

10

Interracial Families in Post-Civil Rights America

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In the four decades since the U.S. Supreme Court declared laws prohibiting interracial marriage unconstitutional, the number of interracial families in America has rapidly increased. But interracial families continue to face unique external pressures and internal relational dynamics due to the persistence of racism in America. While formal structural barriers have been reduced, interracial dating on campuses has increased, and attitudes toward acceptance of interracial marriage have improved, interracial couplings continue to be the rare exception (and not the rule) when it comes to new marriages. This chapter explores why interracial families continue to be so uncommon in the United States, and it describes the challenges interracial families face in dealing with individual and institutional racism, responding to the disapproval of family members, and raising mixed-race children in what is still not a “color-blind” world.

June 12, 2007, marked the fortieth anniversary of the historic Supreme Court decision (*Loving v. Virginia*) that struck down state laws prohibiting interracial marriage. Reporters celebrated the fourfold increase in interracial marriage rates since 1970 and the corresponding decline in opposition to interracial marriage in opinion polls. The concurrent rise of political superstar Barack Obama and a proliferation of multiracial celebrities, athletes, and writers have further focused national attention on interracial families and reframed their mixed-race offspring from “tragic mulattoes” to “Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous.”¹ Indeed, the message repeatedly put forward in the media and in popular discourse is that in post-Civil Rights America, love, marriage and child rearing are all color-blind.

Less well reported is that interracial marriages represent a tiny sliver of all marriages in the United States. In 1970, less than 1 percent of marriages were interracial, and by 2005 that number increased to 7.5 percent of all marriages. Stated differently, over 92 percent of all marriages today are between people of the same race. Interestingly, of the 7.5 percent of marriages that are interracial, marriages between blacks and whites remain the least likely combination. While it is true that more young people today are dating and living with someone of a different race, those interracial relationships are far less likely than same-race relationships to lead to marriage.² Many argue that race is declining in significance, but the fact that interracial marriages continue to hover in the single digits—and are least likely between blacks and whites—suggests that the color-blind rhetoric may be ahead of reality.

The disconnection between Americans' attitudes toward interracial marriage and their behavior illustrates the awkward historical moment that we currently inhabit. On the one hand, in the four decades since the U.S. Supreme Court declared laws prohibiting interracial marriage unconstitutional, the number of interracial families in the United States has rapidly increased, interracial dating on college campuses has become more common, and attitudes toward interracial marriage have improved.³ On the other hand, interracial families continue to report unique external pressures due to the persistence of racism and negotiations over the classification of their mixed-race children. As a result, interracial couplings continue to be the rare exception (and certainly not the rule) when it comes to marriage in the United States.

At a deeper level, the discrepancy between attitudes and behavior mirrors the changing nature of race relations in the United States. Several decades after the passage of Civil Rights legislation, structurally rooted racial inequalities continue to persist in our social institutions, ranging from in the public schools, to health care, to the criminal justice system. Yet, despite these racial inequalities, Americans increasingly believe that race is declining in significance, and many have adopted a "color-blind" ideology in which racism and discrimination are viewed as relics of the past, inequalities are understood to be class-based (as opposed to race-based), and where institutions and individuals are assumed to act in race-neutral ways. This simultaneous denial of racial inequalities and widespread desire to move "beyond race" stand in stark contrast to the persistence of race as a determining factor in life chances, opportunities, and mate selection.⁴

In this chapter, we examine the disconnection between beliefs and behavior by exploring the distinctive challenges that interracial families face in a simultaneously "color-blind" and racialized world. We focus specifically on interracial relationships between blacks and whites because they are the two groups that have the greatest social distance, their coupling carries the greatest social stigma, and the relative rarity of intermarriage between the two groups best illustrates

the influence that structural patterns hold over our seemingly individual decisions about whom we have sex with, date, and marry.⁵ We also explore the challenges associated with raising mixed-race children and how those challenges have changed over time. Our central goal is to make visible the invisible racial structures to better understand why interracial families continue to be so uncommon in the United States in spite of the widespread perception that we live in a post-racial and “color-blind” society.

THE HISTORY OF BLACK/WHITE COUPLING

Interracial relationships, marriages, and children are of great interest to family researchers because they exist outside the “normal” patterns of mate selection. In other words, when individuals date and marry across the color line, they are defying long-standing patterns of racial endogamy (i.e., marrying someone within your own racial group). The historical norm in American families has been to date, marry, and have children with someone of the same race. As a result, when people partner cross-racially, it not only seems “different” or “unusual,” but depending on the time period, it may also have been unimaginable, illegal, nonconsensual, and/or dangerous. Every historical moment has its own specific racial stratification system at work. That system not only outlines the rules of behavior between races, but it also shapes how we understand our own race, the relative position of racial groups, and our individual expectations about the race of our sexual, dating, and marital partners.

Throughout U.S. history, black sexuality and marriage have been the subject of legal, cultural, and political regulation because of the flawed beliefs that (1) black people are fundamentally and biologically *different* from whites, and that (2) blacks are intellectually, culturally, and genetically *inferior* to whites.⁶ During various historical periods, racial stratification systems (grounded in beliefs of white superiority) have supported elaborate mechanisms of separation and necessitated endogamy so that blacks and whites were not only expected, but *required* to create families within their own racial groups. Social norms and laws prohibiting interracial marriage emerged to support racial stratification systems (such as slavery or segregation) so that interracial sex and marriage were institutionally restricted through the legal system and individually regulated through interpersonal violence, rape, and intimidation.⁷

As a system of stratification, slavery relied upon ideas of racial difference and black inferiority to rationalize the domination and exploitation of Africans in America. As slaves, blacks were considered subhuman property of their slave owners. In order to control slaves and maintain white supremacy, interracial coupling was strictly prohibited, and the one-drop rule was used to determine who was “black.”⁸

Miscegenation (or racial mixing) was strictly regulated so that “black blood” would not taint the purity of the white race. In spite of formal prohibitions against miscegenation, however, black female slaves were regularly sexually assaulted and raped by white slave owners. Because of the one-drop rule and the slave system, their mixed-race children were considered black, became part of the slave population, and were counted as the property of their biological fathers. In contrast, white women were protected from the specter of black male sexuality because while a mixed-race child in the slave quarters may have been socially tolerated and considered a financial asset, a mixed-race child born to a white woman directly threatened the purity of the white race and the logic of the slave system. Because of this unequal sense of threat, the mere hint of sexual contact between black men and white women was punishable by public beating, castration, and/or death.

After the Civil War, slavery was replaced by a new system of racial stratification: segregation. While the system changed, the core beliefs of racial difference and black inferiority stayed the same. Blacks were no longer slaves, but they were still believed to be biologically *different* from whites, and intellectually *inferior* to whites. Segregation required the formalization of antimiscegenation laws and explicit legal definitions of who belonged in the category “black.” In this historical context, the norm of racial endogamy, firmly rooted in the ideology of white supremacy, was a powerful mechanism shaping an individual’s mate selection options. Blacks and whites were legally and socially prohibited from cross-racial contact, and blacks were terrorized by widespread lynchings and brutal violence. “Blacks and whites were separate but equal” in law, and separate and grossly unequal in reality. Interracial marriages were illegal, mixed-race children were considered black, and any form of cross-racial coupling was the ultimate cultural taboo.

The Civil Rights Movement challenged the ideology of white supremacy, institutional inequalities, and individual racism. Activists and intellectuals fought fiercely against the social system of segregation and the ideological belief in black inferiority that it rested upon. In the process, progressives denounced the institutional policies and procedures that inhibited black people’s mobility, and they sought to alter black individuals’ self-perceptions so that they would value blackness. In this historical period of social change, formal prohibitions against interracial marriage were targeted, and in 1967, the Supreme Court ruled that all state-level antimiscegenation laws were unconstitutional. But while legal and institutional victories had been won, interracial marriages remained rare in the landscape of American families.⁹

When we consider the link between racial stratification systems, racial ideology, and the history of interracial sex and marriage between blacks and whites, we can better understand the stigma attached to interracial marriage and how that stigma is connected to a fundamentally flawed set of beliefs about race (as

a biological category) and racial groups (as both different and unequal to one another). The ideas of racial difference and white superiority were historically constructed by the dominant group to support existing racial stratification systems and shaped what is considered a “normal” American family by determining whether (or not) individuals could marry cross-racially. In addition, the elaborate rules of racial categorization that were designed to keep people apart, also mandated that mixed-race children were “black” (and black only) irrespective of their mixed ancestry and physical appearance. Because the one-drop rule and the norm of racial endogamy have been uniquely constructed and enforced for blacks and because they are inseparable from the history of slavery and segregation, they allow a particularly clear illustration of the link between structure and mate selection. Throughout American history, black sexuality and marriage have been the subject of legal, cultural, and political control and regulation shaping what we typically consider an individual choice. While the *Loving v. Virginia* decision terminated state laws against interracial marriage, the norm of racial endogamy and lingering biological notions of race, resulted in a social landscape where blacks and whites were expected to marry within their own racial groups.

In post-Civil Rights America, the legal barriers against interracial marriages no longer exist and attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage have steadily improved in opinion polls. Given the widespread contention that Americans are “color-blind” and that racism is a relic of the past, we would expect that interracial couples would face few interpersonal or institutional obstacles. But researchers have repeatedly documented the myriad ways that interracial couples face covert discrimination and overt racism from family members, friends, and strangers in public places. Additionally, interracial families continue to face subtle institutional and structural forces that marginalize their existence and diminish their quality of life. Below we explain the common external pressures that interracial families face, describe the coping strategies used in the context of such marriages, explore how such couples raise their mixed-race children, and consider what the totality of their lived experiences tell us about the changing nature of race relations in the United States.

EXTERNAL PRESSURES: BORDER PATROLLING IN BLACK AND WHITE

While attitudes toward interracial relationships in national opinion surveys continue to trend in the positive direction of acceptance (for both blacks and whites), the story is a bit more complicated on the ground. Sociologist Erica Childs found that blacks and whites tend to lean in opposite directions in terms of differentiating

their *general attitudes* about interracial relationships from their assessment of *specific family members* who are interracially married.¹⁰ Blacks tend to disapprove of interracial relationships generally, but they are tolerant and make exceptions for their family and friends. By contrast, whites tend to express approval of interracial relationships generally, but they disapprove of those relationships for their immediate family or friends.

Heather Dalmage argues that the discrepancy between the attitudes of blacks and whites lies in differential conceptions of same-race relationships. For blacks, marrying within one's racial group is perceived as strengthening the black family and supporting unification in a group struggling for survival and liberation. By contrast, whites tend to support same-race relationships, but they do so unreflectively.¹¹ These differential views of race and marriage affect how individuals interpret and construct the consequences of interracial coupling. Irrespective of race, class, or gender, those within interracial relationships find themselves regularly faced with insulting questions and forced to legitimize their relationships as loving and consensual in ways that mono-racial couples never consider. These daily experiences, and the harsh realities that interracial couples face, create unique stressors that put additional strains on such relationships and may explain the higher divorce rate among interracial marriages and may also contribute to the decision of the large proportion of inter racial couples to cohabitate instead of marry.¹²

Both black and white partners in interracial relationships commonly report experiencing a particular form of racial hostility that Heather Dalmage describes as *border patrolling*.¹³ Dalmage details various behaviors and attitudes expressed by white family members, friends, peers, and strangers that communicate a consistent and clear message: same-race dating and marriage are "normal" and interracial coupling is "different" and "problematic." When individuals date or marry cross-racially, previously unarticulated boundaries between blacks and whites break out into the open, shifting the way that they are perceived by others, changing their relationships with friends and family, and making them the targets of hostility by strangers. Border patrolling occurs for both black and white partners, although the way it manifests is differentiated by race and gender.

White women who marry black men describe being verbally harassed, socially ostracized, and/or excommunicated from family and friendship networks. As a result, some feel they have been re-categorized as inherently "flawed" or "polluted" by other whites, and they describe themselves as "no longer white" or "symbolically black" because of the wholesale rejection and ostracism they experience in their social network. One of researcher Erica Childs' white respondents (named Kayla) described the response of her white family and friends when she started dating a black man:

I lost every friend I had. My friends stopped calling me, whenever I would ask them to do something they would be busy, and my ex-boyfriend said I had lost it and was dating someone black to embarrass him.¹⁴

Kayla experienced a common type of resistance to interracial dating: rejection by her friends and shaming by her former white boyfriend. Her friends' rejection of her because she is dating a black man lies in their (conscious or unconscious) belief that same-race dating is "normal" and that dating a black man is deviant behavior because blacks are *different* from whites. Kayla's ex-boyfriend goes a step beyond ignoring her by openly stating his belief that she was dating someone black to embarrass him. This further illustrates his assumption that blacks are not just different, but *inferior to whites* (i.e., he's embarrassed because she's done something wrong by dating a black man and that reflects negatively on him).

While white women who date interracially face resistance, marriage is considered a far more serious border crossing because of the implicit long-term commitment and prospect of raising mixed-race children. Interracially married white women, particularly those with mixed-race children, experience more intense and consistent forms of border patrolling, in response to which they may need to protect themselves and their children from overtly racist insults, haggle over how their children will be racially categorized, or deal with nuanced slights, glares, and inappropriate questions that people ask in order to make sense of their family.¹⁵

White male partners in interracial marriages also experience border patrolling, but it is distinctly different in form and content from that experienced by white women in interracial marriages and is tied to the historical legacy of interracial intimacy. Unlike white women who report being policed and/or openly harassed (by both blacks and whites), white men who are partnered with black women describe resistance to their interracial coupling as expressions of curiosity, confusion, or concern. They are less likely to experience direct and open hostility from whites, but they do report experiencing it from black men. For example, Warren (one of Amy Steinbugler's white male respondents) described the way black men responded to his interracial relationship:

They'd be like, "Whoa, sister what are you doing with this guy?" I mean it has never—on occasion once or twice was it black women. At least not outspoken, it wasn't white people. The most outspoken were black men who did not like the fact that you could—a white man could have one of their black sisters. They definitely did not like that. It wouldn't be a problem for a black man, if a brother has a white woman. That's cool. The other way it doesn't work.¹⁶

Black spouses in interracial marriages also experience border patrolling, but it differs from that experienced by their white partners. While all border patrolling rests on the assumption that interracial relationships are “deviant,” “disruptive,” and “wrong,” black partners describe the disapproving responses they receive from other blacks as attacks on their racial identity, group loyalty, and self-worth as a black person.¹⁷ Black partners report negative character judgments, ostracism, speculation about their authenticity as black, and accusations that they are suffering from internalized racism. Often, black partners feel forced to legitimize their relationship to family and friends as a loving partnership, as opposed to a wholesale rejection of members of their own racial group. Daily negotiations over how to present an interracial relationship as loving and healthy can be challenging for many couples, particularly at the outset of their relationship.

The border patrolling that black women and men experience in response to their choice of a white marital partner not only differs in content from that experienced by whites, but it is also distinctly gendered. Black men in interracial relationships may be perceived as “weak,” a “sell-out,” or disconnected from the black community, and they may face the verbal attacks of other blacks who perceive their coupling as “treachery,” “betrayal,” and a weakening of the black family. They must also continually negotiate public space, and expend energy calculating their safety when accompanying their white partner. While all black men must negotiate public space around police, security guards, and others holding negative stereotypical views, being a black man and coded as having a sexual relationship with a white woman provides an additional layer of vulnerability to harassment.

Like interracially married black men, black women face social consequences such as being seen as a “sell-out” or “wanting to be white.” But black women may also be viewed by those in the black community as “disloyal” for “giving their bodies” to white men, and this is particularly problematic because of the history of exploitative sexual relations between white men and black women. Family members sometimes suspect and fear that black women in interracial relationships will be exposed to racist verbal abuse when arguing with their partners, or explicit racism by their partner’s family members. Black women also report being accused of social climbing or attempting to raise their social or economic status by marrying a white male.

LOOKING BEHIND THE STEREOTYPE OF THE “ANGRY BLACK WOMAN”

Using survey data, researchers have found that black women hold the least favorable attitudes toward interracial relationships. Qualitative interview studies of black male/white female couples often feature narrative descriptions of mistreatment, hostility,

and/or experiences of such couples being openly and publicly challenged about their relationships by black women. Indeed, the “angry black woman” is a persistent image in discussions of interracial intimacy.¹⁸ But few researchers go further to ask why this pattern might exist, what relationship it has to historical trends, and what factors fuel the lack of support for interracial coupling that is expressed by black women.

Notably, researcher Erica Childs interviewed black women to better understand their perspective. She concluded that their responses to interracial relationships are shaped by both white supremacy and structural inequalities that shape who black women perceive they can and should marry.¹⁹ Specifically, black women feel limited by Eurocentric standards of beauty that prize blond hair, blue eyes, and white skin, thereby reducing black women’s attractiveness to both black and white partners.²⁰ As a result, some black women see interracial dating as black men’s internalization of racism in which they devalue and reject black women as beautiful and/or preferable partners. Such feelings are compounded by a unique demographic reality: the limited pool of marriageable black men due to disproportionately high incarceration rates, drug abuse, homicide, and unemployment.²¹ The cumulative effect of these factors is a large pool of single black women competing for a small number of marriageable black men and feeling their value as potential mates weighed against a white beauty standard. As a result, black women often describe feeling “put down,” “left out” and/or “disrespected” by black men who choose to date white women. As Child’s respondent described: “As a black woman, it is difficult enough to have to deal with whites who [act] as if [black] is inferior, but it is even harder to have your own men act like white is better and systematically choose white women over you; it is hard not to get angry because it feels as if no one values your worth as a woman.”²²

COPING STRATEGIES: FROM COLOR-BLINDNESS TO RACIAL LITERACY

The emotionally charged and hostile reactions toward interracial relationships can be painful for those who are interracially married, even if it’s clear how differing social locations, histories, and beliefs shape those responses. The problem faced by many interracial families is that unlike the invisible forces of institutional racism (such as differential incarceration rates), interracial coupling is highly visible and easily targeted. Through social sanctions, isolation, and disapproval, interracial dating is far easier to target and resist than any of the structural factors that influence mate selection.

Facing the daily realities of border patrolling, individual partners within interracial families are forced to develop coping strategies that range from denial to resistance. Coping strategies tend to evolve from an individual's racial worldview. The sheer act of marrying cross-racially challenges racial borders and yet some individuals rely on color-blind discourse to interpret the responses of others to their relationship. For them, daily negotiations involve patterns of systematic denial of racist actions against their relationship, particularly when they come from close friends and family. White partners who have been socialized not to talk about race often want to avoid conflict in order to protect their family and friends from being characterized as racist. When explicitly racist incidents occur, they work to forget, ignore, reconstruct, cover up, and deny the problematic actions of their loved ones. This denial can lead to complications within their marital relationships because the black partner may feel as if the white partner is not defending him/her while the white partner may feel torn between his/her family and partner. The white partner may also feel ashamed and confused when parents who profess to be "color-blind"—and have raised them to treat everyone equally—suddenly resist their relationship with someone of a different race.²³

Alternatively, some whites are personally transformed by their intimate relationships with a black partner and cope in ways that are similar to those of blacks who have been racially socialized to recognize and resist racism and racial inequalities. Interracially married whites may never have thought about being white and/or they may have been blind to discrimination prior to their relationship, but once coupled with a black partner these same individuals describe being forced to contend with the ambiguities, contradictions, and racism that are triggered by their relationship. Being exposed to the everyday experiences of racism faced by their black partners and/or their mixed-race children can be a transformative and painful process for white partners.²⁴ If they were previously shielded from the negative effects of racism, they may be forced to rethink their previous understanding of race relations, confront white privilege, and reexamine their own beliefs about race, as well as those of their immediate family and friends. In other words, experiencing negative sanctions for partnering with a person of color can transform interracial intimacy into a micro-level political site that leads some (not all) white partners to shift their stance from one of *color blindness* to *racial cognizance* or *racial literacy*.²⁵ France Winddance Twine and Amy Steinbugler describe racial literacy as a set of everyday analytic practices that include:

- (1) a recognition of the symbolic and material value of Whiteness; (2) the definition of *racism* as a current social problem rather than a historical legacy; (3) an understanding that racial identities are *learned* and an outcome of social practices; (4) the possession of racial grammar and a vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of

race, racism, and antiracism; (5) the ability to translate (interpret) racial codes and racialized practices; and (6) an analysis of the ways that racism is mediated by class inequalities, gender hierarchies, and heteronormativity.²⁶

This rethinking of race, racism, and racial identity helps white partners to cultivate a critical analysis to understand how larger socio-political and historical forces shape the different types of resistance to their interracial relationship that they experience from whites and blacks.

In terms of coping with external pressure and border patrolling, racial literacy leads individuals to reorganize their social networks and reorient their behaviors. For example, Glenn was an interracially married, white male respondent of Twine and Steinbugler. He described how the development of racial literacy increased his awareness of “everyday racism” and racial practices using the following example:

Now having spent time with [my wife], I realize that I am a bit [racist] in terms of . . . preconceptions and ideas that you have [about black people] . . . There were jokes about the length of a black man’s penis. . . . My attitude then was, “Well, I’d quite like somebody to make a joke about . . . how big mine was.” And [my wife] sort of explained to me . . . , and once it had been explained to me, I thought, “You’re right.” I used to tell jokes like that, but I’ve avoided those now. . . . As soon as somebody starts to tell a joke that’s got any mention of the race of whatever the person, I tend to frown. And then afterwards I dissect the joke.²⁷

Glenn’s wife helped him to understand how the common social practice of joking about black men’s penises was degrading to black people. Glenn’s new understanding about racism and how it is reproduced in the everyday practice of joke telling has altered his behavior. Instead of telling these jokes, he now resists their telling and has the mental tools to deconstruct them to the joke teller. His emergent racial literacy enables such daily acts of resistance to the racism and border patrolling that he experiences as a white man married to a black woman.

WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

One of the most common concerns that interracial couples face is “what about the children?” Implicit in this question is the idea that mixed-race children will be social misfits (“neither fish nor fowl”) who will be rejected by both blacks and whites and will be plagued by various pathologies, including depression, identity confusion, and double rejection. In addition to issues of psychological

adjustment and racial identity development, “what about the children?” is also a literal question in terms of how mixed-race children will be racially socialized by their parents, as well as classified by the state, institutional bureaucracies, and on various government forms. These “tragic mulatto” stereotypes are not surprising given that throughout American history, racial group membership has been understood as mutually exclusive so that individuals can belong to one (and only one) race. The one-drop rule mandated that mixed-race children be categorized as black and develop a black identity. Only recently have multiracial groups and parents of mixed-race children begun to question and push back against the one-drop rule and the logic underlying it.

While it is true that raising mixed-race children presents particular challenges for parents, the stereotypes of identity confusion are not supported by recent research. Instead, mixed-race adolescents and young adults are creating identities that reflect their particular social context. For example, Kerry Ann Rockquemore and David Brunsma studied mixed-race college students (with one black and one white parent) and found that individuals chose between five different racial identities.²⁸ Some mixed-race students identified exclusively with the race of one of their parents, self-identifying as “black” (or less commonly as “white”). Others blended the ancestry of both their parents to create a hybrid identity as “biracial,” “multiracial,” or “mixed.” Others shifted between several different identities (“black,” “white,” and/or “biracial”), depending on where they were and whom they were interacting with in any given environment. Still others refused any racial categorization whatsoever and instead identified themselves as “human.”²⁹ In this way, they were neither constrained by the one-drop rule nor disallowed from the development of an identity that reflects their ancestry, physical appearance, and childhood socialization.

The second important and consistently documented fact about mixed-race children is that, in addition to *variation* in how they racially self-identify, their racial identity may change over their lifetime. This differs from conceptualizations of single-race identity because identity development for mixed-race individuals neither occurs in a predictable linear fashion, nor does it have a single endpoint. Numerous researchers have documented how racial identity is dynamic and changing as their mixed-race respondents move through their lives, shifting and changing as their lives are linked to social, material, cultural, economic, and institutional forces.³⁰ For example, Steven Hitlin, Scott Brown, and Glen Elder demonstrate how mixed-race adolescents follow various “pathways of racial self-identification” over time and are four times more likely to switch their racial identity than to consistently report the same identification over time.³¹ While change occurs, it varies between diversifying, consolidating, or maintaining “multiracial” self-identification.

Certainly, mixed-race children and adolescents face situations in which they are literally forced into self-designating as a member of just one racial group (e.g., on government forms, applications, and school admission forms). Yet, even describing their racial identity as a “choice” obfuscates the reality that such choices are constrained by physical appearance, the broader context and history of American race relations, and institutional mandates of identification. Raising healthy mixed-race children and navigating the reality of race and racism in their children’s lives creates an additional layer of complexity that is utterly unique to interracial families.

FAMILIES AS THEY REALLY ARE: RACIALLY HOMOGENOUS

Considering families *as they really are* involves asking critical questions about why dominant patterns in marriages exist, what historical factors underlie those dominant patterns, and what prevents those dominant patterns from changing. In this chapter, we have asked why interracial marriages remain the rare exception in the United States, what happens to individuals who dare to break out of the dominant pattern of marrying someone of the same race, and why racial patterns of endogamy for blacks and whites have been so very slow to change. In that process, it’s clear that the seemingly individual decision about whom you find attractive, desire sexually, hook up with, date, live with, marry, divorce, and/or have children with are all “choices” that are fundamentally shaped by race relations and racial ideology in your particular historical moment. In the United States, our rhetoric and thinking may encourage a color-blind worldview, but those who cross the color line experience border patrolling that works against—and fundamentally contradicts—the color-blind ideas that racism is a relic of the past and that race no longer matters in our intimate relationships.

The discrepancy between color-blind beliefs and the reality of resistance to interracial marriages helps us to better understand the slow pace of change in interracial intimacy. When we consider the history of separation and social distance between blacks and whites, as well as the deep well of ideological beliefs about the differences between groups, it is unsurprising that interracial families today continue to face hostility, ostracism, and concern over the fate of their children. And yet, ironically, it is the children of interracial unions who may just force a reconciliation of color-blind attitudes and racist behavior by openly challenging the logic of white supremacy, recognizing the social construction of racial groups, and pushing our country into a new and honest dialogue about the reality of race in America.