

## Where Do Interracial Dating Taboos Come From?

By David Jamison and Erin Tillman

There used to be laws against interracial dating in America, and now there are social taboos against interracial dating in America. But perhaps those taboos are changing? No one I know has done any scholarly research on this, so for the evidence we are going to use our personal experiences. This means that this post is like a living document—we'd like anyone that has a personal experience to add to it in the comments and we'll incorporate it into the doc. This web page shouldn't just be educational, but should also be a place we can all share and learn from each other.

The cultural taboos against interracial dating today seem to be of differing intensities and seem to be promoted by different groups within each race.

David: From what I've seen, women in the black community face strong social pressure to date within their race; most often from other black women, usually friends and mothers.

Erin: I've had a different experience. As a black female, I've never felt pressure from my family to date black men, even if it was my family's preference. But I do think black parents would prefer if their kids dated other black people. However, any negativity thrown my way about dating nonblack people came from black men rather than other black women. Living abroad put a lot of things into perspective for me. I was the only black person in my grade for almost my entire schooling career. I never had a boyfriend or even a date to any of the school dances though I was on homecoming court and prom court, a member of student government, a host on my school TV station, etc. I finally started getting attention from guys when I studied abroad in Europe. There, race wasn't a factor at all. I've dated all kinds of men. I do not have a type. I've only been interested in black men who have similar interests and upbringings, but that makes sense considering that common interests and upbringings are important to me regardless of race. The only time I've experienced unwelcome comments about men I'm dating was when I've been in small towns or rural areas in America. I once had an older black man at work literally yell at me because he thought I was a "traitor" for dating nonblack guys. But when I asked him if he dated nonblack women, he said, "yes,"—and somehow didn't see the hypocrisy.

David: And black women don't seem to mind when other black women date white men who identify with black culture. The one white dude in the campus chapter of every black fraternity in America always has a black girlfriend. Always.

Black men also face pressure to date within their race.

David: I have always seen this pressure come black women. And I didn't find out about it until high school, when my mom moved me to a predominantly white school. One day she said, "What were you doing riding in that white girl's car?" Till that moment I didn't even know it was a thing. When I got to college, I experienced social exclusion from black women all four years because a woman I dated my freshman year was white. I once went into a lounge where my black female friends were studying and I

started talking about my relationship. One of them said "Are you talking about that white girl?" and I said "yeah," oblivious. Then I started getting the cold shoulder from them. Once they came out of the elevator and I said "Hi" and they all looked right at me and walked right past me. None of them were ever friends with me again. I was told in college that dating a white woman made a statement to little black girls that I preferred a Eurocentric standard of beauty, which lowered their self-esteem (blonde hair, blue eyes, etc). It killed me to think that some little black girl was going to have worse self-esteem cuz she thought I didn't think she was beautiful, cuz I think black women are beautiful. To this day, I feel uncomfortable pursuing nonblack women because of the perception it might send to other black people. I know it's ridiculous to live your life based on what some 18-year-old girl tells you, but I'm 45 now, and it's like I've been socially conditioned, you know? I don't know if these women would even care who I dated anymore, but I can't bring myself to act like it's not a thing. But I have rarely felt pressured by another black man to date within my race.

Erin: I have known black women who have had an opinion about black men dating white women, but it's usually older women who've had a problem, in my experience. I'm 37 . . . I rarely encounter that now, so maybe it's a generational thing. I've felt way less judgment from younger people (under 30) than from people my age and older. But women are more harsh with men because that is their potential partner pool. Maybe black women were harsher in their opinions of you dating a white woman because theoretically you were a potential partner for them. I definitely felt a little weird when I was younger seeing a black guy with a nonblack girl (especially if she wasn't very attractive). But I've never been angry at black men for dating nonblack women. Maybe that's because I date other races, so I get it.

David: In popular media, it seems as if white women are pressured to date within their race, but it seems to come primarily from white men, not as much other white women. *Look Who's Coming to Dinner* is the most obvious example, but I also remember a white girl in high school saying she couldn't date a black guy because her father would kill her. As far as I've seen, white men seem to get a lot less pressure to date within their race. But when they do that also seems to come from other white men, usually dads (not so much friends).

So where do interracial dating taboos come from? The majority of colonies in America had laws against miscegenation by the 1600s, but those laws were enforced in a sexist manner. In fact, miscegenation laws were created by (some, not all) white men largely to control both black people and white women. Nearly every conviction in a miscegenation case was against a white woman who had relations with a black man—not the other way around. But newspaper articles and books show that the instances of white male/black female miscegenation was much more common. At the time, black women were considered property, and sexual access was one of the reasons slaveowners bought slaves, as has historically been the case with slavery. *Slavery has always been partly about labor and partly about sexual access*. This has been the case since ancient times and it didn't end with the transatlantic slave trade. In fact, this is the "Southern way of life" that the Confederacy was trying so hard to defend. They were defending the right of their young men to acquire sexual experience with their slaves before they got married to "real" women. But it was not intended for white women to do the same.

During the slave era (and for about 100 years after) black men were lynched for the crime of raping white women in numbers wildly out of proportion to the instances of it actually happening. In fact, precious few instances of black male/white female rapes had ever been documented. Research into this is what brought Ida B. Wells national fame. And Danielle Maguire's book *At the Other End of the Street* details how white men actually committed far more acts of sexual violence towards black women as recently as the years leading up to the Civil Rights Movement. But propaganda was promoted in popular culture and in movies like *Birth of a Nation* in order to create the picture of scary black men—mostly so that instances of white-on-black violence could seem more justified. But black male slaves knew better. The punishment for such a crime has always been so horrific that young black men were taught at very young ages of the consequences of even consensual sex with white women. But the propaganda about uncontrolled black sexuality fed into already present myths about black savagery. Of course, some white men and black females obviously did and do fall in love, but the relations of power between the two have been so unequal for so long that a black woman who was approached by a white man has historically had to look at the relationship within the context of the consequences she would suffer if she said "No." So, is it possible that this history still has some effect on how people socialize their sons and daughters about whom they should date? Do these taboos still serve some useful function for our society?

It seems to be a mixed bag with other American races. For most Asian Americans, it seems as if their interracial dating practices mirror the narrative of white supremacy. Dating white is dating "up," dating a fellow Asian is a lateral move, and dating black or Latinos is dating "down." The American Latino community doesn't seem to be so affected by the narrative of white supremacy in the realm of interracial dating, perhaps because of shared struggles during the Civil Rights Movement—although being Catholic is a plus. This is in stark contrast to the rest of Latin America, in which the interracial dating pressures closely mirror the proscriptions of white supremacy. Among Native Americans, the narrative of white supremacy seems in many ways to have been inverted. Dating white people is looked down upon, while dating someone of color demonstrates that you sympathize with the narrative of the struggle for civil rights and social justice.

Erin thinks: Live and let live and love and let love. Whoever an individual chooses to date, marry, love, sleep with, etc, is their own business.

David thinks: It's complicated. Unless it's not.