



# Ebony and Ivory? Interracial dating intentions and behaviors of disadvantaged African American women in Kentucky



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 1 April 2014

Revised 25 April 2015

Accepted 24 June 2015

Available online 26 June 2015

### Keywords:

Interracial relationships

African American women

Male Marriageable Pool Index

Perceptions about partner availability

Cultural mistrust

Racism

## ABSTRACT

Using data from 595 predominantly disadvantaged African American women in Kentucky, this study examines perceptions about racial/ethnic partner availability, cultural mistrust, and racism as correlates of interracial dating intentions and behaviors with both white and Hispanic men. Participants reported levels of dating intentions and behaviors were significantly higher with whites than Hispanics. The multivariate models indicate less cultural mistrust and believing it is easier to find a man of that racial/ethnic category were associated with higher interracial dating intentions. Women were more likely to have dated a white man if they believed it was easier to find a white man and had interracial dating intentions; however, interracial dating intentions was the only significant correlate of having dated a Hispanic man. Findings suggest a shrinking social distance between racial groups, broadening the MMPI for African American women; yet, the low levels of interracial relationships are likely driven by preferences of men.

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## 1. Introduction

Rates of interracial marriage and of willingness to marry interracially, although rising, are still quite low (Bratter and Eschbach, 2006; Childs, 2005; Lewis and Ford-Robertson, 2010), and African American women are less likely to marry than women of other racial groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Marriage is often preceded by dating; thus, it is important to examine interracial dating intentions and behaviors, and the complicating factor of class distinctions. Pairing intentions and behaviors is important, as prior research would suggest that intentions are more prevalent than actual behaviors (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Additionally, with marriage rates in general declining and cohabitation and other living arrangements on the rise (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005, 2011), the dearth of research on non-matrimonial interracial romantic relationships is problematic. Limited scholarly work has focused on the correlates of or experiences with intimate partner relationships among economically disadvantaged African American women despite their reduced presence in the dating/marriage pools.

Often, research suggests the gendered pattern of African American and white interracial marriage (with lower levels of intermarriage among African American women and white men) indicates bias on the part of black women, but little recent research has empirically examined this issue of interracial dating intentions and behaviors, especially from the perspective of the African American woman (Childs, 2005). This study does, and is guided by William Julius Wilson's (1987) concept of the Male Marriageable Pool Index (MMPI). The MMPI is the sex ratio, or the number of eligible males per 100 females, within a same race and age group. Recently analyzed 2010 Census data notes that the sex ratio in the 25–54 prime-age group is

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more unbalanced for African Americans than any other racial group, with 83 men per 100 women for African Americans as compared to 99 men per 100 women for whites (Wolfers et al., 2015). The current study is unique in the inclusion of items inspired by the MMPI which measure African American women's perceptions about the availability of partners who are African American, white, and Hispanic. From a MMPI framework, African American women's assessment of the availability of same-race partners may influence their interracial dating intentions and behaviors.

Therefore, the goal of this study is to examine how perceptions about racial/ethnic partner availability, cultural mistrust, and experiences of racist events contribute to the interracial dating intentions and behaviors with both white and Hispanic men using a sample of socioeconomically disadvantaged African American women in Kentucky. This novel study is significant in that it explores the relationship intentions and behaviors of a uniquely marginalized and often-overlooked group, shifts the focus from marriage to romantic relationships, and challenges the traditional view that the biases of African American women drive their aversion to interracial relationships.

### 1.1. African American women's relationship trends

Interracial marriage was not made legal until June 12, 1967 in the Supreme Court decision in the case of *Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia* (Bratter and Eschbach, 2006; Jacobson and Johnson, 2006). Thus, the first major study on interracial marriage was completed in the 1970s by David Heer, and revealed a 26% increase in the number of African American and white interracial marriages between 1960 and 1970 (Heer, 1974; Lewis and Ford-Robertson, 2010). Nevertheless, African American women in general have historically been unlikely to marry, and there has been a dramatic decline in their marriage rate between 1970 and 1990 (Crowder and Tolnay, 2000; Harris and Ono, 2005; Raley and Sullivan, 2010). Even the most recent U.S. Census Bureau (2005, 2011) data estimates a decline in the percentage of married African American women between 2005 (29.19%) and 2010 (26.93%).

It is not just marriage, though, as research has demonstrated that college-educated African American women experience lower levels of marriage, but also lower levels of romantic partnership and voluntary sexual activity compared to white or Hispanic women (Clarke, 2011). The picture painted is one in which relatively privileged African American women are deprived of marriage opportunities, but also of romantic love altogether when compared to other racial groups (Clarke, 2011). For purposes of childbearing, Clarke refers to unmarried parenting as “the only game in town” (Clarke, 2011:100). This is not simply a numbers game; critiquing those who might use indices like the MMPI exclusively as an explanation of low marriage rates among degreed African American women, Clarke notes:

“In short, sex ratio explanations for race, class, or gender inequalities of love only become meaningful amid inequality-generating processes that ensure that racial (and class) boundaries around dating populations are maintained (Clarke, 2011: 281).”

Viewing the marginalization of college-educated African American women (who are privileged compared to the Kentucky women in this study) in the “love” market leaves dim prospects for more disadvantaged African American women.

### 1.2. Perceptions about the availability of partners and interracial dating

The current study is guided by the work of William Julius Wilson, who conceptualized the Male Marriageable Pool Index (MMPI) (Wilson, 1987). This study does not test the MMPI concept, but rather, uses it as an interpretive and theoretical framework. Wilson noted that male joblessness, mortality, and incarceration in the African American community reduced the number of eligible (or marriageable) African American men (Wilson, 1987). Wilson calculated MMPI values for different age and racial groups, since individuals generally tend to marry someone of the same race who is around the same age (Wilson, 1987). He noted that these values were different across racial groups such that African American women had a considerably smaller pool of potential partners when compared to white women (Wilson, 1987). Beliefs regarding partner availability are important in shaping intentions and behavior from a MMPI framework. Specifically, African American women who perceive that it is difficult to find an eligible African American man or that it is easier to find an eligible white or Hispanic man may be more likely to intend to date interracially. Likewise, African American women who have these perceptions about the limited availability of same-race partners and the greater availability of partners outside their race may be more likely to engage in interracial relationships. This study includes three items inspired by the MMPI to measure perceptions about the availability of African American, white, and Hispanic male partners. Moreover, this study examines the association between the items measuring perceptions about partner availability and interracial relationship intentions and behaviors of disadvantaged African American women in Kentucky. Interracial relationship intentions are likely a strong predictor of dating someone of another race (Ajzen, 1991).

Wilson's MMPI has been praised for examining the broad social and economic elements related to the marriage squeeze for African American women, rather than simply the demographic aspects of race and age; this marriage squeeze results from heterosexual women outnumbering men, and occurs sooner for African American women than whites (Bennett et al., 1989). This is due in part to high rates of death, mass incarceration, and disproportionately high unemployment among African American men that dramatically reduce the number of eligible same-race mates (Alexander, 2010; Bennett et al., 1989; Janoski et al., 2014; Wilson, 1987). The result is a smaller marriageable pool of African American men for African

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