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Exploring Parental Approval and Disapproval for Black and White Interracial Couples

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Black and White interracial couples encounter societal and familial assessments that create additional tensions and conflict for their romantic relationship. This study examines parental approval and disapproval messages and their impact on interracial couples. Interdependence Theory and Facework provide the theoretical frameworks guiding this qualitative, interpretive examination. Thirty-eight individuals who represent 19 Black and White romantic pairs were each separately interviewed about their experiences as an interracial couple. Of particular interest is the communication of parental support or disapproval. Data were analyzed using Owen's (1984) thematic analysis procedures. Results reveal that interracial dyads both experience public disapproval and illustrate that not all couples experience parental disapproval. However, couples with dual parental approval were less bothered by negative outside experiences than were one-sided approval couples. Data also reveal the importance of parental approval messages and highlight the destructive nature of disapproval messages with regards to the interracial couple's face needs.

Exploring Parental Approval and Disapproval for Black and White Interracial Couples

Racial tensions continue to exist in 21st century United States. “The presence of race in the United States, is like the presence of the air we breathe—something always around us that we use constantly, without much thought” (Orbe & Harris, 2014, p. 23). Tatum (1997) likens the existence of racism to “smog in

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the air . . . sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in" (p. 6). Throughout U.S. history, some of the most pronounced tensions have existed between Black and White cultural community members and/or individuals (Allen, 2010; Jackson & Hopson, 2011). Yet, it is within the smoggy atmosphere of racism, tension, and what Harris (2000) identifies as a societal obsession with racial categorization, that individuals begin an interracial romantic relationship.

In addition to "regular" relational pressures, interracial couples also encounter societal and familial assessments that create tensions and conflict (Lawton, Foeman, & Braz, 2012). The purpose of this study is to examine couples' experiences of parental approval and disapproval, and their impact on Black and White interracial couples in particular. Interdependence Theory and Facework provide the theoretical frameworks guiding this examination. Before turning our discussion to interracial literature and the theoretical frameworks, first we define and discuss the role of parental support and disapproval messages and highlight their effects.

Parental Support Messages

We are specifically interested in the communication of parental support and disapproval and the myriad ways in which such messages may impact Black and White interracial couples in the United States. In terms of parental approval and disapproval messages, "parental" specifically refers to the parents and/or stepparents of each person in the dyad. Approval and disapproval messages have three categories: dual-disapproval, one-sided approval, and dual-approval. Dual-disapproval refers to situations where neither individual in the relationship has all involved parents approving of his or her relationship. Dual-approval indicates that all parents involved with the dyad approve of the romance. One-sided approval occurs when one only partner in the dyad has approval from all parents.

We position parental approval as a form of social support, which can help to affirm couples' relational identities. Social support is a communicative interaction where individuals provide hands-on physical help or emotional consolation to one another (Virtanen & Isotalus, 2011). There are three categories of social support: emotional (expressions of care and concern), informational (provision of new information or advice), and instrumental (the offering of goods and services) (Jacobs & Sillars, 2012). We contend that parental affirmation conveys emotional support and that approving family members create an atmosphere of social support. Next, we review previous interracial communication literature. Here, we highlight interracial disapproval, public disapproval, and family opposition.

Interracial Relationships

A current and concise overview of the history and problems associated with interracial romantic relationships is provided by Brummet and Steuber (2015). The focus in this section is upon the role of disapproval faced by interracial couples; a topic that has received limited attention in the academic literature.

Relationship disapproval. Interracial couples are no strangers to relationship disapproval. Lehmilller and Agnew (2006) describe interracial couples as being traditionally marginalized and open to public condemnation because of their “less-desirable” pairing. Other marginalized pairings include couples with age-gaps as well as gay and lesbian couples. In addition to having a marginalized romantic couple status, Vaquera and Kao (2005) suggest that interracial couples are more cognizant of their public image when compared to couples who date inside their race. They often find themselves in public situations where their interracial relationship is excessively overvisible, which Patai (1992) characterizes as a *stigma*. As applied to the couples in this study, parental disapproval heightens their tainted visibility and/or stigma when interacting with the disapproving parent(s).

Public disapproval. Although public appearances as a couple would not usually lead to an uncomfortable situation for most couples, studies have repeatedly demonstrated that interracial couples may encounter negative reactions and experience public disapproval (Castle Bell & Hastings, 2011; Foeman & Nance, 1999, 2002; Orbe & Harris, 2014). For example, Kreager (2008) investigated the correlation between problems with peers in school among interracially and intraracially dating pairs, reporting that students who dated interracially were more likely to experience peer trouble at school than those who dated in their race. Furthermore, Castle Bell and Hastings (2011) explain that interracial couples reported encountering racism from individuals outside the relationship, which threatens their positive face and functions to stigmatize the relationship. They examined the types of face threats Black and White couples experienced and reviewed how corrective facework strategies are employed by couples as a response. In addition to public disapproval, the history of Black and White racial tensions often translates into family tensions and interracial relationship opposition.

Family opposition. Scholars studying people’s perceptions of interracial relationships often address the issue of concern for family opposition. For example, in Mills, Daly, Longmore, and Kilbride’s (1995) survey of 142 undergraduates, they found that individuals had negative feelings about interracial dating and felt their parents would also share the same negative sentiment. Furthermore, Harris and Kalbfleisch (2000) reported that individuals are unwilling to engage in interracial romantic relationships because they worry family members would not

approve. Research has also shown that some interracial couples experience familial opposition regarding their romances. For example, some interracial couples anticipate, worry, and struggle to gain family approval and often experience family disapproval (Castle Bell & Hastings, 2012; Wilson, 2009).

Theoretical Framework

As the specific elements of Interdependence Theory are mentioned in the introductory chapter of this special issue, here we offer a brief review of how Interdependence Theory informs this analysis. Thereafter, facework will be covered in detail. Please refer to the introduction article for more background on Interdependence Theory. Both theories are employed to analyze and interpret data and results in the sections to follow.

Interdependence theory. Interdependence Theory shows great promise in better understanding interaction between family members and romantic partners and offers a language to discuss family interactions. Central to this exploration is the question of whether a relationship between an individual and his or her parents involves dependence or interdependence. Kelley and Thibaut (1978) explain that individuals have power over those who are dependent upon them. Dependence, then, suggests a level of control over another, whereas an interdependent relationship is characterized by equal relational power. Parental approval and disapproval messages may be considered more supportive or extreme depending on the dependent or interdependent nature of such relational power.

Johnson (2003) further contributes to Interdependence Theory, noting the distinction between positive and negative interdependence. Positive interdependence involves situations in which relational partners are willingly connected and striving for mutual goal attainment. Positive interdependence is achieved through promotive interaction where communicators facilitate mutual goal attainment. Thus, interracial couples together with approving family members promote positive interdependence. In contrast, negative interdependence involves a competitive structure and is not characterized by achieving the same relational goals (the parents want the couple to break up while the adult-child seeks parental approval). Thus, negative interdependence is communicated through parental disapproval messages meant to break up the interracial dyad, rather than support their romantic relationship. Together, Interdependence Theory and Facework are productive for better understanding parental approval and disapproval messages and their impact on the interracial couples in our study.

Face and facework. Face refers to “the situated public identities that one claims during interaction” (Metts, 2000, p. 78). Face plays an important role in maintaining and managing relationships. “Healthy relationships are marked by the

ability and willingness (of both partners) to protect and validate the assertion of both partners desired identities” (Metts, 2000, p. 77). Facework can be explained as the process by which individuals prevent the loss of face for themselves as well as their partner during communication (Goffman, 1967). In essence, people interacting attend to one another’s positive and negative face needs.

Face needs, approval, and disapproval. Lim and Bowers (1991) explain that positive face needs refer to an individual’s desire to “have their goals, possessions, and achievements ratified, approved of, liked, or admired” (p. 420). Parental approval enhances couples’ positive face needs because it validates and communicates admiration of one’s choice in a romantic partner (i.e., “he or she is a real catch”) as well as one’s judgment in choosing a romantic partner. It is likely that parental approval communicates validation to interracial couples (i.e., “*not only* are you a good match, *we also* support your decision to date interracially”). Additionally, negative face needs represent “the want not to be imposed on by others (or the desire for autonomy)” (Lim & Bowers, 1991, p. 420). Parental approval satisfies couples’ negative face needs inasmuch as it increases couples’ autonomy and enables them to be together without imposition caused by disapproval and/or prejudice. Parental approval transforms the family space into an atmosphere of support, where the couple does not have to worry about experiencing prejudice or disapproval. Indeed, parental approval enables the family to function “as an agent of socialization that counters racism” (Wilder & Cain, 2011, p. 577).

Face threats, face attacks, and stigma. Facework can become instantly salient when one’s face is called into question (Tracy, 2002). A challenge to face can occur through instances labeled as Face Threatening Acts (FTAs), which include both verbal and nonverbal face threats such as extreme messages of disapproval. It is likely that parental disapproval produces a face threat for interracial couples. Further, severe accounts of parental disapproval can lead to face attacks. Tracy (2002) explains face threats constitute face attacks when the speaker (in this case, one or both parents) intentionally seeks to damage someone’s face. Couples may experience extreme messages of disapproval, such as when parental messages seek to intentionally damage the adult child’s face (or their partner’s), like being called names or threatened by family members. These experiences constitute face attacks.

Finally, as Vaquera and Kao (2005) explain, the interracial dating pair is a potentially stigmatizing relationship. Stigmas occur when categorizations, attributes, and beliefs about group members are so strongly held that people are “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one” (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Stigma is a useful term at both the individual and relational level. In addition to individual face threats and face attacks, the relational pair may also experience such stigmatization through extreme disapproval.

Research Questions

To examine the role of dual- and one-sided parental approval and disapproval messages within the context of Black and White interracial dating relationships, the following research questions guided the data analysis. The first research question posed was: How do couples with one-sided approval see parental disapproval impacting their relationship? The second research question explores the question: How do romantic couples with dual approval see parental approval impacting their relationship?

Method

Participants

In total, 38 qualitative interviews were conducted with 19 Black and White romantic couples. Our focus on Black and White couples was guided by the history of racial tension between these cultural communities. Participants' regions included 12 states: Connecticut, Texas, Delaware, Maryland, Washington State, New York, California, Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, Iowa, and Florida. This diversity of perspectives demonstrates that participant perceptions were not derived from living in one region. Their ages ranged between 19 and 50 years old. Relationship length ranged between 6 months and 18 years. Twelve couples were White women with Black men, whereas seven were Black women with White men. Two Black males were not born in the United States.

Procedure

Recruitment and methods of data collection. Couples were recruited for interviews through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is a method for qualitative data collection (Keyton, 2005). In keeping with this method, the researcher begins by interviewing one participant. After each interview, the researcher asks the participant if he or she can think of someone who would like to participate. The interviewee then speaks with this potential person and sends the interviewer a referral. We employed this process until 38 individual interviews were completed with 19 couples.

Interviews and interview guide. Data were collected through qualitative interviews that lasted between 35 and 75 minutes. Participants were interviewed separately to enable communication about their relationship without anxiety regarding their partner's thoughts (Patton, 2002). We used a semistructured interview schedule guide during interviews. This approach enabled researchers to ask follow-up questions not previously planned. Interviews were audio-recorded for

accuracy and were fully transcribed (Maxwell, 2005). Interviews with 15 couples (30 interviews) occurred over the phone, and interviews with four couples (eight interviews) were conducted face-to-face. Interviewees' names were changed to protect their identity.

Methods of data analysis. Data were analyzed using Owen's (1984) thematic analysis. Before beginning thematic analysis, we read complete transcriptions to ascertain contextual information. Next, we re-read the transcriptions and made notes in the margins regarding initial themes. Thereafter, Owen's analysis helped us narrow data into theme-and-theory-driven categories. We were attentive to communication that recurred between participants, to utterances that were repeated by participants, and to messages that participants emphasized during the interview conversation (Owen, 1984). Recurrence involves "observing two parts of the report that have the same thread of meaning" (Petronio, Sargent, Andea, Reganis, & Cichocki, 2004, p. 41). Repetition refers to "the duplication of key words and phrases" (p. 41). Finally, vocalic emphasis or forcefulness refers to "vocal inflections and dramatic pauses that stress or subordinate some utterances from other locutions in oral reports" (p. 41). This study's purpose was not to establish generalizability but to discover themes salient "within the group" of couples we interviewed (Maxwell, 2005, p. 115). Themes were considered actual categories if they were consistent across multiple participants.

Data verification. After analyzing the data, we sought to verify the information we developed by engaging in two qualitative forms of proof: member checks and respondent validation (Creswell, 2009; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Maxwell, 2005). Engaging in these verification processes creates a sense of validity about the results. Member checks involve discussing the results with individuals who are population members, but who were not interviewed as participants in the study (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The first author consulted with several couples to be certain the results reflected their lived experiences and employed respondent validation also helped to confirm results (Creswell, 2009; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Finally, interviewees were contacted to discuss the results to be certain that the meaning attached to the data was interpreted correctly (Patton, 2002).

Results

As noted, none of the couples interviewed came from families where both relational partners experienced parental disapproval. Of the 19 couples interviewed, 6 couples experienced one-sided parental approval while 13 experienced dual approval. Couples were coded as one-sided-approval or dual approval if their interview narratives consistently conveyed dual or one-sided parental support. In reviewing data we quickly noticed that couples experiencing one-sided approval

faced different challenges than those with dual approval. Although both couple types reported experiences of public disapproval, all six of the couples with one-sided approval couples shared parental and public disapproval experiences. Extracting and analyzing data specifically related to conversations about family interactions helped to understand disapproval and face implications for couples in this study.

The terminology for one-sided approval and dual approval couples emerged organically during interviews. Specifically, approval and/or disapproval narratives emerged from the following questions: (a) “did you think about having to consider pressure from family, friends, or the outside world before you started dating;” (b) “tell me about the conversation where you shared with your family that you were involved in a serious interracial dating relationship;” (c) “how did your family feel about your being in an interracial relationship;” and finally, (d) “do you ever feel like you have to defend your relationship to others? Can you share specific circumstances where you remember having done this?”

Below, we review data derived from interviews with couples experiencing one-sided approval before examining dual approval narratives. In both cases, theoretical analyses are included throughout the results section and are further explicated in the discussion section.

One-Sided Parental Approval

Data analysis of one-sided approval focused on the effects of disapproval from one or both parents from one partner in the relationship. The data point to the ramifications of parental disapproval on positive and negative face needs and promotive communication. Predictably, the person who was the target of parental disapproval experienced anxiety and felt constrained and judged in family interactions with the disapproving parent(s). For some, initial conversations about their relationships were marked by potent parental disapproval. For others, disapproval narratives focused on parents’ feelings communicated through disapproval messages. Yet other interviewees’ lived experiences convey parental disapproval messages which are paired with the recognition of future public disapproval that extends beyond the family.

In the following example, Kayla described her first discussion with her family about her Black boyfriend as one that was filled with emotion:

One day, my mom called me and said, “Who is this Jack guy, what are you doing, what is going on? Is he Black?” and I said, “Yes and it really does not matter to me.” She said, “You know how your father is going to feel about this, what are you thinking?” Then my dad got on the phone and said, “you stupid little bitch.” Then, there was a lot of yelling and screaming and crying and my family was going crazy.

These first interactions where disapproval was first communicated to interviewees clearly were memorable occasions for disapproval recipients. Like Kayla,

Damon, a Black male in the next example, was concerned before disclosing to his mom. Damon feared and experienced his mother's disapproval; however, his mother also invoked societal disapproval as well:

I worried about talking to my mom. I told her that my girlfriend's name was Jane and my mom said, "she better not be a White girl." And we went through this whole thing. My mom, she um, she ranted and raved and she ah, she said things like, "You have to pick me or this White girl." I got my car taken away. She threatened to make me quit my job. My mom really was not ok with it. She likes Jane, she just wishes that she was not White. My mom was like, "There's so many Black women looking for an educated Black man and it hurts them to see a Black man go to a White girl." She told me if I was successful, that ah, um, society is going to look at it, like "that White girl brought him to where he is." She said people will think "he, ah, got to where he is because of her as opposed to me making it big together with Black woman.

The mother's disapproval in this example displays immediate effects on her son, Damon. She also casts concern onto his future by conveying that any successes he experiences will be credited to his White girlfriend, from a societal perspective.

Neither Kayla nor Damon had their positive face needs met; neither experienced relationship validation; neither family utilized positive interdependence or promotive communication to convey support for the interracial relationship. Moreover, the excerpts from the interviews demonstrate face threatening acts. For Kayla parental disapproval produces a face attack when Kayla's father calls her a "stupid bitch." For Damon, his mother's threatens to "take away his car" or make him "quit" his job. The positive and negative face threats communicated directly to the child are problematic because a parent and an adult son or daughter are more interdependent due to the affection experienced by all involved. In both circumstances, the parental communication is powerfully constraining and utilizes dependent, power-over-you dialogue, which further intensifies threats to negative face needs (Johnson, 2003; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993).

Negative judgments by a partner's family or one's own family affect both romantic partners. Jane (Damon's White girlfriend) reported she felt that she had to "try extra hard" to please her boyfriend Damon's parents and shared how she even questioned her perceived "worth as his White girlfriend" around his disapproving mother.

Family disapproval impacts both initial and subsequent interactions, as can be seen when Tim, a White male, describes the discomfort described resulting from his interracial relationship:

My mother, it really breaks her heart, when she starts thinking about what my children would look like if Nikole and I get married. I have blond hair and blue eyes and my mother does also. I get compliments on how I look like my mother. It breaks her heart that our future kids won't be blond-haired and blue-eyed. The last time she and I spoke explicitly about interracial relationships, we both cried . . . and it really hurt. For my mother, skin color made a difference. My mom feeling this way creates tension . . . I never wanted to talk about it again with her.

This excerpt shows how, even though the reasons motivating the disapproval from parents vary, the implications for tensions and problematic subsequent interactions are consistent. In each of these cases, parental disapproval has a stigmatizing impact on the couples' relationships, their romances were positioned as tainted, stained, and unacceptable, and familial expressions of care were withheld and replaced with attacks and "power-over-you" communication. The parental interpretations of the adult child's interracial relationship in some ways seem to take sides with society's perspective on the relationship.

Parental Dual Approval

Dual approval couples had the support of all parents involved. Of the 19 couples interviewed, 13 enjoyed dual approval. Approval messages reflect parental support of the relationship and leave the couple feeling accepted. An interview with Nancy, a Black female, depicts approval messages. After disclosing that her boyfriend was White she explains her parents' reactions: "They said 'you love who you love.' They were very positive about it . . . My family is understanding and accepting and, uh, I was comfortable telling them." As one would expect, receiving approval upon the initial disclosure to the parent(s) regarding an interracial relationship eased the disclosure experience. Seven of the 13 dual approval couples in this study knew that they would have family support. However, 6 of the 13 dual approval couples cited initial concerns about sharing with one or both parents but were then relieved at the outcome.

Gene, a White male, describes his disclosure of his dating relationship to his mother. The excerpt from the interview shows the kind of relief that acceptance brings:

I didn't know how my mom was going to react. And so, anyway I said, "Oh, by the way, I'm dating somebody, and I really like her, and she's Black." And I just kept on with the conversation. My mom immediately said if she had it to do it all over again, she thinks she would have married a Black man. So she immediately picked up on the fact that I was telling her and (sought) to reassure me by saying "you know, I think it's great." I know that was a weird way to put me at ease but she was basically saying well "that's no big thing."

Gene's description was unique in his mother's attempt to communicate a supportive response by sharing her own thoughts about being in an interracial relationship. Importantly, this excerpt reflected a common theme of putting the adult child's anxiety to rest by validating the relationship with a communicative response that satisfied positive face needs.

Acceptance has several face implications. First, positive face is promoted through accepting one's choice of romantic partner. Negative face is also promoted through parental acceptance. Although face attacks constrain an interactional partner by positioning him or her as needing to defend one's choices (in partner) or lose positive face, approval of a romantic partner does not determine a next

appropriate line of interaction. This grants the discloser optimal freedom in proceeding. It also has implications for later interactions. Although the discloser who received parental disapproval experienced constraints in subsequent interactions *vis a vis* “tensions,” those who received approval could proceed without tensions.

In addition to easing tensions within the family, 5 of the 13 dual approval couples shared that they draw upon their families’ support to more effectively cope with threats from outside the family. Brittney, a White female, shared a story regarding experiencing racism from a family friend at her wedding rehearsal. Her fiancé was introduced to her father’s boss, whom she described as racist. When her fiancé extended his hand to shake, the recipient refused to shake his hand. Brittney elaborated, “She explained it away as a gentleman does not extend his hand first to a lady, or something very Victorian, very 18th, 19th century. But you know, our family handled it.” The snubbing of a handshake can be seen as highly threatening to positive face. This action potentially functions to communicate disregard for the couple, dishonor for their impending union, and an aversion to interracial marriage altogether. Although Brittney does not specify how her family “handled it,” her family employed promotive communication and was able to satisfactorily mitigate the face threat.

Discussion

One-Sided Parental Approval

In each of the above cases of one-sided parental approval, the disapproved individual feels the reverberating effects from the partner’s disapproving family of origin. Threats to negative face, both at the individual and couple level, are seen in the descriptions of pain and awkwardness. The data demonstrate how a lack of parental social support exacerbates anxiety and tension as promotive communicative expressions of parental support are withheld. Furthermore, the data also illustrate that adult children, who are denied parental approval of their romantic partner, experience an ongoing sense of discomfort accompanying any thoughts of, or references to, disapproving family members. This is also true for the romantic partners triggering parental disapproval. In cases of extreme disapproval, dependent, power-over-you communication exists. Negative interdependence occurs as the parent desires the adult child to end the interracial relationship whereas the adult child desires parental approval.

The term “tension” was also recurrent in references to disapproving family members. The constraints, whether directed toward the parents’ own offspring or the romantic partner, are in some ways experienced within the relationship. This term seems to suggest an ongoing concern for continued conflicts and face threats. The tension in itself can be seen as threatening negative face, as one’s sense of freedom to feel comfortable in discussing a romantic partner is constrained.

Moreover, parental communication of disapproval changes the parent and adult-child relationship; they likely become less positively interdependent and their goals become more competitive. Couples who continue their romance cannot share openly with their family about their partner without further experiencing parental disapproval. As parents communicate prejudice against interracial relationships, their negative opinions produce constraining tensions for the romantic pair. Such tensions inhibit autonomy and reinforce negative face threats, and transforms the couples' parents' physical homes into a place they are not welcome. In this regard, parental disapproval can be seen as a "cost" of the interracial relationship specifically attributed to the racial make-up of the people involved. Unfortunately, that "cost" is well beyond the control of those in the relationship and functions to threaten couples' negative face needs.

Ultimately, parental disapproval messages call the couple's face into question thereby producing a face threat; they create anxiety for both partners; they heighten "interracial" visibility and position interracial romances as tainted with stigma; they impose on positive face needs by withholding social support and affirmation of a chosen romantic partner; and threaten negative face needs.

Parental Dual Approval

Examining the dual approval findings through the lens of Interdependence Theory, we can see how dual approval positions both romantic partners in a more equal, positive, interdependent relationship. Dual approval not only meets couple's face needs, it also cooperatively links parents and adult children together to satisfy relational goals through positive interdependence and promotive communication. Such dialogue appears to result in more comfortable, promotive interactions at the time of the interracial disclosure and thereafter. This provides a foundation for better handling any societal face threats toward interracial couple. Dual approval couples immediately had their positive face needs met. They received emotional and instrumental social support through parental expressions of care, concern, and the communication of relationship approval through promotive dialogue. Ultimately, parental dual approval plays a role in the positive, promotive validation of the couple's chosen romantic partner, their positive face needs, and their romantic relationship.

Dual approval not only satisfies couples' positive face needs, it also addresses their negative face concerns. Unlike the one-sided approval couples, parental dual approval affords interracial couples much needed autonomy and freedom from parental imposition of prejudice and dependent power-over-you communication in private spaces. Dual approval is valuable because such dialogue does not contain elements of disapproving, dependent communication. In a discussion about Black families, Wilder and Cain (2011), explain "Black parents and caregivers have worked to buffer Black children from the external forces of racism"

(p. 578). In a similar manner, parental dual approval satisfies couples' negative face needs as their validation buffers the couple from disapproval. Specifically, parental dual approval potentially offers freedom from prejudice and may satisfy couples' negative face wants.

Finally, dual approval transforms both parents' homes into a physical safe "space" where they can come and expect not to encounter criticism regarding their relationship (Hopson, 2011). Thus, couples can visit each family's home without feeling tension or that they are tainted by stigma. But Hopson (2011) refers to space not only as a physical location, but also as a psychological place or mindset. Our findings suggest that dual approval couples also have the ability to enter into a safe psychological space by speaking with their approving parents any time they need them. Parental approval provides a safe space characterized by mutual power and interdependence between parents and their adult children.

Perhaps the negative face benefits, like access to a safe space, are the most obvious when comparing dual approval parents' responses to those provided by disapproving parents, such as: (they do not worry that) their parents will verbally attack their significant other, disown them, take away their car, kick them out, quit speaking to them, or even threaten to make them choose the romantic partner or the family. Dual approval families "represent one social institution that in many ways is responsible for shaping [the interracial couples' socialization regarding acceptance or disapproval – as well as] identity, perspective, and life experience . . . which equip children [couples in this case] with the beliefs, values, and resources needed for success" as a romantic couple (Wilder & Cain, 2011, p. 579). Ultimately parental dual approval augments and addresses face needs and has the potential to affirm the couple's relationship, to buffer them from external racism, and to transform their perspective by providing emotional social support and promotive communication when they encounter public disapproval.

Policy Implications

The findings regarding the salience of the role for parental approval have implications for teaching and training, as well as pointing to broader changes needed in society. First, with respect to teaching family-oriented curriculum, such as family communication and social work, this study points to how the lack of family support regarding interracial relationships undermines functional family communication. While some parents express concerns over potential societal repercussions of the choice to date outside one's own race, this study finds that parental disapproval simply removes the solid foundation of social support that dual approval couples experience when facing society. In essence, societal disapproval of the couple is compounded by strained relationships within one's immediate social circle.

On a societal level, people need to become more accustomed to seeing interracial relationships as a part of the fabric of a diverse country. As recently as 2013, a Cheerios™ commercial created backlash from some of the viewing public when it featured an interracial family. The attention paid to this commercial highlights the relative rarity of this kind of family portrayal. Perhaps more disturbing than the backlash, however, is the fact that as late as 2013, it was still highly unusual for a mixed race family to be portrayed in mainstream advertising media. Extending beyond commercials, interracial families are rarely visible in images throughout society. Beginning as early as children's books, portraits of diverse family and relationship types need to be included. Commercials, advertising, and programming should align more carefully with actual trends in society. As interracial relationships become normalized in our visual landscape, they will be less apt to serve as a trigger for reaction.

Conclusion

Regarding the first research question, the data reveal that one-sided parental approval impacted interracial romantic relationships in numerous ways. First, disapproval exacerbates the tension and anxiety couples experience and it fails to meet their positive and negative face needs. The data indicate that family disapproval actually heightens stigma, as disapproval messages function to disconfirm and invalidate their interracial romantic relationships. Furthermore, the data suggest that disapproval continues to plague the couples' relationships as it consistently reemerges in communication with the disapproving parent(s). Finally, parental disapproval messages produce negative interdependent communication, where the parent communicates "power-over you" messages to their adult children or to their adult child's romantic partner. Ultimately, disapproval messages are inherently face threatening, produce competitive dialogue demonstrated through negative interdependence, and function to attack the couple's relationship face while also leaving the couple's positive and negative face needs unsatisfied.

Regarding the second research question, the data reveal that parental dual approval impacted interracial couples in several ways. Notably, it satisfies interracial couples' positive and negative face needs as parental validation communicates necessary social support messages of care and concern. Second, the data reveal that parental approval reduces stigma, which makes the couple feel less conspicuously visible in the home, and helps the romantic pair manage public face threats better than couples who do not receive dual approval. In this regard, parental dual approval provides a safe space for the couple to come where they are free from the imposition of prejudice. Finally, in addition to meeting positive and negative face needs parental approval also promotes positive interdependent communication between parents and their adult children.

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

Several limitations and future directions for research extend from this study. First, the concept of dual approval emerged organically during the research process as the first author and 38 interviewees engaged in dialogue about their decision to enter into an interracial romantic relationship and inquired about any race-related hesitations they experienced before beginning the romance. The natural development of parental approval and disapproval demonstrates the significance of parental communication of validation or condemnation for interracial couples. However, questions regarding family acceptance or more specifically, the family's reaction to the interracial romance were unplanned entirely. Additional follow-up questions about approval and disapproval experiences may have produced further data, which could have elicited more detailed themes regarding parental approval or disapproval.

Future interracial research should ask questions regarding the specific communicative nature of parental approval and disapproval. It would also be helpful to gain insight into how parental approval changes over time as the parent is confronted with important family events such as marriage or the birth of a child. Furthermore, it would be helpful to examine circumstances where mixed parental approval occurs (John's mom approves, but his dad does not approve). It would be advantageous to examine how approval or disapproval are communicated by parents in disagreement. It would also be valuable to learn how the individual in the interracial dyad actually interprets his or her parent's approval or disapproval in mixed-approval families. Additional research should also consider the role that siblings and extended family members play in constructing a sense of family approval. Siblings or even parents who have dated or married interracial partners before may pave the way for acceptance in the immediate family. Further, grandparents living in the family home or who reside in close proximity to the couple may also contribute to the construction of family approval or disapproval.

Finally, this study contributes to a growing need to understand the increasingly common phenomenon of interracial relationships. But perhaps more important, our research draws attention to the growing realization that prejudice continues to be produced and reproduced in public and private spaces through every day interpersonal communication in the United States. For Black and White interracial couples, parental predispositions for or against interracial dating are very personal for individuals in the romantic dyad. Ultimately, as we employ communication to transform prejudice on the macro level in the United States, let us begin this change in our families.

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