COMMUNICATING RACE IN AN INTERRACIAL ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP:
SELF-DISCLOSURE BETWEEN DATING PARTNERS

by

ALISON B. TREGO

(Under the direction of Tina M. Harris)

ABSTRACT

This study investigates how dating partners in interracial (African American and Caucasian) romantic relationships engage in communication about the topic of race by integrating Communication Boundary Management theory (Petronio, 1993) within the stages of the Interracial Relationship Development Model (Foeman & Nance, 1999). Participants involved in a heterosexual, interracial romantic relationship (not engaged or married) for a minimum of six months were interviewed, including 4 African American females, 4 African American males, 4 Caucasian females, and 3 Caucasian males. Thematic analysis guided by critical incident methodology yielded four categories of communication (external non-relational, external relational, internal non-relational, and internal relational) and two types of critical events (spontaneous and anticipated). Relational outcomes are discussed. Findings suggest that age and influence of family members can contribute to the success or dissolution of an interracial relationship.

INDEX WORDS: Communication Boundary Management, Interracial Romantic Relationship, Interracial, Relational, Communication, Critical Events
COMMUNICATING RACE IN AN INTERRACIAL ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP:
SELF-DISCLOSURE BETWEEN DATING PARTNERS

by

ALISON B. TREGO
B.A., University of Georgia, 2002

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2005
COMMUNICATING RACE IN AN INTERRACIAL ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP:
SELF-DISCLOSURE BETWEEN DATING PARTNERS

by

ALISON B. TREGO

Major Professor:  Tina M. Harris
Committee:       Donald L. Rubin
                Jennifer A. Samp

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2005
DEDICATION

To my father, Gilbert S. “Buzz” Trego, Jr.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my committee members: Dr. Tina Harris, Dr. Donald Rubin, and Dr. Jennifer Samp: Thank you for the guidance and insight you have provided me over these last several years, and for challenging me to “make the leap” when I found myself hesitant to do so. Dr. Harris, I am honored to have been your advisee. I will always remember the day we met, the day that began a new direction for me. Dr. Rubin, Bogardus lives! Dr. Samp: yes, yes, linear, I know.

I would also like to express humble and heartfelt gratitude to my mom, Todd, Kimberly, (you too, O.G.), and all my family and friends. Kiva too. You have exercised extreme patience with me at times, celebrated my achievements with me along the way, and never wavered in your support of me. Thank you.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION .........................................................................................................1
   Purpose of Research ..................................................................................................3

2 LITERATURE REVIEW ..............................................................................................7
   Interracial Romantic Relationships ...........................................................................7
   Interpersonal Communication and Race .................................................................13
   Stereotypes and Communication Behaviors ............................................................16

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ...............................................................................22
   Interracial Relationship Development Model .........................................................22
   Communication Boundary Management Theory ....................................................27
   Disclosure Within the Interracial Relationship Development Model .....................33

4 METHODS ..................................................................................................................40
   Participants ..............................................................................................................40
   Procedure .................................................................................................................45
   Data Collection ......................................................................................................45
   Data Analysis .........................................................................................................46

5 RESULTS ....................................................................................................................51
   Research Question 1 ...............................................................................................51
   Research Question 2 ...............................................................................................66
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Current statistics indicate that the number of interracial relationships is steadily rising. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000), the number of interracial marriages (specifically African American and Caucasian) rose almost 100% from 1980 to 2000. Though this figure clearly indicates that intimate interracial relationships are no longer a rare occurrence (Hibbler & Shinew, 2002), current statistics that report approximately 1.5 million interracial marriages, and an estimated 2.5 million interracial non-married couples, reflect diverse interracial/interethnic marriages and couples that extend beyond African American/Caucasian relationships. Caucasians married to non-Caucasians other than African Americans (AAs) represent the largest group of interracial marriages. Further comparison of interethnic/interracial marriages between Caucasians and Hispanics, Caucasians and Asian Americans, and Caucasians and AAs indicates intermarriage rates were the lowest for AAs and Caucasians (Qian, 1997). In fact, AA/Caucasian marriages total less than 1% of all marriages --54,666,000 (Moore, 1999). These figures may be indicative of the degree to which AA/Caucasian marriages experience social resistance, and therefore experience difficulty preserving their relationship, in comparison to other interracial/interethnic marriages.

Given that partners in an interracial romantic relationship are of different races, they are largely identified by society as members of different social groups, whether or not they themselves identify with a racial group membership. Regardless of how individuals choose to identify in terms of racial identity, partners may encounter social resistance that imposes stress
on the relationship (Foeman & Nance, 1999, 2002; Killian, 2001; Lampe, 1982; Shibazaki & Brennan, 1998). This stress may thwart the development of an interracial relationship, thereby making it difficult for partners to preserve or maintain their relationship. Whether or not race is a central or important element to them, interracial romantic couples will likely face challenges as they communicate about race.

As an individual in an interracial romantic relationship, each partner must manage the external stressors (e.g., negative reactions from family and/or friends ranging from disapproval to loss of support, to hostile encounters in public settings) exerted upon him or her, and the internal stressors (e.g., emerging awareness of own racial identity, reconciliation of internalized prejudices) that may arise as a result of being romantically involved with a person of a different race. As partners in an interracial romantic relationship, the couple must, as a unit, manage the external stressors imposed upon their relationship and the internal stressors that may manifest between them as their relational status presents a unique and complex situation. It stands to reason that interpersonal communication about race serves as a strategy to manage these stressors.

Scholars have defined interracial communication from numerous perspectives, articulating the importance of race in the process of communication. Orbe and Harris (2001) proposed that interracial communication occurs when individuals are aware of racial differences and consider these differences to be central to the communication process. Houston (2002) articulated the saliency of race as inherent in any interracial communication interaction, regardless of the interactants’ awareness or perception of racial difference. In an interracial romantic relationship, interracial communication functions on an individual level, helping partners manage the internal and external stressors they may feel as partners in an interracial
relationship. Interracial communication also functions at a dyadic level, helping the couple manage the internal and external stressors that may exist.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study is to understand how dating partners in an interracial (AA and Caucasian) romantic relationship engage in communication about the topic of race. The Interracial Relationship Development Model proposed by Foeman and Nance (1999) explores the degree to which couples communicate or engage in discourse about the topic of race and its role in their relationship. The model posits four stages through which an interracial romantic relationship will develop and the communication that will likely occur as individuals move towards relational intimacy. Although the model is intended for use or application in understanding the process of communication as partners from different groups engage in ongoing and intimate relationships (e.g., interracial marriage), specific stages of the model, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, may also be applied to less committed, non-marital relationships. The first and second stages of this model will provide the framework in this study for conceptualizing the role that communication about race plays in the initial and early developmental stages of an interracial romantic relationship.

As the literature suggests, individuals may confront issues concerning their racial differences through the acknowledgement of ingroup and outgroup stereotypes (Devine, 1989; Hughes & Baldwin, 2002; Stephan, 1985; Stone, Perry, & Darley, 1997). Thus, it may be assumed that during this process of acknowledgement or awareness, individuals in interracial romantic relationships may confront their own stereotypes, their partner’s stereotypes, and/or their respective group stereotypes, including stereotypic evaluations of personality, behavior, or communication style. For example, AA men and women have been stereotyped by outgroup
members as aggressive, hostile, loud, and incompetent. Caucasian men have been stereotyped as racist, arrogant, and deceptive. Caucasian women have been stereotyped as timid and weak. This type of thinking may potentially impact the status of the relationship. Partners may choose to either preserve and maintain the relationship or dissolve it altogether.

Given the historical and social context of race relations in this country and the myths associated with interracial unions (Aldridge, 1978; Berry & Blassingame, 1982; Foeman & Nance, 1999; Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000; Lewandowski & Jackson, 2001; Merton 1941; Root, 2001; Spaights and Dixon, 1984), an individual who is considering becoming involved in or exploring an interracial relationship may rely upon stereotypes to make sense of or understand a potential partner. These categorizations may have a significant and negative effect on the perceptions they hold of their romantic partner. In the social context where the relationship has originated, individuals involved in an interracial romantic relationship may have subscribed to or, at the very least, been exposed to negative and/or positive stereotypes.

These perceptions, beliefs, stereotypes, or prejudices may have been communicated to partners by members of society, friends, and/or family members, and may influence the content of and the manner in which they communicate about race with their partner. Therefore, it is important to ask whether interracial romantic partners have experienced and/or confronted these issues. The following questions are critical to understanding dialogues about race within interracial romantic relationships. Do interracial romantic partners engage in relational communication about their racial differences? Do interracial couples engage in interracial relational communication? If so, have perceptions and stereotypes affected the content and the process of their communication?
Contrary to myths about interracial dating, individuals in interracial relationships report the same motivations for initiating and maintaining their relationship as their intraracial counterparts (Gaines et al., 1999; Gurung & Duong, 1999; Moore, 1999). Rather than dating someone to test the reality of sexual and social myths about interracial romantic relationships between AAs and Caucasians, individuals involved in such a relationship are essentially motivated by the desire to be in a committed relationship with a person they find attractive (Lampe, 1982; Shibazaki & Brennan, 1998). That this person also happens to be from another racial group is rarely cited as a criterion for dating interracially. In spite of the societal ostracism partners risk experiencing, interracial romantic couples report similar levels of relational satisfaction and relational commitment in comparison to intraracial romantic couples (Gaines et al., 1999; Gurung & Duong, 1999; Moore, 1999). So, if these findings are valid, then we must explore how couples negotiate communication about topic of race in order to understand their perceptions and/or the existence of racial differences. By extension, this inquiry should lead to understanding of how these differences may or may not influence the development of the relationship. It must be noted that these questions cannot adequately be addressed unless we conceptualize race within a relational model.

The study of interracial communication, as a specific focus of interpersonal communication research, serves as a tool for understanding the unique circumstances within which an interracial couple, as opposed to an intraracial couple, manages the interracial dimension of their relationship through communicative practices. Unfortunately, the study of relational communication has yet to focus on interracial communication, or the communication of race, in the early, developmental stages of an interracial romantic relationship. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the content of, and the communication strategies used in,
interracial communication by partners who are in the initial and early stages of an interracial romantic relationship. An integrated theoretical framework will guide this interpretive study. The Interracial Romantic Relationship Model proposed by Foeman and Nance (1999), wherein the communication of race is conceptualized through a stage-model of relational development, will function as a theoretical framework within which communication about race will be analyzed as a process of private or risky self-disclosure, as conceptualized by Communication Boundary Management theory (Petronio, 1991, 1993, 2000).
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Interracial Romantic Relationships

Even though the number of interracial unions in America has increased, current research shows that people still report negative attitudes towards interracial relationships in this country (Hibbler & Shinew, 2002; Root, 2002; Rosenblatt, Karis, & Powell, 1995). A 1997 Gallup poll indicated that 77% of AA respondents and 61% of Caucasian respondents reported general approval of interracial marriage. These figures illustrate that, of the respondents polled, approximately 25% of AAs and 40% of Caucasians reported disapproval of interracial marriages. Moreover, the National Opinion Research Center found that, among Jews, AAs, Asians, and Hispanics, AAs were the most strongly opposed (57.5%) to a close relative marrying someone from outside their racial or ethnic group (Root, 2002). Thus, although individuals report increasing acceptance of interracial marriages, current negative perceptions persist and may reflect a larger historical, social context in terms of racial exogamy in the United States.

Of all the types of interracial and interethnic marriages in the United States, AA/Caucasian interracial marriages have historically been the most controversial (Gaines et al., 1999; Porterfield, 1982). In 1964, Barnett reported that 19 states still had laws that in some way prevented the marriage of individuals of different races, and specified the prohibition of “the intermarriage of Caucasians and Negroes,” which was punishable by fines up to $5,000 and/or up to 10 years imprisonment (p. 95). Until 1967, anti-miscegenation laws existed which deemed AA/Caucasian interracial relationships as immoral and illegal, evidencing societal opposition
and a long-standing perception of social deviance. The U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in the landmark constitutional case of *Loving vs. Virginia* on June 12, 1967 ruled that anti-miscegenation laws violated the equal protection clauses of the 14th Amendment and were, thereby, unconstitutional, forcing all remaining states to repeal anti-miscegenation laws (Davidson, 1992). However, as late as 1999, the state of Alabama had yet to erase from its state constitution the law banning interracial marriages. In fact, 26% of respondents polled in Alabama at the time opposed lifting the ban (Parker, 1999).

As Gaines et al. (1999) reported, the enduring legacy of slavery and segregation that labeled interracial relationships as taboo still persists in our society today, as “interracial couples are often pathologized within American society…particularly when one person is black and one person is white” (p. 462). Because interracial relationships are perceived by many as violating social definitions of normative, and, therefore, “acceptable” behavior, this perception of social deviance characterizing interracial relationships has given rise to, and perpetuated, myths surrounding interracial intimate unions (Porterfield, 1978; Spickard, 1989). These myths may be directed at the interracial couple or the individual partners, stigmatizing them as opportunistic, deviant, rebellious, and maladjusted (Foeman & Nance, 1999; Lewandowski & Jackson, 2001, Root, 2001).

In the context of an interracial relationship, the myth of hypogamy, an exchange-type theory, posits that Caucasian women who intermarry exchange their higher social status of race for the higher socioeconomic position of AA men. Merton (1941) argued the position of exchange as a “hypogamy for white women” because Caucasian women who marry AA men marry into a lower social status. Conversely, Spaights and Dixon (1984) supported the position of hypergamy, surmising that AAs engaged in romantic relationships with Caucasians in order to
exploit the economic and social advantages associated with and afforded to Caucasian individuals. Moore (1999) argued that the myth of hypergamy echoed "the classic theory proposed by Dr. Robert Merton, that people who are in interracial relationships do so because they gain in ways other than for love, such as socioeconomic gain or social acceptance" (p.122). Research that promotes the hypogamy/hypergamy position subjects interracial relationships to social norms of “acceptable” behavior such that “unacceptable” behavior warrants explanations derived from opportunistic motivations (Foeman & Nance, 1999) and deviant motivations.

Deviant motivations stigmatize interracial relational involvement as a manifestation of an individual’s rebellious behavior. These theories suggest that partners are intentionally acting in defiance of parents, families, and social norms (Brayboy, 1966; Hullum, 1982; Spaights & Dixon, 1984). Other theories suggest that partners engage in interracial relationships as an expression of liberalism, or liberal political and/or social beliefs (Aldridge, 1978; Spaights & Dixon, 1984). As Davidson remarks (1992), these perspectives conclude that AAs and Caucasians who intermarry are suffering from “oppositional defiance disorder,” or acting out against the social order represented by their family system (p. 152). Motivations of relational involvement are also derived from sexual myths, which objectify AAs as exotic sexual beings, and therefore, objectify the relationship as an exotic, sexual union. Consequently, partners of AAs are associated with these stereotypes and stigmatized by motivations of relational involvement ranging from being sexually curious (Aldridge, 1978; Berry & Blassingame, 1982) to morally deviant (Petroni, 1973). However, published research refutes these myths.

Individuals in interracial relationships report the same motivations for initiating and maintaining their relationship as their intraracial counterparts (Gaines et al., 1999; Gurung & Duong, 1999; Moore, 1999) and are essentially motivated by the desire to be in a romantic
relationship with a person they find attractive (Lampe, 1982; Shibazaki & Brennan, 1998). Race-based motivations are rarely cited as a criterion for dating interracially. Interracial romantic couples report similar levels of relational satisfaction and relational commitment in comparison to intraracial romantic couples (Gaines et al., 1999; Gurung & Duong, 1999; Moore, 1999) and do not report unusual sexual attraction or unusual sexual relations in their partnerships when compared to intraracial couples (Foeman & Nance, 1999; Gaines et al., 1999; Moore, 1999).

Despite findings from the aforementioned studies, which do not substantiate theories of opportunistic, rebellious, or deviant relational motivations or experiences, research illustrates that that interracial unions continue to be viewed unfavorably by social perceivers. Recent studies have explored individuals’ perceptions of intraracial relationships in comparison to other interethnic/interracial relationships (Garcia & Riviera, 1999; Lampe, 1982; Lewandowski & Jackson, 2001; Zebroski 1999). Lewandowski and Jackson found that, among Caucasian respondents, AA/Caucasian intermarriages evoked more negative responses from respondents, (e.g. negative perceptions of the individuals, disapproval of the relationship) in comparison to intraracial (AA, Asian American, Caucasian) marriages. Interracial couples that included AA/Caucasian partners were perceived less favorably and less compatible than interracial couples that included Asian American/Caucasian partners.

Moreover, respondents could more easily imagine themselves involved in an intraracial relationship or an interracial relationship with an Asian American partner than an AA partner. Similarly, Lampe found that Caucasians were more willing to consider romantic involvement (dating and marriage) with a Mexican American partner than with an AA partner. These studies indicate that AA/Caucasian interracial relationships are perceived differently and more negatively in comparison to intraracial other interracial/interethnic relationships. Recent research
has also explored the extent to which intermarriage partners are aware of external perceptions from members (AA, Asian American, Caucasian, Latin American) in their communities in support of and opposition to their relationship. Zebroski (1999) found that, in general, AA/Caucasian partners perceived Caucasian women as most likely to be supportive of and Caucasian men as most likely be opposed to their interracial marriage.

Further analysis revealed an interesting pattern of perception based on racial/gender composition: Caucasian men and AA women perceived other Caucasian men and AA women as most supportive of their relationship. AA men and Caucasian women perceived other AA men and Caucasian women as most supportive. Inversely, Caucasian men and AA women perceived AA men and Caucasian women as most opposed to their relationship. Similarly, AA men and Caucasian women perceived Caucasian men and AA women as most opposed to their relationship. These findings shed light on interracial marriage partners’ perceptions of others’ attitudes towards their relationship that vary across gender and racial/ethnic composition.

As the literature and research to date have primarily focused on interracial marriages, which offer a solid foundation of literature on such committed relationships, the development of interracial relationships as a relational and communicative phenomenon warrants further and specific consideration. Perhaps research on interracial marriages dominates the literature because interracial married couples are more visible, and, therefore, more easily accessible (e.g., members of a local organization, residents in a community or neighborhood), than less-committed relationships. Perhaps intermarriage reflects a cultural norm that deems these committed relationships more credible to study than relationships outside marriage. It is also possible that, as a relational variable indicative of a high level of commitment, marriage assumes there is more certainty in the relationship, whereas dating relationships may be indicative of a
low level of commitment and less certainty. As such, researchers have focused on the ways in which partners in interracial marriages work to preserve their relationships. Unfortunately, what scholars have failed to recognize or investigate in this research are the processes that result in interracial marriages.

Although it is logical to assume that interracial dating is a precursor to marriage, we do not see the same attention directed towards this prior stage of relational development (Todd & McKinney, 1992). Scholars have assessed external perceptions of and attitudes towards interracial unions, both married and non-married, and the experiences of partners involved in interracial marriages (Moran, 2001; Root, 2001; Rosenblatt, Karis, & Powell; 1995). However, with the exception of one study that looked at dating strategies people reportedly would use within a hypothetical interracial dating context (Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2001), most scholars have not explored with a similar level of interest the experiences of interracial dating partners.

Given the lack of attention to this underresearched and socially important relational dynamic, there are a number of questions communication scholars should be challenged to address. Do interracial romantic partners engage in relational communication about race? Do interracial couples engage in interracial communication? Given societal perceptions of racial differences, and studies that indicate that interracial relationships, specifically AA/Caucasian, are perceived differently than other interracial/interethnic and intraracial relationships (Garcia & Riviera, 1999; Lampe, 1982; Lewandowski & Jackson, 2001; Zebroski 1999), do partners enter these relationships aware of these perceptions of difference? Do interracial partners communicate about these perceptions of racial differences? Have perceptions and stereotypes affected the content and the process of their communication? The literature does not indicate whether a partner’s perception of racial differences affects a partner’s perception of the
relationship and/or development of the relationship, or what effect, if any, communication about race may have on the development of the relationship. As communication scholars, we must conduct research that facilitates increased understanding of the impact that expression of these issues between AA and Caucasian partners may have on an uncommitted relationship.

Interpersonal Communication and Race

Interpersonal communication is an extensive area of research, encompassing social contexts ranging from organizational settings to dyadic relationships, with varying levels of intimacy (e.g., professional superior/subordinate interaction to intimate, partner-to-partner interaction). Despite the appearance of a heterogeneous and balanced body of research, recent scholars have noted the homogeneous, Eurocentric shortcomings of current academic studies. Lannamann (1991) critiqued the communication discipline for this oversight: “The great majority of mainstream interpersonal research studies are based on…subjective and often imaginary responses to hypothetical scenarios, and explanatory models that highlight individual intentionality but not the larger cultural and historical systems” (p. 187). He surmised that interpersonal communication scholarship, to the extent that it ascribes to this “ideology of our everyday cultural experience,” risks representing cultural forms of thought as natural facts (Lannamann, 1991, p. 187). Similarly, Houston (2002) contends that we must question the extent to which “dominant mainstream interpersonal research diverges from that of the people whom we study” (p. 26). Therefore, current interpersonal communication research that does not account for systems of culture, history, and social power fails to adequately explain the communicative practices of phenomenon such as interracial communication, which cannot be fully understood within a generalized, intraracial or multiethnic context.
An extension of interpersonal communication that accounts for these systems of culture, history, and power is the area of interracial communication. Situated within this context, interracial communication becomes a specific component of interpersonal communication. Early definitions of interracial communication include communication between whites and non-Whites (Rich, 1974), and communication between people of different racial groups within the same nation-state (Blubaugh & Pennington, 1976). Contemporary scholars have refined these definitions to illustrate that interracial communication is characterized not only by the physical component of racial identity/composition, but also by current societal perceptions of racial differences between AAs and Caucasians. Orbe and Harris (2001) operationalize interracial communication as “the transactional process of message exchange between individuals in a situational context where racial difference is perceived as a salient factor by at least one person” (p. 5). Therefore, according to their definition, interracial communication occurs at a given time and place between individuals of different races, where at least one person is consciously aware of racial difference(s) and perceives this difference(s) as a tangible element of the interpersonal communication process.

Houston (2002) articulates an alternate position in defining interracial communication, arguing for the saliency of race as inherently existent in the communicative process. As Houston (2002) suggests,

because racial ideologies are central to the organization of the U.S. American social order at this historical moment, every face-to-face encounter involving individuals from groups socially defined as ‘racially’ different is an interracial [communicative] encounter; some are mutually satisfying (i.e., productive, confirming, supportive, loving); others are not (i.e., they are unproductive, discomforting, etc.). (p. 32)
Thus, Houston argues that interracial communication occurs when the communicative process involves individuals who have been assigned a racial identification by society, regardless of their perception of saliency of race in that interpersonal interaction.

Although scholars may operationalize interracial communication based on differing levels of perception or recognition of racial differences, each of these definitions reflects the conceptualization of race as a specific component of interpersonal communication. Furthermore, these definitions articulate a form of communication research that is a necessary component of study within the field of interpersonal communication. The study of interracial communication anticipates the increase of communication that will likely occur between AAs and Caucasians, and other racial/ethnic groups, given present and shifting racial demographics. Population demographics from the 2000 US Census (US Census, 2000) indicate Caucasians comprised 75% of the total population, AAs comprised 12.3% of the total population, and Hispanic/Latino/a Americans comprised 12.3% of the total population. Projected population estimates for 2050, based on the continuance of current trends assessed from the 2000 Census, indicate further changes in the U.S. racial/ethnic composition: European Americans will comprise 53% of the estimated population; AAs will comprise 16% of the estimated population; Hispanic/Latino/a Americans will comprise 21% of the estimated population. Thus, it stands to reason that as the racial/ethnic composition of the populations changes, and the proportion of non-Caucasians to Caucasians increases, members of different races and cultures will likely function in closer proximity to each other, and interracial and intercultural interaction is more likely to occur (Hibbler & Shinew, 2002). Therefore, communication scholars should focus their attention on the process of interracial communication so that we may understand how individuals from
different groups can recognize and appreciate their differences while engaging in effective communication.

Interracial communication increases awareness of the similar as well as the different communication behaviors that may occur or exist in interracial encounters. In addition, such study facilitates understanding of these behaviors through the contextualization of race within a social system of historical and cultural structures. Finally, exploration of interracial communication facilitates understanding of (1) the social perceptions or stereotypes often associated with individuals from different racial groups, and (2) the lens through which individuals interpret communication in an interracial interaction. This lens of interpretation may be influenced by social perceptions of racial difference and race-based stereotypes (Leonard & Locke, 1993). In order to reach this level of interpretation, however, we must first understand how stereotyping functions as part of our socialization process, framing our perceptions and expectations of and interactions with racially different others.

Stereotypes and Communication Behaviors

Stereotyping is one component of person judgment and is noted as operating subconsciously (Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993). As defined by Hamilton and Sherman (1994), a stereotype is “a cognitive structure that contains the perceiver’s knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about a human group” (p. 2). The process of stereotyping involves cognitive categorization as a method of sensemaking through classification of people through schemas, or reliable patterns of conduct, that allow us to anticipate or predict and respond to the behavior of others in an appropriate manner (Banaji, Hardin, & Rothman, 1993). Through this cognitive process, stereotyping or stereotypes provide us with a mechanism or cognitive structure so that we may manage the stimuli that we encounter in our social interactions (Bargh, 1997), thereby
making sense of our social environments. As Banaji et al. (1993) state, "because stereotyped judgments simplify and justify social reality, they are among the most fundamental psychological events that determine the course of social relations” (p. 272).

In the context of an interracial interaction, stereotypes may present social barriers that inhibit or prevent positive interracial interaction and interracial communication. Individual perceptions of racial difference may be informed by a conscious or explicit internalization of stereotypes. Unconscious or implicit stereotyping of individuals from different racial groups may also lead to an assumption of difference based on the characteristics of group categorization. Furthermore, perceptions of group difference may lead to stereotypic evaluations of individuals based on group characteristics (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002).

As such, intergroup stereotypes and stereotypic evaluations affect perceptions of outgroup members and can be counterproductive in the context of interracial communication (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002). They bias individual thought processes by interfering with the perception of the qualities of others and the forming of complex impressions (Stephan, 1985). Stereotyping also acts as a heuristic device (a strategy for simplifying complex impressions) through which we place others in rigid categories (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002), thereby encouraging “essentializing” of groups and facilitating a monolithic set of undifferentiated, oversimplified individuals. Furthermore, stereotypes can create unrealistic expectations of individuals (Stephan, 1985), result in prejudicial attitudes towards groups (Devine, 1989), or lead to unfair evaluations of the behaviors and performance of others (Stone, Perry, & Darley, 1997), which may result in discrimination (Stephan, 1985).

Research demonstrates that AA and Caucasian intergroup stereotypes exist (Leonard & Locke, 1993); however, results vary across studies and are often conflicting (Hughes & Baldwin,
2002). For example, Caucasians’ evaluations of AAs revealed perceived racial differences in athletic and abstract thinking ability (Plous & Williams, 1995). Caucasians also labeled AAs as unreliable, materialistic, sportsmanlike, and pleasure loving (Gordon, 1986), and distinguished and stereotyped different subgroups of AAs (e.g., streetwise or businessman) differently than they stereotyped a general classification of “African Americans” (Devine & Baker, 1991). Caucasians stereotyped AA communication as argumentative, emotional, aggressive, straightforward, critical, sensitive, ostentatious, defiant, hostile, open, responsive, and intelligent (Ogawa, 1971). Similarly, AAs stereotyped Caucasians as demanding, manipulative, organized, rude, critical, aggressive, arrogant, boastful, hostile, ignorant, deceptive, and noisy (Leonard & Locke, 1993). In this research, these stereotypes of racial difference indicate negative perceptions and evaluations categorized by racial difference.

Communication research suggests that AAs and Caucasians exhibit different communication styles as general group characteristics. For example, AAs tend to speak with more vocal range, inflection, and tonal quality than do Caucasians (Orbe & Harris, 2001). Consider the following study. In specific intergroup settings, in the context of interracial interactions rather than intraracial, Orbe (1994) determined that AA men expressed six themes specific and central to interracial communication: (a) the importance of other AAs, (b) learning how to communicate with non-AAs, (c) keeping a safe distance, (d) playing the part, (e) testing the sincerity of non-AAs (fundamental distrust), and (f) an intense social responsibility. Thus, AA men indicate that they behave and communicate differently in the context of an interracial rather than intraracial interaction. Furthermore, their communication style and interpersonal expectations suggest that they may perceive these interactions as potentially threatening.
As Orbe and Harris (2001) outlined, in general, AAs and Caucasians perceive and evaluate AA communication (ingroup versus outgroup) behaviors differently. (It should be noted that there are exceptions to these generalizations, and that not all AAs and Caucasians will report differences in perceptions of ingroup versus outgroup communication behaviors.) For example, AAs generally tend to tolerate interruptions during individual conversations and group discussions, and acknowledge challenges during disagreements. As ingroup or intraracial communication behaviors, AAs perceive these verbal cues as acceptable means through which to express disagreement and gain attention. Conversely, Caucasians perceive and evaluate these same outgroup/ingroup communication behaviors differently. Caucasians generally tend to perceive interruptions during conversations and group discussions, and assertive challenges during disagreements, as inappropriate, threatening, and potentially violent. These different communication styles and the evaluations that result from this socialization process suggest that certain communication behaviors may prove problematic in an interracial interaction.

Another communicative difference between AAs and Caucasians is that, in general, AAs are more likely to value the display of intense emotions and consider such ingroup verbal and nonverbal communication behavior an appropriate expression of emotion in most public settings (Orbe & Harris, 2001). In contrast, Caucasians generally perceive such displays of intense emotions as inappropriate verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors, which violate social norms of self-control in public settings. Hence, as these examples of general group distinction demonstrate, AAs and Caucasians may engage in different types of communication behaviors during both ingroup and outgroup communication contexts.

As the literature (Harris & Orbe 2001; Leonard & Locke, 1993; Ogawa, 1971; Orbe, 1994) suggests, the context in which interracial communication occurs is linked to different
perceptions of appropriate communication behavior (e.g., tolerance of interruption, expression of emotion), contains specific themes for AA men (e.g., learning how to communicate with non-AAs, keeping a safe distance), and reflects intergroup stereotypes that exist between AAs and Caucasians. These examples of general group distinction do not necessarily reflect negative intergroup evaluations, but are indicative of perceptual differences that may lead to group evaluations. As such, individuals are more likely to assess ingroup behavior positively and outgroup behavior negatively (Pettigrew, 1979).

Communication scholars have integrated findings of communication behaviors and intergroup perceptions of communication behaviors to focus on the possible causal relationship between communication and stereotypes, or the communicative component of stereotypes (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002; Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987; Leonard & Locke; 1993). Leonard and Locke suggested that increased interaction between the races may change only specific interracial perceptions, but not overall interracial affect. They posited that increased one-to-one interaction between the races may shape stereotypes, rather than disconfirm them, because many of the modern stereotypes associated with different races contain evaluations of communication behaviors. Jussim, Coleman, and Lerch (1987) determined that a minority person’s personal appearance and use of dialect combined with race was a better predictor of a majority person’s stereotypes of that minority person than race alone. Yet, in testing the relationship between stereotypical impressions and specific communication behaviors in AA/Caucasian interactions, Hughes and Baldwin (2002) found the following:

Specific communication behaviors predict[ed] certain stereotypic impressions.

However, the communication behaviors that predicted participant’s views of the racial other were not based solely on certain racial “communication style” that prior literature
supposes to be “Black” or “White.” Rather, participants drew upon behaviors generally characteristic of White and Black communication to make their impressions. (p. 48)

For example, for both AA and Caucasian respondents, communication behaviors that predicted negative stereotypes of each other included “speaking like a know-it-all” and “speaking loudly” (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002, p. 48). However, perceptions of other items (e.g., cultural slang, direct eye contact) were predictors for only Caucasians’ negative impressions of AAs. It is important to note that although perceptions of communication behavior may affect individual impressions and stereotypical evaluations, perhaps “specific behavior may not culturally ‘belong’ to one group, but rather that clusters of behaviors constitute the style or styles of a cultural group” (Hughes & Baldwin, 2002, p. 50).

These studies do not show consistent patterns for assessing accurate predictors for AA and Caucasian interracial encounters. Rather, they indicate that there remains confusion as to how AAs and Caucasians may engage in effective and productive interracial communication. Unfortunately, these findings do not investigate interracial communication within a specific relational context such as an interracial romantic relationship, but rather from either hypothetical or imagined scenarios or recall and reflection of recent accounts, which is consistent with traditional approaches to communication research. In order to understand how romantic partners may engage in effective interracial communication, research must focus on the actual experiences of AA and Caucasian partners involved in an interracial romantic relationship.
CHAPTER 3
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Interracial Relationship Development Model

Stages of the Model

Foeman and Nance (1999) propose a stage-model of relational development for examining as well as creating “a committed, long-term relationship in which racial/ethnic identity influences the communicative process” (Orbe & Harris, 2001, p. 183). The four stages of this model- (1) racial awareness, (2) coping, (3) identity emergence, and (4) relationship maintenance- suggest a coherent, evolutionary approach to the construction and analysis of an interracial romantic relationship. Should a couple experience each stage of the model, it is assumed that the partners have successfully found a means by which to preserve their relationship and engage in healthy communication experiences about race and its role in their relationship.

Stage One. The first stage, racial awareness, involves the process through which each partner develops an awareness of at least four existing sets of perspectives: their own, their partner’s, their collective racial group, and their partner’s racial group (Foeman & Nance, 1999). Because individuals of different races will likely have and continue to experience and respond to the world and each other in different ways, communication about each of these perspectives affords insight into the cognitions of each partner, the social constructs associated with each partner, and the differing perspectives of as respective ingroup and outgroup members.
Understanding external or outgroup perspective is important to the survival of the relationship because, as Foeman and Nance (1999) observe:

In the United States, the racial stratification system is caste; that is a person is either white or non-white; [therefore], individuals of two races will likely experience and respond to the world and each other in different ways (e.g., the majority partner may develop a more trusting nature than the minority one). Furthermore, outsiders will likely view the partners in different ways…At this phase in the relationship, communication functions to bring about and articulate a common perspective on the role of race in their initial interpersonal attraction…and to highlight or downplay race as an influencing factor. (p. 550)

While working through this phase, each partner may question the saliency of race in his or her attraction to someone of a differing race as partners engage in communication behaviors related to expressing mutual attraction for their partner. Interracial partners should also acknowledge the volatility of their interracial attraction within the social context of their respective ingroup membership.

Secondly, the awareness of this stage is also characterized by an emerging sensitivity to the racial place of the other. Foeman and Nance (1999) define the racial place as “the way that members of a racial group are treated in society, what is seen as their natural role and profile” (p. 550). For the Caucasian partner, experiences revealing or illustrating cultural privilege (the assumption of positive or neutral regard in public places) can reveal his or her partner’s experiences of cultural subordination (the assumption of negative regard in public places). This discovery may be revealed indirectly through daily interaction or directly through a discussion about race. Honest communication during this process of discovery facilitates the development
of cognitive racial consciousness beyond an existing general social awareness. Depending upon previous experiences with interracial encounters, romantic or otherwise, “the couples’ communication at this early stage reflects their ability to adequately address awareness that forms the foundation for later stages. Success at this initial stage “begins to build a base of trust and dialogue for the interracial couple” (Foeman & Nance, 1999, p. 551).

Stage Two. In the second stage of the model, the coping stage, couples learn to manage the external as well as internal challenges and recognize the unique benefits that the interracial nature of the relationship affords. Recognizing their attraction for each other and developing racial sensitivity and racial consciousness in Stage One forms a foundation as the couple determines the extent to which this information will effect and be integrated into their long-term relationship. Predicted negative outcomes (e.g., disapproval from family and/or friends) or challenges to the couple’s choice as relational partners may prematurely force the couple into this stage. As a result, they may find that levels of intensity and commitment increase as they draw together to manage these impositions.

During the coping stage, the couple develops two types of strategies to manage these challenges: proactive and reactive. Proactive strategies develop through communicative practices in which the couple learns protective and negotiative measures that insulate them and their relationship from potentially harmful external elements such as hostile or resistant interactions that they may encounter. They may choose not to expose themselves to these types of threats (protective insulation) or they may choose to alter their exposure to these threats (negotiation). For example, in a proactive circumstance, one partner may choose to attend a social engagement without the other (Foeman & Nance, 2002). In a reactive circumstance, they may choose not to participate in specific social engagement. As these encounters occur, strategies are
communicated and enacted, and from this concept of shared understanding, the couple engages in proactive communication and works together to facilitate proactive processes that establish characteristic responses to a variety of situations (Foeman & Nance, 1999). 

**Stage Three.** According to Foeman and Nance (1999), the third and fourth stages represent the most positive and relationally transforming of the four stages. In Stage Three, identity emergence, the partners individually as well as collectively begin developing a relational identity. They develop and engage in self-sustaining relational behaviors unique to their relationship. By reframing their position as a couple and possessing a relational identity within a larger cultural context, they choose to define their relationship on their terms and through their experiences, as opposed to being defined by others. As Orbe and Harris (2001) observe, “Instead of accepting society’s definition of what it means to be an interracial couple, the couple creates their own perspective and definition of the relationship” (p. 184). Preserving the relationship characterizes a communicative behavior that “functions to provide the voice and words [for the couple] to recast their world” (Foeman & Nance, 1999, p.553).

**Stage Four.** In the fourth and final stage, relationship maintenance, the interracial couple employs and refines the effective coping strategies developed in Stage Two. Furthermore, communication between the partners continuously engages the definition and redefinition of the relationship and their relational identity as described in Stage Three. As Orbe and Harris (2001) and Foeman and Nance (1999) affirm, the various stages represented in this model do not represent a singular lineal progression. Rather, as the partners change, so will the relationship. During the lifetime of this union, any one of these stages may be revisited, perspectives discussed, and strategies negotiated as is warranted and deemed necessary. Through these
processes, their interracial relational identity may change over time to reflect the changing nature of the relationship itself.

For the purposes of this study, the first two stages, characterized by initiation and early relational development, will serve as a framework through which to derive a structural understanding of the ways in which interracial romantic dating couples may discuss race within the context of their relationship. Through a lens of racial awareness, the couple becomes aware of their attraction and its relationship to race, and aware of an emerging sensitivity to the racial place of the partner. The second stage, coping with the social definitions of race, functions upon a base of trust and dialogue established during the first phase. Specifically, Foeman and Nance (1999) state that these perceptions form the foundation for the couple to begin proactive and reactive strategies to manage the challenges they may face due to the interracial nature of their relationship. The communicative process serves to integrate these perspectives with successful strategies so that they are prepared to manage potentially harmful or threatening situations as they may arise.

Given the volatile nature of these situations, however, partners may feel hesitant to share the perspectives derived from a heightened awareness of their racial differences and may resist communicating about the possible implications of this difference. Hence, effective communication at this phase is critical to the development of successful proactive/reactive strategies, and a successful interracial romantic relationship. Ultimately, partners must determine the content of their disclosures and the process through which they communicate these disclosures.
Managing Interpersonal Communication Boundaries

As was previously noted, the Interracial Relationship Development (IRD) model provides a solid description of the four stages through which interracial couples may cycle. The model illustrates how, at each stage, effective communication is critical to the evolution of the relationship, as communication functions to address and negotiate the challenges the couple will potentially face in their relationship. In each stage, the individuals must consider and address the personal and cultural differences attributable to their racial differences. Personal beliefs regarding the issue of race, however, are private issues for many individuals; therefore, private disclosures addressing issues of racial differences can be unfamiliar and uncomfortable. As Petronio and Martin (1993) state, “Because disclosure is intentional, individuals necessarily take into account the outcomes of revealing private information before they disclose” (p. 191). Nevertheless, communication of these personal and private issues is a fundamental requirement to each stage in the model. Hence, individuals must determine individually and collectively the appropriate means by which they can regulate the tensions in their private disclosive interactions during the process of relational development.

Communication Boundary Management Theory

Communication Boundary Management theory (CBM; Petronio, 2000), derived from the concept of dialectical tensions, illustrates the message choices individuals select in their communications. A dialectic is a tension between two or more oppositional or contradictory forces that exists and operates within and contributes to the development of a relationship (Baxter, 1988, 1990). As Baxter (1990) has noted, these oppositional forces are essential to relational change and growth. When conceived as both a process and a condition of a relationship or a system, dialectical analysis investigates the changes and developments of a
relationship in response to these tensions. Viewed dialectically, relationships are defined and shaped over time by the ways in which partners manage contradictions (Littlejohn, 2002).

Petronio (1991, 1993, 2000) has advanced the concept of self-disclosure management and relationship development through her work with CBM theory. Petronio frames the dialectical tensions between revealing and concealing information within a relationship and posits a process of negotiation through communication between the public and the private boundaries that individuals manage in their relationships. The metaphoric boundary serves as a line of demarcation to identify the border around private information. Petronio (2000) also suggests that the tension created by these forces can lead to separation or integration. Individuals may choose to "remain separate within their borders or to engage in communication to find common ground with others" (Petronio, Ellmers, Giles, & Gallois, 1998, p. 572). It is through the process of communication that individuals regulate interaction with others and negotiate interpersonal boundaries.

To achieve a desired degree of interaction with others necessitates consideration of the boundary process that controls issues of privacy. As Altman (1975) proposed,

[Privacy is] an interpersonal boundary process by which a person regulates interaction with others. By altering the degree of openness of the self to others, a personal boundary is more or less receptive to social interaction with others. Privacy is, therefore, a dynamic process involving selective control over a self boundary. (p. 7)

Boundary control mechanisms attempt to resolve the tension between opening and closing the boundaries that function to monitor the level of desired privacy. CBM theory delimits the boundary metaphor and, according to Cragan and Shields (1999), "explains the effect of disclosive information on the establishment, maintenance, and negotiated fit of privacy
boundaries" (p. 96). The theory "assumes that people feel they own their private disclosures. As such, they have a right to control who knows the information" (Petronio et.al, 1998, p. 576). According to Petronio (2000), “Communication Boundary Management theory argues that understanding the way people handle private information depends on the intersection of Boundary Structures and a Rule-Based Management System that drives boundary regulation” (p. 38).

**Boundary Structures**

Boundary structures are defined as four related dimensions: (a) ownership, (b) control, (c) permeability, and (d) levels. Ownership refers to the belief that we own our information and have the "right to govern whether private information about [our]selves is revealed to or concealed from others" (Caughlin et al., 2000, p. 118). Control describes the attempt to dictate who has access to private information. We exercise control over to who we reveal this information according to the risks we assess to be associated with that disclosure. The degree of permeability refers to the extent to which information flows to others with respect to risk. Therefore, “through the concept of permeability, we witness the way this theory addresses the dialectical issue of revealing and concealing” (Petronio, 2000, p. 39). Hence, as the level of privacy assigned to information increases, the degree of permeability decreases. The last dimension of boundary structure refers to levels or degrees of information ownership: people own different levels of boundaries. In addition to personal boundaries, individuals may share, or co-own private information, thus forming dyadic, family, or organizational boundaries. Privacy boundaries must be negotiated with others, depending upon the type of information we co-own. When private information becomes a mutual obligation shared with others, we share in the responsibility of protecting these messages, and we may employ sanctions to ensure an expected level of
responsibility. As the level of privacy assigned to information increases, the degree of permeability decreases, causing the strength of the sanction to increase (Petronio, 2000).

Rule-Based Management System

As was previously noted, these boundary structures are driven by a rule based management system. According to Petronio et al. (1998), opening up the boundaries around private information is determined by rules that are established by the partners to regulate a level of disclosure. These rules function to "help manage the boundary and, therefore, [manage] the accessibility of the private information to others" (Petronio et al., 1998, p. 576). These rules may be enacted as a matter of routine or be determined by the context of the situation. These rules “drive” the management system and, therefore, determine the way the structures function to protect or grant others access to private information. Four essential concepts define the management system: boundary rule formation, boundary rule usage, boundary rule coordination, and boundary rule turbulence.

Rule formation. The first concept defined by the boundary management system is boundary rule formation. Boundary rules, or privacy rules, are constructed to regulate the flow of information between individuals (Petronio, 2000). The construction of these rules is developed on the basis of risk assessment and determined by four criteria: cultural expectations, personal motivations, situational demands, and gender differences. Rule formation is determined by cultural expectations, including cultural definitions of privacy as well as individual-based definitions of privacy. Secondly, privacy rules are influenced by the extent to which an individual is personally motivated and feels compelled to protect self-esteem. Thirdly, this need varies in form, is highly individualistic, and varies from person to person, depending upon the context of the situation. Finally, levels of privacy rules are also influenced by gender. For
women, private disclosure, or opening their private boundaries, is based on a set of target criteria, or being in the presence of the intended other; for men, private disclosure is based on a set of situational criteria, or the context of the situation (Petronio, 2000). Hence, as Petronio explains, because men’s and women’s private disclosures are based on different criteria, they may formulate rules that are inconsistent with each other for revealing and concealing.

**Rule usage.** The second concept defined by the boundary management system is boundary rule usage. Determining rules of access and protection also relies on risk assessment, or the anticipated ramifications of the disclosure of information (Petronio, 1991). Petronio and Martin (1993) observe, "When an individual anticipates ramifications, he/she is weighing the need to disclose against the need to protect private information about the self. In this way, anticipated ramifications function as one type of boundary regulator mechanism" (p. 192). When balancing the opposing needs to be open and closed, the balance tips towards disclosure contingent upon expecting positive or negative ramifications. Revealing private information is risky given the potential vulnerability when a person chooses to make private aspects of the self public (Petronio, 1993). Risk assessment regulates the interpersonal boundaries we use to maintain control over privacy about the self. This motivation for protecting or granting access to privacy also serves to form the basis of rule development. The concepts of boundary rule formation form the basis for the concept of boundary rule usage. Through assessment of these criteria, Petronio (2000) outlines the following:

We determine if we want to tell and who we want to tell private information, the kinds of messages that are used to conceal or reveal the depth and breadth of revelation or confidentiality, and if we reveal, the timing of the message. These choices are used
everyday…and reflect the decisions we make about managing private information. (p. 40)

Rule coordination. The third concept defined by the boundary management system is boundary rule coordination (Petronio, 1991). Because many types of private information are co-owned with others, collective action is necessary to expand boundaries to include more than one person. As such, privacy boundaries must be managed through coordinated sharing and regulation of disclosure of private information. The rights of ownership are co-owned, and because this information is not exclusively owned, we develop mutually agreed upon rules to manage control over co-owned private information. Sanctions or punishments are constructed in the management of rules to direct acceptable levels of revealing and concealing (Petronio, 2000). The strength or weakness of network or relational ties among those who share the private information may influence the level of control and, therefore, the expectations for boundary management that evolves into protection and access rules (Petronio, 1991). Subsequently, as strength of relational ties increases, commitment to rule usage increases; however, commitment level may depend upon the degree to which rules are understood. Boundary management control may be more difficult if rules are implicit rather than explicit. For example, all individuals may not understand implicit rules that are generally understood by a specific social group (e.g., ingroup, family). Explicit rules more easily facilitate individuals understanding of the expectations for boundary management.

Rule turbulence. The final concept defined by the boundary management system is boundary rule turbulence (Petronio, 1991). There are multiple types of boundary turbulence, which typically result from incongruence in boundary coordination. Incongruence, or predicaments, may be seen in the reluctant confidante, or the individual who does not wish to
receive private information and feels burdened by the inclusion of this disclosure. Incongruence may also be seen if the recipient or confidante is unwilling or unable to manage a privacy boundary, or unwilling to move from one boundary to the next. For example, information considered personal and private by an individual may be considered dyadic by his or her partner. The tension between revealing and concealing creates incongruence as individuals remain within the personal privacy level when they are expected to move into the dyadic or familial privacy level (Petronio, 1991). Incongruence may also be seen when an individual's boundaries are invaded and ownership and control over private information is compromised. For example, this is seen when an adult invades a child's privacy, obtains ownership of the information, and exercises control by telling the child what to do (Petronio, 2000).

The concepts and strategies that constitute the CBM theory focus on communication between individuals within a dialectical structure. These opposing forces, the acts of private versus public disclosure, are structured as dialectical tensions that we must manage in our everyday lives. They become the mechanisms through which we make sense of our environment and our relationships. The rules that we form and use individually as well as collectively reflect the practice of boundary management, controlling the dialectic of revealing and concealing.

Disclosure Within the Interracial Relationship Development Model

It has already been noted that boundary management reflects the communicative behavior of privacy regulation. This practice serves a sense-making function through which "we are able to understand the choices that people make to cope with dialectical tensions and contradictions in everyday life" (Petronio, 2000, p 43). An analysis of the communication requirements in each stage of the IRD model through the lens of CBM theory highlights the complex process of self-disclosure and the role of risk assessment in the process of interracial communication.
In the first stage, as partners develop multiple perspectives of racial awareness and racial sensitivity to the racial place of their partner, prior understandings or conceptions of race may be informed by existing social premises, stereotypes, perceptions of interracial couples, and even perceptions of individuals in interracial relationships. As the literature previously discussed indicates (Aldridge, 1978; Berry & Blassingame, 1982; Harris & Kalbfleisch, 2000; Lewandowski & Jackson, 2001; Petroni, 1973), these attitudes are negative evaluations founded upon myths and intergroup biases and contribute to misunderstanding and miscommunication based upon misinformation. In this process of emerging awareness, disclosure of potential biases and prejudiced attitudes may involve communication about negative outgroup perceptions and attitudes about their partners’ respective racial group. For example, a Caucasian partner may experience tension between revealing and concealing information that illustrates perceived ingroup racial dominance, and consequently outgroup racial subordination, due to societal levels of socialized or institutional racism. Yet, because these negative disclosures may be attributed to negative outgroup perceptions that exist at a societal level, this type of communication does not constitute self-disclosure because it does not necessarily reveal personal, private information.

However, partners may be forced to confront their own potential biases as they share with their partner in this process of “realization.” As such, tension may exist between revelation and concealment in consideration or assessment of the risk associated with expression of this new information. On an intimate level, tension may exist as this type of disclosure represents self-disclosure that reflects negatively upon their partner. As such, partners may fear being associated with these negative outgroup biases, fear being judged as prejudiced, and/or fear being labeled as racist, which may jeopardize the potential to develop a meaningful relationship. In this context, interracial communication, or communication about race, constitutes risky self-disclosure.
Based on the structure of each partner’s individual boundaries, the four dimensions of ownership, permeability, control, and levels are challenged. Disclosure of these negative attitudes constitutes a challenge to the ownership of this sensitive information. Each partner must choose whether or not to allow the respective partner to share in this ownership by making the boundary of self-disclosure permeable to the partner, thus relinquishing complete and individual control of this risky information. Questions of ownership are complicated by the public domain in which these stereotypes exist because it is reasonable to assume that both partners have been exposed to or actually experienced these biases. Therefore, knowledge of this public information challenges the dimensions of ownership and control in a manner we would not expect regarding risky disclosure of private information that could only be known by the individuals themselves (e.g., previous relationship experiences, personal illness, or sexual history).

As Foeman and Nance (1999) noted, interracial couples should acknowledge the volatility of their interracial attraction through the disclosure of this private information, given their respective ingroup membership, and “the way that members of a racial group are treated in society” (p. 551). Rules of disclosure may not be determined in this initial stage, and because the relationship is in the early stage of development, each partner must determine the rules by which initial disclosure will be managed. This decision-making process may be complicated by societal or group norms that generalize/categorize appropriate behavior for interracial communication. As was previously noted, for the Caucasian partner, revealing experiences that illustrate social “norms” may actually illustrate social and/or racial privilege, and consequently may simultaneously illustrate/reveal his or her AA partner’s experiences of social and racial subordination. Conversely, for the AA partner, revealing experiences that illustrate social and/or
racial prejudices or discrimination may simultaneously illustrate/reveal his or her Caucasian partners experiences of racial privilege that were previously perceived to be social “norms.”

In this discovery of the other’s “racial place,” partners may offer disclosure through daily interaction or directly through a discussion about race. Although potentially risky, honest disclosure serves to facilitate future communication, as each partner may encounter outgroup perspectives of their partner. This discovery also facilitates the development of cognitive racial consciousness beyond an existing general, social awareness. Depending upon previous experiences with interracial encounters, romantic or otherwise, partners’ communication at this early stage reflects their ability to adequately address awareness that forms the foundation for later stages. Success at this initial stage begins to build a base of trust and dialogue for the interracial couple (Foeman & Nance, 1999). Therefore, partners must learn how to regulate their private, risky disclosure to their partner. Greater understanding of the role that race may play and the ways in which partners disclose their perceptions and experiences with race leads to the following research question (RQ):

RQ1: How do partners in an interracial romantic relationship engage in communication about the topic of race?

The second stage of the model, coping with social definitions of race, introduces the powerful influences of external, social factors. These factors may include societal norms, the general public, family members, friends, co-workers, and any other individual or interaction occurring outside the dyad of the relationship itself. Foeman and Nance (1999) argue that communication about race becomes a defined situation if the couple has not discussed the role of race in their relationship up to this point because external factors or events will likely occur that impose the necessity of communication about their racial composition. This assertion indicates that events, or incidences, will likely occur in the early developmental stages of the relationship.
that may impact communication between partners. Therefore, further analysis of the second stage of the model leads to the use of critical incident methodology as a tool of qualitative data analysis to investigate the following research question:

RQ2: What critical events occur in an interracial romantic relationship with regards to race?

Furthermore, in this second stage, the couple communicates to determine the most effective proactive and reactive strategies to manage the external stressors they may encounter to collectively create stability in their relationship. Therefore, they must determine whether to reveal or conceal risky disclosure based on the assessment of risk from a relational perspective. The couple will create a structure of boundaries based on the four dimensions of ownership, permeability, control, and levels. They must determine whether to reveal or conceal private disclosure to each other as well as to others outside the relationship. High permeability of boundaries facilitates private disclosure between the partners in the relationship. For example, communication about a planned social engagement with family members, such as a birthday celebration, may reveal the potential for a negative racial encounter. The tension of whether to reveal or conceal may stem from uncertainties due to questions of a partner’s commitment and loyalty to the relationship. If perceptions of family resistance pose a relational threat, the couple may decide not to attend due to a high level of risk assessment and the anticipated ramifications of potential vulnerability. Through communication of private disclosure, the couple has decided on a proactive strategy that facilitates co-ownership of risky disclosure, maintains high boundary permeability between the partners, but maintains low boundary permeability outside the relationship in order to manage external social influences.

In this situation, partners have decided on collective ownership of this private information and determined a reactive strategy that serves as a stabilizing function for the
relationship itself. Through utilization of the rule-based management system of co-owned information, partners have determined to protect access to their collectively private information. Based on the success of this strategy, they may establish further rules to access and protect information. Assessing the risk associated with private disclosure allows partners to communicate the costs of and rewards for revealing information about the racial issues existing in their relationship and agree upon boundary permeability. Because these rules are co-created, and the information is co-owned, each partner will be responsible for adhering to the rules negotiated.

Conversely, in assessing the costs of and rewards for revealing information about racial issues, acknowledgement and communication about external stressors may reveal a partner’s unwillingness to pursue the relationship. According to the Foeman & Nance (1999), as partners progress through the development of their relationship, they may revisit the stages of this model as they negotiate new and unfamiliar complexities. Although they do indicate that communication about race will likely occur in these first two stages, and the communication practices established in these first two stages will serve as the foundation for communicative practices throughout the duration of their relationship, the assumption of this model is that the relationship is long-term and intimate, rather than less committed. Hence, greater understanding of the effect that communication about these critical events may have on the stability and/or outcome of the relationship leads to the following research question:

RQ3: How does communication about these critical events impact the relationship?

As the research questions indicate, the focus of this study is directly related to the experiences of interracial romantic dating partners. There is currently little research that provides insight into the initial and early developmental stages of an interracial romantic relationship, and
how individual perceptions of race and racial differences may affect the development of these relationships. Therefore, this study employed a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviewing technique, in order to explore this communication phenomenon. A qualitative approach to understanding this communication experience provides access to the ways in which individuals make sense of their experiences, thus providing access to the richness and details of this phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Studies conducted through in-depth interviewing ground the research and the researcher in the experiences of the subject. In-depth interviewing also provides a method through which researchers may move beyond observable behavior in order to acquire an in-depth, intimate understanding of the participants’ definition of the situation (Glesne, 1999). Moreover, according to McCracken (1988), this research strategy recognizes two factors that may impede the research process, time scarcity and privacy concerns, and allows the researcher to “capture the data needed for penetrating qualitative analysis…” and “achieve crucial qualitative objectives within a manageable methodological context” (p. 11).

AA/Caucasian interracial relationships have historically been the most controversial (Gaines et al., 1999; Porterfield, 1982), and AA/Caucasian interracial couples are evaluated more negatively than other interethnic/interracial couples (Lewandowski, 2001). As previously explained, in comparison to the extensive body of literature and research that have focused on interracial marriages, marginal research has focused on non-married interracial couples (Moore, 1999; Todd & McKinney, 1992). As Killian (2001) observed, “research studies grounded in the words and experiences of interracial couples are rare” (p.27). Therefore, these specific relationships represent the focus of this study.
CHAPTER 4

METHODS

Participants

Fifteen participants between the ages of 18-41 were included in this study: four AA females, four AA males, four Caucasian females, and three Caucasian males. Participants satisfied three criteria for participation in this study. First, participants self-identified as African American (AA)/Black or Caucasian/White. Second, participants identified their interracial dating partner as either AA/Black or Caucasian/White. Third, each participant was either currently or had previously been involved in an interracial dating relationship for a minimum of six months. Participants included undergraduates, graduate students, and non-students. Undergraduate students were recruited from upper- and lower-level speech communication courses at a large southeastern university via a posted sign-up sheet and course instructor class announcements. Students were offered research credit as partial fulfillment of their course requirements. In order to diversify the sample, graduate and non-student participants were also recruited via snowball sampling. When possible, partners of participants who were currently involved and/or previously involved in the interracial relationship were recruited for the study. All participants were assured of confidentiality. (For the purposes of the study, participant disclosures regarding relationship status and/or termination will be discussed in the results section of the manuscript.)

Participants’ Interracial Relationship Status

Current involvement. Five participants (AAF1, AAF2, AAM4, CF4, and CM2) reported current involvement in an interracial romantic relationship for at least six months. AAF1 and her
partner, who was not a participant in this study, had been dating for approximately 18 months. Four of the five participants represented two relational partnerships. AAF2 and her partner, CM2, had been dating for approximately 14 months. AAM4 and his partner, CF4, had been dating for approximately six months. Specific details concerning relationship characteristics for each participant are contained in the following section.

Previous involvement. Ten participants reported previous involvement in an interracial romantic relationship(s) for at least six months. Nine participants indicated involvement in one interracial relationship. Relationship durations were reported as follows: approximately five years reported by two participants (CF1, CF3), 18 months reported by one participant (AAF4), and approximately six-eight months reported by six participants (AAM1, AAM2, AAM3, CF2, CM1, CM3). One participant, AAF3, reported involvement in two relationships, the first lasting approximately four years and the second lasting approximately two years.

Participants’ Demographics and Relational Characteristics

African American Females (AAF). The AAF participants ranged in age from 21 to 24 years old. Three (AAF1, AAF2, AAF4) of the four were undergraduate students. AAF1 was a 21 year-old student who had been involved in her current interracial romantic relationship for 16 months. She and her partner, a Caucasian male, initially met while living on the same hall in an undergraduate dorm, yet they did not begin dating until a subsequent encounter a year later. Regarding her dating history, she shared that she had been involved in two previous interracial romantic relationships with Caucasian males, one of which she considered to be a serious relationship. She had also maintained numerous interracial cross-sex friendships throughout her life. AAF2 was a 21 year-old student who had been involved in her current interracial romantic relationship for 14 months. She and her partner, who was also a participant in this study (CM2),
were casual acquaintances who met through mutual friends. She had not dated a Caucasian male
prior to dating her current partner; however, similar to AAF1, she had engaged in and maintained
numerous interracial cross-sex friendships. AAF3 was a 24 year-old postgraduate and a
consultant employed at an accounting firm in a large, southeastern metropolitan city. She had
been involved in two serious interracial romantic relationships with Caucasian partners. Her first
interracial romantic relationship began when she was 15 and in high school. After dating for
approximately four years, she terminated the relationship during her first year in college. Her
second interracial romantic relationship began when she was 20 and in college. After dating for
approximately two years, she and her partner mutually agreed to terminate the relationship.
Resembling AAF1 and AAF2, AAF3 had also engaged in and maintained numerous interracial
cross-sex friendships throughout her life. AAF4 was a 22 year-old student who had been
involved in one interracial romantic relationship for 16 months. She and her partner had been
friends in high school for several years prior to their romantic involvement. However, she and
her partner terminated the relationship three years ago, during her first year of college.
Paralleling AAF1, AAF2, and AAF3, AAF4 had engaged in and maintained numerous interracial
cross-sex friendships.

*African American Males (AAMs)*. AAMs ranged in age from 18 to 27. All four AAM
participants were students, either graduate or undergraduate, at large southeastern universities.
AAM1 was a 27 year-old doctoral student. He was also a teaching assistant and a graduate
assistant supervisor. Although he maintained numerous interracial friendships with Caucasian
women, he had been involved in only one interracial romantic relationship, at age 25. He and his
partner met in a graduate-level multicultural education class and dated for approximately seven
months, at which point they terminated the relationship. AAM2 was a 23 year-old master’s
student. He had been involved in three interracial romantic relationships, one of which he considered to be serious. He and his partner attended the same private school and became friends during his junior and her sophomore year in high school. Their relationship progressed from a friendship to a romantic relationship, and six months later, they began dating. They dated for approximately eight months. However, for reasons to be discussed later, he terminated the relationship. Like AAM1, he had maintained interracial cross-sex friendships throughout his childhood and adult life. AAM3 was a 22 year-old undergraduate student. He had been involved in four interracial romantic relationships, two of which were serious; one of the two involved a Caucasian female. He and his Caucasian partner met and began dating during his sophomore year in college. After dating for six months, they mutually agreed to end the relationship due to her decision to move out of state. Similar to AAM1 and AAM2, he had engaged in and currently maintained numerous interracial friendships. AAM4 was an 18 year-old undergraduate student who was currently involved in an interracial romantic relationship. He and his partner, who was also a participant in this study (CF4), had been dating approximately six and a half months, but they had known each other for four years. They met during their freshman year of high school, and over time, their relationship progressed from a friendship to a romantic relationship. Prior to dating his current partner, he had been involved in three interracial romantic relationships, each of which had progressed in a similar manner. In addition, he had also been involved in numerous interracial cross-sex friendships throughout his life.

_Caucasian Females (CFs)._ CFs ranged in age from 18 to 41. Three of four were students at a large southeastern university. CF1 was a 21 year-old undergraduate who was currently involved in an interethnic romantic relationship; her partner identified himself as Jamaican. She had also maintained numerous interracial cross-sex friendships throughout her life. Prior to her
current relationship, she had been involved in two serious romantic relationships: one interracial (AA male), and one interethnic (Hispanic male). In fact, she indicated that she had never dated intraracially. CF1 and her AA partner began dating when they were in high school; she was 15 and he was 17. After dating for approximately five years, they decided to end the relationship due to the difficulties they experienced as a result of their long-distance separation. CF2 was a 22 year-old undergraduate who had been involved in one interracial romantic relationship. She and her partner met and became friends while they were in grade school. Over the next five years, their relationship progressed from a friendship to a romantic relationship, and they began dating when she was 17. After dating for approximately six months, she terminated the relationship, for reasons that will be addressed later. CF3 was a 41 year-old postgraduate and an internal consultant employed at a healthcare organization in a large, southeastern metropolitan city. She had been involved in two interracial/interethnic relationships (AA and Indian partners), both of which she considered to have been serious. When she was 36, she began dating her AA partner. They met in the workplace and dated for the next five years. Unfortunately, their relationship was unstable at times and, two weeks prior to our interview, she had terminated the relationship. Resembling CF1, she had maintained numerous interracial cross-sex friendships throughout her life. CF4 was an 18 year-old undergraduate student who was currently involved in an interracial romantic relationship. Prior to dating her current partner, she had not dated an AA male. She and her partner, who was also a participant in this study (AAM4), had been dating approximately six and a half months, but they had known each other for four years. They met during their freshman year of high school, and over time, their relationship progressed from a friendship to a romantic relationship.
Caucasian Males (CMs). CMs ranged in age from 19 to 22 and were all undergraduate students. CM1 was a 22 year-old student who had been involved in one interracial romantic relationship when he was 17. He and his partner met in high school through mutual friends. Their relationship progressed from a friendship to a romantic relationship. They dated for approximately six months before mutually deciding to terminate the relationship. CM2 was a 21 year-old student who had been involved in his current interracial romantic relationship for 14 months. He and his partner, who was also a participant in this study (AAF2), were casual acquaintances that met through mutual friends. Although CM2 had not dated an AAF prior to dating his current partner, similar to CM1, he had engaged in and maintained numerous interracial cross-sex friendships. CM3 was a 19 year-old student who had been involved in one interracial romantic relationship. He and his partner met and began dating while they were in high school; he was a sophomore and she was a senior. They dated for approximately six months. Although she was the only AAF that he had dated, in likeness to CM1 and CM2, CM3 had engaged in and maintained numerous interracial cross-sex friendships.

Procedure

Data Collection

Face-to-face, in-depth interviews were used as the method of data collection. Prior to each interview, a brief introductory meeting, or pre-interview, was conducted either by email, telephone, or in person that allowed the participant to ask questions and/or express concerns regarding their participation in the research study. During this pre-interview, the researcher discussed the consent form (Appendix A), provided the participants with the interview guide (Appendix B), explained the interview format, secured permission for the interview to be audio-taped, and answered any questions that were posed. Interview sites were mutually agreed upon
by the researcher and the participant, and occurred at several locations including (a) the researcher’s residence, (b) the participant’s residence, and (c) a departmental research laboratory. Sites were chosen for levels of privacy and convenience for the participant.

After completing the consent form, participants were asked to respond to a series of open-ended interview questions, as indicated by the interview guide. In order to facilitate a comfortable interview setting and establish rapport between the researcher and the participant, questions were ordered and presented to elicit increasingly intimate disclosures, beginning with probes concerning general relational and communicative topics to probes more specific in nature (Charmaz, 2002). Interviews varied in length of time, ranging from approximately 35 minutes to approximately 70 minutes. On several occasions, following the conclusion of the interview, participants posed questions and/or provided commentary concerning the nature of and/or the researcher’s interest in the study. Given that permission was not explicitly granted to record interactions beyond those defined within the official interview period, it was determined that the researcher was not privy to these interactions, as they were not within the parameters of the participant's consent. Therefore, these exchanges were not audiotaped or included in the transcripts. The researcher and independent transcribers transcribed the interviews. Fifteen interviews yielded approximately 254 pages of transcribed data. Transcripts ranged in length from seven to 25 pages, with an average length of approximately 17 pages.

Data Analysis

This study was approached from an interpretivist perspective, using concepts from the Interracial Relationship Development (IRD) model and Communication Boundary Management (CBM) theory to understand disclosure between partners as they engaged in nonrelational and relational communication about race. Methods of data analysis included the use of deductive and
inductive types of analytic strategies. Deductively driven data analysis works “down” from pre-existing theoretical understandings (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), whereas inductively driven data analysis “attempts to build a systematic account of what has been observed and recorded” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 86). For example, as Ezzy notes, “content analysis can be useful as a stage of data analysis as it allows the relevance of preexisting theory to be tested, and it can be used as a way of assessing the applicability of a theory that emerges during thematic or content analysis” (p. 85). When categories and themes not evident apriori or prior to the analysis are identified, researchers may move from the use of deductively oriented strategies (i.e., content analysis) to inductively oriented strategies (i.e., thematic analysis) in achieving a more comprehensive analysis or categorization and interpretation of relevant data. Guided by these perspectives, transcripts were analyzed in successive phases utilizing coding procedures informed by deductive and inductive type methods.

Preliminary analysis included coding procedures designed to identify and categorize data informed and structured by the stages outlined in the IRD model. Although the IRD model does not present or define formal categories of communication and interaction within the stages, the descriptive model does provide a framework for initial investigation. For example, Stage One indicates communication may include discussion of partners’ identity and social constructs associated with group membership. Stage Two indicates couples will likely encounter events due to the interracial status of their relationship. Therefore, preliminary data analysis reflected a deductive-style coding procedure wherein the transcripts were analyzed for the presence and categorization of topics and interactions, informed by the descriptive stages of the model. Preliminary results from initial coding procedures, however, did not present the breadth and depth of categories or themes present in the data set. Therefore, in order to identify and
categorize unique and prevalent themes present in the data, secondary analysis utilized an inductive-style coding procedure, known as thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis is one component of the initial procedures included in Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) analytic induction strategy known as grounded theory. Grounded theory is “a strategy for handling data in research, providing modes of conceptualization for describing and explaining” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p.3). The first stage of coding during thematic analysis is known as open coding. Glaser (1978) describes open coding as a way to “generate an emergent set of categories and their properties” (p. 56). According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), “open coding is the part of the analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorizing of phenomena through close examination of the data” (p. 62). Strauss and Corbin consider the process of “constant comparison” integral to this coding process. Instances should be compared against other instances for similarities and differences. Through this process, data can be grouped and differentiated by categories and subcategories. From this procedure, additional revisions of emergent themes yielded categories. In addition to thematic analysis, transcripts were analyzed using the critical incident technique to discover the occurrence of critical events or incidences.

Flanagan (1953) considered the critical incident technique essential when determining and collecting certain and important facts related to defined situations. This technique includes identification of an incident or activity “sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made” occurring “in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and its consequences are sufficiently definite” (p. 2). Recent scholars have defined critical events as “events seen as critical, influential, or decisive in the course of some process” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 115), stories marked by key happenings (Coffey &
Atkinson, 1996), and choices and compromises made in personal and professional lives (Tirri & Koro-Ljungberg, 2002).

As mentioned, Stage Two of the model proposed partners would likely encounter events or incidences due to the interracial status of their relationship. Foeman and Nance (2002) indicated these events were defined by or attributable to external, social factors. The critical incident technique provided a tool through which the data could be analyzed for the occurrence of specific situations or critical events, and categorized based on the type of factor discovered. This technique also allowed for identification of critical events that were not attributable to external factors, as defined by Foeman and Nance, but were perceived or determined by the participants and the researcher to be critical incidences. As Flanagan (1953) noted, a single, rigid set of rules should not determine this technique. Rather, this procedure should be viewed as a “flexible set of principles which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand” (p. 22). Therefore, use of the critical incident technique, in conjunction with the coding methods discussed, allowed the researcher to analyze the data in order to discover and identify events reported and/or described by the participants as critical, which were not predicted by the model. The flexibility of thematic analysis and critical incident technique also allowed the researcher to analyze the data, while illustrating the perspective of the subject.

As Ezzy (2002) states, “The aim of qualitative research is to allow the voice of the other, the people being researched, to inform the researcher” (p. 64). Narrative theory articulates this position. According to Cortazzi (2001), “narrative analysis can be used for systematic interpretations of others’ interpretations of events…narrating [is], after all, a major means of making sense of past experiences and sharing it with others” (p. 384). In order to strengthen the validity and reliability of the analysis, and ensure that the analysis accurately represented the
data and the experiences of the participants, the secondary researcher was consulted to review and revise, when necessary, the analysis of the data.
CHAPTER 5

RESULTS

Research Question 1

In order to explore the first research question which asks, “How do partners in an interracial romantic relationship engage in communication about the topic of race?,” participants were asked a series of questions investigating the breadth and depth with which partners communicated about the topic of race (see Appendix B). Questions included whether or not partners communicated about race, what topics were or were not discussed in initial conversations about race, the frequency with which partners communicated about race, and whether or not these conversations were considered to be intimate self-disclosures and/or threatening to the stability of the relationship.

Thematic analysis of transcripts from face-to-face interviews yielded four categories in response to questions posed from the interview guide in relation to the first research question. These four categories are framed from the perspective of the participant and capture the prevalent pattern that emerges when partners do engage in communication about the topic of race. The data suggest that communication typically occurs in response to a conversational prompt. A conversational prompt is defined as an event or observation that initiates or facilitates communication between partners about the topic of race. Categorization of conversational prompts was based on two criteria: (1) the source of the prompt (e.g., external or internal to the relationship), and (2) the topic or content of the prompt (e.g., relational or non-relational). Categorization of the source or locus of the prompt was determined by whether communication
was reported to originate from a partner’s observation of or involvement in a situation that occurred either external or internal to the relationship. For example, external prompts may include communication about interactions with individuals external to the relationship (someone other than their partner such as a stranger, relative, or friend) or communication about situations that occur external to the relationship (i.e., the O.J. Simpson trial or interactions in an interracial classroom). Internal prompts may include communication initiated by a partner about an observation regarding the centrality of race in the relationship or acknowledgment of racial stereotypes (i.e., a partner’s expression of racial identification or level of racial awareness).

The second type of categorization was used to determine whether the prompt was relational or non-relational according to topic or content and whether or not communication was specifically related to the partner’s involvement in and/or the implications of their interracial relationship. For example, a non-relational prompt may include communication between partners about the characteristics of a racial stereotype (i.e., White women are submissive; Black men are aggressive). A relational prompt may include communication about the long-term implications of a partner’s commitment to an interracial romantic relationship (i.e., fear of alienation from family or friends or contemplation of having biracial children). Based on the criteria outlined for the source of the prompt (external vs. internal) and the topic or content of the prompt (relational vs. non-relational), four categories were constructed to capture the types of prompts that initiated or facilitated partner’s engagement in communication about the topic of race: (1) external non-relational prompts, (2) external relational prompts, (3) internal non-relational prompts, and (4) internal relational prompts.
External Non-Relational Prompts

An external non-relational prompt was operationalized as a conversational prompt that originated from a source external to the relationship and contained communication about the topic of race that is non-relational, or not specifically and/or personally related to relational implications of a partner’s racial identity or the interracial status of their relationship. For example, non-relational communication about race between partners prompted by discussions of an interracial communication course constituted an external non-relational prompt. Thirteen of the 15 participants reported that communication about the topic of race was initiated or facilitated by external non-relational prompts. External non-relational prompts were reported to originate from two types of external sources: (1) interactions with individuals external to the relationship (i.e., strangers, acquaintances, and peers), and (2) exposure to information external to the relationship (news stories and internet images).

*External interactions.* Interactions in social contexts with individuals external to the relationship facilitated non-relational communication between partners about the topic of race. Participants indicated that communication was instigated through interactions with others that highlighted societal perceptions of behaviors associated with racial identity. Two Caucasian female participants discussed interactions with others that illustrated expectations of ingroup behaviors (stereo)typically characteristic of AAs and not typically characteristic of Caucasians in different contexts. CF3 recounted a discussion with her partner in which an interaction had facilitated her awareness of racial behaviors:

I realized that black people, when they pass each other on the street, [they] always acknowledge you, they always say hello. White people never do that…Black people do it
because you’re black, and so I’ve often talked about that with him because there is a culture among African Americans that they are part of one group, or one big family.

(459-463)

From a different perspective, CF1 indicated she initiated communication with her partner about the topic of race, which resulted from negative interactions with others concerning her experiences with societal expectations of in-group behavior. As she recalls, “There were a few times when people got on my case because they said I was acting Black. And I remember bringing that up with him and being so upset about it” (CF1, 422-423). Because others deemed her behaviors as atypical of societal expectations for a Caucasian female, yet stereotypically associated with African Americans in general, she encountered resistance from her peers.

In addition, three participants (AAF2, AAM1, CM2) indicated that interactions in academic contexts with individuals external to the relationship initiated non-relational communication about the topic of race. For example, communication between AAF2 and CM2 (dating partners) was facilitated by AAF2’s enrollment in an undergraduate-level interracial communication course. For AAM1, communication with his partner was facilitated by his interactions in a graduate-level multicultural education course. In both of these instances, communication about the topic of race was initiated by his interactions while enrolled in academic courses that emphasized racial/cultural awareness. These partners purposely chose to share their classroom discussions or experiences with their partner, which prompted discussions about race on a societal level.

*External information.* Communication about information external to the relationship facilitated non-relational communication between partners about the topic of race. Information was characterized by exposure to media that evoked communication concerning the concept of
race and perceptions of racial difference. Participants recalled that coverage of news stories such as the celebration of Black History month or national press coverage of the highly publicized O.J. Simpson trial initiated communication between themselves and their partner. CM1 describes his experience with his partner:

It [race] wasn’t something that came up very often, and when we did talk about it, it wasn’t anything in-depth. It was usually something relating to something that had happened, like, if something were to happen in the news that had to do with race. (318-321)

In addition, several participants remarked that perceptions of biased news coverage (i.e., stories depicting stereotypes concerning African Americans) initiated communication between partners about the topic of race. AAF2 discussed race with her partner in response to media coverage of African American men and violence. AAF1 and AAM1 discussed race with their partners in response to media coverage of successful athletes (i.e., Tiger Woods and a university football player) involvement in interracial relationships wherein Caucasian partners were perceived as “trophies” of their success. Perceptions of an individual’s involvement in an interracial romantic relationship also prompted relational communication between partners about the topic of race.

**External Relational Prompts**

An external relational prompt is operationalized as a conversational prompt that originates from a source external to the relationship and contains communication about the topic of race that is relational in nature and specifically and/or personally related to relational implications of a partner’s racial identity or the interracial status of their relationship. For example, relational communication about race between partners prompted by discussion of a disapproving and/or hostile situation that was incurred in response to their interracial status
constitutes an external relational prompt. Fifteen of 15 participants reported that communication about the topic of race was initiated or instigated by an external relational prompt. External relational prompts originated from two types of external sources: (1) non-intimate others (i.e., strangers, acquaintances, peers), and (2) intimate others (i.e., close friends, family members).

**Non-intimate others.** Thirteen of 15 participants reported that communication about negative interactions with or observations of negative reactions from non-intimate others in public settings (i.e., school, restaurants, office) facilitated relational communication between partners about the topic of race. Either one or both partners were present during these negative interactions with nonintimate others, and negative evaluations of their interracial status were overtly and verbally expressed. AAF3 recounts her and her partner’s encounter with a stranger: “The guy approached us. We were eating in a restaurant or something. He was like, ‘You know, you shouldn’t be doing that; races shouldn’t mix, etc.’ Then I politely told him to get away from my table and then we just started talking about it” (274-276). Not only did participants report interactions involving overt expressions of disapproval, but also an awareness of covert expressions of disapproval. Participants described an awareness of people “staring” and the perception of nonverbal expressions of disapproval regarding their interracial status. CF3 recalls:

XXX and I would go out to breakfast quite a bit when he was living here, or dinner, and invariably the only people who ever gave me a hard time were black women. So, when I’d walk into the restaurant, if there was a table of black women, there was an immediate response in terms of their body language. They would always give him looks or side-long glances. So, that was to be expected. We would talk about that, not a lot, but, you know, often confirming yeah, you know, it just happened again or what have you. (430-435)
Or, as AAM3 recalls, “When we go out, like how people would look at us. I mean, we would be walking downtown holding hands and some people would look at you” (343-345). He continues with a second example: “We went to the Grill to eat. We were sitting next to three White girls who, they looked like they were in a sorority. They kept looking over at us. They just kept looking over at us” (364-366). AAM3 indicated that after leaving the restaurant, in response to the reactions he observed from the White girls, he initiated communication about the topic of race with his girlfriend and the relational relevance of their interracial status. Not only did participants report interactions involving overt expressions of disapproval and awareness of covert expressions of disapproval originating from nonintimate others, but they also reported negative interactions with intimate others such as close friends and family members.

*Intimate others.* Twelve of 15 participants reported that communication about negative interactions with intimate others facilitated communication between partners about the topic of race related to relational implications of a partner’s racial identity or the interracial status of their relationship. Either one or both partners were present during these negative interactions with intimate others. For 10 of the 12 who reported interactions, (all but two cases, AAF2 and CM2), participants reported that intimate others expressed disapproval of their involvement in an interracial relationship. As revealed by CF2, and similar to the experiences of nine other participants, her parents overtly expressed disapproval of her involvement in an interracial romantic relationship. This disapproval prompted her to engage in communication with her partner about the relational implications of her partner’s racial identity and the interracial status of their relationship. As she recalls,

I think the only time we really even discussed race was when my parents became an issue. It was really funny because my parents absolutely loved him when we were
friends, but when he started calling the house more and when I started talking about him more, they had more of an issue with it. I think it was about three months into our relationship that I told him I wasn’t sure that I could see him anymore because my parents didn’t approve. (CF2, 172-176)

As indicated, nine other participants in this study recounted an experience similar to CF2. Overall, from overt expressions of disapproval as described above to more covert expressions of disapproval (CM1’s parents expressed general disapproval of interracial relationships), external sources prompted participants to communicate about the topic of race and the implications of their interracial status. Reported implications included mandatory relational dissolution per parents’ directive (CF2, AAM2), possible resistance from immediate family members (AAF1, AAF3, AAM1, AAM3, CM1) and extended family members (AAM1, AAM4, CF4), and additional hostile encounters with family members (AAF3, AAM2). For many of these participants, these negative interactions would prove to have a significant impact on the partner(s) and/or the status of the relationship, as discussed in Research Question 2. Yet, as CF3 explains, external sources rather than the partners themselves typically prompted relational communication about the topic of race. However, participants reported that communication about the topic of race was also prompted by partner’s discussion of non-relational topics.

Internal Non-Relational Prompts

An internal non-relational prompt is operationalized as a conversational prompt that originates from a source internal in the relationship (a partner) and contains communication about the topic of race that is non-relational or not personally and/or specifically related to relational implications of a partner’s racial identity or the interracial status of their relationship. In the current study, non-relational communication about race prompted by a partner’s
observation of societal perceptions of AA females constitutes an internal non-relational prompt. Fourteen of 15 participants reported that communication about the topic of race was initiated or instigated by internal non-relational prompts. Internal non-relational prompts originated from two types of sources: racial stereotypes and racial identity.

Racial stereotypes. Nine participants reported that communication with their partner about stereotypes associated with AAs and Caucasians constituted or facilitated non-relational communication about the topic of race. One participant, AAM3, indicates that these conversations served to educate his partner, who was from a western state, about the prevalence and significance of racial stereotyping in the South. He describes the following:

In terms of African Americans and things like that, the stereotypes that they have up there are not as predominant as they are in the South. I mean, everyone up there is just so different. I mean, pretty much everybody out there is mixed with something. It’s just such an ethnic, diverse place. You know, the South, the stereotypes are so big. She knew a lot about the stereotypes, I mean, she had read about them and things like that. But…she was just surprised. She didn’t realize how racist the South was until she really came here.

(AAM3, 645-651)

However, most participants do not report that discussions of stereotypes serve to educate their partners. Rather, participants report that discussions of stereotypes are marked by humor and sarcasm. They serve “to make light of them” (AAM2, 410), mocking the characteristics ascribed to their racial identity. As AAM2 explains,

We could be riding along and offhandedly I might say, “You know, the only reason I’m with you is because White women are more submissive and you will do what I will tell you to do. You understand that, right?” And she would go, “Of course!” Or she would
saying something I like, “Well, you know, the only reason that I’m with you is because I’m sexually curious about your anatomy.” And I was like, “Of course!” That sort of thing. So, we did it to make light of the situation, and it helped us a little bit actually.

(AAM2, 414-419)

CF4 also reports that her partner mocked characteristics ascribed to him as an AA male. As she recalls, “He will say stuff like when we used to go downtown to Atlanta, he’s like, ‘Oh, I’m Black. Don’t worry about it. People won’t mess with me” (CF4, 256-257). These examples illustrate the prevalent theme that when partners engage(d) in communication about characteristics stereotypically associated with racial identity, these characteristics are not personally ascribed to their partner’s identity or specifically related to their interracial relationship. However, a second type of internal non-relational prompt emerged as participants reported communicating with their partner about experiences directly related to their racial identity.

Racial identity and experiences. Eleven participants reported that communicating with their partner about issues concerning self and/or their partner’s racial identity facilitated non-relational communication about the topic of race. Participants and their partners engaged in communication about racial identification and the experiences encountered given their respective racial identities, as identification was reported as relevant for both AAs and Caucasians. CF3 reports she and her partner communicated frequently about his identification as an AA man. She explains, “He is somebody who is characterized by being a Black man. If not every conversation, at least every day, there is some reference to him being a Black man in America” (CF1, 328-330). She continues, “With him, being Black was a defining feature in his life, and so we visited that topic many, many times” (367-368). Upon further elaboration, CF3 reflects that these
conversations often entailed her partner’s expression of prejudicial experiences given his AA racial identity (542-558). AAM1 (418-419), AAF2 (198-199), and AAF3 (276-284) also report communicating with their partners about their identification as AAs and their racial experiences. Moreover, for AAF1, AAF2, AAF3, and AAM4, experiences related to racial identity include ostracization and alienation from peers and ingroup social networks. These participants were accused of “acting white” and/or labeled “Oreos” by other AAs due to a perceived lack of identification with in-group expectations.

Not only did AAs communicate with their partners about their AA racial experiences, but Caucasian participants and partners communicated with their AA partners about their racial experiences as well. CF1, who felt isolated from her peers because she did not conform to societal expectations of appropriate behavior given her racial identity, indicates she and her partner communicated about these societal expectations. As she recalls, “I talked with him about what it was like for me to be White female in this White town, and how society expects me to act. And he would talk about that from his standpoint too” (CF1, 435-437). AAF3 reports she and her partner each communicated about their varied racial experiences, which were similar to those described by CF1 and previously mentioned AAs. She explains:

He grew up in an all black neighborhood and went to all black schools. It is kind of how we feel when we go to a school with a majority. So we sat and had a conversation about that and just how sometimes he felt like he didn’t know where he fit in because he was too black for white people and too white for black people. So, you know we talked about that and I talked about my experiences. (AAF3, 279-284)

Whether or not participants and their partners strongly associated with their racial identification, in these instances, participants do not indicate relational implications or a change in their
relational status due to communication about their racial identity and experiences. Therefore, these internal prompts constitute non-relational communication about the topic of race. Participants did, however, report communicating with their partner about racial identity and experiences that did impact the status of their relationship.

**Internal Relational Prompts**

An internal relational prompt is operationalized as a conversational prompt that originates from a source internal in the relationship (a partner) and contains communication about the topic of race that is relational or personally and/or specifically related to relational implications of a partner’s racial identity or the interracial status of their relationship. For instance, AAF3 shares that relational communication about race was prompted by observation of her partner’s engagement in uncharacteristic behaviors, or behaviors associated with African American hip-hop culture. Eight participants reported that communication about the topic of race was initiated or instigated by internal relational prompts. Internal relational prompts were reported to originate from two types of sources: (1) implications of relationship on racial identity, and (2) implications of racial identity on relationship.

**Racial identity implications.** Two participants, AAF4 and AAM1, reported that communicating with their partner about issues concerning self and/or their partner’s racial identity facilitated relational communication about the topic of race. Identification was reported as relevant for both AAs and Caucasians and participants indicated that they engaged their partners in communication about whether or not their involvement in an interracial relationship impacted their racial identification. For AAM1, he questioned to what extent, if at all, race motivated his desire to date a Caucasian woman and whether or not his attraction to her altered or diluted his identification as an AA man. AAM1 questions, “Does me dating this white woman
Does just dating one White woman make you less black? Does that just trump 27, 28 years of blackness? Do you dating one Black male, does that take away your 24, 25 years of being White? (AAM1, 504-506)

Resembling AAM1, AAF4 reports that she and her partner communicated about similar uncertainties, questioning “what it means to be in an inter-racial relationship” (254). As she elaborates,

It was that state of confusion because he was just, “Ok, I’m dating this Black girl, but does that mean that I like all Black girls?” And it’s the same thing for me, like, I was dating this White guy, does that mean that I like White guys now? (AAF4, 245-247)

These examples illustrate that relational communication about involvement in an interracial relationship facilitated communication about the effect or impact of the relationship on a partner’s racial identity. Interestingly, a second type of internal relational prompt emerged concerning racial identification and relational implications.

Relational implications. Five participants reported that communicating with their partner about issues concerning self and/or their partner’s racial identity facilitated relational communication about the topic of race. Identification was reported as relevant for both AA and Caucasian participants who indicated that they engaged their partners in communication about whether or not their racial identity determined or impacted their involvement in an interracial relationship.
AAM2 and AAM3 indicate that, given their racial identities, they initiated relational communication with their partners in order to determine and/or confirm their partner’s willingness to engage in a romantic relationship with an AA male. For both participants, the awareness of societal resistance to interracial dating facilitated communication with their partner about involvement in an interracial relationship. According to AAM3, “For me, I wanted to know. Were they comfortable going out with me, you know? Was it something that you want to, you know, keep in between us?” (297-298). While AAM3 reported no prior knowledge that he or his partner would incur specific resistance, AAM2 reported that both he and his partner fully anticipated that they would incur some form of resistance to their relationship. As he reveals,

We sat down and we talked to each other and we knew that it was going to be a fight, we knew that it was going to be a battle. But, we decided…to be together. We knew that people would have something to say and we knew that the people outside the relationship would be the ones making it hard for us to be together. But we wanted to be together so badly that we were willing to go through that. (AAM2, 281-282, 286-288)

Both of these participants explained that, given their racial identity, they engaged in relational communication in order to solidify their status as an interracial romantic couple. However, several participants engaged in relational communication with their partner subsequent to their relational involvement.

CF3 reveals that she and her partner discussed the relevance of their racial identities in their attraction to each other and their involvement in the relationship:

I would talk about it from time to time in terms of…sometimes I’d be insecure about, you know, “Are you only dating me because I’m a White girl?” Like, “What is the attraction
to White women?” And we would kind of get into a discussion around…Well, he would turn the tables on me and say, “Well, what is the attraction to Black men?” (453-456) Although these partners did acknowledge and communicate about the possible relational implications of their different racial identities, CF3 does not indicate that this awareness impacted the status of their relationship. Relational implications of a partner’s racial identity were also reported by AAF1 and AAF3. These participants indicate that (re)definitions of racial identification affected the statuses of their interracial relationships.

AAF1 explains that, despite the mutual attraction between she and her partner, they did not begin dating for almost two years. During that time, she struggled to define herself as a member of the AA sorority/fraternity social network (AAF1, 447-451). She recalls, “We were very interested in one another but nothing ever happened from that…I was a very different person trying to fit into this mold” (AAF1, 489-491). She never felt accepted into this social network, was ostracized by her peers during that time, and after experiencing significant emotional stress, eventually disassociated from the AA Greek sorority system. She and her partner began dating following her disassociation from the AA Greek sorority system. For AAF1, communication with her partner about (re)defining her racial identity facilitated their involvement in the relationship. Conversely, for AAF3, communication with her partner about his racial identity negatively impacted their relational communication and permanently affected the status of their relationship.

For AAF3, her partner’s (re)definition of his racial identity, and the relational communication that occurred, resulted in the termination of the relationship. AAF3 reported that, after dating her partner for almost two years, “He just did this…instead of being himself, he started doing this thing where he was really, really black” (349-350). According to her, his
behavior was atypical for him, “a Gap kid,” and instead was (stereo)typical of AA hip-hop culture (AAF3, 354). Beyond changes in his physical appearance, he expressed interest in joining an AA fraternity, started using slang, and adopted “a ‘hood ghetto’ kind of persona” (AAF3, 353). Despite her attempts to engage her partner in relational communication about his identity transformation, AAF3 indicates that these changes affected their relationship and how they communicated. Ultimately, she and her partner were unable to resolve this conflict. She reflects, “I had become too white to be with him, I wasn’t black enough to be with him” (AAF3, 411).

Research Question 2

Thematic analysis and coding of transcripts from face-to-face interviews yielded 10 critical events reported by eight of the 15 participants (one participant reported three events). The following data represent all critical events reported. I present two types of data reflective of the critical event coding category, isolated talkturns and sequences of talk turns. In some instances, reporting isolated talk turns fully captured the richness of the stories that were told. However, in other instances, reporting sequences of talk turns proved more accurate in preserving the context of the event because subjects reported critical events that were embedded in detailed narratives. Together, these two types of data contextualize the occurrence of the critical event from the subject’s perspective and personalize the immediate effect/impact of these critical events on the participant, their partner, and/or the relationship.

Participants reported either (1) direct involvement in the encounter, (2) their partner’s direct involvement in the encounter, or (3) engagement in communication with their partner about the possible occurrence of an encounter. The occurrence of the encounter or communication about the possible occurrence of an encounter was an unplanned event. An unplanned event is operationalized as an event that occurs wherein participants report having no
prior communication about or previous awareness of the occurrence or potential for the occurrence in that immediate moment.

Participants report two types of unplanned critical events. These two types of unplanned, critical events were categorized based on the actual occurrence of an encounter and coded as either a spontaneous event or an anticipated event. These two types were distinguished as (1) an unexpected or spontaneous encounter that actually occurred, or (2) the anticipation/consideration of a future encounter that may occur. As such, an event was coded as either spontaneous or anticipated. A spontaneous critical event is defined as an event that occurs during an encounter at a specific time and in the absence of any contextual cues (e.g., present in a hostile or volatile environment) or relational cues (e.g., first big fight). An anticipated critical event is defined as an event that preempts a possible encounter that participants consider likely to occur given the conditions that are present and the probability of an encounter.

**Spontaneous Critical Event**

Six participants reported eight critical events marked by an actual encounter that was not expected, given the context of the situation. The event occurred spontaneously without the participants’ prior awareness or knowledge of a possible encounter or confrontation and evoked a significant emotional response from one or both partners. Within this type of event, a consistent theme emerged regarding the initiator of the confrontation and/or the source of the external stressor. From the data, a relative or a friend’s relative was the source of the external stressor in seven of the eight critical, spontaneous events. The friend or relative was described by participants as being present and directly involved in the confrontation. In his interview, an AA participant described an encounter in which his partner’s father confronted him in a parking lot. In a second instance, an AA female participant described an encounter in which a close friend’s
mother confronted her partner and expressed overt disapproval of his involvement in an interracial romantic relationship. In each of these seven critical events, Caucasian and AA participants identified the Caucasian partner’s friend or relative(s) as the external stressor that opposed their interracial romantic relationship, subjected participants and/or their partners to prejudicial beliefs, and overtly communicated this disapproval to the participant and/or their partner. Participants reported two types of spontaneous events involving external stressors: (1) participants were direct targets involved in the encounter, and (2) participants were indirect targets of the encounter. One participant reported a spontaneous event involving an internal stressor.

Direct target of external stressor. Subjection to racially charged language and racist ideologies by the Caucasian partner’s family members constituted critical events for several AA and Caucasian participants. One AA female and her Caucasian partner, both of whom were participants of this study, independently reported the same event. (It should be noted that in order to maintain the integrity and anonymity of the data collection process, each partner was interviewed separately and assured that her/his responses would remain confidential.) The source of the external stressor was the Caucasian male’s father who was present in the critical event and directly targeted the girlfriend as an AA female and as his AA partner. The couple was confronted with the significance of their racial difference during a communicative encounter wherein his father partially uttered the word “nigger” in the couples’ presence. As AAF2 describes the encounter,

There was an event that happened last August. I went home with him. I had met his parents several times. It wasn’t an issue. They never treated me any differently. But, we’re sitting at the dinner table and his dad came home from work and said, “I’ve been
working like a nig…” and then he kind of cut himself short and didn’t finish it. I just kind of sat there because it was kind of surreal. I was like, “Did I just hear that come out of his dad’s mouth?” Because, of anyone, I would never have expected his dad to have said anything like that, never. So, finally, his mom was so disgusted, she got up and left the table and then we ended up going outside and I just broke down and cried because I didn’t know what to do. I think that brought up the race issue definitely because it was kind of an immediate issue…I think that’s when I kind of took a step back and said, “Well, wait a minute”. (263-278)

Prior to this event, AAF2 and her partner, CM2, had acknowledged and communicated with each other about their general perceptions of race and racial differences, yet neither partner indicated that these disclosures were central to the development of their relationship. However, in the occurrence of this event, CM2’s father became an external force or stressor that imposed upon the couple a heightened awareness of their racial difference and the possible implications thereof. It should be noted that CM2 also reports the occurrence of this event and his description resembles her account of the encounter.

Similar to the critical event reported by AAF2, a second AA female participant (AAF3) discussed a critical event that occurred spontaneously or unexpectedly in which both she and her partner were present. As with the previous couple, the source of the external stressor in this relationship was the Caucasian partner’s parents who were present at the time and directly targeted her (AAF3) as an AA female and as his AA partner. In this critical event, his parents communicated to the partners overt racist ideologies regarding their perception of interracial romantic relationships. When asked how her partner’s parents had treated her, AAF3 stated, “They were never rude, but they made it clear that they didn’t want him with a Black girl, and
the only reason they tolerated me was because I was in school and I was doing something” (521-523). When I proceeded by inquiring as to whom they made this clear, she replies, “They made it clear to me” (529). AAF3 recounts the scenario:

Well they actually had the conversation with me. They did, they sat me down and they said, “We don’t condone this, we don’t agree, but you seem like you have your head on straight so we’ll go with it, but just know we don’t agree with interracial relationships.” (531-533)

I then interjected and asked if her Caucasian boyfriend was present during this critical event. AAF3 replies:

He was there. I think his parents wanted him there because they didn’t want, I guess they felt like I might go back and say they said something that they didn’t say. So, it was like, “Hey you guys sit down; we need to tell you something.” (537-539)

The final talk turn in this sequence might indicate that these partners were aware of or anticipated a confrontation with his parents. To ensure an accurate interpretation of this spontaneous critical event, I confirmed with AAF3 through follow-up correspondence that neither she nor her partner had any prior knowledge of or expectation that his parents intended to overtly or explicitly express their disapproval of the relationship. Sadly, for AAF3, being subjected to her partner’s parents’ overt expression of disapproval does not qualify as her most arresting story to be told.

What is unique and remarkable about this participant is that she reported a second critical event that occurred in a separate relationship in which she was dating a Caucasian male. Consistent with the discussion of the prior examples, this critical event occurred unexpectedly and targeted her (AAF3) as an AA female and as his AA partner. Moreover, this encounter
involved a direct encounter with a relative of her Caucasian partner (his mother). This critical event represents a riveting account of a participant’s experience driven by a parent’s racist ideology. As expressed in her own words, AAF3 was aware that his parents didn’t approve:

I think the big, big thing when I finally figured out [that his family didn’t approve], and this is what actually ended our relationship…well kind of ended it. His mother…I had called him because I was supposed to be coming to visit in a couple of weeks, and, by this time, we had been together maybe 5, almost 6 years. Like, I knew his mother was really getting tired of me, like she just didn’t want me around period. I don’t know why, I never had done anything to her. (582-586)

At this point in the interview, her awareness of his mother’s disapproval did not indicate the occurrence of a critical event. Therefore, I inquired as to how she knew that his mother intended to terminate the relationship. In response, she relays the following encounter. In order to retain the frankness with which she spoke of this event, as well as accurately relay the communicative exchanges of the encounter, I have provided a comprehensive sequence of talk turns that contextualize and personalize this tragic story. Continuing from the previous talkturn,

Interviewer: How did you know that?

AAF3: Just because she was just rude. By this time it had gotten to the point…but this time I was not in Virginia anymore; I was in Georgia. I was in college and I called there to talk to him because we had made plans for me to come and visit in a couple of weeks. She told me that he had died in a car accident. She sure did. (590-593)

Interviewer: What did you do?

AAF3: Well I cried. She told me that he had died in a car accident, two weeks ago. They had already buried him. (597-598)
AAF3 next recounts how she discovered that this critical event was in fact a strategic fabrication by her Caucasian partner’s mother in an attempt to terminate their relationship:

Yeah, she fabricated a whole entire story, whole entire story, and I don’t like, I guess I don’t know what she was actually telling him. I have no clue because I didn’t hear from him until you know, it was like maybe a month or so later, which was unusual. So I get the feeling that she told him something crazy. I don’t know what she told him. (598-601)

AAF3 then describes how she learned her Caucasian partner was, in fact, alive: “When he called me and I answered my phone. He said, ‘Hello, where have you been? I thought you were coming to visit? What is going on?’ And I was like…” (605-606). As she explained, “I thought he was dead, I called my parents, I was miserable. I thought he was dead” (614). She continues, describing the initial impact of his phone call, which is when she learned he was in fact alive:

I really literally thought I was crazy. You know how you’ve been with somebody, like your grandmother dies and you might feel like you hear her voice or something. I mean, I thought I was literally losing my mind. He was like, “Are you o.k.?” And I was like, “What’s going on?” I thought I was getting a visitor from the dead or whatever. And, you know, I started talking to him. I just kind of realized…he seems o.k., So, maybe I’ll just ask, “You mother told me you were dead.” And he was like, “What?” At that point I was like o.k., I am talking to the real person. (641-647)

For AAF3, the devastation of this critical event resulted in a series of traumatic events, from learning of her partner’s death, struggling to cope with this loss, and discovering he was alive. This narrative illustrates the severe emotional trauma her partner’s mother inflicted upon her, imposing personal beliefs of disapproval about interracial relationships upon her son and this participant.
Beyond the infliction of emotional trauma, this final example illustrates an encounter in which the participant was directly threatened during a physical confrontation with a relative. Coded as a spontaneous, unplanned critical event, and consistent with the examples mentioned up to this point, his experience reflects a relative’s direct involvement in the encounter and the source of the external stressor. As AAM3 succinctly states, he was “instructed” that the relationship was “to cease and desist” (227). AAM3 recounts the confrontation:

Her father cornered me in a parking lot one night, after a play that I was in, and told me that the situation had gotten out of control, and that I was to no longer have contact with his daughter. To which I replied, “I understand that you are the head of that household, and I understand that you are the breadwinner. I do not agree with what you are doing because it is ridiculous. Your reasoning behind doing so is ridiculous, but as the head of that household, I will respect you. And I will do what you ask.” At which point, I made no effort to contact his daughter. (240-247)

This mandate resulted from her parent’s discovery that their relationship had progressed from a friendship to a romantic relationship. Prior to this event, AAM3 and his partner had communicated often about the difficulties they anticipated encountering from their families and friends who would not approve of their interracial romantic relationship. Following their decision to become romantically involved, they continued to communicate with each other about the difficulties that emerged as a result of their decision. As AAM3 tenderly remarks, “We always knew who we were individually and we always knew who we were together. So, we knew what we could be up against. So, that helped us arm ourselves against the world” (524-526). However, despite honest and open communication about the resistance they encountered during the course of their relationship, a parent’s belief in overt racist ideologies resulted in a
hostile confrontation. This confrontation, instigated by a parent’s unethical behavior, constituted the threat of physical harm.

*Indirect target of external stressor.* Participants reported a second type of a spontaneous, unplanned critical event. These events differ from the previously discussed events because participants were not direct targets of the encounters. Two participants reported they were indirect targets of an external stressor that constituted a spontaneous critical event: (1) the participant (AAF4) was not a witness to but was the indirect target of a negative encounter, and (2) the participant (CM1) witnessed and was the indirect target of a relative’s disapproval of another interracial romantic relationship. Similarly to AAF2, AAF4 reports an encounter in which she was targeted as the AA partner of a Caucasian male. When asked if there was one specific conversation about race that she remembered having with her partner, she answers by describing the following event:

I remember an incident that happened. One of his good friends, his good friend’s mom, came to school during lunch, and was like, “I heard your dating AAF4.” He was like, “Yeah.” And she was like, “Why are you dating her? You are too cute for, you know, to do that. And there are so many other cute White girls here. Why are you doing that?” I think for him that was a real blow ’cause that was his good friend’s mom. And, it was an adult, which, before, we really didn’t have to deal too much with. Dealing with students, that’s on your level, so it’s okay. I mean, you are dealing with adults, especially adults that are outside of your family. It’s kind of like a new realm. (AAF4, 313-321)

Although not present during this encounter, AAF4 reports this encounter as a critical event that occurred in their relationship. As she explains, “It was kind of a blow to him because it was his friend’s mom” (323). For AAF4 and her partner, the confrontation that occurred involved an
authority figure that belonged to her partner’s social network. Characteristic of this critical event, and similar to critical events previously discussed, this encounter involved a Caucasian who was identified as an external stressor who opposed their interracial romantic relationship. However, this encounter differs from the critical events discussed up to this point because the participant was not present during or directly involved in the encounter.

Another spontaneous critical event was reported by a participant who witnessed a relative express disapproval of another interracial romantic relationship. For CM1, this encounter constitutes a critical event because his mother, who was unaware of his current involvement in an interracial relationship, overtly expressed disapproval interracial relationships while witnessing a confrontation between another interracial romantic couple. As CM1 discusses,

I remember vividly one experience where my mom had said something…We had had big drama all day because one of my friends, she was a white girl, and she was dating a black guy, and her family had seen them outside talking and seen them kiss or something. Her parents flipped out. They went up and were talking to him about it, how they didn’t want him to see her anymore. That day we found out that they were transferring her to another school because they didn’t want her to be dating black guys. And I remember at the time thinking how ridiculous it was they were getting all bent out of shape on this. (257-265)

For him, the situation reflects irrational behavior fueled by prejudicial perceptions of interracial romantic relationships. Moreover, this situation was of particular interest to him because he was presently involved in an interracial romantic relationship. However, his mother, who also witnessed this situation, was not aware of his involvement. In the narrative that follows, CM1 describes his subsequent encounter with his mother’s prejudicial beliefs:
She saw that the girl was crying outside and my mom asked me, “Is she okay, what happened to her?” I kind of explained everything. I was like, “This is so ridiculous; I can't believe that they’re freaking out like this.” And I remember her saying, “Well, you know, I think they’re kind of overreacting a little bit, but I kind of understand where they’re coming from. I wouldn’t want you dating XXX”, and she happened to name the girl that I was actually dating at the time! She’s like, “Your dad and I wouldn’t withdraw you from school or anything, but we wouldn’t want y’all dating or anything like that.” I was just, I didn’t know what to think at that point. I was like, “Oh my gosh.” I remember being very angry with her for a long time after that because I felt like that she had always raised me to be very open and accepting of other cultures and everything. Then it seemed like there was a double standard. It was, “Well yes, you can accept all these things as long as you don’t do this.” And I remember being very angry for a long, long time about that. (266-277)

This critical event, similar to critical events previously discussed, involved a Caucasian male’s mother (CM1), who was identified as an external stressor and who overtly expressed opposition to her son’s involvement in an interracial romantic relationship. What is of notable interest, however, is that his mother expressed disapproval of what she assumed to be a hypothetical relationship, unaware that the relationship actually existed. Therefore, this expression cannot be explained as an attempt to terminate or influence a partner’s decision to terminate the relationship. Rather, her expressed disapproval reflects an attempt to exert social pressure apriori, before a relationship might occur.

As the data demonstrate, all critical events reported up to this point are characterized by the following themes/factors: (1) an unplanned, spontaneous event occurred, (2) the participant
The analysis of data up to this point reveals consistent elements contained within the category of a spontaneous critical event. In order to maintain the integrity of the coding categories, the final critical event reported will be discussed separately. However it does qualify as an unplanned, spontaneous event.

**Internal stressor.** The final critical event reported for this study varies from all other critical events by a distinct element: the source of the stressor was internal, not external, to the relationship. There is, however, one characteristic present in this event that is similar to previously discussed events. The participant who reported this event, AAF3, also reported two encounters coded as spontaneous critical events. Although the initiating of this event likely occurred through gradual change or by a process of transformation, AAF3 reported this event “just popped up one day” (408). She further explains:

> I don’t know when it happened. I wasn’t there. Let’s just put it like that. I wasn’t there. All of a sudden he just started hanging around with these guys in [town] that rapped and then that was it. I don’t know when he started hanging out with them, because I wasn’t there when he met them. (AAF3, 451-454)

Unlike the two encounters discussed earlier, characterized by a confrontation with an external stressor, this third encounter is characterized by a confrontation with an internal stressor. For AAF3, this critical event is marked her partner’s change in racial identification. She notes:

> He always was more black than a normal white person would be. He grew up around black people. He knew them all his life and went to school with them all his life. So, he kind of had some of our attributes, but it was never like this. (AAF3, 370-372)
According to AAF3, this change in attitude stems from his expression or adoption of and identification with behaviors stereotypically associated with African American youth and hip-hop culture. As AAF3 expresses, “Instead of being himself, he started doing this thing where he was really, really black. Like, I’m going to grow my hair out and get corn rows, and I’m going to…be an Alpha. It went to super, super extreme” (349-352).

This change in behavior directly affected their relationship because she no longer “fit in” with his lifestyle, which resulted in a change in her partner’s attitude towards her and his involvement in their relationship. As she describes,

I couldn’t hang in his circle of friends because I didn’t understand what they were saying. I didn’t know the lingo. When I came around them I talked white, when it was never an issue before. I mean, this is how I always talk. This is how I’ve talked since I started to talk. So, I mean it just became a thing, “Well, you can’t go with us because we’re going to be here and I don’t think you will be able to handle it.” (AAF3, 459-463)

Ultimately, his transformation and change in attitude towards her resulted in dissolution of the relationship. As she reveals, “I had become too white to be with him, I wasn’t black enough to be with him” (AAF3, 411-412).

**Anticipated Critical Event**

Analysis of data revealed that participants reported a set of critical events distinctly different from a spontaneous critical event, yet contained several of the themes/factors that characterize a spontaneous critical event as previously discussed. This second category remains consistent in the operationalization of an unplanned event in that participants reported having no prior communication or previous awareness about the occurrence or potential for the occurrence
in that immediate moment. Secondly, these events involve the participant and their partner’s relative.

However, this category represents a set of critical events distinguished by the lack or absence of an actual encounter. In the absence of an actual encounter with a relative or a friend’s relative, these critical events occur when participants engaged in communication with their partner about the possible occurrence of an encounter with a relative. Therefore, this category reflects a set of critical events that are characterized by the participant’s awareness of or anticipation that a future encounter with a relative may occur. As such, these critical events were coded as anticipated critical events. An anticipated critical event is operationalized as an event that preempts a possible encounter given the conditions that are present and the likelihood of an encounter.

As described, unlike the encounters reported in the spontaneous event category, what is critical or relevant is not whether an encounter actually occurred between the participant and the partner’s relative. Rather, it is the partner’s suggestion during the course of a conversation that a potential or future interaction could quite possibly occur, thus facilitating discussion between partners about its implications for their relationship. Therefore, the possibility of meeting a partner’s parents constitutes a critical event for these participants. As AAM1 describes,

When she mentioned meeting her parents the first time it was kind of a spur of the moment thing. We were going to meet some friends of mine one weekend. She just decides on the way to meeting those friends (her house was on the way). She was just like, “Well, we’re just gonna stop by, see my parents.” It was kind of one of those things I really wasn’t ready for. I mean I told her, I was like, “ok, no big deal,” but in the back of my mind I was just like, do they know I’m black? (88-94)
For AAM1, his partner’s sudden suggestion of an encounter evoked a response reflecting anxiety not only about meeting his partner’s parents, but anxiety about meeting his partner’s Caucasian parents. The following series of talk turns describe AAM1’s reasoning for the anxiety he experienced in anticipation of this meeting:

“Well I mean, I think it’s already enough for me that you’re an outsider when you’re in a relationship where you’re both the same ethnicity. That’s stress enough…but I think it’s more stress because you have to think, “How do the parents view you? What are their perceptions of African Americans, in my case?” I don’t know how they feel about black people. I mean, I have nowhere to sit down. I mean, do we have common interests? How does this guy feel about this black guy dating his daughter? How’s he going to think about that in terms of, well, is he worried about his friends finding out or something like that? Or his, you know, other relatives finding out, how they’re going to feel about that? I mean, you know, if it gets to the point where we get real serious enough to go to family gatherings and stuff like that. How are we going to be looked upon? So, yeah, it was pretty stressful as far as I was concerned. (112-123)

For AAM1, his racial identity and the interracial status of their relationship presented the possibility of incurring resistance from an external stressor. The source of the external stressor, his Caucasian partner’s parents, is consistent with the external stressors reported in several spontaneous critical events. AAM1 initially describes his anxiety as a response to her suggestion of meeting her parents; however, upon further discussion, the source of the external stressor becomes more specific as he narrows his discussion from concern regarding her parents to concern about her father in particular. This theme is evident in the following anticipated event as well.
For CM3, his partner’s suggestion of a possible encounter also occurred unexpectedly during the course of a conversation in which she invited him to over to her house, where she lived with her parents. As CM3 explains, “You know it was just like, it was very casual. It was just an off-hand comment. I remember, I think that we were deciding what to do that night and she was like, ‘Oh’, very playful, and like, ‘Hey, come on over…’” (704). His partner’s informal suggestion evokes an emotional (unexpressed) response from him because he does not share his partner’s casual, informal perspective. As CM3 expressed, meeting her parents should be “treated as a very formal experience” (694). Upon further discussion of this anticipated event, CM3 conveyed the anxiety that he felt and indicated that the source of the external stressor is more specific. His concern regarding meeting her parents becomes a concern about meeting her father:

It was like going to a forbidden place. Going to meet her parent was, I mean, because I hadn’t met him before. It was kind of a big step. Like not only a big step, well not only a big step, it was a little more drastic measure I guess because he was…he didn’t seem too happy to meet me. She never really talked about him and so I just assumed that he didn’t really want to meet me. (CM3, 706-710)

For CM3 and AAM1, the anticipated event is characterized by the uncertainty of encountering possible resistance to or negative reactions from a partner’s relative because they are involved in an interracial romantic relationship. In addition, several themes are consistent in these two anticipated critical events: (a) the participants are male, (b) the anticipated event occurs during a casual conversation, (c) the possible encounter involves meeting his partner’s parents, and (d) a/his partner’s parents, her father, in particular, is the source of the external stressor. In fact, the
most notable difference between these two situations is that one male is AA and one male is Caucasian. Aside from their racial differences, their stories are remarkably similar.

Research Question 3

Results from Research Question 2 led to analysis of the data for reporting results for Research Question 3. Research Question 3 investigates the relationship between the critical events experienced by partners in an interracial relationship, the communication (or not) about these critical events that occurs between partners, and the extent to which these critical events and/or communication about them impacts the relationship. The following observations are provided for clarification: eight participants reported 10 critical events; two participants (AAF2 and CM2), who are relational partners, report the same critical event; one participant (AAF3) reports three critical events with regards to two relationships; and each of the remaining five participants reports a single critical event. Of the eight relationships represented by these eight participants, one relationship remains intact. This relationship involves partners who are both participants of this study, AAF2 and CM2.

Analysis of the data yielded results of the critical events and their impact on the status of the relationship. Partners report the following: (1) the relationship became stronger because of the critical event, (2) the relationship continued and was not effected by the critical event, or (3) the relationship dissolved as a result of the critical event. Further analysis of the data yielded themes illustrating the communicative impact of these critical events on the participant’s or the couple’s interracial communication. Participants report communication regarding critical events that results in the following interracial communication outcomes: (1) the topic of race is discussed more often and more intimately within the relationship, (2) the topic of race is discussed less often and less intimately within the relationship, (3) selective topics of race are...
discussed within the relationship, but partners self-censure, (4) the topic of race is discussed with someone external to the relationship, and (5) the incident is not discussed. To explicate the findings for this analysis, a brief review of the relevant critical event will precede the findings in order to contextualize the outcome and its impact on the relationship.

According to three participants, the critical event opened up or facilitated more frequent and more intimate conversations about race than prior to its occurrence. AAF2, who reports the incident in which she and her partner (CM2) witnessed his father utter the word “nigger,” indicates a direct connection between the critical event and interracial communication within their relationship:

I think that incident, that event, has caused us to talk about race more often. And CM2 really wants me to… he hates that it happens, but sometimes I bring it up and I know it hurts him because his dad is the one who did it. And he knows that it hurt me. (AAF2, 290-293)

Despite the difficulty in addressing the critical event, she emphasizes that her partner is “perfectly willing to talk about it” (AAF2, 301). She usually initiates these conversations (AAF2, 297), and describes their interracial communication as a mutually engaging, reciprocal process:

I mean if we’re going to talk about race, we’re going to talk about race… He’s always willing to hear what I have to say. I’m always willing to listen to what he has to say. It’s never, “Oh, should I say this? Will this be touchy?” I mean, we’re very big on “say what you feel, because I want to know.” You know, don’t hold things in because it’s only going to make things worse. (442-446)

AAF2 indicates that these conversations do not occur frequently, but during engagement, these discussions are “relatively intimate” (253). She explains, “Race doesn’t come up that often in our
conversations, but when it does, I know we definitely talk about it” (257-258). She also asserts that interracial communication does not constitute “risky” disclosure” (444), nor does it pose a relational threat (325). Yet, despite the willingness of these partners to engage in honest, intimate conversations about race, AAF2 also expresses frustration with the outcome of their interracial communication as she discusses their communication about the critical event:

If we ever talk about what happened with his dad, he just… I mean, we just have the same conversation over and over again. I mean, its just like, I don’t understand where it came from. And he always asks me, he worries that I feel like, that I may think that his parents are racist or something. I don’t. I don’t think that they’re racist. I don’t know what to say. I don’t know why his dad said that. I don’t. I feel like a part of their family. They always treat me like part of their family. When I go down there, I feel like I’m at home. I just don’t understand why it happened. (AAF2, 301-307)

A similar frustration emerges when they engage in interracial, relational communication. She continues:

When we talk about race, I wouldn’t say it is uncomfortable to talk about, but I think sometimes we just wonder where the conversation is going to end. Like, it’s not going to end in an argument, but should we be ultimately hyper-aware of our race and how it plays out in our relationship? Is it something we should be really concerned about? Or, are we wrong for not being concerned about it? (AAF2, 331-335)

In these two passages, she expresses confusion when she and her partner engage in interracial communication and interracial, relational communication. In an attempt to convey to her partner the relevance of race in their relationship, she provides the following explanation:
Sometimes I just want him to understand that in our society that we live in now, there will be times where he’s going to be looked down upon or called names or whatever because he’s dating a black woman…sometimes I try to explain to him it’s just going to be unavoidable. Sometimes I just want him to understand that things will be…not difficult, but we can’t ignore the fact that people may be offended by it, that it’s going to affect other people. (AAF2, 200-209)

She perceives her racial identity as an external stressor exerted upon her partner and their relationship, rather than an internal stressor existing between them. She describes her awareness of the external stressors they may encounter due to their interracial status, acknowledging, “others will probably have an impact on our relationship in some shape, way, or form” (AAF2, 224-225). When asked how she feels these intimate, interracial conversations have impacted their relationship, AAF2 asserts, “I think it’s had a positive impact only because we realize that…things may be different for us, as an interracial couple, than it would be for couples of the same race” (451-453). Her partner also indicates the positive impact of these intimate conversations.

CM2, partner to AAF2, also reports the incident mentioned above. For him, the incident thrust him in the center of this conflict because it was his father who offended his girlfriend. As he reflects,

I was just kind of caught in the middle because, you know, it’s AAF2, the girl I love, who’s just been crushed. And she’s sitting outside in the grass…and my dad, who’s in the hallway crying cause he just offended AAF2. And I’m just trying…I’m the go between. (CM2, 370-373)
He continues, “It was really kind of a tough spot for me because I was…because I know my father. And so, I was trying to convey that to AAF2 and be understanding at the same time” (CM2, 385-387). Despite the tension he experienced in this confrontation, he, like his partner, indicates a direct connection between the critical event and interracial communication within their relationship:

That was probably the most in-depth conversation about race that we ever had. And it really brought to life that there is a lot more there than we both ever, well, not that there is a lot more there, it’s just we’ve…it made us realize that that we are going to encounter instances like that in places that we didn’t expect. And so, in the end it was very good for us to go through that just because it opened so much in each of us. (CM2, 387-392)

In the second and third lines in this passage, CM2 clarifies his statement, indicating that this incident did not impose racial tension internal to or within the relationship between he and his partner. Rather, he indicates awareness of the implications of being in an interracial relationship and the potential for encountering resistance from external sources. For him, this awareness has “changed [the relationship] for the better” because he has become acutely aware of the “racial place” of AAF2, the prejudices she may face, and the resistance she may encounter as an AA interacting in the presence of and with outgroup members. Although he doesn’t indicate the same concern when discussing external perceptions of their interracial relationship, at several points in the interview, CM2 does express concern for how these external perceptions affect his partner. He asserts, “I could care less what somebody says, but AAF2 always takes it very personally and takes it as them attacking her. She thinks that me being with her is hurting me because of what is happening with these people” (CM1, 281-284). Therefore, “when things happen, I always want to talk about it” (CM2, 286).
In agreement with his partner, CM2 affirms that their interracial, relational communication does not pose a relational threat (532). He does, however, perceive risk in these disclosures. He attributes this risk to the consequences of his partner misinterpreting his disclosure “when…talking about something that is potentially a very sensitive subject” (533-534). Despite his concern, he reiterates that interracial communication does not pose a relational threat (433). Moreover, CM2 and AAF2 engage in honest and intimate interracial communication because, according to him,

If you don’t talk about that, then that will jeopardize it. One day something is going to happen and all of a sudden you are going to be forced to look at this thing you have never looked at before. I think that would be worse than talking about it along the way. But I think just specifically with AAF2, it’s really…brought us closer. (433-437)

Despite the difficulty of the encounter, AAF2 and CM2 indicate that the stress exerted upon their relationship by the critical event created a context that forced and facilitated interracial communication. For these partners, interracial communication about race increased in breadth and depth, and both partners perceived a positive outcome in the relationship.

Similar to AAF2 and CM2, AAF4, whose partner was confronted by his friend’s Caucasian mother, also indicates the critical event opened up or facilitated more frequent and more intimate conversations about race than prior to the occurrence of the event. Following the confrontation, she recalls, “I remember we talked about that. That was definitely something that we talked about a lot…that’s definitely one conversation that I remember” (AAF4, 321-327). In this conversation, AAF4’s partner shared the critical event with her, disclosing to her his response during the encounter that reaffirmed his commitment to her and the relationship (327-329). Although they did not revisit this specific event in future interracial communication, she
indicates that the event solidified their understanding of external perceptions of their relationship, defined the centrality of race in their relationship, and highlighted the importance of interracial relational communication. According to AAF4,

>The more we had to deal with it, the more we really defined who we were to each other and what our relationship really meant to us…It was something for real. I think because of us talking about it and the strength that we’ve gotten from the whole discussions, and just really what we had to go through, really made our relationship. (362-367)

Similar to AAF2 and CM2, AAF4 did not perceive these disclosures as risky or posing a threat to the stability of their relationship. She admits, however, that it was not at her initiative that these conversations occurred. Rather, her partner typically initiated these conversations because, “I just personally just got tired of it, you know. I’m like, I don’t want to talk about this again” (AAF4, 347-348).

Also similar to AAF2 and CM2, AAF4 echoes the frustration that interracial communication in their relationship was a necessity for them in order to manage external stressors:

>We had to talk race because…I guess to protect what we had because of what other people would say. We had to talk about what they were saying, and what we were going to do about what they were saying. In terms of, you know, people would just make ignorant comments. (227-230)

Yet, similar to AAF2 and CM2, AAF4 affirms that despite the difficulty of the encounter, the stress exerted upon their relationship by the critical event created a context, which forced and facilitated interracial communication. As a result, their relational communication about race increased in breadth and depth, thereby strengthening the relationship.
The relationships discussed up to this point remained intact following the critical event, the critical event facilitated open and honest communication about race, and interracial communication or relational communication about race was perceived by the partners to strengthen the relationship. Conversely, the following two examples indicate that, although the critical event facilitated honest and open communication about race, relational communication about race resulted in termination of the relationship. For AAF3, who reported three critical events in two separate relationships the relational impact of two of these critical events share similar characteristics: (1) the event facilitated honest and open communication about race between she and her partner, and (2) interracial relational communication resulted in termination of the relationship.

In the first interracial relationship she discussed, AAF3 reports the critical event involving the falsification her partner’s death. Due to the severity of the event, and the duration during which she had no contact with her partner, the critical event facilitated discussion about race that reflects two themes that emerged from the data. Initially, the critical event results in communication about race with someone external to the relationship. Later realization of the truth concerning the critical event facilitates honest and open relational communication about race between AAF3 and her partner. AAF3 admits she never initiated conversations about race (328). At several points during the interview, AAF3 commented that, prior to this critical event, she and her partner had not discussed the topic of race often. Communication about race occurred, as she explains, “only when his mother had a big cow about me being around, but other than that, not really” (307-308). AAF recalls:

I mean we talked about it when, like his mother was really pissed off that he was seeing a Black girl…So, that is when we talked about it, but we really didn’t harp on it because
we had been together for so long. She just kind of got use to me being around. So, after a while, it wasn’t an issue anymore. (230-235)

As she states, AAF3 and her partner initially engaged in communication about race only when discussing his mother’s disapproval of their relationship. After six years of interracial dating, his mother’s disapproval was no longer perceived as a threat to their relationship. Therefore, they no longer engaged in relational communication about race.

Following the initial encounter with his mother and upon receiving word of her partner’s death, AAF3 sought emotional support from her parents, with whom she shares a close relationship. As a result, they were aware of the trauma she initially experienced and the emotional stress she endured the following month in which she believed her partner was dead. Upon realization of his mother’s actions, AAF3 communicated to her parents the true nature of the critical event. Expressing concern for her safety, her parents voiced concerns about the possible implications of her continued involvement in the relationship. AAF3 reflects, “I did not think that our relationship was going to end over it but, at that point, my parents were like, ‘No! Because, if she is capable of doing this, [then] what else is she capable of?’” (651-652) She elaborates on her parents concern:

They are very protective of me. They were just kind of worried about my safety. They said, “No, you can’t go visit him.” By this time I am 20 years old…almost getting ready to turn 20, and my parents are telling me I can’t visit this person that I’ve been with for such a long time. But I understood where they were coming from. I was just like, “you know, you’re probably right.” It was just something I had to let go of. It wasn’t going to work. If this lady is so adamant about this that she would tell me that her child is dead, then I need to leave it alone. (AAF3, 653-659)
By declaring that she terminate the relationship, her parents exerted significant control over her decision. However, AAF3 also acknowledges the soundness and rationale of their position. In this respect, communication about the critical event occurred external to the relationship and facilitated termination of the relationship.

A second communication theme emerged from this event as well. Following the initial phone call from her partner, and in the conversations that followed, AAF3 communicated with her partner about the confrontation that had occurred with his mother and her parents’ response of concern for her safety. AAF3 describes his reaction to her disclosure about his mother’s fabrication of his death as follows:

Oh god, he was livid…livid. He couldn’t…he said, “You are lying.” At first he didn’t believe. I said, “Would I make that up? Who makes that up?” I don’t even know how she could make that up. I mean, how could you tell somebody your child is dead? That is crazy. But I was like, “I am not making this up. Your mother told me that you were dead. She told me you died in a car accident…that they buried you.” (618-622)

At this point, AAF3 and her partner are forced to readdress the topic of race within their relationship and consider its implications for their interracial relationship. In this instance, the critical event impacted the partner’s relational communication about the topic of race as AAF3 conceded to her parent’s concerns for her safety, as well as her own concerns, and terminated the relationship. Interestingly, AAF3 reports a second relational outcome characterized by a critical event that facilitated open communication about the topic of race. This relational outcome involves communication about an internal stressor, her partner’s racial identity.

As mentioned, AAF3 reports critical events in two separate interracial relationships. In the second relationship, AAF3 reports two critical events. When asked whether a single
conversation had impacted the second relationship, she recounts one specific conversation occurring towards the end of their relationship “that was a definitive conversation about race” (AAF3, 355). In the first critical event, her partner began emulating a racial identity or racial characteristics generally identified with an AA persona, which was markedly different from how she had come to know him. She indicates that the critical event opened up or facilitated more frequent and more intimate conversations about race than prior to its occurrence. Moreover, talking about race affected their conversations and how they communicated with each other because, as AAF3 notes, “this transformation had a lot to do with race” (402). For her, this transformation created a high level of uncertainty in the relationship and tension between her and her partner. Despite her awareness that these conversations created stress between them (421), and that she perceived these disclosures as “risky” and a threat to the stability of the relationship (441), she initiated conversation often in an attempt to understand her partner’s behavior:

   I felt like if we don’t talk about it now, that eventually it is just going to become a really big problem. And so I talked about it. And I talked about it every chance I got. Just whenever he did something crazy, I was like, “what are you doing, why are you…” I probably shouldn’t have done that but, at the same time, he did a flip-flop on me. All of a sudden you’re not the same person you are anymore and you don’t want me to ask questions. (442-446)

In response to this racial transformation, she attempted to engage her partner in relational communication. However, her partner was not receptive to these discussions. Her repeated attempts to engage him in relational communication about the topic of race evoked negative, emotional responses from him. AAF3 describes, “He got really pissed off. He was mad because he said that it was something I was trying to hold him back from, being who he wants to be or
doing what he wants to do” (379-380). She notes, “Every time I brought it up, he would get upset and [ask], ‘Why are we talking about this again?’” (430-431) Despite frequent and open interracial relational communication, they were unable to resolve the conflict and the relationship was terminated. In AAF3’s own words, “I had become too white to be with him. I wasn’t black enough to be with him all of a sudden. And I was like, okay” (411-412). For her, the relational outcomes for both her interracial relationships differ from the relational outcomes from previously discussed examples. Whereas AAF2, CM2, and AAF4 indicated that the relationship became stronger, both of her relationships were terminated.

Consistent with AAF3, AAM2, who was accosted by his partner’s father in a parking lot, also reported dissolution of the relationship as a direct result of the critical event. Also similar to AAF3, two themes emerged from the data reflecting the impact of the critical event on relational communication about race. This critical event results in communication about race with someone external to the relationship and impacts relational communication about race between the partners. However, in contrast to the experiences of AAF3, the critical event did not facilitate more intimate or more frequent relational communication about race between AAM2 and his partner. They had established a high level of intimate interracial communication prior to the critical event. Rather, the critical event resulted in both partners avoiding communication about race in their future encounters because the conversation became futile.

As AAM2 discusses, he and his partner had engaged in intimate conversations about the difficulties they experienced in their relationship due to external stressors (58-68). Following the encounter with her father, all direct communication between AAM2 he and his partner ceased. They did communicate with others outside of the relationship and, initially, “kept in touch through friends” (627). In addition, he recalls, “A number of her friends came to her aid, I must
say” (503). After several months following their separation, AAM2’s partner initiated contacted him. As he explains, “her parents deemed that it was okay for us to talk occasionally at that point” (628-629). Not only did she initiate contact with him, but they often saw each other due to coincidental encounters. In the following passage, AAM2 describes these encounters:

I would see her, and this is the strangest thing. I would never, ever, ever, because her father asked me not to contact her. I would never contact her and say, “Hey, meet me here, or hey, meet me there.” But, consistently, for probably the next eight or nine months, after her father told me not to contact her, we would wind up at the same place, or, wind up at the same restaurant or, wind up at the same person’s house, and, it was planned on neither of our parts. (653-657)

In these instances, AAM2 reports that he and his partner engaged in intimate self-disclosure, communicating their feelings to each other and discussing the possibility of continuing the relationship at some point in the future (630-631). However, AAM2 and his partner do not revisit the topic of or engage in relational communication about race. As he states, prior to their dissolution, “Conversations with race…it was always in the moment or about how race specifically applied to us” (AAM2, 604-605). No longer involved in the relationship, and realizing that there was little possibility of future involvement, these partners avoided communication about race because race was no longer a relevant topic of discussion. Sadly, the outcome of this critical event reflects a prejudicial perception of racial difference that approved of interracial friendships, but disapproved of interracial romantic relationships.

For CM1, his mother’s expressed disapproval of him entering into an interracial romantic relationship, (she was unaware at the time that he was, in fact, romantically involved with this partner), constituted a critical event. According to CM1, her position reflects a “double standard”
(276), or a perception of racial difference that approved of interracial friendships, but disapproved of interracial romantic relationships. His partner communicated to him that she had encountered the same “double standard” with her parents as well (CM1, 283-287). As CM1 concludes, “we both knew that neither one of them would be happy if they knew that we were dating” (247-248). Given these circumstances, he and his partner never revealed their interracial romantic relationship to their families. Similar to AAF3 and AAM2, this critical event and the ensuing stress exerted upon CM1 and his partner impacted their relational communication about race and the outcome of their relationship.

When asked whether he and his partner communicated about race, CM1 replies, “Not very often. And race wasn’t something that I thought of very often until an event happened and made me aware of it” (309-310). His awareness of race, prompted by external events, became apparent during conversations between him and his partner when communicating about race. As CM1 explains,

The discussions we had usually didn’t last long, and I think that that was in part because we were aware, like when we sat down to talk about this, it made us very aware of the racial differences that we had. (378-380)

According to CM1, communication about the topic of race increased his awareness of racial differences. However, as the following talk turn indicates, this perception of racial difference may correlate to external perceptions of racial difference (from those outside the relationship) rather than his or his partner’s perception of racial difference:

Well, at first in our relationship, it wasn’t something that came up. I think we both purposely avoided it for a long time because we were aware of it. And at first I don’t
think we knew what our friends would think. So we were like, “well, we don’t know what everyone’s going to think so let’s just not bring it up at all.” (387-390)

The critical event informed CM1 of his parents’ disapproval, which he communicated to his partner. This external stressor exerted pressure upon both the partners and the relationship because they expended significant effort in order to preserve the secrecy of their relationship. CM1 indicates that he and his partner engaged in relational communication about race because both partners had to “manage” their families in order to maintain this secrecy (581-582). However, because the difficulties they experienced were directly related to external perceptions of racial differences, and communication about race revealed these perceptions of differences, these conversations affected CM1’s level of self-disclosure about race. As he reveals, “I think it made me less likely to disclose myself as often, or as deeply as before” (452). CM1 continues:

I’ve always been one of those people I don’t like to cause any problems if I don’t have to. So, I thought… if I had an opinion about you know something that could have dealt with race or whatever… I got to the point where I just kind of kept it to myself or would just kinda mention it without… trying not to get into deep conversation because I always assumed that she probably would feel differently about it and I didn’t want to cause any kind of strife in the relationship that we didn’t need. (457-462)

In addition, these partners also experience stress when engaging in relational communication about race because, given the context in which the critical event occurred, they feared the possible implication of failing to maintain their secrecy:

We kept harping back to the situation where the other girl had gotten transferred and we thought how awful would that be, because its not only are we not with each other
anymore but we’re not with anyone anymore that we know. So I think eventually it just became too much of a stressor. (567-576)

When asked whether the stress of “managing” this secret and the fear of being exposed affected their relationship, CM1 responds,

It was probably one of the things that ultimately led to the demise of our relationship, at least romantically, in that it became kind of like unneeded stress…And so I think it became, eventually became too much stress to try and keep things from them all the time in the fear that somebody’s going to find out. (567-573)

CM1’s experience, like AAM2’s experience, reveals two themes regarding the impact of the critical event on relational communication about race. Both of these participants chose to avoid communication with their partner about race; however, AAM2 and CM1 differ in the second theme that emerges from their experiences. Unlike AAM2, who avoided all communication about the topic of race with his partner following the critical event, CM1 and his partner could not avoid completely communicating about race. Because they were forced to “manage” their parents, they were forced to address the topic of race in their relationship. For CM1, disclosure about race constituted self-disclosure, or disclosure about personal information. CM1 monitored or decreased his level of disclosure because he feared communicating with his partner about race would jeopardize the relationship (452); therefore, when he and his partner did engage in relational communication about race, he self-disclosed less often and less intimately. This theme, or fear of disclosure, is also evident in the experience reported by CM3.

CM3, whose anticipation of an encounter with his partner’s father constituted a critical event, never communicated to his partner his perception of this incident or the anxiety he experienced in consideration of this interracial encounter. Although CM3 does not explicitly
state that the impact of the critical event and the lack of relational communication about race resulted in the termination of the relationship, he does draw conclusions between the implications of the relationship and the critical event. He also expresses overwhelming fear about communicating with his partner about the topic of race. I do not intend to report all talk turns that indicate this participant’s high level of anxiety associated with communication about the topic of race. However, it is relevant to contextualize this particular interview in order to bring to light the level of intensity with which he spoke about his experiences.

Throughout the interview, CM3 expresses fear in the context of intimate relational communication about the topic of race with his partner as well as non-intimate interpersonal communication with AAs (381-386, 390, 417, 453-466, 470). This fear first becomes evident when he is asked whether or not he felt comfortable talking about race with his partner. CM3 responded, “Yes, I mean…give me a minute to work up to it actually. Maybe later, let me talk about it later” (297-298). At this point in the interview, CM3 lowered his head and began to cry. At his request, the interview proceeded and, with his permission, the questions that elicited this emotional response were posed later in the interview. As mentioned, CM3 experienced a critical event in anticipation of an encounter with his partner’s father. Resembling AAF3, AAM2, and CM1, CM3 indicates a connection between the critical event and the outcome or termination of their relationship. However, unlike all participants mentioned to this point, CM3 did not discuss this incident with his partner. He did not engage his partner in relational communication about his anticipation of a possible encounter. Yet, he does reveal that this critical event may have affected his behavior towards his partner, which led to the termination of the relationship.
CM3 mentions meeting his partner’s father at several points in the interview, but discusses this possible encounter in two markedly different manners. Initially, he does not convey a high level of anxiety or fear in anticipation of this encounter:

As far as I remember about going over to her house and meeting her dad, I thought that was a little weird, but I guess, at the time I knew that it was going to be a barrier that would be broken down…something that we dealt with later. (CM3, 434-437)

From this sequence of talkturns, CM3 indicates an awareness of possible resistance, but also expresses a manageable and potentially positive outcome. Later in the interview, I returned to address the set of questions that had evoked an emotional response. These questions concerned him and his partner’s communication about race and his reasons for terminating the relationship. At this point and for a second time, CM3 recounts the same possible encounter, but conveys a high level of anxiety and fear not evident in his prior discussion. Initially, he makes a direct connection between his partner’s intimate self-disclosure and his subsequent behavior.

According to CM3,

I remember things were getting very intense…we seemed very in love with each other. I was definitely feeling really gung ho about it. I remember one night we were talking and she called me her soul mate. It freaked me out. I don’t know why, but, when she called me her soul mate…it really scared me for a while. For some reason I started acting different around her. (615-618)

He continues, “I think I tried to distance myself a little bit from it. I don’t know if it was like to, you know, cope with what she said or if I was just trying to, maybe, subconsciously get away from her” (678-680). When asked whether was a factor in the dissolution of the relationship, CM3 then proceeds to make a connection between his partner’s disclosure and the critical event.
As he explains, “Having her calling me her soul mate, and realizing the commitment I was going to have to make, and I was going to have to meet her father, was for me kind of like a forbidden zone” (688-690) or “going to a forbidden place” (706). In this sequence of talkturns, CM3 makes a connection between his partner’s intimate disclosure, the commitment he infers in this disclosure, and the implications of the commitment constituting a critical event. Rather than attributing his distancing behavior from her and the relationship as a reaction to the critical event, he explicitly indicates the termination of the relationship is due to the commitment implied in her intimate self-disclosure. However, to address his concerns with her regarding meeting her father introduces the potential for relational communication about race. Consistent with his high level of communication apprehension, CM1 is unwilling to engage his partner in relational communication about the critical incident as a means of understanding or resolving his fears.

Consistent with CM3 experience, AAM1 reported a critical event in anticipation of an encounter with his partner’s father and did not communicate to his partner his perception of this incident and the anxiety he experienced in consideration of this interracial encounter. Despite the similarities between CM3 and AAM1 (critical event, lack of relational communication, dissolution of the relationship), AAM1 does not correlate this incident or his failure to communicate with his partner about this incident as the reason for or a contributing factor to the termination of the relationship. Moreover, unlike CM3, AAM1 did meet his partner’s parents upon her suggestion and did not experience the same level of anxiety as he had anticipated.

AAM1 describes his apprehension prior to meeting her parents, indicating that her proposal of a sudden and unplanned visit presented a stressful situation. In addition to the racial implications of this encounter, this critical incident also encompasses a relational turning point unique for AAM1. For him, meeting his partner’s parents signifies a point at which the
relationship has become serious. Rather than communicate this concern to his partner, he recalls, “I tried to play it off as if it wasn’t [stressful], but yeah, I think I thought about it more than she did” (122-124). Unbeknownst to him at the time, his partner had discussed their relationship with her mother and had informed her parents of his racial identity prior to their visit. Her openness with her parents was consistent throughout their relationship. In fact, according to AAM1, she openly challenged her parents at times, confronting their biases and prejudices about AAs and interracial dating and engaging her parents in communication about the topic of race (388-390). According to AAM1, he and his partner engaged in open and honest relational communication about race during the course of their relationship. Unfortunately, these partners were faced with the implications of a previous traumatic event experienced by his partner. Their relationship dissolved due to non-racial relational tension that stemmed from his partner’s unresolved issues surrounding a violent, sexual attack.
CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which partners in an interracial romantic relationship communicated about the topic of race within their relationship, whether or not this communication constituted self-disclosure, and how this communication affected the relationship. This study was guided by a theoretical approach that integrated Communication Boundary Management theory (Petronio, 1991, 1993, 2000), the process of understanding self-disclosure and the risks associated with self-disclosure, within a relational development stage-model that accounted for communication about the topic of race, the Interracial Relationship Development Model (Foeman & Nance, 1999). The results of this study replicate previous research that indicates partners do engage in self-disclosure about the topic of race (CITES). Furthermore, the results add to the current literature on interracial and relational communication by illustrating the structural elements of interactions and the process of disclosure that characterize the communication that occurs in these types of relationships. In this chapter, I will discuss how these results reflect the process of and structural elements that characterize the communication that occurs in the development of an interracial romantic relationship. I will then discuss the conclusions that may be drawn from this study. Finally, I will discuss the limitations of this study and make suggestions for future research.

Disclosure Within A Developing Relationship

Non-risky disclosure. According to Foeman and Nance (1999), interracial communication within the first stage of interracial relational development includes communication that facilitates partners’ “racial awareness” or understanding of racial identities (self and partner’s) and
ingroup/outgroup perspectives. The results of this study indicate that partners engaged in communication that highlights “racial awareness.” This communication was generally viewed as “safe” or non-risky disclosure rather than risky or self-disclosure, and was facilitated by the following prompts: (1) external non-relational prompts (external interactions and external information) that recognized the existence of social perceptions of race and racial differences, (2) internal non-relational prompts (racial stereotypes) that recognized the existence of social perceptions of race and racial differences; and (3) external relational prompts originating from nonintimate others that communicated social perceptions of race and racial differences.

Components that contributed to this communication included discussions of stereotypes, interracial union myths, and current media content associated with race and interracial relationships that highlight an awareness of the social constructs associated with ascribed racial identity and ingroup/outgroup perspectives. These discussions typically affirmed the process of stereotyping (including individual and relational characteristics) and generally served to negate the validity of these generalizations. Participants usually did not fear that acknowledging or discussing stereotypes and myths concerning interracial unions would lead their partner to associate them with similar beliefs and misperceptions.

Most participants who reported communication about societal generalizations and misperceptions indicated that these conversations were not directly related to partners’ perceptions of each other or partners’ motivations for engaging in the relationship. As such, this communication was not considered disclosure about personal and private information and, therefore, was not considered by the sender or perceived by the receiver as self-disclosure. Furthermore, this communication did not pose a threat to the relationship. When these partners did communicate about the societal prevalence of stereotypes, myths, and misperceptions, they
often indicated mutual awareness of racial and gender stereotypes associated with AAs and Caucasians, respective to their ingroup and outgroup membership. In summary, most participants did not perceive communication facilitated by external non-relational (interactions with nonintimate others and exposure to information), internal non-relational (stereotypes), and external relational prompts (relational originating from nonintimate others) as self-disclosure. As such, they did not perceive these disclosures as risky or threatening to partners’ perceptions of each other and/or the stability of their relationship.

As discussed, this type of communication largely reflects one form of communication characterized as occurring in the first stage of the model: racial awareness of individual and ingroup/outgroup perspectives. According to Foeman and Nance (1999), the experience of developing racial awareness constitutes an interpersonal and intercultural awareness. As they explain, “to the extent that a [same-group] couple does not share similar group membership (i.e., religious, socioeconomic, political), the process of awareness may be more tentative, even grinding. When the couple is of different races, differences are immediately obvious” (p. 549). Implications of this statement include (1) racial differences are substantiated as salient differences marked by an ascribed group membership, (2) racial differences constitute cultural differences, and (3) communicating awareness of this difference is correlated as potentially problematic to relational development, similar to communication that indicates differences stemming from other group memberships (i.e., religious, socioeconomic, and political). However, these findings do not support the assertion that partners’ communication that highlighted societal perceptions of difference illustrated obvious and apparent individual dissimilarity due to differences based on racial group membership.
Given these assertions, communication about race is conceptualized as potentially problematic. However, in order for partners to pursue an interracial relationship, communication about race and racial differences is necessary in order to develop relational intimacy. Therefore, successful relational development requires partners to engage in self-disclosure, as intimacy is developed through the process of self-disclosure. Understanding relational development through communication of potentially problematic, or risky, self-disclosure led to the prediction that CBM theory would highlight partners’ message choices and communication strategies based on the assessment of risk as partners communicated about the topic of race. From the first stage of the model, it was expected that (1) partners had engaged in self-disclosure of their attraction and sensitivity to each other, (2) these disclosures would be perceived as potentially risky, and (3) partners would manage these disclosures through boundary management based on the assessed level of risk.

Despite this expectation, however, results largely indicate that partners did not perceive these disclosures as “risky.” In general, whether or not these disclosures revealed negative societal perceptions, participants were not concerned that their partners would perceive these disclosures as reflective of personal beliefs. According to CBM theory, partners assessed these disclosures with a low-level of risk, control, and ownership, and high level of permeability, illustrating the concept of boundary coordination. These partners may feel safe in this communication because they are socially distanced from the source of the prompt. Regardless of whether the prompts are positively or negatively associated with race, they do not feel responsible for or burdened by ownership of the information because this information resides in our social environments and can most likely be assumed to be publicly available to all members.
Rules for boundary formation and usage may be determined by cultural expectations and/or social rules rather than relational rules of communication.

Rule usage and formation may also be determined by personal motivations. Discussion of public rather than personal, private perceptions of race may provide partners with a platform upon which they may further explore the topic of race. By assessing a partner’s reaction as either receptive or resistant to further communication, a partner can determine whether to increase the level of disclosure and choose whether to reveal or conceal more personal and private information. In fact, select participants revealed that communication about stereotypes, interracial union myths, and group perspectives initiated by these specific external and internal prompts often facilitated more intimate disclosures about the topic of race between partners.

Non-risky self-disclosure. Intimate disclosures that revealed personal and private information, or self-disclosures, were facilitated by external relational prompts (originating from intimate others), internal non-relational prompts (racial identity and experiences,) and internal relational prompts and included communication about topics such as families’ perceptions of race and interracial relationships, and personal experiences related to racial self-identification. Most participants revealed that they communicated with their partner about their families’ perceptions of race and interracial relationships. This communication constituted self-disclosure because these discussions, unlike the disclosures previously discussed, often reflected one’s own beliefs.

According to the data, approximately half of the sample (eight participants, - four AAs and four Caucasians) did not perceive communication facilitated by external relational prompts originating from intimate others as risky self-disclosure. In fact, they indicated they discussed family perceptions of race and interracial relationships with their partner within their first several
dates. They also had discussed the racial identity of their partner with their family members, and whether or not their family members were openly supportive of their decision, they did not fear incurring either negative reactions (i.e., hostility, disapproval) or negative consequences (dissociation from family) resulting from their decision to pursue the relationship. This may indicate that, for these participants, lack of overt disapproval rather than overt approval or support from family members contributed to the decision to pursue the relationship.

Furthermore, because these self-disclosures did not convey negative self-perceptions of race and, therefore, did not reflect negatively upon one’s self, participants did not perceive potential risks in sharing this information with their partner. Participants who self-disclosed to their partners and did not perceive disclosure as a risk appeared to be communicating openly and intimately with their partner about the topic of race in most situations.

Another pattern that emerged from the results reveals partners who engaged in relational communication about race and racial identity facilitated by external prompts and who did not perceive risks associated with these self-disclosures, also engaged in non-relational communication about race and racial identity. Both AA and Caucasian participants reported non-relational communication about race and racial identity. This communication was characterized by intimate levels of self-disclosure wherein participants revealed the difficulties they experienced often due to their lack of racial identification with ingroup membership. In many of these situations, race was disclosed as an expression of stress, resultant from external others.

As such, participants assessed a low level of risk associated with these disclosures and granted their partners access to this information. These disclosive behaviors exhibited boundary structures indicative of low levels of control and ownership, and reflective of high levels of permeability. These conversational prompts, which facilitated participants’ decision to self-
disclose, reflects partners’ willingness to reveal personal and private information without the threat of vulnerability. The rules formulated to regulate this flow of information likely indicate personal rules formulated between relational partners, or relational rules, rather than societal expectations or social rules. Motivations also form the basis for rule development (Petronio, 2000). Participants discussed positive reason, or motivations, for self-disclosure, including catharsis (i.e., stress-release), self-validation (i.e., identity), and relationship maintenance and enhancement (i.e., sharing similar experiences). This open and honest communication reported by these participants reflects the process of negotiation and coordination of partners’ boundaries, loosely controlled during the act of self-disclosure.

*Risky self-disclosure.* Conversely, approximately half of the sample (seven participants, four AAs and three Caucasians) reported that external relational prompts originating from intimate others did evoke feelings of anxiety and were often considered risky self-disclosure. These participants reported that the primary reason they feared communicating with their partner about their family’s negative perceptions of race stemmed from fear of association. They feared that revealing this information to their partner may suggest internalized, latent or hidden prejudices associated with family members who subscribed to negative outgroup perceptions of race and interracial relationships. Fears, including arousing a partners’ suspicion regarding motivations to date interracially and being labeled a racist, were assessed as potential risks to their partner’s perception of self and to the stability of the relationship. However, fear of being associated with their families’ prejudices was not the only factor that contributed to fear of disclosure.

Fear of revealing racial inequality also contributed to fear of disclosure. These fears conveyed participants’ awareness of or sensitivity to the racial place (Foeman & Nance, 1999) of
their partner. For Caucasians who revealed family perceptions of racial prejudices, these disclosures revealed differential power structures that placed Caucasians in a superior position to AAs and revealed Caucasians’ cultural privilege and AAs’ cultural subordination. Thus, Caucasian participants feared evoking negative reactions (i.e., suspicion, resentment, hostility) from their AA partners, who may have experienced racial prejudice or discrimination. For AAs who feared revealing family perceptions of racial prejudices towards Caucasians, these disclosures also revealed this differential power structure of racial privilege and subordination. These examples highlight participants’ assessment of risk includes the risks and ramifications associated with the content of the disclosure, the partner disclosing, and the partner receiving the disclosure (Petronio, 1991).

In order to manage the ramifications of these disclosures, these partners adjusted their boundaries according to the target and content of their self-disclosure. Participants engaged in communication strategies such as topic avoidance and self-censure to manage their partners’ impressions and protect their partner from harmful or negative messages. These strategies are categorized as individual- and relationship-based motivations (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000). Given the high levels of risk assessed, these motivations required disclosing partners to exercise high levels of control and ownership of information and low levels of permeability in order to form rules for boundary management that limited access to information. When these new rules were formed explicitly and dyadically (between the partners), boundary coordination marked by these structural levels (control, ownership, permeability) occurred.

It is interesting to note that AA participants explicitly acknowledged the concern of revealing social or racial stratification, whereas Caucasian participants did not. Given their experiences with and awareness of racial stratification, AAs may feel more comfortable
discussing the existence of these societal power structures than their Caucasian counterparts do. Also consistent in this theme is that Caucasian participants who reported topic avoidance and self-censure when relational communication was prompted by external intimate others also reported that communication about negative perceptions and disapproval often constituted a critical event in the relationship. As the results from Research Question 2 demonstrate, relational communication prompted by external intimate others significantly impacted the outcomes of several relationships. For these participants, who feared individual as well as relational ramifications from potential self-disclosure, rules restricting access to information were based on high levels of control and ownership, and low levels of permeability. These partners remained within their personal privacy levels when situational stresses called for boundary coordination. Because these rules were not developed between the partners, these tightly-controlled boundaries resulted in boundary turbulence.

Two participants (CM1, CM3), in particular, expressed a high level of risk associated with communication about the topic of race. CM1 revealed that interracial communication with his partner facilitated by non-relational and relational prompts created tension between him and his partner and threatened the stability of their relationship. He revealed that he was hesitant to engage his partner in discussions about race because this communication highlighted individual differences in worldview perspectives, revealed information about his private and personal beliefs, and constituted self-disclosure. CM3 revealed a similar hesitation when communicating with his partner about race. This participant expressed a high level of anxiety associated with both non-relational and relational topics and indicated this anxiety stemmed from his fear that his partner would associate him with biased prejudicial beliefs. For these two participants, communication about the topic of race was assessed as risky self-disclosure, whether or not the
topic was specifically related to partners’ racial identity and/or the interracial status of their relationship. Also, further inquiry by the researcher based on initial responses indicated that participants engage in a high level of self-censoring, thus reflecting the absence of or unwillingness to engage in communication about the topic of race. These findings did not qualify as conversational prompts because partners chose *not* to engage in communication, but it does illustrate a pattern of communication and lends insight into understanding how partners communicate about the topic of race. As noted above, these participants also feared individual as well as relational ramifications from potential self-disclosure, developed rules restricting access to information based on high levels of control and ownership, and low levels of permeability. Similarly, these partners remained within their personal privacy levels when situational stresses called for boundary coordination, and because these rules were not developed between the partners, these tightly-controlled boundaries resulted in boundary turbulence.

**Conclusion: Strengths and Limitations**

*Strengths*

This study contributes to our understanding of the communication that occurs in interracial romantic relationships and the impact of societal resistance to the stability of these relationships. This study extends Foeman and Nance’s (1999, 2002) research on communication about the topic of race in interracial romantic relationships. These findings support their assertion that communication about race, as posited in Stage One of the Interracial Relationship Development Model, facilitates partners’ awareness of societal perspectives associated with ingroup and outgroup membership and social constructs associated with their partner’s racial identity. In addition, this study contributes to our understanding of the process through which
partners communicate about the topic of race and extends existing research on Communication Boundary Management theory.

Data reveal that communication about stereotypes provides partners with the opportunity to engage in communication about the topic of race on various levels, from an impersonal level (ingroup vs. outgroup membership) to a more personal level (racial experiences and racial identity). Furthermore, communication about stereotypes provided a foundation upon which partners could assess the potential risks associated with communication about race and determine whether or not to increase levels of self-disclosure. The theoretical approach, which integrated CBM theory as a process through which to understand disclosures about race during relational development, highlighted the role of risk assessment in the process of interracial communication. The data revealed that partners assessed risks associated with negative disclosures about race (i.e., societal perceptions of race) that were not necessarily self-disclosive, similarly to risks associated with self-disclosure about race.

The current research was less supportive of the assertion that open and honest communication, as outlined in the second stage, facilitated successful management of the internal and external stressors that interracial couples faced. Critical incident methodology highlighted a remarkable pattern, particularly given the sample size, in the type of external stressor that impacted the relationship. Despite the honest and open communication that occurred, partners were unable to successfully manage the resistance they encountered from Caucasian family members. This pattern was observed in both AA and Caucasian partners, thus highlighting both relational partners general awareness of the Caucasian families’ opposition to their interracial romantic relationship. Moreover, this finding indicated that the race of and partners’ relationship to the external stressor contributed to the stressors’ impact on and outcome of the relationship.
Lastly, the qualitative nature of this study maintained the intensity and impact of the personal experiences reported by the participants. In-depth interviews conducted with open-ended questions provided participants the opportunity to describe their communication about race and the relational events they encountered given their interracial status. Through this form of data collection, participants provided personal narratives that reflect their unique experiences with interracial dating. The use of a standardized tool of instrument (i.e., survey instrument) would have forced participants to respond to statements that would have not fully captured the delicate nuances of the events and communicative practices they reported in the in-depth interview process.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the sample size, the homogenous, young age of the sample, and racial composition of the relationship. The sample size was determined by the qualitative nature of this study and based on the resources available to complete this research. Recruitment of qualified participants proved more problematic than was originally conceived and equal representation was not afforded to all race/gender compositions. Although multiple methods were used to recruit subjects for this study in order to provide equal representation, including sign-up sheets posted in the communication department, announcements made in undergraduate- and graduate-level communication courses, snowball sampling via participants, and solicitations from members in the community, participants were difficult to obtain. For example, several potential participants agreed to participate only if anonymity could be guaranteed (i.e., unwilling to complete consent form, willing to participate in telephone interview only).
Secondly, almost 75% of the sample was under the age of 25. The homogenous age of these participants may have contributed to the consistency of the relational outcomes and relational communication that resulted from the critical events that participants reported. The impact of parents’ disapproval, given the relatively young ages at which many of the reported critical events occurred, was directly related to the outcomes of participants’ interracial relationships. Participants who were living with or financially dependent upon their parents at the time of these critical events felt forced to comply with parental demands to terminate the relationship. Older participants may experience similar parental disapproval, but may not feel forced to comply with parental demands, thereby reporting different relational communication and relational outcomes.

In addition to sample size and age, the racial composition of these relationships is a limitation of this study. Although the focus of the current study was to investigate communication about the topic of race between African American and Caucasian dating partners, these findings may prove insightful only towards research specifically focusing on these types of relationships. Therefore, these findings may not provide insight into communication about race, culture, and religion between dating partners involved other interracial, intercultural, and interfaith relationships.

Although the qualitative nature of this study and racial composition of the relationships were most appropriate for understanding the questions posed by this study, the findings are not generalizable. Future research should continue to explore the impact of race and communication about race on interracial relationships, as well as the impact of culture and religion on intercultural and interfaith relationships, so that we may extend out understanding of these types of relationship to a generalized population. Therefore, researchers should explore these relational
phenomena using research design and sample criteria that would allow for such generalizations, including larger sample size, a diverse age population and multiple relational composition, and a multi-method approach of inquiry using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Qualitative inquiry, including in-depth interviewing, would preserve the personalized experiences reported by participants. Thematic analysis across multiple samples including varied racial, cultural, and religious relationships may provide common themes that are applicable to a larger dating population. These themes could prove useful in the construction of survey instruments specific to the development and maintenance of a dating relationship. Quantitative methodologies, including use of a survey instrument, could measure the frequency with which events occurred in a larger population. These suggestions for future research are drawn from the strengths associated with this study and the contributions this study adds to the field of interracial and relational communication.
REFERENCES


Foeman, A. K., & Nance, T. (1999). From miscegenation to multiculturalism: Perceptions and


Harris, T. M., & Kalbfleisch, P. J. (2000). Interracial dating: The implications of race for
initiating a romantic relationship. The Howard Journal of Communication, 11, 49-64.


M. L. Hecht, & J. Buley (Eds.), *Contemporary perspectives in interpersonal communication* (pp. 221-240). Dubuque, IA: Brown & Benchmark.


APPENDIX A

CONSENT FORM

I, _______________________, agree to participate in a research study entitled “Communicating Race in an Interracial Relationship” being conducted by Alison Beth Trego and Tina M. Harris, Ph.D., of the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Georgia (110 Terrell Hall, 542-4753). I understand that my participation in this research is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent to participate at any time during the data collection process.

The following points have been explained to me:

1. The purpose of this research is to examine communication patterns between African American and Caucasian partners in interracial romantic relationships and explore how they talk about about race.
2. Total time involved in this research will be about 2 hours. In the initial pre-interview, I was contacted by the researcher to discuss the interview format, determine the interview location, and review sample questions from the interview guide. For this interview, I will respond to a series of questions. The interview will be audiotaped and the researcher will record written observations. The interview will last approximately 90 minutes.
3. No stresses or discomforts are foreseen due to my participation in this research.
4. The results of my participation will be confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless required by law. I will indicate my race, age, gender, and relational history on the audiotape; however I will not indicate my name or any other identification on the audiotape. Consent forms will be collected and stored separately from the audiotapes and written observations and destroyed in 3 years. The audiotapes will then be destroyed.
5. I may ask the investigator to answer my questions or provide more information about the study at any time. If I so choose, I can request that a copy of the results of this study be provided to me as soon as they are available.
6. Although there are no foreseen risks due to my participation in this study, in order to make this study a valid one, some information about my participation will be withheld until after the study.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project, and can be reached by telephone at (706) 542-4893.

My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all my questions to my satisfaction and I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

___________________________  _______ ____________________________ ______
Alison Beth Trego, Investigator     Date  Tina M. Harris, Ph.D, Investigator     Date
(706) 542-4893, tregoab@uga.edu  (706) 542-4753, tmharris@uga.edu

___________________________  _______ ____________________________
Signature of the participant     Date  Participant’s name printed

PLEASE SIGN AND DATE ONE COPY OF THE CONSENT FORM AND RETURN IT TO THE INVESTIGATOR. KEEP THE OTHER COPY FOR YOUR RECORDS.

For additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant please call or write: Chris A. Joseph, Ph.D., Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia, 606A Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone (706) 542-6514; email address IRB@uga.edu.
APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW GUIDE

I would like to first thank you for your interest in and willingness to participate in my study. Before I begin asking a series of interview questions, I would like you to please describe your racial identity, indicating what groups you consider yourself to be a member of including racial and/or ethnic, you age or age range, and your occupation.

1. How many romantic relationships have you had that you would describe as “serious” or “committed”?
   a. At what point did the relationship become serious? Can you describe how you became aware of this change in the relationship?
   b. Did you and your partner experience stress in your relationship? Can you tell me about these stresses? External (e.g., family, friends, job) or internal (individual or relational goals, relational commitment)
   c. How did you and your partner manage these stresses? Did you talk/communicate about them? If so, how did you and your partner communicate about them?

2. How many interracial friendships (with someone of the opposite sex) or romantic relationships have you been involved in?
   a. When was your first interracial friendship? How old were you? How old was your friend? How did you meet?
   b. What was the longest interracial friendship you were involved in? How would you describe your friendship?
   c. When was your first interracial romantic relationship? How old were you? How old was your partner?
   d. What was the longest interracial romantic relationship you were involved in? Was it a serious relationship? Can you describe your relationship?
   e. When you think back over your romantic relationships, do you find that you are especially attracted to one kind of person? What kind of person? Do you think that you’ve been especially attracted to people from different racial groups? If so, can you tell me why?

3. How did you and your partner communicate about race?
   a. How would you describe your conversations with your romantic partner about race, in general?
   b. At what point in the relationship did you and your partner first talk about race?
   c. Did you feel comfortable talking about race? Did your partner? Why?
   d. How intimate were these conversations? Can you describe how you felt before and during these conversations?
   e. If you initiated these conversations, how did your partner respond?
   f. If your partner initiated these conversations, how did you respond?
   g. Is there one conversation in particular that set the tone for your overall communication
about race? Can you recount/describe this conversation for me?
h. If you initiated this conversation, how did your partner respond?
i. If your partner initiated this conversation, how did you respond?
4. How did you and your partner manage these conversations or disclosures? In other words, how did these discussions affect your normal communication style as partners?
a. Did these conversations or disclosures cause stress in or jeopardize the relationship? Why or why not?
b. How did the relationship change after these conversations? Can you describe to me in what ways?

5. How did you and your partner talk about general stereotypes or prejudices that exist about African Americans and Caucasians?
a. Did you and your partner talk about these perceptions in relation to yourself or each other? If so, how did you talk about it?

6. How did your family and friends react to your relationship?
a. Did you and your partner talk about any concerns or prejudices that others, such as family members, friends, or coworkers, may have had? Were these issues expressed to you by others? How did you and your partner discuss this?
b. Did you feel these disclosures were risky? Did you feel vulnerable? In what ways?

7. When you look back over this relationship, can you describe how talking about these experiences affected your relationship, either positively or negatively? Can you describe a specific event or encounter that occurred?

8. Did communication in this relationship differ from communication you've experienced in intra-racial relationships? Did you talk about race more, less, or differently in this relationship than you did in your previous intra-racial relationships?

9. Reflecting back on this relationship, how long had you and your partner been dating before you decided to breakup?
a. To what would you attribute the decision to breakup?
b. Was this a mutual decision?
c. What role, if any, do you believe race played in this decision? Was this ever discussed with your partner?

10. How have your experiences in an interracial romantic relationship influenced your general perceptions of African Americans/Caucasians? Was this relationship an important event (turning point) in your own life? Why or why not?

11. How have your experiences in an interracial romantic relationship influenced your perceptions of other African American/Caucasian romantic relationships? of partners involved in African American/Caucasian relationships?

12. Is there anything else you’d like to tell me?