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**“More Trouble than the Good Lord Ever Intended”:
Representations of Interracial Marriage in U.S. News-Oriented Magazines**

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Abstract

This study critically examines, through discourse analysis, news stories regarding Black/White interracial marriage in the broad-reach magazines *Newsweek* and *Time* and in the Black-targeted magazines *Ebony* and *JET*. Findings showed that in their attempts to dissect the reasons for the existence and increase of interracial marriages, stories primarily conveyed negative undertones. Under the framework of critical race theory, the rejection of intimate Black/White relationships can be viewed as an indicator of subtle racism.

Keywords: Blacks, critical race theory, interracial marriage, magazines, Whites

Introduction

Nowhere in our lives, perhaps, is race trickier than when it comes to affairs of the heart, bedroom, and joint savings accounts. It is one thing to craft public policy or organize the masses—but it’s quite another to get race issues sorted out in our love lives, a place that is already filled with vulnerabilities and expectations.¹

— Daisy Hernandez, 2006

Throughout United States history, key periods of change have had significant impact on the nation’s social structure and human relations, none more so than those dealing with race and race relations. With “the corridors of history ... lined with countless instances of racial injustice,”² racial tensions, particularly those between Blacks and Whites, visibly peaked during the 1960s and calls for change resounded. To the federal government, it became painfully obvious that the racial inequities that existed in the U.S. could no longer be

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ignored. As a result, various laws were enacted prohibiting overt forms of racism, defined as “intolerance or hatred of another race.”³ Court cases were also decided favoring the eradication of outdated race-related legislation, including relationships between two people of different races.⁴

Among the significant cases to be decided was *Loving v. Virginia*, a case that was brought forth by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of Mildred and Richard Loving, an interracial couple, who had been banned from living together in their home state of Virginia due to the state’s anti-miscegenation law.⁵ In its 1967 decision regarding this case, the Supreme Court declared the unconstitutionality of Virginia’s anti-miscegenation law and effectively led the way to ending all miscegenation laws. Since that landmark case, the U.S. has witnessed a steady rise in interracial marriages.

A recent Pew Research Center report showed that more than 15 percent of all new marriages in the U.S. in 2010 were between spouses of a different race or ethnicity from one another, more than double the 6.7 percent figure from 1980.⁶ Moreover, it showed that 43 percent of Americans say that more people of different races marrying each other “has been a change for the better in society,” with only 11 percent saying it “has been a change for the worse.”⁷ The same report also revealed, however, that although there has been an overall increase in mixed marriages and a rise in the acceptance of such marriages, the number of marriages between Black and White individuals pales in comparison to other types of interracial marriages. Unions between Black and White individuals are the lowest percentage of intermarriage, with the latest figure at 11.9 percent.⁸ By comparison, marriages between Whites and Hispanics are 43.4 percent.⁹ These findings have been reported in other studies.¹⁰

Communication scholar Victoria Orrego Dunleavy argues that the reason for this disparity is that “Black/White interracial marriages, in particular, engender problems associated with racist attitudes and perceived relational inappropriateness.”¹¹ If individuals perceive a lack of support for Black/White matrimonial unions, they might be dissuaded from entering into such unions. Given the influence of perception, it is critical to closely examine which social institutions or components in U.S. society are reflecting and/or even sustaining the perceived “inappropriateness” of marriage between Black and White individuals.

Researchers have argued that mass media are major conduits of messages regarding interracial relationships.¹² The studies conducted under this argument have tended, however, to rely on anecdotal observations or analyses of entertainment media. While these studies have been valuable, still lacking is research that investigates other forms of mass media content, such as news media coverage. This study hopes to contribute to this area by examining how marriages between Blacks and Whites have been represented in major U.S. mainstream magazines over approximately a 50-year period, beginning in the 1960s. To do so, a discourse analysis of news stories appearing in the broad-reach magazines of *Newsweek*

and *Time* and in the African-American targeted magazines of *Ebony* and *JET* was conducted. Since interracial relationships are defined in terms of race, critical race theory, centrally focused on the inherent Black/White binary in American society, was used as a framework to guide this study.

Critical Race Theory and Perceptions of Interracial Marriage

In this study, race is conceptualized as a social construction. Following the works of others,¹³ race is not viewed as natural or as an essence, but rather as a construct that exists for purposes of creating social hierarchies. Race serves as a way to categorize individuals based on phenotypic markers, such as skin color or hair texture, where particular traits are privileged more than others. The meanings assigned to race and their resulting social stratifications are shaped by the political, social, and historical contexts in which they exist. As defined by sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.”¹⁴

With race being a social construction designed to compartmentalize individuals and create social hierarchies, intimate relations between races thus becomes a threat to the status quo. In the U.S., there has been an aversion toward interracial relationships, especially between Black and White individuals. Black/White intimate relationships first occurred under the umbrella of slavery and most were nonconsensual. Bell argues that slavery set the precedent for sacrificing Black rights in order to maintain the status quo.¹⁵ The historical backdrop and the breaking of taboos that Black/White intimate relations represent have led to the erection of barriers designed to prevent the widespread acceptance of these relationships.¹⁶

These barriers that exist can be understood within the framework of critical race theory (CRT). CRT takes a social constructivist viewpoint of race. Two of the theory’s main assertions are that racism is a common, everyday lived experience for people of color and that individuals and their specific roles in society are socially constructed based on a system of power relations that favors Whites.¹⁷ It is a system designed to advance the interests of Whites over other racial groups. The system is presented as “common sense,” so that only transparent forms of discrimination can be addressed through laws and policies.¹⁸ CRT claims that, although race-based laws privileging Whites have been eradicated, opportunities to racially discriminate thrive, and through media’s discursive practices, continue to privilege White superiority.

Under critical race theory, the rejection of relationships between Blacks and Whites can be viewed as indicators of subtle racism and the underlying efforts at maintaining race-related subordination. It can be recognized as institutionalized racism that is often not easily detectable, but that upon closer examination can be seen to reveal the inability of Whites to see Blacks as emotional equals—as human beings capable of experiencing intimacy and

expressing human feelings.¹⁹ CRT, then, serves as a powerful framework through which to understand the effects of race on a daily basis.

One of the fundamental assertions of critical race theory is that cultural narratives sustain and justify subtle and insidious forms of racism. A primary reason for this is because most cultural narratives are told by Whites; counter-narratives told by non-White voices are missing. Mainstream mass media can be viewed as cultural narratives that are playing critical roles in maintaining myths and taboos associated with intimate relations between Blacks and Whites.

Mass Media Depictions of Interracial Couples

Studies examining media representations of interracial couples have tended to focus on the images found in films or television programs.²⁰ One of the main conclusions reached in these studies is that interracial relationships either tend to be made invisible in entertainment media or, if presented, tend to be shown as problematic and unnatural. Black/White relationships, in particular, are portrayed as dysfunctional and even dangerous.²¹

Sociologist Erica Chito Childs found in her study of interracial couples appearing on primetime television that marriages between such couples tend to be rare, and even fewer show couples raising biracial children. As she pointed out, although interracial pairings try to develop on these programs, they never materialize and are often delegated to minor roles as part of side story lines.²² The first Black/White intimate kiss to take place on television was in an episode of the science fiction television series *Star Trek*.²³ The kiss was a tangential part of a larger story and took place between the show's main character Captain Kirk (played by White actor William Shatner) and Kirk's female crewmember Lt. Uhuru (played by Black actress Nichelle Nichols). Kirk and Uhuru were never a couple, and such a kiss was never again repeated in that long-running series.

One of the earliest mixed race couples to appear on television was Tom (White) and Helen (Black) Willis on the popular sitcom *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985). Although the inclusion of the mixed race couple, albeit in secondary roles, can be thought of as an advancement in television scripting, both Tom and Helen were often ridiculed by their Black neighbor, George Jefferson, due to their differing race.²⁴ George, who did not approve of race mixing and who feared his son might marry Tom and Helen's biracial daughter, often referred to the couple's daughter using the derogatory slang term "zebra."

The Jeffersons did last a decade, but normally shows highlighting interracial couples are often short-lived and are canceled soon after premiering. In 1990, the sitcom *True Colors* centered on a Black/White interracial couple and their blended family. Through humor, the show highlighted the challenges the couple faced due to their interracial mixing, but the series was canceled after only two seasons. Premiering in 2004, *Kevin Hill*, which featured a Black male dating several White women, was met with rave reviews, but it too was soon canceled, after only one season.²⁵

More recently, shows such as *Happy Endings* (2011-2013) and *Parenthood* (2010-present) have Black/White characters appearing as couples, but the realistic portrayals of these couples have been questioned. As media critic Eric Deggans observes, "Race difference is an elephant in the room, instead of a window into a new experience. It's time for network TV to fully tap the real dramatic potential of these couples, and let them talk about the issues we're already tackling in the real world."²⁶

Serious portrayals of interracial marriage have been primarily relegated to non-commercial television. PBS ran a five-part series in 1999 titled *An American Love Story*, that followed a Black/White couple's 30-year struggle against racial prejudice.²⁷ PBS's *Frontline* has also presented documentaries exploring the social obstacles that have faced Black/White couples, including *Secret Daughter*, which delved into the complicated relationship between a biracial daughter and the mother who had abandoned her at an early age, and *Claiming Place: Biracial American Portraits*, which examined the experiences of young biracial Americans.²⁸ Although these programs have been illuminating and powerful, the reach of these programs has been limited due to its distribution venue.

In terms of film, in her comparative analysis of same-race relationships and interracial relationships in films, sociologist Angie Beeman found that relationships between Whites-only couples were depicted as more successful than relationships between other races.²⁹ By specifically performing a content analysis of 40 U.S. films, she found that 100 percent of Whites-only couples were found to be successful, compared to just 38 percent of Black male-White female couples. The researcher further found that interracial couples were shown engaging less in intimate exchanges than same-race couples. Beeman concluded that the differences between Black/White interracial couples to Whites-only couples were significant and ultimately were shown to reinforce the historical taboo of interracial mixing.

Such representations in entertainment media are problematic since it can stigmatize interracial relationships and, according to social activist bell hooks, teach viewers "that curiosity about those who are racially different can be expressed as long as boundaries are not actually crossed and no genuine intimacy emerges."³⁰ If other media forms are also presenting problematic representations of interracial couples, the socially constructed derision toward interracial mixing is aided and White privileging is maintained. Thus, it becomes vital to examine the mass disseminated messages regarding interracial coupling that exist in other mass media, such as news-oriented magazines.

Since past research³¹ has indicated that Black/White interracial relationships tend to be portrayed as the most problematic, the focus of this study was on the representational themes associated with such relationships in mainstream news-oriented magazines. News-oriented magazines are said to serve as important cultural barometers, especially when measuring popular attitudes of society.³² Thus, with that notion as an underlying assumption, the questions that were considered in conducting the study were as follows:

1. What meanings regarding interracial relationships are conveyed in the news-oriented magazine articles?
2. What differences and similarities exist in the representational themes found between the broad-reach magazines (*Time* and *Newsweek*) and the Black-targeted magazines (*Ebony* and *JET*)?

This second question was driven by an interest in discovering if the themes in the broad reach magazines might be more critical of interracial marriages than the Black-targeted magazines. Researchers taking a critical perspective have argued that mainstream broad-reach news media in the U.S. tend to speak as one voice, often privileging Whites over any other racial group.³³

Method

Time, *Newsweek*, *Ebony*, and *JET* were selected for analysis. These magazines are considered prominent news-oriented magazines with relatively long publication histories that cover the time frame of interest for this study, 1960 to 2011. The decision was made to analyze articles appearing in news-oriented magazines beginning with those published in the 1960s, since important legislation pertaining to race relations was enacted during that decade.³⁴

Time is one of the world's largest-circulation weekly news magazines, with a readership of 25 million. Its audience snapshot shows that it has over 11 million unique U.S. readers.³⁵ *Newsweek*, "the world's preeminent conversation starter since its founding in 1933," merged with *The Daily Beast* in early 2011.³⁶ Although *Newsweek* ceased print publication in January 2013 and went solely digital, it reaches more than 13.2 million readers in the U.S. each week.

Ebony and *JET* are both published by Johnson Publishing. *Ebony* boasts itself as the premier "source for an authoritative perspective on the Black-American community."³⁷ Established in 1945, it reaches nearly 11 million unique readers monthly. *JET*, founded in November of 1951, is a weekly magazine with more than 7 million unique readers.³⁸ Some may question the decision to compare the content of *Ebony* and *JET* due to the fact that *Ebony* is a monthly magazine while *JET* is a weekly. However, both news-oriented magazines are said to have followed important Black issues since their inceptions³⁹ and are considered "established icons in African-American communities."⁴⁰ Other studies have also chosen to compare the content of these two magazines due to their profile and status.⁴¹

To identify articles regarding interracial relationships from *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Ebony*, and *JET*, the databases of H.W. Wilson's Reader's Guide Retrospective (1890-1982) and H.W. Wilson's Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature were accessed. Using the search term "interracial marriage," the databases together generated a total of 30 articles from *Time*, 35 from *Newsweek*, 52 from *Ebony*, and 71 from *JET*. Congruent with tenets of CRT that there

is a strong Black/White binary that exists in today's society, the focus of analysis was on Black/White couples in the U.S.; stories regarding other interracial pairings and international couples were discarded. That left for analysis a total of 12 articles from *Time*, 11 from *Newsweek*, 39 from *Ebony*, and 61 from *JET*.

To garner the major themes of the stories on Black/White interracial marriage, a discourse analysis of the text was conducted. One of the key assumptions of discourse analysis is that the choices of words or phrases used within a text are ideologically based.⁴² They embody the social context within which the text was generated. Thus, through an analysis of text, one is able to reveal the biases and discursive sources of power that exist. The text essentially becomes a major source of evidence for grounding claims about social structures, relations and processes.⁴³

For this study, following professor of linguistics and discourse Teun Van Dijk's method of discourse analysis,⁴⁴ the microstructural elements of each article were analyzed by examining the selection of words or phrases used in the story, what type of quotes were included, and any usage of metaphors, analogies, or hyperboles. Of particular interest was understanding how those elements were employed to conjure certain connotations of Black/White interracial marriage and the individuals involved in these intimate relationships. The articles were then examined at the macrostructural level by carefully analyzing the element-based patterns that existed. By doing so, central themes that were manifested across the stories were brought to light. The analysis process entailed several iterations of deep reading and note taking of the content.

In examining the articles that appeared in the varying time periods, an effort was made to first suspend knowledge regarding the time period during which the article was generated. Instead, a concerted focus was primarily placed on deciphering the meanings conveyed regarding mixed race marriage and couples. Following that initiative and after identifying thematic patterns that existed across the articles, any significant shifts in the patterns over the course of the chosen time period were considered. In doing so, the decade and context in which the articles appeared were then considered. Thus, while an initial effort was made to ensure that any knowledge or assumptions regarding the social and political context was not shaping the deep readings of the articles, during the second phase of the analysis, the thematic representations of mixed race couples were then placed within their context.

Before presenting findings from the analysis, in the following section, a synopsis is provided of some of the historically significant events that occurred during this study's chosen timeframe in order to provide some degree of historical context.

Historical Context: 1960s-2000s

The struggle for civil rights was a defining part of the 1960s. The first event that has been credited for igniting widespread civil rights protests took place in Greensboro, North

Carolina, where on January 31, 1960, four Black male college students decided to sit at a Whites-only lunch counter in a Woolworth's department store.⁴⁵ That small act of defiance inspired others to follow and the sit-in movement spread to other parts of the south.⁴⁶ In 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in his "Birmingham Manifesto," called for the desegregation of all lunch counters, restrooms, department stores, and drinking fountains in Birmingham, Alabama.⁴⁷ Following repeated protests by Dr. King and his supporters, within a few months of the manifesto, the demanded integration was put into effect in Birmingham. At the national level, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed outlawing discrimination and segregation based on race/ethnicity and gender in areas including employment and public accommodations.⁴⁸

A militant Black revolutionary group called the Black Panther Movement for Self Defense was formed in California in 1966. While bringing to attention issues on poverty and injustice that confronted Black communities, its main purpose is said to have been to spread Black nationalist ideology.⁴⁹ The movement grew to a national level and helped to inspire the Black power movement that emphasized Black identity and racial pride.

In 1967, the Supreme Court declared in the *Loving vs. Virginia* case the unconstitutionality of Virginia's anti-miscegenation law.⁵⁰ That decision led to the dissolution of anti-miscegenation laws in other states. Even with removal of legal barriers, however, societal taboos against interracial mixing remained. Even activists who were fighting for racial equality were said to have discouraged interracial dating between the activists out of concern that such dating would provoke deep-seeded fears and undermine their efforts to bring about robust change in Black/White relations.⁵¹

Indicative of the continuing problems in race relations, the Kerner Commission's report in February of 1968 indicated critical needs to address the quality of education, employment, and housing for Blacks in the United States.⁵² A beacon of hope for eradicating such disparities, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated shortly after the report was released.

The 1970s has been characterized as a "time for healing" and a period in which reforms passed in the 1960s were being "tested."⁵³ Black Militant protests waned, and further advances in civil rights were moderate at best. The Congressional Black Caucus formed in 1971 and made efforts to be heard within Washington circles. Even with its efforts, however, unemployment and poverty amongst the Black population continued to increase throughout the 1970s.⁵⁴ Although tailored to a White audience⁵⁵, the television series *Roots*, based on the book by Alex Haley, aired in 1977 and sparked dialogue between Whites and Blacks on the topic of race relations.

The 1980s marked a decade in which the disparities between Blacks and Whites in terms of employment and education persisted.⁵⁶ At the same time, however, key figures in the Black community successfully attained prominent public positions. In 1983, Democrat Harold Washington became the first Black American to win the seat of mayor of Chicago.

Before then, only three other Blacks were able to win the title of mayor in other smaller cities (Carl B. Stokes, Mayor of Cleveland, Ohio, 1967; Richard Hatcher, Mayor of Gary, Indiana, 1967; and Ernest “Dutch” Morial, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1978).⁵⁷ That same year, Vanessa Williams, of Black and White ancestry, became the first Black woman to be crowned Miss America, although the revelation that nude photos existed of Williams forced her to eventually relinquish her title.⁵⁸ In 1989, President George Bush appointed General Colin Powell as Chair of the U.S. Department of Defense’s Joint Chiefs of Staff, allowing Powell to become the first Black American to hold the military’s top ranking position.⁵⁹

Events that took place in the 1990s presented clear signs that race-related tensions, especially between Blacks and Whites, were still palpable. The Hate Crime Statistics Act requiring the Justice Department to collect statistics on crimes committed against individuals based on race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation was passed into law in 1990.⁶⁰ Shortly after its passage, an incident involving a young Black man and White police officers rocked the nation’s complacency regarding race relations. In 1991, Rodney King was severely beaten by Los Angeles police department officers after the intoxicated King led the officers on a high-speed freeway chase in Los Angeles. Although four of the officers were charged with using excessive force, they were acquitted the following year. Immediately following the acquittal, riots broke out in the streets of Los Angeles, leading the governor of California to declare a state of emergency.⁶¹ In 1995, the “Million Man March” was held in Washington, D.C., where Black male activists congregated to make the world more aware of the issues confronting the Black American community and was understood to be a sign of the resurgence of Black nationalism.⁶²

The beginning of the third millennium was a time period of milestones in Black American achievement. In 2001, Dr. Condoleezza Rice became the first Black American named as U.S. National Security Advisor.⁶³ That same year, General Colin Powell became the first Black U.S. Secretary of State. In 2002, Halle Berry became the first Black actress to win an Oscar for her leading role in *Monster’s Ball*, with Denzel Washington becoming the second Black actor to win the award for leading actor. In 2009, Barack Obama was elected as the first Black U.S. President. Yet, despite the rise of Black Americans to positions of national prominence, observable signs of racism continued to exist. For example, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported the millennium brought with it a substantial increase in White supremacist groups.⁶⁴ Surveys also showed that a significant number of individuals still resisted interracial marriage, especially those between Black and White individuals.⁶⁵ Survey results from a 2004 study conducted by the Institute of Government & Public Affairs at the University of Illinois showed that 38 percent of White southerners opposed interracial marriage, while 26 percent of White non-southerners were opposed.⁶⁶

The above overview of significant events related to Black/White relations is by no means comprehensive. It is designed to provide an overview of the context in which news stories regarding intimate Black/White relations were written. As presented in the next section, although important social, legal, and political events pertaining to race relations took

place during the study's chosen time frame of 1960-2011, little variation existed in the thematic representations of mixed race couples across the time period. Furthermore, consistencies in themes between the broad reach magazines and between the Black-targeted magazines existed.

Analysis Findings

Themes in Time and Newsweek

A high degree of similarity was found in the stories regarding interracial marriage between Blacks and Whites in *Time* and *Newsweek* articles. In fact, the connotations conveyed in the stories tended to be consistent across the chosen timeframe. The stories that pertained to the changes in the miscegenation laws were presented as relatively short, straightforward stories, with no in-depth analysis.⁶⁷ Stories that were more in-depth in nature presented interracial marriages as problematic and not fully accepted by society. CRT would view such portrayals as maintaining race-related subordination, and ultimately as subtle forms of racism.

The only hope of racism coming to an end and of interracial marriages finding widespread acceptance was placed on shoulders of the children of interracial couples. Three dominant themes were revealed in these stories: (1) certain personal characteristics as requisites to mixed marriage acceptance; (2) interracial marriages reveal the façade of egalitarianism; and (3) interracial children will encounter difficulties, but symbolize hope.

Certain Personal Characteristics as Requisites to Mixed Marriage Acceptance. The articles appearing in the 1960s that focused on particular interracial couples accentuated the fact that the individuals in the marriage were well educated and from good family backgrounds. Moreover, the articles notably described the physical characteristics of the Black husband or wife. For example, a story that was covered by both *Time* and *Newsweek* in 1963 was with regard to the marriage of the first Black woman to attend the University of Georgia. The articles revealed the marriage of Charlayne Hunter to her college classmate, Walter Stovall, the son of a prominent White family in South Georgia. In the *Newsweek* article, Charlayne was described as “a hazel-eyed beauty” and the daughter of a retired Army officer.⁶⁸ The article began with the warning from Southern Whites that interracial marriages would “inevitably” result from desegregation. The author wrote: “And last week they [Southern Whites] thought they had proved the point.” No positive quotes regarding the interracial pairing were provided, except for the statement from the couple saying they simply fell in love. Instead, negative comments were presented, such as the quote from Walter's father saying that it was the “end of the world” and Walter's family friend stating, “He would not be received with the same cordiality as he would have if he hadn't married that nigger.” From the side of Charlayne's parents, the mother was quoted as saying that the marriage did not happen with her “approval” and her father was quoted as saying he was “shocked.”

Time covered the story in a similar manner and presented the same quotes from Charlayne's mother and Walter's father that *Newsweek* provided.⁶⁹ It is interesting to note that in this article, emphasis was also placed on the fact that Charlayne did not want to be a symbol of any form of civil rights. The article points out that in the past, she had been asked to speak before civil rights groups as the first African-American woman to enter the University of Georgia, but that she never felt comfortable in doing so. Charlayne was quoted as stating "she felt 'like a hypocrite' ... all that We Shall Overcome business."

Another interracial couple story covered by *Newsweek* and *Time* in 1967 was the marriage of then-Secretary of State Dean Rusk's daughter, Margaret Rusk, to an African-American, Guy Smith. Although no description was provided of the bride, the bridegroom was described as "healthy, handsome, an honor graduate of Georgetown University and the son of educated and respected parents."⁷⁰ The author went on to write, "Save for his light brown pigmentation, he would seem an eminently suitable match for 18-year-old Margaret Rusk." The couple was described as "beaming" on their wedding day, but the bride's father was described as having a "small, impersonal smile" and her mother as having a "dead serious" expression. Two of the only three quotes provided regarding the marriage are negative. One is from a Louisiana senator who stated, "The great advocates of integration have sown the seeds and they are now gathering the fruit." Another was from Rusk's relative who characterized the marriage as "repulsive." The third quote, although not negative, was also not positive. It was a quote from President Johnson's wife: "I just hope everything goes well for those young folks."

The *Time* article regarding the marriage described the "bug in the brain" that the marriage brought forth in that because of Margaret Rusk's "sobriety and wholesome appearance," any average White parent could easily picture his or her daughter similarly choosing to marry a Black man.⁷¹ The author quoted a sociologist as having stated, "This ... is a kind of bug in the white man's brain—that the Negro is anxious to marry his daughter." The article then went on to provide illustrations of the how the State Department was receiving hate mail and phone calls, and how popular commentators, as well as ordinary citizens, were making racist jokes regarding the union.

Throughout the *Time* article, both the bride and bridegroom were provided with flattering descriptors with an emphasis on the couple being well educated from "nice families." The White bride was described as an "attractive, serious-minded student" who was "eminently level-headed." The Black bridegroom was "a handsome, highbrowed, square-jawed young man" with light-brown skin. In fact, the lightness of his skin is mentioned several times in the article. For example, in providing reactions to the marriage from individuals across the country, the author quotes a college student from the University of Miami as stating that he was "just a little relieved to see the bridegroom is so white. I guess it would have been different if he had been a real black buck."

The *Newsweek* and *Time* articles displaying interracial marriages that followed these early articles were not as blatantly descriptive, but they also tended to highlight professional and well-educated couples.⁷² The articles seemed to suggest a need to focus only on those from high socio-demographic groups. Stories that featured individuals from a lower social stratification were not to be found. Even with professionals featured, the articles covered the negativities associated within the interracial marriages.

Interracial Marriages Reveal the Façade of Egalitarianism. Many of the stories on interracial marriages stressed that such marriages are on the rise, but that society is not quite ready to accept these marriages. In a 1993 *Time* article, the author argues: “As every increasing numbers of couples crash through racial, ethnic and religious barriers to invent a life together, Americans are being forced to rethink and redefine themselves.”⁷³ The author then goes on to characterize the “huddled masses” in America as turning into the “muddled masses” and stresses the challenges associated with the new society. Another *Time* article written in 1999 discussed a PBS documentary about a Black/White married couple who have had to endure years of prejudice and harassment.⁷⁴ The article described how the documentary, through its following of the couple’s lives, “shows that racial rapport in America is elusive not just because of history or politics but also because ... it requires years of personal effort.”

A 1991 story appearing in *Newsweek*, based on interviews with professionals who were either in interracial marriages or intimate relationships, revealed that such couples had had to face overt racism in their everyday lives.⁷⁵ One White man spoke of not being able to live in a particular neighborhood in Brooklyn with his Black wife. He stated: “I’d be out of my f--- mind, they’d kill me.” Another Black woman spoke of how she and her White boyfriend were often stared at and harassed because of their mixed racial pairing. She was quoted as saying, “My situation has been that the black community reaction was very violent, sometimes throwing stuff at us, trying to beat him [Michael] up, that kind of thing.” A White photojournalist married to a Black former professional basketball player explained why interracial couples are met with such hostility: “People who are not racist and are liberals still draw the line at couples. Integration for them means that they go to school together, but God forbid your son and daughter should date.” The difficulties these couples faced as described in these stories were also echoed in the stories regarding the children of interracial couples.

Interracial Children will Encounter Difficulties, but Symbolize Hope. A prominent theme in the *Newsweek* and *Time* articles revolved around the notion that children of interracial couples will inescapably have to confront racial hatred in their lives, but that with fortitude, they hold the key to interracial unity. A 1997 *Time* article began by discussing the adversity which children of mixed marriages face by discussing how professional golfer Frank Zoeller was dropped by sponsors after he made comments suggesting that he did not see golfer Tiger Woods as a “golfing prodigy,” but rather as “a fried-chicken-and-collared-greens-eating Sambo.”⁷⁶ The article’s author wrote: “Zoeller soon paid a price for saying

openly what many others were thinking secretly.” The article ended by emphasizing that the children of the interracial marriages, with their unique perspective on what they have to offer as biracial or multiracial human beings, would be the ones to bring about positive changes in societal views regarding race. A 2007 *Time* article that focused on then-Presidential candidate Barack Obama described Obama’s struggle to belong because of his racially mixed background and how he had been forced to engage in “masking,” presenting the “self that angles for advantage.”⁷⁷ The author suggested that Obama should drop his masks and be proud of his “mixed-race freshness,” that he should be aware that he embodies “something that no other presidential candidate possibly can: the idealism that race is but a negligible human difference.”

The articles in both *Time* and *Newsweek* tended to suggest support for a separate identity for children of interracial marriages. The idea that they should be considered as “multiracial” was supported. In a 1993 *Time* article, the thought that children of Black/White parents should not be forced to choose between the race of their parents was emphasized.⁷⁸ A White woman who was in a White/Black marriage was quoted as stating: “Interracial marriage that works equals multiracial children at ease with their mixed identity, which equals more people in the world who can deal with this diversity.”

A 1995 article in *Newsweek* described how “hundreds of thousands of children from interracial marriages” have “come to age demanding visibility, acceptance—and in some cases a separate identity as neither black nor white.”⁷⁹ In another *Newsweek* article written in 2009, the author told the story of how she, as a Black woman, anxiously awaited to see signs of “blackness” in her biracial baby.⁸⁰ She shared the shame she felt at the fact that she was constantly wanting her newborn “to look black,” rather than look “Caucasian” like her husband. The author wrote that “undaunted by ... failures to find Gabe’s [her newly born son’s] blackness,” she “grew more obsessive” in her “racial cataloging.” It was only after her son’s skin color changed from White to “golden” that she realized that she wanted her son “to be proud of his entire heritage” and that she had been falling into society’s trap of assigning a race to her own son. She ended her piece by stating, “I want my son to grow up wearing his biracial heritage like an invisibility cloak, able to move unseen among people’s prejudices—impervious to racial profiling. But I will prepare him for a world that may think he is black or white, even though he is golden.”

Themes in Ebony and JET

No stories regarding Black/White marriages appeared in *JET* until the 1980s. Stories on this topic, however, did appear in *Ebony* beginning in the 1960s. For the most part, the *Ebony* stories in the 1960s and 1970s took a positive take on mixed marriages.⁸¹ With the 1967 Loving Supreme Court decision being presented as a victory, the messages conveyed that although barriers existed to intermarriage, those barriers were not insurmountable. The articles showed that even in the South, instances of acceptance could be found. Two of the articles from the 1960s featuring Black entertainer Sammy Davis Jr., his White wife, and

their three children highlighted how the couple had found acceptance.⁸² Despite being warned of “trouble” that might be ahead, the couple stressed that they have not seen any negative impact on their careers. In one of the articles written by Davis himself, the entertainer tackled the concern that his children might end up “mixed up.” He wrote: “Look, good marriages produce happy, well-adjusted, functioning children just as bad marriages produce disturbed kids. I don’t think color is the governing factor at all, but I would argue that in a mixed marriage color is more of a safeguard.”⁸³

Such positive takes on Black/White marriages, however, were not the norm when considering all of the examined articles from *Ebony* and *JET*. Fitting with CRT principles, articles provided cultural narratives that stigmatized and maintained historic racial taboos associated with Black/White pairings. The articles that appeared in both *Ebony* and *JET* were inclined to emphasize the challenges and controversies revolving around such marriages.⁸⁴ In their attempts to dissect the reasons for the existence and increase of interracial marriages, negative undertones resound. For example, in a 1975 *Ebony* article titled, “Startling New Attitudes,” the author placed doubts on a nationwide poll suggesting that more Americans are accepting interracial marriages within their own families.⁸⁵ Throughout the article, excerpts from Black scholars refuting the poll’s findings were provided. One sociologist was quoted as saying the poll was flawed because it did not “go deep enough” and that she believed “racial feelings are more intense than ever, maybe more so.” This notion that underlying racial tensions exist under the guise of acceptance was found in both the *Ebony* and *JET* articles.

When critically analyzing the articles, three dominant themes come to the surface: (1) intolerance exists despite changes; (2) Black women are vociferously opposed to Black men marrying White women; and (3) identity confusion among children of interracial marriages.

Intolerance Exists Despite Changes. The articles in the Black-targeted magazines conveyed the idea that although the taboos against interracial marriage are diminishing, individuals who were in interracial relationships still face difficulties. In fact, most of the articles found on the topic from *JET* magazine focused on specific discrimination-related court cases involving interracial couples.⁸⁶ Articles in *Ebony* also presented the prejudice that intermarriage couples face, from physical threats and social ostracism⁸⁷ to subtle forms of harassment, such as stares and whispers.⁸⁸

For example, an *Ebony* article from 1965 quoted a preacher as saying, “Marrying someone from another race in this country is asking for more trouble than the good Lord ever intended a human being to bear.”⁸⁹ The writer went on to state that even so, there were still couples that “keep asking for it.” A *JET* article from 1995 describes a case in which a White female deputy sheriff married to a Black man received threatening notes and packages because of her mixed marriage. The investigators later discovered that the culprit was one of the woman’s former coworkers.⁹⁰

A 1990 article in *Ebony* noted that with the rise in interracial marriages, increases in hate group activities were taking place.⁹¹ A 2010 article in *JET* challenged the idea of “the U.S. as a post-racial, assimilated society,” even considering the rise in the rate of interracial marriages.⁹² Both of the *Ebony* and *JET* articles appeared to be countering the suggestion that the increase in the number of interracial couples was a sign that the U.S. was finally becoming a more egalitarian society.

While articles described the rejection that both of the individuals involved in Black/White relationships encounter, several of the articles did point out that the Black community tends to be more receptive of interracial couples than the White community.⁹³ That being stated, a difference in the treatment of interracial couples depending on the pairing was detected in the articles. Supporting White masculine hegemony, what was conveyed was less of an acceptance of Black men marrying White women than of White men marrying Black women. Some articles explained that the dismissal of the Black man/White woman relationship by the White community was due to the fact that it was viewed as more of a threat to the status quo and the stability of White political power.⁹⁴ A number of the other articles wrote of the Black man/White woman relationship being rejected by Black women because it represented a betrayal to them.⁹⁵

Black Women Are Vociferously Opposed to Black Men Marrying White Women. A theme that repeatedly surfaced in the stories was the idea that Black women found it highly problematic that Black men were choosing to marry White women. This theme first appeared in an *Ebony* 1970 article titled, “A Sister Debates a Brother on That Black Man-White Woman Thing,” in which a young Black writer was interviewed.⁹⁶ The young writer laments that Black women far outnumber Black men and that Black men turning to White women as mates was diluting the Black woman’s self-confidence. She stated, “In order for us black people to survive, we have to come together, culturally and socially.... When a black woman sees a black man with a white woman, this is not helping her develop to think of herself as a worthy person.”

The notion that the Black man/White woman pairing is a threat to Black women found prominence in the articles that appear in the 1990s and 2000s.⁹⁷ The resentment was especially palpable in one *Ebony* article from 1994 titled “Black Men White Women: What’s Behind the New Furor?” that began with reference to the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson allegedly by her former husband and professional football star, O.J. Simpson. The author wrote, “In the midst of all of O.J. Simpson’s legal and career problems, what seems to bother Black women the most is the fact that Nicole Brown Simpson was White.”⁹⁸ The article then goes on to quote a social psychologist as stating, “In the minds of Black women, this thing with Black men and White women has reached epidemic proportions ... because we have so many beautiful Black women of all sizes, shapes and colors, and there are not enough eligible and suitable Black men to go around. There is a man shortage, and it is especially acute for the college-educated, professional Black woman.”

Other articles also gave voice to those who complain that not enough educated and professional Black men exist as possible mates to Black women. In these articles, the reasons given vary for why Black men and White women get together in the first place, but they all tended to unearth underlying stereotypes. The provided reasons ranged from Black men “making it in bed” in order to “make it in the White world”⁹⁹ or for social status¹⁰⁰ to the “forbidden fruit syndrome” of Black men wanting a White woman simply because it was forbidden.¹⁰¹ One 1996 *JET* article quoted a professor of sociology as saying that White women were viewed as “the prize” and that “some Black men will jump over three successful Black women just to be with a White woman.”¹⁰²

A few articles even highlighted the belief that White women are more sexually attracted to Black men than they are to White men.¹⁰³ The 1970 *Ebony* article featuring an interview with a young Black writer quoted her as saying, “I don’t really believe that if a white woman chooses a black man that she considers him as just an individual. I think that she is greatly influenced by this idea that black men are sexually superior to white men.”¹⁰⁴

The articles took on a more sympathetic tone when considering the stereotypes of Black women said to be held by Black men. They appear to attempt to dispel such stereotypes as Black women being “sexually uptight” or “too demanding.”¹⁰⁵ In one *Ebony* article written in 2003, the author wrote, “As troubling it is to witness a single Sister sitting all alone in a coffee shop while a Brother is ogling his non-Black sweetheart just a table away, it’s even more troubling to hear the reasons why some Brothers are routinely snubbing Black women.”¹⁰⁶ She then provided the “oft-cited” reasons for the snubbing as including the “Black woman is attitudinal, selfish, lazy, and sexually uptight.”

It is interesting to note that while connoting support for the complaints of Black women regarding Black men choosing White women over them, they also appeared to show empathy toward those Black women who decided to marry White men. The articles highlighted how Black women feel they have no choice but to marry a White man because of the lack of marriageable Black men.¹⁰⁷ Those articles also tended to provide a positive portrayal of the Black woman/White man couples. A 1993 *JET* article described how after years of unhappiness, she finally found security and joy by marrying a White man. With the birth of her child and her doting husband at her side, the woman is quoted at the end of the article as stating, “This must be what God feels I really deserve.”¹⁰⁸ Another *JET* article published in 1997 celebrated the 50th anniversary of a Black woman and White man living in North Carolina by telling the story of the love between the two and how they “toppled social patterns” through their “courage and devotion.”¹⁰⁹

How the couples were willing to overcome hardships due to their love was emphasized in stories of Black woman/White man pairings. For example, a 1982 *Ebony* article described how one Black woman had to battle with “serious internal struggles” before deciding to marry her White man because of her knowledge of the racism she would have to confront.¹¹⁰ After describing the heroism of this woman, as well as other Black

woman/White man couples, the article ended in an upbeat note with the author stating, “For the most part, these couples face the future with optimism and with a certain strength which undoubtedly will continue to bind the union.” An *Ebony* article published in 2007 featuring former Secretary of Defense William Cohen and his Black wife, Janet Langhart, similarly provided an upbeat ending to its story on the interracial couple by quoting Langhart: “We are closing the circle that has been broken by hatred and racism, and we are doing it with love.”¹¹¹ It is a bit ironic that earlier in the article, Langhart discussed how it was difficult for her to accept her brother’s marriage to a White woman. She did, however, stress, “I’ve come to love her [brother’s wife], though, because of the love she has for my brother.”

While showing support of Black women marrying White men, some of the articles did relay the reality that some Black women are refusing to go down that path because they are afraid interracial marriages are weakening Black identity. For example, in an *Ebony* 2011 article, the writer quoted a professor of social policy as stating: “Even as they articulate their frustrations around the sexual politics between themselves and Black men, they [Black women] maintain a pervading belief that they are the keepers of the race and, as such, they should be with Black men.”¹¹²

The concern that interracial marriages might be in some way diluting Black identity was also manifested in stories regarding the children of mixed race couples. In fact, the prominent theme in the stories focusing on these children was that they tended to experience an identity crisis as a result of their racially mixed heritage.

Identity Confusion Among Children of Interracial Marriages. Only three articles were found to attempt to debunk the notion that children of interracial unions suffered due to their mixed identity. The message they conveyed was that as long as the children are loved, they will be okay. All three appeared in *Ebony*. The first was featured in 1963 under the title, “Are Interracial Homes Bad for Children?”¹¹³ The second was written by Sammy Davis, Jr., in 1966, and was titled “Is My Mixed Marriage Mixing Up My Kids?”¹¹⁴ The third, “Black Women/White Men: The ‘Other’ Mixed Marriage,” appeared in 1978.¹¹⁵ Aside from these articles, all of the other articles in the Black-targeted magazines that pertained to children of interracial marriages focused on the identity-related struggles that these children often experience due to their mixed-race background.¹¹⁶

An *Ebony* article from 1985 that took a look at the emotional health of children of interracial marriages asserted that although racial attitudes have shifted over the years, “mixed couples and their children are still targets of racial slurs, ridicule and taunts—from both Blacks and Whites.”¹¹⁷ Another *Ebony* article from 1987 introduced the “identity crisis” that actress Troy Beyer went through during her formative years.¹¹⁸ The article quoted the actress as saying, “There was a time when I was a very confused little chocolate girl ... I didn’t know if I was White, and I didn’t know if I was Black.” The article stressed that Troy was able to overcome her crisis by deciding to consider herself as Black.

This notion of overcoming internal turmoil by adopting a Black identity is also conveyed a 1999 *JET* article.¹¹⁹ The article introduced readers to two “light-skinned” cousins, Lonnae and Kim, who chose to adopt different identities—one Black and the other White. Throughout the article, Lonnae was portrayed as the stable one of the two, while Kim was painted as conflicted. Lonnae characterizes Kim’s Black side of the family as “professional-lawyers, doctors and Fortune 500 executives,” while the White side was described as “blue collar and less formally educated.” This discrepancy led Lonnae to question Kim’s decision to adopt a White identity and she discussed attempting to lead Kim toward embracing her Black identity to no avail. To Lonnae, if only Kim would adopt a Black identity, she would find internal peace and pride.

Other articles similarly presented the thought that Black identification can help to minimize confusion amongst children of Black/White couples.¹²⁰ For example, in one 2011 *Ebony* article titled “Passing Strangely,” the daughter of a mixed marriage couple talked about how she had been “passing for White” during her childhood years and when confronted about her dark complexion would always lie and say she was Hawaiian. It was not until after high school when she decided to embrace her Black identity that she felt whole. As she put it, “I finally felt free to hold my head high and proclaim to the world, ‘I’m Black, dammit!’”¹²¹ In another 2011 *Ebony* article, the daughter of a Black man and White Danish immigrant relayed that she would often present herself as Hispanic when she was growing up, even studying Spanish and joining a Hispanic engineering society during her freshman year in college. It was only when she switched majors to English and learned about Black literature and history that she came to grips with her identity as a Black woman.¹²²

While presenting stories of how finding a Black identity helped children of interracial marriage find a sense of personal security, the articles further promote the idea that such identification has also helped maintain political agency amongst the Black populace. In fact, in one 1995 *Ebony* story, the notion of creating a separate census category to accommodate mixed race children is presented as a bad idea, with the argument that it might cause people to retreat from their “Blackness” and create a “Black/White buffer zone.”¹²³

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the meanings conveyed in articles pertaining to Black/White intimate relationships that appeared in the news-oriented magazines of *Time*, *Newsweek*, *JET*, and *Ebony*. Any similarities and differences between the broad-reach magazines and the Black-targeted magazines were of particular interest.

The theme that all four of the news-oriented magazines shared was the one acknowledging that although marriages between Blacks and Whites were increasing and U.S. society was touting egalitarian values, racist attitudes toward Black/White couples still existed. This theme actually resonates with critical race theory’s challenge to the multiculturalism view that Americans are said to cherish. It buttresses the theory’s stance that

an underlying problem in U.S. society is that Whites do not want to consider racism as an everyday reality.

The articles pointed out that although the taboos against interracial marriages were diminishing, individuals who were in interracial relationships and their children faced serious difficulties in U.S. society. The broad-reach magazines, however, tended to present a more Pollyanna picture that such racist attitudes would change. Children of mixed marriages were offered as beacons of hope for bringing about true racial unity. Racism was shown to be a permanent blemish on society, unless these children could garner acceptance. No challenges on the long-ingrained notions of race in society were presented. Rather, responsibility for racism was shown to be held within the communities subject to such discrimination. The articles in the Black-targeted magazines with their presentation of court cases that revealed racism against Black/White couples were more likely to point out harsh realities. In fact, children of mixed race marriages were encouraged to adopt their Black identity in order to psychologically survive.

While revealing the existing overt racism toward mixed couples, the four magazines also tended to actually reinforce aversions toward Black/White pairings. The connotation conveyed was that certain criteria had to be met for such couples to be accepted. The broad-reach magazines highlighted the “exceptional” personal characteristics of the couples with a focus on well-educated professionals. For the most part, Black partners were described as light-skinned, educated, and from well-to-do families. In essence, providing this context made the coupling justifiable and more palatable. The emphasis on the lightness of skin can be understood within the realm of skin color bias that is said to have originated during American colonial times.¹²⁴ It was during that period when slaves from Africa were brought into America that a tripartite color-caste system was created, positioning Whites at the top, light-skinned Blacks in the middle, and dark-skinned Blacks at the very bottom. Thus, light-skinned Blacks were placed closer to Whites and were perceived as more valuable than dark-skinned Blacks. This notion that light-skinned Blacks are more accepted in White society reverberates with recent writings from scholars analyzing why certain Blacks have found success in attaining positions of national prominence, such as former Secretary of State Colin Powell and President Barack Obama. According to sociologists Lawrence Bobo and Camille Charles, their light skin, elite educational background, and ability to speak “like a white person made both Powell and Obama more viable options for national leadership roles.”¹²⁵

Physical characteristics as criteria of acceptance of Black/White pairings did not appear in the Black-targeted magazines. The main position was the rejection of intimate relationships between Black men and White women. In fact, stereotypes were often used to explain why Black men would be attracted to White women and vice versa. Surprisingly, however, there was more of an acceptance of relationships between White men and Black women. A more sympathetic tone was relayed with regard to such coupling.

Researchers taking a critical perspective have argued that mainstream news media in the U.S. tend to speak as one voice, often privileging Whites over any other racial group.¹²⁶ Therefore, it was expected in this study that the broad-reach mainstream magazines might be more critical of interracial marriages than the Black-targeted magazines. But this was not the case. All four magazines presented narratives that tended to sustain feelings of hostility toward couples in Black/White relationships. Only “certain kinds” of Black/White relationships were conveyed as acceptable. Light-skinned and attractive individuals were held as ideal in the mainstream magazines, while Black women and White men coupling were favored in the Black-targeted magazines. Overall, the privileging of White males resounded in the stories.

Conclusion

The stories in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *JET*, and *Ebony* illustrate how, even in today’s society, there is a strong Black/White binary that exists and is supported by discourse in U.S. news magazines. The analysis of the narratives presented in the stories reinforces the premise of critical race theory that although law and policy have countered overt forms of racism, institutionalized racism, including those manifested in the news media, still exists. In addition, the hegemonic privileging of White males subsists and continues to be accepted as “common sense.”

While critical race theory emerged out of critical legal studies and radical feminism¹²⁷ and has recently been the lens to critique the K-12 American education system,¹²⁸ part of this study’s aim was to demonstrate the value of applying critical race theory to American mass media in order to probe into the institutionalism of racism. Although a multitude of race-related changes were made in terms of law and policy during the timeframe chosen for this study, the analysis revealed that Black/White interracial marriage was presented and discussed within the news-oriented magazines in extraordinarily similar terms regardless of the year each article was published. Moreover, the discussions tended to convey problematic portrayals of Black/White pairings. With this insight, it perhaps comes as no surprise then when one is confronted even today with news stories concerning segregated proms still in existence¹²⁹ or a story about how a White father of biracial children was approached by police who believed he might have abducted the children because of their differences in skin color.¹³⁰

Critical race theory posits an activist approach in efforts to challenge and change the insidious, institutionalized forms of racism that undergird U.S. society.¹³¹ Change, however, cannot occur unless acknowledgement of “problems” exists. This study is an attempt to first highlight the subtle forms of racism that exist in U.S. media in hopes of ultimately provoking changes to illustrate interracial couples in more positive manners.

This study’s researchers are aware of the possibility of varying readings of the stories analyzed. It is hoped, however, that the findings will prompt dialogue and encourage further

deconstruction of the deeper messages regarding race and race relations embedded in media content in an effort to reveal sustained race-based tensions that exist in larger society. Critical analysis of such deeply personal, yet taboo, topics is the only way to challenge racial biases that continue to pervade and elude substantive criticisms.

Notes

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