Interracial Relationships: The Women's Experiences

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Black and white marriages have been one of the consequences of migration for centuries, yet they are widely seen by society as problematic. How far does the experience of people who are in such relationships support this view? This paper is based on what the women in eight committed heterosexual interracial relationships in Ontario, Canada, had to say about their experiences. The interview process provided me with a clearer insight on these women's experiences, than the literature on the theoretical or stereotypical ideas about racism, couple relationships, the children and other related matters.

My study emerged from my awareness of the increase of interracial marriages in Canada, and the lack of literature on the Canadian experience. I was also highly motivated in the topic because as a black Jamaican, who migrated at 19 to marry a white Canadian, I am living the experience. Having chosen to be in an interracial marriage, and having chosen to write about it, makes me in a sense an advocate. Mine and those of the women who contributed to the research, are some of the many voices which are not normally heard.

I have quoted extensively from interview transcripts so that the voices of these women can be heard. The findings do not speak to the experiences of all women in black and white interracial relationships in Canada, or even to the experiences of all such couples in Ontario. They do however, demonstrate that even though the bulk of the literature views black/white relationships as problematic, this view is not supported by the experiences of these women.

Race and History

It may seem obvious that black-white relationships are 'interracial', but it is important to recognize from the start that such categorizations are social constructions rather than simply 'natural'. Both biological and historical evidence suggests that no "pure" races, in the sense of never mixing with any other racial groups, have ever existed. On the contrary, as Gordon (1964), Porterfield (1978) and Johnson (1994) note, race mixture has been going on during the whole of recorded history. Indeed evidence from the studies on fossil human remains suggests that "even in pre-history, at the very dawn of humanity, mixing of different stocks, at least occasionally, took place." (Gordon, 1964, p 221). And certainly today, despite our nationality, religion or race, we are all, "the product of the intermixture of blood and of culture that has been going on for thousands of years. The notion of a pure race is, then, little more than a myth." (Gordon, 1964, p. 221).

Thus throughout history, societies have constructed different ideas about "race". On the one hand, there are many multiethnic societies, which have created an elaborate range of separate social categories for people with differing combinations of ancestors. In the tropical areas of Latin America and the West Indies, centuries of race mixture have produced a large hybrid population. Here one finds ambiguity in racial or colour terminology with many racial terms used in any given community. Mulattos, creoles, mestizos are among the general categories, and in 19th century creole society there were also more particular descriptions in use, such as quadroon, octoroon, mustee and musteephino. The descriptions still vary between different regions, so that many who would be classified as white in Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic would be classified as "coloured" in Jamaica and Barbados.

Most non-Hispanic West Indian islands have large black majorities and very few unmixed whites. Colour is certainly socially important in these societies, but it is not a question of clear-cut categories so much as a colour spectrum, which is seen as a symbol of class position. Historically, in these areas the upper class was white and near-white, the middle class was predominantly mulatto, and the lower class of peasants and labourers was mostly black. These colour divisions originated in the slavery period, when it was customary for white plantation-owners to form liaisons with black slave women. Thus the newly arrived wife of the Governor of Jamaica, Maria Nugent, writes of visiting Hope Plantation in 1801, where she went to the house, a fifty-year-old Scotsman, and talked to the black women there

"who told me all their histories. The overseer's *chère amie*, and no man here is without one, is a tall black woman, highly polished and shining. She shewed me her three yellow children, and said, with some ostentation, she should soon have another." Long-standing relationships of this type seem to have been typical. However, as another contemporary commentator observed, such unions were rarely formalised as marriages, even with the minority of freed blacks: "no White man of decent appearance, unless urged by the temptation of a considerable fortune, will condescend to give his hand in marriage to a Mulatto!" (Smith, 1988: 87-88).

These attitudes have persisted long after the abolition of slavery itself in Jamaica and the other British colonies in 1838. The near-white elite drew a colour line not in intimate social relationships but in formal marriage, so that while black-white relationships remain common in all social groups in young adulthood, marriage itself typically takes place at a later age within the elite social circle. Interracial liaisons, including informal common law marriages, have thus persisted up to the present as a typical feature of English-speaking West Indian societies.

This situation contrasts sharply with that which developed in the United States, with its two-tier racial categorization system. As Johnson and Warren (1994) note, anyone with any known black ancestry is considered black and is distinguished socially from "whites". Consequently, there are Americans with light skin, light hair and blue eyes who are defined as "black". Here not only was slavery abolished later, but more important, it was succeeded by a system of black-white discrimination which was legally entrenched, so that as recently as the 1960s in many southern states of the United States schooling, transport and many other services were segregated, and interracial marriage was prohibited by law. Although there are instances of marriages between whites and free blacks as early as the seventeenth century (Kouri & Lasswell, 1993: 241), and black-white marriage remained legal in the non-plantation northern and western states, the historic shadow of slavery has infected attitudes and still influences them throughout the country even today. In the last thirty years, despite the lifting of legal discrimination some important forms of informal segregation have continued, most strikingly in housing, and black-white marriage remains strikingly low. Despite the relatively large population on non-European origin, in the United States interracial marriages make up approximately one and one half percent (1.5%) of all marriages, and of these only twenty two percent are black/white marriages (Spigner 1990).

In Britain black-white marriages have been traced back to as early as 1578, soon after the first Africans arrived there, and they continued subsequently with the introduction of black slaves (Tizard & Phoenix, 1993: 6). By the eighteenth century, however, it was clearly established in law that slaves became free on entering Britain, and in London at least black-white mixed couples seem to have been already publicly accepted. On the other hand, the black population remained extremely small. In the early twentieth century it consisted largely of black male seamen in the port cities, who married poor white women, and social studies of them in the 1940s and 1950s typically stereotyped the women as from the bottom of society (Banton, 1955). The situation was radically changed by large-scale immigration of West Indian women as well as men from the late 1950s, provoking a sharp rise in the expression of white British racism, so that for a while the proportion of blacks who married whites fell sharply. By the 1990s, however, among the younger British generations, both black and white, only a shrinking minority now disapproves of interracial marriage. In the British population as a whole interracial unions make up approximately one percent of all marriages and cohabitations (Tizard & Phoenix, 1993: 1), but this is partly because the population as a whole remains overwhelmingly white: if we focus on the black population, the latest figures suggest that one in three black women and a half of black men now form relationships with white partners.

It seems possible that historically the Canadian pattern has followed that of Britain more closely than the United States model. Certainly blacks in Canada were never introduced as slaves, and the first significant settlements were of black soldiers who were freed in order to fight on the British side against American independence. Equally important, the incorporation of Quebec and the subsequent need to keep the loyalty of its French-speaking population has been fundamental in making Canada into a multi-cultural society. The large-scale immigration of black West Indians, which began in the 1970s, has taken place in this existing context. There is, however, very little Canadian information on black-white marriage in Canada, either in the past or the present. Figures on interracial marriages are not collected, and are therefore unavailable. Little research on interracial marriages has been done in Canada, and the only literature on such relationships is a handful of graduate theses. There is a study currently in progress on the "healthy identity development" of black-white children (Toronto Star, 10 January 1998), but this is not yet published. Consequently, this section of the paper will review the research carried out

only in the United States and Britain. I shall base my findings on comparisons drawn from these studies.

Theories of Interracial Marriage

The bulk of the literature on interracial marriages treats such unions as abnormal, deviant, and problematic. These studies which usually attempt to understand why some people choose to marry outside their racial boundaries have resulted in three main categories of theoretical explanations: the "racial motivation theory" (Lewis et al, 1997), the "structural theory" (Kouri & Lasswell, 1993), and the "exchange theory" (Cerroni-Long, 1984, Lewis et al., 1997, & Yancey & Yancey, 1997).

The "racial motivation theory" is based on the widespread popular belief that people are attracted by mysteriousness and strangeness in others. Lewis et al. (1997) set out to test some racial factors of this kind which might play a role in the spouse selection of black/white couples, including "the excitement and novelty of being biracially married, the sexual attractiveness of someone of the "opposite" race, and the ease of talking to individuals who are members of a different racial group" (Lewis et al., 1997:65). It was also suggested that individuals who break social norms and marry outside of their race may do so as a form of rebellion against racial bigotry, or against parental authority. However, they concluded from their own research that common interests, attractiveness irrespective of race, and similar entertainment interests were more important factors leading to black/white unions.

Ernest Porterfield (1978) came to similar conclusions in his earlier study of forty black/white couples in the United States. Porterfield concluded that many interracial marriages came about because the couples had had the opportunity to meet in integrated settings and fall in love. Once they had met, the motives for marriage were similar for interracial and same-race couples. He classified these motives as "non-race related". He thus foreshadowed the arguments of structural theory.

Structural theory proposes that provided that the community sanctions, or at least accepts, such unions, interracial couples marry for the same reasons as racially homogeneous couples. Thus "lack of kinship controls in urban environments makes personal characteristics more likely to be valued than categorical traits such as race, ethnic background, religion or social class" (Kouri & Lasswell, 1993: 242) In the 1970s, British anthropologist Susan Benson (1981) interviewed twenty black/white interracial couples

who lived in a mixed black/white working-class neighbourhood near London. Benson also discovered that her respondents met in socially integrated settings such as work, at school, through friends or in more casual settings. (See also Cerroni-Long 1984).

Exchange theory, by contrast, is based on the assumption that colour difference is like a form of caste theory, and proposes that in black/white marriages, which are most often between black men and white women, typically the women are from a lower social class than the black men, and are therefore exchanging their own higher status as whites for their partner's higher occupational status. Benson (1981) in her study of British black/white couples, did evaluate five of the ten white female respondents as too economically and socially disadvantaged to stand a good chance for a suitable white partner. However, as Cerroni-Long (1984) points out, even though the exchange theory may have validity when applied to hypergamous intermarriages, it is also present to some degree in all marriages. She concludes that -

> *race is not the most important concern of Whites who are actively seeking to enter into biracial relationships. Instead, traditional marital exchange theory, men's financial/occupational status, or women's physical attractiveness appears to be more explanatory as to why such individuals enter into such relationships. In this sense biracial unions follow the same social customs as other romantic relationships (p. 662).*

Along with the motivations that lead to black/white intermarriage, researchers have also investigated the possible problems that individuals in such relationships may encounter, and the consequences of their choice for the partners, their children, including the problems they may encounter due to racist attitudes from the larger community. Once again, particularly in the earlier studies, the investigation seems often to start from the assumption of the abnormality and deviancy of such relationships. Thus Gordon (1964) warns forebodingly that "Negro-white marriages, however 'reasonable' they may be, will, in the foreseeable future at least, prove difficult and problem-laden because the parents, family and friends of the intermarried will continue to regard them with distress and anguish" (p. 271).

A decade later, however, Porterfield (1978) pointed out that earlier studies of American black/white couples were based on samples far too small to "allow for an educated guess, let alone a significant prediction, of their possible success or failure" (p. 105). He argues that much speculation has been based on little knowledge, and that in general the problems of black/white marriages apparently are no different from those of any other

same- race marriage. Quarrels and other family disagreements seldom carry racial overtones. The one racially based problem which he does identify is that of rejection by parents or other relatives, usually of the white rather than the black spouse. The family of most black spouses was usually much more accepting of the mixed marriage.

The effects of black/white marriage on the psychological adjustment of the children of such marriages has been another area of research. The popular view, repeated in some earlier research (e.g. Gordon), had been that neither the black nor the white community accepts children born from mixed marriages, who therefore develop identity problems because of their ambiguous social positions. However, more recent research has demonstrated this assumption as unfounded. Children of mixed parentage do not want to deny any part of their racial inheritance. (See Gibbs & Hines in Root, 1992, Thornton in Root, 1996, Tizard & Phoenix, 1993 and Wilson, 1987).

As for problems encountered from the larger community, the literature suggests that interracial couples' experiences vary according to their social class and housing context. Tizard & Phoenix (1993) in their British study, report that working–class parents, whether black or white, had many racist experiences from the community, whilst the biggest problem for middle-class couples were initial or continued opposition of their parents. Porterfield's (1978) findings are similar except that he also found that many of the white females in interracial marriages in America experienced hostile reactions from black females from the general public, who see the white females as competing with them for eligible black male. He points out, however, that while some respondents experienced stares from the general public as hostile reactions, others reported them as signs of curiosity and admiration.

To sum up, the existing research on black/white marriages does not provide a sufficiently clear understanding of the experiences of the individuals involved in these marriages. Researchers target have tended to focus their attention on the myths and fears of the general public about interracial marriages, and with few exceptions, the research has not allowed the voices of the individuals in these marriages to be heard directly. Furthermore, as Johnson & Warren (1994) note, "dominant group scholars find it difficult to wrest themselves from the 'intergroup' frame of reference, despite the fact that they seek to explain interpersonal behaviour" (p. 8). They argue that "while society is solely concerned with mixed marriages as they relate to intergroup relations, the marriages themselves

are between individuals. This is the interpersonal dimension which... for the partners is by far the most important aspect of the marriage (p. 7).

Thus although a few academics have theorized about the interpersonal dimension of black/white marriages, their discussions of conflicting theoretical explanations still leaves my basic question unanswered: What are the experiences of the women in black/white marriages? More specifically, what are the experiences of the Canadian women? These were the questions I have set out to explore in my Ontario study.

The Ontario Study

The idea for this research came from my own personal interest. Some time ago while I was studying for my undergraduate degree in Canada, I took a course called "Marriage and Family Dynamics". A section of the required text described the experiences of individuals in interracial relationships in the most unfavourable manner. Furthermore, the experiences had been generalized to North America, based on American research. As I read this literature I became increasingly annoyed. First of all, I have inside experience on the subject – being involved in an interracial marriage myself for over twenty years – and did not relate to the literature at all. And secondly, I thought that using American research findings to generalize about the Canadian experience was totally inappropriate.

Canada is a country comprised of people from many different racial and cultural backgrounds. The city of Toronto in particular is known for its large multicultural/multiracial mix. Just by walking down the streets of Toronto, and its neighbouring towns, one can observe the eclectic mix of couples walking hand in hand. Among my circle of friends, I can think of at least twenty interracial couples. After reading the recommended texts, I began to ask my friends about their experiences, which again did not accord with the literature. Hence, I realized the need for research in which the Canadian experience could be told.

This is a small random sample consisting – so far – of eight women in interracial relationships. Six of the women are black, and two are white. Seven of the women have been married for between nine and thirty years, and one has been cohabiting for one year. Three live in Toronto, one in Hamilton, and four in Guelph, all in Ontario. Toronto is a large multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic city, with a population of 2.5 million. Hamilton is also a multi-racial, multi-ethnic city, with a population of 317,000. Guelph is a smaller city with a population of 93,400, and mainly

white, but the university attracts people from all over the world. The two white women are Ontario-born, while all six black women immigrated to Canada from the West Indies. They have sixteen children between them. They all have either had university education or college diplomas, and all the women or their partners are in well-paid occupations. The size and random nature of the sample limit the generalizability of the findings of this study to other populations. Nevertheless, these women can provide us with ideas and ways of looking at the experiences of other interracial marriages.

I conducted the interviews in a semi-structured manner, following a broad life story approach, moving from family and cultural backgrounds, and the couple's coming together and the decision to marry, to family and friends' reactions to the marriage, reactions from the larger community, ways of bridging cultural differences, identity issues in raising children, and perceptions of the larger society's views on multi-racial marriages. All but one of the interviews were tape-recorded. I have anonymized all the voices in order to preserve confidentiality.

As Tizard & Phoenix (1993) note, there is evidence that both black and white people tend to answer differently to questions with a racial content depending on the race and gender of the interviewer. I feel I had an advantage, not because I am black, but because I am a female, and because I am involved in an interracial marriage myself. Knowing this, the interviewees felt that I have a better understanding of the issues that interracial couples deal with. Statements like "you know what I am talking about", or "have you ever experienced that" were common. Hence, I feel that it helped the respondents to be more comfortable, candid and honest with me. In the sections which follow, I shall pick out some of the preliminary findings which I have gained from these first interviews.

Family and Cultural Background

As Rosenblatt et. al.. (1993) note, interracial partnership can lead to questions of identity. "To the extent that identity is linked to group connections, questions about belongingness arise when one is strongly committed to someone from another group and associates frequently with people from that group" (Rosenblatt et. al. 1993: 191). This notion certainly rings true in the women's s responses.

In regards to racial identity, the black females all identified themselves as "black". However, it is interesting to note that the majority of them claimed Canada as part of their ethnic identity. Of the two white females,

only one defined her race as white. Rosenblatt et al. (1995) cite Spickard (1989) who states that "interracial partnership does not obliterate one's ethnic, racial, or other identities. It may however lead one to questions from... oneself about one's identity" (p.191). In the case of Janet, this does not hold true. She has absolutely no questions about her racial identity. "I don't identify myself... as a specific race. I look at myself as a person, as a female".

Regarding attitudes towards race and other cultures that they were exposed to in their family of origin, all the black women reported being in contact with many races and cultures while they were growing up. They all said that they were brought up to be tolerant of different races. They also pointed out that the issue had nothing to do with race, instead, it was all about class, "more classist than racist". The hierarchy of skin colour defined one's social class.

> *With my father's side I imagine more tolerant. My mother's side... being very socially conscious... lived in this very circumscribed society in Jamaica. I understand that when she became friendly with my father, her parents were completely against it because he was too dark.* (Violet, black)

> *We never discussed racism, the skin colour was a factor in Haiti, and your skin colour would dictate your social strata.* (Olive, black)

> *We weren't brought up to be prejudice, we grew up accepting the Chinese culture, the Indian culture, and what little white culture was around. It helped us as we grew older, because otherwise I think we would have trouble with interracial marriage. And with my own family background being so mixed as well it is difficult to have racist attitudes.* (Patsy, black)

One black female, whose parents moved to Canada from Jamaica when she was a child and settled in a predominantly Jewish neighbourhood, said race was never an issue in her in her family.

> *We were allowed to bring home anybody except a rasta or a hippie. There were never any boundaries placed to say this race or that race.* (Pam, black)

In regards to racial attitudes experienced in schools, most of the black women emphasized again that it was more classist where the skin colour determined how one was treated.

> *Sometimes you notice that someone with fair skin will get more attention than someone with a black skin. Or someone who is Chinese will get more attention from the teacher than say a black student.* (Patsy, black)

Oh yah... the colour, the light skin... got better treatment from the nuns.
(Olive, black)

In regards to attitudes about race and culture in the white females family, one of the white females reported that race was never an issue in her family.

> I *was not really taught anything in particular, it was just a way of life. My parents never showed any racism toward any culture at all. As a young child I had many friends from many cultures, and they would come to my home and be welcomed, and nothing was ever said by my parents. And my parents, I can never remember them saying any derogatory remarks about any one.* (Janet, white)

In contrast to this female's experience, the other white female experienced racist attitudes in her family of origin.

> *I don't know if you know about Italians and how they feel about black people... and my dad made a couple racial remarks that made us feel very uncomfortable, and it created a lot of conflict. So my dad is not very open-minded.* (Susie, white)

All the females said that whatever racist attitudes they encountered while they were growing up, they rejected them. Some, because they were not brought up by their parents to hold them, and others, because they just felt it was wrong. Therefore, as Rosenblatt et al (1995) note, it seems that people who reject racism are more likely to enter any kind of interracial relationship, and these same people are more likely to be free from the constraints of those around them who are critical of such relations. (p. 61)

Why the Women Chose Partners From A Different Race

This section looks at patterns in the women s pre-marital dating, how they met their partners, and their motives for coming together.

The structural theory of interracial marriage "... stresses the social acceptance of such marriages due to socially accepted interracial contact in schools, at work, and in leisure-time activities" (Kouri & Lasswell, 1993:246). It holds that with a decrease in prohibitions related to mate selection outside of one's own racial group fosters an increase in positive factors in interracial mate selection (Kouri & Lasswell, 1993). This theory seems to operate very well with regards to the eight females in the study. When asked about pre-marital dating, four of the black females responded that they had dated interracially before. One of the white females had dated interracially prior to meeting their partner. Both black and white females

had relatives who had dated, or are presently involved in black/white marriages. When asked how they met, four of the women said mutual friends and family members introduced them. One met her partner at a nightclub, one at school, and one while they were both hitchhiking with two friends. Thus, consistent with the structural theory, these females were able to chose their partners because they had the opportunity to meet in integrated setting, intermingle, and fall in love.

When asked what attracted them to someone from the opposite race, the primary response was "love and compatibility". These women said they were not motivated by race at all. These comments speak for most of the women, who claim that they were attracted to:

His sensitivity, his openness, his honesty, his ability to tap into his feminine side. He's not afraid of crying, ...his support and acceptance of my children. (Violet, black)

His sense of humour, his warm and genuine personality, and his willingness to embrace my culture. (Patsy, black)

The fact that he is funny, and easy to talk to. It just felt right. (Janet, white)

These findings are consistent with the findings of Porterfield (1978), and Tizard & Phoenix (1993). Thus, these findings clearly demonstrate that non-racial factors are important in mate selection for these females. Common values and common interests are important decisive factors.

The racial motivation theory states that many interracial marriages occur because of racial differences, whether they be that a person of the opposite race finds the other race more physically appealing, or whether individuals go against the social norm of racial endogamy as a form of rebellion, or as a sign of seeking independence. (Kouri & Lasswell, 1993). One of the women did reveal racial motivation as a factor for mate selection.

I needed a loving husband, but because I was ridiculed so much as a child for being so black, I didn't want my children to be as black as me. I wanted them to be lighter skinned, and have different hair. (Daisy, black)

Hence, in analyzing black/white spouse selection, one observes that racial motivation theory may also operate as a factor. Although factors relating to the structural theory are more evident, in Daisy's, case, racial factors obviously played an important role in spouse selection. It must be noted however, that Daisy also reported meeting her partner in an integrated

setting, where she discovered they had similar values and interests. Hence, as Kouri & Lasswell (1993) note, perhaps structural and racial motivational theories work hand in hand. Furthermore, Daisy points out that: "We've been married thirty years, and we are still very much in love".

In analyzing the study and looking at how these females come to choose partners from the opposite race, it is clear that different people marry for different reasons. While the findings showed that one of the females had chosen her partner on the basis of race, they demonstrate that racial factors are much less important in partner selection than non-racial ones. Thus, the factors proposed in the structural theory most support these findings: people meet in integrated settings, discover similar interest and values, become attracted to each other and fall in love. These findings are consistent with the more recent literature.

How the Families of Origin React to Their Choice

This section looks at the circumstances surrounding the couple's wedding. It examines reactions of parents, reactions of others in the family, forms of rejection, process of reconciliation, and relationship with in-laws.

The structural theory maintains that the lack of kinship control over mate selection increases the likelihood of interracial marriages. Hence, lack of kinship support could create divisions in families. For example, as Rosenblatt et al (1995) note, families divided about an interracial relationship may struggle with triangulation, coalitions, keeping secrets, and other family dynamics that block members from maintaining a healthy relationship with one another.

Five of the females in the sample stated that their families on both sides had accepted their marriages.

> *His mother, the minute she met me she just hugged me. Race was never an issue with my parents. The only thing they asked me was; Are you sure he's not gay?* (Violet, black)

> *There was no rejection whatsoever on either side. The only remark that was made when I first met his mother was about how young I looked. Even though he is only ten years older than me, she thought I looked like a young schoolgirl.* (Janet, white)

One of the five females who was accepted by both families, stated that her husband's family was reluctant at first.

> *My mother felt that I'd been going out with him that long, it was time. And with my aunt it was the same thing. Every day I'd come home,*

"anything yet? Anything yet?" With his family there were a lot of sparks that flew. You see, he's from a very homogenous background... from a small town where everyone knows everyone and business, ...and I'm sure when he told them "by the way, she's black" I'm sure there were all sorts of things. However when they met me, and the fact that I was very career-oriented and together, that made everything alright. It was fine. I think had I been a housewife there would have been more pressure. (Pam, black)

Two of the black females in the sample said that their own family didn't oppose the marriage as such, however, they wanted to check their white partners out for themselves. These two females reported however, that their white mothers-in-law opposed strongly to the marriage.

His mother told him that he'll never get anywhere in life if he married me. In the beginning she told him that he could come to see her, but not to bring me. I never met her or gone to her house until three years after I had been living with my husband in Canada. (Connie, black)

I knew I was from Haiti, but I was never treated like dirt or like I'm not valuable or anything like that... or rejected. The first rejection I had in my whole life in Canada was my mother-in-law not wanting to have anything to do with me. But we got married anyway, because my parents said yes. If my parents had said no that wouldn t have happened. (Olive, black)

One of the white females reported that her father strongly opposed to the union.

My father took me aside and had a little discussion about the race thing with me, and what I planned on doing with him like having children... And then he took X out for a ride in the car alone with him... He said to him what are your intentions? I don't want my daughter marrying some average Joe. (Susie, white)

When asked how they coped with the rejection, one of the black females said that she went to therapy for seven years. The other black female said:

I just didn't worry about her. I figured that she just being totally ignorant. I realized that she didn't know me, after all she'd never met me, so I couldn't take it personal. My husband was the one who was hurt and frustrated about the whole thing. As a result, he totally cut himself off from her. He decided that we were a couple and until she was ready to accept that and see me, then he would just stay away. She was very hurt, but stubborn about the situation nonetheless. (Connie, black)

It is worth noting that these two women reported that their spouses supported them by distancing themselves from their mothers. These findings demonstrate the structural view, which maintains that the lack of kinship support could create divisions in families.

When asked about the process of reconciliation, the white female reported that her father just will not accept it, therefore, they never reconciled. One of the black females reported that her white mother-in-law did not necessarily accept the union, "she just became civil" after she became pregnant with her grand children. In contrast to this female, the other black female reported that even after twenty-six years of marriage, there is still no form of reconciliation.

> *My husband continued bringing me there to see them, thinking they'll get us used to me. But the more she got to know me, the more anger she had against me.* (Olive, black)

These results show that the black females experienced less rejection from their families. Consistent with Kouri and Lasswell's (1993) findings, these black families accepted the relationship from the beginning. In contract, two of the black females experienced rejection from their white mothers-in-law, and one of the white females from her father. Two of these females continue to experience rejection from the white families, even after they have been married for many years. Overall, these findings show that family disapproval did not influence spouse selection for these females. Furthermore, it has not affected the stability of the marriage. One female who has been with her spouse for twenty two years had this to say about her mother-in-law:

> *If she wants to give herself a headache over the situation, then she can go right ahead. I am fine, and we are very happy.* (Connie, black)

The Cross-cultural Relationship

What of cross-cultural relationships between the couple subsequently? How do they share, or feel different in terms of their life and pleasures.

Black/white marriages are often seen by society as problematic and conflict-ridden, with a higher divorce rate than same-race marriages. It is difficult to determine the success or failure rate of such marriages in Canada, as such statistics are not available. Therefore, such suggestions are no more than speculations. Though the sample is too small to allow for generalizations of the success or failure of such marriages in Canada, the majority of the women have been with their partners for twenty years or

more, and they all report that they are still happily married. One of the women has been with her partner for thirty years, one twenty six years, one twenty two years, one twenty one years, one twenty years, one thirteen years, one nine years, and the cohabiting female for a year. It is worth noting that for six of these females, this is their first marriage. Furthermore, all the women reported divorces in theirs and their husband's families of origin, in which the marriages were same race. A significant example was given by a black female who said:

> *I've been together with my husband for twenty-two years, and his mother who told him that our marriage wouldn't last, is on her third marriage (one common-law for thirteen years). His sister is divorced, and his brother is going through his third divorce. It is quite a paradox, considering they married people from the same race and similar cultural background.* (Connie, black)

Cerroni-Long (1982), argues that the biggest stresses operating between the couple in an interracial relationship is determined by cultural differences. However, as Rosenblatt et. al. (1995) point out, in any relationship, couples will learn from each other. They will learn each other's needs, expectations, preferences, dislikes etcetera, and they will share or not in these. Couples will also have conflicts. It is the manner in which they resolve them that is important. This is equally true for interracial couples. When asked how they share or feel different in terms of their life and pleasures, most of the women in the sample said that they share in many things together: for example in entertainment, in food in vacations and visits to home countries, and most important, in interest in each other's culture.

> *We have developed combined cultural views.* (Daisy, Black)

> *It's been a wonderful intercultural experience for us.* (Janet, white)

Three of the women said that they differ from their husbands in their preference to some kinds of music. These same three women also said that they like to exercise, but their husbands don't.

When asked if the issue of race has ever been a part of their conflicts with their spouses, the females in the study all replied that although they have conflicts like every other married couple, race was never an issue.

> *No not race. Upbringing is an issue, and I bring it up. Mostly like in driving or pushing the kids. I'm the one who pushes. X is so laid back.* (Olive, black)

Based on the findings of this sample, black/white marriages do not appear to be different from those of individuals who marry within their own race. Although they experience some conflicts and differences, race was

never attributed as the cause. Furthermore, the widely held view that black/white marriages experience more separation and divorce is not supported by this sample. The majority of these females has been married for a substantial number of years, and has reported that they are very happy. These findings are similar to Porterfield's (1978) and also to the personal accounts given by interracial couples in Johnson & Warren (1994).

The Larger Community

This section describes the reactions from friends, neighbours and casual encounters in both the black and white communities. It also looks at the women's experiences with social institutions such as housing, employment, and the police. It examines the different ways in which the women respond to the reactions that they encounter. Finally, it explores the women's opinions on what the larger community thinks of their interracial relationship.

Although interracial relationship was viewed as taboo in the past, recent opinion surveys in the United States indicate a lessening of opposition to such unions (Johnson & Warren, 1994). Johnson and Warren observe that in the streets, people just take interracial couples for granted as part of the scenery, except for certain ethnic neighbourhoods after dark (p. 58). Rosenblatt et. al. (1995) found in their study of black/white couples, that the number of racial incidents most people could recall was small. These observations appear to be operating in this sample, as the women all said that they experienced only a few incidents in which racist acts or remarks were directed at them.

Most of the women reported having no difficulties with friends and neighbours. Only one of the women said she had problems with friends.

None of the women recalled having problems at work, with the police or in locating housing. They all said that they experienced racist reactions from the public in the form of stares and the odd comments. The following comm ents characterize the sentiments of most of the women:

When we go out with the baby, we get a lot of stares. People always ask me "Is he yours?"(Pam, black)

Stares, otherwise nothing else out of the ordinary (Susie, white)

Some of the women noted that they realized that some of the stares they got from people in the public were out of curiosity of the relationship, and admiration for the children.

One black woman reported being questioned about her experience of being in an interracial relationship. Another black woman reported a time when a white woman who was curious about the texture of her children's hair, since her (the white woman's) child from a black/white marriage had curlier hair.

Some of the women noted that they often had more racist reactions outside of Canada, whenever they go on holidays. Three of the black women said that they have more racist comments directed at them when they visit their country of origin, than what they encounter in Canada.

Another important point worth noting is that both the white females said that they learned how to detect racism – both verbal and non-verbal – from their black partners.

> *When I was expecting, we went to the doctor's, ah... my husband and I for a doctor s appointment and ...we were waiting for the bus... and there was an older woman (white) there, and he mentioned to me; "Did you see how she looked, did you see how she looked? She was kinda looking at us like in disgust , and I said no I didn't...".*(Janet, white)

It is interesting to note that even though the black families are more accepting of the interracial relationship, the black women reported having more racist reactions from the black community. One black woman made reference to the black women in the community who might think that she married a white man because she doesn't want a "dark-skinned, nappy head child". And the black males who stare and whisper.

When asked how they respond to racist reactions that they encounter, the women unanimously said that they just "ignore them". Some say that it probably happens more often than they are aware, however, because they are not looking for it, they simply don't see it.

> *I was raised not to be colour-prejudiced. And I don't see it, I don't look for it, I don't have the chip on my shoulder that a lot of people do. I think because I've lived in a number of different societies, ... with people of all kinds of races, I m not looking for it, so sometimes it might happen, and I'm so naive that I don't even know that it's happening, you know, or I don't recognize it as being prejudiced. I just recognize it as that person is just being really stupid, or you know, they are in a bad mood today or something.* (Violet, black)

In regards to their views on the larger community's opinions on their interracial relationship, all the women responded that they are not really concerned with what the larger community thinks. As one woman stated:

...and as far as the larger society, the problem is theirs. This is how I see it. I'm married to this individual, who for whatever reason has decided that he loves me and vice versa... They have to make the adjustment.
(Pam, black)

Overall, the women did not deny their experiences of racism. They all said that they are aware that it exists in the society in which they live, and that it will always be present among some individuals. As one woman stated, "some members of society refuse to accept anything new or unusual... due to fear and ignorance". However, the women experienced very little racism, which suggests that society is possibly more tolerant of interracial relationships than it was many years ago.

How They Are Raising Their Children

Previous literature held that society at large did not accept children of mixed marriages. Gordon (1964) who urged these parents to refrain from having children, argued that these children are faced with all sorts of psychological problems in terms of their identity, and where they fit in society. This will leave them "...disturbed, frustrated and unable to believe they can live normal, happy lives" (p. 370). Contrary to past literature, more recent research have shown that in fact, mixed race children are not the social misfits they were once perceived to be. Most of them do not struggle with the issue of racial identity. In fact most of them have developed a positive racial identity, and embrace their mixed parentage. (See Porterfield, 1978, Root, 1992, Root, 1996, Rosenblatt et. al., 1995, Tizard & Phoenix, 1993, and Wilson, 1987).

This section explores issues around birth ceremonies, and how the couple chooses between cultures. It looks at how the women educate their children about race, and examines their views on their children's sense of identity. It also looks at the roles the grandparents play in the lives of the children.

All the women, except for the cohabiting one have children. All the children have been baptized. One woman's husband converted to her religion at the time of their marriage. Another woman converted to her husband's religion. One of the women baptized her child in both her and her spouse's religions "this way, both sides of the family are happy". Another woman said that because neither her nor her husband was religious, they decided not to baptize their children, in order to allow them to make their own choice when they were older. Instead, they had a naming ceremony.

Children of mixed parentage have to face the reality of racial categorization and racism. Therefore, parents of biracial children face the challenge of how to protect their children from racism, and even accepting that they cannot always protect their children from racism (Rosenblatt et. al., 1995). When asked how they educate their children about race, four of the women said that they did not see the need to educate their children about race. Although they realize that racism is present in the society, they felt that raising the issue might be counterproductive. Therefore, they relied on their children to be discerning of racial attitudes, based on the positive attitudes they absorb from the parents and supporting family and friends.

Two of the black women felt it necessary to teach their children that although they are biracial, they will be perceived as black. Therefore, they should always be aware of their black identity. One white woman said she taught her children to embrace both cultures equally. Another taught her children to be aware of racism. In addition, she taught them to:

> *...look at everybody equally, and not judge anybody by their race, but by who they are.* (Janet, white)

Consistent with Porterfield's (1978) findings, most of the women feel their children will not encounter insurmountable racial problems. They attribute this to the more tolerant society in which they live. Although they are aware that society is more tolerant, they also realize that there are still individuals in the society who will never accept interracial marriages and biracial children.

In regards to their children's sense of identity, most of the women reported that although their children varied in the degree of their skin colour, they basically identified themselves with both races. Furthermore, the children are aware of the fact that they are different, however, it is not an issue, because their peers make them feel special, and they have never reported any outright racist remark from their friends or the general public. One black woman who has a son who is very light-skinned with blue eyes, and a daughter with light brown skin reported that her son sees himself as white, while her daughter sees herself as brown. Neither sees himself nor herself as black. Further, from the women's accounts, their children have adjusted well. Hence, these findings show that based on the women's accounts, whether the children identify with both races or one race, they have all developed a positive racial identity, consistent with more recent literature.

In regard to the roles the grandparents play in the lives of the children, four of the women reported that the grandparents on both sides play very active roles. One woman reported that her father plays an active role but her mother plays no role. She stressed that it wasn't due to racial issues why her mother refused to play an active role. Instead, it was "simply because she couldn't bother". Two of the black women whose parents are deceased said that the white grandparents play no roles whatsoever. One of the women had this to say about a conversation she overheard between her son and her white grandmother:

> *Nanna said, "I'll see you dear" and he said, "But nanna you don't know where we live" and then you could hear a pin drop, and X and I just looked at each other... and she said, "Oh I'll come and visit, I know where you live." "But you never come to our house" ... When she said, "I'll see you dear" the kid couldn't take that bullshit. He said, "You never come, you never come to our house. There is no way you know where we live. Do you know where we live?"* (Olive, black)

Although grandchildren are known to bring special joys to grandparents, from these accounts, some grandparents kept their distance. It was not surprising to note that the white mothers-in-law, who objected to the union in the first place, are the same grandmothers who distanced themselves from their grandchildren.

Family Strategies Developed to Deal with Racial Issues

Even though all the females in this sample experienced very little racism as interracial couples, they are all aware of racist disapproval in society. For the black females especially, they are aware of racism as part of reality in a mostly white society. Some of them reported racial encounters in situations when they were alone without their partners, – from being passed over in the check out line, to being ignored by the taxi drivers, to being called racial names. However, the general opinion of these women is that they feel lucky to be living in a country like Canada, where even though racism exists, it is more covert.

Most of the women said that beyond what they have taught their children, they haven't really developed any strategies to deal with racial issues. Basically, they've taught their children the importance of a good education – especially in a white dominated society – for individual achievement. They have also taught their children to develop their own positive sense of identity.

Some of the women mentioned situations they encountered where racial jokes were being told and they dealt with the situation by stating that they are interracially married, and did not appreciate such jokes. Another black woman told of an incident where she was being ridiculed by a black rastafarian man as she was walking with her husband. Her husband confronted the man, and told him that he was being hypocritical to the premise of his religious cult, which teaches "Peace and Love to all". She further noted that she is aware that confrontation is not always the best strategy.

Conclusions

Summary of Findings

Of the eight females interviewed in this study, all the black females chose the category "black" for racial identity. Of the two white females, one identified herself as "white", while the other one chose not to place herself in a racial category. Regarding ethnicity, the white females identified with the Canadian culture. The black women however, either took on a combined cultural identity with their country of origin and Canada, or they identified mainly with the Canadian culture. Rosenblatt et. al. (1995) argue that interracial partnership can lead to questions about one's identity, in that when a person is committed to someone from another group, and associates frequently with people from that group, they may begin to question their own identity. The extent to which this notion applies to this sample is difficult to assess. The difficulty lies in knowing whether the black women have identified with the Canadian culture because of their interracial partnership, or would they have done so otherwise.

The cities of Toronto, Hamilton and Guelph are not typical of most cities in Canada. However, in regards to the women's reasons for marrying an individual from another race, their responses were very similar. With the exception of one of the females, non-racial factors such as personal attractiveness, common values, and common interests were the most important factors in spouse selection. In addition, it appears from the findings, that people, who grew up learning tolerance for other races, are more likely to marry interracially.

In this study, the black partner's family was more supportive than the white partner's family on a whole. Most opposition was experienced from the white mothers-in-law. However, family disapproval did not discourage the marriage, and the women reported that their marriages have all been

successful. An interesting observation in the study, is that although black kin were more accepting of the relationship, the black women experienced having more racist reactions from the black community. One possible explanation for this could be that there is less racial prejudice in families that accept interracial relationships.

As far as the cross-cultural relationship goes, the women said that their problems were no different than those which exist between other individuals in same-race relationship. They further said, that the issue of race has never been a part of their conflict with their spouses. On the contrary, the interviews suggest how the blending of the cultures provides opportunities for increased human growth and understanding.

In regards to reactions from the larger community, although the women said that they are aware of racism in society, in fact, they experienced very little, which suggests that society is more tolerant of interracial relationships. Furthermore, they feel that their children will not encounter too many racial problems, due to the more tolerant society. They also reported that their children identify positively with both races.

Implications for Future Research

In the past, interracial marriages were seen as problematic. More recent research has proven otherwise. The findings of this small sample are consistent with the recent research. However, it is not representative of black/white marriages in Canada, or even in Toronto and its neighbouring cities. Research of this kind has never been done in Canada, hence, the Canadian experience of black/white mixed marriages are often generalized with the experiences reported in the United States. In the first place, Canada is a different country from the United States. Secondly, The experiences of people in Canada – not to mention the black people – are different from the experiences of people in the United States. Therefore, Canadians need to learn about the Canadian experience. Canada is a multicultural country, and large metropolitan cities like Toronto have a large black/white intermarriage population. The fact that research into such marriages has never been done, suggests that there is no problem. However, this is mere assumption. Hence, there is obvious need for Canadian research on black/white mixed marriages. Research needs to be done on the male's experience, and also on the couple's experience. Research should also be done to compare the experiences of black/white marriages from the different social classes. Thus, future research on black/white marriages in Canada will increase our

knowledge of the experiences of the individuals in these marriages, and possibly help to dispel the myths associated with the American research.

Final Words to the Larger Community About Interracial Marriages

"It is not necessary for society to change for an interracial couple to have a wonderful life together" (Rosenblatt et. al., 1995, p 292). This statement rings true in the lives of these women. Even for the couples who were faced with family opposition, they have continued to live a fulfilled life. As one woman said, "It was us against the forces".

The final question to the women was; "If you wanted the larger society to know something about interracial marriage, what would it be?" I felt that the best way to treat this section is to allow the voice of each woman to be heard.

Get to know the individual, don't be judgemental. We are all human beings who have made different choices. It's not about colour, but individuals in love. (Daisy, black)

I just wish, I mean, I don't even think that it breaks down to the interracial relationships. I just wish people could be able to look at people of colour, and treat people of colour the same as they would treat anyone else... if everybody could do that, then it wouldn't matter about relationships. (Susie, white)

It's not that strange. Every person is a person regardless of their race, colour or creed. (Janet, white)

People are people. You either have things in common, or you don't... Yes there are certain cultural differences, be it in food, music and so on, but these differences do not mean that they have to be negative things. I think both sides can come to appreciate these things. (Pam, black)

We are all the same... Just give us a chance, talk to us, get to know who we are. You know, there are differences, but basically we are all the same kind of people. (Violet, black)

Interracial marriage can be just as much fun as any other marriage. Don't be bothered by outside influences. It is between two people, two individuals... It can be wonderful because you are learning a lot. You have the advantage of learning from two different cultures. It s a form of growth. (Patsy, black)

It's about being open to learn from others. It's about the knowledge and the experiences that you gain from what you learn. It's about growing from the knowledge and experiences. But most of all, it's about love between two individuals. (Connie, black)

It's fine if the mother-in-law steps out of the way. (Olive, black)

The women reported that they are happy in their relationships. However, they all spoke about the need for society to see them like any other couples. They spoke of the need to be seen as individuals, and not as racial stereotypes. They spoke of the knowledge and growth that can be obtained from the different cultures in an interracial marriage. Finally, they spoke of the desire to be left alone by opposing kin members.

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