

Challenges in addressing race related issues with interracial couples

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History of Interracial Marriage in the United States

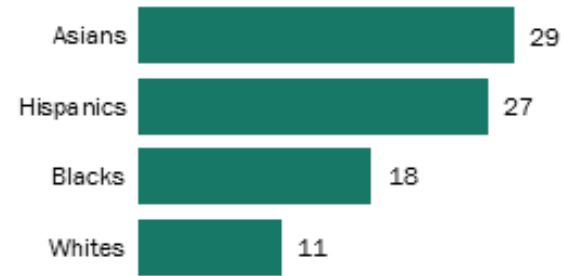
- Largest period of interracial “mixing” during the 17th century; rape of black slaves by white men but also legitimate marriage between whites and blacks of similar status
- Peak of slave trade in 1776 coincided with segregationist practices and laws
- Anti-miscegenation laws adapted over time to ensure whites and blacks and other non-white groups maintained separation and peaked after emancipation of slaves
- 1967 Loving vs. Virginia case struck down anti-miscegenation laws in 16 states
- In 2000, Alabama became the last state to legalize interracial marriage

Current Statistics on Interracial Marriage in the US

- In 1967, when the miscegenation laws were overturned in the US, 3% of all newlyweds were interracial
- By 1980, that doubled to 7%
- By 2015, almost tripled to 17%
- Largest interracial pairing between Asian women and white men (36%-40%)

About three-in-ten Asian newlyweds in the U.S. are intermarried

% of newlyweds who are intermarried



Note: Whites, blacks and Asians include only non-Hispanics. Hispanics are of any race. Asians include Pacific Islanders.
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2014-2015 American Community Survey (IPUMS).
"Intermarriage in the U.S. 50 Years After Loving v. Virginia"

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Psychodynamic Interpretations of Interracial Pairings

The decision to marry outside of one's race was considered to be a “symptom” of:

- Acute feelings of rebellion in one or both partners
- Sexual curiosity and desire for the “forbidden” or “exotic other”
- Internalized racism on the part of the non-white partner



Unique Challenges for Interracial Relationships

- Implicit or explicit disapproval and judgements from social communities
- Discrimination and prejudicial treatment in public arenas (the couple as a unit may be subject to the “isms” and microaggressions most commonly experienced by the historically excluded partner)
- Ruptures and tensions between the couple if not in alignment with how to cope/respond to microaggressions experienced as a unit or by one of the partners
- Ruptures and tension due to racial histories and other differences in interpretation and understanding of social events, microaggressions, etc.

Unique Meaning for Interracial Couples

- Greater sense of unity and support due to lack of support/discrimination in various spaces
- Greater understanding of racial history and other differences that increases empathy and perspectives



Interracial Couples and Conversations Regarding Racial Issues

Kyle Killian (2010)

- More than half of white partners in one of his qualitative studies (using 10 black/white couples) felt that their black spouse was being “hypersensitive” to racial incidents
- Little over half of the black spouses experienced being “turned back” or discouraged from exploring painful racial experiences with their spouse.
- The majority of couples in his study experienced “race talk” as being transgressive, supporting the dominant discourse that discussing differences or racial issues is not welcomed



“New” Definition of Racism (Steven Roberts, 2022)

- “Just as citizens of capitalistic societies reinforce capitalism, whether they identify as capitalist or not, and whether they want to or not, citizens of racist societies reinforce racism, whether they identify as racist or not, and whether they want to or not”
- The most insidious form of racism today is passive racism, which is overlooking or denying the existence of racism, **one’s participation in perpetuating racism**, and encouraging others to do the same
- Reactive vs. proactive anti-racism
 - Reactive is reflecting, taking action, and discussing race related issues after an event occurs
 - Proactive racism involves taking preventative steps, on multiple levels, to address racism beyond specific events and ongoing examination of one’s own behavior

Microaggressions

Racial Microaggressions were first introduced by Chester Pierce in the 1970's and later defined and more rigorously studied by Derald Wing Sue (2007) as “...brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial messages against a person of a target group. They are not limited to human encounters alone but also be environmental in nature.....”

Categories include:

- Micro-assaults: explicit racial derogation, name calling
- Micro-insult: subtle snubs, demeaning a person's heritage or identity
- Micro-invalidation: exclude, negate, or nullify the experiences of the person of color

*The term “micro” can be deceiving as there is nothing “micro” about these events but the word is used to connote how common and invisible some of these events are

Specific Types of Microaggressions

Microinsults:

- Ascription of intelligence, competence, or worth
- Second-class citizenship
- Pathologizing cultural values/communication
- Exoticization

Microinvalidations:

- Alien in own land
- Invalidation of interethnic differences
- Denial of racial/ethnic reality
- Invisibility

Why are they enacted?

Person who commit racial microaggressions often do so because of:

- A lack of understanding self as racial being with a specific socialization
- Lack of exposure and “mutual contact” with certain groups
- Lack of awareness of power dynamics
- Fusion of “historically included groups” with “normal, right, beautiful, better, and true”

Messages Behind Microaggressions

You are not normal; the way you are is inferior or less than

- The way you are or do things is “funny” or “strange” or “crazy” (expressed by laughing; joking about a difference, appropriating it for humor, etc.)
- I should not be expected to conform or adapt to you

You are an outsider, “other,” or don’t belong

- I don’t trust you
- I do not see you as a “real” American or “true expert”

Messages Behind Microaggressions

I get to define you, your reality, or assume who you are

- You don't conform to my idea of who *should be* (surprise is expressed because a stereotype isn't confirmed)
- I can assume how you connect with your ethnic/racial identity
- It's all in your head

You are all the same

- I do not need or want take the time to see you as a unique person within your group

Application to Interracial Couples (white/non-white)

Oftentimes, while a white partner may be sympathetic to the struggles of the non-white partner, it is not always the case that the white partner enters the relationship fully aware of their white identity and the privileges that come with it, including several tendencies that can negatively impact the relationship:

- Explaining away microaggressions through intent or non-race related reasons
- Not being aware when microaggressions have occurred to partner or in the relationship or refusing to take actions
- Deflecting exploration of their own racial identity or race related topics
- Asserting their worldviews or perspectives are more valid or the “more true” interpretation of an event

Racial Identity Development

White Racial Identity Model (Helms)

- Contact
- Disintegration
- Reintegration
- Pseudo/Independence
- Immersion/emersion
- Autonomy

People of Color Identity Model (Tatum)

- Pre-Encounter
- Encounter
- Immersion/Emersion
- Internalization

Questions...

- In the therapy room, how often do you reference your racial identity when sharing a viewpoint or influence in the room?
- How often do you name or explore how racial socialization shapes couples' experiences and with one another?
- Have you ever addressed racial differences between an interracial couple?
- Have you addressed a racial microaggression between you and the couple or within the couple?

Case Example: Cari and Mike

Mike: 30 year old, cisgender male, White American, grew up in VA to a middle class family, works in software/web development

Cari: 30 year old, cisgender female, African American, grew up in VA to a middle class family, PhD student

History: Met at church in childhood, began dating later in adulthood

Presenting Concern: Cari hesitant to get married after four years of dating despite owning a home together. Suggested couples counseling to explore barriers to commitment, ruptures from conversations tied to race related issues

Racial Issues:

Mike: tends to invalidate Cari's comments about racial issues and categorizes them as "serious discussions I need to be prepared for." Chooses to view many situations or events as non-race related and having an "objective truth" that usurps subjective experiences

Cari: avoids discussing race related issues or reactions with M due to feeling invalidated and shut down; contributes to lack of emotional commitment

Racial socialization impacting perception of events

Cari: this just happened last night. These moments are probably a lot more common than I let myself realize sometimes. M was watching a comedian who made a joke about getting a “pubic” haircut. My sister got a similar comment about her hair in childhood when it was cut short. It was painful. It’s a derogatory reference to black hair.

Mike: I had been drinking and didn’t want to have a “serious race talk” in that moment. I ended up trying to make a strong point about why the comment wasn’t racist or even referring to black hair...the comedian was just commenting on short body hair that curls.

Interactions with extended family

Mike: I try really hard to protect Cari from even interacting with some of my extended family at large gatherings in case someone says something offensive

Cari: We've tried to talk about this before and gotten into arguments. I'm on board with reducing spending time together when some not very sensitive relatives are present, but once we are there, avoiding and having to think about where I stand or who I end up speaking to doesn't feel right and takes more work. If something is said, I would prefer M confront it, either there or after...

Mike: if something comes up, I can try, but I'm not even that close to some of them, so what's the point of saying anything if it's only going to make future contact awkward?

Case Example: Patrick & Sonya

Patrick: 29 year old, cisgender male, Irish American, Caucasian, grew up in the Boston area, upper middle class childhood and adulthood, works in private equity

Sonya: 28 year old, cisgender female, Punjabi American, South Asian, grew up in CA, upper middle class childhood and adulthood, works in consulting

History: Met at a MBA event in 2017, dating for two years, currently living separately and thinking about moving in together

Presenting Concern: communication issues, navigating Sonya's relationship with her family (high conflict), and wanting deepened understanding of their social/cultural differences

Racial/Ethnic Issues:

Patrick: avoidance of reflection, binary thinking, viewing racism as something "others" do and struggle to see himself as part of a racist system, lack of critical lens on US history, indirectly dismissive of some of Sonya's views

Sonya: defensiveness, condescending attitude towards Patrick around issues of race/ethnic differences, struggle to feel power in identity as Indian woman due to microaggressions in work setting and be "in process" with Pat around racial issues

Different Perspective on US History and Personal Salience

Patrick: All I did was post a picture honoring WWII vets, my grandfather was a vet, I'm proud of his service and our military

Sonia: I'm not saying you can't be proud of your grandpa, I'm just so frustrated how you can't also acknowledge the harm that was done during WWII, including what the US did to Japanese Americans

Patrick: Sure...but I'd rather focus on the good that came out of the US's involvement in WWII

Sonia: Focusing on the "good" is exactly why racism persists...I get so enraged when he makes statements like this!

Patrick: You have a real way of trying to make me feel small...can I take pride in any part of who I am or do I need to downplay it to make you more comfortable?

Microaggressions from MIL, Differences in Perspectives and Response

Sonia: when I first met Patrick's mom, she told me "I love chicken tikka masala." This was so awkward, I mean, this dish isn't even Indian first of all. And second, why is she assuming this is even related to me? She's made other comments like this one and Patrick says nothing to her

Patrick: She was just trying to relate...granted it was the wrong reference

Sonia: One issue between the two of us (to the therapist) is how he always focuses on intent and removes himself or his family from doing any harm. It's really alienating. I mean, your parents even made a comment how there was no racism when you went to X high after the "black at X high" instagram page came out...like it didn't exist when you were there!

Learnings from working with Interracial Couples

- Focus on impact on the BIPOC partner's experiences and disrupt the tendency to deny or minimize the BIPOC partner's narrative
- Provide psychoeducation about racial socialization, identity development, racial privilege, and how this shapes perception of events
- Introduce creation of individual and joint strategies for confronting, addressing, and coping with microaggressions between the couple, family members, and others
- Do not be afraid to explore “racial differences” vs. just cultural/familial/personality differences!

Thank you!

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