



Creating Space for Dialogue: Discussing Interracial Relationships in a Racialized World

A Review of

Interracial Couples, Intimacy, and Therapy: Crossing Racial Borders

by Kyle D. Killian

New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013. 262 pp. ISBN
978-0-231-13295-4 (paperback). \$40.00, paperback

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0036359>

Reviewed by

Bobbi J. Miller 

Topics related to the intersections of people's identities and the power structure undergirding the way those intersections shape people's lives and relationships are complex and often difficult to discuss. Although these aspects of being are the very core of our experiences, we generally struggle to find the right words to engage others in understanding us and talking about the impact of our differences, and societies' valuing of those differences, on the initiation and development of relationships with one another.

In his text *Interracial Couples, Intimacy, and Therapy: Crossing Racial Borders*, Kyle Killian addresses these tensions as articulated by the 20 couples who participated in this project. The main audience for this book is interracial couples and mental health professionals, both novice and experienced, who work with these families. A major strength of this work is the balance Killian is able to attain between pointing out areas of potential concern in the couple dynamic and remaining sensitive to how those dynamics developed and ways they have allowed couples to function in oppressive circumstances.

In response to past research in this area, which has applied a predominantly deficit-based approach to understanding interracial and intercultural couples (e.g., Bratter & King, 2008), Killian does a masterful job of describing participants' experiences in a nonjudgmental tone that allows the reader to engage with both the challenges these couples face and the inherent strengths they demonstrate in developing novel solutions to dealing with negative public reactions. He addresses some of the positive and negative consequences of those decisions, particularly related to how couples are able to be fully themselves with one another in a manner that fosters intimacy and understanding. Finally, Killian provides suggestions about how therapists can work with interracial couples in a way that helps them examine and "synthesize" their differences into a "new, more inclusive relationship" (p. 154).

Consistent with other research examining the experience of interracial couples (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013), Killian uses an ecosystemic perspective to discuss how aspects of individuals' identities (particularly race, ethnicity, gender, and class) shape members' experiences both within the couple relationship and as a couple interacting with the larger communities that they are embedded within. This focus addresses an identified need for more research examining process issues related to the development of relationships across racial lines (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013; Troy, Lewis-Smith, & Laurenceau, 2006).

Using discourse analysis, Killian describes four main dominant narratives in society that both describe and shape the couples' relationships: (a) homogamy, (b) hypersensitivity, (c) the insignificance of history, and (d) no race talk. Taken together, these discourses are consistent with previous research that has found that interracial couples report that the racial/cultural aspects of their partner are part of what attracted them, and they also tend to deemphasize the importance of cultural differences in their relationship (Seshadri & Knudson-Martin, 2013).

When placing these dominant discourses within the context of the larger literature on multiethnic families, Killian's work reinforces the idea that intentionality in interracial relationships is needed to preserve connections to each member's cultural group and practices, to counter the influence of White privilege, and to increase intimacy in relationships. For example, similar themes can be found in research on transracially adoptive families that has focused on parental color blindness—where parents discount the importance of attending to the role of race in their family relationships and parenting responsibilities. Instead, they focus on the primacy of their affectionate bonds in superseding any issues that may arise due to racial difference (Rojewski, 2005; Sweeney, 2013). Consistent with the potential consequences noted by Killian, adult transracial adoptees have indicated that this approach to the parent-child relationship constrained communication and did not allow them to fully explore and embrace their birth culture and racial heritage (Samuels, 2009). Therefore, Killian's work may highlight an underlying dynamic that affects other dyads in multiracial families and points to the need to explore the similarities and differences that are inherent in varied subsystems (e.g., parent-child, partners) in these families.

A lingering question that readers may have at the conclusion of the text is how Killian made sense of the varying levels of relational stability for the couples involved on the basis of some of the different strategies used to navigate racial/cultural differences. Demographic variables, including the current status of relationships, are included in an appendix to the book. However, these variables are not directly addressed. This may be a function of the fact that the book was written in the middle of collecting data on a second group of couples and therefore Killian did not have complete follow-up information for all involved. However, this discussion would have provided additional insight useful for clinicians working with interracial/intercultural couples.

Overall Killian does an excellent job of discussing the intersections of race, gender, and socioeconomic factors as they affect the development and progression of intimate relationships in the lives of his participants. He also provides clear and detailed recommendations for practitioners about how to approach their work with interracial/intercultural couples. The end result is a text poised to make a strong contribution to the literature on working therapeutically with such couples and to the broader literature on multiracial families.

References

- Bratter, J. L., & King, R. B. (2008). "But will it last?" Marital instability among interracial and same-race couples. *Family Relations*, 57, 160–171. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2008.00491.x> PsycINFO →
- Rojewski, J. W. (2005). A typical American family? How adoptive families acknowledge and incorporate Chinese cultural heritage in their lives. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 22, 133–164. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10560-005-3415-x> PsycINFO →
- Samuels, G. (2009). Being raised by White people: Navigating racial differences among adopted multiracial adults. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71, 80–94. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2008.00581.x> PsycINFO →
- Seshadri, G., & Knudson-Martin, C. (2013). How couples manage interracial and intercultural differences: Implications for clinical practice. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 39, 43–58. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2011.00262.x> PsycINFO →
- Sweeney, K. (2013). Race-conscious adoption choices, multiraciality, and color-blind racial ideology. *Family Relations*, 62, 42–57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3729.2012.00757.x> PsycINFO →
- Troy, A. B., Lewis-Smith, J., & Laurenceau, J. (2006). Interracial and intraracial romantic relationships: The search for differences in satisfaction, conflict, and attachment style. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 23, 65–80. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0265407506060178> PsycINFO →