

Race, Gender and Issues of Self-disclosure for Black Female-White Male Intimate Couples

Author: Marya T. Mtshali

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Boston College

The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

Department of Sociology

RACE, GENDER AND ISSUES OF SELF-DISCLOSURE FOR
BLACK FEMALE-WHITE MALE INTIMATE COUPLES

A thesis

by

MARYA T. MTSHALI

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**Race, Gender and Issues of Self-Disclosure for
Black Female-White Male Intimate Couples**

Marya T. Mtshali

Zine Magubane, Advisor

Abstract

Interviews with 20 members of Black female-White male intimate couples were conducted and, utilizing a grounded theory approach, revealed multiple situations where members of these couples had to self-disclose to others that they were romantically involved with a person of a different race. Using one of the largest study samples to date of Black female-White male couples, I demonstrate how race and gender affect these unplanned and strategic self-disclosure events that members of these couples engage in, and how members of these couples make sense of these public inquiries that are the remnants of our country's racially-charged history. I argue that the ways in which privilege is uniquely distributed within these relationships -- where White men simultaneously possess racial and gender privilege and Black women possess neither -- makes these couples structurally and fundamentally different than other interracial couples, and, ultimately, exemplifies that race and gender matter in the experiences of these couples and how society-at-large views them. Therefore, it is pivotal that experiences of interracial couples are not generalized and that each race and gender pairing receives its own individualized study.

Introduction

It has been heralded in the media that the Pew Research Center recently reported that interracial marriages are at an all-time high – at 15% in 2010 (Wang 2012). While many have hailed this milestone, it is difficult to deny what that statistic also shows: that interracial marriages are still drastically a minority in the United States even in the beginning of the twenty-first century. Although it has been forty years since *Loving v. Virginia* struck down miscegenation laws in the United States, thus making interracial marriage legal, it did not – and could not – eradicate the effects of centuries of formal and informal beliefs and sanctions. Essentialized views about race are among the many reasons behind the rarity of these couples. Discourse disapproving of interracial relationships, such as concerns about the effects it can have on multiracial children, reflects views that race is a “fixed and essential axis of differentiation” and that cultural differences are tied to race and are “absolute” (Frankenberg 1993, p.77). In addition, Erica Chito Childs’ (2005) study of college students’ view of interracial relationships found that the comments of White students implied that Whites and Blacks are inherently different, such as stating that they categorically did not have anything in common with Black people. As Killian (2003) observes, “changing laws does not change people's beliefs and attitudes” (p.14).

The rarity, invisibility, and still present disapproval of interracial relationships is something that members of these couples are often reminded of in social interactions, where the statements and actions of others reveal an underlying assumption that they would only be romantically involved with someone of the same race as them. For this study, interviews with 20 members of Black woman-White man intimate relationships

were conducted and, utilizing a grounded theory approach, revealed multiple situations where members of these couples had to self-disclose to others that they were romantically involved with a person of a different race. Using one of the largest study samples of this type of this race and gender pairing, I demonstrate in this paper how race and gender affects not only the self-disclosure interactions that members of these couples engage in but also how members of these couples makes sense of these public inquiries. The ways in which privilege is uniquely distributed within these relationships -- where White men simultaneously possess racial and gender privilege and Black women possess neither -- makes these couples structurally and fundamentally different than other interracial couples, and, ultimately, exemplifies that race and gender matter in the experiences of interracial couples and how society-at-large views them. Therefore, it is pivotal that experiences of interracial couples are not generalized and that each pairing receives its own individualized study.

Utilizing scholarship on race and gender studies, as well as stigma and self-disclosure literature, I demonstrate my argument by analyzing various strategic and unplanned self-disclosure experiences that members of these couples shared with me. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study and suggestions for future directions in intersectional theory and interracial relationships research.

Literature Review

Interracial Relationships

Interracial relationships have been a part of the American fabric from the beginning of colonization. Indentured servants crossed racial lines in their relationships (Smith and Hattery 2009; Gullickson 2006; Gaines, Jr. and Leaver 2002) and, in the years of slavery,

interracial relations occurred in consensual and non-consensual contexts, most notably between Black female slaves and White male masters (Kennedy 2003, Gullickson 2006, Kalmjin 1993). Despite it being over 40 years since the monumental *Loving v. Virginia* ruling that legalized interracial marriage, these relationships remain controversial and relatively rare. Interracial marriage rates have increased from less than 1% in 1970 (Qian 2005) to approximately 7% in 2010 (Lofquist et al. 2012), with Whites having the lowest rate of interracial marriage at 4% and African Americans having the second lowest rate at 9%. These low rates correspond with Black-White intimate relationships being the least common pairing of interracial relationships (Qian 1997) and the most controversial as well (Lewis and Yancey 1995). Unions between Black women and White men are particularly uncommon, with 26% of Black-White heterosexual marriages consisting of a Black woman and a White man (Qian 2005).

Research on interracial couples tends to be primarily concerned with determining the characteristics of those who enter these relationships (e.g. Yancey 2002, Wright et al. 2003, Jacobson and Johnson 2006, Harris and Kalbfleisch 2000), which in some ways pathologizes these relationships as social scientists seem to seldom ask the question of who tends to *not* enter these relationships. The most renowned theory on interracial pairing is Merton's exchange theory, which postulates that White men and women in interracial marriages have lower levels of educational attainment than their minority. Nonetheless, whether Merton's theory is accurate seems to be inconclusive as studies have produced mixed results (Crowder and Tolnay 2000, Kalmijn 1993, Yancey and Yancey 1998). Merton's theory also applies to socioeconomic status, but other research

has shown that socioeconomic status between partners tends to be comparable (Yancey 2002).

However, there are studies that are more focused on the experiences of those within these relationships. While 75% of Whites and 85% of Blacks as of 2007 approve of interracial marital unions, it is still not unusual for interracial couples to encounter hostility and racism in public situations (Craig-Henderson 2011; Troy, Lewis-Smith, and Laurenceau 2006). Negative reactions from others include stares, mistreatment from coworkers and business employees (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1990) and verbal harassment and threats (Killian 2003). Couples also sometimes receive more seemingly positive reactions, such as people explicitly voicing their approval of interracial relationships (Steinbugler 2009). Steinbugler also documented that while Black male-White female couples tend to have hypervisibility in public spaces --- where others almost always notice and assume they are a couple --- Black female-White male couples encounter a mixture of reactions, where some people recognize their couple status and other situations people do not. Additionally, some studies have shown marriages between Blacks and Whites face more opposition than marriages between other racial groups (Herring and Amisshah 1997; Lewis and Yancey 1995).

Additionally, most of the research on interracial couples focuses on the relationships involving Black men and White women, producing very little understanding in which ways the experiences of Black women with White men – or other interracial relationships – differ. The recent news media trend of discussing the “plight” of “singledom” for Black (implicitly heterosexual) women and their “need” to date outside their race (often code for dating White) has drawn attention to how few intimate couples

involve Black women and White men (see Banks 2011, “Why Can't a Successful Black Woman Find a Man?”, Brown 2010). However, this often narrow-minded and sexist discourse often faults Black women for being unwilling to date White men and fails to explore the complex social realities that can result in these being one of the rarest interracial pairings. The history of sexual relations between Black women and White men, Black racial loyalty, female beauty standards, and stereotypes of Black women are all issues that uniquely affect Black women and White men in these relationships and can result in some people being reluctant to enter these relationships, as well as others to expect Black women not to become romantically involved with White men and vice versa. The history of sexual relations between Black women and White men is one of primarily sexual exploitation and rape from the time of slavery and beyond, often with no legal repercussions (Kennedy 2003, Collins 2000, Gaines, Jr. and Leaver 2002). Historian Danielle McGuire (2010) gives examples of a number of situations from the end of slavery through the Civil Rights era where African-American women were assaulted by White men and notes that it was not until 1960 in Mississippi that a White man was sentenced to death for raping an African-American girl (p.170), although Black men accused of raping White women had been put to death since slavery. This history does influence how Blacks view these interracial relationships, some believing that White men would only date Black women for sexual reasons and/or that Black women should not date White men due to this exploitative history, something that Black women in this study said they had heard from Black men and women.

Dominant Black female stereotypes – the aggressive, emasculating Sapphire; promiscuous Jezebel; and asexual caregiver Mammy -- may not only discourage White

men from dating Black women but also inform the views of Whites and some Blacks, particularly those who have internalized these stereotypes, and, therefore, are surprised to see this pairing. All these stereotypes, particular that of Sapphire and Jezebel, paint a picture of Black women as unsuitable committed relationship partners, particularly for White men, who, due to racial and gender privilege, are viewed as having the “pick of the litter”. In addition, Eurocentric female beauty standards marginalize Black physical characteristics (Childs 2005). A study by Feliciano, Robnett, and Komaie (2009) showed that while heterosexual White men expressed being more open to dating interracially than heterosexual White women on online dating profiles, White women were more open to having a Black partner than White men. The majority of White men in the study explicitly expressed not wanting to date Black women. Additionally, Porter and Bronzaft (1995) theorize that White men are penalized and, therefore, often choose to not marry Black women while, on the other hand, a Black man’s status can be enhanced by his marriage to a White woman. In other words, with the negative Black female stereotypes and hegemonic female beauty standards, White men marrying Black women can be interpreted as marrying “down”.

Stigma & Self-Disclosure

The definition of stigma has evolved since it was first studied in Goffman’s seminal work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* and has taken many iterations – mainly by social psychologists -- the best of which is explained by Jones et al. (1984) as an attribute or mark that symbolizes undesirable characteristics, or a particular negative stereotype about that person and, as Link and Phelan (2001) add, often results in the marked person experiencing discrimination from others. While being in an interracial relationship is not a characteristic that one physically embodies, like other stigmatized

characteristics such as being physically handicapped, who one associates with can be read as social information about one's character: "The issue is that in certain circumstances the social identity of those an individual is with can be used as a source of information concerning his own social identity, the assumption being that he is what the others are" (Goffman 1963). Although it is quite contestable that a White man with a Black woman is viewed as having the same status as Black women in America, to some people his status may be diminished in comparison to other White men who date only within their race.

It should be noted that the majority of stigma and self-disclosure literature discusses stigmatized *identities*, often conflating characteristics with identities – a person with a physical or mental disability is a disabled person, a person who is addicted to alcohol is an alcoholic. There are inherent problems in this conception of stigma, one of which ignores the ways in which stigma applies to those who possess stigmatized characteristics that would not be "identitized". Those who are involved in interracial relationships may or may not consider it an identity but a characteristic of their life.

While most characteristics that are considered deviant become stigmatized, Dovidio, Major and Crocker (2000) argues that deviance does not always result in stigma "unless the distinguishing mark is associated with generalized inferences about the bearer's identity....A person who is stigmatized is almost always the target of prejudice" (p.4). Stigma is relative and contextual, where some groups are more stigmatized than others and where a group may experience stigma in one social situation but less to no stigma in another context. Additionally, power is inherent to the "social production of stigma", where the dominant views of one group become accepted as truth and produce

significant and real consequences for others (Link and Phelan 2001) and placing those who are judging and discriminating in a position of power. Nonetheless, though, we cannot neglect the ways in which those who are stigmatized challenge this power dynamic, often finding overt and covert ways to resist judgments, assumptions, and discrimination.

The experiences of those who possess stigmatized characteristics are affected by the visibility and controllability of the stigma, which Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) argue are in fact the two most important aspects of stigma. Those who have invisible, or discreditable, stigmas may engage in the decision-making process as to whether or not they should disclose their stigma and, if not, employ ways to maintain secrecy around their stigma, thus creating a markedly different relationship to their stigmatized attribute than those who have a visible or discredited stigma. With interracial couples, whether or not the stigma of being in an interracial relationship is discredited and discreditable is also contextual. While in the workplace it may be an invisible stigma, it would be difficult for it to be invisible in the neighborhood where one lives. Whether or not others view one's stigma as controllable affects how others react to it, where those who are perceived as being able to control their stigma are considered more at fault and, therefore, more stigmatized. (Dovidio, Major, and Crocker 1998; Ragins 2008).

Although scholars have not yet come to a consensus on the definition of self-disclosure, for this this paper, Chaudoir and Fischer's (2010) definition is used, which they define as "verbal, interpersonal expressions of self-relevant information" (p. 239). Self-disclosure has a unique relationship with those who possess discreditable stigmas since they are not perceived to have this stigma and have to make the decision whether or

not to inform others. This is a part of an ongoing, reflective process where they must determine in multiple social situations where, as Goffman so eloquently summarizes, they must internally debate "To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where" (1963, p. 42). According to Chaudoir and Fischer's Disclosure Processes Model (DPM) the outcomes of disclosures can be affected by antecedent goals, the disclosure event, mediating processes, and long-term outcomes (2010). Antecedent goals are categorized as approach-focused, where one wants to disclose, and avoidance-focused, where the person wants to avoid disclosure. Those who have approach-focused goals tend to look more for positive reactions from their confidant than those who are avoidance-focused, who emphasize negative cues. The reaction of the confidant, the content of the disclosure, and mediating processes, such as the presence or absence of social support and the changes that occur to social information, affect how the disclosure event is perceived by the discloser. The long-term results of the disclosure, such as the effect on the relationship to the confidant and how the discloser feels emotionally and psychologically post-disclosure event, also affect how the discloser reads the event, their likelihood to disclose in the future and, if they choose to do so, how they attempt to execute future disclosures. The disclosure process also involves a certain degree of double consciousness, where, based off of knowledge of societal stereotypes of the stigmatized group one is categorized as a member of, one must predict whether or not disclosure may illicit a positive, neutral, or negative reaction from the person receiving the disclosure.

Self-disclosure for those with concealable stigmatized characteristics can be an element in micro-level social change since these disclosure events can create visibility and raise awareness about the existence and identities of these people, challenge stereotypes, and even possibly create an educational dialogue, which, in turn, can help to reduce the stigma of the associated characteristic or identity (Cain 1991; Corrigan 2005). However, it is also important to note that, since some characteristics/identities are more stigmatized than others, the benefit of self-disclosure varies and, in some cases, self-disclosure may not be beneficial at all. There are subjective utilities, or disclosure rewards, and subjective risks, such as social rejection, in disclosure that can vary from person to person (Omarzu 2000). These rewards and risks interact with individual circumstances and can affect the probability of disclosure.

Methodology

From 2011 to 2012, I interviewed 20 members (12 women, 8 men) of Black female-White male couples from around the United States, with the largest number of them being from the Northeastern region of the country. Of the 20 interviews, there were 7 couples where both members were interviewed and an additional 6 individuals who were interviewed without their partner being interviewed. At the time of the interview, 13 participants were married, 5 were engaged and 2 were dating and cohabitating. The duration of relationships ranged from 1 year to 35 years and, additionally, 9 of the participants had children. All the women primarily identified as Black or African-American, with the exception of one who identified as biracial (one parent was Black and the other was White). All of the men self-identified as White or Caucasian, and none of the participants identified as Latino. Interestingly, almost half (5) of the women

interviewed were either immigrants or the child of at least one immigrant parent. (There was not a similar pattern with men.) The majority of participants can be classified as middle class based on their occupation or the possession of a bachelor's degree.

Participants were obtained through my personal social network, snowball sampling, and through online postings about my research in an online community of weblogs written by women in this type of relationship and which are often read by other women in these relationships. The majority of my sample is from the latter two sources. All participants were interviewed once, with some either being asked follow-up interview questions by e-mail or others sending me additional information by e-mail. For in-person interviews, participants choose the location of the interview and, for interviews that were not in-person, the participant choose the medium (telephone or a voice-over-internet protocol program such as Skype) of the interview. For the couples that were interviewed, members were interviewed individually, in hopes of them disclosing more honest information. Additionally, these semi-structured interviews were audio recorded, and notes were taken to document body language and/or verbal tone. The duration of interviews ranged from 45 to 120 minutes. Identifiable characteristics of participants have been changed to preserve their anonymity, including the usage of pseudonyms.

For my theoretical framework, I utilized intersectional theory, which argues that race, class, and gender simultaneously interact and influence the social construction of social relations, identities, and behavior (McCall 2005). For example, the theory that Black women date outside their race less due to Eurocentric beauty standards is based on how race and gender interact and influence beauty standards. Although I did not research the effects of class in this study, it is an aspect that should be studied in the future.

Link and Phelan (2001) argue "that many social scientists who do not belong to stigmatized groups, and who study stigma, do so from the vantage point of theories that are uninformed by the lived experience of the people they study" (p. 365). While experiences of stigma are relative and unique to each individual, as being an African-American woman and a member of an interracial relationship with a White man in the United States, my lived experience has often involved me embodying a stigmatized social position and, at times, experiencing discrimination and hostility. These experiences do give me the advantage of being able to relate to a degree to the people that I interviewed for my study, which is something that they seemed to recognize and appreciate. Nonetheless, my experiences in life can color not only the questions in my interviews with study participants, but also the ways in which I interpret their responses. Throughout the research process, I have attempted to be cognizant of the ways in which my experiences and my standpoint can influence the ways in which I interpret the answers of study participants, and I strived during my analysis to let the experiences, feelings, and opinions of the women and men that I interviewed speak for themselves as much as I could, while recognizing that the impossibility of being able to do so with complete objectivity.

Findings

Unplanned Disclosures

Unplanned disclosures most often occurred in situations involving visual dislocation, where members of the couple would be physically together in the same space but are assumed by others to be strangers to one another (Steinbugler 2005). The majority of the people I interviewed felt that people could not tell that they were a couple when they

were in public together. Visual dislocation was more likely to occur when the couple's children were not present, and common situations included standing in the check-out line at the grocery store, placing an order in a coffee shop, and requesting a table at a restaurant. The women in the study talked about self-disclosure more, particularly when it came to unplanned disclosures. This is influenced by gender and race as Killian (2003) has shown that Black partners in interracial relationships tend to be more aware of racist events and talk about them more extensively, while Miller, Olson and Fazio (2004) found that women report racially discriminative experiences within interracial relationships more than men. Additionally, popular notions of masculinity may make some men less likely to admit that others do not recognize or acknowledge their relationship to their partner. On the other hand, people may be more comfortable approaching women than men with these questions. Hildebrandt (2002) found that, regardless of race, women in Black-White heterosexual relationships were approached more by others and encountered more hostility when they were alone with their children in public. The men and women in my study also discussed situations where men, most often Black men, would show interest in the Black woman in the relationship in front of her White partner. According to the participants, Black men were sometimes aware that she was with her partner and choose to ignore this. Although not all participants discussed their emotions in response to these disclosures, the responses of those that did can be categorized into three typologies: resistance, educational opportunity and protective. It is important to note that these typologies are not mutually exclusive and some participants at times utilized two typologies simultaneously; however, I primarily reflect on the dominant typology.

Resistance

It was clear that it angered and, in some cases, annoyed many of the men and women I interviewed to have to so often declare their relationship when they often felt that it was obvious. While these participants answered any questions directed towards them by others, as they discussed these past encounters, it was evident that some of them resisted the acceptability of questioning or disclosing about their interracial relationship or multiracial family. This could be seen in 26-year-old Cynthia as she relayed to me an experience in the hospital when her husband had appendicitis. What was particularly interesting about Cynthia's experience was that even after she explained that the man she was with was her husband, the hospital personnel refused to believe that that was the case. While Cynthia's experience in many ways was atypical, it was not unusual for women and men in the study to mention reactions of surprise, shock, and confusion after disclosing to a questioning person that they were a member of a Black female-White male (BF/WM) intimate couple.

I know in hospitals they never can [tell that we're together]. He had an appendicitis last year in March and...they could not tell that we were together...until I got into the room with one of them...I'm sitting in the exam room with him. My husband-- his appendix is about to rupture, so he's, like, in a whole other world of pain, and I'm, you know, trying to run down his meds, see what's going on, and this and that, and—I'm in the exam room with him and they're asking me if I need help with something, am I lost, you know? 'Do you know where you are?' *[laughs]*...I'm not just going to walk in to some patients' room. After I tell them who I am, they ask me to leave the room, and my husband...and like I said, he's in the whole other world of pain, they ask him, 'Oh, is that really your wife? Is she, like, you know, putting you up to something?' My husband said, even in his pain, 'That is my wife. We don't walk around with our marriage certificate, but that's my wife.' He pulled out his phone and showed them a picture of us on our wedding day. I was, like, are you really kidding me?

It is evident in Cynthia's retelling of the event that she was extremely frustrated that even in emergency situations, she and her husband still had to take out the time to explain their

relationship to the hospital personnel that were supposed to be helping them instead of questioning their relationship. Additionally, the hospital personnel probably would not have doubted Cynthia's statement if she and her husband had been a mono-racial couple.

Cynthia and Nozipho, a retired 59-year-old African immigrant who has been married to her husband for almost 30 years, both discussed others conveying an expectation of disclosure after finding out the women were partnered with White men. Nozipho relayed a conversation with a co-worker that exemplified this expectation:

I never had pictures of my husband at work. I had pictures of my children, especially when they were small....One day, a long time ago, one of my colleagues came into my office....This was a person who from time to time I had lunch with and talked about areas of common concern in our work, and this one time she came into my office...maybe she was walking me back. We were walking back from somewhere, and she stopped in my office before continuing onto her building...she was sort of by the door and she happened to look and see the pictures of...well, the one picture of my girls and she literally jumped and said to me 'You did not tell me' and I asked, 'What did I not tell you?' And she said, uh, 'That your husband was white' and I said, 'Under what circumstances would I have told you that?'...When we talked [in past conversations], I had no idea if her husband was black, white or blue.

Nozipho makes the point at the end of her account that the race of her colleague's husband was unknown to her and, echoing other women in the study, she did not see why the race of *her* husband should matter.

Cynthia, on the other hand, had an interaction where a woman explicitly asked for a disclosure while Cynthia was dining with her husband, who she was dating at the time. Her encounter exemplifies how expected disclosure about stigmatized relationships can be, as well as how often the "when, where and to whom" aspects of the disclosure can be out of the control of the members of these relationships.

We went to a diner after seeing a movie late night, midnight or something like that, and um...we were sitting, like how you and I are, across from

one another. It was a small diner, um, off in the outskirts of somewhere, and this White lady was sitting at a table with a Bla—with a White guy, and she just kept staring at us. I mean, like, staring intently, like we had a big bull's eye on us. We were holding hands and, you know, romantic gushy-gushy stuff, and she was staring at us and then finally she came up and asked us, 'What's your relationship?' Like, what was it? Are we boyfriend-girlfriend? Are we married or are we friends or—like, she was really that bold to come over and ask us.

Educational Opportunity

A few participants talked about their disclosure experiences from the standpoint of educational opportunities, whether this was the mindset that they tried to use to enter the encounter or if this was the result of post-disclosure reflection. This perspective also seemed to coincide with social interactions with others while study participants were with their children. These situations with children often involved a line of questioning from others, typically when one member of the couple was alone with their children in public or in places such as the workplace where one may have pictures of their family at their desk or in their office. Women and men both felt that people did not think their kids were their own, although women discussed these situations much more extensively. Many of the women in the study viewed the series of questions they received about the race of their children as the questioner indirectly attempting to find out the race of the woman's husband. Questions included asking if the woman was the child's nanny, if the child was adopted, and asking about the race of the child (most people seemed to ask if the child was Latino). It was clear that some women found these questions, such as those asking if she was her children's nanny, hurtful, while others were either annoyed or found themselves trying to be more accepting or nonchalant about it. These occurrences usually happened during every day, routine activities with their children. As Chantel, who is a 32-year-old mother of one child, explained, "We would just be out at the playground or out at the store... just running errands and on numerous occasions people would ask if I

was her nanny. There was one woman who asked me more than once.” She also discussed retrospectively wanting to educate people on how upsetting their questions about her relationship to her daughter were to her.

I’ve been asked if she was adopted, and one time someone even tried to guess where she was from. ‘So, is she, like, Peruvian?’ ...She’s as American as it gets in a lot of ways....[In response to me asking she handles these questions] Obviously, I’m still talking about it, and these are interactions that happened a couple of years ago so they hurt, and I think if I had any sort of had any sense of how... hurt I would feel down the line I almost wish that I could have a do-over in a couple of those couple of moments....I wish I could reclaim a couple of those moments and make them a little more like teachable moments, like to say to someone, ‘This is my daughter,’ which is ultimately probably where I left it at, but it would also be nice to say, like, ‘It’s actually kind of, you know, a hurtful thing to ask a mother.’ Just the slightest bit of awareness....I don’t think people have any sort of awareness that they’re doing something wrong, that they’re making assumptions that are hurtful.

Since she feels like the questioners do not know any better, Chantel views the encounters as a social space to teach others what is appropriate to say to others, thus spreading knowledge and preventing this from happening to someone else.

Aria, who is 39 years old and has three children, talked about these incidences as if they were not unusual and voiced a philosophy of acceptance but, shortly after, confessed that she cannot help but get annoyed by the questions. She specifically discussed one situation that irked her where she brought her son with her into work for the day and found their relationship being questioned by a White male co-worker.

I did have one co-worker say to me...he said I took it wrong. I had brought my son up to the office one day and, um...my son was maybe two or three at the time....and the guy was like, ‘I didn’t know you had kids. This is your child?’ And I’m, like, ‘Yes, he’s my child.’ At first he thought, ‘Are you babysitting?’ ‘No, I’m not babysitting.’ ‘This is your child?’ ‘Yes, this is my child.’ And then I get the question ‘Did you...carry him?’...That kind of gets to me some times.

However, during the same conversation, Aria also views these encounters as innocent questions and advocates “go[ing] with the flow,” or just answering the questions without confrontation or anger.

I like to treat it as a learning experience....Obviously, if they're coming up to you, they want to know. They – they're curious. There's no reason to be upset about it. I don't understand why people get upset about it....I treat it as, if I saw a beautiful child....but I can't tell if they're Middle Eastern or Hispanic, I want to know....They're [the people asking the questions] are hearing the question [they're asking] for the first time. You just have to go with the flow, I guess.

Although it is clear from parts of Aria's interview that she is at times annoyed by the questions that she faces about being in a multiracial family, especially when the questions are regarding her children, and is at times offended by them, she also seemed to normalize these encounters and, in many ways, advocated going with the status quo and engaging in the line of questioning due to believing these people meant well. Aria's contradictory feelings can be appreciated in that they reflect the very real ways in which the scenarios these couples face cannot be easily delineated as right or wrong and that they may have more than one meaning to people or even shift in meaning over time.

Strategic/Planned Disclosures

Protective

Some of the male participants talked about intentionally letting others around them know that they were in a BF/WM intimate relationship. None of the female participants in the study discussed doing this, which indicates that the ability to take such an action is influenced by race and/or gender. It is unlikely that these intentional disclosures are as taxing as those that are unplanned since the person disclosing has a certain degree of control as to when the disclosure takes place, and, as evidenced in interviews, these

disclosures contain a certain amount of potential subjective utility to the discloser. Participants who discussed engaging in strategic disclosures described using these situations in a protective manner that often resulted in giving them a certain amount of control in social interactions. However, despite this, that did not negate the disclosure sometimes being anxiety-ridden. Jake, who is 31 years old with one child, often uses strategic disclosures most often in the workplace when he thinks that a co-worker is going to say something offensive about Black or biracial people or interracial relationships. Jake explained the thought process and anxiety behind his use of strategic disclosures:

Sometimes if there's someone who doesn't know her...explaining it to someone else, it's like, so when do I tell them, you know? Like, when do I tell them my wife is Black so they don't have this picture in their mind of what my life's like...or maybe, you know, they will say something I could be offended by or something like that. You don't know how those things are going...I—I guess that's my expectation after being in this relationship for 8 years...and based off of the experiences that we've had, you know? So, I don't want to wait too long to say something, but it's always kinda strange, like, when I bring it up. It's very...I find, it's very intentional when I bring it up, you know? And it may not—I'm trying to be as unintentional as possible...It's very odd, the way that I try to slip it in. I feel kind of phony trying to do it....It doesn't have to be that way, but, it is unfortunately that way.

Jake's disclosure is a mechanism for protecting himself from hearing something that may be hurtful to him or preventing an awkward situation if the person who is saying the bigoted remark discovers that Jake's wife is Black. Although Jake acknowledges that bringing up the race of his wife at points in conversation that may seem random to others in itself can be awkward, it may be preferable since Jake still has some aspect of control in determining the direction of the conversation.

On the other hand, Dave, who is also 31 years old, explained how he waits to inform people about the race of his wife *after* they have said something that is racist. He talked about actively withholding information about the race of his wife until he knows where people stand on race and related issues. This reasoning may benefit Dave by letting him know who he can trust in his work environment since racist co-workers may withhold their views if they know beforehand the race of Jake's wife. Out of all the disclosure accounts I heard from participants, this is the one where the person disclosing exerted the most control by not only controlling when and how they disclosed, but by also using their disclosure as an educational platform to show people that they cannot make assumptions about others' race-related beliefs. In the example below, his strategic timing of his disclosure leads to embarrassment from his co-worker, thus giving Dave the power in this interaction.

I like to not tell people...to find out what they really think. Because I've had people say things to me and show me their true colors...so, um, I've always waited and then...most of the time people are surprised and, um...depends on who it is. If it's, you know, a white person, then they're like, 'Oh, that's nice', and then the black people are like, 'Oh!' and they start dappin' me up and stuff....At first it was like protectin' myself because I didn't want to have any issues with people, but then after a while it was---I got a little older and a little more confident, I guess, I was kinda doing my own social experiment to see what people would think because I---there was a guy at work who said some things to me and, uh...it was a little disturbing and, uh...It was before [he found out that Dave's wife was Black]. I forget exactly what he said...and a couple days later I mentioned it [the race of his wife] to him, and he was really embarrassed.

Discussion

Scholars often make the mistake of writing about people that are stigmatized as being passive and victims (Link and Phelan 2001; Dovidio, Major, and Crocker 2000), but it is evident that members of these stigmatized couples are active members in these

interactions. Some members of these couples seem to resist either during the confrontations or afterwards, voicing a refusal to accept that these interactions are socially acceptable. Some members of these couples believe others ask these questions out of pure ignorance and, therefore, whether before or after these interactions, choose to view it as an educational opportunity for the questioner. This action can also be seen as actively attempting to prevent these uncomfortable self-disclosures happening to other people in the future.

The strategic/planned disclosures that Jake and Dave engaged in essentially reversed the power dynamic often found in unintentional disclosures and made them active resisters in a way that may not be able to be achieved in unplanned disclosures. However, race and gender plays into how explicit and effective one's resistance can be. Whether or not they were aware of it, masculinity and white privilege both played a part in these men actively and intentionally disclosing in an effort to control the conversation. Whiteness gives one the "privilege to be able to set parameters of racial discussions and expect others to comply" (Dalmage 2000, p. 51). If they were women or of a minority race, they may not have felt as comfortable disclosing the race of their wife nor would they possibly have felt that their words would have had an effect on the actions of others around them.

It can be annoying, frustrating and psychologically taxing for members of these couples to have to encounter their relationship being questioned and to have to disclose so often to people, mainly strangers, that they are a couple. Though disclosure is commonly thought to be a process where those disclosing are doing so to achieve certain goals, such as self-expression or to bond with another individual (Chaudoir and Quinn

2010, Omarzu 2000), unintentional disclosures show that these goals may be not be freely chosen by the discloser and there may be of a more practical motive involved, such as disclosing to end a series of questions. From the narratives given by study participants, these disclosures most often happen in situations that are not in their control, which is not unusual for those who have not fully disclosed a stigmatized identity or characteristic (Ragins 2008). Inherent in these unintentional disclosures is a power dynamic that gives power to the person that is doing the questioning and disempowers the person being questioned not simply because their relationship is deemed questionable and requires explanation, but also because it places them in a double consciousness mentality in order to predict the positive or negative consequences of disclosing to this person. The expectation of disclosure that some participants, such as Cynthia and Nozipho, experienced also exemplifies another power dynamic in interactions between the stigmatized and the non-stigmatized where there seems to be a cultural logic where if you deviate from societal norms or other people's expectations of you, you are expected to disclose to others about the deviation. As Goffman explains, "the more there is about individual that deviates in an undesirable direction from what might have been expected to be true of him, the more he is obliged to volunteer information about himself, even though the cost to him of candor may have increased proportionately" (p. 64).

Every time members of these couples face these self-disclosure encounters, they are engaging with the history and effects of American race relations. The creation of miscegenation laws throughout the country served to make their stigmatization official and punishable. While the degree at which these relationships are stigmatized has lessened since *Loving v. Virginia*, the negative reactions that members of these couples

encounter are evidence that the stigma is still there. The social phenomenon of visual dislocation, as well as the surprised reactions of people upon disclosure, reveals underlying assumptions that society has about the coupling of partners that is a reflection of this history. The most obvious assumption is that one's partner would be of the same race as you. However, underlying this assumption is socio-historical “baggage” about race and gender, and, within this specific relationship context, who partners with Black women and who partners with White men. Additionally, there also is an assumption about who associates with whom on a completely platonic-level, where in many situations other people did not even assume that this Black woman and White man standing together were even friends. While people’s reactions of surprise and shock in response to these disclosures may be partially caused by the invisibility of these couples, they also consciously or subconsciously view these women through a racialized and gendered lens that is informed by hegemonic stereotypes of Black women that characterizes them as being “strong, overpowering, physically unappealing, and sexually promiscuous” (Childs 2005, p.160), which often puts them on the bottom of the Western beauty hierarchy (Collins 2000, Craig-Henderson 2011). This, in turn, resulted in a dual-contextual process of evaluating these disclosures and relationships where they determined its validity based off of her being a Black woman and *also* being a Black woman in a relationship with a White man, and had difficulty accepting or understanding the existence of the relationship based off of the assumption that it was unlikely that a White man would be married to a Black woman. Additionally, others may believe that Black women simply are not romantically interested in White men, which, particularly within Black populations, could be in response to the history of sexual exploitation that

Black women have faced that the hands of White men (Craig-Henderson 2001, Kennedy 2003, McGuire 2010) and the contemporary dominant rhetoric often voiced by news articles and programs about the "marriage crisis" for Black women that often states that Black women are just simply not interested in dating or marrying White men.

On the other hand, people may assume a White man would not be coupled with a Black woman because, as far as race and gender hierarchies go, white men have their "pick of the litter" and, therefore, would be unlikely to pick a Black woman as their partner. As explained by Aria, this is a concept that is not lost on some of the women in the study, particularly when it comes to the interaction of race and gender and its effects on Black women. The place of Black women on this

The context of it is primarily...that either you're marrying up or you're marrying down. We all know that in this world, on the scale of race, Blacks are pretty much towards the bottom.... Of course we have this unspoken hierarchy, in my opinion...it's White, it's Asian, and then, um, maybe Hispanic...and then Black. We are not considered—Black women aren't considered the epitome of beauty. Black women aren't considered to be incredibly intelligent, although that's of course a myth. We're one of the undesirables.

Conclusion

These self-disclosure typologies exemplify how "interracial couples employ various strategic responses to acts of overt and covert racism from families, social networks, and the larger society, social systems that directly or indirectly punish those who cross the border of race." (Killian 2003, p. 4). However, it is also clear that race and gender affect not only the self-disclosure situations but also how members of these relationships view and engage in the self-disclosure process. For example, Black men, despite possessing gender privilege, may not be able to utilize a protective position in the workplace due to their lack of racial privilege. Although my sample size is not large, the findings from this

study point to an under researched part of interracial relationships and a way to expand upon intersectional theory. Different interracial couples merit their own research and, comparatively, we can gain a better understand the intersection of race and gender by studying these relationships. Additionally, further research exploring the effects of class and sexual orientation (the latter of which sociologists, like Amy Steinbugler, are exploring) would give us more insight into not only intersectional theory but the lived experiences of these couples.

It is important for research on interracial couples to move beyond only studying those who are married. Although a large percentage of Americans continue to get married, there are couples who have been together long-term and are committed to each other, some of which choose not to get married. These couples are still worth studying as some may characteristically be no different than married couples, with the exception of the legal recognition, and others may have particular reasons for not getting married that could be significantly related to the effects of society's views on interracial relationships, such as not getting married but continuing to date due to a parent's disapproval. Most importantly, it leaves out lesbian and gay interracial couples, most of whom cannot legally get married, and there is a dearth of information on these couples and their experiences as well. Moreover, focusing on primarily married couples carries a certain degree of traditional moralism that should not have a place in social science.

Besides the limitation of sample size, there are also the issues of memory recall and perception. Different people can read the same situation differently and, over time, memories can change. However, it is difficult to study these situations as they occur and memory recall is the best avenue into these social interactions. In regards to the issue of

perception, one of the goals of this study was to highlight the voices of these couples that society so often ignores or attempts to speak for. Therefore, it was vital to document and understand their views of these social interactions and society.

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