

## The Lived Experience of Discrimination by White Women in Committed Interracial Relationships with Black Men

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### Abstract

*This study explores the experiences of discrimination by white women in committed interracial relationships with black men within the South African context from a descriptive phenomenological perspective. Three white females in committed interracial relationships with black males were recruited and interviewed. Open-ended interviews were conducted in order to elicit rich and in-depth first-person descriptions of the participants' lived experiences of discrimination as a result of being in committed interracial relationships. The data analysis entailed a descriptive phenomenological content analysis and description. The results of this study suggest that white women in committed interracial relationships with black men experienced discrimination in various contexts where discrimination manifests as either a negative or a positive encounter; in addition, discrimination evokes various emotional responses and is coped with in either maladaptive or adaptive ways. Finally the experience of discrimination, although personal, necessarily impacts on the interracial relationship. Discrimination experienced by white women in committed interracial relationships with black men is thus multi-layered and both an intra-personal and inter-personal phenomenon.*

### Introduction

Historically discrimination against interracial marriages has been both normative and legal in South Africa. From a socio-political perspective white men got the message that white women needed protection from involuntarily intimate engagements with black men (Hyslop, 1995). These construed beliefs informed the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act 55 of 1949 and the Immorality Act 23 of 1957, which banned interracial marriages and criminalised interracial sexual intercourse (Van der Merwe & Du Plessis, 2004). These laws were abolished in 1985 by the Immorality and Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Amendment Act 72 of 1985 (Van der Merwe & Du Plessis, 2004). Since the proclamation of this law, South African statistics indicate that although committed interracial relationships remain infrequent, there is a noticeable increase in these relationships (Amoateng, 2004; Jacobson, Amoateng & Heaton, 2004). Nonetheless, same-race relationships remain the unwritten rule in South Africa and interracial couples still face many difficulties (Ratele & Duncan, 2003).

Research pertaining to interracial marriages in western countries such as the United States (Batson, Qian & Lichter, 2006; Hibbler & Shiness, 2002; Schoen & Cheng, 2006), Australia (Ellinghaus, 2002) and Canada (Uskul, Lalonde & Cheng, 2007) have been elaborate. However, Troy, Lewis-Smith and Laurenceau (2006) and Killian (2001) indicate that the phenomenon of interracial marriages remains understudied. In South Africa specifically, research investigating interracial marriages is limited (Jacobson et al., 2004; Mojapelo-Batka, 2008).

Many of the studies conducted in first world countries were quantitative in nature and investigated black-white interracial relationships in terms of societal attitudes towards interracial unions (Hudson & Hines-Hudson, 1999); coping strategies of interracial couples (Foeman & Nance, 1999; Hill & Thomas, 2000); support or opposition from families and society (Zebroski, 1999); the experience of prejudice (Schafer, 2008), and marital satisfaction and relationship adjustment (Leslie & Letiecq, 2004; Lewandowski & Jackson, 2001).

Qualitative studies concerning interracial relationships have explored leisure activities and familial and societal responses to the manifestation of committed interracial relationships (Hibbler & Shiness, 2002; Hill & Thomas, 2000; Rosenblatt, Karis & Powell, 1995; Yancey, 2002). Qualitative research, informed by the lived experiences of individuals in interracial relationships is scarce (Jacobson et al., 2004; Mojapelo-Batka, 2008; Killian, 2001).

Research indicates a need to explore how intergroup phenomena, such as discrimination, impact on individuals in committed interracial relationships and how the quality of such relationships is influenced (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006; Schafer, 2008). Within the unique macro context of post-apartheid South Africa, research that explores social reactions that interracial couples experience, is encouraged (Mojapelo-Batka, 2008). For the purposes of this paper, discrimination, due to a committed interracial relationship, is conceptualized as a micro contextual manifestation of the macro contextual variable of societal racism (Leslie & Letiecq, 2004).

White women who married black men used to be pathologised in South Africa (Jacobson et al., 2004). However, increasing independence of women in recent times has permitted them to marry whom they choose (Root, 2001). From this perspective Root (2001) views interracial marriage as a vehicle for examining the social structures that informed and shaped race and gender relations.

The scarcity of qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of women in interracial marriages and the anticipated value of understanding how the experience of discrimination impacts on psychological and relational health, were the impetus for the current study.

### **Theoretical conceptualisations**

Various theories attempt to conceptualise the formation of interracial relationships. The Social-Status Exchange Theory (Merton in Kalmijn, 1998) and the Assimilation Theory (Gordon, 1964) are relevant theories for this paper.

The Social Status-Exchange Theory (SSET) assumes that potential spouses are viewed in terms of their resourcefulness and possible gains in terms of socio-economic status, racial status and physical attractiveness (Jacobson et al., 2004; Kalmijn & Van Tubergen, 2006; McFadden & Moore, 2001). According to the SSET, a potential partner in an interracial relationship will consider the available resources of the other partner and engage in the interracial relationship based on the partner's ability to meet a resource need (Yancey & Lewis, 2009). Thus, interracial relationships between white women and black men were thought to occur when white women of low economic status exchanged their higher social position, as a result of being white, for a higher socio-economic status and financial security, by marrying wealthy black men.

Gordon's Assimilation Theory suggests that black men marry white women because they are more comfortable within Western culture (Gordon in Yancey & Lewis, 2009). Yancey and Lewis (2009) indicate that according to Gordon a committed interracial relationship between a white and black partner, is an "amalgamation between members of the dominant and subordinate racial groups" (p. 30) respectively. Yancey and Lewis (2009) state that interracial marriages can indicate increased tolerance and acceptance between members of different racial groups. However, Lehmler and Agnew (2006) consider interracial marriages to be often marginalised rather than accepted.

### **Discrimination experienced by individuals in interracial relationships**

Researchers have explored the degree and type of racism that interracial couples endure and also examined strategies that individuals use to cope with discrimination against committed interracial relationships (Hill & Thomas, 2000; Killian, 2002; Yancey, 2007). Leslie and Letiecq (2004) for instance indicate that, based on the particular country's history of racial privilege and disadvantage, black and white individuals in black-white interracial marriages experience discrimination differently. In addition, Yancey (2007) concluded that racism is experienced more severely by

black-white couples than interracial couples of other ethnicities. Three major forms of discrimination have been identified as experienced by individuals in committed interracial relationships these are: heterogamous discrimination, indirect discrimination and internalised racism.

*Heterogamous discrimination* involves the unequal and harmful treatment of individuals as a result of their committed interracial relationships. Heterogamous discrimination includes negative, ambivalent and even positive encounters (Yancey, 2007; Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2010). The propagation of anti-miscegenation laws is an example of negative heterogamous discrimination (Castelli, Tomelleri & Zogmaister, 2008). While positive heterogamous discrimination can take the form of patronising speech towards individuals in heterogamous relationships (Ruscher, 2001).

*Indirect discrimination* describes the effect of discrimination against the stigmatised partner in an interracial relationship on the non-stigmatised partner in the relationship (Killian 2002; Leslie & Letiecq, 2004). A white partner may for example experience indirect discrimination in the form of associated stress due to incidences of discrimination experienced by the black partner (Killian 2002; Leslie & Letiecq, 2004).

*Internalised racism* is the process in which dominant and subordinate racial groups internalise the dominant societal discourse that elevates and privileges one racial group over another racial group (Watts-Jones, 2002). Consequently, individuals engage in either self-elevation or self-depreciation depending on their social-group status. Internalised racism creates expectations, anxieties and reactions among stigmatised and disadvantaged individuals, which negatively affects social functioning and psychological well-being (Ahmed, Mohammed & Williams, 2007; Killian, 2002). Within the South African context, black people have historically been the victims of racism and many individuals have internalised the racist ideology of apartheid (Finchilescu & De la Rey, 1991; Subreenduth, 2003). In the context of committed interracial relationships internalised racism may consequently result in a power differential where the white partner assumes a superior position which may lead to relational difficulties.

#### **Discrimination and its impact on individuals' psychological and physical well-being**

The subjective experience of discrimination is significantly associated with psychological distress, psychopathology, health-compromising behaviours and overall dissatisfaction with life (Paradies, 2006). Interracial couples' higher levels of psychological distress and unique relational difficulties have widely been identified by researchers (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006; Killian, 2001; Ratele & Duncan, 2003). Ahmed et al., (2007) and Brown (2008) correlate the experience of discrimination with higher levels of vulnerability to psychological and physical ailments; and Killian (2001) suggests that interracial couples endure major relational challenges due to disapproval from significant others. Research investigating

marital quality and levels of psychological distress in interracial couples indicate that white women in mixed marriages with black men experience elevated levels of psychological distress and reduced marital happiness and stability, when compared to individuals in same race marriages (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006; Leslie & Letiecq, 2004). Williams, Gonzalez, Williams, Mohammed, Moomal and Stein (2008) found that perceived racial discrimination was positively correlated with psychological distress and adversely affected mental health in South Africa.

Considering the challenge that marginalization imposes on interracial marriages in the diverse South African context and the impact of discrimination on individuals' psychological health, this study hopes to contribute to a richer understanding of the experience of discrimination by white women in black-white interracial marriages.

### **Method**

This study was conducted from a qualitative perspective seeking to access the individuals' experiences of discrimination due to their interracial relationships through in-depth, open-ended interviews, pursuing rich nuanced and authentic personal descriptions of each individual's life-world (McKenna, 1982; McLeod, 2001). The aim was to provide each participant with a voice (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002) and to describe the subjective meaning, actions and context of each participant (Popay, Rogers & Williams, 1998).

The tradition of phenomenology posits a "viable option for researchers who aspire to incorporate diverse voices in the research design in meaningful ways" (Orbe, 2000, p. 2), and Husserlian or descriptive phenomenology in particular is advocated when the aim is to gain insight "into the lived experience of diverse racial and ethnic group members" (Orbe 2000, p. 1). Consequently a descriptive phenomenological research method was followed in the present study.

### ***Participants***

Three white women, who experienced discrimination as a result of being in committed interracial relationships with black men, were sourced through convenience sampling to participate in the study (Polkinghorne, 1983). Participants were required to possess the vocabulary and language skills to adequately express their perceptions, feelings and thoughts surrounding their experiences of discrimination (Kruger, 1979). Only participants between 28 and 60 years were invited to partake in the study ensuring that participants had been raised during the Apartheid years, when racial segregation and the prohibition of interracial relationships were the norm in South Africa. Engagement in a committed interracial

relationship for these women would supposedly have required more risk taking, resulting in a higher probability of experiencing discrimination (Sroufe, Cooper & DeHart, 1992). Participants were also required to have been in a committed interracial relationship with a black man for more than two years. The first two years of a committed relationship is critical to establish the foundation of the relationship and determines future relational satisfaction or dissolution (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith & George, 2001). As participants were in their committed interracial relationships for more than two years their descriptions of individual experiences of discrimination were not provided during a period in which the participants were more likely to view their relationships in an exceedingly positive light (Davila, Karney & Bradbury, 1999)

### ***Procedure***

The researcher approached trainee psychologists requesting assistance in obtaining research participants. Contact details of possible research participants were exchanged and potential participants who met the research selection criteria were then invited via email to participate in the study. Participants who were willing to participate were contacted telephonically scheduling a convenient date and time for an interview. An introduction to the study and a consent form were emailed to each participant prior to the interview to comply with transparency requirements of qualitative research (Todres, 2005).

### ***The open-ended interview/Gathering of information***

Kelly (2006) suggests that open-ended, unstructured interviews be used to access in-depth descriptions of personal experiences. In the present study open-ended phenomenological interviews were used to gather information as it enables the researcher to “actively enter the worlds of people and to render those worlds understandable from the standpoint of a theory in behaviours, languages, definitions, attitudes and feelings of those studied” (Schurink, 1998, p. 300). During the interview the researcher adopted a facilitative stance characteristic of the phenomenological interview which aims to clarify rather than direct the discussion (Todres, 2005). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim into a written format, resulting in transcripts which served as the raw data for analysis.

### ***Data analysis***

Inductive data analysis, which supposes the emergence of themes and patterns from the data was used (Janesick, 1994). This form of data analysis is in line with Husserl’s phenomenological method which endeavours to describe the phenomenon from the subjective perspective of the participant’s life-world (Kvale, 1983). Seven steps were followed in an attempt to analyse and describe the life-worlds pertaining to the experience of discrimination of the participants. These steps are the result of a combination of various approaches to analysis of descriptive phenomenological

material (Colaizzi, 1973; Giorgi, 1971, 1975, 1997; McLeod, 2001; Stevick, 1971; Stones, 1979, 1988; Todres, 2005; Van Kaam, 1959; Willig, 2008):

The first step entailed the processes of reflecting and bracketing known as entering *epoche*. The researcher drew on De Rivera's (1981) conceptual encounter approach and engaged her personal experience of discrimination in a committed interracial relationship through reflection. This enabled her to develop a critical awareness in which she was able to identify, acknowledge, bracket and suspend her biases towards the research phenomenon prior to and during data collection and data analysis (Colaizzi, 1973; McLeod, 2001; De Rivera, 2006; Tesch, 1990).

The second step required the researcher to obtain a holistic sense of each transcript, allowing the researcher to see the phenomenon as it is experienced in a specific context (Todres, 2005). Through multiple readings of each transcript, the researcher sought to immerse herself so as to become aware of the nuances and meanings communicated in the transcribed interviews (Moustakas, 1994; Todres, 2005). The purpose of this step is to gain "an intuitive and holistic grasp of the data" (Stones, 1988, p. 153), a necessary process to make the data more intelligible (Moustakas, 1994; Todres, 2005).

As part of step three, the researcher identified different units of meaning which emerged spontaneously from the data. These Natural Meaning Units (NMUs) were differentiated from each other and similar NMUs were clustered together (Giorgi, 1997). This step allowed for NMUs to be understood within the broader context of the specific transcript, whilst relevant nuances contained in NMUs were also accounted for (Todres, 2005).

Step four entailed transformation of the NMUs into psychological expressions of meaning by converting the particular participant's everyday language into psychological statements (Giorgi, 1997). Repetitive and irrelevant content was then eliminated (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Step five consisted of the identification of themes inherent in the transformed meaning units. Primary and secondary themes were identified and their interrelationship was highlighted. Primary and secondary themes were examined in light of the research question, and redundant or irrelevant themes were eliminated. The inter-thematic relationships served to reflect each individual participant's experience of discrimination and were captured in three intra-individual analyses. Characteristic of phenomenological data analysis the researcher employed imaginative variation in which she sought to establish the foundational essences of the lived experience of the phenomenon in question (Kruger, 1979; Polkinghorne, 1989). Imaginative variation required a sensitive reading of the transcript, while verifying the importance and relevance of meaning units against the questions: "What is truly being described by this meaning unit? [and] What is absolutely essential to understand by the psychological dynamic

present?" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 5). If the elimination of a specific theme or characteristic changed the nature of discrimination such that the experience was no longer definable as discrimination, then this characteristic was deemed to form part of the essential structure of discrimination (Kruger, 1979).

Step six entailed establishing the general structure of the phenomenon through inter-individual analysis. In this step commonalities and invariant themes among all three transcripts were identified and interconnected concepts were synthesised to produce an inter-individual analysis. The inter-individual analysis contains the essential elements of discrimination experienced by white women in committed interracial relationships with black men (Dey, 1993; Stones, 1988).

The final step of data analysis required the researcher to conduct a literature survey in order to compare the findings with existing research findings on the topic.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained by the Higher Degree Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg. Participants were provided with a written overview of the study prior to participation and requested to sign a consent form in which the research procedure, the right to confidentiality, anonymity and the voluntary nature of participation in the study were outlined. Anonymity was ensured in that participant identifying details were eliminated or changed. Information was kept confidential by storing all files and transcribed interviews in password protected files on the researcher's computer for the next five years in accordance with the ethical regulations of the Health Professions Council of South Africa. Participants' biographical information was also shredded after completion of the study.

### **Research Findings**

The experience of discrimination by white women in committed interracial relationships with black men is multi-layered. Existing research portrays the phenomenon to manifest in various contexts and to be experienced from various sources; discrimination is thus perceived to be situational and the experience can either be negative or positive; experiences of discrimination are also either direct or indirect. Research further suggests that discrimination evokes strong emotions and is coped with in various ways. The experience of discrimination, although an intra-personal process, necessarily impact on the interracial relationship and is therefore also an interpersonal process.



***Discrimination as a contextual experience within the immediate family***

Both participants **A** and **C** experienced discrimination from their fathers. Participant **A**'s father overtly expressed his disapproval and feeling of betrayal because his daughter chose a black partner, however he later engaged in a process of self-reflection and acceptance of the relationship. As a result **A** re-established her relationship with her father despite his initial discrimination.

**Participant A:** After, we [A and her father] had spoken [about A's interracial relationship with her husband] *ja*. So (*long pause*), um, and (*sigh*) his initial reaction... all that, all that he could say to me was that he felt like he'd been betrayed ... And um, he [father] said even straight away that he knew that his attitude was wrong. And because, you know, faith is very important to him he also knew, he said to me and he knows that God accepts my husband and the problem is with him.

In contrast **C**'s father expressed his disappointment in her choice of a black partner in subtle and ambiguous ways and he withdrew from her emotionally.

**Participant C:** I mean I remember when I told my father... when we got engaged and I told my father... (*looking to the side, hand gesturing*) what were his words? Besides saying, "Don't give the ring back?" Um (*laughing*) Um (*long pause*), something like... um, "Oh I'd really hoped you would find someone who'd look after you!" So the implication is that he [black partner] wouldn't really be able to do that ... I think in a way it's [C's engagement to her black partner] put a little bit of distance between us. Um, you know and probably to do with that stepping back and saying, "Get on with whatever you think is best." But um, *ja* I have felt it [C's engagement to her black partner] has created somewhat of a distance.

Yancey and Lewis (2009) suggest that white family members are generally not supportive of black-white interracial relationships and that white fathers' reactions to their daughters' interracial relationships with black men are more extreme than that of white mothers (Romano, 2003).

***Discrimination as a contextual experience within the extended family***

Various researchers indicate that familial opposition and the subsequent rejection of interracial relationships manifest in subtle ways (McConahay, 1986; Swim, Akin, Hall & Hunter, 1995; Yancey & Lewis, 2009). Participants indicated that they experienced subtle discrimination from extended family members manifesting as exclusion and favouritism.

Participant **A**'s family excluded her and her black husband from important family events and ignored them at family functions when they were invited. This is in line with research findings suggesting that white family members often respond to interracial relationships by threatening ostracism and alienation (Porterfield, 1978; Stember in Lewis, Yancey & Bletzer, 1997).

**Participant A:** Um, but you know *ja*, it took a, quite a long time for them to start just open their hearts to us. And because my, the eldest uncle had been so um, vehemently against the whole thing [interracial relationship] um, he, he wouldn't speak to my husband at functions and he would deliberately would... sort of ignore my husband.

**B** indicated that her in laws discriminated against her by excluding her from conversations by communicating in their home language which she could not understand.

**Participant B:** I met his [black husband's] folks and they all speak perfect English, but there was one like family gathering at his uncle's where they [B's parents-in-law] just spoke Zulu. Which was like kind of, you know... very excluding... you know... but... You know, like being in a family situation where you don't understand what's going on... That's difficult. My husband was very angry... My husband was very angry after that.

Research findings pertaining to black families' approval or rejection of committed interracial relationships is ambiguous. While some findings suggest that black families are more tolerant of committed interracial relationships than white families (Yancey & Lewis, 2009), other findings suggest that this is not the case (Amoateng, 2004; Baars, 2009; Childs, 2005a). South African statistics suggest that black communities are less tolerant of interracial relationships than other racial groups (Amoateng, 2004). Baars (2009) and Childs (2005a) indicate that black families, in particular black women, have become more disapproving of interracial relationships than they have been in the past.

Participant **C** indicated that she experienced discrimination from her family-in-law in terms of being singled out for favouritism. This corresponds with literature suggesting that some black family members seem to tolerate and even favour interracial relationships (Romano, 2003).

**Participant C:** And then from his [C's black partner] side, it's a different form of, of um (*long pause*), prejudice. It's the kind of opposite [type of discrimination]. It's like, "Oh my God", you know, "Here's this white woman," and you know, "this is better than a black woman" for, for, for certain reasons ... So there's a kind of a... a, being elevated to a slightly, um (*long pause*), different level of, of um (*long pause*), I don't know (*playful*), status or... position, or somehow being seen as um a person who... will... open more doors or provide more opportunities, or provide access to new paths somehow or other (*soft tone*). ... Um..., and I mean it is a sort of positive form of discrimination, but it's the same kind of stuff really that operates.

### ***Discrimination as a contextual experience within society***

According to Root (2001) heterogamy naturally begets social ostracism and discrimination due to its defiance of the social norms and values that sanction homogamy. In this study the participants experienced direct societal discrimination in the form of public staring, or derogatory or patronizing commentary, and indirect societal discrimination as a result of their partners' experiences of discrimination in the workplace. Societal

discrimination against committed interracial relationships was experienced by participants **A** and **C** as public staring. Various authors have commented on the prevalence of subtle prejudices in society with public staring as an example of restrained acts of discrimination against individuals in interracial relationships (Childs, 2005b; Root, 2001; Yancey, 2002).

**Participant A:** Some days you don't even notice people are staring at you because they just do (*laughing*). And then some days (*laughing*) you feel like... a friend of ours who's also in a mixed relationship, in a mixed marriage he says like, sometimes [one wants to ask], "Do you want to take a photo (*laughing*)?" And then you can show all the people you know (*laughing, illustrating with hand movements showing a photograph to someone!*)" You know. "And you can stare at it all day long... (*Laughing!*)"

**Participant C:** From a society level, you know, shopping centres and movies and that kind of thing, people do [stare], depending on where you are... as well, it's less of an issue in bigger cities and whatever that it is, than in smaller towns, um, generally speaking.

Another form of societal discrimination is taunting comments from members of the public as experienced by participants **A** and **B**. **A** overheard derogatory comments in public, while **B** was subjected to patronising remarks. Ruscher (2001) and Yancey (2002) indicate that taunting comments are typical forms of societal discrimination.

**Participant A:** When she [stranger in shopping centre] walked past us she just went, "Ag, sies (*expressing disgust; dramatic facial expression*)". And so it was that sort of disgust, you know

**Participant B:** You know and if... nobody ever kind of insulted... in fact most people said, "Oh, that's [referring to **B** and her black husband] so cute (*hand gestures*)" or, you know they... it's very patronising (*laughing*) in a way, you know (*laughing*).

Finally **A** and **B** both reported experiencing indirect discrimination due to racial prejudice and discrimination directed towards their husbands at their places of work.

**Participant A:** And you know, my husband has said very often, I think, for him he just always had to work that much harder for people to see him, you know ... [A's husband experiences employers' process communication as] "Oh, you're black, you think you're going to walk in here and just get the position," or you know, "You're going to be, you think you deserve something more." Whatever people's perceptions are of a particular race, he has to continually overcome...

**Participant B:** It [B's husband being considered for his race rather than his qualifications] makes me very angry (*angry facial expression*). 'Cause I, I just, *ja*, I feel very angry, that he's not seen as a (*long pause*), you know, if he were white, he'd be seen as the qualified person that he is. But because he's black he's just seen [as], you know, "Okay, we can have him, 'cause you know, he's got the qualification", but you know, the glass-ceiling (*long pause*) kind of applies.

Research findings indicate that experiences of discrimination by the stigmatised individual in a committed interracial relationship impact on the non-stigmatised individual as a result of their relationship (Killian 2002; Leslie & Letiecq, 2004).

### ***Emotional Pain and Anger are key emotional responses to the experience of discrimination***

The subjective experience of discrimination is significantly associated with psychological distress (Paradies, 2006; Williams et al., 2008). According to Romano (2003) "choosing a partner of another race in the face of family opposition remains one of the most emotionally wrenching issues of marrying interracially" (p. 271). The present study identified emotional pain and anger as the most salient emotional responses to perceived experiences of discrimination.

Both participants **A** and **B** experienced emotional pain in response to discrimination. **A** experienced emotional pain due to her family's lack of enthusiasm regarding her committed relationship with a black man. **B** felt emotional pain as a result of being excluded by her family-in-law's refusal to speak English in her presence.

**Participant A:** For a few months, well for, I suppose it were more weeks than months that were very difficult (*widened eyes*). Because I felt that we [A and her black boyfriend] weren't doing anything morally wrong and yet we were getting this [disappointing] reaction [from family members] and it was in my own home and it [discrimination] was very difficult because most of the time you are very excited 'bout a new relationship and whatever (*sadness*) ... And I like for me that [A's family's discrimination against her husband] was very hurtful and what was even more hurtful is that his family were so loving ... there were instances where you know, people said very hurtful things and it was, it was difficult (*said softly*), very difficult not to retaliate in the heat of the moment.

**Participant B:** ... to my face they've always been... okay (*doubtful facial expression*)? Um, except I remember... there was one like family gathering at his uncle's where they [B's parent-in-law] just spoke Zulu. Which was like kind of, you know... very excluding... You know, like being in a family situation where you don't understand what's going on. That's difficult.

Participants **B** and **C** both felt anger in response to their experiences of discrimination. Killian (2003) suggests that discrimination, in particular public staring and derogatory comments made by members of the public, evoke anger as an emotional response with stigmatised individuals. **B** indicated that she felt angry, when the receptionist at a holiday resort made a racist comment; she also felt angry when she indirectly experienced discrimination as a result of her husband being racially discriminated against in the workplace.

**Participant B:** So we [B and her white Swiss male friend] went in there and she [the receptionist] said, “Oh thank goodness, (sigh) we don’t have any black people this weekend!” [her black husband was waiting in the car] I’m like (angry facial expression), “Pardon (laughing)?” *Ja*, so, those kinds of things happen occasionally ... It [B’s husband being considered for his race rather than his qualifications] makes me very angry (angry facial expression). ‘Cause I, I just, *ja*, I feel very angry, that he’s not seen as a (long pause), you know, if he were white, he’d be seen as the qualified person that he is. But because he’s black he’s just seen [as], you know, “Okay, we can have him, ‘cause you know, he’s got the qualification”, but you know, the glass-ceiling (long pause) kind of applies.

C was angry at herself for choosing to invest in a committed interracial relationship where prejudicial attitudes have a significant impact on her existence and quality of her relationship.

**Participant C:** You know (long pause), um, sometimes I sort of berate myself for choosing such a complicated situation, you know. Um, so sometimes I sort of think, “Ag, you know, God why didn’t I make things easier for myself? Why have I made life so complicated?” ... You know, discrimination where I catch myself thinking along similar kinds of things of, “Ah, God, come on, why can’t you do this?” Or you know, “If, if you [partner] had been white this would have been easier...”

Yzerbyt and Demoulin (2010) reason that when the experience of antagonism is mediated by racial prejudice or discrimination the emotional response of anger and distrust result; these emotions are absent when the experience of antagonism is independent of race-related attitudes.

***Maladaptive coping strategies pertaining to discrimination: Avoidance***

All three participants made use of avoidance in an attempt to cope with racial discrimination. A coped with discrimination by avoiding to disclose incidences of discrimination to her husband in an attempt to protect him from the psychological impact thereof.

**Participant A:** And then we did it [avoiding disclosing incidences of discrimination] with each other, where as individuals we would not share with the other person what was going on, or what we’d heard [discriminatory statements about A and her husband’s interracial relationship] or (expressive hand movements)... you know whatever the case may be.

A’s use of avoidance corresponds with research indicating that interracial couples avoid sharing their discriminatory experiences with each other in order to protect their partners from experiencing indirect discrimination (Killian, 2003).

B indicated that she and her husband avoided certain geographical areas in South Africa as well as social settings that are predominantly white in order to limit their exposure to possible discrimination. Killian (2003) confirms that interracial couples cope with discrimination by avoiding places that they perceive to be high-risk areas for discrimination. This coping strategy unfortunately leads to restricted leisure activities and travelling opportunities for interracial couples (Hibbler & Shinew, 2002).

**Participant B:** There are places we avoid, like deep Afrikaans places we don't go, we just don't go there. We don't stop, we drive through ... Like there's some places we'd go to and we and we'd go, "Uh uh, no (*shaking head*)." You know it's just white, white, white. So, *ja*, sometimes we feel the vibes. I mean (*long pause*), you don't want to go... we don't confront people.

C avoids dealing with prejudice and discrimination within her relationship by living separately from her partner. Living separately enables her to avoid the emotional impact of discrimination.

**Participant C:** I think there's a lot of avoidance going on currently, which is made possible by living in different places ... Um, so you can continue on quite a functional level with a phone call or two a day and not confront things (*smiling*). But, um (*long pause*) *ja* (*serious facial expression*), I think in the longer term scenario, you're not... it's more avoidance kind of behaviour than... than (*long pause*) really looking at what the issues are and confronting them (*softly and tentatively*) ... And then um..., I think it makes me also (*long pause*), sometimes... avoid certain kinds of difficulties in the relationship.

Killian (2003) suggests that interracial couples avoid discussing race related matters because of its significance in and implication for the relationship.

***Adaptive coping strategies: self-awareness, adopting a positive attitude and faith***

Dupont and Leyens in Yzerbyt and Demoulin (2010) suggest that individuals cope with discrimination by minimising their awareness and denying their experiences of discrimination. This helps them to maintain a positive sense of self and the illusion of control over their lives. This stands in contrast to the experience of some of the participants in the present research who coped with experiences of discrimination through a process of self-reflection and a pursuit of increased self-awareness. Participant A made use of introspection into her own prejudices as a way of coping with experiences of discrimination.

**Participant A:** Um, *ja* I think, I think they [people who discriminate against you] challenge you in that they bring [out] what you, what kind of prejudices you have as well (*long pause*). Um, some of the comments we've got, the negative comments from strangers have been mostly (*trembling voice*) from Afrikaans people. So that makes (*trembling voice*) me feel like, you know, like I, I come out with, I know things that are prejudices within me. So that's something, you know, you've got to work on... in yourself.

C displayed self-awareness pertaining to her own internal racial prejudice against her black partner. She indicated that she has sought professional help from a psychologist to assist her with the process of negotiating differences within their relationship, and her experience of internal and intra-relational prejudice and discrimination.

**Participant C:** And I... I have... I was um, ah, seeing a psychologist (*standing up to close the door*). But he's a white male and he didn't really get a grip on it [internal racial prejudice]. You know, he didn't have... really the, the consciousness to understand what I'm [experiencing]... He was brilliant in many other ways, but not really able to deal with that [internal racial prejudice].

In addition to self-awareness, participants identified adopting a positive attitude as another adaptive coping strategy to deal with discrimination. Participant A described how she and her husband adopted an optimistic stance, hoping and believing that her family will accept their relationship in due course and that reconciliation will eventually occur. Foeman and Nance (2002) describe this coping strategy as “turning to each other” or “framing” (p. 246). The term “framing” refers to a process in which the couple work together to discover an adaptive coping strategy in dealing with discrimination.

**Participant A:** So, we [A and her husband] sort of worked from the point of, “One day we are all going to be reconciled” and we don't want to feel that we have all these things (hand movements) to apologise for.

B described making light of people's questions pertaining to her multiracial family and adopting a positive attitude when encountering patronising remarks.

**Participant B:** Ah, I'd just be as cheerful as possible [when being asked about my relation to my children], you know, just say, “*Ja*, these are my kids. My husband's black (nonchalant tone of voice).”

The last coping strategy identified among participants was their faith. Childs (2005b) and Killian (2003) indicate that interracial couples cope with prejudice and discrimination by minimising their racial differences and focusing instead on similarities, such as a shared belief system. Religion can play an important role in a committed interracial relationship as it helps to ground the relationship and thereby increases the confidence of partners. Religion serves as a protective defence against the adverse psychological effects of discrimination (Killian, 2003). Participants A and B

both expressed the belief that their relationships were orchestrated and sanctioned by God. In addition, they both indicated that their faith in God helped them cope with discrimination.

**Participant A:** It was our faith that's been so much of what's kept everything (*long pause*) stable, you now.

**Participant B:** So when times are tough, you can always go back to that [faith in God]. You know that it's not just the two of us standing by ourselves. You know we're not protected; I mean bad things happen to everybody. You know, we just feel that we're rooted together. And there, there's something more than just me and him. You know what I'm, saying? God is far greater than we are. If He thinks it's right, then it must be right.

### ***The impact of discrimination on the quality of the committed interracial relationship***

Discrimination impacts either in a negative or a positive manner on the quality of a committed interracial relationship. The majority of participants experienced discrimination to eventually result in increased commitment/closeness. Initially **A** and her partner experienced a breakdown in their communication because of not disclosing incidences of discrimination to each other. After realising this they were able to successfully discuss and deal with experiences of discrimination and consequently enjoyed a sense of unity/closeness and increased relationship satisfaction. **A**'s experience of finding constructive ways to deal with discriminatory experiences within her interracial relationship is in line with research findings (Foeman & Nance, 2002).

**Participant A:** Because it [withholding experiences of discrimination from each other] doesn't help anything; but it [discriminatory experiences] still affects your relationship, even though it's indirectly ... So the way for us to do it [dealing with discrimination] was to communicate, "This is what I'd heard, so and so said" um, and get it out in the open and then be able to fight it [discrimination] together ... And more in a way of just building each other up, 'cause sometimes you can handle it [discrimination] and the other person can't... and you know, vice versa. And more as just trying to build each other up than, you know, [rather than] attack anyone else.

**B** and her husband also enjoyed increased closeness as a result of the experience of discrimination.

**Participant B:** I think it [discrimination experienced from family members] kind of made it [**B**'s relationship with her husband] stronger initially.

**B**'s experience of increased closeness and commitment to her husband due to discrimination may reflect Lehmilller and Agnew's (2006) finding that suggests that stigmatised couples compensate for lower levels of investment with higher levels of commitment. Leslie and Letiecq (2004) also indicate that discrimination may lead to "increased bonding and efforts to present a 'united front'..." (p. 562).



In summary, white women in committed interracial relationships with black men experience discrimination in various contexts and from various sources. Discrimination manifest in either negative or positive encounters and is experienced either directly or indirectly. The experience of discrimination evokes mainly negative emotions and is dealt with in either maladaptive or adaptive ways. Within interracial relationships experiences of discrimination may have positive consequences such as more commitment and closeness. Negative consequences such as avoidance to talk about the discrimination can lead to estrangement in the interracial relationship.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

This study had various shortcomings that may be addressed in future research. First, a significant limitation is the homogeneity of the sample, being all white, English-speaking women of similar socio-economic status. Second, only experiences of discrimination among white females were investigated and experienced discrimination by the men in these relationships was not included. Thus, future research could explore experiences of discrimination from the perspectives of black women, black men or white men in black-white interracial relationships.

Third, only individuals in black-white relationships were interviewed in the present research. The experiences of discrimination by individuals in relationships of other interracial groupings were thus not explored. Given the diverse nature of the South African context, future studies could address experiences of discrimination among individuals in relationships of different interracial groupings.

Fourth, the current study investigated the experience of discrimination and briefly related this to the subjective experience of relationship quality and satisfaction. However, research indicates racial identity to be a predicting factor in the experience of relational satisfaction and quality among individuals in committed interracial relationships (Leslie & Letiecq, 2004). The concept of racial identity within committed interracial relationships and the ways in which the resolution of identity challenges may contribute to relationship satisfaction and quality could be investigated.

In terms of outlier concepts that emerged from this study would be that of internalised racism and its relationship to experiences of racial prejudice and discrimination within committed interracial relationships. Further research pertaining to this concept may be particularly relevant within the South African context. Finally, white families often express their concern regarding interracial relationships by emphasising that biracial children will be negatively affected by their parents' decision to form a committed interracial relationship (Childs, 2005b). Future studies could investigate the discriminatory experiences of biracial children within the South African context.

### **Implications of the study**

The research findings of the current study can be applied in various settings. These settings include training of psychologists and psychotherapists; providing psychotherapy for individuals in interracial relationships; and providing counselling and psycho-education for family members of the interracial couple.

The research provided in-depth descriptions of the experiences of discrimination by women in committed interracial relationships and may contribute to a richer understanding among psychotherapists concerning the life-world of white women in committed interracial relationships with black men. The findings emphasise the need for South African psychologists and psychotherapists to be trained to be culturally competent and racially sensitive in providing psychological services to a diverse population.

This study indicated the need among individuals in committed interracial relationships to receive psychotherapy. Psychotherapeutic aims for individuals in committed interracial relationships may include facilitating the resolution of racial identity challenges which may aid individuals to experience positive relationship quality and satisfaction. Psychotherapeutic aims for couples may include an exploration of diverse gender roles, personality, cultural and background differences, racial stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes. In addition, interracial couples may need assistance in negotiating relational conflict. Social group identification serves as a buffer against the adverse effects of experienced prejudice and discrimination. Couples could be supported in acknowledging and appreciating the diversity inherent in their relationship, and assisted in establishing opportunities for open dialogue and the creation of cultural fusions and traditions that are unique to the specific couple. Family therapy may also assist immediate and extended families to adaptively deal with the psychological experience of having a family member engaged in a heterogamous relationship.

Psycho-education for family members of interracial couples may be beneficial in facilitating an opportunity for family members to gain an understanding of diverse racial groups and experiences of individuals in committed interracial relationships. Psycho-education as an intervention may create a platform for family members to ask difficult questions and to express their concerns related to committed interracial relationships in a psychologically safe; psycho-education may also equip family members and friends with knowledge and skills to support individuals in committed interracial relationships when faced with direct or indirect forms of discrimination.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study reflect the multi-layered nature of discrimination as experienced by white women in the context of committed interracial relationships with black men.

Discrimination has been described to be either directly or indirectly experienced in various contexts and to manifest in either negative or positive encounters. The study revealed that white women in committed interracial relationships with black men experience negative emotional responses when faced with discrimination, and deal with it in either in dysfunctional or functional ways. Finally, although discrimination is experienced individually by women in committed interracial relationships it is essentially relational and impacts on the committed interracial relationship.

It is hoped that the research findings will contribute to the limited available research on lived experiences of individuals in committed interracial relationships in South Africa. The researchers also hope that the study may enhance the quality of psychotherapy and counselling training in South Africa to be more culturally sensitive and competent in identifying and addressing the diverse needs of individuals in interracial relationships in South Africa.

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