

# Interracial Lesbian And Gay Couples: Navigating Private And Public Experiences

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INTERRACIAL LESBIAN AND GAY COUPLES:  
NAVIGATING PRIVATE AND PUBLIC EXPERIENCES

by

ANNE BUBRISKI-MCKENZIE  
B.G.S. University of Connecticut, 2006  
M.A. Southern Connecticut State University, 2009

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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Major Professor: Liz Grauerholz

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the private and public experiences of Black/White interracial lesbian and gay couples. Drawing from the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and intersectional feminism, this research focuses on how the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality influence relationship experiences and family processes in both private and public spaces for interracial same-sex couples. This study is based on 19 in-depth interviews with individuals in Black/White lesbian and gay relationships. Participants' stories highlight intersectionality in terms of the ways interracial lesbian and gay couples navigate these interpersonal and public spaces. Participant experiences suggest that the dichotomy of private/public is often blurred, and these two spaces frequently overlap and intersect. Often what participants experience in public is then discussed and interpreted within private spaces. It is in the private space that participants work through complex issues in order to present themselves as a couple in public. Participants frequently used their public and interpersonal experiences with their partners to be reflexive of their own understandings of the social world, relationship processes, and love. Given the lack of research on same-sex, interracial families, this study makes an important contribution to sociological research on families, LGBTQ studies, and race studies.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The definition of family has changed throughout time. For instance, from the Middle Ages to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, family referred to kinship groups for claims to property and privilege in Europe (Coontz 2010). However, at the same time in China, family referred to only the father and his biological children (Coontz 2010). It wasn't until the mid-1800s that family referred to only a legally married couple with children (Coontz 2010). Furthermore, before European colonization, some American Indian and African tribes consisted of "female husbands," permitting women to marry other women in order to establish family ties (Coontz 2010). Despite such historical and cultural variations, "almost all societies use the term [family] to endow certain sexual relations and biological connections with special privileges and obligations...but the family that is codified as 'normal' in law and ideology tends to represent the interests and ideals of the dominant members of society" (Coontz 2010:33).

Throughout American history, privilege and status have historically and arguably continue to favor heterosexual, monoracial, married couples with biological children. Until 1967, with the passage of *Loving v. Virginia*, Blacks and Whites were not able to legally marry. Many states in the U.S. continued to have legal bans on interracial marriage well into the late 1990s. Similarly, in the majority of U.S. states, same-sex couples are not able to legally marry or even adopt children. Some U.S. states have passed laws recognizing same-sex marriage, but there is no federal law acknowledging same-sex marriage. Despite legal restrictions and cultural taboos, interracial and same-sex couples continue to increase and societal attitudes regarding these relationships continue to change (Passel, Wang and Taylor 2010; Wang 2102), suggesting a remarkable resilience of the family institution.

Sociologists have noted how the family and institution of marriage adapt and respond positively to social and cultural changes by reconstructing and redefining family and marital norms (Goode 1982; Amato, Johnson and Rogers 2007). According to Amato et al. (2007), families and marriages improve as they respond to societal changes. However, the most culturally acceptable family formations will always be afforded more social status and privilege than “alternative” family forms (Coontz 2010). Thus, while LGBTQ<sup>1</sup> and interracial families continue to grow and gain more societal and legal acceptance, they are often still marginalized within mainstream American culture.

The continued increase of interracial families and LGBTQ families<sup>2</sup> has resulted in more research on interracial families and LGBTQ families. In the last ten years, multiple areas of sociological inquiry within interracial families have emerged including interracial marriage trends (Passel et al. 2010; Qian and Litcher 2011; Wang 2012), why interracial couples marry (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1990; Fu 2001; Fu 2008), how interracial couples manage their racial difference (Killian 2002; Childs 2005a; Steinbugler 2012), societal attitudes towards interracial relationships (Childs 2005b; Schoepflin 2009; Campbell and Herman 2010), parenting within interracial families (O’Donoghue 2004; Rockquemore and Henderson 2005; Harmen 2009; Edwards, Caballero and Puthussery 2010), and multiracial identity and identification (Harris and Jeremiah 2002; Herman 2002; Brunnsma 2005; Brunnsma 2006). However, the large

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<sup>1</sup> The acronym LGBTQ stands of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgendered, and queer. LGBTQ is used in this study opposed to LGBT since some participants self-identify as sexually “queer” and/or gender “queer.” Also, some participants use the acronym LGBTQ when describing their own communities. In order to appreciate each participants’ self-identified sexuality and gender identity and community, LGBTQ is a more inclusive term.

<sup>2</sup> The term family and couple is used interchangeably throughout when referring to participants’ relationships. Because many participants consider their relationship and partner as family, I use this term to be inclusive and to challenge traditional notions of the term “family.” Thus, while the participants are a couple with their partner, for most, this is also their family.

majority of these studies examine heterosexual interracial couples, ignoring same-sex interracial couples.

Meanwhile, the literature on same-sex families predominately looks at monoracial Black<sup>3</sup> or White same-sex families (Biblarz and Savci 2010). There has been increasing recognition of racial difference among same-sex couples (Moore 2008; Moore 2011; Reed et al. 2011). However, the majority of research on same-sex couples looks at White, middle-class, college educated couples (Biblarz and Savci 2010). With the exception of Steinbugler (2005; 2012) and Rotosky et al. (2008), there is limited discussion of interracial LGBTQ couples and families. This is a peculiar omission since recent Census (2010) data suggest about 20 percent of same-sex couples are interracial compared to about 18 percent of opposite-sex couples (Gates 2012a). Thus, relationship and family processes among same-sex interracial families are neglected topics and therefore ripe for future sociological research.

Drawing from the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and intersectional feminism, this research focuses on same-sex Black-White interracial couples to explore how the intersection of gender, race, and sexuality influence relationship experiences and family processes in both private and public spaces.

### Dissertation Structure and Theme Development

This dissertation is structured differently from traditional dissertations. Instead of having a book like structure that includes multiple findings chapters, this dissertation's findings chapters

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term "Black" opposed to African American because Black is more inclusive. The term Black includes all people of African decent, recent African and Caribbean immigrants who identify as such, and those who identify as Caribbean Americans and African Americans. Furthermore, some participants in this study have Caribbean heritage and self identity as "Black" and not "African American." Thus, to include all participants' self-identified identities, Black is a more inclusive term than African American.

are written in article format for journal publication submission. Thus, the two findings chapters, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, are formatted to each include an introduction, literature review, methods, findings, and a conclusion. Each chapter has a separate literature review specifically addressing the particular chapter findings. Both chapters include similar methods sections since the same sample, data collection and data analyses were used. However, each chapter includes a lengthy presentation of a different theme.

On the other hand, Chapters 2 and 3 are structured more traditionally to include a literature review (Chapter 2) and methods and theory (Chapter 3). The literature review differs significantly from the literature reviews in the two findings chapters. Chapter 2 broadly includes literature on interracial couples, same-sex couples, and the private and public. Chapter 3, theory and methods, extensively discusses the methodology used in this dissertation including important theoretical frameworks. The methods section within the two findings chapters are very short, written in article format, and are snapshots of Chapter 3. Finally, Chapter 6 includes a conclusion providing an overview of the themes discussed in this dissertation, a limitations discussion, and a section on future research directions.

Theme development is the heart of this research and required multiple coding sessions and extensive time to review participants' stories. The two major themes presented in this dissertation look at participant experiences in private and public spaces. Chapter 4 looks at how participants manage public experiences. Multiple themes emerged within this major theme of managing public experiences. The subthemes include negotiating visibility, negotiating invisibility, encountering extended family, navigating LGBTQ spaces, and resisting public hostility. Two primary questions in the interview in which most of these themes emerged are, "Tell me about your experiences as a couple in public places" and "Tell me about your

relationships with extended family.” Emergence of these themes do not stem from a specific question about the theme. For example, I never asked specifically, “how is your relationship visible/invisible” or “how do you resist negative reactions.” Thus, my goal was to allow themes to develop on their own and to remain grounded in the data.

Chapter 5 discusses the other major theme, managing private spaces. It was from public experiences, that many participants reflected on with their partners in the “backstage” private spaces of their relationships. This major theme of managing racial difference in private spaces includes multiple subthemes; partner ally, initial attraction, seeing race differently, heightened racial consciousness, considering children, and racial humor. Racial difference was the primary topic about which participants wanted to discuss. Theoretically sexuality and gender have an impact on their intimate experiences, but the participants overwhelmingly wanted to talk mostly about their experiences as in interracial couple and their racial difference. From the participants’ stories, private spaces and conversation seemed to center on dialog around race. As a result, this chapter focuses primarily on race dialogs among these couples. Interview questions used to develop these themes include; “Do you talk about race with your partner?” and “How does race impact your relationship?” Another question that grounded these themes includes, “Has your relationship shaped your own identity and how you see the world?” Thus, the emerging themes do not stem from a specific question designed to elicit information about heightened racial consciousness, racial attraction, seeing race differently, and so on. For example, I never asked specifically, “Do you see race differently from your partner” or “Do you have a better awareness of race because of your relationship?” Therefore, this dissertation seeks to present themes organically through what data suggest.

### Significance of Research

Because historic and systemic racism in the U.S. continue to create the strictest racial boundary between Blacks and Whites (Bonilla-Silva 2004; Lee and Bean 2004), Black-White interracial couples are least common and least accepted (Passel et al. 2010; Wang 2012). This in part largely reflects how the history of slavery, racism, and racial segregation continue to evade American society and impact intimate interracial interaction (Rockquemore and Henderson 2010). Historically, Black-White intimacy has been legally restricted and considered a cultural taboo. Given this, how then do Black-White couples manage structural and historical racial oppression and cultural taboos about interracial intimacy? For this reason, this study only includes members of Black-White interracial unions. To compound the obstacle of racial divide between Blacks and Whites, this study includes *same-sex* Black-White couples to explore the complexities of how race, gender and sexuality intersect in everyday experiences for interracial same-sex couples.

Keeping the research inquiry open, this study explores same-sex interracial couples' everyday experiences in public and private spheres; how their relationship has impacted their own identities; and how they manage racism, sexism, and heterosexism. This study makes an important contribution to the literature on interracial and LGBTQ families. Additionally, this study contributes to the limited research on intersectionality by revealing relationship dynamics and challenges for these couples whose lives have been largely ignored in previous research. It also contributes to goals of social justice research by bringing silenced voices of members of interracial same-sex couples to the scholarly discussion on what it means to be in interracial and same-sex partnerships. Lastly, this dissertation adds to the growing demand for more research using a theoretical guided framework of intersectionality (Collins 2000; Collins and Anderson

2007; Bowleg 2008). How the intersection of race, gender, class and sexuality impact relationship and family processes are important for a deeper understanding of family life.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Backdrop of Black-White Interracial Intimacy

Family structure changes and adapts according to social and cultural changes within society (Amato et al. 2007). This is viewed as the marital resilience perspective (Amato et al. 2007). Marital resilience scholars argue that families and marriages improve as they respond to societal changes. Thus, as the racial climate and race relations have changed, interracial families have increased (Passel et al. 2010; Qian and Litcher 2011). Interracial unions have dramatically increased in the U.S. since the 1960s (Lee and Bean 2004; Rockquemore and Henderson 2010; Rosenfeld 2010). More specifically, Rosenfeld (2010) reports that interracial marriages only accounted for about two percent of all married couples in 1970 but rose to almost eight percent of all married couples by 2005. This rise is largely due to the Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967, which ruled miscegenation unconstitutional. In most places in the U.S. before this landmark legislation, it was illegal for Blacks and Whites to marry, leaving it inconceivable for public recognition of interracial families.

The legacy regulating miscegenation between Blacks and Whites is rooted in America's horrific history of African enslavement. The slave system depended on the strict regulation of miscegenation and the regulation of both Black and White women's sexuality (Collins and Anderson 2007). Throughout most of American history, interracial families were not legally acknowledged, but actually having people of different races biologically related did occur. However, the dynamics of this "interracial family" were often through coerced and forced sexual assault on Black slave women. During the era of slavery, Black women slaves were frequently raped by White slave masters that often resulted in the birth of children. However, to uphold the

slave system, particularly after the slave trade was abolished, the children born out of slave masters' raping of slave women were considered "Black" through the one-drop rule and were made part of the slave labor and property of the slave master. As Rockquemore and Henderson (2010:101) write, "In order to control slaves and maintain White supremacy, interracial coupling was strictly prohibited, and the one-drop rule was used to determine who was 'Black.'" Furthermore, regulation of miscegenation also applied to White women and Black men. If a child was born from a White mother and a Black slave father, the slave father was often brutally beaten, lynched or castrated because such a child "directly threatened the purity of the White race and the logic of the slave system" (Rockquemore and Henderson 2010:102).

Once slavery ended, while Blacks were not slaves anymore, the racial system of stratification and hierarchy changed little and any type of interracial mixing between Whites and Blacks was often met with severe violence. In the south, Jim Crow laws prohibited Blacks and Whites from intermixing in public spaces. During this time period, it was not uncommon for Black men to be lynched for "suspected" raping of White women, even though studies have documented that sexual assault on White women by Black men rarely occurred (Davis 1981). In addition to the rhetoric that claimed Blacks and Whites were biologically different and Blacks were biologically inferior, other social stereotypes of Blacks became prominent, such as the "mammy," hyper-sexualized Black women, and the Black male sexual predator (Davis 1981; Collins 2000). Whites tried to justify sexual assault on Black women by "[constructing] African American women as overly sensual, lustful and rapacious, possessing such excessive sexuality that even the most strong-willed, reasonable White man eventually succumbed" (Steinbugler 2005:425-426). Unfortunately, these sexual stereotypes of Black men and women permeate today and arguably have impacted negative social acceptance for Black-White intimacy (Childs

2005a). When White women engage in sexual intimacy with Black men, these White women are often perceived as less than, tasteless, and “trashy” (Childs 2005a). These public stereotypical perceptions sometimes affect interracial couples’ ability to be open about their relationship and hesitant to tell family and friends (Childs 2005a; Steinbugler 2012).

This historic overview of the Black-White racial divide, particularly around intimacy, is important to discuss in order to contextualize the sociopolitical barriers that exist for interracial families. By no means do I only consider Black-White families interracial or the only interracial couples to face such challenges, but I would argue that these barriers are greatest for Black-White interracial families. Black-White interracial families face the most social stigma, negative reactions, and arguably face the most discrimination (Childs 2005a; Childs 2005b). Dalmage (2006), a self-identified White woman, talks about her own experience of being treated more kindly and fair when she shopped for real-estate by herself than when she and her Black husband shopped together. Additionally, in terms of economic stability, Black-White interracial couples on average earn the lowest combined annual incomes of any other interracial couple (Wang 2012). One may also argue that a major reason for White-Black couples to have the highest rates of cohabitation (Qian and Litcher 2011) of any interracial pairing, may be because Black-White relationships are the least accepted form of interracial marriage from family members and society at large (Wang 2012).

Yet, despite limited interracial interaction and lack of support, interracial unions continue to increase (Lewis and Ford-Robertson 2010; Qian and Lichter 2011). Interracial unions have dramatically increased in the U.S. since the 1960s (Lee and Bean 2004; Rockquemore and Henderson 2010; Rosenfeld 2010; Qian and Litcher 2011). Some scholars look at the rising rates of interracial unions as a reflection of progress in race relations in the U.S. (Lee and Bean 2004;

Rockquemore and Henderson 2010; Rosenfeld 2010). Interracial marriage has increased significantly since 1980. In 1980, interracial marriage accounted for approximately seven percent of newlywed couples but only three percent of all currently married couples (Passel et al. 2010; Qian and Litcher 2011). The majority of these marriages consisted of a White spouse and a non-White spouse (Qian 1997; Lewis and Ford-Robertson 2010). By 2010, 15 percent of new marriages were interracial, but only eight percent of all marriages were interracial (Wang 2012). Similar to 1980, most interracial marriages in 2010 include a White spouse. Thus, rates of interracial marriage are higher for new marriages compared to all currently married couples in both 1980 and 2010 (Passel et al. 2010; Wang 2012). Yet, the fact that interracial relationships have increased but interracial marriage remains less than 15 percent of all marriages and Black-White unions are least likely to be formed among interracial marriages, suggest that the history of slavery, racism, and racial segregation continue to shape American society and impact intimate interracial interactions (Rockquemore and Henderson 2010).

Interracial marriage varies across racial and ethnic groups. As of 2008, nine percent of Whites, 16 percent of Blacks, 26 percent of Hispanics, and 31 percent of Asians who recently married, married someone of a different race or ethnicity (Passel et al. 2010). Of new interracial marriages in 2010, 43 percent were White/Hispanic, 30 percent White/American Indian or multiracial, 14 percent White/Asian, and 12 percent White/Black (Wang 2012). Interracial marriage rates for Blacks and Whites increased substantially in the past 30 years, but little change occurred for Asians, Hispanics, and American Indians overall (Passel et al. 2010; Qian and Litcher 2011). Societal attitudes toward interracial marriage has improved over time, however attitudes tend to be more positive when the interracial marriage does not involve a Black partner (Passel et al. 2010; Wang 2012). Wang (2012) reports 81 percent of people would

be fine with a family member marrying a White partner and 75 percent and 73 percent would be fine with an Asian or Hispanic partner, respectively (Wang 2012). However, only 66 percent of people would be fine with a family member marrying a Black partner (Wang 2012). Again these figures reflect the legacy of slavery and racial segregation and the continued volatile racial boundary between White and Black.

When exploring the trends of Black-White interracial marriage, it is important to look at Whites' and Blacks' patterns of interracial marriage separately before looking specifically at Black-White interracial marriage. It is important to look at these two groups separately because they include different patterns and trends in the ways they marry interracially. As presented above, one aspect Whites and Blacks have in common is that both groups have the lowest rates of interracial marriage compared to other racial and ethnic groups (Passel et al. 2010).

Even though Whites constitute the majority of the population, Whites as a group have the lowest rates of interracial marriage (Passel et al. 2010). Of marriages overall in 1980, about two percent of Whites married interracially (Passel et al. 2010). These figures rose by 2008 with almost five percent of all Whites who were married had a spouse of another race or ethnicity (Passel et al. 2010). Furthermore, by 2008, of Whites who married interracially, 49 percent married a Hispanic partner, 20 percent married either an American Indian partner or a multiracial partner, 18 percent married an Asian partner, and 14 percent married a Black partner (Passel et al. 2010). Furthermore, compared to White men who marry interracially, White women are almost three times as likely to marry a Black partner (Passel et al. 2010).

Similar to Whites, Blacks also have low out-marriage rates. In 1980, of all marriages, only three percent of Blacks were in an interracial marriage (Passel et al. 2010) and had the highest endogamy rates than any other racial/ethnic group (Qian 1997). By 2008, about 9 percent

of Blacks in all marriages were married to a partner of another race or ethnicity (Passel et al. 2010). Of Blacks who married interracially in 2008, 58 percent married a White partner, 23 percent a Hispanic partner, 13 percent an American Indian or multiracial partner, and seven percent an Asian partner (Passel et al. 2010). Furthermore, Black men are twice as likely to marry interracially compared to Black women (Qian and Litcher 2011). Despite the gender differences in Blacks marrying out, there is little difference for both Black women and Black men in who they marry interracially, with the majority marrying a White spouse (Passel et al. 2010).

As the research suggests, out-marriage rates and patterns for Whites and Blacks vary significantly. Most apparent is that Blacks who married interracially were most likely to marry Whites, whereas Whites who married interracially were least likely to marry Blacks (Passel et al. 2010). Moreover, gender patterns between Blacks and Whites who out-marry differ as well. Black men are more likely to marry interracially than Black women but there are not large differences in who they marry interracially (Passel et al. 2010). However, White women and White men have similar out-marriage rates, but compared to White men, White women are almost three times more likely to marry a Black partner (Passel et al. 2010).

Differences between Black and White interracial marriage rates may impact why Black-White interracial marriage only accounts for 12 percent of all interracial marriages (Wang 2012). Co-habitation for interracial Black-White couples increased significantly by 2010 with more Black-White interracial couples cohabitating than being legally married (Batson, Qian and Litcher 2006; Qian and Litcher 2011). Furthermore, foreign born Blacks marrying Whites has increased substantially from 1980-2008 (Qian and Litcher 2011). However, U.S. born Blacks are far more likely to marry Whites than foreign born Blacks, but unions between U.S. Blacks and

foreign born Blacks far exceed interracial unions between U.S. born Blacks and Whites (Batson et al. 2006). Region also plays a role in Black-White interracial marriage trends. During the 1970s – 1980s, marriages between Black-White couples were less frequent in the South than in non-Southern regions (Kalmijn 1993). However, by 2010, of newlywed Black-White couples, 51 percent lived in the South, 20 percent in the Midwest, 16 percent in the West, and 14 percent in the Northeast (Wang 2012).

While recent studies suggest interracial unions and families are increasing, it is difficult to ignore how the legacy of societal disapproval towards Black-White interracial relationships impacts trends in interracial family formations. From the horrific days of slavery to Jim Crow and now de-facto segregation, the racial climate for Black-White interracial relationships is not as rosy as some may believe. The more recent research, both qualitative and quantitative, clearly suggest Black-White interracial couples are the least accepted, least common and arguable the most taboo type of interracial relationship (Childs 2005a; Childs 2005b; Passel et al. 2010; Wang 2012). Nevertheless, research on interracial relationship trends demonstrate that Black-White interracial couples are increasing and becoming more accepted than ever before (Passel et al. 2010; Wang 2012). While this is significant and positive, it is still important to acknowledge how the history of Black-White interracial intimacy and various social structures and social institutions impact these relationship processes.

### Theorizing Opposite-Sex Interracial Couples

There have been multiple theories to explain the patterns in interracial marriage over the past 30 years. These theories include status-exchange (Davis 1941; Merton 1941), traditional assimilation (Gordon 1964), differential assimilation (Lewis and Ford-Robertson 2010), and

structural opportunity (Blau 1977; Heaton and Jacobson 2000). These theories overlap in many ways, but each theory has specific aspects that set them apart from one another. Researchers have tested these theories primarily using quantitative methods and census data, collected in 1980, 1990, and 2000, and data from the American Community Survey.

Merton (1941) and Davis (1941) framed the status-exchange theory when describing interracial marriage between Blacks and Whites. However, this theory is also used when evaluating all types of interracial marriages in the U.S. According to Davis (1941) and Merton (1941), people who intermarry racially often “exchange” statuses, usually race and socioeconomic statuses. They argue that lower racial status partners who have high levels of socioeconomic status (measured by education) will most likely marry a member of the higher racial status who has less education or less socioeconomic power. Thus, when well educated Black men marry less educated White women, there is an “exchange” of socioeconomic status in order to offset the lower racial status. Davis (1941) and Merton (1941) proposed this particular interracial marriage pattern as common. A critical aspect of the status-exchange theory is that as a society, people need to agree upon which racial groups are high status and which group are low status (Fu 2001).

There is mixed support for status-exchange within the research on interracial marriages. Some studies find support for the status-exchange theory when analyzing White and Black marriages, particularly those including a White woman and a Black man (Kalmijn 1993; Qian 1997; Fu 2001). Kalmijn (1993) finds that status exchange may be a factor in Black-White marriages since he found White women marry Black men of higher socioeconomic status (education) 25% more often than marrying Black men with less education. Black women who marry White men also marry White partners who are less educated or have fewer socioeconomic

resources (Kalmijn 1993; Qian 1997). Thus, these studies suggest that both men and women of racial minority groups “marry down” to White partners with less education, perhaps for a lower racial status exchange for their higher socioeconomic status. Kalmijn (1993) does propose that structural opportunities may play a large role in these patterns, another theory that will be addressed in a following section.

However, other studies do not support the status-exchange theory (Qian 1997; Schwartz and Mare 2005; Fu 2008). Fu (2008) finds that there are no significant differences in exchange status for people who marry within the same racial group from people who marry outside their racial group. Same race couples and interracial couples on average tend to match in socio-economic-status. Fu finds that most couples match equally in relation to educational achievement and occupational prestige. Using educational achievement and occupational prestige to assess “status” higher-status minorities tend to marry similar status Whites significantly more than lower-status minorities (Qian 1997; Fu 2008). Fu (2008) argues that if this trend of high-status minorities marrying equally high-status Whites continues, it may put endogamous minority families at higher risks of poverty and reduced access to resources since higher-status minorities may be taking their resources away from their community into more White communities. Because these couples tend to match in their educational and occupational prestige, Fu (2008) calls this type of marriage “equal status exchange,” rather than exchange status. Qian (1997) also concluded that racial minorities who marry Whites are most likely trying to match or maintain educational compatibility between themselves and their partners.

Some aspects of status-exchange theory include structural opportunity. Structural opportunity theory focuses on how social structures shape patterns of interracial marriage (Heaton and Jacobson 2000). More specifically, this theory looks at the “contexts which

facilitate interracial marriage by creating greater contact among groups...[and] organizational arrangements which foster intergroup contact as opportunity structures” (Heaton and Jacobson 2000:30). Organizational and structural arrangements include group population for geographic location especially with regards to residential and school populations as well as immigration patterns.

Group population has often been used to describe interracial marriage patterns under the structural opportunity theory. Blau (1977) is frequently cited for arguing that group size greatly impacts the rates of interracial contact and thus the chance of interracial marriage. Thus, the smaller the minority population, the more likely one will marry someone of the majority population, and the larger the minority population the more likely one will marry within their own group (Qian 1997; Qian and Litcher 2011). This helps explain the U-shape pattern of interracial marriage for Asians and Hispanics. Researchers argue that as large amounts of Asian and Latino immigrants came to the U.S. during the 1990s, the rates of interracial marriage declined since there were more members of one’s own group with which to interact and thus have the organizational arrangement for higher rates of endogamous marriage (Qian et al. 2011).

Similarly, as Whites and Blacks have more opportunity to interact through school and work, the rates of intermarriage increase (Heaton and Jacobson 2000). Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1990) also conclude that a significant factor for Black men or women to interracially marry is moving away from one’s community of origin. One may argue that Tucker’s and Mitchell-Kernan’s (1990) finding may contribute to higher rates of Black men marrying interracially than Black women because mobility for men may be easier than for women. Research on the Black community illustrates how Black women are central to the functioning of

social and family networks (Collins 2000), which may keep Black women more connected to their community and family than Black men.

In addition to group size and interracial marriage, structural arrangement of residence, school attendance and work location impact the chances for marry someone of another race or ethnicity (Heaton and Jacobson 2000). Military service results in high rates of interracial marriages, particularly for White-Black marriages, because of the integration and equality promoted within the military (Heaton and Jacobson 2000). Even though Black women and Black men serve in the military, since there are more Black men this may play a role in why more Black military men marry outside their race than Black women. Heaton and Jacobson (2000) also found college as a good opportunity structure for Blacks and Hispanics to have more exogamous marriages. This may be primarily because Blacks and Hispanics are less represented on college campuses compared to Whites and Asians and therefore have smaller same-race dating pools (Heaton and Jacobson 2000). This aligns with the argument that group size matters for interracial marriage rates.

In addition to college and military influences on interracial marriage, residential location affects interracial contact and thus interracial marriage as well. Neighborhoods have historically been racially segregated and continue to be racially segregated today (Massey and Denton 1993; Dalmage 2000; Stoll, Covington and Stoll 2012). However, racial segregation varies by race. Blacks and Whites tend to be the most segregated from each other (Massey and Denton 1993; Emerson, Chai and Yancy 2001; Stoll et al. 2012), whereas, Asians and Hispanics tend to be more integrated with Whites in residential settings (Emerson et al. 2001). Furthermore, Whites also prefer to live near Asians or Hispanics rather than Blacks (Emerson et al. 2001). More specifically, even if a neighborhood low crime and good schools, if it includes more than 15

percent Black residents, the majority of Whites would not buy a home in that neighborhood (Emerson et al. 2001). Furthermore, the likelihood of Whites purchasing a home in this type of neighborhood declined if the family had children under the age of 18 (Emerson et al. 2001). However, race was not a factor in Whites deciding to buy a home if the neighborhood had higher populations of Asians or Hispanics (Emerson et al. 2001). Public schooling is also affected by residential patterns. Therefore, it is less likely for Black and White children to interact with each other than it is for White and Asian or Hispanic children to do so.

In addition to status-exchange and structural opportunity theories, one of the most cited theories for explaining interracial marriage trends stems from Gordon's (1964) assimilation theory. Gordon (1964) proposes that over time minority groups assimilate to the dominant group which results in decreasing racial discrimination and racism. There are multiple phases of Gordon's (1964) assimilation theory. First, cultural assimilation entails the subordinate group learning the dominant group's culture leading to structural assimilation, in which the subordinate group is accepted into society structures of the dominant group. Second, marital assimilation occurs when interracial marriages are accepted similarly to monoracial marriages followed by identificational assimilation, in which the children of interracial marriages are accepted into mainstream society. Gordon (1964) views marital assimilation as the most important phase in the assimilation process. This eventually leads to substantial declines in racial prejudice and discrimination assimilation. Finally, civic assimilation occurs when all power conflicts between groups disappear. This theory assumes that the dominant group is White-middle class and that all groups will inevitably assimilate to White-middle class values (Lewis and Ford-Robertson 2010).

However, more recent social scientists strongly critique Gordon's assimilation theory arguing that it is too restrictive, Eurocentric, and it only considers a one-sided assimilation

approach perhaps most fitting for describing the assimilation process of European immigrants in the early twentieth century (Alba and Nee 1997; Lewis and Ford-Robertson 2010). Lewis and Ford-Robertson (2010) contend differential assimilation is more fitting when describing interracial marriage in the past 30 years, particularly Black-White interracial marriage. Differential assimilation occurs when “rates of absorption vary between racially underrepresented groups...some groups may not achieve assimilation at all [and] criteria for successful assimilation into the dominant culture may change over time” (Lewis and Ford-Robertson 2010:412). Changing race relations and diversity of immigrants have now produced a Black/non-Black racial hierarchy system entailing that “assimilation is differential and problematic for African Americans” (Lewis and Ford-Robertson 2010:413). Because interracial marriage includes higher rates of interracial marriage for Hispanics and Asians and very low rates for Blacks, this “supports the notion that Hispanics and Asian Americans face less social and structural barriers in American society...structural access is crucial for increasing the occurrence of interracial dating and marriage” (Lewis and Ford-Robertson 2010:418).

Another important aspect of differential assimilation theory that is less frequently attributed to this theory includes ideologies of accepted mainstream physical attractiveness. America has a long history of idealizing White feminine beauty as the ideal beauty standard (Davis 1981; Collins 2000) and this may play a critical role in the gender disparities seen in interracial marriage, particularly those involving a Black woman partner. In fact, for White, Asian and Hispanic men, there are significantly lower rates of interracial marriage with Black women than with women of other races/ethnicities (Passel et al. 2010). White, Asian and Hispanic women on the other hand have much higher percentage rates for marry a Black partner (Passel et al. 2010). Thus, one may contend that part of the assimilation process includes

assimilation to mainstream notions of beauty. Childs states, “A woman’s perceived attractiveness is central to being chosen in the marriage market, and Black women start with a deficit because attractiveness is based on White European standards of beauty” (2005b:553). Furthermore, because Whites are the largest group population in the U.S., their mate preference greatly impacts the patterns and trends of interracial marriage. Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan (1990) discuss the issue of Eurocentric female beauty standards in the U.S. and how this likely plays into the difference in interracial marriage patterns between Black men and women. Rightly argued, the authors contend that because of Eurocentric female beauty standards in the U.S., Black women are less likely to meet these standards, whereas, there are not similar “beauty standards” for Black men. Childs’ (2005b:558) study of Black women’s opinions on interracial marriage found that “the women expressed their frustration and anger not with individual couples but with a society that devalued their worth as [Black] women...Black men dating interracially are seen as a rejection of Black womanhood and an embracement of White womanhood.” Most of the Black women in Childs’ (2005b) study discuss how mainstream notions of beauty are associated with White femininity and beauty and how light skin is favored and valued for Black women but dark skin for Black men is seen as equally valued compared to light skin. Most of the Black women also felt that there are less interracial relationships between White men and Black women because White men also adhere to White standards of female beauty (Childs 2005b). Thus, it is evident that race and gender play critical roles in interracial union trends.

Differential assimilation may also help explain varying attitudes about interracial marriage. Overall, attitudes concerning interracial marriage are more positive and are much more positive among adults ages 18-29 than ever before. However, these attitudes also support the

trend of a Black/non-Black racial system. As discussed in the previous section, attitudes towards interracial marriage tend to be more positive when it does not involve a Black partner (Passel et al 2010). More specifically, if a family member or friend is going to marry interracially, a marriage to a Black partner is least preferred (Passel et al. 2010; Wang 2012). Passel et al. (2010) find that approval for interracial marriage overall among Whites has increased in the last 10 years. However, even though overall approval of interracial marriage is higher among Blacks when compared to Whites, Blacks' approval of interracial marriage has decreased in the past 10 years. More specifically, the greatest amount of decrease in approval of interracial marriage among Blacks is towards marriage involving either a White or Asian American partner (Passel et al. 2010). It could be argued that as our racial system moves towards a Black/non-Black system (Bonilla-Silva 2004), Blacks are becoming acutely aware of this shift that still leaves Blacks at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Thus less positive feelings towards interracial marriage between Blacks with Whites or Asian Americans (now considered "White" or "honorary White") may be a sign of protest.

Bonilla-Silva (2003) argues that creating a critical race-consciousness among Whites is imperative for reducing racial inequality in America. In order for racial inequality to decrease, structural arrangements around racial boundaries also need to change. As the research shows, in turn these structural arrangements influence interracial interaction and thus chances of interracial marriage. However, differential assimilation argues that structural opportunities are different for different racial and ethnic groups, particularly for Blacks. As Bonilla-Silva (2004) points out, American society is moving away from a White/non-White racial system to a three tier system of White, honorary White, and collective Black or more simply a Black/non-Black system. This system certainly seems to be playing out in interracial marriage trends over the past 30 years

when looking at the research on differential assimilation and structural opportunities. As the research suggest, interracial marriage still dominates among Hispanics and Asians, particularly interracial marriage to Whites, with Black and White interracial marriages still lagging behind.

### Trends in Monoracial Same-Sex Couples

Approximating the number of same-sex couples in the U.S. can be difficult to estimate using standard census and other national survey data (Cohn 2011). In fact, the U.S. Census and the American Community Survey did not start “counting” same-sex couple households until 1990 and 2005, respectively (Cohn 2011). While there are obstacles to accurately assessing the number of same-sex couple households, the overestimates and underestimates off-set one another and more or less provide a fairly truthful representation of same-sex couples in the U.S. (Cohn 2011). Based on the 2010 Census data, there are about 646,000 same-sex couple households in the U.S., a more than 80 percent increase since 2000 (Gates 2012b). Same-sex couple households also increased at twice the rate as opposite-sex households from 2000 to 2010 (Gates 2012b). Of the 646,000 same-sex couple households, about 20 percent identified as a married couple (Gates 2012b). Furthermore, it is fairly evenly split between lesbian and gay male households overall as well as between married lesbian and married gay male households (Gates 2012a). The state with the highest rate of same-sex couple households is District of Columbia followed by Vermont and Massachusetts (Gates 2012a). However, DC drops to 38<sup>th</sup> in ranking of *married* same-sex households while Massachusetts moves the top rank for married same-sex households (Gates 2012a).

The 2010 Census also provides data on the racial and ethnic variations of same-sex couples. Similar to opposite-sex couples, about 80 percent of same-sex couples are White (Gates

2012b). However, compared to opposite-sex married couples, there are larger proportions of African American/Black same-sex couples, smaller proportions of Asian American same-sex couples, and equal proportions of Hispanic same-sex couples (2012b). As previously stated, same-sex couples are more likely to be interracial/interethnic than opposite-sex couples (Gates 2012b). More specifically, about 21 percent of same-sex couples are interracial, compared to 18 percent of opposite-sex couples and compared to 10 percent of opposite-sex married couples (Gates 2012b). The state with the highest rate of interracial/interethnic same-sex couples is Hawaii with a little over 50 percent of same-sex couples being interracial (Gates 2012b). Furthermore, at least a quarter or more of same-sex couples throughout the Western and Southwestern states are interracial/interethnic (Gates 2012b).

Another growing trend among same-sex households is the inclusion of children. Based on 2002 national data, Macomber et al. (2007) report that about 33 percent of lesbians and around 15 percent of gay men have had children. Since 1990, same-sex couple households with children have grown from 12 percent to 16 percent by 2009 and peaking at 19 percent around 2006 (Gates 2012c). Interestingly, the largest proportion of same-sex couples raising children (26 percent) live in Southern states where it also viewed as predominantly more conservative (Gates 2012c). Northeastern states follow closely with about 24 percent of same-sex couples parenting children (2012c). Gates (2012b; 2012c) also presents racial differences among same-sex couples with children. Forty percent of African American same-sex couples have children in the household compared to 16 percent of White same-sex couples (Gates 2012c). Furthermore, a quarter of African American same-sex couples are raising biological children compared to 17 percent of White same-sex couples (Gates 2012c).

Given the obvious increase in same-sex households, research on same-sex couples and families are growing substantially. However, this literature predominately looks at monoracial same-sex families (Biblarz and Savci 2010). Until recently, the majority of research on same-sex families looks at White, middle-class, college educated couples (Biblarz and Savci 2010). Moore argues (2011:58-59), “If we allow ‘lesbian families’ to mean ‘White middle-class lesbian families,’ and if we do not fully ‘race’ ourselves and our subjects, we cannot de-center the White subject as normative and we reify the myth that ‘Black people aren’t like that.’” Furthermore, the limited research on Black lesbian families suggests differences in domestic division of labor, child rearing, and definitions of relationship equality compared to White lesbian families (Moore 2008; Moore 2011). Previous research on White lesbian couples showed that these couples commit to more liberal feminist ideals of androgynous gender identity and equal division of domestic labor (Biblarz and Savci 2010). However, other studies on White lesbian couples with children suggest that the ideals of equal childcare and paid employment do not always play out in everyday life (Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins 2007; Kurdek 2007). Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins (2007) however, find that housework remains fairly equal among White lesbian couples even when children are present in the family. Moore (2008) argues that Black lesbians for the most part do not ascribe to the second-wave liberal feminist ideals as many White lesbian families do. Instead, Black lesbians with children often define equality by equal labor force participation, financial independence and being economic providers (Moore 2008; Moore 2011). The role of mother and motherhood is culturally significant and powerful within the Black community, which many Black lesbians actively seek to uphold and embrace as their identities (Moore 2008; Reed et al. 2011). Furthermore, the role of mother in the Black heterosexual and lesbian community is deeply embedded in traditional gendered relations (Moore 2008; Reed et al. 2011).

However, unlike many White lesbian families, Black lesbian families do not feel that there is inequality when the children's biological mother performs more housework and childrearing responsibilities (Moore 2008). In fact, Moore (2008) argues that this dynamic allows biological mothers to trade-off their larger domestic responsibilities for more authority in making decisions about family finances and their children's well-being.

Moreover, when it comes to gender identity, Black lesbians often emphasize traditional gendered representations rather than assuming androgynous gendered identities (Moore 2008; Reed et al. 2011). In fact, Reed et al. (2011) finds in their study on Black lesbians and pregnancy, that Black lesbians often fit into three categories; femme (very feminine), stud (very masculine) and stemme (fluid gender identity). However, Reed et al. (2011) state there are very strict social sanctions that can include severe violence when one does not fulfill the "proper" gender identity. In line with heterosexual norms, being a stud "was equated with dominance in relationships and relational and community authority...the 'one in control' within relationships" (Reed et al. 2011:755). These gender presentations play out when it comes to pregnancy and parenting. According to Reed et al. (2011) femmes or "good gay females" are prototypic since they are the best fit for mothering and do not engage in sex with men under any circumstance unless their stud partner approves it for conceiving a child. Femmes that become mothers receive the most social support and praise, while a stud that becomes pregnant is often met with severe isolation and sometimes even violence (Reed et al. 2011). Reed et al. (2011) also note that pregnancy and the birth of a child further validates gender identity within the Black lesbian couple. For femmes, motherhood affirms their feminine identity and in many instances self-worth and self-expression, whereas, for studs it allows them to affirm their masculine identity of family provider and dominant partner (Reed et al. 2011). The authors do state that their study

should not be generalized to large populations since it includes only younger, low-income Black lesbians. However, this is an important contribution to the much needed literature on Black lesbian families. Thus, research suggests that family dynamics and gender identity and presentation may vary between White and Black lesbian couples.

Studies on gay male families are far less common, but on the rise (Biblarz and Savci 2010). Similar to studies on lesbian families, gay male family studies tend to be dominated by White, middle-class educated participants. It seems that studies on Black gay male families are even more scant than Black lesbian families (Biblarz and Savci 2010). The limited research on gay male families indicate two trends; 1) studies that look at the processes gay men engage in to become fathers and 2) once children are present, the family processes of raising children and domestic labor within gay male families (Biblarz and Savci 2010). In terms of the latter research, most studies find that gay male couples with children tend to co-parent more equally than heterosexual couples, but often not completely equal (Johnson and O'Connor 2002). However, when parenting and family responsibilities were divided, gender seemed not to be the deciding factor. Instead, these decisions were made based on each partner's personal qualities, skills, and interests (Silverstein, Auerbach, and Levant 2002).

Interestingly, in Carrington's (1999) seminal study on gay and lesbian couples and domestic work, he contests the notion that same-sex couples have "true egalitarian" partnerships. Carrington (1999) shows that even among same-sex couples, "traditional" gender patterns of domestic labor are reproduced. For most of the couples in Carrington's (1999) study, the partner who made more money and had a more demanding profession did less domestic work. Also, Carrington (1999) argues that the way his participants spoke about domestic work reaffirmed deeply embedded gender socialization. For gay men, many of them down played or understated

their partner's domestic work while uplifting their partners' hobbies and paid work. Carrington (1999) argues this discourse is a way to "do masculinity" and separate individual identity from domestic work, in essence devaluing domestic work. Similarly, Carrington (1999) shows how the lesbian participants often described their partners as doing equal or more than equal work when in reality they did not. Carrington (1999) argued this was a way women stressed the value of domestic work and teamwork, rather than minimizing its existence. From Carrington's critical contribution to research on same-sex couples, to more recent work of Moore (2008) and Biblarz and Savci (2010), it is positive that family research is expanding on same-sex families. However, there is little research that looks at interracial same-sex families.

#### Same-Sex Interracial Couples

There are only a handful of studies that have focused on interracial same-sex couples and families. One theme in the scant literature on same-sex interracial couples is interracial sexual intimacy and how this shapes racial identity (Steinbugler 2005; Steinbugler 2012). These studies argue that interracial sexual intimacy plays a key role in how partners of interracial same-sex unions form their own racial identities. As previous studies on interracial heterosexual couples confirm, most White partners in the relationship do not think about their racial identity (Killian 2002; Childs 2005a). This is also seen within same-sex interracial couples (Steinbugler 2007).

However, different from heterosexual interracial couples that view their relationship as "just like any other," Steinbugler (2007:123) finds that same-sex interracial couples do not make such claims primarily because "they do not have access to the symbolic resources to claim that their intimacy is natural, normative, or mundane." Furthermore, while heterosexuality is more accepted in public spaces than other sexualities, heterosexual interracial couples often make their

intimacy “invisible” in order to avoid negative consequences from bystanders (Steinbugler 2005). This also occurs for same-sex interracial intimacy. However, some same-sex interracial couples “manage their visibility by ‘passing’ as heterosexual friends” (Steinbugler 2005:439) more frequently than their heterosexual interracial couple’s do to pass as friends.

Another important theme within the literature on same-sex interracial couples is coping with stress (Rostosky et al. 2008; Jeong and Horne 2009). For interracial same-sex couples, coping with stress is a significant aspect of the relationship (Rostosky et al. 2008; Jeong and Horne 2009). Same-sex interracial couples must cope with both the minority sexual status as well as stress associated with being in an interracial relationship (Rostosky et al. 2008). For most of the participants in Rostosky et al.’s (2008) study, the status as a same-sex couple was more stressful than the status as an interracial couple. However, a few participants discussed greater family support for a relationship with a same-sex partner, rather than being with a partner of a different race. One White participant states, “She [mother] told me it would be worse if I brought home a guy that was Black. If I was a lesbian, I couldn’t help it. It wasn’t my fault” (Rostosky et al. 2008:288). However, Jeong and Horne (2009) found very few differences in perceived stress between White monoracial lesbian couples and interracial lesbian couples. They do acknowledge that their sample size of interracial lesbian couples is significantly smaller than the sample of monoracial White lesbian couples. However, both studies found that social support is strongest from the couples’ partners and weakest from family members (Rostosky et al. 2008; Jeong and Horne 2009).

There may be multiple barriers contributing to limited amounts of research on interracial same-sex families. Cherlin (2010) concludes that because family patterns are shifting so much and changing rapidly, traditional demography measures may have serious limitations for

studying family. Cherlin (2010:415) states, “Family demographers have developed techniques that are good at measuring events with clear beginnings, endings, and boundaries, but phenomena they study increasingly fail to have these nice properties. Cohabiting relationships may not have a clear beginning point.” This difficulty in measuring cohabitation certainly applies to interracial and LGBTQ families, particularly since cohabitation rates are high for both types of families. Cherlin (2010) suggests that more qualitative, ethnographic studies are needed in future family research to overcome this research barrier.

Most obviously, a significant research barrier includes access. Researchers have discussed the difficulty in gaining access to LGBTQ communities, and more so to LGBTQ communities of color (Moore 2008). Similarly, recruiting heterosexual and same-sex interracial couples to participate in research studies is also challenging (Steinbugler 2007). Steinbugler (2007) discusses that defining terms for inclusion criteria were a challenge in itself since people have different perceptions of racial identity and racial identification. For instance, Steinbugler (2007) writes that couples who included a White partner and biracial partner whom “passes” for White but considers her/his racial identity Black, asked if they would “qualify” as an interracial couple. Because Steinbugler (2007) was interested in how people in interracial relationships develop racial identities, she decided to include these couples. Furthermore, Steinbugler (2007) had other couples that did not use or like the term “interracial” and thus hesitated to participate in the study all together. Given these challenges and barriers, it makes sense why the gaps within interracial family and LGBTQ family literature exist.

## Private and Public Families and Family Life

There has been considerable discussion among sociologists on the topic of private and public. The private and public have been theorized and empirically studied throughout the history of sociology (Bailey 2000). As Bailey writes:

Private and public are the common referents to deep and basic domains of social experience. They denote fundamental ordering categories in everyday life and also connote anxieties, choices and diagnoses for sociologists and for those they study. They are part of that set of basic and generative ordering principals that sociological thought rests, trades upon and constantly reflexively questions. They form a complex and often apparently unstable unity in which each requires a form of the other, but their general dimensions can be unpacked (2000:384).

Much of this scholarship on private and public addresses family and family experiences. Social scientists have not always agreed on what constitutes as the “private” and “public” spheres, however. What is often in debate is how private and public spheres relate to one another. Most scholars define the private sphere as home and within one’s self (Bailey 2000). Some discuss the private as including identity (Calhoun 1994), emotional labor and introspection (Hochschild 1983), and intimacy (Cherlin 2013). The public is most often referred to as the world outside the home. However, there is considerable debate on what function each sphere provides and if these spheres are really different and separate.

The more traditional view on private and public argues that the private sphere (home) provides a refuge from the daily grind and chaos of the public sphere. Lasch (1977) dedicates an entire book, *Haven in a Heartless World*, to the idea of the home and family as a sanctuary from the harshness of the public sphere. This nostalgic view of private and public separates the two into unique distinct settings in which there is little overlap. This view regards the home as particularly sacred and closed off to any outside influences and social oppressions.

In contrast to the perspective of the private being a safe haven, feminist scholars view the private sphere as a reproduction of the oppressive structures of the public sphere and more specifically, the private sphere is where women are controlled (Lopata 1993; Hansen 1987). Feminist research on intimate partner violence has brought attention to this perspective by demonstrating how for many women the home is a place of terror, abuse, and patriarchal control and domination (Dobash and Dobash 1979). These studies highlight how public social structures of patriarchy and male privilege permeate into and perhaps are exacerbated within the home and how the private sphere reflects public social arrangements. As feminists note, “the personal is political.”

Others view the private and public as overlapping and include private spaces within public arenas and public spaces within the private sphere without the critical lens feminist scholars apply (Marks 1994; Fahey 1995). For most social scientists, the family is often regarded as part of the private sphere and the outside world as the public sphere. Fahey (1995:688) argues, “There are numerous public/private dualisms in social life, they are not ‘objective,’ externally observable givens but ‘subjective’ constructs shaped by the contexts in which they emerge.” Marks (1994) empirically demonstrates how private intimacies among co-workers occur in very public spaces such as the office. Marks (1994:846) argues, “Institutional differentiation on the macrolevel, and individuation, dyadic intimacy, “self-disclosure,” and privatization of space and time on the microlevel march together, and these processes unfold in full force both inside and outside families and organizations.” Thus, the private and public spaces intersect with private space in public realms and public space in private realms.

Cherlin (2013) structures his entire textbook around the concept of “Public and Private Families.” According to Cherlin (2013), the American family is separated into two types of

family; the public family and the private family. Each type of family incorporates different roles, functions, societal obligations, and challenges. The primary function of the public family is caring for other family members such as children, aging parents, or a sick or disabled partner. In essence, the public family is providing a public service by caring for others that would otherwise need public organizations to do (Cherlin 2013). Furthermore, Cherlin (2013) argues everyone in society benefits from the public family since the public family provides important services for members of a given society. In contrast, Cherlin (2013) defines the private family as one that provides the love and intimacy and emotional support between partners. The private family focuses more on meeting individual needs. Furthermore, the private family may include partners of the same or opposite sex in a long term committed relationship or a parent and child. The private family lives in the same residence and shares various resources. However, there is often overlap between the roles of the public and private family such as when a parent feels love and satisfaction (private family) through raising a child (public family) (Cherlin 2013). Thus, while Cherlin (2013) separates family into two unique functions, in many cases, these boundaries become blurred and more ambiguous.

Another important perspective of private and public life is Goffman's (1959) concept of dramaturgy. Goffman (1959) proposes that people are "actors" in everyday life either participating in front stage or back stage performances. Front stage performances include how one presents themselves to others, often in public spaces or with strangers. People engage in impression management, in that people monitor how they act by regulating their use of gestures language, and attire (Goffman 1959). Goffman (1959) describes impression management as performing and following a "script." Front stage behavior frequently differs from back stage behavior. Back stage is where one can be their true self and it allows the performance to end.

Back stage is often in private settings, usually in solitude but can be in the presence of others who we are most comfortable with and allow performances to drop.

Dramaturgy and impression management also apply to social groups. For example, Yoshino (2006) describes how people of color often feel pressured from the dominant White social group to assimilate to “White norms.” This often entails people of color, particularly Blacks, to monitor their dress, speech, hair, and participation in social organizations (Yoshino 2006). Otherwise, Blacks and other groups of color are at risk for being stigmatized and stereotyped. Anderson (1990) discusses how young Black men often engage in impression management around Whites. Some Black men go out of their way to be nice and accommodating to Whites in order to break stereotypes Whites may have about young Black men (Anderson 1990). Similarly, gay and lesbian couples often monitor their individual and relationship performances in public to “pass” as heterosexual (Steinbugler 2012). Thus, Goffman’s (1959) concepts of dramaturgy and impression management contribute to understanding private and public spaces.

The private and public spaces explored in this dissertation focus more on experience and less on family roles and functions. I’m more interested in how couples experience the private intimacy of their partnership and also their individual self, as well as how they experience the social world outside their home often thought of “public spaces.” Furthermore, I take the stance that the public and private are not exclusively independent, but rather these spheres overlap and impact each other and influence how people experience these spaces. I agree with feminist scholars who argue the private sphere often reflects the structures of the public world and how oppressive structures in the public realm operate within the private realm. The phrase the “personal is political” certainly describes how the intersection of private and public matter in

how one experiences life. Furthermore, Goffman's (1959) concepts of dramaturgy and impression management are also considered in this dissertation when exploring the private and public experiences of interracial same-sex couples.

## CHAPTER THREE: THEORY AND METHODS

The primary purpose of this study is to bring silenced voices to an important conversation. Because literature on interracial couples focuses mostly on straight couples and because the literature on same-sex couples centers on monoracial couples, voices from interracial same-sex couples need to be part of these discussions on intimate relationship processes. Moreover, it is important to focus on Black-White interracial couples since they are the least common and least accepted type of interracial intimacy (Passel et al. 2010; Wang 2012). However, overwhelmingly heterosexual Black-White couples only have a voice within social science research. Therefore, I seek to bring new voices into the conversation on what it means to be in an interracial relationship. To bring these voices into the conversation, I felt the best approach would be qualitative methods of in-depth interviews. Over a six month time period, I conducted 19 interviews with individuals in same-sex interracial relationships. I interviewed people individually because I was most interested in how individuals experience their relationship from their standpoint and unique experience.

This chapter will present the theoretical frameworks of the methodology and a detailed discussion of the methodological approach. I will start with an overview of the theories that guided the research methodology. This discussion will also include the project's core methodological framework of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). I will then detail the sampling and recruitment strategies followed by a description of the participants. Next, I will present how data were collected and analyzed followed by a discussion of the research limitations. Lastly, I will conclude this chapter with a personal reflection.

## Methodological Framework

Because this study seeks to explore relationship processes through an intersectional feminist lens, qualitative methods are most appropriate (Collins 1997; Bryman 2008). Using a combination of phenomenological methodology, feminist methodology, and constructivist grounded theory, I use in-depth interviews, allowing participants to voice their experiences in order to capture how relationship processes unfold.

Phenomenology is one theoretical framework that emphasizes capturing one's everyday experiences from her/his socially constructed standpoint. Schutz's (1967) concept of phenomenology is primarily rooted in the theoretical concepts of classical sociologist Max Weber. Weber's concept of *verstehen* was central in Schutz's phenomenology. According to Weber, *verstehen* stresses that in order to really understand the reality of someone else, you must put yourself in his/her shoes. Thus, for phenomenologists, it is important to understand the reality of another person from his/her subjective standpoint. Phenomenology argues you cannot impose your values or experiences on another if you really want to understand someone else's reality and experience. Therefore, understanding the social world cannot occur unless there is an understanding of the intersubjective reality of the actors being studied. The individual thus plays a critical role in forming the social world and social reality (Schutz 1967).

Phenomenologically inspired methodologies seek to understand social phenomena from the lived experience of the individual and their subjective reality of the everyday life. This experience is subjectively defined and interpreted. Schutz (1970:271) states, "The safeguarding of the subjective point of view is the only but sufficient guarantee that the world of social reality will not be replaced by a fictional nonexisting world constructed by the scientific observer." Phenomenological methodology allows the researcher to understand and see the participant's

subjective reality of her experience in the world. Bogdan and Taylor (1975:4-5) state, “Qualitative methods allow us to know people personally and to see them as they are developing their own definitions of the world. We experience what they experience in their daily struggles with their society.” Thus, the in-depth interviews used in this study are open-ended to allow participants to guide the conversation and present their own accounts of the social world in which they live and interact.

Stemming from phenomenology, feminist standpoint theory also guides the methodological approach for this study. In essence, phenomenologists are viewing individuals from the individual standpoint. Smith (1979) argues that women’s everyday experience is a “bifurcated consciousness” produced along “a line of fault” within their personal, lived, and reflected-on experience. Hartsock (1983) extends on Smith’s theory of standpoint and introduces a feminist standpoint epistemology. Hartsock (1983) argues that women have a different and unique standpoint than men, and that this standpoint is often rooted in experiences of patriarchal dominance and other power dynamics that shape women’s reality and lived experience. Hartsock (1983:285) states:

The concept of a standpoint structures epistemology in a particular way...it posits a duality of levels of reality, or which the deeper level or essence both includes and explains the ‘surface’ or appearance, and indicates the logic by means of which the appearance inverts and distorts the deeper reality.

However, more contemporary feminists argue Hartsock’s standpoint theory is problematic since it only recognizes gender as the primary standpoint for “women’s experiences.” Intersectional feminists assert race, culture, class status, sexual orientation, impacts of colonialism and other social inequalities, oppressions, and social categories provide different “standpoints” for different women (Collins 1997). Thus, a more accurate way to understand

one's experience is through intersectionality (Collins 1997; Collins 2000; Collins and Anderson 2007). Studies truly adopting the theoretical framework of intersectionality are rare but critically needed (Bowleg 2008; Ferree 2010). Intersectionality is rooted in the concept of an interlocking matrix of domination (Collins and Anderson 2007). Collins and Anderson (2007:5) describe:

Fundamentally, race, class, and gender are intersecting categories of experience that affect all aspects of human life; thus, they simultaneously structure the experiences of all people in this society. At any moment, race, class, or gender may feel more salient or meaningful in a given person's life, but they are overlapping and cumulative in their effect on people's experience.

People experience these intersecting inequalities differently depending on their social location. For example, Black women in the U.S. may experience sexism and racism, but a wealthy Black woman will have a different experience of class privilege and racial oppression than a poor Black woman or middle-class Latina. Furthermore, a Black lesbian's identity and experience are not only shaped by gender, race, and class but also by sexual orientation. For intersectional feminists, a person is situated in the matrix of domination where a person's power or subjugation may shift depending on the place, time, and context. Burton et al. (2010:446) argue that intersectional feminism has greatly contributed to research on families of color because "it is concerned with the politics of location in that it directs researchers' attention to how this mutual construction is shaped by social institutions and social interactions in the context of systems of inequality."

However, while intersectionality has become more known and valued theoretically, as Bowleg (2008:312) argues, "the notion that social identities and social inequality based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, sex/gender (and one could add a host of other identities such as class, disability status, etc.) are interdependent and mutually constitutive, rather than independent and uni-dimensional poses a variety of thorny methodological challenges." This may be one of

many reasons why researching the interracial dynamics of LGBTQ families remains absent from the literature. Methodologically, few empirical studies implement “true” intersectional methods and analyses and often resort to the additive approach of most social science research leaving very few “blueprints” in how to conduct intersectional research from design to analysis (Bowleg 2008).

It is important to note that intersectional feminist standpoint does not imply that group processes and group experiences are absent and only individual experiences exist (Collins 1997). Collins (1997:375) states, “The notion of a standpoint refers to historically shared, group-based experiences. Groups have a degree of permanence over time such that group realities transcend individual experiences.” Thus, feminist standpoint is still based in the social construction of social categories that include group patterns. Intersectional feminist data collection also does not insist that participants separate their multiple social identities into fragmented accounts (Bowleg 2008). Intersectional researchers need to ask participants to “discuss her identities and experiences however they best resonate with her” (Bowleg 2008:315), then use that identity (such as Black lesbian woman) to explain her day-to-day challenges and experiences rather than fragment the identities by asking her to recount her experiences of race, gender, and/or sexual orientation (Bowleg 2008). For example, when I asked one of my participants to describe her identity or what is important to her identity, Andrea states:

...It’s always troublesome for me to think about fixed categories. I think a lot of that had to do with being mixed-race. It’s hard to be – you’re not just one thing or the other... You know, I don’t exist in a vacuum, so I can’t compartmentalize one or the other.

Furthermore, Wilcox (2009) discusses the concept of “embodied knowledge” in which the mind and body create the lived experience and ways of knowing the social world. Wilcox

(2009) argues all knowers have sexually and racially specific bodies and spatially and culturally situated bodies that shape and limit the knowers' perspectives and experiences, and it is through these bodies that individuals experience the world and develop consciousness. Thus, I argue qualitative methods of in-depth interviews are an optimal approach to a better understanding of the participants' subjective standpoint at the intersection of gender, race, class and sexuality.

Social theories of phenomenology, feminist standpoint and intersectional feminism complement the use of Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory as the core methodological framework for this research. Charmaz (2006) extends traditional grounded theory as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Glaser and Strauss' (1967) seminal book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* was instrumental for qualitative methods of analysis. This was the first study that outlined a systematic method for qualitative research within sociology (Charmaz 2006). At this time, quantitative methods and positivism dominated sociology, leaving qualitative methods at the margins (Charmaz 2006). Glaser and Strauss (1967) argued that theory can be systematically and objectively be created from data rather than only relying on testing hypotheses derived from theory. Glaser and Strauss (1967) believed the most objective qualitative approach is to come into the research with no preconceived notions or theoretical backgrounds that may influence the data collection or analysis. They argued beginning qualitative research with data collection and analysis before writing a literature review prevents the researcher from being persuaded by previous research findings and theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This approach would be truly inductive by creating unbiased theoretical conclusions from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Charmaz (2006) summarizes the central elements of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) "grounded theory" to include: 1) ongoing data collection and data analysis throughout the study, 2) creating codes and categories from data, 3) comparing

data in every stage for rich analysis and not just descriptive analysis, 4) constant memo-writing, 5) sampling for theoretical development and not population representativeness and 6) writing a literature review after data analysis.

For the most part, Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory guides this research project. However, because I come into this research with a theoretical framework and literature review, I cannot honestly say that I'm engaging in true grounded theory. While I respect the grounded theory approach, I also acknowledge how this study is situated within multiple theoretical frameworks and a long process of reviewing previous literature on this topic. In fact, a large part of my decision to explore the experiences of same-sex interracial couples comes from finding this gap in previous literature as well as my commitment to issues of social justice, all grounded in my use of intersectional feminism. Chapters 2, 4 and 5 include a combination of prior literature review and writing as well literature review and writing after the data were collected and analyzed. Therefore, I follow Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory since she recognizes it is almost impossible to enter a study without a theoretical and literature review background. Charmaz (2006) argues that our backgrounds, academically and personally, play a role in the entire research process. Not only are our minds influenced by the theories and literature we read before hand, but we also play an active role in constructing the data collection and analysis simply because we are present in these stages and cannot be invisible actors (Charmaz 2006). This is similar to the phenomenological approach recognizing the researcher's role in shaping and interpreting reality when in conversation with others while also respecting others' standpoints of experience (Schutz 1967).

Furthermore, Charmaz (2000; 2006) advocates the use of reflexivity within the research process which directly aligns with a core element of feminist methodologies. Feminist

methodology seeks to redefine and reconstruct the way research has been traditionally practiced. Feminist researchers assert that historically research has been done by men and for men, and thus feminist sociologists argue that when women conduct research through the tradition model created by men, women still uphold structures of patriarchy. Therefore, simply “adding women” will not deconstruct patriarchy or male domination. Rather than continuing to practice research methodologies that primarily men have defined in the social and natural sciences, feminist researchers seek to change the methodologies. A primary change is the rejection of objectivity and implementation of reflexivity. Objectivity in research is viewed as including no bias or personal judgment. Feminist researchers argue that objectivity is impossible when studying social phenomena and the lived experience since anything studied in the social sciences involves people and world they occupy (Harding 1987; Maynard 1998). Instead, feminist sociologists assert that the researcher should be reflexive through acknowledging how one’s presence based in one’s gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and so forth, impact the research. Harding (1987), a prominent feminist researcher, claimed this approach as “strong objectivity,” because it includes the in-depth reflection of one’s background factors on the research process. Harding and other feminist researchers believe that particularly in data collection that involves personal interviews, the researcher should strive to eliminate hierarchy and create a space for conversation that is beneficial for both the researcher and the interviewee. These feminist approaches go against the “masculine” ways of traditional research that includes distance, separation, and hierarchy (Harding 1987). Harding’s (1987) suggestions call for including “feminine” characteristics of reflection, non-hierarchical conversation, and building intimacy within the research process.

Extending Harding and Maynard’s discussion of feminist methodology, intersectional feminists argue that to engage in true intersectional research, one must become aware of not only

one's own oppression and privilege but also the history of oppression and privilege of one's participants and to place those narratives in a larger socio-political context (Collins 2000; Bowleg 2008). Bowleg (2008:318) advocates the intersectional analyst must place participants narratives within a larger sociopolitical context in order to "bridge individual accounts within the historical and contemporary social contexts in which they occur...[and] broaden their analytical scope beyond the collected data to become intimately acquainted, if they are not already, with the sociohistorical realities of historically oppressed groups."

Thus, Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory expands on traditional grounded theory in adding the important methodological aspect of reflexivity. Charmaz (2006:10) argues:

I assume that neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices. My approach explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an *interpretive* portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it.

It is important to note that with the exception of reflexivity, most of Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory centers on Glaser and Strauss' (1967) traditional grounded theory guidelines in terms of ongoing data collection and analysis, creating codes from the data, using comparative analysis, and creating theory from the data.

### Sampling and Recruitment

Going into this study, I knew recruiting participants would be challenging. Given that members of interracial same-sex couples are a small segment of the population, some may argue against limiting the sample to Black-White same-sex couples. In fact, this question came up among peers and colleagues when I began to recruit participants. Reasons for focusing on Black-White same-sex couples are simple. Because racial boundaries in the U.S. have historically and

continue to be the strictest between Whites and Blacks, and because Black-White interracial couples are the least accepted interracial relationship in society, I felt it was important to explore this type of interracial relationship. Also, stemming from an intersectional feminist background, I acknowledge how complex the intersectional analysis would be if I included every type of interracial/interethnic relationship. Thus, interviewing people within a certain type of interracial relationship would allow for a much deeper and rich racial analysis, at least for these couples. Therefore, inclusion criteria broadly consisted of the participant being in a committed relationship with a partner of the same self-identified sex and who self-identifies as being in a Black-White interracial relationship.

I recognize the great diversity within the Black community in terms of cultural and immigrant background, and I was open to exploring these dimensions if they emerged. Only one participant in my sample identified with a Black heritage other than African-American. Furthermore, all but one participant identified as White or Black. The exception was one participant who identified as biracial Black/White, but looks “Black” and therefore often identifies her life experiences as a Black woman. She wondered if I would still be interested in interviewing her. Steinbulger (2007) was also presented with this question when recruiting participants and I responded similarly as Steinbulger by telling the potential participant that as long as she considered herself to be in a Black/White same-sex relationship, I would be happy to interview her. Steinbulger (2007) found some of her participants rejected the term “interracial” when referring to their relationship because they argued it highlighted difference that they did not feel. Steinbulger (2007:50) suggested this is “an important methodological dilemma – how to talk about or study a group of people when they do not share a common self-conscious identity.” Interestingly, I did not come across this “dilemma” in regards to using the term “interracial.”

Because interracial same-sex couples overall are not a significantly large population, recruiting participants regionally was not adequate. Therefore, I decided to use national outlets to recruit participants. I sent out flyers through national academic listservs and through national and regional LGBTQ organizations. Many of my participants responded through the academic listservs, which some may argue creates educational and class homogeneity. However, snowball sampling through many of these participants lead me to other participants that are not professionally affiliated with higher education. Furthermore, recruiting participants through national listservs also diversified my sample in age, length of relationship, and geographical location. Snowball sampling was very effective in this study mirroring previous studies on interracial and same-sex couples (Childs 2005a; Steinbugler 2007; Moore 2008).

Theoretical sampling as outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) was also implemented in the data collection procedures. In line with theoretical sampling, I allowed sampling to evolve during the research process. For example, when I first began recruiting participants, I noticed only women were responding to the study advertisements. I wanted to have men in the sample to explore how interracial gay male couples compared to interracial lesbian couples. Therefore, I started to recruit gay men in Black-White interracial relationships to interview for the study.

### Participant Demographics

There is diversity in age, relationship length, and residential location. The ages ranged from 28 to 70, with the average participant being around 45 years old. In terms of gender, I interviewed ten women, two of whom also identified as gender-queer. In terms of sexuality, all of the women identified as lesbian, of which three also identified as queer and one also identified as bi-sexual. Of the ten women, four women identified as Black/African American and six

women identified as White/Caucasian. I interviewed nine men. All of the men identified as gay and one also identified as bi-sexual. Of the nine men, four identified as Black/African American and five identified as White/Caucasian. The average participant's relationship length was about ten years. All of the participants have at least a college education with roughly half holding graduate degrees. All of the participants identify with middle class status and work in professional careers. Some of their professions include college professor, architect, higher education administrator, project manager, community organizer, and graduate student. My participants tend to live in three regions of the U.S., with seven living in the Northeast, seven in the Southeast, and five in the Midwest. All of the participants living in the Southeast reside in the state of Florida. States represented in the Northeast include Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Washington D.C. States represented in the Midwest include Tennessee, Kansas, and Wisconsin.

#### Data Collection

Since this study reached out nationally to recruit participants, I decided to conduct all the interviews via phone interviews. This also seemed beneficial for participants since it was easier and took less time out of their day to have a phone conversation than to meet in person. There is also a level of anonymity that comes with talking on the phone. Furthermore, most participants conducted the interview from their home which I would assume provided a comfortable environment for them to engage in conversation with me. All of the participants contacted me through email to arrange a date and time to complete the phone interview. Once we established a time to interview, I emailed the consent form for their review. The consent form asked participants' permission to audio record the interviews. The IRB waived the need for written

consent; however, I audio recorded every participants' verbal consent before the interview commenced.

All of the interviews were audio recorded. The average interview lasted a little more than an hour with the shortest interview lasting 35 minutes and the longest interview lasting two hours. There were rarely any awkward silences or a feeling of discomfort on the part of the participant or myself. All of the participants were very willing and ready to share their stories and feelings about their relationship experiences. In order to safeguard the participants' confidentiality, participant names and identifying characteristics were removed during transcription and pseudonyms were used to replace participants' names.

In line with grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967), I went into each interview with only a few guiding questions to allow the participants and myself to create a more organic conversation in which topics and themes could emerge on their own. This strategy aligns with feminist methodologies that argue participants should be in control of the interview allowing their thoughts and experiences to unfold with very little direction from the researcher. Thus, my goal was to hear individuals' stories from their standpoint and allow them to speak on what they felt was important rather than me going in with assumptions of importance.

I began each interview with building rapport by explaining why this research is important and how I value their time and what they have to say. I also disclosed to my participants that I am in a long-term interracial heterosexual relationship and that I have always thought of myself as a straight ally to the LGBTQ community. I often discussed how I have very close uncles and aunts who are in gay and lesbian relationships and that I have always fought for social justice for the LGBTQ community. All of my participants shared with me their gratitude for this research study and how they felt it is very important. Before I proceeded to ask my first interview

questions, I asked if they had any questions for me. Sometimes they would ask questions about my interracial relationship or what I planned to do with this research when I'm finished. By the time I was ready to ask the first interview question, I felt that a decent rapport was established in each interview and I think that positively affected the flow of the conversations.

I always began the interview by asking if participants would tell me a little bit about themselves and what they considered to be important to who they are and their identities. For some interviews this question prompted a wonderful 15-20 minute monologue about their background, family, growing up and a great overview of what made them who they are. I allowed this discussion to guide the next topic. For instance, if a participant was talking a lot about extended family, I would go with that lead and probe a little more about their relationships with family.

The interview guide had three main sections; partnership dynamics, family relationships, and public experiences. For instance, when asking about public experiences, I would start with "Tell me a little bit about your experiences as a couple in public." Then I would include some probing questions if needed such as, "Are there any places you avoid going as a couple" and "Is there a place that you feel most comfortable to visit as a couple." Similarly, when asking about family, I would begin with, "Tell me about your relationships with family members." These broad questions allowed the participant to describe what aspects within the topic were important rather than me controlling the conversation by initially asking very specific questions, such as "What is your relationship like with your mother" or "Do you have a good relationship with your parents." At the end of the interview, I always asked if there was anything else they thought would be important for me to know that I did not ask and if there were any additional questions I should ask in the next interview. Some of the participants provided great additional questions

that I explored with other participants. For instance, one of the first participants I spoke with suggested I ask people what other types of interracial relationships, such as with friends, family, and co-workers, they have in their lives. I also felt by asking my participants for question suggestions, it became a more reciprocal conversation and in essence participants played an active role in developing the research project.

### Data Analysis

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) was followed as my guide for analyzing the data. The primary goal during data analysis was to keep the voices of my participants in their standpoint while also creating themes organically. Constructivist grounded theory works particularly well for this project due to the very limited research and theoretical conclusions about same-sex interracial couples. While I have read extensively on interracial and same-sex couples, the lack of literature on interracial same-sex couples enabled me to go into data analysis with few preconceived ideas.

All of the interviews were transcribed and identifying characteristics were removed from the transcript to safe guard the identity of the participants. Once transcription was complete, I began to code the data. Coding is a critical aspect of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990). While traditional grounded theory emphasizes strict objectivism in coding and theoretical conclusions through coding, Charmaz (2000) argues that “strict objectivism” is rarely achieved since the researcher is always present with his/her biases and social position when analyzing data. Charmaz (2000:522) states, “...a constructivist approach recognizes that the categories, concepts, and theoretical level of analysis emerge from the researcher’s interaction within the field and questions about the data.” This perspective follows Harding’s (1987) feminist

methodology of emphasizing the importance of self-reflection and “strong objectivity.” Thus, the data analysis for the current project followed Charmaz’s (2006) constructionist grounded theory rather than the traditional grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Charmaz (2006) advises two types of coding to be used for qualitative analysis, initial line-by-line coding followed by focused coding. I begin with initial line-by-line detailed coding of the data. Charmaz warns that in this coding phase, it is critical for the researcher to acknowledge that while the data reflects the participants’ perspectives, as the research begins to make sense and the data is categorized, the researcher must be aware of how her/his experiences may be different from what the data reveal and to be reflexive about these differences. Following Charmaz’s (2006) line-by-line coding, I began coding every line of the transcript making sure to focus on the action within the line and code using verbs rather than code thematically. I agree with Charmaz (2006:51) that “the research participants’ actions and statements teach [us] about their worlds, albeit sometimes in ways they may not anticipate...the grounded theory method itself contains correctives that reduce the likelihood that researchers merely superimpose their preconceived notions on the data.” Therefore, I was careful to give codes to each line that captured the participant’s action and feeling. For example, a long statement from one participant, Candice, took up multiple lines in the transcript and each line needed to be coded. Candice explained:

I get a lot of aggressive stares from straight Black men, who are like what are you doing with her? (code: *sensing aggression*) And I get a lot of stares from straight White men, it’s more like I want to get in on that, if that makes sense. (code: *feeling sexualized*) Once there was a 4 yr old that pointed and said look at them daddy, what are they? (code: *being othered*) And then when I’m holding her hand, older Black people won’t give me the “hey nod,” which I hate (code: *feeling rejected*).

Thus, rather than giving the entire thought one code, I coded each line with a distinct code. I also paid attention to the action instead of giving a more thematic code such as “people’s reactions.” Throughout the initial coding, I kept memos to write down important thoughts and questions as I went through each transcript. These memos became particularly important as I began focused coding.

According to Charmaz (2006), during focused coding the researcher takes the most common initial coding categories to create themes that will eventually become the theoretical conclusions. Often in focused coding new categories are created out of multiple categories and some categories may be dropped completely (Charmaz 2006). For example using Candice’s statement above, I took the four initial codes; “sensing aggression,” “feeling sexualized,” “being othered,” and “feeling rejected” to create the category, “negative reactions from strangers.” Another important aspect of focused coding I engaged in is comparing data. I had other transcripts with initial codes similar to the example above. However, as I compared Candice’s experiences to other participant experiences, I began to see different patterns of the type of “negative reactions from strangers.” For example, Candice spoke very clearly about different types of reactions from different types of people while other participants did not always make these distinctions. Furthermore, most participants commented on feeling “stares” from strangers but may not have gone into detail about the type of stare as Candice did. I created another category, “being visible” in order to capture this aspect of public experience that the majority of my participants described. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, the larger theme of “managing public experiences” includes the final subtheme, “negotiating visibility.” It was through detailed coding and keeping memos I connected and compared codes from different transcripts to eventually create major themes and subthemes.

## Limitations

As with any research project, limitations are inevitable. While qualitative research is not meant to be generalizable to the larger population, some find this a significant limitation of qualitative research. Due to the qualitative nature of this project, the findings cannot be generalizable to the larger population. Furthermore, non-random sampling was used which also limits any generalizability. Another limitation is that there is a possibility that the participants' stories are not accurate, but the point of the research project is to capture how the participants experience and construct their reality. Snowball sampling is used which provides further limitations in sample diversity. Snowball sampling created a more homogenous sample group in terms of education and social class standing. However, there is sample diversity in race, gender, sexual orientation, age, relationship status and geographic location. Furthermore, while many social scientists embrace phenomenological and feminist methodologies, some find critical limitations in these approaches. Giddens (1976) argues that the focus on only the subjective realities of individuals fails to address or acknowledge how unconscious conditions influenced by social structure influence these subjective realities (cited in Porter 2002: 57).

While I acknowledge that there are limitations to this research project, I argue qualitative research is not intended to make generalizations to larger populations; this is more of a goal in quantitative research. Rather, qualitative research seeks to explore in rich detail social processes. I do believe the stories of the participants provide rich data about their lived experiences individually and with their partners. Thus, this research overall is a contribution to the growing literature on interracial families and LGBTQ families.

## Personal Reflection

The decision to explore the experiences of same-sex interracial couples is rooted in my own personal interest in interracial relationships. I have been in a long term interracial relationship and so from a very personal level, I have always been interested in hearing about interracial couples' experiences. More specifically, as a White woman married to a Black man and being very conscious of America's racial history and continued racial inequality and racism, I am particularly curious about relationship processes of Black-White interracial couples. When I first began to think about what I wanted to research for this dissertation, I knew I wanted to focus on interracial couples and families. After having my son, I was especially interested in exploring parenting among interracial families, particularly the experiences of White mothers of biracial children. Thus, I began an extensive literature review on interracial families and parenting.

Social science research on this topic has grown substantially in the last 20 years, but there is still a need for more scholarly contributions. However, what immediately jumped out at me while reviewing this research on interracial relationships was that it only focused on heterosexual couples and families. My feminist background in women's studies instilled in me a commitment to social justice research and providing an academic platform for ignored voices. Thus, I felt it was important I bring attention to same-sex interracial couples and provide an academic outlet to share their experiences. Additionally, a part of me was also curious how same-sex interracial couples' experiences compared to my own experiences of being in an interracial relationship. Overall, I felt strongly that I had an obligation to put my initial research interests aside and focus on what would be the most meaningful contribution to social science research while also providing a space for social justice work. For me, a commitment to social justice research means I am not central and that my needs are not at the core of my motives.

In addition to the theoretical feminist and Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory arguments for reflexivity, my personal reflection of this research project is important to share. Going into this research, it was critical to address the potential bias and obstacles I may encounter as a White heterosexual woman interviewing Black and White lesbians and gay men. Even though I share a common experience of being in a Black-White interracial relationship, this relationship is largely shaped by the privilege of heteronormativity and heterosexuality. The reflexive aspect is also intersectional, since in some instances I may share a similar identity or experience but other times I did not. It was important for me to acknowledge my potential biases and privileges and how my social position may impact and affect the interviews (Harding 1987; Maynard 1998). As a White straight woman, I carry the privilege of Whiteness and heterosexuality, but I also experience gender oppression as a woman. Through my graduate work and personal relationship with my partner, I have spent a great deal of time learning about what it means to have White privilege and how this affects my experiences as a woman. Honestly, I have spent more time examining my racial and gender dynamics of privilege and oppression than my privilege as a straight person. However, this research has made me understand how important sexuality and heteronormativity are in thinking about intersectionality and everyday experiences. My participant narratives challenged me to reexamine my personal and relationship privilege of heterosexuality and everyday privileges I benefit from. Their stories made it clear how my partner and I can operate more smoothly in a society that privileges heteronormativity despite being an interracial couple.

It is also important to acknowledge my privilege and power that goes along with being the researcher, but it is equally important that I reflect on how this privilege and power may influence the participant's voice during interviews. Thus, during interviews, transcription, and

writing, I strived to maintain the participant's voice at the center, in their words, in their tone, and not through the interpretation of myself (McClaurin 2001). I believe this feminist research approach enhances trust, which is a critical factor in qualitative research. During my interviews, I felt the atmosphere was relaxed and participants spoke continuously with very few awkward silences. Even though my interracial relationship is heterosexual, I sometimes shared my own stories with participants and we often found many similarities. I do think my disclosure about being in an interracial relationship myself helped build rapport and connection with my participants. Many of my participants would even ask after they told me a story, "has that happened to you...?" I always welcomed my participants to ask me questions and I felt this made the interview process more reciprocal and shared knowledge exchange.

Lastly, throughout this research, I consistently reflected on a passage from Collins (2000:15) to keep me grounded and centered on what is important:

...to be credible in the eyes of [a particular] group, scholars must be personal advocates for their material, be accountable for the consequences of their work, have lived or experienced their material in some fashion, and be willing to engage in dialogs about their findings with ordinary, everyday people...

Thus, the methodology and methods chosen for this study align well with my commitment to social justice research and reflexivity. Phenomenology and intersectional feminism provide solid theoretical frameworks for employing constructivist grounded theory as my primary methodology. Using constructivist grounded theory, the qualitative method of in-depth interviews was the best method for exploring the subjective realities and experiences of members in interracial same-sex relationships. It is from these interviews and participant voices that two major themes emerged. The following two chapters will include detailed discussions

around “managing public settings” and “managing racial difference in private spaces” among interracial lesbian and gay couples.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: MANAGING PUBLIC SETTINGS**

### Introduction

Racial tension and racial inequality, particularly between Whites and Blacks, are systemic and unfortunate outcomes of the long history of racial oppression, racism, and discrimination in the U.S. Major steps toward racial equality have been made, especially in the last 40 years. Nevertheless, the U.S. is still plagued with stark racial inequality in housing, education, employment, and health (Hochschild and Scovronick 2003; Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Delmage 2006; Takeuchi, Walton and Leung 2010.). These inequalities play a critical component to race relations and interactions between people of different races and ethnic backgrounds (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2006; Yancy 2006). Furthermore, American families are still largely monoracial and studies demonstrate that neighborhoods, schools, and other places of social interaction are for the most part racially segregated (Delmage 2006; Yancy 2006). This leads to people interacting with their own race and cultural background and experiencing very little if any interracial interaction. Thus, interracial intimacy deviates from the norm, and in particular Black-White intimate relationships historically have been culturally taboo. Those couples who break with tradition and form interracial, same-sex relationships face unique challenges. They are likely to face public hostility not only because they are interracial, but also because they are a same-sex couple. They also face increased visibility through verbal and nonverbal reactions.

The current study adds a very important element to the discussion on interracial couples' experiences in public. With the exception of Steinbugler's (2012) very recent seminal work on comparing heterosexual and same-sex interracial couples, previous research on interracial

couples has primarily relied on exploring the experiences of heterosexual interracial couples. Interracial same-sex couples are largely overlooked within the social science literature. It is peculiar that research on interracial unions largely neglects same-sex interracial couples given recent census data suggest same-sex couples are more likely to be interracial compared to opposite-sex married or unmarried couples (Gates 2012b). Therefore, it is important to include lesbian and gay interracial couples in the conversation on what it means to be in an interracial relationship. Without these voices, then our understanding of interracial intimacy is limited.

### Interracial Intimacy across Sexuality

Despite limited Black-White interracial interaction across social institutions, interracial unions continue to increase (Lewis and Ford-Robertson 2010; Qian and Litcher 2011) and interracial unions have dramatically increased in the U.S. since the 1960s (Lee and Bean 2004; Rockquemore and Henderson 2010; Rosenfeld 2010; Qian and Litcher 2011). Some scholars look at the rising rates of interracial unions as a reflection of progress in race relations in the U.S. (Lee and Bean 2004; Rockquemore and Henderson 2010; Rosenfeld 2010). However, research also suggests that Black-White interracial relationships are the least common type of interracial couple and the least accepted form of interracial relationship (Passel et al. 2010; Wang 2012). This in part reflects how the history of slavery, racism, and racial segregation continue to permeate American society and impact intimate interracial interaction (Rockquemore and Henderson 2010). Historically, Black-White intimacy has been legally restricted and considered a cultural taboo. The racial line between Black and White has been and continues to be the most volatile racial boundary in the U.S.

Furthermore, public attitudes concerning interracial unions are more positive and are much more positive among adults ages 18-29 (Passel et al. 2010). However, attitudes towards interracial unions tend to be more positive when it does not involve a Black partner (Passel et al. 2010; Wang 2012). This gives some support for Bonilla-Silva and Embrick's (2006) argument that American society is moving away from a White/non-White racial system to a three tier system of "White," "honorary White," and "collective Black," or more simply a Black/non-Black system. They contend that some Asian and Latino groups, depending on generation status, skin color and assimilation status, have more fluid ability to move into the "White" and "honorary White" categories than Blacks who will predominately remain at the bottom of the social stratification system in the collective Black category (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2006). This trend also speaks to the social desirability of obtaining "Whiteness" and distancing from "Blackness," seen in public opinions on which types of interracial relationships are more desired than other types. Wang (2012) reports 66 percent of people would be fine with a family member marrying a Black partner, while 81 percent would be fine with a family member marrying a White partner and 75 percent and 73 percent would be fine with an Asian or Hispanic partner, respectively (Wang 2012). These percentages support the argument that the greatest racial barrier lies between Blacks and Whites, especially concerning interracial intimacy.

Nevertheless, over the past few decades visibility of Black and White interracial couples in public spaces has become more prominent. While there are more Black-White heterosexual unions than Black-White same-sex unions, same-sex couples are more likely to be interracial than heterosexual couples (Gates 2012b). Moreover, popular media including sitcoms, movies, and music include many more lesbian and gays couples than ever before. Even some male athletes are beginning to "come out" and speak up about being gay despite how the arena of

sports has historically been homophobic. While, homosexuality is not a new phenomenon, the visibility and greater acceptance of lesbian and gay couples within public arenas has increased in recent years. Within mainstream media, most gay and lesbian couples are depicted as monoracial despite the recent research demonstrating that at least 20 percent of same-sex couples are interracial (Gates 2012b). Similarly, interracial couples are often seen as heterosexual couples, ignoring the visibility of interracial same-sex couples. Within the social science literature, interracial intimacy has largely focused on heterosexual interracial couples. Likewise, literature on gay and lesbian couples has largely centered on monoracial couples. Thus, interracial lesbian and gay couples have been largely overlooked within social science research.

Steinbugler (2005; 2012) offers two of the very few studies on gay and lesbian Black-White interracial couples. Steinbugler's (2012) point of entry is to compare how straight, lesbian, and gay interracial couples negotiate racial difference. Steinbugler (2005) argues that while heterosexual interracial couples must manage the stigma of interraciality in public spaces, gay and lesbian interracial couples must manage both stigmas of being interracial and same-sex. This often makes gay and lesbian couples more marginalized and "[positions] these couples even farther from normative ideals of romantic intimacy"(Steinbugler 2005:3). Steinbugler (2012) provides a critical account of how interracial straight, lesbian and gay couples negotiate racial difference in public spaces. Most of her participants, straight and gay, experienced some form of relationship invisibility. This was particularly true for lesbian and gay couples. Steinbugler (2005) states that unless the lesbian and gay couples are openly affectionate or holding hands, not only does their relationship go unrecognized because of occupying heteronormative spaces, but they are also treated as complete strangers due to their racial difference and public assumption that two people of the different races would not even be friends, let alone lovers. In

contrast, Steinbulger (2005) notes that when interracial lesbian and gay couples become visible in public settings, they often regulate their level of amount of public displays of affection for fear of violence or negative reactions. From these narratives, Steinbugler (2012:xiii) suggests that interracial couples must engage in “racework” or “the routine actions and strategies through which individuals maintain close relationships across lines of racial stratification.” One form of racework Steinbugler discusses is “visibility management,” a strategy interracial straight, lesbian and gay couples use to negotiate public visibility in order to navigate safely and comfortably in public. When interracial couples engage in visibility management, they “modify their behavior in order to conceal their intimacy or clearly signal its presence” (Steinbugler 2012:62). The current study extends Steinbulger’s work not only to examine how interracial lesbian and gay couples manage visibility and negotiate racial difference in public spaces, but to also better understand how the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality influence their navigation through public settings.

### Theoretical Framework

Because this study seeks to explore how the intersection of race, gender and sexuality shape the public experiences of lesbian and gay interracial couples, this study is largely informed by the theoretical framework of intersectional feminism. Collins (2000), one of the most noted scholars of intersectional feminism, discusses how intersectionality is rooted in the concept of an interlocking matrix of domination:

Fundamentally, race, class, and gender are intersecting categories of experience that affect all aspects of human life; thus, they simultaneously structure the experiences of all people in this society. At any moment, race, class, or gender may feel more salient or meaningful in a given person’s life, but they are overlapping and cumulative in their effect on people’s experience (Collins and Anderson 2007:5).

People experience these intersecting inequalities differently depending on their social location. For intersectional feminists, a person is situated in the matrix of domination where a person's power or subjugation may shift depending on the place, time, and context. Intersectional feminism has greatly contributed to research on families of color because "it is concerned with the politics of location in that it directs researchers' attention to how this mutual construction is shaped by social institutions and social interactions in the context of systems of inequality" (Burton et al. 2010:446).

However while intersectionality has become more known and valued theoretically, "the notion that social identities and social inequality based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, sex/gender (and one could add a host of other identities such as class, disability status, etc.) are interdependent and mutually constitutive, rather than independent and uni-dimensional poses a variety of thorny methodological challenges" (Bowleg 2008:312). This may be one of many reasons why researching relationship processes among interracial lesbian and gay couples is often overlooked. It is important to note that intersectional feminism does not imply that group processes and group experiences are absent and only individual experiences exist (Collins 1997). Collins (1997:375) states, "The notion of a standpoint refers to historically shared, group-based experiences. Groups have a degree of permanence over time such that group realities transcend individual experiences." Thus, intersectional feminism is still based in the social construction of social categories that include group patterns.

Empirical studies truly adopting the theoretical framework of intersectionality are rare but critically needed (Bowleg 2008; Ferree 2010). Intersectional feminism has been extensively theorized but it is harder to find empirical based social science studies that use intersectional

feminism within the research design, data collection and data analysis. It is from this intersectional theoretical argument that this study makes an important contribution to the limited empirical research on intersectionality.

In addition to intersectional feminism, this study is also framed by Goffman's work on presentation of self (1959), relations in public (1971), and stigma (1963). Much of Goffman's theories apply to how interracial same-sex couples navigate through public spaces. Goffman's theory of dramaturgy (Goffman 1959) is certainly pivotal in how these couples present themselves in public. Goffman (1959) proposes that people are "actors" in everyday life either participating in front stage or back stage performances. Front stage performances include how one presents themselves to others, often in public spaces or with strangers. People engage in impression management, in that people monitor how they act by regulating their use of gestures language, and attire and perform by following a "script" (Goffman 1959). Furthermore, part of impression management includes the use of tie-signs (Goffman 1971) which interracial couples engage in frequently in order to define their relationship and relationship status to strangers.

Dramaturgy and impression management also apply to social groups. For example, Yoshino (2006) describes how people of color often feel pressured from the dominant White social group to assimilate to "White norms." This often entails people of color, particularly Blacks, to monitor their dress, speech, hair, and participation in social organizations (Yoshino 2006). Otherwise, Blacks and other groups of color are at risk for being stigmatized and stereotyped. Anderson (1990) discusses how young Black men often engage in impression management around Whites. Some Black men go out of their way to be nice and accommodating to Whites in order to break stereotypes Whites may have about young Black men (Anderson 1990). Similarly, gay and lesbian couples often monitor their individual and relationship

performances in public to “pass” as heterosexual (Steinbugler 2012). Thus, Goffman’s (1959) concepts of dramaturgy and impression management contribute to understanding private and public spaces.

Goffman’s theory of stigma (1963) also helps describe interracial same-sex couples’ experiences in public spaces. Because interracial same-sex couples deviate from the norm in terms of socially acceptable relationship formations, their relationship unfortunately is often stigmatized. The stigma these couples receive is intersectional, in that stigma may stem from both race, sexual orientation, and in some instances gender. Thus, Goffman’s multiple works on the interaction between individual and society are key to analyzing the current study.

### Methods and Data

This study is based on 19 in-depth interviews with individuals in Black/White lesbian and gay relationships. Participants were in a committed relationship with a partner of the same self-identified sex but who is of another self-identified race, either Black or White. Exploring the worlds of Black-White interracial couples are important since research suggests that Black-White interracial relationships are the least common type of interracial couple and the least accepted form of interracial relationship (Passel et al. 2010; Wang 2012). In part, this largely reflects how the history of slavery, racism, and racial segregation continue to evade American society and impact intimate interracial interaction (Rockquemore and Henderson 2010). Historically, Black-White intimacy has been legally restricted and considered a cultural taboo with several U.S. states having legal bans on interracial marriage until the late 1990s. Furthermore, the racial line between Black and White has been and continues to be the most

volatile racial boundary in the U.S. Thus, this study focuses on Black-White interracial, same-sex relationships.

### Data Collection

National outlets were used to recruit participants. Flyers were sent out through national academic listservs and national and regional LGBTQ organizations and support groups. About half of the participants responded through the academic listservs, which some may argue creates educational and class homogeneity. However, snowball sampling through many of these participants lead me to participants that are not professionally affiliated with higher education. Furthermore, recruiting participants through national listservs also diversified the sample in age, length of relationship, and geographical location. Snowball sampling was very effective in this study, mirroring previous studies on interracial and same-sex couples (Childs 2005a; Steinbugler 2007; Moore 2008).

All interviews were completed via phone and audio recorded. Participants contacted me through email to arrange a date and time to complete the phone interview. Once we established a time to interview, I emailed the consent form for their review. The consent form asked participants' permission to audio record the interview. The IRB waived the need for written consent; however, I audio recorded every participant's verbal consent before the interview commenced. All of the interviews were audio recorded. The average interview lasted a little more than an hour, with the shortest interview lasting 35 minutes and the longest interview lasting two hours. In order to safeguard the participants' confidentiality, participant names and identifying characteristics were removed during transcription and pseudonyms were used to replace participants' names.

## Participant Demographics

There is diversity in age, relationship length, and residential location. The age ranged from 28 to 70 with the average participant being around 45 years old. In terms of gender, I interviewed ten women, two of whom also identified as gender-queer. In terms of sexuality, all of the women identified as lesbian of which three of the women also identified as queer and one woman also identified as bi-sexual. Of the ten women, four women identified as Black/African American and six women identified as White/Caucasian. I interviewed nine men. All of them identified as gay and one also identified as bi-sexual. Of the nine men, four identified as Black/African American and five identified as White/Caucasian. The average participant's relationship length was about ten years. All of the participants have at least a college education with roughly half holding graduate degrees. All of the participants identify with middle class status and work in professional careers. Some of their professions include college professor, architect, higher education administrator, project manager, community organizer, and graduate student. Participants tend to live in three regions of the U.S., with seven living in the Northeast, seven in the Southeast, and five in the Midwest. All of the participants living in the Southeast reside in the state of Florida. States represented in the Northeast include Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Washington D.C. States represented in the Midwest include Tennessee, Kansas, and Wisconsin.

## Data Analysis

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) was followed for data analysis. The primary goal during data analysis was to keep close to the data while also creating themes

organically. Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory differs from traditional grounded theory in that,

...neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices. My approach explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an *interpretive* portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it (Charmaz 2006:10).

This study follows most of the basic principles of traditional grounded theory as presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967) including: 1) ongoing data collection and data analysis throughout the study, 2) creating codes and categories from data, 3) comparing data in every stage for rich analysis and not just descriptive analysis, 4) constant memo-writing, 5) sampling for theoretical development and not population representativeness and 6) writing a literature review after data analysis (as outlined in Charmaz 2006).

Two types of coding were used, initial line-by-line coding followed by focused coding (Charmaz 2006). Every line of the transcript was coded, making sure to focus on the action within the line and code using verbs rather than coding thematically. Throughout the initial coding, I kept memos to record important thoughts and questions as I went through each transcript. These memos became particularly important as I began focused coding, which commenced after initial line-by-line coding was completed. During the focused coding, codes from the initial coding stage were collapsed into categories and compared across data. The collapsed categories eventually formed major themes and subthemes. Memos also helped determine how various categories fit together to create final themes and subthemes.

The emerging grounded themes for this study include negotiating visibility, negotiating invisibility, encountering extended family, managing LGBTQ spaces, and resisting public

hostility. The primary questions in the interview in which most of these themes emerged are, “Tell me about your experiences as a couple in public places” and “Tell me about your relationships with extended family.” Thus, the emerging themes do not stem from a specific question about the theme. For example, I never asked specifically, “how is your relationship visible/invisible” or “how do you resist negative reactions.” Thus, my goal was to allow themes to develop on their own and to remain grounded in the data.

### Findings

Managing public spaces was a central aspect to the lives of my participants. Every participant had a story about how they negotiate, navigate and ultimately manage public spaces while out with their partner. The interplay between individual, group and society is important to understanding how these couples managed public spaces. How these couples present themselves and manage their public performances (Goffman 1959) while also enduring social stigma (Goffman 1963) are important to better understanding relationship processes and experiences.

Most of the participants’ stories include very positive experiences which is important and promising. However, every participant had at least one negative or uncomfortable public experience. It is important to note that most of the participants live, work, and socially interact in predominantly White, straight environments. Only a handful of participants describe their living environment as racially diverse, and even fewer discussed having large numbers of lesbian and gay couples living in the same neighborhood. Thus, operating in largely White and heteronormative spaces may provide a different experience than living in an environment that is racially diverse and includes an array of sexual orientations. However, because the majority of the U.S. population is White and heterosexual, participants experience life in the most common

U.S. demographic environment. For these individuals, managing public spaces involves negotiating visibility, negotiating invisibility, encountering extended family, managing LGBTQ spaces, and resisting public hostility.

### Negotiating Visibility

Heterosexual and same-race relationships are the norm and therefore often receive little public attention. Romantic relationships that deviate from what is expected or considered “appropriate” may receive more public attention and often have heightened visibility. This was particularly the case for many of the participants with whom I spoke. Most of the participants discussed instances where they felt a personal awareness of their relationship receiving stares, glares or other public reactions that marked their relationship as being more visible than other types of relationships. An important aspect of visibility for many of the participants is the heightened awareness of how the intersection of racial difference, gender presentation, and sexuality impact the relationship visibility in public spaces.

Stienbulger (2012) found that interracial same-sex couples were more likely to monitor or downplay their visibility when in public more so than heterosexual interracial couples. However, in the current study, none of the participants hide or downplay the fact they are a gay or lesbian couple when out in public. In fact, they expressed that it is important for them to be themselves and affirm their relationship to others. Yet, this often takes work and usually requires concerted efforts to affirm both the existence of their relationship as well as their relationship status to others. For example, Cindy, a Black woman who has been with her partner for 33 years, describes how she and her partner often introduce themselves when they meet someone new:

I say, "I'm Cindy," and Gwyneth says, "Cindy's my wife." So that's what we believe, you know, that we have to be out every single moment of every single day.

Here Cindy makes concerted efforts to assure people know that Gwyneth is her wife.

While participants do not engage in impression management (Goffman 1959) to conceal their sexuality, many, like Cindy, often engage in front stage impression management (Goffman 1959) to affirm that their relationship is just as valid as heterosexual married couples'. Some participants also engaged in impression management by using their relationship as a way to break down stereotypes about homosexual promiscuity. Vince, a Black man, who has been with his partner for 15 years, discusses how he uses his relationship presentation to defy stereotypes and stigmas about gay couples:

And so a lot of people feel like particularly gay men, you know they're not really monogamous individuals, it's just who's ever there at the time and they're ruled by their sexual relationship and I think that's the biggest stereotype. That people see us and they ask our Bishop or our minister if we are monogamist, if we are in a long term relationship. So yeah, gay folks aren't capable of long term relationships and I think that's a big stereotype.

Similarly, Travis, a White man who has been with his partner for 15 years, talks about affirming his relationship with others, particularly in the church setting:

Every now and then somebody will struggle and say, "So, uh, uh, is it, uh." I say, "Just say spouse." [Travis continues later in the interview] We're just not that public about our displays of affections. But I will say this, at church there's what would be called crossing of the peace, where we all turn and greet each other in the name of Christ and we shake hands. But married couples generally hug and, in fact, we hug when we're in church and pass the peace.

Vince and Travis make efforts to manage how their relationship visibility is perceived by others. However, their goal is to have their relationship viewed as "normal" or just like any other married couple.

Goffman (1971:189) asserts that “anchored relationships,” relationships where each member “identifies the other personally, knows the other likewise, and openly acknowledges to the other that an irrevocable starting has been made between them” are an essential aspect of social interaction within public spaces. Members of anchored relationships use markers, gestures, vocal expression and other signs to visually affirm to others and themselves that they are “tied” as an important social bond. Goffman (1971) refers to this process as “tie-signs.” Furthermore, Goffman (1971) describes that social interactions and encounters in public spaces rely on “ritualized indications of alignment” so that people may operate smoothly in a given society. Tie-signs facilitate smooth operation since they reaffirm social order and expected social interaction. Goffman (1971) provides the example of a tie-sign of two people of the opposite sex eating in a restaurant. This tie-sign signals to others they are most likely a romantic couple; married, dating, or perhaps having an affair (Goffman 1971). Whereas, when two people of the same-sex are dining together, the tie-sign usually sends a message to others that they are most likely friends, co-workers, or siblings, and not a romantic couple. While people use tie-signs to understand social phenomena, Goffman (1971) warns that a tie-sign does not always tell the full story. Thus, participants often have to engage in extended use of tie-signs in the form of vocal expression and gestures so people know their relationship exists and often that it is a serious, long-term relationship.

“Being visible” or being out in public, in most instances, are positive experiences for my participants. As Martin, a Black male who has been with his partner for four years, describes:

People will more often than not assume we are together. We haven't had anyone say anything negative to us, at least not to our face. We've never been treated poorly, ever. In fact sometimes it seems we are treated better in that people are happy to see us as a couple. If anything, people are more positive.

In Martin's opinion, his relationship visibility attracts even more positive attention compared to heterosexual and monoracial couples.

Being visible for most of the participants does not include public displays of affection. For the majority of participants, public displays of affection are not important nor wanted. Many of the participants discuss that public displays of affection are just not a natural part of the relationship and it has nothing to do with feeling uncomfortable or afraid. For example, Travis states:

We're just not that public about our displays of affections...we don't walk down the street holding hands, but we don't walk around the house holding hands either. We wouldn't walk down the streets in San Francisco holding hands because we're not the holding hands type of couple. We don't have any problems with public displays of affection, but we don't really participate in it.

Cindy also talks about how it is rare for her and her partner to show public displays of affection, but like Travis, she attributes this to their generational upbringing of minimizing public affection:

I think it's more of a generational thing. You know, I see kids walking across campus all the time holding hands and being themselves. But I think that for me, it's just more of a generational thing.

However, there were a few participants that talked about being affectionate in public. These participants did not discuss any fears of being able to display their affection. Interestingly, like Cindy points out, these participants tend to be under 30 years old. Andrea, a Black woman who has been with her partner for two years, energetically says:

I think people get excited about us because we're this positive, obviously loving couple. We're both very social. We throw stuff [get-togethers] at our house, and we have people over a lot. We're sort of visible out there.

Candice, a Black woman who has been with her partner for almost a year, often talked about negative public experiences when out with her partner. However, despite these experiences, she doesn't have any hesitation to be affectionate with her partner:

I'm pretty comfortable with our relationship wherever we go. We are really affectionate.

While all of my participants are proud of their relationship and are not afraid to be themselves in public and engage in tie-signs, an important issue of visibility my participants discuss is how they believe the racial difference between themselves and their partners marks them as very visible couples. Lesley, a White woman who has been with her partner for 12 years reflects:

We go as this unit that's half and half. If we were both Black, they might see us as a couple, they might not. But somehow, sometimes I think her race is underscored by my Whiteness... people notice she's Black because I'm White. If I was Black, Hispanic or Indian, they might not notice she was Black. The other thing though in some settings, the racial difference has drawn attention to the fact that we're probably a couple because [if same-race] you could just be two friends traveling together, you could be siblings, but if you're Black and White to such degrees – none of those.

Lesley's reflections speak to how our society structures racial difference as being a Black and White binary. Lesley's statement also reflects that due to the dense racial segregation still prominent in U.S. society, that it would be unlikely for a White and a Black woman to be close friends or sisters. In this way, race and gender in Lesley's example may be seen as tie-signs. When two people of the same race and same gender are in public together, people use these markers to assume the people are friends or siblings. However, when different race but same gender people are together in public, in Lesley's view, this stands out and is marked differently.

Janice, a White woman who has been with her partner for over a year, has a similar experience of noticing how the Black/White racial difference between herself and her partner makes their relationship more visible. Janice notices the racial difference of Black and White becomes more visible compared to her previous relationship with a Vietnamese woman:

It seems to be particular to the same-sex but also Black-White interracial couples, because my previous girlfriend - a very brief relationship – was with a Vietnamese woman, and I wasn't aware of race in the same way with her. Although, it also might have been that we...she was very masculine and, I think, passed as a boy, so I wasn't aware so much of the same-sex stuff in public. Whereas, with Tiffany it's very obvious that we're two women together.

Both Lesley and Janice talk about the stronger racial contrast between White and Black versus any other interracial combination. However, Janice reflects more intersectionally on her relationship visibility. She questions whether the gender presentation of her previous partner plays a role in her feeling of heightened visibility with her current partner. She wonders whether, because her previous partner may have passed as a man, that this relationship went more unnoticed than her current relationship with Tiffany since “it's very obvious [they are] two women together.”

Like Janice, other participants questioned whether public attention and stares are due to racial difference or being a same-sex couple or a combination of both. Andrea reflects:

Then there are just strange looks. In my mind, based on where I think the sustained eye contact or staring is directed at – maybe it's because of her gender, maybe it's because we're interracial.

Mia, a White woman who has been with her partner for almost a year, also questions the source of the stares and attributes this complexity to people seeming very confused about her relationship:

Most people are just really confused, like we get a lot of stares and it's hard to tell whether it's because she's Black or because they just don't know if I'm a guy or a woman, they just don't know what to make of us.

Like Janice, Nichole, a White woman who has been with her partner for 4 years, analyzes her relationship visibility and compares it to a previous relationship:

When we are open and together, I definitely--you feel people look at you. I'm always like, are they looking at us because we're gay or because one of us is Black and one of us is White, or is it the combination of the two. So, you know, and I forget that we're--I forget that she's Black and I'm White. I forget until then, until I notice people looking at us... You know, it's like, first we're a gay couple, and then double whammy of a Black girl and a White girl... you can tell by looks, because I've dated an interracial girl who almost looked White, and I didn't get the same looks.

There is a slight difference between Janice's and Nichole's observation of public visibility and comparing it to experiences with previous partners. Janice questions if the stares are because of the racial difference or being a same-sex couple. Nichole makes an important observation that suggests the increased stares with her current partner may be due more to racial difference since she felt more visible with her current Black partner compared to her previous "almost looked White" girlfriend and there was no mention of differences in gender presentation and "passing" between Nichole's previous and current partner. Thus, Janice's and Nichole's experiences are important because they both have previous interracial relationships to compare to their current relationship experience. In both cases, Janice's and Nichole's experiences with their Black partners underscore an increased "stigma" associated with Black-White interracial relationships. Employing Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma, it seems at least from Janice's and Nichole's experiences that being with a Black partner compared to partners of other racial or ethnic backgrounds produces more stares and attention from strangers. Interestingly, while Goffman

(1963) focuses on individual stigma, here it is a relationship stigma reflecting larger societal taboos specifically towards Black-White interracial romance.

Overall, participants experienced reactions that were welcoming, confused looks, and long stares. However, regardless of the reaction to their visibility, none of the participants try to hide their relationship or change the way they operate in public. Rather, they affirm their relationship whenever possible and for those that enjoy public displays of affection, they do not hesitate to engage in it.

### Negotiating Invisibility

Despite feeling very visible in many instances in public, the majority of the participants also have stories about feeling invisible. This feeling of invisibility stems from strangers disregarding either participants' relationships as same-sex couples and/or ignoring one partner's physical and emotional presence. There are often instances where one partner is treated as invisible while the other partner becomes highly visible. These situations often include deliberate disregard of one partner because of their perceived race, gender, and/or sexuality. I argue that these instances illustrate how the interraciality and/or sexuality of the relationship are sometimes dismissed or ignored and therefore make the relationship "invisible."

The first pattern of invisibility underscores the historic problem of the male gaze and the sexualization of the female body. Almost all of the women participants under the age of 30 had a story about being in public with their partners and having straight men make advances towards one of them. This often created feelings of disrespect and irritation, particularly for the partner that was treated as invisible and disregarded. These advances by the opposite sex only occurred

to the women participants, suggesting a sexualization of the female body and perhaps male eroticism of lesbian sexuality. Candice, a Black woman, states:

I get a lot of stares from straight White men, it's more like "I want to get in on that," if that makes sense.

In this statement, Candice describes feeling sexualized by the male gaze. This observation seems to imply how some White straight men are interested in creating a threesome with her and her partner. She goes on to say that even when she lets the men know she is with her girlfriend "sometimes they don't believe, sometimes they believe my partner is a guy." So, on the one hand, Candice is unsure if the men making advances mistake her partner for another man, but she also states that even after telling them she's with her female partner her words are still disregarded and the men continue the advances.

Mia, a White woman, also experiences this from the opposite side. She is the partner that is often ignored and dismissed:

And even when she'll tell people she's with her girlfriend, people will still be suspicious and some guys will still try and hit on her with me there.

Through the sexualization of Candice and Mia's partner, men are blatantly ignoring their lesbian relationships and making one partner invisible and sexualizing the other.

Andrea, a Black woman, who has been with her partner for two years, also describes instances where she is hit on and her partner is ignored and feels disrespected. Andrea says:

Yeah, I don't know if it was clear hitting on, but something will occur. Beth will feel very disrespected... The point in which Beth gets upset is when she's working, and physically behind the bar; and I can be standing two feet from her, but I'm on the other side of the bar. A third person comes up and says something, and they're not aware of the relationship.

Andrea questions the legitimacy of the male attention and also states perhaps people are unaware of their relationship. This also demonstrates how their lesbian relationship goes unnoticed and

unrecognized within heteronormative spaces. More importantly, this ignoring of the relationship has real consequences to her partner's feelings and emotions.

Furthermore, Nichole, a White woman, discusses an important intersectional invisibility of sexuality and race when out with her partner:

A few guys that would come up and--this happened three times--and would say something to her about me, as in like, "why are you with her when you could be with me" type of thing. That happened like three separate times--or just a complete disregard for me, you know, just would come and started trying to talk to her and ask for her number. I don't know if that's completely misbehaving, or if I'm White or what. It was all Black guys that had done it... I felt disrespected--not by her, but by them. You know, they wouldn't do that to a straight couple, or would they do that if I was a Black girl?

Nichole discusses an interesting dynamic of race, gender, and sexuality by questioning if the men would disrespect her in the same way if she were Black or if she were a man. While this suggests a disregard for the lesbian relationship and the interracial relationship, it also speaks perhaps to a larger issue of gendered dominance in which some men feel they have the right to disregard women's words and assertions. Candice, Mia and Nichole talk about telling men to "back off," yet the men do not take their words seriously and proceed with more advances.

While these experiences are particular to the younger women in my sample, there may also be an issue of race and gender. Even though it is a small number of Black women in the sample, it is important to note all of the male advances while the couples are together in public are directed at the Black female partners. On first thought, the advances to the Black partner may be due in part to the more feminine gender presentation compared to their White partner. Both Candice and Andrea describe themselves as "high-fem" and their partners as more gender androgynous to "butch." However, Candice and Andrea talk about their partners receiving male advances when their partners are out alone. So, it is not necessarily that White, more gender

androgynous looking women are unattractive to straight men, but for some reason in the participants' stories, White women's bodies are not "available" when out with their partners. Perhaps, their relationship status as a couple safeguards their bodies, while Black women's bodies are seen as sexually available regardless of relationship status. From a critical race perspective, the Black female body has been hyper-sexualized and "available" for sexual exploitation from White and Black men regardless of whether the woman is in a relationship or not (Davis 1981). A note of caution should be granted here given there are only a few voices being represented. However, I do think it is an important phenomenon going on in these particular stories.

The second important area of invisibility participants experience while out in public with their partner centers more on the specific issue of race. In the previous discussion the White partner was ignored and disrespected while the Black partner was "visible" sexually. In the following instances, it is the Black partner that is ignored and treated as "invisible." For many of the Black participants, they recounted instances when out as a couple in stores, restaurants or social events, where they would be ignored and disregarded while their White partner would be helped, addressed, and even assumed financially superior. For example, Cindy describes:

We would go in stores and we would clearly be together, and we would be treated as though we were not together. So somebody would say to her, may I help you -- they would ignore me, they would talk to her and engage with her, and then I would have to insert myself into the conversation or the situation. Whenever we would go out to dinner, the waiter or waitress -- I mean, these are just little things, but they're things that get on my nerves -- the waiter or waitress would always hand her the check.

Evan, a Black male who has been with his partner for six years, recounted a similar experience to Cindy's:

There are times when we enter the room and I'm immediately dismissed by the other people in the room because they see me as a Black person and so the moment I walk in I have to prove I'm not that "kind of Black person." He [his partner] is just easily accepted into a group of people and I'm often the only African American there and I have work my way through the room until they realize I can swing together a couple of sentences and have a degree and make all the money in the relationship... I'm the only Black person out of 100 or 200 people and they are very jovial with Larry and I'm ignored and I can get upset at times because he doesn't always understand that he gets drawn into conversations and I get left out and I'm just kind of there.

Like Cindy, Evan also talks about being dismissed as financially instable because he is Black:

I make good salary and he doesn't even have a job and the waiter will walk up and give him the check... It's because he qualifies, he's a White male... So now I do the ordering so they know "I'm in charge, I'm taking care of this."

Similarly, Lesley talks about an experience of invisibility when she and her partner went to a social event. Her partner was a VIP member and would not even be assisted at the registration table. Lesley recounts:

She inquired about her nametag and they wouldn't even look at the nametags. They just assumed she couldn't possibly be for that table... and they kept not paying attention to her. White couples would come up, and they would attend to them. She said she felt like they thought she was a panhandler.

Lesley went on to say that it wasn't until she went up to the table and demanded their assistance to her partner that they actually received any help. Lesley recounts another story that illustrates the invisibility of her relationship to strangers due to race:

I had a backpack on. I needed something, so she [partner] went in my backpack. This odd middle-aged White, I'm not sure if he was homeless, but kind of a street character – comes up to me and says, "Oh, my God. Do you realize someone's going in your backpack?" I was like, "Yeah. That's my partner. I asked her to get something out." He asked, "What are you doing here today anyway?" I said, "We're here for the Pride parade." He said, "They warned us on TV that the place would be filled with queers today." But it's weird because she was Black, he walked past a drag queen and didn't blink; but because this Black woman was going in my backpack, that's an alarm.

Thus, even at a gay social event, the interraciality of Lesley's relationship is ignored and viewed as invisible. Not only is the relationship ignored, but Lesley's partner is racially profiled.

Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma applies to these participants' experiences. In these stories, the stigma is not necessarily related to the relationship as it was in the previous section, but rather here it is a skin color stigma. The Black participants are treated differently from their White partners, often completely ignored or stigmatized as being financially inadequate. This individual skin color stigma crosses over to the relationship stigma previously discussed since both deal with the stigma of "Blackness" and being intimately affiliated with Black people. These stigmas speak to the larger societal issue of racism, most prominently affecting Blacks. American society places "Whiteness" as the norm or "normal" skin color and according to Goffman (1963) those that deviate from the "norm" are stigmatized.

Interestingly, this theme of invisibility seems to primarily apply to the women participants. Evan is the only male to discuss explicit experiences of being ignored and dismissed. Perhaps it is because only the women went into detail about their experiences or that women are more aware of their surroundings and environment. Often people in the marginalized positions of society must be acutely aware of their environment and how others interact and react to their presence (Henley and Freeman 1995).

These stories illustrate how their relationship often goes unrecognized and/or disrespected from an intersectional standpoint depending on the space and people involved. One common thread is that all of these experiences occur in heteronormative and often racially homogenous spaces. While negotiating visibility produced both positive and negative experiences, it seems that negotiating invisibility creates only negative experiences.

## Encountering Extended Family

Public spaces also include interactions with extended families such as parents and siblings. While this space may be more blurred between private and public than other spaces, I view extended family interactions as public since it is outside the very intimate spaces between partners. Furthermore, many participants engage in dramaturgy (Goffman 1959) while interacting with their extended families through monitoring and managing how they present themselves, their partners, and their relationships. Many participants do not have the same comfort and support from family members as they do their partners. Thus, allowing themselves be their “natural selves” or putting their guards down is rare. Furthermore, for most participants, being “out” in non-family public spaces occurred before “being out” with family members.

Overwhelmingly, most participants describe how extended family members were not happy or supportive of their relationship, particularly in the beginning. For most participants, their current relationships are not their first same-sex relationships, but more likely their first interracial relationships. However, participants voiced that family members often still have issues with their sexual orientation and now those issues are compounded by issues with interraciality. For instance, Candice describes:

They [parents] were just a little bit freaked out that she [partner] is White and they want me to be with a Black man...My sister is straight but she dates gang members and brings them home, but I can't bring my partner home. I'm pretty sure they won't be supportive of my relationship.

Candice's statement is particularly interesting since earlier in the interview she describes her family as “[buying] into Black middle class acceptability. My family is basically the Cosby's.” However, her family seems to accept or at least tolerates her sister's choice of partners, which include gang members who are not often considered acceptable by middle class standards, but

her parents do not accept her same-sex White partner who comes from a middle class background and attends graduate school. For Candice's family, a heavy social stigma of being in a same-sex and interracial relationship is clearly present.

Vince experiences similar reactions from his family:

I grew up in a very religious Black family. So sexual orientation, many of the family members are homophobic. So that was always a religious issue you know, that was not what God intended and so that was always the issue we had. With race, because we grew up in a very, very segregated community a lot of my family members still have mistrust of Caucasians, and that's very evident in the family itself. I mean it's the fact that he's a guy is a bigger issue, but the fact that he's White is also an issue. And that's simply because of the feelings they have towards Caucasians, you know.

Here, stigma about Vince's same-sex relationship is evident and makes him an outcast to his family. Another important point Vince brings up is his family's "mistrust" of Whites. While statistics demonstrate that not all Blacks and Whites are entirely embracing of interracial relationships within their families (Passel et al. 2010; Wang 2012), qualitative research reveals the important differences why many Whites and Blacks may not approve of interracial relationships (Root 2001; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Childs 2005a; Childs 200b). For Vince's family, the disapproval is rooted in his family's experience of racism and racial segregation which has created a legitimate "mistrust" of Whites. Childs (2005a;2005b) also reports similar findings on how Blacks are sometimes suspicious of how Whites will treat (or mistreat) their Black partners. On the other hand, qualitative research reveals the primary reason Whites disapprove of interracial relationships within their families is due to racism or the belief that Blacks and Whites should not "mix" (Root 2001; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Childs 2005a). Janice's comments about her father, who is very accepting of her sexuality, but less so about Janice being in an interracial

relationship highlight this difference between some Blacks and Whites in their hesitance to support interracial relationships:

For me, with my dad, some of the things he said were uncomfortable in terms of race and prejudice from more of a generational view, but he is not in any way overtly racist. So there definitely is anxiety in terms of when I brought her home whether they would have problem with her on the surface or were they going to be thoroughly accepting, but I was like, “Oh, is my dad going to say some idiot comment that he doesn’t realize he is making?”

For both Candice and Vince, their relationships endure a stigma of not being socially acceptable forms of romantic partnerships. While neither Candice, Vince, nor Janice hide their relationship from their families, they certainly are not as open about their relationships as they are in other public spaces. This is true for many of the participants.

The complex dynamics of family and family processes, in many ways, makes it more difficult for participants to feely express or engage in tie-signs to make their relationship known and understood to family members. In some aspect, participants have to manage their performance and presentation to a higher degree when interacting with family members than when out in other public spaces. One example is White participants felt the need to reveal the race of their partner to family members before introducing them. For instance Dylan, who has been with his partner for over a year, says:

Well, I do believe I mentioned his race beforehand because, like I said, he's more of the exception than the rule for me. But you know, he made a very good entrance, it was actually at my parents' house, and he brought a very nice gift basket and he was very polite, so everyone got along just fine. My parents are very Southern hospitality people, you know.

In addition to Dylan “preparing” his family for “the exception than the rule,” he also describes how his partner makes an extra effort to present himself in a way that he best believes will win over the affection and acceptance of Dyaln’s family. Dylan’s partner engages in impression

management (Goffman 1959) to match his partner's family's characteristic of "Southern hospitality" by bringing a gift and being "very polite." One may also argue that because Dyaln's partner is Black and was presenting himself for the first time to a "Southern" White family, his partner may have engaged in more impression management than when in other public spaces. Anderson (1990) discusses how Black men often engage in impression management around Whites. Some Black men go out of their way to be nice and accommodating to Whites in order to break stereotypes Whites may have about Black men (Anderson 1990).

While most participants describe their families as not being initially supportive of their sexuality or their interracial relationships, many participants state that over time family members began to accept and in some cases even embrace their relationships. Martin, a Black man who has been with his partner for four years, describes a turning point at his wedding for his father with whom he had a very distanced relationship since "coming out:"

I was surprised by the version of my dad that showed up to the wedding. He seemed to finally find some measure of peace and I think just the physical act of being around so many people who felt so positive about our relationship changed something in him and it was like a different person and he was so there and wanted to be there and celebrating us that was never there before. So I think just doing this very traditional thing with so many other people was very transformative for him.

This touching account from Martin reveals an interesting layer of performance and stigma. Martin feels it was because he and his partner engaged in a "very traditional" event such as a wedding, that his father had a major turning point. In this instance, the traditional wedding marked as a "structural" tie-sign to affirm recognition of their relationship status. Perhaps, in the eyes of Martin's father, a traditional wedding made Martin's relationship less stigmatized and instead institutionally and socially accepted. Furthermore, maybe also the mere "wedding

performance” Martin and his partner engage in also ease the stigma Martin’s dad feels about the relationship.

There were some participants who have very positive experiences with family members. Many of these positive experiences include family members of younger generations. Often siblings are more accepting than parents, or nieces and nephews more so than aunts and uncles.

For example, Jeff describes:

A lot of his nieces and nephews and my nieces and nephews, they have never known any different. So they were born, even though they’re in their early 20s, when they were born, it was always Uncle Steven and Uncle Jeff, and Uncle Jeff’s mother and Uncle Jeff’s brothers. They were raised in this environment. So for them, it’s like “I don’t see the big deal because I’ve never known it any other way.”

Not only are Jeff’s and Steven’s nieces and nephews accepting of their relationship, but they use tie-signs in the use of language, such as “Uncle” to affirm and define their uncles’ relationship status. This symbolizes that they not only accept this relationship, but they see it as a serious life-long legal commitment with similar status, authority, and obligations of a heterosexual married couple.

Lesley, also has a similar experience with her partner’s brother. Lesley describes how her brother-in-law often introduces herself and her partner to others:

Her brother usually is able to say and doesn't flinch with is, “This is my sister Karen, and this is my sister Lisa.” They have a big understanding of sisters in spirit or whatever. I’m okay with that because I feel he’s saying, “I love my sister and my sister loves you, so I love you like a sister.” That’s okay.

Similar to Jeff’s experience, Lesley’s brother-in-law also uses a “structural” tie-sign to affirm the status of his sister’s relationship to others. Furthermore, the verbal recognition of Lesley and Vince’s partnership by using structural tie-signs also begins to chip away at social stigma

associated with their relationships. It is important to also note that both Jeff's and Lesley's relationships are not legal marriages, but they and some members of their families treat it as such. Thus, the use of structural tie-signs is even more important in these examples since they are being used similarly as legally married heterosexual couples would, and thus these tie-signs are assisting in the couples' presentation. Their family members are saying, this relationship is just like any other marriage in our family and we're going to acknowledge it as such.

While, not all participants are able to experience these very positive family encounters like Jeff and Lesley, most participants talked about the process of how their families "came around" to eventual acceptance. Some families are more accepting and embracing than others, but for many participants, impression management, performance, and social stigma are still important aspects of their interactions with their extended families. Very few participants truly felt that their extended families are "backstage" spaces where they can be their true selves and avoid stigma. Because of this, extended family is considered a public setting and not a private space.

### Managing LGBTQ Spaces

While mainstream media often paint the LGBTQ community as open, tolerant, and accepting, participants in this study paint a very different picture that unfortunately includes racism, racial exclusion, and racial stereotyping. A particularly interesting dynamic that emerged from the voices of some of the Black lesbian participants has to do with "proving" their sexuality to other mostly White lesbian communities. "Proving" sexuality often included elements of racial stereotyping and racial exclusion. Candice was particularly vocal about this problem. She

felt like she did not “fit the mold” White lesbians assigned for what a Black lesbian is supposed to be and act like. Candice states:

She [her partner] didn't have a perception of Black queerness because Black lesbians are supposed to be butch apparently. I feel like Black lesbians don't have a place in the queer community...Black queerness is confined to very specific boxes, like I'm high fem so I can't be queer in the Black and the queer community. I'm always read as straight regardless of what community I'm in.

Candice goes onto to describe:

People in the past didn't believe me, but now I'm always with my partner so it's different. Yeah, when we're together, yeah. I feel like I have to continually work to “out” myself.

Here, Candice reflects that it was only until she became involved with her current White partner, that the local LGBTQ community accepted her and believed that she is a lesbian. Furthermore, Candice felt that she not only has to “out” herself in the straight community, but because she does not fit the White lesbian preconceived notions of what Black lesbians are supposed to look like, she also must “out” herself in the lesbian community.

Cindy is not as consciously aware of this dynamic as Candice, but she illustrates it nicely as she recounts her story of meeting her partner for the first time:

I wore dresses and stockings and heels and makeup and wigs and all kinds of stuff, because I was an opera singer. So most of the lesbians wanted nothing to do with me. Most of them thought that I was a fag-hag... Gwyneth was kind of one of the few whoever kind of acknowledged me. So, like, the bisexual women would acknowledge me, and the gay men were my friends, and the lesbians kind of snubbed me. I mean, there were a couple of others who were Black, but they were kind of like, outlaws too... once I kind of got with Gwyneth, then I became accepted in the LGBT community.

Here Cindy talks about being very feminine and being mistaken as a “fag-hag,” or in other words a straight woman who socializes primarily with gay men. Cindy makes a clear distinction between how she is treated by gay men, bisexual women, and lesbians, but does not specifically

talk about why the lesbians treated her so poorly. Perhaps a similar dynamic to Candice's explanation of not fitting a particular mold of what a Black lesbian is "supposed to look and act like" is playing out in Cindy's experiences. However, unlike Candice's story, Cindy talks about other Black lesbians being considered "outlaws" or in other words marginalized from the mainstream dominant White lesbians. Therefore, an intersectional expectation is going on in these narratives combining the interplay of "doing" race, gender, and sexuality "appropriately" for the dominant White majority and those that transgress from the expectation receive exclusionary treatment.

Moreover, there's another similarity between Candice's and Cindy's stories. Like Candice, Cindy finally feels accepted into the predominately White lesbian community when she becomes partners with Gwyneth, her now White wife. Both Candice and Cindy "needed" White partners to affirm their sexual lesbian identity to the larger White majority group. Candice had to "continually out herself" to the other White gays and lesbians. Her statement, "now I'm always with my partner so it's different" seems to imply that it is through being visibly with a White woman that her LGBTQ community believes her sexual attraction to other women. In essence, Candice's and Cindy's stories portray a setting in which their White partners became the "gatekeepers" into White lesbian communities and perhaps without them, experiences of exclusion would persist. Vince also commented on the issue of "proving" sexuality among Black lesbians compared to Black gay men:

Well, as far as proving how gay I am, that doesn't seem to be a problem with the Black male LGBT community. But I do see that with the lesbians here in our community.

In addition to proving sexuality and racial exclusion experienced by some of the Black lesbians with whom I spoke with, all of the Black participants, whether male or female, had at

least one story to tell about a racist incident they experienced from their LGBTQ communities.

Jeff who lives in a more racially and ethnically diverse area than most of the other participants

still experiences racism quite frequently from the gay community. Jeff explains:

I think the gay community – I think other gay people tend to have more problems with our relationship than just with the general population. If the general population has a problem with us, it's generally because we're gay – not necessarily because we're an interracial relationship. I think that within the gay community, there's a lot of racism. When I see it, I see it more within the gay community than in the general population, I think.

Jeff goes on to give some specific examples:

They [gay community] make the assumption that I'm only with him because he's White, first of all; and that he takes care of me because he is White, and therefore he should be making more money, and he takes care of me, and that's why I'm with him. That's totally not true at all on any count. That's the assumption, and to me that's racism.

Another account Jeff described occurred while at a gay bar:

I go sit in the bar and have a drink. I just go to sit there and talk to people and chat it up. Somebody might sit at the next bar stool, and I'll start talking to them. They'll go "I'm not into Black guys." I'm thinking, "Okay, how did you get from 'hi' to all the way down there? I'm just saying 'hi' because you're sitting next to me at the bar. You don't need to make this grand announcement because your mind and my mind are not in the same place." What I like to usually say is, "That's okay because I'm not into you. I was just saying hi is all."

Vince also recounts his racist experiences within his LGBTQ community:

And so there are still people in the gay-lesbian community who see me as a Black male and they immediately have stereotypes about how I'm going to act, how I am going to talk, how I am going to behave. And so I frequently get things like, "Well, you don't act like a Black person, or you don't talk like a Black person." And I am like, "Well, how am I supposed to talk?" And that is still out there, and even in the gay community.

Similar to Vince's experience, Trevor tells me a story about a racist comment directed at his

Black partner from a White gay male friend:

Well, there was or there is a couple that was White, made a comment to Martin that he's not Black enough and Martin took offense to that. That's probably the biggest challenge, the stereotypes and all that. I mean there's some joking, but I don't participate in that.

Evan also had a story about racism within the LGBTQ community. Evan and his partner Larry, attended a recent gay event that included overnight camping in RVs. Evan remembers being one of few, if not the only Black person, and had multiple experiences of being ignored and left out.

However, one such experience occurred on the last day of the trip:

On the last day Larry was emptying out the commode and this couple walked by and said, "That's a shitty job" and he points at me and says, "I'd make *him* do it." And so I heard it and I thought, okay, maybe he's just kidding and I just let it go. About five minutes go by and he comes back and says, "I said that's a shitty job, make *him* do it" and points to me again. And I said to him, "Well since the Emancipation Proclamation, we *all* do it." And I so got upset I had to go inside the trailer and so Larry walked over to them and went off on the guy.

Some of the White participants made comments about sensing racial tension or certain "attitudes" from other lesbians and gays towards their Black partners. For instance, Melanie told me about a lesbian community that she and her partner lived:

We bought a house in a woman's community and the first time we went there she invited her mother and sister because she was the only Black person in the community. And I think she was getting nervous about it and I think there were some attitudes there. I was there by myself sometimes, and people felt that she was hard to get to know and she was being a little defensive about being in an all White community. I sensed this more there than anywhere else.

Other White participants talked about things they have seen or heard within their LGBTQ communities but not necessarily directed specifically at their partners. Travis, for instance mentions:

There's not a lot African Americans that are involved in the community [LGBTQ]. Those that are successful tend to move away. And the reason, and we've had friendships with folks that have moved away, and they say they're moving away because there's no community here for them.

When Dylan talked about race in the LGBTQ community, he discussed the issue of how Black men are sometimes degraded as sexual objects by White gay men. Dylan says:

I kind of felt as though I have heard guys get more excited about talking about sleeping with a Black man, as opposed to--you know, I think he's going to ask me out for the third date, kind of thing.

When I asked Trevor, who is White, if he has heard of Black gay men being treated as “eye candy” and not as serious relationship material, he said:

Yeah, well, more like you know people who are just gaping and not looking for a relationship I guess.

Janet, a Black woman, also mentioned feeling sexually objectified in her experiences with White women. She described feeling like she has “a flag on her ass,” in that, sometimes White women only see her as an exotic sexual fantasy rather than as a potential serious partner. Based on the participants’ stories there does seem to be a trend suggesting that the Black body, particularly the Black male body, is hyper sexualized within the LGBTQ community. Interestingly, while the Black male body is hyper sexualized, the Black female body must “prove” her sexuality to other members of the LGBTQ community.

It is obvious that race does matter in terms of how many of the participants are perceived and treated by others. However, Candice makes a keen observation that speaks to the pervasive issue of colorblindness and people’s refusal to want to engage in discussions about race. Candice tells me:

No one really says anything about us being an interracial couple in the community here, but it just feels a little weird sometimes. No one else likes to acknowledge our racialized differences, no one wants to talk about race when we talk about or understand our jokes and also we just live in a really, really, really White community. So it’s hard for me to, every other queer couple are all in same race relationships, so it’s hard to talk about us with them. People just see that we are a happy cute couple and let the race thing go by.

Janet also discussed that in her professional LGBTQ circle, every time she would bring up the topic of race and racism, it was minimalized or ignored. Janet noted that race is not important to White LGBTQ professionals and that marginalization based on sexual orientation is the only issue up for discussion.

### Resisting Public Hostility

An important theme that came up in almost every interview was how the participant and their partner resist exclusion, negative reactions, homophobia and racism. Participants voiced different resistance strategies. Some use deliberate avoidance to make a statement while others use avoidance as a refusal to deal with hostile environments.

Some expressed feelings of frustration and anger, but even within these responses, many of the participants deliberately refused to associate with anyone or anyplace that is unwelcoming to either their partner or their relationship. Steven, a White man who has been with his partner for 23 years, felt empowered that through his financial means he and his partner are able to make a statement to people and places that did not treat them fairly or respectfully:

We are empowered to be out as a couple and going places and doing things. So we know the power of money, and we are very active in that respect. We will tell companies in person or on the phone or anything else. We are very vocal in letting people know why we will or will not spend our money with them... We're not going to spend our money somewhere where we don't feel like we're welcome.

Another form of avoidance as resistance comes from Melanie who shares a bad experience of both homophobia and racism on a private golf course:

I went in to the office very irritated. So, I only play in a league there, but I don't play socially and Janet will never go back... And she felt bad because she knew it was an important thing to me because I've never had a membership before and I probably never had because I don't like all the exclusivity and now I probably will never join another again.

Here Melanie confronted the club management telling them that due to the treatment they received from other club members, they would not be returning and she would cancel her membership. Melanie had discussed earlier how she always wanted to join a golf club when she retired and how important this was to her. However, despite the importance and the life long dream, she refused to part take in any organization that mistreated her partner and their relationship.

Cindy, a Black woman, describes how after feeling physically threatened because of her lesbian relationship, she and her partner moved out of their neighborhood of over 20 years in order to avoid further harassment:

So we come out of our house and we're walking down the steps, and all of a sudden, we hear this huge booming voice screaming, I can't remember exactly what, but obscenities and stuff about dykes and obscenities. It was like resounding and bouncing off all these houses. You know, we just ran down the steps and jumped in the car... Then I really felt threatened by this guy. I mean, I felt that, I mean, he was 17 years old, he was buff and built. I really felt physically threatened by him. That was about the point where we knew we were going to have to move.

Jeff also engages in avoidance as resistance. His use of avoidance is more personal and even extends to family members:

If people don't like us as a couple, it's their issue, and we just don't deal with them. That goes all the way down the family. If they don't like it, then that's their issue. I'm not dealing with it.

Janice and Nichole, both White women, discussed their preferences to socialize in predominately Black environments and to avoid mostly White environments. Janice states:

I do find it a lot easier to be around, to be the only White person or one of the few White people in a predominantly Black, or people of color, women-of-color group than I do when I'm with Tiffany in a group of White people. I'm very aware of

the fact that she's the only African American person there in a group of White people.

For Janice, she seeks out places that will include mostly people of color to avoid places that cater to mostly Whites. Similarly, Nichole avoids the same environments. When I asked her if there were any places she and her partner avoid, Nichole replies:

Yeah, any place that I would say is full of straight White people I would be inclined not to go to; but I mean, if it was a place with straight Black people, I would feel fine... I definitely feel more accepted by Black people who I've met out in public or wherever.

What's interesting in Nichole's statement is her emphasis and distinction between different straight environments based on race.

While many participants had clear ideas of where they would use their power of avoidance, others struggled with deciphering which environments or places would be homophobic or racist or both. Trevor tells me:

Well, I guess there are sometimes I'll worry about certain bars and then it's like will they not be okay because of the gay thing or the race thing... Sometimes, our friends will be like "let's go to this bar," and I'll be like, "No."

For other participants, avoidance was not their resistance strategy. Instead, they refused to let any place or any person get in the way of what they wanted to do or where they wanted to be. Vince illustrates this resistance strategy nicely:

We are both very strong personalities, we're not people that get intimidated or back down from conflict. And so if we walked into an area and people are staring at us we just ignore them and keep doing what we need to do... And I think that's because you do have some couples and we know some that will not visit certain areas because they are afraid of how they will be treated. And we just say we will deal with it when we get there, you know it doesn't stop us from going where we want to go.

Previous literature on interracial couples suggests that Black-White couples feel resistance and sometimes hostility from Black women towards their relationship (Childs 2005a; Childs 2005b; Steinbulger 2005). Childs's (2005b) research on interracial relationships extends to exploring Black women's attitudes and perceptions of Black-White interracial romance. Childs (2005b) presents interesting findings that contextualize Black women's voices within a large sociopolitical context. Childs (2005b) suggest that the Black women in her study overwhelmingly find Black-White interracial relationships problematic. However, what Childs discusses is that the root of the Black women's perspectives stem from issues of societal racism and sexism and not from feelings of dislike of Whites. As Childs (2005b:558) asserts, "The data presented suggests that Black women's opposition to interracial dating is not rooted simply in jealousy and anger toward White women as is often portrayed but is based on what interracial relationships represent to Black women and signify about Black women's worth...the women expressed their frustration and anger not with individual couples but with a society that devalued their worth as women...Black men dating interracially are seen as a rejection of Black womanhood and an embracement of White womanhood." Interestingly, participants in the current study never mention feeling Black women's disapproval towards their relationships. This may lend support to Childs's (2005b) findings that Black women disapprove of straight Black-White interracial relationships because of how racism and sexism structure the heterosexual relationship and heterosexual standards of beauty.

### Conclusion

There are three important public spaces participants had to navigate on a regular basis, the dominant heteronormative and often monoracial public environments of strangers and

extended family, and their LGBTQ community. For most of the public spaces, a structural element of White privilege and racial homogeneity dominate. Thus, participants' experiences are shaped by the intersection of race, gender and sexuality and the dynamics of oppression and privilege. Depending on space and location, certain aspects of one's status occupies a position of privilege while other statuses may experience oppression.

However, for most of the Black lesbians, it seems as though in both heteronormative and LGBTQ settings, there is little experience of privilege. Their middle class status certainly provides avenues of privilege, but in comparison to their White lesbian, and Black and White gay male counterparts, there is seldom experience of privilege. Some Black lesbians experienced being sexualized within heteronormative environments primarily because of their gender, but arguably their race might also contribute to the sexualization and pursuance of their bodies by straight men. Furthermore, some Black lesbians also experience stereotyping and expectations of what a Black lesbian is supposed to act and look like within the LGBTQ community.

The gay male participants experience gender privilege in heteronormative settings because their bodies are not sexualized or harassed as compared to the lesbian participants. However, in heteronormative and LGBTQ settings, Black gay men are privileged by their gender but oppressed in all settings by race as well as experiencing sexuality-based oppression in heteronormative spaces. White gay men, on the other hand, experience racial and gender privilege across all settings but experience sexuality based oppression within heteronormative environments. Thus, this study illustrates how important intersectionality is as a theoretical framework to understanding how one experiences oppression and privilege depending on the space, place, and their own identities of gender, sexuality and race.

Moreover, an important theme within this study that needs more attention deals with the racial tension within the LGBTQ community. One may assume that because lesbians and gays already deviate from societal norms regarding “appropriate” ideals of sexual orientation, that the LGBTQ community would inevitably be open, accepting, and tolerant with other forms of oppression. However, we also know that major movements such as the Women’s Movement and the Civil Rights Movement often focused only on one form of oppression while dismissing or ignoring other issues of oppression. The Second Wave Women’s Movement primarily focused on gender liberation while ignoring issues of race, ethnicity and class. Likewise, the Civil Rights Movement heavily focused on eliminating racial oppression without including the struggle to end gender oppression.

Thus, the history of the LGBTQ community has largely been racially segregated and the mainstream LGBTQ community has and continues to center around sexuality-based oppression issues while leaving gender-based and race-based oppression at the margins. Yet, the overwhelming majority of the narratives of the Black participants described numerous instances of racial exclusion, stereotyping, and blatant racism experienced in their own LGBTQ community. It is hard to tell if participants talked more about racism within their LGBTQ community compared to heteronormative spaces because they experienced more racism within their LGBTQ community, or whether this is the community they tend to operate in as a couple more often, or perhaps their awareness of it is heightened because they feel it should be an inclusive and supportive environment.

Steinbugler (2005) found that all of her Black-White straight and gay participants experienced invisibility in which one partner would be ignored or both would be treated as strangers rather than a couple. The participants in this study did experience one partner being

ignored, and this was always the Black partner. However, most of the participants felt that because their racial difference is so stark, they were more visible as a couple. As Lesley pointed out, she felt it was more obvious they were a couple, because it would be unlikely that they were friends or sisters since friendships and families tend to be dominated by racial homogeneity. Stienbugler's (2005) findings also speak to safety concerns among gay and lesbian couples while in public. None of my participants talked about hiding their relationship or trying to "pass" as a straight couple. In fact, it was the opposite in that most of my participants went out of their way to affirm their relationship when out in public. Furthermore, there were very few comments about feeling uneasy or being afraid for their safety when out. However, in the resisting public hostility theme, there were multiple voices that described how they made concerted effort to avoid places that may potentially cause hostility. So on the one hand, participants sound very empowered to go anywhere, but many also are very aware of public spaces they will avoid or at least are very cautious when going to some places.

Steinbugler (2012) coined the phrase "racial fatigue" to describe how her participants had to constantly think about how the racial difference between themselves and their partner would impact their experiences when out in public. I would say participants in the current study often experience "intersectional fatigue" since they are frequently thinking not only about their racial difference but also their status as a same-sex couple and how the combination of racial difference and sexuality will impact their experiences, particularly when deciding what community to enter.

In addition to dynamics of oppression and privilege participants encountered in public settings, Goffman's theories of dramaturgy and stigma also help describe interracial same-sex couples' public experiences. The visibility and invisibility of participants' relationships highlight Goffman's concepts of tie-signs (1971), dramaturgy (1959), and stigma (1963). Many of the

participants engaged in the use of tie-sings in order to affirm their visibility as a couple. As Goffman (1971) argues, some must put extra effort into their use of tie-signs if their relationship is not the norm. Therefore, because participants are with same-sex partners, to the public, this arrangement may be viewed as a friendship or family. Interestingly, participants in this study did not seem to engage in impression management (Goffman 1959) to conceal their sexuality. Previous studies suggest the opposite (Steinbulger 2005; 2012). Rather, participants made extra efforts to “be out” or make sure people knew the status of their relationship. However, one may also view the extra effort to affirm their relationship status, particularly those who are married or life partners, as engaging in impression management. Here, participants make asserted efforts in the “front stage” (Goffman 1959) to demonstrate that their relationship is just as valid as heterosexual married couples. For some, this front stage performance of impression management (Goffman 1959) was also used to defy stereotypes about sexual promiscuity among gay men and lesbians in order to demonstrate they are in long-term monogamous relationships.

Stigma (Goffman 1963) was also prominent in participants’ experiences. However, at least from their stories, race is stigmatized more so than sexual orientation. Both in heteronormative and LGBTQ spaces, Black participants repeatedly discussed how they felt marginalized, ignored, were assumed financially instable, and in some instances, uneducated, by Whites. In these situations, “Blackness” is stigmatized and devalued and “Whiteness” is normalized and valued. This study cannot determine that race is a more salient and problematic issue in public spaces compared to sexual orientation, but participants seemed to allude to the fact that they experience racism at a higher level and more often than homophobia.

Overall, interracial same-sex participants are operating as a “performance team” (Goffman 1959) while navigating public spaces. Performance teams may be thought of as “any

set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine” (Goffman 1959:79). A primary goal of a performance team is to clearly define a situation in how they want it to be perceived by others (Goffman 1959). Thus, the use of impression management and tie-signs are critical tools for performance teams to be successful. In order to navigate public settings, participants in this study became performance teams to manage various public reactions and situations so they could define how they wanted others to acknowledge them, albeit sometimes more successful than other times. For participants to be successful performance teams, much work is done in the “backstage” more intimate and private spaces of their relationship. These backstage spaces is where they rely on each other for support to process and reflect on the public sphere and to regroup as a team in order to go do “work” in public spaces of everyday life.

## CHAPTER FIVE: MANAGING PRIVATE SPACES

Interracial same-sex couples face multiple challenges while in public spaces. They face heightened relationship visibility because of their racial contrast in addition to their same-sex partnering. With heightened visibility, they are often stigmatized, particularly the Black partner in both heteronormative settings and LGBTQ spaces. Interracial same-sex couples also endure hostility and unwelcoming behaviors from extended family. In order for these couples to deal with these public challenges, they often use private or “backstage” (Goffman 1959) spaces to regroup and engage in prep work to succeed as a “performance team” (Goffman 1959). The current study adds an important element to the discussion on interracial couples’ private lives. Much of the public challenges interracial same-sex couples face are racialized and thus, a large part of participants’ backstage work includes discussing race, racial difference, and even self reflections on one’s own racial identity.

Based on interviews with gay men and lesbians in Black-White relationships, I examine the private interactions that sustain these relationships, despite living in a social and cultural environment that is often hostile to their existence. Interestingly, racial difference was the primary topic about which participants wanted to discuss. Theoretically sexuality and gender have an impact on their intimate experiences, but the participants overwhelmingly wanted to talk mostly about their experiences as an interracial couple and their racial difference. From the participants’ stories, private spaces and conversation seemed to center on dialog around race. As a result, this study focuses primarily on race dialogs among these couples. Exploring how Black-White interracial couples manage and discuss their racial difference is important for understanding racial dynamics and the ways people conceptualize race in their social world.

Given this, how then do Black-White same-sex couples manage structural and historical racial oppression and cultural taboos about interracial intimacy? It is from this inquiry that the present study departs.

While previous studies provide important insight into racial interactions and racial identities, they have primarily focused on exploring the intimate dialogs and experiences of heterosexual interracial couples. That is, interracial same-sex couples have been overlooked within this social science literature. It is peculiar that research on interracial unions largely neglects same-sex interracial couples given recent census data suggest same-sex couples are more likely to be interracial compared to opposite-sex couples (Gates 2012b). This leaves several questions unanswered. Do discussions and reflections around race within same-sex interracial relationships look or sound the same as that between heterosexual interracial couples? Might issues surrounding sexual orientation trump race?

### Backstage Racework

Goffman (1959) describes backstage work as the place where people can be their “natural” selves. It is in the backstage private spaces that individuals often work through the complexities of the public spaces and prepare their public performances and impression management (Goffman 1959). For interracial couples, research suggests that a prominent aspect of their backstage lives includes discussing race (Killian 2002; Childs 2005a; Steinbugler 2012) and racework (Steinbugler 2012) including self reflection of one’s own racial identity (Luke 1994; O’Donoghue 2004; Childs 2005a; Harmen 2009; Steinbugler 2012).

How interracial couples manage their racial difference through discussions on race and racism has become a focus in recent research on interracial couples (Killian 2002; Childs 2005a;

Steinbugler 2012). This research suggests that interracial couples' dialog on race often reflects one of two ideologies: color-blind or race-consciousness. Bonilla-Silva (2003) defines colorblind racism as an ideology to which many Whites ascribe that includes a "melting-pot" position-- everyone is the same, the more we talk about race the worse it gets--more or less ignoring that race exists or that racism is a systemic institutional problem. Those who adhere to a color-blind ideology might remark "there is only one race, the human race...we're just like any other couple" (Killian 2002:606). On the other hand, race-conscious talk includes an acknowledgement of how race shapes and impacts everyday life. Those who engage in race-conscious dialog acknowledge that race matters and that society structures racial difference.

Research on interracial couples suggests that many partners, particularly White partners, engage in racial dialog centered on colorblind ideology. Thus, couples down play differences or ignore them all together and only stress their similarities (Killian 2002; Childs 2005a; Steinbulger 2012). Furthermore, couples or partners engaging in color-blind "race talk" relate any instances of racism or racial discrimination to individual acts and not systemic institutional or structural problems of race in the U.S. (Childs 2005a; Rockquemore and Henderson 2010). In Childs' (2005a:22) research on interracial couples, all 15 White partners stated they never thought about their racial identities, explaining either "that it was not meaningful or did not play a significant role in how they thought of themselves." Childs (2005) discusses how these types of comments are linked to White privilege and how this privilege affords Whites to not think about race. For some interracial couples, Black partners also ascribe to the colorblind ideology (Childs 2005a). Childs (2005a) reports that five of the Black partners, while acknowledging they were Black, did not like to think in racial terms about themselves or their lives. One partner stated that she is "obviously Black but I'm human not a color" (Childs 2005a:21). The couples that use the

color-blind framework consistently deemphasized race as an important factor in their identities as couples or in the decisions and experiences they had as couples (Childs 2005a). Childs notes that while these couples always discussed how race never played a role, they often recounted how family, co-workers, and neighbors would say racialized comments or act “weird” around them.

Moreover, Killian (2002) finds that White partners in interracial relationships often believe their partners are hypersensitive to race. Killian (2002) reports all couples stated Black spouses notice race more and they are more emotionally affected by negative public reactions than White spouses. Killian (2002:608-609) states, “White partners employed a discourse in which they professed a lack of awareness of their Black partners’ perceptions of different social spaces, such as their work environment, and their sense of safety in those spaces.” Thus, as Killian alludes, this demonstrates how many of the White partners use White privilege of not having to notice, acknowledge, or think about race on regular basis.

Killian (2002) also discusses how White partners often downplay the importance of their partners’ racial and ethnic history and heritage. Killian (2002) calls this, “history’s insignificance” arguing this discourse is particularly problematic when engaged in by interracial couples and families since research has documented the importance of non-dominant races to have a sense of heritage and accurate history of their ancestors. This is especially true for African Americans in order to create a healthy sense of self and identity (Collins 2000). Killian (2002:611) states, “The dominant discourse of history’s insignificance is convenient because the people who have most to lose and the least to gain from examining it can label it as unimportant or just plain boring.” Killian (2002:612) further argues, “Removing themselves from a stream of racial and ethnic continuity, interracial couples can also comply with the liberalist discourse by

seeing themselves as individuals ‘on their own’ instead of parts of larger family systems and larger sociocultural history.” Killian suggests that many of the Black partners learned quickly in the relationship that history is insignificant to their partners and talking about family and particularly racial history with their White partners made their partners too uncomfortable and in some cases unacceptable. Thus, Killian (2002:614) concludes that there is an “overarching discourse of ‘no race talk.’”

Members of interracial couples who engage in colorblind thinking and dialog may be “empowered by this strategy, possibly because it allows them to ‘avoid’ or prevent opposition against interracial unions from ‘touching’ them” (Childs 2005a:42). Lastly, according to Childs (2005a:42), “Colorblind language is problematic because it ‘disguises (somewhat deliberately) or normalizes (sometimes unwittingly) relationships of privilege and subordination...deemphasizing race in identity, relationships, and others’ perceptions does not acknowledge or challenge the central and undeniable role that race plays.”

However, many interracial couples discuss race using a race-conscious ideology of acknowledging how race impacts their relationship, family, and everyday life experiences (Killian 2002; Childs 2005a; Steinbulger 2012). Most of the Black partners in Childs’ (2005a:20) study discussed that racial identity, particularly Blackness, “was integral to how they saw themselves and how others viewed them.” The couples that use a race-conscious framework consistently emphasized the role of race in their relationship. These couples recognized and often confronted or challenged opposition. Adopting a race-conscious approach may be empowering for these couples in that “placing the emphasis on race may allow them to confront or challenge what they perceive as opposition or differential treatment” (Childs 2005a:42).

In addition to the research on interracial couples' "race talk," research on Whiteness has examined how White mothers begin to understand "Whiteness" and White privilege through parenting their multiracial children (O'Donoghue 2004; Harmen 2009). Most of the women in these studies became acutely aware of what it means to be "White" and what privileges they have had throughout their lives because of their "Whiteness." However, O'Donoghue (2004) argues that most of the women in this study, once becoming part of an interracial family, do not have access to all of the privileges of being White and they experience racism in very intimate ways. Some of these experiences include "trouble renting apartments, difficulty in obtaining mortgages, being harassed by police or experiencing police harassment of their children...wondering and being worried about their children's treatment by teachers, and being questioned about their legitimacy as parents" (O'Donoghue 2004:81). These women are also very aware of how their White privilege instantly returns when entering the social world without their husbands and children (O'Donoghue 2004). Because of these complex experiences, O'Donoghue (2004) argues the women develop a unique identity that may be considered a biracial identity. O'Donoghue (2004:81) states, "In many ways, they seem to have become biracial themselves, members of the Black and White worlds, as defined by a rigidly defined and constructed society." Thus, traditional theoretical frameworks of racial and ethnic identity formation may not apply adequately for people in interracial partnerships and families (O'Donoghue 2004).

Luke (1994) also discusses how White women in interracial relationships especially with children often navigate the issue of "outsider within" and a "biracial" identity. Luke (1994) suggests these women are on the borderlands because they are not fully accepted by either Whites or Blacks and they are constantly negotiating the complexity of being on racial

borderlands. Luke (1994) by no means equates these White women's racialized experiences with people of color in terms of oppression. Rather, she argues the dominant discourses on race and marginality do not fully address these White women's experiences. Luke (1994:70) asserts, "Clearly, the center-margin metaphor does not provide an adequate analytic framework with which to explain the cultural and identity politics of interracialism, let alone racism. As I have tried to demonstrate, racisms do not operate unilinearly from White to Black, or among identifiable ethnic/racial groups."

All of the previous studies discussed include only heterosexual Black-White interracial couples and families. Steinbugler (2012) seeks to explore how same-sex Black-White couples negotiate racial difference compared to heterosexual Black-White couples. Similar to heterosexual interracial couples, Steinbugler (2012) finds her participants speak in either dominant colorblind discourse or more racial-conscious dialog. She defines this complex process of intimate conversations on racial difference among interracial couples as "racework." Steinbugler (2012:xii) describes racework as the "routine actions and strategies through which individuals maintain close relationships across lines of racial stratification." Racework becomes particularly important within intimate relationships since these are often the spaces where people make the most deeply rooted bonds (Steinbugler 2012). Furthermore, Steinbugler (2012) makes an important point about the word "work" as central to understanding the term "racework." Steinbugler (2012:xiv) asserts, "conceptualizing these social practices as 'work' makes interracial intimacy visible as an ongoing process, rather than as a singular accomplishment. This analytic shift also reveals how race 'works' in intimate spheres."

Similar to O'Donoghue (2004) and Harmen (2009), Steinbugler (2012) also discusses how being in an interracial relationship has shaped the White partners' own racial identity. For

some of Steinbugler's White participants, they spoke in colorblind terms of not having a racial identity and being racially invisible. However, for many others, their racial identity of what it means to be White and how race plays out not only in the public sphere but also within their intimate private space became clearer through their experiences in interracial relationships. Steinbugler (2012) refers to this process as "moving towards a critical lens" and "cultivating racial literacy."

The current study extends previous research on how interracial couples manage their racial difference by including voices of same-sex interracial couples. These voices are severely underrepresented in the social science literature and therefore, this study seeks to contribute to better understanding the experiences of interracial couples across sexual orientation. Are the ways same-sex interracial couples manage their racial difference similar to previous research on heterosexual interracial couples? What types of "race talk" do same-sex interracial couples engage in? How does being in an interracial relationship shape one's own racial identity? Lastly, how does sexuality and gender shape how same-sex interracial couples manage their racial difference? All of these inquiries are explored in the current study.

### Methods and Data

This study is based on 19 in-depth interviews with individuals in Black/White lesbian and gay relationships. Participants were in a committed relationship with a partner of the same self-identified sex but who is of another self-identified race, either Black or White. Exploring the worlds of Black-White interracial couples are important since research suggests that Black-White interracial relationships are the least common type of interracial couple and the least accepted form of interracial relationship (Passel et al. 2010; Wang 2012). In part, this largely

reflects how the history of slavery, racism, and racial segregation continue to evade American society and impact intimate interracial interaction (Rockquemore and Henderson 2010).

Historically, Black-White intimacy has been legally restricted and considered a cultural taboo with several U.S. states having legal bans on interracial marriage until the late 1990s.

Furthermore, the racial line between Black and White has been and continues to be the most volatile racial boundary in the U.S. Thus, this study focuses on Black-White interracial, same-sex relationships.

### Data Collection

National outlets were used to recruit participants. Flyers were sent out through national academic listservs and national and regional LGBTQ organizations and support groups. About half of the participants responded through the academic listservs, which some may argue creates educational and class homogeneity. However, snowball sampling through many of these participants lead me to participants that are not professionally affiliated with higher education. Furthermore, recruiting participants through national listservs also diversified the sample in age, length of relationship, and geographical location. Snowball sampling was very effective in this study, mirroring previous studies on interracial and same-sex couples (Childs 2005a; Steinbugler 2007; Moore 2008).

All interviews were completed via phone and audio recorded. Participants contacted me through email to arrange a date and time to complete the phone interview. Once we established a time to interview, I emailed the consent form for their review. The consent form asked participants' permission to audio record the interview. The IRB waived the need for written consent; however, I audio recorded every participant's verbal consent before the interview

commenced. All of the interviews were audio recorded. The average interview lasted a little more than an hour, with the shortest interview lasting 35 minutes and the longest interview lasting two hours. In order to safeguard the participants' confidentiality, participant names and identifying characteristics were removed during transcription and pseudonyms were used to replace participants' names.

### Participant Demographics

There is diversity in age, relationship length, and residential location. The age ranged from 28 to 70 with the average participant being around 45 years old. In terms of gender, I interviewed ten women, two of whom also identified as gender-queer. In terms of sexuality, all of the women identified as lesbian of which three of the women also identified as queer and one woman also identified as bi-sexual. Of the ten women, four women identified as Black/African American and six women identified as White/Caucasian. I interviewed nine men. All of them identified as gay and one also identified as bi-sexual. Of the nine men, four identified as Black/African American and five identified as White/Caucasian. The average participant's relationship length was about ten years. All of the participants have at least a college education with roughly half holding graduate degrees. All of the participants identify with middle class status and work in professional careers. Some of their professions include college professor, architect, higher education administrator, project manager, community organizer, and graduate student. Participants tend to live in three regions of the U.S., with seven living in the Northeast, seven in the Southeast, and five in the Midwest. All of the participants living in the Southeast reside in the state of Florida. States represented in the Northeast include Massachusetts, New

Jersey, and Washington D.C. States represented in the Midwest include Tennessee, Kansas, and Wisconsin.

### Data Analysis

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) was followed for data analysis. The primary goal during data analysis was to keep close to the data while also creating themes organically. Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory differs from traditional grounded theory in that,

...neither data nor theories are discovered. Rather, we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices. My approach explicitly assumes that any theoretical rendering offers an *interpretive* portrayal of the studied world, not an exact picture of it (Charmaz 2006:10).

This study follows most of the basic principles of traditional grounded theory as presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967) including: 1) ongoing data collection and data analysis throughout the study, 2) creating codes and categories from data, 3) comparing data in every stage for rich analysis and not just descriptive analysis, 4) constant memo-writing, 5) sampling for theoretical development and not population representativeness and 6) writing a literature review after data analysis (as outlined in Charmaz 2006).

Two types of coding were used, initial line-by-line coding followed by focused coding (Charmaz 2006). Every line of the transcript was coded, making sure to focus on the action within the line and code using verbs rather than coding thematically. Throughout the initial coding, I kept memos to record important thoughts and questions as I went through each transcript. These memos became particularly important as I began focused coding, which commenced after initial line-by-line coding was completed. During the focused coding, codes

from the initial coding stage were collapsed into categories and compared across data. The collapsed categories eventually formed major themes and subthemes. Memos also helped determine how various categories fit together to create final themes and subthemes.

The emerging grounded themes for this study include initial attraction, heightened racial consciousness, seeing race differently, race and parenting, racial humor, and partner ally. The primary question in the interview in which most of these themes emerged is, “Do you talk about race with your partner?” and “How does race impact your relationship?” Another question that grounded these themes includes, “Has your relationship shaped your own identity and how you see the world?” Thus, the emerging themes do not stem from a specific question about the theme. For example, I never asked specifically, “Do you see race differently from your partner” or “Do you have a better awareness of race because of your relationship?” Thus, my goal was to allow themes to develop on their own and to remain grounded in the data.

### Findings

The findings in this study add to the limited research on how same-sex interracial couples manage racial difference through interpersonal dialog and interpersonal experiences in the private sphere. Through the participant stories, six sub-themes emerged describing how they manage their racial difference. These subthemes include; partner ally, initial attraction, heightened racial awareness, seeing race differently, considering children, and racial humor. For the most part, participants engaged in a race-conscious approach to managing their racial difference. Across the sub-themes, the majority of participants discuss and recognize how race plays a role in their everyday lives. However, there are various levels of race-consciousness among the participants and there are clear distinctions between the racial consciousness of Black

participants compared to White participants. Yet, overall it was rare for the participants to engage in strictly colorblind ideology.

### Partner Ally

We had each others' backs. If there was someone struggling with something, there was someone always there to add strength and whatever...I think there has to be mutual respect and we always respected each other personally and professionally and that has carried us a long, long way.

Melanie, a White woman who has been with her partner for 22 years, sums up what the overwhelming majority of participants feel about their relationships and partners. As Melanie describes, it is in the private spaces, the "backstage" that participants worked with each other by providing emotional and physical support to battle the complexities and often hostilities of the public sphere. This is not to say that the private spaces only provide a sanctuary to the public and what goes on in the public sphere is left at the door step. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Participants routinely discussed their gratitude for the ability to discuss the public world within the intimate spaces of their relationships.

Finding support and a place of refuge from their partners was specifically important for many of the Black participants. Many Black participants discussed how their partners were not only their significant others, but were also their allies in dealing with and resisting racial marginalization and oppression. Evan describes his partner Larry as his biggest source of support. Evan believes it is from Larry's experience of having to deal with sexuality-based oppression and marginalization within the Mormon Church that Larry is able to truly empathize with Evan's experiences of race-based oppression and marginalization. Evan describes:

Larry is the best ally any one of color can have. Because of the abuse he suffered from the Mormon Church he has an idea of what it's like to be dismissed and controlled whole heartedly...Larry comes from an oppressive past coming from

the Mormon Church and so he can identify what it's like to be an African American. He has seen, when he's paying attention which he does now more than he has ever done in the past, and he will call people out. He is my ally, my partner, my best friend, my husband, and that is a beautiful thing. He just comes from a background that allows him to identify with what it's like to be oppressed.

Similarly, Candice expresses her appreciation of her partner's support:

I think this one [relationship] is different in important ways. She is very out there and is conscious about race and so I can talk to her about it. Others really didn't acknowledge race and so it was really hard to talk about it with them and deal with it... She's really the best thing that happened to me. She's really supportive in a way I never thought possible. I come home all race ragey and she's really supportive. She really helps me open up to people, and I have really struggled with being the only person of color out here away from family and the queer community is really White uppity here and I have no base to relate to that. People really look at us in confusion and wonder how the heck we work. And she's just really great.

In Candice's reflection, she discusses how her partner is a critical source of support for both Candice's feelings of race-based and sexuality-based marginalization. Candice talks about public experiences of stares and looks and feeling isolated and reflects how the backstage space is where she regroups and works through these issues with the support of her partner.

Andrea also talks about her partner's understanding of race, gender and sexual marginalization:

There's a greater understanding of marginalization and other instances of being in the literal minority, all the politics, and academic and practical indignity that go along with that. That was ultimately why I know that one relationship was not successful, because it just wasn't being on the same page and understanding what it is to be marginalized outside of just sexuality and gender.

Candice and Andrea both reflect on how the support of their partner is different from previous relationships. They both attribute their partners' support as a main reason why their relationships have remained strong. An important aspect of both Candice's and Andrea's statements is that

they both find it important for their partners to be “on the same page” not only about gender and sexuality, but also about race. Previous research on interracial couples suggest the more racial empathy and support White partners provide, the stronger and more stable the relationships (Killian 2002). In fact when racial issues are ignored or minimalized, often greater tension exists between interracial couples (Killian 2002; Steinbugler 2012). Furthermore, Black participants in multiple studies convey the importance in being able to talk with their White partners about race and racism (Childs 2005a; Steinbugler 2012). Thus, to find refuge at home and to be able to converse openly with their partners about oppressive experiences and to feel validated and affirmed are important in maintaining relationships for participants in this study.

Similar to Candice and Andrea, other participants discussed the importance of support their partners provide because of being in a same-sex relationship. Janice remarks in response to me asking, “What are some of the best things about your relationship:”

How much we talk about things and the sense of emotional closeness that we have, the sense that we’re on the same page. I’m constantly surprised how much similarity there is in the ways that we think about things or about the world. And, so, to have that reflected back at me, that someone else thinks this way or someone else understands, has been really affirming... I think, thinking about consciousness, that’s also one of the reasons I really fell for Tiffany was the fact that she not only had the feminist consciousness but also queer consciousness and very trans-aware, trans-friendly. We’re on the same page in terms of gender and transgender politics, and that’s one area that I sometimes find that people aren’t aware of it in the same way, and it’s nice to be speaking the same language.

Here, Janice mentions the importance of feminist and queer consciousness as an anchor for her relationship with Tiffany. Moreover, she describes the ability to be “on the same page” as “emotional closeness” and affirmation.

Other participants discussed the importance of being on the same page in terms of resisting heterosexual norms. Couples often felt a sense of support and satisfaction knowing they

could defy “public” societal gender norms with their partners in their private “backstage” spaces.

Jeff describes:

I think one of the things that we did that we decided to do early on in our relationship is to not try to mold our relationship based on traditional heterosexual relationships or roles, or what people say a relationship should be. We just decided we would go in there and do what works for us as long as it works for us.

Vince also discusses the comfort he finds in the ability to be himself with his partner in order to resist heterosexual stereotypes frequently targeted to lesbian and gay couples:

Most of the stereotypes is that there has to be defined sexual roles, so somebody has to be the feminine somebody has to be the masculine. When you just play equal roles you know you're equal in the relationship sometimes he's more feminine, sometimes I am and vice versa, so they [heterosexuals] don't understand that dynamic that, social dynamic when people of the same sex get together in a relationship...I mean it makes it easier for the relationship because there's not that tension you're supposed to do this I am supposed to do that.

So for Jeff and Vince, being able to just “be themselves” with their partners and not have to conform to dominant heterosexual notions of what a relationship is supposed to look like and how each partner is “supposed” to act, helps them deal with heterosexism and gender role conflict.

As presented, for so many of the participants, being able to lean on their partners for support and to feel empathy from them, are crucial aspects of maintaining strong partnerships. It is in the private, backstage spaces that they become each others’ allies and are able to regroup and work through public issues of race-based and sexuality-based marginalization and oppression. Additional aspects of backstage work where strong bonds are formed between partners includes “seeing race differently,” “heightened racial consciousness,” “race and parenting” and “racial humor.” These subthemes will be

presented in the following sections, but first, it is important to look at how participants' relationships began and what influenced their attraction to one another.

### Initial Attraction

Previous research on interracial couples has shown that many White partners discuss having a colorblind attraction to their Black partners (Childs 2005a; Steinbulger 2012). Colorblind attraction is when one ignores or does not acknowledge race as a factor in their attraction to their partner. This experience was rare for the White participants with whom I spoke however. The majority of the White participants recognized that race played a role in their attraction to their Black partners. Mia reflects:

I didn't know she was a lesbian for a while. It was mostly because I had only known one Black lesbian in my life, and so she wasn't on my radar at first. And also I never thought a Black lesbian would be attracted to me because I'm real White. I've always been attracted to Black people, I mean the first person I liked and kissed was a Black guy and the first person I ever thought I had real deep feelings for was a Black guy.

Mia's comment reflects an intersection of sexuality and race in her initial attraction to her partner. She explained that even though her partner had made advances towards her, but because Mia had preconceived ideas of what a "Black lesbian" would look and act like, she did not believe her partner was gay. Another important aspect of Mia's statement is her reference to her being "real White." For most Whites, they do not see themselves as racialized bodies, they view themselves as "raceless." Here, Mia acknowledges not only how race influenced her attraction but also how her own race played a role. During our conversation, Mia rarely used colorblind language to describe her attraction and experiences with her partner.

Janice also talks about her attraction to people of color:

I mean, in general I've noticed that I tend to be more attracted to people of color, so that may be part of it, as well as the part of who she is and part of her activism... I've always been attracted to people of color, but I think that it's more that it happened to be in these particular spaces and the consciousness that often comes with that. But it's not necessarily that I'm seeking a particular race.

Janice makes an important reflection that her attraction to people of color is connected to her politics, social consciousness, and activism. She explained how she feels more comfortable in places that are majority Black compared to being in majority White spaces. For Janice, she recognizes she relates better to people of color and therefore she is more attracted to people of color. Janice talked about being attracted to specific aspects of her partner's physical and mental attributes:

One of the things we've talked a lot about is the politics of hair. She has locks [which Janice commented elsewhere that she finds very attractive] and so talking about my own questions around what are the boundaries here as someone in an interracial relationship and around hair [and figuring] out how to talk about these things or how to bring them up without feeling really uncomfortable or that that's the problem. And so, I was also thinking just about color and skin color. Tiffany's really dark, which I really like. It's taken me a while to feel comfortable about commenting about our skin against each other. When we're together and we have our arms against each other or something, I'll comment on liking the way that our skin looks together or something. And for us to feel comfortable – for me to feel comfortable about pointing out some of those things or thinking, talking about color.

In addition to being racially conscious about her attraction to her partner, Janice talks about how their racial difference plays into her physical and emotional connection with her partner. Janice also employs a critical lens in her thinking about boundaries around certain sensitive racial topics she wants to bring up with her partner.

Cindy also talks about her partner's attraction to Black culture and "Blackness:"

Well, I mean, Gwyneth, as we say, is an honorary Black person. She had been with a couple of Black men in high school. I don't know that she had ever been with a Black woman. But I think she is very attracted to Black culture -- Black music, Black art, Black history, Black literature.

While critical race theory often talks about the sexual eroticism of the Black body by Whites as the motive for Whites' attraction to Blacks, I did not get this sense from the White participants with whom I spoke. For Janice's and Cindy's partners, it seems that their social interests and connection with the Black community drive their attraction. Furthermore, their choice to be in spaces that are not majority White also plays into their opportunities to meet and develop relationships with Black people. Nichole also reflects on this as a major factor in her attraction to Black women:

I mean, maybe in the back of my mind, it might have been the race that she was; but definitely after hanging out a few times, I would say that was part of it, was that the race she was...I have friends ask me, "Why are you attracted to Black girls, what do you think it is?" I started wondering to myself, is it because I played basketball since I was young and that's, you know, normally, I mean, more Black people were on my team than White a lot of times. Is that why? I mean, I wonder about that myself.

Some Black participants also used race-conscious language when describing their attraction to their White partners. Martin reflects on his attraction to White guys:

Growing up, I went to school with a lot of friends that were White, same in college. I don't know, maybe I was more attracted to him because he was White, I don't know if I'm more attracted to White guys than Black guys. I know I'm more attracted to them than Asian guys or Latinos.

Similar to Nichole, Martin talks about being in social environments that include many people of the opposite race and believes this may influence his attraction to White men. However, different from other participants, Martin is clear about his attraction to White and Black men over Asian or Latino men.

It is quite interesting that the majority of White participants in this study do not use colorblind language to describe their attraction to their partner. Instead, most talk openly and

honestly not only about being attracted but also they reflect on why they may have an elevated attraction to Black people or people of color more generally.

In addition to racial attraction, many participants commented on being attracted to a particular gender presentation and expression. The male participants overwhelmingly preferred “masculine” gender presentations. For instance, Jeff talked about being attracted to his partner “sweating while doing manual labor” around the house. Vince also described his attraction to “masculine” men:

I'm a very masculine person and I tend to be attracted to other masculine guys, but he's also very masculine. So that probably was an attraction, I may not have consciously been thinking about it, but subconsciously I'm sure that was an attraction to me also.

Similarly, Martin prefers “masculine” presentation as well, but makes a comment about a particular “type” of masculinity he likes. Martin describes his partner, “Yes, he is masculine, like the boy next door, clean cut, definitely my type.” Before, Martin also talked about preferring White guys as partners and his statement, “the boy next door” usually is reserved as a covert way of saying “White.” So here, Martin’s attraction is intersectional describing covertly his preference for a particular type of masculine partner, a White “boy next door” type. While, the frequent stereotype and media representation of gay men includes effeminate gay men, almost all of the male participants in this study commented on the masculine presentation and expression of themselves and their partners. Sociologically speaking, all of the male participants grew up socialized to “act” and “do” gender appropriately (West and Zimmerman 1987), which for them means masculinity. Performing masculinity “correctly” or “appropriately” in U.S. society means to devalue and separate from any type of femininity (Kimmel 2009). However, the male participants’ attraction to other “masculine” men also defies traditional definitions of acceptable

gender roles within romantic unions. Here, gay men are choosing to be with other men that have more masculine gender presentations rather than men that have more feminine gender presentations. Thus, they are representing a “same-gender” relationship.

However, different from the male participants, women participants experienced more socially accepted gender fluidity and tended to be more attracted to partner that have opposite-gender presentations than themselves. While the large majority of male participants were firm about being attracted to “masculine” men, women participants varied in their preference of masculine or feminine presentations. For instance, Nichole describes the gender presentation attraction to her partner as:

Yeah, more feminine. I mean, athletic, feminine; not like, you know, not super-feminine.

Here, Nichole says she prefers “feminine” but in more than one instance defines the “type” of femininity she prefers. She makes it clear that she does not like “super-feminine” or “high-fem” as other participants describe.

On the other hand, Andrea discussed how she prefers more “masculine” gender presentation:

I would say she [her partner] falls on the more masculine side of the gender spectrum. It wasn't – I think there are definitely folks that are dykes and only date one type. I don't know if that was what attracted me. But it's hard to parcel out certain aspects. But I don't know if I would attribute her confidence to her more masculine and gender expression, but it's all wrapped up in it.

Interestingly, Andrea questions if her attraction to her partner's confidence has to do with her partner's “masculine” gender presentation. This speaks to a larger gender structure of masculine being equated with confidence, power and status, whereas, femininity is often equated with passiveness and submission.

While most of the male participants described themselves and their partners as “masculine” and thus represented a more “same-gender” union, most of the female participants had partnerships that represented a more dichotomous gender presentation, in which one partner presented more “masculine” and the other more “feminine.” However, it’s important to note that while the public performance for lesbian couples tended to be a dichotomous gender presentation, in the backstage spaces of their relationship, they tended to be very fluid in their gender performance. For example, Candice who describes herself as “high-fem” in terms of gender presentation, describes:

The funny part is that she looks a lot more butch, but in terms of performance I think I’m more masculine...I think I do more of the masculine performance and she does more of the masculine presentation.

Similarly, Mia states:

I mean outwardly we present this butch/fem but in reality we incorporate both gender roles within each of us.

It is interesting that for some lesbian couples, their “front stage” presentations are to emulate the “traditional” heterosexual feminine/masculine dichotomy, but then in the “back stage” spaces of their relationships they are much more fluid in the gender expression and presentation.

Furthermore, a more defined pattern around the intersection of gender and race in terms of presentation play out more among the lesbian participants. While most of the men, Black and White, describe themselves and their partners as “masculine,” most of the lesbian couples include a more “feminine” presentation among Black partners and a more “masculine” presentation among White partners. While this study did not explore more deeply this pattern, it would be an important future inquiry in how this impacts the public and private experiences.

## Heightened Racial Awareness

An important process emerging from the stories participants shared reveals that for almost all of the White participants, their level of racial consciousness increased through their experiences of being in interracial relationships. Almost all of the White participants talked about a heightened awareness of race and racial dynamics by going through life with their Black partners.

Travis who has been with his partner for 15 years describes:

I have seen racism directed toward my partner in ways that were probably not immediately visible to me until I was in an interracial relationship. I have experienced and observed people being uncomfortable and nervous around him that were clearly based on his race.

Here, Travis talks about racism becoming more visible to him because of his experiences in an interracial relationship. It is important to note that Travis talks about recognizing racism as always existing, but it went unnoticed until he saw it directed at his partner. This may speak to White members of interracial relationships or parents of biracial children experiencing racism indirectly through their partner or children and how it “hits home” because their partner and or children are an extension of themselves.

Lesley reflects on this unique positioning as a member of an interracial relationship:

But for people who have a certain understanding of the history and legacy of race in this country, I think sometimes women like me are colored gray. We're not Black. But we're not pure White either in the sense that we live and see and experience and understand race and the legacy of racism on a daily basis in a different way from a slightly different point of view [compared to Whites not in interracial relationships].

Lesley, like Travis, talks about a heightened awareness of race and racism while being in an interracial relationship. However, Lesley also alludes to racial “borderlands.” She talks about not being “Black” but not being “pure White” and instead being “colored gray.” Lesley feels through

living life with her Black partner, she understands race and racism differently from most Whites, but she also recognizes that she will never truly know what it is like to be Black and treated as such. Thus, for Lesley, she's "gray" and lives on the borderland of White and Black.

Mia discussed growing up in a sheltered, predominantly White middle-class environment where race was seldom talked about. However, when she started her relationship with her Black partner, Mia explains how she began to see race more vividly:

I mean I see things through her eyes more, things I would haven't seen before. I see things that are racialized more now... It just made me much more aware of my [White] privilege, like for example one day we were at the bank and this lady was at the drive up ATM and is in the middle of the parking lot and we just wanted to get out. If she just moved up a bit we could get by, so I said, "Why don't you just honk your horn," and she [partner] was like, "What are you kidding me, I'm Black and they have security here." And that just never crossed my mind before and now I'm like oh yeah, that is a big deal.

In this statement, Mia not only discusses how she sees things more "racialized" now than before, but she goes further in her racial consciousness to begin to understand how she benefits from White privilege. Mia acknowledges that at the time she did not understand why it would be an issue for her partner to make a justified public disturbance, but now Mia recognizes that the presence of police changes the situation dynamics for her Black partner. Mia's recognition of the racial undertones in this situation speaks to her acknowledgment of racial profiling and institutional racism within the justice system.

Similar to Mia, Janice also discusses recognizing race and racism beyond the individual level:

I had to work through a lot of recognizing, okay, here's the wider systemic things, but also to make sure that I'm not actually dragging it into the relationship unnecessarily in some ways, like to deal with my own stuff and insecurities. Then talking with her through them but also recognizing what work I have to do on one end as well and not feeling guilty about it.

Janice talks about not only acknowledging race and racism, but she discusses how much work she puts into understanding the structural or “systemic” nature of race and racism. Furthermore, Janice talks about her own personal reflection on how this impacts her emotionally by dealing with insecurities and White guilt. For some of the White participants, this is the first time they have been in an intimate relationship with Black partners. Like Janice, others mention the struggles of grappling with race and racism in a way they never had to experience, or had the privilege of not experiencing before. While most participants did not use the term “White privilege,” going through a racial awakening and becoming more aware of race and racism forced some participants to confront their own racial privilege of obliviousness. For example Candice talks about noticing the difficulty her partner has sometimes in dealing with race and racism:

She just wasn't used to seeing racism so overtly, she was in the post-racial society and so I recognize how hard that has been for her while I'm more used to it...I'm much more adapted to it and used to it than my partner is. I'm used to being the only Black person and being “othered.” So I'm accustomed to it, my partner isn't, so it's harder for her.

While most of the White participants described a heightening of racial consciousness, the way participants experienced this differed. Some merely acknowledged seeing race and racism more while others worked very hard to understand structural levels of race and racism. The work participants engaged in to better understand race and racism mirrors Steinbulger's (2012) concept of racework in the form of emotional labor. Steinbulger discusses the emotional labor of racework as partners having to “decide whether and how to discuss racial matters, critically examine their own racial status, and attempt to understand their partner's racial disposition...they also exact an emotional cost” (2012:84). Even though the overwhelming

majority of the White participants become more aware of race through their interracial relationship experiences, there are also times when they see race differently.

### Seeing Race Differently

Most studies on interracial couples suggest interracial couples either speak in “colorblind” language or race-conscious language (Childs 2005a). None of the participants in the current study used colorblind language. All participants, Black and White, describe how race impacts their relationship and relationship experiences. However, there is a variance in how much race impacts each participant’s relationship with most participants talking at length about race and few briefly mentioning racial impacts. Nevertheless, all participants acknowledge that race plays some role in their relationship experiences. Furthermore, participants use race as an identifying characteristic when asked about their own identities. No one defined themselves as a member of the “human race,” a common colorblind descriptor.

As evidenced in the previous section, the overwhelming majority of White participants discuss how being in an interracial relationship has heightened their awareness of racial difference and racial dynamics. However, while they all acknowledge race matters, for many participants, they feel as though there is a difference sometimes in how race and racism is recognized between partners. This difference in race recognition is what I refer to as “seeing race differently.” For example, Melanie cannot be described as someone who speaks in colorblind terms since she acknowledges how race and racism impact her relationship and her partner directly. However, she does explain to me how differences in understanding race sometimes create arguments between her and her partner:

At the beginning we’d have a lot of, I don’t know, issues, little things we had to work through on things like different sensitivities. It kind of went both ways. I

think she, uh, I know she is more sensitive than I am around racial issues, and rightly so, and her experiences haven't always been positive. But some of the language sometimes, like sometimes she would say things about farmers and I would get a little bit out of shape and explain why I got upset from racial perspective and that got her even angrier. And she would say, "There certainly is a big difference between a slave and a farmer." We've worked through most of that. I think she thinks I'm fairly accepting but not totally understanding, but as the world goes I'm probably okay.

Here, Melanie provides a good example of how seeing race differently is different from colorblind language. She talks about having different "sensitivities," but she acknowledges that there are rational bases for why her partner would be more sensitive around race. She does not invalidate or minimize her partner's right to feel racial oppression. However, when Melanie tries to explain why she gets upset about comments her partner makes about farmers through an analogy about racial discrimination, it deeply upsets her partner because the structural and historical oppression of Blacks is very different from that of White farmers. It is interesting though that Melanie attempted to be empathetic and tried to bring an example she felt her partner would relate to that then backfired into a larger argument. Further, Melanie believes her partner thinks she's "fairly accepting but not totally understanding," which speaks to this dynamic of not being colorblind but not having full racial consciousness.

Lesley, who is fairly conscious about racial dynamics and how race affects her relationship, also recognizes that there are times when she and her partner acknowledge or experience race differently:

I think I'm pretty open and recognize that I don't experience things as a Black person or person of color. There will be times she will experience things and see race in it, and doesn't think that I do. It becomes a point of contention or annoyance. Or she'll see that race is a bigger issue in an encounter with someone than I would or than I acknowledge... Then she comes home, and I'm kind of like the composite face of those White folks, not always, but in particular if I don't say something that's immediately affirming of the racial dynamics, or if I say, "Well,

just don't let it take you." I sound dismissive to her ears of the racial dimension that's hurtful.

Lesley went on to describe an experience at a hospital when she and her partner were taking care of her father-in-law. Lesley discussed how the doctors seemed to listen and pay attention to her more than her partner and says:

In that situation, she [partner] very well would read that they were listening to me as a White person, where I would probably initially read they were paying attention to me because I was a pain in the ass.

In some respect, Lesley's words border Bonilla-Silva's (2003) concept of colorblind racism, particularly when Lesley feels she does not acknowledge or validate her partner's experiences of racism. However, I think an important distinction is that Lesley recognizes she experiences life differently than her partner because she is White and her partner is Black. Moreover, Lesley reflects on how she and her partner sometimes view racial experiences differently and acknowledges she may not notice things her partner does. In other words, Lesley does not ignore the fact that race matters or exists and she recognizes that she may be even "dismissive" at times which clearly demonstrates she is not oblivious to race and racism.

Candice also reflects on a difference in racial awareness between herself and her partner. Candice describes talking daily about race with her partner and she feels very comfortable discussing racial issues with her partner. However, there are instances when Candice and her partner may not see eye-to-eye on race:

I mean there are just some things she doesn't notice that I notice, but she's getting I guess better at that... And there are some places where there is a different awareness. We went to a market and there's a giant place with knives and confederate flags everywhere. I said, "Let's go," she said, "No, I want to look at the tee-shirts," and I said, "No we have to leave right now."

Candice talks about her partner “getting better” at noticing race and racism, but then talks about her partner not clearly seeing why she would be uncomfortable in a store with weapons and confederate flags. Candice’s partner’s unawareness in this instance illustrates how White privilege allows Whites to be selective in their racial awareness and the ability to ignore racially hostile environments when there is something of more interest at stake (such as wanting to see the tee-shirts despite her partner’s feelings of discomfort).

Similarly, Evan describes his partner as his “ally” and talks about his partner’s ability to understand oppression and racial marginalization. However, Evan also mentions there are times where his partner does not quite understand all racial issues, particularly the less obvious or more covert instances of racism. Evan reflects:

I’m the only Black person out of 100 or 200 people and they are very jovial with him [partner] and I’m ignored and I can get upset at times because he doesn’t always understand that he gets drawn into conversations and I get left out and I’m just kind of there.

Similar to Candice, Evan also finds a different awareness to racial dynamics, particularly in social settings, between himself and his partner. This is interesting, because both Candice and Evan talk at length about how empathetic and supportive their partners are to understanding racial marginalization and oppression. Overall, seeing race differently shows how some White participants walk a fine line between engaging in colorblind racism and racial consciousness. Even when the White partner does not engage in colorblind talk and acknowledges racism, there still are everyday instances in which they use ability to ignore race or racial dynamics, a benefit of White privilege.

## Considering Children

Another area of racial consciousness participants discussed dealt with considering whether to have children. While only one participant actually had children, many participants talked about either once considering having children or considering having children in the future. Deciding to bring children into same-sex relationships often includes more challenges for lesbian and gay couples than for heterosexual couples. Lesbian and gay couples often have to negotiate how children will be brought into their relationships, whether through adoption, blending families, IVF, surrogacy and so forth. For most heterosexual couples, these types of decisions or discussions do not take place unless the couple can not conceive on their own. Thus, there is often increased backstage work for same-sex couples when deciding whether or not to have children. Furthermore, parenting for same-sex couples means backstage work with their children to prepare them for the public world which may be hostile and unwelcoming to their type of family formation. For instance, Melanie, the only participant that has children, describes:

Actually, I think it was a little easier because they [her children] both are accepting of same-sex couples and marriage and all that. But, in the first place we lived it is a upper middle class community with some pretty strong attitudes there and I think at first my oldest daughter was a little shocked and then after a period of time was very defending about it all.

Many couples also talked about race as an important aspect in deciding how and when to bring children into the relationship. For some, even the thought of bringing children into the relationship had a profound impact on how they understood race in America. For instance, Lesley was one that had such an experience. She describes:

We had gone to the Black Film Festival a couple years ago and they were redoing a documentary about the murder of Emmitt Till... I don't remember if it was him in the casket, but it was a very poignant moment. I'm a crier in movies. I'm very rarely caught in this delayed action. I remember I gasped. I stopped breathing and

burst out in tears shaking. Part of it was at that point we had talked about maybe fostering or adoption. I felt like the mother in that moment, like that could be my child. It gave me that insight into what a White or Black mother raising a mixed or Black child, especially a male, might feel like.

This introspective experience Lesley had aligns with similar experiences of other White mothers' raising biracial children. Similar to the previous discussion on heightened racial consciousness, here Lesley has a deep empathetic experience that builds her racial literacy and understanding of racial dynamics. Lesley's experience mirrors Reed's (1994) experiences as a White mother raising biracial children as described in her publication *Crossing the Color Line*:

...it is about Whiteness, about trying to cross the color line at many places, about the meeting points of Whiteness and Blackness, about the politics of feminism and antiracism, about loving Blackness, about my children and all children, about mothering Black children in a society that does not value children, and particularly does not value Black children. It is about living as a racial 'insider' who stands outside prescribed racial arrangements, a position that affords unique insight into those arrangements. It is about being a bridge (xii-xiii).

In addition to Lesley, Reed's experience was also reflected in another participant's story. Vince, even though is Black, becomes more critical about race and racial dynamics when he talks about bringing children into the relationship. Vince lives in a very White environment and did not seem to express any negativity towards it. Furthermore, while we were discussing living environments and moving to new places, Vince said he could live just about anywhere. However, this sentiment changed when we started talking about children, and more specifically having children of color. Vince shifted his content with "living just about anywhere," to being much more selective in choosing a living environment:

If we did have kids it would fundamentally change things because we would have to think about is this the best place for our kids to be raised, what kind of environment do we want them exposed to, what kind of neighbors, what kind of kids in the school we want them exposed to, so that would really shape where

we're going to move because we have that additional individual that we really have to think about, and their future.

Other participants reflected racial consciousness when thinking about the process of having biological children or adopting children. Janice has put a lot of thought into the genetics of having children with her partner:

I've also thought about the genetics in terms of color... Tiffany, is very dark, so also how it works genetically if the woman is of color, or if the woman is White, even if you have an African American donor, just like the color kind of stuff, like combinations, how it would kind of work out or not work out.

There is a vast array of skin tones of biracial children and even when children are biologically related to both parents, there is no way to determine skin tone at inception. However, Janice's thoughts about how best her child can "represent" both her and her partner, and specifically the darker complexion of her partner, speak to an elevated racial consciousness. It is important to note that Janice explained earlier she and her partner have discussed Janice carrying the child and thus would most likely have the biological ties to the child. Because of this, it is significant that Janice not only mentioned her partner's very dark skin, but she then questioned even if an African American donor would reflect the same "darkness" as her partner. Janice not wanting to "White wash" her future children is an important reflection in racial consciousness and parenting.

Martin and his partner have decided to take a different route for bringing children into their relationship. They have decided to adopt children. Martin's partner is adopted as well and so Martin discussed an important connection they have to supporting adoption. Martin also told me they have talked extensively on the racial/ethnic background of the child:

We would adopt for sure and we've agreed that children of color would be the best way because our thinking is that there are so many children of color that are left behind and that what we see is the need and we feel that is where we can

make a difference and whether that means Native American, African American or what have you, we are agnostic about it. But, we do want to be there for children of color.

While Martin says they are “agnostic” about what background the child comes from, they are adamant that the children be children of color. Martin also explains their reasoning for this is rooted in a social justice emphasis of recognizing there are too many children of color that need to be adopted and are often last to be adopted.

Lastly, other participants talked about racially conscious parenting practices. Jeff was adamant about ensuring biracial children understand both sides of their racial backgrounds:

I think both sides need to really dive into the other culture and try to make sure the kid gets exposure and understands the heritage and both the cultures. In my mind, you can't just say, “You know what? I'm going to raise my kid as a White kid.” You can't leave that part out. It's just not fair. That's part of him, too, so he needs to understand all of that.

Jeff's main assertion is that biracial children are not “White washed” and do not get exposed to the importance of their Black heritage and background. Childs (2005b:551) found that many Black women oppose interracial dating and marriage because they are afraid once Blacks become romantically involved with Whites, they will remove themselves from their Black communities and “interracial marriage is described as an ‘escape into White society.’” From the small number of participants in the current study that spoke about wanting children, the majority of these participants made it clear that they would not “White wash” or ignore the Black heritage and identity of their biracial children. This parenting practice reflects race-consciousness and not colorblindness.

## Racial Humor

While many participants felt comfortable talking seriously about race and racial issues with their partner, many also engaged in racial humor. None of the participants expressed feeling uncomfortable about the racial humor, rather, they often talked about how they enjoyed being able to joke around with their partner about their racial differences. Most of the humor participants engaged in revolves around racial stereotypes, White and Black. For instance, Candice said while laughing:

At home we just hang out but talk about race, like the other night she said, “Do you want some watermelon, and no it’s not because you’re Black.”

Vince also describes humor as an important aspect of his relationship:

So we don't have an issue with, well you can't talk about this subject or that subject and we kid about each other, you know, all the time. He'll do something, I'll say, “You know, you White folks,” things like that and he'll do it too. We go to the beach and he'll go, “You're kind of unusual. Most Black folks don't like water.” So we're very comfortable with it. And I think that's because we know that neither one of us harbor any animosity towards people of the opposite race and, so, I don't get offended when he, we're making jokes with each other, things of that nature.

Similarly, Jeff discusses how racial humor is common in his relationship:

We tend to make jokes a lot because I always make jokes about CPT, colored-people time. I always say “They’re on CPT.” He’ll make a comment, “Are they going to be CPT?” I say, “I bet so. They look pretty much the type.” So we’ll have comments like that and make jokes. Where he grew up is a pretty redneck area. I’ll see rednecks, and I’ll say, “There are some of your people. There’s your family out there.” We laugh at it.

Race is one of the most sensitive topics to discuss, especially between people of different races.

This sensitivity is heightened even more between Blacks and Whites given that Black Americans have endured the most severe forms of racial oppression and racism than any other racial or ethnic group in the U.S. Humor may be one way people are able to “discuss” racially sensitive

topics with more ease and comfortability. Many of the racial joking participants shared are connected with very offensive racial stereotypes (both Black and White) in the U.S. However, none of the participants seemed to take the jokes personally or be offended by them. In fact, the joking seemed to have the very opposite effect by bringing couples closer together. Bustamante et al. (2011) found engaging in racial/ethnic humor based primarily on racial/ethnic stereotypes was a primary coping mechanism for relieving stress and coping with inevitable racial/ethnic differences among interracial/intercultural couples. Cindy from the current study expressed that humor was one of the best aspects of her relationship and how it helps her and her partner cope with stress:

We're really funny -- I mean, Gwyneth is hilarious. For me, that is a very important part of a relationship, because life can be really tough and you've got to be able to laugh and you've got to be able to have fun. So I think we are compatible -- that's the best way to say it, that's the best part about the relationship.

Thus, humor is one way the participants connect with their partner and find comfort in being able to speak openly and candidly, which seems to be important to most participants.

### Conclusion

The private spaces of the participants' relationships may be considered their backstage (Goffman 1959), in which they regroup and support one another in order to go out in public settings as a cohesive and successful performance team (Goffman 1959). It is in these backstage spaces that participants frequently reflect on individual and relationship experiences in public. As was presented, most of the dialog and intimate work done by participants centered around issues of race. This may largely reflect that for most participants, this was their first Black-White interracial relationship and not their first same-sex relationship. Therefore, the racial difference is

a new experience and being in a same-sex relationship perhaps is more familiar. The fact that participants mostly focused on telling me about their experiences around racial difference also underscores the importance of race within interpersonal and intimate processes and that racial dynamics are not reserved only for public spaces. Thus, highlighting how the “personal is political” in that the private sphere and public sphere overlap, interrelate, and intersect. By no means do I think sexuality and gender are not relevant nor impacting participants’ private experiences, but because participants mostly discussed their racial difference from their partners, this chapter primarily focused on race.

An overarching phenomenon occurred throughout this chapter. For almost every theme, White participants seemed to engage in a more race-conscious rather than colorblind approaches to situations or discussions. For the large majority of White participants, being in an interracial relationship actually forced them to confront their own White privilege and recognize race in a way they never had to before. Similar to some of Steinbugler’s (2012) participants, the current study’s participants developed a “critical lens” and “cultivating racial literacy” (Steinbugler 2012). In many ways, it is in the intimate spaces of the interracial relationships that participants began to question, acknowledge, and recognize how much race plays a role in their everyday lives. However, it is important to note that for the majority of the White participants, their racial consciousness only came about because of being with a Black partner. In other words, it was rare that White participants sought out racial literacy before becoming romantically involved with their Black partners. This reflects the structural nature of White privilege that allows Whites to ignore race on an everyday basis and only have to think about it or “see” it when in the company of people of color. In one aspect, the interracial relationship in this study improves peoples,’ particularly Whites,’ awareness to race, racism and privilege. However, in another aspect, this

study highlights how our society still has a long way to go before the dominant group (Whites) will on their own acknowledge, confront, and acquire as Stienbugler (2012) states, racial literacy and a critical racial lens.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

### Private and Public Experiences

How same-sex interracial couples navigate their private and public spaces was the central focus of this dissertation. Using the methodology of grounded theory, two major themes emerged from the participants' stories; managing public settings and managing private spaces. Often in social science literature, the private and public are dichotomized into separate specific spheres, as does this study. However, many scholars argue that these spheres overlap, intersect and impact one another (Lopata 1993; Marks 1995; Bailey 2000). This is certainly the case in the current study. More specifically, this study affirms the feminist stance on how the structures and oppressions of the public impact the experiences in the private. Participants in this study often reflected interpersonally and individually in their intimate private spaces on public experiences. As will be discussed below, it is in the backstage or private spaces that participants worked at understanding their public experiences on an individual level and for some on a structural level.

Managing public settings presented challenges for participants in this study. While most of the participants shared many positive experiences in public settings, all participants had at least one negative story about being in public. Because these negative experiences are unique for interracial same-sex couples, it is important to discuss them when addressing larger structural systems of social inequality. Furthermore, different public settings often brought on different challenges and obstacles for participants. Extended family encounters include different dynamics than operating in public spaces with strangers and both these settings differ from experiences in LGBTQ spaces. Thus, each public space offers insights into how interracial same-sex couples navigate their different public experiences.

The intersection of race, gender, and sexuality was present in the subthemes of navigating public settings: negotiating visibility, negotiating invisibility, encountering extended family, managing LGBTQ spaces, and resisting public hostility. The dynamic of visibility and invisibility demonstrated how participants navigate through welcoming and unwelcoming environments. The visibility and invisibility of participants' relationships also highlight Goffman's concepts of tie-signs (1971), dramaturgy (1959), and stigma (1963). Many of the participants engaged in the use of tie-signs in order to affirm their visibility as a couple. People's social interactions and encounters in public spaces rely on "ritualized indications of alignment" so that people may operate smoothly in a given society (Goffman 1971). Tie-signs facilitate smooth operation since they reaffirm social order and expected social interaction. As Goffman (1971) argues, some must put extra effort into their use of tie-signs if their relationship is not the norm. Participants often have to engage in extended use of tie-signs in the form of vocal expression and gestures so people know their relationship exists and often that it is a serious, long-term relationship.

Interestingly, participants in this study did not seem to engage in impression management (Goffman 1959) to conceal their sexuality. Previous studies suggest the opposite (Steinbulger 2005; 2012). Rather, participants made extra efforts to "be out" or make sure people knew the status of their relationship. However, one may also view the extra effort to affirm their relationship status, particularly those who are married or life partners, as engaging in impression management. Here, participants make asserted efforts in the "front stage" (Goffman 1959) to demonstrate that their relationship is just as valid as heterosexual married couples. For some, this front stage performance of impression management (Goffman 1959) was also used to defy stereotypes about sexual promiscuity among gay men and lesbians in order to demonstrate they are in long-term monogamous relationships.

Stigma (Goffman 1963) was also prominent in participants' experiences. However, at least from their stories, race is stigmatized more so than sexual orientation. Both in heteronormative and LGBTQ spaces, Black participants repeatedly discussed how they felt marginalized, ignored, were assumed financially unstable, and in some instances, uneducated, by Whites. In these situations, "Blackness" is stigmatized and devalued and "Whiteness" is normalized and valued. This study cannot determine that race is a more salient and problematic issue in public spaces compared to sexual orientation, but participants seemed to allude to the fact that they experience racism at a higher level and more often than homophobia. In part, this may also be due to the fact that it may be easier to conceal their sexual orientation versus their race. Gay and lesbians may be able to more easily "pass" as straight in public spaces, whereas skin color is marked easily and difficult to conceal. Participants in the discussion on visibility discussed how the racial difference between themselves and their partner made them more visible. More specifically, they felt that being Black-White couples compared to any other type of interracial couples, made them stand out even more and draw more visibility to their relationship.

Racial stigma also seemed very evident within LGBTQ spaces. Some Black participants even commented they felt more racism within their own LGBTQ community than within the dominant heteronormative community. Issues of Black lesbians feeling they needed to "prove" their sexuality and Black participants generally feeling excluded and in some instances hyper-sexualized reflects how deeply-rooted racism is in U.S. society. Even in spaces that are seen as open, tolerant and accepting, racism exists and in some cases is very overt. Thus, participants often experience public settings differently depending on their own social location of race, gender, and sexuality. Public experiences highlight how the interplay of privilege and oppression

operate in every day life and how this interplay also affects how participants regulate their presentation of self and their performance team as a couple.

In order to be able to engage in “public work” and succeed as a performance team, participants used the private “backstage” spaces of their relationship to regroup, recharge and reflect on their public experiences. The backstage for participants was where they could let their guard down and be themselves naturally. Support from each was instrumental in their ability to regroup and recharge as a couple and individually. In private spaces, discussions and reflections of each others’ racial difference seemed to dominate what participants wanted to talk about with me. This could be for a variety of reasons. Perhaps because many of the public experiences centered around the couples’ racial difference and for many participants, this is their first long-term Black-White interracial relationship and not their first same-sex relationship. Thus, the “newness” or different experiences of being in a Black-White relationship may be at the forefront of their minds. Perhaps, also because I disclosed as being straight, participants thought it was easier for me to relate to them if we discussed interraciality more so than sexuality.

Therefore, because participants talked mostly about racial difference while in their backstage spaces, the chapter on private settings focuses primarily on race. It is not say that sexuality and gender are not important. In fact, in many of the themes within this chapter sexuality and gender played important roles and theoretically, the intersection of gender and sexuality are critical to one’s experience. However, in order to present participants’ voices from their standpoint, and because they wanted to mostly talk about racial difference, race for the purposes of this study was the primary focus of their private lives. Furthermore, the emphasis on racial difference in the participants’ stories reflects the importance of race in relationship processes and how race shapes interpersonal experiences. Within managing private spaces, many

subthemes emerged including partner ally, initial attraction, seeing race differently, heightened racial consciousness, considering children, and racial humor.

While previous research often found that many interracial couples engage in colorblind dialog (Killian 2002; Childs 2005a; Steinbugler 2012), this was not the case in this study. I was surprised to find that the large majority of the participants engaged in race-conscious dialog and thinking. Perhaps this difference is due to participants in this study on average having more education than those in previous studies, but education alone cannot explain this difference (there are very well educated people who support the mainstream colorblind ideology). Rather, from the participants' stories it seems as though intimate interpersonal experiences and their public experiences aided in developing White partners' "critical racial lens," (Steinbugler 2012). In almost every subtheme, most of the White participants reflect how living everyday with their Black partners makes them see the world in a different way. These everyday experiences force them to acknowledge their White privilege and how race impacts not just the public world but also the very intimate spaces of their relations. Perhaps in some ways and for some people, being part of an intimate interracial relationship helps people to see race in a new way and to think more critically about race and racial dynamics in society. Overall, these private "backstage" experiences help same-sex interracial couples manage and process the public world by being able to regroup, recharge, and reflect by leaning on one another for support. It is also in the backstage spaces, that structures of the public world trickle in and force some participants to reflect on structures of power, privilege and oppression.

Again, this study cannot determine empirically whether race and racism is a greater challenge than heterosexism and being in a lesbian or gay relationship. However, this study does suggest that at least for these participants, race is a primary issue in their everyday lives, one in

which almost all participants talked most about and in most detail. The chapter on public experiences also suggests that for Black participants, particularly Black lesbians, compared to White participants, issues of racial oppression and privilege are consistent across all aspects of public spaces. While White participants can “escape” their marginalization based on sexuality when in certain spaces, Black participants never seem to be able to “escape” their marginalization based on race. It is certainly obvious from this study, that race and racism pervade all aspects of society, even in spaces that may otherwise appear to be more tolerant and accepting than mainstream environments. The term LGBTQ “community” may not feel like an all embracing and loving community for many of its members, particularly Black LGBTQ individuals. The LGBTQ community has a history of racism and privileging Whites, particularly White middle-class gay men (Berube 2010; Han 2013). Furthermore, when looking at policy initiatives, it seems many believe we have “arrived” at racial equality with eight states banning some form of affirmative action policies at the institutional level. However on the other hand, nationally, there are huge policy pushes for LGBTQ equality but rarely do these LGBTQ movements address racial inequality both within mainstream society and in LGBTQ communities (Berube 2010; Han 2013). It is interesting that while this study suggests race and racism are still very critical issues, society at large seems to believe we live in a “post-racial” era and now the primary focus needs to be on LGBTQ equality. In part this pattern reflects history in that historically the women’s movements focused primarily of gender and the Civil Rights movement focused primarily on race without regard to multiple members of these movements that have identities that cross race, gender, class and sexuality. This study demonstrates the need to continue an intersectional focus on experience and dynamics of privilege and oppression with perhaps alluding that racial oppression and racism are inescapable across all aspects of society.

### Strengths and Limitations

This study has explored the way same-sex interracial couples experience their private and public lives together. As with any study, there are strengths and limitations. The strengths and limitations of this study are primarily associated with the sampling technique, interview mode, and data. Often qualitative methods are best when trying to capturing how people make sense of their world and how relationship processes unfold. Thus, this study used only qualitative methods of in-depth interviews in order to explore rich data and gain a deeper insight into participants' lives.

In order to complete interviews, I had to gather an adequate sample size from a population that is very small and arguably difficult to find. In order to include enough voices, I decided to use a national sampling approach, which I believe is a strength of this study. Using a national sampling approach, I was able to gather participants diverse in regional location, race, gender, age, and relationship length. Furthermore, using the Internet as a primary tool for recruiting participants allowed greater ease for national sampling. Arguably, today people may also find the Internet and email as a more convenient way to communicate and respond to recruitment flyers thus allowing further access into a population that may otherwise be difficult to reach. All the participants had the option to either email or call me to arrange an interview. However, none of the participants called for initial contact with me and instead, each contacted me through email. Therefore, using technology as part of the sampling procedures was certainly a strength for this study.

There are also limitations with my sampling methods. Using purposive and snowball sampling approaches often greatly help in gathering more participants, but there is also a risk of having a sample that is too homogeneous. Recruiting participants through specific regional and

national organizations for purposive sampling may play into the educational and class status homogeneity of my sample. Despite the sample diversity described above, there are two elements of this sample that are very homogenous: educational attainment and social class. I use social class as the term verses socio-economic-status, since people completing graduate and professional degrees may be pocket-poor, but they are acquiring education that puts them in a higher social status. Therefore, even though there are variations in participant incomes, as a whole they occupy similar social statuses of middle class. Similarly, all of the participants are college educated, holding at least a bachelor's degree. While this homogeneity may be seen as a limitation, it may also be viewed as a strength. Arguably, because the participants all have similar social class statuses and educational attainment, in some way social class and education are "controlled" when it comes to analysis.

Another strength and limitation of this study is interview mode. All of the interviews were conducted by phone. Because this was a national sample, and I did not have resources to travel for interviewing, I felt phone interviews were the next best option. Skype interviews may also work well, but I felt the higher risk of having a bad connection, delayed speech, and the call dropping all together could have the potential to negatively impact the interview dynamic, conversation flow and participant thought processes. The fact all interviews were conducted by phone is a strength of this study. Having a consistent interview mode is important for data collection and analysis. Another strength of the phone interview is that it allowed more flexibility in scheduling interviews and time to complete interviews. I was able to interview participants late in the evening after work or on the weekend in the comfort of their home. Being able to talk to participants from their home I believe also helped create a more relaxing natural environment for the participants. A limitation of this study is clearly that I was unable to capture

body language and nonverbal cues from participants during the interview. Especially for qualitative methods, nonverbal language is important and often reveals rich information. However, I also believe a phone interview when discussing sensitive issues such as race and sexuality, may provide participants with a certain level of anonymity and safety. Lastly, phone interviews may tend to be shorter than face-to-face interviews. The average interview I conducted was about 60-90 minutes with some lasting longer than two hours. Therefore, while there are obvious limitations to phone interviews, I felt overall the phone interviews went well and provided very rich data.

Data are another aspect of the research methods that come with strengths and limitations. A common criticism of qualitative methods is that they do not provide data that can be generalizable to larger populations. However, the purpose of qualitative inquiry is not to generalize findings to larger populations but rather to explore in-depth social processes. Through the interviews I conducted, hundreds of pages of interview transcript were used to capture the social worlds of the participants. These transcripts of participants' stories provide in-sights into relationship processes and experiences that may otherwise be overlooked with survey data. Thus, this study includes a great strength of providing rich data that reveals in-depth ways participants negotiate, manage, and navigate their private and public worlds as a member of same-sex interracial couple.

### Future Directions

Private and public experiences of same-sex interracial couples were the primary focuses of this dissertation. This study was exploratory due to the limited research existing on same-sex interracial couples. Thus, interviews with participants were open ended and included only a few

guiding questions. This research strategy was framed by grounded theory that assumes data will reveal the important social processes and not the preconceived ideas of the researcher. Because of this approach to the research design and methodology, participants' stories provided rich information across a variety of aspects of their lived experience. Future research on same-sex interracial couples may want to narrow the research objective to begin to look at more specific experiences same-sex interracial couples have.

One such site of inquiry would be to examine same-sex interracial couples' relationships with their extended families. What are the relationships? How do these relationships impact the intimacy of the couple? Are there any particular challenges or benefits of the relationships with extended family? Exploring lesbian and gay interracial couples' relationships with extended family is important to informing the larger discussion on family studies. Blacks tend to have stronger and closer relationships with extended family than Whites on average (Cherlin 2010), so it would be interesting to explore how this different dynamic between White and Black families impact lesbian and gay Black-White couples.

While most participants in the current study did not have children, many discussed wanting children in the future. Some research has been conducted on lesbian and gay families with children. However, literature on same-sex families with children predominately looks at monoracial lesbian and gay families and parenting (Biblarz et al. 2010). Until recently, the majority of research on lesbian families looked at White, middle-class, college educated lesbian couples (Biblarz et al. 2010). The limited research on Black lesbian families suggests differences in childrearing, domestic division of labor, and definitions of relationship equality compared to White lesbian families (Moore 2008; Moore 2011). Previous research on White lesbian couples showed that these couples commit to more liberal feminist ideals of androgynous gender identity

and equal division of domestic labor (Biblarz et al. 2010). However, other studies on White lesbian couples that have children suggest ideals of equal childcare and paid employment do not always play out in everyday life (Carrington 1999; Kurdek et al. 2007). Goldberg et al. (2007) however, finds that housework remains fairly equal among White lesbian couples even when children are present in the family. Moore (2008) argues that Black lesbians for the most part do not ascribe to the second-wave liberal feminist ideals. Instead, Black lesbians with children often define equality by equal labor force participation, financial independence and being family providers (Moore 2008; Moore 2011). The role of mother and motherhood is culturally significant and powerful within the Black community, which many Black lesbians actively seek to uphold and embrace as their identity (Moore 2008; Reed et al. 2011). Furthermore, the role of mother in the Black heterosexual and lesbian community is deeply embedded in traditional gendered relations (Moore 2008; Reed et al. 2011). However, unlike many White lesbian families, Black lesbian families do not feel that there is inequality when the children's biological mother performs more housework and childrearing responsibilities (Moore 2008). In fact, Moore (2008) argues that this dynamic allows biological mothers to trade-off their larger domestic responsibilities for more authority in making decisions about family finances and their children's well-being. Given these differences between Black and White lesbian couples, it would be interesting to explore who interracial Black-White lesbian couples parent and divide household labor. Who do these couple define equality? How do they divide childcare and housework?

Studies on gay male families are far less common, but on the rise (Biblarz et al. 2010). Similar to studies on lesbian families, gay male family studies tend to be dominated by White, middle-class educated participants. It seems that studies on Black gay male families are even more scant than Black lesbian families (Biblarz et al. 2010). The limited research on gay male

families indicate two trends--studies that look at the processes gay men engage in to become fathers and once children are present, the family processes of raising children and domestic labor within the gay male family (Biblarz et al. 2010). In terms of the latter research, most studies find that gay male couples with children tend to co-parent more equally than heterosexual couples, but are often not completely equal (Johnson et al. 2002). However, when parenting and family responsibilities were divided, gender seemed not to be the deciding factor. Instead, these decisions were made based on each partners' personal qualities, skills, and interests (Silverstein et al. 2002). Because most of these studies only look at White gay male couples, it would be good to explore how Black gay male couples with children divide childcare and housework and compare it to previous research. Furthermore, also exploring how interracial Black-White gay male couples parent and divide household labor would be important as well. Another important avenue to explore is how interracial gay and lesbian couples compare when it comes to parenting and domestic work? Are there many differences or more similarities? This would make an important contribution to widen our understanding of family life.

Lastly, this dissertation suggests race relations and racism within the LGBTQ community need further examination. LGBTQ studies have largely focused on their injustice based on sexual marginalization, but have overlooked the need to address other issues of oppression that intersect with sexuality-based oppression. Because almost every Black participant and many White participants in this study recounted experiences of racial discrimination and racism within their LGBTQ community, this study suggests that this is a significant problem that deserves further attention and action.

## Conclusion

Overall, this study makes an important contribution to sociological research on family, LGTBQ studies, and race studies. The participants' stories shed light into relationship processes that were previously overlooked. Intersectionality as a guiding framework for this study highlighted the ways interracial lesbian and gay couples navigate interpersonal and public spaces. This study suggests that the dichotomy of private/public is often blurred, and these two spaces frequently overlap and intersect. Often what participants experience in public is then discussed in the intimate spaces of their relationships. Furthermore, participants also used their public and interpersonal experiences with their partners to be reflexive of their own understandings of the social world, relationship processes, and love. Despite the sometimes difficult and negative experiences participants recounted, overall, it was obvious from all of my participants that they deeply love their partner, enjoy sharing life together, appreciate learning from one another, and have deep respect for each other.

## **APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-  
2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

## Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Anne M. Bubriski**

Date: **June 19, 2012**

Dear Researcher:

On 6/19/2012, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination  
Project Title: Exploring the Experiences of Same-Sex Interracial Couples  
Investigator: Anne M Bubriski  
IRB Number: SBE-12-08496

Funding Agency:

Grant Title:

Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 06/19/2012 10:49:46 AM EDT

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Joanne Muratori'.

IRB Coordinator

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

### ***Introduction***

Tell me a little bit about yourself. What are the most important aspects of your identity?

### ***Partnership***

How long have you known your partner?

How long have you been in a romantic relationship with your partner?

Tell me about how you met your partner

What are some of the best things about your relationship?

What are some of the biggest challenges about your relationship?

Do you talk about race with your partner?

Do you talk about gender with your partner?

Do you talk about sexual preference with your partner?

How do you divide the household chores and cooking?

Do you have children?

### ***Extended Family***

Tell me about your relationships with extended family.

What were some of the messages you received growing up about race?

What were some of the messages you received growing up about gender?

What were some of the messages you received growing up about sexual orientation?

### ***Public***

What are your experiences as a couple in public?

How do you think other people perceive your relationship?

How is your relationship treated in your LGBTQ community?

## **APPENDIX C: ANNOUNCEMENT OF DEFENSE**

Announcing the Final Examination of Anne Bubriski-McKenzie for the degree of Doctor of Sociology

Date: June 28, 2013

Time: 11:00am

Room: PH 409

Dissertation Title: Interracial Lesbian and Gay Couples: Navigating Private and Public Experiences

This study explores the private and public experiences of Black/White interracial lesbian and gay couples. Drawing from the theoretical frameworks of critical race theory and intersectional feminism, this research focuses on how the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality influence relationship experiences and family processes in both private and public spaces for interracial same-sex couples. This study is based on 19 in-depth interviews with individuals in Black/White lesbian and gay relationships. Participants' stories highlight intersectionality in terms of the ways interracial lesbian and gay couples navigate these interpersonal and public spaces. Participant experiences suggest that the dichotomy of private/public is often blurred, and these two spaces frequently overlap and intersect. Often what participants experience in public is then discussed and interpreted within private spaces. It is in the private space that participants work through complex issues in order to present themselves as a couple in public. Participants frequently used their public and interpersonal experiences with their partners to be reflexive of their own understandings of the social world, relationship processes, and love. Given the lack of research on same-sex, interracial families, this study makes an important contribution to sociological research on families, LGTBQ studies, and race studies.

Outline of Studies:

Major: Sociology

Educational Career:

B.G.S., 2006, University of Connecticut

M.A., 2009, Southern Connecticut State University

Committee in Charge:

Dr. Elizabeth Grauerholz

Dr. Shannon Carter

Dr. Fernando Rivera

Dr. Maria C. Santana

Approved for distribution by Elizabeth Grauerholz, Committee Chair, on June 04, 2013

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