An overview of black-white interracial marriage: Implications for counselors

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Abstract
Nothing would infuriate many White parents more than the thought of their offspring marrying a Black person. No other mixture touches off such widespread condemnation as Black-White mixing. Historically, Black-White interracial marriage has been the most controversial of all types of intermarriage in the United States (McLemore, 1991). In order to maintain their cohesiveness and identity, many groups have explicit rules about who may marry whom, groups such as Africans, Asians, some Europeans and even some Americans. These constraints on intermarriage may be based on religious, political, cultural, social class, and/or racial-ethnic differences (Clayton, 1979). Although changes have occurred over the past three decades, people still frown on interracial marriage (Belkin & Goodman, 1980).
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Nothing would infuriate many White parents more than the thought of their offspring marrying a Black person. No other mixture touches off such widespread condemnation as Black-White mixing. Historically, Black-White interracial marriage has been the most controversial of all types of intermarriage in the United States (McLemore, 1991). In order to maintain their cohesiveness and identity, many groups have explicit rules about who may marry whom, groups such as Africans, Asians, some Europeans and even some Americans. These constraints on intermarriage may be based on religious, political, cultural, social class, and/or racial-ethnic differences (Clayton, 1979). Although changes have occurred over the past three decades, people still frown on interracial marriage (Belkin & Goodman, 1980).

Little research has been done in the areas surrounding this issue which might provide a better understanding of the various social processes involved. What research that has been done has focused on the incidence of interracial marriages: causal factors, sociopsychological characteristics, and the problems encountered by the marriage partners and their children. This paper will examine the research investigating interracial marriages in the areas mentioned. It will also provide directives for future
Black-White marriages. I will also take a briefly examine demographic trends based on available data, and motives for interracial dating, social context, beliefs in Black-White marital combinations and theoretical points of view, and finally implications for counseling interracial couples.

Demographic Trend of Black-White Marriages

The rate of interracial marriage has varied by state, with many states prohibiting any interracial marriages until the Loving versus Virginia decision in 1967. With the passage of this decision all laws against interracial marriages were declared invalid (Burma, 1952).

Some evidence does suggest that the rate of interracial marriage decreased in the first half of the century and prior to the 1954 Supreme Court decision declaring unconstitutional segregated public schools (Burma, 1952; Lynn, 1953). However, data from California conversely indicated that the rate of interracial marriage increased slightly following the court decision of 1954 (Barnett, 1963). There are yet other statistics which suggest racially mixed marriages
may be on the increase in the United States (Heer, 1966; Powledge, 1963).

Information on interracial marriage in the United States has never been systematically collected. Thus, determining the location and frequency of Black-White marriages is difficult. For the first time in 1960, the U.S. population census was tabulated to show the number of husband and wives who had the same or different racial backgrounds. But information from public documents such as marriage and divorce records are geographically limited, ambiguous, and non-representative. And even in some areas, the publication of such records are prohibited by law (Monahan, 1970). Currently, the national frequency of racial intermarriage is unknown. Although many states collect marriage data, some gather no information on the race of the applicants.

The United States Census Bureau publishes reports on the marital status of the general population which includes some data on mixed marriages. These data, however, are estimates, based on a 5 percent sample which provide information concerning intermarriage trends for several regions, but not for the separate
states. The use of small population samples magnifies the problem because selection tends to depend on availability from a larger population.

Beliefs and Theories about Black-White Marital Combinations

Despite the increase in Black-White interracial marriages, a taboo against such marriages remains (Brandell, 1988). Recent media attention to Black-White intermarriages has highlighted the intensity of the debate. Porterfield (1982) observed that, in both popular and professional circles, the notion is fostered that those who contract mixed marriages are somehow different in motivation than those in same race marriages.

In the case of Black-White interracial marriages, the lack of social support can be expected to range from open hostility or disdain to slight suspicion about the validity or appropriateness of the marital union. Thus, even when the interracial family system itself is functional, the negative attitudes held about interracial couples in the workplace, in housing, with friends, and with family still continue (Brown, 1989). Intermarriage also appears to be on the
increase not only because of the breakdown in parental control over mate selection but also because the traditional social categories which define interracial marriage are vague and diffuse. As the various segments of the population lose their visibility, barriers to intermarriage are dissolved (Brown, 1989). In spite of the tendency for old categories to persist, other categories of mate selection such as personal characteristics will likely increase in relative importance. These factors contribute even more to the hypogamous tendency.

Given these factors and the apparent resurgence of blatant racism, clinicians may anticipate more interracial couples and their families to be in need of therapeutic interventions. If assistance is sought, clinical professionals need to be prepared to approach such clients with a clear and distinct understanding of the issues at hand.

According to Merton (1941), one of the problems in studying Black-White marriages in the United States is the lack of a broad theoretical framework. He sees rates and patterns of intermarriage as being related to cultural orientations, income and symbols of status;
and asserts that the conflicts and accommodations of mates from socially disparate groups are partly understandable in terms of this structure. While this model served to stimulate research, the findings did not always support Merton's hypotheses. Even in recent times, there has been no development of an integrated theory of interracial marriage.

Spaights and Dixon (1984) characterize interracial couples as personally insecure and self-loathing. Other theoretical perspectives suggest that persons who marry interracially are rebelling against their families, rather than cooperating with the social order represented by their families. The interracially married person (generally the white partner) is depicted as if he or she is suffering from "oppositional defiance disorder" (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, (DSM-IV), 1994) 4th ed. American Psychiatric Association). Aldridge (1978) and Hullum (1982) proposed that such an individual is attempting to show how liberal he or she is perhaps in response to a straight or rigid system in the family of origin.
There is no scientific evidence that supports the idea that interracial married persons are psychologically unstable or rebellious (Aldridge, 1978). Theories about sexual curiosity, preoccupation, and revenge offer clear evidence showing that only 3% of black men marry interracially (Poussaint, 1982) and of all the racial groups in the United States, blacks have the lowest rates of intermarriage (McLemore, 1991). Theories about social class are contradicted by empirical data demonstrating that interracial couples are almost always from similar economic, social, and educational backgrounds (Aldridge, 1978).

Further research needs to be reviewed and updated on the integration of theories for Black-White marriages. Most of the data presented in this paper is dated from the 1960s and 70s.

Motives for Black-White Marriages

The notion that those who contract mixed marriages are somehow different is reinforced in both popular and professional circles. One Black psychiatrist asserted that "deep seated psychological sickness of various sorts underline the vast majority of marriages between Blacks and Whites, and these unions are areas for
hostility, control, and revenge" (Osmundsen, 1965, p. 731). Some other possible explanations include that some Whites marry nonwhites for idealistic or liberal reasons, i.e., to defy the prevalent cultural prejudice of society. Another motive may be that the individual may experience a profound psychosexual attraction to someone who may be physically different (McLemore, 1991). There is also the notion that a White person may marry a nonwhite to rebel against parental authority (Saxton, 1968). Another motive is repudiation Cavan (1969) asserts that a mixed marriage indicates that the person either has not been thoroughly integrated into his/her social group or has repudiated it for some reason. Finally, the idea of neurotic self-hate or self-degradation (by marriage to an "inferior") is also expressed in some circles (Rubenstein, 1963). The problem with most of these conceptual and theoretical notions is that they are unsystematic, fragmentary, and speculative. In many instances, they are derived on the basis of individual cases or small samples. Therefore such information should not be accepted as a valid motive for all mixed marriages.
In view of the greater opportunities for increased contacts and interaction between different groups in recent years, many interracial marriages now occur simply because the individuals are compatible (Belkin & Goodman, 1980). In these cases, there is no motivational differences between a conventional and an interracial marriage. An investigation by Porterfield (1978) which was based on a sample of 40 legally married Black-White couples (33 Black male/White female and 7 White males/ Black female couples) suggests that many Black-White couples marry for the same reasons as other couples in the general population, reasons such as love, status, money, and, education. A major limitation of this study, however, is that since no attempts are made to draw a representative sample, conclusions and inferences should not be interpreted as applying to the total Black-White population of the United States.

Motives for marriage presented in the Porterfield (1978) study are classified into three general categories: (1) nonrace-related, (2) race-related, and (3) status of an individual in his/her racial group (the desire for a husband of comparable educational-
occupational status and if one is ostracized from one’s own racial group). A combination of motives were reported by husband and wife. For nonrace-related motives there were love compatibility and pregnancy, and for race-related motives there were more appealing and interesting. The Black man tends to date the White female for a status symbol and because she is less domineering. It is said that the Black woman is more domineering than the White woman because the Black woman has had to defend herself since slavery. Grounds for interracial marriages are usually the same as those for marriages between persons of the same race, i.e., love and compatibility, for example.

Although many unconventional social and psychological characteristics have been ascribed to individual marrying interracially, Porterfield’s (1978) data did not support this argument. To the contrary, they strongly suggest that a majority of the interracial dating and marriage on the part of these respondents is not related either to some pathological abnormality or any crusade against prejudice. This group’s motives for marriage did no appear to be any
different from those individuals marrying "in the conventional style," i.e., within one's own race.

Berry and Blassingame (1982) stated in their writing that individuals tend to be sexually curious about people of a different race. When people date interracialy, their relationship is typically regarded as being primarily sexual in nature, whereas same-race dating might be thought of as based on socialization needs or on friendship. White women who have dated Black men are often regarded as morally deviant (Petroni, 1973). Additionally, there has been continuous theorizing about the Black man's so-called preoccupation with "forbidden" White women (Spaights & Dixon, 1984).

Some theories emphasize economic and social class differences in relation to Black-White interracial marriage. For example, Davis (1941) proposed that lower class White women exchanged their "high caste" racial status for the higher socioeconomic status achieved through marrying higher class Black men. Now it is theorized that Black women who marry White men do so for social and economic gain, with the assumption that they believe White men can offer them upward
social mobility, which is not the case for the oppressed Black man (Poussaint, 1982; Spaights & Dixon, 1984). Spaights and Dixon (1984) suggest that Blacks have romantic alliances with Whites in order to exploit them economically.

Black-White marriages are not looked upon as a taboo but they are still considered out of the norm. The motives mentioned above about Black-White marriages have changed, the motives now are the same as any other same race or interracial couple, that is for status, education, and financial stability.

Social Context of Black-White Marriages

The intermingling of young adults of different races at the high school and college levels is widely expected to be reflected over the long run in an increased rate of intermarriage. Because of the continual lowering of the average age of dating and entering marriage, high schools will be increasingly faced with mixed racial interaction (Barnette, 1963). The fact that large numbers of interracial couples meet on college campuses reduces the amount of parental and community control over the choice of an individual’s dating partners. Young people have revolted against
traditional institutions and values which have led them to reject the taboos on dating across racial line (Staples, 1982).

While sociologists have theories and hypotheses on the rebellion-rejection theme explaining the occurrence of intermarriage, no empirical studies appear to exist. It seems that an increase in interracial dating would result in an increase in interracial marriages. Using selective data, Heer (1966) observed an upward trend in Black-White marriage in those areas where residential segregation by race is low and where there are minimal economic status differences between the White and Black population.

While the proportion of Black men dating interracially appears much higher than that of Black women, the difference is not so great when it comes to interracial marriages as reflected in 1960 census data. While it appears that Black women are deprived of dating Black men, there are less Black men to Black women. The vast majority of Black males are still available to the Black women for matrimony (Aldridge, 1978).
Many of the Black men who married White women were of a higher social status than their other race wives. Because this social status differential was so common, a theory was formulated about it. Sociologists hypothesized that the Black male traded his class advantage for the racial caste advantage of the White bride (Merton, 1941). Now interracial marriages are more likely to involve spouses from the same social class (Goode, 1980). Furthermore, when intermarriages involved members of different social classes, there was a pronounced tendency for Black women to marry up socioeconomically rather than to marry down (Bernard, 1966).

Consequently, one reason that Black women marry White men is to improve their social status. This also applies to all homogamous marriages. One exception, however, are the marriages of Black female entertainers to white men. Because of their close association with White males in the course of their jobs, many of them form interracial unions (Staples, 1974).

Further research might be undertaken to determine whether the characteristics of interracial marriages
approximate those of same-race marriages or appear significantly different.

Counseling Interracial Couples

When focusing on interracial relationships it might be beneficial to look at the demands and adjustments by the Black man in this White society. Some may benefit from professional therapeutic assistance in combating the stresses of an intolerant community or family. It is essential that the Black man (as well as the white mate) recognize that problems will arise from social pressures, interpersonal difference, and value differences. If the Black man is aware of social pressures and basic values and cultural differences, he may experience less stress and be better able to prevent the development of conflict or, at least, to understand the conflict and manage it when it develops (Kiev, 1973).

In counseling, the Black man could benefit from an exploration of his motivations for being involved in an interracial relationship. He will need, as will any other client, and atmosphere of unconditional acceptance, support, and caring (Ivey, 1988). An
examination of how Black and White families shape and pass on their values, attitudes, and norms would be beneficial to his understanding of any conflicts he may experience with his racially different companion. He may be able to avoid major interpersonal conflicts if he is able to communicate and share his basic values, attitudes, and expectations.

It is crucial that a Black man’s interracial relationship be examined thoroughly to determine that neither member is in the relationship to change the other. Each must accept the other without a preoccupation with control, domination, and possession. Neither should desire to convert or reform the other, and each can appreciate and grow from the diversity (Adam, 1973).

Professional counselors working with Black men in interracial relationships must develop an approach to counseling that addresses the whole person. Therapeutic objectives for the client who comes to the counselor scared and confused should include support and validation. Particularly for the Black therapist working with a Black male client, there should be an
attempt to increase the sense of communication with him (Staples, 1974).

Transference issues will probably surface. The Black male's feelings about being Black and his identification with the various labels and politics of the Black community will probably be transferred on to the Black therapist. The reactions he has received from various family members and the Black community in general. His interracial relationship will have to be addressed sufficiently for the Black male client to perceive and receive nonjudgmental, effective counseling (Staples, 1974). The therapist, whatever their race or sex, also will have to contend with his/her own feelings about racial identity in addition to those of the client. The therapist may react with subjective feelings and behaviors. These must be dealt with directly so that the progress of therapy is not seriously hindered. It has been suggested by Black psychologists that therapists need to look at ways in which they themselves have been interacting with other Blacks for years and their own attitudes regarding interracial relationships. There is a problem not only of possible projection of the counselor's own self-
image and racial identity onto the client but also the use of the general white stereotypes of how Blacks think, act, and feel (Calnek, 1970). Therapists must control countertransference and retain emotional control and an image of nonbiased professionalism.

The Black man involved in an interracial relationship may have some unique counseling needs. Those needs will depend largely on his motivations for developing such a relationship. If the precipitating motivations are rooted in negative feelings about himself and other Blacks, in curiosity, revenge, or racial stereotypes the Black man may possibly benefit from an introspective examination of his ego development, sexuality, racial identity, and relationship with women. If there exists genuine compatibility and caring, the Black man may need professional assistance in dealing with hostility and nonacceptance of his mate from family members and friends and with the antagonism of the white persons such as supervisors, landlords, and neighbors. He may experience mixed messages from both Black and White communities and may not feel totally accepted in either. It can be generally assumed that when the
partners in an interracial relationship have insight, and communicate their feeling, and are in a relatively tolerant community, the relationship can prosper (Adam, 1973).

If one (or both) of the members in the relationship is accused of being pathological in making the choice of interracial marriage, the clinician needs to explore the individual's past to determine if there have been significant life events or crises with an explicit racial overtone that may have left unresolved and ambivalent feelings in the individual. If there are troubling events from the past (e.g., sexual trauma at the hands of another race perpetrator) the clinician should determine if certain defense mechanisms (e.g., reaction formation, identification with the aggressor) can be addressed (Davidson, 1992).

Ultimately, the aim of therapy for the Black man is to help him understand values and cultural conflicts and to foster greater knowledge. Towards the accomplishment of the future, Black-White marriages will experience more congenial climate for success of the society continues to become more attuned to individual freedom and personal rights regardless of
race, color, cree, or religion. Social scientists can also play a vital role in improving conditions (for the interracially married) by objectively analyzing this phenomenon so that many of the myths, misconceptions, and underlying principles of failure are put to rest. Such studies would not necessarily facilitate an increase in interracial marriage, but would certainly provide a healthier climate for those who choose such a relationship.

Brown (1989) warned that the clinical professional may have racist attitudes that can influence therapeutic interventions. If this is so, myths about interracial marriage must be addressed in order for clinical strategies with interracial couples to be unbiased. One place to begin correcting a racist outlook on interracial marriage is to expose the negative biases of these theories about motivation (Davidson, 1992). Thus, in the clinical situation when the issues of pathology, rebellion, sexual curiosity, preoccupation, or revenge, social or economic mobility, and exhibitionism are raised, clinicians must be cognizant first that these racist formulations are not supported by empirical evidence. They must understand
that, as Porterfield (1978) explained, much of the mysticism and confusion surrounding interracial sexual relations in the United States can be traced to the unique conditions of slavery.

The prudent course for clinicians to follow when faced with these issues of interracial marriage in the therapeutic setting is first to determine who owns the "problem" and then to focus on the strengths of the couple. It may be advisable to rule out the presence of ulterior motives, whether hidden or blatant. Certainly it is important for the clinician to help the couple clarify the true nature of their relationship and to normalize the couple's responses and attraction (Adam, 1973).

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If any hidden agenda for the marriage is exposed, the couple will then benefit from seeing whether their love, common values, and mutual goals are strong enough to sustain a marital bond. The suggestion that the person choosing to marry interracially is, necessarily, the victim of some self-defeating desire for a taboo relationship or is a helpless causality of unconscious processes needs to be put to rest (Pope, 1986).

Similar clinical considerations emerge when the ulterior motive of rebellion is cited or suspected as exerting an undue force on the decision to marry. In these cases, it is useful to examine possible oppositional traits. If there is a general response pattern of defiance of authority, hostile dependency, or complicated separation and attachment issues, these matters will need to be confronted (Davidson, 1992). There is good reason to suspect that when extended families are not supportive of the interracial marriage, some level of rebellion is needed for the marrying partner to self-differentiate (Brown, 1989).
It should neither be assumed that the differentiation itself is dysfunctional nor that the rebellion is a sufficient condition for the couple choosing to marry (Brown, 1989).

In dealing with issues about sexual curiosity, couples may consider how long-lasting they expect their relationship to be and whether their alleged curiosity is diminishing, leaving the relationship without spark or interest (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1990). Sexual preoccupation, or the reduction of one’s spouse to the status of a sexual object, is a problem that exists in some same-race marriages and, no doubt, in some interracial marriages (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1990). As such, it should be dealt with primarily as a relationship dilemma and not a racial issue. The reality is that interracially married couples are most likely to have been engaging in sexual relations for some time (at least since their marriage) and generally are beyond being curious, if that ever was a factor. As in most relationships, healthy sexual adjustment involves moving from sexual curiosity to genuine intimacy (Davidson, 1992).
When examining the issue of social or economic mobility, it is reasonable to keep in perspective the fact that people generally want to "marry up," or marry their equal, rather than otherwise (Brown, 1989). If the alleged social or economic climbing is detrimental to either of the partners, then the couple will need to weigh this factor in the balance of their overall desire to marry (Brown, 1989). Common sense dictates that individuals should examine whether they are motivated to marry principally for profit and, if so, to see the potential pitfalls in that decision (Brown, 1989).

Often when a person is overtly exhibitionistic he or she is seeking approval or attention (Aldridge, 1978). To begin to rule out exhibitionism as the motivation for interracial marriage, the clinician could examine whether the individuals involved no longer want or are attracted to their partner after they have been seen in public and have observed some response, or if that public response is necessary to sustain interest in their partner (Aldridge, 1978). Some level of secrecy is more often the norm with interracial couples than is exhibitionism, and as such,
is the problem with which most couples have to contend. Some willingness to exhibit may be, in many cases, a healthier alternative (Brown, 1989).

If and when the couple's so-called ulterior motives are ruled out, the clinical professional may work with the couple and their family members (if they are still willing to be involved) to determine who owns which part of the problem about interracial marriage (Porterfield, 1982). Family members may have to examine whether their accusations about ulterior motives expose their racism rather than indicate weakness in the interracial couple's decision to marry (Davidson, 1992). Also, because prejudice against Black-White interracial unions remains a societal problem, couples and their families need to be aware that in accepting such relationships, they are dealing on higher moral ground than are many other member of society and that to do so bring with it higher demands (Brown, 1989).

When couples are told that their love is not legitimate but is the product of craziness or rebellion against parents, is based on sexual curiosity or perversity, is stimulated by the desire for material or
social gain, or is happening only for shock value, the
effect may be devastating (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan,
1990). Clinical professionals must empathize with and
give validation to the feeling of any couple facing
such an onslaught and then should direct attention to
the couple's strengths (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan,
1990).

Black-White couples may find encouragement and
strength by the clinicians shifting the focus away from
the suspicions about ulterior motives, toward their
true reason for being together. As stated previously
like most couples of the same race, interracial couples
marry because of love; compatibility; and share
interest, values, and ideas (Brown, 1989; Porterfield,
1982). Even unsupportive family members often consider
the partners perfectly suited for each other, except
for their racial dissimilarity. The clinical
professional, then, would do well to emphasize the
similarities in the relationship. At the same time, a
strength exists in the individuals who have transcended
racial bias in their most intimate relationship and
have been able to appreciate their interpersonal
differences (Davidson, 1992).
Even in the situation in which a couple recognizes some degree of truth in certain charges about ulterior motives, the clinician can help put their responses into perspective. Rebelling against one's parents, hoping to improve one's economic situation, or wishing to gain attention, for example are not unique to black-white marriages. Many successful marriages have an irrational component, but Black-White unions cannot be held as exemplary in this regard (Davidson, 1992).

When clinicians work with interracial couples and their families, they need to have a critical awareness of the theoretical perspectives still presented, in the literature, concerning motivations for Black-White interracial marriage. They must recognize the inherent racial bias of these theories and guard against their influence in the therapeutic context if they are to work without prejudice. Certainly, if a particular marriage is characterized by misguided motives it should be examined on an individual case basis, but to generalize that Black-White couples have ulterior motives is clinical sustained.
References


