

INSIDE INTERRACIAL MARRIAGES:
ACCOUNTS OF BLACK-WHITE COUPLES

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(ABSTRACT)

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the chronic daily concerns that eight self-identified Black-White interracial couples described as stressful and to identify the coping strategies that they utilized to reduce feelings of distress. Another goal of this study was to discover the actions that these eight couples took to maintain marital satisfaction. This investigation consisted of a total of 24 interviews, 16 individual and 8 couple interviews, based on the research questions guided by stress and coping theory. Couples identified three chronic stressors: Worrying About Children, Wanting to be Accepted, and Building a Successful Marriage; Nine coping strategies were identified: Distancing, Putting Family First, Problem-Solving, Accepting of Problems, Having Faith in God, Denial, Communicating With Spouse, Positive Reframing/Reflecting, and Escaping. Five maintenance behaviors were identified as well: Having Couple/Family Time, Communicating, Being Considerate, Getting Away Together, and Planning/Remembering Special Occasions.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Interracial couples comprise 2% of all married couples (Gaines & Ickes, 1997). The U. S. Census Bureau counted 65,000 Black-White interracial marriages in 1970 and 218,000 in 1989 (Brown, 1995). By 1992 that number had increased to a total of 246,000 (Besharov & Sullivan, 1996), representing 20% of all interracial couples (Gaines & Ickes, 1997). There has also been a parallel increase in the number of children born to interracial couples. Such families do not necessarily fit into the African American racial category nor the Caucasian racial category. By their existence, interracial partnerships challenge two societal presumptions -- that Black and White people are culturally unequal and that people of different races cannot form stable, satisfying relationships (Rosenblatt, Karis, & Powell, 1995).

According to Johnson and Warren (1994), “during the long period of slavery in the South, the taboo against intermarriage and sexual relations involving black men and white women increased in strength, while interracial sex relations became normal experiences for a large percentage of white men” (p. 28). But still, “the taboo on sexual relations between black men and white women remained powerful in most of the South throughout the first half of the twentieth century” (p. 35). For years the two races were kept separate by miscegenation laws and segregation that did not allow racial mixing. Marriage, cohabitation, or dating outside one’s race was far beyond the limits of segregation and could be extremely dangerous. Not too long ago across the South, interracial relationships were not only forbidden by law but Black men were often lynched by White mobs on the slightest suspicion of being involved with White women. Even after the 1963

Civil Rights Act passed, the Ku Klux Klan and its sympathizers continued terrorizing interracial couples and their families (Mathabane & Mathabane, 1992).

People of mixed Black and White parentage have in the past generally been regarded with hostility, contempt, or pity by Caucasians. Curiosity, even animosity, is often evident when an interracial couple or family is out in public. Some people stare flagrantly, others give obscured looks, and a few make derogatory comments that can be overheard by interracial couples and their families. White people have a hard time accepting dual-race families because such families are viewed as have crossed an imaginary dividing line which keeps the cultures separate (Reddy, 1994). Once that line has been crossed, people are perceived as being wrong and/or different. Reddy (1994) explains it best in this excerpt:

Our society operates in such a way as to put whiteness at the center of everything, including individual consciousness -- so much that we seldom question the centrality of whiteness, and most people, on hearing "race," hear "black." That is, whiteness is treated like the norm, against which all differences are measured. The all-pervasive effects of this country's normative whiteness include persuading people that everyone is white unless labeled otherwise and that all spouses are of the same race (p.12-13).

A number of people still believe that the two races should remain separate. Many others are unaware that they have such racist beliefs or thoughts until they are confronted by a situation that places them in direct contact with a dual-race couple or family. One important change from the past is that the majority of people no longer openly admit or bluntly commit racist acts against such families.

The entrance of children into an interracial relationship gives rise to additional challenges as parents make efforts to protect their children from racist acts. Depending on how the parents racially define themselves, the children of interracial couples potentially face greater childhood stress because they are a product of two or more ethnic cultures. Being different makes it harder for children of interracial couples to be accepted by their peers and by society in general (Gibbs & Moskowitz-Sweet, 1991). When children suffer distress of this type, parental stress levels also rise.

Only recently has the public become aware of the unique struggles of dual-race individuals. Because of his fame and access to the media, golfer, Tiger Woods, was able to bring the issue of dual or multiracial identification to public attention. His actions buttressed the efforts of others like Ruth Bryant White who lead a march on Washington, DC on July 20, 1996, in support of multiracial individuals and their families. Speakers at the march talked about how they wanted to be recognized as multiracial instead of having to choose among the racial categories typically listed on employment and Census Bureau forms (White, 1996).

Rationale and Purpose

Most of the existing research on interracial families focuses on children and issues of identity. Not much research attention has been given to other issues that couples may identify as stressful. There is not much literature on how couples cope with the unique issues of interracial families. My research targeted this under-investigated population from the perspective of Black-White interracial married couples with children. The purpose of this study was to identify the chronic daily concerns couples described as stressful and discover the coping behaviors they employed to reduce feelings of distress. A second goal

was to identify the actions couples took to maintain relational satisfaction. The research questions which guided this investigation were:

1. What circumstances or events do Black-White couples identify as most stressful?
2. What coping behaviors do partners employ to reduce stress?
3. How do couples explain the stability of their relationships -- what maintenance behaviors do they engage to sustain marital satisfaction?

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

Theoretical Framework

This investigation was guided by stress and coping theory. From this theoretical framework, individuals in a Black-White interracial relationship are envisioned as experiencing various types of stressors related to their choice to marry and rear children. Stressors in this research were defined as the chronic strains that individuals in interracial relationships face. Examples include marital and parenting concerns and issues raised by extended family members. Chronic strains initiate an appraisal process (Thoits, 1995). For a person in a Black-White interracial coupling the strain of having to deal with the disapproval of other family members, close friends, and on lookers might trigger an appraisal of threat, depending on past experiences as well as current opinions and resources available (Bird & Melville, 1994). Once a person feels threatened, physical and emotional reactions -- upset stomach, neck strain, anger, worry -- alert him/her to the need to employ coping strategies.

There are two types of coping strategies: problem-focused and emotion-focused (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping consists of the efforts activated to alter, deflect, or in some way manage the stress itself through direct action (e.g., confronting and problem solving). For instance, some couples joined organized support groups (e.g., the Atlanta-based Interracial Families Alliance) which help them manage racial pressures (Turner, 1990). Support persons provide instrumental, informational, and/or emotional assistance in times of stress (Thoits, 1995). Emotion-focused coping refers to strategies employed to regulate the intense feelings aroused by a stressor. A way

of dealing with emotions is to calm them by altering the meaning of the stressor. For example, individuals sometimes deal with anxiety and worry through self-talk – repeating to themselves that there is nothing to worry about, everything will work out for the best (Bird & Melville, 1994). People typically use multiple tactics when coping with stressors or ongoing strains. Activation of coping strategies typically lowers stress and increases psychological and physical well-being (Taylor & Aspinwall, 1996).

Background on Interracial Couples

Chronic Strain and Coping strategies

Black-White interracial couples face stressors similar to those of other married couples, but their situation is potentially exacerbated because of their individual cultural differences and the tense social situations they may encounter. The racial context within which interracial couples live can be a source of chronic strain. Interracial couples have to decide how to defer a family faith, celebrate holidays, carry on cultural traditions, and deal with the reactions of family and friends to their relationship (Crohn, 1995). Interracial couples, for example, experience a range of responses to their family situations. Some gain the unconditional acceptance of family, work colleagues, neighbors, friends, and community members, while others face rejection (Luke, 1994; Reddy, 1994; Rosenblatt, Karis, & Powell, 1995). Luke (1994) found that people respond to interracial couples and their children in different ways and placed them by response into three groups. Group one consisted of those who unconditionally accepted the interracial nature of the family without raised eyebrows or discomfort. Group two rejected the family or couple immediately and permanently by the use of overt racist slurs, actions, or avoidance. Members of group three were unsure about how to react and gave ambiguous signals

when encountering interracial families. Not only did the rejection of family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and community members have a personal impact, but it took a toll on the couple and put a strain on their marriage.

Parents of interracial couples can be powerful sources of support or cause deep emotional distress (Luke, 1994). When interracial couples have trouble with their parents and other close relatives, they tend to break with their families and maintain only necessary and civil contact. To continue a relationship that is opposed by close family members requires a willingness to risk emotional and social alienation, recurrent personal pain, and hostility toward any children born to the couple (Rosenblatt et al., 1995). Another coping strategy used by interracial couples is to go out of their way to prove that their marriage is happy and successful (Luke, 1994).

The social environment of the education system is potentially the greatest source of chronic strain for biracial children and their parents (Luke, 1994). When biracial children begin school, it is usually their first and most enduring encounter with public life. Parents feel guilty and hopeless when teachers position their children into cultural categories that are not representative of their personal choices. Many parents go to great lengths to ensure that their children fit into standards of normalcy (e.g., ensuring that their children are clean and well dressed, punctual, have good lunches, are courteous, and high achieving).

A chronic strain that co-exists with those posed by the education system is the problem of societal perceptions. Many people insist that interracial children are simply Black, when in reality they incorporate a dual racial heritage (Brown, 1995). This false perception can undermine the formation of a healthy racial identity and create stressful

conflicts within the family. Children who are not taught about their heritage and avoid the issue of race, may become rebellious, act out in school, withdraw from interacting with peers, or turn against their parents (Gibbs & Moskowitz-Sweet, 1991). Parents of interracial children, in addition to their typical parenting responsibilities, have to decide how to deal with the racial and ethnic identity of their children. Interracial couples also struggle with how to instill in their children a sense of identity and equip them with ways to deal with prejudice (Crohn, 1995).

According to Wardle (1987), biracial parents cope with their children's identity issues in one of three ways: (1) say that their child is a human being above all else -- color is totally irrelevant; (2) teach their child to have a Black identity or the identity of the parent of color and help them learn minority survival skills; or (3) teach their child that they are interracial and should have an interracial identity. Wardle concludes that it is important that parents of interracial children teach their children to accept all of their cultural backgrounds. Defining children by their multicultural identity emphasizes the mixed cultural heritage that they possess and in the long run reduces stress in the family.

Although Black-White couples violate a fundamental social taboo, they face the same problems that other couples face as they go about having a family (Brown, 1987). So a coping strategy used by some Black-White interracial couples is to define themselves as being like other couples. They too must deal with the ordinary challenges and opportunities of a couple relationship, such as working toward conventional goals and struggling with the everyday issues of making a living and maintaining a household (Rosenblatt et al., 1995). Interracial couples pay bills, have work related problems, and child care concerns just like other couples. Claiming ordinariness may reduce stress for

interracial couples by countering the views of others who see them as unnatural, strange, doomed to fail trouble makers, or otherwise inappropriate or defective. However, when used in excess, the coping strategy of thinking and feeling ordinary can be a stressor. Perceptions of being ordinary can lead to avoidance of issues that require discussion and action.

Couples also feel the chronic strains from discrimination, prejudice, and racism. Some couples may find it difficult to separate couple experiences from the experiences of the African American partner (Rosenblatt et al., 1995); there can be a spillover of strain from one spouse to the other. How couples maintain a satisfying and stable relationship amidst all of these potential stressors is an addition concern of this study. This aspect of the interracial couple relationship has gone unnoticed in previous research.

To summarize, very few studies have focused on the ongoing strains incumbent in the lives of Black-White marital couples. Much more is known about the identity concerns of children in such families than about how dual-race marital partners marshal resources to protect themselves and their families from the numerous possible stressors that can impact their lives. The couple relationship in Black-White families also has been neglected in past studies. Little is known about actions couples take to maintain the quality of their marriages as they meet the typical challenges of life in a dual-race relationship. This study explored the life experiences of Black-White married couples from the perspective of stress and coping theory. The goal of this research was to capture the reality of Black-White married life by focusing on couples' descriptions of the strains they encounter, coping resources they employ, and maintenance behaviors they activate as they go about their daily lives.

Chapter Three

Methodology

A qualitative approach was selected for this research project because it allowed this under-investigated population to talk about their life experiences so that others might become aware of their struggles and strengths. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted as the main source of information gathering. In depth interviews gave participating couples the opportunity to answer questions in detail. Follow-up questions could be asked, based on the information provided and geared to each participating individual and couple. The participants revealed the sources of their stress, the strategies of coping they employed as well as the behaviors they used to maintain their marriages.

Site and Sample

The investigation identified and explored stressors, coping, and relational maintenance within eight Black-White interracial couples. More specifically, the sample was comprised of seven African-American male-White female couples and one African-American female-White male couple. Study participants were identified through a snowball technique. Initial participants were known to the investigator. They, in turn, named others as possible informants. All the participants met the following qualifying criteria: a) couples categorized themselves as interracial and had an African American (Black) member and a Caucasian (White) member, b) had at least one child under the age of 18, and c) were committed to completing all three taped interviews. The couples ages ranged in age from 25 to 47 years, with their children's ages ranging in age from 22 months to 14 years. The educational background of the sample ranged from completion of high school to a doctoral degree. The participating couples had been married from 2 to

14 years. Of the 16 respondents, five individuals had been married previously, and two had previous children from previous marriages. Furthermore, of the eight couples, one family was composed through adoption. For all participants, pseudonyms were assigned to each to assure confidentiality. For a more detailed description of the sample, see Table 1.

Data Collection Process

Data obtained for this investigation were gathered from participants living in separate communities of two mid-Atlantic states. Two locations were needed to locate sufficient volunteers who met the study criteria. Each possible participating couple was first contacted by telephone, provided an explanation of the study, and asked to participate. Scheduling of interviews proved to be challenging for couples due to job priorities, parental responsibilities, and family vacations.

A total of 24 interviews were conducted, 16 with individual spouses and 8 with the couples. Each interview was preceded by an introduction and total reading of a consent form which had been approved by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Tech. Participants were asked to sign the consent form before being interviewed. Interviews took 2-5 hours and were tape recorded. All interviews were held in the homes of the participants except for one couple. In that case, the individual interviews were conducted at the couples' place of employment and a joint interview was conducted in their home. All interviews were scheduled to meet the needs and ensure the comfort of the participants.

Table 1. Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Former Mar.	Previous Children	Yrs Married	No. of Children	Education	Profession
Todd	44	-	-	14	3	BA + 3yrs	Child Services Assis.
Carla	43	-	-			MS	Director
Bill	34	-	-	12	2	High School	Police Investigator
Rose	33	-	-			Assoc. + 1yr	Assis. Teacher + Cashier
Clyde	25	-	-	2	1	High School	Brick Mason + Cook
Cindy	26	-	-			High School	Leasing Agent
Joe	47	*	-	6	1	Ph.D.	University Professor
Tonya	43	*	-			Ph.D.	Clinical Psychologist
Tony	45	-	-	6	2	B.S.	Business Owner
Pam	47	*	-			MS	Teacher
Stan	42	-	-	9	1	2 Assoc.	(2) Funeral Home Director
Von	36	*	2			High School	Mental Health Worker
Keith	34	-	-	8	2	MS	Information's Officer
Julia	35	-	-			MS	University Advisor
Jeff	40	-	-	11	2	High School	Assembly Worker
Stacy	39	*	1			High School	Office Services Specialist

At the beginning of each interview, basic background information such as age, education, length of couple's marriage, number and age of children, workplace was gathered. The use of individual and joint interviews allowed the couple to discuss individual issues or situations freely and confidentially. The joint interviews provided me the opportunity to observe couple interaction.

The semi-structured interviews were comprised of questions that were supplemented with probes which acted as a means of gathering in-depth meanings and checking for accuracy. All of the interviews began and ended with light conversations that helped the respondents relax and become more comfortable with me. This brief amount of time was used to discuss one's day, the location of the couples' homes, or their interest in my educational background and my reason for wanting to do this study.

An interview guide was on hand during the interviews to help me make sure I asked key questions. The interview guide also helped to organize the topics of research concern. I wrote field notes as soon as possible after leaving the interview site. The field notes allowed me to jot down things that a tape recorder could not pick up. For example, when something discussed reminded me of conversations with other couples, I recorded these mental connections (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Field notes also consisted of comments made early in an interview before the recorder was turned on, or notes about a person's facial expressions, or a participant's body language. In addition, I recorded my own thoughts and feelings about the interview process, the findings, and possible themes. After conducting interviews, a volunteer and I transcribed the tapes verbatim. Transcripts were then checked for accuracy and corrections made.

Data Analysis

In order to formulate conclusions relative to these particular Black-White interracial couples, the transcripts were read and reread (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). First, I assigned each set of interviews a number and used it as a referral as I analyzed the data. Second, during long undisturbed periods I read over the transcripts at least twice to familiarize myself with each interview. During the second reading I looked for any common themes; distinguishing points, phrases, or patterns of behavior; participant's ways of thinking, or conversational points that stood out among the individuals/couples. At this point, I began to develop a preliminary list of coding categories. The coding categories created "units of data" which placed sections of my fieldnotes and transcripts under the particular topic represented by the coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

After generating preliminary coding categories, colors were assigned to each. For example, as I read through my data again, colors were used to highlight units of data. Some of the data had more than one color code depending on how it related to the category. Also as coding continued some of my coding categories had to be changed, modified, or discarded due to their workability. Once the units of data were color coded, patterns of consistency emerged that constructed themes within the categories. The patterns identified were a direct reflection of the responses from each participant.

Reliability

Field notes, transcripts, and conversations with my advisor informed the data analysis process and were important in writing the findings. As I took notes and coded, I tried to preserve as much of the interview communication in the transcripts as possible which included the informants' repetitions, the start overs, and the nonverbal expressions

(e.g., laughing and smiling). My field notes included statements of my personal feelings and experiences during the research process. These notes also captured my mistakes as well as my insights. I met with my research advisor frequently during the data collection and analysis processes. We discussed the various aspects of the collection process which included the identification and location of participants. The emergence of the analytic categories and themes were discussed, revised, and selected with the supervision of my advisor.

Chapter Four

Results

This qualitative study was based on in-depth interviews of eight Black-White interracial couples. The purpose of this study was to identify the chronic daily concerns that couples described as stressful and to discover the coping behaviors used to reduce feelings of stress. The study also explored how these interracial couples maintained the stability of their marriages. The research questions that guided this investigation were:

1. What circumstances or events do Black-White interracial couples identify as stressful?
2. What coping behaviors do Black-White couples employ to reduce stress?
3. How do couples explain the stability of their relationship -- what maintenance behaviors do they engage to sustain marital satisfaction?

The results gathered are a summation of the accounts of the eight Black-White interracial couples who agreed to participate in the research. From my observations, the participants responded genuinely, being honest with their explanations, actions, and expressions. The results are presented by providing answers to each of the research questions used to guide the study.

Research Question One: Stressful Circumstances

This question was constructed to examine what circumstances or events that Black-White interracial couples found to be the most stressful. Responses reflected issues unique to their marriages and produced three main categories of stressors: Worrying About Children, Wanting to be Accepted, and Building a Successful Marriage. Although informants overwhelmingly reported that racial issues were resolved before they married

or had been relinquished at the start of their romantic relationship, when couples become parents, racial concerns become apparent in their conversations about stress and coping.

Figure 1 displays the three categories resulting from analysis of participant responses. A brief description of each category is presented.

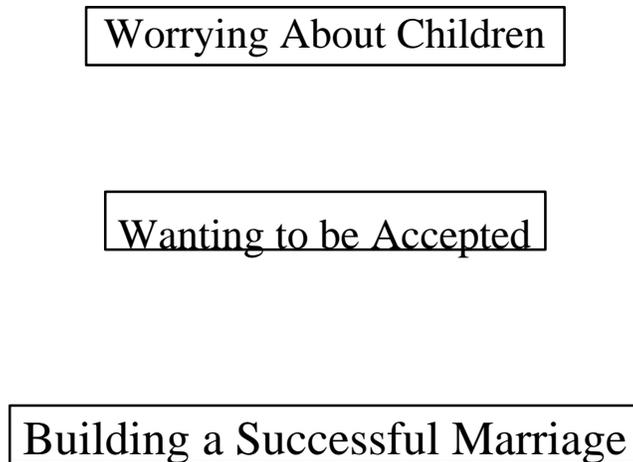


Figure 1. Stressful Circumstances

Worrying About Children

Worrying About Children was the most commonly expressed stressor among these interracial couples. Eight of the 16 respondents stated that handling the responsibilities of parenthood was their biggest stressor. Informants were concerned with rearing children to be competent individuals. They felt that it was important to equip their children with the ability to handle any situation that might arise due to their family background. Informants said that their children were advantaged by the cultural experience of their biological heritage. Parents stated that their children were given the opportunity to identify with more than one race, and were free to describe their race as they desired. The informants also reported being worried about their children being mistreated because of their racial makeup. Raising their children was an important priority for them. These interracial couples did not want their children to suffer any negative consequences or feel rejected because they were born to two parents of different races. Examples of how informants worried about their children follow.

The most stressful thing that I worry about is [her daughter], this girl growing up in school with prejudice and everything...what's going to happen to her, how are people going to react to her. (Cindy)

My kids concern me. My kids concern me because I didn't want my kids to be confused. (Bill)

The things that bother me the most about it would be how my children are treated because of it. (Stacy)

Informants Von and Julia also expressed their concerns in further detail in the following examples.

I think how to raise our child is one of the most stressful things. That comes from background. Not even that we are of two different races, but we just come from different backgrounds. Stan was a lot different from what I was. I am not sure if it was a cultural thing. His parents were just a lot stricter than mine were. (Von)

Another stress factor was when my daughter started kindergarten and the teacher was choosing what to call her. We got into a discussion about her being African American, well she is but she is also White and I want her to check both. She sees her as a little Black girl and that's fine and I didn't have a problem with that but that is her choice. But I am going to define her to what she is biologically and when she is old enough to decide for herself that's fine I have no problem with that. (Julia)

Wanting to be Accepted

Another commonly expressed stressor for these Black-White interracial couples was Wanting to be Accepted. Seven of the participants were concerned with having their interracial relationship accepted by members of their own family. Respondents stated the importance of having approval from their immediate family members over the racial combination of the relationship because they wanted to maintain their family ties. Having their spouse's accepted by immediate family members was an important stress reducer because acceptance meant the spouse would not feel hurt by family rejection. Listed are examples of what informants said.

My relationship with Tony's family has been very stressful for me because it took so long for them to accept me...so long after that to trust them. Though this year it's been better. (Pam)

My father was not supportive. He didn't come to our wedding. He would speak to Jeff and everything but it was something that he would not have wanted me to do.

(Stacy)

My mother's first reaction was he is not allowed in the house. She was divorced at the time and dating a local attorney...they felt if the associates got wind of it and it would be bad for the firm. So, Stan was not allowed in the house. She preferred that I did not associate with him. When she found out that I was pregnant, her first reaction was, "you really need to think about what you are doing to that child." (Von)

Stress was not only caused by disgruntled family members demonstrating their objections, but by disgruntled members of the community as well. Couples said they married for the love that they had for one another and by chance the person that they loved and chose to marry was of a different race. Informants indicated that they did not feel any different from other couples, but that society viewed them as different and expressed it in both subtle and overt ways. The situation caused stress because the informants wanted to be seen as a normal couple. When the informants were out in public, they wanted people to look at them and see only a couple not a mixed race couple. The following examples are explicit in depicting how the informants were treated and how they felt about such treatment.

I think the things that concerned me was how other people, and I'm not talking about family, I'm talking about strangers, how you're going to be accepted by society. You know, when you first get married you're kind of looking for somebody to make your wait a little bit longer in a restaurant or something like that, or waiting for someone to give you a dirty look and say, "that son-of-a-bitch is with a White girl." (Bill)

We could go shopping and I will walk around for hours and nobody will look up and Keith will walk up and it's like, "can I help you." We have gone into that and that is kind of stressful because he's like, "no, I'm with her," and I'm thinking, you could have helped me before he came around. (Julia)

Some informants also reported being worried about being accepted by their own church community. For persons who were regular church members and active in the church, this was more of a stressful issue. This was the case for Rose.

I was thinking at first how my Christian family, my church family would accept it or if they would have a problem with it. It's not really the case now, everything is fine, but at first for me it was a big thing. (Rose)

Building a Successful Marriage

A third stressor for these Black-White interracial couples involved their marital relationship. Seven respondents felt that simply living with another person and jointly building a successful life together was a stressor. Statements provided by Carla and Tony express the issue best.

Things that are stressful to me don't have to do with racial differences at all. I mean, it's living with another person, the stress of raising a family and the responsibility of that, I find probably to be the greatest and really wanting to do it well, and, probably feeling strapped with emotional resources, financial resources, or whatever and to really to do it well I find to be the biggest stressor and being busy. (Carla)

If things aren't going smoothly for whatever reason, there is a sense of failure. If things aren't good, you really have to look at why you stay in the relationship. When I separate things, I love Pam and I guess there is just stress because I don't know if there is

anyone else I would want to spend my life with. Not even a Black or White issue, I just don't want to fail. (Tony)

Another respondent mentioned how he and his wife managed to work through stressors in order to build a successful relationship.

Being able to establish ourselves and pay for our bills, be happy between me and her and our child as a whole family. For me I think that getting down to that in the whole situation and realizing that we are just starting this thing, it's just beginning and we can be successful from here on out and not be behind and not be in debt. Just be happy and be successful and comfortable. (Clyde)

Keith, another respondent, stated his feelings about his relationship.

This was something that I wanted and I couldn't let how somebody else felt keep me from it. If I had it to do over again I would do it again. There is always that little voice, "now that I have done this, I am going to stick to it." Because there were other situations where I knew guys who dated White girls and all but it was just to a certain extent...But that's something that never bothered me because if it's something that I believe in then I'm not going to let anything stop me. I know that I can't please everybody. There are still people who when they see me and her together it bothers them but that's their problem. (Keith)

Research Question Two: Coping Behaviors

This research question was provided to identify the coping behaviors adopted by Black-White interracial couples. Responses produced nine categories of coping behaviors that aided the respondents in reducing stress: Distancing, Putting Family First, Problem-

Solving, Acceptance of Problems, Having Faith in God, Denial, Communicating, Positive Reframing/Reflecting, and Escaping (Figure 2).

Distancing

Putting Family First

Problem-Solving

Acceptance of Problem

Having Faith In God

Denial

Communicating With Spouse

Positive Reframing/Reflecting

Escaping

Figure 2. Coping Behaviors

Distancing

When dealing with stressful circumstances, 10 of the 16 participants spoke of taking time alone, away from the issue. Being alone helped to calm them and put their circumstances into perspective. Two husbands talked of how they put distance between themselves and the stressor.

I go into a little shell and don't talk or come out of it. It's like a safe place. Find your little spot and try to sort things out. (Tony)

Physically, if I'm really angry I go out and do something, backing off trying to defuse the situation a little bit and that way I will be able to deal with it more rationally. (Keith)

When stress was brought on by conflict with a spouse, having some time alone apart from the spouse was helpful in that nothing was said which could later be regretted. After distancing themselves, the participants said they were better able to cope with the situation. Julia spoke of how she coped by distancing herself.

With us, we talk about it. With me my personality, if I'm mad about something, give me space and some time to cool off. Keith is the type of person who wants to deal with it right then and there and I'm the type of person where I don't want to say something that I'm going to regret. So I sit back and let the adverse subside and sometimes give me an hour and I'm fine. But for me I need space. (Julia)

A couple, Carla and Todd, discussed how distancing was a coping behavior for them.

I think we drift apart and give each other a little space for a while and then come back and talk. (Carla)

Todd finishes her statement by adding:

You sort of have to learn just what the other person needs to deal with the situation. We try not to let things go too long, we generally have a good awareness when we can talk again and try to make things right. Sometimes it is sooner than later. So we try to give each other a little space and continually try to come back to the issue for whatever reason, and if that's not the time, we don't mess with it and go on to something else. (Todd)

Putting Family First

Seven participants felt that Putting Family First was also important to handling stress. When encountering a stressor, participants reported that by having the support of their family, they could deal with almost any situation.

To me family is everything, it comes first before friends, work, before anything. I have always felt that way. (Cindy)

I think family should be at the top of the list as far as commitment and what comes first. I work two jobs but if there's something with the family that needs my attention the jobs just wait they just get push aside. (Rose)

But the only time when things get bad is when we both are under the gun and we come home and we're both stressed out and we're like who's going to take the kids, and I'm like come on I'll take them. Let's go down stairs and we all do something that's real quiet, sit down and color a little bit [laughing], doing some talking across the room...try to ease the burden as much as we can and times like this we try to regroup and focus on what is really important. (Keith)

Problem-Solving

Problem-Solving was another coping behavior employed by these Black-White couples. Seven participants mentioned that when under stress they continued to be objective about the situation and thoroughly thought through the outcomes. Because of their objectivity, the participants said they were able to explore all their options and come to a solution. Also by exercising problem-solving skills, the participants were able to reduce stress. Rose employed this coping behavior.

I try to be very objective with things, to try to look at all sides of it before I make a conclusion about stuff. (Rose)

Rose's husband Bill also incorporated this behavior.

I try to look at the whole picture and not just focus on one thing I try to look at everything to come up with a flat honest solution to a problem that may be causing stress. (Bill)

Another respondent added.

A lot of times just working though it. One thing that helps me get through when it's really stressful is just having a friend for each thing and just knowing what you are going to do and how you're going to handle it and deal with it. That helps me to decide what I'm going to do or how I'm going to handle the situation. (Stacy)

Acceptance of Problem

Seven participants handled stressful events as they arose by accepting the fact that they had a problem. As issues emerged the participants acknowledged them and handled them in the best way possible. According to Todd and Cindy acceptance was a pattern of coping with stress.

I know that there have been times where I haven't really utilized a lot of what I had there to work with and my whole thing is not to waste myself and my time. Certain stressors can be, even though they're negative, can be changed to a positive way. Some you can't do anything about but let it be stressful the way it is and deal with it. Some of it can actually be used to a positive...in reflecting back again, I've gotten pretty adept at using those types of situations to my better. (Todd)

It is a matter of compromising yourself for people being different. It is a certain amount that you manage to live with, tolerate, or say something about. But there are certain ways that become accepted that everything is not going to be your way and realizing that. (Cindy)

Other informants also mentioned this pattern of coping.

You have to realize who you are, where you're at, and what you're doing and how you want to attack that situation. (Clyde)

I think that when you get to a certain point you can just accept it. If you don't look for it you're not going to see it because it's not there. (Bill)

Having Faith In God

Having Faith in God was another means of coping mentioned by six respondents. The participants felt that when under stress and that they had exhausted all other means to rectify the issue, they could put their faith in a higher power, a spiritual power. Several mentioned that all they had accomplished was done with God's help. By having a strong belief in God and putting complete faith in him, participants believed that no stressor was impossible to handle. Furthermore, they stated that God would always be there to help them through difficult times.

What I believe about God what he wants me to do, what my life is about that is what I'm about generally. I think that really why everything else kind of falls into perspective of what other people think about me or what society rules are aren't necessarily God's rule. (Carla)

There is a God and he's done a lot to give us everything that we need to work with and just try to appreciate the things that we have...But certain things, I have enough foundation of character and enough foundation with my circumstances at that time that some how or another with the grace of God there too, I was able to overcome or work myself out or make adjustments of those situation and bring back some better conditions for myself. (Todd)

My religious faith has been stronger in my life, but I feel like I am trying to establish more faith and teaching my kids. (Pam)

Denial

Five participants mentioned that denial and suppressing an issue was their way of coping. They pretended that the problem had not really happened--that it could go away or work itself out.

I try not to lash out, I try to suppress it, (Stan)

Withdrawal, my favorite. I like denial but I withdraw. (Cindy)

Sometimes I ignore it. (Pam)

Communicating

Communicating was a key means of coping which five individuals employed to handled their stressors. Discussing the issue allowed spouses to express their views and decide the best manner to handle the situation. From the discussion participants

determined whether to just listen to what was being said, offer constructive advice, provide simple but supporting remarks, or give an opinion. For one respondent, Tonya, this skill was useful with her mother as well as with her husband.

I try to talk to her as openly as possible and be supportive. My mom is not one to be real emotional and talk about things and it's difficult. But I try to talk to her especially with this....Talk, sometimes Joe will tend to get a little obsessed about things and exaggerate some things so I think I help him to stand back and look at the things he is obsessing about. (Tonya)

Here are some other examples in which communication coping skills were practiced.

If I'm upset and come home and have had a really bad day or something, Bill is always there to listen and he gives me his opinion and he also respects that I have my own opinion about things. Mostly when we are there we are good sounding boards. We pretty much know how each other is so we can react to our stresses and a lot of the times point out things that one of us aren't seeing. (Rose)

Communication was also used for spousal support. When dealing with stressors, respondents were depending on the support from their spouse in order to better cope with an issue. So through willing discussions, support was shown. In the following examples are the responses of informants on how communication was seen as spousal support.

My love for my family and Jeff, he is my sounding board. (Stacy)

We balance each other out and that's very helpful. I am so easygoing and she is to. So we make for a good relationship. It can also create stress but it is also helpful. (Tony)

His wife continues the statement.

He knows that I am here to help him and I can come to him when I am overloaded.

It's good to know that he is there. (Pam)

I will talk to her and find out what is going on. It is usually something on the outside that is making her mad and she brings it home and I am vice versa. In our relationship we try to talk it out and make sure that it does not become a factor in our relationship. We usually work it out like that and fix the problem. (Clyde)

Positive Reframing/Reflecting

Under Positive Reframing and Reflecting participants reflected on their lives and other past issues when trying to cope with current pressing issues. Reflecting allowed respondents to reexamine their thoughts, values, and beliefs.

The more important thing is who I am in relation to what I believe and that just centers me on everything, I mean that's the center of who I am and what I believe about myself and so everything else is exterior to that. (Carla)

To appreciate what they [his children] have and be grateful for what they have but yet and still to make most of what they have...and not to take things for granted because we all do and we're challenged throughout our lives not to do that and I made an effort to impress upon them [his children] to make the most of what they do have because they can look around any situation out there in this world today and see people who don't have just a little bit that they do have. So the need to be grateful for where they [his children] are and what their station is in life...just that there is a God and to be thankful and to be respectful to other people. (Todd)

Cindy felt that having a strong belief system eliminated stress.

I have strong beliefs and values. Clyde will tell you, I am very hard headed and I stick to what I believe in regardless of who said what, who acts this way toward us. It doesn't matter. So it doesn't affect me I keep the same beliefs whatever regardless. The same values I was brought up on. (Cindy)

Escaping

Finding a way to escape the issue was the coping behavior utilized by two respondents. Clyde and Stan resorted to drinking or smoking to get away from their problems and reduce stress.

I believe I did smoke more cigarettes then, I was nervous and probably drank more. But I quit a lot of that stuff too because acting out on your stress makes you look like a child. (Clyde)

I use to come from work and fix a drink right after I got home. Von would say I am not the same person when I drink which makes sense. Anyway, I quit. We had problems. I felt she would be out of my life if I didn't quit. I came home one evening, poured my drink and she said did I think I needed help with my addiction. I said I didn't think I needed help. She got me over it. She saw something bad happening. (Stan)

Research Question Three: Maintenance Behaviors

For most married couples there are times of tension within the relationship. Maintenance behaviors keep the relationship on a steady and satisfying course. The Black-White interracial couples participating in this study practiced maintenance behaviors which they said kept their marriages together and sustained marital satisfaction.

The responses assembled from this study formed five categories: Having Couple/Family Time, Communicating, Being Considerate, Getting Away Together, and Planning/Remembering Special Occasions (see Figure 3).

Having Couple/Family Time

Communicating

Being Considerate

Getting Away Together

Planning/Remembering Special Occasions

Figure 3. Maintenance Behavior

Having Couple/Family Time

Almost all of the participants, 15 out of 16, said that having some quiet time together as a couple was very important to their relationship. The participants reported loving their children and being devoted to taking care of their children, but also needing some time away together. Being alone together as a couple allowed time to enjoy one another's company and gave the couple time to regroup, rest, and appreciate each other.

We will take time off work or have long lunches or something like that. (Keith)

Julia, his wife, adds to his statement.

We also do what we have to do at work and then we come home and one of us are with the kids and the other is doing dinner or something -- lately it's been him, and we all eat then we spend time with the kids and when we put them down, that is our time, around 8:30 to whatever. (Julia)

Another couple made a comment on having time together.

We do things like, on most weekends we go out to breakfast on Saturdays.

(Tonya)

We almost always have dinner together and so we talk about our days, what's going on. (Joe)

One respondent elaborated on the issue.

Well we both spend a lot of hours away from each other with our work or jobs, so being able to get together and go out to eat...come home and watch TV together. Just pretty much anything we can do together because we don't spend a lot of time together anymore. Anything we can do together makes both of us look at our relationship, where we are at, where we stand, and that child. (Clyde)

Likewise, having some quiet time together as a family was also important to these respondents. Family time gave the parents a chance to catch up on what was going on in their children's lives. After parents worked all day and the children were at daycare or school, time spent together as a family was valued. During Family Time, these couples made efforts to enjoy as well as appreciate their children. Showing their appreciation and love was accomplished through some of the simplest tasks (e.g., eating together, playing games, watching television).

We play volleyball on Sundays, that's our kick for the week. We wait for Sundays. It's something that we can do that we both enjoy and we get with our friends, [their daughter] goes down to the park with her little friends and it's something that all of us can do and that we enjoy. (Cindy)

We make an effort to eat together two to three times a week (as a family). (Todd)

His wife agreed.

Mainly on Sundays we do. (Carla)

He continued.

Most of the time on Sundays we do eat together....To appreciate the children I guess I think. We have been given this and it is a responsibility for us. It is an extension of what we have for ourselves. (Todd).

Communicating

Keeping the lines of communication open, spouses discussed the events of their day, any troubles they were having, and how they were feeling about work, family, and so on. Of the respondents, 12 mentioned how communicating with their spouse was the chief

pattern of maintenance for their relationship. Communication was done in several ways: as simple chit-chat during a brief moment, as one couple stated.

We talk a lot. (Carla)

I think we talk more than most couples. We talk a lot constructively. (Todd)

Yes I think we do talk a lot. (Carla).

Another respondent mentioned how she and her husband communicated.

Just try to always have time for each other to talk, even if it's not long on some days, (Rose)

Talk about work and see what we can find out that can help our relationship like are there some things that I could do to help out more because she does everything.

(Clyde)

We will go hiking or canoeing sometimes and talk. We do a lot of talking. (Joe)

Now we just realize that you have to talk about it. (Von)

Being Considerate

Being Considerate was mentioned by several respondents (9). Showing consideration to their mate was a way of expressing thanks, love, and appreciation. To these respondents a gesture or a gift said more than words. One couple spoke of how they appreciated the gifts as well as the gestures.

I bring her things. I try not to be too annoying and be considerate and take on some responsibilities sometimes...those are the types of things I do. What she does for me, she makes an effort to do things that are going to take some stress off of me. Sometimes I have to get inside myself to really appreciate it but sometimes I know that's what she is doing. Sometimes she will come in and make a nice cake because she knows

that I like things sweet. But I hope that she appreciates the flowers and the little gifts that I give to her. Sometimes I come in and mop the floor. (Todd)

Carla replied to her husband's statement.

Trying to do things that make it a little more easier for me, not just gifts but gestures that make it a little more easier. (Carla)

Another couple spoke of about their gestures.

Sometimes, like when he is going to work and making his lunch, I will sneak a little note in his lunch box...we always try to tell each other we love each other before we leave the house. He calls and check on us everyday when he is at work at night. (Von)

If I can't get them on the phone, I call my neighbors' house and get them to make sure things are all right...we have a lot of little things that happen that no one knows about. That allows us to be special to each other. (Stan)

Pam spoke of the gestures her husband does for her.

At first when we married there were a lot of cards. Now it's calling each other on the phone. It's nice to talk to him on the phone...we have taken dance lessons. (Pam).

Getting Away Together

Being able to get away together as a couple without the presence of children was a behavior employed by these couples to maintain a good relationship. Having time away from their families was a refresher. Getting Away Together reminded respondents of how their lives once were before the children arrived. In the meantime, time away also allowed informants to spend sufficient time together as a couple. Five respondents noted that Getting Away Together was a maintenance behavior that was fun to do. Two couples provided examples of their time away together.

Couple one said:

Every now and then like last year we went away for a weekend without the kids.

(Stacy)

I thought it was nice. (Jeff)

We do find that when we do get off together, we have fun. I don't think we require doing a lot to be satisfied as far as being together, just as though we are together and there is satisfaction in that. (Stacy)

Couple two stated:

We try to plan at least once a year to go away for a night just the two of us.

(Rose)

Like up at Mountain Lake or something like that. (Bill)

Like we went to Atlanta with some friends without the children. (Rose).

A third couple mentioned their time together.

We need more time together as a couple. We realize that. (Pam)...We go to the movies. (Tony)

One respondent commented on how the relationship was before the children arrived.

That we can still laugh and still be the people that we were before, I mean that we haven't compromised because of the relationship...we can still travel like we did before maybe not as much because there is a lot more. (Julia)

Planning/Remembering Special Occasions

The final category, Planning/Remembering Special Occasions was a maintenance behavior that two respondents found useful. Planning as well as remembering special

occasions helped maintain the relationship by providing new experiences. Carla and Todd, felt that celebrating special occasions was a behavior that helped maintain their relationship.

I try to do holidays and birthdays. (Carla)

That's something that I really appreciate about what she does because I really never had that like individual celebration. We had family like things all the time like get together and stuff like that, but individual celebrations I didn't have too many of them. So it has been very good trying to get some traditions for our family. (Todd).

Planning some special time together was what another respondent, Clyde, did to maintain his marriage.

Just give her some romancing and she will be all right. (Clyde).

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to identify the chronic daily concerns that eight Black-White interracial couples described as stressful. The study was also designed to uncover the coping behaviors that interracial couples employed to reduce feelings of stress. Furthermore, the investigation served to identify the actions Black-White interracial couples took to maintain their relational satisfaction. The guiding framework used to inform the study was stress and coping theory. From this perspective, individuals involved in an interracial partnership were envisioned as experiencing various types of stressors related to their family composition and employing coping strategies to reduce stress.

Stressors

Married couples face all kinds of events and circumstances, ranging from financial matters to issues about child care, that can be sources of stress. Many problems in interracial marriages are no different from those in any other marriage (Porterfield, 1982). Certain problems, however, are unique to this type of marriage (Porterfield, 1982).

This study identified the chronic daily stressors that informants were experiencing. One particular stressor that couples discussed was worrying about their children. This finding was similar to the results identified by investigators Karis and Gillespie (1997). In their book Of Many Colors: Portraits of Multiracial Families, these researchers concluded that the most divisive issue was not that two adults of different racial backgrounds choose to marry, but that these adults produced mixed race children. Such children acquired a

dual heritage and typically found themselves in a marginal societal position. Parents in another study worried about their children being mistreated because they realized that children of Black-White unions may be adversely affected by negative societal attitudes (Brown, 1987). Parents in past research, like the parents in this study reported protecting their children by taking measures to equip them to handle any situation that might arise.

According to Tizard and Phoenix (1993), interracial parents talked about the need to encourage confidence and self-esteem in their children as well as play down color as an issue. Parents in past studies also encouraged their children not to look for racism. Furthermore, interracial parents emphasized the need to help their children understand racism and where possible to confront it (Tizard & Phoenix, 1993). The biracial children of these eight couples had been mistreated because of who they were and where they came from and this was a stressor for the parents.

A second stressor that the participating couples spoke of was the issue of wanting to be accepted. The intensity of racial resistance and condemnation has varied according to the period of time, the geographic area, and religion and other cultural factors (Schuman, Steeh, & Bobo, 1985; Stuart & Abt, 1973). The United States has a known history of segregation and strong prejudices against African-Americans. Concomitant exploitation and denial of freedom, human rights and opportunities have weakened relationships between Whites and Blacks (Schuman et al., 1985; Stuart & Abt, 1973). Mixing of these two races has been perceived as wrong. To this date, there are people who have strong feelings against Black and White individuals coupling (Rosenblatt et al., 1995 Schuman et al., 1985; Washington, 1970). The participating couples faced hurtful situations that were about discrimination. There had been times when they were out in

public, for instance a restaurant, and they were told there were not any seats available. They had to wait long periods of time to be waited on or the waitress was rude. There also had been incidents involving derogatory comments, blatant stares, and startled glances from people. Such actions demonstrated to participants that people in society disapprove of their relationship and did not accept them. Furthermore, the negative responses from society were not always one sided. The negative reactions came from both the White and Black communities. This was and is an indication of the racial prejudices in our country.

The third stressor that the eight couples encountered was building a successful marriage. The couples had marital strains that were similar to those of other couples, but they also had other stressors that only pertained to them as a mixed race couple. Being in an interracial marriage required more effort in building as well as maintaining the relationship. Informants had the responsibility of not only keeping up a household and living with another person who had a different personality, but also raising biracial children and dealing with racial prejudices.

Coping Behaviors

In order to deal with their identified stressors these Black-White interracial couples implemented several coping strategies. The coping behaviors employed by informants were those commonly employed by other non-interracial couples (distancing, problem-solving, acceptance, religion, denial, and escape) (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1984; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Several new coping behaviors were also identified.

The most frequently mentioned coping behavior of the respondents was distancing. Distancing, a coping strategy described by Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis,

and Gruen (1986) was practiced to give participants time away from a stressful issue. Distancing helped informants calm down and thus reduced their stress level. By putting some distance between themselves and the stressor respondents gained time to adjust to the situation and think about the best possible solution, one that they would not regret later.

Putting one's family first was the second most frequently mentioned coping strategy employed. This strategy was also a new coping behaviors that was not mentioned in the literature reviewed. Participants' stated that their families were a high priority because race was a constant underlining issue in their marriages. The couples coped by making their families their number one priority. Their immediate family was the most important support network for these interracial couples, despite also being their center of stress.

Problem-solving was the third coping behavior employed. Problem-solving or as Lazarus and Folkman label it, planful problem-solving, allowed participants to acknowledge an issue and move to eliminate it. They reported being objective about the situation and examining its every aspect.

Acceptance was another important coping strategy for these interracial couples. To the participants, acceptance was important because many of the issues that they had to handle and learn to live with required accepting behaviors. Couples indicated that there would always be someone who objected to their relationship or to their children. Sometimes the stress of not being accepted was generated from immediate family members. Some family members of interracial couples had reacted in hostile ways. Research revealed that Black-White marriages tended to be accepted by Black, but not by

White spouses' relatives and friends (Porterfield, 1982). Researchers Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell (1995) as well as Tizard and Phoenix (1993), found that some members of the immediate family of the larger majority of White partners were at first hostile to or fearful of an interracial partnership. Opposition by immediate family members was reported in almost all of the White families in which White women entered an interracial relationship (Rosenblatt et al., 1995), which was the case in this investigation.

The issue of race was difficult for these Black-White couples to accept because they were hurt by the criticism from their otherwise supportive friends and extended family members. In order to ward off such criticism some White partner's families withheld information from neighbors and other family members. In this way they maintained an image as an all-White family (Rosenblatt et al., 1995). Also, by maintaining that image they could protect family members who opposed the relationship from a loss of status and privilege from other Whites who might consider a family relationship with an African American to be a sign of low status (Johnson & Warren, 1994; Rosenblatt et al., 1995). The couples in this study chose to accept the consequences of their decisions and work within their families to change any negative attitudes.

Turning to religion or praying was a coping strategy identified by other researchers (Carver et al., 1989; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The participants of this investigation referred to this copying behavior as having faith in God. Putting their trust in God gave the informants comfort and reassurance that no matter what the stressful circumstances, everything was going to work out. Also, having faith in God meant that God was always there for them. Couples reported praying more than usual when they were under stress.

Denial, too was a commonly identified coping strategy in past studies (Carver et al., 1989). Respondents practicing the coping behavior of denial acted as though their stressors were not real. Denial was also a means of not dealing with the issue.

Communicating was another coping behavior used by the participants. Communication allowed them freedom of expression, which lead them to practice problem-solving discussions, advice giving, or listening behaviors. Being able to talk about the stressor was said to reduce stress and strengthen their marriages.

Previous literature did not label spousal communication as a coping strategy. Communication was instead labeled as seeking social support (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Seeking social support was described as talking to someone who had a similar experience, talking to someone to find out more about the issue, or asking someone for advice (Carver et al., 1989; Folkman et al., 1986). Seeking social support, was also described as finding someone to listen so an individual could express their feelings and receive sympathy and understanding. This type of support was employed by the participants, but they emphasized that it was their spouse in particular that they approached for support and that talking was the most important function of the contact. A key point was that the couples did not rely on others (e.g., friends or relatives) for support but relied almost exclusively on each other, meaning they did not go outside their marital relationship with their problems.

Positive reframing and reflecting was a coping strategy identified by these informants. In the stress and coping literature cognitive reframing was described as self-talk -- seeking the positive in an otherwise negative situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The couples in this study took a much broader perspective. They mentally re-examine

past experiences which allowed them to reevaluate their thoughts, values, and beliefs in order to handle present stressors. This reevaluation process also helped informants make decisions that lowered stress.

The last coping behavior couples employed was escaping. By practicing escape as a coping strategy, participants were able to avoid some troublesome issues (Lazarus et al., 1986). They did not have to deal with the stressor until later, if ever. By escaping, informants hoped that the problem would vanish and leave them stress free.

Discovery of the two previously unrecognized coping strategies provided greater insight into how these Black-White interracial couples deal with stress. These couples not only dealt with the typical marital stressors that other non-interracial couples faced, but also the stressors that were unique to their marital situation. The additional stressors, seemed to require some unique copying behaviors. Differences of race and culture as well as the reactions of some disgruntled community members brought on additional stressors. Coping with these stressful circumstances resulted in feelings of mastery and increased well-being.

Maintenance Behaviors

Many Black-White interracial relationships are not successful. Couples end up separated or divorce. In his book Billingsley (1992), Black and White Together: Trends in Interracial Marriage, interracial couples were compared to Black couples and White couples and Billingsley found that a major constraint facing interracial marriages was that such unions were more conflictual and less stable than the others. This study identified the maintenance behaviors or actions and activities Black-White couples used to sustain their

marital relationships. The participants in this investigation reported doing various things to aid in maintaining their relationships and sustaining marital satisfaction.

Couples in the study tried to spend quality time together both as a family and as a couple. They used communication to discuss their issues or to re-acquaint themselves with one another after a busy day. Showing consideration was a behavior that was emphasized because it was an expression of love and appreciation for one's spouse. Finding time to go away together as a couple was another maintenance behavior that allowed them to escape from their daily or weekly routines. Planning and remembering special occasions were an addition maintenance behaviors that established traditions and family rituals which created structure and added excitement to couples' relationships. Everyone in the family seemed to look forward to such occasions.

The maintenance behaviors identified by the couples in this study were in agreement with previous research by Canary and Stafford (1994). These researchers concluded that maintenance behaviors involved both interactive and noninteractive behaviors which usually involved symbolic exchanges between partners. Such strategic and routine interactions were used to maintain relationships, meaning that such approaches functioned to sustain couple involvement in each other's daily lives (Canary & Stafford, 1994). Employing maintenance behaviors assisted couples in keeping their marital satisfaction high. This was important to these couples because they relied on one another so much. The spouse and the family functioned as the center of stress, but were also the main support system during stressful times. Family was also the focal point of the maintenance behaviors. Couples and their families relied on each other for love and support.

Conclusions

This investigation explored the lives of eight Black-White interracial couples by examining their stressors, coping behaviors, and maintenance strategies. These couples initially stated that did not experience stress due to their relationship. But examination of their responses revealed that the stressors they identified were indirectly affected by race. Brown (1987) reported that race is “a variable that must be considered in practice with interracial families as they present themselves. Furthermore, race is not necessarily a critical dimension in the problems of Black-White couples, but its possible contributions to their problems must be assessed” (Brown, 1987, p. 26). The couples investigated felt they were mistreated because of their racial family characteristics. The worries that they had about their children were generated because the children may be mistreated because of their racial characteristics. Other researchers concluded that it was not necessarily one’s race, but the cultural differences between the spouses that caused relational stress. The greater the cultural differences, the more difficulty couples were said to have understanding each other and adjusting to marriage and the more difficulty other families would have adjusting to the required changes in the couples (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984). These participants did not go looking for troubling situations, nor did they report having cultural differences between them that created stress. The situations that created stress in their lives came from outside their immediate families. It was within their marriage and family relationships that they found comfort and strength.

Acceptance was an important, yet stressful, issue for the participants in this investigation. There tended to be more stress in the marital relationship when the couple members were only dating. As the relationship progressed and the couple married, the

hostility of family members had dissipated thus reducing stress. Potential reasons for the alleviation of hostility appeared to be due to the number of years the couple spent dating.

The average number of years spent dating before marriage among the couples interviewed was seven. The dating period seemed to give family members sufficient time to get to know the potential partner, become comfortable, develop trust, and accept the partner as an individual and not as someone who was White or Black. Family members had time to cope and adjust to the interracial relationship.

Another factor that seemed to encourage the change of views of previously unaccepting family members was the birth of a child. Members of disgruntled families who had lingering reservations about the couple's relationship, became more accepting with the arrival of the interracial couples' first child. The children were considered innocent and undeserving of mistreatment. So family members came to love and accept the children as well as the interracial relationship.

A related discovery was that, among the couples, it was the mothers of the family who either openly accepted or rejected the interracial relationship. The mothers may have had their doubts, but they were happy for their son or daughter.

Communication played a large part in the lives of the participants. It was a common strategy used by the couples. During the investigation, communication came up twice as a category. It was both a coping behavior and a maintenance behavior. As a coping behavior, communication was a means for the couple members to talk about what was causing them stress. Persons could express their views about issues and discuss the best possible solutions. In talking about the stressor, an individual was seeking a supportive person to listen. Through discussion, he or she was also seeking some

constructive advice for resolving the stressor. Communication was also used to receive an objective opinion.

In a different category, communication was employed as a means of maintaining the interracial couples' marital relationships. Communication used as a maintenance behavior was a means of restoring the continuity within the relationship and keeping it satisfying. Communication was effective, especially when there was conflict with the spouse. When there was disharmony amongst the couples, communication was what restored the relationship. Spouses came up with a solution or agreed to disagree and returned the marriage to its normal state.

Furthermore, communication helped the couples stay in touch with one another. At times, partners were extremely busy and became a little out of touch with one another. Talking from time to time throughout the day, over the simplest issues, maintained relationship satisfaction.

Limitations

While this study provided useful results, there were limitations to this research. The target of my study was eight Black-White interracial couples with children under age 18. The results were based on the responses of the eight couples, 16 participants. The responses may have varied if additional couples were interviewed. By having more participants, other stressors, coping behaviors, and maintenance behaviors may have been discovered.

The actual partnerships of the couples was another limitation. All of the participating couples were African-American males married to White females except, for one couple. Billingsley (1992) stated that interracial unions involve greater numbers of

Black males than Black females. The information gathered may have been different if additional Black females married to White males were included. It is the relative preponderance of Black men and White women in interracial unions that has given rise to the most persistent theories seeking to explain interracial marriage (Billingsley, 1992).

Another limitation was the locations of the study. The participating couples were located in rural and urban communities of two states. The locations may have played a factor in the findings because the opinions and experiences of interracial couples may vary by geographic area. According to Billingsley (1992), the strength of social control over behavior varies from place to place and from time to time, and may vary from gender to gender. Life experiences could be different for interracial couples residing in the Northern, Southern, Western, or Midwestern states.

The last limitation is the supporting literature. There was not an abundance of research available on Black-White interracial relationships. Most of the research available on such couples pertained to children and how those children identified themselves and coped with being biracial.

Suggestions for Future Research

More studies are needed on Black-White interracial marriages. The number of interracial relationships are increasing. More information is needed on the how such couples successfully cope with marriage and family issues that come up during the normal give and take of everyday life.

Researchers have developed coping scales which show the strategies people employ when dealing with stress. These scales are considered universal, but the validity of their application to minorities is not clearly understood. My investigation, suggests that

Black-White interracial couples employ some of the same strategies as individuals in other research but also use some strategies unique to their situation.

There appears to be an imaginary color line in this country. The salience of race remains closely linked to status considerations (Kalmijn, 1993; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1990). Kalmijn (1993) stated that “while the color line in marriage seems to be fading, there has been no shift towards a pattern of what can be called unconditional boundary crossing” (p. 142). This poses interest for future research. Such research could explore the reasons spouses select partners of a different race.

Another research topic that could be useful involves race identification. Future research might focus on the race of parents on birth certificates. An increasing percentage of children are being born to interracial parents. It would be interesting to note how parents identify their biracial children at birth and their reasons for such identification. Understanding how parents cope with parenting issues as their biracial children grow into adulthood would expand our knowledge of family relationships beyond early childhood.

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Appendix A - Informed Consent

Informed Consent for Participants of Investigative Projects

Title of Project: Inside Interracial Marriages: Accounts of Black-White Couples

Investigator(s): Angela S. Donnell and Gloria W. Bird, Ph.D.

I. The Purpose of this Research/Project

You are invited to participate in a study of interracial marriages. Little is known about actions couples take to maintain the quality of their marriages as they meet the typical challenges of life in a dual-race relationship. This study will explore the life experiences of Black-White married couples focusing on couples' descriptions of the strains they encounter, coping resources they employ, and maintenance behaviors they activate as they go about their daily lives. This study will consist of 8 to 10 married couples with children under age 18.

II. Procedures

As a participant in this study you have to take part in two interviews to be conducted in your home (or a place of your choosing). The interviews will give you the opportunity to answer questions in detail. The interviews will also allow me to ask follow-up questions based on the information you provide.

There will be an interview of each spouse separately followed by a joint interview with both you and your husband or wife. The interview sessions will last between 30 minutes to 1 1/2 hours depending on how much you have to say. First, you will be asked some brief questions about your background (age, education, number of children and so forth). Next, you will be asked some questions about the sources of stress in your life and how you deal with those experiences. You will also be asked about the routine and special things you do to keep your relationship running smoothly. The interviews will be audio-taped and typed up.

III. Risk

There should be no risk involved in taking part in this study. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, you can withdraw from answering a question or withdraw from the study all together without penalty.

IV. Benefits of this Project

No promises or guarantees of benefits are being made to encourage you to participate in this study. Sharing your personal experiences with others may help people better understand Black-White marital experiences and provide insight into how such couples maintain their marriages. This study will provide you with an opportunity to share your views and reflect on your strengths.

V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality

You will not be identified by name in the transcripts. Throughout the study your name will be replaced by a false one. At no time will we release the results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent. My faculty advisor and I will be the only persons with direct access to the audio tapes and transcripts.

The audio tapes will be secured and stored in a locked file drawer when not in use. Once the study is completed, the tapes will be destroyed. Any oral or written presentation or information provided about this study will not include your real name and all efforts will be made to change or eliminate any of the information that might identify you.

VI. Compensation

Other than our sincere appreciation, no compensation is being offered to encourage you to take part in this study.

VII. Freedom to Withdraw

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If at any time you feel uncomfortable responding during the interviews, we can stop and resume at a later time or you can withdraw from the study. Also, you are free not to answer any questions that you choose.

VIII. Approval of Research

This research project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, by the Department of Family and Child Development.

IX. Subject’s Responsibilities

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the responsibility of answering the questions to the best of my knowledge and as honest as possible. I understand that if a scheduled interview must be postponed, I will call and reschedule.

X. Subject’s Permission

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project.

If I participate, I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I agree to abide by the rules of this project.

Signature

Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact:

Angela S. Donnell
Investigator

(540) 381-2278 or (336) 852-0292
Phone

Gloria W. Bird, Ph.D.
Faculty Advisor

(540) 231-4791
Phone

H. T. Hurd, Ph.D.
Chair, IRB
Research Division

(540) 231-9359
Phone

Appendix B - Background Interview Guide

Background Questions

First I need to ask some general background questions.

1. In what year were you born? _____
(year)
2. How long have you been married to _____? _____
(partner's name) (years)

How long did you date before you married? _____
(months or years)

3. Is it your first marriage? YES NO

If NO, How many times have you been married? _____
(number)

4. How many children do you have with _____?
(partner's name)

5. How old are your children?

Girls _____
(age) (age) (age) (age)

Boys _____
(age) (age) (age) (age)

Which of these children are currently living with you full time? _____
(number)

Does anyone else live in your household? YES NO

If YES, Who? _____
(name & relationship to person)

6. Describe your ethnic background for me.

7. Are you currently employed? YES NO

If YES, Where do you work? _____

What is your job or job title? _____

How many hours do you work each week? _____

How long have you had this job? _____

8. Do you live near any of your immediate family? YES NO

If YES, Who? _____

How often do you visit? _____

9. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

(years completed or degree)

Appendix C - Individual Interview Guide

Individual Interview Guide

1. Tell me how you met _____?
(say partner's name)
2. What initially attracted you to _____? What caused you to want to see her (or him) again?
3. As you saw each other more often, what was it about _____ that lead you to believe that this might be the person you wanted to be with long term...want to marry?

Probes: Were there certain ways _____ behaved or things _____ said that lead you to believe that marriage was a possibility?

Who first brought up the topic of marriage?

Tell me how it was brought up...what happened?

How did you feel about making this commitment?

What does commitment mean to you...how should partners in a committed relationship behave toward each other?

4. When you describe your marriage to people who don't know both of you, do you say you are in an interracial marriage? How do you handle the situation?
5. What were the first reactions of your immediate family to your relationship?

Have their reactions changed since then?

Probe: For example, when you progressed from dating to a more committed and exclusive relationship and then to marriage, did family behaviors change?

And when you decided to become parents, did anything change with your family?

6. In what ways is your immediate family supportive of your relationship?

Probe: How do they show their support? What exactly do they do?

7. What about extended family (aunts, uncles, cousins)? Describe their initial reactions and tell me if their reactions have changed over time.

8. And friends? Have any of your friendships changed...grown stronger or weaker...because of your relationship with _____? Tell me about it.
9. What would you say are the most stressful things about choosing to be in an interracial relationship?

Probe: What are the top three sources of stress related to being in an interracial relationship?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

10. Let's take the most stressful things you mentioned one at a time, and for each one, tell me how you manage your stress when this problem comes up?

Probe: The first source of stress that you talked about was _____.
What do you do when this comes up?

The second stressor you mentioned was _____.
What do you do when this comes up?

The third stressor you identified was _____.
What do you do when this happens?

11. If you compare this type of stress (being in an interracial marriage) with the other sources of stress in your life, where would it rank?

Probe: What stressful things would you rank **Higher**?

What stressful things would you rank **Lower**?

12. Give me some examples of how being in an interracial relationship has affected your relationship with _____...affected how you get along with each other?

Probe: Tell me two ways the extra stress has affected your relationship.

- 1.
- 2.

13. Let's take these things one at a time and talk more about them.

When (what was said under 1.) happens, what do you do...how do you handle the situation?

When (what was mentioned under 2.) occurs, what do you do...how do you manage the situation?

14. In what other ways has being in an interracial marriage affected areas of your life?

Your work situation?

Your involvement in the neighborhood or community?

Your parenting style?

Your personal values or beliefs?

Are there other ways your unique marital situation has affected your life?

15. How do you react personally when you are under stress? Describe yourself to me...how you feel emotionally and physically when under stress.

16. On a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being extremely stressed out and 1 being only slightly stressed, where would you place yourself for this past week?

Was this a typical week for you? Was there anything unusual about it?

17. What were the biggest causes of your stress this week?

18. What percentage of your stress this week was due to being in an interracial relationship?

19. Do you recognize when _____ is under stress? How can you tell?
(partner's name)

Probe: Are there emotional or physical symptoms that you recognize?

20. What are some things that you believe about yourself...personal characteristics...that help you get through tough times?

21. Are there other beliefs you hold...for example about families, or relationships, or parenting...that help you through difficult time.

Appendix D - Couple Interview Guide

Couple Interview Guide

1. What do you find most satisfying about being together as a couple?
2. Tell me about the routine things you do...almost without thinking...to maintain the love and keep the feelings of satisfaction alive in your relationship?

Probe: Describe some of the routine things you do on a day-to-day basis to keep your relationship running smoothly. For example, are there things you do before going to work to help maintain positive a marital atmosphere?

And are there things you might do during the day?

And what might you do in the evening or after work to keep the relationship “on track” and satisfying?

3. What are some of the “special” things you do for each other to keep your relationship satisfying?
4. At one time or other most couples experience some difficult times because of one or both partner’s actions. Without mentioning the specific incident, just describe for me how each of you go about restoring or repairing your relationship after you have done something disappointing, hurtful, or upsetting to the other.

Probe: Let’s begin with _____. What do you do to get back “on track”
(name of spouse)
after doing something upsetting?

It might help to think about the situation one step at a time. For instance, first I usually.....; next, I try to.....; after that I may.....;

Now, let’s continue with _____. What do you do to get
things
(name other spouse)
back “on track” after doing something upsetting?

5. What are the most satisfying things about being parents?

Was having children a difficult decision? Why or why not?
6. Tell me how stress has changed since you became parents?

What do you find the most stressful about being parents?

7. Based on your own experiences, what advice would you give other parents about how to handle stressful situations like the ones you have encountered?

8. How do your children behave when they are under stress?

What things do your children find stressful?

Have they had to face any problems because of their racial background?

How do you support your children when they show signs of stress?

Are there things your children do on their own to reduce their stress?

9. How supportive is the community in which you live? And the school system, how much support do they offer you and your children?

10. How do you support each other when under stress? What do you do to help each other through stressful times?

11. What benefits have you gained from being in an interracial relationship?

What are the benefits to your children?

Vita

Angela Sherrel Donnell was born and raised in Greensboro, North Carolina. She arrived at Virginia Tech in the fall of 1991 on a full five year athletic scholarship. She received her Bachelor of Science degree in Human Services from the Department of Family and Child Development and a minor in Health from the University in 1996. She began her graduate work at Virginia Tech in the Fall of 1996 on full two year scholarship provided once again by the Virginia Tech Athletic Department. During her graduate training she received a full assistantship assisting the Director and Assistant Director of the Office of Student Life of the Athletic Department.

After completing the requirements for a Master's degree in Family Studies from the Department of Family and Child Development, she intends to seek a career in Social Services working to help abused and neglected children to live better lives while helping the parents to change theirs.