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# "It's Because You Are White": A Qualitative Study on the Impact of Whiteness and White Privilege in Interracial Relationships

Adrienne Gruenes

*Minnesota State University, Mankato*

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"It's Because You Are White":

A Qualitative Study on the Impact of Whiteness and White Privilege in Interracial Relationships

By

Adrienne Gruenes

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

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In

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This thesis has been examined and approved.

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Dr. Kristen Treinen

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Dr. Justin Rudnick

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Dr. Shannon Miller

## **Abstract**

“It's Because You Are White”:

A Qualitative Study on the Impact of Whiteness and White Privilege in Interracial Relationships

Previous research has produced numerous studies on the dynamics of interracial relationships. However, there is still a gap in the existing research concerning how whiteness and white privilege impacts interracial relationships. This qualitative study sought to examine how whiteness and white privilege impacts interracial relationships when one person in the relationship identifies as white and their partner identifies as a person of color. I conducted in-depth interviews with four interracial couples who had one person in the relationship that identified as white and their partner identified as a person of color. Each couple participated in a dyadic interview and then each persons in the relationship participated in a separate individual interview. The findings of this research conclude that whiteness and white privilege impacts interracial relationships in the following ways: 1) the racial salience of the relationship 2) the acknowledgment of privilege in the relationship, and, 3) the whiter the couple looked the less racism/discrimination that they faced.

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the phrase “it’s okay.” You mean the world to me. You are my best friend. Thank you so much for everything. I love you.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

I look white, but that white skin conceals my inner life. This feeling of being costumed in one's own skin, of 'masquerading' as white in public, maybe one thing white partners of black people share regardless of other differences among us. The process does not work the other way, however. The black partner does not become white, does not acquire white privilege, does not describe that feeling of masquerade, and has always been a spy in the enemy's country. The color line is permeable in one direction only. (Luke, 1994, pp. 68- 69)

Before entering my graduate program, I had little knowledge about what being white meant. I had heard about words like race, whiteness, privilege, and white privilege, but I did not really know how it applied to my life. It wasn't until I started dating people of color that I began to realize how all these terms impacted my own identity and how it impacted my relationships. One example of how I realized my whiteness and privilege was when I was with my fiancé, who is an Indian male. Within the first month of dating him, I was confronted with my whiteness and his darkness. My fiancé was walking me to my car and as we were in the process of saying goodbye, a car full of white persons pulled up near us. At first, I didn't think anything of it, but while the group of people were sitting in the car, they started to look at me and my fiancé as if they were scared. After a couple of minutes, a white man got out of the car and looked at myself and my fiancé again very closely. The man then aggressively turned towards the car full of people and yelled to them, "Stay in the car! There is a black man standing out here!" The man walked away. As he was walking away to his apartment he was kept looking at myself and my fiancé until he finally went inside. This all happened in a span of five minutes, but it felt like an

eternity. Throughout our relationship, there have been several instances, like the one I mentioned before, where I have acknowledged my privilege and my whiteness being a white person in an interracial relationship. These instances led me to wonder if other interracial couples have similar experiences like mine and my fiancé's. Particularly, if interracial couples that involve a white person and a person of color have similar experiences that myself and my fiancé do.

### **Purpose of Study**

In the past scholars have analyzed interracial relationships in a variety of different contexts such as friendships, workplace relationships, intimate partners, etc. One of the main reasons for the increase in scholarship is because there has been a slight increase in the number of interracial relationships in the United States. Bialik (2017) declared that in 2015, "one-in-six U.S. newlyweds (17%) were married to a person of a different race or ethnicity" (para. 1). This is a slight increase from previous years because in 1967 only 3 % of marriages were interracial (Bialik, 2017). The rise in interracial relationships suggests that there needs to be more scholarship on interracial communication. According to Orbe and Harris (2008), interracial communication is, "the transactional process of message exchange between individuals in a situational context where racial differences is perceived as a salient factor by at least one person" (p. 6). Furthering that interracial communication occurs when people who are racially different from one another communicate with each other. Although there has been an increase in scholarship on interracial communication, more scholarship still needs to be created on the topic. Mainly because "race continues to be one of the most important issues in the United States" (Orbe and Harris, 2008, p. 7). However, even though race is an important issue, Orbe and Harris (2008) contend, "we are unwilling to talk honestly and openly [about race]" (p. 7). Moreover, there still needs to be more research on interracial communication because of the importance of

the issue and the lack of racial discourse in our society. This study adds to the existing research on interracial communication because this study explored the communication between people of different races.

Additional research needs to be done on the growing number of interracial relationships that involve a white person. Bialik (2017) reported that in the United States, the top four types of interracial couples involve a white person. “The most common racial or ethnic pairing among newlywed intermarried couples is one Hispanic and one white spouse” (para. 7). Given the prevalence of interracial relationships, particularly ones that involve white persons and a person of color, there needs to be more research on this topic. My study sought to fill the gap in research pertaining to white persons in interracial relationships because the population I studied were interracial couples who had a white partner and a person of color in the relationship.

The final topic that needs to be explored more within interracial relationships is how whiteness and white privilege impacts interracial relationships where one person identifies as white and their partner identifies as a person of color. Whiteness is, “the social construction which produces race privilege for white people by appearing racially ‘neutral,’ unlinked to racial politics universal and unmarked” (Rowe & Malhotra, 2006, p. 170). Whereas white privilege is “the taken-for-granted benefits and protections afforded to whites based upon skin color” (Bond & Inwood, 2016, p. 716). These definitions prove that white persons have unearned advantages being the dominant group within society. The power dynamics in the relationship will have an impact on the relationship. One way the power dynamics could have an impact is through the couple’s communication with one another. The couple will have to navigate their communication in the relationship due to the white person being a member of the dominant group. More discourse needs to be addressed on this topic because, “identifying and explaining various

communicative practices is valuable and important to understand how those persons marginalized in dominant society communicate with those who have direct access to institutional power” (Orbe, 1998b, p. 8). This study aimed to fill the gap in research on how whiteness and white privilege impacts interracial relationship that involve a person of color and a white person. Specifically, how whiteness and white privilege impacts the communicative practices of interracial couples where one person identifies as white and their partner identifies as a person of color.

### **Research Question**

This qualitative study examined the impact of whiteness and white privilege on interracial relationships.

RQ 1: How does whiteness and white privilege impact interracial relationships?

### **Precis of Chapter in Thesis**

The first chapter of the thesis introduced the topic of whiteness and white privilege in interracial relationships. I introduced the topic by first explaining why the topic is significant and needs to be studied. This topic needs to be studied is because of the lack of racial discourse within our society and the growing number of interracial couples that involve a white person and a person of color. Secondly, the introduction identified why this topic needs to be studied in field of Communication Studies. Namely because this study can offer insight on how interracial couples who have a white person and a person of color in the relationship navigate their communication based on the power dynamics of the relationship.

The second chapter explored the existing literature surrounding whiteness, white privilege, and interracial relationships. The literature review examined the literature on how non-

interracial and interracial couples' relationship develop, definitions of white privilege and whiteness, definitions white innocence, and finally looked at co-cultural theory and how co-cultures navigate their communication when talking to persons of the dominant group.

The third chapter focused on the methods used in this study. For this study, I used qualitative in-depth interviews. Specifically, in this section, I touched on the method I used, described my participants and procedures, and explained my data analysis.

In the fourth chapter, I addressed my results of the study. Specifically, I identified the common themes of my data. I talked about how I found an overarching theme of contradiction amongst the participants. I also identified three underlying themes of how whiteness and white privilege impacted the participant's interracial relationship. I also used quotations from my interviews, my personal experiences, and previous research on this topic to support the common themes within my research.

In the final chapter, I revisited my research question by looking at how my themes related to my research questions. Then I discussed the implications, limitations, and the future research of my study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In this literature review, I analyzed four key areas of research that proved to be beneficial when looking at the impact of whiteness and white privilege in interracial relationships where one person identifies as white and their partner identifies as a person of color. In what follows, I explored the existing literature on: 1) Relationship Development, 2) Whiteness and white Privilege, 3) Definition of white innocence, and 4) Co-Cultural theory. All these topics aimed to understand how white privilege and whiteness impacts interracial relationships.

#### **Relationship Development**

Relationships develop in different ways. While some relationships take longer to develop, others may develop quickly. Regardless, each relationship has different dynamics that make the relationship unique. This section of the literature review highlighted the difference between how non-interracial couples develop their relationship in comparison to how interracial couples develop their relationship. It is important to examine these differences because non-interracial couples do develop differently than interracial couples in several different ways.

#### **Non-Interracial Relationship Development**

Different scholars have viewed relationships from various perspectives. Scholars have defined relationship development in terms of the different stages of the relationship like first kiss, dating, marriage, etc. Knapp (1978) argued persons in a relationship go through five stages of coming together and five stages of coming apart. The stages of coming together in a relationship according to this model are: “initiating, experimenting, intensifying, integrating and bonding” (Knapp and Vangelisti, 2005, p.152). Initiating describes the, “processes enacted when

we first meet someone” (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005, p. 154). Experimenting occurs when each persons in the relationship try out new things with the other person. The next step in the relationship according to this model is intensifying, which is where there is an, “active participation and greater awareness of the process” (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2005, p. 155). This is where friends become close friends, or two people start to move towards a romantic relationship. After a relationship experiences the intensifying stage, the relationship moves onto the integrating stage. Knapp and Vangelisti (2005) asserted that in the integrating stage, “the relationship has now reached a point where the two individual personalities almost seem to fuse or coalesce” (p. 156). Finally, the last stage, bonding, establishes a declaration of the relationship that this is a committed relationship. Different relationships in this stage do different things to declare that they are in a relationship. People might get married in this stage or buy a house together.

The next set of stages in Knapp’s (1978) model examined what happens when a relationship comes apart. When the relationship comes apart relationships experience signs of “differentiating, circumscribing, stagnating, avoiding, and terminating” (Avtgis et.al, 1998, p. 281). In the first stage of the model, differentiating, this is where, “partners begin to see their differences as undesirable or annoying” (Floyd, 2017, p. 214). The next stage of the model describes when a couple starts to reduce or limit their communication. This process is called circumscribing. Proceeding the circumscribing phase, the relationship then goes into the stagnating stage which involves, “partners avoid communicating about anything important because they fear it will only lead to conflict” (Floyd, 2017, p. 214). Once the communication is reduced even more, the fourth stage, avoiding, occurs. Just as it sounds, in this phase, the people in the relationship create more distance between each other by avoiding one another. This could

mean that they do not see each other or do not talk to each other. The final stage of the model is the terminating phase, which means that the relationship has ended. For marital relationships, this could mean that the couple gets divorced or when two best friends decide that they want to end their relationship.

Baxter and Bullis (1986), on the other hand, use “turning points” to address the development of a relationship. Fife (2006) highlighted, “a turning point analysis differs from a stage analysis, such as Knapp’s 10 stages of relationship development (Knapp & Vangelisti, 1996) because of the focus on specific relational events” (p. 76). Baxter et. al (1999) explained that turning points are the sites of developmental change in relationships. Depending on the relationship, turning points can be different for each relationship. Some turning points could include: first kiss, first time having sex, buying a house together, meeting your partner’s parents, first big fight, etc. Baxter and Pittman (2001) found, “the most frequent types of agreed-upon turning points in the relationship for heterosexual couples were quality time and external competition. “Quality time refers to special times when the couple privileged privacy away from others” (Baxter and Pittman, 2001, p. 10). Baxter and Pittman (2001) also found, “external competition is another major turning point for heterosexual couples. This category involved events in which at least one of the parties experienced a competing demand for time or other relational resources” (p. 11). All in all, these turning points present a different method of examining a relationship than relationship development stage models do.

### **Interracial Relationship Development**

While non-interracial relationships share similarities with interracial relationships in their development, there are some key differences that occur. Foeman and Nance (1999) identified that one key difference for interracial couples is that their relationship development is largely



depended upon on how society views their relationship rather than how the two people in the relationship view the relationship. The key stages of interracial relationship development as defined by Foeman and Nance (1999) are racial awareness, coping, identity emergence and maintenance.

Racial awareness, according to Foeman and Nance (1999, 2002) is when "individuals become aware that they are attracted to one another and that the possibility for intimate involvement exists" (p. 238). During this stage, people in the interracial relationship become aware of at least, "four concurrently operating sets of perspectives: (a) their own, b) their partner's c) their collective racial groups, and d) their partner's racial group's" (Foeman and Nance, 1999, p. 549). The overall topic that comes up in this phase is that there is a racial difference between the couple. Motoyoshi (1990) explained that "in the United States, the racial stratification system is caste; that is a person is either white or non-white" (pp. 85-86). The persons in the relationship then proceed to address this white/non-white dichotomy throughout the relationship.

The second phase of the relationship development model is coping. Foeman and Nance (1999, 2002) found that interracial couples go through a stage that involves coping with the societies definition of race. "Many couples are forced into the coping phase by an unaccepting society. Ironically, whereas a couple from different cultures may need more time to work through their complex attraction, they may be pushed into a deeper commitment than they had intended" (Foeman & Nance, 1999, p.551). The coping stage of the relationship development model largely centers on the opinions and attitudes of people. This could cause the couple to either last long-term or to break apart very easily.

Identity emergence is the third stage in Foeman and Nance's (1999) model. This phase of the model the couple redefines their relationship based off their own expectations of the relationship rather than what society thinks. "In the emergence phase, couples begin to develop behaviors that are self-sustaining. Instead of looking at their differences as an obstacle to be overcome" (Foeman and Nance, 1999, p. 553). This phase is the most important part of their relationship because for once it allows for the individuals and the couple to define their relationship by their own terms.

The final stage in Foeman and Nance's (1999) model is maintenance. This phase focuses on maintaining the relationship. As Foeman and Nance (1999) pointed out, "literature and experience tell us that the stages suggested here are not lock step. Individuals and couples may revisit steps at different points in their lives" (p. 554). For example, the couple may experience different events that forces them to address their racial awareness again, such as having children. In turn, they might have to cope with it what they have gone through and maybe redefine it in other ways. No matter what the circumstances are, each couple will have to address it as time comes on their own.

Examining interracial relationship development is crucial for my research because my research aimed to understand all the different aspects of how white privilege and whiteness impact interracial relationships. This means looking at how interracial relationships develop in comparison to non-interracial relationships. As we have seen in the previous literature, non-interracial relationships and interracial relationships do develop differently. Now that we have looked at the basics of how different relationships develop, we can now focus on establishing some key definitions: white privilege and whiteness. By establishing these terms, we will be able to fully examine how white privilege impacts interracial relationships.

## **White Privilege and Whiteness**

The next area of research that I examined in this literature review is the difference between white privilege and whiteness. As seen in previous literature, scholars often view whiteness and white privilege in the same realm. One of the reasons why is because, "like whiteness, white privilege has often been invisible to those who benefit from it the most" (Rothenberg, 2012, p.3). Meaning that white privilege and whiteness predominately go hand in hand with white persons. However, as I pointed out in this literature review, the concepts of white privilege need to be separate terms. In this section, I provided definitions of white privilege and whiteness according to what scholars define them as.

### **White Privilege**

White privilege as a term is a recent phenomenon within the field of academia. However, there has been a handful of scholars who have been making ground on the research on white privilege. As cited in Blanchett (2006), McIntosh (1990) explained that white privilege is defined as any phenomena, whether individual (e.g., biased teacher attitudes/perceptions), structural (e.g., curricular and pedagogical practices geared toward white, middle-class students), political (e.g., biased educational policies), economic (school funding formulas that contribute to inequity), or social (social constructions of race and disability), that serve to privilege whites while oppressing people of color. (p. 24)

McIntosh (1998) extended her definition of white privilege by describing white privilege as an "invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks" (p. 30). This description indicates that white persons have a lot of benefits in society that they may not realize. Rothenberg (2012) provided examples of ways in which white persons are privileged.

Such as the ability to go into a store and look at merchandise without being followed or viewed with suspicion, the privilege of never being asked to speak on behalf of all people in your racial group when you offer an opinion, and the right to drive about freely in suburban neighborhoods and on U.S. highways, or even in your own neighborhood, without worrying that the color of your skin will make you vulnerable to unwarranted harassment by law enforcers. (p. 3)

Kendall (2002) added onto the definition of white privilege by explaining that, “white privilege is an institutional (rather than personal) set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in our institutions” (p. 62). The people who largely benefit from this system of privilege and power are white persons.

Even though white privilege can exist on many forms, “white people may choose to avoid additional information about white privilege” (Conway et.al, 2017, p. 310). The reason why is because few white persons will admit that they have white privilege or even privilege. One reason why this is because, “the potential existence of in-group racial privilege threatens white’s sense of their own merit” (Knowles and Lowery, 2012, p. 210). By acknowledging the existence of their privilege, white people feel that they did not work for what they have in their life. Another reason why white persons do not acknowledge their privilege is because they have become complacent in a society that benefits them. Rothenberg (2012) reiterated, “white people have a hard time accepting the idea of white privilege because they have been benefiting from it for so long that they can no longer distinguish between their privilege and their sense of who they are” (pp. 3-4). Looking at the literature on white privilege benefited my study because my study sought to explore whether the white person and their partner acknowledged the white

partner's privilege in the relationship. This study also looked at the impacts of white privilege on interracial relationships.

## **Whiteness**

Discourse surrounding whiteness "is relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible as it continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain" (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995, p. 291). The main reason why whiteness and white identity is still an "uncharted territory" is because, like white privilege, not many people, and particularly white persons, acknowledge and recognize their race. "Many people cannot remember a time when they first 'noticed' that they were white because whiteness was, for them unremarkable. It was everywhere" (Rothenberg, 2012, p 2). Therefore, the need to study this term is indeed paramount to research because of the lack of scholarship and discourse on whiteness.

Depending on which scholarship you look at, there could be a whole wide range of definitions of what whiteness is. Martin and Krizek (1996) explained whiteness and white identity is the "social construction of both racial and ethnic categories and focus on the pan-ethnic experiences of whites born in the United States" (p. 127). Leonardo (2002) on the other hand viewed whiteness and white identity as separate entities. "Whiteness is a racial discourse, whereas the category 'white people' represents a socially constructed identity" (p. 31). Nakayama (2000) aligned more with Leonardo's definition of whiteness where whiteness and the white identity are different entities:

Whiteness, however, is a slippery topic precisely because whiteness is not a fixed property per se. It does not inhere in bodies. Instead, whiteness serves a number of social functions that serve to reinforce domination, not only in relation to race, but sexuality, gender, class, location, and certainly nationality. (p. 364)

Nakyama (2000)'s definition of whiteness is centered around the discourse of privilege but does not so much attribute it to white persons specifically.

Fine (1997) on the other hand concluded that the identity of white people and whiteness cannot be counted as separate terms. In the book *Off White: Readings on Race, Power, and Society*, Fine (1997) explained, "Whiteness and color, are therefore not merely created in parallel, but are fundamentally relational and need to be studied as a system" (Fine et al., 1997, p. 58). She supported her claim by saying, "Whiteness is actually coproduced with other colors, usually alongside blackness, in symbiotic relation. Where whiteness groups as a seemingly 'natural' proxy for quality merit and advantage, 'color' disintegrates to embody deficit or 'lack'" (p. 58). Rather than viewing whiteness and white identity/color as a separate entity, Fine (1997) views these concepts as working s with other colors and continuing the perpetuation of power and privilege.

My research added onto the existing research on whiteness because my research aimed to understand how white privilege and whiteness impact interracial relationships. I wanted to see if participants were able to acknowledge the whiteness in their relationship and be able to define how it impacts their relationship. The next topic I explored in this literature review is the concept of white innocence. This topic is important to address when talking about whiteness and white privilege in interracial relationships because it acknowledges that to mask their privilege and whiteness, white persons tend to exhibit characteristics of white innocence. This research investigated whether participants would show signs of white innocence.

### **White Innocence**

Both Ross (1990a) Ross (1990b) studied the concept of white innocence. Ross (1990a) explained white innocence is the, "insistence on the innocence or absence of responsibility of the

contemporary white person” (p. 3). As suggested by Ross (1990a) and Ross (1990b) an implication of white innocence is that white people do not acknowledge their continued faults that they have committed. Wekker (2016) asserted white innocence is “an inability to see the atrocities committed by white people” (p.172). Some of the atrocities include but are not limited to racism and violence. Just like white privilege, and whiteness, white innocence is another topic that is not talked about within our society. Most people will not admit their own faults. “The claim of innocence, however is a double edge word: it contains not-knowing, but also not wanting to know” (Wekker, 2016, p. 17). As described in this quote, the presences of innocence within our society allow white people to put up shields around themselves. This shield prevents white people from knowing what they did is wrong and allow white people to deny the things that they have done.

Another aspect of white innocence centers on the idea that white persons tend to disregard that they are a dominant member of society. Ross (1990b) explained, “the rhetoric of innocence avoids the argument that white people generally have benefited from the oppression of people of color, that white people have been advantaged by this oppression in a myriad of obvious and less obvious ways” (p. 2). Asch (2015) also contended “‘White innocence’ denies white privilege and erases the ways in which people of color are subject to racial discrimination” (Murphy and Harris, 2018, p. 52). This scholarship reaffirms the notion that white persons turn a blind eye to their privilege with in society. Most of the time it is at the expense of people of color within society. The study I conducted builds on the work of white innocence because I explored whether the white person in the relationship will admit to their own faults or if their partner will admit to their faults.

### **Co-Cultural Theory**

The final area that I explored is co-cultural theory. Co-cultural theory is the glue that held this project together because it focused on a key aspect of my project: how persons who are in a marginalized group alter their communication with person who has dominate power.

Co-cultural Theory was created by communication scholar Mark Orbe in 1996. The premise of the theory, according to Orbe (1998a), is that it, "explores the process by which co-cultural groups members select certain communitive practices when interacting within the structures of dominant society" (p. 14). The theory stems off multiple different theories and perspectives that focus on the same type of rhetoric. According to Orbe (1998a), these theories/ perspectives include: "work of feminist scholarly namely, muted group theory (Kramarae,1981), and stand point theory (Smith, 1987)" (p. 8). In general, co-cultures can be defined as, 'groups that co-exist within a dominant cultural sphere" (Ramirez-Sanchez, 2008, p. 89). Specifically, co-cultures, "could be any group with lower- power status, including homeless and first-generation college students" (Littlejohn and Foss, 2010, p. 217). To communicate with dominant members of society, co-cultural groups, "adopt certain communication orientations when functioning within the confines of public communication structures" (Orbe, 1998b, p. 7). The co-cultural theory explained that there are certain factors that prompt co-culture members to alter their communication when they communicate with members of the dominant group. They are: preferred outcomes, field experience, abilities, situational context, perceived cost and rewards, communication approach" (Orbe, 1998b, pp. 8-9).

The first factor, preferred outcome, refers to the ideal outcome of the member of the co-cultural group. Orbe (1998) explained "each person asks themselves the following question, 'what communication behavior will lead to the effect what I desire" (p. 89). The person wants to make sure that this is the appropriate action to take when communicating with the person from



the dominant group. Some examples of some preferred outcomes that the co-culture group can consider when communicating with a member of the dominant society are assimilation, accommodation, and separation" (Orbe, 1998a).

The second factor, field experience, is described by Orbe (1998a) as the lived experiences of the person of the co-culture group. The field experiences of co-cultural groups are crucial when interacting with someone of the dominant society. The reason why is because, "the influence of one's experiences is an important consideration in the cyclical process of contemplating-choosing- evaluating co-cultural communication practice" (Orbe, 1998a, pp. 93-94). For example, if you had a bad experience communicating with someone, you might alter your communication differently when you interact with another person.

The third factor is abilities or, "the person's relative ability to engage with different behavior" (Orbe, 1998a, p. 95). Depending on the person within the co-cultural group, abilities might look different to different people. Orbe (1998a) found that "some members of co-cultural groups related that they do not have the 'natural ability' to engage with certain practices that go against their personal style" (p. 96). Meaning that some people may or may not find it difficult to alter their own behavior to fit in with the dominant culture.

The next factor that could determine how co-cultural groups alter their communication when communicating with someone with a dominant member of society is situational context. Just how it sounds, situational context refers to using different communication approaches depending on the situation. Orbe (1998a) concluded that "without question, different practices are considered the most appropriate and effective depending on the specific situational circumstance" (p. 98). Additionally, one situation that might work in one setting might not work in another.

The fifth factor is perceived cost/ rewards. One thing that all the areas have in common is that they are all interconnected in some way. This is not a linear process, but an ongoing circle that keeps on rotating that is full of possibilities of how to communicate with someone.

Analyzing the perceived cost/rewards is no exception. Orbe (1998a) described

Depending on the specific situational context and preferred outcome, co-cultural group members will evaluate the anticipated costs and rewards of specific communicative practice differently; often this reflective process is governed by individual field of experience. (pp. 101-102)

Finally, the last factor that co-culture groups consider when interacting with someone from the dominant group is communication approach, which as Orbe (1998a) explained it as

Practices that fall along the continuum of nonassertive, assertive, or aggressive behavior. Nonassertive communicative practices include behavior by which individuals are seemingly inhibited and nonconfrontational... Aggressive communicative practices would describe those activities perceived hurtfully expressive, self-promoting, and assuming control over the choices of others. (p. 104)

Due to the difference in communication between co-cultural and dominant groups, a better understanding of why there needs to be more scholarship on the communication of co-cultural groups is needed. This study aimed to examine how a person of color (co-culture person) and a white person (dominant) person communicate with one another.

The topics that were presented in this literature review were: 1) Relationship Development, 2) Definitions of whiteness and white Privilege, 3) white Innocence, and 4) Co-Cultural Theory. The existing literature points to the importance of studying interracial relationships as they are impacted by white privilege and whiteness because it impacts how the

relationship is developed, their acknowledgment of their privilege and whiteness, and white privilege and whiteness impacts the interracial couple's communication with one another.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of my research was to explore interracial relationships in which one person identifies as white and the other person identifies as a person of color. Specifically, I examined how whiteness and white privilege impact those relationships where one person identifies as a person of color and the other identifies as a white person. My research question aimed to examine this topic by looking at specifically how white privilege and whiteness impact interracial relationships. Below is my research question:

RQ 1: How does whiteness and white privilege impact interracial relationships?

In the following section of my thesis, I will explain my method, describe my participants and procedures, and explain my data analysis.

#### **Method**

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) asserted, “Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality” (p.8). Meaning that no one reality is the true reality, but rather reality is made of multiple truths – truths built through individual experiences. This concept is paramount to my research because I was learning about other’s truths while listening to their stories and life experiences. This approach allowed me to move beyond generalized ideas of what interracial couples experience and focus on the ways in which these couples experience their racial-ness within their romantic partnerships. In addition to examining participants’ experiences, another aspect of qualitative research is to “look at the intimate relationship

between the researcher and what is studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 8). Along with the couples, I explored my own experience with white privilege as I am a white person in an interracial relationship with an Indian man.

### **Participants**

I interviewed 8 participants (4 couples) for this research. The racial and gender demographic of the couples were: A white female/black male; a white man/ Asian woman; a gender fluid white person/one agender mixed (Asian &white) person, and finally a white man and an Asian female. The participant’s ages ranged from 18 – 35 years old. The relationship duration (how long they have been together) ranged from 2 months to being together for 8 years. The couples could define the nature of the relationship from an open relationship to marriage. While conducting this research, it was important for me to have one person identified as white and the other person identified as a person of color, because it allowed me to gain insight into their experiences on white privilege and whiteness. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) reiterate, “Qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalist approach to the world. This mean that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempt to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring them” (p. 3). Gaining insight into another culture requires be able to view the experiences of those within the community in a natural setting. For me, the community was interracial couples where one person identifies a as white and the other person identifies as a person of color.

### **Participant biographies**

Blair and Rodney – Blair is a white woman and Rodney is a black man. They have been together for a total of eight years. They first saw each other at a bar on Halloween. Eventually

after hanging out with each other and messaging each other on Facebook they started to date. They have been married for two years as of August 2017. They have one child. Blair works at a hospital. Rodney works for a nonprofit that works with underprivileged youth. He also coaches JV basketball. They currently live in a Midwestern state.

Stacy and John – Stacy is an Asian woman and John is a white man. They have been together six years. They recently got engaged and will be married in 2018. The couple met through a mutual friend on one of Stacy's friend's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. Stacy and her friends were going to go downtown to celebrate, but the only way that Stacy's friend was going to get Stacy to go downtown was by setting Stacy up on a date. Stacy did in fact go downtown and eventually met John who was her blind date. John works in the competency restoration field. Stacy did not disclose where she works or what she does for a living. Stacy is originally from Cambodia but moved to the U.S. when she was 14 and Stacy both currently live in a Midwestern state.

Andie and Richard – Andie is an agender Asian/white person. Richard is a gender fluid White person. They have been together for a little over a year. They had seen each other on their college campus, but officially met each other through a dating app. After the first initial contact, Andie and Richard started going out on a couple dates and now they have been around each other ever since. Andie and Richard identified that they are in an open relationship. Andie is a GWSS (Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies) major with an English minor. Richard is also studying GWSS.

Lily and Chuck – Lily is an Asian woman and Chuck is a white man. They have been in a long-distance relationship for about 2 months. They met at a conference in December 2017. The day after they met they went to tour the city that the conference was in. After they initially met, they started talking a lot with each other via text message. One thing led to another and they

made their relationship official. Lily is a graduate student at university in the Midwest. She is originally from Japan. Chuck is from the eastern part of the United States, but now lives in the Midwest and works on a college campus.

### **Procedures**

To recruit participants, I utilized snowball sampling, which is defined as “random sample of individuals [that] is drawn from a given finite population” (Goodman, 1961, p. 3). I used snowball sampling by posting the call for interviews to Facebook. My friends then shared my posts on their pages. Additionally, another way I utilized snowball sampling was through my participants. If someone agreed to be a participant in the study, I asked these folks if they knew anyone who would fit the criteria of the study and if they would share the details of the study with the people they knew.

I conducted 12 interviews with each couple participating in 3 interviews. The first interview was comprised of a dyadic interview; two participants interact in response to open-ended research questions. After the dyadic interview, each person in the relationship participated in a separate individual interview. A total of four dyadic interviews were conducted and eight individual interviews were conducted. Collier and Thompson (2006) assert, "The 'interpretive' nature of communication scholarship affords researchers the opportunity to craft methods and perspectives of inquiry to better investigate questions concerned with complex, multi-leveled social phenomenon, such as race" (p. 490). Therefore, conducting the dyadic and the individual interviews were beneficial because it allowed me to see if there was a difference in the participant's communication style based on their partner being there or not. Utilizing both forms of interviewing was ideal in conducting my research because it allowed myself, as the researcher, to see how each person in the relationship navigated their communication when they were with

their partner and when they were not with their partner. Additionally, as I mentioned before in the rationale of the study, people are often unwilling to talk about race; therefore, separating the couple allowed each partner to more willingly open about issue of race and white privilege in a private setting.

The interviews were semi structured, which allowed myself and the participants to be more flexible when conducting the interviews. The average interview time for the dyadic interviews were approximately 35 min. and the average time for the individual interviews was approximately 31 min. The total amount of audio data for the dyadic interviews was approx. 2.5 hours and approx. 4 hours for the individual interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze my data, I transcribed each of the interviews. Once my transcriptions were completed, I went through the transcriptions and made initial notes about my reactions about the transcriptions. After I made initial notes on the transcripts, I used thematic analysis to find emerging themes. According to Owen (1984), a good theme within the data is based off 1). Recurrence 2. Repetition 3). Forcefulness. When I went through my transcription for the second time, I heavily relied on these tactics in order find my themes. Proceeding that process, I went through my initial list of themes again to narrow down my search. Finally, I compared my themes to current research on whiteness and white privilege in interracial relationships.



## **CHAPTER 4:**

### **RESULTS**

This chapter examines the findings of the study. The results of this study focused on the specific impacts that white privilege and whiteness have on interracial relationships where one person identifies as white and the other person identifies as a person of color. Throughout the result section I used my own person reflections as well as previous scholarship to help me analyze my results. In this chapter, I discussed the overarching theme that I found throughout my research. I also addressed specific themes regarding how whiteness and white privilege impacts interracial relationships.

#### **Overarching Theme**

When I was analyzing my findings, I found an overarching theme throughout my research. The overarching theme in my research was that during the individual and the dyadic participants often contradicted themselves in their communication. Baxter (1990) identified, “a contradiction is present whenever two tendencies or forces are interdependent (the dialectical principle of unity) yet mutually negate one another (the dialectal principle of negation)” (p. 70). Throughout both types of interviews, I found that participants would make significant claims pertaining to race, whiteness, and white privilege, and minutes later would negate the claims they made. Below, I highlighted some of the ways in which the participants in the study contradicted their communication throughout the interviews. I also address the two opposing forces in the theme that allowed this contradiction to occur. Contradictions were present two out of the three themes of this study.

#### **Dominant Themes**

When analyzing my findings, I found three underlying themes in my research. The three themes revealed that white privilege and whiteness impact interracial relationships in the following ways: 1) the racial salience of the relationship, 2) the acknowledgment of privilege in the relationship, and, 3) the whiter the couple looked the less racism/discrimination that they faced.

### **Racial Salience in Relationship**

The first theme that I found in my research was that white privilege and whiteness impacts how participants defined their relationship. Some ways in which white privilege and whiteness impacted couple's definition of their relationship was 1) the participants largely defined their relationship in terms of how other societal members interpret their relationship, and 2) the participants expressed hints of colorblindness to their racial differences.

#### *External influences*

The participants largely defined their relationship in terms of how other people view their relationship rather than focusing how they themselves define their relationship. All the participants (both individuals and couples) mentioned that the first time that they first acknowledged their partner's race was because of other people. For example, a lot of the participants mentioned their family largely shaped the definition of their relationship by acknowledging the differences between the participants and their partner. In her individual interview Blair (white woman) in her individual interview pointed out that

We would go to, um, and this sometimes happens, like, we'll go to like my families, you know side, like, Thanksgiving or Christmas. And then, um, my uncle who lives, or, you know, isn't used to being around like different races. And he'll make a comment and I'm like wow that was really racist.

Another example of how external influences impact Blair's (white woman) and Rodney's (black man) relationship is that Blair intentionally wears her wedding ring when she goes out in public. She noted that "Like when I am out in public, like, I make sure that I have my wedding ring on because I feel like if people, like, see that I have a mixed kid, they're going to be like where is the dad? Is he in the picture?"

Andie (Asian/white agender person) and Richard (white genderfluid person) had a similar story of how their relationship is defined by their family members making comments. One of the stories that Andie, told was about their experiences with another partner who was also white, but still speaks to how external influence impacts the definition of their relationship. Andie expressed in their individual interview that

There have been some awkward holidays there. There was one time where I had to, um, it was not with this partner but another one of my very very close, um, partners. I went to an Easter lunch. We were invited to a friend's house and, uh, I from the conversations that we were having had assumed very wrongly that this friend's family was friendly towards people of color. And I started to talk about issues from the perspective of you know as a person of color. And I was interrupted in the middle of my speaking point to say, "Wait you're a person of color?"

This example that Andie gave shows how a family can define your relationship. In this case it speaks to how their family views each person in the relationship.

Another example of how the participant's families defined the couple's relationship was language barriers between the different families. Stacy (Asian woman) and John (white man) both highlighted how their families are defining their relationship by acknowledging different languages in the relationship. Stacy expressed, "So for his family, that, he [her fiancé John] has

no knowledge of the language that we are speaking. Stacy then continued to mention how she and her fiancé accommodated to the language barrier between their families by saying that, “So we have to have one other person to be a translator all the time in the room.”

All these stories expressed that the relationship between the participants were defined largely by the people around them more so than how the couple defined the relationship. With my fiancé, I go through similar experiences in my relationship. My relationship with my fiancé is largely dictated by our racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. For example, as we are preparing for our wedding, we must keep in mind what traditions (from both sides) we want to keep. Like Blair’s (white woman) comments, my relationship with my fiancé’ is defined by what comments people make about us. For example, I cannot even count the number of times people made the comment to my fiancé, “Are you marrying her for her citizenship?” Comments like these illustrated the degree to which our relationship was impacted by the way other people define our relationship.

### *Colorblindness*

Another way that white privilege and whiteness impacted the participant’s definition of their relationship was that some participants expressed colorblindness. Three of the couples in the study exhibited colorblindness by not acknowledging difference between their partner and themselves. For example, when I asked Rodney (black man) and Blair (white woman) what advice they would give to someone entering in an interracial relationship, Rodney expressed that you need to view the relationship as a relationship and not an interracial relationship. He stated that, “I think that if you're going to it thinking that this is an interracial racial relationship it probably isn't for you.” He then continued by saying, “If you're putting a label on your relationship. Then there's some part of you that probably doesn't, is...You're gonna to run into

some problems somewhere. Lily (Asian woman) shared a similar opinion that Rodney did when I asked her about advice that she would give to interracial couples. She said that, “I would say just focus on the person's personality instead of their racial difference.”

Some other examples of how the participants were colorblind included how they acknowledged their own and their partner’s racial differences. One of the interview questions I asked the participants in both types of interviews was how important their partner’s racial differences to each other was. Most of the participants and their partners said that they really haven’t thought about the racial differences or they view themselves as equal in the relationship. John (white man) expressed in his individual interview that the racial differences in his relationship are “really not that important that they are different.” Another participant, Chuck (white man) in his individual interview also expressed a similar sentiment that John did when he said that he would rank the racial differences between him and his partner as low to medium. The reason why he said low to medium is because he hasn’t noticed a lot of differences yet because he and his partner have not been together for that long and they are in a long-distance relationship.

Another response that encompasses this idea of colorblindness came up in Stacy’s (Asian woman) individual interview. Towards the end of her interview, Stacy and I were talking about the interview questions that I had. She made the comment that I need to ask more question that allowed people to open up more about the topic because it was a hard topic to talk about. We then proceed discuss what question I would put in to allow the participants to open more. Stacy then remarked that, “yea. But I kind of... I think it’s because I don’t see color or race. That’s why it’s a lot easier for me and more open for me to say.” These responses highlight how the defining of their relationship is altered by hints of colorblind ideology. Rather than

acknowledging the differences between each person in the relationship, participants instead choose to not acknowledge the racial differences in their relationship.

### *Contradictions in racial salience in the relationship*

The first topic that caused contradiction amongst the participants was how important they felt their racial differences were. One couple that stood out as having the biggest contradiction for this section was between Lily (Asian woman) and Chuck (white man). As I mentioned in the previous section, I asked the participants how important their racial differences were to one another. During their dyadic interview, both Chuck and Lily expressed that they do not view their racial differences as important. Chuck noted, “I don’t know. I guess, um, maybe I thought of them as a lower importance just because, like, I haven’t noticed a whole lot yet that has been problematic.” Lily also agreed with him when he made this comment in the dyadic interview. However, when it came to the individual interviews Lily contradicted her partner by saying how important their racial differences were in their relationship. Lily explained that, “I guess it’s important.” Lily’s comment showed a contradiction in how she and her partner defined their relationship. Before their racial differences were not important, but later Lily felt that they were important.

According to Baxter (1990) for a contradiction in a relationship to occur, there must be two forces (tendencies) that agree with one another, but also negate one another in a relationship. For example, a couple’s need to stay close to one another and their need for their space is a contradiction because they could agree with one another, but at the same time it could negate with one another. In terms of this theme, Lily and Chuck present two tendencies that agree with one another yet negate one another as well. For them on one side, they think that their racial differences are not that important, but on the alternative side, Lily thinks that their racial

differences are important with one another. This causes the contradiction because on one end people as a whole do not open up when talking about race and the importance of race because it is a controversial topic within our society. Thus, by not talking about it, couples are playing it safe in the relationship. On the other hand, by not acknowledging racial differences, it erases people's entire identity.

### **Acknowledgement of Privilege in Relationship**

The second theme that was present in my research was how whiteness and white privilege impacted the acknowledgment of privilege in the relationship. In this section, I explained a) the participants defining what privilege and white privilege is b) whether participants acknowledged their privilege/ their partner's privilege b) the contradictions of privilege in their relationship.

#### ***Defining Privilege***

My analysis of my interviews suggested that the participants had a good grasp of what privilege and white privilege was and could give me examples of each of these terms. To gauge how much my participants knew about these concepts I first asked them to describe what whiteness, privilege, and white privilege were. I got a variety of answers amongst my participants. In her individual interview Blair (white woman) said that to her privilege, in the general context, is where "people who have like, um, maybe more opportunity than others. Um, and maybe the most opportunity that's not because of them. Like, maybe because of, like, their race or their parents." Another explanation of privilege that was given by my participant, Richard, (white genderfluid person), in their individual interview said that privilege is, "It means that.... Privilege means that you, that there's no need for you, for a person to think about what

they're doing. "In terms of white privilege, my participants had a pretty good grasp of what the term meant. Lily (Asian woman) said in her individual interview that she views white privilege in terms of protection. She explains that it does not protect from everything. However, she stated that, "but like um, you know like people, the white people don't, don't ha...have to experience...the, being marginalized by society." In other words, Lily expressed the ways in which white people are protected from being marginalized by society. Rodney (black man) gave a good example of white privilege in his individual interview when he stated, "I mean in a sense that I notice that when if I go to the gas station and I get out of my car and someone else gets out of the car and they see me... Without question they will lock their car or double check. I don't think that happens to white people too often." Overall, the participants understood the concept of privilege and white privilege.

### ***Privilege in Their Relationship***

Even though the participants were able to define the terms, the participants in the study varied on whether their partner did not have privilege and/or white privilege or they themselves did not have privilege/white privilege. When I asked if her partner had privilege in the relationship, Stacy (Asian woman) in her individual interview expressed, "[mmmm mmmm.] (nonverbal no)." She said the reason why is "Because we share our responsibility." Additionally, she said that, "And he never showed that he had something given to him or born with it." Regarding white privilege, I asked Stacy if she saw any impact of white privilege and whiteness on their relationship, she said, "Mmmm not." For her fiancé's answers, he had similar responses to the questions. When I asked John if he sees white privilege impacting their relationship, she shakes his head to give a nonverbal no.



Blair (white woman) and Rodney (black man) had similar yet different responses to the questions that I asked Stacy and John. In terms of general privilege, I asked Blair in her individual interview, whether she has privilege in her relationship. At first, she said that she didn't have privilege in the relationship, but then she started to question herself by saying "I think, um, I mean there's thing where like my name is on the house. That's because I have a better job and he has more debt that he racked up in college. It doesn't have to do with, like, I mean it doesn't have to do with he's black or how he grew up or anything like that." She followed up later by saying, "Um, but I don't think of it as like I'm a better person, you know?" When I asked Blair how white privilege impacts her relationship with your husband in her individual interview she said, "I think for me personally, like, it really doesn't impact anything in our relationship."

During the dyadic interview, I asked Rodney (black man) and Blair (white woman) how they see white privilege impacting their relationship. Rodney's response was, "she (referring to Blair) had an advantage coming from a well more educated home." Rodney then also mentioned that she'll correct him on his words that he is saying wrong. Blair responded to his statement by saying that, "Yea, but I can't do math or—." Rodney then answered her comment by saying that, "Yea, but those are things that I had to learn on my own."

In their interview, Lily (Asian woman) and Chuck (white man) varied in their answers a little bit on whether privilege/white privilege impacted their relationship. When I asked Lily if her partner had privilege in the relationship she said that he did. The reason why is because she said that, "He's white. He's a man. He has a job." When I asked her how white privilege impacts her relationship? She said that it has been fun. When I asked her why that is she followed up by saying that "I mean, um, yea, it's kind of fun to get to know him as well. And, um, so I, I'm

willing to understand the whiteness more. Chuck responded to these questions by saying that he does have privilege in the relationship because of the role he plays in the relationship. He states that, “I know she looks to me to be somebody to kind of lead the relationship.” Additionally, Chuck also said that one way he has privilege in his relationship is because of being white in a majority culture in the U.S. rather than being a minority in his partners culture (Japan). He further explains that, “it’s sometimes very looked down upon that a Japanese person would marry a non-Japanese.”

Andie (Asian/white agender person) and Richard (white genderfluid person) both acknowledged the privilege in their relationship. Richard explained that because they are white they have a huge amount of privilege. They fully acknowledge their privilege by saying that, “As a white person I definitely have privileges in this interracial relationship. Definitely.” In addition to privilege, Richard also acknowledges that white privilege also impacts their relationship with their partner. “Um. I think it impacts it. You know. You know. I think the way that it impacts it is that it's helping deconstruct it.” Richard follows that by saying that

I think that because both... I don't want to speak for Andie, but I think that in this case it's ok. I think that both Andie and I are both very much so in the same boat about like wanting to deconstruct whiteness and like using, not using, but like having this interracial relationship and being aware of the ways in which it can potentially like change the world. Not really change the world, but like change how society views interracial relationships

Andie (white/Asian agender person) agreed with their partner by also acknowledging the privilege in their relationship. Andie said, “It's impacted my side of the relationship and that I have to learn to come out of white privilege.”

These examples provide support for the ways in which white privilege and whiteness impacts interracial relationship. One of the ways being that it impacts their relationship by either acknowledging or not acknowledging their own privilege or their partner's privilege. In my relationship with my fiancé, I try to acknowledge my privilege, but there are times where I feel that I need to do a better job in acknowledging my privilege. One example of where I feel like I need to constantly recognize my privilege is when my fiancé and I talk about his immigration status and U.S. immigration as a whole.

### *Contradictions in privilege*

The second area that couples contradicted themselves was when they were talking about privilege. Privilege was a topic that was rife for contradiction with the couples.

For Stacy (Asian), she contradicted her communication when she was acknowledging her partner's privilege. Through the dyadic interview and her individual interview, she reiterated that she and her partner view each other as equal and that he does exhibit his privilege in the relationship. However, there times after those statements that she said somethings that showed how her partner did have privilege in the relationship. For example, right after I asked Stacy if partner has privilege in the relationship said no, but not even two seconds later she said that "whenever he shows some sort of privilege we work together." This shows a prime example of how there was a contradiction in her communication about privilege.

In terms of this theme, Stacy (Asian woman) also presents two tendencies that agree with one another, but also negate one another. For Stacy, on one side, she does not acknowledge her partner's privilege, but at the same time, she said that when her partner exhibits his privilege, then they work it out. It is this push to acknowledge the privilege in the relationship, but also a pull that says, "oh I'm not privileged, and my partner is not privileged." This causes a

contradiction because, like race, privilege is another topic that most people usually do not open about. One hand, by acknowledging the privilege in the relationship, work to understand the power dynamics in the relationship. However, on the same token if you do not acknowledge the privilege in the relationship, this could have a lot of implications on the relationship and on a societal level. By not acknowledge white privilege, it continues to put up this shield of innocence around white persons that reiterates a false notion that they can do no harm and prevents white persons from correcting the harm that they have caused.

### **The Whiter We Look the Less Racism/Discrimination We Face**

The final theme that I found in my analysis was that the whiter the participants looked the less racism/ discrimination that they faced. In other words, if the participants had a lighter skin color, they received less racism/discrimination. During the dyadic and individual interviews, all the couples said that they haven't received any racist/ discriminatory remarks. However, three out of the four couples elaborated on why they haven't received any racist/discriminatory remarks.

When I was conducting John (white man)'s individual interview (who is with an Asian partner) I asked him how society views their relationship. His response was that they perceive it as common. He then talked about how their relationships is more acceptable than other interracial relationships. When I asked him why that is he said that it's because they are, "lot more similar or similar minded."

Chuck (white man) had a similar mindset to John when I asked him how white privilege impacts his relationship with this partner. He remarked that, "as a white male in a white male/Asian female relationship, it's a lot easier on me than it would have been had I been anything else." The reason why he feels that way is because on one hand, "we won't get as many

comments just because I'm white” and on the other hand Chuck mentioned “if I were another race it would really be awkward.” Lily (Asian woman) also shared the same opinion as her partner. She talked about how her family and friends would have made a lot more comments about their relationship if she was dating someone that was not Japanese or not white. However, since she is with a white guy she says that it is more socially acceptable. Additionally, Lily also commented that she felt safer being with a white guy. She exclaims “I kind of noticed that compare to being in a relationship like, other than white guy...I might of like, um, felt like, unsafe.” She also reiterated that her family was comforted knowing that she was with someone who was white because of this aspect as well. This goes to show that even the relationship the whiter the couple is the less racism and discrimination that they face.

Andie (Asian/white agender person) also addressed this topic in their interview when they talked about how being a light skinned person of color has impacted their relationship. During the couple interview they said that being a light skinned person of color, “really makes things a lot easier when it comes to, uh, social reactions.” However, then during their dyadic interview Andie highlighted that, “I'm not considered to be a person of color by white people.... And I continue to be an invisible person of color until it is convenient for them.” Richard also touched on the general topic by elaborating on the dynamics of different types of racial couples. They said that, “if it were two people of color, I feel like it would be there would be other problems. The topics that the participants talked about reiterated how the whiter the participants were/the lighter the skin color of the participants, the less racism/discrimination that they faced.

My fiancé and I shared similar experiences with this theme because of my racial identity as a white person. Chuck (white man) mentioned earlier that the reason why he and his partner do not get as many comments about their relationships is because he is white. Although other

people have made racist remarks towards my fiancé, people do not make comments towards me because I am not a person of color. For example, one night when we were out, a white man walked by my fiancé and I and said to my fiancé, “damn Indian.” The man then proceeded to say to me, “Oh I didn’t mean you.” This experience adhered to the theme of the whiter we are the less discrimination we faced because I didn’t receive any comments in that moment because I am white.

In this chapter, I provided an analysis of the three dominant themes within my research. My findings showed how whiteness and white privilege impacted interracial relationships in the following areas: 1) the racial salience of relationship, 2) the acknowledgment in their privilege, and 3) the whiter the participants were the less discrimination/ racism that the couple received. In addition to those themes, the participants also unveiled a large theme of contradiction in their communication. Overall, the participants in the study offered important insight on how whiteness and white privilege impacted their specific relationship.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

In this chapter, I conclude my study with a discussion of results in the study. The purpose of the study was to find out the impacts of white privilege and whiteness on interracial relationships. In this chapter, I will present the answer to my research question, the implication and limitations of my research, and future research possibilities.

#### **Revisiting the Research Question**

The research question that I used in this study was, “How does whiteness and white privilege impact interracial relationships?” In my analysis I posited that there are three different ways that whiteness and white privilege impacts interracial relationships. The three ways that whiteness and white privilege impact interracial relationships are: 1) the racial salience of the relationships 2) the acknowledgment of their privilege 3) the whiter the participants were the less racism/discrimination that they faced. Additionally, an overarching theme of my data was that there were contradictions in communication between my participants from interview to interview.

The overarching theme that I found in my research was that there was contradiction in communication between my participants from interview to interview. Meaning that participants said one thing in an interview and either said something differently in another interview or they said something different in the same interview. This theme came up when the participants were talking about the racial salience of their relationship and the acknowledgment of privilege in their relationship.

Apart from the overarching themes there were three underlying themes that were analyzed in the data. The first theme centered around how whiteness and white privilege impacts

the racial salience of the relationship. Most of the participants expressed that they themselves rarely acknowledge their and their partners racial differences, but external influences (family, friends, societal members, etc.) pushed them to think about it. For example, Blair mentioned that she intentionally wears her wedding ring out in public so that other people acknowledge that her husband is her husband or that her child is her child. Andie mentioned that the fact that they were questioned on if they were a person of color in their relationship made them realize their racial differences between their partner.

The participants also exhibited hints of colorblindness when talking about how important their racial differences were to each other. Some of the participants were showing signs of colorblindness because, as I mentioned before, some of the participants didn't view their racial differences as important. When asked what advice they would give couples entering in an interracial relationship, Rodney said that if you go into a relationship because it's an interracial relationship, it's not for you. He said that you must view it as a relationship. Lily also had a similar remark by saying that couples should focus on the person's personality rather than their partners racial differences. These examples resemble colorblind ideology because it ignores the racial difference rather than acknowledges them.

The second theme focused how white privilege and whiteness impacts the acknowledgement of the privilege in the relationship. All the participants in the study did a good job of giving definitions and examples of whiteness, privilege, and white privilege. However, the participants in the study varied on the acknowledgement of their privilege. Some participants fully acknowledged their privilege and/or their partner's privilege, but sometimes they did not do that.



The last theme that I analyzed in my research was how the whiter the participants were the less racism/discrimination that they received. This theme was apparent in the couples that had lighter skinned person of color or white in it. The participants gave various reasons why they received less racist/ discriminatory remarks. According to Chuck (white man), one of the reasons why that was because he was white. Andie (Asian/white agender person) gave another reason when they stated that since they are a lighter skinned person of color that is the reason why they receive less racist/ discriminatory remarks. The final reason, according to the participants, was because if the couple involved two people of color, they would have a lot more barriers than other interracial couples.

### **Implications**

This study offers a wide variety of implications for both interracial couples who involve a person color and a white person and additionally for societies view of interracial couples as we whole. First, an implication of this study is that it addresses the topic of the model minority. Within the third theme of my analysis, the participants touched the belief that the reason they received less racist/ discriminatory remarks is because of their lighter/white skin tone. This theme in my research is aligns with the model minority ideal. Kawai (2005) noted that, “the model minority is probably the most influential and prevalent stereotype for Asian Americans today” (p. 109). Sakamoto et al. (2012) explains

The term was meant to convey the stereotypic view that Asian Americans were becoming economically successful by persevering and overcoming disadvantages through hard work, thrift, strong family ties, and emphasizing children’s education. The term ‘model minority’ also obliquely suggested that Asian Americans were less prone to the sort of social problems that are often thought to be more highly associated with low-income

communities such as divorce, single-parent families, poor educational attainment, juvenile delinquency, crime, drug addiction, unemployment, and welfare dependency. (p. 310)

By viewing their relationship as more acceptable within society, the participants are adhering to the model minority ideal. An ideal that is largely shaped by the idea of the Asian person are largely more accepted within society than other races.

Another implication of this study is that it warrants a discussion on the topic of interracial relationships. Not only for interracial relationships, but for interracial couples that involve a white person. Wang (2012) also found that 9% of interracial relationships had a white partner in the relationship in 2010. As interracial relationships with a white person and a person of color become more common. It is imperative that we start doing more research/scholarship and have more discourse on the rhetoric on the impact of white privilege and whiteness on interracial relationships. The reason why is because if we want to work towards being an anti-racist society, we need to start from the ground up and look at our own relationships and see where we need to change.

### **Limitations**

Throughout my study I have identified two limitations within my research. The first one being that because of my race, participants may or may not have disclosed certain information. Meaning that since I am white, participants that identified as a person of color may or may not have wanted to disclose certain things because of my racial identity. If they chose not to disclose for that reason, it possibly could have limited my research.

Another limitation I had in my research was that it took a long time to get participants for my study. When I posted the call for my research on Facebook, a lot of people commented or

messaging me saying that they would participate in my study, but when it came down to it, only a few people followed up with me to schedule and complete their interviews. Since I only got four couples, (eight participants), I felt that limited my research.

### **Future Research**

The purpose of the study was to examine the impact of whiteness and white privilege on interracial relationships. Since the number of interracial relationships is growing, there are numerous possibilities of potential research I could do. My study only had participants/ couples who were either white, black, Asian, or mixed race. I think that future research on other races who are in interracial relationships with a white person is something else that could be explored. For example, research that might include someone who is Latinx.

Another possibility of research would be to explore whiteness and white privilege on interracial couples who are not from the U.S. A handful of my participants were from other countries, but I think it would be interesting to explore how these topics are viewed in other parts of the world. For example, do white Europeans acknowledge their privilege in the same way that people from the U.S. do? Or, do white persons who are in another country that is not predominately white acknowledge their privilege? These would be some of the questions that I would like to explore for future research.

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