

# Can a Racist Society Produce and Sustain Just and Healthy Interracial Relationships? A Few South African Case Studies

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**Abstract:** In this study the experiences, perceptions and challenges of being in a mixed-race relationship (M-R) are explored against the backdrop of previous South African pieces of legislation meant to keep the various race groups apart. The study is located within a conceptual framework predominantly informed by a constructivist approach, including some tenets from the social constructionist approach. For the purposes of this study, six cases of mixed-race couples consisting of black and white partners only were recruited through snowball sampling. The results of the study indicate that individuals found their involvement in M-R relationships to be a positive experience, and thus resulting in a positive attitude change and a sense of personal growth. However, M-R couples and their extended families experienced cognitive dissonance which required them to discard their previously internalised racial stereotypes. To do this, strategies such as cognitive differentiation, re-categorization and de-categorization were used. This enabled the couples and their families to attempt the shift toward non-racial socially constructed categories. Most of the challenges of being in M-R relationships were experienced on both the interpersonal and the inter-group levels. The losses, disadvantages, challenges, concerns and pains experienced by M-R couples were mainly related to family and social disapproval as well as general family and social efforts aimed at discouraging race mixing.

**Keywords:** Interracial, relationships, social category, social contact, racial stereotypes and attitudes.

## INTRODUCTION

Most couples face inter and intrapersonal challenges in their intimate relationship. These challenges are part and parcel of being in relationship. To a large extent, interracial couples experience similar relational challenges and concern that same-race couples experience. However, over and above these, interracial couples have to negotiate and navigate - within the space of spousal or partner intimacy - the added complexities that emanate from differences in their racial, cultural, or ethnic backgrounds.

My interest in the issue of M-R couples is inspired by the few cases I have had to deal with as a practicing Clinical Psychologist. This article is part of my effort to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of difference at play in relationships as well as insider and outsider perceptions thereof. In my experience, nowhere are these differences in sharper focus than in interracial relationships. Speaking and writing about interracial relationships must not be understood either as an endorsement of the idea of race, which has been proven to have no biological basis, or a value judgement one way or the other on the phenomenon. The social, psychological and legal (in Apartheid South Africa) reality is that interracial couples exist as such and are perceived as such. This then is our starting point in this article.

The focus of this article will be on how the couples deal or cope with the impact of their differences and the experiences of disapproval by others. The article will also explore the extent to which the strategies used by the couples to deal with negative attitudes and actions were effective.

## BACKGROUND

Under apartheid inter-racial relationships were banned in South Africa. The ban on mixed marriage began in 1949. Before that, things were different. Although racial prejudice and racial inequality permeated all levels of South African society, the absence of national laws prohibiting interracial marriages and relationships seems to have greatly reduced the social stigma around it. There were of course strong racist and social prohibitions, spoken and unspoken, that discouraged racial mixing and punished those who deviated. But the introduction of legal prohibition was a tipping point. On top of the existing, mainly social, economic, racist stigma around interracial mixing, from 1949 interracial mixing was outlawed. It does not mean that people stopped falling in love across the colour line, it certainly did not stop sex across the colour line, but it shrunk the social space severely, increased the stigma associated with it, and removed the legal protection completely.

Four Acts were especially significant in constructing, maintaining and enforcing racial categorization. These are: (1) The Population Registration Act, Act 30 of

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1950, which provided that the entire population be classified according to racial groups which would form the basis for the National Party's policy of separate development. (2) The group Areas Act, Act 41 of 1950, Mesthrie (1993: 179) maintains that the primary task of the Act was to provide and establish separate areas that would be used exclusively by one racial group for residential and business purposes. (3) The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, Act 55 of 1949 and (4) The Immorality Act, Act 23 of 1957 prohibited all sexual relations between blacks and whites. These pieces of legislation had a great impact on the lives of all people in South Africa, especially on mixed-race couples and families.

Ratele and Duncan (2003) point out that mixed-race couples continued to face hardships despite the repeal of the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 in 1985. The first mixed couple to get legally married was Mr. Protas Madlala and Ms. Suzanne Leclerc. In spite of the laws being repealed, Mr. and Mrs. Madlala, like other mixed-race couples, were confronted with a set of difficult circumstances (Donaldson, 2000; Kekezwa, 2000; Khama, Le Roux, & Heunis, 1990; Leqoca & Leqoca, 1995; Mashego, 2005).

A report by Cruywagen (1991) refers to how the marriage between a prominent South African politician and member of the ANC, Allan Boesak, to Elna Botha led to divisions within their families and within the ANC in Cape Town. Cruywagen quoted an anonymous female political leader who commented on the Boesak marriage saying: *"As a politician, Mr. Boesak must know that he belongs to the people and that it is justifiable that we are upset with his actions which are not in concert with our thinking"*. In a recent news report by a prominent leader and member of the opposition party, the DA's Mr. Mmusi Mainamane indicated that the fact that he is in a mixed-race relationship has attracted a lot of attention both negative and positive (eNCA News, 2015:26). He said *"being in a interracial marriage is a challenge...I can recall moments where even ANC MP who, when we get into heated debate in parliament they want to attack the fact that I am married to a white South African ...."*

Clearly therefore, even though interracial marriages are not legally prohibited any more in South Africa, indications are that the social construction of marriages across racial lines might still be the same. We will explore this further in this article.

Journalist Mpho Lakaje, who is married to a white woman, reflects on how the country has changed in the

20 years since the end of white minority rule: "This racial classification is very engraved...it's like it is in the psyche of South Africans" (BBC News, 2014:1). As much as there seems to be an increase in the visibility of M-R relationship in South Africa, there is still deeply engraved racial stereotyping and classifications which may have negative implications for mixed-race couples and their children. The laws have changed but culture, perceptions and social norms lag behind.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a recent and steady growing body of empirical and theological work being undertaken into 'mixed' relationships within the South African context (Dayile, 1998; Jaynes 2007: Morrall, 1994; Mwamwenda, 1998; Ratele, 1998b; Ratele, 2002; Stacey, 1998; Sherman and Steyn, 2009 Woodward, 1999.). This kind of research is timely and should be seen as part of a broader research effort into the social, political, cultural, as well as economic relations between racial groups. Nevertheless, there is relatively little local research that is specific to mixed-race relationships.

A few of the studies made on interracial relationships tend to focus mainly on the negative motives of those who choose to marry across racial lines and the crisis related to the racial identity development of bi-racial children (Chiong, 1998; Johnson & Warren, 1994; Gaines & Leaver, 2002; Aboud, Mendelson & Purdy, 2003).

The focus of the previous studies might have been influenced by the dominant social discourse, which has predominantly pathologised (Davidson, 1992) and criminalised relationships between a black and white person because such relationships, within a racist society confront the society's ideas of do's and don'ts, what is desirable and what's not, and what is acceptable and what's not (Ratele & Duncan, 2003).

Fanon (1986:12) for example states that racial contact between black and white races in post-colonial context was part of 'a collective form of mental illness, a massive psycho-existential complex'. Fanon was most alert to the social location, economic power and psychological pathology at play in interracial relationships. For him, it seemed nearly impossible to have normal interracial relationships between the colonizer and the colonized. So, he spent a long time seeking to understand the spectrum of dynamics at play in such relationships. In his view the colonial

condition could not, even if the individual couples involved thought to the contrary, produce what Martin Buber called an I-thou, just and equal relationship between individuals from different races.

According to Ratele and Duncan (2003), this does not mean that Fanon regards all interracial mixing as inherently pathological. The authors argue that he means to emphasize how problematic, pathogenic even (in the sense of inducing psycho-pathology, inauthentic forms of identity); such racial contacts prove to be in contexts in which one racial group is socially and economically dominant over the other. They further assert that what can be seen as desirable or undesirable, good or bad, proper or improper, moral or immoral, mixed or pure and legitimate or illegitimate relational practices are not just the results of what is here-and-now, but that these binaries are produced by particular historical, economic, political and cultural conditions.

At its sharpest, Fanon's question remains unanswered. That question is: Can a racist and unequal society produce, let alone sustain, healthy and normal interracial couples? Maybe this is a question that can never be answered once and for all. Most human societies are mired in ethnic, patriarchal, homophobic class and race inequalities and prejudices. But couples do not wait for these to be removed before they fall in love. In other words, from time immemorial, couples have had to navigate their way through the traffic of prejudices and inequalities.

However, Davidson (1992) introduces a slightly different argument when he suggests that there are several theories about interracial marriages which seem to suggest that individuals who choose to marry interracially have ulterior motives that may be hidden or even unconscious.

It is one thing to argue, as Fanon and others have done, that the weight of the colonial condition and the economic and social arrangements that empower one group over another, making one a group of masters and the other a group of slaves, has tremendous impact, even in the most intimate of human relations. This is a valid argument that cannot be thrown away slightly. It is an argument we must always keep at the back of our mind. However, to go about research on interracial couples, with a negative starting point, criminalizing them from the beginning is bad research methodology. This is something, this article is determined to avoid,

Chiong (1998) looks at how previous theories of racially mixed marriages necessarily presented negative outcomes since the common starting point was to portray mixed race marriages as deviant. In many of these instances, interracial couples were hypothesized as having deep-seated resentment of their parents with a consequent desire to cause them pain. Sometimes members of interracial couples were portrayed as having a desire for self-degradation, inferiority complex or simply rebelling against what they saw as a rigid system (Hullum, 1982).

In addition, a number of theories about interracial couples suggest more conscious ulterior motives, such as, sexual curiosity, preoccupation or revenge on the people of the out-group, the desire for social or economic mobility and exhibitionism (Davidson, 1992).

Davidson also argues that, one place to begin correcting a racist outlook on interracial marriages is to examine the negative biases of these theories. He points out that such theory are seldom if ever supported by empirical evidence.

For example, Gadberry and Dodder (1993) and Qian (1999) indicate that the majority of interracial (more especially black/white) marriages were in the same educational bracket. These authors also argue against some of the theories of interracial marriages (for example, the exchange theory, which defines interracial marriages as motivated by the exchange of a higher/white racial status for higher socio-economic status, sex or physical attractiveness) and indicate that women, irrespective of race, frequently married for economic support while men marry for physical attractiveness. Several writers have indicated that the racist formulations about mixed-race relationships (such as those briefly outline above) are historically and socially constructed. Often, these formulations are an effort of the dominant culture to maintain hegemony (Chiong, 1998; Fanon, 1986; Johnson & Warren, 1994; Ratele & Duncan, 2003; Rosenbolt, *et al.*, 1995).

## METHOD

In this essay we have chosen an interpretive research method which seeks to develop an understanding of a situation from the perspective of the participants (that is, an empathy approach, which is more consistent with the constructivist perspective), and from the perspective of distanciation (that is, stepping outside the context of subjective experiences, which is more consistent with the social constructionist

perspective). Kelly (1999b: 399) argues that understanding the phenomena from within their context, in an empathic manner, as well as from a more distance, skeptical perspective, is a combined effort which is like two hands working in unison and yet apart.

The focus of this article is, however, not the explanation of how a socially constructed reality (for example, 'race' or 'race-mixing' discourse) developed, but rather how these socially constructed discourse made particular set of practices (for example, mixed-race relationships/marriages) intolerable or conceivable in the South African context. Our focus is on interpreting the subjective experience in the context of the socially constructed discourse and developing an understanding of patterns of experiences across time and situation.

In this approach, we follow Kelly (1999b) who refers to this as using the whole range of resources at the researcher's disposal. Within this range will be included understanding of the history, theory, society, language, politics and experience. This is not secondary interpretation applied to an experience in an add-on

fashion, but fundamental to understanding of the very context of the experience, as it is revealed from outside of the experience; from the perspective of the types of questions, experience, information and concerns which the researcher has, as an outsider.

The outsider is drawn into the apprehension of meaning, which ceases to be the domain of the insider or author exclusively. Kelly (1999b: 401) refers to this as distanciation, and argues that distanciation is not only an epistemological necessity (because of the absence of the author), but it allows us to say more than can be known purely from 'within' the author's context. No matter how thoroughly we understand a context from 'within' or 'as it is lived in its context'; there are certain things about the context that are only going to become evident when we look at it from the outside.

To achieve the aim of the present study, descriptions were gathered from interviews of six couples (recruited through snowball sampling method) who were in mixed-race relationships in Gauteng, South Africa.

**Table of the Biographic Information of Participants:**

	Gender	Race	Age	Education	Previous Marital Status	No. of Children Previously	Period of the M-R relationship	No. of Children in M-R relationship
Couples								
1	Female	Black	38	Honors Degree	Never Married	2	3yrs	0
	Male	White	37	Matric	Never Married	0		
2	Female	Black	36	Masters Degree	Never Married	1	11yrs	1
	Male	White	64	Masters Degree	Divorced	1		
3	Female	Black	24	BSC Degree	Never Married	0	2yrs	0
	Male	White	28	BSC Degree	Never Married	0		
4	Female	Black	32	BSC Honors	Never Married	0	5yrs	0
	Male	White	42	BSC Honors	Never Married	0		
5	Female	White	30	Diploma	Never Married	0	3yrs	Wife 5months pregnant with 1 <sup>st</sup> child
	Male	Black	32	Diploma	Never Married	0		
6	Female	White	32	Matric	Never Married	0	7yrs	0
	Male	Black	39	Diploma	Never Married	0		

In-depth interviewing was used as the primary tool for collecting data. A broad question, 'What is your experience of being in a mixed-race relationship?', was used as a framework for initiating the discussions with the participants. It was decided to use an interpretive, qualitative research design to explore these descriptions. Qualitative research entails a set of methods aimed at uncovering an individual's or a group's social, cultural or normative pattern of behaviour and interaction. The qualitative researcher analyses social settings, motives and meanings, actions and reactions, organisations and culture (Roth, 1993: 46). According to this approach, the social context is important in understanding the social world. The meaning of social action or an event depends on the context in which it occurs (Neuman, 1997; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

By adopting a qualitative methodological approach, certain patterns in the collected information were found (using analytic comparison method, which focuses on identifying similarities and differences in the collected data).

Ethical considerations regarding the study included obtaining ethical clearance from the Ethics Committee of the University of South Africa and the guarantee of confidentiality to the participants. Informed consent was obtained from the participants to record the interviews and publish the findings of the study.

## RESULTS

### Intra-Personal Level

From the vantage point of the intrapersonal level we will provide summaries of a partner's internal psychological processes, descriptions, perceptions, challenges and emotional experiences.

As is the case with any intimate relationship, a M-R relationship goes through processes and phases of adjustment. On an individual level the M-R relationships were mainly defined and described in a positive manner by most of the participants. For example, the following experiences were expressed by some of the participants:

*"One thing I can say is that I am happy in this relationship. I think it works and that there is hope".*

*"I love Nkosi, sometimes I ask myself if this is God's will for me or if this is my heart's desire".*

*"Being in a mixed-race relationship is a process that one can never say it's over... but I am happy with my baby and my husband".*

*"I think there is a definite cultural growth as well... Yes, I think this is the one and I feel really happy".*

*"For me it is a thing of 'God...God loves everybody...to fall in love with a black person, was never a problem for me... even though I grew up in a very racist family... and a country where there are beliefs that you are not to mix with people of other races".*

In contrast to many theories of interracial relationships that typify the motives of interracial couples as pathological and different to that of same-race couples (see Davidson, 1992; Hullum, 1982, & Kalmijn, 1993), most of the participants were motivated by both interpersonal rewards (like love, fidelity, companionship etc.) as well as by inter-group rewards, like learning more about other racial groups, changing racial stereotypes, breaking bondages of racism, rebelling against racial separation and dealing with the guilt of past oppressive race relations. The following remark by two of the partners illustrates the point:

*"I think is a very rich relationship because mixing with people of your own culture, background or race I seem to be very comfortable with people like that but I do not learn a lot..."*

*"This relationship made me even more aware... I also think there was a time in my life where I had to lay down my own racism".*

When interpersonal reasons were used as motivation for being involved in a M-R relationship, the relationship tended to be described in a more positive manner as compared to the case where more extended socio-cultural reasons, such as rebelling against social pressure or spiritual factors, were primarily used as justification for the relationship.

Most of the participants acknowledged the negative effect that the socio-political context of Apartheid and racism had on their perceptions about people of the out-group. These perceptions were tied to painful experiences and awareness of, for example, deep-

seated animosity, hatred, mistrust and negative attitudes towards people of the out-group. This would be followed by a need to let go of racist ideas and beliefs about people of the out-group along with a positive attitude change. The need to let go of a racist mindset was clearly linked to the experience of the intimate contact with a person from the out-group (Morrall, 1994). This contact dissolved internalized negative schemata about people of the out-group (Baron & Byrne, 2003). Most of the participants experienced this phase as an advantage, a phase of growth, and also as a process of individuation rather than a crisis. This conclusion is also in line with the views of a number of authors and researchers (see Johnson & Warren, 1994; Rosenblatt, *et al.*, 1995; Huber, 1976; Yancey & Yancey, 2002).

The initial reactions to falling in love with a racially different person was, therefore, characterised by the challenge of reconciling that which an individual chose or decided to do (that is, loving or being involved with a person from the out-group) and dissolving negative attitudes and preconceived ideas about people of the out-group. For some of the participants, the process of self-evaluation (in relation to the people of the out-group) and conciliation started before they could even commit themselves to the M-R relationship.

In other words, the more racist the socio-political context was, the more difficult it was to dissolve racist attitude and stereotypes about people of the out-group. The context in which the couple met seemed to play a crucial role in this regard.

During the process of self-evaluation and re-viewing old internalised racial stereotypes and attitudes about people of the out-group, most of the participants experienced conflict or what Baron and Byrne (2003) refer to as cognitive dissonance. When cognitive dissonance occurs, the person who is subject to the contradiction feels discomfort. Hogg and Vaughan (2005) describe this as post-decisional conflict, and they say that the best way to relieve this discomfort is by "bringing the attitude into line with the behaviour". Various cognitive strategies, such as differentiation and social re-categorisation were used to deal with the dissonance. This allowed most of the partners to re-configure or reshape previously constructed racial categories. The use of differentiation and re-categorization were effective in dealing with the conflict or dissonances that the partners experienced about the M-R relationships. However, these strategies did not result in the complete re-construction of racial

stereotypes or cognitive schema about people of the out-group, but rather contributed to the re-categorisation of the individual partner as a member of the in-group.

Ratele (2003) refers to similar ways of adjusting within the post-apartheid era where labels like a "hard working black man" or a "non-racist Afrikaner boss" were used instead of relating to each other beyond race or physical appearance. In this way racial stereotypes related to all the people of that racial group may remain unchanged, but some members are removed or shifted to a different category. Some white participants distanced their self-definition from the white racial group and developed more interest in and empathy for black people. In some instances, cognitive dissonance was resolved by one distancing oneself from the general South African racial identifications.

Strong emotional experiences (both positive and negative) of the participants were related to family and social reactions towards the M-R relationship. If the out-group was perceived as belonging to a higher social level, the participants generally reported positive emotions such as a sense of pride or improved self-esteem. In cases where the out-group was perceived as belonging to a lower social level, the participants reported negative emotions such as guilt, irritation, shame and embarrassment about past injustices of the apartheid era. This view was also expressed in Rosenblatt, *et al.* (1995) and, Yancey and Yancey (2002). This may also be regarded as a coping strategy, since accepting that one feels embarrassed or guilty about the M-R relationship itself might result in a sense of cognitive dissonance again.

Most black participants reported more positive emotions such as a sense of pride for having broken through a higher social level, while some white participants reported more negative emotions for being tied to a lower level of social functioning or being treated by people of the white community as inferior.

### **Interpersonal Level and Inter-Group Levels**

The interpersonal and inter-group levels of interpretation will enable us to integrate interpersonal processes, perceptions and challenges between the partners of the M-R couples as well as their families. They (the levels) also highlight the issues of race, socio-economic status, gender, as well as the values and practices which inform and maintain the existing social order. The following are descriptions and

verbatim examples of how the partners described the (racial) difference within the M-R relationship:

*"I realised we never had any black people working in our house... The respect that I used to have for my granny changed because I realized she is a racist ...so it was difficult for me to get the balance ... even in the area I stayed there were no black families or black kids in our school. It was always like that".*

*"When we are out in the public, or when we are with friends or when we are hearing and seeing people's attitudes towards us, then we are reminded about our differences colourwise. ...Sometime we also forget about another one's colour".*

*"I am completely colour-blind. It is only when we go out to Sandton City... sometimes I even forget that she is black".*

*"We do have issues but our issues have nothing to do with us being racially different".*

*"I feel like you are being judged because of your outside appearance...I feel that it's a type of apartheid that you can never run away from.... I feel that sometimes people don't use their own judgement and instead they use what society puts before them".*

Through the process of social comparison and categorization (perceived in both white and black participants' social groups) the white social group was regarded as higher or superior than the black social group on dimensions like race, class, economic position or economic power, and intellectual ability.

This resulted in white people regarded as having a positive social collective identity and black people with a negative one (see De la Rey, 1991; Fanon, 1986; Hook, 2003; Taljfel, 1981; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Ratele & Duncan, 2003). As reflected in the following statement by one participant:

*"Just you going out with a white person, I think they look at me differently, even my own family, they said they did not know that I am so brave... I think it is our own belief that whites are superior to us, like*

*we are an inferior race...Also when I started going out with him my self-esteem was boosted. I said to myself that I never thought I could do this".*

Except for previously used legislation, various strategies and actions were employed, especially by family members, to enforce or encourage remaining within the social category that one belongs in. Most white people, as reported in this study, used indirect or subtle influences, such as inflating prices or creating barriers to certain services or areas, to enforce racial separation. On the contrary, black people used direct influences like saying discouraging comments or preventing the white partner from participating in family rituals. In this way the resolve of the M-R relationship met with challenges from both racial groups. The more racist and conservative the family was described as, the more direct influence was used to enforce conformity to the prescribed social category and norms, as well as to discourage the continuation of the M-R relationships.

Some studies suggest that high-status groups are more likely to discriminate than low-status groups (Caddick, 1982; Fang, Sidanius & Pratto, 1991; Crocker, Thompson, McGraw & Ingerman, 1987). This finding was confirmed by the different reactions from the participants' families and communities. Black families and communities were described as more accepting and approving of race mixing than white families and communities. Some participants indicated that the more racist and lower the level of education of the social context was, the more negative were the social reactions towards the M-R couples (Case & Greeley, 1990). Reactions such as frustration, anger, distancing, obsessing about racial boundaries and racism from the white people could be related to a perceived threatened social status. On the other hand, reactions of appreciation and respect from the black people could be linked to the sense of pride and the need to gain a higher social status. Black participants were better treated by their fellow black people, while white participants were treated as inferior or holding a lower social status by their fellow white people.

Despite the observation that the black community was described as more accepting of the M-R relationships, some of the younger black males and female friends of the participants in this study directly expressed a sense of envy or loss of a possible partner to the out-group. Similar findings were reported in most of American literature. An example in this regard is

Bernard (1981). Different gender reactions (from both races) also indicated social efforts in maintaining and enforcing loyalty to the in-group.

In most instances, the implications of social comparison were preferential treatment for members of the in-group and discrimination against those belonging to the out-group. One of the advantages or gains of M-R relationships was described as the gaining of more access, through the other partner, to privileges of people of the in-group. On the other hand, the disadvantages, losses, or challenges expressed by most of the participants indicate a price one pays for making an individual choice (that is, difference) rather than a group choice (that is, conforming to the group norm). The experience of M-R couples is that they do not belong to any racial category, and thus feelings of being marginalised are inevitable. Their experience of disadvantages, losses or challenges was mostly related to feelings of rejection. This aspect was expressed even though none of the participant couples experienced direct discrimination or racism when they publicly presented themselves as a couple. The discrimination was thus very subtle.

Reported family and social reactions towards the M-R relationships pointed to a general level of mistrust between the two racial groups. Some current research focuses on manipulating interdependence in intergroup encounters and assessing integration in diverse social networks (Bergsieker, Leslie, Constantine, & Fiske, 2012). Therefore, eliminate the negative, accentuate the positive.

These reactions were mainly aimed at enforcing collectiveness rather than difference or individualism. The language used in enforcing racial separation reflected racial stereotypes or category congruent stereotypes towards people of the out-group. This language was articulated in certain conversations or discourses with the aim of blaming or justifying their perceived social position. This aspect was also echoed by Potter and Wetherell (1992). The discourse used by most whites was that of justification of their perceived dominant social position, while most blacks used the language of blaming the dominant social group for their lower social position.

White families of the participants in this study initially reacted more negatively, or were more distant, to M-R couples than black families did. This finding was also confirmed in other South African research reports such as found in Donaldson (2000); Kekezwa, (2000);

Khama, *et al.* (1990), Leqoca & Leqoca (1995); Mashego (2005) and Morrall (1994). Fang, *et al.* (1998) is an example of a non-South African study which has also confirmed this finding.

Hyslop (1995) defines the white South Africans' opposition to M-R relationships as a desire to maintain dominance. Fathers and older family members were reported as more disapproving of the M-R relationship. Most of the initial negative family reactions were followed by comments or actions that were aimed at discouraging the continuation of the M-R relationship. This illustrates some of the difficulties involved in relinquishing old, internalised racial stereotypes.

Most participants found it difficult to talk to their parents or friends about the M-R relationship. The difficulty was mainly due to the knowledge that either a family member or friend was racist or held conservative attitudes, the possible instability or division that the M-R relationship could cause within the family or social system, the fear of being rejected, and so on. These expectations resulted in more delays and difficulties in talking about the M-R relationship with their families. Knowing that parents or friends held liberal values resulted in fewer delays and difficulties in informing them about the M-R relationship.

Apprehension in disclosing the M-R relationship affirms the view that even if the participants have made individual choices, they still valued parental or societal approval. This finding is also supported by authors such as Almonte and Desmond (1992), Donaldson (2000), Kekezwa (2000), Khama, *et al.* (1990), Leqoca and Leqoca (1995), Mashego (2005), and Prinzing and Prinzing (1991).

On an interpersonal level, the participants' M-R relationships seemed to threaten group membership, the stability of the family and social system. The introduction of a person from a different racial group threatened family stability as it resulted in family divisions, disruptions and pain. Most parents were reportedly faced with the challenge of having to review their stereotypes about people of the out-group. Adjusting to, or reaching the phase of, accepting a son- or daughter- in-law from a different race, to a certain extent, required the dissolution of old stereotypes about people from a different race. This assertion was also made by Spears, Oakes, Ellemers & Haslam (1997). Similar experiences were reported in the stories of parents of M-R couples presented by Almonte and Desmond (1992), Prinzing and Prinzing (1991), and Rosenblatt, *et al.* (1995).



Processes like negotiation, convincing, persuasion, threatening to terminate the relationship with the disapproving parent, using available social support or praying, were used by the M-R couples as strategies to deal with their families' negative reactions. The subsequent acceptance of the M-R relationship by some of the parents was effected by a process of de-categorisation, where different racial categories were dissolved, and both the white and black parents started referring to a partner from the out-group as either 'daughter-in-law' or 'son-in-law'. The attitude change of some of the parents was mainly due to persuasion, whereas positive attitude changes observed from some of the couples' friends was voluntary and mainly due to contact or observation that it was possible for people of the out-group to live with people of the in-group, the point made by Baron and Byrne (2003).

Circumstances such as the seriousness of the M-R relationship, as expressed through an engagement, marriage or the birth of a M-R child, and the risk of losing a valuable relationship with their son or daughter, caused some of the parents to change their attitude and react positively towards the M-R relationship. This was affirmed by authors like Johnson and Warren (1994), Kouri and Lasswell (1993), Kekezwe, (2000) and Rosenblatt, *et al.* (1995).

As regards the M-R relationships considered in this study, the intimate contact between the partners resulted in the de-valuation of their racial differences; a finding which Carrim (2000) describes as the 'silencing of race'. This process of individuation and cognitive de-categorization involved completely dissolving the previously constructed black/white racial category (that is, the 'us' and 'them' category) and replacing it with the 'we' category, (Gaertner, *et al.*, 1997).

General social reactions, however, constantly reminded the couples about their racial differences.

This finding confirmed previous research results indicating that the biggest problem for mixed-race marriages rests not with the partners themselves, but with family, friends and social reactions towards their relationship (Johnson & Warren, 1994; Olofsson, 2004). This finding could also be related to Fanon's (1986) views about how racial contact between black and white races proves to be problematic, and even pathogenic (in the sense of inducing psychopathological, inauthentic forms of identity) in contexts where one racial group maintains a powerful degree of aggressive dominance over the other.

Although a M-R relationship in this study group was perceived as an advantage on a personal level (for example, receiving preferential treatment, breaking bondages of racism and racial prejudice, developing unconditional friendships and/or standing out), the M-R couples in this investigation initially experienced negative family and social reactions or disapproval which resulted in the loss of valuable relationships, and other disadvantages or challenges. This observation is also reflected in the works of Johnson and Warren (1994), Olofsson (2004), Prinzing, (1991), Rosenblatt, *et al.* (1995), and Yancey and Yancey (2002).

Receiving preferential treatment might be perceived as an advantage of being with a racially different partner. However, this essentially reflects general inter-group patterns where services and benefits are socially or legally provided on the basis of group membership. Whereas these racially discriminating patterns of social and organisational behaviour can be exploited by M-R couples, it lies at the very heart of the interactive problems experienced by them. This inter-group pattern could account for the discrimination experienced by all people perceived as members of the out-group (Tajfel, 1981; Taylor & Brown, 1988; Baron & Byrne, 2003). Some of the participants indicated that preferential treatment between different racial groups was experienced negatively or as a disadvantage because it resulted in feelings of being rejected, isolated, and marginalised. By partaking in racially preferential patterns of social behaviour, dissonance was experienced and racially biased stereotypes were re-validated.

Most of the participants indicated that there were differences in cultural or traditional practices, and appear to have accommodated each other in terms of cultural expressions. Examples of these are: types and ways of processing food, family expectations and traditional gender roles.

The following are verbatim examples of how the partners described the cultural/traditional difference between and/or within the M-R relationship:

*"There are a lot of differences in terms of the food we eat, the kind of entertainment... we eat more his food because he cooks... I find out that I am more into the white culture or way of doing things".*

*"I cook pap myself and I actually end up eating it up all by myself. For us it is not a*

*big cultural change, because she was not eating traditional food anyway. Thebe is very Western. That makes the difference non-existent”.*

*“I think there are differences that are related to culture between me and my wife... Maybe the family’s expectation is too high. They are thinking that a white person is wealthy and expect certain things from her. This is something different from my culture”.*

*“I would prefer something to be done this way and he would prefer it differently... It would be more because of our... cultural differences like feeling like to eat with your hands... It is easier for us to accommodate them, so we eat more his food and practice more his culture”.*

*“The difference is cultural and not in skin colour... I think there is, for example, the way that I cook and the way that his grandmother cooked. Fortunately, his mother is a very westernised lady, I have eaten her food, they are very white, but sometimes when I’m cooking he would jump in and suddenly start telling me how to cook rice”.*

These processes of accommodating each other seem to relate primarily to cultural and gender dominance. Cultural and gender dominance is not, however, unique to M-R relationships. Such patterns of social relationships prevail within the South African context and in many societies (Bernard, 1981; Hood, 1983; Collins, 2003; Ingoldsby & Smith, 1995). Adopting a western culture or life style (such as food, socializing and living) resulted in a sense of loss or disconnection for some of the black participants. Ratele (2003) refers to this sense of disconnection as racial alienation and estrangement. Unlike day-to-day cultural lifestyles, abstract cultural practices like customs and rituals seem more difficult to change because of their strong connection to the ancestral belief systems (Monning, 1988; Seleti & Ngubane, 2005; De Villiers, 1985).

Language differences reflected another aspect of culture (Fanon, 1986; Louw-Potgieter & Giles, 1987; Scherer & Giles, 1979), and were described by most of the participants as a frustrating challenge. Within the

M-R relationships considered in the present study, the use of different mother tongues was experienced as a barrier when it came to expressing deep emotions or relating one’s childhood experiences one’s other partner. Outside the M-R family, the primary challenge for most partners was the inability to understand and relate to members of their partner’s group. Being unable to understand or participate in the conversations resulted in their being unable to share and co-create meaning (Hoffman, 1990). This further resulted in feeling of isolation and not belonging to that specific social group.

In some instances, language differences were experienced by the participants as a tool used to discriminate against, and exclude, people of the out-group. This was done either intentionally or unintentionally. In cases where unstable or non-trusting M-R relationships were documented, being excluded, through the use of a different language, resulted in feelings of suspicion and mistrust. The use of language as a tool to exclude members of the out-group was mostly reported within black social settings. This could be related to the finding that the M-R couples who participated in this study were mainly accepted and exposed to the black communities rather than to the white communities.

Similar ideas were enforced by Group Areas Act, which had stipulated that a white person marrying a non-white person could not attract that person into the white group, but would have to become a member of the non-white group for the duration of the relationship (Ratele & Duncan, 2003). The Group Areas Act was repealed but, its suggested practices are still continuing in a more subtle way. Manzo (1996) suggests that this old piece of South African legislation, to some extent, gave expression to the fear of racial boundary crossing amongst the dominant social group.

Gender differences within the M-R relationship were expressed in two main areas of functioning; namely, (i) the expression of feelings, and (ii) the socio-economic hierarchy or status of the partners. Fundamentally, this seems to be a gender issue, as most females, irrespective of race, were more able to express their emotions than their male partners; and most females, irrespective of their race, seemed to be of a lower socio-economic hierarchy.

In most instances, the participants’ racial identity was related to physical appearance and, consequently some black participants were expected to change their

physical appearance to that of a white person. This expectation could be related to Fanon's (1986) concept of lactication and the collective inferiority complex amongst blacks imposed by the oppressive apartheid system.

Nevertheless, most of the participants indicated that, except for certain aspects of their cultural identity, there was no need or consideration to change their physical identity. Their main concern, however, centred on the racial identity or classification of their children, which concern was also confirmed by the findings of Sowards' (1993). This aspect resulted in some parents accepting the automatic racial classification of their children (or future children) as coloured, while other parents re-constructed their children's racial classification and categorization as 'mixed-race' or 'no classification' at all. In this way they dissolved the racial boundaries that were used to define their children.

Some participants expressed the wish that their children could integrate the best of both parents' cultural backgrounds. This point confirms the assertions by authors such as Fanon (1986) and Hood (2003), that the social categories and the subsequent social identities are socially constructed and changeable.

For some of the participants, the idea that none of them was coloured, and having their children automatically labeled 'coloured' seemed difficult to accept. Initially, some prospective grandparents tried to discourage the continuation of the M-R relationship by raising concerns and questions about the racial classification of the grandchild. Similar findings were also reported by Johnson and Warren (1994), Shanks-Meile and Dobratz (1991), and Spickard (1989). Johnson and Warren (1994) point out that society's taboos are ostensibly not fully transgressed if no children are born from the relationship because there is no permanent blurring of boundaries between the groups. In essence, M-R children render the racial boundaries insignificant; their (the children's) very existence challenges the system.

Some participants were also concerned about the effects that social processes may have on their M-R children's racial identity and sense of relatedness. Tizard and Phoenix (1993) state that they found the majority of M-R children in their study did not experience the feelings of social isolation and rejection by both the white and black groups, which the marginalisation theories described as 'their fate'. These authors however, also found that incidents of racism

and discrimination were reported by most M-R children. Participants who expressed concern about the possible discrimination that their M-R children could face committed themselves to enlightening, educating, protecting and encouraging their children in ways that would equip them with skills to deal with such experiences.

Similar commitments were expressed by the M-R parents in a survey conducted by Prinzing and Prinzing (1991). The authors suggest that M-R children have the same need as all other children, but their needs are also unique, in the sense that they need conscious guidance for handling difficult racially-defined socio-cultural situations, as well as accurate in age-appropriate information about racism and how it might affect them.

## **LIMITATIONS**

Difficulties in identifying M-R couples that fitted the criteria of the present study resulted in the use of a small sample size. Qualitative research, on the other hand, does not easily offer the opportunity for replication and generalization of the results. The intention of qualitative research is to search for meaning rather than to prove a scientific fact or phenomenon.

The snow ball sampling technique used in recruiting participants for this study might have led to participants who were overly optimistic, which may have resulted in presenting a more positive expression of their life worlds, with the negative effects of being in the M-R relationship minimised.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, being in a M-R relationship involves a process of individuation, whereby individuals are required to review their collective socio-cultural existence and make a choice based on what they need or feel at that moment, rather than comply with prescribed group norms. M-R relationships represent an individuated choice or difference, as they go against what is socially prescribed as common or desirable.

A unique aspect of M-R relationships is that they attract huge social attention. Unlike same-race relationships, they carry the burden of being the subject of a continuous public discourse, despite being a private affair between two people who love each other (Donnan, 1990 and Sue, 2000). Continued social comments on, and reactions towards, M-R

relationships confirm their unfamiliarity or uncommonness. It is this non-conformist nature of M-R relationships that requires from the participants a high level of self-differentiation and individuation that challenges racial norms and cultural collectivism.

The difficulties that the M-R couples in this study, and some of their parents, to a certain extent, overcame in their quest to dissolve internalised racial stereotypes may also provide more insight in grasping the complex challenges involved in general processes of reconciliation. This is especially so when considering that reconciliation might entail dealing with complex issues such as nationality, ethnicity, culture and religion.

Being in a M-R relationship or having a M-R grandchild does not provide the couples and their extended family members with any option but to resolve possible racist mindsets and stereotypes. This observation was also made by a number of authors such as Johnson and Warren (1994), Rosenblatt, *et al.* (1995), and Yancey and Yancey (2002). This is a challenge because other members of society might not understand or accept the existence of these relationships.

As was the conclusion in the works of Spears, *et al.* (1997); Tajfel (1981) and Taylor and Brown (1988), it was evident that social comparison and categorisation are inevitable social processes, leading to a stratified society, wherein members from different social groups either blame or justify their respective social positions. The choice made by some of the participants of this study to dissolve racial categories suggests the possibility of a united society. The reported social resistance and disapproval of M-R relationships, however, suggest that the environment is not yet completely conducive for a non-racial way of life in South Africa. This view also finds resonance in Kahn (2007). This will continue to pose a challenge to M-R couples, their offspring, as well as to the society at large. South Africa is definitely not where it was 20 years ago. We have made progress. It is hoped that this study will stimulate interest and further research in this field, leading to a greater understanding of the experiences and challenges of mixed-race couples and their children in the South African context.

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