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Abstract:

With the occasional news headline about racism being hurled at interracial couples, I began to wonder how the struggles of interracial couples can be analysed through a sociological lens. In this essay, I hope to use the theory of intersectionality to dive deeper into the reasons why interracial couples can be controversial and complex, along with considering other sociological challenges faced to determine whether it is fair to consider interracial couples to be considered deviant.

As I was researching marriage data from Singstats, the numbers intrigued me—I previously assumed that the percentage of interracial marriages were on an increasing trend. However, the trends are largely stable across the last 10 years, although there have been some (not too significant) increments in the last 3 years.

With such trends, interracial marriages are here to stay. Understanding the challenges they face is a step towards greater acceptance and doing that through a sociological lens enables greater enlightenment and insight.

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In this essay, I intend to examine the experiences of interracial couples through the sociological lens of intersectionality: from their battles with discrimination to their successes, and how that feeds into the ways in which societies can do better to enable greater acceptance. Through understanding how the dimensions of discrimination in gender, race, culture and the labels of deviance intersect, I hope to impart you, the reader, with a greater appreciation of the challenges that interracial couples face. Due to the limited literature on interracial couples in Singapore, this essay will utilise sources that are mostly from the U.S. Many of the findings from such papers are in many ways relevant to Singapore.

Why bother with intersectionality?

Kimberlé Crenshaw defines the theory in her seminal works as a method and a lens through which to analyse how systemic injustices are experienced differently based on overlapping identities. She emphasizes that understanding these intersections is crucial for addressing the complexities of discrimination and social justice (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, n.d.). In the context of interracial couples, explaining the intersections will illuminate not only the discrimination that they face in society, but who exactly is the “more privileged” person in the relationship.

The increasing relevance of interracial couples and discrimination

A population that embodies multiracialism tends to have a higher probability of interracial marriages (Heaton & Jacobson, 2000). In Singapore, almost one in five marriages are interracial, and the rates of interracial marriages have been stable for the past decade (*Singapore Department of Statistics: Statistics on Marriages and Divorces*,

2023). In the United States, the proportion of interracial marriages had risen up to 17% in 2015 from 7% in 1980 (Brown, 2017) and is continually increasing. With stable trends in Singapore and increasing rates in the United States, the topic of interracial marriages remains relevant in society.

I have noticed an increasing amount of discrimination shown towards interracial couples in my society. More incidents have been reported in recent years: From the incident of a member of a tertiary institute of education hurling racist remarks at an interracial couple (Lam, 2022), to the personal struggles that Sim (in an Indian/Chinese marriage) shares in her article where she has been insulted for not marrying within her race (Sim, 2021). While my perception could be attributed to more vigilant reporting, it does not change the experiences that many interracial couples have in Singapore.

The dimensions of discrimination

There are no studies that cover the intersection between all the sources of discrimination I intend to discuss. Thus, I will elaborate on each factor with the studies I could find and explain how they can intersect for an interracial couple.

Beginning with race—the most obvious factor: The difference in race between members of a couple can trigger microaggressions from different groups of people. A microaggression is defined as a “commonly occurring, brief, verbal or nonverbal, behavioural, and environmental indignities that communicate derogatory attitudes or notions toward a different “other.”” (APA Dictionary, 2023). They can be unintentional or intentional in nature. The ways in which partners handle them can vary. For example, a

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paper from Csizmadia et al. (2015), written around the challenges of U.S. Black/White and Asian/White couples, discovers that it is quite common for white partners to face microaggression, backlash and even discriminatory comments for the first time in their lives, especially from their own close family members when getting into an interracial relationship. From the lens of social conflict theory, this could be due to family members thinking that interracial couples are going against racial hierarchies, which can disrupt the social dominance that more privileged racial groups have in society.

The observed struggles of Whites handling discrimination vis-à-vis those from minority groups could also be understood through socialisation (the process by which people acquire, accept and normalise societal values, practices, roles and statuses through interacting with their social milieu to live in society, definition taken from our lesson material). Those from racial minority groups and groups of privilege are likely to have socialised to different conditions. Racial minorities have had to deal with discrimination throughout all the agents of socialisation, be it from primary sources like their schools, to secondary ones like the workplaces or associations they build. Logically, they would be better adapted to dealing with microaggressions, racist or discriminatory remarks, compared to their more privileged partners (on average). This can cause instability in the relationship, as the more privileged partner may need to undergo resocialisation to adapt to the dynamics of the partnership, thereby contributing to the restoration of social equilibrium and maintaining functional harmony within the relationship as a microcosm of broader societal structures. Ironically, this is one instance in which the more privileged individual in the relationship suddenly experiences being less privileged!

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Another perspective would be to understand the prevalence of interracial marriage as a function of race and gender (Chuang et al., 2021). A study from Chuang et al. (2021) looked into how gender and racial compositions of Black/White and Asian-American/White interracial couples can result in discrimination that stems from perceived competition: Black women felt competition with White women, and Asian men perceived competition with White men. Black women reported more negative attitudes toward Black male–White female pairings, while Black men’s attitudes toward White male–Black female couples were not similarly emphasized. This suggests that Black women experience specific gendered pressures or perceptions tied to interracial dynamics, particularly competition with White women. This shows how gender and race can intersect in the ways in which discrimination exists.

Culture is yet another dimension where tensions and discriminations can stem from. Differences in communication styles, family structures, religious beliefs, and values can create tension and require ongoing negotiation (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013). For example, couples may need to find ways to blend or accommodate different approaches to child-rearing, religious observances, or the expression of emotions. Tensions that arise from such differences in culture can lead to disapproval, or even escalate to discrimination when the unintended partner’s ignorance offends their partner’s family.

The children of interracial couples are not spared from discrimination. Not only are they potentially at higher risk of developing depressive symptoms (Fisher et al., 2014) and

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engaging in substance abuse (Goings et al., 2018), they also face discriminations of sorts in education. In the U.S., teachers often categorise biracial children based on their physical appearance and how they believe society will perceive the child, instead of how the child self-identifies. As a result, many biracial children tend to be miscategorised by their peers and school staff (Williams, 2009). Identity tends to be another area of struggle for interracial children: Those that are interracial may only identify with only one of their birthparents and that can cause tensions with some extended family members. Interracial children may also struggle to be included with their extended families as they look visually different from their extended families and thus be discriminated against (for example being “too light-skinned” for black communities and being “too dark” in white communities, judgements based on colourism).

Imagine being from a more privileged race. Your family disapproves of your choice of partner, simply due to the colour of their skin and the culture they come from. They argue that you are disrupting your race’s “purity” through picking him/her, and they start to isolate themselves from you as they hear how committed you are. When you’re out with your partner, you find that people give you odd looks in the street, which can feel rather overwhelming towards the end of the date. Some of your friends distance themselves from you, in the hopes that you would change your mind on who you marry. Social isolation increases in your life due to societal pressure (Hibbler & Shinew, 2002). To make matters worse, your child is racially misidentified in school and with extended family being more distant, they miss out on the bonding, support and encouragement children receive from extended families.

This is exactly how dimensions of discrimination intersect to form the uphill challenge of successfully living as an interracial couple. These layers and pressures can lead to interracial couples wanting to conform to societal norms—to date within their own race. It is then possible to understand why interracial couples have higher divorce rates (though this does vary depending on the races of the interracial couples) (Pew Research Centre, 2012). It is worth noting that not every interracial couple will face all of these dimensions (and not all at the same time), but oftentimes there is more than one dimension that affects them at some point along their relationship.

Are interracial couples deviants? Why does such a label matter?

The most relevant aspect of deviance in this discussion would be how interracial couples are considered to be outliers, as they go against the “norm” of endogamy or homogamy. Some Black/White couple’s extended families have described interracial couples as not only being different, but deviant (Childs, 2002). The perception of interracial couples as deviants is influenced by the U.S. cultural context, including historical hypersexualization of Black individuals, societal stereotypes, and the legacy of racial segregation, which shape biases and disgust responses toward these couples (Quinn-Jensen et al., 2023).

In my society, interracial couples can be viewed as deviants, as they often defy normative expectations of ethnic homogamy, particularly among those with previous marital experiences (Kuo & Hassan, 1976). In Singapore’s past, interracial couples were viewed as deviants due to colonial power hierarchies that were reinforced by regulating

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interracial intimacies in ways that maintained the supremacy of white men (Loos, 2012). In fact, the result of cultural differences can lead to interracial couples being labelled as deviant (Skowroński et al., 2014).

Labels like “deviant” has detrimental effects on interracial couples. It not only feeds into the abovementioned issue of social isolation but can also lead to stigmatisation of family members related to the interracial couple. This is known a “courtesy stigma”, where the family of a labelled person might also be marginalised and discriminated against (Maloušková & Fafejta, 2021). In this case, members of society begin to force their opinions and judgements onto the in laws of the couple. With discrimination not only targeting the couple itself but their family, the deviant label has great potential to cause destabilisation in families.

While there are groups of people that hold onto their judgement of interracial couples, there are reasons as to why some may believe that they are not deviants in society. With increasing rates of interracial couples in the U.S. and a stable rate in Singapore, there are also increasing signs of acceptance! In Singapore, social dynamics are changing, and growing diversity within the community is increasingly accepted. There is an increase in the number of interracial-couple-influencers, and while they do receive the occasional racist comments, they do develop a strong following: at the time of writing this essay, on popular social media platform Tiktok, account user name @sherriandyixi, a Chinese/Indian couple with 3.5 million followers and account user name @debrxrahkwek, an Indian/Chinese couple with 166 thousand followers have continued growth, despite their relationships being interracial. While one can argue that

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the reasons for their growth can be attributed to their marketing methods, it is undeniable that an increased following implies to some extent a greater level of acceptance of interracial couples in society.

What can we do to make things better?

One of the most significant ways to bring about greater acceptance would be to change the ways in which family members with prejudice treat and handle the news of their loved one finding love in another race. In fact, interracial couples that had accepting parents were less sensitive to negative outside experiences (Bell & Hastings, 2015). A lot of influence lies in family approval, and that would make for an impactful starting point.

Changing the perceptions of family members that are deep in their beliefs is challenging. Out of the theories for collective action, emergent norm theory, to me, stands out as one of the possible solutions that can kick start greater advocacy and support for interracial couples. The theory highlights the structural conditions that must be addressed to foster social change. It implies that societal acceptance of interracial couples depends on resolving underlying issues like racism, stereotypes, and systemic inequalities. In the years to come, perhaps anti-racism movements could address the structural strain of systemic inequality, pushing for greater acceptance for interracial relationships, away from labelling them as deviant, as part of broader social progress.

What does the future hold?

Throughout this essay, we have seen how factors of race, gender, culture and the threat of the deviant label results in layers of discrimination shown towards interracial

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couples. I hope that after reading this essay, we can all have greater appreciation for the intersecting layers of discrimination and labels that interracial couples have overcome to be able to make it to marriage and beyond. While the future is uncertain, I choose to believe that one day, interracial couples would become a norm and there would be little judgement and prejudice thrown at them. To turn this dream into a reality—to create a safer society for all of us, let us advocate for greater acceptance together!

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