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Will Interracial Couples Ever Be Accepted in American Society?

by Cara Raiman

(Honors English 103)

The Assignment: Write a 10-page descriptive synthesis research essay on an American Culture issue of your choice. Include: a research question, working annotated bibliography of 20 sources that contain a combination of primary source articles from the COD Library databases; primary source books; specialized reference works; WWW for current and popular culture information and statistics only; one general reference work; one personal interview; a notebook of your knowledge, ideas, questions, and analyses on the topic; a working thesis statement and sentence outline; ten open-ended interview questions; source note cards; and an MLA-formatted Works Cited page.

As they walked down the street, the interracial couples were sneered at, sworn at, and spat on. They stared straight at the ground as they walked, for fear of making eye contact with people who did not approve of their relationship. They received threatening phone calls, and in the middle of the night, they might have seen a cross burning on their front lawn, or have awakened to bricks crashing through their windows. Interracial couples dealt with many trying situations in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Even though many interracial couples today do not experience such severe punishments from society as they did fifty years ago, they still know they are viewed negatively by some Americans. Although American society's attitudes about interracial relationships have softened over the last fifty years, interracial couples still comment on their struggle to be accepted in today's world.

Fifty years ago, many Americans strongly disapproved of interracial relationships, and especially in the South, they clearly voiced their opinions about them. Mark Mathabane, author of Christopher Award winning book, Kaffir Boy, and his wife Gail Mathabane, comment on their interracial relationship and marriage in the book, Love in Black and White: The Triumph of Love Over Prejudice and Taboo. Mathabane discusses how the Ku Klux Klan terrorized interracial couples in the South by burning wooden crosses in their yards, making obscene phone calls, and holding rallies in vacant lots, actions that would frighten most people (171). Renee C. Romano, assistant Professor of History and African American Studies at Wesleyan University and author of the book, Race Mixing: Black-White Marriage in Postwar America, observes mixed couples sixty years after World War II. Romano discusses that some Americans believed that because God "created" separate races, people were sinful if they engaged in interracial relationships (45). In the late 1800s, interracial relationships began forming due to slavery in the United States. Robert P. McNamara, Maria Tempenis and Beth Walton, authors of the book, Crossing the Line: Interracial Couples in the South, explore interracial marriages, particularly in South Carolina, and the isolation the couples face in their community because they have violated generations of traditions. They explain that interracial couples were considered beneficial for slave owners because any children produced from the couple would also become slaves (McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton 23). However, many people in the in the early 1800s South felt that children of interracial relationships were difficult to tell apart from black people (McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton 25). Because most, if not all, blacks had a lower status in society during most of the 1800s, many whites felt that looking like blacks was extremely insulting (McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton 25). McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton note that as the 1800s progressed, to be black meant to be a slave, and many slave owners began forbidding interracial relationships, even though it was beneficial for them (23). Because whites dominated most decisions in American society from the late 1790s to 1865, all Southern states prohibited marriages between blacks and whites (McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton 25). According to Romano, interracial marriages in the 1950s were just as disturbing to many Americans as interracial marriages were in the

1860s (45). She explains that the divorce rate among interracial couples in the 1950s was significantly higher than couples with both partners of the same race (138). She explains that the greater risk of divorce among interracial relationships in the 1950s was because of the pressure and objection society showed towards mixed couples (138). The South was a very difficult place for interracial couples during the 1800s. Because American society let their prejudices form their views about interracial relationships, most mixed couples faced many roadblocks that were difficult for them to overcome.

Because many Americans have yet to change their views about interracial relationships, the lives of most mixed couples are negatively affected even today. Many family members who voice their negative opinions about interracial relationships to the mixed couples can have a major impact on the couples' decisions. For many generations, parents have had an extremely difficult time accepting that their children were in an interracial relationship. In her book, Of Many Colors, Peggy Gillespie, co-director of Family Diversity Projects, Inc. in Amherst, Massachusetts, comments on interracial families in America and the stories they have told describing the emotions and struggles they face in multiracial families. In her interview with Gillespie, Epi Bodhi, a white female, states that when she announced her plans to marry Charlie, an African American male, her mother did not accept (17). However, her father pointed out her marriage was her own affair, not theirs (Gillespie 17). Mathabane also admits that his friends told him not to mention publicly that his wife was white because people might not accept his interracial relationship, and he could possibly ruin his career as a famous author (193). However, Mathabane refutes his friends' advice and states that his wife fell in love with him when he was poor, not famous. While many black women continued to reject him, he felt that if he did not reveal his wife's race, he was being unfair to her because her reasons for loving him ran deeper than his money or his fame (Mathabane 193).

Many children of interracial relationships must face their peers who constantly ask them why they are different. Paul C. Rosenblatt, Terri A. Karis, and Richard D. Powell, educators and authors of the book, Multiracial Couples: Black and White Voices, explore twenty-one interracial relationships and the contradicting support they receive from their family, friends and community. They point out that biracial children feel the need to pick only one race because of immense peer pressure (Rosenblatt, Karin, and Powell 213). Rosenblatt, Karin, and Powell also confirm that most biracial children will feel they need to choose one race over the other by the time they reach junior high or high school (213). In an interview with Charles* and Marie Jones* on May 1, 2004, they discussed the pros and cons they experienced in their interracial marriage. Marie Jones*, a black female, stated that her biggest concern about their relationship was their children. They have a two-year-old daughter and recently welcomed a baby boy into the world. Even though their children are very young, Marie* is worried about sending them to school to face peers and teachers who may not accept interracial relationships. Before they had children, the Jones discussed that their children might encounter problems because they were mixed. They understood that they might need to explain many situations to their children at a young age. However, they felt that any battle their children would encounter could only make them stronger human beings. They understood that as most children grow older, their peers' influence would increase with the need to fit in and they were ready to address that problem with their children when the time came. Couples' decisions to have children can be affected because of the situations their children may face. However, not only do the negative attitudes of the interracial couples' family's impact the couples' decisions, but the public's negative opinions also affect mixed couples.

Adam Goodheart, a member of the C.V. Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience at Washington College, discusses in his article "Change of Heart," from the American Association of Retired Persons, that whites, blacks and Hispanics have a new acceptance of interracial relationships. Although many Americans believe the relationship between blacks and whites in American society has increased dramatically over the years, Americans continue to face many disappointing divisions between the two races (Goodheart 43). In her book, Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk About Race and Identity, Lise Funderburg, journalist for *Mirabella* and *New York Newsday*, comments on views across the United States of many adults who come from interracial families. Funderburg notes that occasional stares, a mumbled comment, or being disowned from the family are problems few interracial couples can

avoid (25). Rosenblatt, Karin, and Powell also observe that many interracial couples would like to go shopping or for walks, but feel “mistreated” in public with constant stares and comments (31). Many interracial couples must pay closer attention to what they do because they are constantly being watched when they are in public (Rosenblatt, Karin, and Powell 32). According to Rosenblatt, Karin, and Powell, many interracial couples felt they were not given a chance to be seen as an ordinary couple because they were mixed (31). Charlie Bodhi, the black counterpart of his relationship, in his interview with Gillespie, acknowledges black females’ negative feelings about interracial relationships and the possible sources of those feelings (18). He understands why black women may feel he has “sold out” by marrying a woman of another race (Gillespie 18). He explains that African Americans have had to work together to be able to move forward in America, and by marrying a woman of a different race, he is “abandoning” his own race (Gillespie 18). However, Charlie Bodhi contradicts that statement by explaining that he can only love whom he wants and people should not define him based on those characteristics (Gillespie 18). Mark Mathabane’s wife, Gail, also admits that she was unaware of any pain her marriage to her husband might cause black women (200). She continues to explain that she believed whites would disapprove of their interracial relationship the most (Mathabane 200). Many interracial couples deal with difficulties on a daily basis because their skin tones do not match. Because they come from different racial backgrounds, society disapproves. They must battle their way through the obstacles society throws at them to lead a comfortable life in America.

And yet as time has progressed, more Americans have started to approve of interracial relationships. Some Americans have started to view them as a way to help control prejudice in the early twenty-first century. When discussing the differences between races in America, Goodheart states that progress has been made in two important areas over the years, including interracial relationships. The Gallup Poll, an organization that conducts surveys nationwide, surveyed Americans in November 2003 and found that about 70 percent of Americans believed marriage between blacks and whites was acceptable, up from just four percent in 1958 (Goodheart 44). Some Americans feel that an advantage of interracial relationships is that they can help American society overcome prejudice and ignorance (Rosenblatt, Karin, and Powell 225). According to Romano, interracial marriages could help impact American society in ways the Civil Rights Movement was not able to (287). Although there are only few positive differences in the ways Americans are viewing interracial relationships compared to fifty years ago, these differences are opening the door for better views towards interracial couples. As Americans move further away from slavery, many people are opening up to new possibilities.

Many family members are also starting to accept interracial relationships within their families. According to Goodheart, many Americans have recently stated that they would not have a problem if one of their own family members were to engage in an interracial relationship (44). Charles Jones* stated in his interview that his family and his wife’s family did not give them any trouble when they began dating. He expressed that their parents never spoke of the differing races. However, because their parents never commented on their different races, he explained that he and his wife were unsure if their parents did have any problems with their relationship, but were not vocal about the problems to help support them. Charles* stated that he was grateful their parents did not argue against their marriage because he did not want another obstacle to try and overcome. Marie Jones* supported her husband’s comments about the support they received from their families and added that her parents openly welcomed Charles* into her family. Along with the support interracial couples are now receiving from their families, mixed couples are also helping American society change its views by explaining the advantages of interracial relationships and how their lives have changed from them.

Interracial couples report that many areas of their lives are affected positively because of the interracial relationships they are engaged in. Interracial couples can experience many different scenarios and events that can help them grow emotionally and mentally that people with only one racial background might not experience. Rosenblatt, Karin, and Powell report that people in interracial relationships are exposed to more experiences and are often able to apply what they learn to help them grow (227). Interracial couples have noted that their children can also be affected positively from being biracial. Not only are the children’s lives affected, but the children can also influence those around them, including

their own parents. Romano states that biracial children can help conquer the division among races (287). Rosenblatt, Karin, and Powell also state that the biracial children of many interracial families they interviewed all lead typical lives (193). In her interview with Gillespie, Janet Obermann Ford believes that children raised in multicultural families are gifted in ways “single-race” children can never be (32). Rosenblatt, Karin, and Powell also state that biracial children have the advantage of learning “two worlds” whereas single race children may only learn their own (196). They explain that many parents of single race children hardly ever explain any benefits of other races because they think their race is the only race that matters (Rosenblatt, Karin, and Powell 196). Thus, many Americans are starting to understand that biracial children may have an advantage over single race children. Biracial children’s lives can be affected positively even though they are sometimes tormented by their peers. Interracial couples also encounter a lot of positive aspects being married interracially and many have learned how to ignore certain events or comments from the public.

Many interracial couples have also found ways to overcome society’s negative views towards them. Because America has mostly seen interracial relationships as negative, mixed couples have constantly had obstacles to conquer, making many of them wiser and stronger. Many interracial couples explain that many of the problems between them come from influences outside of the relationship, not from within (Rosenblatt, Karin, and Powell 34). Epi Bodhi states in her interview with Gillespie that about 90 percent of any arguments or problems she and her husband have had in their marriage have been because they were “different genders, not races” (17). Many single race couples may have similar arguments that mixed couples have, but they may believe that mixed couples’ arguments occur because of conflicting races, not genders (Gillespie 17). McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton point out that one of the most effective ways to overcome society’s actions towards interracial couples is for the couples to simply ignore the reactions society shows towards them (111). If both partners are strong enough emotionally to ignore outsiders’ feelings and views towards them, interracial couples find that coping with the problems they have becomes much easier (Rosenblatt, Karin, and Powell 34). Another problem interracial couples struggle with is determining which race to base their rituals on. Marsha Wiggins Frame, author of the article “For Better or Worse” from *The Christian Century*, studies how interracial couples have to make difficult decisions when dealing with religion, gender roles, money, sexuality, and child rearing. Frame notes that religious and family rituals are significant when interracial couples are trying to reconcile their differences (1). She points out that many interracial couples may find themselves forming new rituals in their relationships that draw from both cultures or from neither to help overcome that problem (Frame 1). Also, one of the hardest fears for interracial couples to overcome is the fear of physical harm the public fills their heads with (McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton 94). Interracial couples begin to think that they may be next and many couples become frightened (McNamara, Tempenis, and Walton 94). However, many interracial couples have a strong confidence in their love of one another in order to overcome the public’s negative outlook about interracial relationships.

As a twenty-first-century American, I cannot imagine what interracial couples faced fifty years ago. I have never had to deal with any negative reactions from the public when I am with my boyfriend, who is black. When I first met him, I never thought that our races would affect how American society would treat us. I have never received any stares or comments while we walk or shop. While the rest of my boyfriend’s family seems to be all right with our dating, his mother and brother have yet to accept his relationship with me, a white female. They have made comments about me to him, causing him stress he should not deserve. I hope that over time they do come to accept our relationship and understand how beneficial mixed relationships can be for society. The first time I realized that many people in society were still not accepting interracial couples occurred when my boyfriend refused to get out of the car in a mostly white town. I did not understand why he had a problem with getting out of the car, but he later explained to me that he would rather not put himself in a rough situation if he did not have to. As naïve as I was, I thought he was being ridiculous. However, I now understand that many people in our society may never accept two different races together as a couple. Although I know that one interracial couple cannot help American society to understand the benefits of mixed relationships, we can begin by showing what positive aspects can come from the relationship and pass that knowledge on. Prejudice and racism are

hard to live with in a society, but many interracial couples are helping to erase them.

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