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## Crossing the Color Line in Women's Friendships



As a White woman interested in building friendships across race, I've often reflected on the wisdom of the advice given by African American lesbian poet Pat Parker (1978, p. 68):

For the white person who wants to know  
how to be my friend  
The first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black.  
Second, you must never forget that i'm Black.  
—Pat Parker, "For the White Person Who  
Wants to Know How to Be My Friend"  
from *Movement in Black*,  
Firebrand Books, Ithaca, New York.  
Copyright © 1978 by Pat Parker.

The deep truth expressed in this poem is that, in order to cross the color line in friendship, White people simultaneously need to see the other person's individuality free of racial prejudice while always being aware that people of other races have a unique identity that reflects their racial heritage and experiences with racism. A cross-race friendship is not likely to succeed if one person cannot see beyond the other's race. However, it is not sufficient to be "color-blind" in friendship. This denies the Person of Color the reality of her or his life as a member of a racial group with its own cultural values and as a target of racism; it also ignores the history of privileges the White friend has had. A similar point may be made concerning cross-cultural friendships. Women from different cultures, such as American and Arabic or Chinese and Liberian, confront a fundamental Otherness (Bell & Coleman, 1999). A recognition of these differences may be needed before a common ground or empathy can occur and lead to friendship.

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Cross-race friendships are significant because understanding women's relationships is important within the realm of the psychology of women. Building alliances among women has been one of the feminist principles that guides research in the field. The idea that "sisterhood is powerful" rests on the assumption that affiliations among women who differ in terms of race, class, culture, sexual orientation, and ability can be developed. The strong racial tensions present in the United States also suggest there is a need for greater racial tolerance. In the near future, one of three Americans will be a member of an ethnic minority, and this will increase the need for racial understanding. In addition, ethnic and cultural prejudices that resulted from the terror attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 point to the need for greater cross-cultural awareness. Cross-race friendships might aid in this process. Having a cross-race friend—as opposed to merely knowing someone of another race as a neighbor or co-worker—is associated with more positive racial attitudes and has been shown experimentally to reduce racial prejudice (Pettigrew, 1997; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997).

Despite the great importance of interracial relationships, little research has been done specifically on cross-race friendship. Hypothetically, transcending the race barrier might be easier for women than men. First, women tend to be more intimate and affectionate with their friends than men are (Duck, 1991). This capacity for intimacy perhaps would enable them to empathize easily with women of other races. Women's stronger orientation toward interpersonal connection may be partly responsible for the positive racial attitudes they express. In a national survey of high school seniors, both Black and White women more than men of those races indicated a willingness to be friends with people of other races (Johnson & Marini, 1998). Intergroup contact in real-world situations also may reduce prejudice. Intergroup contact had a positive and significant effect on the attitudes toward Hispanics of Whites living in an area with a high concentration of Hispanics (Stein, Post, & Rinden, 2000). Second, women of all races share a common oppression based on gender, which, if acknowledged, may enhance a sense of sisterhood.

Contrary to expectation, women and girls do not have more cross-race friends than do men and boys (Smith & Schneider, 2000; Way & Chen, 2000). Little is known about why this occurs. Recently, researchers have begun to ask questions about how same-sex friendships vary across races and cultures. Cultural blueprints for friendship exist that specify who can and cannot be friends, what friends are supposed to do together, and how intimate the friendship will be (McCall, 1988). Discomfort or conflict might occur if the friendship deviates from what is expected. The friendship blueprints of different cultures are just beginning to be explored.

The blueprint in the United States is that friendships typically occur between those who are alike in terms of race, age, sex, social class, sexual orientation, and culture. As a friendship develops, the personality of the friend, as well as similar interests, attitudes, and values, becomes increasingly

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important. Friends also are expected to be considerate, affectionate, self-disclosing, and companionable (Hays, 1984). In addition, all friendships require trust (Holmes & Rempel, 1989). As friends get to know each other better, they become more vulnerable to one another. Trust is based on the belief that friends will be responsive to one's intimate communications, as well as sometimes make sacrifices to help, if necessary. Once formed, close or best friendships are regarded as virtually self-maintaining (Rose & Serafica, 1986).

The idea of friendship as an intimate, personal, spontaneous, and private relationship between two people reflects a Western, White middle-class notion of friendship. Many cultures do not share the individualism of European and North American societies (Bell & Coleman, 1999). Thus, women from other cultures may hold different values about friendships. For instance, in the United States, friendships are regarded as important, but have no public recognition. In contrast, friendships in South Korea are influenced by Confucianism, which identifies friendship as one of the five basic relationships required for a stable society (French, Bae, Pidada, & Lee, 2006). The word *cheong* describes the intimacy that exists between friends (and family members); it refers to the merging of individuals into a new collective unit. Obligations of the relationship are outlined and incorporate elements of unconditional acceptance, trust, and intimacy. Extremely close Korean friendships imply a sharing of one's life that requires a level of intimacy and merging of identities to a degree that is not reflected in U.S. concepts of friendship.

The blueprints of West African and North American friendships also differ. In Ghana, West Africa, social norms dictate that friendships should be approached with caution. One poem sighted on a Ghanaian truck intoned: "Beware of friends. Some are snake under the grass. . . . Some are just no good; Beware of friends (cited in Adams & Plaut, 2003, p. 333). North American norms of friendship are quite different; friends are considered to be "good medicine," and many people want to win friends. The differences may be due to cultural expectations of obligations toward others. The interdependence of West African society may make it more difficult for people to turn down requests for help from a friend, whereas in North America, the obligations of friendship are light, which makes it easy for people to escape from undesirable friendships. Whatever the reason, Ghanaians are more likely than North Americans to say that it is foolish or naïve to have many friends, that one should be cautious or suspicious toward friends, and that friends should provide material and practical support and advice. On the other hand, North Americans value having more friends, think that having no friends would be sad or regrettable, and expect trust and respect from friends (Adams & Plaut, 2003).

Cross-race friendships develop similarly to any other friendship but may also entail additional responsibilities and rewards not associated with same-race relations. My goals in this lecture are to illustrate the barriers to cross-race friendship and examine how those barriers might be overcome, particularly in women's same-sex friendships. Three experiential exercises

shown in Table 1 accompany this lecture: (a) a guided fantasy about being a person of another race; (b) an experiential assignment aimed at exposing students to areas of cultural difference; and (c) an essay assignment in which students reflect on cross-race friendships. Responses given by students to Exercise 3 in Psychology of Women classes I have taught are used as examples in the following *discussion*.

TABLE 1  
Experiential Exercises on Cross-Race Friendship

**Exercise 1: Guided Fantasy on Being a Person of Another Race**

Imagine it is morning and you are just waking up. If you are a Person of Color, you will be White when you wake up. If you are White, you will wake up as an African American (or select the minority race that is most represented in your region). As your eyes open, you see your hand against the sheets. What is the color of your skin? You rise and enter the bathroom. You look in the mirror. What do you see? Examine your face. Look down and imagine your body. How does it look and feel to you?

You go into the kitchen and greet the rest of your household. How do they respond to you? How does it feel to be \_\_\_ in this environment? You go outside to get the newspaper. Your neighbors see you. How do they react to you?

You get dressed for school. What do you do to get ready (e.g., hair, clothes)? How do you look? You enter the class. Where do you sit? How does it feel? The professor is talking about race. All the other students are a different race from you. How do you feel?

Later, you go to see a White male teacher about your grade in a course. You believe you deserve a higher grade on an exam. You show the professor where you got your information. How does this situation make you feel? What is the outcome?

You meet your girlfriend/boyfriend at a cafe. How comfortable is the situation? How comfortable is your girlfriend/boyfriend? How does the server treat you? How do other customers and passersby respond? Now you go to meet your friends. How do you feel with them? What do you do together?

Next, you apply for a job that you want. You ask the personnel director for an application. How do you feel? How does she/he respond? What do you think your chances are of getting the job?

You go home and go to bed. You close your eyes. When you open them again, you will slowly come out of the fantasy. Hold onto the feelings you had. We will discuss them.

Discussion Questions

1. What were the advantages and disadvantages of being another race?
2. How comfortable was your world (family, neighborhood, friends) to a person of another race? How might this affect your ability to form interracial friendships?
3. What was your social world like as a person of another race?
4. How did you feel being the majority/minority race in an academic and job setting? What privileges did you have as a White person? As a Person of Color, how were you treated by White people?
5. What was the most important thing you learned from the race reversal fantasy?

**Exercise 2: Inclusion**

Participate in one of the following exercises about the experience of being a Person of Color.

1. Examine the covers of 10 books written by African American authors. Grades 1 through 10. How are they presented? What messages are conveyed by the covers of the books?
2. Read an issue of *People of Color* from your neighborhood. How do you feel about the White-oriented perspective on race representation?
3. It has been a Sunday morning. How do you feel about the race barriers that exist in your community for a race reversal?
4. Compare a personal narrative aimed primarily at a large urban audience with a narrative by a Person of Color. How do you feel about the extent to which the narrative addresses the experience of a woman of color?

**Exercise 3: Whom to Keep**

People tend to have a "whom to keep" list. Who are the people pointed out in her narrative and who to keep? How do you feel about the response to the feedback she has learned about?

1. How interested are you in the influence of her close friends on her life?
2. What is your response to her ally, White people? How do you feel about her ally, White people, than vice versa? How do you feel about her willingness to form a relationship potentially "bring to the attention of a person of color" and how do you feel about her ally, White people, than vice versa?

TABLE 1 (continued)

**Exercise 2: Increasing Race Awareness**

Participate in one of the following assignments and write a three-page essay about the experience.

1. Examine the children's section at any bookstore. What is the availability of books with African American, American Indian, Latina/Hispanic, or Asian American children as main characters at the preschool level and from Grades 1 to 6? To what extent are girls vs. boys of different races represented? What content or themes are explored? Discuss what messages are conveyed to girls of different races about themselves by the books or lack of books. What messages are conveyed to White children?
2. Read an issue of *Essence* or *Ebony* or another magazine catering to Women/People of Color. How easy or difficult is it to buy these magazines in your neighborhood? What articles or topics reflect concerns not represented in White-oriented magazines? What did you learn about the women of the race represented in the magazine?
3. It has been said that the most segregated hour in the United States is 11 A.M. Sunday morning. Places of worship are highly race-segregated. Cross the race barrier by attending services at a place of worship that is predominantly for a race not your own. Discuss your reactions to the experience.
4. Compare an issue of the main local paper with an issue of a newspaper aimed primarily at another race (e.g., African American), if you live in a large urban area. What concerns are expressed in the newspaper for People of Color that are not expressed in the White newspaper? To what extent did either paper educate you concerning what it means to be a woman of that race?

**Exercise 3: Whom to Let In and Whom to Keep Out:  
Thinking About Friendship**

People tend to have friends who are a lot like themselves. As Minnie Bruce Pratt pointed out in her essay *Rebellion*, very early in life we are taught "who to let in and who to keep out" (1991, p. 19). For example, Pratt described how her parents taught her to be cordial to Blacks but never to invite them into the house. In response to the following questions, write a three-page essay about what you have learned about drawing or crossing the color line in friendship.

1. How interested are you in having a same-sex friend of another race? What influence has your family had on your attitudes? How many cross-race close friendships do you have now, if any? What race(s) are they?
2. What is your "friendship potential" as a cross-race friend? How knowledgeable are you about people of other races? (Refer to Exercises 1 and 2.) Generally, White people are less informed about the concerns of People of Color than vice versa. If you are a Person of Color, how much responsibility are you willing to assume in order to educate a White person who has friendship potential about your racial concerns? If you are White, what do you "bring to the table" in terms of contributing to/understanding the concerns of a person of another race? How could you educate yourself about other races, so that you would have more to contribute in a cross-race friendship?

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TABLE 1 (concluded)

3. If you are a Person of Color, what would *inhibit* you from pursuing a same-sex friendship with someone White? If you are White, what would inhibit same-sex friendships with someone of another race?
4. What would *motivate* you to establish a cross-race friendship?
5. Would someone of another race want to be friends with you? Why or why not?
6. What problems might arise in a cross-race friendship that are not likely to occur in a same-race friendship?
7. What benefits are there to having cross-race friendships?
8. What is the likelihood that you would pursue a cross-race friendship in the future? (1 = not at all likely; 7 = highly likely)
9. Specify your race, age, gender.

## BARRIERS TO CROSS-RACE FRIENDSHIP

Numerous barriers to cross-race friendship exist. A few that will be covered in this lecture include (a) racism and prejudice, (b) racial segregation of neighborhoods and schools, (c) the expectation by Whites that People of Color must assimilate into a White social world for such friendships to occur, and (d) peer influences.

### *Racism and Prejudice*

Racism and prejudice are the most powerful barriers to establishing cross-race friendship. Prejudice against Black people is predominant in the United States, possibly due to the unique history and subhuman treatment of Africans brought to the colonies as slaves (Amodio & Devine, 2005). However, prejudices exist against many different ethnic groups in American society. Although many White people today consciously reject racist beliefs and assert that everyone should be treated equally regardless of skin color, a majority of Whites hold negative attitudes toward other races, particularly Blacks (e.g., Schuman, Steeh, Bobo, & Krysan, 1997). In one study, 25 to 74 percent of White people selected the following traits to describe Black people: lazy, athletic, rhythmic, low in intelligence, poor, criminal, hostile, and loud (Devine & Elliott, 1995). Sometimes these beliefs are communicated directly by parents, as illustrated by the comments of one White woman student:

I used to go to bake sales with my mother when I was six. The black people would bring in beautiful pies and cakes, but after they left the church, people threw all of the desserts in the trash. My grandmother told me they were dirty people. . . . My mother also told me that my brother and I were not allowed to walk home from school with a black boy we knew because the neighbors were complaining. Everyone had to stay on their own side of the tracks.

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At other times, they are communicated indirectly, as another White woman explained:

My grade school was considered progressive. It was a mixture of children of university faculty and children from, as my mother euphemistically said, "the other side of town" (black children). While I never heard or saw my mother saying anything overtly racist—indeed, she proclaimed that we were getting a "better education" because we were "exposed to different people"—she was always very condescending toward the mothers of the black girls, taking particular care to explain in a simple way how to fill out the forms to award [Girl Scout] badges. She also made a point of telling me how fortunate I was to "have these experiences." Now, looking back, I realize she was drawing the line between "them" and "us." I also see that in my daily interactions I am still very aware of the line drawn in part by my mother. . . . I am careful with people of other races, take more time to be warm and helpful. . . . Now that I examine those expressions, I'm afraid they are a bit too close to the attitude my mother used to take.

In terms of Black women specifically, Weitz and Gordon (1993) found that White college students ascribe more negative traits to Black women than to American women in general. Almost all (95 percent) described Black women as threatening (argumentative, loud, stubborn, bitchy, or dishonest). About 28 percent endorsed "welfare mother" traits as describing Black women (for example, too many children, fat, and lazy). Only 19 percent selected traits associated with a good mother/wife/daughter image (for example, intelligent, family-oriented, loyal to family ties). In contrast, traits selected by the White women and men for "American women in general" were uniformly more positive, including intelligent, sensitive, attractive, sophisticated, emotional, ambitious, career-oriented, independent, talkative, imaginative, and kind. Similar negative stereotypes about Asian, Latina, and American Indian women exist among Whites and may result in White women rejecting Women of Color as possible candidates for friendship. These stereotypes then may be perceived as "differences" that cannot or should not be transcended, as indicated by a 19-year-old White woman's remark:

I am not particularly interested in having a friend of another race. If they lived in an entirely black neighborhood, I would be uncomfortable visiting their home. . . . I am more likely to pursue a friendship with those African-Americans who display ambition in business and who try to speak in a well-modulated voice. You might say I [would be willing to be] friends with blacks whom other blacks would refer to as "Uncle Toms," those blacks who show the traits of my white friends. . . . My friends have told me I am a racist and I suppose that I may seem that way to some.

Many White Americans today are not consciously or deliberately prejudiced. Public expressions of racism are discouraged, and many people have a sincere belief that people should be treated equally. Although overt prejudice is less accepted, unconscious or implicit racial biases appear to be quite prevalent. For instance, Whites tend to associate Black faces more



strongly with negative words (e.g., awful, repulsive) and to associate White faces more strongly with positive words (e.g., appealing, delightful), which demonstrates an implicit race bias against Black people (Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995). This illustrates that deep-seated negative attitudes may be activated when Whites interact with Blacks and other People of Color. These unconscious attitudes may cause them to avoid interactions with people of other races.

Even when a White person does not engage in overtly racist acts, Whites benefit from White racism toward other races. The inadvertent benefits of being White are referred to as "White privilege." For example, a White person with less experience might be able to get a job more easily than a Black person with more experience if the employer thinks that Whites are smarter. The White person is "privileged" over the Black person simply because of skin color.

Do People of Color hold racist views of Whites that result in Whites being perceived as undesirable as friends? According to the definition of racism, People of Color can be *prejudiced* against Whites but cannot accurately be labeled *racist*. "Prejudice" refers to unreasonable or hostile feelings, opinions, or attitudes directed against a racial, religious, or national group or behaviors that discriminate against individual members of such a group. In contrast, racism has two components: (1) the *belief* that one's race is superior and has the right to rule others and (2) a *policy* of enforcing such rights or a *system of government* based on them (Mallon, 1991, p. 115). White people have the power in the United States to put their racial prejudices into action in terms of governmental and institutional policies as specified by this definition; people of other races do not. Moreover, White people benefit from White racism even if they do not support racist policies. For instance, Whites have easier access to mortgages than African Americans in many cities because some banks apply different criteria to Whites who wish to obtain a loan than they do to Blacks. This policy, called *red-lining*, is illegal but widely practiced (e.g., Janofsky, 1998; "Subtle but Odious," 1998).

People of Color who are prejudiced against Whites often develop racial hostility in response to the racism they experience. They frequently operate from three major assumptions (Sue, 1990). First, there is a common saying among Black Americans and other People of Color: "If you really want to know what White folks are thinking or feeling, don't listen to what they say, but how they say it" (p. 427). A second assumption held by many People of Color is that all Whites are racist because they actively or passively participate in racist institutions and benefit from them. Third, many believe that most Whites will go to great lengths to deny that they are racist or biased. These suspicions may make People of Color wary of becoming friends with Whites.

In summary, many White people hold negative attitudes toward People of Color that are likely to inhibit cross-race friendships. People of Color, in turn, may not be very motivated to establish friendships with Whites who do not regard them as peers or who deny that racism exists.

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### *Racial Segregation*

Racism has had a profound effect on race relations through the practice of racial segregation within neighborhoods, schools, religious institutions, and the workplace in the United States. Due to school segregation prior to the 1960s, most women over 55 today did not expect to become friends with someone of another race while growing up (Wilson & Russell, 1996). For a short period of time in U.S. history, court-ordered integration in urban areas introduced Whites and Blacks to each other in school settings. However, the nationwide dismantling of school busing programs in the 1980s and 1990s once again reduced opportunities for cross-race friendships between girls.

In racially segregated neighborhoods and schools, cross-race friendships are not an option. In addition, racial segregation can contribute to racial hostility when the only interracial contact that People of Color have is with White people in positions of power and authority over them. As one Black woman explained:

Growing up, the only Caucasians that I remembered coming into my neighborhood were the bill collectors and the police. The bill collectors came to collect and then were gone. The police came under the guise of law enforcement. I remember some of the Caucasian officers shoving, kicking, and hitting several Black men. . . . It was clear to me that the Caucasian officers were the aggressors, since the Black men were handcuffed and the Black officers stood around without saying a word or stepping in to stop their fellow officers' aggression. Seeing the brutality of those police officers solidified an existing uneasiness [in me] of the Caucasian people. I believe this is the "why" I used to avoid building friendships with other races.

Racially integrated schools are more likely to facilitate cross-race friendships, particularly in the early grades; however, interracial friendships have been found to decline during the teen years. For instance, among third graders in an integrated school, 24 percent of White students named a Black student as a best friend, and 37 percent of Black children named a White child as a best friend in research conducted by Singleton and Asher (1979). These percentages dropped dramatically in high school, when about 8 percent of White 10th graders named a Black student as a best friend, and only 4 percent of Black students named a White student as a best friend. A 19-year-old Black woman student in the Psychology of Women class described how her cross-race friendships were affected as she got older:

As a young African-American child, I was never given the option to let certain people in or out of my life. Economic segregation decided for me. It decided that I was going to only let my own people into my life. It made me realize at an early age that friends like myself were easy to obtain and very comfortable to have. [Then] we moved to a desegregated neighborhood. . . . Many of the whites in the neighborhood were those who could not afford to make the

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Although integration of predominantly White schools increases the likelihood of cross-race friendship between White and ethnic minority girls, it does not guarantee it. Even in an integrated environment, cross-race friendships may be inhibited by the social segregation of children by race in classrooms and playgrounds (e.g., Black girls playing jump rope, White girls playing hopscotch). Similarly, social class differences between middle-class and low-income children might reinforce racial and cultural divides. School integration also does not guarantee that girls of different racial or ethnic minority groups, such as Latina and Asian, will befriend each other. Hamm (2000) observed an interesting pattern in a racially diverse high school that included African American, Asian American, Latina/o, and European American students where Whites were the majority group. Cross-racial friendships were found among 41 percent of the Asian Americans, 19 percent of the African Americans, and 19 percent of the European Americans (data on Latinas/os were not reported). The typical cross-race friendship constellation was comprised of one White and one racial/ethnic minority student. Friendships among Asian American, African American, and Latina/o students were very rare. Thus, the integration of predominantly White schools appears to encourage cross-race friendships with White girls but may not facilitate friendships between girls from different racial minorities.

### *Expectation of Assimilation*

In discussions of cross-race friendship, White people often assert that they would be glad to have a cross-race friend if they only could find a Person of Color who fit into their social world. In other words, the expectation is that a cross-race friendship will occur only if the Person of Color assimilates into the White person's social group (i.e., knows and conforms to the norms of the White group). This sentiment was directly expressed by one White woman, who indicated that she had never had a friend of another race:

I pursue friendship when I have something in common with the other person. If I met a Black woman who I enjoyed being with . . . I wouldn't hesitate to become friends . . . [if] each of us had the same set of values and lifestyle . . . [but] I can't think of any black people who have the same values and lifestyles as I do. . . . It's not because they're different from me, but because of their values.

There are several possible reasons for White people's reluctance to move outside a White social world. First, because a majority of people in

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the United States are White, Whites have many individuals of their own race from whom to choose friends. Second, White racism contributes to the attitude that Whites should "stick with their own kind," as well as the belief that People of Color are very different from themselves. Also, many Whites have had little exposure to People of Color on an interpersonal level, as opposed to a formal level, such as boss-employee, and are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the interests, customs, or styles of interaction with people of other races. Last, White people may believe they have little to gain or learn from a cross-race friendship.

White attitudes such as those described may result in inequities in cross-race friendships, when People of Color are expected to assimilate into White culture, but White people do not reciprocate. For example, Serafica, Weng, and Kim (2000) described how several groups of Asian American women, including Filipinas, Japanese Americans, and Chinese Americans, were accepted as friends and invited into White women's social circles only after they became assimilated, or came to share the norms, values, and attitudes of the White majority. Similarly, Taiwanese students in the United States who had knowledge of American culture had more friendships with Americans than did students who were less assimilated (Ying, 2002).

Language difficulties were reported to be one of the most challenging barriers to cross-race friendship for Asian international women students (Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005). Limited English skills and unfamiliarity with the U.S. educational system made it a struggle for the Asian Indian, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese women to earn the trust and respect of American students. The Asian women also experienced conflict between the traditional gender roles valued in their culture and the expectation for independence and interpersonal assertiveness that was expected of women in the United States. One Korean student noted that: "You have to do almost everything for yourself here [in the United States in order to survive] . . . Relying on people to help you is seen as a weakness [rather than a sign of strength]" (p. 169).

Expectations for emotional support in friendship also may be culturally based. For instance, White women appear to have higher expectations for emotional support in friendship than do Black or Asian women. Cross-race friendships could be impeded if women are not aware of the cultural differences. For instance, White, Black, and Asian American women college students were asked to read about a hypothetical situation in which a close, same-sex friend was experiencing a breakup with a long-term boyfriend (Samter, Whaley, Mortenson, & Burleson, 1997). Then they rated which of nine messages would be most effective in that situation. White American women indicated that highly comforting statements like "That's awful. One minute you think everything's cool, and the next minute you get dumped" would be most effective in helping a same-sex friend. Black and Asian American women also endorsed the highly comforting messages but rated them less highly than White

women did. However, Black women also said that low-comfort messages would be helpful, such as: "You are my friend, so I have to be honest with you. You're acting like this is the end of the world, not the end of a relationship."

Messages that White women considered to be "low comfort" or "cold comfort" also were rated more highly by Black women in a study of what type of support from friends was considered to be most helpful (Holmstrom, Burleson, & Jones, 2005). In response to a hypothetical situation, Black women were more likely to say that friends were helpful if they told their friend how to act in a situation, advised the friend to forget about the problem, suggested that there "were more important things in this world" to think about, or otherwise challenged the legitimacy of the friend's perspective. White women rated the preceding behaviors as not helpful and preferred instead a friend who would acknowledge the friend's feelings, indicate that the feelings were understandable, offer to talk about the feelings, and suggest alternative ways to view the situation.

One implication of these results is that cross-race friendships between Black and White American women and between Asian and White American women may be more difficult to establish and maintain than same-race friendships. White women view friends as important sources of emotional support and prefer to discuss feelings more than to solve problems. In contrast, emotional support is less central to Black women in friendships, and both Black and Asian American women interpret less comforting types of support to be valuable. Messages from a friend that White women might consider to be "cold comfort" actually may be quite appreciated, and even preferred, by Black women. The different expectations for friendship easily could contribute to feelings of discomfort in cross-race interactions that might inhibit friendships.

Other Women of Color may find the effort to enter a White world to be too great, as one Black woman indicated:

I am very limited in the amount of time I have to spend cultivating relationships. There are no white people in the places that I enjoy going for recreation such as rollerskating, softball games, and get-togethers with family and friends. . . . White people I know seem to like golfing, tennis, skiing, surfing, bowling, iceskating, and soccer. . . . So, the likelihood of my developing a close relationship with a white person would be dependent upon the amount of effort I put into going outside my boundaries and into an environment which includes whites.

### *Peer Influences*

Opposition from peers is another reason cross-race friends are driven apart at puberty, if not earlier (Wilson & Russell, 1996). Friends may ridicule or reject girls who develop attachments outside their racial group. For example, Black girls who socialize with White girls might be labeled a "UT," or

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Uncle Tom. White girls might be called a "wigger," a pejorative term for a White person who acts Black. In some instances, intense social sanctions are enacted against cross-race friendships, including verbal and physical attacks or ostracism, to name a few. Some of this pressure may be fueled by the concern that cross-race mixing even among the same sex may eventually lead to interracial dating. These pressures cause many girls to turn away from cross-race friendships in adolescence, as indicated by a Black woman student:

I was accepted into the cliques that existed in my private predominantly white elementary school. I felt comfortable being one of the very few black children there. [Then] after attending a predominantly black public school, I saw hostilities that I had not seen or had not noticed before between whites and blacks. . . . My white friends from my previous school would call my mom to ask if I could sleep over at their homes and I would immediately whisper to my mom, "Does her mom know that I am black?" I have preconceived notions that her mom would not want me to sleep over if she knew that I was black. . . . I became unable to relate to my white friends as I had done before. Unconsciously, I was accepting my black peers as my exclusive circle of friends.

A second reason that cross-race friendships drop off in the teen years may have to do with the maturation rates of girls of different races (Wilson & Russell, 1996). For example, more Black than White girls develop breasts or pubic hair by age 8. Black girls also menstruate earlier than White girls, on average. Girls who mature early receive a lot of sexual attention from boys, which draws the girls away from their former activities and derails their friendships with less physically mature girls. As girls enter their teens and young adulthood, issues of beauty and style subvert their cross-race friendships in ways that do not affect men's interracial friendships. In the United States, White women with pale, creamy skin and long, blond, straight hair are widely regarded as the most beautiful; women with deeper shades of skin and dark, kinky hair are placed at a disadvantage in terms of the beauty standard. In adulthood, the economic advantages that accrue to White women due to White skin privilege and through their association with White men further divide women along racial lines.

In summary, the discussion of barriers to cross-race friendship presented here suggests that mutually satisfying and fully reciprocal cross-race friendships may be difficult to establish. A White woman's insensitivity toward racism or unconsciously prejudiced remarks may offend the Woman of Color; conversely, the Woman of Color may not want to assume the extra burden of educating a White woman about racial matters in order to make friends with her. Lack of contact due to racial segregation of schools and neighborhoods also prevents the racial mixing necessary to form friendships. Furthermore, Whites may not extend themselves to People of Color who are not assimilated into White culture. If friendships happen to be formed across the color line, hostile reactions from peers and competition for men or jobs may drive cross-race friends apart.

## PROMOTING WOMEN'S CROSS-RACE FRIENDSHIPS

Is it possible for Women of Color and White women to be friends, given the barriers to interracial friendship? Hall and Rose (1996) reported that cross-race friendships between Black and White feminists were most successful when several conditions were met. First, the White woman usually had to initiate the friendship because Black women were hesitant to approach White women as friends due to previous negative experiences with Whites. Second, the friends had to act consciously to establish trust around racial matters. This was accomplished by socializing, not just at work or school, but in each other's homes. Third, the friendships were stronger when White women educated themselves about race and acted as allies against racism in both public and private settings. In return for the extra effort that cross-race friendships seemed to require, the women cited numerous rewards. The insights cross-race friendships provided into another culture were highly valued; examples ranged from being exposed to different types of food or activities to making feminist political work more meaningful. Furthermore, the friendships were often seen as more solid than same-race ones because they were forged more consciously.

It is clear that, once established, cross-race friendships can yield ample benefits to participants. However, interracial relationships are more likely to evolve if certain preconditions are met. Three that will be discussed include (a) contact with people of other races, (b) transformative experiences that challenge prejudiced attitudes, and (c) the willingness of White people to act as allies to People of Color.

### Contact

Contact between women of different races is one necessary precondition for the development of cross-race friendships. For women who seldom interacted with someone of another race while growing up, the first place interracial contact is likely to be made is in work, college, or sports settings. These interactions have the potential to lead either to conflict or to friendship. However, there is reason to believe that sustained cross-race contact under certain circumstances will facilitate friendships and racial tolerance toward other members of the friends' respective racial groups (e.g., Thomas, 1995; Wright et al., 1997). Interracial contact provides opportunities where prejudiced attitudes and beliefs can be tested and changed. This is most likely to happen when the two people have equal status (i.e., where both are students) and when the contact is sustained and cooperative (Thomas, 1995). For instance, cross-race friendships among elementary school children in a mixed-race school were similar to those in a same-race school in terms of friendship functions such as loyalty and emotional security (Aboud, Mendelson, Purdy, & Mendip, 2003).

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Several women students described having their prejudices disproved by intimate contact with women of another race. Being assigned a Black college roommate who was from the Chicago projects was the impetus for one White woman to face her racial biases. Another woman noticed her own covert stereotyping and racism when she defended to her family a friendship she had with a Black woman: "I responded by saying, 'She's different. She's very educated.'" Similarly, a Black woman who had grown up and lived in a mostly Black environment explained how an intimate disclosure by a White women challenged her preconceived notions about Whites. One day, the White woman asked her for help and confided that she had been sexually abused as a child and was now having marital problems. The Black woman recounted:

I sat and listened to B— with amazement and disbelief . . . surprised that she trusted me enough to talk openly about her pain . . . and disbelieving that a Caucasian woman could experience any of the things B— had just described to me, especially after seeing the happy-all-the-time June Cleaver depictions on television.

Although still wary of Whites, this personal experience made the woman more willing to respond to those Whites who approached her with personal sincerity.

An added benefit of cross-race friendships is that they appear to increase racial tolerance in those who witness the friends' positive interactions. College students who observed cross-race friends complete a task together became significantly more positive in their attitudes toward the friends' respective racial groups than did observers who watched a neutral or hostile cross-race interaction (Wright et al., 1997). Thus, cross-race friendships may have the potential to affect race relations positively among the friends' extended social network.

### *Transformative Experiences regarding Race*

Consciously sought or serendipitous events concerning race or other experiences of discrimination also may serve as catalysts for challenging racial prejudice and promoting cross-race friendships. Several of the White women interviewed by Hall and Rose (1996) indicated that they consciously and deliberately chose to learn more about race; they educated themselves through reading and talking with both White and Black women. One White woman spoke of the importance of White people "not coming empty to the table" in the discussion concerning race. This relieved the Black women from having to assume the role of educator, a responsibility that was often resented because it reinforced stereotyped roles of the Black woman as the nurturing mother figure (e.g., Mammy) to Whites. For instance, undergraduate Women of Color, including African American, Latina, and Asian American women, indicated that they felt ambivalent about the constant



demand to educate Whites about racial matters (Martinez Aleman, 2000). On one hand, they recognized the need to help their White peers who lacked personal experience with racial prejudice and discrimination. On the other hand, they said that the need to educate others took time away from their own personal and intellectual growth.

Other types of transformative experiences may be built on a person's decision that racial prejudice is morally wrong. For example, one 21-year-old White woman had serious arguments with her father about race:

My father thinks that other races are the reasons this country is in such bad shape. He was an active member of the KKK for a short period of time. . . . Most of his animosity was directed toward blacks. He tried to drill into my head that blacks were bad. . . . But I just knew my father was wrong. . . . [Often] I argued with him about it. . . . I've just never had the prejudice in me.

Similarly, a 35-year-old White woman expressed guilt about her failure to continue friendships with Black women from work outside the work setting. Even though she had been invited to parties and dances by Black co-workers, she had never attended, citing safety as a factor. She pondered whether this was an honest reason or "an excuse not to take the risk to really get to know those who are different." Other White women struggled with having received one message from parents to "love thy neighbor" and treat all people equally and an opposite message when the families deliberately fled from racially mixed neighborhoods and schools.

Transformations in racial attitudes also may develop from empathy related to incidents of discrimination that were not racially based. One 21-year-old woman thought that prejudice directed at her because she was overweight had made her reluctant to judge others based on race. According to a 34-year-old White woman, her family's racial tolerance was expanded by empathy for gay issues:

The summer of my freshman year, my older brother announced that he was gay. Mike's lover was a black man. . . . That year I discovered how cruel prejudice and fear could be. . . . [There were] nasty phone calls from neighbors. . . . I heard the hushed voices of my parents late into the night . . . [and] was surprised by the cruelty of [his peers]. . . . I often felt his pain. . . . [Then] my brother died of AIDS and I discovered another world of untouchables. . . . In the later years, Mike's partner became a member of our family. . . . We mourned together. . . . When we gathered for dinner in a few months after Mike's death, my father said, "People realize how little differences in color and lifestyles matter when they gotta rally together to survive." His words were profound. As a family, we have come a long way in recognizing our prejudices.

Sometimes the challenge to race prejudice results from a class or lecture such as this one. After completing the three exercises from this lecture, one White woman student wrote:

Why, now, do I feel uncomfortable when I read the questions in this exercise [on cross-race friendship]? I think that I try very hard to be open-minded,

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unprejudiced, nonjudgmental, and I feel disappointed in myself when I am brought face-to-face with my shortcomings in this area. The reality is that intellectually I see similarities between races more than differences, but on a gut level my fear of the differences outweigh rationality.

Another White women who participated in the exercises in this lecture was extremely upset during a discussion of White privilege. She argued that she treated everyone fairly and that she did *not* benefit from institutional racism. However, an event occurred during the semester that forced her to challenge her assumption. In her friendship essay, she had described an incident at work where the cook, a Black male co-worker, had cursed her and mentioned her race. She was shocked at what she labeled "reverse racism" and reported the incident to the White owner of the restaurant. Her view of the situation had changed drastically a few days later, when she presented me with a supplement to the essay. The cook had apologized to her. She learned that he had been forced to do so by the owner, who angrily told him, "You picked the wrong White girl to mess with." The event caused her perception of the situation to shift. She wrote:

I felt very confused and upset about this. It made me realize that racism really is prejudice + institutional power. The cook may have been prejudiced against me or even angry with all whites. However, I realized that he couldn't have been racist even if he wanted to. He was "put in his place" and made to apologize, not because of our argument, but because he is black and I am white. It was no longer "our" argument. It had become bigger than that and I began to feel like the one to blame. I felt like something had been turned around and I was on the wrong side.

In sum, the intervention by the boss served to reinforce racist values (e.g., "White is right").

For other women, the transformative experience may result from a lifetime of dealing with racism, as suggested by one Black woman:

At this stage of my life, I don't feel the need to prove anything to anyone. I have broken through enough color barriers and am well aware of my abilities and attributes. If the intended friend is receptive to change, pliable, and willing to ignore possible long-held stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory practices, I am more than willing to educate, befriend, evolve, and grow with them.

The ability to look beyond race as suggested by Pat Parker in the opening poem, while simultaneously never forgetting about race, provides an important blueprint for establishing a cross-race friendship, as one Black woman explained:

I would like to understand the blanket hatred deeply rooted in many Caucasians and be given the opportunity to explain my own deeply embedded anger. If we could come to grips with our inner feelings, bring them to the surface, face and deal with them intelligently, then work toward solving our problems, then we could begin to develop a friendship. . . . There are benefits

to having cross-race friendship. . . . You may share ideas, compare lifestyles, negate the bad, build on the good, break down/shatter barriers, and possibly change the world.

Transformative experiences concerning race suggest that racist attitudes can be unlearned by listening to each other's ideas, learning to disagree with respect instead of derision, working for common goals, and viewing people of other races as "like me" or "insiders," instead of "different" or "outsiders" (Fishbein, 1996).

### *Becoming an Ally*

An ally is "a person who is a member of the 'dominant' or 'majority' group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population" (Washington & Evans, 1991, p. 195). According to this definition, becoming an ally around race requires that White women first take the experiences and analyses of Women of Color seriously, then use our race privilege to help change the economic conditions, institutions, and cultural traditions that oppress them (Christensen, 1997). Often, a White woman's first step toward being an ally is likely to occur in the context of peer interaction, when she is confronted with a choice between gaining acceptance by other Whites or supporting a friend of another race. This alliance builds trust in a cross-race friendship. For example, one 22-year-old woman chose to become an ally to a Black friend after she took the friend to a party aboard a boat in an affluent White community. The boat owner, a close White male friend, made comments about how much his property value was being lowered by having someone Black on the boat. She chose to drop the White man as her friend. Her willingness to incur interpersonal losses to resist racism cemented the friendship with the Black friend.

Crossing the line to become an ally is not without its risks (Christensen, 1997). This threat is one faced by Women of Color all of their lives. An excellent historical example of the extreme cost of racism for African Americans is shown in a documentary by Spike Lee, *Four Little Girls*. The film depicts the circumstances surrounding the murder of four Black girls in a church bombed by White supremacists in Birmingham, Alabama, during the civil rights era.

White women who begin to do serious antiracist work may experience negative emotional consequences, such as rejection by peers and family. Their personal safety may also be threatened by White people who turn to violence in order to defend White privilege. By accepting a portion of the violence for crossing the race line, White women are able to stand in solidarity with Women of Color. An example of how one White woman came to be an ally of a Black woman is illustrated in *The Long Walk Home*, a movie starring Whoopi Goldberg as Odessa, a Black maid, and Sissy Spacek as her

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White employer, Ms. Thompson. When Odessa joins the 1956 bus boycott organized by Blacks to protest racial segregation of public facilities, Ms. Thompson is faced with a moral decision concerning whether to help her Black employee or to side with White segregationists. The costs and rewards of her eventual choice to act as an ally to Odessa are vividly portrayed.

White people who become allies generally do so after developing a strong understanding of their own racial identity and the consequences of White racism for People of Color. Cross-race friendships are then sought out as opportunities for growth. Such a friendship is movingly illustrated in *Passion Fish*, one of the few films that has addressed the issue of interracial friendship between women.

## CONCLUSIONS

The discussion presented here concerning what inhibits and promotes women's cross-race friendships suggests that, although difficult to establish and maintain, such relationships provide numerous interpersonal benefits. In addition, close interracial same-sex relations enhance racial tolerance among the friends' social circles. However, the ability for Women of Color and White women to join together in sisterhood depends, to a large extent, on White women's willingness to confront their own racial prejudices and take the initiative in forming such relationships. Conversely, cross-race friendships require that Women of Color be open to knowing and socializing with White allies.

Last, the friendships are strongest when the relationship is able both to encompass race and to go beyond it. Although friendships have their serious side, the companionship and enjoyment friends provide are highly valued. In other words, as Pat Parker (1978, p. 68) concluded in her poem "For the White Person Who Wants to Know How to Be My Friend": "If you really want to be my friend—*don't* make a labor of it."

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