

# “A Little More Ghetto, a Little Less Cultured”: Are There Racial Stereotypes about Interracial Daters in the United States?

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## Abstract

Negative stereotypes about racial minorities, particularly African Americans, persist in the United States. Given the imperviousness of racial stereotypes about minorities, can individuals who date interracially also be stereotyped? The author investigates this by conducting the first systematic study of men’s attitudes toward white and black women who date outside their race. First, the author inductively uncovers these stereotypes through focus groups. Second, to assess these stereotypes’ nationwide prevalence and to minimize social desirability bias, the author applies a survey experiment, in which interracial dating is subtly primed via photographs of couples, to a national sample of men. The findings are mixed. In the experiment, crossing the white-black racial boundary does activate negative stereotypes for women, which may have reputational costs, but mostly among older white male respondents. These costs include changes in men’s perceptions of their class status, cultural values, and even sexual practices. In conclusion, interracial dating is a key social site where gender-based moral norms are policed, class divisions are constructed, and racial boundaries are maintained.

## Keywords

interracial relationships, stereotypes, race and ethnicity, experiments

Anxieties over interracial relationships have deep roots in the United States. Black and white unions were historically illegal in many states until the Supreme Court banned antimiscegenation laws in 1967 (Childs 2009). Despite these legal changes, black-white unions remain rare (Livingston and Brown 2017). Furthermore, negative racial stereotypes about racial minorities persist, which leads to their rejection by other daters (Bany, Robnett, and Feliciano 2014). Nevertheless, we do not know if individuals who date minorities are also negatively stereotyped. This is a crucial question given that others’ opinions may powerfully shape the social context that daters experience. Uncovering these stereotypes would increase our understanding of the black/white boundary and help us identify the social consequences individuals may face when crossing it.

To my knowledge, this is the first systematic study of men’s attitudes toward women who date interracially. I ask, (1) What are the present-day stereotypes associated with black and white women engaged in interracial relationships? (2) Can observing interracial dating activate these stereotypes among a national sample of U.S. black and white men? I focus on attitudes toward women to

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build upon the abundant literature on the gender stereotypes women confront (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Seeley 2014; García 2012) and because women's sexual behaviors may be more socially policed than those of men (Crawford and Popp 2003). Furthermore, I examine the opinion of heterosexual men because of their importance to women's romantic markets though future research should also explore women's attitudes. Nevertheless, I do include racial variation. I explore how interracial relationships are perceived on both sides of the white/black color line, arguably the fundamental racial division in the United States (Davis 1991). By studying black men's views, I go beyond prior studies that focused on whites' attitudes.

Examining racial stereotypes is not an easy task. A growing body of research on racial attitudes shows that because of changing norms around the expression of racial prejudice, standard social science data collection techniques such as surveys and interviews may underestimate lingering racial animosity among individuals (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Therefore, I use two distinct approaches. First, I conduct a series of focus groups with U.S. adults to inductively identify the stereotypes associated with women who date outside their race. Second, to assess their national prevalence, I quantitatively examine whether interracial dating does indeed activate these stereotypes among a nationally representative sample of men. To circumvent social desirability, I use a survey experiment in which I present the profile of either a black or a white woman and experimentally manipulate the race of her past romantic partners via photographs.

In the experiment, I find the existence of several racial stereotypes about interracial daters. When women date men outside their race, negative stereotypes are activated, especially among older white men. I contend that the activation of these stereotypes has a *reputational cost* that could negatively affect women's experiences in the romantic market as well as in other life domains. These reputational costs could even discourage some women, who may anticipate losses to their social standing, from dating or marrying outside their race. These costs include changes in men's perceptions of their class status, cultural values, and even sexual practices. Nevertheless, they are less prevalent among younger men, so these stereotypes may be weakening. I conclude that interracial dating is a key social site where gender-based moral norms are policed, class divisions are constructed, and racial boundaries are maintained.

## THE EFFECT OF SOCIAL TIES

Understanding the effect of interpersonal relationships on individual outcomes has been a central theme in sociology since its foundation. Part of this peer effect may be driven by the fact that the perceived traits of the people we associate with may shape how others perceive us and treat us. Nevertheless, this mechanism has received little attention from researchers (Flores 2018).

Our close ties may signal positive or negative messages about ourselves to others. Individuals put considerable effort into managing impressions, especially when interacting with someone for the first time (Goffman 1959). Part of this impression management may include choosing the friends who will signal the qualities we would like to broadcast to others. For example, in school settings, students are often advised not to socialize with the "wrong crowd" because this could affect how teachers perceive them (Coleman 1963).

In an experimental study, Walther et al. (2008) tested whether the characteristics of an individual's friends affect observers' impressions of them. They found that observers rated Facebook users with attractive friends as more attractive than those with unattractive friends, even if both sets of participants were shown the same users' pictures. Nevertheless, they found that friends' attractiveness did not affect users' perceived moral qualities such as honesty, competency, and credibility. If our social ties have the power to shape others' assessments of certain attributes, such as our beauty, could they also affect assessments of other personal attributes like our class status? I test this empirical question in this study.

In this research, I test the power of a specific type of social ties, romantic relationships, to shape how men perceive women. Romantic unions occupy a central place in the interethnic relations literature signaling a strong bond among individuals and the weakening of social boundaries between groups (Gordon 1964). If even our platonic peers may affect how others perceive us, I expect that our romantic ties may be at least as consequential in terms of shaping how we are viewed by others (Flores 2018).

## BLACK-WHITE UNIONS AND GROUP BOUNDARIES

Scholars have called attention to "social boundaries" or socially meaningful distinctions that exist

between groups. The nature of these boundaries is important because it shapes the processes through which individuals gain access to privilege, status, and opportunities (Alba 2005; Lamont and Molnár 2002). A bright or unambiguous boundary may narrow the possibility of full integration and increase the costs associated with crossing these boundaries. These costs include growing distance from peers, feelings of disloyalty, and concerns about acceptance. A blurry boundary, on the other hand, permits for “ambiguous locations with respect to the boundary” and more inclusion in the mainstream (Alba 2005:22).

Interracial relationships, which are a form of boundary crossing, may reveal the state of intergroup boundaries (Hoffman 1896; Merton 1941). These relationships uncover the existence of interaction across group boundaries and also signal that members of different groups accept each other as social equals (Kalmijn 1998). Therefore, low levels of intermarriage between members of two social groups may suggest the existence of intergroup prejudice (Gordon 1964), which may also mean that intergroup boundaries are bright (Alba and Nee 1996).<sup>1</sup>

Historically, the black-white boundary in romantic relationships has been bright. The social interactions between black men and white women have been heavily policed historically, especially in the U.S. South (Childs 2009; Nagel 2003). For black men, being “found in a woman’s room” or having “inappropriate communications” with white women were considered sex crimes even after emancipation. The mere allegation of such behaviors had the power to ignite the anger of entire communities, often resulting in antiblack lynchings between 1882 and 1930 (Hagen, Makovi, and Bearman 2013). By 1913, 42 U.S. states had anti-miscegenation laws that were aimed primarily at preventing black and white individuals from forming interracial unions. Nevertheless, in a 1967 decision, commonly referred to as *Loving v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court invalidated all prohibitions on interracial marriages (Nagel 2003).

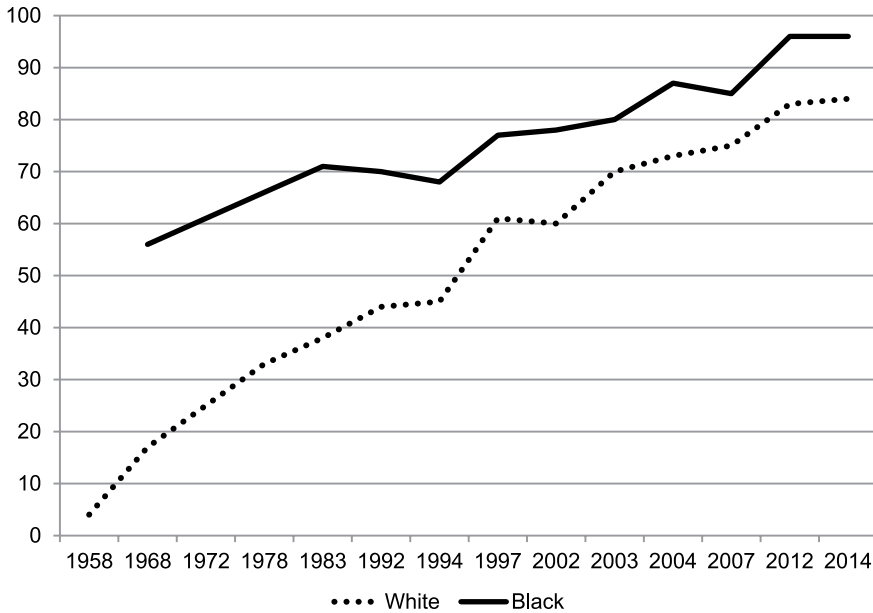
Mirroring these legal changes, survey data appear to show a growing acceptance of black and white couples among the general public. Gallup has tracked attitudes toward black and white intermarriage by asking respondents, “Do you approve of marriage between blacks and whites?” In 1958, only 4 percent of whites approved of black-white marriages. By 2014, this figure had grown to 83 percent (Figure 1). These apparent attitudinal changes also extended to dating. In 2010, 83

percent of U.S. residents agreed with the statement that “it is all right for blacks and whites to date each other,” compared with only 48 percent in 1985 (Wang and Taylor 2012). Indeed, a report on interracial marriages from the Pew Research Center concluded that “today’s attitudes and behaviors regarding intermarriage represent a sharp break from the not-too-distant past.” Such a “sharp break” means that we are witnessing, according to this report, the “fading of a taboo” (Wang and Taylor 2012).

Given social desirability bias, however, these survey data do not necessarily mean that the rigid boundary separating whites and blacks is a thing of the past. Not only do white-black couples remain uncommon (only 18 percent of blacks married outside their race in 2015; Livingston and Brown 2017), but racial stereotypes still seem to shape blacks’ dating experiences. Indeed, many individuals continue to prefer dating within their race even in settings such as online dating, in which structural constraints such as occupational or residential segregation should be less relevant (Lewis 2013). Using a sample of daters from Yahoo Personals, a popular online dating site, Robnett and Feliciano (2011) found that among those who were open to dating outside their race, the white-black line was the most rigid. Although 92 percent of white women explicitly excluded black men, 76 percent of their black counterparts excluded white men.

Bany et al. (2014) asked a sample of Anglo, Hispanic, and Asian college students the reasons why many of them rejected black men and women as potential romantic partners. Only 10 percent of respondents cited structural constraints. Instead, they more often cited a lack of physical attraction, perceived cultural differences, anticipated social disapproval, as well as negative racial stereotypes about blacks. Black women were described by some respondents as aggressive and abrasive. In turn, black men were portrayed as violent, “gangster,” and potentially dangerous.

Distinct stereotypes exist for different U.S. groups. White men are typically stereotyped as ambitious, wealthy, and intelligent, but also negatively, such as being prejudiced, arrogant, and uncoordinated (Conley, Rabinowitz, and Rabow 2010). In turn, black men are commonly stereotyped as being hypersexual, violent, low educated, and unable or unwilling to support their families (Collins 2005). White women are typically seen as “feminine,” kind, and attractive, but also as sexually promiscuous (García 2012). Racial stereotypes about black women include that they lack moral



**Figure 1.** Percent of respondents who approve of marriages between black and white persons.

Source: Gallup surveys, 1958 to 2014.

Note: The question was “Do you approve of marriage between blacks and whites?”

values, are less physically attractive than other women, and are aggressive and loud, which may counter normative ideas of “femininity” (Weitz and Gordon 1993).

In sum, if the black-white boundary remains bright or unambiguous, we would expect that people who cross it would be penalized, perhaps by becoming associated with negative stereotypes, which I examine in this study.

## RACIAL STEREOTYPES AND DATING IN THE UNITED STATES

Historical and qualitative evidence suggests there are negative stereotypes about individuals who date interracially. During the 1800s, many whites considered black men who were intimately involved with white women as transgressors who had to be punished to protect the “purity” of white womanhood (Hodes 1999). Because interracial relationships were typically presumed to be non-consensual, white women were perceived to be victims of black rapists. Rape allegations often triggered mob violence, particularly after the Civil War (Hagen et al. 2014; Kalmijn 1998). When white women declared that their relationships with

black men were consensual, they were often portrayed as “low class and licentious” or outright prostitutes (Moran 2003).

During the 1900s, some black individuals tried to achieve full acceptance into mainstream society by marrying whites. Given the higher status accorded to whites, having a white spouse was a form of accomplishment among some blacks (Romano 2003). Hence, marrying a white person provided a form of upward mobility. Nevertheless, black observers sometimes perceived African Americans marrying whites to be “betraying” their race to gain social acceptance in white society (Doering 2014).

Childs (2005) found that some of these stereotypes may still be present today. Some of her informants, white women dating black men, believed that others considered them to be “low class, sexually promiscuous, and/or dirty.” In other studies, individuals in interracial relationships reported hostile stares in public spaces (Rosenblatt, Karis, and Powel 1995).

Although the public expression of racial prejudice may no longer be socially acceptable (Bonilla-Silva 2006), these qualitative data show that women in interracial relationships continue to feel public animosity in the form of negative stereotypes. Nevertheless, most of these studies were conducted more than 15 years ago, so it is not clear

whether negative stereotypes persist or whether new ones have emerged. Not only do surveys report that public opinion toward interracial relationships has become more tolerant, but there are also growing numbers of high-profile interracial couples (Sternitzky-Di Napoli 2018), which may be helping dispel old stereotypes. Moreover, individuals in interracial relationships may be especially sensitive to public perceptions. It is not entirely clear whether individuals in general actually hold these stereotypes.

## QUALITATIVE DATA AND METHODS

With the assistance of two undergraduate research assistants, I conducted nine focus groups with residents of a midwestern state to uncover, in an inductive manner, contemporary stereotypes associated with women who date outside their race. Because of the sensitivity of the topic, I divided focus group participants by race and gender: black women, black men, white women, and white men. All participants in my focus groups were college students in their 20s. I also conducted a focus group with middle-aged white men in a nearby working-class community to increase the variability of responses. I provide more detailed information about the focus groups in the Appendix. To minimize social desirability bias, I implemented different strategies, including asking indirect questions, which I detail below.

## QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Through these focus groups, I found that stereotypes about interracial dating do exist, but they vary by race and gender of the interracial daters. Hence, I explore the stereotypes associated with white and black women who date outside of their race separately.

### *When White Women Date Black Men*

White men in my college sample initially stated that their opinions of their girlfriends would not change if their girlfriends had dated black men in the past. One respondent said, “I don’t really think it would make a difference. Yeah, it doesn’t really matter to me.” However, when we asked them how other men might feel about a hypothetical woman dating outside her race, their responses often changed.

**Researcher 1:** What about if you see a white girl holding hands with a black guy on the street, do you think people would have

certain ideas about the girl like “Oh, she likes black guys”?

**White Man 2:** Yeah, um based on like, what my friends, think, I probably think it a little too, but I don’t know if I really wanna admit it, like to myself, you know? But um, uh I think that it’s a common idea to think that, uh, she’s like a little bit more ghetto, you know, like, maybe a little less cultured, possibly. Those are like a couple that I can think of, based on like, things I’ve heard my friends say.

Although the historical literature shows the existence of class-based stereotypes for white women in interracial relationships, the existence of a culture-based stereotype has not been documented in prior research. White men were not alone in holding these stereotypes. Black men also believed that aside from the small group of white women who date black athletes on campus—who tend to be middle-class women involved in sororities—white women who date black men tend to be “ghetto” or “urban.”

**Researcher 1:** How about when it comes to white girls who date black guys?

**Black Man 1:** Okay, so I was weirded out when I actually thought about it because I was like man, the prettiest black girls tend to sway toward the white guys, why is it that most of the time, stereotypes here, the white chicks who are willing to mess with the black guys are the ones who act urban—because I hate saying “act black, act white.” Ones who act urban and yeah, I guess I would just leave it at that, ones who aren’t at the top of the food chain in the white girl pyramid. Those are the ones who stereotypically go after the black guys.

The term *ghetto* has multiple meanings (Wacquant 2004), possibly referring to social class and/or cultural practices. With regard to class background, our informants believed that being ghetto meant having low levels of education and income. To better understand the cultural dimension of this term, we probed our respondents further.

**Researcher 1:** Okay, you were mentioning something about cultural differences you perceive... what are some of these cultural differences with black girls?

**White Man 2:** Um uh... the way that, you know the way that they’re brought up could

differ. So um, the way that they might act or react in certain situations, umm uh, like the type of—anywhere from the type of music they listen to, to what they eat, to how they dress, to, what they think looks good, you know. It's just an entirely different culture I think, growing up under uh, white parents as opposed to any other, colored parents.

From this quotation, we can infer that the term *culture*, as used by this white male respondent, encompasses not only preferences in music, food, and fashion but also differences in interaction styles and values. A neutral observer might expect white women who socialize intimately with black men, who allegedly belong to an “entirely different culture,” to be perceived as more “cultured” or cosmopolitan, because they would become familiar with “black culture.” This is not the case. According to some of our white male informants, instead of “gaining” other cultures, they became less “cultured.”

We asked white men how they defined “cultured” in this context. One respondent defined it as “the white male stereotypical, like what this country was founded upon ‘cultured,’ you know.” White men cited “culture” along with skin color as important factors that shaped their willingness to date women of other races. When describing their perceptions of U.S. racial and ethnic groups, they spontaneously placed these groups along a continuum on the basis of how close they were to whites in terms of “culture” and phenotype. They expressed a strong preference for dating women from races they perceived to have similar phenotype and culture relative to whites, such as Asians. On the other side of the spectrum, they perceived blacks to be the most physically and culturally distinct group. Some white men struggled to even imagine dating a black woman. Such scenario, they reported, had never crossed their minds, but they imagined their families and friends would find it “shocking,” as one of them characterized it.

Our participants also mentioned a sex-based stereotype. A middle-aged white man believed that some white women are attracted to black men because they “must love those big black dicks,” which echoes historical evidence that white women involved with black men were considered sexually promiscuous in the past. Merton (1941) himself argued that some white women would marry black men, despite strong social norms against it, because they believe that a “Negro husband is the only man who can satisfy [them] sexually” (p. 373).

### *When Black Women Date White Men*

Some black male informants believed that black women who date whites do it for instrumental reasons: to gain social mobility, which I refer to as the “social climber” stereotype. These men questioned black women’s intentions in dating white men, and they believed that some black women were attracted to white men for their social and economic resources. As one of them put it,

But also if we just think about it from like a general standpoint—in my high school or college or anything, on average white men have—let’s say in terms of money, would have more money at this time. Like right now for me I’m just a working student, so I’ve got to make my own money. I can’t call my mom and ask her for some money to go on some like elaborate trip to some random place—I can’t do that. My elaborate trip would be going to a cheap restaurant. So like a lot of times at our age, around our age, they have—a lot of times they’re more—they have a lot more resources, which are very attractive to women. I mean they might say it’s not, but it definitely is. (Black Man 2)

In addition to the “social climber” stereotype, black men also reported that they believed that the most attractive and highly educated black women tended to date white men rather than black men. These men had a generally negative reaction to this, because they thought that it reflected badly upon them and highlighted their unfavorable position in the U.S. racial hierarchy:

[Black women who date white men] are like the ones who really got like—those are the ones who got the master’s from Harvard, driving a BMW and I mean are gorgeous—they’re just like, no black guys please. But it’s—I don’t know, I guess if it’s a beautiful black girl who’s only dating white guys you just get upset because you saying like she’s making a statement saying that black guys aren’t good enough—for that reason I’m upset with you. (Black Man 1)

One white man also believed that it is the most attractive black women who date white men. He added that such women tended to be more “Americanized”; that is, they share the culture and values of white society more generally.

## THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS

These qualitative findings show that despite the apparent growing acceptance of interracial couples, at least as reported in surveys, negative social stereotypes about women who cross the color line seem to persist. Nevertheless, these stereotypes vary depending on who is crossing the racial line and who is watching.

The main stereotypes I uncovered were *low class*, *kin*, *social climber*, and *slut*. All stereotypes were mentioned in at least two different focus groups (which was my criterion for their inclusion in the survey experiment). Black and white men described white women who dated black men as “low class” or “urban” (low class). On the other hand, when black women dated white men, white men described these women as more culturally similar to whites than other black women, which I refer to as the kin stereotype. In contrast, black men stated that these black women were often highly educated, but that they were motivated by an instrumental desire to access white men’s social and economic resources (social climber).

The kin and class stereotypes are deeply interconnected. They reflect the long-standing group-based inequality and social distance between whites and blacks along two dimensions: culture and class. I expect that these two dimensions will operate distinctly on the basis of men’s race. For white men, I expect white women dating black men to seem culturally different from them and lower class. For black men, I anticipate that the same white women might also seem lower class but more culturally similar to them.

Finally, with regard to the slut stereotype, I expect that white women dating black men will be perceived to be sexually promiscuous. On the other hand, I expect the opposite for black women: they will be perceived as less sexually experienced when dating white men, because white men are not generally stereotyped as “hypersexual” (Childs 2005).

## EXPERIMENTAL DATA AND METHODS

These qualitative findings are compelling; however, it is not clear whether men in general hold these stereotypes. I could apply a traditional survey to a national sample of men, but because race-based stereotypes are a sensitive topic in the United States, respondents may withhold their true opinions. To address this issue, I implement a survey experiment on a national sample of men as part of the Project on Social Stereotypes in Dating

(PROSSID). This experiment has three advantages. First, it provides unbiased causal estimates of the power of interracial dating to shape men’s attitudes toward women. Prior observational research may have been affected by confounders (Green and Gerber 2003). Second, this experiment addresses social desirability bias by using subtle cues based on photographs of real people to signal interracial dating. Direct questioning about racial attitudes by interviewers may activate social norms against the expression of racial prejudice (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Third, by using a national sample of men, this experiment is better suited to generating causal inferences about a heterogeneous population than prior research based on qualitative case studies.

The PROSSID sample consists of 1,116 non-Hispanic white men and 825 non-Hispanic African American heterosexual U.S. men. Participants were recruited during the spring of 2015 by Research Now, a private survey company that maintains a panel of respondents who are rewarded for their participation. Quotas were implemented so that the survey participants mirrored the U.S. population of black and white men in terms of their age and household income. Table 1 compares the age and household income of PROSSID respondents with U.S. population census estimates. It shows that the PROSSID sample is very close to census estimates, though in the case of white men, it is somewhat older and poorer. An additional oversample of 400 older white men was collected to test for age effects, as I expected older respondents to be more conservative.

Table 2 shows that the PROSSID sample provides significant variation in terms of age, geography, and socioeconomic background. The average age of respondents is 45 for black respondents and 52 for white male participants. Thirty-six percent of PROSSID respondents live in nonurban areas. This national sample provides significantly more diversity than traditional experimental studies conducted on college students. In addition, recent evidence suggests that national samples of online respondents provide similar results than samples that are explicitly designed to be representative, especially when demographic differences such as age, sex, race, and income are adjusted for (Weinberg, Freese, and McElhattan 2014). Therefore, in all of my analyses, I adjust for these factors. Average survey completion time was nine minutes.

The survey experiment depicted couples in different romantic settings: holding hands at a coffee shop, walking embraced, and, finally, in a marriage proposal. I included this last condition because opposition to marriage may be stronger than dating

**Table 1.** Comparison of PROSSID and U.S. Census Samples.

Variable	PROSSID		U.S. Census	
	White (%)	Black (%)	White (%)	Black (%)
Age (years)				
18–24	8.06	13.09	11	16
25–44	27.06	34.42	31	38
45–64	33.33	39.27	37	34
≥65	31.54	13.21	20	12
Total	100	100	100	100
Household income				
<\$15,000	20.97	19.52	11.4	23.5
\$15,000–\$24,999	16.49	14.18	11.6	15.4
\$25,000–\$49,999	17.56	34.42	25	28
\$50,000–\$74,999	21.68	12.36	18.7	15.1
≥\$75,000	23.3	19.56	33.4	18
Total	100	100	100.1	100

Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

Note: PROSSID = Project on Social Stereotypes in Dating.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics, Project on Social Stereotypes in Dating Sample ( $n = 1,941$ ).

	% or Mean (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Race			
White	57.50%		
African American	42.50%		
Age (years)	49.18 (16.81)	18	91
Community size <sup>a</sup>	2.21 (0.98)	1	4
Education	4.0 (1.58)	1	8
State			
California	8.0%		
Florida	7.0%		
Texas	6.0%		
Illinois	6.0%		
New York	5.0%		
Pennsylvania	5.0%		
Ohio	5.0%		
Michigan	4.0%		
North Carolina	4.0%		
Georgia	4.0%		
Indiana	3.0%		
Virginia	3.0%		
Washington	3.0%		
Other states	37.0%		

Source: Project on Social Stereotypes in Dating.

<sup>a</sup>Community size: 1 = large, 2 = medium-size city, 3 = small town, 4 = rural.

(Childs 1995; Merton 1941). To increase the level of realism, I hired models of different races to portray these couples. I recruited two female models (one white woman and one black woman) and four male

models (two white men and two black men). All the models were in their early 20s and attended the same midwestern public university. To reduce heterogeneity among models, I selected individuals with



**Table 3.** Experimental Design (n = 1,941).

		Two Former Boyfriends			
		White/White:	White/Black	Black/Black	Black/Black:
		White/White	Proposal	Black/Black	Proposal
White woman	Condition 1 (n = 155)	Condition 2 (n = 159)	Condition 3 (n = 329)	Condition 4 (n = 163)	Condition 5 (n = 169)
Black woman	Condition 6 (n = 159)	Condition 7 (n = 154)	Condition 8 (n = 325)	Condition 9 (n = 167)	Condition 10 (n = 161)

Source: Project on Social Stereotypes in Dating.

Note: The table shows the number of respondents in each experimental condition. “White/white” refers to respondents who were shown two white boyfriends. In the “white/white: proposal” condition, the female model had two white boyfriends and became engaged to one of them. In the “black/white” condition, respondents were shown one white and one black boyfriend. In the “black/black” condition, respondents were shown pictures of two former black boyfriends. Finally, in the “black/black: proposal” condition, the female model had two black boyfriends and became engaged to one of them.

similar class backgrounds, body types, and heights. See the Appendix for an example of these images.

I implemented a 2 × 5 between-subjects experimental design, presented in Table 3. Study participants were told that they would learn about a woman’s personal life so they could assess her emotional maturity. Participants read a short profile of a woman named “Mary,” which is a name used by significant numbers of white and black women (Gaddis 2017). The race of Mary was experimentally manipulated by displaying a photograph of either a white or a black female.

The second axis of variation was the race of Mary’s two former boyfriends. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of five boyfriend conditions. In the first condition, Mary’s two former boyfriends are white. In the second condition, the two former boyfriends are also white, but she becomes engaged to one of them. In the third condition, one of the boyfriends is black and the other white. In the fourth condition, the two former boyfriends are African American. Last, in the fifth condition, both of Mary’s former romantic partners are black, and she becomes engaged to one of them.

A short vignette describing why Mary decided to end each relationship accompanied each boyfriend’s photograph (see the Appendix for a detailed description of the experimental design). I included these vignettes to reinforce the alleged task of the study: the evaluation of Mary’s emotional maturity in dealing with her personal life. In addition, reading the vignettes may have made the experimental treatment, based on pictures, less obvious to respondents.

I counterbalanced the display of both the vignettes and the photos to control for order effects. Respondents were then asked to rate Mary on a number of personal traits, including maturity,

education, and attractiveness, and to identify Mary’s socioeconomic background. A randomization check is included in the Appendix.

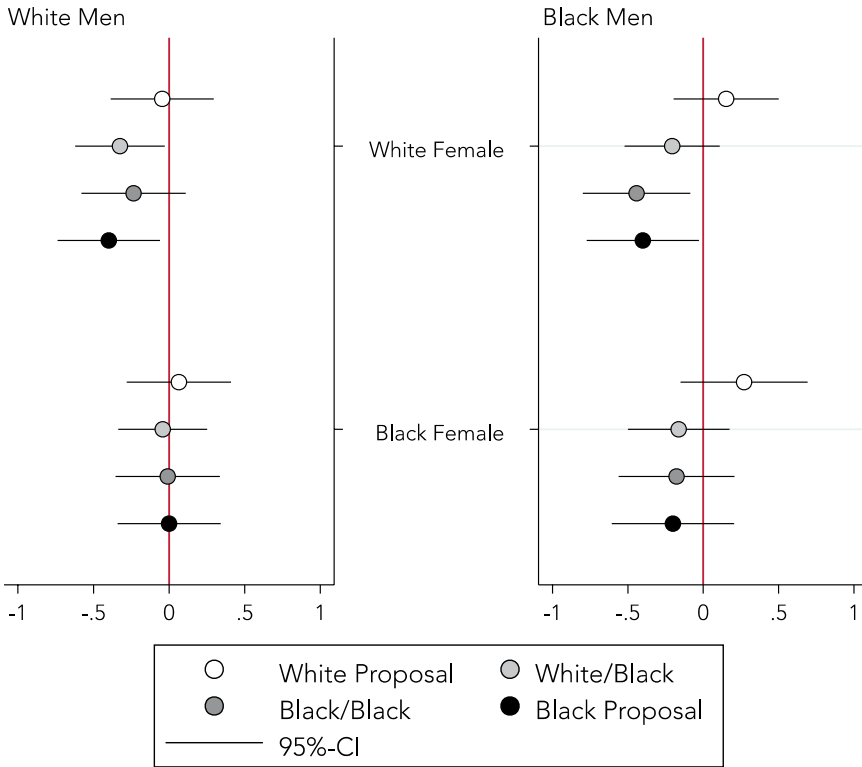
### Experimental Results

I present my results in graphical form to make the size of coefficients and their statistical dispersion easier to gauge. Full regression results are included in the Appendix. For all analyses, I used ordinary least squares regression.<sup>2</sup> All statistical models include income and age controls.<sup>3</sup> Although the two female models are physically similar, they still could be perceived to be different in terms of their attractiveness, class background, or other traits. Therefore, I examine the effect of interracial dating for each woman separately, because they could have different baseline values. I compare how men rated each woman *separately* on a number of different attributes across different experimental conditions. In other words, each woman is compared to herself in different dating contexts. The changing condition is the racial background of her former boyfriends.

## STEREOTYPES

### Low Class

In the focus groups, both black and white men believed that white women who dated black men were more likely to come from impoverished backgrounds. I now test this hypothesis by using perceived levels of education. Therefore, I test whether white women who date black men are more likely to be perceived as less formally educated than women who only date white men. I find partial support for this thesis. Figures 2 to 5 show the effect size of each



**Figure 2.** Effect of interracial dating on perceptions of women's formal education (low class).

treatment relative to the control group, which is having dated two white men. In each figure, the first graph, in the upper left corner, shows the effect of interracial dating on white men's perception of the educational attainment of white women. The reference category is having dated two white men. The white bubble indicates the difference in this woman's perceived educational level when she has dated two white men and gotten engaged to one of them relative to the control condition; the light gray bubble below represents the difference in her perceived education when she has dated one black man and one white man relative to the control condition; the dark gray bubble shows the same difference when she has dated two black men; and last, the black bubble indicates this effect when she has dated two black men and gotten engaged to one of them.

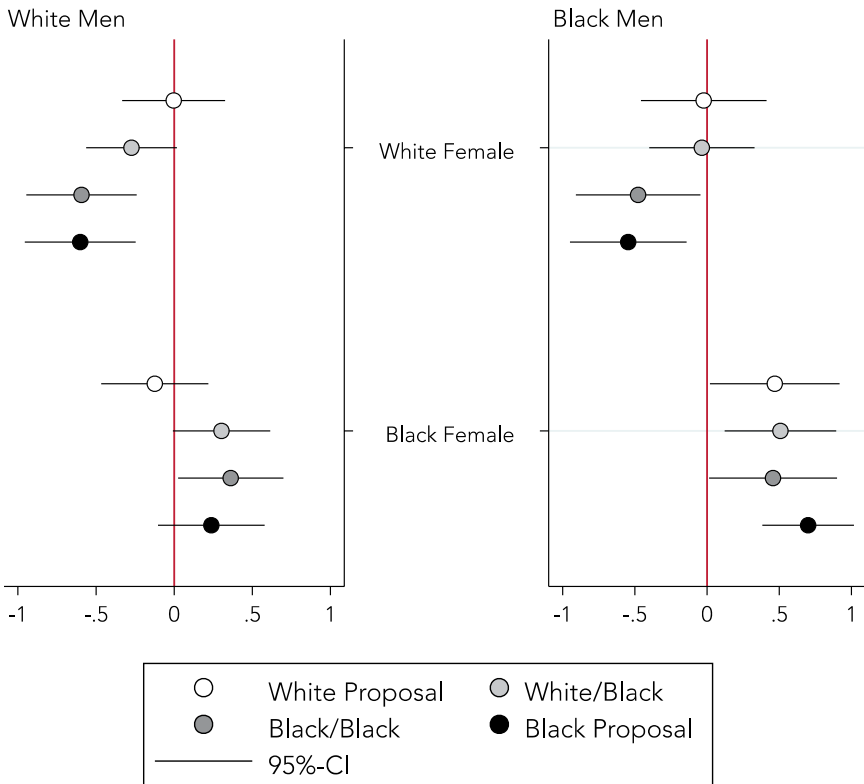
To measure differences in perceived education, I rely on an eight-point scale, which consists of the following categories: less than high school, high school or GED, some college, two-year college degree, four-year college degree, master's degree, professional degree (JD or MD), and doctoral degree (PhD). Figure 2 shows that dating a black man reduced the perceived education level of white Mary

by  $-.32$  on the eight-point scale. This difference is statistically significant at the 95 percent level. A similar penalty can be found when she dated two black men, though it is only marginally significant. Finally, when she became engaged to a black man, her perceived education also decreased ( $-.39$ ). In contrast, the dating history of black Mary did not affect her perceived education level as assessed by white men.

When it comes to black men's perceptions, I found a very similar pattern. Black men also perceived the white woman to be less formally educated when she dated black men. Also, just as I found with white men, the dating history of black Mary did not change how educated black men considered her to be. In summary, I found that both black and white men believe that white women who date black men have lower levels of formal education than those who date within their race. In contrast, there was no discernible effect for black women.

### *Kin*

The kin stereotype has the strongest support in this study among all stereotypes (Figure 3). During the focus groups, white men stated that they perceived



**Figure 3.** Effect of interracial dating on perceptions of female’s values and culture (kin).

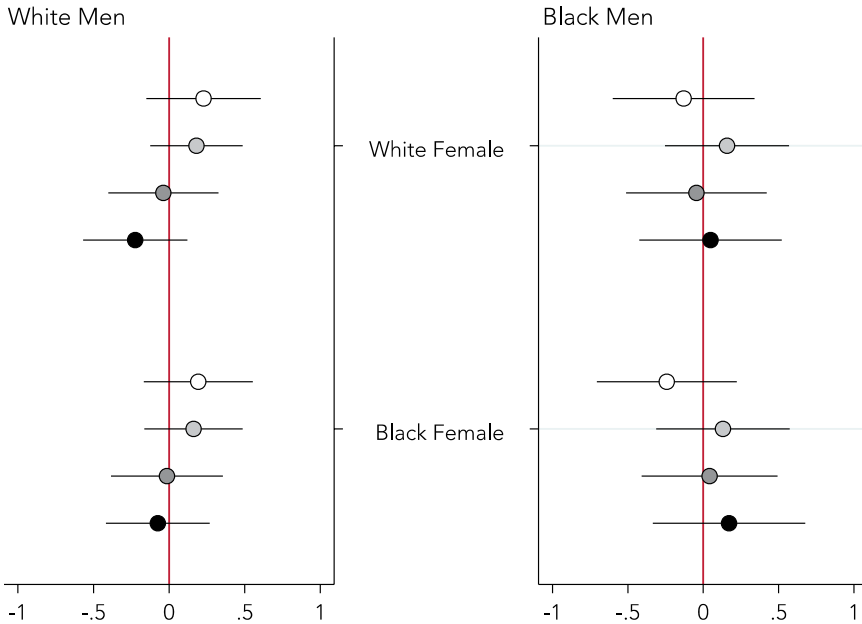
vast cultural differences between whites and blacks, to the point that black culture was, from their perspective, an “entirely different culture.” As a result of these perceived differences, they believed that white women who date black men would be less likely to possess an “American” culture, which they defined as the culture and values of white people. I found substantial support for this stereotype. I operationalized this stereotype using the following item: “Do you think Mary upholds her family’s values and traditions?” This item was designed to test whether respondents perceived the woman character to be culturally similar to her own family. The seven response categories were “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “somewhat disagree,” “neutral,” “somewhat agree,” “agree,” and “strongly agree.”

I found that as the white woman increased her involvement with black men, both black and white men were more likely to agree that she did not share the values and traditions of her family. Similarly, both white and black men believed the black woman was more likely to share her family’s values when she dated within her race.

A benign interpretation of this effect is that male respondents believe that white Mary does not

uphold her family’s values and traditions because she is more liberal and open minded than her parents, because she is willing to date black men. In other words, male respondents may assume that Mary’s family is more conservative than her and that by dating interracially, Mary may be challenging her family’s values. To test this possibility, I included a second culture-based item, which read, “Do you think Mary’s cultural tastes, traditions, and customs are just like yours?” This question was designed to test whether survey respondents believed the female model was culturally distinct from them. If male respondents believed that Mary shares their same culture when she dates outside of her race, this would imply that this stereotype is not necessarily negative in nature.

The results for this second item were somewhat similar to the first item on the basis of family values (see Graph 7 in the Appendix). White men believed that white Mary was less likely to share their culture when she had dated black men (especially when she became engaged to one of them). In contrast, interracial dating with blacks caused black men to believe that the white woman shared their culture and values (though these effects were



**Figure 4.** Effect of interracial dating on perceptions of being too interested in climbing “social ladder” (social climber).

only marginally significant). The results for the black woman were less conclusive.

In summary, the results show that both black and white men believe that black and white women are less likely to share the values of their families as their romantic links with men of other races increase. In addition, white men also believed white women who dated black men were less likely to share their culture and values.

### *Social Climber*

As I mentioned previously, some of my African American respondents, both men and women, mentioned the stereotype that black women who date white men are trying to climb up the “social ladder” and access white men’s social and economic resources. I tested this stereotype by asking our respondents if they thought Mary was “too interested in status and climbing up the ‘social ladder.’” However, Figure 4 shows that interracial dating did not significantly affect how men rated the two female models on this dimension.

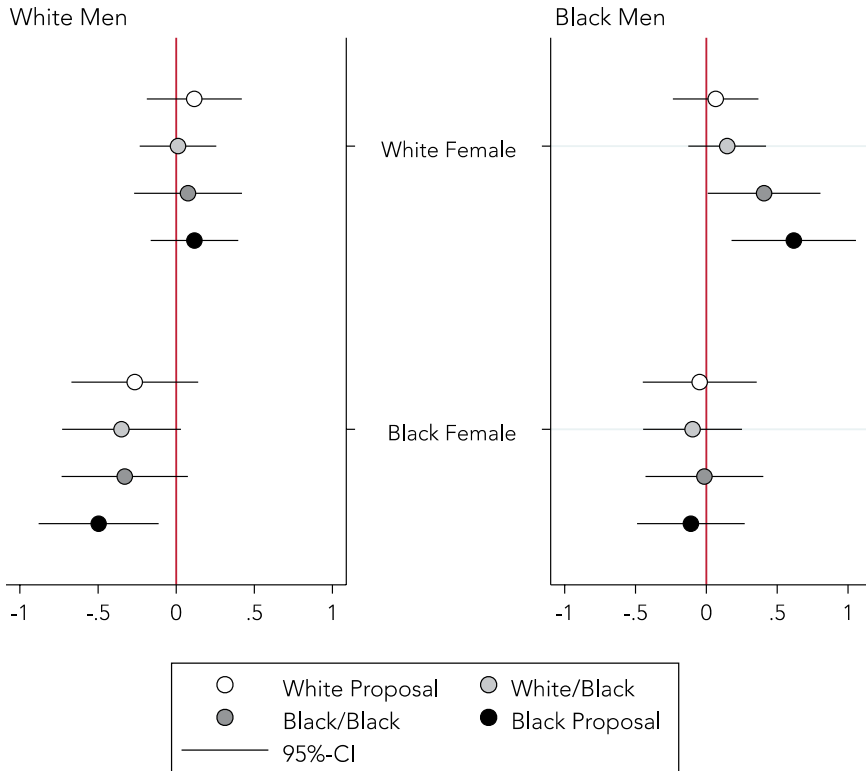
### *Slut*

Last, I tested whether interracial dating affected men’s perception of women’s sexual practices. To

test this, I asked my respondents to estimate the number of sexual partners the model has had, as individuals with many sex partners are often considered to be “promiscuous” (Wiederman 1997). The question read, “How many sexual partners do you think Mary has had in her life?”

Overall, I found that interracial dating increased men’s estimates of women’s number of sexual partners in some cases (Figure 5). More specifically, I found that as the black woman increased her involvement with black men, white men judged her to be less sexually experienced than when she dated white men. Having dated a black man and a white man reduced her perceived number of sexual partners by 1.5 relative to having dated two white men (coefficients in graph are standardized). A similar reduction (−1.41) occurred when she dated only black men. Finally when she became engaged to one of the black men, her estimated number of sexual partners, as judged by white men, decreased further (−2.13). No similar effect was found for white women as judged by white men.

In the case of black men’s perceptions, I found that interracial dating did not affect how sexually active they thought the black woman was. As Figure 5 shows, such estimates were similar across all experimental conditions. However, it did affect black men’s perceived sexual experience of the



**Figure 5.** Effect of interracial dating on women’s estimated number of sexual partners (slut).

white woman. The more the white woman dated outside of her race, the more sexually experienced black men thought she was. Her perceived number of sexual partners increased by 1.75 when she had dated two black men (relative to two white men) and by 2.65 when besides dating two black men, she became engaged to one of them. The magnitude of these effects is considerable given that white and black women report a total of 4.86 (*SD* = 13.77) and 5.67 (*SD* = 22.76) lifetime male sexual partners, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

In summary, I found evidence for the capacity of interracial dating to activate sex-based stereotypes on some women. However, these effects were present only when men judged women from other races. On one hand, white men believed that black women dating white men were more sexually promiscuous. On the other hand, black men believed that white women involved with black men were also more sexually experienced.

**Generational Differences**

A common expectation in the literature on race relations is that age moderates individuals’

attitudes toward interracial unions. In general terms, older people are assumed to be more disapproving of these relationships (Childs 2005). To test for generational differences in men’s responses to interracial dating, I compared respondents less than 45 years of age with those 45 years and older and tested whether interracial dating was more likely to activate negative stereotypes about women among our older respondents. For men younger than 45 in 2015, interracial relationships have always been legal, as the Supreme Court revoked any legal limitations in 1967. To conduct this test, I used an oversample of 400 white men collected through PROSSID. Unfortunately, I did not have a similar oversample for black men. Therefore, I conducted this analysis only for white men.

Overall, I found evidence that older white men have stronger stereotypes about women who date outside their race than their younger counterparts. Table 4 shows the full regression results. I found that older respondents were more likely to believe that white women who date black men were lower educated than their younger counterparts. Similarly, the kin stereotype was stronger among older respondents (though it was also shared among

**Table 4.** Effect of Interracial Dating on Stereotypes about Women (Interactions with Age; white respondents only).

Variable	Education		Kin		Social Climber		Sex Partners	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Treatment (reference: WW)								
WW: proposal	-0.085 (0.259)	-0.166 (0.267)	0.082 (0.270)	0.055 (0.271)	-0.056 (0.361)	-0.199 (0.284)	0.223 (0.315)	0.064 (0.242)
BW	-0.231 (0.253)	-0.096 (0.243)	-0.538* (0.218)	0.227 (0.247)	0.315 (0.277)	0.260 (0.282)	0.001 (0.237)	0.109 (0.204)
BB	-0.231 (0.279)	-0.142 (0.260)	-0.568* (0.241)	0.133 (0.272)	-0.159 (0.299)	-0.007 (0.328)	0.059 (0.289)	0.664* (0.286)
BB: proposal	0.043 (0.282)	-0.207 (0.280)	0.034 (0.277)	-0.237 (0.270)	-0.440 (0.303)	-0.198 (0.301)	-0.144 (0.249)	0.243 (0.244)
WW: proposal $\times$ older	0.068 (0.307)	0.329 (0.317)	-0.323 (0.321)	-0.108 (0.330)	0.379 (0.403)	0.287 (0.340)	-0.022 (0.355)	-0.366 (0.328)
BW $\times$ older	-0.026 (0.289)	0.053 (0.285)	0.311 (0.267)	0.006 (0.296)	-0.260 (0.319)	-0.253 (0.322)	-0.065 (0.268)	-0.352 (0.296)
BB $\times$ older	-0.185 (0.327)	0.052 (0.314)	-0.029 (0.306)	0.344 (0.323)	0.141 (0.353)	-0.046 (0.376)	0.132 (0.334)	-1.236*** (0.353)
BB: proposal $\times$ older	-0.611 <sup>+</sup> (0.327)	0.128 (0.327)	-1.089** (0.333)	0.665* (0.323)	0.348 (0.350)	0.187 (0.346)	0.322 (0.284)	-0.843* (0.329)
Income	0.130*** (0.022)	0.126*** (0.022)	0.020 (0.022)	0.030 (0.022)	-0.092*** (0.025)	-0.041 <sup>+</sup> (0.024)	-0.039 <sup>+</sup> (0.022)	-0.076*** (0.023)
Older	-0.340 (0.240)	-0.516* (0.223)	-0.036 (0.215)	-0.207 (0.247)	-0.087 (0.263)	-0.130 (0.252)	-0.228 (0.222)	0.494* (0.229)
Constant	2.760*** (0.342)	2.704*** (0.309)	4.727*** (0.305)	4.456*** (0.306)	4.385*** (0.385)	3.849*** (0.349)	1.662*** (0.337)	1.900*** (0.285)
Observations	753	759	753	759	753	759	753	759
R <sup>2</sup>	.088	.059	.077	.029	.040	.014	.021	.035

Note: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. "Older" refers to respondents who are 45 years old and above. "WW," the reference category, refers to respondents who were shown two white boyfriends. In the "WW: proposal" condition, the female model had two white boyfriends and became engaged to one of them. In the "BW" condition, respondents were shown one white and one black boyfriend. In the "BB" condition, respondents were shown pictures of two former black boyfriends. In the "BB: proposal" condition, the female model had two black boyfriends and became engaged to one of them.

<sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Table 5.** Effect of Interracial Dating on Stereotype Activation.

Stereotype	White Men		Black Men		Older White Men	
	White Women	Black Women	White Women	Black Women	White Women	Black Women
Low class	+		+	+	+	
Kin	-	-	-	-	-	-
Social climber						
Slut		+	+			+

younger respondents). This was the case especially when the female models became engaged with a black man. In the case of the white woman, older respondents were more likely to believe that she did not share the culture and values of her family. The opposite occurred when the black woman married a black man. I also found that the slut stereotype was stronger among older white men but only when evaluating the black woman. Older respondents were more likely to believe that she was less sexually promiscuous when she dated only black men ( $-1.236, SE = 0.353$ ) and when she became engaged to one of them ( $-0.843, SE = 0.329$ ). I did not find significant interaction effects by age for the “social climber” stereotype.

In summary, I found that age is an important moderator of the effect of interracial dating on stereotypes about women. With the exception of the kin stereotype, which seems to be widely shared across age groups, I found that interracial dating is more likely to activate negative stereotypes among older respondents.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Are individuals who date outside their race stereotyped? This research moves the field forward by (1) inductively uncovering present-day racial stereotypes about women who date outside their race through focus groups with black and white adults and (2) assessing these stereotypes’ national prevalence using a survey experiment of 1,941 white and black men. Because of concerns about social desirability, I used an experimental design in which interracial dating was primed in a subtle manner through the use of photographs.

I found four main stereotypes about black and white women who date interracially: kin, low class, slut, and social climber. Table 5 summarizes my results. In the survey experiment, I found strongest support for the kin stereotype, which had not been documented previously. The kin stereotype is the

belief that, given the perceived cultural differences between blacks and whites, women who date outside their race do not share the culture of their own racial group but inherit that of their male partners. I found moderate support for the low class and slut stereotypes and low support for the social climber stereotype.

Besides uncovering the contemporary stereotypes associated with interracial dating, this study makes two additional contributions to the scholarly understanding of interracial relationships and racial boundaries.

### *Interracial Dating May Produce Reputational Costs*

Although recent survey evidence suggests that the racial boundary between blacks and whites in the United States has weakened, my evidence suggests that it remains rigid enough that women who cross it incur reputational costs in the form of negative stereotypes among men. I define reputational costs as losses individuals face in their social standing in terms of changes in how others perceive them. In the case of women in interracial relationships, these costs may include losses to their perceived educational attainment and/or to their perceived cultural compatibility, as well as a perception of licentious sexual practices. For Alba (2005), social costs are the hallmark of racialized boundaries, and they may signal that the black-white boundary remains relatively bright.

These reputational penalties may occur in women’s close relationships, which include romantic suitors and friends, but also within more distant but still consequential relations such as employers and teachers. For example, one of my survey respondents, a 38-year old white man, stated, “I would never date a white woman who dated a black man. I might bang her, but never date her.” Although the man does not discard feeling sexually attracted to the woman, this quotation reveals how interracial dating may shape men’s perception of the suitability of women for long-term relationships.

The negative character of these stereotypes was apparent in the open-ended qualitative responses provided by some of our survey takers. Although few respondents expressed open racial hostility, several survey takers expressed skepticism about interracial relationships. In a few cases, respondents openly expressed their opposition to interracial dating. A 37-year-old white survey respondent wrote about Mary,

She dated a nigger. She is worse than poor white trash. She is a loser. Once a white woman dates a black her life is over and I will not interact with her ever again. I will not hire people like that, I will not talk to people like that, I will not allow them in my life and my freinds [*sic*] feel the same way. What a shame because she is attractive but she decided to be a whore instead of a good woman. The bible warns us about women like that in Proverbs and Revelations.

Although this quotation is on the extreme side, it exemplifies the power of interracial dating to generate strong negative reactions among some men and highlights its potentially high reputational costs for women. In the eyes of some men, it has the power to transform a “good woman” into a “whore,” a middle-class woman into “poor white trash.” In this way, interracial dating is a key social site in which gender-based moral norms are enforced, class boundaries are erected, and racial lines are maintained.

These reputational costs could potentially affect the prevalence of interracial couples in several ways, though my data does not allow me to test it. First, by imposing reputational costs in the form of negative stereotypes, interracial dating may limit the dating options available to individuals who date outside of their race because their own social standing may be damaged. Second, if women are aware of the social penalties associated with interracial relationships, this could discourage some of them from pursuing relationships outside of their race. In other words, some individuals may not date outside of their race because they might anticipate losses to their social standing.

### ***Racial Attitudes Still Matter, but We Need New Methods to Measure Them***

I also found that the choice of methodology shaped the results I obtained. White men initially downplayed the importance of race for intimate relationships

during the focus groups. To circumvent social desirability, I used different ways to probe our informants. Instead of asking them if they held these stereotypes, I asked about whether their friends had them. Furthermore, I asked their opinion of a hypothetical woman they observed in the street. Through these two strategies my collaborators and I obtained richer information about social attitudes toward interracial relationships, including about stereotypes not previously reported in the literature.

I designed a survey experiment to further address the issue of social desirability. In this design, respondents do not fully know what is being tested. Race scholars who conduct experiments often use vignettes to prime race. Nevertheless, the verbal description of our models' races could have alerted our respondents that I was testing the prevalence of racial stereotypes, which may have resulted in more socially acceptable responses. To prevent this, I used real photographs of people in different dating scenes to increase the realism of the study and to make the treatments subtler.

Some caveats are in order. Although I find compelling evidence that interracial dating affects how women are perceived by men, I do not know if these findings also apply to women who are intimately known to these men. Perhaps these stereotypes operate only when men have little information about women. Close interaction with women may deactivate these stereotypes. Future work should assess this. Future research could also examine how women respond to interracial dating both of men but also of other women. As mentioned earlier, there are reasons to believe interracial dating may also have strong attitudinal effects among women (Armstrong et al. 2014).

Those caveats aside, however, this study provides compelling evidence that interracial dating has the power to negatively transform the moral and personal attributes of women in the eyes of some men.

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## NOTES

1. In addition, structural factors such as residential and occupational segregation may also contribute to racial endogamy (Kalmijn 1998).
2. As a robustness check, I also used an ordered logit model instead of ordinary least squares to analyze some of the dependent variables, such as perceived educational attainment, but I found substantively similar results.
3. In alternative models, I removed all control variables from the models and found similar results.
4. Summary statistics were obtained by merging the General Social Survey waves 1989 to 2014. Sample weights were used. The question read, "Now thinking about the time since your 18th birthday (including the past 12 months) how many male partners have you had sex with?" Hispanic women were excluded from this estimate.

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