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A Qualitative Study of Interracial Dating Among College Students

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Abstract

We present the results of a qualitative research study involving interracial dating on a U.S. university campus. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 college students (10 couples) who currently were involved in interracial dating relationships. Participants repeatedly told us of experiences they had relating to public interaction. These involved dynamics relating to religion, friends and acquaintances, and prejudice and discrimination incidences. Additionally, themes emerged relating to the couple's interpersonal relationships. These included their own reactions to discriminatory behavior, being thick-skinned about their interracial status, interracial sensitivity experienced by the African-American partner, and experiences of shared culture connectedness. Finally, the couples related common suggestions for future couples who consider interracial dating.

Un Esudio Cualitativo sobre Citas Interraciales entre Estudiantes Universitarios

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Resumen

Presentamos los resultados de un estudio de investigación cualitativa sobre citas interraciales en un campus universitario de Estados Unidos. Realizamos entrevistas semiestructuradas con 20 estudiantes universitarios (10 parejas) que actualmente participan en relaciones de noviazgo interraciales. Los participantes de estas experiencias nos contaron repetidamente las experiencias que tenían en relación a sus interacciones públicas. Éstas involucraban dinámicas relacionadas con la religión, amigos y conocidos e incidencias de prejuicios y discriminación. Además, surgieron temas relativos a las relaciones interpersonales de pareja. Estos incluyen sus propias reacciones al comportamiento discriminatorio, siendo poco sensibles a las relativas a su estado interracial, a la sensibilidad interracial experimentada por la pareja afroamericana y a las experiencias de conectividad de la cultura compartida. Por último, las parejas relacionarosn sugerencias comunes para futuras parejas que considerarann citas interraciales.

Palabras Clave: citas interraciales; racismo; afro-americanos; investigación cualitativa

I nterracial dating in the United States encompasses a complex history due to strained relations at times among different races. Social prejudices, segregation, slavery, religious beliefs, and misinformation influenced the intensity of these relations. Interracial relationships were outlawed in many regions of the country during the time of slavery and beyond. Infractions resulted in imprisonment and punishment, including death (Todd & McKinney, 1992). Prejudice and discrimination towards interracial relationships was still deeply rooted and prevalent into the twentieth century, particularly in some regions of the South. According to Davidson (1992), 16 states still prohibited interracial marriages until the Supreme Court declared those laws unconstitutional in 1967. Public attitudes have somewhat since the desegregation movement of the 1960's, and more individuals are willing to engage in interracial relationships (Fiebert, Karamol, & Kasdan, 2000; Knox, Zusman, Buffington, & Hemphill, 2000). Interracial marriages have become incrementally more popular in the past few decades (Yee, 2012). Moore (1999) reported that marriages between African-American males and Caucasian females increased eight-fold over a period of three decades, and marital rates between African-American females and Caucasian males rose as well (Lewis & Ford-Robertson, 2010).

Several factors may have contributed to the growing popularity of interracial relationships. First, the United States is becoming more racially diverse (Healey, 2012). This increased proximity and availability among races influences dating selection (Craig-Henderson, 2011). Second, desegregation and considerable efforts to promote racial equality have affected the inclined rates interracial marriages. Social scientists use the increase of interracial unions as one indicator of integration and assimilation. Smith and Jones (2011) indicate that if people are unwilling to engage in interracial relationships, then racial assimilation in a particular culture is unlikely.

Third, changing religious beliefs influence interracial marriages. Some churches and other religious institutions actively discouraged interracial relationships. The much-publicized case of Bob Jones University recently changing its policy on interracial dating is an example (Nordlinger, 2000). Desegregation, increased racial tolerance, and the promotion of social unity in religious institutions have

changed their policies and no longer disprove of interracial relationships.

Several studies examined multiple characteristics of participants in interracial relationships. General congruence is found on many of these characteristics. Those most likely to interracially date include both African-American and Caucasian men, younger persons, those who live and interact in integrated settings, and those who have previously dated interracially. Those least likely to date interracially include young black women, middle-aged-to-older individuals, and those living and interacting in non-diverse settings. Research also suggests that Southern influence exacerbates prejudice and discrimination against African Americans (Waldrep, 2011). The South has a stormy racial past, including the horrors of slavery. Research shows that though the South has improved racially, race is still a sensitive issue (Feagin, 2011).

Researchers have studied interracial marriage extensively, but Wilson, McIntosh, and Insana (2007) indicate that little research has been conducted on interracial dating. Due to American views on dating and marriage, people who interracially date are not necessarily similar to those who interracially marry. Americans tend to view marriage as a more committed, permanent relationship and view dating as short-term, non-committal, and recreational. Thus, experts conjecture that interracial dating may be more socially acceptable than interracial marriage (Yancey, 2002). Solsberry (1994) and Lewis and Ford-Robertson (2010) reported that most interracial dating relationships occur among college students, whereas most interracial marriages are between older, previously married middle-class persons living and interacting in integrated settings. Consequently, differing characteristics between those who interracially date and those who interracially marry require independent research that focuses specifically on dating.

In addition, Foeman and Nance (2002) and Tyson (2011) indicate that only a handful of qualitative research studies exist that specifically address interracial dating. Thus, such research studies are needed due to the increase of these relationships and the paucity of similar studies, helping researchers better understand the dynamics involved within interracial dating milieu. Quantitative studies provide helpful data relating to characteristics of interracial relationships. The research

question we addressed in the present study was the following: what are the phenomenological constructs experienced by college students who choose to date interracially? Qualitative research is needed to personalize the data and vocalize the experiences and views of people involved in this activity. Here, we give voice to an underrepresented group and believe the findings will be useful in a larger research context to eventually understand the broader perspectives regarding American interracial dating.

Sample

Twenty individuals were selected as subjects for the present study. They consisted of 10 heterosexual interracial dating couples where one of the persons in the relationship was Caucasian and one was African American or bi-racial. Nine of the females were Caucasian, and 1 female was African American. Four of the males were bi-racial, 5 were African American, and 1 was Caucasian. Couples had dated from 2 months to 2 years, and the average length of relationships was 11 months. One couple was comprised of a Caucasian woman and a Kenyan man. Most of our sample was taken from students enrolled in a private, selective, rural, Midwest, comprehensive university, enrolling around 3,000 students. Two students dated individuals from different colleges, and we included those two persons in our sample. The individuals ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old. Most couples were from the Midwest and Eastern United States, with one from Western United States and one from out of the country. The individuals described themselves as having been reared in a wide range of cultural backgrounds, including rural, suburban, and urban settings. Likewise, participants indicated a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds: high, medium, and low. Consequently, our sample represented, overall, a wide-selection of individuals from multiple milieus.

Criterion sampling (Silverman & Marvasti, 2008) was the basis of the subjects being selected for the study. That is, we did not impose any exclusionary criteria but, rather, included all individuals who met the criterion of being in an interracial dating relationship at the time the study was conducted. The institution is a mostly residential campus (98%), so intimate connections for locating the individuals were

generally feasible. Our sample was selected via informal means where we made natural associations and observations, inviting individuals to participate in the study through personal (face-to-face) requests. We did not issue a general campus call (e.g., bulk e-mail) for all who were interracially dating to identify themselves and volunteer for participation in the study. Following this protocol may have been interpreted by some as being invasive with respect to the privacy of the couple's interpersonal relationships. There were no couples whom we approached and asked to participate in the study who refused to be interviewed. Also, although obviously they could discontinue at any time in the study, there was no attrition among the participants. The interviews took place over a time frame of 2.5 years.

The institution from which the study's subjects were drawn is mostly Caucasian (94%). In this milieu, few students on campus are thought to have interracially dated at the time of our data collection. Approximately half of individuals in the sample used for the present study had previous interracial dating experience. All participants stated that they had not previously decided to date interracially; rather, the relationships occurred in the natural course of meeting the other individual and naturally developing romantic feelings for them. The names used in the article for reading clarity are pseudonyms.

Method

We designed a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2012) whereby we could begin to understand and report the experiences of the subjects—as they had come to view their dating worlds. Consequently, in-depth interviews comprised the primary means of data collection. The interviews were semi-structured in order to allow reflexivity with the participants. That is, we responded to our interviewees, and they also engaged with us. This method allowed the participants sometimes to take the interviews in their own directions—giving voice to their ideals and perspectives, apart from formal interview questions (Silverman, 2011). At times, the participants took us in unanticipated directions with stories or vignettes that illustrated their points. In true qualitative inquiry form, our end goal was to allow the participants themselves opportunities to tell their stories and experiences (Alvesson, 2011).

The study's design was inductive. As such, we did not begin with a theory or template by which to interpret the data. Rather, as a

phenomenological study, we wanted to garner the details of the subjects' experiences and try to portray their realities the best we humanly could, rather than filtering the experiences through a theoretical grid or ideological system. Following the advantages noted by Firmin (2006), we conducted the interviews in waves. The intervening time in between interviews allowed for deeper reflection regarding the data collected and conferences among the interviewers for thematic analyses. In addition to interviewing each person individually, we also interviewed the participants as couples. This provided the opportunity for cross-comparisons in the data provided by each participant individually (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Mason, 2002). Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

Open coding strategies followed Maxwell's (2012) protocol. This means we did not begin with any preconceived or theoretical constructs but, rather, approached the data inductively. Constant comparison was used as the interviews progressed and we sifted through the participants' information (Bereska, 2003). This means that after the respective interviews, we compared the data from the transcripts with previous interviews, appraising similarities in constructs, words, and ideology. The coding process involved asking key questions, conducting organizational review, concept mapping, and visual displays of findings (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2011). Regular meetings among the researchers allowed for reflection, comparison, and contrasted-analysis of the coding process. Consistent with Bogdan and Biklen (2007) and (Marshall, 2002), some initial codes later were dropped due to lack of plenary support. In other places, categories were combined or collapsed to enhance or complement organizational structure. Final themes were only reported for conclusions that possessed clear consensus among the couples (Slayton & Llosa, 2005).

Initially, we found repeated discussions among the participants relating to public, family, peer approval, religious experiences, personal comfort levels, and racism/discrimination. The final themes shared consensus among the participants and we experienced saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) of the data with the 20 individuals interviewed during the study relative to these constructs. Saturation means that adding new participants to our sample, in this case after 20 individuals, was not adding substantially new data in the interview data.

Consequently, we discontinued interviewing participants at that number, believing our sample size was sufficient for accomplishing the study's objectives (Neuman, 2006).

The results comprised two over-arching categories: issues relating to extrinsic and intrinsic dynamics. Internal validity for the study was enhanced via a number of means. One was through member checks (Carlson, 2010) that were initiated with the participants following data analysis and coding. The participants indicated essential concurrence with the reported findings, enhancing the study's internal validity. Another was through generating data trails (Armino & Hultgren, 2002). This involved grounding each finding in specific data from the participants' transcripts. The process is helpful for future researchers who wish to further pursue the study and also to ensure that sufficient data exists to adequately support the reported findings. Third, we utilized an independent qualitative researcher to review the work (Tracy, 2010). This research technique helps researchers to ensure that inadvertent bias has not entered into the analysis process. As such, we were assured that an outside observer drew essentially the same conclusions we did, when independently viewing the data and proposed themes.

In sum, we believe that the study represents a solid research protocol (De Wet & Erasmus, 2005). Following the standard procedures for rigorous qualitative research, our aim was to generate a study that possessed both robust design and process. Internal validity issues were deliberated both at the time of the study's design and also throughout the implementation of the data collection and analysis. We consider the final product aptly to represent the consensus of the participants who provided interviews for the study which is the ultimate aim of a phenomenological, qualitative research study (Dixon-Woods, Shaw, & Smith, 2004; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002).

Results

The results showed issues relating to both extrinsic and extrinsic matters. Extrinsically, the participants addressed religious issues, how they perceived their friends' reactions, and matters pertaining to alleged prejudice. More intrinsically, participants also addressed their own

reactions to discriminatory behavior, the importance of possessing fortitude regarding their interracial status, the sensitivity experienced by their partners, and shared culture connectedness dynamics. Through the process of in-depth interviewing, the participants also related various suggestions for others considering participation in interracial dating.

Issues Regarding How Couples are Viewed by Others

Religious. Most of the participants in the study stated that they had not experienced blatant opposition to interracial dating from religious clergy or friends whom they considered very religious. They did report, however, some indirect opposition. That is, they indicated that these individuals expressed unwarranted reservations about the dating relationship or others conveyed subtle, negative responses to them. Moreover, these responses were said to be based solely on the color of the partner's skin and not on substantive matters, such as character qualities. Jim illustrated this point: "It wasn't like a direct issue, it was more of an assumed issue… assumed that you stayed together as far as your race is concerned." Heather concurred: "She (her mother) kind of warned me that even within our church there will be people that don't like me dating Jason. But I haven't experienced any of that yet, and even if I do, I'm okay with that." Nathan added that he had encountered some institutional racism and felt that many Protestant churches focus their ministry mainly on people of the Caucasian ethnicity. This dynamic, Nathan felt, carried-over to interracial dating milieu when he and his girlfriend attended church together. Overall, the participants in the study felt as through they experienced more subtle (but not overt) racist reactions from persons in religious contexts than they did in completely secular ones.

   Family. A couple of interviewed individuals reported no reaction from immediate family. Allison, for one, said: "My family really hasn't acted one way or the other. I think my mom really doesn't care." A couple of the participants had experienced negative extended family reaction. Kari, for example, had not completely discussed interracial relationships with her family. She reported: "The topic hasn't really been approached head on, but I know my dad has strong opposition to the idea. And it could be because it's a new idea to him, and he's been

brought up very traditionally—that white women marry white men." Serenity shared that it took time for her mom to accept her interracial relationship and her Kenyan boyfriend:

> After she initially met him, she would make negative comments to me about him and our relationship. However, after she saw him more and especially after he stayed with us for a couple of weeks, she was more approving of our relationship. Since his last stay, she has not made any negative comments.

The other participants, however, had experienced some form of positive reaction from immediate family. Nathan, who is bi-racial, said of his parents' reaction: "They support it, if anything my parents encourage me to date girls of more different ethnic backgrounds." Nicole also had experienced interracial relationships in her family, with her mother's grandfather being Caucasian and her sister engaged to a Caucasian man. She surmised: "They're fine with it—they don't really care… nobody really has a problem." Sabrina expressed gratitude for her family's support: "I think my family has responded really positively… and they've been a great support."

In contrast to generally having the support of their immediate family, approximately half of interviewees reported experiencing negative responses or opposition to their interracial dating relationships from extended family members. Julie commented on her grandfather: "You can tell that he's not incredibly happy with it… my grandpa was just kind of like, 'Well, because I love you, I'm just going to keep my mouth shut.'"   Obviously, this type of reaction generates a level of undercurrent tension.   It has the potential for being the proverbial elephant in the room that nobody wants to discuss. Serenity shared: "My grandma does not approve of interracial relationships, though her opinion does not deter me from entering into them… [she] does not know him [her Kenyan boyfriend], but doesn't approve of me dating 'colored' guys." Jim related that his great-grandpa did not know about his interracial relationship, and if he did, he would have a significant problem with it. Jim shared that he did not plan to tell him until the relationship became more serious and headed toward marriage. He explained that he did not want his African-American girlfriend to experience his great-grandfather's opposition and rejection prematurely.

Allison likewise expressed concern for her extended family's expected negative reaction to meeting her bi-racial boyfriend for the first time. She stated that she thought her extended family may not be sensitive to his race and may not approve of their relationship. Nathan shared that his extended family was alienated by his own parent's interracial union. He explained that he was not close to his extended family and was not sure about their reaction to his Caucasian girlfriend because of his parent's interracial marriage. Nathan stated his sentiments in the following manner: "That's a tough issue because my parents are an interracial couple and there has been a long history of divisions in our family because of that, they had only started to heal when me and my sister were born."

Friend/Acquaintance. About half of interviewees reported that their friends and acquaintances did not mention or seem to mind their interracial relationships. For example, David stated: "No one really has mentioned it." The other half of the interviewed individuals reported favorable responses from friends and acquaintances. Julie shared: "My roommate is very supportive of it—she doesn't understand why there aren't more interracial dating relationships." Sabrina similarly expressed: "My friends have been extremely supportive." Only a couple interviewees reported some friends or acquaintances reacting negatively to their relationships. Consequently, overall—participants in our study found substantial social support for their dating relationships, either from family members, or from friends.

Prejudice and Discrimination Incidence. Most individuals interviewed in our study reported little awareness of public reaction when being together in public as an interracial couple. They had no reported incidences of receiving racial slurs or other forms of outward negative behavior by others. There was one notable exception, however, mentioned by each of the participants: staring. For example, Darren shared: "People stare. I guess that's not unusual… people stare at me and that gets annoying, very, very frustrating. That's about the most uncommon thing that's happened." Allen similarly expressed: "I have received several stares from people in the public. I can't tell whether they are positive or negative stares, but they seem to be stares of surprise."

Some interviewees reported not noticing attention when with their partner in public. One stated reason for not noticing public reaction was lack of personal self-awareness. That is, individuals do not normally expect attention from strangers or even consider it if it occasionally does occur during the course of routine daily activities. Tyrese stated: "I don't really pay attention to the reaction of those people around me." Kari similarly expressed: "I wasn't aware of any—it never even crossed my mind. I don't even think about things like that, and Nicole echoed the previous statements: "I don't really see any… maybe I'm naive, I don't know."

A few interviewees reported positive reactions. Julie shared: "A lot of the guys [in public] kind of give [her African-American boyfriend] the look like, 'Good job!'" Rachel added: "I think it [public reaction] is actually positive, like: 'Yeah, you're doing this! Yeah, you're branching out.'" The majority of participants in our study, however, reported experiencing negative reactions, such as prejudice, and discrimination as critical incidences. For example, Julie commented on a reaction she and her African-American boyfriend experienced: "A couple people when we've been at large malls and stuff make little random comments like, 'Oh, you really like chocolate, don't you?'" In another instance, she described:

> I was trying on sunglasses at one of those stands in the middle of the mall this summer, and I had on a particularly dark pair. I was looking at them in the mirror, and this lady walked up to me and asked if that was so I couldn't tell what my boyfriend was. [pause] And he was standing on the other side of the cart.

Individuals we interviewed noted generational, racial, gender, and regional influences on public perception. David illustrated:

> I'd say with an elderly crowd it's a lot more awkward because they're not used to it as much, and that's probably one thing with older people—old, old people. And then, I think black girls typically respond negatively to it [interracial dating], I would say.

Darren echoed the racial influence:

> We've [he and his Caucasian girlfriend] been to some places, a mall where some African-American girls looked at her really funny. African-American women tend to be a little more vicious toward that kind of circumstance. They'd feel that a Caucasian woman, if she's dating a black guy, that she's taking a black guy, a good black guy from an African-American woman. So I'm kind of taken off the market by somebody I shouldn't be taken off the market by.

Rachel expressed that she had experienced negative feedback from African-American women as well. She stated that she had noticed the attitude of: "What are you doing taking my man?"

Consistently, the most salient resistance was said to have come from the participants' older family members. Serenity illustrated this principle when she added her sentiments regarding generational influences: "The older generation is typically more disapproving of interracial relationships, and Rachel stated: "I'd say, from the older generation I have a little trouble… because of what they went through in their history with racism and everything." In some instances, the regional influences were evident regarding the perspectives of the older adults. For example, Daniel noted a Southern upbringing with his grandmother as influencing opposition to interracial relationships. He reasoned: "My grandmother on my father's side has the issue [against interracial relationships], not to justify it, because she was raised in the South, so she has a different perspective than we do." Allison likewise shared that some members of her extended family were Southern, and she worried that they may have racist tendencies due to their background. Other individuals expressed that they would not consider living in the South because of its history of racial tensions.

Issues Related to How Couples Intrinsically Process Interracial Dating Dynamics

Reactions to Prejudice and Discrimination. Most participants indicated that when they have experienced racism or discrimination, they generally undergo inward responses without outward expressions. That is, they are not oblivious, being unaware of the occurrences. But when these reactions of others occur with strangers, they tend not to react

in covert ways. Julie stated her reaction with her boyfriend:

> I mostly like squeeze his hand or something. There's no polite way to respond that isn't going to be defensive. And I'm not defending it because I don't see a problem with it. I don't see a need to explain myself to complete strangers [about interracial dating].

Interviewees generally commented that they do not care about the opinion of strangers, so they did not feel the need to overtly respond to rude remarks. However, a few people mentioned that they would outwardly respond to comments or opposition from those whom they know well, such as friends and family. They feel that issues with these individuals need addressing because of the closeness and permanency of those relationships. Nathan reflected the sentiments of most people in

> I think that you have to decide what kind of relationship you want with the person that it's coming from. If it's a random thing from somebody you don't know I don't think that there's really much you can do in terms of that other than just ignore it and move on. If it's somebody like a friend then I think it needs to be addressed, you just need to talk to them and be honest with them. And the same with family—it's just a matter of still loving the person and desiring a relationship with them and not letting this become the issue that's going to destroy whatever relationship you have.

Thick-Skinned. Almost all of the participants interviewed indicated having little self-consciousness regarding what others think of them relative to interracial dating. In other words, they reported being relatively thick-skinned. Some interviewees reported more self-consciousness in certain milieu or circumstances, however. Jim expressed: "I'm usually not [self-conscious], depending on the time. Once in a while, depending on the group you're in, you get a little, looks, and it makes you wonder what they're thinking. But it's not, it's not really self-conscious that much." Bryant and Sadie shared that self-consciousness diminished with length of relationship. They reported being slightly more sensitive in some situations during the beginning of their relationship. However, that discomfort faded with experience. In

Sadie's own words: "The longer you're together the less conscious you become of the fact that you're interracial, and therefore you don't notice if people looking or not because you don't care." The majority of individuals interviewed described themselves as feeling generally confident with themselves and their partner in public.

Interracial Sensitivity by the African-American Partner. Although not generally affected by interracial prejudice [as previously indicated], most individuals in our sample who were non-Caucasian identified themselves as being more affected than their partners by interracial dynamics.   When this phenomenon was further queried, Black participants shared they had previous experiences interacting with prejudice [and sometimes discrimination]. Caucasian participants concurred that their Black dating partners, by and large, were more sensitive to the interracial dynamic than they were. Nicole surmised: "I think that I might be [more affected by interracial issues]. I think that I might have more of a background, know more about them [prejudiced behaviors by others] than Jim [her Caucasian boyfriend] does." Nathan, who is bi-racial, shared: "Definitely me… just because she [his Caucasian girlfriend] hasn't had to deal with them [prejudicial behaviors by others] until dating me, whereas it's something I've had to deal with my whole life, with my parents, with pretty much everyone."   The couples agreed that the phenomenon occurred, irrespective of whether it was the male or female who was Black or White. For example, Kari expressed: "I guess that would be David [her bi-racial boyfriend who was more affected than herself] because he's more aware of it because he's dated White girls before. I know he's maybe seen some looks from people that weren't pleasant." Only a few couples stated that both of them deal with interracial issues equally, and they said this was due to the uniqueness of their particular circumstances.

Perceived Cultural Connectedness. Except for one couple, cultural issues or difficulties between the dating partners were said to be relatively minor, not causing stress in the respective relationships. One couple consisted of a Kenyan man and Caucasian woman, and most of the reported differences they faced were ethnic. Serenity stated: "We've dealt with a lot more cultural issues than racial issues in our relationship. Since he's Kenyan, I've learned a lot about his culture, and he has had to learn a lot about mine as well." Most differences

mentioned by other couples were due to differences in backgrounds relative to rearing and upbringing. They were said to be relatively minor, involving mostly communication patterns and issues relating to styles of music, food, and dress. Nathan believed [as did most who provided their perspectives on this issue] that an acceptance of each others' differences was the key reason that these matters did not become significant problems in the couple's relationships: "I just think the whole issue of acknowledging differences in culture, that not one culture is right and another is wrong, and acceptance of that. And I would say both in terms of our relationship with each other and how other people see our relationship."

Discussion

The participants in the present study provide cogent role models for others on university campuses who might contemplate interracial dating. Giving voice to the participants in the study can be an invigorating step in the ultimate process of improving and increasing interracial dating in collegiate contexts. For example, giving the results of the present study exposure in the media, both on college campuses and to the general public, can help give courage to those contemplating the interracial dating experience. Such exposure has been known to be effectual in other contexts (Pastorino & Doyle-Portillo, 2006), and we believe it is warranted here.

   The salience of social support seems critical from the present study. For couples in the present study, having approval from their parents seems to have been a key component helping to moor their relationship. In another study of interracial dating (Tse, Firmin, Hwang, & Firebaugh, 2006), we found significant relationships among generations and prejudice in interracial relationships. In particular, our previous showed that people who were reared in previous generations (older in age) tend to be less accepting of interracial relationships than are younger people (i.e., those who were reared after the passage of civil rights laws). Given the ages of the present participants, therefore, we were not surprised to see parental support. At the same time, nonetheless, we note that the present study did not analyze the generational, racial, or gender perceptions   of   racism   (per   se)   but,   rather,

the perception of these constructs by members of interracial couples.

However, we are addressing a self-select group of individuals in this study—not individuals identified at random. Parental prejudice against interracial dating, we believe, is strong in American society. But for the participants in the present study—their parents were reported to be generally supportive of the experience for their children. It was not surprising that the participants' extended family (e.g., grandparents) were far less supportive of the behavior, given the societal mores and racial discrimination in which they were reared. In sum, as an older generation passes from the societal scene, replaced by one who has only known an era of civil rights in America, we believe the future for interracial dating will be more promising than it has been in the past. Demographic data recently released by Kohut, Parker, Keeter, Dherty, and Dimock (2007) of the Pew Research Center supports this conclusion.

Many individuals in our study mentioned experiencing opposition from African-American women to interracial dating. This opposition mostly took the form of disapproving glances and verbal disapprobation. This finding is consistent with research by Clark, Windley, Jones and Ellis (1986), Knox, Zusman, Buffington, and Hemphill (2000), and Todd and McKinney (1992). In particular, young African-American women are the demography most often identified as being opposed to interracial dating and are the least likely to interracially date. There likely is a rich sociological and social psychological dynamic at work in these circumstances. It is beyond the scope of the present study to surmise how this apparent force exerts itself among Black young women—but it seems cogent and worth further exploration in both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms.

Several individuals referred to the American Southern culture exerting a negative influence regarding interracial relationships in U.S. society. These participants often explained a relative or acquaintance's prejudiced views being due to their Southern upbringing. A few persons mentioned that a particular region of the country was an important consideration with respect to interracial relationships, and they would not consider living in Southern (or rural) areas. Despite Bob Jones University, the last bastion of overt higher education racism (Firebaugh

& Firmin, 2007), lifting its interracial dating ban, this milestone does not imply that racism has altogether ended on college campuses. Additionally, differences in the reactions between the immediate family and extended family may be due, at least in part, to generational differences in families. Generically, research has shown older American generations to be more racially biased than newer generations (Attias-Donfut, & Waite, 2012).

Sociological data indicates that racial tensions still exist in the South, despite many recent improvements (Waldrep, 2011). As previously noted, interracial marriage was illegal in many Southern states until the mid-1960s (Davidson, 1992). Evidently, however, couples who date on a Midwestern campus find themselves somewhat at ease. The college they attend is physically located on rural land, so formal dating typically occurs in one of the surrounding cities where cultural, sporting, and other events are plentiful. Comparing the findings of the present study with similar qualitative research at Southern universities, as well as institutions across a wide cross section of the country, could produce some highly enlightening findings.

Since the time of the interviews and up to the present, four of the ten couples have broken up, two couples are engaged, three couples continue dating, and the status of one couple is unknown. Obviously, we may assume that not all interracial couples marry—nor should we infer this notion. Dating may be considered a rite of passage as an American cultural norm (Wilson, McIntosh, & Insana, 2007). Not all intra-racial couples marry—nor are they expected to do so. There is no reason, therefore, that interracial couples would have this expectation. In fact, we were encouraged that the added stress and pressure that comes with an interracial relationship did not create some type of an unhealthy (premature) bond between the couples. That is, working under the assumption that dating relationships are just that—dating—we would hope that some couples move toward marriage and that other couples eventually move toward other individuals (breaking up as a present couple). In short, the group of individuals, as a whole, seemed to have outcomes that were somewhat expected of other intra-racial couples. To us, that suggested normal patterns of individuals who are neither unduly bonded nor unduly affected by racism encountered via the course of interracial dating.

   The results from the present study can be applied through the lens of exchange theory (Felciano, Robnett, & Komale, 2009). The construct began as an economic theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) that subsequently has been applied to multiple contexts, including interpersonal relationships (Rosenfeld, 2005).   According to Lawler, Thye, and Yoon (2012), exchange theory is rooted in sociological research and plays an important function in advancing research constructs in this domain. The theory essentially is an expenditures/benefits type of model. It proposes that life functions as a result of how perceived rewards are integrated with perceived costs. As such, worth becomes a function of perceived rewards, minus perceived costs. In this paradigm, a perceived "positive" relationship exists when the worth is a positive number and vice versa. This factor of worth impacts a relationship's outcome since, in this model, positive relationships are expected to last longer than when the perceived worth is viewed as negative. In the context of exchange theory, Harris and Kalbfleisch (2010) suggest that familial and societal factors worked against the successful likelihood of interracial dating. Empirically, we found this factor to be true with the present sample of students. Viz, they expressed varying levels of negative influenced sometimes imposed from family and society. At the same time, however, Takeuchi (2006) has shown that perceived physical attraction, meaningful connections, and genuine friendship generally add "positive weight" to the social exchange equation. This finding is consistent with what students told us during their interviews. In the end, the students in our study continued in their respective interracial dating relationships, from an exchange theory perspective, because their respective perceived benefits outweighed their perceived costs.

   We apply this paradigm to higher educational settings as student personnel administrators should take extra steps in order to maximize positive and minimize negative factors in campus milieu. Naturally, administrators cannot mandate or force students to behave, think, or feel any particular way. Nonetheless, they can take affirm steps of action in order to generate a campus culture where multiculturism is appreciated, valued, and celebrated. Beyond this general objective, particular actions can include inviting interracial special speakers to campus, hiring staff who are in interracial marriages or relationships, using posters

and media that include interracial couples in pictures or video clips, offering college courses that advance diversity mindsets and perspectives, and featuring articles that support interracial dating in student newspapers. The exchange theory worth ratio is more likely to tip in the positive direction—not by chance—but through university administrators making individual and collective commitments to achieve diversity ends. Fostering cultures of inclusion on most college campuses will not be achieved through a one-time-effort. Rather, the positive worth ratio in domains such as interracial dating will be achieved as long-term, collective and pervasive efforts are undertaken, assessed, and enhanced throughout university milieu. We believe that the results from the present study will be useful to college administrators, student personnel staff, and faculty as they work toward achieving more cogent levels of campus inclusion.

Limitations and Further Research

Good research always reports the limitations of the study (Price & Murman, 2004). The present sample was taken from a selective, comprehensive, religious university located in the Midwest where 94% of the student population is Caucasian. Future qualitative research projects should build on the present one, therefore, moving to colleges with differing demographic milieu. We noted previously the need to replicate the present study in the Deep South. However, other locals such as large metropolitan cities also likely play significant roles in how comfortable students finding their interracial dating relationships. Since the present institution also had a religious influence inherent to the nature of the student body, future research should extend to other institutions where no formal spiritual connection exists. The published research literature to date has not revealed any studies comparing racial ideation between Christian university students and non-Christian (or non-religious) students. Consequently, the relevance of the religiously-based sample used in the present study is worthy of potential future research as future researchers compare the results of our present sample with samples from non-religious couples who date interracially.

Our present sample was limited to individuals of stereotypical college age (18-24 years old). Future studies should further explore graduate

students and other older individuals who interracially date. Community college milieu would make an excellent comparative analysis with the present findings, for example. Law school, medical school, and students in other professional programs also would make ideal comparisons. Given students' (assumed) maturity levels as they age, interesting contrasts may be drawn with the findings of the present study. Replication, of course, is the key to establishing external validity in qualitative research (Firmin, 2006b).

We believe that 20 individuals, comprised of 10 couples, provided an apt sample for the present study—particularly with the (previously noted) saturation that occurred in the data collection process. However, having additional couples may have provided some additional stories or voices which we were unable to tap when reporting the present findings. In qualitative research, more subjects do not necessarily equal better findings (Flick, 2002; Johnson & Christensen, 2010; Ten Have, 2004), but they do provide richer repertoires of interesting cases that can be reported in an article such as the present one. In short, additional studies with more subjects can help to provide richer examples and illustrations of how interracial couples find their dating experiences in academic contexts.   Nonetheless, our sample contained primarily Caucasian females and African American males—so additional, future studies should compare the present results with inverse pairs of interracial dating couples.

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