

Social Acceptance and Relationship Satisfaction among Interracial Heterosexual Couples in Ottawa City, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Interracial couples are confronted by unique challenges that are exacerbated by social prejudice and the associated problems of access to social support systems, with implications on relationship satisfaction. This research explored the role of social acceptance on relationship satisfaction among interracial heterosexual couples in Ottawa City, Canada. The research specifically utilized an interpretive phenomenological research design. A sample size of 10 heterosexual interracial couples was selected through snowball sampling. A structured in-depth interview method of data collection was applied. Thematic data analysis techniques were used, data was presented using theme tables while data analysis and discussion was supported by verbatim excerpts. The findings revealed mixed experiences regarding social acceptance and rejection in interracial marriages. Thematic analysis identified two primary themes and six sub-themes. The first theme, Social Acceptance as a Marital Satisfaction Enhancer, included Family Acceptance and Positive Societal Stereotyping as sub-themes. The second theme, Interracial Marital Relationship Stigma as a Stress Factor, encompassed Overt Racial Prejudice, Self-Stigma, Societal Stigma, and Negative Stereotyping. It was concluded that the interaction between social acceptance and relationship satisfaction among interracial heterosexual couples is complex. It was thus recommended that therapeutic interventions strengthen self-agency of interracial couples. Future studies should be extended to rural areas.

Key words: Social Acceptance, Stigma, Relationship Satisfaction, Interracial Marriages, Heterosexual Couples

INTRODUCTION

Interracial marriage is a phenomenon that has characterized the evolution of humanity since antiquity (Shiyoka, 2019), with claims of interracial marriages being traced way back the 1st Century Asia (Kumar, 2021). The term race refers to an identity of a group of people who share a common natural skin and hair colour (Henderson, 2019). This means that colour is the main criteria that is used to associate one with a particular racial identity. Accordingly, Lengyell (2020) avers that race is a socially constructed concept since it is people who categorize individuals based on physical features, typically skin colour and type of hair, and generalize them as belonging to a particular racial background. Such categorizations have led to the grouping of the human race into Hispanic, White, Black, Arab, Asian and multiracial identities (Lykke & Rendall, 2018; Miles, 2018).

In Continental America, the United States (US) offer a rich menu of scholarship from which to make sense of the past, the present and the future of interracial coupling (Henderson, 2019; Kerney, 2021; McIntyre, 2018). Lewandowski (2021) recounts that prior to the 1960s, the proportion of interracial marriages in US was a paltry 0.4%. This was largely because interracial marriage was a punishable offence until the year 1967 when a monumental civil rights declaration was made that recognized interracial coupling following the case of Loving vs. Virginia (Henderson, 2019). Such laws were largely motivated by economic control as white people perceived that their economic resources were under threat of inheritance by black people through interracial coupling (Lewandowski, 2021). Thus, until then, racial segregation and intolerance characterized North America, which stifled intercultural socialization, often at the expense of racial minorities who were deprived of socioeconomic upward mobility (McIntyre, 2018).

The Loving vs Virginia case paved the way for the acceleration of racial tolerance and the blurring of racial boundaries in the US society (Kerney, 2021). Since the decriminalization of interracial marriages, the US has witnessed substantial increase in interracial couples (McIntyre, 2018). Today, the US is one of the countries posting record growth in interracial marital unions (Choi et al., 2022). At the turn of the 21st century, at least 5 million interracial couples were documented (Deitz, 2016). However, barely two decades later, this number has doubled to about 11 million (Kerney, 2021). Further, as high as 17% of new marital unions in the 21st century were interracial as compared to 1% in the 20th century (Henderson & Brantley, 2019). As of the year 2019, almost 1 in 5 (20%) of all newlywed couples had a partner from a different racial background (Lopez, 2022). In some states such as Honolulu, the percentage is as high as 42% (Kerney, 2021). Calnas et al. (2015) observe that among the interracial marriages, American whites coupling with Asians is the most common, with motivations varying from family orientation that makes Asians more attractive, to societal access that makes Americans more preferred.

Tran (2019) argues that modern day Americans are generally open to interracial coupling, with many either dating across ethno-racial lines or would not hesitate to start such relationships. However, according to Kerney (2021), racial prejudice still permeates much of North America despite the increased blurring of racial boundaries and the growth in racial diversity. For instance, interracial couples often experience backlash from the society as a significant population of Americans continue to object interracial marital unions, which expose couples to various forms of stigma and aggression from haters (Henderson & Brantley, 2019). These racial prejudices weigh on the marital health of interracial couples, aggravates their relationship quality (Lopez et al., 2022) and increase their risk of divorce as compared to mono-racial unions (Zhou, 2017).

The scenario in Canada in many ways mirrors the statistical trends in the US, especially from a historical perspective. Canada's past has been punctuated with racial discrimination; whereby, interracial couples did not enjoy the social acceptance that was accorded to monoracial marital unions in as much as it did not have blatant laws criminalizing interracial coupling (Ferrell, 2021). Canada witnessed a surge in interracial marriages in the last decade from 4% to 33.1% due to rapidly changing racial and cultural demographics (Lengyell, 2020). However, although Canada shares a long common border and other cultural similarities with the US, there are marked contextual differences that need to be put into perspective in theorizing relationship satisfaction of interracial couples. Among these is the ratio of interracial marital unions between Blacks and Whites, which is disproportionately higher in Canada as compared to the US, and the relatively small population of Blacks in Canada due to early abolition of slavery in the country (Ferrell, 2021).

The importance of relationship satisfaction in maintaining functional families is paramount, especially amidst increasing racial diversity and interracial marriages, particularly in metropolitan areas like Ottawa, Canada (Lengyell, 2020). Despite the proliferation of interracial unions, empirical evidence on the relationship quality of such couples, especially outside the United States, remains scanty (Dew, 2020; Miles, 2018). This research gap in Canada obscures the challenges faced by interracial marriages, contributing to misunderstandings and perpetuating outdated notions of lower relationship satisfaction in such unions (Kerney, 2021). Critiques of these outdated models suggest that they fail to capture the nuanced dynamics of interracial marriages, potentially undermining our understanding of their contribution to family functioning and societal wellbeing (Miles, 2018; Notice, 2019). Choi et al. (2022) further argue that overcoming racial hurdles may lead to unique marital trajectories beyond traditional models. Therefore, the present study explored social acceptance in relation to relationship satisfaction among interracial heterosexual couples in Ottawa City, Canada.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Deitz (2016), interracial couples experience unique challenges in building their relationship, potentially driven by their differing heritage, such as; differences in sex role expectations, work and leisure attitudes, emotional expression, family rituals and traditions, language barriers, conflicting child raising perspectives, conflict style differences, racial prejudices and social stigmatization, differences in religious practices, and level of involvement of the extended family. The is argument is supported by Calnas et al. (2015), who posited that interracial couples have a lower degree of relationship stability because of cultural dissimilarity, different interpersonal styles, varying values about marriage and family that calls for a high level

of marital adjustment. The challenges of interracial couples are exacerbated by social prejudice, and the associated problems of access to social support systems which further elevates marital distress (Choi et al., 2022; Henderson & Brantley, 2019; Miles, 2018). The resulting negative social pressures emanating from the external environment is likely to undermine relationship quality (Kerney, 2021). However, the empirical evidence barely captures the various nuances such as locus of control and other demographic characteristics that often come into play in relationship satisfaction (Namvaran et al., 2017).

The level of social acceptance can influence how interracial couples perceive and navigate their relationship dynamics, potentially impacting their overall satisfaction and happiness together. Osanami (2018) studied the attitude of Swedish nationals toward interracial marriages among whites and immigrants. This study was motivated by the continued emigration of non-white citizens into Sweden, which of late is making up a significant proportion of the Swedish population. The research was a mixed methods study involving 420 survey participants as well as 28 participant-interviewees indigenous Swedish citizens. Data collection was facilitated through the post office for one year from October 2008 to November 2009. Though the study acknowledged that interracial marriages were on the rise, the findings showed indigenous Swedish population preferred not to be married to non-white citizens. The study aimed to elucidate the attitudes that Swedes hold towards marrying individuals from different cultures, highlighting a conceptual gap in the existing research. This finding contradicts the broader narrative of growing acceptance and prevalence of interracial marriages documented in various regions, including North America, Asia, Africa, and South America (Henderson, 2019; Kumar, 2021).

Greif and Saviet (2020) interrogated the social acceptance of in-laws for interracial marital dyads. The study acknowledged that there were difficulties with integrating in-laws into American families. Now that Americans are increasingly embracing mixed-race marriages where children decide their own marital mates, the study sought to interrogate the impact of this in the typical American family. This was a mixed methods study that sampled 68 children-in-law in mixed-racial marriages through a convenience cross-sectional sampling technique. The study found that there was tension in multiracial marital relationships mainly caused by cultural differences such as language barriers. However, the study also noted the openness of some in-laws to learn a new culture, which made cultural differences fun rather than difficult. While the literature generally suggests an increasing acceptance of mixed-race marriages in American society (Kerney, 2021; Choi et al., 2022), Greif and Saviet's (2020) findings indicate that there are difficulties with integrating in-laws into American families, particularly in the context of mixed-race marriages. The study was conceptualized to investigate the attitude of in-laws towards interracial marriages which raises a conceptual gap. The study interviewed children born in mixed marriages which raises a contextual gap.

Csizmadia and Lopez (2019) did a study on the perceptions of American university students on inter-race marital relationships. The study was grounded on the Ecological Theory which suggests that college students' worldview is informed by their racial background as well as the college they attended. The study sampled 231 multi-racial college students aged between 18 to 24 years located in relatively liberal urban campuses having a fair mix of different races as well the relatively conservative rural, white-dominated rural campus. The study established those students from campuses composed of a fair mix of students from different racial backgrounds had a positive attitude towards inter-racial marital relationships. This means that social acceptance of interracial marital relationships increased with exposure to cultural diversity. Such societal acceptance of interracial relationships potentially facilitated the relationship satisfaction of heterosexual couples. The study aligns with Shiyoka (2019) who suggests that attitudes towards interracial unions are historically rooted. The study was conducted among university students which raises a contextual gap.

Irby-Shasanmi and Erving (2022) studied the negative social interactions interracial couples experience in their immediate families and what it portends to their relationship satisfaction and quality of life. The study was motivated by the significant increase in the number of Americans in interracial marriages. The study estimated that a significant number of people involved in such marriages did not enjoy the support of their families. Secondary data was collected from the National Survey of American Life (NSAL), the data being collected between 2001 and 2003. The study was restricted to 3,136 couples who had stayed in the marriage for at least 1 year, with 322 couples being in interracial marriages while the rest were in same-race marriages. The study

established that people in interracial marriages experienced stigma and discrimination from their immediate family members compared to those in same-race relationships. The study aligns with the existing literature on interracial marriages, particularly in highlighting the challenges faced by couples due to negative social interactions and stigma (Shiyoka, 2019; Lengyell, 2020). The study used secondary data, which raises a methodological gap.

Brown et al. (2019) investigated marital quality within interracial couples, with the aim to understand the challenges and vulnerabilities that interracial marriages may face, particularly in terms of marital equality and stability. Drawing on secondary data from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study, the research covered a three-year period from 1998 to 2000 and involved 4,898 participants. The study's findings indicated that, over time, the quality of relationships within both interracial marriages and same-race marriages experienced a decline. The research revealed that interracial couples reported higher marital satisfaction compared to couples of than interracial marriages. However, it also predicted a potential divergence in the marital paths of Hispanic and African couples, suggesting that they might be more likely to separate before reaching their eighth marriage anniversary. These results shed light on the complex dynamics within interracial marriages, with variations in satisfaction and potential challenges in marital longevity across different racial groups. It aligns with the understanding that race is a socially constructed concept, as discussed by Lengyell (2020).

Jibeen (2019) studied stress resulting from the clashing of different cultures in interracial relationships and the extent to which acculturation affects marital satisfaction. This was a quantitative study that was moderated by communication as well as gender role and involved Pakistani immigrants residing in Canada. The study was motivated by the clash in the culture of original Canadians and Canadians of Pakistani extraction. The Euro-Canadians practiced individualistic culture that treats women as equal partners to men in marital relationships while Canadians originating from Pakistan practiced a collectivist culture that is patriarchal, treating women as subordinate to men. The study used purposive sampling method to select 125 Canadian citizens originally from Pakistan aged between 25 years to 50 years. The study established that Pakistani immigrants struggled to adapt to Euro-Canadian culture and therefore negatively impacting marital satisfaction of the participants. Moreover, the study established that positive communication was directly correlated to stress-free marriages. The study is significant because it brings out the notion of value differences that underpinned the challenges that confronted interracial couples. The study also represents one of the few accounts of interracial couple studies that are of immediate relevance to the Canadian context. It underscores the importance of communication in mitigating stress and maintaining marital satisfaction, which is consistent with findings from other research, such as that by Namvaran et al. (2017) and Sawai et al. (2018). The study used secondary data to arrive at conclusion, thus raising a methodological gap.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research utilized interpretive phenomenological research design. The study was conducted in Ottawa, a metropolitan city that hosts several international organizations, embassies, and renowned universities making it attractive to people from all parts of the world. The city is thus characterized by racial diversity that made it ideal for the present study (Voth, 2021). The total number of married couples in the city is 850,525 (Statistics Canada, 2022). A sample size of 10 interracial heterosexual couples was considered adequate. Snowball sampling method used. In this sampling method, the study uses the first known invited participants within the community setting who are then encouraged to recruit others who would be interested in the study (Asenahabi, 2019). This sampling method was used since no official list of interracial heterosexual couples exist and therefore, the chain referral technique characteristic of snowball sampling makes it feasible to locate and access study participants (Das & Tripathi, 2017). To mitigate the risk of bias introduced by relying solely on one or a few initial participants, multiple starting points were used. By selecting several individuals who represent different segments of the target population, the sample was diversified and captured a broader range of perspectives and connections.

Structured in-depth interview method of data collection was applied. Interviews were conducted in person. Interviews were likely conducted in a private and confidential setting to encourage openness, with

standardized guiding questions used to ensure consistency across participants while allowing detailed exploration of experiences related to social acceptance, stigma, and relationship satisfaction. Thematic analysis was performed on the data. Thematic data analysis, as described by Braun and Clark (2019), involves distinguishing themes, evaluating data, and reporting findings. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) highlight thematic analysis's advantages, such as identifying emerging themes, its applicability in both deductive and inductive methods, and suitability for studies on current behaviors. Neuendorf (2018) notes its ability to identify influential variables. Thematic analysis allows for systematic coding and categorization during data collection and analysis, facilitating the tracing of variable influences and clarifying similarities and differences (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). It systemizes data reduction, breaking data into smaller bits for analysis (Neuendorf, 2018). Richards and Hemphill (2018) detail qualitative thematic analysis tactics, while Duckett (2021) outline a three-stage analysis process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Akinyode and Khan (2018) propose a five-step qualitative data analysis procedure: data logging, anecdotes, vignettes, data coding, and thematic network linking themes. These methods ensure a systematic and comprehensive approach to thematic data analysis. In the present study, thematic analysis was used as guided by the 5-step analysis proposed by Akinyode and Khan (2018).

The study took measures to ensure confidentiality, representation of the truth, respect for personal space, and respect for respondents' individual culture. This was detailed in a confidentiality agreement and informed consent form which was issued to all consenting participants beforehand for their perusal and written consent. Müller-Funk (2021) argues that respect for one's culture is an important consideration right from the time a study is commissioned to the development of the study design, study instrument development, decision on data collection methods, actual data collection, and dissemination of reports. This is because it informs the psychosocial environment in which people live. Migliore and Killian (2018) emphasize that cross-cultural researchers must acknowledge and work within the cultural environment in which the study is taking place by respecting divergent worldviews, ethical practices, and religious orientations. Sensitivity was maintained to the diversity of culture that respondents represent and made every effort to demonstrate respect for the unique individualities and cultural orientation of each participant.

Confidentiality pertains to the safety of raw data and the way it is communicated both verbally and in written form (Migliore & Killian, 2018). When reporting data, the study used pseudonyms and codes instead of real names to hide the identity of the participants. The associated raw data would be erased within one year upon completion of the research and dissemination of study findings. The data was de-identified by removing or altering specific information that could potentially reveal participants' identities, such as exact locations. The data was aggregated to present findings in terms of trends and patterns, rather than individual cases, so as to further safeguard anonymity. Reflexivity was ensured through a critically examination of how own beliefs, assumptions, and attitudes toward interracial relationships may have influenced data collection, interpretation, and thematic analysis. Given the sensitive nature of race and intimate relationships, reflexive journals and field notes helped in the identification of possible biases and fostered the preservation of participants' lived experiences. To enhance trustworthiness, peer debriefing involving discussions with fellow researchers to challenge interpretations and reduce subjective bias. Additionally, maintaining an audit trail strengthened dependability and confirmability of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The demographic profile of respondents revealed a diverse range of backgrounds in terms of age, duration of marriage, educational attainment, employment status, and how they met. The participants' ages ranged from 32 to 69 years, with most respondents being in their mid-30s to late 50s. The length of marriage among these couples varied significantly, from as short as two years to as long as 27 years. Educational levels were predominantly high, with many holding a master's degrees and one participant engaged in pursuing post-doctoral studies. Employment status indicated that most respondents were engaged in full-time permanent employment, particularly in government and professional sectors, while others were self-employed or retired. The couples met through various avenues, with online dating platforms playing a significant role in bringing them together as nearly two-thirds of the couples interviewed met through online dating. Others met through

university affiliations, religious communities, shared interests such as jogging and language classes, and social events like weddings.

Thematic analysis yielded mixed experiences characterized by social acceptance themes among some couples and social rejection themes among others. Two themes and six sub-themes emerged. The first theme was Social Acceptance as a Marital Satisfaction Enhancer. Under this theme were two sub-themes: Family Acceptance and Positive Societal Stereotyping. The second theme was the theme of Interracial Marital Relationship Stigma as a Stress Factor. Under this theme were complementary four sub-themes. In rank order, these were: Overt Racial Prejudice, Self-Stigma, Societal Stigma, and Negative Stereotyping. Each of these are analyzed and discussed as follows:

Theme #1 Social Acceptance as a Marital Satisfaction Enhancer

The theme of social acceptance as a marital satisfaction enhance manifested in two sub-themes: family acceptance and positive societal stereotypes.

Sub-theme #1.1 Family Acceptance

Family acceptance was the most salient sub-theme under the theme of social acceptance as a marital satisfaction enhancer. Analysis of the verbatim expressions showed that acceptance from both families fosters emotional security, strengthens relational bonds, and provides support during marital challenges. Couples that experienced social acceptance acknowledged that family approval contributed to their sense of belonging and stability within the marriage. For instance, this manifested in respondent's attribution of his family's encouragement as a key factor in preventing separation. Conversely, when family involvement was minimal, the effect of social acceptance on satisfaction appeared neutral, as seen in the response of a wife who noted that distance from family reduced their influence on the relationship. Additionally, when one partner's family was accepting, it created an environment of comfort and support. The following are verbatim extracts:

C4-H: "Acceptance by both of our families has made us stronger as a couple."

C4-W: "I don't think it does mainly because of the distance."

C8-H: "They pushed us together, not away... maybe that's the small push that kept us together."

C8-W: "I have been very well accepted by them... I'm truly now an integral part of the family."

C9-H: "My family has been very accepting, so that's helpful."

C9-W: "Not at all because our family accepts him."

C10-H: "My family has not approved or disapproved of my relationship."

C10-W: "The acceptance from my family did impact positively our relationship."

From the finding, it can be inferred that family acceptance plays a crucial role in fostering relationship satisfaction by providing emotional security, reducing external stress, and offering a support system during challenges. Couples who experienced family acceptance found that it strengthened their bond and provided a nurturing environment where both partners could focus on their relationship rather than external pressures. This means that when families were supportive, couples could rely on them for guidance, affirmation, and assistance, which contributed to a stronger relationship. The findings align with Greif and Saviet's (2020) observation that while cultural differences may pose challenges, openness from in-laws facilitates a supportive marital environment, echoing respondents' accounts of comfort derived from familial acceptance.

Sub-theme #1.2 Positive Societal Stereotyping

Positive societal stereotyping was also a manifest sub-theme under social acceptance as a marital satisfaction enhancer. The results in Table 2 reveal how societal perceptions can sometimes reinforce admiration and social rewards. For instance, some participants described their interracial marriage as an advantage, emphasizing cultural exchange, shared values, and mutual enrichment. Others noted that their relationship was viewed positively by the broader society, with admiration from peers and compliments reinforcing a sense of uniqueness. Additionally, some linked their experience to faith communities, where cross-cultural integration fostered greater acceptance. In this case, positive stereotyping did not only contribute to social validation, it also reflected underlying perceptions of interracial relationships from a section of the society as progressive. These insights were evident in the following verbatim examples:

C1-H: "In many ways I think it has affected our relationship positively. These are all based on generalized stereotypes which I try not to consider."

C1-W: "I view our interracial marriage as an advantage. We already share similar values and mindset. He has introduced me to new things, like the Chinese language and culture."

C9-H: "There's some social reward where a racial couple is very admired by the general population of Canadians. I think people look at that and think that's neat or that's different or good for them. I get compliments about that right from friends back home like oh wow, that's cool there is an admiration which is a good thing. Maybe they find it exotic, and I think it's been socially rewarding as well."

C9-W: "A lot of the interracial couples I know are Christian, and I wonder if it's because being in a church, being Christian, especially here in town in a big city. We are taught our churches be a little bit more cross-cultural and we tend to be more accepting and more integrated."

The foregoing findings suggest that a positive societal attitudes towards interracial couples is a potential protective factor for interracial marital relationship satisfaction. The findings align Csizmadia and Lopez (2019) whose study found that exposure to diverse cultural settings fosters greater acceptance of interracial unions, which is consistent with participants' experiences of admiration and validation from peers and faith communities. The study also resonates with Jibeen (2019), who emphasized that cultural differences, while sometimes a source of stress, can also lead to greater personal growth and shared values, as seen in participants' appreciation of cultural exchange. The finding that positive stereotyping reinforces social rewards suggests that interracial couples may benefit from societal admiration, yet it also reflects an underlying perception of these marriages as progressive rather than fully normalized. This implies that while positive stereotyping enhances relationship confidence, it may also subtly frame interracial unions as exceptions rather than a natural part of societal fabric.

Theme #2: Interracial Marital Relationship Stigma as a Stress Factor

This section categorizes responses into sub-themes and overarching themes, highlighting experiences of overt racial prejudice, self-stigma, and societal stigma.

Sub-theme #2:1 Overt Racial Prejudice

Under the theme of Interracial Marital Relationship Stigma as a Stress Factor, Overt Racial Prejudice was the most dominant sub-theme. The findings suggest that while some couples report minimal or no perceived prejudice, others experience subtle and overt racial prejudice, which adversely contributes to their relationship satisfaction. Several participants described public stares, whispered comments, and exclusionary behavior, highlighting societal discomfort toward interracial unions. For instance, one couple noted that social gatherings could be isolating when translation was withheld from the non-native spouse. Another described how security personnel treated them with suspicion while shopping, reinforcing feelings of social alienation. However, some participants reported that they actively chose not to dwell on societal reactions, minimizing its impact on their satisfaction. The supporting verbatim responses are as follows:

C3-H: *"We get looks from some people, knowing that they are looking at us as being different and that we don't belong."*

C3-W: *"Looks on the street, when we go to gatherings of his people (He is a Hausa from Northern Nigeria), sometimes they won't translate for me into English."*

C7-H: *"I cannot think of any at this time. It is something that we really don't think of and we don't let stuff like that bother us."*

C7-W: *"The initial lack of acceptance has prevented a natural bond between my family and my in-laws."*

C8-H: *"The obvious part was at the church. They started with whispers, then said it aloud."*

C8-W: *"At times he is exposed to different kinds of subtle racist comments or backhanded comments."*

C10-H: *"I haven't experienced prejudice from society, although I sometimes get questions regarding challenges that we may face."*

C10-W: *"When we were shopping, the security person stopped my spouse and asked to see our receipt."*

The findings suggests that while interracial marital couples downplay racial prejudice, their sensitivity/awareness and activation of coping mechanisms signify its adverse effects on their marital wellbeing. The findings align with Irby-Shasanmi and Erving (2022) whose study found that interracial couples often face stigma and negative social interactions from their immediate communities, reflecting participants' experiences of exclusionary behavior at social gatherings.

Sub-theme #2.2: Self-Stigma

The notion of self-stigma was also apparent from the analysis of respondents' expressions. Some individuals expressed perceived concerns about being viewed differently, despite having no direct experience of prejudice, suggesting a tendency to project societal biases onto their relationship. Others reported heightened sensitivity to racial comments, leading to decreased tolerance for ignorance. This finding was implied in the following verbatim responses:

C1-H: *"I may be projecting as I have not had any tangible experience, but I think there's some confusion perhaps from outsiders observing us as a couple."*

C1-W: *"I don't feel any prejudice from society. I tend to avoid looking at people around me out of discomfort, so I don't really notice any stares."*

C2-H: *"I have not experienced prejudice from society as an interracial couple."*

C2-W: *"At times strangers may be surprised to discover we are a married couple, but we were not treated differently."*

C5-H: *"I have become more aware of people that make racist or ignorant comments or jokes and have become less tolerant of it among old friends."*

C5-W: *"We approach these experiences as opportunities to educate, foster understanding, and demonstrate the strength of our partnership."*

C6-H: *"People will look at us a little longer maybe."*

C6-W: *"I find that it's not as bad as I had anticipated."*

The finding highlight the interplay between perceived societal biases, personal expectations, and actual experiences of prejudice in interracial marriages. This suggests that while societal attitudes toward interracial marriage remain complex, individual agency potentially play crucial roles in shaping relationship experiences.

Sub-theme #2.3: Societal Stigma

The third sub-theme was societal stigma, reflected in the fact that external social circles such as religious communities reinforced racial expectations, making some individuals feel betrayed for marrying outside their racial group. These experiences demonstrate how societal stigma can create emotional strain, influence family relationships, and challenge the couple's sense of belonging, though some ultimately found pathways to reconciliation. The following are verbatim excerpts:

C7-H: "My parents, especially my mother, were not happy when I married my wife. I had previously been married to a Jamaican lady for 5 years before meeting my wife. My father was not as upset, but he supported my mom. They didn't come to the wedding, and it took a few years before they visited us, and only after our daughter was born. We didn't speak much for almost 5 years after our son was born, but after my father sent me a long letter to apologize, we started visiting them again in 2019."

C7-W: "His parents and one sister refused to come to our wedding."

C8-H: "The church members felt like I had betrayed Black people, but for me, it was God. They openly said, 'Good Black people should date Black girls.'"

C8-W: "When we started dating I just put distance – we weren't even the closest to begin with, but for a variety of different familial issues – but when I started dating my husband, I think she said comments to my mom about our potential mixed kids, and I essentially just distanced myself from her."

The findings underscore the deep emotional and relational impact of familial and communal rejection in interracial marriages. The findings are consistent with observations by Migliore and Killian (2018) who noted that religious and social institutions can reinforce racial loyalty, leading some individuals to feel a sense of betrayal for choosing a partner outside their racial group.

Sub-theme #2.4 Negative Stereotyping

Negative stereotyping as sub-theme manifested as some participants encountered racial assumptions, such as warnings about specific ethnic groups engaging in deceitful behavior or comments reinforcing racial stereotypes about physical traits. Others described increased awareness of prejudiced jokes. While a few couples reported minimal direct prejudice, they acknowledged moments where societal biases influenced how others perceived their relationship dynamics. The following are verbatim excerpts:

C1-H: "Nothing overt. Perhaps glances in public."

C1-W: "A hairstylist warned me to be careful because, according to her, men of Chinese descent sometimes lead double lives."

C5-H: "I have become more aware of people that make racist or ignorant comments or jokes and have become less tolerant of it among old friends."

C5-W: "We have encountered moments that reflect societal biases, such as occasional stereotyping or assumptions about our relationship dynamics."

C8-H: "The obvious part was at the church. They started with whispers, then said it aloud."

C8-W: "My husband has been pulled over by the cops for absolutely no reason."

C10-H: "I haven't experienced prejudice from society, although I sometimes get questions regarding challenges that we may face."

C10-W: "I noticed how police officers interact differently with him, as a black man, compared to me, a white woman."

The findings highlight the persistent presence of racial stereotyping, which, while sometimes subtle, can impact the lived experiences of interracial couples. Some participants reported being subjected to racialized warnings, such as assumptions about deceitful behavior based on ethnicity. While some couples reported minimal direct prejudice, their experiences suggest that societal biases still influence how others perceive their relationship dynamics, echoing Migliore and Killian's (2018) argument that even in increasingly diverse societies, interracial relationships remain subject to scrutiny and stereotyping.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion was drawn that social acceptance plays a crucial role in shaping relationship satisfaction among interracial heterosexual couples. Family acceptance and positive societal perceptions contribute to emotional security and relational stability, reinforcing the importance of supportive social environments in fostering marital well-being. However, the presence of stigma, discrimination, and systemic biases highlights ongoing challenges that some interracial couples face, indicating that societal attitudes toward interracial marriages remain complex and varied. The role of family acceptance in fostering emotional security and strengthening relational bonds reflects the significance of mutual affirmation and appreciation for enhancing marital stability (Barnacle & Abbott, 2009). However, the challenges of stigma and discrimination identified in the findings suggest potential disruptions in conflict regulation and open dialogue, which are key to sustaining relationship satisfaction.

Interracial heterosexual couples should prioritize open and adaptive communication strategies to navigate cultural differences and financial expectations effectively. Families should actively support interracial couples by fostering an inclusive and accepting environment, recognizing that their acceptance plays a crucial role in the couple's emotional security and relational stability. Encouraging open dialogue and understanding different cultural perspectives can strengthen interracial marital family bonds and reduce potential sources of tension. Marriage and family therapists should integrate culturally competent counseling approaches that address unique challenges faced by interracial couples, including managing societal stigma, navigating cultural differences, and enhancing intercultural communication skills. Social institutions such as churches should promote inclusivity by fostering supportive communities for interracial couples, emphasizing shared faith as a unifying factor rather than a source of division. Faith-based programs that encourage dialogue, mentorship, and cross-cultural understanding can help couples navigate religious and cultural differences in a constructive manner.

The study has contributed to knowledge by highlighting the complex role of social acceptance in interracial marriages. It established that family acceptance and positive societal perceptions enhance relationship satisfaction, while stigma and discrimination pose challenges. By identifying the impact of societal biases, self-stigma, and systemic discrimination, the study provides a nuanced perspective on the social factors influencing marital well-being. These insights can inform policy and social interventions aimed at fostering a more inclusive environment for interracial couples. Future research should explore same-sex interracial couples, rural populations, or compare Canadian cities to broaden understanding.

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