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# A preliminary examination of differential sexual attitudes among individuals involved in interracial relationships: testing “Jungle Fever”

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## Abstract

“Jungle Fever” is a stereotype that individuals who enter interracial relationships out of a desire to experience sex with someone of a different race. This research is an initial attempt to gather empirical evidence that address this stereotype. Analysis of the sexual attitudes of never married/cohabited individuals in the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey find little support for this stereotype. Because this finding only examines attitudes, and not motivations, this research is very preliminary. Future extensions to this work are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

“Jungle Fever” is a stereotype that individuals who enter interracial relationships out of a desire to experience sex with someone of a different race. White supremacist use such myths to justify opposition to interracial romance (Ferber, 1998). Even some academicians (e.g., Staples, 1994) argue that sexuality is often the major attraction for black–white couples and the black filmmaker/activist, Spike Lee, develops this idea in his film “Jungle Fever.” Other researchers (Davidson, 1991/1992; Lewis, Yancey, & Bletzer, 1997; Yancey & Yancey, 1997) argue against the idea of interracial sexual obsession. Yet there is no empirical evidence that addresses this question. This research is a preliminary attempt to gather empirical evidence that address this stereotype.

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## 2. Gauging sexual obsession

To assess whether individuals involved in interracial relationships are sexually obsessed one can compare their number of sexual partners with individuals who have not had an interracial sexual encounter. An individual operating out of a Jungle Fever mentality should seek out many sexual partners of a different race. Yet individuals with a strong desire for many sexual partners may eventually engage in sexual relations with members of other races. These sexual unions can have nothing to do with a desire for interracial sexuality but represent a general desire for sex. Since [Krull \(1994\)](#) and [MacDonald et al. \(1990\)](#) link causal sexual attitudes with promiscuous behavior, a better way to analysis the sexuality of interracial unions is through sexual attitudes.

[Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels \(1994\)](#) and [Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, and Kolata \(1994\)](#) postulate that sexual attitudes can be divided into three categories: traditional, relational and recreational. Traditional attitudes represent the belief that premarital sex is always wrong. Relational attitudes represent the belief that sex should be part of a loving relationship but does not have to be reserved for marriage. Recreational attitudes represent the belief that sex need not have to be linked with love. If among individuals with sexual experiences those with interracial sexual experience have less traditional attitudes, then interracial mating may be linked to less traditional morality. If Jungle Fever is correct then sexual curiosity, instead of love, that drives interracial sexual unions and one expects a lower propensity for relational attitudes among individuals who have engaged in interracial sexuality.

## 3. Data

Data for this study comes out of the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey conducted by [Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels \(1992\)](#). To simplify analysis, those that previously engaged in a homosexual encounter were eliminated from this study leaving over 95% of the sample. This research includes only individuals who have never married/cohabited. There are two reasons for this limitation. First, individuals who have married/cohabited are likely to have undergone sexual attitude changes, in part shaped by their marriages/cohabitations. This data cannot capture the timing of their changes in sexual attitudes and their encounters with interracial sexuality making it harder to establish the directionality of permissive sexual attitudes and interracial sexuality.

The second reason for examining this population can be seen in the observation of [Michael et al. \(1994\)](#) that it is never-married, non-cohabiting individuals who are the most likely to possess promiscuous sexual attitudes. Thus attitudes of sexual promiscuity have the highest level of variability among those that never married or cohabited. The purpose of this research effort is to assess the viability of the Jungle Fever myth. Examining a population of great variability of sexual attitudes increases the changes of capturing a possible Jungle Fever effect.

## 4. Analysis

Subjects of the National Health and Social Life Survey were asked if they believed premarital sex to be wrong. Higher scores denote less acceptance of traditional sexual attitudes. That

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