

## *Introduction*

# WHAT INTERRACIAL COUPLES CAN TELL US

LARRY: A guy at work told me, “Mixed marriage offends me, it just *offends* me.”

And I can accept that—it’s not for everybody. But it’s his heart that’s hurting, not mine. Not everyone can do this. Not everyone is that strong.

DEBRA: Yes, everybody has to decide what they can live with and can’t live with.

ROBERT: We’re just like any other couple . . . perfectly normal.

LINDA: As far as things happening to us, we’re real boring.

**A**S PEOPLE IN intimate relationships can quickly confirm, individuals looking at the same picture, or living through the same event, often report completely different experiences. Attending to disparate aspects of situations, we tend to interpret what we are sensing, feeling, and thinking in varied ways. The two couples quoted above report dissimilar experiences, just as individual partners in interracial relationships may have contrasting takes on or constructions of what is “real” or “true” for them. While this can be a source of confusion or frustration, it is also a phenomenon that all couples must learn to effectively handle if their relationship is to be successful. As partners in interracial relationships diverge from one another on multiple axes of power—such as gender, ethnicity, culture, religion, or social class—

their basic beliefs and assumptions often differ markedly, and such variations shape the lenses through which they view their interpersonal worlds. Therefore, partners in interracial relationships, coming from distinct social locations, may exhibit very different understandings of everyday situations that they encounter.

Here is another illustration of the idea that “the truth is in the eye of the beholder.” The General Social Survey conducted by the National Opinion Research Center found in 2002 that 10 percent of whites interviewed nationwide (and only 5 percent of blacks) were in favor of a law banning marriage between blacks and whites. What does this mean? This statistic can be interpreted, and used, in a variety of ways. On the one hand, one in ten whites, and only one in twenty blacks, wanted to outlaw interracial marriage, and these shrinking percentages speak to trends toward improvement (i.e., increased tolerance, decreased social distance, etc.) in interracial relations as seen in survey data over the past four decades. On the other hand, the fact that 10 percent of whites reported a wish to make it *illegal* for blacks and whites to marry speaks to a phenomenon of continued *intolerance* for interracial relationships (see Harris and Kalbfleisch 2000; Miller, Olson, and Fazio 2004). Persons who prefer the former, more optimistic view of this statistic might also suggest that race is not so significant as it once was. In contrast, persons who hold the latter view would point to race’s continuing importance across social contexts (e.g., public spaces, classrooms, therapy rooms, etc.).

In 2010 the Pew Research Center asked white respondents how they would feel if a member of their family were to marry a black person. Sixty-four percent said they would be fine with it, and 33 percent said it would bother them or they would not accept it. Similarly, Herman and Campbell (2012), using the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, report that 29 percent of white respondents reject relationships of all types—dating, cohabiting, marrying, and having children—with African Americans and Asian Americans. Back to the Pew Research Center study, seventy-three percent of Hispanics reported they would be fine if a family member married a black person, and 27 percent said they would be bothered by it or they would not accept it. The Pew Research Center also asked persons of color how they felt about a

family member marrying a white person, and 19 percent of blacks and 15 percent of Hispanics reported that they would be bothered by it or would not accept it (Pew Research Center 2010a). To summarize these rates of nonacceptance: a full third of white respondents stated they would have a problem if a family member married a black person, and a little over a quarter of Hispanics voiced discomfort with the scenario. In contrast, fewer than one in five blacks and about one in seven Hispanics expressed concerns about a family member marrying a white person. Thus, the social location of the respondent vis-à-vis the social location of the person whom the relative is marrying has a clear impact on the favorability of the scenario. These statistics highlight a great range in perspectives about interracial relationships.

Partners in these relationships, and their family members, may also subscribe to these opinions and perspectives. Some people point to gains made and are quite positive about their experiences together and the opportunities available to their children. Other couples recount painful experiences of prejudice emanating from strangers, friends, and family, and discuss particular strategies they use to cope with racist discrimination. Still others speak to an experience of being welcomed warmly by the partner's family of origin, while others experienced a cool, cautious reception by their partner's family. These experiences are valid for those who have lived through them.

A main purpose of this book is to give voice to this diversity of perspectives, as expressed during in-depth interviews of twenty interracial couples. Individually and conjointly, these couples discussed in detail how they met, how they fell in love, what their life together has been like, what differences, if any, they have negotiated, and how and to what extent they have dealt with prejudice as a couple. Because it presents interracial couples' own narratives about their relationships with friends and family and their strategic responses to prejudice, this book will be a valuable resource for interracial and multiethnic couples, the helping professionals (i.e., practitioners in psychology, marriage and family therapy, social work, and counseling) who work with them, and social scientists.

Historically seen as "nonnormative," interracial marriage has dwelt in the margins of society *and* the social sciences and has been pathologized in both

contexts. This book redresses this problem by privileging the voices of persons living in interracial marriages and by examining how processes of racism, sexism, and classism intersect and unfold in personal and professional relationships on a daily basis. Partners in interracial relationships will have an interest in this book as it addresses topics that are, and are not, talked about by many couples who come from different backgrounds. It offers ways to measure to what degree couples are “on the same page” when it comes to their experience of their relationship together. For instance, a partner may ask himself or herself, “Do my partner and I agree about how much resistance or outright discrimination we have encountered while we’ve been together? How accepting is my partner of my values, customs, and traditions? And what similarities and differences do I have with my partner on basic beliefs and assumptions?”

Interracial couples and multiracial families continue to proliferate, adding to the increasing diversity of US society, and of clinical practice. Among opposite-sex married couples, one in ten (5.4 million couples) are interracial (US Census 2010), representing an increase of 28 percent since 2000. In addition, the most recent census reported that 18 percent of heterosexual unmarried couples were of different races. With this major shift in demographics, helping professionals can expect to work with growing numbers of interracial couples and multiracial families who “traverse multiple and potentially contradictory relational topographies” (Imber-Black 2006:274).

The book discusses how therapists, psychologists, social workers, and counselors can effectively help interracial couples and multiracial families help themselves, and presents assessment tools and intervention techniques. Finally, this volume will be of interest to family researchers wishing to know more about how interracial couples experience their relationship together, the struggles or challenges they face, how they deal with partner differences, what family identities they create, and what they think about counseling or therapy. Thus, the audience for this book is therapists, social workers, counselors, and psychologists, scholars in the field of family studies and family science, and interracial couples interested in hearing the narratives of other couples who have negotiated difference, resisted familial and societal disapproval, and strived to make their relationships work.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BOOK

Why write a book on interracial couples? In the past four decades, racial and ethnic demographics have shifted dramatically in the United States, and the number of people marrying outside their own ethnic or racial group is on the rise (Childs 2005; Kennedy 2004; Negy and Snyder 2000; US Bureau of the Census 2000b). For instance, there are ten times as many interracial couples today than there were forty years ago. Considering the salience of skin color in US society, it is surprising that so few studies in the helping professions have been devoted to race, and, more specifically, to interracial couples (Davis 1990; Solsberry 1994); only a few seminal articles and book chapters (Falicov 1996; McGoldrick and Preto 1984) address the wide variety of interracial and interethnic relationships and the unique challenges such couples face.

McGoldrick and Preto (1984) stated that variables that influence the adjustment required in relationships include differences in race, social class, religious affiliation, and education, and they posited that couples from similar backgrounds would likely experience less disparity and less demand for adjustment than couples from diverse backgrounds. Thus, while interracial couples often experience the same types of relationship conflicts as couples comprising partners from the same racial or cultural backgrounds (Biever, Bobele, and North 1998; Ho, Matthews Rasheed, and Rasheed 2004), interracial couples (Killian 2001a, 2001b, 2003, 2012; Rosenblatt, Powell, and Karis 1995) frequently face distinct challenges and situations that require additional reflection, consideration, and negotiation by partners, especially in contexts that pathologize or problematize the forging of such connections (Killian 2008).

Little is known about how individuals from different racial and ethnic backgrounds come together to form new couple and family identities. Scholars often have viewed the subject as an opportunity for testing their theories on mate selection (see chapter 1) and relationship development but without incorporating couples' own perceptions and experiences of becoming a couple. Additionally, clinical approaches usually do not explicitly address the interconnections of race, gender, and class (Collins 2000), and hence do not capture the complex and changing nature of clients' social-psychological and

political selves, or subjectivities. Recognizing these gaps, this book looks at how interracial couples view themselves and the social forces that implicitly and explicitly influence partners' perceptions and experiences. The use of both individual and conjoint interviews as data sources is a unique methodological aspect of this book, one that provided insights not obtainable by projects that collected data either only from individual partners or only from couples. Further, the intersections of race, gender, and class are explored, and therapeutic approaches that incorporate analysis of the interviews with the couples are also presented. In sum, this book is significant because it addresses an important topic seldom addressed in the literature, features rich, descriptive data from interracial couples, and provides helping professionals useful tools and strategies for identifying issues and enhancing couples' relationships.

### **UNPACKING BASIC CONCEPTS: RACE, DISCRIMINATION, AND MISCEGENATION**

Much ambiguity exists with regard to the use of the terms "race" and "ethnicity" in the American vernacular in general and the literature of the helping professions in particular. First appearing in English in 1580, "race" did not take on its modern definition until the early 1800s, evolving into one of the most misconstrued and misused words in our language (Farley 2005; Lowe 2009; Pedersen 2000).

The term derives much of its meaning from its roots in the physical sciences. In its biological conception, "race" invokes the system by which all life is classified into subcategories according to specific physical and structural traits. In the study of *Homo sapiens*, physical differences involving pigmentation, facial features, stature, and texture of body hair are factors commonly used to distinguish "races." In the past few decades, theories of race based on biology have been rejected in favor of the conceptualization of race as a cultural category (Lowe 2009). We know that not all members of any particular racial grouping fit all the various criteria. For example, some women of Afri-

can or Caribbean origin are born with straight hair, and some men whose ancestors originate from Asia are six feet or more in height. If we move beyond superficial characteristics, we discover that there are more similarities than differences between racial groups, and more differences within groups than between them. In fact, 94 percent of physical variation lies *within* so-called racial groups (American Anthropological Association 2010; Lowe 2009).

Despite these inherent problems, biological constructions of race were used implicitly to support segregation and social inequity and were embraced by many of the most “enlightened” members of North American society well into the twentieth century. The meaning or interpretation of particular characteristics, such as skin tone or the size and shape of a person’s nose, was determined by “experts” (typically self-appointed) who made sweeping predictions about the moral character, personality type, and intelligence of individuals based solely on the physical attributes of their racial group. Such thinking crystallized in the concept of “polygenism,” which posited separate origins and independent evolution of the races, and later served as the intellectual justification for colonialism, slavery, the Nazi concept of a “master race” (Wolpoff and Caspari 2002), and racist social policies and institutions such as the Jim Crow laws. For example, under Jim Crow, the state of Florida regulated intermarriage with the following law: “All marriages between a white person and a negro, or between a white person and a person of negro descent to the fourth generation inclusive, are hereby forever prohibited.” The term “fourth generation inclusive” is a direct reference to the “one-drop” rule, whereby many Southern states counted anyone who had one thirty-second African heritage as “black” (Jones 2000). Thus, one-drop laws policed the boundaries or borders of whiteness, with any racial mixture effectively negating whiteness. Eugenicists (e.g., Sir Francis Galton, Harry Heiselden) proposed that selective procreation (and sterilization, with or without consent) could “refine” the human race by encouraging the birth of children with healthy and “beautiful” characteristics (Washington 2006). Eugenic ideals were informed by ethnocentric Anglo-Saxon standards, and persons deemed genetically “unfit for life” were frequently dark-skinned.<sup>2</sup> Harry Hamilton Laughlin, eugenicist and head of the Station for Experimental Evolution at

the beginning of the twentieth century, once expressed profound anxiety that “no two races had ever maintained their purity while living in as close proximity as U.S. blacks and whites did” (Washington 2006:193).

Eugenicists contributed their vision of “racial hygiene” to the dogma of fundamentalists who preached the moral necessity of maintaining a separation of the races. Literal, concrete interpreters of religious text still refer to Biblical verses to support their interpretations of God’s intentions. For instance, in the Old Testament, Moses tells his fellow Israelites, “Do not intermarry” with persons from other nations and of differing religious traditions (Deuteronomy 7:9, New International Version). Interpreted in a sociohistorical context, Moses is prohibiting *interfaith* marriages for fear they will erode the religious convictions of his people, but some persons today see it as an explicit, literal condemnation of all forms of intermarriage. Utilizing the concept of race, and upon “empirical” and religious bases, whites created an invidious hierarchy in which they occupied a position as a normative, “superior,” “unprefixed” people (Minnich 1990).

Arising from a set of prejudiced beliefs and attitudes, racism is manifested in both overtly hostile actions and more subtle “dysconscious” acts directed against persons of color (Rains 1998; Ridley 2005). Racist actions range from denial of goods and services, to psychological intimidation, to verbal and/or physical assault, to murder. “Racial discrimination” may be defined as concrete actions that adversely affect the personal safety, security, or social and economic opportunities of persons whose skin color or ethnic heritage differ from that of the perpetrator. Racism and discrimination are manifested in the attitudes and behaviors of individuals as well as in the actions of larger societal institutions. Because race remains a central organizing principle in US society (Brown et al. 2003; Twine and Gallagher 2008; Lee and Bean 2007; Zack 1997), persons who cross the color line and become intimate are viewed as unusual, problematic, or even deviant. And, of course, only societies that essentialize race, maintaining it as a principle of sociocultural organization and meaning, will see interracial couples as noteworthy phenomenon and imbue them with special social meaning (Childs 2005).

Thus, the notion of a “pure” white identity and the ideology of white supremacy have a paradoxical, synergistic relationship with interracial couples.



The archaic, pejorative term for interracial coupling is “miscegenation,” derived from the Latin *miscere* (to mix) and the Indo-European *gen*, denoting “genus” or “race.” Defined then as “mixture of different races,” “miscegenation” served as a clarion call for white supremacists everywhere. White supremacy, by characterizing miscegenation as a social scourge, is able to sustain or reproduce itself by presenting mixed couples as something that must be resisted and fought against. Sexton eloquently asserted that white supremacy works to *produce* miscegenation in the sense that “it articulates it, inscribes it—as its most precious renewable resource, as the necessary threat against which it continually constructs itself. . . . It relies upon miscegenation to reproduce its social relations” (2002:20).

Because of the prevalence of racism in the wider social milieu (Childs 2005; Kennedy 2004; Romano 2003; Root 2001), partners in interracial relationships historically have experienced rejection, hostility, and criticism. For example, Lewandowski and Jackson (2001) found that European American men married to African American women were perceived as significantly less competent and as less likely to be professionally successful than were those married to European American women. African American men married to European American women were perceived as less competent, as less traditional, as having a weaker racial identity, and as less comfortable with same-race others than were those married to African American women.

Persons who discriminate against interracial couples may believe it is “immoral” or “unnatural” for persons of different racial groups to form couple relationships. While individual racism manifests itself in the behavior of one person or small groups of people, institutional racism involves the adverse, discriminatory behavior and policies of larger institutional structures. Institutions such as school boards, banks, and real estate agencies have been seen to engage in discrimination against individual persons of color and interracial couples (Farley 2005; Root 2001). And legal recourse is complicated for interracial couples, who are victims of discrimination because their status as *an interracial couple alone* does not neatly fit within the categories of plaintiffs who can allege discriminatory action “because of” race, familial status, or marital status under current statutes (Onwuachi-Willig and Willig-Onwuachi 2009:234). Using Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, Onwuachi-Willig

and Willig-Onwuachi highlighted how, in the event of housing discrimination, interracial couples

can face difficulty in explaining their “expressive harms” or “lack of dignity” through discrimination under the courts’ current analysis where the defendant landlord has rented or sold housing to monoracial couples of all races, but has refused to do so for mixed race couples. . . . Current protected categories under housing discrimination statutes essentially require individuals in interracial couples to make their individual races and family unit separable categories in order to pursue discrimination claims based on interraciality. . . . This implicit requirement . . . rests on an assumption of the monoracial family that works to reinforce the normative ideal of family as monoracial.

(2009:253)

Discrimination against interracial couples takes concrete, material forms, and interraciality is not yet a protected category under housing discrimination statutes.

If choosing a partner from a different racial background made no difference in a person’s life, then those interviewed for this book would have had few stories to tell about their experiences of discrimination and racism. However, since racism does manifest itself in myriad ways in a racially stratified culture, and since it affects *everyone*, it necessarily has an impact on black and white couples as well. And racism’s impact is different for different people, including white and black partners in interracial relationships.

Beliefs and notions that gain currency in a society, such as the idea that there are essential characteristics and differences that accurately define racial groups, can begin to be viewed as normative truths (Foucault 1980). Such “truths,” or *dominant discourses*, are defined as systems of “statements, practices, and institutional structures that share common values” (Hare-Mustin 1994:19) and that sustain a particular worldview. One such discourse, “homogamy,” holds that people are attracted to one another because of their similarities in background. Shared characteristics, such as race, religion, education, income, age, and other demographic and status variables, have been considered to be major factors in the mate selection process (Surra et al.

2006) and thought to predict relationship success and satisfaction. Heterogamous mate selection practices run counter to this discourse of homogamy. Various notions or “rationales” of why persons do not, or *should* not, select partners across the border of race continue to be prevalent in our society. As one of the first researchers on interracial couples reported, “it is not surprising that strong norms against racial intermarriage should be accompanied by beliefs that such marriages are fraught with special hazards and are likely to fail” (Porterfield 1982:25). Embodying this prevailing ideology of society at large, homogamy is also utilized by white supremacists as a rationale for maintaining social and geographic segregation of persons from different races in an effort to maintain white racial “purity” (Ferber 1998; Root 2001).

### INTERRACIAL IN THE AGE OF OBAMA: THE IMPACT OF COLOR-BLIND AND “POSTRACIAL” DISCOURSES

Interracial couples are frequently pointed to as evidence that racial borders or barriers no longer exist or simply do not matter (Kennedy 2004). The discourse that US society is *color-blind*, or evolving in that direction, has become increasingly widespread over the years (Childs 2005; Gallagher 2003; Ridley 2005). “Color-blind discourse” is rooted in the belief that a persistent refusal to see differences in race, ethnicity, or color is humanistic (i.e., we humans are all alike) and socially and politically correct (i.e., one reduces the risk of being called racist if one does not acknowledge racial difference). A color-blind stance dispatches the problem of race in one fell swoop, effectively taking those with race-based power and privilege “off the hook.” Pinderhughes writes that this stance “protects those holding it from awareness of their ignorance of others and the necessity of exerting the energy and effort to understand and bridge the differences” (1989:44). Perhaps it is not surprising that many white people believe that the United States has already become a truly color-blind nation, with national polling demonstrating that a majority of whites now believe discrimination against racial minorities no longer exists (Twine and Gallagher 2008). Thus, the color-blind discourse allows a majority of whites to believe that blacks have “as good a chance as whites” in

obtaining housing and employment and achieving middle-class status. But can race really be erased so easily?

Parallels exist between the meanings and the interpretations made of the increasing rates of interracial couples in the United States and a major milestone in the American political scene. On November 5, 2008, the *New York Times* stated, “Barack Hussein Obama was elected the 44th president of the United States, sweeping away the last racial barrier in American politics with ease as the country chose him as its first black chief executive.” Post sums up the discourse around Barack Obama’s election in the following way: “This narrative is all about race even as it makes various claims about the diminished significance of race: the prospect of racial healing, the ability of a new generation of Americans to transcend their own identity, and the emergence of a post-racial society” (2009:909). Much like the hullabaloo made over the increasing frequency and visibility of interracial couples and multiracial peoples, Obama’s election was accompanied by passionate, and premature, proclamations that racism was at an end in the United States. After the November 2008 election, almost half of white voters (48 percent) and three-quarters of black voters (74 percent) said they expected to see race relations improve during Obama’s presidency. Voters were less effusive a year later, with a plurality of whites (45 percent) reporting that Obama’s election had made no difference to race relations, and 15 percent reporting it has made race relations worse (Pew Research Center 2010a). Taking the election of a black—black and white, in fact<sup>3</sup>—chief executive as an indication that racial tension and inequality had been successfully dispatched was a quantum leap, with such an interpretation implying that no further work needed to be done in the quest for equality. This embracing of the notion of a “postracial” United States in popular culture and mass media does not allow space for either acknowledgment of or critical reflection on racism as an ongoing phenomenon. Are interracial couples and their children now blessed to live in a postracial era where racial boundaries will simply vanish?

Rather than talking about whether a postracial society has been achieved, it might be more fruitful to have discussions about whether such an achievement is even *possible*. Vast material disparities remain between blacks and

whites. The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) reported that the median income of black workers is about \$600/week, approximately 80 percent of the median income of white workers. The US Bureau of Justice Statistics (2009) reported that black men are imprisoned at 6.6 times the rate of white men, with nearly one in twenty black men incarcerated. In addition, the unemployment rate for blacks is nearly twice that of whites across demographic categories (*New York Times*, Nov. 9, 2009). The catastrophe that was, and is, Hurricane Katrina is yet another reminder that skin color and poverty remain markers of not only who can thrive but who can survive (Agathangelou 2010). Racial issues are very much still with us.

The fact of President Obama does not allow us to rewrite history and remove race as a powerful organizing principle in US society or a significant factor in the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns. On the contrary, voting results in battleground states broke down clearly along racial lines. For example, in the 2008 South Carolina primary, Obama won 78 percent of the black vote, but only 24 percent of the white vote (National Public Radio, Jan. 28, 2008). In 2012 Obama's reelection was attributed to his capturing 61–66 percent of the youth vote in the crucial battleground states Ohio, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Virginia despite failing to win a majority of voters thirty years and older in these crucial states. Young adults under thirty are the most racially diverse age group in the United States, with only 58 percent being white non-Hispanic, compared with 76 percent of voters thirty and older (Pew Research Center, 2012); race continues to play a role in voting patterns. And innuendos that Obama had been born in Kenya and was secretly a Muslim would never have gained currency if white persons had not experienced him as “other.” On the other hand, voting for Obama offered some whites, and many young people, an opportunity for a kind of redemption (Post 2009), by deflecting the implications for race privilege and entitlements through signaling their willingness to be a part of a movement toward a postracial United States. National Public Radio commentator Daniel Schorr (2008) stated, “The post-racial era, as embodied by Obama, is the era where civil rights veterans of the past century are consigned to history and Americans begin to make race-free judgments on who should lead them.” That is, by voting for

the first black president, one could create evidence of an instance of “race-free judgment,” and by broadcasting how one voted, one could affirm one’s racial *innocence*, in Shelby Steele’s use of the term.

The more pundits declare the arrival of a postracial society, the clearer it becomes that we are not there yet. Following President Obama’s State of the Union address in January 2010, political commentator Chris Matthews quipped that he “forgot he was black.” Such an observation served to highlight Matthews’s view of blacks, with Obama being seen as the exception to the rule in that he was not *really* black, and also reminded viewers of how obsessed the media had been with candidate Obama’s race. Asked to explain his comment the following day, Matthews stated that he had meant it as a compliment to President Obama for rendering race a “nonissue.” He went on to assert that Obama is “postracial,” rendering racial debate no longer relevant. Obama’s election, just like the rise in interracial couples, continues to be used as a trope by some to support color-blind discourse. And while Chris Matthews insisted he meant well, and had not intended to be offensive, others wasted no time fanning the flames of racist political discourse following Obama’s election.

The perception of Obama’s “otherness” has actually intensified since his first election (*New York Times*, Aug. 19, 2010), partially due to an aggressive misinformation campaign. The Pew Research Center (2010b) conducted a poll that found that 18 percent of Americans now believe Obama is Muslim, up from 11 percent after his inauguration, and 27 percent Americans doubted he was born in the United States and therefore doubted the legitimacy of his election. And white hostility and resentment toward President Obama and blacks continue to be on display at opposition conventions and protests. A popular sign seen at a Tea Party event in 2010 featured the president’s face with the caption: “The Zoo Has an African Lion and the White House Has a Lyin’ African!” Other signs seen in the years since Obama’s election include “Obama’s Plan: White Slavery” and posters portraying the president as Hitler, an African “witch doctor,” and the arch-villain the Joker from the Batman comics and films. A Tea Party event held in Denver on April 15, 2009, featured an explicitly racist poster: a picture of a monkey with the words “Obamanomics: Monkey See, Monkey Spend” (see Susurro 2010). In fact, the number of

racially offensive images of President Obama and his wife proliferated so rapidly that Google began running an apology with certain image-search results (Blow 2009).

And the First Couple is not the only target of overtly racist images and posters. Since Obama's election, blatantly anti-black attitudes and beliefs have resurfaced and become more explicit, accompanied by an increase in anti-black hate crimes (Blow 2009). As one black colleague commented, "At least you know exactly where you stand." Interracial couples know where they stand, too. In October 2009, Keith Bardwell, a Louisiana justice of the peace, refused to issue a marriage license to an interracial couple out of concern for any children that the couple might have. Bardwell commented, "I'm not a racist. I just don't believe in mixing the races that way" (*New York Times*, Oct. 17, 2009). So, where does discourse around race, and interracial couples, stand?

In 2010 I attended a conference on culture that brought together a racially diverse group of 280 helping professionals who voiced their strong commitment to social change through therapy and activism. The theme of the conference was "difficult dialogues," and race, gender, class, and sexual orientation were discussed over two days with varying degrees of intensity. Even though interracial unions remain a relatively small percentage of all marriages, the most intense exchanges revolved around the topic of interracial relationships. Helping professionals—who in this instance committed money and time to attending sessions designed to raise their awareness and sensitivity to issues of race, gender, and culture in their practices—are people, too, and as such they carry very strong feelings about interracial couples. Discomfort, anxiety, and personal pain were palpable as persons shared their views and experiences. The consequences of marrying across racial borders, themes of betrayal, and feelings of anger, frustration and bitterness were aired. Some did not approve of their children's choice of a mate across racial borders. For example, a black male therapist, addressing all attendees, flatly stated that he had told his children to "not even think about" bringing home "that mess" (i.e., white people). The choice of words and the intense feelings underpinning these conversations demonstrate just how far society is from being "postracial."

Interracial relationships are a lightning rod, a touchstone eliciting strong reactions from people from all walks of life and personal history, including couple and family therapists, social workers, and counselors committed to sociopolitical change. Crossing racial borders to form an interracial relationship is a very public phenomenon that still runs risks, whereas how one votes is a very private affair between a person and a machine. No one knows how you voted unless you choose to tell them, but being married to a person of a different race, and moving through public space with that person, is a status that elicits a variety of reactions, and carries social and political implications and consequences for both partners. Interracial couples live on racial borderlines; their narratives of partners' experiences as individuals and as a couple, with friends, family, and the larger communities of which they are a part, speak to the status of race relations and how society reacts and responds to interracial relationships (Fryer 2007; Qian and Lichter 2007).

Through interview data and analysis, this book provides an indication of the degree to which interracial couples are viewed by their communities and society as viable and acceptable, and also the degree to which partners in these relationships view and treat one another. By examining interracial couples' narratives, we are afforded an opportunity to see not only how partners perceive their lives together, but how these relationships undergo processes of *racialization*, that is, how interracial relationships are given meaning within the context of US society (Childs 2005:6; Martinot 2002, 2010; Sexton 2002).

## THE POLITICS OF VOICE: A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Here at the onset of this study, I concede the inadequacy of the terms available to discuss issues of "race" (e.g., "interracial" or "biracial"). These terms tend to "other" people and conceal the diversity *among* persons to whom these labels are applied. I acknowledge the problematic aspects of these terms—their use is provisional and subject to continued critique. To challenge the meanings and influence of terms such as "race" and "interracial," the very terms must sometimes be employed (Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powell 1995). In addition, I agree with Luke (1994) that issues of racism, racial iden-



tity, and difference are epistemological and political issues that are correctly claimed to belong to those who embody and live those differences. But I also concur with Luke's thesis that the politics of silencing some and authorizing others to speak carries debilitating consequences:

When I say I cannot speak or criticize because of my color ("I am white—I cannot speak about race") or sex ("I am male—I cannot speak about women"), that position limits political engagement on two levels. First, it legitimates a refusal to examine why history has written scripts that used to silence women and persons of color and now silences those who used to speak for (and against) them. Second, given that historical legacy, those who are now silenced are prevented from repositioning themselves politically and epistemologically so that they can engage in the work of political transformation *without* reinstating themselves as authors of such transformations.

(1994:51)

As a couple and family therapist, researcher, and spouse in an interracial and intercultural marriage, I conducted my interviews and recorded my findings with an awareness of the sociopolitical implications of both the content and the process of that writing, how my social location might have impacted the research process, and how the study would be subsequently communicated. While an author's social location undoubtedly influences his projects, framing how he thinks and what he writes, it does not invalidate his position to study and to speak on controversial topics such as interracial relationships.

In the process of searching for participants for this study and presenting preliminary findings at national conferences, I encountered a range of reactions to my research. Some colleagues praised my pursuit of a marginalized topic and said they eagerly anticipated my findings. Others voiced concerns that my study would merely perpetuate societal prejudice against and pathologization of interracial couples. For example, one colleague stated that using a sample of black and white couples might reinforce the rigid dichotomy between these two groups and reduce the overall diversity of interracial couples to this most sensationalized of combinations. When I asked a black colleague if he could ask fellow faculty if they knew of any interracial couples who might

be willing to be interviewed for this study, he later reported that a black colleague had replied, “Why would I know any?” These interactions demonstrate the emotionally and sociopolitically charged nature of this topic and communicated to me early in the process the need for a sensitive and self-reflexive approach to conducting the research and reporting the findings.

In addition to the reasons stated earlier, I focused mainly on black and white couples because a more diverse sample of racial combinations would have resulted in findings too diffuse for practical application. It is my hope that a book grounded in the participants’ insights and experiences will work to dispel common myths and preconceptions about these couples and open a space for highlighting the unique strengths and struggles of this growing population. My intent is an exploration of how interracial couples perceive their lives and experiences and the presentation and analysis of these data in a way that creates and sustains sensitive and constructive approaches to working with these couples.

## THE COUPLES, THE INTERVIEWS, AND ANALYSIS

Regarding research methods, social scientists have seldom relied upon those actually experiencing interracial relationships as an entry point into such relationships. A descriptive or qualitative approach to research provides the opportunity for the subjects of a study to actively participate in the development of research through their insights, and their participation may help to challenge some misconceptions about interracial couples. Moving beyond observable, surface behavior, inductive researchers analyze both inner and outer perspectives on social relations. An in-depth understanding of participants’ “definition of the situation” is achieved by actively participating in the subjects’ lives, thereby gaining insights about the empirical social world in question (Thomas 2002). Less concerned with sheer numbers of subjects, inductive research seeks to access the richness and detail of subjects’ narratives and ways of making meaning. Statistician and quantitative researcher Cronbach noted, “Descriptions encourage us to think constructively about

results. . . . There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our hypotheses, and our observations should be open to them” (cited in Rist 1977:45).

My sample comprised twenty black–white married couples who (1) had been married for a minimum of a year, and (2) had at least one child together. The sample came from New York state (Syracuse and surrounding smaller towns, Rochester, and New York City), small towns in Ohio, specifically in the southwestern (Oxford and Hamilton) and northern (Lorain, Elyria, and Parma) areas of the state, and the Houston, Texas, metropolitan area. The sample was acquired by asking friends and colleagues from different personal and professional contexts in these respective communities if they knew any interracial couples who met the criteria. Because the contact persons did not know one another, and because the interracial couples also did not know one another, the potential problem of sample homogeneity was averted. The sample was diverse in regard to spouses’ family-of-origin background, social class, level of education, and income. Participants ranged in age from twenty-three to fifty-seven years, and couples had been married from three to thirty-one years, with a mean duration of 10.9 years.

As a majority of black–white married couples consist of black male–white female spouses (Batson, Qian, and Lichter 2006) and black female–white male dyads account for approximately 26 percent of black–white married couples (Lichter and Qian 2004), the sample consisted of fourteen black male–white female<sup>4</sup> couples, and six black female–white male couples. Please see appendix A for a summary of information about the research participants.

I collected the data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the partners as individuals and then together as a couple for a total of fifty-nine interviews. Each interview lasted 1.5–2.5 hours. I prepared specific queries in advance and also kept the interview flexible to allow for the inclusion of material deemed important or meaningful by the participants. First, I interviewed the spouses separately in order to solicit thoughts and feelings that might not have been shared in their partners’ presence. Then, immediately prior to conducting the couple interviews, I asked each partner individually to share additional thoughts or perceptions that had occurred to him/her

since completion of the individual interviews. Individual and couple interviews were audiotaped with permission, and I wrote field notes following the interviews to capture important themes, ideas, and observations.

The individual interviews utilized open-ended questions that focused on the beliefs and attitudes of the subjects' family of origin, their own dating history, and the reactions of friends, family, and the society in general to their relationship. Couple interviews utilized open-ended questions about major milestones of their current relationship, experiences negotiating differences, and their reactions to the interviews themselves. Additional follow-up interviews ( $N=9$ ) were conducted several years after the initial interviews to check in with the couples for further thoughts and perspectives about their relationship and to ascertain their subsequent marital status.

Following transcription of the interviews, the data were analyzed using the "grounded theory approach" (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Corbin and Strauss 2007) aided by HyperResearch, a software program (ResearchWare 2004). The first stage of inductive analysis method involved the categorization and sorting of descriptive data into codes that separate, compile, and organize descriptive data (Charmaz 2006). HyperResearch permitted me to assign multiple codes to the same data, and then store and retrieve coded data. Coding categories were retrieved and combined over a set of interviews through data reports organized through the use of descriptors and/or the selection of multiple codes. I used a method of constant comparison, in which the interview transcripts were compared and contrasted to identify recurring words, phrases, and themes in the descriptive data. The partners' individual perspectives were analyzed first individually. Then within-couple analyses were conducted, with the two partners' perspectives in each couple compared for similarities and differences. The individual and within-couple analyses were linked to cultural themes and practices (Gilgun 1995), and I examined how particular themes emerged depending on participants' social locations. Comparisons were also done across couples, both as individual partners and as dyadic units. Data analysis was also facilitated by the use of an ecosystemic theoretical framework (Bateson 1979; Falicov 1995; Keeney 1982). Ecosystemic theory holds that any person's power and privilege relative to others at any systemic level is linked to multiple locations within eco-

systems of race, gender, culture, social class, ability, religion, education, and age, to name a few. Viewing interracial relationships across various systemic levels and sociohistorical contexts, and seeing interracial couples' experiences as being structured via a system of interlocking race, class, and gender oppression (Collins 2000), expands the focus of one's analysis, making visible the intersection and interdependence of these ecosystems.

It should be noted that descriptive data gathered from fifty-nine structured interviews with forty people partnered in black–white relationships do not permit a generalization of the findings to the entire population of interracial couples. While this project does not claim generalizability in the quantitative methods sense (e.g., a representative sample survey), it is *analytically generalizable* (Becker 1990), or *transferable*. Rather than a generalization to a defined population that has been randomly sampled, analytic generalizability in the qualitative research tradition features generalization to a *theory* of the phenomenon being studied, a theory that can have broader applicability than the specific cases studied. For example, in this project, the life experiences, perceptions, negotiation processes, and strategic responses of twenty black–white couples capture important aspects of other relationships where partners come from diverse backgrounds (nationality, religion, ethnicity, etc.), such as intercultural couples (Killian 2008) as well as interracial couples featuring other racial combinations. In other words, the ideas, processes, and theory emerging from the life narratives of the interracial couples interviewed do apply to more people and groups than just the sample studied here, and readers are likely to recognize and resonate with the lived experiences, situations, relational processes, and theorizations presented in the pages of this book.

Reaffirming the importance of social and historical contexts, chapter 1 features a discussion of how racialized bodies become borders, a presentation of a historical overview of interracial relations, and a summary presentation of “interracial mate-selection theories,” some quite pathologizing and inflammatory.

*One*

## RACIALIZED BODIES AND BORDERS IN THE UNITED STATES

**A** NECDOTAL—AND STATISTICAL—EVIDENCE ABOUNDS to confirm that some people carry a very negative bias toward those who are different from them in race, ethnicity, or religion, and that some people are still vehemently opposed to interracial relationships. In 2000 Alabama repealed a ban on interracial marriage, the last state to do so. While the repeal of such a ban certainly represents progress, the distressing backstory to this event is that 41 percent of Alabamans voted *against* lifting the ban. In December 2004, the Federal Bureau of Investigation launched an investigation into a hate mail campaign against prominent black men married to white women (National Public Radio, Dec. 30, 2005). In 2009, the FBI issued a press release stating that anti-black hate crimes had risen 8 percent from 2006, whereas the combined total of hate crimes against all other races in the same period declined by 19 percent (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2009). Cross-burning incidents continue across the country, and since President Obama's election, the numbers of hate groups (i.e., nativists, Neo-Nazis, etc.) and militias have exploded to record levels (Southern Poverty Law Center 2010, 2012). And in late 2009, a white justice of the peace in Louisiana refused to issue a marriage license to a black and white couple out of concern for any children they might have. Mr. Bardwell said, "I think those children suffer, and I won't help put them through it" (*New York Times*, Oct. 17, 2009). What do we make of this?