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## IDENTITY: HOW DEPTH OF UNDERSTANDING IMPACTS INTIMACY

### BETWEEN WHITE AND NON-WHITE SUBJECTS IN INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIPS

#### **Introduction**

Race relations are a particularly potent topic of discussion in the United States, this is helped in no part by the remnants of institutional racism that linger in society, whether it be on an interpersonal level, or a systemic one. Though the construct of race was first devised in Europe as a mechanism of social division and reinforce notions of White Exceptionalism, America's use of the concept took this to a new level, using the theory to justify atrocities such as the Transatlantic Slave Trade, Jim Crow laws, and the Japanese Internment Camps.

In addition, the relationship between science and race is also controversial, with science being used to lend reputability to destructive ideologies such as Eugenics and Social Darwinism, both of which are frequently cited as justifications for discrimination across the globe, from colorism and apartheid to genocides and ethnic cleansings.

The effects of institutional racism are still very much alive in society, but they have become more subtle and subversive to stay alive. Experiences of people of color in America largely differ from those of White Americans. While progress on all levels continues to be made narrow this divide and make a more equitable society, there is still much work to be done; part of this work involves correcting humanity's tumultuous relationship with race and science.

Structured, ethical, and clinical explorations of race relations can prove invaluable in providing nuance and reputability to conversations about race and ethnicity in society and help to encourage social progress and understanding, the latter being the focus of this paper. The two studies examined in this paper both grapple with understanding in the conversation of race relations, particularly with an emphasis on interracial relationships between white individuals and ethnic minorities.

### **Interracial Dating with Asian American Women and White European American Men**

“Influence of Interracial Dating on Racial and/or Ethnic Identities of Asian American Women and White European American Men” (AhnAllen & Suyemoto, 2011) examines the effects of interracial dating on self-perception, perception of others, and acting in Asian American women and WEA men. The choice to focus on AA women and WEA men was done because of abundance, with more than half of all interracial marriages being between AA women and WEA men.

To answer this question, researchers selected 9 young interracial couples (18 subjects total) to participate in individual interviews with researchers. All participants were required to have immigrated before the age of 10 to establish more consistent exposure to American racialization. Subjects and researchers were matched by ethnicity to create more detailed interviews (Papadopoulos & Lees, 2003); thus, the female subjects were interviewed by AhnAllen and the male subjects by an unnamed White European American research assistant. Subjects received \$15 for their participation. Demographic data of the participants found the median age of subjects to be 26 years old and the median duration of their relationships to be 29 months. Questions administered were created to collect qualitative data on perceived shifts in

self-perception, perception of others, and acting based on understandings of themselves and other racially and ethnically (AhnAllen, 2011, p. 66).

Of their findings, AhnAllen and Suyemoto's (2011) study found the most change for AA Women in how they perceived themselves, stating the following:

(1) Increased appreciation of Asian American culture and heritage (2) Increased self-confidence as Asian American woman because of acceptance and value from partner (3) Increased appreciation of uniqueness and personality characteristics not related to being Asian American. (p. 66, Table 2)

As for WEA men, AhnAllen and Suyemoto's (2011) study found the most change in how WEA men perceived others and in how they acted, stating:

(1) Increased open-mindedness and acceptance of (cultural) differences (2) Increased awareness of systemic racism and of impact on personal relationships (family) (3) Increased understanding of and empathy for Asian Americans and people of color. [For] Acting oneself: (1) Increased action as a White ally: educating others. [For] Acting with others: (1) Changes in interactions with Asian Americans (2) Changes in communication approaches with Asian American partner. (p. 66, Table 2)

Interestingly, AhnAllen and Suyemoto (2011) found that in AA Women, there was an, "Increased comfort in speaking out or self-expression." (p. 66, Table 2); specifically, that multiple interviewees had mentioned taken to social and/or political activism because their relationships provided safe spaces for personal expression (AhnAllen, 2011, p. 68). Multiple White European American interviewees also mentioned specific their specific realization of white privilege (AhnAllen, 2011, p. 68) and the practice of "educating others about racism white privilege." (AhnAllen, 2011, p. 70).

Ultimately, AhnAllen and Suyemoto (2011) established that interracial relationships between AA women and WEA men proved beneficial to broadening understanding of one's own racial ethnic identity as well as those of others. AA Women mentioned that their WEA partners provided validation from a dominant group which, in turn, validated their experiences, while WEA men demonstrated shifts in their understandings of their own cultures and their own whiteness.

### **Achieving Accuracy in Interracial Relationships**

“Do You Really Understand? Achieving Accuracy in Interracial Relationships” (Holoien, D. S., Bergsieker, H. B., Shelton, J. N., & Alegre, J. M., 2015) is a combination of two studies ultimately trying to answer the question, “During interracial interactions, when are Whites and racial minorities likely to accurately perceive how understood cross-race partners feel?” To do this, researchers at Princeton University devised two studies to assess how long-term and spontaneous interaction in interracial relations affected feelings of being understood.

Study 1 took 234 undergraduates to a beginning-of-the-year orientation in which they were matched into 117 same-sex roommate pairs. 59 of the pairs were same-race dyads (19 Asian, 10 Black, 30 White), and 58 were cross-race dyads (33 White/Asian, 25, White/Black). All participants were asked to write in a journal nightly over a 10-day period, and researchers would collect their data in two waves 1 week apart from each other. Questions were created to extrapolate quantitative data using a seven-point agreeability scale to assess each subject's open-mindedness, understanding, desire to affiliate, and initial closeness. To measure the accuracy of interpersonal understanding, self-assessment of one subject's ability to understand their counterpart was referenced with the other's score of how understood they felt by the subject. (Holoien, 2015, p. 80)

Study 2 took 72 Black/White dyads, 54 female and 18 male and were seated in front of each other and a researcher would facilitate conversations between the two partners. Holoien's (2015) procedure goes as follows:

first interaction, participants spent 5 min discussing five "small talk" questions adapted from Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, and Bator (1997; e.g., "What did you do this past summer?"). The experimenter then returned to set up the second interaction by having White participants select a topic to discuss from a set of nine facedown cards and Black participants select the first speaker by drawing a name from a lottery. Both drawings were rigged to yield the racial discrimination (high racial salience) or peer relationships (low racial salience) topic and the Black participant as the first speaker. Next, participants completed preliminary questions on the computer in separate rooms. During this time, Black participants also read the topic card and brainstormed what they wanted to say. Next, participants spent 8 min discussing negative experiences with racial discrimination or peer relationships. Last, participants completed final questions on the computer."

(Holoien, 2015, p. 85)

In both studies, desire to affiliate and accuracy of understanding was inversely correlated between White and minority subjects. With White subjects, accuracy decreased with increasing desire to affiliate. With minority participants it was the opposite, with accuracy increasing as desire to affiliate increased. (Holoien, 2015, p. 82, p. 87)

In a summary of Holoien's (2015) study, researchers found:

"Collectively, these findings suggest that desire to affiliate may help racial minorities accurately perceive how well Whites feel understood but hinder Whites from accurately perceiving racial minorities, at least in contexts in which race is salient. We also found

that partners' overestimation of how well they understood participants (relative to how understood participants felt) was associated with worse relationship quality. Specifically, participants felt less cared for, experienced less positive affect, and viewed partners more negatively" (Holoien, 2015, p. 87)

### **Contextualization**

The two papers examined take opposite approaches to answer hypotheses about the *intimacy* of interracial relationships in their respective capacities: the first, to clarify the benefits of strong interracial relationships, and the second addressing barriers to *achieve* strong interracial relationships. While both studies use interviews and interviewer-facilitated self-assessment to extrapolate their conclusions, AhnAllen's paper uses a qualitative data and Holoien uses quantitative data. This would make sense considering the drastic difference in the scale of these experiments. AhnAllen only examined 9 couples (18 subjects in total), the median age of subjects being 26 years; demographic information (AhnAllen, Table 1) reveals that most participants were grad students or post-college. In Holoien's first study, all 234 participants were undergraduate freshman and in his second, the median age of all 144 participants being 19.2, bringing his total subject count to between 234 and 378. This also raises questions about age: how different would results be if AhnAllen's study looked at freshman? Or how would Holoien's have differed if his participants were grad school age? While all participants would fall into Piaget's "Concrete-Operational" stage of development, or Erikson's "Intimacy vs. Isolation" phase, both studies are subject to concerns surrounding generalization of results and in the case of AhnAllen's study, self-selection of participants yielded data-altering trends in subjects such as education, East Asian heritage, and particular interest in topics of race and ethnicity (AhnAllen, p. 73).

Though I would scrutinize both papers for addressing specific phenomena and attempting to generalize interracial relationships by their findings, AhnAllen's study is compelling because of cognitive development within her subjects. Though participants in all studies lie in the same age range, they exist at polar opposites of these ranges. This would make AhnAllen's study, if at all, more *representational* of adult interracial relationships such as interracial marriages. This cannot be said about Holoien's study, though his is compelling for different reasons. Though Holoien's conclusions are limited by the median age of his subjects, his data pool is significantly larger, which would likely be more representational of very young adults. I do not think this conclusion is as valuable to the broader discussion of interracial relationships in the U.S. as AhnAllen's. With all this being said, Holoien's study is stronger, simply because of its larger data pool and its multifaceted analysis of spontaneous and long-term interracial relationships.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, both studies are invaluable to discussions of race relations. AhnAllen's paper alerts us to the benefits of interracial couples, specifically how this pairing expands both partner's minds and awareness in the world while providing safe spaces for these conversations to be had. AhnAllen's study is also important to help therapists and clinicians understand the impact of interracial relationships on AA women and WEA men. Holoien's study reveals a major hurdle to be overcome, and how discussions of racialized experiences should be approached on all fronts.

Personally, AhnAllen's study did not contribute to my understanding of my own whiteness, but rather *what I should do with it*, mainly through validating other's experiences and providing safe spaces for discussions of race. Holoien's study taught me to slow down; in conversations of race, White people have the tendency to jump in head-first to signal their

“strong allyship” and solidarity even though solidarity seems like the bare minimum. While I’ve been conscious of this, I still lapse into this behavior sometimes. I think it is important that White people question their incentives for understanding the experiences of minorities across the board. It seems like many white people disaffected by racism just say the right things, others do not even try to hide their prejudice. Recontextualizing the conversation of race in the minds of White people seems to be the most important step in progress. White people have to *want*, genuinely want this change in the world.



## References

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