Intimate Encounters with the Other: Negotiating Racialised, Ethnic and Cultural Identities within Intimate Spaces

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Abstract:
This paper focuses on conceptually outlining how in today’s mobile and highly interconnected world, people of different heritages and backgrounds construct and negotiate their racial, ethnic and/or cultural identities in intimate spaces. By examining the growth of primarily heterosexual couples involved in intimate ‘mixed’ relationships in Australia, Britain and the USA, this paper questions the dearth of empirical and theoretical research in this area. Drawing upon a new and critical framework that disrupts notions of difference on a binary/polemic level, this paper provides a brief conceptual setting to a proposed research project, which aims to reveal and explore a number of complex and contradictory issues about racialised, ethnic and cultural differences in intimate spaces in Australia, Britain and the USA.

Introduction
Within the context of Anglo-multicultural nations such as Australia, Britain and the USA, people are entering intimate ‘mixed’ relationships¹ at an ever-increasing rate, but public and academic policy has yet to catch up and explore fully why or how this is the case. It is either ignored or relegated to the margins of other debates, obscuring the complex nature of intimate ‘mixed’ relationships. This paper then, seeks to explore a number of key conceptual questions about intimate ‘mixed’ relationships as a precursor to a proposed research project which will attempt to address the public and private discourses that surround intimate ‘mixed’ relationships, as a way of seeking to understand how individuals subvert notions of difference within personal and intimate spaces.

First, let’s examine some recent trends and figures.
Some Recent Trends & Figures

The Australian 2001 Census reveals a nation rich in cultural diversity (ABS 2000; Jupp 1995). Furthermore, according to the current Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimates, the number of ‘mixed’ relationships in Australia is increasing. For example, in 1974, 39% of all marriages were between people with different birthplaces; and by 1998; this proportion had increased to 52% of all marriages.

In the UK, there is also an increase in the number of mixed relationships, particularly within the Black and White-Anglo communities – for example, half of British born Caribbean men and a third of British born Caribbean women live with a white partner (Berthoud 2000). In a recent Observer Newspaper Poll focused on Race Relations in the UK, 82% would not be bothered if a family member married someone from a different ethnicity and only 22% said such marriages were more likely to fail. In the United States, exact figures are hard to attain, but the number of intimate ‘mixed’ relationships is on the increase and there has been a longer history and presence of writing and research on intimate ‘mixed’ relationships, primarily between African Americans and Anglo-Americans (Daniels 1997; Fine et al 1997; hooks 1981, 1992; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2001; Thompson and Keith 2001; Zebroski 1999). These new figures point to a number of key societal shifts as a result of migration, multiculturalism, globalisation and the increasing population of mixed heritage children.

Secondly, this paper will now briefly outline what I mean by ‘multicultural intimacy’ in the context of two key notions - Otherness and intimacy.

Literature Review

Most of the debates around the notion of ‘mixed’ relationships are steeped in a deep historical and scientific legacy, which promotes the notion of a ‘pure’ race and where notions of ‘the Other’ are always depicted as negative, and the Self or ‘the norm’ is never questioned or challenged (Henry-Waring 2002). Using Foucault’s (1981) ideas about power and knowledge, I argue that the meta-discourses of Otherness reflect an ideology that is essentially hegemonic (Foucault 1981: 109-45). Power and knowledge are continually reinforced throughout all levels of society through a number of vehicles, both formally and informally, individually and collectively, and explicitly and implicitly.
The meta-discourses of Otherness act as hegemonic carriers of ideology and power, that for the purposes of this paper and this forthcoming study, give primacy to White, male, Anglo, heterosexual, affluent, Christian values and beliefs, at the direct expense of those defined as ‘Other’. At the heart of these meta-discourses lie a set of pervasive ideologies that combine to assert that it is ‘normal’ and ‘of value’, and an ‘ideal’ to be White, male, heterosexual, affluent, Christian and able-bodied. Furthermore, these norms are never questioned. They are deemed to be normal, and are viewed as the benchmark from which Others are constructed and defined.

Like most hegemonic ideologies, the construction of the Self and the Other posits each as diametrically opposed entities. This polemic structure is crucial to the basis of these meta-discourses; as the Self is always asserted in a positive light in sharp contrast to the Other, which is defined, shaped and construed negatively. As a result, those deemed as Other can easily be dismissed as invalid contributors, and yet still be regarded as objects worthy of intense scrutiny and control.

Consequently, most of the discussion about intimate ‘mixed’ relationships, when it exists, is focused around negative connotations, which imply a dilution of, usually, a pure White, Anglo-Saxon race to the denigration of Black and other peoples (Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993; Langton 1993). Furthermore, these ideas were promoted more visibly and forcibly from the period of colonialism and imperialism in the UK, the USA and Australia. In particular, at key periods, it was deemed as an offence (officially at least) to have intimate ‘mixed’ relationships, and yet it is clear that the power of White slave or landowners ensured that they had sexual access to women (and men) deemed as Other. The situation was not only racialised, but also highly gendered, as white women were also complicitly and directly involved (Jones 1999; McClintock 1995). This contentious history has led to a legacy, which still depicts Black female sexuality as loose, immoral, licentious, threatening and diseased objects and Black male sexuality as one of both fear and fantasy (Bhabha 1992; Gilman 1985; Henry 1993; Magubane 2001; Marshall 1994; Mirza 1997; Langton 1993; Singh 1997). In contrast, white women are seen as paragons of virtue and white male sexuality as the ‘norm’, and biologically justifiable (Frankenberg 1993; Jones 1999; Mohammed 2000; Pettman 1988).
Looking more specifically to the Australian context, where discussions about multicultural success stories abound, even here there is scant information on intimate ‘mixed’ relationships.

**Example: The Australian context**

Despite the continuing tensions with its Indigenous populations, post-war Australia has to a large extent been regarded as a multicultural success story (Jupp 1995). Indeed, when reading the literature, one could easily be forgiven for thinking that migrants from non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, primarily from Southern Europe and later South Asia, are the only communities that have disturbed the notion of what it is to be Australian. This of course belies the long and rich heritage of Indigenous peoples, the Chinese, the Afghans and other communities at the time of Anglo-Australian settlement. Nonetheless, these non-Anglo communities remain overlooked, marginalised and neglected. The vast majority of research and literature on racialised, ethnic and cultural difference in Australia tends to refer primarily to migrants from Southern Europe and South Asia to the detriment of Indigenous and indeed, Anglo-Saxon, Anglo/Celtic communities (for a brief review, refer to Batrouney and Stone 1998; Hartley and McDonald 1994). Furthermore, much of the literature that does exist lies in a highly contentious and deeply political context of immigration and multiculturalism, which in effect both homogenises and reinforces the notion of the Other (Bhabha 1992; Said 1978). There remains a popular and idealised view of what it means to be Australian and historically, politically and socially, despite the rhetoric of multiculturalism, it is still seen as firmly Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Celtic. Groups/individuals not regarded as ‘typically’ Australian are either encouraged to primarily adopt a more typical Australian lifestyle or are viewed as not fully part of the Australian community. Attempts to understand and tolerate different cultures remain an area where the cultural exchange is largely one-way – from migrants to the host society – and is usually seen as part of an eroticisation and assimilation, rather than an equal integration (hooks 1981, 1992). Thus, despite the fact that there is a long history of intimate relationships in Australia between Indigenous and Anglo communities, very little has been documented and if it has, the commentary has tended to view such intimate relationships as inferior and highly problematic.

Disappointingly, government and academic research still relegates this area of social life to the margins. This is a serious oversight as it continues to obscure the
complexities and subtleties of such relationships as well as to ignore the many lessons and possibilities that intimate private discourses may offer public ones. There remains a deep sense of agony and rawness attached to historical notions of intimate ‘mixed’ relationships and this legacy extends not just to those historical and primarily non-consensual relationships – but also to the ways in which intimate ‘mixed’ relationships are viewed today by Anglo, Black, Indigenous and other communities. As a result, intimate ‘mixed’ relationships remain on a number of levels a source of anger, frustration and concern, both between and across different communities. Nonetheless, they are also regarded as a ray of hope, a symbol of tolerance and a more accurate representation of the changing nature of new and hybrid identities in a globalised, postmodern world (Hall 1996; Modood et al 1997; UK Census 2001; Australian Census 2001). However, this paper agrees with Alibhai-Brown (2001), who argues that an increase in intimate ‘mixed’ relationships should not be seen as a barometer of racial harmony. It can in fact mean that there may well be increasing, but differently targeted, levels of racial intolerance at the same time. This paper therefore urges caution over the view that intimate ‘mixed’ relationships are a sign of the ‘melting pot’ taking shape. Rather, this paper hypothesises that intimate ‘mixed’ relationships do not lead to a utopian version of a large melting pot, and nor do they necessarily provide a set answer to the tensions inherent in modern-day multiculturalism. Instead, this paper suggests that these relationships demand acknowledgment, and an understanding of the ways in which individuals and communities resist and subvert dominant notions of Otherness. It is my contention that by naming and exploring ‘multicultural intimacy’ as experienced by people in intimate mixed relationships, that the binary discourse of Self and Other can be undermined. Further, that by understanding ‘multicultural intimacy’ a more critical debate on Otherness can take place.

Multicultural Intimacy

Sociologically, while there has been an increase in debates about self and intimacy in late modern societies (Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1998), very little has focused on intimate relationships between people of different cultures. Thus while Giddens (1992: 130), suggests that intimacy is effectively a matter of emotional communication ‘with others and with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality’, both the social constraints and possibilities opened up by two people of visibly
different cultural/ethnic/racial backgrounds are ignored. Notably, Jamieson’s (1998) work does suggest the possibility of different types of intimacy – a ‘specific form of knowing, loving and being close to another person’, a ‘disclosing intimacy’ of the Self – yet here, too, there is little discussion of inter-cultural intimacy, or what I have termed ‘multicultural intimacy’.

This paper and proposed study seeks to find answers to some key questions in the hope of deconstructing binary notions of the Self and Other. Specifically, this paper demands a radical shift in the way in which intimate ‘mixed’ relationships are viewed. It asserts that a full understanding of the varying permutations of the intimate ‘mixed’ relationship debate must be examined within a wider critical and multifaceted framework, which seeks to reveal, rather than obscure. As a result, this paper reiterates that any effective research into intimate ‘mixed’ relationships must be based outside traditional frameworks of difference, which views ‘the Other’ as negative – hence, the need for the proposed research study.

**Proposed Research Project:**

The proposed study intends to make a significant and unique contribution to a much-neglected area of research, which will undoubtedly have implications for other multicultural nations other than Australia and pose challenges to the ways in which academic and public discourses engage with ‘multicultural intimacy’. In this regard, the research methodologies and tools will be innovative and will firmly be employed within a critical and radical framework which argues that because there are many ways in which such individuals may subvert, resist and ignore (or be seduced by) prevailing notions of Otherness, conventional approaches are inadequate. Critically, this proposed study will aim to shed light on these questions by empirically exploring the following:

1. How do couples in intimate ‘mixed’ racial, ethnic and/or cultural relationship negotiate their sense of Self in relation to each other?
2. In what ways, if any, do the representations of being an ‘Other’ inform/shape intimate ‘mixed’ relationships?
3. Is being an ‘Other’ in an intimate ‘mixed’ relationship ever reconciled or overcome, if so how?
4. Are there any public and private lessons that can be learnt from those involved in intimate ‘mixed’ relationships?
5. What are the prospects for the future intimate ‘mixed’ relationships, individually and collectively?

By seeking to address these questions, this forthcoming study aims to reveal how the language and experiences of everyday, intimate social relations can be utilised as a critical way of understanding intimate ‘mixed’ relationships on an individual, and collective level without resorting to polemic debates which deny and obscure the complex realities and also the possibilities of such liaisons.

In conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to prepare conceptually for a forthcoming study, which aims to bridge a much-maligned gap in empirical research in Australia and elsewhere on the issue of ‘multicultural intimacy’. This study should have far-reaching implications for our understanding of intimacy across cultures and critically, for the ways in which difference should be theorised and applied in today’s mobile and highly interconnected world.

Endnotes

1. I define intimate ‘mixed’ relationships to include all intimate relationships where one partner comes from a different ‘racial’, ethnic, religious and/or cultural origin to the other.

2. The Observer 2001 Poll, Now you have your say, Sunday November 25, 2001 Available at: http://www.observer.co.uk/race/story/0,11255,605350,00.html Last accessed: 28/7/06. Unfortunately, no details about survey population in terms of numbers, ethnicity, gender or age were provided on-line

3. According to recent reports, 400,000 people ticked the ‘Mixed’ category in the 2001 UK Census. Furthermore, as Blanchard (2001), reviewing figures from the Policy Studies Institute, states, one in ten ethnic minority Britons is the product of 'Mixed' parents; one in 20 pre-school children in the UK is thought to be of Mixed Race. 40 per cent of Black children in the UK have one white parent.

4. Indeed, it is hard to find references to this historical and contemporary phenomenon even from within the archives of the Australian Institute of Family Studies.
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