

# Interracial Dating on College Campuses

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## **Interracial Dating on College Campuses**

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The environment of a college campus is a relative setting to explore this dynamic of interracial relationships because it is one of the first opportunities that many young adults will have to be able to engage with people of different races and backgrounds from themselves. Collegiate environments such as the classroom and dormitory provide opportunities for students to learn how to work together with others who are different from themselves (Lewis and colleagues, 2000). Most young adults will experience different types of relationships throughout their lives; and romantic relationships are categorized differently than those on a more causal or platonic level. Kennedy (2003) observes that interracial relationships signal that racial boundaries are fading and given the context of American history, these relationships can be viewed as encouraging development. Many colleges around the country are trying to diversify their campuses in hopes of closing the gaps amongst the students of opposite races and encourage all types of interracial relations.

### **History**

The racial/ethnic composition of American colleges and universities has long been a contentious issue. Affirmative action legislation was passed in the 1960s to address inequalities that stemmed from discrimination, and the use of race-conscious admissions policies was upheld in the Bakke and Grutter U.S. Supreme Court cases as a means of providing educational benefits for all students. (Bowman, 2012). Historical patterns also influence the context of interracial

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relationships. As recently as 1967, sixteen states still banned interracial marriage until the Supreme Court struck down those laws (Davidson, 1992; Foeman & Nance, 1999).

As Patterson (1998) suggests, there is a reservoir of distrust influenced by a history of slavery, anti-miscegenation laws, and discrimination that may inhibit the development of intimate associations between blacks and whites. Younger generations seem to be more open towards and view interracial dating and marriage more favorably than older generations (Knox, Zusman, Buffington, & Hemphill, 2000).

### **Literature**

For some people, growing up around the same types of people, or people who “look like you,” can provide a source of comfort. According to Saenz et al (2007), one important consideration is whether students of different backgrounds are connecting to each other in meaningful ways and interracial romantic relationships are an example of a meaningful intergroup relationship (Vaquera & Kao, 2005). A study done at a predominantly white university consisted of 120 black students and more than 2,000 white students in attendance, found that one major factor that operates as a deterrent to the initiation of such relationships among students is fear. Fear of upsetting or being disowned by parents, fear of what friends will think, and negative reactions in public from strangers (Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000).

### **Gender**

Wilson and Russell (1996) assert that white women who date interracially tend to see their behavior as proof that they are not racially prejudice. To black females, these authors argue,

interracial dating is a reminder that white females have appearances that mainstream society deem beautiful. A related finding is that many of the black men interviewed by Craig-Henderson (2006) stated that black women were the group most opposed to their interracial relationships. Of the 25 men she interviewed, 11 reported negative reactions from black women in public, including hostile stares and impolite comments.

### **Universities**

Chang (1999) states that the increased representation of students of color on college campuses (i.e., structural diversity) will lead to more frequent interactions among students from different racial/ethnic groups (i.e., informal interactional diversity), which then leads to student learning and retention. This suggests that if students are exposed more frequently to other students outside of their backgrounds, it can encourage positive interactions which can lead to a more inclusive environment amongst a college campus. However, other studies have shown that the link between structural diversity and interactional diversity occurs only among white students because students of color can easily interact across difference at predominantly white institutions (Saenz, 2010; Saenz, Ngai, & Hurtado, 2007). Homophily describes a tendency in which “contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001, p. 416).

It is important to study interracial romantic relationships at predominantly white universities because social factors influence black students’ acclimation to predominantly white universities (Davis et al., 2004). Moore (2002) found that at his research at a university in a rural community, the black women expressed openness to dating, but interracial dating amongst white males and black females was almost nonexistent. Black female students believed that a

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relationship between a black man and a white woman is based on what the man can get from the relationship, such as sex, status, money, homework, or laundry.

Most white college students interviewed by Childs (2005) said that they did not care about other people dating interracially, but gave racialized explanations why they would not, such as not being attracted to blacks or not having anything in common with them. Using a different methodological approach, Bahns, Pickett, and Crandall (2012) had observed that pairs of students socializing at a large, diverse university were generally more similar to one another (in terms of attitudes and behaviors) than were the pairs at less diverse colleges. McIntosh (1995) wrote the whites enjoy the daily advantage of skin privilege but have been “conditioned into oblivious about its existence.”

Todd Schoepflin (2009) conducted interviews on the academic and social experiences of black and white students at a predominately white university. Included in these interviews were 35 black students and 35 white students at an institution that he refers to as “Upstate University.” All between the ages of 18 and 24. He found that interracial dating is unsettling to some black females at this institution. Some expressed skepticism regarding the romantic interest that white females and black males have in each other. One student Nikki asserted: “White girls on this campus are from small towns. They’re not used to seeing blacks, and they’ve heard stories and myths about black men. So, when they get here, they’re just so curious and they wanna know how it is to be with a black man.” Like black women in studies by Moore (2002) and Childs (2005), black female participants in Schoepflin’s study questioned the legitimacy of relationships involving black males and white females. By suggesting that white females and black men

pursue each other just to see if the myths they have heard are true is a way of dismissing the validity of their relationships.

According to the research, compared with black women, black men addressed interracial relationships in different ways. Black men are seemingly more likely than black women to participate in interracial relationships at “upstate” university. Another interview conducted with a white male student named Guy, expressed that he would not date interracially. He stated: “At first I looked at it and said, ‘That’s weird,’ because I wouldn’t do it.” He explained: “I just don’t think that ...may be stereotyping their background and mine... I’m a white boy from an Irish town, black girl from the city... as a generalization I don’t think we could be compatible.” The findings from this study reveal that black and white women expressed more favorable attitudes toward interracial dating compared with black women and white men. The results indicate there is some degree of acceptance for romantic relationships between black and white students and “upstate” university. As such, the dating pool is shallower for black females.

### **R/CID Model**

Existing literature shows an increase in interracial dating among college-aged adults (Wang, Kao, & Joyner, 2004). Students who engage in interracial relationships (specifically speaking in terms of those with romantic intent), will experience various stages within the relationship that can be displayed in a detailed timeline called the “Racial/ Cultural Identity Development Models (R/CID)” that was first developed from a pattern discovered by Berry and Stonequist. The R/CID Model is useful in helping to understand the various stages that a student of color who is romantically involved with someone outside of their race, to better identify issues they may experience within that relationship; and can aid student affairs professionals to better understand

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their students developmentally and in their students cultural understanding of themselves and those around them (Sue & Sue, 2008). The five stages within this model are: Conformity, Dissonance and appreciation, Resistance and Immersion, Introspection and Integrative awareness. Each one of the five stages experienced in this model influences both students involved in the relationship.

Stage 1 Conformity is emphasized in the literature as the most damaging for the person of color involved in the relationship (D.W. Sue and D. Sue, 2008). Students in this stage begin to feel a sense of internalized oppression. According to the literature, in this stage a student has “bought into societal definitions about their minority status in society.” For example, this would be seen when a student of color has a desire to only date light-skinned students. The attitude of favoring lighter skin is present in ways in which societal discrimination/racism become so normalized that a person favors intimate partner relations with those who carry white or white-like traits (Sue & Sue, 2008). Stage 3 is a significant shift from stage 1 (Sue & Sue, 2008). This is because in this stage, people begin to value themselves and have an appreciation for their racial background. It includes both favoritism for those of their same race and devaluing of white concepts.

### **Qualitative Research**

To further my research on the topic of interracial dating amongst college campuses, I conducted a qualitative study with fellow students on my current college campus. This study consisted of six interviews with some of my fellow peers. All the students who participated in this study identified themselves as being a part of the gender binary, such as identifying as male or female.

I interviewed three male students and three female students, four being students of color and the other two being Caucasian, from different cultural backgrounds with various questions that describes their experiences and or personal perspectives on interracial dating/relationships.

One major finding that was concluded from the study was that 83% of the students interviewed stated that their parents/guardians had a say or influence on who they chose to have as a romantic partner. This finding is also supported by Firmin & Firebaugh (2008) who states: “family members provide a cogent influence.” Miller, Olson, and Fazio (2004) also surveyed college students:

on perceived friend and family approval for dating someone of a different race or status group; and reported that non-Caucasian males reported more disapproval from their Caucasian partner's friends and family than from their own family. Caucasian females predicted more opposition from their family regarding dating individuals from low social ranking groups than did Caucasian males.

Amongst all the participants who participated in my qualitative study, it was found that 100% of them stated that race is not a factor when looking for an intimate partner. They all stated similarly that the potential partners personality and qualities they possess are what matters most to them. Clark et al. (1986) supports this finding by stating: “that race is not a salient obstacle and does not play a big part in interracial relationships. Couples generally tend to focus on similarities rather than differences.” I found in my research that other studies done have also measured views and openness to interracial dating on college campuses. Knox et al. (2000) surveyed 620 students at East Carolina University regarding their attitudes towards and experiences with interracial dating. 24.2% reported being willing to interracially date.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Interracial relationships impact intergroup relations and the overall experience of students on their college campuses. Some limitations found during these studies was that the data can obviously only speak for the participants of the study. It was found from the data given that interracial relationships are more favored between black men and white women, and while not completely off the table, is hesitant amongst black women and white males. study on the topic of interracial dating on college campuses would dive further into the experiences and struggles of the students involved in them and would draw attention to the negative stigmas that are put upon them from society. Key studies of interracial dating on college campuses show such relationships to have a tense history and still face acquaintance, familial and social pressure. Due to the increase of this phenomenon and wide variety of similar studies, more quantitative and qualitative research is needed. Increased study on this topic would provide university officials, faculty, and counselors with helpful information and aid student services.

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