

Interracial Marriage and Black Women's Racial Identity: Polyrhythmic Voices and Realities in Adult Education

Joyce McNickles
Westfield State College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc>

 Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

Recommended Citation

McNickles, Joyce (2010). "Interracial Marriage and Black Women's Racial Identity: Polyrhythmic Voices and Realities in Adult Education," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2010/papers/51>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Interracial Marriage and Black Women's Racial Identity: Polyrhythmic Voices and Realities in Adult Education

Joyce McNickles, Westfield State College, USA

Abstract: *This research study explored how Black women who are married to White men understood, experienced, and described their Black identity. Applications of womanism, Black women's epistemology, racial identity theory, and constructivist grounded theory revealed Exogamous Black Identity as a dimension of racial identity.*

Introduction

Adult educators have drawn upon racial identity development theory and Black identity models as frameworks for understanding the experiences that African American women bring to the learning environment. However, existing models have not examined Black identity as it is experienced by Black women who are married to White men. Given the historical context of White men's sexual abuse and exploitation of Black women in the United States, women who marry White men undoubtedly have unique ways of experiencing racial identity, racial group membership, and racism. Marriage between Black women and White men has increased at a faster rate than it has between Black men and White women, despite the latter remaining the numerical majority. As such, much of the literature on Black identity when discussed within the context of interracially married Blacks has highlighted Black men's experiences.

Research Purpose

The purpose of the study was twofold: (1) to identify how Black women who are married to White men understand, experience, and describe their Black identities; and (2) to generate a theory that identifies the learning process by which they came to describe and understand their Black identities.

Questions Guiding Research

The study was guided by two questions: 1) How do Black women married to White men experience and describe their Black identity? 2) Are there previous life experiences with race and gender that may explain how Black women married to White men experience and describe their Black identity?

Conceptual Frameworks

Womanism and Black Women's Epistemology

Womanism, Black women's epistemology, and racial identity theory provided the conceptual frameworks. Sheard (1994) introduced womanism and Black women's epistemology to adult education as a way of understanding the marginalization and intersecting realities of Black women's lived experiences. Its premise is that the multiple oppressions of racism, sexism,

and classism have created a polyrhythmic reality for Black women. That is, the identities of race, gender, and economic class are experienced simultaneously.

Black women's epistemology posits that oppression has forced Black women to generate their own knowledge and meaning making system. The standards used to assess and validate knowledge claims rest on four assumptions: knowledge is gained from lived experience; dialogue is used to assess knowledge claims; an ethic of caring, which includes emphasizing the uniqueness of individuals and personal expression, the appropriateness of emotions when engaged in dialogue, and empathetic understanding; an ethic of personal accountability, which means that if one claims to have knowledge it must be communicated in a way that displays a personal interest (Collins, 2000).

Racial Identity Theory

Racial identity is often perceived as an individual's racial category, whether one is Black, White, Asian, and so on. This research study relied on Helms's (1990) definition that racial identity is "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with the particular racial group" (p. 3). According to Helms, racial identity encompasses personal identity, reference group orientation, and ascribed identity. Personal identity describes the attitudes about oneself or personality characteristics. Reference group orientation is the degree to which a person uses a particular racial group to guide feelings, thoughts, and behaviors and is evidenced by the individual's choices of organizational memberships and espoused values. Ascribed identity relates to the person's conscious choice of racial group affiliation. Each component of racial identity can act independently of the other.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study that applied the techniques of constructivist grounded theory. Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology that generates theory derived from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Constructivist grounded theory considers the participant's location within a social structure marked by hierarchies of power based on gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and other aspects of difference (Charmaz, 2006).

Ten women were interviewed and identified through the researcher's personal contacts and referrals from colleagues and friends. Selection criteria were that the participants self-identify as a woman of African heritage, which includes any ethnicity within the African Diaspora; were currently married to a man who self-identified as White or of European heritage; and had been married at least three years. The ages of the women ranged from 31 to 72 years old, and their marriages were between 6 and 21 years in length. The geographical representation included the Northeast, South, and Midwest regions of the United States.

Thematic Findings

Several themes emerged from the research: 1) the women experienced race and gender simultaneously before and after marriage 2) historical and social factors influenced how they experienced Black identity before and after marriage 3) they contradicted socially conventional constructs of Black identity and Black female identity 4) they rejected the assertion from others that having a White husband was a contradiction to possessing a strong Black identity 5) they defined Black identity based on their own personal understanding and life experiences 6) each

had defining experiences before marriage when she was the only female, only Black person, or only Black woman.

Experiencing Race and Gender Simultaneously

Whether in a workplace or social setting, they could not separate being Black from being a woman. One participant noted:

A bunch of women who were on this prestigious [museum] fellowship were sitting in the room and they were bitching about the fact that no women had been selected. I was going with them for a little bit, sitting there listening. Then I looked around the room, and I was just like, this is a group of like eight White women. I'm only the third Black person to get this. I'm sitting here and they're bitching about this lack of representation. I shifted in that moment from being a woman to a Black person and to a Black woman pretty quickly.

After marriage, participants continued to experience race and gender simultaneously. One woman commented:

I kind of came to that place where I could not manage these two things, being a woman and being with a White man and then being Black. I think somewhere along the line they integrated. I became simply a Black woman, not a woman in a relationship with a White man. There were times early on where I felt that I had to try to be Black, to prove that being with him wasn't making me any different.

Another woman said:

I think that I am a Black female, so I am. I feel that they [Black and female] are one. I've integrated them in that way so it doesn't matter where I am or who I'm with or, , what I'm doing, I know that I am a Black woman. I am a woman and Black. In other circumstances it affects more that I am Black, but I am still Black woman.

Social and Historical Events

When asked to describe what being Black meant to them as a child, adolescent, or young adult, several linked it to historical events and influential Black icons. Recollections of the March on Washington, Elijah Muhammad, the Black Panther movement, attending segregated schools, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, were all woven into their stories. One participant spoke of a Black history class she signed up for in high school. It was the 1970s, and there were no Black teachers at her school. She described the outrage when she discovered that a White woman was teaching the course:

We questioned her qualifications. How was she going to teach us about us? How was she going to teach us about Black history? I'll never forget it.

Another woman who attended high school in the 1970s noted:

I had been taking a lot of stuff from the Black Panthers and they were opening my eyes to what, you know, not so much of what Black is—it's who you are. It's the way you live.

Contradicting Conventional Constructs of Black Identity and Black Female Identity

Participants understood that they contradicted conventional social constructs of Black identity and Black female identity. For some, it was a manner of speaking and enunciating that others perceived as a contradiction to authentic Blackness. One woman who was born in New York City and attended kindergarten there moved to Utah with her family when she was six years old. Upon returning to New York at age 11, she found that her acquired accent coded her as non-Black among her peers.

I got this a lot; well, you speak White . . . I had no understanding of what that meant. I was like what does that mean. They said you just sound White; you speak like you're White. I'm thinking to myself as an 11-year-old, what does that mean? What is Black speak and what is White speak? I didn't understand.

For one participant, the contradictions were her rough-and-tumble tomboy behavior as a teenager, her passionate interest in math and science, and her decision to pursue a career as a biochemist with the federal government in the 1960s when it was unheard for women—and Black women in particular—to do so. She noted:

I didn't have very many female friends because of that [being a chemistry major], and the males were sort of afraid of me. I didn't have any real attachments. I think I went through my whole freshman year and sophomore year before I had a boyfriend or anything. They would talk to me, but not like for dating or anything like that.

Another woman noted how she contradicted social constructs:

My family's always thought I was smart because I liked different things. I loved art. I was going to the opera at 10 and 11. You know, it was like, where the hell did she come from?

After marriage participants were aware of contradicting conventional constructs of Black womanhood because they did not have a Black husband but rather a White one. One woman commented:

I definitely feel when people see my husband they think oh, she's not a real Black girl...because I couldn't really be a real Black girl if I was married to a White man.

No Contradiction but a Polyrhythmic Reality

While others viewed a Black woman marrying a White man as a contradiction to holding a normal or healthy Black identity, the women did not. They confronted assumptions from both Blacks and Whites that they must have rejected Black identity because they were married to White men. This assumption is rooted in a limited and dichotomous view of racial identity which presupposes that the essence of Black identity is to function in opposition to White identity. Furthermore, if marriage is perceived as the social union of two individuals then it would be difficult for the Black identities of the women to be in opposition to the White identities of their husbands. The women understood their Black identities differently. They saw and experienced Black identity from multiple social locations and lived it in a polyrhythmic manner.

One participant noted:

People think because I married outside my race that I lost my Black identity; they don't know me. Just because I'm married to a White man, doesn't mean I don't have my

opinions on this [racism]. I'm still a Black woman. I'm a Black woman first. That's just what I am.

Another said:

I felt that other people have the problem. My husband can be sitting right there and I will say stuff that you don't say in front of White people . . . I say things at Black gatherings as if I were not married to a White man. I would say the same thing at the White [gatherings]. They [other Blacks] look at me kind of funny like *how can you say that when you're married to a White man?* How could you make statements like that?

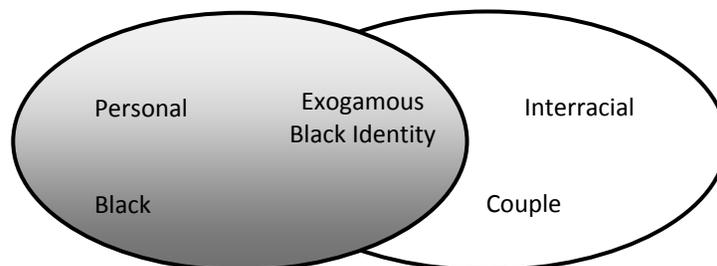
Discussion of Exogamous Black Identity

Apparent in all the women's narratives was that each had reflected on previous experiences that occurred before their marriage to make meaning of their Black identity after marriage. Rejecting depictions of Black identity based on rigid or dichotomous borders, the participants described their racial identities in ways that were expansive, fluid, and individualistic.

The grounded theory emerging from the study was that the women experienced a polyrhythmic reality which resulted in the intersection of their Black identity and interracial couple identity. This led to the activation of a new social identity, *Exogamous Black Identity* (McNickles, 2009).

Exogamy, a term that emerges from sociological and anthropological literature, refers to the act of marrying outside one's social group (Blau et al., 1984). All individuals develop a couple identity when they marry, which then becomes part of the self-concept (Badr, Acitelli, & Carmack Taylor, 2007). As indicated in Figure 1, Exogamous Black Identity describes the reality of simultaneously occupying two separate but interrelated social identities: an individual Black identity and interracial couple identity.

Figure 1. Exogamous Black Identity.



The racial aspect of their couple identities affected how others perceived the women. Consequently, couple identity became increasingly significant to the women because they observed and reflected on its ability to impact the social interactions they had with Blacks and Whites. Having White husbands added a degree of racial marginalization for these women that Blacks in same-race marriages did not experience.

Implications

Exogamous Black Identity is a timely response to Sheared's (1999) call that adult educators examine and understand the polyrhythmic realities learners bring to the learning environment. The more adult educators know about the multiple ways black identity is

experienced, the better prepared they will be to provide non-oppressive, inclusive learning environments. As adult learners, Black women bring their social identities and corresponding experiences to the learning environment.

Much of the prior literature on Black identity has been derived from research conducted with young college students. The assumption has been that as a developmental learning process Black identity does not extend much beyond late adolescence and young adulthood. Exogamous Black Identity expands the literature of multicultural adult development theory by increasing the theoretical representations of Black women's identity. Exogamous Black Identity should be seen as an expression of identity, unique to the experiences of Black women who are married to White men.

References

- Badr, H., Acitelli, L. K., & Carmack Taylor, C. L. (2007). Does couple identity mediate the stress experienced by caregiving spouses? *Psychology and Health, 22*(2), 211-229.
- Blau, P. M., Beeker, C., & Fitzpatrick, K. M. (1984). Intersecting social affiliations and intermarriage. *Social Forces, 62*(3), 585-606.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: a practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (Rev. 10th anniversary ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory; strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine
- Helms, J. E. (1990). *Black and white racial identity: theory, research, and practice*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- McNickles, J. D. (2009). *Interracial marriage and Black women's racial Identity: Polyhythmic voices and realities*. Unpublished Ed.D, National-Louis University, Chicago, IL.
- Sheared, V. (1994). Giving Voice: An inclusive model of instruction--A womanist perspective. In E. Hayes & S. A. J. Colin III (Eds.), *Confronting racism and sexism in adult education. New directions for adult and continuing education* (Vol. 61, pp. 27-37): San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sheared, V. (1999). Giving Voice: Inclusion of African American students' polyhythmic realities in adult basic education. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 1999*(82), 33-48.