked with each other about how whites and blacks stereotypically act. When I asked Scott and Taylor if they noticed any cultural differences between their two families, he quickly commented, "We can dance." In this joke, we see two things. One, we see an acknowledgement of group identity, "we" referring to his black family. Second, we see his acknowledgement of one of the stereotypes often associated with blacks—dancing. By turning the stereotype into a joke, Scott can both embrace the racial identity and reject the racial stereotype.

Becky and Marcus laugh about stereotypical white and black behavior with each

other. They quiz each other, asking each other to identify whether the person being

described is white or black. They phrase the question as "Is that yo' people or my

people?"

Becky: He'll come home from work, and he'll be sharing details of a case with

me [Marcus starts laughing hysterically], and he just wants my knee-jerk reaction

because I'm, ya know, he stays in lawyer mode all the time. He just wants Joe

Schmoe citizen kind of reaction.

Marcus: Yes.

Becky: And I'll say, "Is that your people or my people?" And I can tell from the

facts of the case, "Awww. That's my people. [Laughs]" Ya know, just stuff like

that."

Marcus: Something happened on tv and so, I think I started this…I have to,

[Becky laughs] Unfortunately, I started this. But I say, "Oh! White people!" like

that, and she looked like…it started off like [slaps table] like that and then it

ended up, she be like, "yo' people."

Becky: "That's yo' people." Like, okay, like the avalanche thing that happened,

ya know the snow people. I'll say, "You don't see any black people on that

mountain."

Marcus: No.

Becky: He'll say, "No, 'cause that's breaking the rules. Black people don't walk

out in the cold, on purpose, and climb a mountain." I mean just stuff like that.

Marcus: You might find the mountain, and we are, and you go up there by yourself, and there's an avalanche that could happen that could bury you in the snow. Ok?

Becky: Yeah, "White people." [laughs] That kind of stuff.

Marcus: I'll see you at the bar.

[Becky and Interviewer laugh.]

Marcus: I'm gonna have a cup of coffee while ya go.

[Laughs]

Again, the couple embraces race as they acknowledge belonging to two different racial groups. They also make a joke out of stereotypical white and black behavior. In this example, we see Marcus in particular, identify with the stereotypical black behavior. What we see in these relationships is that the individuals see each other as just that—individuals. If Marcus does something that is stereotypically black, Becky does not then affix all other black stereotypes to him. She continues to see him as a person who may or may not do other "black" things. In this way, the couple manages the tension between embracing race and rejecting race.

Jokes about Interracial Couples

In addition to joking about stereotypical black and white behavior, couples also joke with each other about stereotypical issues surrounding black-white relationships. Samantha and Robert said that Robert sometimes jokingly remarks with his friends, "Make it easy on yourself and get a white girl." Ryan and Erin discussed a similar remark. Four couples, including them, were spending an evening together. One of their

friends noticed halfway through the evening that all of the couples were interracial. Not only were they all interracial, but they also were all white males and women of color. The friend then made the joke to the group "Oh! Well, the white guys got all the dark skinned women."

In these two jokes, we can easily see the kernel of truth. If we think back to Chapter I, we remember the historical narratives surrounding interracial relationships. For both races, the "other" was seen as forbidden. These jokes capitalize on the history of interracial relationships. We see the dialectic here as Ryan and Robert recognize the color difference in these relationships (embracing race). We also see, considering the larger context of each interview, that neither of these relationships have "testing forbidden fruit" as their relational motivation. In this respect, the two men are rejecting race and mocking the ignorance in societal messages that suppose that interracial couples are together for all the wrong reasons.   Now that I have established the presence of this dialectic in interracial relationships, I turn next to the strategies couples use to manage these dialectical tensions in their communication with each other, their families, and larger society.

<div align="center">Praxis Strategies: Managing the Dialectic</div>

My analysis suggests two main praxis strategies couples utilize for managing the embracing race vs. rejecting race dialectic. First, couples use denial, wherein they choose one pole of the dialectic and ignore the other. Second, some couples use segmentation as they fluctuate between the two poles, dependent on the topic or issue.

Denial

Baxter and Montgomery (1996) identify several ways couples can manage a dialectic. One such way is through denial. Denial occurs when the couple chooses one side of the dialectic and ignores the other side. A few of the couples interviewed used this praxis strategy. In theory, couples using this strategy could either opt to embrace race and completely ignore the rejection aspect, or they could completely reject race and ignore the racial aspect of their identity. Interestingly, most of the couples who used the denial strategy rejected race and refused to embrace the racial aspect of their identity. One couple did, however, completely embrace race and did not reject it. Important to note here is that even though the couples can choose to select one pole of the dialectic and deny the other, this does *not* mean that the other pole of the dialectic ceases to exist. It merely means that couples seek to select one pole and deny the other. They do this with varying degrees of success.

Choosing Solely to Reject Race

First, we will consider the couples who selected to reject race completely. One couple insisted that they do not racially identify on any forms. Brian proudly stated, "I mark 'other.'" Meghan made the same statement. They explained their rationale to me.

> Brian: No, because you are then being classified. You have to understand that when I was born, I was a colored baby. By the time I was an adolescent man I became a black man, and by the time the 1990's came around, 1980's rather, late 80's, I became an African American. How can we change (laughing)? So, dependent on where I am at, if I am [here], I would be a colored man, if I am

[there] I would be a black man, and if I am [over there], I would be an African American man, you know. So, to be black or African-American or colored would be a classification of being a man, you know, and you are forgetting you are an American one day.

Meghan: As I, I always check "other", you know I put US Citizen (laughing) because I feel the same way as he does. What difference does it make, you know, if you are an American you are an American. I feel the same way. I highly feel the same way.

Brian: It's, it's kind of hard to really articulate that, but it is just one of those things where I do not like to be classified, you know, I do not like to be put into this little small box that could be grouped with the whole nation or the whole world because I do believe in my individuality and my uniqueness and if you say that I am this based on this criteria, you know, I don't buy that because I don't meet all of those things that are in that criteria, and I don't think no person on the planet does. So, I mean, I don't know if I am answering that question [well], but I do know this: Over a period of time I refused to be classified. Cause that's gonna change. (laughing) It's gonna change, I am telling you. In your lifetime it's gonna change.

What is attention-grabbing about Brian and Meghan's stance is how they use their current rejection of race to make sense of their past. Brian and his wife relayed during the interview how he used to be stopped by the police for no

reason. They would see his car and pull him over. He says that he used to think that this was racially motivated. However, he reported that he had undergone a lifestyle change and gave up drinking and other activities. He says that the harassment stopped when his lifestyle changed; and, therefore, he believes the harassment had more to do with his lifestyle and not much to do with his race. We see this sentiment in their dialogue:

Meghan: Brian is involved in a lot of good things here in town and everything, so they are kind of used to us now. But at first, you know, they used to harass us a lot, especially like I remember back when we …First time here? The police, you know, they harass you: "Why don't you get up against the wall?" and do a search, you know. Yeah, I remember that perfectly. You know, stuff like that, you know, little harassments all the time…They told us to get up against the wall because I walked away from them. They were plain clothed, and you know, I told them I didn't know even who they were, you know, they didn't identify themselves. But I remember that vividly. I remember every time they [saw] our little car at that time that we had, they would stop it, you know, so, that's just an instance, you know.

Brian: But in retrospect, and this is just me. I believe that if you behave in a certain way, live in a certain way, and, God forbid, dress in a certain way, and interact with a certain group of people and a class of people, certain group of people, you subject yourself to the scrutiny of law enforcement. At the time, I

did not look at it that way because, obviously… But in retrospect, I can see that.

And the proof is once I stopped behaving in a certain manner, I stopped

getting…how should I say (laughing) watched, interacted with law enforcement

or, you know. I was not under scrutiny at a certain point, and I can look back and

see that.

Although Brian and Meghan seem to acknowledge that "dressing in a certain way"

matters, they still argue that the harassment was more related to lifestyle than race. Over

and over again in the interview, Brian and Meghan affirmed that they did not buy into

the idea of race. However, as you can see, their comments seem contradictory at points.

Nathan's and Jillian's rejection of race was noticeable when they answered

questions about the positives and negatives of being in an interracial relationship. I

asked them, "So, what positives or negatives have come from being in this relationship?"

Jillian responded

I've think I've changed a lot over time, but, again, I don't think it's— I've

changed because I'm in this relationship. I think I have changed because of my

relationship with Nathan. It's not because I'm in a bi-racial relationship and so

that has necessitated certain things. I have grown and become a very different

and a much better person because of him [emphasis on HIM]…didn't matter

what color his skin was. So, I mean I again, I wouldn't chalk it up to it's because

we're in a bi-racial relationship. I would chalk it up to he's an amazing person,

and I've changed because of him.

Nathan replied similarly stating

Nathan: I mean, it's not it's not the biracial nature of the relationship that positives are coming out of it. The only positive I could see is if as a sort of model to people out there. Right, I mean, that's the positive or or maybe…Yeah, the people out there, um…but...

Jillian: But that's Nathan being a role model, not us being a lead…a role model. I mean, it's…Nathan is a role model for Kevin in a variety of settings.

Nathan went so far as to state that he did not believe in race. He only believed in the human race. However, shortly thereafter, Nathan gave a compelling metaphor of the system of racial oppression.

Nathan: When, when, when, I was teaching and we're talking about Frankenstein—This actually makes sense. And we talk about the issue of monstrosity and I said "Well, was the creature a monster because…from the beginning? Or was the creature a monster because of what society was doing to him?" Because if you read the novel, I mean the monster's intelligent, but he looks weird. Right? And so…over time he becomes sort of evil, when in the beginning, you say, "Well, no, he's just a sort of nice guy." Well, ya know, in a sense, the same thing's happened. It's like I I sort of wonder, "Well, what would I have been like?" Right? If I didn't respond the way that I responded [to your parents' disapproval]. Right?

Jillian: Or have that stimuli to respond to.

Nathan: Or have that stimuli to respond to, so, ya know, it's that, ya know. What am I now as a result of the stimuli?

Again we see a contradiction between the couples arguing that they reject race while still clearly embracing race in their language and mindset.

The important reality to consider here is that although these couples select rejection and deny the role of race in the relationships, race does not disappear from their lives. In fact, other comments from the individuals in these couples make it glaringly apparent that these couples have experienced racism and do from time to time deal with race-related issues. For example, Charles, was adamant throughout the interview that I, as a researcher, "had it all wrong." Irately, he told me only a few questions into the interview that he knew where I was going and I could stop. He stated

> Charles: But see that's, that's…People gonna make it be black and white. I tell, I tell her that, but she don't believe me. [Referring to the interviewer] But it's not like that, but only people do that have a problem with that. They gonna always. But we're just people, and that's all I see is people. You know, I don't see that she's white and I'm black. We're two people. All that matters is there's two people that care about each other and love each other. That's all that matters, you know, so the rest of it, it dudn't have nothin' to do with it. So you know, you wanna worry about--she's white and I'm black, you know-- but I ain't gonna worry about stuff like that.

I found it ironic that in the same breath that Charles was denying race's role in their relationship, he did it by drawing attention to their racial identities. He contradictorily states, "I don't see that she's white and I'm black." This statement is akin to saying, "I couldn't hear you when you say you hated me." Additionally, he made a most-telling

comment toward the end of the interview. He was talking about his wife Vanessa's father and he said, "He told me that if his daughter had to marry a black man, he was glad it was me. I really didn't know how to take that." Although Charles denies race in some of his comments, he unknowingly embraces it in those same comments. Again, although couples choose to deny embracing race in theory, in practice, this is very difficult to accomplish because the two poles of the dialectic are always present.

In the varying degrees of rejection of race, we can see a societal platitude. For many in US society, embracing race is not a positive thing. Race is seen only as a socially constructed system of oppression, whether or not people label it as that. Therefore, the ideal way to handle race in some minds is to completely reject this system and become the proverbial "colorblind American" (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Race seemed to be defined in these couples' minds as entirely negative. The idea of embracing and appreciating the cultural diversity that race can bring seems absent from the consciousness of these individuals.

Choosing Solely to Embrace Race

Although most of the couples who used the denial praxis strategy rejected race, one couple chose to select the other pole of the dialectic and embrace race entirely. Erin and Ryan clearly embraced race. They dismissed that being colorblind was a good thing. They both fully embraced the racial identity of both themselves and each other. Further, they acknowledged that race affected many of their life decisions.

As I talked about briefly above, many US citizens believe that being colorblind is both achievable and ideal (Feagin, 2001). Erin and Ryan do not hold this idea. In fact,

they hold just the opposite idea. Erin speaks about how the word "colorblind" resonates

with her:

> Erin: I see that phrase as having been so co-opted by the Right and that, and to
>
> me, color isn't something to ignore in terms of different. But difference doesn't
>
> scare me, and I don't think that people need to be the same…

Erin and Ryan also choose to fully embrace their racial identities. Both Erin and

Ryan talked about their racial identities. Ryan made reference numerous times during

the interview to his whiteness and how being white influenced how he perceived the

world. He also talked about the appreciation he had for being able to delve into issues of

race with his wife and gain a deeper understanding of racial issues. Erin, too, spoke

about her black identity and what it meant to her. She felt so strongly about relishing her

black identity that she spoke openly about fighting for the right to identify as African-

American.

> Erin**:** I emphasize the fact that I'm black, I'm African American. And I always
>
> follow that up with biracial because A) It's obvious, and, you know, if I don't say
>
> that people eventually push, push me towards that anyway. But, for me, it's
>
> important because what it means to me is that that is not a part of my identity that
>
> I'm ever going to be willing to deny or not fight for…Because anybody that
>
> wants to tell me that I'm not black enough to be, to be black, or people that want
>
> to tell me that, well, you know, you can't claim blackness when it benefits you or
>
> any of those things… It's like, you know, I, if I had been born two years before I
>
> was, my parents would have gone to jail because it was illegal for them to date, it

was illegal for them to be married in the state where I was born in 1967. I don't

find that to be a *stigmatizing* identity. I find that to be a *reality* of identity. And

to say that that's not part of who I am is just ludicrous to me. And it means

something to me that I have that connection to African American people, that I

have a connection to the experience of the African diaspora. That, to me, that's

analogous in many ways to the experience of the Native American diaspora, the

Irish diaspora…When I identify as African American, I identity as Ida B. Wells;

I identify as Sojourner Truth; I identify as Frederick Douglass. I do *not* identify

as Clarence Thomas.

 [Laughs]

In addition to considering race with respect to their identities, Erin and Ryan also

embraced race when they made major life decisions. One area, in particular, we see

race's impact is in their decisions regarding children. Erin and Ryan were considering

adoption and both agreed that if they adopt, they want to adopt bi-racial or black

children. They are deliberate in this decision.

Erin: [W]hen we adopt kids we're adopting kids that are biracial and black.

Ryan**:** Yeah, we've already decided that.

Erin**:** We've already talked about that…And I have no interest in, you know,

paying–literally paying–five times as much for a white baby. Because, I mean,

the fees... the adoption agency fees are expensive, but they're also... they're

literally... White babies cost more…Yeah. The least likely to be adopted are,

um, black male children.

Ryan**:** Yeah, and, and the numbers that I looked at were just... shocking.

Not only did Ryan and Erin want children of color, but they also were concerned about the actual skin pigment of their children and the resulting messages the children would receive. However, their main concern was not about the child being subject to prejudice. Their main concern was the child being exposed to undue privilege because of lighter skin.

Erin**:** If we're here when our kids start going to school and if our kids grow up here, that's going to freak me out because as much as people race me as white...it'll be even more so with our kids, and I really worry about that because I don't want my kids to grow up thinking they're white…I don't want them to grow up thinking that they're white in the way that people in this town think about whiteness. Because I don't want them to think that they're better than people who aren't white…I've read enough studies that, you know, what your parents and your family tell you is not—increasingly not as influential as what your peers tell you. And the schools here are very, they're segregated. And they're internally segregated. Like so many schools, you know. Because they track, and they track by race and class, and I don't want my kids getting benefits because they're white, because they're light-skinned. And I know that they will. And they'll internalize that. And I worry about that…And I mean I don't know that it's easier or harder because, you know, I mean I'm sure I internalized things about being light-skinned…Because I internalized a lot of negative things about

being light-skinned also from the black community and just the whole social idea

of like the tragic law and all those things.

Erin also sent a message to other interracial couples. Not only do she and Ryan

embrace race, but they feel others should, too. She made a point of arguing that all

interracial couples needed to "confront [their] own racial stuff." She said

> Erin**:** You're going to fight and sometimes racial stuff will come up and you'll
>
> fight-- that you didn't ever expect, I think. And that doesn't mean that, you, you
>
> know, you secretly married a racist or you secretly married a Black Nationalist
>
> or, you know, something. You know? It means that you grew up in this country.
>
> And stuff that you don't know that you internalized is going to come out in ways
>
> that you don't expect. And you just have to confront that. And you have to
>
> really work through it and be honest about it. And, you know, try to figure out
>
> why it happened or, or what it means…Marriage and race and gender are all
>
> things that we all think we know about, and we do, but we go into them with
>
> these scripts that we may or may not be aware of.

Now that I have considered how some couples used denial as a management strategy, I

will talk about couples who used segmentation as a management strategy.

Segmentation

Most couples in my study used the praxis pattern of segmentation. Baxter and

Montgomery (1996) define segmentation as a way of managing a dialectic where certain

poles of the dialectic are favored at different times, dependent on the topic being

addressed. In this instance, couples vacillate between embracing and rejecting race dependent on the topic with which they are dealing.

Rejecting Race and Couple Identity

When talking about aspects of their identity as a couple, the dominant theme that emerged from couples was "We're normal," reflecting that couples, in this instance, reject race in their relationship. Just as with the couples who used denial, couples using segmentation went out of their way to make the point that they were just like any other couple. As we see in Cole and Isabella's conversation, couples often forget about race in the private realm of their relationship. However, sometimes in the public realm, others' communication points out their interracial nature.

Cole: We were talking about this yesterday. I am so used to Bella I am not thinking, "Oh, I am married to a white woman," but when you see people looking at you, you are thinking, "What? Oh, okay. I remember."

Isabella: You can forget. When you get to the point—I mean, it doesn't matter. It's not an issue, but people make it an issue.

Audrey made an astute analogy when she likened the visibility of race to the visibility of some disabilities. She explained,

I really do think you get to a point where it may be curious to other people, so I guess like being living with someone with a disability, you just deal with it, and it's, while other people stare and look, you remember, "Oh, okay. This is odd to

them, and they're staring and looking, and they don't get it." But, um, it's not a

big deal to us.

Rejecting Race in Individual Identities

Beyond stating that their identity as a couple was normal, the individuals also

made it clear that the racial identity of their significant other was not the more prevalent

aspect of their identity. In this way, couples rejected race as the foremost aspect of one's

identity. While societal messages reinforce the message that race matters, couples who

use segmentation strategies reject the notion that race should be the most salient aspect

of identity. Jillian matter-of-factly stated toward the end of the interview, "I'm married

to Nathan. I'm not married to a black man, or "Here's my black husband." It's "Here's

Nathan." Audrey further attested that race had little if anything to do with why she was

with her husband. She testified, "He's not with me because I'm black and I'm not with

him because he's white. It's just sort of like a shoe size or something. I forget that

we're an interracial couple until somebody points it out to us 'cause I'm not married to a

white man. I'm married to Isaac."

A humorous note I want to make here is that some couples actually reported

having moments of genuine surprise when the realization that they were married to a

person of a different race hit them. Many couples reported that this realization occurred

while the other was sleeping. Several partners reported waking up and looking at their

partners, only to be shocked to "see" that their partner was of a different race. Parker

and Abby laugh about one of these moments.

Parker: I never thought of Abby as a white woman. It never crosses my mind. I

think of you as a woman, you know, but she's my friend! You don't think of

her… Sometimes I wake up and I look across at her and I'm like, "Abby is

white!" [Laughter] You know, when she is sleeping! But, it would hit, "I'm

actually married to a white woman!" but then it just passes… I mean, it's very –

it's really stupid to make that an issue. It's very, very stupid, you know?

Abby: From our opinion and our…

Parker: I'm usually right! [Laughter]

Embracing Race in Discussions Concerning Children

Now while these couples reject race as a salient aspect of their own identities,

they begin embracing race when they start discussing the identity of their children. We

see couples embrace race as they begin considering what to name their children and as

they begin helping their child racially self-identify and monitor messages they received

from others.

Some couples were mindful of race when deciding what to name their children.

Understanding that blacks still experience a lot of prejudice, some couples did not want

to jinx their child by giving him or her a "black name" that would elevate the chance that

the child would face discrimination. Landon reported

Landon: My parents always told me you want to give a child a name that doesn't

have so much of a racial connection so that an employer can't distinguish

between white/black and what not, and so a name like John, you don't know

whether John is black, white, Hispanic or Asian. So, you know, I don't want to

name my kid Laquita or something like that for the main fact that if someone were to have a prejudice and they see you on paper, then they are going to – you don't have equal opportunity at that point, and so it was really important for my parents, and I think I got the same type of idea. We've talked about it, that we want to have a name where, you know, it gives a child an identity but not to a race per se.

Other couples wanted to ensure that the child did not have a stereotypical white name or a stereotypical black name, but that the name fit the child's bi-racial nature: a race-neutral name, of sorts. Tim and Alyssa discussed this issue:

Tim: Racial identity and image comes into play when we were talking about what names to choose. So, one thing we said was, "We don't want to pick a name that screams 'I'm black' like Tyreese or a name that screams "I'm white" like Trevor." Um, and so…

Alyssa: Or Dillon.

Tim: So, that is something that when you are naming a kid you care about maybe more than I thought I would care about. I mean, that's like a critical point where [race] becomes salient.

Beyond just deciding what to name their bi-racial children, couples also had to begin conversations with their kids as they began to bring home from school questions about racial identity. Emily reported that her daughter came home from school and told her, "Momma when you come to school after you leave the kids ask me if I'm adopted." Emily explained that "there are issues that biracial children are gonna deal with that

other children who look like their parents, at least on the surface, don't have to deal with." She noted that when raising bi-racial children, "there are some different skill sets that you have to start teaching really early on that are coping mechanisms biracial children that someone like me who is white…doesn't have to deal with."

Others who did not have kids yet talked about conversations they anticipated and how they were planning to address race-related issues. Couples also talked about wanting to see both races in their children. Cole and Isabella said

Cole: We want them to reflect us, so we always said when we have children, I don't want them looking all black. I want them to reflect some of their mother, also. So, we are hoping that it's right down the middle, which probably would be the case.

Isabella: I think with any parent you probably don't want them to look exactly like one parent. I was reading that one in six kids looks to be like one race. They said one in six kids looks all white or all black. I was telling Cole, and we were like, "What if we have a kid and it looks all black or all white?" Not that it matters, but I guess if we had a choice, we would like it to reflect both of us. I guess that is one thing we talked about, and of course, you know, they probably will get some racist reactions from people, and we were talking about how can we strengthen their self confidence in a way where that wouldn't matter to them. We talked about that.

Cole: We decided that we are going to teach them as best we know how that this Earth is just temporary. We want to teach them that they belong to God and that's the country you want to come from.

Isabella: And that it doesn't matter how they look or how somebody thinks they should or shouldn't think, but that God loves them, and we love them, and it doesn't matter what somebody thinks about them or how somebody treats them.

Cole: And of course you'd like to prepare them for, you know, ignorant people because they will be treated, you know, it depends on who they meet, they are going to be treated with animosity. So, we want to explain to them why that's gonna happen and how to deal with it. Naturally, I mean, we do discuss ways of how we plan to raise our kids when it comes to race issues.

Isabella: We talk about that apart from race. We talk about how we want our family to be when we have children, what values we want to instill in them, how we want our family to be… So, that's part of it, naturally.

Segmentation: Keith and Emily—A Case Study

One of the best examples of segmentation in my study were Keith and Emily. When it came to issues of their identity as a couple, Keith and Emily whole-heartedly rejected race at various points in the interview. Keith and Emily both asserted that they were 'normal.' In fact, Emily stated, "It's even interesting to me that we're a part of a research project on interracial couples." However, only a few minutes later in the interview, she talked more about their identity as an interracial couple and, moreover, an

interracial family, in which instances they whole-heartedly embraced race. She even admitted her contradiction when she said,

> Now, it's interesting I will tell you that I do see us and I caught myself even recently. I-. I see us as a family of color, you know. So, when I talk about my kids' experiences I've caught myself talking about-. We sent them to a private preschool, and I've caught myself talking to other people going, "You know, we were like the only family of color in the whole place."

We see the contradiction or tension again when, in the same sentence, Emily talks about forgetting she's in an interracial couple, while at the same time being in a one-race room feels odd to her. She says, "I mean, really, I-. I forget sometimes that we're an interracial couple and when I'm in a room full of white people it looks odd to me because when I come home every night, I see black and brown." Keith and Emily vacillate between embracing race and rejecting race. In fact, one might argue that Keith and Emily embrace race in public settings because of messages about race's salience. However, at home, race is most often *not* salient. Therefore, in private settings, they reject race simply because it simply is off their radar.

Keith talked explicitly about his identity as a black man and how he wanted to be seen as man first. We see in his comments the dialectic tug-of-war. He acknowledges his race and his children's race. However, he also resists giving it the prominence others give it. He strikes a balance by saying, "Yes, I'm black, but I'm a million other things first." Hear his words:

Keith: And so, for me personally, about Keith is, treat me as a man. I can be

black last but treat me as a man first because my first impression is I'm gonna

treat you with respect. I'm gonna treat you as a man. I'm gonna treat you as

woman and respect you as a woman. And, that's the way that I'd like to be in

return and that's what I want for my children. I want people to see them first as

young ladies. They can be biracial second, third, fourth and fifth.   But, I want

them to be respected as first as individuals as, you know, as a human being.

Emily, by her actions, also believes this when it's just the two of them. However, if we

remember the story from earlier in this chapter, Emily had to embrace both her and

Keith's racial identities when she was forced to "come out" to her parents about Keith's

racial identity. Emily, also, teased Keith about being a black man who liked

"stereotypically white" things such as Nascar and ZZ Top, which Keith proudly

confirmed.

Keith and Emily also teach their children that the world is much bigger than

black and white, and it has many cultures that are not defined by race. They use this

strategy as a teaching tool to de-emphasize race and reframe it as more than black and

white. Here, the couple fully embraces race and talks about it more in terms of cultural

diversity. In this instance, race is still embraced and made salient. Race is reframed as

fun and exciting with the message that the world has a lot of rich diversity, some of it

being racial diversity.

Emily: Keith and I traveled oversees to see-. You know, in Europe. And, every

time I would go to a different country, then I would talk to my children about

things having to do with cultural differences that had nothing to do with race because I want them to see the world from that paradigm not from the black/white paradigm. That's what has become more important to me than anything else. Yes, you have a black father and a white mother. We love each other, you know. And, that's something that we need to work with them-- that there's a bigger world out there than North America where a black and white is such a big deal. And, let's talk about Germany. Let's talk about Peru. Let's talk about Japan. Let's talk about all these other things because all these people look different than us too. So, that's kind of how we've tried to shift it to talk about differences.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter, we have delved into how couples manage the dialectic of embracing race vs. rejecting race. Couples respond to the "Race Matters" message that family and society send them. They craft race-sensitive messages to families in the form of coming-out messages. Couples in their own private relationships often reject the salience of race or reject race entirely, arguing that other differences are far more important to them than race. Further, many of the couples feel the tug-of-war between embracing and rejecting race, which comes out sometimes in the form of racial jokes the couples share with each other.

Because this tug-of-war is a reality in the lives of interracial couples, the couples have developed praxis strategies to manage this dialectic. The two praxis strategies the couples I interviewed used were denial and segmentation. Some couples chose to either

completely embrace race or completely reject it. Other couples embrace and reject race

dependent on the topic under discussion. Now I will turn my thoughts toward

understanding how the analysis presented in this dissertation helps us better understand

the experience of interracial couples.

CHAPTER VI

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

"Oh the places you'll go! Oh the people you'll see!"
                                                        -Dr. Suess

When I began this journey, I could have never anticipated all of the personal and

professional changes my life would undergo or all of the wonderful people I would meet.

Fourteen couples, four computers, countless tears, endless processing conversations, and

two and half years later, I am a much different person than I was before I began. What

began with just a curiosity has become a passion both personally and professionally. In

this chapter, I will consider the answers to the initial questions I posed, the questions that

remain unanswered, and new questions that have arisen. I begin by summarizing my

findings from the previous chapters and outlining what I have learned from the couples

who shared their lives with me. I then offer theoretical reflections connecting these

findings with previous research and offering ways it can inform future research. Finally,

I conclude with personal reflections about my personal and professional journey.

Conclusions

Summary of Chapters

In Chapter III, I addressed the question about race-related challenges with respect

to family and how couples communicated about those challenges. I focused on

messages interracial couples received from their families. Some couples experienced

only positive reactions from their families. However, consistent with previous research,

many families either disapproved or had major concerns (Foeman & Nance, 2002, 2003;

Hibbler & Shinew, 2002; Rosenblatt, 1995). I compared differences between reactions

from the white families and reactions from the black families. I found that there were both similarities and differences. Black families and white families shared similar concerns about life being harder for both the couple and the couple's children. Families often warned their son or daughter, saying, "Life is hard enough. Why add more complications?" Further, parents warned that bi-racial children would have difficulty being accepted by either race. This concern was often voiced as the infamous question "What about the children?"

Though black and white families shared some similar concerns, they also had differing reasons for their disapproval. Whites families disapproved of the couples on moral grounds, holding the idea that mixed relationships are immoral. Whites also were gravely concerned with what others would think of their son or daughter's choice. Further, they emphasized to their son or daughter that disapproval of their partner was "nothing personal" against the black partner; it was just about the partner being black. I discussed in the chapter that whites have the privilege of ignoring the racial aspect of their identity, their whiteness. Because of this luxury, whites find it easier to separate the racial element from someone's general identity. In these relationships, whites are able to divorce the black person's racial identity from other facets of his or her identity. Therefore, families make the case to their loved ones that they like "Marcus" as a person, just not as a part of the family.

Black families disapproved of their loved one's interracial relationship for reasons distinctly different from the white families' reasons. While whites believe that race mixing is immoral and an embarrassment in the community, blacks believe that the

interracial relationship will endanger their son or daughter. Black disapproval of interracial relationships is steeped in the black experience in the US. In fact, two meta-narratives with origins in the slavery period still inform opinions on interracial relationships in the black community today (Staples, 1999). The black male/white female narrative is one that paints the black male as savage and the white woman as forbidden fruit (Staples, 1999). This narrative suggests that black male/white female relationships are a forbidden love. Because of the purity attached to the white woman, black men who had relationships with white women, historically, were beaten, castrated, or even lynched. History corroborates this narrative (Newbeck, 2004; www.nytimes.com; www.pbs.org). So families were particularly worried about their black sons having a relationship with a white woman because of the white hostility still directed toward blacks in interracial relationships.

The white male-black female narrative, also from the slavery period, was historically a relationship of domination and exploitation (Staples, 1999). Black female slaves were raped by slave masters both for sexual enjoyment and to create more slaves. That narrative trickled down through history leading black families to express trepidation concerning their daughters having a relationship with white males. Black families often warned the daughter that the white man wants to sexually experiment and dominate you with the admonition that "They're not in it for love."

In Chapter IV, I addressed two research questions as I considered the challenges couples face with larger society and with their identities using the lens of Standpoint Theory. I found that the white person came into the relationship unaware of how

invisible his or her whiteness was to them, a common mindset for white Americans (McIntosh, 2000). The white person also did not understand many aspects of the black experience. The black partner often found this humorous, as the white partners embarrassed themselves while learning about a new culture. Some black partners felt as though they had enrolled their white partner in black school. In black school, whites learned about everyday racial and cultural differences such as food, hair, and music.

However, more importantly, whites began observing and experiencing racism. Because of these racist encounters, whites started getting an inside look and, thus, a fresh perspective of the social position of their black partner. As a result, white partners became protective on their black partners. In fact, some whites became political advocates both individually and institutionally. Some white partners started teaching family members about black culture and challenging racist beliefs. Others worked in school systems and universities to start programs that address the needs of students of color. The most interesting finding in this chapter to me was that even though whites experienced racist encounters, some whites were still oblivious to their whiteness. When asked to explain what it meant to be white, some white partners could not articulate an answer. Blacks, however, quickly articulated what it mean to be black. Some Blacks also had a shift in identity as they became an outsider within (Collins, 1986). They began to see the white world as an insider rather than an outsider. With this new perspective, came the reification in their minds of the reality of racism.

In Chapter V, I delved deeper into the challenges of identity as I considered the unique challenges of interracial couples in managing the racial aspect of their identity as

a couple. In doing this, I presented a new dialectic, one that is peculiar to interracial couples. Interracial couples wrestle with the dialectic of embracing race vs. rejecting race. This dialectic is a tug-of-war between embracing and making salient their racial identity versus rejecting the interracial nature of their relationship. Although couples sometimes embraced race because of cultural differences within their relationship, I found that couples were often forced to embrace their identity by families and society. For example, couples hid their relationship from families when they knew the family would disapprove. When the couple reached the point of long-term commitment, couples struggled with how to tell their families about their relationship. Many couples crafted "coming out" messages to announce their relationship. The messages took two distinct formats. If families knew that their son or daughter was dating, but did not know about the race, the partner had to inform the family about the race of his or her partner. The other format occurred when the family knew about the relationship, but did not know that the relationship was romantic. In these instances, partners had to tell families that the relationship was not platonic, but romantic.

At other times, couples chose the opposing side of the dialectic, rejecting the salience of race in their relationship. Couples talked about how differences such as age, religion, upbringing, and gender caused more internal conflict than race did. The dialectical tension became obvious when couples started making racial jokes with each other. In these jokes, we are able to see how couples both embrace their racial identity and reject racial stereotypes. The logic of jokes relies on the fact that jokes have a kernel of truth to them. Embedded in racial jokes are racial stereotypes about how

whites and blacks act and how they interact. Through making light of these stereotypes, couples both embrace the societal stereotype enough to laugh while rejecting its generalizability.

Couples used two main praxis strategies to manage the dialectic of embracing race vs. rejecting race (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Several couples used denial to manage the dialectic. This management strategy took one of two forms. In one form, couples chose to embrace race fully and celebrate differences as good and enriching. To them, rejecting race was both impossible and undesirable. In the second form, couples chose to reject race. These couples argued that they were colorblind and that race was invisible to them. For these couples, embracing race was negative and reinforced racist categorizations. The second management strategy couples used was segmentation, where couples favored one side of the dialectic over the other when discussing certain topics. I found that couples rejected race when talking about themselves and their identities both individually and as a couple. However, couples embraced race when they began talking about issues with their children, including what to name their child and their child's racial identity. I turn next to the specific contributions coming from these results.

Contributions

My first set of research questions asked "What race related challenges do couples face with respect to their families, and how do couples communicate about these challenges?" The biggest challenge couples face is disapproval from their families, specifically their immediate families. Keeping with the existing research (Foeman & Nance, 1999, 2002; Rosenblatt, 1995), families still have issues about children and life

being harder for the couple. Also, I found that white families still seem to disapprove more often than black families (Foeman & Nance, 1999, 2002; Rosenblatt, 1995).

The communication surrounding family issues took three distinct forms. One, couples engaged in sense-making communication wherein they comforted each other and tried to explain or work their way through issues with each others' families. Second, couples engaged in communication with the families themselves, as partners stood up for their spouses and protected their spouses from disparaging family members. Last, couples crafted coming-out messages for families. Although other researchers have acknowledged these messages' existence (Foeman & Nance, 2002), I look at the specific content of these messages and the contexts in which they occurred.

My second set of research questions asked "What race related challenges do couples face with respect to their race communities, and how do couples communicate about these challenges?" I found that in the African-American, black women still disapprove more often than black males (Rosenblatt, 1995). Couples still experience prejudice against them as a result of individual and systemic racism's continuing prevalence. In this study, I considered the experience of interracial couples using the lens of Standpoint Theory which researchers had not done before. Using this lens, allows us to analyze interpersonal relations through a critical lens that highlights white privilege's effects on black-white interracial relationships, a reality that otherwise might go unnoticed. Couples communicate with each other about their reactions to societal racism and how they felt about each others' reactions to the racism. Further, they form a

teacher-student relationship, of sorts, that allows them to learn from an intimate vantage point about each others' respective cultures.

My third set of research questions asks "What race-related challenges with respect to identity do couples experience, and how do couples communicate about these challenges?" Previous research considered only the individual identities of partners in interracial relationships. In this study, I looked at the transformation of both the individual and dyadic identities. Identity is dynamic (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995). Therefore, it is necessary to consider how couples manage a changing identity. In order to this, I considered how couples managed the task of determining the salience of race in their day-to-day interactions with each other. To better understand the communication surrounding this identity management, I analyzed the management strategies couples use to negotiate identity management.

Overall, in all of my research questions and their answers, I considered not only the challenges that couples faced, but also the resulting communication. I added to the existing literature in academia by bringing a distinctly communication-oriented approach to understanding interracial relationships. Most of the extant literature comes from the fields of psychology and sociology. Yet, as we know, relationships are communicative constituted. Relationships *are* because communication *is*. In this way, I have added to the overall academic discussion of interracial couples and issues of race by bringing a communication lens. With respect specifically to the field of communication, I have added two major contributions. First, the interpersonal communication research, like most other research, has a white bias (McIntosh, 2000). Most of what we know about

relationships has come from studying white, heterosexual couples. I have added to the understanding of relationships, in general, by bringing racial diversity to the discussion of interpersonal dynamics. Second, more specifically, I have added to Foeman and Nance's (1999, 2002) Communication Theory of Interracial Relationships. Foeman and Nance (1999, 2002) developed a theory that discussed the stages of relationship development for interracial couples. However, their fourth stage, maintenance, was entirely undeveloped. They write in their discussion of the theory that couples "maintain." I have laid out in this study specific ways that interracial couples communicatively maintain their relationship. Now that I have described my overall contribution to the field of communication and the answer to my research questions, I will give more in-depth theoretical considerations.

Theoretical Considerations

Racism

Persistent racism: As I listened to couples share their experiences with families and society, I was reminded that both individual and systemic racism still exist. Racism is often divided into two types: individual or institutional (Feagin, 2001). Individual racism occurs interpersonally, such as calling someone the n-word or other racial epithets. This type of racism is easily recognized because it is so overt, and is regarded as inappropriate, unethical, and inhumane by the majority of people. The second type of racism, institutional, is a more covert racism. Institutional racism is less obvious because it manifests itself in such things as policies, healthcare disparities, and degrading stereotypes (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Feagin, 2001). Institutional racism focuses

on the extent to which whites have experienced privilege and people of color have experienced disenfranchisement. Although most people will identify use of racial epithets as racism, much fewer will identify the absence of a black president in US history as racism (Feagin, 2001). Couples experienced both types of racism. They experienced strong messages of disapproval from families and racial epithets from society. Couples also openly talked about institutional racism as they considered issues such as police brutality and racial profiling.

Defining racism: Many sociologists are beginning to argue that racism should be defined solely or primarily as institutional so that more resources can be spent addressing the racism that has penetrated our social institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Collins, 1999; Feagin, 2001). Bonilla-Silva (2003) writes that racism is "a sociopolitical concept that refers exclusively to racial ideology that glues a particular racial order" (p. 8). Feagin (2001) argues that failing to define racism as institutional or systemic allows white society to declare the end of racism, while ignoring the remaining racial disparities. I understand this argument and the desire not to relegate racism's power to interpersonal contexts alone. However, we must not shift the definition of racism to be understood only as institutional racism. To this end, communication scholars must play a role in not only addressing racism, but also in defining it. Let me explain further.

Communication scholars need to add to social psychology's and sociology's perspective on racism with a distinctly communication-oriented perspective. How are we to do this? Organizational communication experts have long argued that organizations and systems are communicatively constituted (McPhee & Poole, 2001). In

other words, communication between people creates and re-creates organizations. We can never forget that organizational systems are forged from people talking to each other.. The danger in defining racism completely as institutional is that we forget that the root of institutional racism began in interpersonal contexts. Further, the end results of institutional racism are manifested in interpersonal relationships. To illustrate this point, let us consider the example of organized religion.

The societal institution of religion has been plagued with racism for centuries. Throughout history whites have used religion and morality to prove their political position on issues of race. Pro-slavery advocates used biblical scripture to legitimate their position. Tise (1990) writes

> Abolitionists charged that slavery was an immoral, unchristian institution. In response to this attack, proslavery writers turned increasingly from arguments of political economy popular in the 1820s to concepts related to morality and religion. Hence, they characterized slavery as a missionary institution, a divine trust, and a practice encouraged by scripture. (p. 115)

More recently during the Civil Rights Era, the Virginia Supreme court judge that upheld Virginia's anti-miscegenation law did so stating

> Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay, and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix. (Newbeck, 2005, p. 144)

However, if we shift religion from the abstract realm to the concrete realm, we see that both the origin and end result of this area of institutional racism occurs in interpersonal contexts. The slave-master relationship preceded the religious rhetoric co-opted by slave owners in the South. Religion was then manipulated to legitimize slave-master relationships. Each passing decade perpetuated the racism that had been planted in the societal institution of religion. If we look at the end product of this religious institutional racism, we see that it manifests itself in interpersonal contexts.   In this study, it manifested in the lives of Abby and Parker. Remember that when Abby and Parker went to church, the pastor gave a sermon on "not being unequally yoked," implying that Abby and Parker were sinning by being in a mixed relationship. So, the beginning of the religious rhetoric about black-white separation began as a result of the interpersonal slave/master relationship. Although it becomes a much bigger issue as it infiltrates the system, the end result is prejudice between a preacher and an interracial couple, another interpersonal context.

Defining racism solely as institutional carries with it the danger of not seeing the "faces." As I sat across from couples who relayed racist incidents to me, my heart connected with theirs, and I hurt with them. When I heard the couple tell me about being out enjoying an evening together and hearing a person driving by yelling "Nigger," I saw the anger and hurt on Cole's and Isabella's face. When the couple carrying out the simple task of grocery shopping with their baby was told, "Look at that crap" as someone pointed at their son, I saw the tears of anger in Parker's eyes and heard the questioning disgust in his voice. We must never separate the "faces" from the racism

we are trying to fight. Those "faces" are the reason we fight racism in the first place. Both racism's root and result occur in interpersonal contexts.

Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theory has been adapted and used most frequently by feminists. However, Orbe (1998) has applied it extensively to issues of race and culture. Orbe (1998) discusses how co-cultures in US society are marginalized. As a result, they see life from a different vantage point than the dominant culture, in the case of race, white America. Because of understanding life from a different vantage point, co-cultures have adopted communication strategies to deal with being a position of less power.

What seems to be missing from the research is the experience of those in the majority who begin understanding the standpoint of the oppressed. One of the major tenets of standpoint theory says "The potential understanding of the oppressed (the standpoint) makes visible the inhumanity of the existing relations among groups and moves us toward a better and more just world" (Miller, 2005, p.305) In terms of racially oppressed groups, when whites begin understanding at a deep level the standpoint of blacks, the injustice and racial inequalities become more apparent, more believable, and more problematic. At this point, I do think it is important to make the caveat that whites can never fully understand the experience of blacks. However, although whites cannot understand fully, whites can understand to a large extent. And, as we see in my couples, often understanding leads to activism.

In this study, we see couples learning about each other's perspective or standpoint. Particularly, when whites are "enrolled in black school," they learn about a

way of life that had previously been invisible to them. They learn both to see the

privilege they have been given as a white person and to see the injustice their partner has

experienced as a black person. However, one of my most astounding findings was that

not all of the white partners had these realizations. Some white partners realized their

whiteness. Still others did not. Therefore, even intimate knowledge and insight into life

or a person of color and their negative experiences are not enough to counteract the

entrenched societal messages about whiteness and white privilege.

The question for future research then becomes, "What is the difference between

those who begin to see and understand white privilege and those who do not?" The

answer to this question matters because couples are microcosms of larger society

(Gordon, 1964; Lewis, Yancey, & Bletzer 1997). We can transfer what we learn from

couples to begin better understanding how to teach perspective-taking and racial

awareness. Further, for the racism in our country to get substantially better, people in

positions of power—primarily whites—have to experience a racial enlightenment.

Moreover, critical theorists must reconnect with their purpose and begin addressing

questions of *how* to effect change rather than merely being content to prove over and

over—and over—again that change needs to occur. The question for today's scholars

must be "How?"

In addition to considering the impact of the racial awareness of the white

partners, we should also consider further a second concept from Standpoint Theory, the

concept of the "outsider within." Frankenberg (1993) says that "The oppressed can see

with the greatest clarity, not only their own position but…indeed the shape of social

systems as a whole" (p. 8). This concept has been largely considered in organizational contexts (Daniel, 2007; Orbe, 1998; Salazar, 2005). Although the "outsider within" concept has been considered primarily in organizational contexts, the concept has not been considered in interpersonal contexts.

Considering the "outsider within" and its relevance to the interpersonal and family branches of communication is essential. Family communication scholars should learn about the experience of the black partner in the relationship in order to better understand the partner's experience of working *and living* in the dominant world. In other words, not only does the black partner work in a white world, but now upon coming home, he or she still *lives* in a white world. Psychologists have talked about the need for African-Americans to reconnect with other blacks in order to "just have a break" and have someone who understands the black experience (Tatum, 1997). Tatum (1997) answers the question "Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" which actually does address the question of why blacks tend to congregate when they are in venues dominated by the majority. She writes that sometimes blacks just need a psychological break from their white cohorts. They need to sit with individuals who understand their blackness. A question that seems to arise here is, "Do black partners in white relationships feel like they never get a break?" Based on my finding, it seems that black partners struggle between minimizing the importance of race within the relationship with being able to rely on an extensive network of family and friends to provide racial, ethnic, and cultural support. More research needs to give voice to people of color and their experiences in these situations.

Relational Dialectics

Baxter and Montgomery (1988) introduced dialectics to the field of communication in the form of relational dialectics. Since its entry into the communication discipline, various other researchers have used the theory to identify dialectics that are specific to particular kinds of relationships (Apker, Propp, & Ford, 2005; Kramer, 2004; Rawlings, 1989). Although various researchers have sought to identify the dialectics that are present in particular relationships, far fewer of them have given the same attention to the manner in which the relational participants manage those dialectics. In this particular study, I made the attempt to not only identify a dialectic that was specific to interracial relationships, but to also discuss how couples managed the dialectic, thus getting at the communicative nature of relationship maintenance.

In doing this, I found a way in which I believe the praxis strategies as originally posited by Baxter and Montgomery need to be reconsidered. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) list several possible ways of managing dialectics. They, then, sort these praxis strategies into two categories, functional and dysfunctional. Baxter and Montgomery (1996) place "denial" in the dysfunctional category stating that is has "limited functionality, although [it] might appear with some frequency in life" (p. 61). They write

> Denial represents an effort to subvert, obscure, and deny the presence of a contradiction by legitimating only one dialectical pole to the virtual exclusion of the other poles. Just as both hands are necessary to enact clapping, at least two oppositional poles are essential to enact contradiction. In seeking to deny the

existence of the other poles, relationship parties undertake denial of the

contradiction. (p. 61)

However, my data suggest otherwise. Several of my couples used denial as a

strategy to manage the dialectic of embracing vs. rejecting race. They used it in two

senses. Various couples chose to deny embracing race in their relationship. They called

themselves colorblind and talked about race being a made-up barrier. In these instances,

my bias becomes clear, and I agree that denial is an unhealthy approach. Throughout my

conversations with these couples, I saw and heard their repeated reference to issues of

race, yet they denied over and over that race mattered to them at all.

A second way denial was used occurred when a couple completely embraced

race in their relationship and resisted rejecting it. However, the descriptor

"dysfunctional" does not fit these couples' use of denial as a praxis strategy. These

couples included race in their discussion of their identity, politics, children, work, etc.

They processed the effect race had on their relationship. While some might find this

constant processing problematic, one woman in a relationship made a telling statement

when she said, "Difference doesn't scare me." Whereas many would project onto this

couple and say constantly thinking of race will harm the relationship, this couple

reframes race and says "It's not a negative." In this way, the definition of denial does

indeed fit the couple. However, the couple does not seem to be dysfunctional in their

communication, but rather one of the healthiest examples of communication I saw in the

study. This example illustrates that we cannot say that denial is inherently

dysfunctional. Researchers should give further consideration to the

functional/dysfunctional labels put on praxis strategies and avoid a, perhaps, hasty

categorization without due consideration of the context in which the communication

takes place. Now that I have summarized my findings and talked through major

theoretical considerations, I turn my attention to the limitations of this study and areas

for future research.

<div align="center">Limitations and Future Research</div>

No study is without limitations, and this study is no different. As I reflect on this

project, I see a few ways in which my study has distinct limitations. First, I conducted

this study in a university town. This affected both the context in which many of my

couples live and work, and it affected the demographics of the couples themselves. The

town is probably more educated than "Normal" America. In the future, I would like to

interview couples from various regions of the US to get a different sample of

interviewees. In addition, although I did not collect the education levels of my

participants, I can say that from my discussions with them, most of them had college

degrees, which I am certain is directly related to living in a college town. Moreover, not

only did most interviewees have a college degree, but at least half of the participants had

Masters or Doctorate degrees in their respective fields. Education has been linked to

diminishing racist attitudes (Feagin, 2001). Therefore, I do wonder what effect

education had on the responses I received from couples. In the future, I would like to

interview couples with a wider variation of educational attainment.

Second, I constructed my research questions from a review of the literature. As a

result, I developed questions about challenges couples might face with the family, racial

group, and their identity—all challenges that had been identified in the past. This has the potential to create a study where the researcher finds what he or she thinks she will find. In the future, researchers should take a more grounded approach and leave out as many assumptions as possible. We as scholars must be careful that *we* are not the ones perpetuating the stereotypes we are trying to debunk. Researchers should start with the sole intent of understanding the experience of interracial couples. Maybe they have race-related challenges. Maybe they do not. Maybe they communicate about the issues. Maybe they do not.

Third, I would like to delve deeper into the composite identity (if one exists) of the kind of person who dates interracially. I find myself cringing with that goal because of the potential stereotyping that might occur, yet I *absolutely* heard at several points during my interviews certain characteristics in partners that kept being mentioned over and over again. "I was exposed to different cultures at a very early age." "I have always felt a kinship with the black community." "I never felt like I was really white." "My parents did not teach us to see color." Though it was beyond the scope of this study, I want to consider what, if anything, makes individuals who date interracially different and more willing to step outside the social box. I now come to a close by reflecting on this study and my development as both a person and a scholar during the course of this project.

Personal Reflections

I am white. I have never realized that more than I do right now.

People often ask me, "How did you get interested in issues of race?" Although the question seems easy enough, I have yet to come up with a definitive answer. However, my thoughts immediately turn to my childhood and a hodgepodge of scattered thoughts form a collage in my mind. I think of the small town I grew up in rural Indiana. I think of a landmark hill in my home county called Nigger Hill by the locals because blacks used to be lynched there. [I started not to use that awful word—nigger—and use "n-word" instead. But I want you to hear it like I heard it growing up. Feel the sting.] I think of picking up geode rocks at my grandpa's farm and calling them "nigger heads," not "geodes."   I think of the stories I heard about the one African-American man who lived in a small town next to ours. He was called Nigger John by everyone around until he died sometime in the 1990s. I never knew his last name, and no one I asked could tell me either. They would say, "No, just call him that. That's what he wants to be called." [I am now on a mission to find John's real full name.] I think of hearing racist jokes on the sidewalk at my church and repeating those jokes to others at school.   I think of Michael, the one African-American student in my high school who was adopted by a white family. He was the only African-American I knew by name until I was a sophomore in college.   Although I am far removed from that time and place, those thoughts have stayed with me through college and graduate school and constantly influence both my racial identity and the way that I approach discussions about race.

Throughout my dissertation, my whiteness has increasingly moved to the forefront of my mind. My interview questions, the interview itself, the analysis, and the writing have all been influenced by how I am continuously processing my racial identity. In the beginning stages of my project, I created my interview schedule. I read over it and thought the questions made sense. Seven or eight interviews into my project, I started seeing assumptions in my questions. Why did I think interracial couples would report positive or negative aspects of their relationship associated with race? Why did I think couples would experience reactions from families? I actually felt myself cringe once when I asked a couple about the positives. I was coming face-to-face with assumptions I had made as a researcher and as a white woman.

The actual interviews raised a wide range of emotions for me. I nervously attempted my first interview. I found myself anxious that I would say something racist. Getting in the car after an early interview, I questioned what I had gotten myself into. I did not want the type of relationship this couple had. I wondered if interracial relationships had to be that way, where one partner's views and feelings were validated at the expense of ignoring the other partner's views and feelings. Were interracial couples destined to be unhappy? I did not want to find that as a researcher. Another reaction I did not anticipate from myself was the anxiety I would feel before my first interview with a white male and black female couple. I have dated interracially. I have experienced disapproval from females in the black community.   I sat at home and tried to reassure myself that "she approves of interracial relationships, so she won't be mad at you if she finds out your boyfriend is black." Still, I was surprisingly anxious about how

I would be received by the black female partner. The interview turned out to be one of my favorites, and I felt not even a tinge of judgment from the black partner.

My whiteness also became self-evident in my writing. As I read over my analysis chapters, I realized how my interpretation of the data flowed from questions I had about the experience of the white partner in interracial couples. I found myself drawn to the couples whose families disapproved and the strategies those couples used to negotiate relationships with their partner and their families. I grew acutely aware of the white bias in my writing evidenced by a recent conversation. A black colleague of mine offered to read over my chapters to give me some additional feedback. I quickly stated, "I'm afraid. I think it's written from a white perspective." He quickly quipped, "Well, that would make sense since you're white." We shared a good laugh, but that candid reaction from me made me realize that I am still navigating how to write and talk about race openly as an academic. I am nervous that readers will say, "What a racist!" Ack!" It also helps me realize that if after two years of thinking about it every day it is still hard for *me* to tackle, what must it be like for those who have never thought about it? I am trying to remember that mindset.

In my personal life, I began seeing how my dissertation was affecting my relationship. I became hypersensitive to both my racial identity and the influence of race on my relationships. I soon found myself being more sensitive about racial issues than my black partner. My boyfriend in exasperation asked me once, "Can we please stop talking about race now?" and "Don't be principled to the point of stupidity, Boo." I took his advice on occasion and both "chilled out" and "rolled with it." I found myself

having heated debates about Ebonics, white privilege, and discrimination. The thing that surprised me most was that I was often more liberal and black power than my black partner. I began understanding how monolithic I had assumed blacks to be.

My ideas about racism have changed. When I began my dissertation, I believed that racism was completely the fault of whites and that racism from blacks was only a reaction of years of oppression. Now my views have shifted some. White privilege is undeniable. However, I realized that when I assert that the black community's response is only a reaction to my actions, I am disempowering the very group I want to empower. Although the system of racism and privilege exists, all people have agency. Each individual, both white and black, has to choose how to respond to the system.

All of these thoughts have affected how I see my role as a civil rights activist. Honestly, I grew so sick of thinking about race. At times, I vented relentlessly to my Shih Tzu Madeline: "I can't think about this anymore. I don't want to always think about my race. I don't want to always think about how I'm being perceived. I want to go on a date and not discuss black and white. I just want to be. *I just want to be*." For the first time, I felt like I caught a glimpse of the emotional energy blacks have to exert to exist in a white world where their racial identity is constantly scrutinized and judged based solely on their skin color. Once I realized the emotional energy it took to always be reminded about race, I had a second equally powerful realization: I could lay the struggle down and pick it up again when I had "rested." Being white afforded me the luxury of "getting away from race for awhile." I found myself needing to be around white people. I found myself not wanting to watch a "black movie." At that point, I

began wrestling with the decision of accepting or relinquishing the privilege of "laying it down." I came to the point when I understood that my responsibility was to start choosing not to accept that privilege. In one of my classes we watched Martin Luther King's Mountaintop Speech. A student in my class commented and questioned, "How do blacks feel when white people show up to Martin Luther King Day? Do they feel like we don't belong there? Sometimes I feel an odd tension in the air." My response to the student was, "People of color are not upset that we show up on Martin Luther King Day. They are upset that we don't show up the other 364 days." Whites can lay issues of race down and pick them up when it's convenient or, even worse, vogue. Now, in my classes, I talk about race and quite regularly engage students in discussions about race and all of its societal implications. I am loving it. I no longer am nervous to say the word "black" in front of black students. I have had an epiphany: Black people already know that they are black. [Laughs]

So, as I write the closing paragraph of my dissertation, I find myself actually laughing, as I do so often, about how I am processing my racial identity. I am so different from the person who wrote the research proposal three years ago. Now, when I enter a room, I find myself gravitating toward the African-Americans because I feel more comfortable with "my people." I get anxious when I am at an all-white church because I think, "Yikes. I don't fit in here." Yet, when I walk into an all-black church I think, "Yikes, I don't fit in here." I put on my big hoop earrings, turn up the R & B on the radio, and drive to meet my black partner. He hugs me and says, "You know you got a little sistuh in you." I laugh and then look at his hand holding mine and see the

contrast between his skin and mine. I am learning to embrace the process of racial

awareness and all of its messiness. At the beginning of this project, I thought I would

come to this point and understand everything. How laughable! However, I can say this:

I am white. I have never realized that more than I do right now. I am white, right?

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Tell me the story of how you met one another.

2. What reaction did you get from your families when you introduced your boyfriend/girlfriend to them
    a. From your immediate families?
    b. From your extended families?
    c. How did you talk about these reactions with each other?

3. What kind of concerns, if any, have been raised by your family (parents, sibling, etc) or friends about your interracial relationship?
    a. Did you talk about this concern as a couple?
    b. How did you talk about it?
    c. Can you recall any conversations?

4. What do you think the larger racial communities thinks of your relationship as an interracial couple?
    a. Can you think of a story from your past when you felt like it mattered to your race community?

5. What does it mean to you to be black? What does it mean to you to be white?
    a. Has that changed over the course of this relationship?

6. What was significant in your family history that brought you to this relationship?

7. What was significant in your dating history that brought you to this relationship?
    a. Did you date outside of your race before this relationship?

8. In what ways, if any, has race been a part of your conflicts with each other?

9. What have been the special blessings of your interracial relationship?

10. What advice would you give to other interracial couples?

Adapted from Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell (1995)

APPENDIX B

CODING THEMES

Family Reactions

1. White families disapprove more than black families
2. Black families disapprove/are concerned
3. White families are fine with it.
4. Black families are fine with it.
5. White families and black families approve for different reasons
6. Handle disapproval by avoidance of family
7. Talk about disapproval with each other
8. White person becomes torn between family of origin and family of choice
9. Pray/Involve spirituality to deal with disapproval
10. Some sense of resolution/turning points
11. Now they love him/her!
12. Weddings
13. Open, but hides hurtful comments
14. "We're just friends"
15. Moving from friends to more
16. Negotiate rules about family
17. Rejected partners make efforts to connect with family

Community Responses

18. Black females disapprove more than black males
19. Disapproval in community
20. When friends disapprove
21. He/She is a "good black person"
22. Community people are fine with it
23. No community with which to engage
24. Decide where they are comfortable and where they are not
25. Location, location, location
26. Racism against black partner

Identity of Individuals/Couple

27. Couples want to be viewed as "normal" by society
28. Couple wants to be seen by each other as people first
29. Black identity shift
30. To be white

31. To be black
32. Black person thinks white person is naïve
33. White person admits becoming more racially aware

Children

34. Teach children to value being mixed
35. Teach children that they are black
36. Let children decide their race
37. Kids—it's an issue
38. Kids—no issues
39. Talk about kids

Communication in Relationship

40. Make racial jokes with each other
41. White person gets defensive about being "bad person"
42. Racial/cultural differences create moments of tension, some funny and some not
43. People choose whether to ignore or respond to racism
44. Other differences are more important
45. Why racism exists (Excuses)
46. So many similarities

Miscellaneous

47. What makes people date interracially
48. Drawn attracted to ethnic features

VITA

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