

LET'S GIVE THEM SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT: EXPLORING RACISM
AND RACIAL TENSIONS AS POTENTIAL FACE THREATS IN BLACK AND
WHITE INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS.

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how racism and racial tensions potentially threatened the face needs of Black and White interracial couples. Specifically, this study investigated the benefit of family approval of one's interracial relationship. Couples use of corrective face work in response to prejudice was also examined. This research used a qualitative, interpretive method to gather and analyze data from 14 personal interviews. The interview schedule enabled interviewees to use storytelling to share their experience of being in a Black and White interracial relationship.

Interviewees were asked questions surrounding their experience as the partner in an interracial relationship. Couples shared how they told their family that their romantic partner was a different race and shared how they encountered prejudice when they are out in public. Further, they spoke about how people stare at them and make comments about their interracial relationship. The data underwent a thematic analysis (Owen, 1984) where I reviewed the data and searched for themes that were recurrent and repeated by interviewees.

There were several themes that emerged. First, the very presence of racial tensions and racism affects interracial couples. Second, family support seemed to mitigate threats to couples' positive and negative faces and enabled couples to engage in open and honest dialogue with their family and their significant other. Finally, even couples with family support, engaged in corrective face work to respond to the face threats posed by racism and racial tensions.

Mom. Thank you for loving me like you did and for showing me what it meant to trust Jesus and take leaps of faith. I will always remember the lessons you taught me. That I can do anything I set my mind to and that we will either find a way or make one. Everytime I hear a baby cry, each time I see a butterfly or a beautiful rainbow, I will think of you. Thanks for believing in me. I will love you forever.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Racism is real and present between Black and White Americans in the United States today. For the purpose of this project, racism, racial discrimination, and race need to be defined. First racism is defined as, “the systematic subordination of certain racial groups by those in power” (Orbe & Harris, 2008, p. 9). Second, racial discrimination is identified as, “acting upon your racial prejudice when communicating with others” (p. 9). Third, racial prejudice is conceptualized as, “inaccurate and/or negative beliefs that espouse or support the superiority of one racial group” (p. 9). Also, after careful consideration and conducting interviews, Black individuals were referred to as Black instead of African American, since this is how interview participants self-classified. To continue, racial tensions and racism are present between Black and White Americans even today. Observant individuals may notice that, “the presence of race in the United States, is like the presence of the air we breathe—something always around us that we use constantly, without much thought” (Orbe & Harris, 2008, p. 23).

Discussing racism and racial tensions makes people uncomfortable. In fact, White Americans with good intentions try hard not to discuss race (Eliasoph, 1999). Often, it seems that individuals would rather ignore racism and racial tensions than discuss them. In the United States, we have witnessed destruction associated with this practice. As a result, legislators passed laws, which most people assume settled racial problems in the United States. However, “we must confront racism at its origins, defeat it in the American soul, and move toward a new beginning in national relations” (Asante, 2003, p. 12). Therefore, we need to acknowledge the historical roots of these

racial tensions and prevent them from damaging our society. Simply put, the laws that legislators passed did not end racism, nor did they soothe racial tensions. If race relations are to change, if individuals are to understand others' points of view and learn from one another, then continuing to ignore the history between Whites and Blacks can no longer be a part of America's essence. We must engage in dialogue.

My thesis will examine the narratives of interracial couples to discover how racial tensions potentially threaten their face positive and negative face needs. This research is important to communication literature for several reasons. First, this topic ought to be included in the communication literature because there is a communication issue at stake if scholars do not address racial tensions. Racial tensions are communicated both verbally and non-verbally in our society. Therefore, as scholars we have to investigate the practices whereby these tensions occur. Second, Black and White interracial couples are more prominent in the United States today than they have been in the past. In fact, the United States is browning (Prinzing & Prinzing, 1990; Wright, Sparks, & O'Hair, 2008). Further estimations project that by the year 2050, Whites will be the minority in America. Black and White interracial relationships are becoming more common and it is imperative that communication literature adequately examine this relationship. Third, although interracial relationships are more common, discussing racial tensions as they are potentially face threatening to interracial couples has not been done before. Though the lack of literature on this subject may correlate with the reasoning that discussing racism and racial tensions are a taboo subject, scholarly literature ought to include information on this subject.

Although most scholars are not addressing racism and racial tensions, there is a growing body of literature in the communication field that examines Whiteness and racial privilege in American society (Jensen, 2005; Kendall, 2006; McKinney, 2005; Sullivan, 2006; Yancey, 2004). Orbe and Harris (2008) discuss White privilege in America asserting that, “those who are not privileged have been oppressed in a society that places more value on skin color than character” (p. 272). However, this is only the beginning of a larger conversation that needs to take place. This topic is important since examining the narratives of Black and White interracial couples will help scholars understand how their stories are reifying race, racism, and race relations today. While the body of literature about racism and race relations is slowly growing, further research in this area is needed.

Furthermore, acknowledging how racial tensions are potentially face threatening to Black and White interracial couples will add to the body of communication literature in romantic and personal relationships. Though dating is a common topic in communication research, the literature rarely addresses interracial relationships between Black and White Americans. Therefore, the literature could be considered sparse and insufficient since researchers mostly seem to focus on studying White college students and relationships. This is interesting in and of itself. For example, if one is to examine romantic and personal relationship literature, one would find a vast array of topics from attachment style, equity, and self-disclosure methods. The literature exists, although it does not overtly acknowledge its slanted focus on a small portion of the American demographic. However, if one wanted to examine Blacks within the context of romantic and personal relationships, the literature is limited and

almost non-existent. Interpersonal and romantic relationship research is largely homogenous. Seemingly, it is possible that White privilege may be present in communication literature. Scholars need to expand the literature in romantic and personal relationships so that it encompasses a more diverse population.

Finally, the discussion about racism, racial tensions, and race is an important one and has a place in communication literature. Thus, it seems that this topic is more of a philosophical question about communication theory asking, “What should one do with knowledge?” It is the contention of this thesis that scholars and individuals alike are responsible for what they know. Therefore, this knowledge should be used to bring about change in society. As a result, examining how racial tensions are face threatening to interracial couples in scholarly literature is beneficial to communication literature because it may pave the way for having intelligent discussions outside academia. Thus, this knowledge may change the world. So, “let’s give them (the world) something to talk about.”

Before examining racial tensions, as they are potentially face threatening to Black and White interracial couples in my literature review, below I will discuss racism, the non-traditional nature of my master’s thesis, and acknowledge my position in relationship to my research.

Discussing Racism

A healthy discussion that examines the potential face threat that racism poses for Black and White interracial couples is necessary. However, discussing this without acknowledging that racism exists between these two groups would be terribly insensitive (Asante, 2003). Doing so would not benefit our society, interracial couples,

or scholarly literature. Therefore, before examining the narratives of interracial couples consideration must be given to the larger picture from which their stories occur. As a result, before I discuss racial tensions and explore how they are potentially face threatening to Black and White interracial couples, I will examine racial tensions that exist between White Americans toward Blacks in my literature review.

We need to talk about racial tensions, regardless of how uncomfortable the discussion may be, in order to get on the same page. For example, “the majority (of people) in the United States believes that race relations are generally good, (however) Blacks and European Americans have starkly divergent perceptions of what good means” (Orbe, 2005, p. 178). Engaging in dialogue about racial tensions may help align these diverse perceptions. Additionally, our society is co-cultural. “The United States is a country of many cultures, each of which exists simultaneously within, as well as apart from, other cultures” (Orbe, 1998, p. 2). Therefore, every day in the United States individuals communicate with people from different cultures whether at work, at home, at school, at church, or within one’s local communities. However, the problem with this is that everyday, miscommunication occurs too. In fact, “one of the reasons for the failure of communication between blacks and whites is due to cultural differences” (Asante & Noor Al Deen, 1984, p. 508). Perhaps better dialogue about racial tensions and cultural differences may help people understand others’ thought process and help individuals develop genuine cross-cultural relationships. Additionally, we have to talk about racism and racial tensions because all too often, “racism often becomes somebody else’s problem when it is really a national concern” (Asante, 2003, p. 13). Rather than continuing to ignore those individuals whom we do

not understand, we should engage in dialogue with the intention of getting to know individuals who are different from us. This practice may promote cultural harmony or at least help to lay a foundation for cultural understanding in America. This discussion cannot continue to go unaddressed.

Racial tensions are potentially face threatening for interracial couples. People seem to notice Black and White interracial couples. Seemingly, they are an odd sight, even today. For example, when the public eye is drawn to an interracial couple as they enter a room or a restaurant, this is face threatening. When schoolteachers mistake mothers and fathers to be children's nannies rather than their parents, this is face threatening. Interracial couples are impacted by the larger story of racism that is being played out in the United States. As a result, interracial couples must manage the potential face threat of racism affecting their relationships through racial tensions. Throughout my thesis, I will attempt to shed light into this phenomenon. Also, I will discuss face threats more in depth in the literature review.

Acknowledging My Position

Before moving to the review of concepts, it is appropriate to acknowledge my position in relationship to my research. My story is below.

This is the most difficult section of a paper that I have ever written. It is awkward discussing my relationship with this topic of study in my literature review because doing so requires that I share personal information about my life and romantic relationship. As such, I am experiencing anxiety for several reasons. However, it is possible that my anxiety and discomfort are a result of something bigger, something intangible. It is possible that I am uneasy because I am attempting to make sense of

racial messiness by writing about how racial tensions potentially cause face threats for Black and White interracial couples. Maybe I have anxiety because I fear ‘the’ question: “What does she know anyways?” I have never before cared so deeply about a subject matter. I have never contemplated for such great a length of time how my audience would receive my research. I have never so boldly expressed my weaknesses, my failings, and my struggles of understanding a race that I will never be. Never before have I asked other people to share about the messiness of being in a Black and White interracial relationship. Perhaps I have anxiety because I am well aware that some people do not approve of this. Thus, I am writing this thesis and I am sweating. Maybe I fear of how my research will be received? Personally, I do not think my uneasiness has anything to do with fear. I think I am anxious because I care so much.

Though this discussion, my blatant honesty, and being a White person raising this topic, makes me feel vulnerable and even very uncomfortable at times, I still believe in the dream. I am not drawn to the dream because I think it is romantic. Rather, I believe that it has become a societal necessity. I believe that, “We will overcome.” This thesis is hard to write for thousands of reasons, but I am compelled to share these stories. After sharing the stories of the interracial couples I interviewed, I feel that it is only appropriate to begin by sharing mine.

I noticed racial tension as a school kid while I was growing up. I remember coming home from school, as early as sixth or seventh grade, crying, and asking my mom on several occasions why people were so mean to one another. This is not because racist acts were directed towards me. Rather, I watched altercations between

individuals that I went to school with. I noticed how people stared at interracial couples, even in middle school. I remember hearing other students make comments about my classmates like, “why does he/she date Black or White people?” I remember wondering and then asking my mother if there was something ‘wrong’ with this dating practice. I observed the segregation of seats in the lunchroom, in my math class, and in the high school hallways. I watched people get into fist-fights in the lunchroom, each blow packed with racial bitterness because an outside member had come too close to a member of a particular click—whatever does ‘too close’ mean anyways? This continued in high school and although there were also divisions based on an individual’s popularity, these are not the divisions I am referring to.

In high school, even as an outsider, I observed racial division. I watched people get labeled based upon whom they spent time with, what they wore, their intelligence, how they spoke and athletic ability. I befriended everyone regardless of his or her race. I often felt like an outsider among the White kids because I had more friends that were not White. I remember feeling more judged by my own race than by my non-white friends who accepted me. I felt like an outsider. I did not understand. And I did not like what I was experiencing.

My mom tried her best to explain that racism is wrong. We watched *West Side Story*. We talked about slavery, Japanese internment camps, the Civil Rights Movement. We discussed Dr. King in length. She described racism and racial tension in the 60s and 70s and I listened with an aching heart. She told me about similar experiences when she was made fun of by White kids at a school dance after dancing with a Black man that she was friends with. We discussed American history and the

terrible things White people did to others. She told me that racism was wrong and taught me to love and to treat everyone equally. My mom was a devout Christian. She was good at loving people and so her answer was sufficient for that time. However, her instruction to simply love and be nice to all people regardless of their race did not fully educate me. I still could not comprehend racial tensions and racism enough to understand interracial issues. I would not understand for some time.

Looking back, I learned early in grade school that the American constitution asserts, “that every man is created equal.” However, this contradicted my lived experience and observations. Though I attempted to learn more about racial tensions, racism, and Black culture, I just did not understand it. This puzzled me for years. And then, almost suddenly, I understood. I am White. Seemingly, I lacked an insiders’ knowledge and could not understand real-life struggles. As a result, there are some things I cannot experience directly, so my comprehension is incomplete. This realization made writing this thesis all the more difficult. There is so much literature on Black history and culture. I cannot possibly read it all. My desire to learn about the Black culture is going to take a lifetime. Even then, I will still be White and unable to understand everything. I have only my observations, my experiences, and the literature that I have read to rely upon. As a result, I do not know everything. I cannot know everything. Furthermore, since I am White, I automatically benefit from the privileges associated with this categorization (Asante, 2003). Thus, I have to acknowledge that White privilege exists, because I am aware that racial tension exists. This is difficult for me. I do not want to benefit from this racist system, but I do. While I have been consciously aware of racial tensions throughout my life, as I learned about

intercultural and interracial communication research, something inside me demanded that I discover more.

The research that follows is not the just a story that details how racial tensions are potentially face threatening for Black and White interracial couples. It is their narrative. These shared experiences reflect how each couple learned to understand the most important person in their lives, their significant other.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following, I will discuss the need for narratives in scholarly research. Next, I will review scholarly literature on the historical roots of racism and uncover experiences rarely found in our history books. Additionally, I will examine literature, which unveils instances of racism and racial tensions embedded in our country's past. Further, I will review literature on Essed's (1991, 2001) identification of five accounts of everyday racism. Finally, I will review literature on face work (Goffman, 1967; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Holtgraves, 1992; Metts, 2000). Combined, this literature will serve as the theoretical framework upon which I will examine how racial tensions are potentially face threatening to Black and White interracial couples.

A Narrative Approach

My thesis will explore narratives of Black and White interracial couples and the face threats found therein. When examining racial tension as it affects Black and White Americans, seemingly people are trying to define the sides into, well – Black and White. However, people seem to be looking at each side differently, from their perspective rather than considering the others' perspective. Therefore, below I will examine the need for narratives in scholarly research and I will attempt to use narration to discuss and unveil some historical instances of racism. Hopefully, this paper will help people visualize the larger story of racism and racial tensions in America. Only then can someone understand how this story affects the face needs of Black and White interracial couples.

Narratives are a medium to exploring the meaning embedded in our life's stories. "Seeing our lives as stories does not guarantee total clarity as to what our story will ultimately mean. I can only discover and create meaning in the living of my story" (Taylor, 1996, p. 22). Therefore, sharing stories is part of the process in the search for meaning. This makes sense. We read books. We go to movies. We watch the latest television drama. We meet friends at coffee shops to talk about our lives. We constantly engage in storytelling. The great thing about story telling is that it allows the hearer to place themselves in the storyteller's situation. Similarly, story telling may function as a non-threatening avenue for discussing racial tension. For example, "in order to make you understand, to give you my life, I must tell you a story—and there are so many stories..." (Woolf, 1996, p. 23). I hope that using a narrative form to examine racial tension will help individuals understand how racial tensions are potentially face threatening for Black and White interracial couples and the meaningfulness of that threat to the relationship.

Using a narrative is a common approach to conducting scholarly research. This is because "narratives are a very common form of human communication. Although storytelling is subject to socio-cultural variation, people from all walks of life can and do make sense of their experience by linking events through plot lines, thereby constructing narratives" (Boudens, 2005, p. 1,287). Further, using a narrative form is a traditional approach to conducting qualitative research (Fisher, 1987, 1988, 1989) and this method will be employed in this thesis. Given the highly personal, reflexive, and individualized nature of the topic, such a methodological approach is warranted. In fact, Fisher (1989) defends the use of narratives in scholarly research stating that,

“narration is a conceptual framework for understanding human decision, discourse, and action...it can be interpreted and assessed as modes of expressing good reasons, as rhetorical forms including conclusions about people, community, and the world” (p. 55). Thus, using a narrative form will help the interracial couples I interview to tell their story about how they make sense of the potential face threat of racial tensions.

A narrative approach is helpful for this research because it is inclusive and unifying in nature; people are able to place themselves in the larger story. As such, a narrative form “celebrates human beings by reaffirming their nature as storytellers...by insisting that discourse will always tell a story” (Fisher, 1989, p. 55). Therefore, the interracial couples that I interview will be acknowledged rather than, marginalized. The storytelling process will help scholars understand the “people, community, and the world” (p. 55) as interracial couples experience it. This is the benefit of narration. Fisher seems to best describe the usefulness of narration:

the narrative paradigm is a philosophical statement that is meant to offer an approach to interpretation and assessment of human communication—assuming that all forms of human communication can be seen fundamentally as stories, as interpretations of aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character (p. 57).

Therefore, narration offers researchers the ability to clearly examine what is at the heart of their research. This study aims to interpret “all aspects of the world occurring in time and shaped by history, culture, and character” (p. 57) as these parts affect the interracial couples that I will interview. As a result, narration is the best way to

understand how racial tensions potentially threaten the positive and negative face needs of Black and White interracial couples. Hopefully, this research will help scholars and individuals in society make sense of stories detailing how racial tension affects the face of Black and White interracial couples.

Historical Racism

“One cannot consider the periodic fury of the Black community...without an appeal to historical experience” (Asante, 2003, p. 20). Before discussing how racial tension affects Black and White Americans in their interracial relationships today, instances of historical racism and racial tension must be uncovered and given a voice. The racism portion of this literature review will attempt to do two things simultaneously. First, it will acknowledge some experiences in Black history that are rarely mentioned in history books. Second, it will increase one’s knowledge about racial tension as it impacts the Black community. This acknowledgement is vital since “conquering the past has become even more treacherous in recent years because of the rapid increase in the number of people who know nothing substantive about American history” (Asante, 2003, p. 19). Therefore, individuals cannot understand how racial tension is potentially face threatening for Black and White interracial couples without acknowledging the full story behind race relations. Finally, while I will acknowledge horrific instances of racism, the whole story cannot be told here. The information is too vast for this short paper. Also, I am limited by my understanding of racial tension as much as I am limited by my experience with racism and racial tension. Though I cannot tell the whole story, engaging in this dialogue about race relations, the roots of racism, and racial tensions are a good first step. Hopefully, other conversations will

emerge as a result of this discussion. Maybe one day through dialogue and education, we can erase racism (Asante, 2003). What follows is my attempt to uncover this challenging dialogue.

This Was Not Mentioned in My History Book

Our history books deceive us by omitting the seriousness of race relations existing between Black and White Americans. They lack information that is necessary to understand history as it could be told from diverse perspectives. All that one has to do to verify this claim is to pick one up. I remember that my childhood history book indicated that with one speech, Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves with the emancipation proclamation. This is the same history book that asserts that the civil war ended slavery and that the civil rights movement abolished racism in America. My history book reported this information and lacked emotion. In fact, I never remember reading about slavery and thinking, “this is terrible.” Seemingly, American history books discuss slavery from a feel good perspective. It is almost as if they do not want Whites to experience any cognitive dissonance regarding their treatment of Blacks throughout history. As a result, there are many things that White Americans need to understand about the Black’s experience with racism and racial tension.

First, White Americans need to recognize that our history books are void of information about the Black community’s experience in America. Since they are not fully educating us, they are perpetuating racial tension. Perhaps, “One of the biggest issues to be confronted by the American democracy is the historical tendency to denounce anything and anyone that calls attention to the country’s dreadful past” (Asante, 2003, p. 18). America seems to be ignoring racial tension by failing to

acknowledge the full reality of past racial relations between Blacks and White Americans in our history books. This is dangerous for American society today. As a result, our history books have left out information resulting in ignorance regarding the Black culture or the racial tensions in our society.

Second, White Americans need to acknowledge racism's pervasive existence in America and its impact on Blacks. The impact of race, racial tensions, and racism are constant in the life of Blacks (Orbe & Harris, 2008). In fact, "at a collective level as well as a personal level, in our minds, the residual impact of years of enslavement and racial segregation and discrimination dominate all possibilities" (Asante, 2003, p. 174). Therefore, race is not something that an individual can escape from. Moreover, being Black is loaded with meaning. As mentioned before, most Americans are not well-educated concerning history (Asante, 2003). Simply put, most White Americans are culturally illiterate about the experiences of Black culture. As a result, the meaning and the history embedded behind being classified Black are misunderstood by the majority of people. In fact, "our ignorance of the contours of American history complicate every attempt to understand the depth and bitterness and frustration" (p. 41) of Blacks. Race is everywhere. It affects the lives of Blacks everyday. The wounds from our country's history will continue to bleed and complicate interracial interactions today as long as America continues to silence the past. To begin to tackle racial tension, we need to be open to understanding how our past is affecting our present and future.

Unveiling Racism from Our Past

Seemingly, even historians find this topic to be anxiety-ridden and taboo. However, “we must learn to remember the things that we’ve learned to forget” (Dillard, 2008). Although “the horrible details of racism have affected the psyches of the victims” (Asante, 2003, p. 25), although “there are still White Americans who harbor deep racial resentment against Blacks” (p. 25), our history books remain devoid of information explaining this phenomenon. Our history books do not detail the Black experience in America. This void in the literature has enabled American society to learn to forget the horrific details of our past. However we need to remember that which history has attempted to omit. For example:

We were victims of the most horrendous and vicious racism, denied economic opportunities and yet condemned for our poverty, refused admission to colleges and yet blamed for our ignorance. And when we protested, we were called vile names, assaulted with sticks and cattle prods, and often murdered (p. 29).

Blacks in this country have suffered “maltreatment, brutal and subtle discrimination, and the denial of their citizenship rights” (p. 29).

Additionally, all too often our history books omit the most devastating accounts of slavery in this country. For example:

Our ancestors worked in hot fields and along cold damp riverbanks with no shoes. They picked cotton till the tips of their fingers bled and went home to their shacks to find that their children had died of dehydration or starvation. When it snowed they wore burlap to protect their scarred and

bleeding feet while building this country up for other people... We've worked as hard and longer than anyone, but let me try to get a \$50,000 or \$100,000 to start my business from your bank. Racial prejudice and discrimination are ingrained in the way that Whites respond to Black Americans (p. 90).

Though this may not appear in our history books, this is a part of the macronarrative for race relations today.

An additional factor rarely found in our history books involves the spirit of Blacks throughout this struggle. Blacks' desire to enter the promise land and leave the wilderness experience of racial injustice and inequalities behind (Asante, 2003). Throughout the wilderness experience, inherent in the Black spirit is a desire for a just future. Though the pain of racism has continued, "there is a sense that Blacks from the seventeenth century, during and after the enslavement, have been, by and large, people of the wilderness" (p. 22). And as a people of the wilderness the Black culture, as it relates to horrible racial injustice, has been silenced in America. Seemingly, Blacks may not feel at home here because it appears as if Whites are clueless about America's past. For example:

Whites may have forgotten, but we have not forgotten how Blacks were not allowed to testify in courts, to serve on juries, to bear weapons, or to own the land that we toiled over and made productive. Furthermore, when we wanted to be educated, we found obstacles everywhere we turned. Is it enough to say that those elements of racism and white domination have disappeared? No, it is not enough... (p. 44).

An additional factor rarely found in our history books involves the spirit of Blacks throughout this struggle. Blacks' desire to enter the promise land and leave the wilderness experience of racial injustice and inequalities behind (Asante, 2003). Throughout the wilderness experience, inherent in the Black spirit is a desire for a just future. Though, the pain of racial tension and racism has surfaced throughout American history, illustrated through lynching, the government's actions or inactions, and the murder of Dr. King, Blacks hold to their desire for the promise land (Asante, 2003). "The key to our survival as a people has not been compulsive optimism or self-delusion, but a prophetic sense of justice, a belief that one day wrong will be righted and truth will triumph across the American landscape" (p. 18). The wilderness experience can be summed up by the following, "I am, as a reflection of many Blacks, the quintessential product of the American Wilderness experience: shaken, but eternally optimistic about what can be if a national will existed to create a constructive human transformation" (p. 31). Hopefully, this project will be part of this transformative process.

To conclude this section, I need to mention that it is not by accident that I reviewed this literature before discussing the five characteristics of accounts of everyday racism Essed's (1991, 2001) and face work (Goffman, 1967; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Hotlgraves, 1992; Metts, 2000). It is my contention that interracial couples' face needs can only be examined after taking into consideration the greater picture. Therefore, we have to get what is unsaid out in the open so that we can talk about race relations and interracial couples. This discussion will serve as the

framework for drawing conclusions about how racial tension and racism potentially poses a face threat for Black and White interracial couples.

Face work

There are several aspects of face work that this project will draw upon as the theoretical basis for explaining how racial tension is potentially face threatening for Black and White interracial couples. Below I will discuss face work (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Holtgraves, 1992; Lim & Bowers, 1991; Metts, 2000) and the define terms that I will draw upon in data analysis section of this project.

“Healthy relationships are marked by the ability and willingness (of both partners) to protect and validate the assertion of both partners desired identities” (Metts, 2000, p. 77). This can be accomplished by paying attention to one’s partner’s face needs and through face work. To begin, face work can be explained as the process by which individuals prevent the loss of face for themselves as well as their partner while interacting (Goffman, 1967; Holtgraves, 1992; Lim & Bowers, 1991; Metts, 2000). Face refers to “the situated public identities that one claims during interaction” (Metts, 2000, p. 78). For example, when interracial couples are out in public, face work may involve protecting each partner’s identity as well as protecting the autonomy of the interracial relationship as a whole. To accomplish this, both partners in a Black and White interracial relationship must be aware of their positive and negative face needs (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holtgraves, 1992; Lim & Bowers, 1991; Metts, 2000). Though it is possible that most interracial couples are not familiar with these terms, their actions imply that they possess this tacit knowledge. As a

result, positive and negative face needs ought to be examined to determine how Black and White interracial couples' faces are potentially threatened in this manner.

Lim & Bowers (1991) refer to positive face needs refer to an individuals' "desire to have the qualities that one values appreciated and approved of by others" (Lim & Bowers, 1991, as cited in Metts, 2000, p. 82). Positive face can be broken down into two categories, fellowship face and competence face (Lim & Bowers, 1991). Fellowship face is "defined as the desire to be included and to be viewed as a worthy companion" (p. 84). Competence face is "defined as the desire to be respected for admirable traits (knowledgeable, intelligent, experienced, accomplished, and so forth)" (p. 84). Additionally, negative face needs "refer to an individual's desire to be free of imposition and restraint, to have free access to his/her own territory and possessions, time, space, and resources" (as cited in Metts, 2000, p. 83). This project hopes to discover how these potential face threats affect Black and White interracial couples.

People desire to be viewed in a positive manner. However sometimes situations occur where individuals are do not appear as positive as they would like to. When this occurs, corrective face work is needed. Corrective face work "functions to restore face and re-engage routine interaction after a person's face has been lost or put in jeopardy" (Metts, 2000, p. 78). For the purpose of this study, Essed's (1991) five characteristics of accounts of everyday racism will be used to demonstrate how couples use corrective face work to respond to racism and racial tension. Specifically, Essed's (1991) accounts are viewed as an arm of corrective face work. There are five characteristics of accounts of everyday racism developed from examining narrative

theory (Essed, 1991). While, this paper will use only draw upon the fifth account, it is important that readers consider all five. The first step context, takes into account “when, where, and who were involved” (Essed, 2001, p. 6). The second step complication, asks, “what went wrong, what was not acceptable” (p. 6)? The third step the explanation, involves asking, “is there a reason to believe that this is racism or discrimination” (p. 6)? The fourth step the argumentation, refers to making a logical connection as to “why this (situation/instance) can be seen as racism” (p. 6). The fifth and final step reaction has to do with the individuals’ response to racism. This step is, “what did you do about it” (p. 6) and inquires as to how the situation was handled. The fifth account will provide the criteria used to comprehend how couples respond to the ‘face threat’ of racism and racial tensions.

Research Questions

The purpose of this project is to explore how racial tension and racism poses a face threat to Black and White interracial couples. Data will be collected through a series of semi-structured interviews, where I will encourage the couples, one by one, to discuss how racism has impacted their relationship through sharing their relationship’s story. The research questions guiding this study are as follows.

RQ 1: How does external racial tension and racism between the White and Black community impact the face of interracial couples?

- How does racial tension and racism threaten a couple’s positive or negative face?
- How do couples attempt to restore face and employ corrective face work after experiencing the face threat of racial tension or racism?

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this project I interviewed Black and White interracial couples, invited their narratives about their relationship, and examined how racial tensions are potentially face threatening in their relationship. Due to my interest in recognizing the historical contexting of current social interactions, I focused on this one specific population, rather than interview a variety of combinations of interracial couples.

For this project, I interviewed seven Black and White interracial couples. Five of the couples were Black men dating or married to White women, and two couples were White men, dating or married to Black women. Their ages ranged between 19 and 27 years old. Relationship length ranged between nine months and six years. Of these couples, one was married, another engaged, another lived together, while the four remaining couples were dating for between nine months and six years.

In the following, I explain the value of taking a qualitative and reflexive approach to examining how racial tension impacts interracial couples. Finally, I discuss the formation of my interview schedule as well as the methods of data collection and reduction.

A Qualitative Approach

This thesis drew upon a qualitative, reflexive methodology. Since scholars should choose the method of research that is most appropriate for answering their research question, this project warranted a qualitative methodological approach. My research question was not quantifiable in its current syntax. Also, there is little quantitative research that examines face work in communication literature. While quantitative statistics have great purpose and a place in communication research, my

interest was not to discover how many people think racism and racial tension exists. I did not want to know how many acts of racism an individual could recall over the course of their interracial relationship. Instead, my interest was to unravel the meanings embedded in these couples stories. These cannot be plotted on an X or Y-axis.

Qualitative researchers have a relationship with what they investigate. Some researchers may call this project a “prose” or “me-search” and argue that a qualitative researcher’s relationship with the phenomenon under study takes away from objectivity. Still, other researchers would insist that some information can only be discovered through having a relationship with the subject under examination. My life experience has led to many practical questions about how other interracial couples experience their social world.

Reflexivity

When I refer to the term reflexive, specifically speaking, I am referring to “experience, where experience is a social process” (Steier, 1995, p. 69). Additionally, the term reflexive implies that individuals can recognize that they actively participate in their experience, even when they are being evaluated. Reflexivity involved both my participation as a researcher as well as the interracial couples whom I interviewed. First, as a researcher I expected that my experience of conducting interviews and collecting data would affect me. Throughout the process, I learned about another culture and I could better comprehend the struggles that Black and White interracial couples encountered as a result of racial tensions in our society. Moreover, as a qualitative researcher, I expected that the information I encountered would change me

intrinsically. Second, for the individuals involved in this project taking a reflexive approach had to do with their ability to demonstrate a self-awareness during the research process. During interviews, where the individuals shared their narratives they constructed “the worlds in which they live” (Steier, 1995, p. 65). They shared about their reality with the face threat of racial tension. Further, taking a reflexive approach inferred that both the researcher and the participants were affected by the research experience. It is reflexivity that enabled individuals to place themselves in a position to respond to racial tension as it is encountered or experienced. What I have described above is a part of the social process that I experienced as I took a reflexive approach to conducting research.

Additionally, taking a reflexive approach implied that as a researcher, I would share my experience as the White partner in a Black and White interracial relationship in my research (Steier, 1995). This relationship is as much a part of me as my research is. While being so passionate about one’s own research may make it difficult for some individuals to conduct research, I anticipated that my position in relation to this topic helped me to discover and relate to the stories of these interracial couples. For example, “reflexivity becomes, rather than a cognitive stance, a social process allowing more space for others and encouraging different stances toward those whose communication processes we seek to understand” (Steier, 1995, p. 83). As a qualitative researcher, I found that my ties to this subject did not hinder this research, rather the opposite occurred. I was able to understand the stories of these interracial couples better. The understanding gained when a researcher takes a reflexive approach is at the core of the “social interpretative process” (p. 82). If researchers seek to

understand their participants and contribute real knowledge as a result of their studies, then applying reflexivity as a social approach may be one of the best ways to accomplish this goal.

Developing the Interview Schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule was used to help interracial couples find their place in the story of racism that is occurring in America. This discovery was referred to as historical contexting (Fisher, 1988). Historical contexting acknowledges that there is a larger story, or to use Gergen and Gergen's (1984) term, macronarrative, going on around us. The decision to take this approach when I developed the interview schedule was unique. This approach allowed me to view the interview process as part of each interviewees' narrative. As individuals, the participants entered into the larger story of racial tension, racism, and race either when they were born, or when they began their interracial relationship. Next, they found their place within the story. They will continue to contribute to it by their existence, as people who are labeled by their race and by their involvement in a Black and White interracial relationship. Their individual experiences, or micronarratives, are shaped, in part by the larger micronarratives in which they exist. Finally, these individuals will depart from the story when either their relationship ends or their life concludes. However long they are present in this dialogue, they will mold the macronarrative that evolves.

Doing a semi-structured interview was beneficial towards helping the interviewees find their place in the larger story. It allowed me to probe for information and bring about self-discovery through our conversation. By thinking of information to probe for and including this on my interview schedule in advance, I was not limited

to ask only the questions on the interview schedule. Instead, interviewees had the freedom to bring the focus in another direction and their narration was not limited by the interview schedule. Therefore, I felt that a semi-structured interview schedule was best for this project and its goals.

Also, having developed a semi-structured interview schedule that came from a historical contexting and a narrative approach affected the types of questions that I asked. The questions functioned as a tool with which these individuals could share their own experiences and knowledge with me. Instead of my questions dictating their response, the questions encouraged their disclosure about racial tensions and enabled interviewees to speak for themselves. Thus, their experiences were the data. They framed and guided this research project, rather than allowing my questions to function in this capacity.

Additionally, the historical contexting approach was beneficial and helped me question the couples while remaining sensitive to the topic. Also, during the interview process I maintained objectivity. For example, “narratives allow us to think of emotions as more than single words or decontextualized phenomena. We can think of them as events, plots, happenings, or in the form of human action and interaction” (Boudens, 2005, p. 1,288). As such, though I experienced the story with my participants, I could simultaneously remain objective and sensitive to the topic. This was important since I was aware that some people may have found it difficult to talk about racism and racial tension. In allowing the interviewees to tell their story, they were free from the restraint resulting from the frame of my questions. This freedom lessened any anxiety surrounding this topic. This construction of questions allowed the

interviewees to tell their story and I was able to “collect data that was not constrained by data collection methods” (p. 1287). In this case, this would have referred to the method of questioning participants during the interview process. As a result, these individuals told their story and my questions helped, rather than hindered the narration process. Finally, I narrowed down the information I collected in the data reduction process.

Data Collection

Data was collected through conducting a series of 14 interviews with 7 Black and White interracial couples. Each interview lasted almost one hour in length, most between 35 and 50 minutes. I interviewed both individuals separately so that they felt comfortable disclosing information. This interview method was warranted because of the sensitive nature of this topic.

A convenience snowball sample was used to find 7 interracial couples. After interviewing one couple, I asked the couple if they know anyone whom they think would like to participate in this project. If they referred me to a couple, I asked them to contact the new couple before I called to set up an interview. I repeated this process until I interviewed 7 couples. Additionally, I asked friends and coworkers if they knew any Black and White interracial couples. When they were able to point me to a couple, I had my friends or family members contact that couple first to ask if I could interview them. Afterward, I contacted that couple to arrange an interview. This was important because the couple was not caught off guard by my phone call. Going through a friend or a family member enhanced my credibility as a researcher. Having a friend or family member refer me to an interracial couple helped these couples feel comfortable talking

with me, since they trusted the friend or family member that put us in contact. Moreover, I made sure to minimize possible threats to their face (positive and/or negative) when I invited them to participate. Since this is such a sensitive topic, I could not approach interracial couples on the street. As a result, I felt that a convenience snowball sample was the best method for recruiting participants.

Before I begin the interview process, there are several things that I did to accomplish my goal of being approachable and open. First, before beginning the interview and before recording anything, I thanked the individual for agreeing to share his/her story with me and I invited them to ask any questions about the research and the interview process. Second, I explained that I will be audio-recording the interviews and I asked the individuals to sign a consent form indicating both that they are aware that they were audio-recorded and that they agreed to participate in this project. Third, I explained that I would be audio-recording the interview so that I could listen to the interview after it is over and because I did not want to miss any important details shared during their interview. Fourth, I informed the individuals that their participation in the interview was their choice and that they could stop the interview at any time. Finally, I openly acknowledged that this topic is loaded with anxiety. I believe that doing these things increased their comfort level while they shared their story. After the interview, I typed up any notes or thoughts that I had, specifically with regards to how each interview related to the theories and literature framing this research.

It was important that the individuals participating know that their information would be kept private. Therefore, I took all precautions necessary to insure the anonymity for the individuals involved in this study. To accomplish this, at the end of

each interview, I told the couples that I needed to assign a pseudo name to refer to them. I asked them if they would like to choose their name. I kept a record of which couples are which in a place that was separate from my data to insure that the couples' names could not be linked to their data. In the same respect, I stored their consent forms in a separate location. Finally, to secure that the participants' identities will be protected, all of these locations were locked and the information on my computer was password protected.

Data Reduction

After conducting all of the interviews, I searched for patterns and themes. Once I identified the patterns, I transcribed the parts of each interview that reflected those patterns. It intended to look for instances where the couples discussed having experienced racial tension or situations where they were affected by racial tension in either the Black or the White community. I examined how these instances and circumstances are considered to be face threats. Next, I looked to see if any of the couples experienced similar situations and I paired these occurrences so I could present this information as data. Finally, I used Owen's (1984) thematic analysis to narrow down the data into theory driven and theme driven categories. Then, I transcribed the information that related to these categories. According to Owen (1984) when narrowing down data, researchers should look for three things: recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence, involves "observing two reports that have the same thread of meaning" (Petronio et Al, 2004, p. 41). Repetition, refers to "the duplication of key words and phrases" (p. 41). Finally, forcefulness, refers to vocal inflections and dramatic pauses that stress or subordinate some utterances from other

locutions in oral reports” (p. 41). When the interview themes were common among the interracial couples I interviewed, I knew I had data that may potentially explain how racial tension and racism potentially threaten Black and White interracial couples’ face needs.

Verifying the Results

This project had the potential to help give interracial couples a voice in a world that often silences the racial tension they experience in their relationship. Therefore, it was important for me to verify that the findings accurately reflected the thoughts and feelings of the Black and White interracial couples. To accomplish this, I triangulated my findings by discussing them with a few of the individuals I interviewed. Also, I shared this information with other members of this population and asked for their input. Validating this information is important to the quality of qualitative research as well as for the interracial couples involved. Taking these steps ensured that these results accurately represented the population they claimed to.

CHAPTER 4 : FACE THREATS, RACISM, RELATIONSHIP APPROVAL & POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE FACE

Basis for Attraction

Interviewees reported that they were attracted to and valued certain qualities in their significant others, indicating that race is not the sole basis for their attraction. First, partners reported attraction for various reasons including: having developed a long friendship or working relationship, a deep sense of caring for the other person, valuing that the other person was genuinely caring, compassionate, and genuine in their interpersonal interactions. Further, couples indicated that shared religious beliefs were a driving factor in their attraction to their romantic partner. Couples also disclosed their favorite qualities about their significant other. They gave the following responses: patience, wisdom, religious beliefs, loyalty, intelligence, and quality conversations. Two examples from personal interviews may best illustrate this claim. In the first example, Nina discussed what attracted her to Sam. In the second, Sam explained why he was attracted to Nina. She said the following:

- 1 I decided to date Sam because I enjoyed spending time
- 2 with him. It is not for his race. It is more for who he is
- 3 as a person. If he was Black with the same attributes then
- 4 I would be dating him.

Similarly, below Sam indicated that his attraction to Nina was not based on race-related reasons, but rather personality was the basis for his attraction:

- 5 I decided to date Nina because this is not about race or skin
- 6 color. If your personalities match, then it really should not
- 7 matter.

A majority of the interviewees indicated that there are many reasons that couples are attracted to one another and many qualities that individuals value in their romantic

partners. After discussing the sample and discussing the basis of attraction for the interracial couples in this project, next some potential face threats will be examined.

Potential Face Threats

Data from this study indicate that Black and White interracial couples experience three face threats: racism and racial tensions exists, its existence affects interracial couples, and relationship disapproval. Further, family disapproval of one's romantic relationship is the greatest face threat that couples experience. To understand why family approval is so crucial, perhaps it is helpful to consider how much of an issue family disapproval would be. Lack of support from family members could cause them to withhold support for decisions or interfere. This is especially true in our romantic relationships. The existence of racism and racial tensions in America combined with family approval or disapproval, potentially threaten Black and White interracial couples positive and negative face needs.

In this chapter, I will examine the existence of racism and interracial couples and finally I will conclude the chapter by discussing the benefits of family approval, dual-approval.

Racism Exists

The excerpts below elucidate what is otherwise an intangible concept: the ontological nature of racism and racial tension as they affect the face needs of interracial couples. In the first two examples interviewees spoke about the process of noticing racism when they were out in public with their significant other. In the third example, one interviewee explained that in his perception, America attempts to ignore

racism to avoid the mitigation of it. During a personal interview, Jeremiah mentioned the following:

8 In today's world, people meet you for the first time,
9 and they see color. I think noticing it has a lot to do
10 with race markers and stereotypes in America.

When people meet others for the first time, often people remember physical features.

Maybe people remember someone's hair color, their smile, or the color of their eyes.

However, when people see interracial couples, they notice their different skin colors.

Couples believe that this has to do with the culture of America. Leslie spoke about the existence of racism in America saying:

11 Where I grew up, I am not saying it is free of
12 racism, I don't think anywhere in America is.

In the second illustration, Leslie referred to the presence of racism, acknowledging that it is present across America. Therefore, not only are racism and racial tensions present in American culture, they are embedded in race markers all over the nation.

Matthais explains that racism is present in America, despite society's attempts to ignore its prevalence. He said:

13 Racism is like a smell that we
14 spray cheap potpourri over.
15 We try to make it seem like it is not
16 there anymore. But in all reality, it
17 is there. It is as worse as it has ever been.

These three illustrations lay a framework, which I will build upon throughout the data and analysis section. Racism is present in America, it is embedded in American culture, it affects the face needs of interracial couples and, when society avoids dialogue on the topic, interracial couples are affected.

Every couple I interviewed discussed racism and racial tensions. Several couples actually used the word racism while others acknowledged its presence by describing stares or by sharing comments that people make when they are out in public. Couples suggested these stares and comments communicated disapproval of their interracial relationship.

Interracial couples' face needs are compromised by the existence of racial tensions and racism. Next, I will draw upon excerpts from interviews to illustrate how interracial couples encounter relationship disapproval, through experiencing racism and racial tensions when they are out together in public.

Racism and Interracial Couples

While simply existing in the public world together would not usually lead to an uncomfortable situation, interracial couples face a complicated range of reactions from society that warranted further analysis. During an interview, Kelly said it best:

18 I don't think that people realize the impact that they
19 have, those staring or commenting. They are making
20 a bigger deal out of things than what it really is.

From this example, we are able to understand how overt stares or comments threaten the face needs for interracial couples. Interviewees acknowledged that when the public stares or makes comments, they feel that people make a bigger deal out of their interracial relationship than they should. This threat to positive face occurs because stares and comments illustrate the existence of racism and communicate disapproval of interracial relationships. Therefore, it is society's stares and comments that makes being in public with one's significant other face threatening. In the two examples

below, Matthais and Deon shared their thoughts about people staring at them when they are out in public saying:

21 It is 2008, almost 2009. If you walk down the street
22 and see a Black and White couple, people still turn
23 their heads, and think that is weird. But why?
24 It is not the first time, it wont be the last time you
25 see it. It is just something that should be looked at
26 like a norm instead of something odd.

Matthais indicated that interracial couples should not be viewed as unfamiliar by society.

In the two examples below, Deon and Jeremiah take this a step further, by providing specific examples of how they have been scrutinized by the public. Deon stated:

27 She likes plays. When we go to plays, the audience
28 isn't young, they are middle aged White people.
29 We go there and you would not believe the looks.

While being out in public with one's significant other is a normal activity for couples to engage in, for Black and White interracial couples, this can attract unwanted attention. Deon and his significant other experience this when they are at plays together. Similarly, Jeremiah described a face threatening situation when he and his girlfriend were out together in public:

30 There was the old White guy driving in a van. We
31 were walking through town. He was breaking all
32 the rules of the road because he saw us holding
33 hands walking together.

These stares and comments communicate the disapproval of interracial relationships, threaten couple's negative and positive face needs, and illustrate how racism and racial tensions are present in society today.

Interracial couples' encounters with racism and racial tensions could restrain their freedom and autonomy as a couple, acting as a constant threat to their negative faces. Not only do interracial couples sense that they do not belong when these threats occur, they lack the freedom to function as a "normal" couple since they cannot walk down the street without being stared at. Society's stares force couples to respond to their threatened face. These responses will be discussed further in the chapter on corrective face work.

Now that we have examined how interracial couples experience approval or disapproval in a public scenario, I will examine this aspect of face from a familial perspective. While not every Black and White interracial couple may fit into this model, tentative findings emphasize that relationship approval from family members, meets several face needs for Black and White interracial couples.

Benefits of Relationship Dual-Approval

Data indicate that Black and White interracial couples are threatened not only by the existence of racial tensions and racism but also relationship approval or relationship disapproval. Approval and Disapproval can be taken in three contexts: approval or disapproval from one's family, friends, and society. This project examined the role of family approval in three sub-categories: dual-approval, one-sided approval/perceived one-sided approval, and disapproval/perceived disapproval. In this project, I will examine how both families' approval benefits couples. For the duration of this paper, this will be referred to as dual-approval.

The reason that I chose to focus on interracial couples experiencing relationship approval has to do with my interest in dialogue about racial tensions, racism, and race

relations. Interracial couples having dual-approval provide the best examples of communication, which enables open and honest dialogue. Therefore, below I draw upon examples from the data and explore the role of racism and relationship approval with respect to the positive and negative face needs of Black and White interracial couples. The couples' use of corrective face work will be explicated further in the next chapter.

Dual-approval is beneficial for interracial couples. However, before discussing this, a thorough comprehension of this term would be helpful. Dual-approval occurs for Black and White interracial couples, when both the male and the female's parents are supportive of their interracial relationship. When Black and White interracial couples encounter dual-approval from family members, a variety of their face needs are met. Below, I will examine how interracial couples' positive and negative faces are maintained through dual-approval.

Even dual-approval interracial couples experience public threats to their positive face needs. However, since families approve of their interracial relationship, couples may perceive public face threats to be less threatening. Dual-approval is beneficial because it communicates respect for interracial couples' positive face needs. Therefore, family approval plays a role in reliving the stressors experienced when society does not communicate that interracial relationships are appreciated and valued. Before drawing upon excerpts from interviews to demonstrate how threats to interracial couples' positive face may be perceived as non-threatening, further discussion about the benefits of dual-approval and positive face is necessary.

Dual-approval is inherently beneficial to one's positive face needs and reduces the threat to interracial couples' positive faces. One reason for this is because dual-approval gratifies both individual's general face needs. As a result, dual-approval may relieve the threat to the interracial couples' public identities enabling "the situated identity that an interracial couple claims during interaction" to be maintained (Metts, 2000, p. 84). The positive foundation that families provide maintains interracial couples' positive faces, regardless of the existence of racism and racial tensions in society. Rather than be threatened when their faces are put in jeopardy through the public's stares, interracial couples continue to be comfortable in their interracial relationship, because their families are supportive. Therefore, tentatively the greatest benefit of dual-approval may be that it maintains a couples' positive face, by giving them the tools necessary to manage negative face threats. After discussing how dual-approval meets interracial couples' positive face needs, next I will examine how dual-approval maintains couples' negative face needs.

Not only does relationship approval fulfill both partner's positive face needs, it meets their negative face needs as well. While it is likely that not everyone fits this model, data indicate that open and honest communication is facilitated by dual-approval and meets partners' negative face needs. By definition, this occurs because dual-approval guarantees that both individuals are "free from restraint" and have the freedom to be an autonomous in their relationship. Below, I will draw upon data from interviews to demonstrate how dual-approval enabled couples to have authentic and deep discussions with each other and with their family members.

The first examples illustrate open dialogue that couples experienced when sharing how they told their family members about their romantic relationships. Couples who reported ‘knowing’ that race and racial tensions are not issues in their family, experienced more anxiety when telling their families that they had a significant other, than they did when sharing that their romantic partner was racially different. For couples with this approval, disclosure about their interracial relationship was not seen as a positive face threat. Jeremiah replayed this saying:

34 I was more nervous about telling them that I
35 had a girlfriend. I was not even thinking about race.

For Jeremiah, it was more stressful to tell his family that he was in a dating relationship. Leslie expressed the same sentiments.

36 I did not really feel comfortable telling them that
37 I had a boyfriend. It had nothing to do with race.

Finally, Nina reported that there was no pressure from her family about race. Nina stated:

38 There was no pressure from my family about race.
39 It was harder to tell my parents that I had a boyfriend.

Couples whose families were supportive of race and accepting of individuals who are not their same race, provided deeper levels of support for interracial couples. For these couples, knowing their family was supportive of race and race-related issues relieved threats to their positive faces.

Dual-approval provides a foundation upon which Black and White interracial couples positive faces are supported. This support mitigates threats to their positive faces and allows the couples to feel included and viewed as worthwhile couple, at least in their immediate families.

Not only does dual-approval maintain couples' positive faces, it encourages open and vulnerable dialogue between the couple and their family members. Dual-approval satisfies a couple's positive face needs because it encourages dialogue between couples and their families. As a result, couples may have more open and honest conversations where partners can discuss racism and race relations with their significant other and their family. Data indicated that dual-approval is foundational. Excerpts from interviews illustrated the types of conversations that dual-approval facilitates. Couples learned about one another's race and racism by engaging in open and honest dialogue. Data indicated that these types of conversations are facilitated by dual-approval. Marshy's conversation with his fiancé's dad provided a good example of this dialogue.

40 Her dad {who is Black} and I were talking. He told me
41 that he did not have any issues with race or being Black
42 until he came to America, where they had issues with race.

Without dual-approval, Marshy would have never had this deep conversation.

Although Marshy does not have lived experience of being Black in America, through dialogue, he learned a little about Black culture. This conversation was enabled by the father's acceptance of their interracial relationship.

Another example of dual-approval facilitating open dialogue between family members occurred when Marie was concerned about taking her significant other boating with her family.

43 I invited him to come with me boating. I have an aunt
44 in Texas that I would go boating with. She said, "hey if
45 you ever want to bring some a friend that would be great.
46 I noticed a previous time on the dock that a racial slur was
47 uttered. It something like, "get away from here nigger."
48 And I thought, oh gosh, is bringing him going to be ok?

49 Is someone going to attack him? So I told him, “hey you
50 are more than welcome to come, but I noticed this and it
51 concerns me.” He said it was probably fine but if your aunt
52 thinks it is a problem, I will not come. My aunt reassured
53 me that it would be fine, and he came boating.

She knew that her family was supportive, so when she experienced anxiety about bringing him to this family event, she decided to discuss her concern with her family.

This example illustrates that approval is needed for open and honest conversations like this to take place. Further, all avenues of conversation are enabled when dual-approval exists. They need their family’s approval. Since her family was supportive, the couple had the freedom and autonomy to go boating, and thus supported the couples negative face needs. As a result, they were free to go on this outing without worry about how outsiders would respond to their interracial relationship. Her family’s approval was more important than any possible public face threats.

Dual-approval is important for Black and White interracial couples. The support communicated through relationship approval maintains Black and White interracial couples’ positive and negative faces. Through the affirmation of family members, couples have the opportunity to function as a “normal” couple would. As a result, they are free from the anxiety of having to defend their autonomy and work for the approval of their relationship when they are with either partner’s families. Since couples have dual-approval, they do not have to choose between their families and dating their significant other. They are free to go places without worrying about racism and racial tension from their families, and they are invited to and included in family outings. Therefore, data indicated that dual-approval maintains both individuals’ positive and negative face needs.

CHAPTER 5: CORRECTIVE FACE WORK

Even interracial couples whose families bestow them with dual-approval may partake in corrective face work to respond to racism and racial tensions they experience when they are out in public together. Specifically, it is possible that the freedom interracial couples experience, as a result of dual-approval, enables them to utilize corrective face work to positively respond to disapproving public reactions to their relationship. Interracial couples may be less likely to perceive face threats to be very negative when they encounter them because their families support their decision to be together. This finding is important to this project, because it changes the couples' focus from the negativity of the racism they encounter to a constructive co-effort at handling prejudice. Therefore, I will now analyze how dual-approval couples employ corrective face work to respond to racism and racial tensions experienced in the public arena.

Essed's Accounts: "How do You Respond?"

Despite family approval, data indicate that dual-approval couples constantly engage in corrective face work to combat negative public sentiments towards Black and White romantic relationships. We have already established that interracial couples are made aware of these two things through the stares and comments the public makes when they are out together in society. As a result, dual-approval couples recurrently are pressed to answer Essed's (1991) question: "How do you respond?" (to racism) because the public makes disapproval so obvious for interracial couples. As previously mentioned in the literature review, this response involves the use of corrective face work.

Data from this project indicates that Black and White interracial couples reported engaging in three actions, which fall under the umbrella of corrective face work, thereby answering the proposed question. Couples responded to the racism and racial tension communicated through the public's stares and comments by engaging in the following actions: taking responsibility, getting used to it, and cognitively reframing encounters. Excerpts from interviews with couples will be laid out below.

Taking Responsibility

Several couples responded to the face threat of racism and racial tensions by *taking responsibility*. The process of taking responsibility for a face threat occurs when couples internally decide to 'own the stares' as a cognitive method, where they internally process and respond to racial tensions and move on. Jeremiah illustrates how someone can respond to a face threat by taking responsibility for it:

54 We are all human beings when it comes
55 down to it. We are all people and citizens
56 of the world. If I know something, I have
57 a responsibility to share it and I do that. I am
58 a part of what is going on. I know that I have
59 a responsibility to educate people, especially
60 those who are close to me, about my
61 point of view. When I have the chance to do this
62 I do. I take this responsibility seriously. Whenever
63 I feel like I need to be the bigger, or more mature
64 person, I do. I talk to those that are close-minded.

Taking responsibility for the racial tension and racism occurs when Jeremiah internally processes the face threat and decides how he will respond. Jeremiah asserts that he "has a responsibility to educate people...about his point of view." Therefore, one avenue for responding to the face threat of racism and racial tensions is to seek to educate others. I have included this example because it illustrates his cognitive

decision to “be the bigger, or more the more mature person.” This example demonstrates how one can take responsibility for the face threat through choosing how to respond to its occurrence.

Another interviewee, Matthais, takes responsibility a bit differently, saying the following:

65 Sometimes when people stare at us, I smile at them,
66 because then they know I caught them looking. They
67 get embarrassed and look away. When people look or
68 stare, most of those people I am never going to see again
69 in my life, so it is not worth it for me to get stressed if
70 someone stares.

Matthais took responsibility through his response to their glances. By smiling, he seems to dismiss the stares, electing to not “get stressed out” by them. His response to other peoples’ glares demonstrates how interracial couples can take responsibility for racism and racial tensions by internally processing the face threat, and moving on.

Kelly takes responsibility for a face threat she encounters in a similar manner saying:

71 I see them staring but I do not care. When we get stares
72 I just look at them back. It does not really bother me.
73 I just look at them back...

Kelly first responds to this threat on her negative face by deciding not to react emotionally to the stares, indicating, “it does not really bother me.” Through corrective face work, she makes a decision regarding how to respond to the glances. As a result, Kelly takes responsibility for the glares when she responds by looking back at them.

As an act of corrective face work, the three examples above illustrate how interracial couples take responsibility when their negative face needs are threatened by

racism and racial tensions. During the process of their taking responsibility, the couples express three interesting findings. First, Jeremiah not only chooses to be the “bigger and more mature person” in response to this face threat, but also he discusses that this implies taking the responsibility to educate others seriously.

Second, in their interviews, both Matthais and Kelly explained their choice to glance back at the stare perpetrators and catch them in the act. Matthais points out that when he does this, those glancing get embarrassed. Rather than accept the face threat, they are challenging it by threatening the positive face of those staring. Most likely, the people that Kelly glances back at may also be embarrassed from being caught. In this case, both those staring, along with Kelly and Matthais, experience a face threat. Specifically, the stares that interracial couples receive when they are out in public threaten a couples’ positive face needs since they are embarrassing. They also threaten their negative face needs, since being stared out denies the couple the autonomy to be out in public together. However, when a couple responds to this threat by staring back or even smiling at the perpetrator, the couple’s response threatens the perpetrator’s positive face needs.

The third finding responds to the historical context that gives additional meaning behind the returned gaze. In responding to their glances by looking back, interracial couples break from the traditions of past behavior, which happened during slavery. For example, when White masters mistreated African slaves, slaves were coerced to comply with this mistreatment. Rather than look up at their master after being whipped or beaten, the slaves more than likely did not make eye contact with the abuser. However, as illustrated in the interview data, this is not the case today. Instead

of looking down and accepting the discrimination from Whites, Black and White interracial couples are empowered. Rather than look away, some couples make eye contact, smile, and acknowledge the perpetrator. This response seems to indicate: “I am not the problem, our relationship is not the problem: You are the problem.” While the couples, like the slaves, did not have control over other people’s actions, they take responsibility the only way they can: by controlling their emotional and physical response to racism and racial tensions encountered in public. Though some interracial couples chose to take responsibility for the face threat of racism and racial tensions when they encounter it, others decide that they must get used to it.

Get Used To It

Couples may respond to racial tensions by deciding that they need to get used to their existence and continue with their relationship. While interracial couples are always responding to the existence of racism and racial tensions, dual-approval allows couples the freedom to process these face threats and respond positively. Part of this positive response may include telling oneself to ‘get used to it’ when racism and racial tensions are encountered. Data suggests that this kind of self-talk may be made possible through dual-approval granted by interracial couples’ parents. Below, I will draw upon examples from interviews with my participants where they responded to racism and racial tensions by telling themselves to ‘get used to’ it. Leslie, for example, discussed her response to racism and racial tensions during our interview time:

- 74 Here at college, there is a big racial divide.
- 75 Which is something that you get used to.
- 76 Even all the comments about our relationship.
- 77 It is just something I had to adjust to. One guy
- 78 actually said, “so you like your men like you like

79 your coffee? Black...”

Leslie acknowledges that at her college she had to adjust to the racial divide. Not only does this divide represent the existence of racism, but also she indicates that people make comments about her interracial relationship. Both the comments and this divide became issues that Leslie had to get used to as a result of being in an interracial relationship. Therefore, Leslie had to engage in corrective face work. She answered Essed’s (1991) question, “How do you respond” by telling herself that both the comments and the racial divide were things she “had to get used to” and “had to adjust to.”

Another interviewee, Marie, expressed a similar response to being stared at, stating:

80 If they (people) do (stare at us) I don’t know it.
81 But I am sure that people probably do (stare).
82 You know, I noticed people staring more when
83 we first got married. If it happens now, I have gotten
84 used to it.

Part of ‘getting used to it’ involves the recognition that there is nothing that interracial couples can do about racism and racial tensions. Jeremiah best illustrates this thought process saying:

86 We know that people are going to stare and look at us
87 and there is nothing that we can do to change this.

However, while acknowledging that there is nothing that an interracial couple can do about these stares seems to be a negative practice, perhaps it is not. These couples experience racial tension and racism and choose to remain a couple. Perhaps in making the decision to get used to the face threat and accept that there is nothing they can do to change it, they are using corrective face work to respond to face threats in a

more positive manner. Simply put, in choosing to get used to it and realize they cannot change other people's actions, Black and White interracial couples choose to not let the stares threaten their positive faces. As a result, they adjust to the stares and get used to them, but they do not change their behavior. While some interracial couples engage in corrective face work to respond to the face threat of racism and racial tensions by getting used to it and acknowledging that they cannot control others' actions, other couples employ corrective face work to cognitively reframe the face threat of racial tensions and racism.

Reframing Racial Tensions and Racism

Part of answering the question from Essed's (1991) accounts, "How do you respond" to racism and racial tensions may include cognitively reframing them. By engaging in this process, couples have control over whether or not they experience a face threat when racism and racial tensions are encountered. Relationship approval from couples' families conveys support of their interracial relationship. As a result, interracial couples respond to racial tension and racism by reframing these face threats. During this process, they minimize the face threat because they have the one thing they consider to be vital: their family's approval. Data indicate that dual-approval enables couples to cognitively reframe face threats when couples are stared at in public. During interviews couples indicated that they constantly reframe face threats (stares and glares) when they are out together in public. The words that the couples used to describe their response to racism and racial tension illustrate the otherwise intangible process of reframing. Instead of allowing society to control the

situation, interracial couples take back the control and minimize the face threat through the art of reframing. Examples of this are annotated below. Leslie describes:

88 We felt like we were getting a lot of stares from people. So we
89 started talking about being a Black and White couple. We knew
90 that the stares could be because people do not approve, or
91 because people are not used to seeing Black and White couples.

Leslie explains that the stares she and her significant other encountered evoked a response. They talked about them as a couple and came to a conclusion. This sentence is crucial as it illustrates how this couple lessened the face threat of being stared at through reframing the reason for the glances. Each couple I interviewed reported engaging in a similar thought process. An additional example from another interviewee, Marshy, involves the same reframing process.

92 When people stare, there is not a way to say for sure what
93 people are thinking. So I try not to make assumptions. I tell
94 myself that they might not be thinking something bad. They
95 may be just looking around.

Marshy, reframes the stares from the beginning. In line 92, he illustrates this perfectly by refusing to assume that the stare constitutes a face threat. In doing so, the stares become less threatening.

Jeremiah illustrates this same reframing process, however he tells himself something different. Rather than blame those who stare, he blames the glares on the culture that we live in. His words demonstrate how reframing is used to lessen the face threats from racism and racial tension.

96 I have realized that people are people and they are from different
97 backgrounds and cultures. They hold different beliefs than we do.
98 It is not their fault for staring. It is not our fault for dating.
99 This is a product of the culture that we live in.

When couples experience racism and racial tension, by reframing these threats, they actually minimize the face threat. The immediate tensions are reduced by shifting the focus away from a person creating a face threat to “culture.” Whether or not a situation is face threatening may depend on how a couple responds to racism and racial tension. They can react to it, or they can reframe it.

Couples with dual-approval work through Essed’s (1991) five characteristics of accounts of everyday racism, as an act of corrective face work, in response to racism and racial tensions. In doing so, couples answer the proposed question: “How do you respond?” to the face threat of racism and racial tensions. Couples may respond to racism and racial tension in three ways: by taking responsibility, getting used to it, or by cognitively reframing racism and racial tensions when they experience these face threats. It is possible that this method of corrective face work is enabled by a vital component: family dual-approval.

Summary

After all the interviews were conducted interracial couples unanimously agreed on one thing: they (the interracial couples) did not have a problem with or believe it was a problem to be in an interracial dating relationship. In fact, most of the couples that I interviewed said that they believe their relationship will help make a difference in the world, especially with regards to racial barriers in America. Gemain summed up all the interviewees thoughts in his interview, when he said:

100 I know what we are doing is right. Our relationship
101 is one way to show that a bridge can be built past the
102 racial barriers. It shows that there can be peace between
103 races, especially considering how deep the husband
104 and wife relationship is. We are all human beings.

105 I think that, one day, people will see the light that we
106 are trying to bring into the world, in time.

Perhaps the dream that Black and White interracial couples hold onto is no different than the dream that the African American community believes in: “that we will see the light that we are trying to bring into the world, in time.” As evidenced from my literature review, as human beings, we are all created equal. Individuals deserve to be treated with respect. based on one’s character and not treated poorly because of their skin color (Asante, 2003). Interracial couples seem to advocate for freedom to be who they are and to be romantic with someone, regardless of their race.

Seemingly, it can only benefit race relations in America to have so many people fighting for this freedom and racial equality. Perhaps we need to partner with interracial couples in their quest, rather than fight against them with our stares, comments, and disapproval. Perhaps, our society needs an education in treating people with respect. The interracial couples I interviewed have a plan to win the fight for racially equality. Interracial couples mention one theme, which came up in every interview: as a society we need to educate people and teach them that racial equality is right. Gemain stated this best:

107 If there is any way to attack racism, one way to
108 attack racism is to educate and cultivate a
109 generation of people who know what is right
110 and what is true.

Perhaps this is the ultimate response to racial tensions and racism in American between Blacks and Whites. We need to educate one another. We need to teach our children that people are created equal. We need to stop prejudice and racism when we encounter it.

Instead of asking how racial tensions are face threatening for Black and White interracial couples, perhaps the question scholars should be asking is: how do interracial couples respond to the existence of racism and racial tensions in America? This seems to be the dialogue that interracial couples engaged in during our interviews. While couples did discuss instances of racism, more often than not, they spent their time explaining to me how they responded to their encounters with racism and racial tensions. Therefore, instead of focusing on the instances of racism and racial tensions, interracial couples' concentration seems to be problem-focused. Seemingly, interracial couples are more interested in learning how to respond to the threat that exists, rather than discussing the threat itself.

The interviews data suggests four possible ways, which couples may use corrective face work to answer Essed's (1991) question: "How do you respond" to racial tensions they encounter? Some couples response is to take responsibility. Others decided they had to 'get used to it.' Some reframed the racial tensions. Dual-approval may be inherently beneficial for interracial couples and America because dual-approval enables couples to respond positively, instead of negatively to instances of racism and racial tension.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In the following section, I will review the findings of this paper and discuss the benefits of dual-approval for interracial couples. Thereafter, I will discuss reflexivity, disclose my position in relation to this research topic, and share my final thoughts. Following, I will examine this study's limitations. Ultimately, I will conclude by suggesting future directions for research.

Findings

Below, I will summarize this project's findings as they relate to the proposed research questions:

RQ 1: How does external racial tension and racism between the Black and White community impact the face of interracial couples?

- How does racial tension and racism threaten a couple's positive or negative face?
- How do couples attempt to restore their face and employ corrective face work after experiencing the face threat of racial tension or racism?

First, external racial tension and racism between the Black and White community impacts the face of interracial couples for a simple reason: racism and racial tensions exist. As a result, racism and racial tensions are face threatening for Black and White interracial couples. Data indicate that it is the overall presence of racial tension and racism that is face threatening for couples. As such, Black and White interracial couples' positive and negative faces are threatened. This may be the case because racial tensions and racism act as an umbrella under which people

interact. Thus, people are affected by racism that exists around them and interracial couples are no exception. Since Black and White interracial couples are impacted by racism and racial tension around them, they use corrective face work to restore their face.

Second, interracial couples employ corrective face work after they experience racial tensions or encounter racism. Couples engage in corrective face work for two reasons. Corrective face work is a natural response for interracial couples when they encounter relationship disapproval. This disapproval is communicated by others' stares and comments when the couple is together in public. The stares and comments force couples to decide how they will respond to these situations. This decision requires the use of corrective face work. In other words, corrective face work is needed to repair damage to couples' positive and negative faces, but data also show how the corrective face work potentially empowers the individuals.

Couples engage in corrective face work to negotiate threats to their relationship. In this project, couples negotiated these face threats by deciding how they would respond to racism. Couples did this by answering Essed's (1991) question: how do you respond to racism? Data indicate that dual-approval couples responded in three ways: taking responsibility, getting used to it, and cognitively reframing encounters. Having the support of family members may provide foundational support when couples encounter racism and racial tension. Not only does their family's affirmation provide couples with a foundation to stand upon, it enables couples to view the world more positively. Therefore, dual-approval benefits couples and society.

Benefits of Dual-Approval

There are many important perks to relationship dual-approval. Perhaps most important is that the support, which a couple experiences at home, may be the change scholars desire. It is possible that family approval of interracial relationships offers couples a more positive lens through which they can view and even change the world. This was illustrated in couples' chosen responses to face threatening acts: taking responsibility, getting used to it, and cognitively reframing encounters. Rather than give up on their relationships, couples found more positive ways to handle racism and racial tensions. Since couples' families supported their interracial relationship, couples were better equipped to handle face threatening situations. The actions employed as corrective face work are the first obvious assets to dual-approval.

Another advantage to dual-approval is acknowledged by interracial couples' attitude about how they view life. Feasibly, dual-approval enables Black and White interracial couples to perceive that the world is as 'supportive' as their families are. In fact, during personal interviews couples whose families are supportive of their relationship reported that they do not feel stigmatized by society. It is possible that mutual support for the interracial relationship enables both the couple, and their families, to see the world as supportive or approving. Either couples will perceive that the world is as supportive as their families are, or since they have their families support, perchance they are not as intimidated by the racial tension out in the world.

Marie said it best during a personal interview:

111 We look through the world with the eyes
112 we want to see it with.

If interracial couples can view the world through a positive and supportive lens, then they can positively change and interact with it. Likewise, should couples perceive the public to be as supportive as their families are, then the benefits of dual-approval might positively impact America, one family at a time.

More than likely, dual-approval couples will be the world changers. Maybe these couples will use their positive outlook to stop racism, engaging in dialogue with one person at a time? So many times, we set out to change the world as a whole. Possibly, what we need to do is change our world, the one closest to us. We accomplish this in two ways. First, we can educate ourselves, share vulnerably with our families, and explain to our children that being different colors does not make one person better than another. Second, we can share our knowledge with others. By sharing with the people closest to us, we change our world because we change our sphere of influence. Therefore, dual-approval may enable interracial couples to engage in these actions. As a result, dual-approval is beneficial because it positively impacts interracial couples and may change our world.

Reflexivity

Limited Understanding

My understanding of this subject matter will always be limited. More than ever, I am aware of my White skin and my lack of lived experience. There are just some things about being Black that I will never be able to understand. Even after conducting interviews and reviewing literature, I will always lack lived experience. I tried to learn as much as I could while collecting data. In fact, on average I spoke with the Black partner 15 minutes longer than the White partner. I seemed to have more questions for the Black

partner. I know more about the White experience in America. I wanted to know more about the Black partner. However, my academic preparations as well intentioned as they might be, can only explain the Black experience to me. While I may grow in knowledge, I will still be limited in my comprehension. Though this limitation deeply saddened me, I will continue to be vulnerable and ask questions.

Objectivity

Many people ask how researchers can be objective and still have a relationship with what they research. At first, I struggled with this thesis. I struggled with objectivity. I had to keep telling myself, this is their story; I am sharing their story. This is because the data had their own direction of travel, which was different from the road I expected. What I thought I would find, does not exist. Instead, I learned about the role objectivity plays for a qualitative researcher. It means reminding myself that I am sharing my participants' story and giving voice to their lived experiences. While I may have a relationship with this subject, the story was theirs to tell, and mine to share. As a researcher, I learned a valuable lesson: I have a responsibility to report their story accurately. All too often, researchers think we know what data should say. Sometimes we think we know what makes sense before doing a study. Although the data may be unexpected, the findings make sense. As an interpretive analyst, I learned how to use theory as a framework for drawing logical conclusions and making sense of the data. In the end, I have a clearer understanding of the role that theory plays in guiding the research process.

My Thoughts on Racism and Racial Tension

In America, racial tension and racism is present in the Black and the White community. Anger lingers and misunderstanding continues. In response, America often chooses to ignore or silence this dialogue. Although the Black and White skin colors are not the same, we are not that different from one another. People are people. Most of the time, people want to be understood. We want our experiences to be justified. We like to have our thoughts and actions reassured. Additionally, we want to be known for who we are. We want to be included. We want to have the qualities that we cherish, acknowledged by others. We want the freedom to be ourselves, without having to consider what others think of us. Though we are similar in these respects, we harbor similar misunderstanding, judgments, and bitterness. As a result, racism and racial tensions are pervasive. In America, we have rejected the core need of our humanity: the acceptance of one another. Rather than acknowledge the wrong of the past through our dialogue and proper study of history, we have silenced the greatest American liberty: equality. In retrospect, this project taught me that while we are similar, we are not equal. However, we can do something about this. We can engage in dialogue.

My Thoughts on Making a Difference

I have come to the conclusion of this project, yet several questions still remain. How can I make a difference? How can I help race relations between Black and White Americans? Even after writing this paper, while I do not have these answers, my passion about this topic is more intense. I have learned that finding the answers is a process, which will take time. As a result of my passion, I hold to something deeper

than answers to my questions can provide. I still believe in the dream. I believe that racial equality is possible between Blacks and Whites in America. I believe that if we want to live in a society where individuals are truly free and equality exists between races, then as a society, we must respond. So I must use my knowledge to bring forth change, one interracial interaction at a time. I have learned that I can inspire racial equality by discussing and seeking to comprehend how race, racism, and interracial race relations affect communication in America. I believe that one person can make a difference. As a result, I will continue to engage in dialogue about racism and racial tension.

My mom used to tell me that if I want to change the world, I should seek to change the one closest to me, my sphere of influence. One person can make a difference. I can learn. I can ask questions. I can advocate for racial reconciliation and mutual understanding across racial boundaries. Yet, as much as I learn, I realize that I will never fully understand what it is like to be Black in America. This made me doubt if one person can make a difference. However, rather than allow this disillusionment to depress me I will continue to research race, racism and race relations in America. The accusations about White researchers studying the Black community are true. As a White researcher, I will always lack the lived experience of being Black in America. Nonetheless, I believe that I can contribute to this research because I am not just a White scholar who is concerned about racism. There is more depth under my White skin. My passion for social justice and mutual understanding propels me to move forward. I am compelled to continue this research.

While the questions that linger are substantial, the answer is far less complicated. Who is this White girl? Why does she want to study race? I am just a human being, one spec in history. As a researcher, I am here to tell this story because it speaks to the core of who I am as a person. I believe that if the situation surrounding racial tensions, racism, and race relations do not cut to the core of who we are as humans, then something is missing inside of us. However, before we can analyze what is absent in society, we need to know something about ourselves. So I will answer THE lingering question: why am I, a White girl, doing this research? I am writing this for two reasons. Since age ten, I have had a burden for social injustice, racism, and racial tension existing in interactions with Blacks and Whites in America. My passion for righting the inequality in this country is central to who I am. It burdens my heart. Also, I am a member of the population of study, as I am engaged to marry the most amazing person that I have ever known, a Black man.

Now that I have answered your questions, I have a question to propose: How do you see my role in contributing to this body of research? What can I bring to this dialogue on Black studies, racism, and race relations in America?

Limitations

There are several limitations to this project. The first involves the population of study. The participants' age group is one area that could really make a difference in the data. Participants' ages ranged from 19-27 years old. It is possible that people in another age group, perhaps an older age group, may offer additional insight into interracial couples' responses to racism or racial tensions. Older interracial couples may have additional dismissive practices or they may not notice racism if they have

dual-approval and have been a couple for a longer period of time. Further, it would be beneficial to study a larger number of interracial couples. Doing so may allow for the discovery of additional responses to racism and racial tensions as part of corrective face work. Since each couple is different, studying more couples may aid the investigative process. Also, it would be helpful to do a quantitative analysis to learn how often interracial couples experience face threats caused by racism and racial tensions. Possibly, questions surrounding the frequency of these face threats would greatly add to our understanding of racism and racial tensions experienced by interracial couples. Finally, race was a limitation in this study in that I only looked at White and Black couples. It is possible that all interracial couples experience the need to engage in corrective face work resulting from family approval or disapproval. The contention that engaging in corrective face work is universal for interracial couples worldwide is a consideration, which, if employed in this project, may have yielded different types of data.

Future Directions for Research

There are several opportunities for future research on this topic. First, researchers should examine the role of dual-approval, and relationship approval for interracial couples. It is possible that there is a strong correlation to interpersonal communication literature, which examines the role of intact families (families with both parents) and secure family units on the lives of children. Possibly, dual-approval, like intact families may offer couples, like it does children, a safe place where they can grow and develop into healthy adults. For interracial couples, dual-approval enables couples to examine their inner prejudices and talk openly about racism and racial

tensions with their significant other and their families. With dual-approval, couples have the necessary foundation to function as a healthy couple. This should be investigated further.

In addition to examining the correlation between interracial couples and intact families, it would be beneficial to consider how maintenance behaviors play a role in responding to racism and racial tensions. Since “people are more likely to maintain relationships that are both equitable and rewarding” (Canary & Stafford, 2001, p. 144) scholars should investigate interracial couples’ corrective face work methods. Since we have concluded that the existence of racism and racial tension are face threatening for Black and White interracial couples, it would be interesting to explore maintenance behaviors as part of this corrective face work process. More than likely, maintenance behaviors are employed when couples’ positive and negative face needs are unfulfilled or threatened. The exploration of the use of maintenance behaviors as a part of corrective face work merits further attention.

Another area for future research includes the study of arm’s length racism, which Gordon Alport investigated. Some couples I interviewed did not have dual-approval. Rather they experienced arms-length racism as family members told them, being in a Black and White interracial relationship is OK for everyone else, but not for them. The study of arms-length racism can be applied to the study of approval and its impact on Black and White interracial relationships.

Finally, it would be interesting to consider couples’ self-disclosure methods. Specifically, who did couples share about their interracial relationship with and why? Did couples prepare for the conversation? Did they share with people that were the

most important to them first or those people whose opinions were not as significant? Self-disclosure methods may reveal more about how couples experience threats to their positive and negative faces. Scholars should investigate this area further.

As we move forward with this research, some considerations need to be addressed. We have already established that this topic is ground breaking in communication literature. This is evidenced by the lack of research in this area. For example, if you look up articles on interracial dating in a popular search engine, communication and mass media complete, you would find three articles about interracial relationships. However, if you were to enter 'dating' into this same search engine, 417 articles come up. As we move forward, this research can benefit America and give a voice to interracial couples. However, we need to conduct more research in this area. It would be nice if we could find more than three hits on this topic in one of the most popular search engines. This is a good place to start. It is possible that by engaging in dialogue, and conducting research on this topic, we can start to shift the ontology.

Most importantly, researchers need to engage in an epistemological discussion. What is the point of knowledge? What should we do with the knowledge that we have gained? I do not believe that knowledge is merely something to report; rather it should be used to bring change. Therefore, as we move forward, we need to take action. Not only do we need to have more research available on this topic, we need to engage in dialogue. We need to discuss interracial relations, racism and racial tension. Perhaps we can begin the epistemological discussion now. Let us use this knowledge not to complain, but to make a difference. We can accomplish this by having bold and honest

conversations about this topic. Let us be individuals who engage in dialogue. As scholars, how should we respond to this information? Let us do more research. “Let’s give them something to talk about.”

APPENDIX: IRB APROVAL



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901, 407-882-2012 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Notice of Expedited Initial Review and Approval

From : **UCF Institutional Review Board**
FWA00000351, Exp. 6/24/11, IRB00001138

To : **Gina Castle**

Date : **September 08, 2008**

IRB Number: **SBE-08-05798**

Study Title: **Let's Give Them Something to Talk About: Exploring Racial Tensions as Potential Face Threats in Black and White Interracial Relationships.**

Dear Researcher:

Your research protocol noted above was approved by **expedited** review by the UCF IRB Chair on 9/8/2008. **The expiration date is 9/7/2009.** Your study was determined to be minimal risk for human subjects and expeditable per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.110. The categories for which this study qualifies as expeditable research are as follows:

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The IRB has approved a **consent procedure which requires participants to sign consent forms.** Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Subjects or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

All data, which may include signed consent form documents, must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

To continue this research beyond the expiration date, a Continuing Review Form must be submitted 2 – 4 weeks prior to the expiration date. Advise the IRB if you receive a subpoena for the release of this information, or if a breach of confidentiality occurs. Also report any unanticipated problems or serious adverse events (within 5 working days). Do not make changes to the protocol methodology or consent form before obtaining IRB approval. Changes can be submitted for IRB review using the Addendum/Modification Request Form. An Addendum/Modification Request Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <http://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

Failure to provide a continuing review report could lead to study suspension, a loss of funding and/or publication possibilities, or reporting of noncompliance to sponsors or funding agencies. The IRB maintains the authority under 45 CFR 46.110(e) to observe or have a third party observe the consent process and the research.

On behalf of Tracy Dietz, Ph.D., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 09/08/2008 03:07:49 PM EDT

IRB Coordinator

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