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Race and Romance: Understanding Students of Color In Interracial Relationships

Trina S. Tan

With the rise of interracial relationships on college campuses, student affairs professionals encounter more students of color facing racial identity development issues within their intimate relationships (Wang, Kao, & Joyner, 2004). This literature review examines the Racial/Cultural Identity Development model (R/CID) (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008) when applied to heterosexual interracial couples between People of Color and White people. I explore issues of internalized oppression and ethnocentric attitudes, as well as insights on how student affairs professionals best support these students.

College campuses are a promising space for cross-cultural intimacy to develop, but “interracial relationships are also still accompanied by stigma, even for young people” (Herman & Campbell, 2012, p. 345). While there are many variations of issues that People of Color experience in interracial relationships with White partners, I synthesize two issues in relation to the R/CID model: internalized oppression and ethnocentric attitudes. Inevitably, interracial couples face very different issues in comparison to intraracial couples both within their partnership dynamics and individually. The Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model (R/CIDM) by D.W. Sue and D. Sue (1990, 1999) for People of Color serves as a significant tool in supporting college students in interracial relationships. Weaving lessons from the R/CID model is valuable for students of color in their development when personal identity discoveries surface and flourish during their college years, particularly when engaging in intimate relationships. This article presents an overview of the R/CID model for People of Color, followed by a summary on the existing research on interracial dating and relationships.

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Existing Literature

According to D.W. Sue and D. Sue (2008), the development of the R/CID model first evolved from a pattern discovered by Berry and Stonequist (as cited in D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008) in which People of Color experienced a shared sense of oppression. In their book, they attributed studies by Atkinson, Morten, and Sue (as cited in D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008) to the development of the Minority Identity Development model (MID), which was further developed and renamed as the Racial/Cultural Identity Development model by D.W. Sue and D. Sue to connect with a more expansive audience. The R/CID model is also used for White identity development understanding, and while there are several White Identity Development models, the two most noteworthy are Hardiman's White Racial Identity Development Model and Helms White Racial Identity Development Model (as cited in D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008). While Hardiman's model was one of the first of its kind, D.W. Sue and D. Sue noted Helms was most widely cited in research pertaining to White identity (2008). For the purposes of this article, this review will focus on the R/CID model for People of Color to emphasize a need to empower and support students of color to find their voices in their relationships with White partners.

A vast number of combinations of races and ethnicities encompass the term "interracial/interethnic relationship," alongside the countless ways those interactions vary couple-to-couple. Studies on this topic assert "attitudes toward interracial relationships differ by race" and more research is needed to look into the racial and ethnic breakdown to draw more inclusive and specific results (Field, Kimuna, & Straus, 2013, p. 30). By using the R/CID model, a study D.W. Sue and D. Sue created with the intent of "[encompassing] a broader population," this review examines interracial romance and common conflicts with a goal of relating to a wider audience (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008, p. 242).

While it is not encouraged to use the R/CID model as a sweeping theory for all People of Color, it is useful for helpers, such as student affairs professionals, to understand these stages to better identify issues experienced by students of color dating White students. D.W. Sue and D. Sue emphasized that People of Color experience the stages in various orders, and its linear style is not forthcoming for all People of Color (2008). While these models serve as important aids for student affairs professionals, it is significant to remember people are complex individuals and the stages only speak generally of the human experiences. This is especially true since there are many other cultural facets to identifying as a Person of Color. The various races and identities to consider, such as Asian American, Pacific Islanders, Latinos/as, Black/African Americans, and multiracial people possess their own cultural norms and nuances (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008).

On the topic of interracial relationships, existing literature shows an increase in interracial dating among college-aged adults, but fewer people interracially marry in the United States (Wang, Kao, Joyner, 2004). Despite this, there was a significantly greater amount of research on interracial marriages than on interracial dating; this is attributed to the ambiguous qualities of dating (Mok, 1999). With more people closing the social distance gap through interracial relationships, I assert it is important to better understand intercultural communication and conflicts which could either lead to marriage or, the other extreme, deter a person from an entire race altogether. The topic of supporting students who cross-culturally date in higher education is under-researched, and the greater focus on marriage than on dating demonstrates the lack of attention for this population. Additionally, much of the research on interracial relationships spoke mostly on the interactions between Black/African American and White couples. In my searches, I discovered a vast number of research on interracial relationships lacked discussion including Asian American, Pacific Islander, Latino/a, Middle Eastern, and multiracial pairings, a major gap on the research of interracial couples.

Racial/Cultural Identity Development Models

The Racial/Cultural Identity Development model is expressed in five stages: Stage 1 is named Conformity. Those in the Conformity stage express devaluing attitudes toward themselves, while demonstrating favoritism for White people. They express oppression and discrimination for those in their shared race and attitudes of discrimination towards other People of Color.

In Stage 2, Dissonance and appreciating the person moves into questioning feelings about the self and White people. It is a stage in which a person questions former ideas of valuing White concepts over self. This conflict continues with questioning why he/she formally favored White concepts. This is the stage when one begins to notice commonalities between the self and others of the same race, while still expressing feelings of discrimination for other People of Color.

Stage 3 is Resistance and Immersion, when people begin to value themselves and appreciate their racial background. A significant shift from Stage 1 includes both favoritism for those of their same race and devaluing of White concepts. Conflicted feelings toward other People of Color continue but this time on discerning potential shared experiences.

Those in Stage 4, the Introspection stage, express attitudes of discernment across the board. People in this stage question the foundations as to why they express feelings of pride toward the self and negative feelings for White people/White dominated systems. Those in this stage also notice their previously unwavering

loyalty for those in their same race and develop a new interest in other People of Color outside of their own race.

Stage 5, Integrative Awareness, is the last stage in which a person expresses various forms of understanding and selective value-placement. A person in this stage expresses both confidence in the self and affinity for those of the same race. There is a newfound admiration and understanding for other People of Color and more trusting relationships with White individuals (D.W. Sue and D. Sue, 2008).

Internalized Oppression

In Stage 1, Conformity of the R/CID model, D.W. Sue and D. Sue assert that students of color experienced attitudes of internalized oppression (D.W. Sue and D. Sue, 2008). Students at this stage “bought into societal definitions about their minority status in society” (D.W. Sue and D. Sue, 2008, p. 248). The literature emphasized this stage as one of the most damaging of all for People of Color and is most telling in the presence of White supremacy in society. While People of Color transition from this stage into other stages in their lifetime, it is vital to take note of deeply rooted oppression from Stage 1 and of how it continues to show up in future interactions and decisions (D.W. Sue and D. Sue, 2008). The R/CID model can aid student affairs professionals to better understand their students developmentally and in their students’ cultural understanding of themselves and those around them.

Strong favoritism for White dominance shows up in various ways in interracial relationships. Using the R/CID model when approaching college students in interracial relationships helps the student affairs professional to better understand either signs of internal conflicts of self-hatred or desires to fit in with the dominant group (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008). For example, understanding the R/CID model and Stage 1 is relevant when interacting with a student of color who desires to only date light-skinned students. This attitude of favoring light skin presents the ways in which societal discrimination and racism become so normalized that a person favors intimate relationships with those who carry White or White-like traits. A second example is when a student of color in Stage 1 express desires to be, look, and act more like White people by dating them. The literature asserts that both instances of self-deprecating attitudes and the desire to become more like White people create a painful experience for many People of Color—an experience does not heal completely as society continues to move as a White-dominated world (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008).

If or when a student begins to transition into Stage 2: Dissonance and appreciation, the student begins to notice acts of discrimination from White friends

and partners. This creates distrust and suspicion with White romantic partners. During this stage, D.W. Sue and D. Sue (2008) emphasized that people of color begin to notice stereotypes dismantled within their race and also raise questions of White dominance as a group. In the literature, People of Color commonly emerge into this stage unhurried as they begin to question the world around them, but the impact of a racist incident propels a person into Stage 2 (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008). By using the R/CID model as a guiding compass, student affairs professionals can better recognize signs of internalized oppression and support students of color in more meaningful ways.

During Stage 4: Introspection, People of Color transition out of complete affinity for those in their same race and begin to question their own bias. Additionally, they question their distrust of White people as a whole and pursue “selective trust and distrust according to the dominant individual’s demonstrated behaviors and attitudes” (D.W. Sue and D. Sue, 2008, p. 251). An example of how Stage 4 acts out in an interracial relationship is if students experience pressure from fellow students of color to separate from a White partner, because the White partner is considered the “enemy” (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008, p. 250). This pressure to choose either the White partner or the friends of color creates a tension in the student’s group identity and developing understanding of whom to trust.

Ethnocentric attitudes

For students in the Dissonance stage or the Resistance and Immersion, their race awareness rises significantly, and it is important for student affairs professionals to take notice in how this plays a role in the students’ interracial relationships. According to D.W. Sue and D. Sue (2008), with the increasing interest and pride in self and desire to learn more about one’s cultural background, the student inevitably learns more about the existence of racism and the discrimination of People of Color. The literature suggested that feelings vary from exploration, anger, sadness, and fear. The literature also presents that an ethnocentric attitude develops as students begin to increasingly value their cultural upbringing (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008). For people in interracial relationships, these emotions show up during conflicts and general intercultural communication issues (Killian, 2013). For a couple with one White person and one Person of Color, conflicts arise from ethnocentric attitudes and prevents an understanding of what kind of a role race plays in the daily lives of each partner, particularly for People of Color.

In Killian’s (2013) research, noted that with the help of therapists or mediators, interracial couples were able to address conflict, race, and differences for the first time in their relationship. A White partner may not notice microaggressions and other forms of discrimination because of their dominant identity and societal

privileges (Killian, 2013). The literature asserted White partners who only see commonalities and fail to understand their partner's difference in perspective minimized the experiences of People of Color (2013). D.W. Sue and D. Sue (2008) state that when students of color experience dissonance, resistance, and immersion, it causes them to exert their energy and newfound awareness toward three entities: their own identity, People of Color from their own race, and an understanding of White dominance. The literature stressed little attention paid to the issues of other People of Color outside of their race. According to D. W. Sue and D. Sue, students of color experience Stage 2 and/or Stage 3 of the R/CID model transition through mixed emotions of pride, shame, and increased confidence in their cultural background (2008). There is much energy put into honoring the self during this transition. For students discovering this new sense of pride and awareness in their race and culture causes them to see primarily through their own new perspective and deeply question their former bias for White dominance (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008).

Further conflicts arise for students in interracial relationships in both their attempts to defend a cultural norm and to value when it is met with resistance from a White partner. During the resistance and immersion stage, the R/CID model suggested students experience feelings of aggression towards White dominance; "guilt, shame, and anger" are key emotions during this stage (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008, p. 248). In addition, a negative experience caused students of color to doubt how much they trust White individuals, including White intimate partner (D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 2008).

Beyond Dating Advice: Implications for Student Affairs

Findings in this literature review revealed that the R/CID presents valuable aid to notice and understand the experiences of students of color in interracial relationships with White partners. Because the experiences of those in interracial relationships greatly differ from those in intraracial relationships, it is vital to consider a student's personal identity development through their intimate partnerships. By looking into various stages from the R/CID model and by understanding how it shows up in internalized oppression and ethnocentric attitudes, this literature review demonstrates the fluidity of awareness and how these transitions play out in a student's intimate relationships. These experiences are important for student affairs professional to understand in order to know how to best approach and support these students of color going through internal tensions and external pressures from peers. By better understanding their developmental stages and discovering how they show up in student's dating lives, student affairs professionals can better target the issues and provide a space for students to feel supported in their journey.

Whether it is recognizing internalized oppression or a newfound awareness of racism in society, it is beneficial for a student affairs professional to understand the perspectives presented in the R/CID model to guide programs on interracial dialogue; not simply to give dating advice. Literature on interracial relationship interventions asserts for helpers to possess a firm grasp on their own racial and ethnic identity before supporting couples (Killian, 2013). Killian warned that helpers' bias can play a role in how the power dynamics reveal themselves when assisting an interracial couple. Studies also recommended for interracial couples to go back to basic communication skills, such as utilizing "I-statements" to allow people to express how they feel to their partners (Killian, 2013, p. 159). This aids in creating a space where students own their experiences. Another suggestion from the literature is for helpers to facilitate dialogue using a "both/and" approach to allow both people an opportunity to share their truths without fear of one being correct and the other wrong (Killian, 2013, p.157). Accordingly, "timing of such a dialogue is crucial; how and when social locations and issues of differences are discussed is directly related to issues of power," thus the beginning moments of a program are not the ideal time to start the conversation on race dynamics in the relationship (2013, p. 157).

I recommend that student affairs professionals choose creative avenues for programming in order to support students in interracial relationships, such as art and theatrical expression. With the endless combinations of partnerships for interracial couples, the experiences are vast and near impossible to label or constrict. By allowing an open and creative space for students to freely express their frustrations, joys, differences, and commonalities, it allows for more open communication across these intimate relationships can develop. Creating an open dialogue for students to express their experiences allows them to practice how to approach difficult conversations and face intercultural conflict in their dating lives and beyond.

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