

Public Attitudes Toward Interracial Relationships: A Case Study on Gender Comparison

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Abstract: In recent years, interracial relationships have been widely discussed in China. By analyzing public attitudes towards interracial relationships, this paper provides an overview of people's different attitudes toward women's interracial relationships and men's interracial relationships on Chinese social media. It introduces three cases of interracial relationships, including two women's interracial relationships and one men's interracial relationship and compares people's different attitudes. This approach explains why Chinese social media users have such different attitudes from the perspective of ethnocentrism and patriarchy. Through a combination of theory and examples, the study points out that ethnocentrism causes people to think negatively about interracial relationships, while patriarchy leads to gender differences in attitudes toward interracial relationships, which is a double standard. Additionally, this research highlights that the discrimination and stigmatization of interracial relationships and female groups can be improved in the long term by the policymakers' efforts through publicity and education.

Keywords: interracial relationships, gender difference, ethnocentrism, patriarchy

1. Introduction

With the acceleration of globalization and the development of technology and transport, there are more and more exchanges between different countries and races. While such complementary exchanges may be reflected in economy, politics, and culture at the national level, one of the manifestations at the individual level is transnational and interracial relationships. Statistics from China Statistical Yearbook 2022 show that except for the two years of closure in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, every year between 40,000 and 50,000 interracial couples registered their marriages in China from 2007 to 2019. That's just the number of couples who have registered marriages; in fact, interracial couples will face the dilemmas of distance, family, and identity, and not all interracial relationships can make it to marriage, so the number of people in interracial relationships is much higher than the statistic. Based on the data, interracial relationships are not an uncommon occurrence in our society. Moreover, taking the year 2018 as a detailed example, the number of marriages between Chinese women and people from other countries and regions accounts for nearly 44% of all interracial marriages. It indicates that in recent years, the gap between the number of Chinese men marrying foreign women and the number of Chinese women marrying foreign men has not been large.

However, there is a phenomenon that the general public applies a double standard to citizens who are in interracial relationships based on gender. Chinese women who are in relationships with people from other races and regions become the target of stigma while Chinese men in interracial relationships are regarded as an honor. It can be summarized from social media posts and comments that some people hold the view that women, who should be regarded as objects and products, are born to “belong” to men and that international people are “outsiders” who have plundered their belongings. Therefore, they abuse and criticize these women in interracial relationships and do not realize that they are at fault. Social support, however, plays an essential role in life satisfaction, depression, and loneliness of individuals, so under the influence of stigmatized perpetration, some women in interracial relationships experience chronic anxiety and stress, which can be detrimental to mental health [1].

Despite plentiful research on interracial relationships and the definition, perpetration, and experience of stigma, focused attention on gender comparison of public attitudes toward interracial relationships in China is of deficiency. Many Chinese researchers take a region as an example or use a selected theory to analyze the identity dilemma, cultural adaptation of expatriates, and local attitudes toward interracial relationships.

Furthermore, there has been a lot of previous research on stigma and well-being among individuals in interracial relationships. For instance, conducting an online survey with 480 participants, Rosenthal & Starks propose that beyond individually experienced discrimination, relationship stigma from friends may link to lower relationship commitment, trust, more partner aggression victimization, etc. [2]. Rosenthal, et al. focus on relationship stigma from different sources, including family, friends and the public, and the consequences of well-being, especially anxiety, depressive symptoms, etc., whose findings support that stigma may have adverse consequences for the well-being of people in interracial and same-sex relationships [3]. Using AddHealth, Pittman, et al.’s findings indicate that interracial couples are more likely to experience discrimination, higher perceived stress, and poorer mental health compared to White couples [4].

In recent years, some scholars have also noticed that there is a gender difference compared women’s interracial relationships to men’s interracial relationships and have carried out several pieces of research. Scholars such as Miller, et al. use Stress Process Theory and data to examine the impacts of gender and race on depression and self-rated health of White, Black, and Hispanic young adults [5]. They mention that interracial relationships have positive and negative effects on well-being, but the extent of health outcomes is significantly influenced by the couple’s racial composition [5]. Stillwell & Lowery argue that gender roles make Whites’ greater resistance to interracial relationships involving White women with natural quasi-experiment and lab experiments [6]. The gendered double standard for close intergroup contact among Whites shows that gender norms play a critical role in American racial boundaries [6].

All the above papers or journals either demonstrate authors’ thoughts about interracial relationships or elucidate the stigma and stress experienced by individuals in interracial relationships in detail. Although they are insightful, innovative, or instructive to interracial relationships, they merely place emphasis on limited respects. For example, some papers ignore the differences in levels of discrimination and stigmatization between women and men in interracial relationships. Moreover, in China, stigma has been studied mainly in relation to AIDS, mental illness, and feminism; not many researchers attempt to analyze interracial relationships from the perspective of stigma, and even fewer have paid attention to the gender differences stigmatization in interracial relationships. However, such difference exists objectively and has tended to intensify in recent years, so this research gap needs to be bridged.

This research intends to explore why the general public’s attitudes toward women’s interracial relationships and men’s interracial relationships have such strong differences, what influences their

attitudes, and what causes this difference. Based on what is mentioned above, other social groups like white Americans stigmatize women more than men for dating outside the group as well [6]. Since gender inequality and restrictions on women's sexuality are common across cultures, this study may fill the gap in Chinese research in this specialized area. According to the related cases and phenomena, this study will lay more emphasis on the factors of ethnocentrism and patriarchal thoughts.

2. Cases on Interracial Relationships

2.1. Videos of a Chinese Woman with Her African Husband

In June 2022, a few photos of a Chinese girl and her husband traveling from China to West Africa caused widespread discussion on Chinese social media platforms. A Chinese blogger shared a set of photos on her personal social media account recording herself and her husband traveling together from China to his home in West Africa, from which it can be seen that her husband has curly hair, darker skin color, and other features of black people. This condition has caused the media and the general public to think deeply about her reasons and motives for marrying her husband and going to West Africa. On the Internet, many media believe that this Chinese girl was deceived by a black man, lacking a sense of responsibility for her own safety and future. For over a year, this blogger has been updating her account as she shares her daily life in West Africa, including going to concerts, trying different restaurants, experiencing various leisure activities, etc. Despite the fact that, according to the videos, she has a fulfilling life, spends her free time doing things that interest her, and has a great relationship with her husband, a considerable number of people still hold a negative view on this matter. They simply comment on the basis of their own stereotypes and selective negative media coverage, regardless of the clarifications and records released by the people involved. At the same time, they prejudiced, discriminated against, and stigmatized the Chinese woman and other women in interracial relationships, with many of the comments on the photos or videos they shared being malicious.

2.2. A Chinese Woman with Her Spanish Boyfriend

Similarly, in June 2023, a Chinese woman shared a photo of herself and her Spanish boyfriend taken during their graduation ceremony on social media. Surprisingly, after the photo was sent out, there were many negative comments. Some even viewed the women's interracial relationship as ignoble, promiscuous, rebellious, worshipping everything foreign and belittling everything indigenous. It's a clear case of discrimination and stigmatization of women. It was after the rise in the photo's influence and popularity that more and more people began to support her and condemn those disrespectful commenters.

2.3. A Black Influencer on Douyin

In the video software Douyin, which is the Chinese version of Tik Tok, there is an account that documents the daily life of an African woman, Rose, who has married a Chinese man and lives with her husband in rural Zhejiang Province, China. Each of her videos reaches hundreds of thousands of views. By contrast to the former two cases, most of the comments under her videos are "She is smart and capable, speaking good Chinese.", "A gentle and kind woman", "Her husband is so lucky.", etc., which is the opposite of comments about Chinese women's interracial relationships. In August 2023, Rose returned home to Africa with her husband and children. The public's attitude to this situation was mostly positive, praising her. Even some local official media posted or reposted videos on Douyin, covering the story with positive content.

3. Analysis on the Gender Difference in Interracial Relationships

The problems revealed in the above three examples of interracial relationships are mainly the lack of identification and respect for members from other ethnic groups and the double standards for different genders in the same matter. Therefore, this paper will analyze the gender difference in interracial relationships from the perspective of ethnocentrism and patriarchy in the following chapter.

3.1. Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism refers to the prejudiced attitudes and hostility of members of any social group toward external groups. People with ethnocentrism divide human society into various groups whose members psychologically identify with the characteristics of the social group they belong to, such as values, attitudes, customs, traditions, lifestyles, etc. [7].

In the first case, when opponents see an interracial relationship between a Chinese woman and a black man, they simply visualize the black man as a deceiver and criminal, even though there is no evidence and no victims. The presence of more and more black people in China will lead to the abuse of multiculturalism, the distortion of moral norms, and the disregard of the law. In fact, their thoughts are completely separating the group they are in from others. In the context of ethnicity, the “others” is the distrusted in essence, which can develop into hostility [8]. In other words, those people emphasize the concept of “us” and “others” and categorize different kinds of people. They are categorized by other people to classify the certain target of social judgement and the process of perpetration of stigma [9]. For example, in the first and second cases, the categories are Chinese people and people from other races. They view “others” as a competitor, a threat to “I” or even an enemy to prove that their own race is absolutely superior and that people from other races, as non-national “invaders”, all have jealousy or malice towards the nation, which can have a detrimental effect on it [10]. Their stereotype and discrimination are that more and more black people coming to China through interracial relationships will bring new problems of law and order, public health, and racial issues. However, there is no evidence to prove that the rate of black people working illegally in China or engaging in crimes such as drug trafficking and robbery is higher than Chinese people themselves.

Ethnocentrism also refers to a cultural bias that leads people to make right or wrong judgments about the habits and traditions of other cultures and negative assessments of the diversity of groups and cultures, causing cultural authoritarianism and blind xenophobia, and thus a situation of stagnation and decline in cultural development [7]. In the first and second examples, many people who have released negative comments actually carry the conventional idea of Chinese women marrying into male families to people of other races. They blame or criticize other cultures, without enough respect and understanding for different cultures and cultural diversity. Multi-culture and cultural integration have become trends that all cultures and peoples must face. If one simply avoids and rejects it, then the development and inheritance of China’s own culture will also be affected.

Unlike the first two examples, in the third example, there is not much resentment towards the blogger Rose because she lives in Zhejiang Province, China with her husband, speaks fluent Chinese, and accepts and learns Chinese culture. Her videos indicate that she lives completely in accordance with Chinese customs and social environment. Therefore, she is not classified as one of the “others”. Moreover, the patriarchal thought that a woman’s identity follows her husband’s makes it easier for people to accept her, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that a considerable part of the opposition to interracial relationships, especially women’s interracial relationships, is influenced by ethnocentrism. It has led

to the perception of interracial relationships as a betrayal of culture and nation, and thus the maintenance of the sublimity of Chinese culture and Han ethnicity.

3.2. Patriarchy

Another aspect that cannot be ignored when analyzing gender differences in interracial relationships is the deep-rooted influence of patriarchal societies on humans' minds. The patriarchy-centered culture causes diametrically contrary attitudes towards male interracial relationships and female interracial relationships, with double standards of treatment.

Patriarchal societies have created different gender temperaments for men and women, reinforcing male domination [11]. This essentialist traditional gender concept is also reflected in the relationship between the two genders. Women, the objects of staring, are in a position of inferior and subordination. Even in today's modern world, there are still many people who see women as men's subordinates, rather than as independent and equal human beings. In interracial relationships, once a woman chooses a man of another race, it is seen as a sign of being out of control. Males regard all females as their own belongings, namely present or future possessions, so if a female breaks out of her silence and has the behavior of rebelling and escaping the existing state of affairs in the view of the dominant male, she is suppressed and blamed. On the internet, it rises more into discrimination and stigmatization of the whole female community.

In stark contrast, men's interracial relationships are mostly free from prejudice or stigma. Some people may even approve of and praise this behavior, considering it as a sign of a man's ability to make women of other nationalities and races "belong" to China and to solve their own marital and reproductive problems. This is because men who have relationships or marry women of other races are perceived to be bringing people and wealth from other races back to their own people, while female interracial relationships are the opposite, taking away. This opinion still sees women as subordinate and property to men, tacitly recognizing the unequal status of men and women in emotional relationships and ignoring the fact that both women and men are equal and independent individuals in a relationship. There is also a hidden logic behind this view that women are valuable and can be defined as commodities to be traded with men, which is a reification of women [12]. Dong's study categorizes and analyses the gender topics in the 2020 Weibo "Hot Searches" and compares the messages from netizens to reveal the penetration of patriarchal ideology into people's views and daily lives [13]. Although there are no direct references to the topic of interracial relationships, there are many references to women's emotional relationships and family values. Under the control of patriarchal ideology, the emotional needs and choices of women and men as equals are consciously or unconsciously ignored.

Historically, since the Qin and Han dynasties, with the strengthening of authoritarian centralization, the two genders have been subjected to clearly different requirements in all aspects of their specific lives, and in the context of patriarchy, women, in particular, have been subjected to strict orientation and discipline [14]. The idea of women as a subordinate position has been deeply embedded in people's minds for a long time, so in interracial relationships, conservatives feel offended and betrayed when women turn to men of other ethnicities, yet in reality, the choice of a personal relationship is the birthright of every woman, who should not be stigmatized because of it.

4. Suggestions

This study is proposed to better understand where the stigma of interracial relationships comes from and the reasons for differences between women's interracial relationships and men's interracial relationships.

Since the patriarchal society has existed in China for a long time, it is difficult for people's thoughts to be completely changed or reversed in a short period of time, but after a long period of time, generation after generation, they can still be improved. This study may inspire policymakers to improve the situation in terms of both publicity and education. From the perspective of publicity, they can make initiatives and appeals on the Internet and various social media, hoping that people can view interracial relationships, especially women's interracial relationships, in an equal and correct manner. People should stop all forms of discrimination and stigmatization against interracial relationships and avoid causing stress, anxiety, and depression to women in interracial relationships, which affects their mental health. Furthermore, they can start an anti-stigma campaign to make people realize that interracial relationships should not be stigmatized and that women's interracial relationships should not be treated with double standards.

After learning the analysis of the study, policymakers can also attempt to educate people about the proper way to view interracial relationships and women. For example, by promoting courses and lectures in universities on how to view interracial relationships, more people can understand and approve that interracial relationships are just one of many types of relationships, and that they should not be treated in a special way, let alone discriminated against or stigmatized. Furthermore, nor is a woman an attachment to anyone, a wife, a daughter, or a mother to anyone but herself. Women have the right to choose, to lust and to refuse on an equal standing with men.

5. Conclusion

Stereotypes and stigmatization of interracial relationships exist in global cultural contexts, but there is very little research in China on how people's attitudes about interracial relationships are diametrically opposed by gender. The main reason is that researchers themselves can be influenced by the larger socio-cultural context and overlook the plight of women in interracial relationships. By analyzing three actual cases of female interracial relationships and male interracial relationships, this paper concludes that the discrimination and stigmatization of female interracial relationships stems mainly from the dual role of ethnocentrism and patriarchy. As a result of the intersection of these two thoughts, women in interracial relationships are viewed as wrongs and betrayals, and are labelled, discriminated against, and stigmatized as unfaithful to society and the nation.

This paper partially bridges the gap in research on gender differences in public attitudes toward interracial relationships by Chinese researchers, analyzing the reasons for such gender differences and offering suggestions. However, this paper mainly uses case studies and comparative methods without more precise and accurate first-hand data, such as questionnaires and data analyses, to support it, which has certain limitations. In the future, the researcher can design questionnaires and invite a sufficient number of participants to fill out the questionnaire, analyzing the outcomes based on what they have written. With the data from people of different ages, genders, and regions in China, the study would be more explicit and more convincing.

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