

## Race and Gender at the Crossroads: Black Men and White Women in Cross-Racial Relationships--an update <sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*A study of relationships in America between Black men and White women was the focus of study during four years of open-ended recursive interviews, focus groups, and self-assessments involving 45 participants and an interview research team of 7 University professors and graduate students. Black men and White women expressed a belief that they have a different set of challenges that need to be accepted in the process of crossing the color line in relationships and in raising children. Both genders expressed knowing the experience of loving, caring, committed relationships with partners from across the color line--a line many expressed was often indiscernible to them. Yet, the contradictions of perceptions are blatant--how people perceived themselves as Black men, White women, or Black women; how they perceived members of the other groups; and how they believed they were perceived. In the ongoing struggle to understand racism and the impact on a new generation of interracial, multiracial children, the social, emotional, and experiential factors influencing these perspectives require further analysis.*

**Keywords:** cross-racial marriage, racism, constant comparative analysis method

*“Those who choose love across the color line challenge the conventional wisdom that racial equality can be achieved in the absence of a rich network of interracial relationships and that love is truly free when it is cabined by pervasive segregation.”*

~~Rachel F. Moran, 2001, *Interracial Intimacy*, p. 16

*“Cause even though we had fought a war to keep the world free, the color line in America worked both ways; and even a rich white man . . . was afraid to cross it.”*

~~Denzel Washington in *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Demme, & Saxon, 1995)

### 1. Introduction

In Stanley Kramer's 1967 film *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, Spencer Tracy and Katherine Hepburn meet their daughter's gentlemanly Black fiancé, Sidney Poitier. "The audience knew that in the end the family unit would ultimately expand to include him" (Golden & Shreve, 1995, p. 151). However, a generation later, the camera lens focused on a different scene. In Spike Lee's 1991 *Jungle Fever*, Cyrus (played by Lee) responds to his friend's affair with a white woman (played by Wesley Snipes and Annabella Scierra) with the emotive expressions: "H-bomb" and "Nuclear holocaust." The exclamations are no exaggeration—in the movie or, seemingly, in real life. Interracial relationships—from holding hands to marriage—continue to cause explosive emotional responses in America. While movie-goers have challenged the violence of Spike Lee films, few could doubt that art was imitating life as Lee admittedly mirrored the 1989 murder of Yusuf Hawkins in the plot of *Jungle Fever*.

The murder, the lynching of young Yusuf, was because Italian youths in Bensonhurst thought he was the *black* boyfriend of one of the *white* girls in the neighborhood (Kroll, Smith, & Murr, 1991). The movie reflected a violent image of "a nation polarized by an unabating obsession with color" (p. 46). The study of interracial relationships, particularly long-term unions and marriages, is valuable in understanding the nature of race relationships (Bakken & Huber, 2005; Grapes, 2000; Huber, 2000; Moran, 2001; Yancey & Yancey, 1997). This study began with the assumption that race remains a divisive aspect of relations between Blacks and Whites in the United States and that a closer exploration of the perceptions of those people most intimately involved in relationships at the crossroads of race and culture between Blacks and Whites is necessary to gain a clearer focus on the social and cultural interactions and reactions surrounding them. A purposive snowball sampling technique (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, pp. 56-57) was employed to permit focus on one specific segment of this population, Black men, and White women<sup>2</sup> because these unions appear to engender strong societal reactions. A critical pedagogy orientation directed our interest to the social practices, structures, and perceptions that influenced interracial and cross-racial relationships. The focal points of this inquiry were family, school, and mass media, specific aspects of the process of hegemony identified by McLaren (1998) as a process of subordination not "of force but primarily through consensual social practices, social forms, and social structures produced in specific sites such as the church, the state, the school, the mass media, the political system, and the family" (p. 177).

## **2. Review of the Literature on Black-White Multicultural Marriages**

While many studies focus on racial issues, a review of the relevant literature indicates a paucity of both quantitative and qualitative research on relationships and intermarriages between American couples composed of one person of primarily or only *American of African* heritage and the other of primarily or only *American of European* heritage<sup>3</sup>.

Predating the Civil Rights era, Merton (1941) and Davis (1941) advocated a theory of hypogamy that explained Black-White unions on the premise that Black men belong to a lower caste than White women belong and will trade personal assets such as attractiveness for status. In an early study, Porterfield (1978) interviewed 40 Black/White couples and reported that most Black-White couples in his study married for the same reasons as other couples, out of love and compatibility. When Schoen and Wool dredge, (1989) studied marriage choices in North Carolina and Virginia in 1969-71 and 1979-81, they suggested that White women make greater status gains when they marry outside their racial group, indicating that acceptance of Blacks in the family may be based on status gains. More recently, in another study that addressed the issue of multicultural marriages, Yancey and Yancey (1997) concluded that biracial relationships seem to form with the same principles as same-race relationships and suggested that sex and age were more predictive variables of interracial relationships than race.

### **2.1 Legislating "Loving" and Relating**

Since marriage between Blacks and Whites has been a legislated activity, examination of the laws governing interracial marriages informs this study. In 1967, the Supreme Court decision known as *Loving v. Virginia* (argued 10 April, 1967, and decided 12 June, 1967) overturned the existing ant miscegenation laws in Virginia and fifteen other states. In the previous fifteen years, fourteen states had repealed laws outlawing interracial marriages (Hall, 1992, p. 513). However, as Brown (1987) pointed out in his social casework with Black-White couples, "laws do not eradicate sentiments, and strong feelings still persist against Black-White marriages. Color labeling, rather than actual *color* appears to be the issue" (p. 24).

### **2.2 Demographics: Multiracial Marriages and Children**

The 1970 Census reported 310,000 interracial married couples. The 1990 Census reported four marriages per 1,000 were mixed with 71 percent between Black men and White women, 29 percent White men with Black women. From the 1994 Census data, interracial married couples who were Black/White accounted for only 2.4% of all married couples. In the 2000 Census, 1,464,000 of married couples were identified as interracial married couples with a 268,000 identified as couples with a Black husband and a White wife (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003), accounting for 4.7% of all married couples. The apparent increase in *Black-White* marriages has impacted Black marriages, as well. Between the 1970s and the 1990s, the incidence of Black marriages dropped 20 percent (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992, p. 119). The 1993 Census reported 1,195,000 interracial married couples, but some estimates put the number closer to three million (White, Edwards, Lafferty, Monroe, & Rainert, 1997, pp. 35-36).

In the mid-western state from which the participants in this study were purposively chosen, 4.9 percent of the marriages in 1993 (the year in which this study was started) were interracial, with the most common combination (345) between a Black groom and a White bride (Center for Health and Environmental Statistics, 1994, p. 121). Interracial or interethnic opposite-sex married couple households grew by 28 percent over the previous decade from 7 percent in 2000 to 10 percent in 2010, accounting for 7.9% of all married couples. The 2010 Pew Research Center Report (U.S. Census Bureau's 2010 American Community Survey) found that in 2010: "Among all newlyweds, 9.4% of whites, 17.1% of blacks, 25.7% of Hispanics and 27.7% of Asians married someone whose race or ethnicity was different from their own."

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

##### **3.1. a The Site of this Study**

A Midwestern, metropolitan, University City with a population of approximately 300,000 people was the site of this study, and the majority of respondents/informants were living in the city at the time of the interviews. Fewer than 5% of the respondents were living in another Midwestern community during the interviews, but they had lived in the site city during most of their lives.

##### **3.1. b Purposive Sampling**

The research team targeted a sample representative of the demographics of interracial relationships between Blacks and Whites: about 71 percent Black men and White women. It was not within the limitations of this study to explore relationships composed of White men and Black women. Additional interviews were conducted with mothers of *American of African* heritage whose children had dated across the color line (that data is not considered here). A subset of this group had been or were teachers. Their perspectives on teaching were explored in focus group inquiry, as well. The investigators controlled for age of relationship informants (18-45) and for mothers (18-80); educational level (high school diploma through advanced degree); and employment (employed or full-time student status). The concept of *cohort* was also considered in the purposive sampling process. Ryder defined "each group of people bore over a relatively short and contiguous time period as a *generational cohort* that is deeply influenced and bound together by the events of their *formative years*" (Meredith & Schewe, 1994, p. 24). However, Ryder distinguished a generational cohort from a generation since a cohort "can be as long or as short as the events that define it" (p. 25). Informant participants represented both the perspectives of those who had experienced the Civil Rights era in the United States and those who followed in the next generation, learning of the struggle for equality via history books, film, and story.

#### **3.2 Recursive, Ethnographic Interviews**

Each of the 45 participants in this study was invited to respond to questionnaires as well as to two surveys dealing with personal attributes and ego development. After providing informed consent, participants had the option of selecting their own pseudonym for the study. All names have been held in strictest confidence. The entire interview process, individual and focus, was recursive and analytical. All data were encoded.

##### **3.2. a Individual Interviews**

In conjunction with the questionnaires and surveys, participants scheduled at least two interviews of 90-120 minutes each. Participants were encouraged to reflect on their personal family of origin relationships and intimate relationships in semi-structured interviews. The approaches taken in these open-ended interviews employed strategies detailed by Harry Wolcott (1987): One approach is to invite informants to tell their life story, with each newly introduced person or event providing the perceptive interviewer a possible topic for future elaboration. The other approach is to ask informants to recount the events of their daily lives and routines (p. 49). The life-story approach was taken in the initial interview, and the daily-events approach was used during probes in the follow-up, recursive interviews. Participants were asked to provide a self-description of their physical characteristics as well as a description of the physical characteristics of the people they had been involved with in their significant relationships. Each participant was also asked to provide the names of relationship partners who might be willing to participate in the study, a snowball methodology that implicitly facilitated triangulation and the obtaining of informants. Participants were asked to tell about their significant relationships from birth to present. Most participants began with parents or another family member. In the recursive interviews, informants were asked to talk about their daily lives with partners.

### **3.2. b Focus Group Interviews**

The completion of individual interviews was followed by focus group interviews. Three groups evolved--Black men, White women, and Black mothers. The same process of member checking was employed during the focus group process. The principal researcher's emerging interpretation of the data was shared with the individual participants and the other members of the research team on an ongoing basis. This process of recursive interviews and informal conversations ensured a reciprocal exchange of information and opportunities for validation of the ongoing data analysis.

### **3.3 Collecting Data**

#### **3.3. a The Research Instrument**

As is always the case in ethnography, the main research instrument was the researcher, or in this case, the interviewer(s) on the research team, for it is through the researcher's sense and senses that analysis emerges (Lincoln & Guba, 1990). Three faculty and three Masters-level graduate students in the College of Education at a Midwestern university composed the original team. During the years the study was conducted, all members of the team were female Americans of European heritage. Five members of the team had experienced interracial relationships, and two had married Black men. One was the natural parent of a multiracial child. Four outside readers worked on the focus group interview analysis: one Black male, two Black females, and one White male.

**3.3. b Data Collection.** The various sources and techniques employed to develop triangulation points included: taped and transcribed recursive interviewing, taped and transcribed focus group interviewing, member checking of transcribed interviews by informants, informal interviewing, self-description, perspective-taking instruments, and researcher journaling (Wolcott, 1988).

#### **3.4. Analysis the Constant Comparative Method**

The initial step of data analysis began with the first interview. The researchers maintained researcher logs and face (or cover) sheets on notes for the recording of attitudes (both theirs and the informant's), perceptions, themes, and possible prominent ideas. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, and then returned to the informant for "member checking" and verification of accuracy. Next, the interview was unitized, a process in which each meaningful unit (a word or group of words that have meaning in relationship to the context of the study) was mounted on a separate index card. After the interviews of the first 12 informants had been transcribed and unitized, the research team met for initial phase one provisional category development. The team determined to work with the male informants first (a total of 6). Prominent ideas were determined by having each researcher identify the idea she determined to have the most substantiation--an indwelling, reflective *feels like* kind of process supported by the transcription references already supporting the idea as prominent (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The following ideas were identified as the most prominent: (a) racism, (b) descriptors (of partners), (c) complexion, (d) expectations, and (e) attractiveness. The team determined that all but the first, *racism* were similar enough to be considered as parts of the same theme, *descriptors*. The second phase of provisional category development began.

Research team meetings were conducted on a weekly basis during nearly two years of the four years eclipsed by this study. Once analysis began, the meetings were taped and also transcribed. Team members were provided copies for member checking, and the transcriptions were added to field note data for triangulation and verification.

### **4. Preliminary Interpretations**

Each unit card was studied to determine thematic relationships, patterns, and connections. The first two categories that could be substantiated led to the first meaningful outcome. Since the qualitative approach to inquiry emphasizes an emergent research design process (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 144), these outcomes were viewed as preliminary interpretations that further guided the research, and particularly the questions asked during the focus group interviews.

#### **4.1 Unitization and Categorization of Data**

**Category 1:** Initially, 21 units from 4 different cases were identified to determine the first rule of inclusion: "Black men set up comparative descriptors of women that depict White women in positive terms and Black women in negative terms."

Development of this category led to 72 units from 4 of the 6 initial male cases: (a) 24 units, 3 cases comparing Black and White women; (b) 21 units, 3 cases describing negative characteristics of Black women; and (c) 27 units, 3 cases describing positive characteristics of White women.

**Category 2:** Initially, 9 units from the same case were identified to determine the rule of inclusion: "In describing attractiveness and what attracted/s them to women, *Black men* describe both physical and non-physical features of women of American of European heritage women and only physical features of *American of African* heritage women." Next, 21 units from 3 cases were identified to substantiate the category; an additional 7 units were added representing a total of 4 of the 6 cases being analyzed.

**Outcome Proposition 1:** Black men in this study set up comparative descriptors of women that frequently depicted White women in positive terms and Black women in negative terms. These descriptors focused on personality characteristics and the way White women made them feel in comparison to Black women. During his individual interview, Alyn Moore explained it this way:

I won't say Black women are more independent. I think they believe when they get in a relationship with a Black man that it's only a matter of time until he screws up. So, I think that there is more of a barrier--it may take longer to get closer to a Black woman than a White woman. With White women, you are innocent until proven guilty. (AM.1.640-654) In a later interview, he reiterated the point (AM.2.436-437) and went on to explain that Black women date White men to get the things they can't get from Black men "emotionally and materialistically" (AM.2.451). Often, the relationship issue is, "What can you do for me?" (AM.2.315).

Most of the time a Black woman is going to consider herself really strong . . . And so she wants a Black man who is 'out there' . . . . And a lot of times you get a situation where the Black man is just doing, doing, doing, and the Black woman is not. White women want the cool and suave kind of Black man. . . . White women are interested in Black men because of the lifestyle that they lead: It could be from a bad childhood, stealing, or whatever, to the guy who had to sell drugs in the past. Just the ability to hustle, to think on your feet and be able to take a situation where you have little to nothing and be able to make something out of it. I think that, sometimes, that is what attracts White women to Black men. (AM.2.334-365).

In describing his interpretation of the White woman drawn to the Black man, he illustrated with the story of Nickie: "It seemed as if she was a mother and she had a son and this boyfriend was her son and throughout all of the mistakes, he would somehow get another chance. That is what I meant when I said she was a very nurturing person." (AM.2.380-384)

**Outcome Proposition 2:** In this study, a majority of the Black men frequently described both physical and non-physical features of women of American European heritage with whom they were intimately involved. Contrary to a theme that would evolve in the focus groups with Black women, neither Black men nor White women focused on physical or sexual descriptors of each other. White women often described that the men were athletic or even accomplished athletes, but sexual performance was *never* a feature of the description by White women of their Black male partners.

**Outcome Proposition 3:** A theme emerged in several of the informants' cases during categorization of units. Several of the Black men expressed a sense of *betrayal* or *abuse* by a person of their own *color* and, then, experienced a subsequent redemption by a person or persons identified as White. *Abuse* was employed to include physical abuse, sexual abuse, and extreme discrimination as catalysts in the cycle.

One participant, Al Okinawa, reflecting on his experiences as a young man, explained: "I was really overcompensating for a problem that I, well, I wasn't really acknowledging that I had a problem, but the problem was that I was feeling really serious pangs of an inferiority complex" (AO.1.1848-1853). Al talked about having a crush on his English teacher (AO.1.1108+) and other crushes on *White* females to whom he turned or who *looked out* for him. The same description of rescue was described by Victor Demure who cited several White female teachers and counselors who provided tutoring and the expense of application fees for him while in high school and college (VD.ii.8).

The *betrayal cycle* was also evidenced in the informants' declarations of *aloneness*. Okinawa identified a feeling of "Us against the world" (AO.1.1971-1974), a statement about his *best* relationships also used by Denny Rodman (DR.1.826-830+). Similarly, Okinawa stressed the importance of having "somebody on my side" (AO.1.2003-2005), a sentiment also expressed by Paul Rodgers (PR.2.395-402).

Alyn Moore explained that the problem might be that both Black men and women had had to struggle and because of it: "Black men like to run things, and so you have a Black man who likes to run things and a Black woman who won't let him, you got a problem" (AM.2.251-254). He described the need to run things was based on the desire to *not* get "played like a punk" (AM.2.290-291), a desire so strong that he will often intentionally "mess up" to end the relationship. One of the worst ways to mess up was to get involved with a White woman: "in the eyes of Black women, most of them would rather be shot than to have that happen. It is a complete smack in the face" (AM.2.262-264), an ultimate betrayal.

### **5. Focus Group Interpretations**

After nearly three years of individual recursive interviewing and analysis, the research team determined to conduct focus groups with purposive samples of targeted populations involved in the study. A group of White women who had been in relationships that crossed the color line or who had perspectives on these relationships was organized with a focus on personal experiences and the experiences of children from these unions. A second focus group was convened with the same focus topics involving Black men. Finally, a group of Black female educators was invited to reflect on crossing the color line and issues in education. A subset of women from this focus group requested an additional focus group to continue the conversation.

The first focus group interview was with 5 females, *White* women--Albanie, Frankie, Nickie, Pollie, Rosie. The interview team was composed of a female teacher, Cordelia; and a female university professor, Linnia, both White. The second focus group interview was with 3 Black men,--Aspen, Omaha, Seattle. The interview team was composed of two White female university professors, Lydia and Padelia.

The final focus group interview was with 5 Black women, who were all teachers in preK-12 classrooms--Della, Moniqa, Stella, Tacoma, and Tulsa. The interview team was composed of a Black female teacher, Sheria; and a White female university professor, Lydia. The transcription and scripting team included four females, two university professors, and two preK-12 classroom teachers, all of American of European heritage. All transcripts were returned to the informants for verification and correction.

#### **5.1 On Relationships--Black men**

The interview centered on relationships, both romantic and familial. While the focus group was more a discussion than an interview and few prompts were needed, the following presentation will connect comments from one speaker at a time, rather than attempt to capture the interactive nature of the interview discussion.

**Aspen:** My perspective is from a current relationship. I have been in a relationship 17 years; 2 children, one is almost 12 and the other is 7, both boys. I dated across the color line before my wife. Dated one other serious relationship 6 months prior to meeting my current wife from college.

My folks just passed away. I have had plenty of time to reflect on . . . what they have done. I see myself with both parents. I had a close relationship with my mother in the fact that I was the youngest of 4. . . . My father worked 2 or 3 jobs and wasn't in the home much until later on. . . . I see my personality more from my father. My father was very jovial, very warm to people. I see myself very warm, up front, caring and outgoing. My father was very outgoing. My mother was very caring but she allowed him to lead. . . . I talk to people and I find out little things that my mother and father did. It was very common for someone to move into the area looking for a job and my folks would open their home. . . . I see myself in trying to do something for mankind in my own small way. I know what my folks did meant so much to an individual, and I try to do that.

**Seattle:** To me, I see myself as a man first, and then as a Black man. It's what is in your heart. Love doesn't know color. My family accepts that--especially my mother. You have to go beyond color and look at someone's heart. Who they are, not what they are. How they perceive you and how they treat you and how you treat them. What you give and are given back. It doesn't matter what the color.

The family hurdle is about 80%. [My mother's and my] relationship was more like a sister-brother relationship. My father had made a career out of the Marines. I didn't know my father until I was 12 years old. My mother raised me as a single parent. The values that she had were that I am going to treat you like I want to be treated. We are all in a *melting pot* and have to live together. . . . It is how you treat other people. If you want respect, you give it. Those are the values she instilled in me. They will last until the day I die.

**Omaha:** My perspective would be the social and professional side to being in a mixed relationship. My present wife and I have been married 8 years. . . . I am a minister at a predominately Black church. In fact my wife is the only White, but they welcome her with open arms. . . . I don't go around saying my wife is White.

Love truly has no color. I know the terminology, verbiage "crossing the color line" because of the fact it is like crossing religion. Some religious denominations you don't go outside of that to marry. . . . In all honesty, whenever you get into a relationship like that you know it is going to be a challenge because there are some things that you cannot get past. That is on both sides. When my wife went home and told her mother she was going to marry a Black man, I thought I would have to leave the country . . . about 6 or 8 months later, she said "you are all right after all." If you are in a mixed relationship, it affects the whole family. Socially it is a challenge. People say and do little things to try to get their digs in to let you know that they don't approve of the relationship.

One of the things that is vitally important to me, and this is something I have talked to my wife about: She is a White woman and was born White and will die one. I am Black and will die Black. Culturally speaking as far as fads and adaptation, I don't want her to act Black and I'm not going to act White. As you say acting White or Black there is some inherent behavior patterns that are totally related to different cultures. There are certain things that White people do that Black people don't do and vice versa. It is not like we are trying to be somebody we are not. If it is real it has to stay real. Just be yourself. . . . If something goes wrong, it is not going to be because she is White and I'm Black. In one movie, Gregory Hines was involved with a White girl and a guy came up to him and says, "You didn't tell me that your wife was White"-- Hines says, "You didn't tell me that yours was ugly either."

## 5.2 On Relationships--White Women

The following transcript excerpts represent key incidents related by the women in the focus group regarding their experiences in interracial relationships with Black men.

**Albanie:** This past weekend, I was talking to my father, and it was a really good conversation. We live a long ways apart. We don't talk on the phone very freely because I have noticed if any other family is around, he doesn't talk much. . . . I was just thinking that it was a really wonderful conversation, and I would have to write him a note and say how much I appreciated that he had been so open with me in the conversation. It was almost as if I had thought it, and once it hit the air waves everything shattered because the next thing he said to me was . . . ([maybe to] make sure he didn't think he had lost his mind or something he delivered this to me). He said, "Well, I can't wait until the next time you come home; just make sure you don't bring a Black man." Out of nowhere. I was stunned. Where did that come from? It has been years since I have been with a man of color.

**Rosie:** My dad is the same way. . . . He doesn't have very much nice to say. My ex-husband was my college sweetheart. He was my first boyfriend, first date, first everything. [To my parents] I was a whore. When I said he was my first boyfriend, then I was a *selective* whore. They hated the fact that we lived together--so I was no better than a wild animal. When we got married, I thought things would get better; [but] that ended it and they said they would never speak to me again. . . . When I got pregnant--you can be married, but you are not really tied to him, but when you get pregnant, you are--it was horrible. My mom wrote me a letter in red ink. She is a school teacher. . . . [She said] I shouldn't be telling anyone because it is shameful to have mixed race kids, and they will never fit in anywhere because they are not going to be Black and they are not going to be White. They will never have any friends. . . . My son was in first grade. He is very light skinned. We lived in a suburb, and there was nobody there but White people. In first grade, he was asking me if he could have lighter skin. I hate for my parents to be right about this. That concerns me.

**Frankie:** I taught in this small town one year. I felt like I had to be two people. At the job, teaching, which is primarily White, I would never have told about my life after 3:30 p.m. They would have come unglued--because I was living with a "*colored* man." He was on the police department at that time, and there were 4 or 5 Hispanic/Mexican people; and we were very accepted, and we did lots with them.

**Nickie:** I was standing on the curb at a restaurant talking to an African American gentleman, and it was clearly a friendly conversation, but the police came by and asked if I was ok. I said "yes" and the police said, "Are you sure?" I said "yes." He circled around the parking lot and came back and he asked again. We were *clearly* having a friendly conversation.

**Frankie:** I had a high school girl babysitting. She encountered someone who knew the 2 kids and someone called her a "*nigger* lover."

**Albanie:** What was I paying attention to that I didn't expect that kind of explosiveness? My first experience--I can't believe it happened in the 90s. The entire family made an about face, though my sister-in-law tried to be supportive. Colleagues turned away, said you wouldn't be able to date anyone who is White.

No decent man will touch you. I wonder if I didn't help support that myth. When we first divorced I wrote [in my journal] that he was the first Black man I ever dated, and I would be by myself the rest of my life because I had shut all the doors.

**Rosie:** I am marked. I will never be wanted by a White man and they [parents] would rather you be alone than be with another Black man. I will have to raise my kids by myself. I think I perpetuate it too because I think how many White men do you know who are strong enough that they could raise, not only another man's child, but a Black man's child and have that child come up with any kind of self-esteem. I know in the military we saw women who had mixed children that married White men and their friends just teased them relentlessly. I don't even think about looking for a White man.

**Albanie:** Faulkner has a line from a story where a White woman from the novel is having the child of a man of color. Faulkner ends the story--America wasn't ready for the children of these mixed relationships. This line comes into my head more than I want. I would like to believe in equity, but I am not optimistic.

### 5.3 On Relationships--Black Women

A target topic in the focus group with black women was to respond to statements from the other focus groups. Another important consideration was the difference between Black men marrying White women and White men marrying Black women. Two of the women in this focus group, Sheria and Stella, were married to White men.

**Lydia (Interviewer):** In the Black male focus group, the men continually co-signed each other. They expressed that they felt they could be themselves in a relationship with a White woman. They didn't have to give up who they were. Why do you think they chose a White partner?

**Tacoma:** Get you a White woman and you don't have to hear all that mouth. You don't have to hear all this stuff. Are White women taught they can't get mad? When a sister gets mad, everyone will know she is mad. White women have to be taught to show anger. I notice that in schools; the loudest people in the schools are the Black females. Brothers say they are too loud and show their anger. Black guy wants not so much anger.

**Stella:** When I was in college and they had a choice of White woman or me, they would choose her because they knew they were going to get sex. They knew they weren't going to touch me. White women would pay.

**Della:** It is a different kind of sex. Black women aren't good at oral sex. White women are more inclined to give oral sex.

**Stella:** Sexually, people are turned on by the forbidden. In crossing the color line, it is going to the forbidden--sexual stimulation. The excitement of being with someone you are not supposed to be with.

**Della:** I think Black men date White women because they are trying to get back at White men for slavery. White women are the cream of the crop, and it will make White men angry.

**Stella:** When people see mixed couples, they think *slavery*. The way people were treated during that time and the pain today from Black males dating White females. Rape is thought of and they are jailed. If it were a Chinese woman, it wouldn't be a problem. The White woman was always an enemy of the Black female, even during slavery. Viewing the Black male with the White woman, and viewing the Black woman with the White male are two different issues. The Black woman is not given support like the Black male is. When I first met my husband, I saw White. But when love came, he was just my husband, companion and friend. Doesn't matter what color. I love my mom because she is my mom but not because she is Black.

**Sheria:** Maybe it isn't racial at first, but that we have an affinity for people who are like us.

**Monica:** I agree with Stella. Not all interracial marriages are the same.

**Stella:** When you make it an issue, it will always be an issue. If you don't make it an issue, then it won't be an issue. Each individual marriage has a reason; just like two Blacks have a reason to marry. Don't look at it as an interracial marriage. Start by not making it an issue. Accept it as two people who love each other.

### 5.4 On Children and Education

The three groups also discussed issues of multiracial children and factors regarding education. Following are excerpts from the groups' perspectives on these areas. Lydia and Sheria are the interviewers.



**Aspen:** I remember when I was in college in the 70s, in the college environment. Open-minded. It [crossing the color line] was okay on campus grounds, but off there it was different. Now it is different--the 70s compared to 90s. Marriages that are filed for right now for Black men are approximately 45% interracial.

When people come to America, they look for a job and look for education and look at the university. Look at the student population. With the change, you are going to meet someone you like. With that, you have a blending.

**Omaha:** At my workplace, they had asked me if I would play Santa Claus. I said sure. This little boy came up to me as I was handing out candy canes. I look at things like this relative to who I am and how I think about my relationships and about what happen in society. This little boy was probably about 7 or 8 years old. I handed him a candy cane and he rolled his eyes. He shook his head and came to me and said, "You can't be Santa Claus." I said, "Why is that?" He said, "Because you are Black." I said I was from the South Pole. He said okay and walked away and told his friends. You look at things like that and it makes you feel good about who you are. I could have developed an attitude. I have a collection of how Santa looks all over the world.

**Frankie:** One of the girls last year was from a divorced family. He made it a point to say the new one was not divorced, and told me they went to a good church. Commented even though they seemed like good friends it would be hard for their girls to date our boys because they are biracial.

**Nickie:** My grandma would say, "I'm not racist but I don't want to be the first of my friends to have a bi-racial grandchild. Grandma looked at Tate--my betrothed who is Asian--what do you think is going to happen here?"

**Frankie:** There have been a couple of incidents on the bus but that is because they have 5th through 12th grade riding all on the same bus. He came home last year one day and said, "A couple of those 7<sup>th</sup>-grade boys are calling me *oreo*." He didn't even understand. I explained.

**Rosie:** My son is so white skinned that you can't tell. I don't introduce him as "this is my son; he is biracial, and I have a Black husband." I don't do that. When his dad picked him up one day, he was acting really funny and he said [to his Dad]: "You are Black." He is 3 years old. For weeks, he didn't even speak to his father. He had nothing to say. . . . We [had] never talked about it. I assumed he just knew.

**Frankie:** We grew up with a lot of racial problems in junior high and high school. My husband doesn't "act like a Black person," friends will say. They had never associated with a Black person, and they were glad to get to know him. It changed their thinking. People run into one person of a race and get terrible ideas and it takes a long time to break down that prejudice.

**Moniqa:** Early on in school, I was not accepted. In 5th grade, it got better. In middle school, the process started over. In 7th grade, we got another African American student. He wasn't accepted by anyone. Even my friends didn't accept him because he was Black. A child told me that she afraid to touch me because my color might rub off. After 12 years, some friends started perceiving me as Black *and* as a person. It has to be a long-term exposure.

**Tacoma:** Black people are racist also. We blame, and we do the same kind of things. Have to understand how this country was formed--slavery--it was formed wrong from the beginning: "You will never be equal and as good as us." After getting rid of Jim Crow? Things just didn't automatically get better. Asking kids, who are they going to get mad at? There were a lot of people that died and gave their lives so you would not have to be a slave anymore. You don't know which side of the fence their forefathers were on. Even during slavery, there were a lot of Whites who helped Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. Whom are you going to get mad at? There is nobody sitting here that is responsible for any of that stuff. There were a lot who didn't like Jim Crow and all of that. When we watched Martin Luther King from Montgomery to Memphis, there were a lot of European Americans who stood up. He never would have accomplished what he accomplished had there not been Whites that got on that bandwagon and helped him out. Whom are you going to get mad at?

**Lydia:** What about interracial children? We're seeing an expansion of multi-race children. Will that end the division between Black/White?

**Tacoma:** African Americans accept them faster. More mixes would help. KKK was afraid of losing the pure race. Trying to get rid of racism is going to be long and hard. Blacks are prejudiced against Blacks. European Americans are prejudiced against *White trash*. An Amish man came and talked to one of our classes. They have prejudice also. There is an "other side of the track" that doesn't have anything to do with color.

**Della:** My daughter answers my phone and someone says she sounds White. What makes you *sound* White? Correct English.

**Sheria:** Do people relate speaking correct English as being White?

**Della:** Ghetto rats do. I wasn't going to raise my child like that. There are good people in every race.

**Sheria:** Do biracial students make friends with one race opposed to the other?

**Stella:** Yes, one boy will say he is Black. But he is biracial. He wants to say he is Black. I look for books with biracial couples. I've found two.

**Tulsa:** I was furious when Tiger Woods wouldn't say he was Black. We didn't have anyone in the sport. Then he explained his point of view, that he wasn't going to slight either one of his parents, then it was okay. Why would he slight his mother and say he was just Black.

**Tacoma:** Need to start at home. My husband, Les, went fishing with his friend and his friend's 5-year-old son, Sammy. Out on the fishing bank, little Sammy said, "I just hate Black people." I know his dad just wanted to dig a hole. He said, "Why do you say that? Les is Black. I like Les." Sammy answered: "The other day when I went to the park, a little Black boy took my swing from me." His dad admonished him, "You can't hate people because of one little thing like that." Sammy concluded, "Okay, next time I'll just kick his butt." If his dad had, instead, supported his son's statement, Sammy would have been encouraged to dislike people he considered Black.

## 6. Crossing the Color Line--Interpreting the Issues

Black men in this study attributed the values that they carry regarding the color line to their home upbringing, especially to their mothers. They emphasized that love doesn't know color--a theme reiterated by White women in the study. The emphasis on children having experiences that affirmed that love has no color was stressed. Equally, those children needed to see the demonstration that people are people first, not colors.

Several participants in the study had recently relocated their families so the population that they lived around would be more comfortable for their interracial children. They changed schools, not locations. Black men and White women expressed a belief that they have a different set of challenges that need to be accepted in the process of crossing the color line in relationships and in raising children. Both expressed knowing the experience of loving, caring, committed relationships with partners from across the color line--a color line just as many expressed was often indiscernible to them. Contrary to earlier interpretations of Black-White relationships and the theory of hypo gamy, *none* of the participant informants cited social status as a reason for their relationships. Informants agreed that forcing children to choose the racial identity of only one parent was wrong. Athlete Tiger Woods was offered as an example of an individual with parents from two different races/heritages that has refused to identify with only one parent's race.

But perhaps the clearest understanding that members of the research team continue to ponder and analyze is the obvious contradictory perceptions of the various actors in the drama of Black-White relations. Given the open, often painful, candor of the participant informants in these interviews, the team seldom doubted the authenticity of the perceptions shared in these transcripts. Yet, the contradictions of perceptions are blatant--how people perceived themselves as Black men, White women, or Black women; how they perceived members of the other groups; and how they believed they were perceived. Another apparent dissimilarity was the frequent reference to *slavery* in the focus group with women of African heritage, while neither the term nor the reference to the historical issues was mentioned by the men in the focus group.

In the ongoing struggle to understand racism and the impact on a new generation of interracial children, the social, emotional, and experiential factors influencing these perspectives require further analysis.

### 6.1 Lingering Issues

Like any valid research project, ours has generated more questions than it has answered. Like any valid ethnographic inquiry, questions continue to emerge from new interviews and ongoing analysis. An important assumption of this research team is that research should provide richer, fuller understandings of the dynamics of teaching and learning, new perspectives, even new paradigms from which teachers perceive the importance of interactions with and between students. Issues and areas for further investigation as the interviews and review of literature continue include the following:

1. In at least two of the 6 male cases, as well as at least two of the 5 female cases, childhood sexual abuse was discussed. Is there a connection between abuse and choices made about relationship partners and, if so, is choosing a partner from another race part of that dynamic?
2. Is *colorism*, a bias toward people of a certain color, a driving force in the attraction of men of color to White women? Of White women to Black men? Of Black men to Black women? Of Black women to Black men? Are the issues of color and complexion issues directly related to slavery?
3. What impact (if any) does the complexion of a man's mother have on his dating preferences?
4. How do we identify these perspectives as they relate to school issues involving children of multiracial parents? Children of monoracial parents? Teachers from monoracial backgrounds and experiences?

## 6.2 On Our Way to Where?

What drives this extensive exploration? Perhaps Joel Crohn (1995) said it best in the introduction to *Mixed Matches, How To Create Successful Interracial, Interethnic, and Interfaith Relationships*:

All of us, whether we are intermarried or not, are caught between our need for continuity with tradition and the necessity of adapting to a rapidly changing world. . . . And all of us need to learn how to understand, negotiate, and creatively use our differences in an increasingly multicultural world. (p. 19) We believe that interracial relationships offer a positive dimension to the diverse world in which we live, particularly in the promotion of harmonious Black-White relationships—a position that has been supported by other researchers, as well (see Yancey & Yancey, 1997). We intend that our research effort will aid in the creation of an intercultural world focused on people rather than on color. Our interviews confirm that in American society, schools, and families, we have not accomplished this level of equity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this research was presented at the AAER conference and then published in the proceedings: Huber, T., & Bakken, L. (2010). Race and Gender at the crossroads: Black men and White women in cross-racial relationships. *Journal for the Advancement of Educational Research: Association for the Advancement of Educational Research*, 5(1),120-135.

<sup>2</sup> Note on word choice: The research team in this study prefers the use of *multiracial*, as opposed to *biracial* or *interracial*, because the term seems to most appropriately represent the *multiple* cultures from which we have all descended. The term *interracial*, however, seems to more accurately represent the implication of the two sides of the metaphorical *Black-White* color line. Also, although it is appropriate to hyphenate compound adjectives, to avoid creating hyphenated Americans, the hyphen will not be used in descriptors to describe people. For further discussion of the hyphen in this usage, see Henry L. Gates (1992, p. 125.) The implicit intention is to stress that all people in the review of literature and participants in this study are Americans by nationality, though their unique cultural affiliation, racial/ethnic classification, and developmental scripts distinguish them. *Black* and *White* will be used when it is specifically the issue of *color* that is being discussed. In direct quotes and in the context of discussing direct quotes, the original author's word choice has been maintained. (For a review of the findings of studies regarding terms of racial designation, see Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992, pp. 70-72.)

<sup>3</sup> Another note on word choice: In keeping with the work on multicultural/diversity knowledge bases and assessment reported by the research team of Huber, Alagic, Gibson, & Mitchell (2004; see also Huber, 2004; Huber, Mitchell, Alagic, & Gibson, 2006), in this study the usage of preference is to place the emphasis on the person and the nationality first, then to identify the nation of origin or heritage (e.g., American of African heritage or American of European heritage). However, since this study deals with the specific issue of the color line, *Black* and *White* are used.

<sup>4</sup> All names of participants have been coded to protect identities and guarantee confidentiality. IRB was obtained through the Office of Research, the Wichita State University.