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Narratives of intimate interracial relationships in South Africa

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2020
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/30766

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ABSTRACT

The current research study sought to explore and understand the experiences of young people in interracial relationships post-Apartheid through their own personal narratives. A total of 8 individuals who identified themselves as being in an interracial relationship were interviewed. The data from these interviews were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis, constructing multiple complex narratives of interracial relationships in South Africa quite differently from the typical pathologizing narrative. These significant themes are discussed in relation to the broad intersections of 1) race and class, and 2) race and gender, and the possibilities for forming new identities in the present and for the future. Participants told their narratives in a way that displayed an intersection of issues of race, religion, culture, language and social class in influencing their intimate relationships as well as in constructing their own identities as individuals and in relationship with their partners in relation to racial categorization. All participants asserted that they did not experience race as a significant factor of division or incompatibility within their relationship, although it remains salient in their relationships with others (in families, communities and public spaces). The sense of common identification with their partners was often expressed in terms that highlighted class as more pertinent than race. Levels of education, language and the types of spaces these individuals occupied appeared to play a role in facilitating interracial relationships and in impacting their relationship dynamics. However, it remains clear that hierarchies of class and race are closely aligned in contemporary South Africa and these middle-class couples may find some aspects of their own lives similar despite raced histories, but the racialized past remains significant. Furthermore, participants reported that gender dynamics also create prominent issues within their relationships but that these dynamics were also shaped by an intersection with race including questions of embodiment and how one's body may be experienced and perceived by oneself and by others. Lastly, the participants talked about forming new identities as individuals and as intimate partnerships, particularly exploring ways of doing things or thinking about things that may differ from their own upbringing as a way to find common ground. This means that these relationships are characterized by fluidity in identities, entailing patterns of asserting and resisting racialized (and gendered, cultured and other) identities.