Couples' Experiences and Perspectives on Interracial Marriage: A Phenomenological Study Among Adventists

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Abstract. Today’s world is often defined as a world without borders, or a global village. The distance between countries and continents seems to get shorter with the innovation of faster means of transportation and telecommunication. This new reality has given a different face to the world; meeting different people and mixed communities is no longer strange. In this new configuration, interracial marriages in both Christian and non-Christian communities have increased significantly, but very few studies look at the interracial marriage from the couples’ perspective. This study probes experiences and perspectives of interracial Christian couples. A phenomenological study design among eight Seventh-day Adventist couples living in Silang, Cavite, Philippines, helped explore their joys and challenges, as well as their perceptions about interracial marriage. The study found that Adventist interracial couples have a distinct foundation of marriage. This plays an important role in the way they experience and overcome their challenges.

Not very long ago, couples from different races were singled out. Today, interracial marriages are more accepted, and in some places, such couples will not even attract attention. This does not necessarily mean that people have changed their perception of interracial marriages, but rather that the factor of color is seen less as a threat for a relationship today than in the past (Passel, Wang, & Taylor, 2010). A racial group is not just differentiated from other groups by biological traits (color). There are also socio-cultural characteristics due to their geographical location. However, the previous configuration of the world made the appearance of interracial relationships difficult. The industrial revolution and the availability of new technologies has diminished the distance between races and indeed, cultural characteristics themselves have begun to break down. Recent
studies reveal an increase in interracial marriage in the United States of America and other countries (Inman, Altman, Kaduvettoor-Davidson, Carr, & Walker, 2011; Passel, Wang, & Taylor, 2010). Despite that increase, few of these studies examine the specific experiences of interracial couples. However, according to Bratter and King (2008), though the tensions between races are probably less perceptible than before, some studies have shown that interracial couples are more likely to divorce than same-race marriages (Heer, 1974; Heaton, 2002).

According to a national study conducted in the United States by the Barna Research Group (2008), the divorce rate among Christians from the same race was higher compared to that of the general population. This suggests that in the case of interracial Christian couples, there might also be a higher rate of divorce because of cultural differences. But according to Thomas (2007), Christian couples seem to hold a different foundation of marriage than non-Christians, so it is interesting to know how it could or not prevent them from the danger of separation especially in the case of cross-cultural marriages. It is also important to know their marital experiences, their differences, their coping mechanisms, and their perceptions of cross-cultural marriages. For that reason, the experiences and the perception of interracial marriages of Adventist interracial couples were explored in this study.

Review of the Literature

The literature shows that cross-cultural marriages are called by various terms. Among those terms can be cited intercultural, interethnic, dual-culture, mixed-marriages, out-marriages, and interracial/biracial relationships. So, the term *interracial marriage*, which is part of cross-cultural marriage, refers specifically to couples whose partners are coming from two different racial groups (Donovan, 2004). However, though the couples are from different races and the history and biblical view of interracial marriage will be briefly discussed; this study focuses more on the cultural differences than on the racial discrimination that they may face as an interracial couple. Therefore, the term interracial will be used to characterize the couples, but the focus of the study will mainly be placed on their cultural difference.

Interracial Marriages: Historical and Biblical Foundations

It has been said that the “Almighty God created the races—White, Black, Yellow, Malay, and Red—and he placed them on separate continents, and but for the interference of his arrangements, there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix” (Bazile as cited in Williams, 2012, p. 94). This statement seems not only too strong, but it visibly paints a wrong picture of the gospel. It really appears that Bazile (as cited in Williams, 2012) did not completely explore this question on
interracial marriage from a biblical point of view. Of course, this statement was made in 1963 and Bazile was a judge who was strongly against interracial marriage. The opposite view came from Daniel Marshall, a Catholic priest, who emphasized, in the case of Andreas Perez and Sylvester Davis—a Hispanic woman and a Black man who wanted to get married (and both were Roman Catholics)—that marriage in the Roman Catholic Church was a sacrament and that there was no doctrine of the church that condemns a White person from marrying a Black person (Oldham, 2010).

This paints the picture of the history of interracial marriage in the United States of America, where the history of interracial marriage has been greatly influenced by various events that occurred in the country. First, the end of the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the mid-19th century marriage did not really change attitudes toward marital relations between races. In some states, interracial marriages were legal; in others, they were not. However, partners in such marriages—conducted outside the borders of the states where such marriages were illegal—were allowed to live together. It is just 44 years ago that the United States Supreme Court officially ruled that mixed-race marriages were legal throughout America (Goodwin, 2011).

The history of South Africa is quite similar to that of the United States. Though the colonies of South Africa, like those in the United States, were known for the use of slaves and free women for sexual enjoyment, the years 1678 and 1685 were known respectively for the proclamation forbidding the practice of taking those slaves as concubines and for laws forbidding marriage between Black female slaves and White men. In 1902 the law was extended to the relationship between White women and Black men. In 1950, an Immorality Act prohibited all sexual relationships or marriage between Blacks and Whites, meanwhile other interracial marriages were not specified. This was applicable to all South Africans, even those married abroad. It was not until 1985 that interracial marriage in South Africa was legitimized (Olivier, Barnard, Cronje, & Nathan as cited in Mojapelo-Batka, 2008).

Though studies on interracial relationships have generally been done in countries such as the United States or South Africa where socio-political history has shaped the occurrence of such relationships, the increase in interracial marriages is not only an American business. Countries such as Hong Kong have shown a steady increase of interracial marriages since 1991 (The International Encyclopedia of Marriage and Family [IEMF], 2003). However, IEMF states that the increase in interracial marriage is not uniform across all races. For example in the United States, Asians are leading the interracial marriage rate (9% of Whites, 16% of Blacks, 26% of Hispanics, and 31% of Asians). Moreover, in 2008, 46% of native born and 25.6% of foreign-born Asians in America married a non-Asian compared to only 2 to 4% of Blacks (Passel et al., 2010).

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A clear example of Asian intermarriage is the case of Filipinos. According to the Philippine Government statistics, in 2004, over 72% of Filipinos living abroad were engaged in an interracial marriage. According to the Philippines Today (2011), this number is due to two facts: First, from 1906 to 1925, over 150,000 Filipinos were brought to the U.S. to help as workforce in the agricultural fields, and the gender ratio was 14 males to one female. Second, the Anti-Miscegenation laws that banned marriage between Whites and Blacks/Mulattoes/Mongolians did not include specifically Filipinos.

In Europe, many studies show that the attitude towards interracial/cross-cultural dating and marriage has considerably improved over the years (Lange & Westin, 1997 & Torngren, 2011). In 2005, the Integration Barometer survey in Sweden included a statement that “persons from different cultures and races should not build a family and have children”; although over 88 percent of the respondents disagreed with this statement (Torngren, 2011, p. 6). However, though attitudes continue to change in general, societal attitudes toward interracial/cross-cultural couples is the main factor cited as the cause of tensions, not between the couple themselves, but in their relationships with people around them (Gerholm, as cited in Torngren, 2011).

Regarding the biblical view of interracial marriage, Hann (1999) argues that the Bible does not use the word race when talking about people on earth. He explains that the Bible refers to everyone as humans in relation to the same, shared ancestor—Adam. He emphasizes that God separated people only because of their rebellion at the tower of Babel (Genesis 11) and in his point of view; the only intermarriage that is to be avoided by Christians is the marriage with non-Christians. Anderson (1999) does not totally share Hann’s (1999) point of view. He believes that the biblical boundaries include race as well as faith. He takes as an example the text of 2 Corinthians 6:14, which states that Christians are not to be “unequally yoked with unbelievers” but he is against the opinion that the Bible does not use the term race when talking of human beings. He states, “the curse is put upon Ham’s son Canaan. For us to see what God says concerning interracial marriage, we must study Canaan and his descendants” (p. 3). It seems that there is more than one possible way to interpret the Bible’s instructions on this topic.

The challenges of interracial couples were also a concern for White (1912) when she stated that it is unacceptable for believers to put the future of their children in jeopardy. Reading this, it can be concluded that White was against interracial marriage. However, Plummer (2003) explains that in the rest of the quotes of White throughout the chapter on the matter; it appears that her intention was to call the believers to be careful not to waste their energy in dealing with societal reactions instead of working for the Lord. Today, the challenges that face interracial marriage may certainly be different from those in olden times.
The Challenges of Interracial Marriage

Anxiety, insecurity, guilt, anger, depression, and identity conflict are some of the possible challenges that married couples experience. In the case of an interracial couple, there is potential for greater impact because of the cultural differences. However, the causes of such issues are generally not related directly to the couples’ adaptation to each other, but seem to stem more from problems of cultural or ethnic differences, racism and societal pressure (Stephan & Stephan, as cited in Kibbler & Shinew, 2002; Wong, 2009). Further, research shows that interracial couples may have a greater adjustment to marriage—in part because of society’s overall attitude towards their relationship, which may range from curiosity to disapproval. Regarding the societal reaction, Chito, Childs and Dalmage (as cited in Bratter & King, 2008) stated that the negative reactions to interracial couples from strangers and the diminished social support from family and friends generally characterize the couple’s experience. But they studied only the Black/White couples who were not necessarily Christians. Their work did not consider Hispanic/White, Asian/Black or Asian/White couples.

Donovan (2004) has classified the challenges that cross-cultural couples face in two groups: the normative challenges that represent basically the difficulties that most of the couples face (the adjustment to marriage, personality and gender difference, and parenting) and the cultural challenges (family disapproval, language barrier, cultural norms, societal disapproval, traditions, and children’s identity). Though interracial couples generally experience family disapproval, there is mostly a shift in the perception of both families when they come to know each other. In other words, events such as birthdays, weddings, anniversaries or even any dramatic event help both families to learn about their different cultures (Inman et al., 2011). Another way to diminish the tension between both families is to have a balanced or shared worldview, that is the beliefs, values, and assumptions that mediate communication, relationships, modes of problem-solving, and decision-making. Couples or families that share these values can have an easier time adapting (Ibrahim and Schroeder, 1990).

Success Factors of Interracial Marriage

There is no magic potion to make a marriage work. In other words, what works for a couple may not work for another. The literature offers various solutions to overcome the challenges that interracial couples face. Four different types of models are common in meeting these challenges: submission (one partner submits to the culture of the other), compromise (each partner gives up certain aspects of his or her culture), obliteration (both try to erase their differences), and consensus which is presented as the most effective, though rarely used—it is a give and take on the part of both partners (Romano, 2008).
Several experts have suggested behavioral approaches that could be helpful in overcoming the challenges of cross-cultural marriages (Romano, 2008; Donovan, 2004; & Inman et al., 2011). These include, but are not limited to, good motives for the marriage, common goals, learning about each other’s culture, sensitivity to each other’s needs, understanding for the other’s culture, flexibility, solid and positive self image, spirit of adventure, ability to communicate, commitment to the relationship, and a sense of humor.

In conclusion, the review of the literature showed that though the issue of racism is no longer a great barrier as before, interracial marriages still seem to be more exposed to failure than same-race marriage because of the societal attitude and the difference in cultures. Though many solutions are provided from both non-Christian and Christian perspectives, the Adventist circle has not provided materials that could help Adventist interracial couples. This study was done to explore the specific experience of interracial Adventist couples in order to understand how they live and to start generating strategies for such Christian couples to face successfully the challenges that are linked to their cultural differences.

Methodology

This qualitative study used a phenomenological design to explore the experiences of interracial Adventist couples. I used this design because the purpose was to understand the perception of interracial marriage by those Christian couples through the accounts of their lived experiences. I selected eight couples for this research study from Silang, Philippines, using purposive sampling. The criteria I used to select the couples who participated in this study were (a) being from two different races, (b) having been married for at least two years, and (c) both partners being Adventists.

Two self-constructed interview guides were used; one was a couples’ interview guide (demographic questions and questions on experience) and one was an e-mail interview guide. Overall, eight interviews of couples and eight e-mail interviews were conducted. The e-mail interviews allowed for follow-up when the respondent had good points that needed to be explored. Field notes were also used from the observation during the time spent with some of the families during the interviews. I conducted couples’ interviews in their homes, according to their schedules.

I used the detailed approach of Van Manen to analyze the data of this study. Van Manen’s detailed approach is a method of analyzing data, which consist of scanning the first interviews line by line in order to identify the underlying themes (Polit & Beck, 2008). So, after transcribing all the data of the first two recorded couples’ interviews, I meticulously read the transcription several times and formulated several codes. These codes were grouped according to their
similarities and categories such as communication, child rearing, in-laws, and readings, etc., were identified. From those categories, I documented emergent themes such as reaction to marriage, adjustment, and challenges. Then, during the following interviews, I found some more categories such as Bible-centered environment, travelling.

**Results and Discussion**

Overall, I interviewed eight couples: Four Asians/Whites and four Asians/Blacks. Specifically, two Black Americans and two Black Africans for the Asian/Black couples, and four White Europeans for the Asian/White couples were the participants of this study. The couples’ relationship length varied from 4 years to 42 years. The respondents acknowledged that English was the language used for communication in all eight couples, though two couples said that they were able to switch from time to time to the language of one of the partners. From the codes and categories, five themes emerged from the interviews: reaction to marriage, adjustment, challenges, and overcoming the challenges. From the e-mail interviews, one additional theme emerged: God is the God of marriage.

**Reaction to Marriage**

In most of the cases in this study, the family reacted positively to the relationship. The families of most of the participants were happy about the fact that their son/daughter was getting married. They just had some concerns about the fact that the weddings took place overseas for at least one of the partners and sometimes for both. So, the fact that the families did not know the person or that they considered that their child was marrying too early were in general the cause of the concerns. The racial differences did not appear to be a problem for most families. One of the respondents—an Asian woman, stated, “for me they were fine—they accepted him. In the beginning they were worried just because they did not know him but the nationality was not a big deal.” Another experience similar to this comes from a Black man:

Okay, well my family did not have any problem with the fact that I was going to marry a Filipina but they reacted because I was married too soon. For them, I was still a boy just graduated from college. They were expecting me to work some years, go for graduate studies and just marry later on. They already know that I had a girlfriend from the Philippines. They are okay with that—they are happy.

Some of the negative reactions, however, came from friends and communities (colleagues and church members). One of the Asian/Black couples really struggled with the pressure of friends and colleagues. The fact that there was already some history of unhappy intercultural marriages and that the man was
stereotyped, “I didn’t act Asian—I acted American” really pushed the friends and colleagues into a negative reaction when they learned that the couple was going to get married.

Though there were negative reactions from some friends, those reactions were more related to the differences in culture than to the color factor. The findings in Inman et al.’s (2011) study are contradictory. Basically, they found that it was much harder for their participants to find support from their direct family members, while friends were more open to the relationship. So, the different result of this study may be due to the fact that the respondents are Christian and their families in general are too, while the friends and the colleagues may not share necessarily the same beliefs. Having friends and colleagues reacting against the relationship may show that Christians are more open to interracial marriage than non-Christian. However, Christian or not, negative societal reaction is recorded in the literature to generally be difficult to bear for the couple and in that sense really plays a role in the couple’s adaptation process (Batter & King, 2008).

**Adjustment to Marriage**

In the couples’ point of view, the adjustment is a long process that at first takes one to a year and half. Adjustment continues as long as the relationship continues (“I always have to adapt every time we go to my wife’s place”). However, two cases of adjustment are seen in this study—a longer process in case the couple has in-laws living with them and a shorter process when the couple does not. But, in both cases, the spouse’s support, flexibility, playfulness with in-laws, and spending time together, were found to be helpful during the adjustment phase.

Two of the eight couples experienced sharing some time with their in-laws in the beginning of their relationship. All expressed the difficulties of finding balance when the in-laws were in the house because one culture becomes dominant. Moreover, conflicts happen easily in relation to the fact that the cultural differences are more likely to be perceived by the in-laws. One of the ladies said “it is hard because the culture is not something easy to change.” They therefore came to the conclusion that being separated from the in-laws would help them to have a better transition. The other couples who did not experience in-law issues still pointed out that they believed that the adjustment they had to make was not really related to the cultural differences but rather to their personality differences. A White lady shared:

I did not need to adjust to my husband’s culture except the few times we visited his family. I think it would be true to say that our adjustment was not so much cultural as it was personal.
Interracial marriage requires greater adjustments, due to the societal attitude to these kinds of union and at the same time, the pressure brought by curiosity or family disapproval (Bhugra & De Silva as cited in Wong, 2009). This study is somehow in agreement with Wong’s view, as it appears that according to the couples’ experiences, they had to adjust to each other’s culture when living with the in-laws. However, they also perceived that their adjustment was more personal than cultural. The reason behind this could be related to their religious beliefs because the respondents expressed that they did not view themselves as typical African/Filipino/American/European, but rather they viewed themselves as Christians. This is why the adjustment may seem in their point of view the same as a monoculture marriage.

Romano (2008) divides the adjustment phase into three: the honeymoon phase (everything is new and wonderful), the settling-in phase (when differences cause major disagreements), and the life-pattern phase (when the differences are minimized). The last phase is the one where usually intercultural marriages break up because of thinking that their differences are insurmountable. But Romano (2008) goes further and says that the wiser thing to do at this stage is to allow for differences without giving up one’s own identity. It therefore appears that in the case of intercultural Christian couples, there is less to give and to take since both share the same Christian beliefs.

Challenges of Interracial Marriage

Three categories emerged out of the codes related to the challenges. The interracial Adventist couples basically face challenges in communication, in child rearing, and the difference in Christian growth and social difference. Communication in problem solving definitely stands to be the greatest challenge that interracial Christian couples face. Whether related to culture or not, it appeared that most of the couples have issues in relation to their incapability of solving problems using either verbal or non-verbal communication. Most of the couples (4 Asians/Blacks and 1 Asian/White) expressed that from the beginning of their lives together—under the same roof—communication has been an issue. As the White man who experienced the problem said, “it is hard to communicate with her—she cannot discuss anything without getting emotional—too emotional.” Additionally, an Asian lady said:

Sometimes, he is really rough and what is wrong with him? For him, it was really like “you have to express yourself,” “If you have to say something just say it, don’t cry.” It was really hard for me because I am not used to it.

Child rearing is the second challenge that faces interracial Adventist marriages in Silang. In the couples’ experience, the decision of how to raise a child is really important for the couple. In the case of an interracial couple, the difference in perspective can create a serious problem. This study found that
though in the beginning the couples had a hard time in defining the way of raising their children, they all agreed that culture should not be emphasized, but rather, Christian education. However, conflict appears—not in terms of the values that have to be transmitted to the child but rather in regard to the kind of daily habits the child should learn. Another Black man shared:

Her cultural style is like when the baby is hungry, you feed them, whenever they’re tired, they sleep, you know. Whatever they want, they have their own schedule. . . . it just drives me crazy. So, I said this is not going to work. American schedule.

It appeared also during the discussion that child education starts really early. All couples acknowledged that the earlier you start to pass either Christian values or good habits, the better. They therefore pointed out the importance of maintaining a healthy home environment based on Christian values, and to some extent, cultural values such as language and history.

The last challenge perceived in this study was the difference in social class and the difference in commitment to God. One couple admitted that in the beginning of their marriage, the difference in the relationship with God was obvious, but by the help of the one who was more exposed to spiritual truth, they were able to overcome that challenge. However, for another couple, the husband presents the social class differences as the main issue in their marriage, while the lack of commitment to God seems to be a secondary one. The man, talking about his wife, said:

She does not come from a wealthy background, she comes from a poor background . . . . Because in this country due, to animism they cannot get out of their system even if they get baptized unless they are really committed, which I don’t think she was and that is where automatically all the problems started to come up.

It seemed that the lack of commitment to God, or the difference in Christian growth might be a serious threat in an Adventist interracial marriage. This is especially accentuated with some other cultural issues.

This study’s findings are similar to the findings of Inman et al. (2011) who found that their respondents have to deal with challenges such as parent’s culture, faith, and parenting. Moreover, values, food and drink, sex, male-female roles, time, place of residence, polities, friends, finances, in-laws, social class, religion, children rearing, language/communication, dealing with stress, illness and suffering, and ethnocentrism are all presented as challenges of cross-cultural marriage (Romano, 2008). In addition to that, Markoff (as cited in Donovan, 2004) cited communication, differences in values and the concept of marriage, autonomous behavior and practices, prejudices and stereotypes, and the surrounding family. There is a long list of challenges that are experienced in
inter racial couples; though most of them are also lived by monoculture couples (Donovan, 2004). Though couples in this study experience some of the challenges presented by the literature, it appeared throughout the interviews and time spent with each family that their attachment to God really make a difference. Thomas (2007) stated in his book on Christian marriage that marriage can give the “deepest and happiest moment of life” to an individual and in his point of view it is the reason why God created such institution (p. 2).

Overcoming Challenges

From the analysis of data, a few categories were found under this theme. The respondents think that a Christ-centered environment is the most important tool to deal with challenges. Besides that, open discussions, readings, flexibility, and openness to change are the other tools that are useful in overcoming the different challenges that can be met in the marriage.

These findings support Ballinger’s (2010) report. Actually, while studying Christian couples, he reported that his respondents expressed the importance of using the Bible as a textbook for marriage. However, the literature on non-Christians places communication as main key (Donovan, 2004; & Inman et al, 2011), together with the promotion of each other’s culture, openness to diversity, and partner’s support in interracial marriages. It therefore seems that in regard to the respondents’ experiences on overcoming challenges, though Christians share the point of view of non-Christians, they go beyond them by placing faith in God as the main ingredient for the success of their marriage. It may be an advantage for them since they have greater reasons—spiritual reasons, to make their marriage work. Thomas (2007) believes that knowing and understanding God’s intent for marriage and having a positive view of oneself is the key to a successful marriage.

God Is the God of Marriage

The e-mail interviews related to the Christian perspective clarified the couples’ views and explained quite a bit the way they live their experiences. Those interviews revealed that, overall, the respondents recognize that the marriage comes from God and that it is a daily experience. They also do believe that the husband is a spiritual leader and that the wife’s role is more about homemaking though both share responsibilities in the home. “For me marriage is a covenant between two people and God. The marital vow is very sacred and holds great responsibility.” Though they do not have any argument or particular Bible texts to support interracial marriage, they all believe that the Bible holds a positive opinion on interracial marriage. One Indian lady said, “I don’t think God
discriminates between people depending on their race, so trying to find out the biblical basis of interracial marriage never crossed my mind.”

According to Cunningham (1999), “a Christian marriage is more than just the union of two Christians of the opposite sex. A Christian marriage is characterized and governed by Christian principles that are taught in the Bible” (para. 7). While crossing culture was not an issue in God’s plan of marriage, His intention was not, and still, is not for His children to marry unbelievers. Christian marriage should not be taken lightly because God Himself instigated it and because there are promises associated to committed Christian couples (Westley, 2004). Therefore, only those who have strength and courage to marry to answer a call or vocation from God can really share such experience (Thomas, 2007). Though the Adventist couples in this study did not provide such deep understanding of the purpose of God in creating marriage, it appears that their perception of marriage is not too far from the cited Christian writers. Thus, their understanding of marriage is certainly influenced by their relationship with God and their knowledge of the Scripture.

Conclusion and Recommendations

When individuals from different races decide to share their lives together, they need to be aware that what it requires for them to adjust to one another is greater than what it does for couples within the same race. The reaction of the relatives of those couples appears generally to be positive, although concerns can be related to the fact that the families do not know the partner. The negative reaction that the research participants of this study often experience comes from the communities. The adjustment phase appears to be smoother when the in-laws do not share the same space with the couple. These interracial Adventist couples face some adjustment challenges just like any other interracial couples and even same-race couples, but the main ones are communication, child rearing, societal differences, and difference in commitment to God. Though it requires a little bit more to adapt, the challenges that Adventist interracial couples face seem to have a smaller impact on their relationship as opposed to non-Christian interracial couples presented in the literature.

Different approaches to overcome the challenges are proposed by various authors but in case of Adventist interracial couples interviewed in this study, a Christ-centered environment, open discussions, readings on the matter, and flexibility are the tools that work. Defining themselves much more as Christians than as holders of the culture of their different countries, it appeared throughout the research that Adventist interracial couples are less likely to break up than the non-Christian couples present in other studies. However, to reinforce the knowledge on the matter and to help Adventist young adults to be more prepared when engaged in such relationship, the following recommendations are given:
a) Christian Churches, especially the Adventist church, need to address interracial marriage issues in their different publications, b) the church support system needs to be more active for those couples considering the fact that the difference in spiritual growth is one of the challenges, c) seminars on Christian child rearing strategies need to be organized more often in schools or churches with interracial marriages, and d) more research needs to be done in order to understand clearly the experience of interracial couples.

References


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