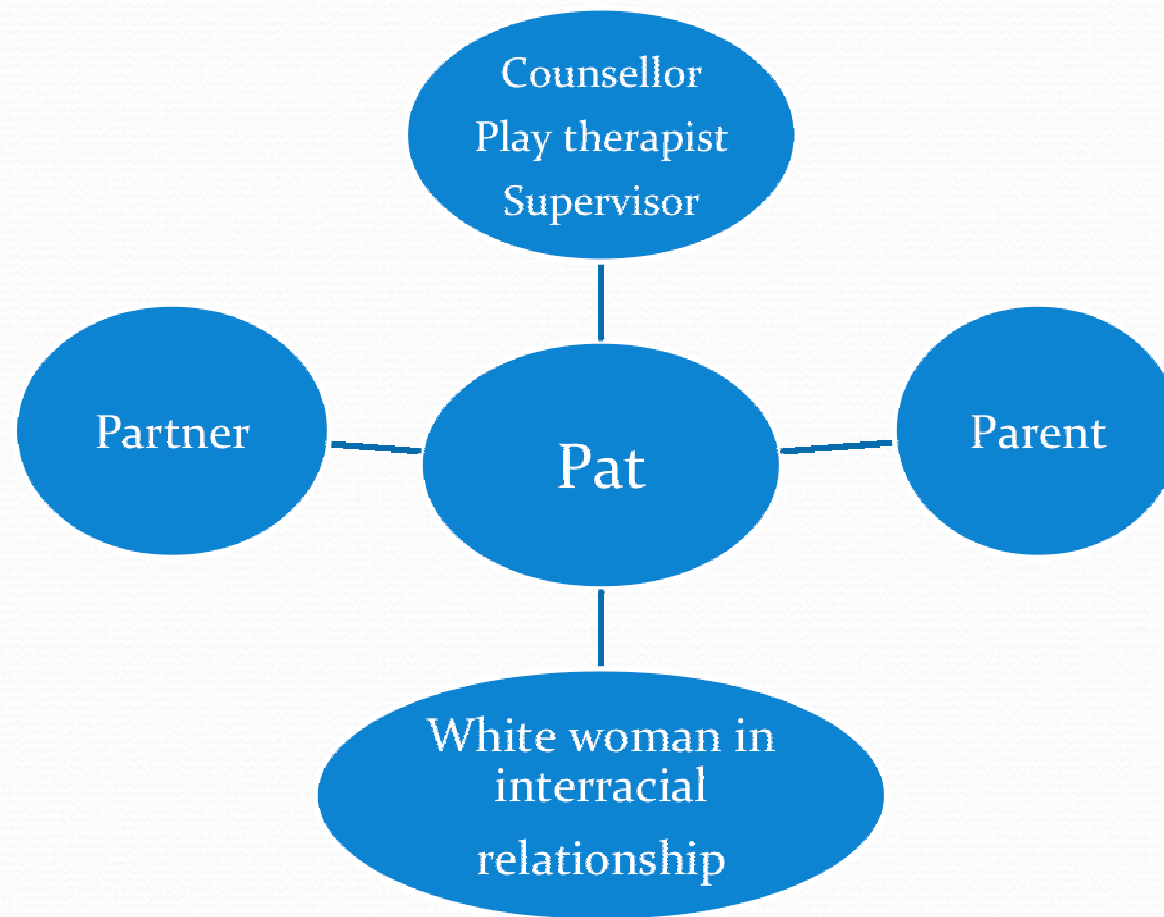


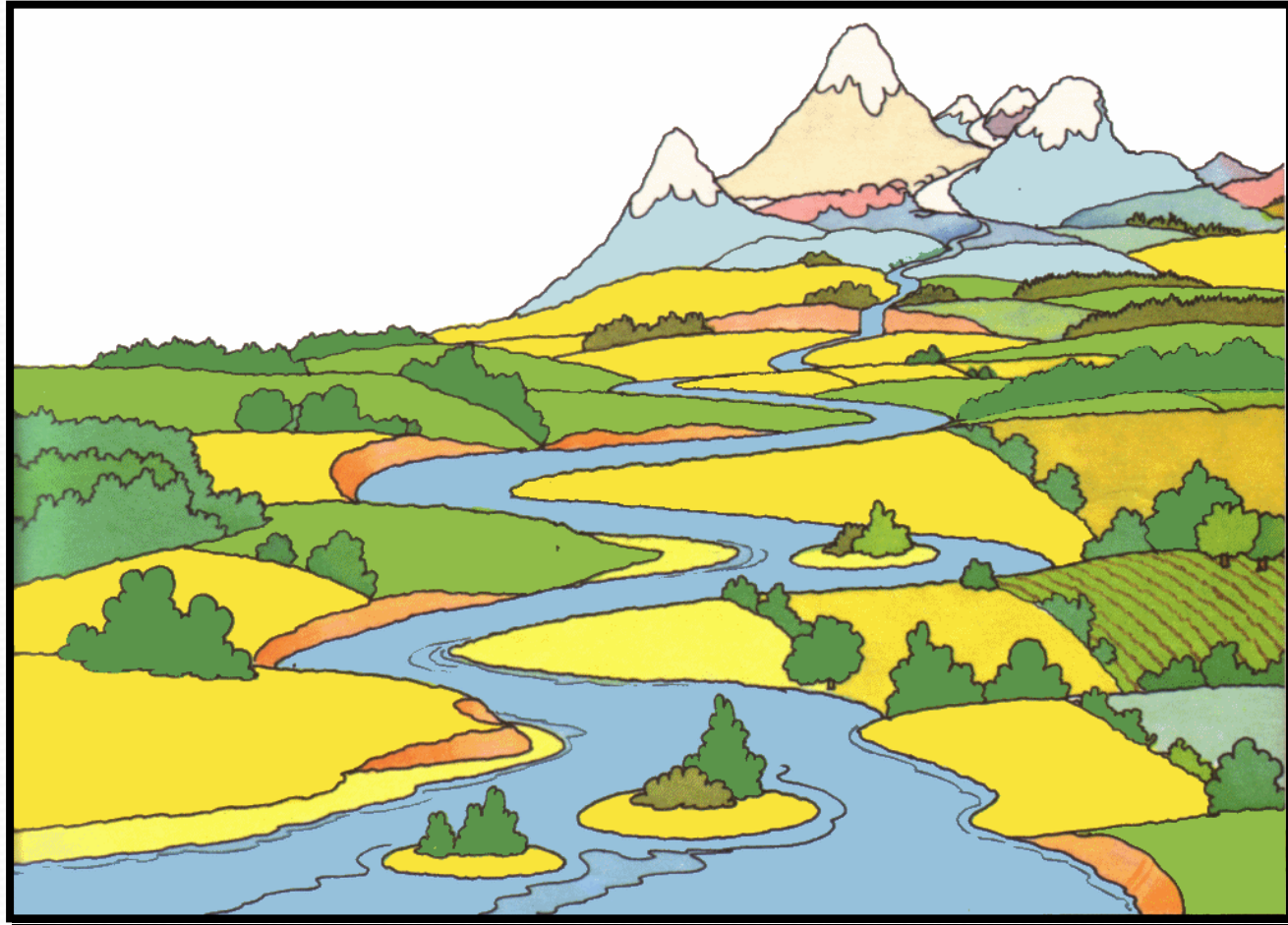
Experiences of white women in mixed race families



Who am I?



My Journey



Rationale for doing this research

- This research focuses on interracial relationships of white women who have visibly distinct non white partners.
- From a personal and professional standpoint, this is a subject that often evokes highly charged emotional responses, particularly when there are perceptions related to social taboos of crossing racialised boundaries. According to Parker and Song (2001) “The topic of mixed race can bring out the worst in people. From the vicious harassment of couples in mixed relationships to the hatred expressed on supremacist websites, few subjects have the same capacity as racial mixture to reveal deep seated fears and resentment (p1)”.

Methodology

- This is an exploratory, subjective, creative and descriptive study
- With all of this in mind, it was important for me to choose a methodology which would incorporate the opportunity to write using an autobiographical approach, to use creative reflexivity such as image journaling, to have a narrative approach to data collection using in-depth, informal interviews, which to enable women's voices to be heard.

Methodology (2)

- According to Moustakas (1990), one of the key elements of heuristic enquiry is that the researcher:
- “must have had a direct personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated. There must have been actual autobiographical connections. It also must have social context significance because it is about understanding the world in which we live (p. 14).
- “The closer the subject matter to our own life and experience, the more we probably expect our own beliefs about the world to enter into and shape our work – to influence the very questions we pose, our connections, of how to approach these questions and reinterpretations we generate from our findings” (Du Bois, 1983, p.636).

- This heuristic research has a phenomenological foundation with an aim to describe and connect with the lived everyday experiences of white women in interracial relationships from their own personal perspectives.



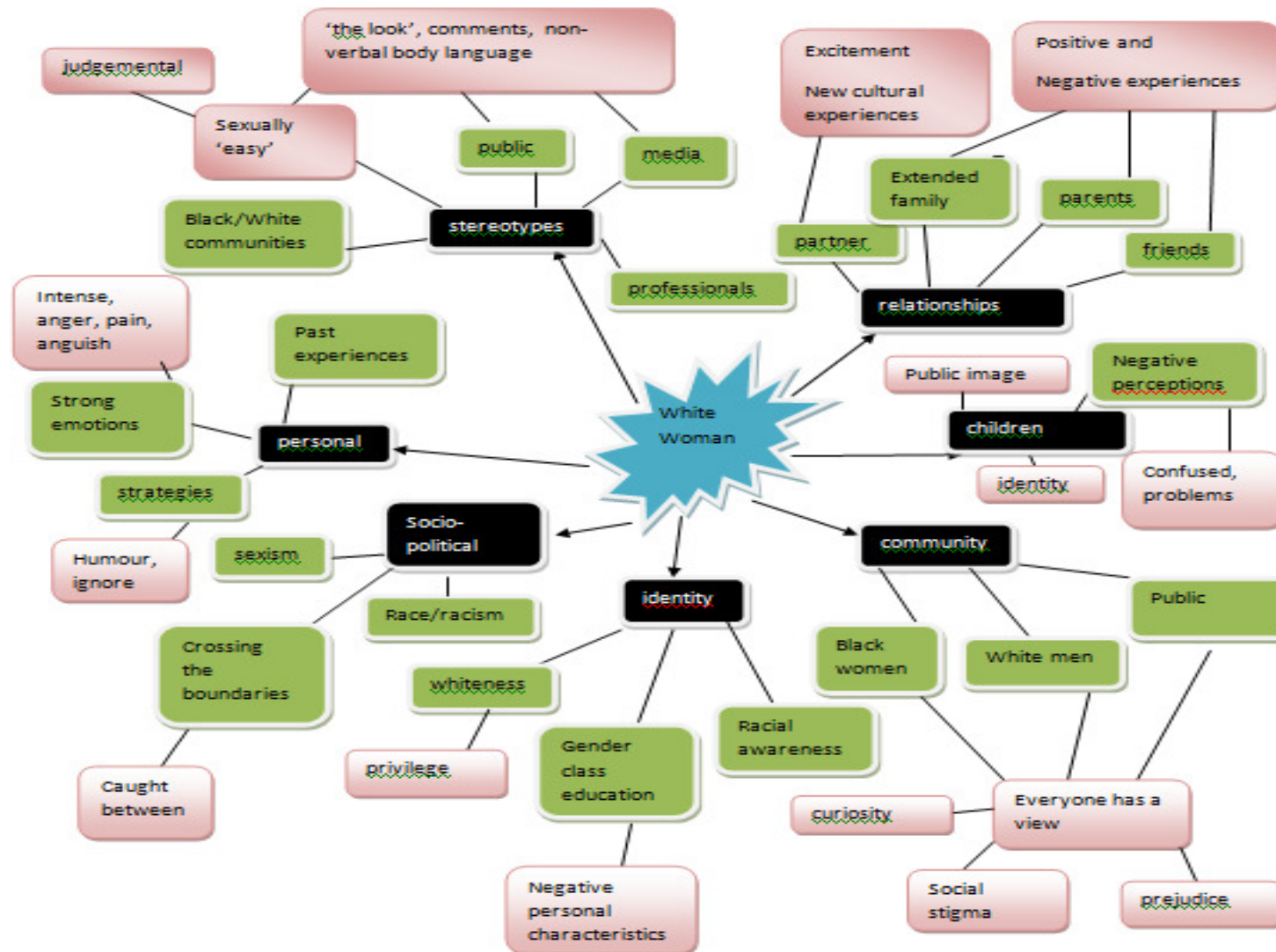
Participants

- This study is a qualitative, exploratory, heuristic enquiry of eight able bodied and heterosexual women who were all in interracial relationships. They were obtained by what is known as a snowball or opportunistic method through social and professional contacts.
- 8 women for in-depth, informal conversational interviews. This was to enable a flow of natural dialogue rather than stilted question and answer sessions. In addition I have had many informal conversations with women who have shared their own experiences and this has enhanced the data collected with the eight main participants and reinforced the importance of the subject for women in interracial relationships. The participant women were in the age range of 25 to 60. 6 were married and 2 were in long term relationships. 7 women had children between the ages of 18 months and 23 years. Three of the women had university educated partners, three women's partners had attended further education and two completed secondary education. Four women had a partner of African-Caribbean background, three with an African background and one with a Nepalese ethnic background.

Data analysis

- Immersion – in depth reading of women's narratives. Emotional connections, social contextual issues
- Visual representation using collages
- Incubation – taking a break
- Illumination – reading again – individual depictions and clustering into themes. A constant revisiting data
- Explication - deeper analysis of themes and personal insight into the synchronicity of my experiences reflected in each woman's experiences which appeared to be a reflection in the totality of my journey of personal discovery. It was as if I was holding up a mirror of my life and my identity development as a white woman in an interracial relationship was being reflected back to me.

Themes



How come you and you are
together?

What about the children?

Intense
emotional
experience

I'm not racist but ...

Who am I?

Emotions





How come you and you are together?

- Many had stories about experiences and comments from others about their relationships, how external people may regard interracial relationships and perhaps seeing their relationship as unnatural and non-traditional and uncomfortable.
‘you put your relationship on the slab for people to dissect’.
- What women were describing were feelings of being publically exposed and a sense that everybody has openly and publically dissected their personal relationships and formed an inaccurate and intrusive view of their personal relationship.

Critical Gaze



What about the children?

- children highlighted the intensity of emotion women felt, the injustices and extra layers of worry that being a mother of a child of mixed race brought into the parenting experience.
- aware they did not physically resemble their children and this often resulted in various reactions from outsiders with assumptions made about being foster carers or adoptive parents.
- “I had to check out for myself I had the strength because I knew that my experience as a mother would be very different if my son was white...I have those extra layers of worry that I wouldn't have if he was white. I was not just the partner of a Black person but the mother of a Black boy as opposed to a Black girl.”
- aware that other people's perceptions of children of mixed heritage may be unfavourable and invalidating

I'm not racist but....

- As the relationship deepens and appears to become serious then the reality of thinking about family reactions comes to the fore
- All women reflected anxiety of differing degrees about informing their families of being in a relationship with a black man
- The reactions of families ranged from immediate acceptance to shock or disbelief
- Often white women and their families also experienced negative comments from educational and health professionals..

Who am I/Where do I belong?

- Women were at various stages of racial awareness in line with Helms' (1990) and Donoghue's (2004) identity models.
- How race informed the women's lives ranged on a continuum from 'colour blind' to an active anti-racist stance as also identified in research by Sweeney (2008) and Karis (2003).
- This is also influenced by the social context of white culture and how this informs white women's perceptions and views about their own white identity and their partner's racial identity.
- Being in a relationship with a Black man impacted differently on women. Some expressed being affected by their personal experiences and realisation of the daily impact of racism on their partners, stirring strong feelings and realisations within themselves and their identity as a white woman. For example, living in 'both worlds' but not feeling as if they 'belonged in either'.

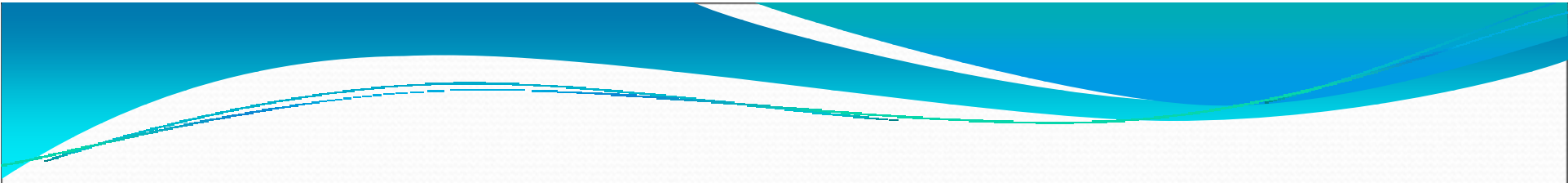
- I remember explaining that it was almost like having a schizophrenic personality, because you lived your life as this well educated, middle class white woman who was a teacher, and that was who you kind of were, but then you got this other identity. And so when you are 'you' not in your home, people treat you in this way and then you are 'you' with your family and you get treated very different, and then you are 'you' with just you and your partner, different again, you and your child, different again, so you actually end up adapting to all these different....you cannot just be that one self, and you tune in and become very sensitive and aware and pick up on things.”

Discussion

- Does Race Matter?

The interracial relationship can bring to the fore issues about race that otherwise may be unseen, that is, racialised and sexualised stereotypes that currently exist.

Whilst this current research is not meant to be complete or conclusive it introduces aspects of racially nuanced lived experiences of white women who have crossed racialised boundaries. This research supports other studies (Okitikpi, 2009; Rosenblatt et al, 1999; Killian, 2012; Sweeney, 2008) identifying a range of views of white women in interracial relationships along a continuum from colour blind to anti-racist. Some women claimed that race did not matter in their lives and emphasised being 'ordinary' or 'boring', particularly in their private worlds. They recognised that external perceptions about their relationships were different, and this shaped and influenced their behaviour when they were outside so as not to be perceived as similar to the unfavourable stereotypes e.g. being seen as united and together as a family and, ensuring children were well behaved. For other women, race was seen as central to their identity as a couple and as a family with discussions about where to live and where to send children to school and challenging racist attitudes.

- 
- Although some women denied the importance of racism and stereotypes, all women could draw on experiences of invalidating comments, and critical looks that influenced their behaviours. Thus there was some recognition at an unconscious level of these influences and how they affected their behaviours. Other women who were more cognisant about issues of race would consider the impact of racism and how this would influence situations such as where they would socialise and who they mixed with.
 - There were a range of responses from the women regarding the importance of discussions about race from those who did not talk about the importance of race in their lives as partners of black men through to those who recognised the salience of race to themselves and were also able to acknowledge, empathise and discuss the pain and frustration of their partner's experiences as well as their own and their children's experiences.

The Good White Girl

- Being in an interracial relationship challenges explicitly held beliefs in a family of what was acceptable
- The relevance of skin colour. This visible difference can feed into people's subjective views, historical and social contexts and symbolic imagery.
- 'language of skin' exists to depict how people are perceived through that initial coloured lens which may trigger a range of feelings including fear, hatred and suspicion with the subjective and perceived social value our relationships becoming judged according to these differences of skin colour.
- racialised images of masculinity and femininity were argued to inform social attitudes, perceptions and stereotypes of different ethnic groups. They appear to have relevance to this current research as those women who saw the significance of 'colour in their relationships had to fight against the stereotype image of 'poor white woman as trash'.
- Thus entering an interracial relationship may mean a white woman gains high racialised visibility by association with her partner, albeit sometimes unfavourable and adverse, being perceived as betraying whiteness. The relationship is perceived as socially provocative and challenges the 'good white girl' image of virtue, decency and respectability. She becomes a 'norm' breaker and for some women, this was identified as bringing scandal and shame on the family with their family's initial response often being a refusal to speak.
- A realisation that as a white woman she has transgressed racialised and gendered norms by 'crossing boundaries.

The Perfect White Mother

- What is a good white mother? She is married, heterosexual and her husband is white and has a similar social background in contrast to this perceived ideal, white women in interracial relationships and having mixed race children are seen to transgress these socially accepted norms.

- Specific issues for mothers may include

- A change of social status.

Whilst there are social, gendered views about the role and expectations of being a white mother, when a white woman enters an interracial relationship and has children, she moves out of the 'norm' to another socially positioned place that of 'racialised motherhood'.

- Questions about maternal competence

questioned mainly posed by black members of families about practical skin and hair care and providing 'culturally embedded' meals reflecting their partner's family traditions. Some women discussed how they were scrutinised and maybe did not reach expected standards.

Mothers are 'other' to their children

- White mothers often do not look like their children due to differences in skin colour, facial features and hair texture. This has implications for the personal, emotional internalised feelings of both mother and child as well as how one is perceived externally by strangers, family and community.
- The skin also provides direct information about the external world, socially of an individual's membership to social group, as well as a connection with a mother. The role of skin in the mother/child relationship is a sensory experience, using all five senses, which can evoke the joy of love but also the pain of recognition that your child may be exposed to difficult experiences due to the colour of their skin.
- Skin colour can evoke a range of feelings from fear, hatred, alienation through to love, from a close connection and mutual togetherness to distance. For white mothers of mixed race children, there needs to be a gathering up of inner strength and development of resilience to face the looks and invalidating comments, through being challenged as to whether they are 'good enough' mothers and live with the tensions created by the proximity of love and difference.

- Identity

- This process is not static, it is fluid and constantly evolving as new situations and challenges arise. Our belief systems adjust and change to assimilate these new experiences. Sometimes these new ideas are added to existing beliefs and sometimes individuals achieve a developmental transition in their sense of self. Identity is multi-factorial including race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, gender and class.
- It has to be recognised that this is a growth and developmental process which changes over time. Women undergo a process of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of their identities based on their experiences of being in an interracial relationship.
- Using Helms (1990) model as a guide, women in this research were at different levels of awareness about their racial identity and the impact of being in an interracial relationship. These ranged from minimal awareness seeing the world through a 'colour blind' lens through to women who had a more coherent narrative about the impact of racism and how it affected many aspects of their lives, the importance of being proactive in having open discussions with their partners and children and an awareness and realisation of their own white identity together with the privileges their whiteness affords them
- Entering an interracial relationship involves a number of challenges and changes in identity for the white woman including a shifting of reference group orientation, a recognition that she will be treated differently if she is on her own or with her partner and will be scrutinised as a woman and as a mother. Other challenges involved questions about their morality and valid 'white woman' membership due to transgression of the expected white dominant norms.

Implications for counsellors



- key recommendations identified for multiculturally skilled counsellors incorporate counsellor awareness of assumptions, values and biases, understanding the world view of the culturally different client and developing appropriate intervention strategies and techniques. This is then broken down further into 'beliefs and attitudes', 'knowledge and skills'. **The emphasis throughout is the need for self-awareness development by counsellors to understand their own biases and stereotypical views.**
- Lago (2011) discusses the dialectic tension that exists between the 'universalist' approach of working with everybody the same whatever their origins or identity' and a client diversity approach and reinforces the need for self awareness of their own cultural experiences and how these may inform their own views and values, be aware of their own identity development as well as their clients and consider whether their approach is appropriate. **Counsellors working with white women in interracial relationships need to expand self-awareness by considering how they may unconsciously perceive white women, couples and mixed race families.** Counsellors who wish to work effectively should develop their understanding of the client's world view as a woman, partner and mother, and in addition, developing knowledge about other social positions involving class and gender.

- In line with existing theory (Lago, 2006, 2011; Sue, 2010) what is needed is (1) a genuine respect and awareness and comfort in discussions which may be race related. Counsellors need to be comfortable and able to talk openly about racial issues, (2) cultural empathy is required, and that is an ability to step into the client's racial world view and acknowledge and validate that experience. This requires deep reflection on the counsellor's own racial experience and privilege and/or oppression associated with the counsellor's own racial identity, (3) counsellors should become knowledgeable about historical and societal contexts which impact on the woman's experiences, (4) counsellors should develop the ability to acknowledge the reality of racism and (5) for white counsellors there should be increased reflections about the social positioning and meaning of whiteness and privilege (Ryde, 2010) and for black counsellors an exploration of their own internalised biases, stereotypes, emotions and experiences. (Helms, 1991; Sue, 2010).

Women's experiences and thoughts concerning therapy

- Due to negativity from both black and white communities women may be cautious about discussing personal issues with black and white counsellors;
- Some women may anticipate hostility, criticism, disbelief or lack of awareness of their experiences
- Women may feel 'constrained' or 'judged' in the therapeutic relationship and their experiences and strengths unacknowledged;
- Some women may feel counsellors avoid certain topics particularly issues of 'race';
- Many women have developed strategies such as screening people, discrediting and confrontation.

