An Adlerian Approach to Black Male White Female Marriages:
Unique Challenges and Distinctive Intervention in an Ambivalent Society

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Abstract

The review focuses on the Black male White female (BMWF) marriage population in the US. There has been astonishing growth in the number of BMWF marriages in the last 46 years, but they have been paid little attention by researchers and clinicians, especially the psychotherapeutic community. This review examines the historical, sociological and psychological context of these interracial couples, the unique challenges they face, and distinctive interventions to assist them. The Adlerian concepts of social equality, phenomenology, social embeddedness, and a strength-based perspective are discussed. Adlerian Psychology is established as an appropriate approach to help therapists understand and serve these couples.
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An Adlerian Approach to Black Male White Female Marriages: Unique Challenges and Distinctive Interventions in an Ambivalent Society

Introduction

There were approximately 286,000 Black male White female (BMWF) marriages in the United States (US) according to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2006. In 1960 there were only about 26,000 BMWF marriages (as cited in Aldridge, 1978; Romano, 2003). This represents more than a 1,100% increase in BMWF marriages in the 46 years between 1960 and 2006. This incredible growth rate is even more surprising given the total number of all marriages has seen only marginal growth since 1960 (Joyner & Kao, 2005). In 2006 the U.S. Census Bureau reported there were about 59,500,000 total marriages. BMWF marriages account for only 0.48% (286,000) of all marriages in the US. While the actual number of Black men marrying White women might be small compared to the total number of marriages, this increase is still astonishing.

Far more astonishing than the growth rate of BMWF marriages is that they grow in spite of the racial discrimination, hostilities and violence directed against them (Killian, 2003; O'Donoghue, 2004). Almost thirty years ago Porterfield (1982) commented that no other interracial marriage fuels such widespread condemnation. Lewandowski and Jackson (2001) reported that in the US the BMWF couple type has been viewed as the most despised and most repugnant of all interracial relationships. As will be considered, societal attitudes toward race and interracial relationships may be growing more positive. Regardless of society’s attitudes, however, these marriages exhibit great resilience and perseverance in the face of adversity, and still continue to grow in number.
There are a variety of factors credited for the substantial growth rate of BMWF marriages. Progress made by the Civil Rights movement, greater economic and educational opportunities afforded Blacks, and increased social contacts with Whites were identified by Davidson (1992). Kalmijn (1993) suggested three factors were at work. The first is that White prejudice against Blacks has been in steady decline. The second is that the educational, occupational and income gap between Whites and Blacks has substantially narrowed. And the last factor, perhaps the culmination of many factors, is the historic 1967 Supreme Court decision in Loving v. Virginia ("Loving v. Virginia," 1967) banning anti-miscegenation laws as unconstitutional.

Given the substantial growth of BMWF marriages in the US over the last 46 years, one might expect to find a great deal of academic interest in exploring these relationships to better understand them, but you would be mistaken. There are scant studies covering BMWF marriages (Bratter & King, 2008; Herr, 2009; Leslie & Letiecq, 2004; Sullivan & Cottone, 2006; Watts & Henriksen, 1999). In addition, clinical professionals such as social workers, counselors, and psychotherapists have paid little attention to BW marriages, even though some researchers (Brown, 1987; Killian, 2003; Porterfield, 1982; Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003; Watts & Henriksen, 1999) have identified multiple problems that often face these couples in the US (Davidson, 1992). In the opinion of Watts and Henriksen (1999), the counseling literature contains very little information on working with interracial individuals, couples, and families. BMWF marriages are a significant population with special needs and strengths that deserve more attention and resources by researchers, educators, and clinical professionals.

In order to locate enough research on BMWF marriages to write a current review, articles from 2001 to 2009 in the fields of economics, history, law, psychology, religion and sociology
are cobbled together. Perhaps the lack of research is indicative of society’s ambivalence towards this couple type. Ambivalence here is defined as contradictory attitudes or feelings, such as attraction and repulsion, held simultaneously toward an object, person, or action. As will be seen, society has had and continues to maintain an ambivalent posture regarding BMWF marriages and relationships.

In order to help the reader understand this author’s subjective perspective within this review, I define myself within U.S. society. I am writing as a White, post-college educated, middle-class, middle-aged, married, heterosexual, Christian, male, marriage and family therapist-in-training. I acknowledge I carry with me my early life socialization and privileged racial class values, beliefs and biases. My hope and intention is to write a review that is anti-racist and free of racism. As Rosenblatt, Karis and Powell (1995) so aptly stated, “it is not a simple matter to free our work from our own racism” (p. 18). I am intentionally working at becoming aware of and changing those values, beliefs and biases that are at odds with social equality. I do so because it is a moral imperative that I take quite seriously, and I also want to become a culturally competent therapist. I ask you, dear reader, for understanding when I do not quite measure up and to hold me accountable to continue making progress on my journey.

This review examines the historical, sociological and psychological context of BMWF marriages, the unique challenges they face, and distinctive therapeutic strategies and interventions to assist them. The Adlerian concepts of social equality, phenomenology, social embeddedness, and a strength-based perspective are discussed. Adlerian Psychology will be established as an appropriate approach to help therapists understand and serve these couples. To better understand this population, the individuals involved, and the issues surrounding them the following definitions will be helpful.
Defining the Population

Black and white. In the literature reviewed the terms “Black” or “African American” are used interchangeably but consistently by each author within each study. In a 2007 Gallup opinion poll, of those respondents that had a preference, 24% preferred the term African American and 13% preferred Black. A clear majority of 61% of the Black adults surveyed said it did not matter which term was used. Therefore, this review uses the terms “Black” or “Blacks” as its convention.

In the same manner the terms “White” or “European American” are used interchangeably but consistently by each author within each study. To facilitate ease of reading and to respect the equality of both races, the terms “White” or “Whites” will be the convention.

In a clinical setting it is suggested the therapist ask the client which term he or she prefers, and then to encourage the client to elaborate. The client’s answer may give some helpful insights into his or her racial perspectives, the presenting concerns, and the possible dynamics of the therapeutic relationship. This author’s own internship experience in using this approach was very positive.

American. As researchers point out, the term Black is often used to lump together various people of African-descent, such as West Indian or Creole (Batson, Qian, & Lichter, 2006; Yancey, 2007) To further identify the specific population this review focuses on Blacks who are American citizens regardless of ethnic origins and not Black immigrants. In a similar fashion, the term White is often used to lump together various people of European-descent, such as English or German. To further identify the population this review focuses on Whites who are American citizens regardless of ethnic origins and not White immigrants. The studies in this review usually point out when immigrant participants are included, but do not usually point out
when they are not included. For the purposes of this review, the assumption is made that immigrants are not included in a particular study if it is not mentioned that they are included.

**Interracial.** Laszloffy (2005) defines interracial as “a couple relationship where each partner is of a different race” (p.42). Intermarriage (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006; Rosenfeld, 2008) and intercultural marriage (Sullivan & Cottone, 2006) are similar terms used interchangeably throughout the research literature. These last two terms however connote a broader range of variables from which individual spouses within a marriage can differ. Besides race, for example, religion, ethnicity, or language among others can be considered as differing variables within an intermarriage or intercultural marriage. Ultimately every couple, whether same-race or interracial, heterosexual or homosexual can be viewed as being in an intercultural relationship since there are an infinite number of actual differences between partners. This review will use the term “interracial” as the convention since its focus is on the specific coupling of a Black male and a White female. The term interracial seems appropriate as the racial difference is the obvious marker to those outside the relationship. However, in no way is this meant to define race as the most important feature of this coupling.

**Heterosexual.** Heterosexual couples are the population under study in these research articles. While the same sex interracial relationship population is growing there is far less research available about them than about heterosexual interracial relationships.

**Marriages.** Interracial marriages are the primary relationship under consideration in this review, although a few research articles combine marriage and cohabitation relationships to increase sample size and the power of the results. In this review attention will be drawn to research combining these figures.
Miscegenation and anti-miscegenation. The definition of miscegenation is “race mixing”. It was coined by the Democrats during the U.S. presidential campaign of 1864 hoping to tar the Republicans with a national political scandal suggesting they favored racial mixing and by extension sex between White women and Black men (Romano, 2003). The definition of anti-miscegenation is “to not mix the race”, referring to White and nonwhite sexual mixing, either outside or inside of marriage (Yancey, 2002, p. 71).

Racism. According to the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, racism is defined as, “any action or attitude, conscious or unconscious, that subordinates an individual or group based on skin colour or race. It can be enacted individually or institutionally” (Randall, 2001, p. 1).

Racial discrimination. Killian (2003) defined racial discrimination as “concrete actions which adversely affect the personal safety, security, or social and economic opportunities of persons whose skin color or ethnic heritage differs from that of the perpetrator. Racism and discrimination are manifested in the attitudes and behaviors of individuals as well as in the actions of larger societal institutions” (p. 6).

Institutional racism. When institutions such as banks, real estate agencies and school boards discriminate against individual persons of color and interracial couples, it is called institutional discrimination (Killian, 2003). This can take the form of disproportionate denials of mortgage applications, steering away from buying a home in certain neighborhoods, and lack of funding for schools in disadvantaged communities.

Historical, Sociological and Psychological Perspectives

Historically, BW marriages have been the most controversial of all types of interracial marriages in the US (Porterfield, 1982), with the BMWF couples combination eliciting the highest level of all interracial discrimination (Davidson, 1992; Walker, 2005; Yancey, 2007). In
order to successfully provide support to these couples it is crucial for therapists to understand the historical, sociological, and psychological context through which these relationships have travelled (Poulsen, 2003). Key events, ideas, and perspectives concerning BMWF relationships in the last 400 years of U.S. history will be discussed.

1600’s

Beginning about 1619, Africans first arrived in Jamestown being traded to colonists by a Dutch merchant ship in need of food and other supplies. The Africans’ status is in question, but some scholars believe that “indentured servants”, both Black and White, male and female, lived, worked, and suffered together to gain their freedom and a better life in the new world (Yancey, 2002). The next 20 years, until about 1640, is believed to be the only period in U.S. history when Blacks and Whites were tolerated as social and economic equals (Schafer, 2008). Interracial marriages and biracial children, called Mulattoes, were socially acknowledged and had legal rights for this short period of time (Yancey, 2002).

By 1641 the agricultural industry in the colonies was growing rapidly and in need of a cheap labor force to harvest tobacco and various other crops (Yancey, 2002). British law regulated how the colonists treated indentured servants who were subjects of the crown, but did not specify how non-subjects should be treated. Simple greed led to exploitation as Massachusetts was the first English colony to legalize slavery. In time this economic incentive would lead to ideological justifications for the further mistreatment and dehumanization of Blacks (Yancey, 2002).

One such justification, the idea of innate White superiority over Blacks and Mulattoes, was an outgrowth of the prevailing Age of Reason during which theological understanding of the world was slowly replaced by philosophical and scientific reason (Fredrickson, 2005). Another
justification came from Christian religious beliefs, prominent at that time in certain denominations, that God forbid intermarriage and physically separated the races to keep them pure (Keener, 2002). A particularly potent justification, from the scientific theory of “polygenism” which held that the races were distinct species, was used in the defense of slavery against the egalitarian notion of a common humanity (Fredrickson, 2005; Keener, 2002). All of these ideas, beliefs, and “evidence” shaped the intellectual, social, political and cultural context of that period in history. Some of the lingering present day stereotypes of Blacks as lazy, unintelligent, violent and immoral can be traced to these beginnings (Golebiowska, 2007), although humankind’s tendency to oppress one another is ancient in origins (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964).

In 1661 the colony of Virginia reversed English common law declaring a child’s inheritance would now be derived from the mother, not the father. In effect, this deviously shielded wealth from passing from White fathers to biracial children (Fryer, 2007; Yancey, 2002). It also ensured that a child born to a Black female slave, regardless of the race of the father, would remain a slave without any inheritance rights (Romano, 2003). In fact, White plantation owners soon realized it was more profitable to procreate their own biracial children as slaves rather than to buy new slaves (Romano, 2003). This allowed White men to continue to perpetrate sexual exploitation of Black female slaves without fear that any resulting children would upset the established racial order or inheritance patterns (Yancey, 2002).

In 1691 Virginia enacted the first law criminalizing interracial marriage (Fredrickson, 2005). White women were banished from the community if they interracically married a Black, Indian, or Mulatto man. Outlawing interracial sex and marriage was a way of drawing and maintaining a color line defining Whites as free and Blacks as slaves (Fryer, 2007; S. Yancey,
To ensure the success of race-based slavery, Whites could not be allowed to marry nonwhites and produce legal interracial heirs (Yancey, 2002). Simply stated, the White race needed to be kept “pure” and it was seen as the responsibility of White women to maintain it by not marrying Black men (Romano, 2003).

1700’s

In 1788, the U.S. Constitution provided for counting three-fifths of all slaves for the purposes of representation in Congress and for taxing purposes (Finkelman, 1999). Called the “three-fifths compromise”, this clause in effect identifies Blacks as only three-fifths of a person in the eyes of the U.S. Constitution. Considered by some scholars (as cited in Finkelman, 1999) as a proslavery document, the word “slave” was not used in the final document in order to not inflame Northern states ire over the slavery issue.

1800’s

It took more than 200 years since the beginning of legalized slavery in 1641 before the ambivalent elements in U.S. society came to a violent confrontation resulting in the split of the nation. Abolitionists and pro-slavery adherents vehemently disagreed over the morality of enslaving Blacks. The partial resolution of this issue only came through the bloodshed of the Civil War. The adoption of the 13th amendment to the U.S. Constitution ended legalized slavery in 1865. Unfortunately, this did not end the racial discrimination and hostilities directed at Blacks and at interracial marriages.

In the years immediately after the Civil War, commonly called Reconstruction, from 1865 to 1877, opportunities for Blacks economically, politically and socially opened up newfound freedoms from slavery as U.S. citizens. Especially welcome was the passage of the 14th amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1868 guaranteeing that slaves would receive the
rights of citizenship by requiring “equal protection of the laws” (Fryer, 2007). However, even before the end of Reconstruction, the Black Codes, or Jim Crow laws, at the state level once again restricted Black freedoms (Schafer, 2008). This was especially true in some of the southern states, where anti-Black sentiment still ran high and violence was often used by Whites to terrorize and control Black behavior (Schafer, 2008). These segregation laws were in fact justified, “by the need to protect white women from ‘bestial’ black men” (Romano, 2003, p. 2). Whites interpreted Black attempts to gain civil, political, and legal rights as a desire for “social equality”; nothing more than a coded term for interracial marriage (Romano, 2003, p. 2).

1900’s

It was another 70 years or so before the U.S. government took any significant steps to end segregation and secure the civil rights of Black Americans. In 1954, the case of Brown v. Board of Education was a “fundamental breakthrough on the road to civil rights” (Fryer, 2007, p. 74). A convergence of social and cultural changes resulted in the Supreme Court decision ordering the desegregation of the public school system (Romano, 2003). Prior to this, the academic community’s refutation of the existence of biological differences between the races arose in the wake of WWII. Next, America’s claim to leadership in the “free world” as the beacon of Democracy and equality did not ring true while its own Black population experienced racism in the form of government sanctioned Jim Crow laws. Finally, through decades of legal work by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) the court held that segregation in public schools stigmatized and injured Black children and denied them the ability to achieve their true potential. Responding to the southern states’ fears that desegregation would lead to increased miscegenation, the Supreme Court avoided ruling on the constitutionality of anti-miscegenation laws in the years immediately after the Brown decision.
According to Silber, one Justice supposedly remarked at that time, “One bombshell at a time please” (As cited in Romano, 2003, p. 156).

With the historic 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Supreme Court invalidated laws that mandated segregation on buses, in parks, in public accommodations, and in federally funded institutions (Romano, 2003). The civil rights movement of the 1960’s extended beyond mere civil rights however, with Blacks challenging the Jim Crow system, their political disenfranchisement, and White supremacy in all of its forms. Movement activists envisioned a world in which Blacks and Whites could relate to one another as social equals, and as a “beloved community”, where people would value and respect one another without regard to the color of one’s skin (p. 178). Concerning interracial couples, perhaps the civil rights movement’s most important legacy was its effectiveness in discrediting all forms of segregation laws, according to Romano (2003). Nevertheless, the Supreme Court still had not dealt with the most entrenched of all of the segregation laws; those that prohibited interracial marriage (Fryer, 2007; Romano, 2003). But that was soon to change.

In 1967, in the landmark case of Loving v. Virginia, the Supreme Court finally ruled that state anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional, violating the 14th amendment and were therefore null and void. The court said, “There can be no doubt that restricting the freedom to marry solely because of racial classifications violates the central meaning of the Equal Protection Clause” (“Loving v. Virginia,” 1967, p. 12). In 1967, sixteen states still had such laws on their books, all former slave states, except Oklahoma (Fryer, 2007; Romano, 2003). In all, 41 states had anti-miscegenation laws at one time or another in their state histories.

Given the widespread condemnation of interracial marriage historically, its decriminalization would prove relatively insignificant if Whites’ attitudes about Blacks and
interracial marriage stayed the same (Romano, 2003). Some of the main objectives of the civil rights movement were to change Whites’ negative attitudes about Blacks, to get Whites’ to deal with their own internalized racism, and to see beyond the color of Blacks’ skin to “the content of our character”, in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. (p. 191). Again and again, racism and racial discrimination were shown to be “unfair, immoral, and illegitimate” by movement activists (p. 191). The Supreme Court finally agreed, but would the rest of the US?

Summary

For almost 400 years BMWF marriages and relationships have had a tumultuous and dangerous road to follow as U.S. society did its worst to keep them apart. This included the enslavement of Blacks and their biracial offspring, the criminalization of their interracial marriages and relationships, the restriction of access to political power and wealth, the stigmatization of their interracial relationships as pathologically deviant, and through many other atrocities. Only the moral certitude and perseverance of Blacks, and a few like-minded Whites, advocating for legal, economic and social equality within the US has effected changes in these conditions.

Adlerian Perspectives

Social Equality

Alfred Adler has been called “a man ahead of his times” in regards to his ideas about social equality (Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000, p. 5). The ideal of social equality has been voiced in many different ways by many different people. The Declaration of Independence of the United States of America states, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”. From a religious point of view, the Bible, throughout the
old and new testaments, encourages humankind to “Love your neighbor as yourself”. From Adler’s perspective, “Equality is the iron clad rule of social living” (Dreikurs, 1995, p. 209). His view was that people can only live in harmony with each other on the basis of equality.

Unfortunately, humanity has yet to live up to these high ideals. The declaration of Independence, while proclaiming the equality of all men on the one hand, was calculating on the other hand that Blacks were only three-fifths of a human being. Rudolf Dreikurs (1995) wryly pointed out that, “all human beings are fundamentally equal and similar. Only people don’t know it because they notice the differences and do not see the forest for the trees” (p. 212). Adlerian therapists strive to see all clients as equal and worthy of respect. Equality does not refer to sameness, but to the valuing of the uniqueness and unsurpassable worth of each individual. To feel social equality is to feel valued as a human being (Dreikurs Ferguson, 2003).

Watts (2000) asserts that Adler promoted social equality for women, contributed to the discussion of gender issues, and addressed the negative effects of marginalizing minority groups. For example, Adler spoke out against the inequitable treatment of women as early as the 1920’s, stressing it would make loving relationships and mutual cooperation between the sexes impossible (Dinkmeyer & Sperry, 2000). This thought was reiterated more recently by McIntosh (1988) when she said, “Only rarely will a man go beyond acknowledging that women are disadvantaged to acknowledging that men have an unearned advantage, or that unearned privilege has not been good for men’s development as human beings, or for society’s development…” (p. 3).

Adler (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964) recognized the plight of other oppressed peoples, specifically naming both “Jews and Negroes”, and called their attention to the great tendency of one neighbor to oppress another (p. 454). Commenting on this tendency, Adler observed, “The
Frenchman considers the German inferior, whereas the German considers himself as belonging to a chosen nation...Until mankind consents to take a step forward in its degree of civilization, these hostile trends [prejudices] must be considered not as specific manifestations, but as the expression of a general and erroneous human attitude” (p. 452). Adler looked to undermine this erroneous attitude in two ways. First, Adler encouraged the oppressed individual to not allow her or himself to be the target of the attacker, but to stand up for oneself and to consider the attacker as ignorant (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). Second, prejudice was regarded as a “misdirected social movement” whose basic mistake was striving for significance at the expense of other people. Turning the movement’s attention to more useful and friendly ways to gain significance would put them “in tune with the spirit and the idea of the community of mankind” (p. 454).

Race as a Social Construct

One way in which to understand the “misdirected social movement” of racism in the US is through the contemporary idea of race as a social construct. Race as a concept is used by the dominant cultural group to classify and separate individuals and groups by physical characteristics such as skin color, facial and bodily features, and hair color and texture. The concept is also used to make attributions about intellectual, cultural, physical and behavioral characteristics that are thought to differ innately. Scholars, however, generally agree that race has little biological legitimacy (Killian, 2002; Laszloffy, 2005; Yancey, 2007). The concept of race itself does not imply one race is superior to another, but once a hierarchy of value is applied by the dominant cultural group then the concept moves beyond race into racism (Fredrickson, 2005). The ideology of racism uses a deep sense of difference to justify inequality of treatment, according to Fredrickson. Race is constructed by the dominant cultural group in such a way that
supports the needs, wants and identity of dominant group members over those of minority group members (Laszloffy, 2005).

Adler inferred this idea of social constructs in his story of the little red-haired boy (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964). He said, “We know that children with red hair are exposed to teasing from which they then suffer. This is one of many ancient superstitions which represent gross errors. One must explain to such children that there is a whole series of injustices in mankind, that people often find a means of oppressing others, and that this always takes the same form. If one people wants to depreciate another, if one family considers itself superior to another, then they stress particular traits to use as a point of attack” (p. 455). Getting teased for red hair in no way compares to racial discrimination, hostilities and even violence directed against Blacks and interracial couples, but Adler correctly identified the tendency within humankind to oppress those that are different, and he steadfastly educated both the public and the oppressed individual in ways to overcome these acts of “stupidity” (p. 455).

A Significant Adlerian Contribution

Alfred Adler’s vision for social equality has been shared by like-minded Adlerians as well, some also contributing in very profound and nation-changing ways. The groundbreaking school desegregation case (“Brown v. Board of Educ.,” 1954), decided by the Supreme Court, was partially influenced by the social equality theories of Alfred Adler. Former president of the American Psychological Association and self-identified Adlerian, Kenneth B. Clark was credited with providing critical information that persuaded Justice Thurgood Marshall and the Supreme Court to eliminate racial segregation in public schools. Clark (1967) said, “To the extent that Adlerian theory influenced my own thinking and research, and to the extent that my thoughts and writings have influenced in any way the civil rights movement, determines, at least
in part, the extent to which ideas of Alfred Adler have contributed to the accelerated quest for racial justice in America” (p. 182).

*Adlerian Psychology as a Multicultural Approach*

Given its perspective on and historical participation in the progress of social equality for all peoples, Adlerian Psychology and psychotherapy is an appropriate multicultural approach in working with BMWF marriages. The wide range of multicultural issues addressed in the Adlerian literature includes, racism, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social equality (Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2006b). In order to provide relevant psychotherapeutic services in a rapidly changing diverse U.S. society, Watts (2000) stated that an approach must successfully tackle issues of multiculturalism and social equality. In putting forth Adlerian therapy as an appropriate approach for a diverse clientele Watts noted that Adler centralized the concepts of social embeddedness and social equality early in his theoretical development and long before multiculturalism became a primary concern to the main stream of psychotherapy. Dr. Paul Pedersen, a noted pioneer in multicultural counseling and therapy, said that, “[Adler’s] holistic perspective was an articulate expression of what I have come to call a ‘culture-centered’ perspective and multiculturalism generally” (Nystul, 1999, p. 218). According to Corey (2005), the Adlerian approach is a good fit to working with culturally diverse clients, with its emphasis on viewing the clients within their own social context and worldview. Although not perfect, Corey concluded it was difficult to see major limitations from a multicultural viewpoint when Adlerian therapy is applied competently and appropriately.

*Summary*

Adlerian Psychology and psychotherapy is a good fit to working with a diverse clientele, including BMWF marriages. Alfred Adler was a pioneer in understanding multicultural issues,
especially the concept of the social equality of humankind. Adler recognized racial
discrimination and oppression as a “misdirected social movement” in the US. He worked
steadfastly to correct society’s basic mistake of trying to gain significance at the expense of other
people, and he educated the oppressed individual about the ignorance of the oppressor and how
to stand up for oneself. Adlerian therapists strive to value the uniqueness and unsurpassable
worth of each client, thus helping the client to experience the reality of social equality.
Additional Adlerian concepts will be considered throughout the rest of this review.

Unique Challenges

BMWF marriages hold a unique position within U.S. society. They are certainly
different than same-race marriages in that each partner is categorized as coming from a different
race. BMWF marriages are the fastest growing interracial union in the US (Kalmijn, 1993).
Blacks are the least likely of all racial minorities to marry Whites (Bratter & King, 2008; Qian &
Lichter, 2007), and Whites are the least likely to marry with any minority group (Bratter & King,
2008; Rosenfeld, 2008) so these BMWF marriages are rare. As we have already seen, BMWF
marriages are the most controversial couple type (Porterfield, 1982), eliciting the highest level of
all interracial discrimination (Davidson, 1992; Walker, 2005; Yancey, 2007). Given their unique
position within U.S. society, it should come as no surprise that BMWF marriages have some
unique challenges that face them. The challenges of racial discrimination, marital instability, and
a pathological perspective will be discussed.

The Challenge of Racial Discrimination

Of all the studies that have been conducted on BMWF marriages, the issue of racial
discrimination and its impact on the couple seems to be the most researched and discussed. That
makes some sense given the combination of historical slavery, longstanding societal prohibition
against race mixing, and on-going racial discrimination from the dominant culture that focuses attention on the BMWF marriage relationship. In a clinical review Solsberry (1994) commented that of all interracial marriage types, those which had a Black spouse tended to provoke greater discrimination. Current research continues to focus attention on the existence and impact of racial discrimination on the lives of these couples, but it does so from a number of different perspectives. It still focuses on actual experiences, but now also on what appears to be the increasing acceptance and probable decreasing of racial discrimination toward them. Current research also focuses on the couples’ greater range of responses to discrimination.

BMWF couples in the US continue to experience racial discrimination to various degrees (Killian, 2003; O'Donoghue, 2004; Poulsen, 2003; Schafer, 2008; Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003; Yancey, 2007). Although other people of color are subject to the prejudices and biases of the dominant culture, BMWF couples have some unique discrimination experiences. Almost thirty years ago Porterfield (1982) commented that no other interracial marriage fuels such widespread condemnation. Lewandowski and Jackson (2001) noted that in the US the BMWF couple type has been viewed as the most despised and most repugnant of all interracial relationships.

Current Experiences with Racial Discrimination

Continuing racial discrimination. The current literature clearly illustrates that BMWF couples are still experiencing some racial discrimination from family, friends and society (Killian, 2001; Leslie & Letiecq, 2004; O'Donoghue, 2004; Schafer, 2008; Yancey, 2007). In a very small qualitative study Killian (2003) reported that all nine BMWF couples endured painful experiences of racial discrimination and intolerance to their interracial relationships by wider society. These acts of racial discrimination include being stared at in public, having others make rude comments to them directly or indirectly, and receiving poor service at restaurants. Similarly,
O’Donoghue (2004) reported that all 11 White women married to Black men in another very small qualitative study suffered some or all of the following experiences. Their families of origin disassociated themselves from the interracial couple. They felt excluded by both White and Black society. They had difficulties renting apartments and obtaining mortgages. They faced hostile comments, stares, and incidents from others. They or their children were harassed by the police. Their qualifications to parent biracial children were questioned. These were new and unique experiences for these White women from being identified as having a Black partner or having biracial children.

In a small qualitative study (n=21 interracial couples containing 6 BMWF couples), Yancey (2007) reported that Whites married to Blacks are likely to face more hazardous racism than Whites married to non-Blacks (Hispanics and Asians). He found that Whites married to Blacks were much more likely to mention actual personal experiences of discrimination than Whites married to non-Blacks. This, however, is not every BW couple’s experience.

A different experience with racial discrimination. In a small mixed methodology study investigating the various types of racial discrimination experienced by 20 BW couples, Schafer (2008) reported that some BW couples did not qualify for the study because they could not recall experiencing any discrimination towards them as a couple since they had been married. The purpose of the research was clearly explained to the potential participants as pertaining to direct experiences of racial discrimination towards them as a couple. Since these were volunteer participants the author wondered why these BW couples would not want to admit to experiencing racial discrimination if they had experienced it. One could speculate these couples did not feel safe enough to reveal this information to the researcher, perhaps due to a racial difference between one partner and the researcher. Another possibility could be that the couples
just cannot remember experiences of discrimination they have had, perhaps because they attributed the experience to the ignorance of the perpetrator and not themselves. Another possibility is that these couples actually did not experience discrimination since they had been married. Perhaps supportive elements such as strong family acceptance and a geographic location where interracial couples are accepted could account for their lack of discriminatory experiences. Clearly, the experiencing of racial discrimination is unique to individuals and couples, and varies greatly.

Societal Changes in Racial Discrimination

*Media portrayals.* Even though some BMWF couples still experience discrimination, it appears that acceptance of BMWF relationships is increasing which may indicate racial discrimination is decreasing in the US. Media portrayals of BMWF couples, as well as other interracial couples, are definitely more positive as observed and recorded in a personal journal kept from October 2009 to March 2010. Recent and on-going television commercials by Best Buy, Levi Jeans, eHarmony.com, Mutual Life Insurance, and IIT.Tech.com all have positive portrayals of BMWF couples and families with biracial children. Another eHarmony.com commercial shows a Black female and White male on a cruise ship kissing, smiling, and demonstrating their mutual interest and compatibility. Recent television programs as different as the reality shows, Keeping Up with the Kardashians, Kendra, Drug Rehab with Dr. Drew, and the top-rated cable news channel Fox News show BMWF couples and families as loving, committed and functional. Finally, National Geographic Magazine (December 2009, p.9) displayed an ad with a BMWF family with a biracial son laughing and having fun while enjoying a cup of Starbucks coffee. Admittedly, these are all businesses trying to sell a product, but positive images of BMWF couples and families within the media influence viewer perceptions
and may lead to more acceptance and less discrimination within U.S. society. Indeed, Porterfield (1982) identified this factor as actually facilitating the increase in BMWF marriages. According to Bowman, the more interracial marriage occurs, the more likely it is to occur and to be accepted within U.S. society (As cited in Porterfield, 1982).

Approval ratings. What other evidence is there to support the position that acceptance of BMWF is increasing and racial discrimination may be decreasing in the US? According to a 2007 Gallup poll (2007, August 16), 77% of all Americans (about 231 million) now say they approve of interracial marriages between Blacks and Whites, with 17% (about 51 million) saying they disapprove. Compare this to only 4% approval with more than 94% disapproval when Gallup first polled Americans about BW marriages in 1958. This 50-year trend illustrates an increasing acceptance for BW marriages. This trend is well established in the literature (Fryer, 2007; Kalmijn, 1993; Qian & Lichter, 2007).

Even more dramatic is the separate trends for Black and White acceptance of BW marriages. In 1968, the first year Gallup specifically tabulated Black opinions and about a year after the Loving v. Virginia decision; Black approval of BW marriages was already at a majority 56% with 33% disapproval. By 2007 that approval had risen to 85% with only 10% disapproval. One of the few studies on Black attitudes concerning interracial marriages confirms the 85% approval rating (Jacobson, 2006).

In sharp contrast, by 1968 there was only 17% White approval of BW marriages and a decisive majority of 75% that disapproved. By 2007, however, there had been an astonishing reversal of those numbers with 75% of White Americans now approving of BW marriages with about 19% still disapproving. Although these positive trends are encouraging and suggest a greater acceptance of BW marriages and by extension a lessening of discrimination, there are
some researchers (Childs, 2008; Golebiowska, 2007; Kalmijn, 1993) that question this assumption.

*Dissenting views.* In a study on BW marriage trends by Kalmijn (1993), the author reported that research at that point in time reflected the increasing acceptance of BW marriages in the US. Kalmijn, however, felt that this acceptance was in name only since it required no behavioral change or commitment on the part of the respondents. It could have been simply a politically correct response to the popular social norm of not judging a person by the color of their skin.

Curious whether White approval of BW marriages via trends was a valid indicator of decreasing racial discrimination, Golebiowska (2007) analyzed a nationally representative sample from the 2000 General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is produced by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago in Illinois. Hoping to isolate the effect of politically correct, or social desirability answers, Golebiowska asked White respondents “how strongly [would you] favor or oppose a marriage between [your] close family member and a Black person” (p. 271). Only 23% either favored or strongly favored having a Black in-law, while 37% opposed or strongly opposed having a Black in-law. These figures alone show a disparity between the 75% White approval of BW marriages and the 23% favorable response to having a Black in-law. What surprised the author was that almost 40% responded that they neither favored nor opposed having a Black in-law. Considering this a probable social desirability answer Golebiowska estimates the actual number of Whites that oppose having a Black in-law is much higher than the 37% that admitted to it. These findings demonstrate that even with a 75% White approval of BW marriage many Whites are not yet prepared to accept a Black person into their family.
Future possibilities. One trend that does create hope for a more accepting future for BMWF marriages, with the possibility of more Whites welcoming a Black person in their family, is how age factors into White approval ratings. According to Gallup (2007, August 16), younger Americans (85%), regardless of race or ethnicity, are more inclined to support Black-White marriages than are older Americans (67%), even though older Americans still show majority support. Just among Whites these results are similar. Whites, aged 18 to 49, approve (86%) compared with (64%) of Whites aged 50 years and older who approve. Blacks, aged 18 to 49, approve (89%) compared with (77%) of Blacks aged 50 years and older who approve. One potential outcome of this trend is that as the older generations die the social environment for BMWF marriages will be more accepting because of younger, more approving, generations that takes their place. In support of this trend, Golebiowska (2007) reported that younger people were less likely to hold hostile attitudes toward BW marriage. Age was, in fact, found to be the best predictor of attitude toward interracial marriage (Golebiowska, 2007).

Summary

Recent research demonstrates some couples still experience discrimination to varying degrees, but other couples do not. Any discrimination is unacceptable and needs to be vigorously challenged, but there are encouraging signs that U.S. society and the dominant White population in particular seem to be more accepting of these BMWF couples. Gallup opinion polls are clear as to this positive trend in approval. Media portrayals also present more positive images of interracial couples and families. When one adds the growing numbers of Black men and White women marrying as an indicator in and of themselves of greater acceptance of racial differences, it seems that some progress is being made toward full acceptance of BMWF marriages in the US.
The Challenge of Marital Instability

The substantial increase in interracial marriages in general, and in BMWF marriages in particular, has been interpreted as signifying a fading of the racial boundaries (Qian & Lichter, 2007) and as an increase in social acceptance of these relationships in the US (Joyner & Kao, 2005). Excitement about the increase in interracial marriages may be dampened however if these marriages are highly likely to break up (Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). This is especially important considering a report from Lee and Edmonston that children living in interracial families have quadrupled to more than 3 million between 1970 and 2000 (As cited in Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). It is in society’s best interests to ensure all marriages and families provide a stable environment where spouses, parents, and children are safe, nurtured and supported.

There is very little current research on divorce rates of interracial couples, and what little earlier research exists is contradictory and dated (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). Historically, both professional and popular circles believed those in interracial marriages were somehow different in motivation than same-race couples (Porterfield, 1982). In addition, they believed these marriages were burdened with “special hazards” and were more likely to fail (p. 25). Tubbs and Rosenblatt (2003) reject this characterization as unfair, however, stating there is no empirical evidence supporting BMWF marriages as unstable, at least not based on the speculations of psychological flaws, biological incompatibility or special hazards.

Early Research

A classic sociological review of Black-White marriages (Aldridge, 1978) summarized the major, but meager findings and trends from the early 1900’s to the 1970’s. Aldridge commented that the research on instability, which consisted of only two small studies, was contradictory as to the degree of success of Black-White marriages as measured by divorce. Neither study
reported a greater success rate, but BW marriages were either less successful or at least as successful as same-race marriages. Aldridge posited that BW marriages probably were less successful due to the “particular personal and social problems and the unusual difficulties that confront them” but could not be sure because of the lack of statistics to support that hypothesis (p. 361).

In another early sociological review Porterfield (1982) noted that given the strong norms against all types of interracial marriages, it was not surprising that society held beliefs that interracial marriages were burdened with special hazards and more likely to fail than same-race marriages. The then available divorce research was based on small samples, was contradictory and there was no statistical basis to support a hypothesis of higher instability rates. Porterfield urged caution by researchers when using the various information sources about BW marriages in the US. Lack of systematic collection, questionable results from the U.S. Census, and fragmentary public documents including marriage and divorce records made good analyses exceedingly difficult.

In a clinical review of all interracial marriages but primarily focused on BW marriages from 1939 to 1989, Solsberry (1994) reported that success rates for all interracial couples combined were poor based on the available statistics. Studies by Bontemps, Saxton, and Simpson and Yinger found that the overall divorce rate for all interracial marriages in the US was higher than it was for that of the general population and higher than it was for other types of intermarriage, such as religious intermarriage (As cited in Solsberry, 1994). Solsberry attributed the higher divorce rates for all interracial marriages to experiences of racial discrimination by one or both races placing those marriages in a more vulnerable position socially, emotionally, and psychologically.
As can be seen, these earlier research efforts were hampered by a number of factors. There was very little research to refer to, the results were contradictory, statistics were not available or reliable, records were fragmentary or missing, and professional and popular opinions and beliefs drove some of the “findings”. Although these earlier findings had shortcomings and should be viewed with caution, they provided a beginning point and a direction with which to proceed with more research and to renew efforts to understand and support these marriages.

Current Research

What has current research found? Contrary to earlier research and popular belief, Bratter and King (2008) found that prior to 1980 interracial marriages as an aggregate were slightly more stable, but not significantly, than same-race marriages as an aggregate. Only 46% of interracial marriages ended in divorce by the 10th year as compared to 51% of same-race marriages. The authors also found it is every interracial cohort group after 1980 that has been more divorce prone. For example, interracial first marriages entered into after 2000 are 50% more likely to divorce after the 10th year than similar same-race couples. Bratter and King carefully point out, however, that this increased risk for divorce reflects the situation of some types of interracial couples but not all.

Study 1

In this large quantitative study Bratter and King (2008) examined if being in an interracial marriage increased the risk of divorce compared to same-race marriages. Using a nationally representative sample (n= 5,676 total respondents in marriages, containing 74 respondents in BMWF marriages) from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (Cycle VI), the authors found that BMWF first marriages were twice as likely to divorce by the 10th year of marriage then similar White/White couples (the reference group). When using Black-Black
couples as the reference group, Bratter and King found that Black-Black marriages had a persistently higher risk of divorce by the 10th year than similar White-White marriages, but BMWF marriages were still more likely to divorce by the 10th year than similar Black-Black marriages.

These findings held true even after the authors took into account various non-racial factors associated with higher divorce rates. These factors included; younger age at first marriage, parental divorce, cohabitation, birth of a child prior to marriage, lower education, lower income, age differences, and ethnicity differences. A possible explanation of this finding offered by Bratter and King is the “unwelcoming context” these interracial couples may enter into (p. 170). Diminished support from friends and family, negative reactions from strangers, and institutional racial discrimination are just some of the problematic interactions that may disrupt these marriages (Childs, 2005; Hill & Thomas, 2002; Killian, 2003; Rosenblatt, et al., 1995; Yancey, 2007).

Strengths and limitations. What is new and groundbreaking about the Bratter and King study is its ability to separate out each type of interracial marriage by race and gender, such as BMWF or WMBF, and look at their specific risk of divorce. For example, White male Black female (WMBF) first marriages are 44% less likely to divorce by the 10th year than similar White/White couples. This is one of the important pieces missing from earlier research (Aldridge, 1978); the ability to look specifically at the couple type in question; in this review, BMWF marriages.

This is one of only three studies in this review that uses a nationally representative sample, and therefore may be relatively free of sample bias. However, there could be a certain amount of sampling error based on the small number of BMWF couples contained in the larger
sample. Also, the authors are only looking at first marriages and not adjusting for divorce rates for subsequent marriages ending in divorce. Generalizing these results to the U.S. population of BMWF marriages will be difficult unless other research on divorce can increase the number of BMWF couples in the studies. This was achieved in the next study reviewed.

Study 2

In another large quantitative study using 1991-2001 Survey of Income and Program Participation data from the U.S. Census, Zhang and Hook (2009) also studied the risk of divorce for interracial couples. Using a nationally representative sample (n = 23,139 total married couples, with 145 BMWF married couples), the authors found that BMWF couples were the least stable of all marriage types, interracial or same-race marriages. Compared to the White-White reference group, BMWF marriages were 85% more likely to divorce. When using Black-Black couples as the reference group, Zhang and Hook found that BMWF marriages had a higher risk of divorce than that of Black-Black marriages, but not significantly.

When factors associated with marital instability were controlled for BMWF marriages were still 65% more likely to divorce than White-White marriages. These multiple factors included; marriage cohort, region of residence, younger age of first marriage, age, educational differences between spouses, lower levels of education, lower levels of income, having no or fewer young children. One plausible explanation Zhang and Hook offered for these results is the persistent racism and distrust directed at Black men in the US.

Strengths and limitations. This is the second of only three studies in this review that uses a nationally representative sample and it has the same potential strengths and limitations as discussed above. The obvious strength in this study as compared to the Bratter and King study is that it doubles the number of BMWF marriages from 74 to 145 while more than quadrupling the
overall sample size from 5,676 to 23,139 couples, thus potentially minimizing sampling errors and increasing the precision of the findings. These two studies use different data sources, two different instruments, and different samples of marriage stages to arrive at the same basic conclusion; BMWF marriages have a significantly higher risk of divorce than White-White couples.

Discussion

The Study 2 findings are in substantial support of the Study 1 findings although not quite as high likelihood to divorce. The disparity may be due to the different time lengths of marriages in each study; married at least 10 years (Study 1) vs. 3-4 years (Study 2). According to Kreider, marriages are most likely to disrupt within the first 8 years (As cited in Bratter & King, 2008), and so the greater length study might capture those marriages that divorce in years 5 through 10, resulting in the higher divorce risk in Study 1.

Another possibility for the disparity is that Study 2 did not specifically look at first marriages as Study 1 did. One might speculate that the inclusion of remarriages that also ended in divorce affected the finding because of differences in risk of divorce between first marriages and subsequent marriages and divorce. This could be the focus of a future research study

The Challenge of a Pathological Perspective

Early Theories

Many of the early theories of interracial relationships suggested the couple had ulterior motives for establishing these unions; motives that displayed a pathological deviance or an abnormal level of rebellion (Aldridge, 1978; Davidson, 1992; Porterfield, 1982; Watts & Henriksen, 1999). Both unconscious and conscious motives were posited. Some of the unconscious motivations included; rebellion against parental authority or society, personal
insecurities, and self-loathing. Some of the conscious motivations included; sexual curiosity, ambitions toward upward mobility socially and economically, and exhibitionist tendencies. In one of the classic sociological reviews, Porterfield (1982) stated the problem with these early theories is that they were speculative, fragmentary, unsystematic and based on individual cases and small samples, and therefore, should not be accepted as valid for all interracial marriages. Davidson (1992) cautioned clinicians that these theories of ulterior motives were not supported by empirical evidence.

In introspect these early theories were “culture-bound”, that is, based on the dominant culture’s lingering belief that Whites were innately superior to Blacks. Therefore, any White person desiring to intimately identify him or herself with a Black person had to be psychologically impaired (Romano, 2003). Professionals within the mental health field were just as likely affected by these erroneous ethnocentric beliefs about racial differences as were non-professionals (Sue & Sue, 2008).

Recent Research

Recent research has found that interracial marriages are entered into for the same various reasons same-race marriages are formed (Davidson, 1992; Killian, 2001; Rosenblatt, et al., 1995; Watts & Henriksen, 1999). Common themes like love, companionship, and compatibility were mentioned by partners in a small qualitative interracial marriage study by Killian (2001). The author reported that most of these couples went through a gradual process of meeting, falling in love, and finally coming to a realization that life without this person was unimaginable. Other studies have mentioned shared interests, values and ideas as reasons for interracial attraction (Brown, 1987; Porterfield, 1982). Interracial couples themselves have maintained that their
relationships are no different than same-race couples (Rosenblatt, et al., 1995; Watts & Henriksen, 1999).

In a qualitative study exploring the ego strength of individuals (n=21) in Black-White relationships, Bakken and Huber (2005) found that 10 of 12 Black males (83%) and 8 of 9 White females (89%) scored at very complex differentiated and integrated stages in their ego development. These participants gave thoughtful and complicated rationale for their interracial relationships. The authors suggest this finding contradicts the popular culture and professional literature that claims individuals within Black-White relationships are reflecting internalized negative cultural stereotypes of gold-digging, exhibitionism, sexual curiosity, rebellion against family, or low self-esteem. In fact, this study argues that these individuals evaluated the characteristics of the person to whom they were attracted and did not simply look at the person’s skin color to judge him or her acceptable.

*Structural Theory*

Structural theory provides a framework within which to understand the normative formation of relationships, including BMWF marriages. According to Kouri and Lasswell, mutual attraction and demographics contribute to the initiation, development and maintenance of an interracial marriage (As cited in Wright, 2008). For example, a Black male and White female could be attracted to each other because of similar values such as religion, similar interests such as hobbies, similar backgrounds such as neighborhood, or similar ideas such as politics. Therefore, structural theory hypothesizes that interracial couples marry for the same reasons same-race couples do; they meet, they discover mutual interests, they fall in love, and they decide they cannot live without each other, and so they marry.
Re-conceptualizing BMWF Marriages

More recently, researchers and clinicians have begun to re-conceptualize BMWF marriages in a strength-based perspective instead of a problem-laden perspective (Davidson, 1992; Killian, 2001; Laszloffy, 2005; Rosenblatt, et al., 1995; Solsberry, 1994; Yancey & Yancey, 2002). According to Laszloffy (2005), all too often the strengths of interracial couples are underreported in the research literature and overlooked by therapists whose perspectives are sometimes skewed by racial stereotypes and biases. In a recent study on therapists’ clinical experiences with interracial couples, Poulsen (2003) commented that research seems to be transitioning from taking a problematic and pathological perspective to focusing increasingly on a strength-based perspective in order to understand the proactive, creative and unique ways in which interracial couples negotiate their relationships with their partners and with others.

In seeing strengths instead of problems, Laszloffy (2005) suggests interracial relationships build resilience in the face of oppression, promote tolerance at the personal, interpersonal and societal level, and encourage understanding of multiple perspectives arising out of their marginalized and ambiguous status in society. Davidson (1992) points out that partners in interracial marriages display strength by transcending racial bias in their relationship and appreciating their interpersonal differences. In the dedication for their book, *just don’t marry one: interracial dating, marriage, and parenting*, editors and interracially married partners George A. Yancey and Sherelyn Whittum Yancey (2002) compliment the interracial couples who walked this path before them as brave, pioneering, persevering, sacrificial, bold, and loving.

An Adlerian Strength-based Perspective

Adlerian Psychology has long been a major proponent of the strength-based model of individuals, couples and families. Within this therapeutic approach, clients are optimistically
viewed as unique, capable, creative and responsible (Carlson, et al., 2006b). One of the first and primary tasks of an Adlerian marriage therapist is to make a personal connection with each partner and with the couple. One way to do this is by helping them identify their unique individual and corporate strengths, assets, resources and abilities rather than focusing on their problems and deficits (Carlson, Watts, & Maniaci, 2006a; Corey, 2005). This initial focus on strengths is encouraging and may build hope within the couple for a positive outcome to their relationship concerns. These identified strengths then become resources for both the couple and therapist to call on throughout the change process.

The positive, strength-based lens of Adlerian Psychology encourages the marriage therapist to see a healthy, resource-laden relationship that just needs some fine-tuning in order to grow. Adler had a positive idea of health as more than the absence of illness (Nystul, 1999). Adlerian therapists do not view the client couple as ill or sick, but discouraged and in need of encouragement. This is completely opposite of the problem-oriented, illness-laden view that is part of the medical model in general.

Summary

There is an on-going transformation in the way BMWF marriages are perceived in the US. Historically, they have been mistakenly viewed as pathologically deviant and problem-laden, by both professional and popular circles (Davidson, 1992; Porterfield, 1982). Recent research finds that BMWF marriages and same-race marriages are entered into for the same reasons (Killian, 2001; Watts & Henriksen, 1999). Currently, BMWF marriages are experiencing greater acceptance within society and being perceived in a healthier, strength-based perspective by the psychotherapeutic community (Laszloffy, 2005; Poulsen, 2003). This is a much needed and welcomed change for these marriages and by these marriages. Adlerian
Psychology has been a pioneer in viewing individuals, couples, and families from a strength-based perspective and has much to offer in support of BMWF marriages (Carlson, et al., 2006b).

Distinctive Interventions

Nowhere is the lack of attention paid to BMWF marriages more apparent than in the very limited number of clinical interventions identified or developed for them. The lack of research literature about BMWF marriages in general has been noted, and there are even fewer suggestions about how to support these relationships clinically. This has not gone unnoticed by some researchers and clinicians.

An increasing number of researchers have noted the very small but growing body of literature describing useful clinical interventions for interracial couples (Bratter & King, 2008; Brown, 1987; Sullivan & Cottone, 2006; Watts & Henriksen, 1999). Other researchers discuss the need to address the unique therapeutic concerns that interracial couples face (Brown, 1987; Killian, 2003; Solsberry, 1994; Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003). Yancey (2007) advocates that marriage counselors and social workers should develop distinct approaches for working with BW marriages because of the likelihood of more hazardous racial discrimination directed at their relationships. Davidson (1992) recommended that therapists and other clinical professionals be prepared to assist interracial couples with a clear and distinct understanding of the unique issues they confront, especially racism.

The following strategies and interventions were identified in the research literature as useful in working with interracial couples. The focus here is on race, not because it is the only important issue that confronts these couples, but because it is one of the most visible yet most neglected aspects of their relationships from a clinical perspective (Yancey, 2007). The strategies and interventions to be discussed are; self of the therapist work, Adlerian Therapy as a
postmodern approach, the role of race, addressing race in therapy, and the Multiple Heritage Couples Questionnaire (MHCQ).

_Self of the Therapist_

_Racial identity and attitudes._ Much of the research, especially the clinically oriented studies (Brown, 1987; Herr, 2009; Killian, 2003; Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003) and reviews (Solsberry, 1994; Sullivan & Cottone, 2006), strongly recommend that the therapist become aware of and sensitive to their own racial identity and beliefs about interracial relationships. This is the crucial first step in providing culturally sensitive and appropriate mental health services to a diverse clientele (Sullivan & Cottone, 2006; Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003). The focus here will be on White therapists, although all therapists, regardless of race are encouraged to undertake this self-work. White therapists, like the rest of the dominant culture in the US, can move through life unaware of their own racial identity and their privileged status. Until recently, racial identity issues were viewed by the dominant culture as important only to people of color (McIntosh, 1988; O'Donoghue, 2004).

Therapists must also explore their own attitudes and deeply held beliefs about Blacks and interracial couples and families. Davidson (1992) commented that in order for clinical interventions to be therapeutic, the therapist must address his or her own assumptions, myths and stereotypes about Blacks and interracial relationships. Laszloppy (2005) added that challenging one’s own biases and racial beliefs is exceedingly difficult, but critical nonetheless, in order to provide effective assessments with interracial couples.

One particular attitude or belief held by a therapist identified in the literature as problematic is the notion of “colorblindness”. Childs (2008) loosely defines “colorblindness” as the dominant culture’s attempt to move beyond racial concerns by not acknowledging race or
refusing to see color. Often unrecognized by Whites, colorblindness underlies modern forms of
colorblindness according to Yancey (2007). This idea of colorblindness is widely accepted in
colorblindness underlies modern forms of racism according to Yancey (2007). This idea of colorblindness is widely accepted in
contemporary American society, where it is considered polite to ignore color or racial differences
without abandoning various prejudices and deeply held racial beliefs (Childs, 2008). Not only is
it impolite to talk about race, but a common White assumption, even among some White
therapists, is that a colorblind approach demonstrates their goodness or niceness (Killian, 2003).
Similarly, Kenney, Kenney, and Wherly commented that therapist biases in the idealized notions
of “not seeing color” and “seeing all people as equal” are all too common (Laszloffy, 2005).
These notions can undermine the therapy process when they remain unexamined and
unchallenged.

_Self-assessment._ There are a number of avenues by which a therapist can begin the self-
assessment process. It is Laszloffy’s (2005) conviction that challenging deeply held beliefs and
recognizing the nuances of one’s racial ideology cannot occur in isolation but must occur
through direct, sustained and intense interactions with others from diverse racial backgrounds.
Choosing to seek supervision or consultation with a clinical supervisor of a different race could
be one way to start these types of relationships, especially if you are working with a diverse
clientele. Choosing to live in a diverse community and actively participating in its traditions and
celebrations may be another. It can be as simple as talking about your feelings concerning BW
relationships with a trusted colleague or supervisor (Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003). Hardy and
Laszloffy (1995) advocate the use of cultural genograms to prepare culturally aware and
sensitive therapists. Cultural genograms focus attention on the therapist-in-training’s family of
origin’s issues concerning race and culture. The self-assessment process can also be
supplemented by continuing education classes and reading new research literature in the multicultural area.

It is important, especially for therapists of the dominant culture, to purposefully make a choice to do something to get involved with people of color. It is far too easy as a dominant culture member to continue to think this is not an issue that is that important, especially since your life can go on fairly normally, in convenience and ease, without doing anything at all to make sure everyone experiences social equality. McIntosh (1988) describes this as White privilege, a package of unearned assets Whites can cash in each day, but in which we can remain oblivious. Indeed, with respect to racial and ethnic minorities, most counselors do not have enough practical experience in their daily lives, let alone in their training as counselors according to Sue, Arredondo and McDavis (1992).

*Multicultural counseling competencies.* To help therapists understand more clearly what is needed and what will be helpful to diverse clients is Sue et al.’s (1992) guidelines describing multicultural counseling competencies. (1) Counselor awareness of own assumptions, values, and biases; (2) understanding the worldview of the culturally different client; and, (3) developing appropriate intervention strategies and techniques are the three broad competencies necessary to practice sensitively and ethically with a diverse clientele. Within each of these topics there are three subcategories specifying, (a) the appropriate beliefs and attitudes which a competent therapist should hold, (b) the appropriate knowledge the competent therapist should possess, and, (c) the appropriate skills the competent therapist should master (see D. Sue, et al., 1992, for a more detailed accounting). Aspirational rather than achieved, these goals make it clear that cultural competence is an active, developmental, and continuous process (Sue & Sue, 2008).
Adlerian Therapy as a Postmodern Approach

Postmodern therapy approaches, with their emphasis on client meaning-making, have been identified in research studies as appropriate for use with interracial couples (Hill & Thomas, 2002; Killian, 2001a; 2003). Recent literature reviews on interracial and intercultural marriages also recommend the use of postmodern therapy approaches (Poulsen & Thomas, 2007; Sullivan & Cottone, 2006). As summarized by Sullivan and Cottone (2006), these therapies are appropriate because they are, “characterized by a collaborative and curious stance that is open, accepting, and inclusive of a variety of different understandings that acknowledges the couple’s strengths as well as any liberating traditions found in their respective cultures” (p. 224). Two of the distinguishing hallmarks of postmodern therapy approaches are; (1) client construction of her or his personalized view and interpretations of what is experienced, typically called “constructivism”, and, (2) client construction influenced by the language, relationships, and culture shared with others, typically called “social constructionism” (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). The Adlerian concepts of phenomenology and social embeddedness parallel these postmodern characteristics.

Phenomenology. Adlerian Therapy has been categorized by Corey (2005) and Carlson, Watts and Maniacci (2006b) with other postmodern approaches using the phenomenological perspective for understanding the client’s worldview and behavior. Adlerian therapists attempt to view each client phenomenologically, that is, from the client’s subjective perception of his or her own experiences. This subjective reality is created from the client’s perceptions, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, convictions and conclusions about him or herself, others and the world. The client’s behavior then can be understood in light of this subjective reality. Objective reality is illusory according to the Adlerian perspective. What is most important is how each client
interprets reality and the meanings the client assigns to what is experienced. Adler emphasized the need for therapists to reject any preconceived ideas and to use empathy to understand the client’s subjective reality. “We must be able to see with his eyes and listen with his ears”, is the simple way Adler defined the phenomenological approach (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 14).

**Social embeddedness.** Every individual is a social being, and behavior can only be understood sufficiently within the context of the people, places, culture, religion, politics, circumstances, etc., which the individual finds her or himself surrounded by. As stated by Adler (As cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964), “Individual Psychology regards and examines the individual as socially embedded” (p. 2). In effect, Adler rejected the Freudian idea that the individual stands alone with her or his intra-psychic conflicts in favor of an interpersonal social model (Oberst & Stewart, 2003). Through the concept of social embeddedness Adlerian therapists take into consideration not only the intra-psychic or internal beliefs, values and motivations of an individual but also the interpersonal relationships, and external forces in society that impact the individual, both in the present and historically. This is especially relevant for working with BMWF couples considering the historical, sociological, and psychological context within which they find themselves.

**An illustration.** To illustrate the concepts of phenomenology and social embeddedness, consider a personal story shared by researchers, authors, and interracially married partners George A. Yancey and Sherelyn Whittum Yancey (2002, pp. 48-49). Independence Day, the fourth of July, is an important holiday for Sherelyn, having grown up in an all-White environment that instilled in her a sense of American patriotism. It is especially significant since she had an ancestor suffer at Valley Forge with George Washington. Independence Day, the
fourth of July, is not a day to be celebrated for George since Blacks were not freed on that day but rather were labeled only three-fifths of a human being. Same day, same historical event, but each person formed different interpretations and meanings, and choose opposite actions and reactions in response to this yearly holiday.

*Keep an Open Mind about the Role of Race*

Therapists should not make assumptions about the role race plays in presenting concerns of BMWF couple clients (Poulsen, 2003; Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003; Walker, 2005). Remaining open and clinically curious of the clients’ unique and subjective reality is necessary in order to properly understand and to provide appropriate support. Each partner brings his or her own experiences from unique social contexts and each has his or her own subjective meanings attached to those experiences. Therefore, the role of race can only be determined by the couple themselves. The therapist needs to be aware of and sensitive to a wide range of possible responses by the couple and by each partner. Current research supports this position.

*Many different perceptions.* Every interracial couple and partner will have their own unique perception of racial discrimination. Schafer (2008) investigated the perceptions of experiences of prejudice among the 40 individuals in 20 BW interracial marriages (n=40 BW total couples containing 14 BMWF couples). Q methodology was used to understand participant’s subjectivity, reducing the many individual viewpoints down to four distinct but related factors, which represent shared ways of thinking. The author found that perceptions can be grouped according to similarities and differences, but ultimately there are unique individual and between-couple perceptions of experiences of prejudice. In essence, this provides some supporting evidence for what therapists thought was common sense; that therapists need to be open and sensitive to understand a particular client’s unique experiences, while recognizing that
those experiences are similar to experiences seen in other clients. The author suggested these findings can be used in the development of and in training programs for multicultural therapists, counselors and social workers as templates illustrating how individuals and couples perceive experiences of prejudice differently. In addition, therapists can learn to be open in accepting individuals’ unique experiences even when they do not match their own experiences.

Some couples unaware. Many interracial couples seeking pre-marital counseling are not aware of the impact their cultural differences, including race, have on their relationship issues. This is a personal observation and opinion expressed by J. Gori (personal communication, July 22, 2009) reflecting on her 20 year therapy career working with interracial and intercultural couples. Typically, as Gori leads them through the structured approach of the PREPARE-ENRICH premarital inventory, the couples’ expressions of surprise reveal their lack of, or limited awareness of, cultural and racial differences impacting their relationships. In addition, Gori confirmed the uniqueness of every couple and the corresponding need to accept and adapt one’s therapeutic approach to understand and serve interracial and intercultural couples appropriately and sensitively.

Couples choose not to mention. Many interracial couples may not mention race, ethnicity or culture as part of their presenting concerns (Killian, 2003; Laszloffy, 2005; Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003). In a unique and very small qualitative study focusing on seven AAMFT clinical member therapists’ perspectives concerning interracial marriages, Poulsen (2003) reported that of all the couples seen by these therapists over a time span of 12 to 30 years, very few couples included race or racial discrimination as part of their issues. Most of the couples presented in therapy with “generic” issues of marital conflict. The common issues most often presented included; infidelity, communication problems, conflict with in-laws, drug abuse,
domestic violence, differing expectations, beliefs or values, sexual dysfunction, and parenting issues. Even though most of their clients only presented common issues typical of same-race couples, the therapists themselves were consciously cognizant of race, ethnicity, and culture as potential underlying factors in their relationship functioning and subsequently found a way to address race with the couples.

One reason couples may not mention race or racial discrimination as one of their presenting concerns is that the therapist may not be seen as “safe”. Due to previous discriminatory experiences with the larger society, BMWF couples may see the therapist as just another member of the mental health profession that views their relationship as abnormal. W.E.B. Dubois coined the term “double consciousness” to describe a Black person’s experience in the US, and it has been applied to BMWF couples as well (As cited in Killian, 2003). Double consciousness is the couple experiencing themselves as normal and healthy privately, but the community treating them as a problem publicly. Trying to live with two different experiences daily can be tiring for these couples. Since the therapist is a part of the public arena, the couple may initially conceal their true concerns (Killian, 2003).

Another reason some couples may not mention race as a concern is that racial discrimination, although present in their life, may not negatively affect the quality of their marriages. Leslie and Letiecq (2004) examined the comparative strength of one’s experience of racial discrimination, racial identity, and social support in predicting marital quality in 76 BW marriages (containing 52 BMWF marriages) from the Washington, D.C. area using a mailed survey. They found that a partner’s perception of discrimination was not significantly related to marital quality. This contradicts conventional wisdom about discrimination’s negative effect on individuals and marriages (Bratter & King, 2008; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). Leslie and Letiecq
suggest that perhaps living in a region with relatively high rates of interracial marriage and its acceptance may decrease the influence of discrimination on these couple’s marital quality. Nevertheless, some couples seem to have developed coping strategies to minimize the effect of discriminatory experiences and not allow them to negatively affect their marriages.

Addressing Race

Yancey (2007) expressed concern about the adequacy of contemporary marriage programs to help interracial families. Therapists often fail to address racial issues even though they concentrate on improving communication skills. While all marriages can benefit from better communications, interracial couples and families also need to address the racial dynamics occurring in their marriages. Relationship issues such as communication, decision-making, parenting, sexual relationship, in-law interference, and financial pressures are extremely important in a marriage, but the issue of race in BW marriages needs to be recognized and assessed for its contribution to the tensions faced by these couples (Brown, 1987). If social workers, counselors and therapists do not consider race as a factor in the problems faced by BW marriages, then they do not consider all of the forces that may impact these relationships.

Racial differences between client and therapist. During the therapeutic alliance building phase Sue and Sue (2008) and others (Laszloffy, 2005; Poulsen & Thomas, 2007) recommend addressing the racial differences between the clients and the therapist early & directly. One question could be, “Sometimes clients feel uncomfortable working with a counselor of a different race. Would this be a problem for you?” (p. 342). The minority member client may react negatively to the dominant culture therapist, and this might be an indicator of the stress arising from prior experiences of racial discrimination. Every interaction with a client provides a window into that client’s worldview for the astute therapist. Any past issue, especially negative
ones, may be addressed therapeutically in a safe and supportive environment with the client’s permission.

Local therapist Gori (personal communication, July 22, 2009) addresses the racial difference between client and therapist through self-disclosure. She “names” it right away in the first session by taking two minutes to tell them about her own interracial marriage of 20 years. She shares briefly both the difficulties and the blessings of being joined to a person of another race and culture. This has been a very effective and powerful approach allowing her to build rapport quickly by communicating being open and accepting of her couple’s interracial relationship. Self-disclosure is a personal issue for therapists to decide and to handle ethically, appropriately, and safely.

Race as contributor or solution to concerns? Poulsen (2003) advocates therapists actively address racial differences, leaving space for the possibility that it may not only contribute to the problems but could help with solutions as well. Explore the issue in such a way that allows the couple to describe the role race plays in their relationship. For instance, “Are your racial differences and racial experiences a resource for helping in your present concerns or are they a part of your concerns?” Asking the question this way demonstrates the therapist’s positive view of interracial relationships while acknowledging that racial differences may play a part in the couples presenting concerns. Tubbs and Rosenblatt (2003) recommend that if the issue of race has not been addressed during the initial assessment by the couple, the therapist should not be hesitant to bring it up at a later time.

Naming race. Killian (2001) believes there is a larger societal norm that people should not talk about race or racial discrimination. This “no race talk” rule impacts BMWF couples and can be seen in the therapy setting. This “no race talk” rule was adhered to by five of the ten
couples (n = 10 couples containing 7 BMWF couples) in this very small qualitative study examining how interracial couples experience life together. For example, some of these Black partners did not discuss the racial discrimination they had experienced feeling their White partners would not be empathetic, and some of these White partners either did not notice or wished to remain oblivious to the discrimination directed at their Black partner.

Acknowledgment by the therapist of the far-reaching power and scope of this rule is an important first step in the therapy process, according to Killian. Naming this unspoken societal norm strips it of its power to control by making it visible, obvious and accessible. Then, the therapist can challenge this “truth” in the couples’ minds through a step-by-step discussion of:
1. how this rule is evident in other contexts (e.g., work, school, church) by what does not get discussed,
2. how that is helpful or unhelpful, and finally,
3. what concerns might not be brought up in therapy by the couple because of this rule. Granting permission to talk about that which is not talked about, by first locating those issues outside the therapy room, may create a sense of safety for the clients to discuss any and all issues of their concern within the therapy room (Killian, 2001).

Hardy and Laszloffy echo Killian’s point by encouraging therapists to ask explicitly about race because it sends the message that it is okay to talk about this issue directly (as cited in Laszloffy, 2005). This is important, especially in mixed race company, given the social prohibitions against talking about race openly. In Laszloffy’s (2005) experience it is more common for clients to not explicitly bring up race when the therapist is White, even if it is related to their presenting concerns.

The power of “naming” the race issue was poignantly made during this author’s final class project for the Multicultural Counseling class at Adler Graduate School. The project’s
purpose was to get experience talking with a person different than me in some substantive way. My interviewee’s name was “Jack”, not his real name. He is a 24 year old single, male. He prefers to be identified as Black or Black-American. He is a high school graduate. His passion is writing and performing rap music and he is working on breaking into the professional music scene. He donates time giving inspirational and motivational talks to children and teenagers at public schools and recreation centers. He is recently employed as a home health-care worker. He has lived much of his life below the poverty line. He has been homeless at times.

In introducing the purpose of the interview to Jack I explained some of the goals of the Multicultural Counseling class. One major objective of the class is about gaining knowledge and understanding about cultures and peoples other than my own. The second major goal is becoming aware of my own personal prejudices and bias which I absorbed from my upbringing in the dominant white culture. I need to take responsibility for any intentional and unintentional biases in order that I not bring it into my work as a counselor and do harm to my minority population clients. Another goal is to become mindful of the “unearned privileges” I enjoy as a member of the dominant culture that nonmembers do not consistently enjoy and are often denied. As a dominant culture member I must decide to make a conscious effort to do something different than the current status quo in order to create a just and fair society for all people in America.

After this introduction I asked Jack a number of questions, and encouraged him to ask me whatever questions he wanted to know about my life as a White person. What follows is a very short excerpt from our interview. It is a condensation of thoughts and not necessarily the exact wording. I attempted to retain the implied meanings.

**Bill:** Are you comfortable talking with me here [about racial issues]?
Jack: Yes, I can tell you’re not thinking “sick” (racist things). I get a good vibe talking with you. You’re very understanding. I have good communications with you. You understand a lot of where I’m coming from. I never talked about this stuff with a White person before. You’re open.

Talking about racial issues with a White person was a new experience for Jack. He seemed to have a good feeling about our interaction. What was not so obvious or expected was that “naming race” had a profound impact on my life as well, both personally and professionally. This was also my first experience talking in depth with a Black person. Jack and I maintain our friendship and we continue to talk openly about racial issues and their impact on our lives. Also, I am more comfortable with, and taking the initiative in, talking about racial concerns with other Whites, people of color, and clients. For me, it is no longer the “elephant in the room that nobody addresses”.

The Multiple Heritage Couple Questionnaire

An Adlerian intervention. The Multiple Heritage Couple Questionnaire (MHCQ) is an informal assessment tool designed by Adlerian clinicians (Henriksen Jr, Watts, & Bustamante, 2007) that specialize in multicultural counseling. Although no psychometrics are provided, and no research literature was located reviewing this tool, the designers have found it valuable in gathering information for assessment purposes and therapeutic in helping couples learn about and discuss issues impacting their lives they may not have previously talked about (Henriksen Jr, et al., 2007).

The MHCQ is an 8-topic self-report assessment that is assigned as a homework assignment for the couple to complete separately and bring back to the next session. The therapist then conducts a semi-structured interview with the couple to encourage discussion and
increase awareness of the impact on each partner and their relationship. Although designed to cover more cultural issues than just racial discrimination, the MHCQ has two topics that readily lend themselves to discussing the impact of societal intolerance toward interracial couples; questions about “Culture of Origin” and “Family Context” (see Appendix for complete MHCQ). Each partner is asked to discuss their experiences with their own culture and family and their experiences with their partner’s culture and family.

Methodological Issues and Future Research Directions

Research Limitations

_Not enough research._ The greatest limitation in studying BMWF marriages is the scant amount of research available (Bratter & King, 2008; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009). This may be an indicator of society’s ambivalence about this small but growing population. It also may just be an indicator of the relatively short time these marriages have been studied, essentially starting with the 1967 Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court decision. There are almost no studies specifically about BMWF marriages prior to that date.

Another limitation arising from the overall lack of research on BMWF marriages is the dearth of replication studies. The two divorce studies (Bratter & King, 2008; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009) within the last 3 years are the only exceptions that were located. It is difficult to determine the strength of findings and to apply them appropriately without corroborating research.

_Qualitative limitations._ The limitations with qualitative studies were numerous. The majority were done independently without a research team so the interpretations of the results are open to debate (Killian, 2003). Outside auditors were not consulted to review the process or the results of the research. Rarely was it mentioned whether participants were asked to verify the
interview transcripts for accuracy of intended meanings. Most samples were very small with less than 20 participants (Killian, 2001; O’Donoghue, 2004; Poulsen, 2003). Usually the samples were selected from the same geographical locations, such as Cleveland, OH or New York City. Most samples were convenient but purposive and then allowed to snowball to gather the desired number of participants. Many participants were volunteers, with some being paid. The effect of these limitations is to restrict the generalizability of the findings to the general population by introducing sampling bias and sampling error.

**Quantitative limitations.** The limitations of the quantitative research are more difficult to identify because of the different types of research reviewed. The few quantitative studies with large samples were usually about interracial marriages that included many different combinations of races, not just BMWF couples (Bratter & King, 2008; Fryer, 2007; Zhang & Van Hook, 2009) Typically the number of BMWF marriages within any study’s sample was still very small to small limiting the generalizability of the findings (Forry, Leslie, & Letiecq, 2007; Leslie & Letiecq, 2004; Schafer, 2008) Most of the studies are causal-comparative and more prone to error, with multiple interpretations possible.

**Adlerian limitations.** Somewhat disappointing was locating only three articles on BMWF marriages written by Adlerian researchers or clinicians. None were actual research. The first was a composite case study (Watts & Henriksen, 1999) about a White wife married to a Black husband. The second was an article (Watts & Henriksen Jr., 1998) describing the Interracial Couples Questionnaire (ICQ) and how to use it. A third article (Henriksen Jr, et al., 2007), updating the ICQ and renaming it the Multiple Heritage Couples Questionnaire, was written to expand its use to include intercultural couples and not just BMWF couples.
Future Research Directions

Simply more research. The scant amount of research on BMWF marriages represents a gap in the literature in and of itself. Some researchers and clinicians advocate for studies to be conducted and interventions developed specifically with BMWF marriages in mind (Childs, 2005; Forry, et al., 2007; Yancey, 2007). More research on BMWF marriages is simply needed in different areas.

Larger samples needed. Future research needs larger sample sizes in order to better generalize the findings. One way to increase sample size might be to include cohabitating BMWF couples along with marriages. This may be desirable since there are more interracial cohabiting couples than married couples (Gullickson, 2006), it seems more socially acceptable to cohabit in this day and age, and marriage commitment does not seem to mean as much as it did in the past. This illustrates a difference of opinion within the field.

According to Schafer (2008), marriage is a legal commitment meant to be long term with the effect of merging families by forming in-law relationships. This does not happen in dating or cohabitating relationships, and so the author argues that only marriages should be the focus of research. Gullickson (2006) on the other hand argues for the inclusion of cohabitating couples in the research samples along with married couples. This author states that to properly understand the growth and dynamics of interracial relationships, especially given the dramatic increases in both interracial marriages and cohabitating couples, and the increase in childbearing in these relationships, it is imperative to include both in future research.

Given the great need to better understand these couples and the limitations that arise from small sample sizes, the inclusion of cohabitating couples with marriages seems to be a reasonable, albeit imperfect, direction in which to proceed. If included the differences between
marriage and cohabitation would then need to be better understood to apply the findings appropriately.

*Coping strategies for racial discrimination.* Research is needed to identify the coping strategies that allow some BMWF couples to successfully manage the racial discrimination that exists in their lives. Studies have found that some BMWF couples are able to maintain marital quality in spite of the presence of racial discrimination (Leslie & Letiecq, 2004; Walker, 2005). With this information, perhaps clinicians can then develop and teach coping strategies to other BMWF couples that may be experiencing discrimination from family, friends, and the wider society.

*Contributing factors in divorce.* Research is needed to better understand the relational dynamics of BMWF marriages and the contributing factors to the high divorce rate of these couples. In separate studies by Chan and Smith, and, Shibazaki and Brennan, the authors suggest that the marital quality of interracial relationships are less affected by racial differences than by the social pressures exerted against them (as cited in Tubbs & Rosenblatt, 2003). Then again, other studies suggest BMWF marriages suffer the common problems that same-race couples suffer (Killian, 2003; Watts & Henriksen, 1999). Most likely it is a combination of factors internal to the individuals, interactional within the relationship, and external to the marriage that arise in society.

Summary, Conclusions and Implications

*Review Summary*

*Introduction.* There has been an astonishing increase in the number of BMWF marriages in the US since the 1967 Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court decision decriminalizing interracial marriages. The number of these marriages has continued to grow in spite of racial discrimination
directed at them by professional and popular circles. Researchers and clinicians have largely ignored this important population based on the scant research literature and useful interventions designed for them. The ambivalence of U.S. society is palpable considering its negative perceptions and behaviors directed toward BMWF marriages, and its inattention to their needs.

**Historical, sociological and psychological perspectives.** Given the historical, sociological, and psychological impact of slavery and racial discrimination perpetuated against Blacks and BMWF relationships, these marriages are in need of social support, especially more focused attention by the research and clinical communities.

**Adlerian perspectives.** Adlerian Psychology and psychotherapy have much to offer in support of BMWF marriages and relationships. Adlerian Psychology pioneered multiculturalism and served diverse populations long before other psychotherapeutic approaches. Social equality is a central concept Adlerian therapists use to attribute unsurpassable worth and respect to every client.

**Unique challenges.** BMWF marriages face unique challenges within the US. Racial discrimination continues to be directed against these couples, but it seems to be decreasing. There are some encouraging signs for growing acceptance within U.S. society, especially from the younger generations of Whites and Blacks.

BMWF marriages experience the unique challenge of having the highest risk of divorce of all marriages including both interracial and same-race marriages. Historically, a high instability rate was mistakenly attributed to “special hazards”, but currently BMWF marriages are seen as experiencing the same common problems every other couple faces. The question remains, nevertheless, as to the causes of this high risk of divorce.
Finally, BMWF marriages face the unique challenge of the lingering view that their relationships arise from psychological deviancy and are laden with many problems. These views are now seen as erroneous culture bound perspectives regarding the superiority of Whites over Blacks that dominated society and professional circles. Recent research has found, however, that BMWF marriages form for the same reasons other couples marry; love, compatibility, mutual attraction, etc. As researchers and clinicians accept responsibility for their own racist beliefs and biases, they are re-conceptualizing BMWF marriages in a strength-based perspective that views these marriages as resource rich. Adlerian Psychology has been a pioneer in viewing individuals, couples, and families from a strength-based perspective.

**Distinctive interventions.** Although still small in number there is a growing body of distinctive interventions that have been helpful in working with BMWF marriages and relationships. Researchers, clinicians, and probably BMWF couples themselves would agree the most important intervention is for the therapist to work through his or her own racial identity and attitudes toward interracial marriages. To not do so is to possibly harm the couple with stereotypes, prejudices and biases, even if done so unintentionally.

Postmodern approaches have been identified as appropriate therapy for BMWF marriages. Adlerian Psychology is recognized as a postmodern therapy approach that centralizes the client’s social context, or social embeddedness, and the subjective meanings, or phenomenology, that arise out of it. Adlerian therapists reject any preconceived ideas and use empathy to understand the client’s worldview.

Therapists need to keep an open mind and remain curious about the role of race in the relationship concerns of a BMWF couple. The couple’s experiences can range from being unaware of race’s impact on their relationship, to being aware of it but choosing not to mention it
to the therapist. Couples may choose to not mention it because the therapist is seen as an extension of a disapproving culture and not “safe”. The couple may not mention it because they have learned how to manage the negative impact of racial discrimination already and don’t consider it the primary reason for seeking marital counseling. In any case, the role of race should be allowed to be determined by the couple themselves.

Given the undue importance of race in the US and the impact of racial discrimination on peoples of color, and by extension those intimately linked to them, it is necessary for therapists to address the issue of race in therapy with BMWF couples. To not do so would be ignoring a contextual element that has had an impact on the couple’s relationship. Therapists can address race in a number of different ways. During the initial session, asking the couple if they will feel comfortable working with a counselor of a different race will reveal significant client perspectives regardless of the answer. These perspectives can then be addressed in a safe and supportive therapeutic environment.

A second approach to addressing race is therapist self-disclosure, if applicable. Sharing personal information about his or her experiences being in an interracial relationship may build rapport quickly and communicate the therapist is open and accepting of the couple’s interracial relationship. According to Sue and Sue (2008), Blacks tend to establish a personal commonality with the therapist in contrast to other ethnic groups. Self-disclosure, however, is a personal issue for therapists to decide and to handle ethically, appropriately, and safely.

A third approach to addressing race is for the therapist to ask the couple whether race is a resource to help with their presenting concerns or whether race is a part of their presenting concerns. Doing so may demonstrate the therapist’s positive view of interracial relationships while acknowledging that race may play a part in the couples presenting issues.
Finally, there is a social prohibition against talking about race, especially in mixed race company. It is common for clients not to bring up race and racial discrimination when the therapist is White, even if race is related to their presenting concerns. When the therapist explicitly asks about race it sends the message it is okay to talk about this issue directly.

*The Multiple Heritage Couple Questionnaire.* The Multiple Heritage Couple Questionnaire (MHCQ) is a distinctive Adlerian assessment tool and intervention. Adlerian clinicians have found it useful in helping interracial couples talk about race and racial differences, among other areas of interest. This is one of the only assessment tools for interracial relationships located within all of the research literature reviewed, not just the Adlerian literature.

**Methodological issues and directions for future research.** There are two primary limitations with research on BMWF marriages. The first is the scant amount of research available. The second limitation is the very small to small samples sizes of the vast majority of the literature being reviewed. The effect of these limitations is to restrict the applicability of the findings to the samples under study. While these findings give some direction with which to work with the entire BMWF marriage population in the US, more research needs to be conducted that can be more confidently generalized.

Future research suggestions flow out of the research limitations mentioned above. There is simply a need for more research to be conducted with BMWF marriages. An effort needs to be made to increase the sample sizes, and one way to do this may be to include the fast-growing BMWF cohabitation population. Another research suggestion is to identify the coping strategies that couples employ who have minimized the negative impact of racial discrimination on their relationships. Clinicians could then teach these coping strategies to other couples. Finally,
BMWF marriages seem to be experiencing the highest divorce risk of all marriage types. Relationship dynamics and forces external to the relationship need to be better understood to provide the support these marriages deserve and need.

Conclusions and Implications

Racial discrimination. It seems fairly clear from the available evidence that racial discrimination of BMWF marriages and relationships is decreasing in the US. This is a welcomed trend that is very late in coming. There are a number of implications for therapists that arise out of this conclusion. First of all, therapists in general and probably older therapists in particular, need to seriously undertake their own self-assessment as to their racial identities and attitudes about BMWF marriages and relationships. As the approval poll (Gallup, 2007, August 16) showed, older Americans, which includes Black and White therapists, are less approving than younger Blacks and Whites of BW marriages. Therapists that do not do this self-assessment are likely to do harm to clients through the imposition of their own stereotypes, prejudices and biases.

Second, believing that any remaining racial discrimination should be replaced with social equality, therapists must take an activist role on behalf of their clients and U.S. society. This role is about challenging and educating the public and institutions that continue to discrimination against BMWF marriages and relationships. Alfred Adler boldly challenged therapists to take this role in order to correct “misdirected social movements” and to help them become “more in tune with the spirit and the idea of the community of mankind” (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1964, p. 454).

Third, if therapists will be working with BMWF couples, then they need to become knowledgeable about both Black and White cultures (see McGoldrick, Giordano, & Garcia-
Preto, 2005 for a more detailed accounting). This is in accordance with the multicultural counseling competencies as set forth by Sue et al. (1992).

Finally, as a practical matter, and self-serving at that, is the growing diversification of U.S. society. It is estimated that by the year 2050 Whites will be a minority at 47% (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). If White therapists have not become culturally aware and sensitive to peoples of color and of their own White racial identity and cultural biases, then these White therapists may not have much of a client base with which to meet their own financial needs. White therapists need to become culturally sensitive and competent if he or she hopes to succeed as a counseling professional.

Marital instability. Historically the research evidence for the instability rates of BMWF marriages has been contradictory, fragmentary and based on flawed societal beliefs. The two current instability studies reviewed, however, provide replication that substantiates the finding that BMWF marriages have a significantly higher risk of divorce than White-White couples. While it seems premature to say this is conclusive evidence, it does finally provide a firmer foundation from which future research can proceed with a greater degree of confidence.

Given this higher risk of divorce for BMWF marriages, it seems clear that a greater effort needs to be undertaken by society in the form of increased research and clinical support for these marriages. The Federal government needs to fund more research and development with BMWF marriages specifically in mind. Researchers need to focus on factors that may contribute to the high risk of divorce for these marriages, including the impact of racial discrimination. Clinical training programs need to develop different curricula that address the unique concerns of this important population. Finally, therapists need to be aware of and sensitive to this high risk of
divorce for these marriages. Indeed, therapists may need very unique and specific approaches in working with these high risk couples (Yancey, 2007).

A strength-based perspective. It is now readily apparent there is a major transformation underway in the perception of BMWF marriages and relationships in the US, including the professional community. Earlier theories of BMWF marriage formation based on psychological deviancy and rebellion have been substantially replaced by evidence based research that finds these marriages are formed for the same reasons as other marriages; love, compatibility, mutual interests, and other such factors.

Researchers and clinicians have also begun to take responsibility for their culture bound biases about BMWF marriages and are re-conceptualizing these relationships as strength-based unions instead of being problem laden and bound for failure. This is not to say that professionals now think that BMWF marriages do not have problems, but rather that their problems are basically similar to other marriages. It would also be naïve to think their problems are exactly like other marriages, as individual differences and cultural differences combine in every marriage to create unique concerns for every couple. But race, in and of itself, is not the problem.

It is necessary that researchers continue to substantiate, and clinicians continue to communicate this strength-based perspective. These BMWF marriages and relationships may then feel encouraged and more supported within society. Hopefully, this will translate into stronger, more resilient marriages that will withstand the pressures from within and from without that stress these important relationships.
References


Appendix

Multiple Heritage Couple Questionnaire

1. Partner’s Culture(s) of Origin
   a. How have beliefs and/or messages from your partner’s culture(s) affected your couple relationship? How have they or might they affect couples similar to you and your spouse?
   b. What are some things you have done or other multiple heritage couples might do to overcome any difficulties generated by these beliefs and/or messages?

2. Your Culture(s) of Origin
   a. How have beliefs and/or messages from your culture(s) affected your couple relationship? How have they or might they impact couples similar to you and your spouse?
   b. What are some things you have done or other multiple heritage couples might do to overcome any difficulties generated by these beliefs and/or messages?

3. Time Orientation
   How would you describe your orientation toward time in relation to your partner’s orientation toward time? [If differences are reported] How do you compromise on these differences?

4. Gender Roles
   How would you define the masculine and feminine gender roles in your relationship? What are your expectations about what your partner should do in his/her role?

5. Family Context
   a. What role does your partner’s extended family (or family) play in your relationship?
   b. Discuss how your family responded to your decision to enter into a multiple-heritage relationship. How do you believe your experience compares with those of couples similar to you?
c. If you were asked to offer guidance to a multiple heritage couple regarding the extended family interactions, what would you tell them?

6. Religion and Spirituality

a. Describe the role that religion or spirituality plays in your relationship.

b. What guidance would you offer other multiple heritage couples about religion and spirituality?

7. Your Children (if any)

a. What role do you believe each partner should take in the child-raising process?

b. If you have children, how do you believe growing up in a multiple heritage family has affected them?

c. How do you believe their experience compares with those of children in families similar to yours?

d. If you were asked to offer guidance to a multiple heritage couple regarding how to best empower their children to handle negative reactions from persons outside of the immediate family, what would you tell them?

8. Optional

If you were given the opportunity to educate a large, diverse group of persons about being in a multiple-heritage relationship, what would you tell them?