

Filling the Void: Interracial/Inter-Cultural Dating 101

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Believe it or not, in this age of information overload, where millions, probably billions of books on various topics exist, one would be hard pressed to find a book or any other resources that deal with the interracial dating experience for gay men. This article is a start in the direction of providing resources to navigate the interracial dating experience. Interracial dating 101 if you will, though there is much more that needs to be written on this subject to provide resources for those of us who choose to date interracial. It's not always as simple as falling in love with someone of a different race or culture. To set a solid foundation for being in an interracial relationship, I would suggest there is some homework that needs to be done on the front end to help mitigate any relationship strain that may come about related to racial or cultural differences later in the relationship.

To set the stage for this interracial dating 101 article, I would like to first point out that there are some differences between the terms interracial dating and inter-cultural dating. Race of course refers to a person's racial background (ex: Black, Caucasian, Hispanic, etc). Culture is much wider and encompasses many things that could include race, but also things such as religious beliefs; urban versus suburban or rural upbringing; being raised Amish or not and the list can go on and on. Here we must think about how each person's background, their values, beliefs and experiences shape who they are and contribute to the dynamics in the relationship.

Before I go too far, I would like to set the stage for how I got to the point of writing this article for the national chapter of the National Association of Black and White Men Together (NABWMT). A couple of years ago I started my work in this area when members of the Philadelphia chapter of NABWMT asked me to do a presentation on interracial dating at the 2009 national conference in Philadelphia. At that time to prepare for the presentation, I decided to tap some of the resources most people might consider when trying to find information on the subject of interracial or intercultural dating. I turned to Google and Amazon.com as a means of searching for information on these topics. For this article I decided to return to this method of searching for information to see if any new resources have been created in the past two years. Sadly enough nothing has changed; there were very few resources to be found in my searches in 2009 and in 2011 these resources continue to be slim to none.

As mentioned, for this article I completed an updated search of both Google and Amazon.com to see what the search results returned. I entered the search terms "gay male relationships" in Google. Very few things that I would consider positive came up in the first ten hits. In the first ten hits there were several links to websites that talk about gay male relationships from different perspectives, a few of which were from a negative perspective. One of the hits was to an article written by a psychotherapist in the late 90's. While I feel he tries to convey the message that as gay men we need to work toward building healthy relationships and authentic intimacy that is more than sexual, the overall tone of the article could leave one with a

doomsday feeling about gay men actually having the capacity to create intimacy beyond sex. Of course there was at least one hit in the top ten about gay men and HIV/AIDS, an issue which has been inextricably tethered to gay male sexuality. Of the paid ads that came up, most of them appeared to be sexual in nature. I would not consider these resources to be healthy, supportive articles about gay male relationships.

I also Googled “gay male interracial dating”. The majority of links that came up in the first ten hits were related to sex and dating sites. There were a couple of Youtube videos discussing interracial dating that came up as well. Of those links that were not about dating and sex, the others seemed to focus on the provocativeness of interracial dating and not about discussing healthy aspects of how to date interracially. Much of these links also seemed to be focused on interracial dating between Black and White men, though we know there are many other variations of interracial dating that exist. So if you are an Asian man who is with a Latino man, where would you find anything about your specific dating experience? The paid ads on the right side of the page for this Google search were mostly all sites where one can find men to have sex with.

Next I tried a search of Amazon.com, which has one of the most comprehensive databases of books that exist on anything one could imagine, except interracial dating among gay men as it turns out. I typed in the words “gay male interracial dating” into the book search engine to see what I might find. I knew it wasn’t going to be good when it only returned two results for my full key word search terms and neither of them had to do with gay male dating. Then it provided search results for four other configurations of the key words I used (ex: gay male interracial dating). In this way, it was only looking for gay male dating and removed the search word “interracial” to see if more results would return. The other three searches removed various words from my original search criteria. With all the search term variations that amazon.com provided me, only one book came up that had anything to do with interracial dating and it was fiction and was of an erotic nature. Between the Google and Amazon.com searching, very few relevant results were returned pertaining to interracial dating and none of them appeared to provide a framework for interracial or inter-cultural dating nor discuss ways of navigating these relationships.

So this begs the question, where does one find these resources? I think that many of us who have dated interracially or inter-culturally can attest that often times there are things we may deal with in the context of our relationships that may not present themselves in relationships where both partners in the couple are of the same racial and/or cultural experience. Some examples of things that may come up include: issues around your partners race from family and/or friends; dating someone of a different religious experience than your family’s belief (ex: someone of the Islamic faith dating a Christian); dating someone from a different country among other things. Cultural differences can be even as nuanced as one partner coming from a smaller more reserved family and the other from a larger family where they are more boisterous and socially aggressive. The possibilities of the varying cultural differences that could present themselves are endless.

In 2010, I was approached by Stevie and Arthur Martin-Chester of the Philadelphia chapter of Men of All Colors Together (MACT) about doing a workshop for them on interracial dating. I immediately jumped at the opportunity to create this workshop as I know there are very few opportunities to create a space to discuss interracial and inter-cultural dating. For the past 6 years I have worked as a mental health therapist, 5 of those years working as a therapist specifically with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) population. Given my therapist background and this topic area, I created a couple of documents to help facilitate the discussion in the workshop and to also give attendees concrete action steps to walk away with as they engage in the interracial and inter-cultural dating experience.

I agreed to make these documents available on the website of the National Association of Black and White Men Together. I realize the information on these documents is only the start of a larger body of information that needs to be written and published about the experiences of interracial and inter-cultural dating. I hope this article and the attached documents are helpful for people who are already dating interracially/ inter-culturally or who are considering it. One of the key things in the process of dating is communication and taking the time to really understand the views, beliefs, values and experiences of your potential partner. This is even more pertinent when you are deciding to date interracially or inter-culturally as issues of race and culture can create tension in the relationship if they are not addressed early on.

I welcome feedback and comments on this article as well as the documents I have shared. I can be reached via email at lee.carson@comcast.net. I look forward to hearing about people's experiences with interracial and inter-cultural dating as well.

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Managing Racial Differences in Relationships

This document provides both questions to reflect on when dating inter-racially and suggestions to manage conflict that may arise in the context of your dating experience. There are a multitude of issues that may arise, all of which are not covered here. However this document provides a starting point for reflections and considerations to help manage conflict within the inter-racial dating experience.

Interpersonal Domain

- Have a clear understanding of what level of racial and/or cultural awareness you want a partner to have.
- Early on in the dating experience, explore the other persons understanding of your racial and/or cultural background.
- If you feel the other person doesn't have the level of competency or understanding of your racial or cultural background, decide if you want to do the work of educating them.
- If the other person has fundamentally different views on race relations or your race specifically, decide early on if this will be a significant barrier to your relationship. If so, address these differences early as you may find this isn't the right person for you.
- If racially discordant issues come up in the context of a relationship you are already in:
 - Have discussions with your partner about their views. Communication about racial and cultural differences is important to maintaining a healthy relationship.
 - If the issues come up in the context of something they have said that was hurtful or disconcerting, be sure to convey this and explain clearly what they said and why it bothered you.

Family & Peer Group Domain

- What are the messages you received from your family and/or peers related to racial and/or cultural groups growing up? What were the messages that your partner received?
- How have these messages shaped who you are today and how you experience your culture? How you view other racial/cultural groups? How have the messages your partner received shaped their cultural experience? Their views on other racial and cultural groups?
- Openly discuss between you and your partner, how the both of you experienced your race and/or culture growing up and how you feel these experiences have shaped who you are and your beliefs.
- When issues around culture and/or race arise from family members, any discomfort should be discussed between the 2 of you and a plan on how to move forward established. Not addressing issues can eat away at the relationship.
- When issues arise from family members or peer groups related to interracial dating consider:
 - Addressing the issue head on with them, letting them know that you don't approve of their discriminatory beliefs.

- Helping them understand that this person is important to you in your life and why. It's sometimes hard for people to keep prejudicial attitudes if they see how happy you are. Additionally, sometimes people are willing to make "exceptions" to their prejudicial beliefs.
- Setting limits around your interactions with family and friends if they are not willing to embrace your partner because of their race.
- Re-assessing friendships if they are not willing to accept your partner choice based on race or cultural issues. Maybe you're better off without these friends if they aren't showing unconditional support.

Societal Norms & Attitudes Domain

- While it's a long and difficult process to change societal norms and attitudes around race and cultural issues, there are a few things to consider when it comes to interracial dating:
 - Be aware not to digest racist and oppressive attitudes towards other racial and/or cultural groups.
 - If you feel you have strong reactions towards certain racial and/or cultural groups, take time assess where those come from. Are they valid? If not, what will you do to change your views?
 - Address racist and derogatory comments that family and peers make. By not doing so, you are tacitly endorsing their attitudes.
 - Encourage friends and family who have limited knowledge about certain cultural or racial groups to attend festivities that will increase their experience and knowledge.

Spheres of Potential Conflict in Inter-Racial Dating

The concentric circles below demonstrate the sources from which different levels of conflict may arise in the context of inter-racial dating.

