The Lived Experience of Discrimination of White Women in Committed Interracial Relationships with Black Men

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Abstract

Adopting a descriptive phenomenological approach, this study explores the experiences of discrimination of white women in committed interracial relationships with black men within the South African context. Three white females in committed interracial relationships with black males were recruited and interviewed. Open-ended interviews were conducted in order to elicit rich and in-depth first-person descriptions of the participants' lived experiences of discrimination as a result of being in committed interracial relationships. The data analysis entailed a descriptive phenomenological content analysis and description. The results of this study suggest that white women in committed interracial relationships with black men experience discrimination in various contexts, where discrimination manifests as either a negative or a positive encounter; in addition, discrimination evokes various emotional responses and is coped with in either maladaptive or adaptive ways. Finally, the experience of discrimination, although personal, necessarily impacts on the interracial relationship. The nature and impact of discrimination experienced by white women in committed interracial relationships with black men is thus multi-layered and both an intra-personal and an inter-personal phenomenon.

Introduction

In South Africa, discrimination against interracial marriages has, historically, been both normative and legal. From a socio-political perspective, white men got the message that white women needed protection from involuntary intimacy with black men (Hyslop, 1995). Construed beliefs of this nature informed the *Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act* No. 55 of 1949 and the *Immorality Act* No. 23 of 1957, which banned interracial marriages and criminalised interracial sexual intercourse (Van der Merwe & Du Plessis, 2004). These laws were abolished in 1985 by the *Immorality and Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Amendment Act* No. 72 of 1985 (Van der Merwe & Du Plessis, 2004). Since the proclamation of this law, South African statistics indicate that, even though committed interracial relationships remain infrequent, there is a noticeable increase in these relationships (Amoateng, 2004; Jacobson, Amoateng, & Heaton, 2004). Nonetheless, same-race relationships remain the unwritten rule in South Africa, and interracial couples still face many difficulties (Ratele & Duncan, 2003). Research pertaining to interracial marriages in western countries such as the United States (Batson, Qian, & Lichter, 2006; Hibbler & Shinew, 2002; Schoen & Cheng, 2006), Australia (Ellinghaus, 2002) and Canada (Uskul, Lalonde, & Cheng, 2007) has been elaborate. However, Troy, Lewis-Smith, and Laurenceau (2006) and Killian (2001) indicate that the phenomenon of interracial marriages remains understudied. In South Africa, specifically, research investigating interracial marriages has been limited to date (Jacobson et al., 2004; Mojapelo-Batka, 2008).

Many of the studies conducted in first world countries have been quantitative in nature and investigated black-white interracial relationships in terms of societal attitudes towards interracial unions (Hudson & Hines-Hudson, 1999), the coping strategies of interracial couples (Foeman & Nance, 1999; Hill & Thomas, 2000), support or opposition from families and society (Zebroski, 1999), the experience of prejudice (Schafer, 2008), and marital satisfaction and relationship adjustment (Leslie & Letiecq, 2004; Lewandowski & Jackson, 2001). Qualitative studies of interracial relationships have explored leisure activities and familial and societal responses to the manifestation of committed interracial relationships (Hibbler & Shinew, 2002; Hill & Thomas, 2000; Rosenblatt, Karis, & Powell, 1995; Yancey, 2002). Qualitative research informed by the lived experiences of individuals in interracial relationships is scarce (Jacobson et al., 2004; Killian, 2001; Mojapelo-Batka, 2008). Research indicates a need to explore how intergroup phenomena, such as discrimination, impact on individuals in committed interracial relationships, and how the quality of such relationships is influenced (Lehmiller & Agnew, 2006; Schafer, 2008). Within the unique macro context of post-apartheid South Africa, research that explores social reactions that interracial couples experience is encouraged (Mojapelo-Batka, 2008). For the purposes of this paper, discrimination related to being in a committed interracial relationship is conceptualized as a micro-contextual manifestation of the macro-contextual variable of societal racism (Leslie & Letiecq, 2004).

White women who married black men used to be pathologised in South Africa (Jacobson et al., 2004). However, the increasing independence of women in recent times has permitted them to marry whom they choose (Root, 2001). From this perspective, Root views interracial marriage as a vehicle for examining the social structures that informed and shaped race and gender relations. The scarcity of qualitative research exploring the lived experiences of women in interracial marriages, and the anticipated value of understanding how the experience of discrimination impacts on psychological and relational health, were the impetus for the current study.

Theoretical Conceptualisations

Various theories have attempted to conceptualise the formation of interracial relationships. The Social-Status Exchange Theory (Merton, 1941, as cited in Kalmijn, 1998) and Assimilation Theory (Gordon, 1964) are relevant theories for this paper.

The Social Status-Exchange Theory (SSET) asserts that potential spouses are viewed in terms of their resources and possible personal gains in terms of socio-economic status, racial status and physical attractiveness (Jacobson et al., 2004; Kalmijn & Van Tubergen, 2006; McFadden & Moore, 2001). According to the SSET, a potential partner in an interracial relationship will consider the available resources of the other partner and engage in the interracial relationship based on the partner's ability to meet a resource need (Yancey & Lewis, 2009). Thus, interracial relationships between white women and black men were thought to occur when white women of low economic status exchanged their higher social position, by virtue of being white, for a higher socio-economic status and financial security, by marrying wealthy black men.

Gordon's Assimilation Theory suggests that black men marry white women because they are more comfortable within Western culture (Gordon, 1964). According to Gordon (as cited in Yancey & Lewis, 2009), a committed interracial relationship between partners who are, respectively, white and black constitutes an "amalgamation between members of the dominant and subordinate racial groups" (p. 30). Yancey and Lewis (2009) assert that interracial marriages can indicate increased tolerance and acceptance between members of different racial groups. Lehmiller and Agnew (2006), however, consider interracial marriages to be more generally marginalised than accepted.

Discrimination Experienced by Individuals in Interracial Relationships

Research has explored the degree and type of racism that interracial couples endure, and has also examined strategies individuals use to cope with discrimination against committed interracial relationships (Hill & Thomas, 2000; Killian, 2002; Yancey, 2007). Leslie and Letiecq (2004), for instance, indicate that, based on the particular country's history of racial privilege and disadvantage, the individual partners in black-white interracial marriages experience discrimination differently. In addition, Yancey (2007) concluded that racism is experienced more severely by black-white couples than by interracial couples comprising other ethnicities. Three major forms of discrimination have been identified as experienced by individuals in committed interracial relationships, these being heterogamous discrimination, indirect discrimination and internalised racism.

Heterogamous discrimination involves the unequal and deleterious treatment of individuals as a result of their being in committed interracial relationships. Heterogamous discrimination includes negative, ambivalent and even positive encounters (Yancey, 2007; Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2010). The propagation of anti-miscegenation laws is an example of negative heterogamous discrimination (Castelli, Tomelleri, &

Zogmaister, 2008). In contrast, positive heterogamous discrimination can take the form of patronising speech or special privileging of individuals in heterogamous relationships (Ruscher, 2001).

Indirect discrimination describes the secondary effect of discrimination against the stigmatised partner in an interracial relationship on the non-stigmatised partner in the relationship (Killian 2002; Leslie & Letiecq, 2004). A white partner may, for example, experience indirect discrimination in the form of associated stress due to incidences of discrimination experienced by the black partner (Killian 2002; Leslie & Letiecq, 2004).

Internalised racism refers to the process of systemic oppression whereby dominant and subordinate racial groups have, either consciously or unconsciously, respectively come to internalise the dominant societal discourse that elevates and privileges one racial group over another racial group (Watts-Jones, 2002). As a consequence, individuals tend to engage in either self-elevation or self-depreciation, depending on their social-group status. In the case of stigmatised and disadvantaged individuals, internalised racism creates expectations, anxieties and reactions which adversely affect their social functioning and psychological well-being (Ahmed, Mohammed, & Williams, 2007; Killian, 2002). Within the South African context, black people have historically been the victims of racism, and many individuals have internalised the racist ideology of apartheid (Finchilescu & De la Rey, 1991; Subreenduth, 2003). In the context of committed interracial relationships, internalised racism may thus result in a power differential where the white partner instinctively assumes a superior position, which may lead to relational difficulties.

Discrimination and its Impact on Individuals' Psychological and Physical Well-Being

The subjective experience of discrimination is significantly associated with psychological distress, psychopathology, health-compromising behaviours, and overall dissatisfaction with life (Paradies, 2006). Interracial couples' higher levels of psychological distress and unique relational difficulties have been widely identified by researchers (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006; Killian, 2001; Ratele & Duncan, 2003). Ahmed et al. (2007) and Brown (2008) point to a correlation between the experience of discrimination and higher levels of vulnerability to psychological and physical ailments, while Killian (2001) suggests that interracial couples endure major relational challenges due to disapproval of their relationship by significant others. Research investigating marital quality and levels of psychological distress in interracial couples indicates that white women in mixed marriages with black men experience elevated levels of psychological distress

and reduced marital happiness and stability when compared with white women in same race marriages (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006; Leslie & Letiecq, 2004). Williams, Gonzalez, Williams, Mohammed, Moomal, and Stein (2008) found that perceived racial discrimination was positively correlated with psychological distress and adversely affected mental health in South Africa.

Considering the challenge marginalization imposes on interracial marriages in the diverse South African context, and the deleterious impact of discrimination on individuals' psychological health, this study hopes to contribute to a richer understanding of the nature and impact of discrimination as experienced by white women in black-white interracial marriages.

Method

The present study was conducted within a qualitative framework, and sought to access the participants' experiences of discrimination as a consequence of their involvement in interracial relationships through in-depth, open-ended interviews, pursuing richly nuanced and authentic personal descriptions of each individual's life-world (McKenna, 1982; McLeod, 2001). The aim was to provide each participant with a voice (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002) and to describe the subjective meaning, actions and context of each participant (Popay, Rogers, & Williams, 1998). The tradition of phenomenology posits a "viable option for researchers who aspire to incorporate diverse voices in the research design in meaningful ways" (Orbe, 2000, p. 2), and Husserlian or descriptive phenomenology in particular is advocated when the aim is to gain insight "into the lived experience of diverse racial and ethnic group members" (Orbe, 2000, p. 1). Since the aim of this study was to gain insight into the lived experience of discrimination related to being in an interracial relationship, a Husserlian methodology was deemed appropriate, as opposed to other phenomenological approaches inspired by Heidegger, where explanation, construction and interpretation play a more prominent role (Giorgi, 1997). Husserlian phenomenology posits that "What matters is to describe the given as precisely and completely as possible; to describe and not to explain or analyze" (Kvale, 1983, p. 184). A descriptive phenomenological research methodology was thus applied in the present study.

Participants
Three white women who experienced discrimination as a consequence of being in committed interracial relationships with black men were sourced through convenience sampling to participate in the study (Polkinghorne, 1983). Participants were required to possess the vocabulary and language skills to adequately express their perceptions, feelings and

thoughts concerning their experience of the focal phenomenon (Stones, 1979; 1988). Only women aged between 28 and 60 years were invited to participate in the study, thus ensuring that the participants had all been raised during the Apartheid years, when racial segregation and the prohibition of interracial relationships were the norm in South Africa. For these women, engagement in a committed interracial relationship would supposedly have required more risk taking, resulting in a higher probability of experiencing discrimination (Sroufe, Cooper, & DeHart, 1992). Participants were also required to have been in a committed interracial relationship with a black man for more than two years. The first two years of a committed relationship are regarded as critical in respect of establishing the foundation of the relationship, and thus in determining future relational satisfaction or dissolution (Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001). The requirement that participants were to have been in a committed interracial relationship for more than two years also ensured that their descriptions of their personal experiences of discrimination were not provided during a period in which they were more likely to view their relationships in an exceedingly positive light (Davila, Karney, & Bradbury, 1999).

Procedure

The researcher approached trainee psychologists to request assistance in obtaining research participants. Contact details of possible research participants were provided and potential participants who met the research selection criteria were then invited via e-mail to participate in the study. Participants who were willing to participate were contacted telephonically in order to schedule a convenient date and time for an interview. An introduction to the study and a consent form were e-mailed to each participant prior to the interview in order to comply with the transparency requirements for informed consent (Todres, 2005).

Gathering of Data

Kelly (2006) suggests that open-ended, unstructured interviews be used to access in-depth descriptions of personal experiences. Accordingly, this was the method selected for the present study as most conducive to enabling the researcher to "actively enter the worlds of people and to render those worlds understandable from the standpoint of a theory that is grounded in the behaviours, languages, definitions, attitudes and feelings of those studied" (Schurink, 1998, p. 300). During the interview, the researcher adopted a facilitative stance which accorded with the aim of the phenomenological interview to clarify rather than direct the flow of the communication (Todres, 2005). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim into a written format, resulting in transcripts which served as the raw data for analysis.

Data Analysis

Inductive data analysis, which presupposes the emergence of themes and patterns from the data, was used (Janesick, 1994). This form of data analysis is in line with Husserl's phenomenological method, which endeavours to describe the phenomenon from the subjective perspective of the participant's life-world (Kvale, 1983). Seven steps were followed in an attempt to analyse and describe the life-worlds contextualizing the participants' lived experience of discrimination. These seven steps derive from a combination of various approaches to the analysis of descriptive phenomenological material (Colaizzi, 1973; Giorgi, 1971, 1975, 1997; McLeod, 2001; Stevick, 1971; Stones, 1979, 1988; Todres, 2005; Van Kaam, 1959; Willig, 2008).

The first step entailed the processes of reflecting and bracketing known as entering *epoché*. The researcher drew on De Rivera's (1981) conceptual encounter approach and engaged her personal experience of discrimination in a committed interracial relationship through reflection. This enabled her to develop a critical awareness in which she was able to identify, acknowledge, bracket and suspend her biases towards the research phenomenon both prior to and during the process of data collection and data analysis (Colaizzi, 1973; De Rivera, 2006; McLeod, 2001; Tesch, 1990).

The purpose of the second step was to gain "an intuitive and holistic grasp of the data" (Stones, 1988, p. 153), which process is necessary in order to make the data more intelligible (Moustakas, 1994; Todres, 2005). Obtaining a holistic sense of each interview transcript allowed the researcher to see the focal phenomenon as experienced in a specific context (Todres, 2005). Through multiple readings of each transcript, the researcher sought to immerse herself so as to become aware of the nuances and meanings communicated (Moustakas, 1994; Todres, 2005).

The third step involved identifying different units of meaning which emerged spontaneously from the data. The emerging Natural Meaning Units (NMUs) were differentiated from each other, and similar NMUs were clustered together (Giorgi, 1997). This step allowed for the NMUs each to be understood within the broader context of the specific transcript, whilst relevant nuances contained in NMUs were also able to be accounted for (Todres, 2005).

Step four entailed transformation of the NMUs into psychological expressions of meaning by converting the particular participant's everyday language into psychological statements (Giorgi, 1997). Repetitive and irrelevant content was eliminated in the process (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Step five consisted of the identification of themes

inherent in the transformed meaning units. Primary and secondary themes were identified and their interrelationship was highlighted. The primary and secondary themes were examined in light of the research question, and redundant or irrelevant themes were eliminated. The inter-thematic relationships served to reflect each individual participant's experience of discrimination and were captured in three intra-individual analyses. A characteristic means of phenomenological data analysis employed by the researcher was imaginative variation, in which she sought to establish the foundational essences of the lived experience of the phenomenon in question (Kruger, 1979; Polkinghorne, 1989). Imaginative variation required a sensitive reading of the transcript, while verifying the importance and relevance of meaning units against the questions: "What is truly being described in this meaning unit?" and "What is absolutely essential to understand the psychological dynamic operating here?" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 5). If the elimination of a specific theme or characteristic changed the nature of the experience described such that it was no longer definable as discrimination, then this characteristic was deemed to form part of the essential structure of discrimination (Kruger, 1979).

Step six entailed establishing the general structure of the phenomenon through inter-individual analysis. In this step, commonalities and invariant themes among all the transcripts were identified, and interconnected concepts were synthesised to produce an inter-individual analysis. The inter-individual analysis comprises the essential elements of discrimination as experienced by white women in committed interracial relationships with black men (Dey, 1993; Stones, 1988).

The final step of the data analysis process required the researcher to conduct a literature survey in order to evaluate the significance of the findings of the present study in light of existing research findings in the field.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Higher Degrees Ethics Committee of the University of Johannesburg. Participants were provided with a written overview of the study prior to participation and requested to sign a consent form in which the research procedure, the right to confidentiality, assurance of anonymity, and the voluntary nature of participation in the study, were outlined. Anonymity was ensured in that participants' identifying details were eliminated or changed. Information was kept confidential by storing all data files and transcribed interviews in password protected format on the researcher's own computer. Participants' biographical information was also shredded after completion of the study.

Research Findings

The experience of discrimination of white women in committed interracial relationships with black men is multi-layered. Existing research findings portray the phenomenon as (1) manifested in various contexts, and experienced from various sources; (2) perceived to be situational, and as capable of being either negative or positive; (3) either direct or indirect. Research further suggests that discrimination evokes strong emotions and is coped with in various ways. The experience of discrimination, although an intra-personal process, necessarily impacts on the interracial relationship and is therefore also an inter-personal process.

Discrimination as a Contextual Experience within the Immediate Family

Both participants *A* and *C* experienced discrimination by their fathers. Participant *A*'s father overtly expressed his disapproval and feeling of betrayal because his daughter had chosen a black partner; however, he later engaged in a process of self-reflection and acceptance of the relationship. As a result, *A* re-established her relationship with her father despite his initial discrimination.

> **Participant *A*:** After, we [*A* and her father] had spoken [about *A*'s interracial relationship with her husband] *ja*. So *(long pause)*, um, and *(sigh)* his initial reaction ... all that, all that he could say to me was that he felt like he'd been betrayed … . And um, he [father] said even straight away that he knew that his attitude was wrong. And because, you know, faith is very important to him, he also knew, he said to me, ... he knows that God accepts my husband and the problem is with him.

In contrast, *C*'s father expressed his disappointment in her choice of a black partner in more subtle and ambiguous ways, and withdrew from her emotionally.

> **Participant *C*:** I mean, I remember when I told my father … when we got engaged and I told my father … *(looking to the side, hand gesturing)* what were his words? Besides saying, "Don't give the ring back"? Um *(laughing)* um *(long pause)*, something like … um, "Oh I'd really hoped you would find someone who'd look after you!" So the implication is that he [*C*'s black partner] wouldn't really be able to do that … . I think in a way it's [*C*'s engagement to her black partner] put a little bit of distance between us. Um, you know, and probably to do with that stepping back and saying, "Get on with whatever you think is best". But um, *ja*, I have felt it [*C*'s engagement to her black partner] has created somewhat of a distance.

Yancey and Lewis (2009) suggest that white family members are generally not supportive of black-white interracial relationships, and that white fathers' reactions to their daughters' interracial relationships with black men are more extreme than those of white mothers (Romano, 2003).

Discrimination as a Contextual Experience within the Extended Family

Various researchers indicate that familial opposition and subsequent rejection of interracial relationships manifest in subtle ways (McConahay, 1986; Swim, Akin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995; Yancey & Lewis, 2009). Participants indicated that they experienced subtle discrimination from members of the extended family manifesting as exclusion and favouritism.

Participant *A*'s family excluded her and her black husband from important family events and ignored them at family functions when they were invited. This is in line with research findings suggesting that white family members often respond to interracial relationships by threatening ostracism and alienation (Porterfield, 1978; Stember as cited in Lewis, Yancey & Bletzer, 1997).

> **Participant A:** Um, but you know *ja*, it took a, quite a long time for them to start just open their hearts to us. And because my, the eldest uncle had been so, um, vehemently against the whole thing [interracial relationship], um, he, he wouldn't speak to my husband at functions and he would deliberately, would ... sort of ignore my husband.

B indicated that her in-laws discriminated against her by excluding her from conversations by means of communicating in their home language, which she could not understand.

> **Participant B:** I met his [black husband's] folks and they all speak perfect English, but there was one like family gathering at his uncle's where they [*B*'s parents-in-law] just spoke Zulu. Which was like kind of, you know … very excluding …..... you know, like being in a family situation where you don't understand what's going on. ... That's difficult. My husband was very angry … my husband was very angry after that.

Research findings pertaining to black families' approval or rejection of committed interracial relationships are ambiguous. While some findings suggest that black families are more tolerant of committed interracial relationships than are white families (Yancey & Lewis, 2009), other findings suggest that this is not the case (Amoateng, 2004; Baars, 2009; Childs, 2005a). South African statistics suggest that black communities are less tolerant of interracial relationships than are other racial groups (Amoateng, 2004). Baars (2009) and Childs (2005a) indicate that black families, and in particular black women, have become more disapproving of interracial relationships than was apparent in the past.

Participant *C* indicated that she had experienced discrimination from her family-in-law in terms of being singled out for favouritism. This corresponds with literature suggesting that some black family members seem to tolerate and even favour interracial relationships (Romano, 2003).

> **Participant C:** And then from his [*C*'s black partner] side, it's a different form of, of um *(long pause)*, prejudice. It's the kind of opposite [type of discrimination]. It's like, "Oh my God," you know, "Here's this white woman!" and, you know, "This is better than a black woman" for, for, for certain reasons. … So there's a kind of a ... a being elevated to a slightly, um *(long pause)* different level of, of um *(long pause),* I don't know *(playful)* – status or … position, or somehow being seen as um a person who ... will ... open more doors or provide more opportunities, or provide access to new paths somehow or other *(soft tone)*. … Um … and I mean it is a sort of positive form of discrimination, but it's the same kind of stuff really that operates.

Discrimination as a Contextual Experience within Society

According to Root (2001), heterogamy, by its nature, naturally begets social ostracism and discrimination due to its defiance of the social norms and values that sanction homogamy. The participants in the present study experienced direct societal discrimination in the form of public staring and either derogatory or patronizing commentary, and indirect societal discrimination in the form of the discriminatory attitudes, expectations and practices their partners experienced in the workplace. Societal discrimination against interracial relationships was experienced by participants *A* and *C* in the form of public staring. Various authors have commented on the prevalence of subtle prejudices in society, with public staring an example of restrained acts of discrimination against individuals in interracial relationships (Childs, 2005b; Root, 2001; Yancey, 2002).

> **Participant A:** Some days you don't even notice people are staring at you because they just do *(laughing)*. And then some days *(laughing)* you feel like … a friend of ours who's also in a mixed relationship, in a mixed marriage, he says, like, sometimes [one wants to ask], ''Do you want to take a

(laughing) photo? And then you can show all the people you know *(laughing, illustrating with hand movements showing a photograph to someone)*!'' You know. ''And you can stare at it all day long … !'' *(Laughing)*

Participant C: From a society level, you know, shopping centres and movies and that kind of thing, people do [stare], depending on where you are ... as, well, it's less of an issue in bigger cities ... than in smaller towns, um, generally speaking.

Another form of societal discrimination is taunting comments from members of the public, as was experienced by participants **A** and **B**. **A** overheard derogatory comments made in public, while **B** was subjected to patronising remarks. Ruscher (2001) and Yancey (2002) indicate that taunting comments are typical forms of societal discrimination.

Participant A: When she [a stranger in a shopping centre] walked past us she just went, "*Ag*, sies *(expressing disgust; dramatic facial expression)*". And so it was that sort of disgust, you know.

Participant B: You know and if ... nobody ever kind of insulted ... in fact most people said, "Oh, that's [referring to **B** and her black husband] so cute *(hand gestures)*" or, you know, they ... it's very patronising *(laughing)* in a way, you know *(laughing)*.

Finally, **A** and **B** both reported experiencing indirect societal discrimination due to racial prejudice and discrimination directed towards their husbands at their places of work.

Participant A: And you know, my husband has said very often, I think, for him he just always had to work that much harder for people to see him, you know … . [**A**'s husband experiences employers' process communication as] "Oh, you're black, you think you're going to walk in here and just get the position," or, you know, "You're going to be, you think you deserve something more." Whatever people's perceptions are of a particular race, he has to continually overcome … .

Participant B: It [**B**'s husband being considered on the basis of his race rather than his qualifications] makes me very angry *(angry facial expression)*. 'Cause I, I just, *ja*, I feel very angry, that he's not seen as a *(long pause)* ... you know, if he were white, he'd be seen as the qualified person that he is. But

because he's black he's just seen [as], you know, "Okay, we can have him, 'cause, you know, he's got the qualification". But, you know, the glass-ceiling *(long pause)* kind of applies.

Other research findings indicate that experiences of discrimination by the stigmatised individual in a committed interracial relationship impact on the non-stigmatised individual as a result of their relationship (Killian, 2002; Leslie & Letiecq, 2004).

Emotional Pain and Anger as Key Emotional Responses to the Experience of Discrimination
The subjective experience of discrimination is significantly associated with psychological distress (Paradies, 2006; Williams et al., 2008). According to Romano (2003), "choosing a partner of another race in the face of family opposition remains one of the most emotionally wrenching issues of marrying interracially" (p. 271). The present study identified emotional pain and anger as the most salient emotional responses to perceived experiences of discrimination.

Both participants **A** and **B** experienced emotional pain in response to their experiences of discrimination. **A** experienced emotional pain due to her family's lack of enthusiasm regarding her committed relationship with a black man. **B** felt emotional pain as a result of being excluded by her family-in-law's refusal to speak English in her presence.

Participant A: For a few months, well, for ... I suppose it were more weeks than months that were very difficult *(widened eyes)*. Because I felt that we [**A** and her black boyfriend] weren't doing anything morally wrong and yet we were getting this [disappointing] reaction [from family members] and it was in my own home and it [discrimination] was very difficult, because most of the time you are very excited 'bout a new relationship and whatever *(sadness)* … . And I, like, for me that [**A**'s family's discrimination] was very hurtful, and what was even more hurtful is that his family were so loving … . There were instances where, you know, people said very hurtful things and it was, it was difficult *(said softly)*, very difficult not to retaliate in the heat of the moment.

Participant B: ... to my face they've always been ... okay *(doubtful facial expression)*? Um, except I remember ... there was one like family gathering at his uncle's where they [**B**'s parent-in-law] just spoke Zulu. Which was like kind of, you know … very excluding … but ... you know ... like being in a family

situation where you don't understand what's going on. That's difficult.

Participants *B* and *C* both felt anger in response to their experiences of discrimination. Killian (2003) suggests that discrimination, and in particular public staring and derogatory comments made by members of the public, evoke anger as an emotional response on the part of stigmatised individuals. *B* indicated that she felt angry when the receptionist at a holiday resort made a racist comment; she also felt angry when she indirectly experienced discrimination as a result of her husband being racially discriminated against in the workplace.

> **Participant *B*:** So we [*B* and her white Swiss male friend] went in there and she [the receptionist] said, "Oh thank goodness, *(sigh)* we don't have any black people this weekend!" [*B*'s black husband was waiting in the car]. I'm like *(angry facial expression)*, "Pardon *(laughing)*?" *Ja*, so, those kinds of things happen occasionally … . It [*B*'s husband being considered for his race rather than his qualifications] makes me very angry *(angry facial expression)*. 'Cause I, I just, *ja*, I feel very angry, that he's not seen as a *(long pause)*, you know, if he were white, he'd be seen as the qualified person that he is. But because he's black he's just seen [as], you know, "Okay, we can have him, 'cause you know, he's got the qualification". But you know, the glass-ceiling *(long pause)* kind of applies.

C was angry at herself for choosing to invest in a committed interracial relationship where prejudicial attitudes have a significant impact on her existence and the quality of her relationship.

> **Participant *C*:** You know *(long pause)*, um ... sometimes I sort of berate myself for choosing such a complicated situation, you know. Um, so sometimes I sort of think, "Ag, you know, God why didn't I make things easier for myself? Why have I made life so complicated?" … You know, discrimination, where I catch myself thinking along similar kinds of things of, "Ah, God, come on, why can't you do this?" Or, you know, "If, if you [partner] had been white this would have been easier …".

Yzerbyt and Demoulin (2010) reason that, when the experience of antagonism is mediated by racial prejudice or discrimination, the resulting emotional response is one of anger and distrust – which emotions are not provoked when the experience of antagonism is independent of race-related attitudes.

Maladaptive Coping Strategies Pertaining to Discrimination: Avoidance

All three participants made use of avoidance in an attempt to cope with racial discrimination. *A* coped with discrimination by avoiding disclosing incidences of discrimination to her husband in an attempt to protect him from the psychological impact thereof.

> **Participant *A*:** And then we did it [avoiding disclosing incidences of discrimination] with each other, where as individuals we would not share with the other person what was going on, or what we'd heard [discriminatory statements about the interracial relationship between *A* and her husband] or *(expressive hand movements)* … you know, whatever the case may be.

A's use of avoidance accords with research findings indicating that interracial couples avoid sharing their discriminatory experiences with each other in order to protect their partners from experiencing indirect discrimination (Killian, 2003).

B indicated that she and her husband avoided certain geographical areas in South Africa, as well as social settings that are predominantly white, in order to limit their exposure to possible discrimination. Killian (2003) confirms that interracial couples cope with discrimination by avoiding places that they perceive to be high-risk areas for discrimination. This coping strategy has the adverse effect of leading to restricted leisure activities and travelling opportunities for interracial couples (Hibbler & Shinew, 2002).

> **Participant *B*:** There are places we avoid, like deep Afrikaans places we don't go, we just don't go there. We don't stop, we drive through … . Like there's some places we'd go to and we, and we'd go, "Uh uh, no *(shaking head)*." You know it's just white, white, white. So, *ja*, sometimes we feel the vibes. I mean *(long pause)*, you don't want to go … we don't confront people.

C avoids dealing with prejudice and discrimination within her relationship by living separately from her partner. Living separately enables her to avoid the emotional impact of discrimination.

> **Participant *C*:** I think there's a lot of avoidance going on currently, which is made possible by living in different places … . Um, so you can continue on quite a functional level with a phone call or two a day and not confront things *(smiling)*. But, um *(long pause)* ja *(serious facial expression)*, I think in the longer term scenario, you're not … it's more avoidance kind of behaviour than …

than *(long pause)* really looking at what the issues are and confronting them *(softly and tentatively)* … . And then, um ... I think it makes me also *(long pause)*, sometimes ... avoid certain kinds of difficulties in the relationship.

Killian (2003) suggests that interracial couples avoid discussion of a race related matter because of its significance in and implication for the relationship.

Adaptive Coping Strategies: Self-Awareness, Positive Attitude, and Faith

Dupont and Leyens (as cited in Yzerbyt & Demoulin, 2010) suggest that people cope with discrimination by minimising their awareness of it and denying their experiences of discrimination. This helps them to maintain a positive sense of self and the illusion of control over their lives. This stands in contrast to the experience of some of the participants in the present study, who coped with experiences of discrimination through a process of self-reflection and the pursuit of increased self-awareness. Participant *A* made use of introspection into her own prejudices as a way of coping with experiences of discrimination.

> **Participant A:** Um, *ja* I think, I think they [people who discriminate against you] challenge you in that they bring [out] what you, what kind of prejudices you have as well *(long pause)*. Um, some of the comments we've got, the negative comments from strangers have been mostly *(trembling voice)* from Afrikaans people. So that makes *(trembling voice)* me feel like, you know, like I, I come out with, I know things that are prejudices within me. So that's something, you know, you've got to work on ... in yourself.

C displayed self-awareness pertaining to her own internal racial prejudice against her black partner. She indicated that she had sought professional help from a psychologist to assist her with the process of negotiating differences within her relationship with her black partner, and her experience of internal and intra-relational prejudice and discrimination.

> **Participant C:** And I … I have … I was um, ah, seeing a psychologist *(standing up to close the door)*. But he's a white male and he didn't really get a grip on it [internal racial prejudice]. You know, he didn't have ... really the, the consciousness to understand what I'm [experiencing] … . He was brilliant in many other ways, but not really able to deal with that [internal racial prejudice].

In addition to self-awareness, participants identified adopting a positive attitude as another adaptive coping strategy in dealing with discrimination. Participant *A* described how she and her husband adopted an optimistic stance, hoping and believing that her family will accept their relationship in due course and that reconciliation will eventually occur. Foeman and Nance (2002) describe this coping strategy as "turning to each other" or "framing" (p. 246). The term "framing" refers to a process in which the couple work together to discover an adaptive coping strategy in dealing with discrimination.

> **Participant A:** So, we [*A* and her husband] sort of worked from the point of ''One day we are all going to be reconciled'' and we don't want to feel that we have all these things *(hand movements)* to apologise for.

B described making light of people's questions about her multiracial family and adopting a positive attitude when encountering patronising remarks.

> **Participant B:** Ah, I'd just be as cheerful as possible [when being asked about my relation to my children], you know, just say, "*Ja*, these are my kids. My husband's black *(nonchalant tone of voice)*."

The last coping strategy identified among participants was their faith. Childs (2005b) and Killian (2003) indicate that interracial couples cope with prejudice and discrimination by minimising their racial differences and focusing instead on similarities, such as a shared belief system. Religion can play an important role in a committed interracial relationship, as it helps to ground the relationship and thereby increases the confidence of partners. Religion thus serves as a protective defence against the adverse psychological effects of discrimination (Killian, 2003). Participants *A* and *B* both expressed the belief that their relationships were orchestrated and sanctioned by God. In addition, they both indicated that their faith in God helped them to cope with discrimination.

> **Participant A:** It was our faith that's been so much of what's kept everything *(long pause)* stable, you know.

> **Participant B:** So when times are tough, you can always go back to that [faith in God]. You know that it's not just the two of us standing by ourselves. You know we're not protected; I mean bad things happen to everybody. You know, we just feel that we're rooted together. And there, there's something more than just me and him. You know what I'm saying? God is far greater than we are. If He thinks it's right, then it must be right.

The Impact of Discrimination on the Quality of the Committed Interracial Relationship

Discrimination may impact in either a negative or a positive manner on the quality of a committed interracial relationship. The majority of participants experienced discrimination to eventually result in increased commitment and closeness. Initially, *A* and her partner had experienced a breakdown in their communication because of not disclosing incidences of discrimination to each other. After realising this, they were able to successfully discuss and deal with experiences of discrimination and consequently enjoyed a sense of increased unity/closeness and relationship satisfaction. *A*'s experience of finding constructive ways of dealing with discriminatory experiences within her interracial relationship is in line with research findings (Foeman & Nance, 2002).

> **Participant *A*:** Because it [withholding experiences of discrimination from each other] doesn't help anything; but it [the experience of discrimination] still affects your relationship, even though it's indirectly ... . So the way for us to do it [dealing with discrimination] was to communicate, ''This is what I'd heard, so and so said'', um, and get it out in the open and then be able to fight it [discrimination] together ... . And more in a way of just building each other up, 'cause sometimes you can handle it [discrimination] and the other person can't … and you know, vice versa. And more as just trying to build each other up [rather] than, you know, attack anyone else.

B and her husband also enjoyed increased closeness as a result of the experience of discrimination.

> **Participant *B*:** I think it [discrimination experienced from family members] kind of made it [*B*'s relationship with her husband] stronger initially.

B's experience of increased commitment and greater closeness to her husband as a consequence of their experience of discrimination reflects Lehmiller and Agnew's (2006) finding that suggests that stigmatised couples compensate for lower levels of investment with higher levels of commitment. Leslie and Letiecq (2004) also indicate that discrimination may lead to "increased bonding and efforts to present a 'united front'…" (p. 562).

In summary, white women in committed interracial relationships with black men experience discrimination in various contexts and from various sources. They experience discrimination from immediate and extended family members by being ostracised and excluded. Societal discrimination is experienced in the form of public staring, taunting comments and discrimination against their partners at work. The experience of discrimination evokes mainly negative emotions, such as the pain of rejection and anger. The participants coped with rejection in either adaptive or maladaptive ways. Maladaptive coping entails mainly avoidance of talking about instances of discrimination experienced, which can lead to estrangement in the interracial relationship. Adaptive coping entails self-awareness of their own discriminatory attitudes and their impact on the relationship, adopting a positive attitude, and faith. Within interracial relationships, experiences of discrimination may have positive consequences such as increased commitment and closeness.

Limitations and Recommendations

Certain shortcomings of the present study could be addressed in future research. The sample of the study was homogenous, all the participants being white, English-speaking women of similar socio-economic status. Only experiences of discrimination among white females were investigated, and the experience of discrimination by the men in these relationships was not included. Future research could thus explore experiences of discrimination from the perspectives of black women, black men or white men in black-white interracial relationships. Only individuals in black-white relationships were interviewed in the present research. The experiences of discrimination by individuals in relationships of other interracial groupings were thus not explored. Given the diverse nature of the South African context, future studies could address experiences of discrimination among individuals in relationships involving different interracial groupings. An outlier concept that emerged from this study would be that of internalised racism and its relationship to experiences of racial prejudice and discrimination within committed interracial relationships. Further research pertaining to this concept may be particularly relevant within the South African context. Finally, white families often express their concern regarding interracial relationships by emphasising that biracial children will be negatively affected by their parents' decision to form a committed interracial relationship (Childs, 2005b). Future studies could investigate the discriminatory experiences of biracial children within the South African context.

Implications of the Study

The findings of the current study can be applied in various settings. These settings include the training of psychologists and psychotherapists; the provision of psychotherapy for persons in interracial relationships; and providing counselling and psycho-education for family members of the interracial couple. Insofar as

the research provided in-depth descriptions of the experiences of discrimination of women in committed interracial relationships, it may contribute to a richer understanding among psychotherapists of the life-world of white women in committed interracial relationships with black men. The findings emphasise the need for South African psychologists and psychotherapists to be trained to be culturally competent and racially sensitive in providing psychological services to a diverse population.

This study indicated the need among individuals in committed interracial relationships to receive psychotherapy. Psychotherapeutic aims for persons in committed interracial relationships may include facilitating the resolution of racial identity challenges, which may aid individuals to experience positive relationship quality and satisfaction. For interracial couples, psychotherapeutic aims may include an exploration of diverse gender roles, racial stereotypes, cultural and background differences, personality, and prejudicial attitudes. In addition, interracial couples may need assistance in negotiating relational conflict. Social group identification serves as a buffer against the adverse effects of experienced prejudice and discrimination. Couples could be supported in both acknowledging and appreciating the diversity inherent in their relationship, and assisted in establishing opportunities for open dialogue and the creation of cultural fusions and traditions that are unique to the specific couple. Family therapy may also assist both immediate and extended families to deal adaptively with the psychological experience of having a family member engaged in a heterogamous relationship.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reflect the multi-layered nature of discrimination as experienced by white women in the context of committed interracial relationships with black men. Discrimination has been described as being either directly or indirectly experienced in various contexts, and as manifesting in either negative or positive encounters. The study revealed that white women in committed interracial relationships with black men experience negative emotional reactions when faced with discrimination, and deal with discrimination in either dysfunctional or functional ways. Finally, although discrimination is experienced individually by women in committed interracial relationships, it is essentially relational and impacts on the committed interracial relationship. From this perspective, the findings of this study could be useful for psychologists working with individuals in interracial relationships or with interracial couples. As indicated by one of the participants in the study, (some) psychologists may be ill equipped to execute constructive interventions for individuals involved in interracial relationships:

> **Participant *C*:** And I … I have … I was um, ah, seeing a psychologist (*standing up to close the door)*. But he's a white male and he didn't really get a grip on it [internal racial prejudice]. You know, he didn't have … really the, the consciousness to understand what I'm [experiencing] … .

It is hoped that the research findings will contribute to the limited available research on lived experiences of individuals in committed interracial relationships in South Africa, so as to enable psychologists to execute more constructive interventions. The researchers also hope that the study may contribute towards enhancing the quality of psychotherapy and counselling training in South Africa such that it becomes more culturally sensitive and competent in identifying and addressing the diverse needs of individuals in interracial relationships in a country where the incidence of interracial relationships may continue to increase.

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