SEEKING COMFORT AND SAFETY:
HOME SEARCH EXPERIENCES OF BLACK/WHITE INTERRACIAL COUPLES

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ABSTRACT

Although the proportion of black/white interracial marriages has modestly increased in recent decades, along with social acceptance of such unions, this population may still face race-based discrimination when making decisions about where to live. In this paper I explore the home-finding experiences of 15 members of black/white interracial couples who live in the San Francisco Bay Area, drawing on qualitative data gathered during individual interviews. My findings fall into four major categories: race-conscious strategies that some interracial couples employ when looking for a home; the impact real estate agents and other professionals have on the cities or neighborhoods in which a couple looks for a home; the conflicts couples may have when selecting a city or neighborhood over issues such as feeling safe and feeling accepted; and finding a neighborhood that will aid in promoting healthy identity development for mixed-race children. I conclude with a discussion of key findings and suggestions for additional research, such as including interracial couples in future housing audits.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview

The topic of my thesis research, and the subject of this paper, is located at the intersection of two areas in which extensive sociological scholarship has been conducted: housing segregation and contemporary race relations between blacks and whites in the United States. Due to my academic and personal interests in these two areas, I chose to examine the experiences of interracial couples that are composed of one African American partner and one Caucasian partner--referred to in some literature and in this paper as “black/white interracial couples”--in looking for shared housing.

The Context for My Research

Despite marked improvements in black/white race relations in recent decades, misunderstandings, stereotypes, and hostilities continue to fuel whites’ racist beliefs and behaviors. For example, contemporary articles in the popular press demonstrate that, despite decades of “substantial civil rights gains” for black Americans (Yen 2007, p. 5), “biased views of black men stubbornly hang on decades after segregation” (Texeira 2006, page not available). Moreover, one reporter suggests that the stereotypes that black men often face permeate many basic aspects of life, stating that “if [black men] do not
carefully calculate how to handle everyday situations—in ways that usually go unnoticed—they can end up out of a job, in jail, or dead” (Texeira 2006, page not available).

Similarly, I found that the black men I interviewed for this study also used calculated strategies in order to successfully navigate their home-finding experiences.

While research indicates that black/white housing segregation has experienced modest declines in recent years, the legacy of racial residential segregation continues to painfully impact countless non-white individuals and families. Although race-based discrimination is now less prevalent—and more covertly practiced by individuals and institutions—than in previous eras, blacks still represent the most segregated racial/ethnic group in the United States, a fact that is particularly pronounced when blacks and whites are compared. Research shows that while other factors may also contribute to residential segregation, race remains the force that drives this persistent phenomenon (Conley 1997; Massey and Denton 1993; Zubrinsky 2001).

Although the proportion of black/white interracial marriages has increased slightly in recent decades—as has social approval of such unions—such couples (regardless of marital status) may still face race-based discrimination, bias, or suspicion when making choices about where to live (Childs 2005; Dalmage 2000; Qian 2005). Further, the home-finding decisions and experiences of black/white interracial couples may differ noticeably from those of single-race couples. For instance, they may encounter a unique combination of overt or unspoken prejudice directed toward the black member of the couple, mitigated by acceptance of the white member—a phenomenon described by more than one of my respondents. In addition, the experiences of these couples may also differ from that of
interracial couples who are not black/white, due in part to these races’ particular legacy that entwines slavery, white racism, and other negative images. These couples bring together, on a personal yet publicly visible level, the two races whose shared historical experience is arguably the most problematic in this country.

**Framing and Reframing My Research Question**

Against this backdrop, then, I originally framed my research question as, “What factors do black/white interracial couples consider when looking for housing?” However, in the process of developing and conducting my project, I learned that this somewhat narrowly framed question does not properly capture the nuances of couples dealing with issues often unique to their particular situation, such as which neighborhood or school may contribute to providing an optimal environment for raising mixed-race (or other non-white) children. These fundamental and sensitive decisions constitute personal choices that also help map the evolving landscape of a changing social world.

With these distinctions in mind, my research question may better be posed along the lines of, “What borders and boundaries do black/white interracial couples navigate when deciding where and how to find a safe space in which they and their mixed-race children can comfortably live?” In doing so, I found that the concept of “safety,” as explored by my respondents, can have multiple meanings in the context of finding a home. The term can variously mean protection from crime and physical violence, from external hazards
such as traffic, and from an outside world that may be hostile toward interracial couples and their mixed-race children.

**Structure of My Paper**

In this paper I provide a literature review that examines three main areas: key issues in black/white residential segregation, some of the nuances experienced by black/white interracial couples related to housing and neighborhoods (including seeking a comfortable, healthy environment in which to raise mixed-race children), and discourse about race, particularly in relation to how individuals interpret their home-finding experiences. I also describe the methods I used in collecting my data, which included conducting individual interviews with 15 individuals in black/white interracial relationships, and analyzing the findings from my interviews.

The majority of this paper is devoted to reporting on and discussing several key findings that help illustrate the home-finding experiences of contemporary black/white interracial couples in the San Francisco Bay Area. The key findings I report on are as follows:

- *Racialized* and *non-racialized* home-finding strategies; these are terms I used to classify whether (or to what extent) respondents took race into consideration during their home-finding experiences
- Roles played by real estate agents and mortgage lenders
- Meanings of “safety” when home, race, and fear intersect
• Seeking a space where interracial couples and mixed-race children will “fit in”

In considering my data, I analyzed respondents’ perceptions about their home-finding experiences in the context of their core views about race, because I contend that for this population it is difficult to separate home-finding processes and preferences from race-based discourse and perspective. In addition to race, several interviewees also addressed, to varying degrees, issues of class. Wherever possible, I have incorporated this data into my Findings chapter, although because class was not an issue I focused on with my interviewees, the information is limited in scope and perhaps not fully reflective of respondents’ opinions on the subject. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of my findings and suggestions for further research.

Acknowledgements

On a personal note, I wish to acknowledge the many individuals who contributed to my thesis and to the completion of my master’s degree in sociology from California State University, East Bay. This includes Professor Maxine Craig, my thesis advisor; my committee members Professor Benjamin Bowser and Professor Carl Stempel; Professor Patricia Jennings, graduate advisor for sociology; everyone who helped me find my pool of interviewees; the men and women I interviewed, who were willing to candidly discuss their experiences and opinions with me; and my family and friends for their support during this process—many thanks to you all for the cheerleading and guidance.
Finally, I was in a black/white interracial relationship for the majority of the time that I worked on this project, and I am grateful for how that experience helped me locate my thesis topic as well as possibly enrich my understanding of some of the issues explored in this paper.
CHAPTER TWO

Methodology

Respondents

To explore my research question, I gathered primary data through individual, in-depth interviews with 15 San Francisco Bay Area residents involved in black/white interracial relationships at the time of our interview. I obtained University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to recruiting any potential respondents.

I located all interviewees through individual referrals. In October 2005 I began contacting friends, coworkers, classmates, and other acquaintances in person, by phone, and/or email, seeking suggestions for potential interviewees. I compiled a short list of criteria interviewees should meet, as follows:

- Identify as white/Caucasian or black/African American,
- Be in a black/white interracial relationship at the time of the interview,
- Have been in this relationship for at least one year,
- Live with his/her partner or spouse,
- Have experience looking for housing together with his/her partner or spouse,
- Be age 21 or above, and
- Live in the San Francisco Bay Area.

In addition to the above list of qualifications, I also sought interviewees whose experience seeking housing with his/her partner or spouse had occurred within the last 10
years or less, in order to minimize memory issues related to recalling the home-finding experience. While the majority of my subjects met this prerequisite, I also interviewed a couple who had lived in their home for 13 years; this particular experience yielded some rich data and did not appear compromised by recollection problems.

Because I anticipated difficulty in locating pairs of couples to interview, my research design did not rely on my ability to interview both members of couple in order for an individual to participate in my data collection process. Despite this initial trepidation, I was pleasantly surprised that I was able to interview five pairs of couples.

In addition to the process described above, I explored some other methods for recruiting interview subjects, such as posting free ads on some websites with local content. However, I received little or no response from these methods, and did not locate any interviewees as a result of this strategy.

Drawing on my own personal networks, I was able to locate eight interviewees. Referrals from my interviewees themselves also proved to be a valuable resource, accounting for my other seven interviewees. In all, I contacted 23 people about being interviewed; of this number, two people did not respond and six others did not meet one or more of the eligibility criteria outlined above. I did not turn away anyone who was interested in participating and met my basic list of qualifications.

The basic demographics of my interviewees are as follows:

- Race: Six interviewees were black; nine were white.
• Gender: Six were male; nine were female. In terms of race and gender, this breaks down to three white men, three black men, three black women, and six white women.

• Age: Interviewees ranged in age from 31 to 51. The average age was 40.6 years.

• Rent or Own: Four interviewees rent an apartment or house; the remaining 11 own their home.

Please see Table 1 for more details about my respondents.

In addition, using U.S. Census data, I mapped selected socioeconomic characteristics of each respondent’s city, at the census tract level. This data, shown in Table 2, indicates that the racial makeup can fluctuate widely within a city’s various neighborhoods; for example, the four respondents from Central City live in areas where the black population ranges from 4.6% to 61.8%. Regarding economic data, I report the median household income and median home value for each tract; respondents’ household incomes, which I asked about in my interviews and which are shown in Table 1, typically exceed by a large proportion the median household incomes for each census tract.
Table 1, Demographics of Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alias</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity*</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Household Income+</th>
<th>Educational Attainment</th>
<th>City# / Housing Status (Rent/Own)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>White.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Married to Olivia</td>
<td>$200,000</td>
<td>2 years of college</td>
<td>Greenwood / Own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>I’m black.</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Married to Doug</td>
<td>$200,000</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Greenwood / Own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Black.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Married to Nancy</td>
<td>Over $300,000</td>
<td>2 years of college</td>
<td>Tech City / Own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>White/Irish.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Married to John</td>
<td>Over $300,000</td>
<td>2 years of college</td>
<td>Tech City / Own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>White.**</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Married to Patricia</td>
<td>Over $100,000</td>
<td>[not available]</td>
<td>Tech City / Own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>African American.</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Married to Bill</td>
<td>Over $100,000</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Tech City / Own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>African American.</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Married to Melinda</td>
<td>$300,000-400,000</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Smithtown / Own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melinda</td>
<td>I’m part Irish, part Norwegian, French and Indian, and I just say white.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Married to Greg</td>
<td>$300,000-400,000</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Smithtown / Own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet</td>
<td>White. I’m Jewish.</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Partnered with Vanessa</td>
<td>$100,000-150,000</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Bay City / Rent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>Black or African American.</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Partnered with Janet</td>
<td>$100,000-150,000</td>
<td>Graduate or professional degree</td>
<td>Bay City / Rent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>Caucasian and Jewish.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Married (spouse not interviewed)</td>
<td>$120,000</td>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>Summit City / Own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>White.</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Married (spouse not interviewed)</td>
<td>$75,000-100,000</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>Central City / Own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>African American.</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Married (spouse not interviewed)</td>
<td>Over $150,000</td>
<td>Graduate or professional degree</td>
<td>Central City / Rent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>Caucasian.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Married (spouse not interviewed)</td>
<td>$125,000</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Central City / Rent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzanne</td>
<td>White.</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Married (spouse not interviewed)</td>
<td>$140,000-180,000</td>
<td>Graduate or professional degree (two)</td>
<td>Central City / Own</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes to Table 1

* Near the end of each interview, I asked each respondent a series of demographic questions, including one phrased, “How would you describe your race or ethnicity?” The responses from this question are shown here.

** The specific response to the question regarding race or ethnicity was lost from the tape of my interview with Bill. I have inserted his generic racial classification.

+ Regarding household income, interviewees had the option of providing a single figure or a range (or neither). As a result, a variety of responses is provided here and all figures should be interpreted as approximations.

# All city names are fictitious.
Table 2, Selected Characteristics of Respondents’ Neighborhoods
(at the census tract level)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City and Respondent(s)</th>
<th>Racial Composition*</th>
<th>Median Household Income</th>
<th>Median Home Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bay City (Vanessa and Janet)</td>
<td>Asian, 27.0% Hispanic, 30.7% Black, 7.4% White, 29.3%</td>
<td>$65,769</td>
<td>$306,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central City (Suzanne)</td>
<td>Asian, 18.4% Hispanic, 4.7% Black, 32.9% White, 39.6%</td>
<td>$87,686</td>
<td>$431,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central City (Grace)</td>
<td>Asian, 2.0% Hispanic, 29.1% Black, 61.8% White, 2.9%</td>
<td>$29,904</td>
<td>$115,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central City (James)</td>
<td>Asian, 11.2% Hispanic, 3.9% Black, 4.6% White, 77.5%</td>
<td>$133,272</td>
<td>$690,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central City (Mike)</td>
<td>Asian, 7.6% Hispanic, 3.1% Black, 5.3% White, 80.3%</td>
<td>$100,970</td>
<td>$665,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenwood (Olivia and Doug)</td>
<td>Asian, 38.2% Hispanic, 29.0% Black, 1.9% White, 26.6%</td>
<td>$62,850</td>
<td>$340,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smithtown (Greg and Melinda)</td>
<td>Asian, 18.5% Hispanic, 10.6% Black, 1.0% White, 65.6%</td>
<td>$94,138</td>
<td>$466,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summit City (Denise)</td>
<td>Asian, 7.7% Hispanic, 12.8% Black, 2.2% White, 73.4%</td>
<td>$65,063</td>
<td>$245,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tech City (John and Nancy)</td>
<td>Asian, 29.8% Hispanic, 19.5% Black, 3.5% White, 42.9%</td>
<td>$113,489</td>
<td>$448,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tech City (Bill and Patricia)</td>
<td>Asian, 11.0% Hispanic, 14.3% Black, 3.5% White, 66.4%</td>
<td>$100,734</td>
<td>$436,400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes to Table 2

* This column shows percentages for the major racial groups represented in each census tract. Percentages do not add to 100%.

Source: www.socialexplorer.com, a program of the U.S. Census (accessed July 14, 2008)
Data Collection Instrument

I created a questionnaire with approximately 40 items, which served as my data collection instrument. (See the Appendix for the interview guide.) This questionnaire is broadly divided into several categories including:

- Introductory questions
- Questions about interviewee’s current living situation
- Questions about what I termed the “home-finding” process, which explored factors the interviewee felt were important in locating his/her current home
- Questions about interviewee’s neighborhood and neighbors, which includes the interviewee’s impressions of the racial composition of his/her neighborhood
- Questions about children and their influence on the home-finding process (if applicable)
- Questions about interviewee’s experience (if any) with discrimination (of any sort)
- Demographic questions

The questionnaire also included some items that, though less easily classifiable, yielded some of my most useful and interesting data; that is, responses to these sorts of questions helped flesh out interviewees’ attitudes and opinions on topics such as safety, crime, and race relations. These questions included:

- What does your home mean to you?
• What advice would you give another interracial couple that is new to the house hunting process?

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews, which generally lasted 45-60 minutes, were conducted in person between fall 2005 and fall 2006. All interviews were audio recorded, with the subject’s consent. Prior to conducting interviews, I did a short screening by phone or email to verify that potential subjects met my basic qualifications.

All interviews were conducted privately, generally in the interviewee’s home, although a few were done in a private room at the subject’s workplace. As noted earlier, of my 15 interviewees, I interviewed five pairs of couples. In these cases, interviews were done without the other partner or spouse (or anyone else) in the room, which allowed interviewees to speak freely and, at times, provide different perspectives on a shared experience.

Data Analysis Procedures

Taking a qualitative approach for analysis, I transcribed all interviews into MS Word files and used these transcriptions to code and analyze the data. All interviewees were assigned aliases, as were their cities of residence and specific neighborhoods within various cities; no personally identifiable data is disclosed in this paper or in any other presentations about the data.
I applied what could be categorized as a grounded theory approach to my analysis. While I was initially interested in exploring to what extent, if any, black/white interracial couples experienced race-related discrimination in the housing selection process, I did not begin the project with a specific hypothesis that I expected to prove or dispel. In addition, in the course of conducting my 15 interviews, I found myself becoming more intrigued in exploring larger issues such as race-based discourse and its relationship to the housing process.

As a result, through being open to the data that emerged during my interviews, I was able to subtly refine my interview guide as time went on—that is, each interview helped inform me, to some extent, as to the sorts of questions and responses I wanted to focus on—and subsequently organize the data that I found most compelling and relevant into four general categories. These categories, which are discussed in more detail in the Findings chapter, are: 1) racialized and non-racialized home-finding strategies of black/white interracial couples; 2) the roles played by real estate agents and mortgage lenders; 3) meanings of "safety" when home, race, and fear intersect; and 4) interracial couples' quest for a space where they and/or their mixed-race children will "fit in" and feel comfortable.
CHAPTER THREE

Literature Review

Introduction

Recent U.S. Census data, highlighted in the popular press with rosy headlines (such as “Mr. Right Might be White” and “Love is Color-blind”), point to increases in black/white interracial marriages, which account for about 10% of interracial unions. In 2005 there were 422,000 such mixed marriages, up 15% since 1970. While 2005 Census data shows that approximately 70% of black/white interracial marriages are composed of a black man and white woman, the proportion of black female/white male marriages are also on the rise, increasing about eight percent between 2000 and 2006 (Crary 2007; Sharpe 2007; Walker 2007).

While most interracial marriages consist of a white person and a non-white person, intermarriage between whites and Asians as well as whites and individuals that identify as “some other race” is more common than black/white unions, as each of these pairings accounted for 18% of interracial marriages in the 2000 Census (Lee and Edmonston 2005). The fact that marriage between blacks and whites accounts for a relatively small proportion of all interracial marriages has several related explanations. Interracial marriage did not become legal nationwide until 1967; further, the historically problematic relationship between blacks and whites endures in many forms to this day, including the persistence of segregation in public spaces such as schools, and this separation often
extends into private life as well. Qian (2005) also suggests that due to economic differences between blacks and whites, as well as blacks' resilient racial identities, black/white interracial marriages will not see a dramatic increase in the foreseeable future. In addition, despite some growth accompanied by increased social acceptance of these unions, both qualitative and quantitative data indicate that black/white interracial couples still typically face barriers in deciding where to live and navigating other basic life choices.

This literature review examines three main areas: key issues in black/white residential segregation, some of the nuances experienced by black/white interracial couples related to housing and neighborhoods (including seeking a comfortable, healthy environment in which to raise mixed-race children), and discourse about race.

**Black/White Residential Segregation**

There is general agreement in much of the sociological literature (including Conley 1997; Massey and Denton 1993; Zubrinsky 2001) on several points salient to residential segregation. A variety of formal and informal practices in the real estate and mortgage lending industries have contributed to the promulgation of racial residential segregation, accompanied by racist behaviors practiced on the individual level. Blacks constitute the most segregated racial/ethnic group, a phenomenon that is especially noticeable when blacks and whites are compared; furthermore, while other factors, including socioeconomic status, may also have some effect on housing segregation, race outweighs
all other possible causes (Massey and Denton 1993; Zubrinsky 2001). Housing data, collected since the passage of the Fair Housing Act in 1968 (amended in 1988), indicate that black/white segregation continues to persist but also shows modest declines in recent years, and is sometimes mediated by the relatively recent, dramatic growth of other racial/ethnic groups in many large metropolitan areas of the United States. Finally, the growing presence of black/white interracial couples in the housing market is an emerging topic for study and adds further complexity to the issue of housing segregation. These points are examined in more detail below.

Housing Discrimination: Practices and Persistence

Although the Fair Housing Act outlawed discrimination in housing, this legislation primarily served to send overt discrimination underground. The prevalence of discriminatory housing practices have led some (Conley 1997; Dalmage 2000) to document a “dual housing market,” a system in which housing opportunities are segregated by race (generally to represent a white/black dichotomy, although also a white/non-white paradigm). In the dual housing market blacks receive discriminatory treatment in areas such as housing selection, real estate agent behavior, and the ability to finance home purchases.

In mortgage lending, black homebuyers have historically been victims of redlining, a practice (which the Community Reinvestment Act of 1977 is designed to prohibit) in which banks designated certain areas or neighborhoods as undesirable for providing
financial services, independent of an individual borrower’s risk (Massey and Denton 1993; Squires and Kubrin 2006). Information obtained through the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (1975), which facilitates the collection of data on the race of a mortgage applicant, indicates that among blacks and whites with similar credit histories, black applicants are turned down for mortgages twice as often as whites. Dalmage suggests that the reason applicants may not check the “race box” is due to concerns about potential discrimination (Dalmage 2000, p. 89). The dual housing market also impacts blacks once they purchase a home, as research has demonstrated a relationship between a neighborhood’s racial composition and property values, with large increases in black homeownership having a negative impact on home values (Squires and Kubrin 2006).

In real estate, discriminatory practices include geographic steering (showing prospective homebuyers different properties and/or neighborhoods based on the buyers’ race[s]) and giving preferential treatment to white homebuyers and renters, such as being shown more properties and being quoted lower selling prices or rents, compared to blacks. Another phenomenon to which real estate agents contribute is that of racial tipping, which occurs when white families move out of a neighborhood and are subsequently replaced by black families, thereby “tipping” the racial composition of the neighborhood and contributing to white fears that a majority-black neighborhood will result in lowered home values and increased crime (Dalmage 2000, p. 74).

Housing discrimination has been documented by a variety of entities. Galster (1990) analyzed 71 fair housing audits conducted by private and public agencies in the 1980s; the majority of audits compared the treatment of black and white home seekers, and over
70% of all audits focused on the rental sector. Galster found that blacks seeking rental housing were the most likely to experience some form of subtle discrimination (a 1 in 2 chance), while blacks wishing to buy a home were the least likely (a 1 in 5 chance).

The largest housing audits have been sponsored by the federal department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) between 1977 and 2000. Table 3 summarizes some aspects of the HUD studies. A comparison of the 1989 and 2000 HUD studies showed that although discrimination against black renters and homebuyers modestly decreased during this period, these groups still face challenges when seeking housing. For example, the incidence of geographic steering has increased as, compared to whites, black homebuyers tend to receive information about fewer neighborhoods and are more likely to be shown properties in racially integrated or minority neighborhoods (Turner and Ross 2005). Galster and Godfrey (2005) suggest that the persistence of steering is due to real estate agents’ economically based beliefs and practices and that this behavior is not likely to be altered by fair housing training.

Each HUD study employed the use of matched pair tests, a method in which two individuals--one white, one non-white--separately contact or visit a real estate or rental agent to inquire about homes for sale or apartments for rent. The two individuals are matched on key characteristics including income and, other than race, present virtually identical qualifications in the home-seeking process. Testing pairs are trained to ask the same questions and demonstrate the same preferences. The data collected during these tests are then analyzed for evidence of differential treatment (Turner and Ross 2005; Turner, Struyk and Yinger 1991).
Table 3, Summary of HUD-Sponsored National Fair Housing Audits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Study</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing Market Practices Survey (1977)</td>
<td>- First national audit study of housing market discrimination.</td>
<td>More than 3,200 housing audits (paired tests) conducted in 40 metropolitan areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Provided national estimate of level of housing discrimination against blacks.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Discrimination Study (1989)</td>
<td>- Data gathering period corresponded with initial implementation of 1988 Fair Housing Act Amendments.</td>
<td>3,800 housing audits (paired tests) conducted in 25 metropolitan areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Provided national estimates of level of housing discrimination against blacks and Hispanics.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Discrimination Study (2000)</td>
<td>- Provided national estimates of level of housing discrimination against blacks, Asian/Pacific Islanders, and Hispanics.</td>
<td>More than 4,600 housing audits (paired tests) conducted in 22 metropolitan areas (for testing discrimination against blacks and Hispanics). For the entire study, tests were done in 46 metropolitan areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Also produced estimates of discrimination against Native Americans (tested in three states).</td>
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</tr>
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Sources for Table 3: Saltman 1979; Turner and Ross 2005; Turner, Struyk and Yinger 1991

While the matched-pair method is the most common way of testing for housing discrimination, some fair housing agencies have also used a technique called the “sandwich audit.”¹ This method uses a three-person mixed-race team. When testing for discrimination against black home seekers, the team is made up of two white testers and one black tester; each tester visits a property individually, with the black tester making the second visit. This method can help to determine whether there are random differences in treatment or a pattern of discrimination (Turner 1992). For example, sandwich audits

¹ I did not locate any reference to housing audits or tests conducted by interracial couples. Please see the Discussion and Conclusion for a recommendation on including this population in future housing studies, as this appears to be an underutilized yet important method, particularly as the ranks of interracial couples continue to increase.
were used in 1972 in a test of 93 apartment complexes in Baltimore; results showed that blacks were discriminated against up to 55% of the time during the housing search process (Saltman 1979).

Other researchers also point to modest declines in contemporary housing segregation. One device commonly used to measure segregation is the dissimilarity index, which indicates the extent to which blacks and whites are evenly spread among neighborhoods in a city, using a model so that each neighborhood replicates the racial composition of the city as a whole (Massey and Denton 1993, p. 20). Using the dissimilarity index, Iceland (2002) found a slight decrease in the nationwide segregation of blacks between 1980 and 2000 (moving from a score of 73 in 1980 to a score of 64 in 2000; a score of 100 indicates complete segregation).

Regardless of statistical declines in housing segregation, the reality of white hostilities persists for many black Americans, and home itself may offer refuge from a discriminatory world. In a chapter on home ownership, Feagin and Sikes (1994) write:

> To black families, home represents one of the few anchors available to them in an often hostile white-dominated world. Home is for African Americans the one place that is theirs to control and that can give them refuge from racial maltreatment in the outside world....Home is the place where one can get support in an intimate way to deal with problems beyond the home....The black home can be the one place where one does not have to be on guard (pp. 222, 224-5).

Because African Americans are often compelled to lead a so-called dual life--one in public, one in private--Feagin and Sikes frame home as a safe space for African American families, and in my data collection I wanted to see if any of my respondents expressed similar feelings about their homes.
A common interpretation of continued and widespread patterns of residential segregation is that whites’ racially-related housing preferences drive the persistence of this phenomenon. Emerson, Chai and Yancey (2001) suggest that while “nonwhites have gained the freedom to move into predominantly white neighborhoods...whites also have the freedom to move, and they appear to move away from minority populations” (p. 923). In order to explore the motivations of whites’ racially-related housing preferences, Emerson et al. conducted a national telephone survey of 1,663 randomly selected non-Hispanic whites. Their results showed that while the presence of Latino and Asian neighbors does not tend to impact whites’ home-buying choices, a neighborhood with even a relatively small black population generally poses a deterrent to white homebuyers.

A specific reason that may drive whites’ residential preferences relates to fears about crime and race. For arguably the majority of people in this country, the association between race and crime is hard to escape. When examined as a black/white issue in both the sociological literature and the popular media, there is a widely held perception among many whites that blacks, especially black men, represent a threat to personal safety. For example, Chiricos et al. (2001) characterize the link between race and crime--specifically, the “presumption of criminal threat in relation to black men”--as “pervasive” in American society (p. 322), pointing to the contemporary cases of Charles Stuart in Boston and Susan Smith in South Carolina. Stuart and Smith are white adults who were convicted of committing crimes against their family members; both initially blamed black men for these offenses, providing evidence of the pervasive fears and association of black men with criminality. Similarly, Skogan (1995) suggests that, “It is widely assumed that
expressions by many whites of concern about crime are rooted to a significant degree in their fear of black people” (p. 60).

Not surprisingly, studies (Chiricos et al. 2001; Quillian and Pager 2001) that examine perceived neighborhood racial composition and perceived threat of crime have found links between local racial makeup reported by respondents and perceived crime problems, regardless of actual statistics. For example, Quillian and Pager (2001) analyzed data sets from Baltimore, Chicago, and Seattle in order to examine the relationship between neighborhood racial makeup and perceptions of neighborhood crime levels. Their findings show that:

[T]he percentage of a neighborhood’s black population, particularly the percentage young black men, is significantly associated with perceptions of the severity of the neighborhood’s crime problem. This relationship persists under controls for official neighborhood crime rates, as well as a variety of other individual and neighborhood characteristics (Quillian and Pager 2001, pp. 718-19).

Further, in a review of studies on fear of crime, Skogan (1995) found that for whites, “residential proximity to black people is related to fear of crime” (p. 69).

Two theoretical models used to explain the structuring and persistence of racial residential segregation are the spatial assimilation model and the place stratification model, both of which are explored by Zubrinsky (2003). According to Zubrinsky, the spatial assimilation model primarily applies to individuals whose skin color and other physical characteristics make them appear to be either white Hispanics or Asians. Under this model, residential segregation is maintained by differences in socioeconomic status and acculturation. Massey and Denton (1993) agree that “blacks face strong barriers to spatial assimilation within American society…. Compared with other minority groups,
they are markedly less able to convert their socioeconomic attainments into residential contact with whites” (p. 151), a phenomenon which leads to housing segregation as well as exclusion from the benefits (better schools and home values; lower crime rates) often associated with majority-white neighborhoods.

The place stratification model concentrates on the endurance of prejudice and discrimination in shaping the residential mobility of minority groups, particularly blacks and black Hispanics. Zubrinsky (2003) suggests that both of these models treat race as an important factor, although the “relative importance [of race] depends on group membership” (p. 170). Squires and Kubrin (2006) conducted an analysis that seems to reinforce this model. Using U.S. Census data, they found that in 14 of the 15 largest metropolitan areas segregation between black and white homeowners was greater than that between black and white renters, which may suggest that since renters are typically seen as a more transitory population than homeowners, concerns about the race of one’s neighbors are less of an issue for white renters.

Finally, a 21st century review of sociological literature on racial residential segregation must acknowledge that framing the issue in terms of a black/white phenomenon is often no longer appropriate. Due to growth in immigration and in some cases increased neighborhood diversity, contemporary analyses often adopt a multicultural perspective in examining patterns in this area, with one finding being that other major racial/ethnic groups may act as a “buffer” between white hostilities and black desires for residential integration. For example, in reviewing Census data for 325 metropolitan areas from 1980 to 2000, Iceland (2002) finds diversity increased while
segregation declined, although blacks continued to experience the highest levels of segregation, followed by whites. In addition, while increased racial/ethnic diversity does not generally influence levels of segregation for groups such as Latinos and Asians, the growing presence of multiethnic areas does reduce black segregation (Iceland 2002). As a final point, while segregation of Latinos and Asians generally decreases as income rises, this trend is not seen among blacks (Massey and Denton 1993). This point is explored in more detail in the following section, which includes a discussion of the impact of socioeconomic class on black/white racial residential segregation.

*Considering Factors Other than Whites’ Racial Attitudes*

While most sociologists agree that the persistence of housing segregation is primarily due to race, some have explored other factors that may help account for it. One common explanation relates to social class. Although Conley (1997) hypothesizes that class position must be understood as a function of income, educational attainment, occupational status, and accumulated wealth (specifically property), he finds that residential segregation and the persistence of the dual housing market cannot be explained by socioeconomic status, as research indicates that levels of black/white segregation tend not to vary much by class. Using income data from the period 1970 to 1980, Denton and Massey (1993) computed indices of black/white dissimilarity for the 30 largest black communities in the United States. Their findings showed that improved economic status had little or no effect on segregation levels, which averaged 72.8 (with a
value of 100 indicating complete segregation) for families earning $50,000 or more (Massey and Denton 1993, pp. 85-7).

More recent data draw the same conclusion. In an analysis of data collected in Los Angeles County in 1990, Zubrinsky (2001) notes that, regardless of socioeconomic status, blacks are underrepresented in most of the county’s 58 regions delineated in this dataset, including the regions that are more desirable, tend to be comprised of middle class and upper middle class residents, and are predominantly white. The actual degree of black/white segregation reaches levels almost six times higher than it would if, using a segregation prediction model, black households were distributed based only on income, age of head of household, and other household characteristics. Zubrinsky concludes that this data demonstrates the “inability of blacks to turn socioeconomic gains into greater residential mobility...lend[ing] credence to the notion that factors such as prejudice and discrimination, ethnocentrism, or something as simple as inaccurate information about the housing market explain the lion’s share of persistent racial residential segregation” (Zubrinsky 2001, p. 286).

Another explanation suggested for the resiliency of racial residential patterns is the self-segregation preferences of blacks. Studies typically find that blacks seek a more integrated housing environment than whites, with some blacks preferring an integration level of 50% black and 50% whites. Whites typically express a preference for considerably lower levels of integration and, in fact, 2000 Census data shows that while the “average non-Hispanic white person in metropolitan America lives in a neighborhood that is 80% white and only 7% black....A typical black individual lives in a
neighborhood that is only 33% white and as much as 51% black” (Logan 2001, p. 1).

However, many black families may choose to live in less integrated neighborhoods rather than face the prospect of white hostility and racism. Krysan and Farley (2002) note that “[o]ne fundamental debate about African American racial residential preferences hinges on whether preferences are shaped by a desire to be with one’s ‘own kind’ or to avoid being around the ‘other’” (p. 941). Krysan and Farley drew on data from the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality to explore two key indicators of blacks’ residential preferences: the most attractive racial composition and respondents’ willingness to live in various neighborhoods with different racial compositions. Their analysis found that blacks’ preferences are “inextricably linked to discrimination and white hostility” (Krysan and Farley 2002, pp. 968-69). While in this context blacks may appear to play a role in maintaining patterns of residential isolation, this behavior is not primarily due to black solidarity, ethnocentrism, or racial pride, but is generally a reaction to racially-based opposition practiced by whites as well as, typically, the racial steering behavior of real estate agents. However, Lacy (2007), who studied racial identities of members of the black middle class, found among her respondents that “one of the benefits of being middle class is the option of living in any neighborhood one desires. Their housing decisions are no longer restricted by the behavior of real estate agents” (Lacy 2007, p. 100), and some chose a home in majority-black neighborhoods while others bought in predominantly white areas.

Finally, one less explored factor that may contribute to where blacks and whites live has to do with the methods used to find housing. Again analyzing data from the Multi-
City Study of Urban Inequality, Farley (1996) concluded that a home seeker’s race can impact the methods used to locate housing. Fifty percent of white respondents said that working with a real estate agent or broker was the best way to find a home, compared to 25% of blacks. Blacks tended to rely on what Farley called “informal” methods, such as looking at newspaper advertisements and asking friends or family for referrals; further, he suggests that the use of these informal methods may increase the cost and/or length of blacks’ housing searches.

**Housing Experiences of Black/White Interracial Couples**

An emerging area of sociological research (and research in related disciplines) explores the experiences of black/white interracial couples, which are both difficult to classify and under-explored. In these studies, researchers typically conduct qualitative interviews with couples about issues including raising children, dealing with family resistance to interracial relationships, and deciding how and where to live as a couple—issues which may initially seem mundane but which also help to define some central issues of contemporary race relations in this country. Not all of these studies include data about interracial couples’ experiences finding housing. For example, Kouri (2003), who interviewed 20 black/white interracial couples in the Los Angeles area (time frame not provided, presumably in the 1990s), focuses on how couples are able to develop and maintain strong relationships in the face of racism. While Kouri’s work does not explicitly deal with housing, I have included her research in this literature review as it
relates to the burgeoning body of work in this area—namely, firsthand accounts of issues typically faced by black/white interracial couples.

**Crossing and Redefining Borders**

Some scholars have also explicitly examined the concept of a racially informed border or line that is typically straddled by black/white interracial couples and multiracial families. One of Dalmage’s (2000) central theories is that interracial couples figuratively “trip” back and forth across the color line immortalized by W.E.B. Du Bois, exploring where they and their multiracial children belong, and often being questioned by both blacks and whites about their identities and allegiances (Dalmage 2000, p. 17).

Two key concepts used in such analyses are borderism and border patrolling. In this context, borderism is defined as “a unique form of discrimination faced by those who cross the color line, do not stick with their own, or attempt to claim membership (or are placed by others) in more than one racial group” and which can be enacted on both institutional and individual levels. Border patrolling is an element of borderism; in this case it refers to members of both races (white and black) practicing discrimination and reinforcing racism through methods such as colorblind discourse (in the case of whites; this concept is discussed in more detail later in this chapter) or demonstrating a lack of acceptance of partners (in the case of blacks) (Dalmage 2000, pp. 40-3, p. 54). Border patrollers may engage in this behavior to protect resources such as goods and power.
Not surprisingly, race emerges as an issue, if not a key focus, in the residential selection experiences of many black/white interracial couples. Dalmage (2000), who in 1995 conducted 47 interviews with multiracial family members in Chicago and the New York City area, is one of the few to explore the issue of housing and interracial couples in detail. Her group of respondents included members of black/white interracial couples as well as children produced in interracial marriages. She suggests that interracial couples experience a particularly nuanced dual housing market, which is characterized by the “segregation imposed by white-controlled institutions and separation desired by many members of black communities” as well as white individuals who want to enforce the color line (Dalmage 2000, p. 43, p. 78). When living in predominantly black neighborhoods, mixed-race families may be pushed to the edges of the black community and refused so-called “insider status” (Dalmage 2000, p. 80), while black/white interracial couples who reside in predominantly white neighborhoods may cope with a racist ideology that is expressed through covert discrimination or overt hostility (Dalmage 2000, pp. 86-87). Her findings showed that inter racially married couples generally feel accepted in black communities, compared to white communities, although living in a majority-black community does not preclude coping with border patrolling (Dalmage 2000, p. 84).

Regarding housing opportunities, Dalmage found that most interracial couples she interviewed “either suspected they had been discriminated against or had made decisions
to avoid certain areas for fear of discrimination” (Dalmage 2000, p. 91). She suggests that when one member of an interracial couple looks for housing by him- or herself, a realtor or landlord tends to assume that his or her spouse and children are of the same race. When this assumption is not met, the realtor or landlord may steer the couple toward less desirable properties or otherwise violate Fair Housing Act laws, a situation experienced by at least two of her interviewees (Dalmage 2000, pp. 90-2).

Between 1999 and 2001, Childs (2005) interviewed 15 black/white interracial couples living in the Northeast. While not a focus of her book, Childs reports some findings related to housing. Several of the couples she interviewed chose to live in predominantly black or racially diverse neighborhoods due both to personal preference and financial circumstances; these couples reported that they did not experience problems related to prejudice or racism in these environments (Childs 2005). In these cases, Childs (2005) notes the possible convergence of race and class, suggesting that “it seems that [these] interracial couples...have an easier time and face less opposition renting apartments in lower-income black neighborhoods” (p. 33). A few other couples who lived in majority white communities recounted incidents of opposition or lack of support among their neighbors, while other couples reported that the racial composition of an area was not a factor in choosing where to live (Childs 2005).

In 1991, psychologists Rosenblatt, Karris, and Powell (1995) interviewed 21 black/white interracial couples living in the St. Paul/Minneapolis area. Two of the 21 couples reported experiencing racism during the process of buying or renting a home together--one at a bank prior to closing on a house, when the black male in the couple
was told the documentation he had was not sufficient for moving forward in the financing process, and one who felt they were steered toward an apartment building where the resident population was primarily non-white (Rosenblatt et al. 1995, pp. 141-2). Overall, their interviewees noted the general lack of racism and high level of tolerance present in the Twin Cities’ area, even when compared to “some of those [cities] that I consider more liberal,” in the words of one subject (Rosenblatt et al. 2001, pp. 174-5).

Although Wright, Houston, Ellis, Holloway, and Hudson (2003) did not collect firsthand qualitative data, the authors suggest that, because “mixed-race partnerships confound conceptions of social inequality between groups...mixed-race couples must make decisions about family life that take into account public responses while also upholding their own personal needs, desires and values” (p. 468). Further, such couples face a unique combination of “constraints” and “choices”, as follows:

Constraints include financing, the activity of real estate agents, and neighborhood milieu. On the choice side, mixed-race households, much like everybody else, view neighborhoods as sites for creating and enacting their identities. As such, household choice of neighborhood combines an array of factors that include racial identity, class, sex, family status and education (Wright et al. 2003, p. 468).

The authors cite a study that found interracial couples in Los Angeles were more likely to live in neighborhoods in which neither racial group was concentrated (Wright et al. 2003). Wright et al. (2003) also argue for the development of a new segregation measurement tool or index that takes into account neighborhoods in which the majority of residents live in interracial or mixed-race households (pp. 469-470).

In one of the few extant articles utilizing quantitative data for an examination of interracial couples’ residential choices, Holloway, Ellis, Wright, and Hudson (2005) used
data from the 1990 Census long form to analyze residential patterns of mixed-race households in 12 metropolitan areas primarily on the west and east coasts. Latino/white households account for more than half of all mixed-race households in these areas as a whole, followed by Asian/white and then black/white households. Among the authors’ goals was determining whether interracial couples tend to cluster in particular neighborhoods or are apt to live in areas dominated by the race of one of the members of the couple. In order to do this analysis, the authors developed the Neighborhood Diversity Exposure, an index that measures the exposure of various same-race and mixed-race households to diversity in their typical residential neighborhood. Among their findings, the results showed that:

[M]ixed-race households are more likely to live in diverse neighborhood settings than same-race households…. [Further,] mixed-race households tend to experience higher levels of neighborhood racial diversity than white same-race households, but lower levels than non-white same-race households. Black/white pairings are an exception, as they live in more diverse neighborhoods than the black population in general (Holloway et. al 2005, pp. 319-320).

In addition, by analyzing median household income and home ownership data, the authors found that higher income mixed-race households tend to be more exposed to whites than lower income mixed-race households. As with the many authors who agree that race is the nexus for understanding patterns of residential choice, Holloway et al. (2005) also assert that in the context of mixed-race households, “race (in tandem with status markers like income) and nativity provide some of the best understandings of the neighborhood geographies of mixed-race households” (p. 299).
Children of Black/White Interracial Unions

The mixed-race children of black/white interracial couples add another layer of complexity to the housing search process, in terms of finding an environment that is accepting of such families and fosters positive identity development. Brown (2001) interviewed 119 young adults, primarily college students, who are the offspring of black/white interracial unions. Her respondents reported feeling out of place growing up in neighborhoods that were either predominantly white or black; the majority felt that living in a racially integrated area resulted in an environment with greater acceptance and less hostility. One woman explained, “I definitely like a mixed neighborhood. There is a lack of stress on race. You don’t have to choose sides and be constantly tested. With blacks you always have to prove that you are black enough. With whites you have to worry that they know you are black” (Brown 2001, p. 86), which seems to aptly characterize the feelings of many adults in black/white interracial relationships as well as the children of these unions.

Some literature suggests that the desire of black/white interracial couples to live in a multiracial neighborhood may be a useful strategy for raising mixed-race children, particularly with respect to children’s identity development, and in turn providing a safe space for this development. Root (1998), who has written extensively on the topic of racial identity, suggests:

> Mixed race persons have always had an ambiguous identity to resolve.... There are few if any role models due to the lack of a clear racial reference group. Friends, parents, and other people of color usually do not comprehend
the unique situation and intrapersonal conflict inherent in the resolution of an ambiguous ethnic identity for mixed-race persons (p. 102).

Tizard and Phoenix (1993) interviewed 58 mixed-race teenagers (children of white and African or Afro-Caribbean parents) in Britain around the topic of identity issues. When youth were asked if they preferred to live in a neighborhood that was mainly white, mainly black, or mixed, 21% said they had no preference, while 68% preferred a mixed area (Tizard and Phoenix 1993, p. 64). Regarding racial identity, 39% of youth respondents thought of themselves as black; 10% thought of themselves as black in certain situations; and 49% never thought of themselves as black; thus, most of the interviewees had a “mixed” or “brown” identity, and some thought of themselves as “more white than black” (Tizard and Phoenix 1993, p. 47 and p. 64). Further, the authors found that defining oneself as black was not related to social class or the racial composition of one’s family or school; rather, it is associated with holding politicized ideas about racism. Although this study explores the attitudes of British (rather than American) youth of mixed-race heritage, I would suggest that the findings are not dissimilar to those that could be expected in the United States, in that most preferred to live in racially integrated neighborhoods; however, I suspect that a larger proportion of black/white multiracial children in this country would identify as black.

Talking About Race

Another common theme in studies of black/white interracial couples deals with how interviewees, and in one case non-interviewees, discuss race. For example, both
Rosenblatt et al. (1995) and Childs (2005) asked respondents to identify their racial/ethnic identities in their own words, a strategy which demonstrates that there are multiple ways to position and describe race. I also used this strategy in my own interviews. Further, in framing an analysis of my data, I chose to adopt a structure in which I considered my interviewees’ perceptions about and interpretations of their home-finding experiences as being informed by their core views about race, an approach which grew out of the scholarship discussed in this section.

In this context, there are two primary strategies for thinking and talking about race: colorblind and race-conscious discourse, which Dalmage (2000) and Childs (2005) both explore. Childs (2005), who interviewed 15 black/white interracial couples, found the following: 10 respondents “clearly stated” that they were black or African American, while five others provided more ambiguous descriptions—such as being a member of the “human race”—thereby “acknowledging that they were black but that they preferred not to think in racial terms” (p. 21). Although not true with 100% of her respondents, she found that those whose identities are framed as black or African American tend to take a race-conscious approach, which acknowledges the role race plays in peoples’ lives (Childs 2005, p. 2), while those with a more ambivalent perspective are more likely to adopt a colorblind strategy, which deemphasizes race. All 15 white respondents “reported

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2 This issue is also considered by Frankenberg (1993), whose book explores how white women think about race. Her terminology is somewhat different from that used by Childs (2005) and Dalmage (2000), as Frankenberg employs the terms color evasion and race cognizant. She uses color evasion in part because “differences of racial identity and their connections to positions of domination and subordination are, for the most part, evaded within this discursive repertoire rather than literally not seen” (Frankenberg 1993, p. 268). While “the discursive repertoire of color evasion is organized around the desire to assert essential sameness,” race-cognizant interviewees “insisted on the importance of recognizing difference....[T]hey shared two linked convictions: first, that race makes a difference in people’s lives and second, that racism is a significant factor in shaping contemporary U.S. society” (Frankenberg 1993, p. 157).
little or no attachment to their racial identity, either stating that race was not meaningful or did not play a significant role in how they thought of themselves” (Childs 2005, p. 22). However, thinking related to race is usually complex, as, for example, some of the white interviewees “distanced” themselves from their own race due to the impact of white racism and prejudice on the black community.

Perceptions of racism may be influenced by the discourse used by each individual in an interracial couple or the couple as a unit. Childs (2005) found that “the way the black partner identified racially seemed to influence not only the way the white partner conceptualized race and interracial relations but also the way the couple discussed their relationship” (p. 23), although for some couples discourse may vary based on the situation or context. For example, black partners who took a colorblind approach were more apt to state that race played a minor role in how society treated them, while those with a race-conscious perspective were more likely to report experiences with racism (Childs 2005, pp. 78-9). This trend extended to housing-related issues in Childs’ study, as five of the 15 couples who “consistently denied the importance of race in their experiences” also reported that their majority-white neighborhoods provided an environment that was supportive of their relationship and their family (Childs 2005, p. 53).

In addition to her interviews with black/white interracial couples, Childs (2005) also conducted same-race focus groups composed of white and black “community members.” She found that white focus group respondents tended to employ a colorblind discourse when sharing their views of interracial relationships for themselves or their families,
along the lines of, “I don’t have a problem with interracial couples but -,” followed by reasons why interracial relationships do not succeed or should not occur (Childs 2005, pp. 51-2). In contrast, black focus group respondents tended to use a race-conscious discourse to articulate their opinions on race. Focus group participants agreed that “relations between blacks and whites aren’t good and attribute it to prejudiced views, racist thinking, and whites’ discriminatory actions.” Further, each black participant shared one or more examples of his or her personal experience with racism, including having difficulty buying a home in certain areas and being denied opportunities in the workplace (Childs 2005, p. 78).

Dalmage (2000) also explores the spectrum of racial attitudes and argues that “colorblind arguments ultimately perpetuate the status quo...[diverting attention] from institutional and individual racism...” (p. 15). In looking at the experiences of multiracial families, she notes that essentialist concepts of race can be subverted and allow for the emergence of a “more sophisticated and progressive” consideration of race (Dalmage 2000, p. 17), who herself adopts a race-conscious perspective throughout the book.

Commenting on white privilege, she notes,

People who spend their leisure and family time in single-race interactions often take racial categories for granted. They may think of race as a simple concept. Those individuals who live close to the [color] line know that race is anything but simple. They are challenged to question what it means to be black or white (Dalmage 2000, 17).

In the context of housing, Dalmage (2000) says that the protection of white privilege allows whites to “claim a colorblind stance and avoid discussing race” (pp. 93-4), which may be challenged when multiracial families move to a majority-white neighborhood.
Although not explicitly discussed, the majority of Kouri’s (2003) interviewees (20 black/white interracial couples in Los Angeles) appear to adopt a colorblind approach. For example, many “stated that they married a ‘person’ rather than an individual who was either black or white” (Kouri 2003, p. 359). He respondents also described their experiences with racial integration positively. Finally, she briefly discusses the influence of parents on racial perceptions. Some respondents had parents who never discussed race with their children and as a result these respondents “never developed negative views toward different groups of people” (an analysis which seems to overlook the concept of covert racism and/or white privilege). Other respondents had parents who practiced the philosophy of equality regardless of religion and/or race/ethnicity, while other parents expressed superficially colorblind attitudes similar to those described by Childs (2005), such as, interracial relationships are not bad but they are not suitable for my child (Kouri 2003, p. 362).

I also briefly considered the work of others who explore race in their research, although not in the context of housing or interracial couples. In a book that examines the use and meaning of racial terms in the school environment, Pollock (2004) echoes the arguments of Dalmage (2000) and Childs (2005), noting that “although speaking in racial terms can make race matter, not speaking in racial terms can make race matter too” (Pollock 2004, p. 174). Pollock conducted her research in a multicultural California school where one issue was the overrepresentation of black youth among those students skipping class. However, rather than using race-conscious discourse to discuss this issue, as some of Dalmage’s (2000) and Childs’ (2005) respondents did, Pollock (2004) found
that school administrators tended to shy away from using a “racial label” to describe black students, although they typically had no qualms about using racial or ethnic terms to describe non-black populations at the school (such as “Chinese students”) (p. 175). She observed that, in general, school employees who seemed comfortable describing individual students as black or African American were persons who themselves identified as black or African American, and even these adults, like those of all races, “acknowledged quite explicitly that they often anxiously deleted the very word [black]” from their conversations about students not attending class (Pollock 2004, pp. 176-7).

Returning to the situation of students skipping class, Pollock (2004) named the two “central dilemmas” of racial discourse: the possibility of being either inaccurate or inappropriate. In this case, her initial plan to count the races of kids who were skipping class seemed like it would focus analysis inaccurately or inappropriately on black students (Pollock 2004, p. 188). She also describes another strategy used in race talk—a “knowing silence,” a technique employed because an issue is so obvious one does not even need to say it, which normalizes a particular phenomenon (Pollock 2004, p. 194). Pollock is not the only author to make this distinction, as Dalmage (2000) also comments on this strategy: “[W]hites striving to be good liberals avoid any reference to race. They would point out a freckle on the side of someone’s face before they would use race as an identifier” (p. 39).

Using the lens of blacks and whites, Bonilla-Silva (2006) writes that colorblind racism now represents this country’s dominant racial ideology. This ideology uses a subtle, superficially nonracial approach to “otherize softly” (Bonilla-Silva 2006, pp. 2-3).
He argues that the phenomenon of colorblind racism operates through four frames (which are defined as “set paths for interpreting information”) used interchangeably by whites. These frames are abstract liberalism (which uses ideas related to political and economic liberalism, such as individual choice, to explain race-related issues), naturalization (which claims that racial phenomena are natural occurrences, such as the concept of self-segregation practices), cultural racism (which draws on culturally-based explanations), and minimization of racism (which suggests that today discrimination is no longer a key issue for non-whites) (Bonilla-Silva 2006, pp. 26-29).

Using these frames, Bonilla-Silva (2006) characterizes the discourse of colorblindness as “slippery, apparently contradictory, and often subtle” (p. 53). This relates, for example, to Childs’ (2005) experience of interviewees commenting on the issue of interracial relationships by saying, “I don’t have a problem with it, but -” although Bonilla-Silva does not suggest, like Pollock (2004), that his interviewees avoid using racial labels to describe individuals or groups. (This may be because his analysis is based on survey data and interviews which ask questions about race-related issues, while much of Pollock’s data comes from observation.) Most of Bonilla-Silva’s argument stems from the perspective of whites’ colorblindness; however, he also explores whether or not blacks may utilize this approach. He finds, similarly to Childs (2005), that “blacks call it like they see it,” in contrast to whites’ tendency to shy away from naming or discussing race-related issues. He notes that, unlike whites, “most blacks [he interviewed] answered questions without filtering them through the rhetorical maze of colorblindness” (Bonilla-
Silva 2006, pp. 164-5), which, though he doesn’t name it as such, relates to Childs’ (2005) discussion of race-consciousness.

On a final note regarding race-based discourse, Wright et al. (2003) briefly examine the contemporary Western history of language related to interracial (primarily black/white) partnering, much of which has been pejorative, through the use of terms such as “amalgamation” and “miscegenation”. The authors suggest that though “intermarriage” is today the popular term for interracial unions, they prefer the expression “mixed-race partnerships.” This terminology “centers attention on the process of racialization,” and also encompasses married, unmarried, and same-sex couples. However, the authors acknowledge that this phrase also has the potential to be negatively interpreted (Wright et al. 2003, pp. 460-2).

Summary

To summarize the literature referenced in this chapter, my thesis is situated in the context of several related topics, including the complexity and persistence of black/white housing segregation, the emergence of black/white interracial couples as a unit of social analysis (particularly as it relates to their housing search experiences), and the role that mixed-race children play in the housing search process. In addition, an examination of some of the sociological literature on race-based discourse has proved useful for framing my analysis. However, while the literature discussed here helped me to refine my research questions and provide a context for my analysis, this review also indicates that
my core topic--the housing experiences of black/white interracial couples and their mixed-race children--remains an understudied area.
CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Overview of Findings

In this chapter, I explore several key findings that emerged during my coding and analysis and that may merit further study. In framing my analysis, I adopted a structure in which I considered my 15 interviewees’ perceptions about and interpretations of their home-finding experiences as being informed by their core views about race. That is, in my data analysis and with the population I studied, I suggest that it is almost impossible to separate home-finding processes and preferences from race-based discourse and perspective. I drew upon Childs’ (2005) distinction of race-conscious and colorblind discourse for this classification and analysis; however, unlike Childs’ approach with her respondents, I chose to locate my interviewees along a single spectrum that adopts these two perspectives as endpoints, rather than neatly depositing them into one category or another.

While some of my respondents’ perspectives are clearly articulated—for example, one respondent, a black male, said, “Everything in this country is about race,” and proceeded to back up that contention throughout his interview—I found that it was not always a straightforward task to classify my interviewees according to whether they are primarily race-conscious or colorblind. As a result, I decided that conceptually locating them along a continuum provided a better way of understanding their varied points of view, attitudes,
and opinions, as well as acknowledging that some people may use different approaches for different situations.

Thinking in terms of a spectrum helped me to group some respondents in the same categories—for example, several white women spoke of having learned to view the world in racialized terms as a result of their experiences of being married to a black man and/or raising mixed-race children, but I placed these respondents in a different location on the spectrum than the black men I interviewed. Further, I placed two of the three black women I interviewed in a third category, as both have experienced discrimination but do not obviously place race at the forefront of their perspective or worldview. Please see Figure 1, Spectrum of Interviewees’ Race-Related Attitudes, for a visual representation of this continuum.

The idea of this spectrum provides a context for the key findings reviewed in this chapter, which are as follows:

- Racialized and non-racialized home-finding strategies
- Roles played by real estate agents and mortgage lenders
- Meanings of “safety” when home, race, and fear intersect
- Seeking a space where interracial couples and mixed-race children will “fit in”
Figure 1, Spectrum of Interviewees’ Race-Related Attitudes

Janet
Grace
Bill

[socialization is less obvious than for Melinda et. al]

Vanessa

[perspective informed by race and sexuality]

Greg
[race and economics are equally important in his outlook]

Denise
Doug

[race is a non-issue]

Olivia
Patricia

[aware of having experienced race-based discrimination; race does not weigh heavily on informing their life outlook]

Melinda
Nancy
Suzanne
Mike

[socialized by experiences of having black spouse and/or mixed-race children]

John
James

[view world through lens of race]

COLORBLIND

-------------------------RACE-CONSCIOUS
"Send the lightest kid into the store":
Racialized Home-Finding Strategies

One of the most striking findings in my study is that five interviewees--James, John and Nancy (who are husband and wife), Greg, and Suzanne--specifically adopted and/or recommended the use of overtly race-based approaches to finding a home. \(^1\) I refer to this as a racialized housing strategy. As described by my interviewees, this strategy is for a couple to consciously decide that the white spouse or partner will make the first contact with a landlord or home seller, an approach which may be related to issues of both race and gender. For example, this approach was highlighted by the three African American men in my group of respondents, which may be indicative of the extreme racism this group still faces regularly. In contrast, the three black women I interviewed cited a variety of strategies employed (consciously or not) during the home-finding process, none of which explicitly drew upon race. Also, this strategy seems to apply primarily to or be recommended for people who wish to rent a home, rather than buy a property\(^2\); in addition, most interviewees were unmarried at the time of these experiences. Finally, while several other interviewees (including Denise, Janet, and Mike) noted that the white member of the couple often made the initial in-person contacts during house hunting, in these cases this approach was typically a matter of convenience or personal preference, as opposed to the conscious pursuit of a race-based strategy. However, since James, John, and Greg fall at the race-conscious end of the spectrum, with Denise and Mike at the

\(^1\) Although I also interviewed Greg's wife, Melinda, she did not discuss this strategy during our interview.

\(^2\) While the majority of my interviewees currently live in houses they bought, several also discussed previous experiences with obtaining rental housing as part of a black/white interracial couple.
opposite end, this finding also helps illustrate that it is difficult to separate attitude from action.

James, an African American male in his mid 30s, lives with his wife (who I did not interview) and their young daughter in an upscale area of Central City. They rent a home with another couple; except for James, all of the adults in the household are white. When I asked James about his advice for other interracial couples looking for housing (a question I posed to all interviewees), he recommended the use of a racialized housing strategy—a consciously chosen and implemented approach—which he and his wife had previously employed when looking for rental housing.

I would suggest that if you are an interracial couple, especially a black and white couple, that your first contact with the landlord is the white person....It seems to make people more comfortable. Depending on how robust the housing market is, people can make choices based off of thin air. Oftentimes people’s initial reaction to stereotyping don’t let them—let them get a better picture of you on paper before they can stereotype you. Make sure you send your resume or your background so they know a little bit more about you than just walking in as a person of color, would be my recommendation....When we were looking for our second place together—that’s kind of what we did. But again that’s not to say that the landlord we ended up with, if I had walked in there as a black person, would have turned us down. I don’t think that’s true in his case. I still think it’s a good strategy, because you want the first crack at the place you like. You don’t want anything to negate that. There’s no question that I think profiling and stereotyping happens. You want to minimize that as best you can.

Interestingly, the couple did not use a racialized approach when finding their current rental home, although James did note with some irony that, other than he and his mixed-race young daughter, everyone else who would be living in the house was white. Was this a mitigating factor? Probably not, since none of the tenants have ever met the landlord in person. He felt the possibility of discrimination was not an issue with renting this home,
as the transaction was handled through a management company, which may have been more aware of protecting tenants’ rights. Regarding this distinction, James said:

I think that company was going to be a little more careful about stuff like that. Because most of the housing stock is just a guy with a unit or two somewhere. And they can do whatever they want to. You farm it out, they have to be a little more careful. But not that much more careful.

As we were wrapping up our interview, James returned to the idea of a racialized housing strategy, specifically commenting on skin color as a mechanism for avoiding possible conflict or bias in this realm. His comments also indicate that he is aware of employing this approach in virtually all aspects of life:

I guess the strategy for [finding] housing is the strategy for everything else. Back in the day--my mother’s family, they’re all spectrums of color, and a few of them could pass for white. When they’d drive across country, they’d send the lightest kid into the store to get the snacks for everybody to eat, because they don’t want any trouble. And I guess that’s almost a different version--our housing strategy is a different version of the same thing. “Go ahead, send the lightest person in there and kind of smooth things out a little bit, and then sneak the rest of them in the back door.” So it’s the same thing [laughs].

John, an African American man in his early 50s who lives in Tech City with his wife Nancy and their children, outlined a racialized housing strategy similar to James’ approach. As some background to this strategy, it is useful to look at a general comment John made that seems to sum up his perspective, encompassing both race and class, and which was echoed to some degree by another interviewee (Greg):

I recognize that everything in this country is about race, but at the same time you can make it in spite of what you look like, if you work hard and bust your butt, you can go out and create a nice life for yourself.... I think it’s more about economics than it is about race in this country a lot of times, even though it’s kind of hard to see the dividing lines,
because so many minorities are poor, so it’s what came first--being a minority or [being in] poverty?

John and his wife, Nancy (who I also interviewed), lived together in two Tech City rental homes in the early 1990s. Regarding finding these homes, he recalled, “[W]hen Nancy and I were looking for apartments, we’d send her out to find the closest [one]. Not because I thought, oh my god, this [the prospect of discrimination] is wrong. It’s reality.” He described this approach as a “very conscious decision” in order to negotiate what he described as the “racially motivated housing market.”

In both cases, he did not meet the landlord prior to the house being rented; he did so at some point after the couple was already living in the home, an experience he described as, “After we moved in there, after the fact [this meeting] was usually not a big deal, because Nancy validated my existence.” He also said that, “If I go [with Nancy to look for rental properties], there’s a possibility, one, they’re not going to show us the houses that we want to look at; they’re going to show us neighborhoods where we don’t want to live,” thus recognizing the possibility of steering. He is matter of fact about the potential for experiencing housing discrimination as it relates to renting, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

When you’re someone who owns a piece of property, you’re going to try and minimize the potential for you to have problems. So [for example] you don’t rent to a bunch of single dudes. If you rent to single guys, you’re going to run into problems....Pretty much you can take behaviors and associate them with either an age group, an ethnic group... so you just have to make a decision and unfortunately sometimes that’s broken down on racial lines....Did I feel that I was a victim of socialization, of prejudice, when this was happening? No, I was just a victim of “that’s just how it is.” Did I feel angry? No. That’s just how it is.
As James had alluded to in his interview, John also commented that (contrary to fair housing laws), “People shouldn’t have to rent to you just because you have the money and you want to live here. No. It’s a free country. If I don’t want to rent to you, I’m not going to rent to you.” He also stated that he never took any action against what he perceived as discriminatory housing experiences, which Feagin and Sikes (1994) suggest is not an unusual reaction among this population:

Middle-class black renters can demand fair treatment, but the personal energy costs can be high....[In addition], [j]udging from our interviews, black homebuyers rarely consider the possibility of using government enforcement agencies to fight housing discrimination, perhaps because of the generally weak fair housing agencies at all government levels and a sense of futility because racial discrimination in housing is so widespread (p. 234; pp. 236-237).

However, John did not advocate a specifically racialized approach when looking for a home to buy, as he felt that money is the deciding factor in these cases. In his opinion, “If you can afford it, [home sellers or other decision makers] don’t care if you’re monkeys. They’re going to sell you a house.”

When I interviewed John’s wife Nancy, a white woman in her early 40s, I asked for her impressions about the couple’s use of a racialized housing strategy. Her response indicated that she had not considered the possibility of racial discrimination related to finding rental housing, until John suggested it to her.³

³ As a side note, as with several other white interviewees, Nancy indicated that she experienced a shift in her perceptions of race based on her relationship with her spouse and on parenting mixed-race children or children of a different race. Later in the interview, she commented about this evolution:

I think [my family of origin] grew up with a lot of racial tolerance because everybody in [my home state] was so white that there was very little to be racist against....I used to think I was blind to [skin color] until I married a black man. Now I think I’m much more aware of it. Now that I have children of mixed race, I’m very aware of it. But up until then I felt I was colorblind.
Initially, and this happens frequently through our lives together, [my husband] recognizes a racial situation way before I do. So I think we had a couple situations occurring, and he could tell as we were looking for rental properties—he could identify right away, this was going to be a problem; where I was just acting like—it didn’t even occur to me that there might some racial influence going on....[He could] anticipate it based on where in town that house was located. So, I think in his mind, that effort to have me look at a property first started way before he even presented it to me. I didn’t understand there would be that need. I didn’t understand that there would be discrimination, because I do think the Bay Area’s pretty tolerant. So it didn’t even occur to me that there might be racial discrimination, but we definitely felt it and then, I definitely, once it was pointed out to me, I did recognize that it was happening. But before that I would have been definitely ignorant to it.

Nancy said that initially when she and John looked at homes for rent together they were sometimes turned away, and were not able to pinpoint why this rejection occurred; however, when Nancy began going on her own to look at a property first, the couple was able to rent homes they liked. I asked if she thought that perhaps they would not have been able to rent these homes otherwise, to which she responded:

Yes. I do know that we did--there were a couple places that we didn’t get because of some racial influence; I’m assuming it was because he was black. But yeah, there were definitely--I’d get out of the car first, go say hello, he’d come up behind me later and you could see a change in tone and a change in response, or level of friendliness.

Greg, an African American man in his late 40s, lives in Greenwood with his wife Melinda and their children. He also described a racialized strategy that he and Melinda (who was then his fiancée) used when they were looking for rental housing. However, this approach seems somewhat less deliberate, and based more on the couple’s situation at the time, than those strategies described by John and James.

When we were looking around for a rental house, because we were going to move in together, Melinda went [by herself] to look at the house. I was [out of the country], on a business trip. She went to look
at the house; she talked to the guy’s wife. There were some things about the house that she didn’t like, but the woman was--she looked at Melinda and thought, oh yeah, she’ll probably be a good tenant. Right? But she didn’t see me....[The landlord’s wife] probably thought her fiancé was white.

Although Greg did not meet the landlord/husband before moving into this home with Melinda, they soon learned he was, as Greg said:

[O]ne of these old guys who was so bigoted that he didn’t really even know how to hide it....I guess he liked me because he felt I was a professional...but he never would have--if I had come there with Melinda, and he was there, he probably would have found some reason not to [rent to us], I suspect.

This remark helps illustrate how class can interact with race; because Greg was a white-collar professional, he may have appeared less threatening, or more acceptable, than a black man who was less educated or made less money may have. After living in this rental home for about a year, Greg and Melinda began negotiating with the owners to buy it. However, the asking price was higher than they felt the house was worth, and the couple’s initial feeling about the male landlord’s attitudes never changed. They decided to apply their own particularly racialized strategy to this situation. Greg, who talked freely throughout our interview in terms of both race and economics, recalled:

[W]e didn’t like the guy. I particularly didn’t like him because I thought the guy was a racist. After talking with one of my uncles who is a school administrator, highly educated guy; we talked about this, and he said, you know, the best way to fight way racism is hit him in the pocket. So I decided I wasn’t going to give my money to this guy....I think, the market was hot and he was looking to exploit the market. But I wasn’t about to be exploited by him.

Greg recommended interracial couples use a specific checklist, described in detail below, when looking for housing together, both in terms of determining their own
comfort level in a particular area and in order to make an assessment of whether discrimination may have occurred in the process of seeking a home.

I think for me, because of some of the horror stories you hear, there’s a tendency to--any little thing that happens, in the back of your mind, you’re always wondering, was it because of this, [or] was it because of race? Whereas I know [my wife] doesn’t think that, because she doesn’t have--she’s not conditioned to--she hasn’t had to deal with that. I think if you’ve got the money, race is less of a factor. If you’re going to look in a certain neighborhood, go drive around the neighborhood at different times. See what it looks like. See who’s out. See what people are doing. Park your car around the corner; walk down the street and talk to somebody, see what kind of a reaction you get. Walk down there by yourself, and then walk down there with your wife, and ask people in the neighborhood questions, and see how you get--see what their response is. Make sure that everything that you need to have in order is in order: your money, credit history, all that stuff. Make sure everything’s where it should be, so that if something happens, it becomes obvious that it’s not because of this, this, or this; rule out everything else, well, then, it must be--is it race? Because for me, when I have an issue with someone, or when something happens like that, I don’t want to be one of these people when something bad happens, they say, it’s because of race. Oh yeah, this person’s just prejudiced. No, I want to be able to say, okay, did I do a, b, c, d, e, f, g? I want to rule out everything else so that’s the last thing. So I say well, you know what, it’s not this, it’s not this, what else is there?

As with most of my interviewees who touched upon the possibility of race-based discrimination, in the above passage Greg described how he was careful to exclude all other possibilities before coming to that conclusion. His iteration of this thought process is the most complex I came across in my interviews, and it echoes strategies suggested by some of Feagin and Sikes’ (1994) respondents, who also emphasized a desire or tendency “to see, if possible, negative action against [black Americans] as rooted in some factor besides color” (p. 276). In addition, as John did, Greg acknowledges that money may
often supersede possible racial discrimination in the housing arena, a point which again helps to underscore the association between race and class.

Suzanne, a white woman in her late 30s, recently bought a home in Central City with her husband (who I did not interview); this experience is described later in this chapter. Before Suzanne and her husband were married, they lived together in two or three rented apartments in the Bay Area. In securing one of these apartments, they employed a racialized housing strategy in order to position themselves in what they considered the best light. In the excerpt below, Suzanne acknowledged that this strategy was more of a worst-case scenario approach, since she did not feel they actually experienced housing-related discrimination.

Our future landlord [in this case] was an ex-cop [who was white] and we just were scared of what he would think of us as an interracial couple; we weren’t living together at that time. And so I actually did all the stuff by myself and got the place on my own name, rather than on his name. And then we just said that he was going to move in once we were married. So, we were worried about that. But again, we really never had a bad experience....[Although] had we both gone in as an unmarried interracial couple, I don’t know if they would have...I mean, they loved us once we were there, but I don’t know if we would have gotten the place, because it was in the peak of the real estate renting market, where you just couldn’t get places.

The experiences discussed in this section stand in contrast to a racialized housing strategy related by Dalmage (2000). One of the black/white interracial couples she interviewed bought a new home in a majority-white subdivision outside of Chicago; their strategy in moving to this neighborhood was to have the husband, a black man, purchase the home without the white wife’s participation because “then at least they would know it
was a black person walking in” (Dalmage 2000, p. 86). None of my respondents mentioned this sort of approach.

“*They size you up and they show you certain properties*”: 
**Roles of realtors and mortgage lenders in interracial couples’ home-finding processes**

While respondents in the previous section described situations in which they may have experienced discrimination through interactions with individuals such as a homeowner or landlord, this section explores how representatives of institutions—specifically, the real estate industry and financial establishments—can play a significant part in determining where a black/white interracial couple may live, as well as the varied opinions of respondents about this role.

Melinda, a white woman in her 40s who is married to Greg, suggested that a realtor can subtly manipulate which neighborhoods a couple is shown, particularly as it relates to a neighborhood’s racial composition. This belief in the use of steering emerged when I asked her if she paid attention to the racial makeup of the neighborhoods in which she was being shown homes; in looking for her family’s current home, she often went house hunting without Greg. Although it is not clear from her response whether her realtor knew she was part of an interracial couple (and I did not clarify this during our interview), her answer seemed to place much of the responsibility on the realtor and also acknowledge the covert role of race, coupled with access to financial resources, in the real estate industry:
Well, I think the racial makeup—the real estate agent kind of adds to that, you know, they size you up and they show you certain properties. Or they know that you’re interested in something. And also the price of the house, what you can afford, and how many bedrooms—all that comes into play, and a lot of it is sort of unspoken about. So, I don’t know if there were houses that would have been perfect in [a nearby area that was predominantly non-white] and she never showed them to me, I just don’t know. But I think I said that we would want to be in sort of this general area.

When Denise, a white woman in her early 30s, talked about cities in which she did not want to live, she said that she had ruled out a particular Bay Area city based on her realtor’s advice. As a result, she no longer was interested in homes in that city.

[The realtor] also kind of talked us, talked me, out of [this city, which I had been considering]. I did the first day [of house hunting] alone [with the realtor]. So she kind of talked me out of [this city], saying that it’s more dangerous, the resale values aren’t as good, and it would be harder to sell the home and stuff like that.

Suzanne also felt that a realtor may wield considerable influence. She recommended that black/white interracial couples work with a realtor who is supportive of a mixed-race partnership in order to avoid possible steering or other bias.

To me, it’s the realtor that—you could probably get a realtor that would make certain biased decisions or not show you things. I mean, I don’t expect that much of that in the Bay Area but...I think there probably are some realtors who might not give people all the best options or may not push them—you know, give them the resources they need.

Suzanne also noted that once they found a house to purchase, her husband had some trepidation about dealing with a mortgage broker, although his fears were ultimately unfounded:

I think finding a mortgage broker was a little nervous-making for my husband because he was assuming—it was a white person, recommended by somebody else; one of his white friends—and I think my husband was afraid that [the broker] would not think he was good, credit-wise, so that was a little nervous-making for him, but the guy seemed great
and very straightforward and direct. But there was some anticipation of anxiety around that…[as a result of] that feeling of, what do people in the money world think of black people. From the news, from everything we know. And just his own anxiety about, was his credit good enough.

The apprehension that Suzanne’s husband felt regarding the mortgage financing process is rooted in historically institutionalized practices that have systematically excluded blacks and other non-whites from housing markets, as well as contemporary, if more covert, forms of discrimination by lenders. While the passage of the 1968 Civil Rights Act and the Equal Credit Opportunity Act officially outlawed discrimination in lending, both statistical data and anecdotal evidence indicates that exclusionary practices still persist. For example, a 2003 study by the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) showed that blacks in Oakland and San Jose who sought home loans were turned down 2.8 and 2.4 times, respectively, more often than whites (Zito 2003), while several of Feagin and Sikes’ (1994) respondents also indicated that they had experienced various forms of lending-related discrimination.

At the time of my interview with Grace, a white woman in her early 30s, she was preparing to move into a home in Central City with her husband (who I did not interview) and two daughters. Although she is not as race-conscious as some of my other respondents, she was aware of race-based issues in her search. For example, she acknowledged that race may have been a factor in her experiences with a real estate agent and, as Melinda did, she too noted that a realtor can influence the neighborhoods an interracial couple may be shown, as well as the often inextricable link between race and finances.
Grace: In terms of really looking for homes, I don’t feel like, or maybe I’m just so used it. You know, it’s possible that we saw things that an all-white couple wouldn’t have seen....[such as homes in] different neighborhoods. Less--more mixed neighborhoods. It’s possible that our realtor [who was white] steered us toward homes that she wouldn’t have steered an all-white couple toward.

Interviewer: Did you tell her you were looking for a racially diverse neighborhood?

Grace: Maybe. Or maybe she just knew. Or maybe we told her. I don’t know....But I’ll bet it was an issue she was sensitive to. You know. But then you get into money issues. But then again she showed us stuff in [a certain Bay Area city, which is] not your--you know, it has a pretty high concentration of white people; it’s not your most ethnically diverse neighborhood, so...But I’ll bet it was on her mind. You know, like, kind of quietly, it was on our mind. I’ll bet it was on her mind as well.

Despite Grace’s use of the term steering in the previous passage, it does not sound as if she perceived this possibility in a negative light, since she felt her realtor was “sensitive” to the issue of race. Further, the fact that Grace did not feel she and her husband encountered “a lot of discrimination” in the home-buying process may have been due to an element that didn’t exist in my other interviewees’ experiences. Grace’s mother, who is white, had recently sold her own home in Southern California. She was buying the Central City property, a duplex, with Grace’s family and would live in it as well, and her race and/or her financial backing may have paved the way in what otherwise could have been a more rocky experience. For example, regarding mortgage lending, Grace acknowledged the potential for discrimination:

I mean, my mom came in with a lot of money because she’s just sold a house. I think potentially people of color do experience discrimination in lending, you know, and if just [my husband] and I’d gone to a mortgage broker or a lender, you know, we might have encountered some discrimination. But, you add another white person with money, you know, you’re not going to--[my mother] fronted [the financing]....
So that wasn’t going to be an issue for us. But, so, in the lending, I foresee that we could have experienced some discrimination.

This approach also helped Grace and her family afford a home in a wealthier neighborhood than was previously an option for them. She and her family are moving from one home in Central City, located in an area that she characterized as “ethnically pretty diverse, with somewhat of an absence of white people…[I]t’s pretty working class. It’s urban,” to a larger home in an area in the same city that she described as being “a much more affluent neighborhood.”

The opinion of Doug, a white man in his early 50s who is married to Olivia, provides a counterpoint to the beliefs of several other respondents, as he felt that finding a real estate agent who understands a couple’s preferences and price range is an effective way to mitigate any potential prejudice. Doug’s advice for an interracial couple was to work with a competent real estate agent. He said:

I think prejudice [on the part of the home seller] still does exist, so again it’s the real estate agent--if you can do most of your dealings with real estate agents, then you don’t have to worry about any of that. It really becomes a paperwork exercise, as opposed to a personal interaction exercise.

Doug and Olivia’s home-finding experiences are discussed in more detail in the next section.
"It was much more of an intuitive thing than a well-thought-out thing": Non-Racialized Home-Finding Strategies

The respondents highlighted in this section used what I broadly categorize as non-racialized strategies for finding a home, in that race was not obviously employed as part of their approach. Also, it should be noted that there are examples among my interviewees of people using different strategies for different situations (such as renting versus buying).

A few interviewees described a strategy that I have classified as relating to intuition or spirituality. For example, Patricia, an African American woman in her early 40s, lives with her husband Bill (who I also interviewed) and their three children in a residential neighborhood of Tech City. Her point of view regarding finding a home is almost spiritual, as is her general worldview. 4

She and Bill purchased their present home about four years prior to my interviews with them. The couple has been together about 17 years, and had lived for the majority of the relationship in a home Bill had bought before meeting Patricia. As their family

4 Patricia’s approach to life is perhaps more colorblind than anything else, overlaid with a spiritual, Eastern-influenced philosophy. For example, when I asked if she had ever experienced discrimination (in any area of her life) she responded that she had, mainly in terms of shopping for what she termed “big ticket” items, but that she did not feel anger or bitterness as a result of these experiences. Instead, she explained:

I almost feel like, that’s their issue. It’s their problem, their shortsightedness. And I just always think, karma will come back to you. So it’s not anything worth having a vengeful kind of thing, it’s just like, it’s all right, go ahead and treat me, or do what you want to do, but it’s going to come back to you tenfold. But I haven’t had any really severe kinds of discrimination, so I don’t know if that’s why I’m able to think in that way, as opposed to being really angry about it. And a lot of times I just think, how sad for that person, if they have to try to make someone feel lesser than them, to make themselves feel more important or to be worthy, or...for whatever reason why they’re doing it.
expanded, they worked with a realtor to look at a few homes for sale in the same general location, but the asking prices exceeded their budget; Bill and Patricia would always go together, but without their children, when looking at these homes. Next, the couple planned to remodel and expand the home they were living in, but eventually decided not to pursue this avenue as the cost of renovations (including hiring an architect) would ultimately surpass the home’s value at that time. Finally, they decided to look again at existing properties and found their current home (a foreclosed property, although they did not initially know that) through a realtor’s referral to a website that listed available homes, as Patricia explained:

Bill found [our current] house one night on the website. We drove by, called, and said we wanted first right of refusal, and then we would drive by, because we lived so close. We were thinking--that was like on a Saturday, that we were going to get in on a Monday to see it--and we started noticing all these people coming through and we’re like, what’s going on? So we called our realtor, got in, looked at it--ours was like the sixth bid in line, and they had to take it through the court [because it was a foreclosure] and for some reason all the ones before us got rejected and ours got accepted. It was karma. It was like a blessing, the whole thing--because it made no sense why none of those other [bids] had went through.

Like all of my interviewees, relative affordability was an issue for Patricia and Bill’s home purchase. However, in this case Bill’s parents helped them with the down payment on their new home, allowing Bill and Patricia to keep their previous home as a rental property. This experience is similar to Grace’s, in that the parent(s) of the white member of the couple provided financial assistance with the home purchase.

My interview with Patricia’s husband, Bill, a white man in his mid 40s, confirms the non-racialized approach the couple used, although his perspective seems less spiritual and
more matter of fact, compared to Patricia’s. From Bill’s point of view, he and Patricia wanted to stay in the same general neighborhood, but in a more spacious home, and they did a real estate search accordingly. This choice would also allow their children to continue attending the same school. However, like Patricia, he also alluded to the element of coincidence in their search, commenting, “And we got lucky when we ran into [the home for sale]--they hadn’t put the signs out yet or anything like that.” Bill also described a stress-free process, in terms of whether he and Patricia experienced any race-based issues during the home-finding process.

Tech City is probably unique for most of the country. I would say no [we didn’t], because there’s so many different nationalities and marriages around, I think that’s what makes it easier. It wasn’t even a consideration for us to buy this house and move in, because we never ran into any of that stuff.

Suzanne’s experience of finding her current home also falls into the spiritual/intuitive category. While the main issue she and her husband dealt with was finding a property they liked and could afford, their eventual decision was based in part on instinct:

We actually put a couple of bids on places [in the neighborhood in which they now live] and didn’t get any of them. I had given up on our search….and then our realtor called us and said, “Hey, if you can, come look at this place. It was in contract; it just fell out of contract, and….if you could make a bid tonight”; the realtor said we could probably get it….So we went and we walked in the door and just loved it. Within five minutes we’re like, yes, we’ll take it. We’ll take it! So it was kind of a strange process….Actually, when we finally decided on this place, to be honest, it was because we just thought it was lovely. It had everything else, but we just walked in the door, and it had high ceilings, and we just were like, oh my god. It was much more of an intuitive thing than a well-thought-out thing.

Suzanne also said that she and her husband had previously looked at other properties in the same neighborhood and liked the area; in this respect they may have pursued a
somewhat racialized strategy, as they sought a home in an area where they felt comfortable, both for the pair as an interracial couple and her husband as a black man. She described their current Central City neighborhood as being “very mixed and people [of different races] living next to each other,” in contrast to their previous Central City neighborhood, where “[w]e never had any problems; but at the same time, we always noticed--[my husband] is the only black person around. And that’s not fun.”

Olivia, an African American woman in her early 40s, and Doug, a white man in his early 50s, recently married and bought a home together in Greenwood. Olivia’s teenage daughter, Vanessa, who is African American, also lives in the home. Responses from both Olivia and Doug (in separate interviews) indicated that they did not adopt an overtly race-related strategy to finding their current home; nor was theirs a particularly intuitive or spiritual process.

Both emphasized that their housing search was primarily driven by the preferences of Vanessa, as the teenager wished to attend a particular high school that is part of a public school district. Because high school enrollment is based on where students live within the district borders, Olivia and Doug were further constrained in their home selection process. As Doug said, “We decided against a number of houses because of Vanessa wanting to go to [this high school].” However, Olivia clearly had a hand in the city in

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5 It is possible that this preference to live not only in a particular school district but also within the boundaries for a certain high school could have contributed to a home-finding process that was racialized to some degree. For example, did the mandate to live within these boundaries result in a home search that focused on homes in neighborhoods that are either predominantly black or white? The city of Greenwood is less than 50% white, with a very small black population, which likely led Olivia and Doug to look at homes located in somewhat diverse neighborhoods. I did not engage Doug or Olivia in a discussion as to why Vanessa wanted to attend this particular school; thus, as this is an unknown variable for these respondents, it is not possible to do more than speculate on what drove this preference.
which their search was centered, as she noted, “I did not care where the house was—with
the exception that it had to be in Greenwood. Then I agreed, okay, I could do [another
nearby city]. But I love Greenwood, so that was the one thing.”

In terms of looking at properties, the couple did not follow a prescribed formula but one based on convenience. For example, depending on their schedules, each would go individually to see an available property and if that person liked it then the other person would look at it later. When looking at open homes on the weekends or other times when Vanessa was not in school, they also brought her, whether they were looking as a duo or separately.

When I asked Olivia whether she felt that they had any experiences during the house hunting process that she might perceive as discrimination or prejudice, she responded:

> No, not at all….Everybody seemed very warm and friendly, and I don’t know, it could have been because we had Vanessa with us, and nobody wanted to cross those boundaries. I don’t know, but I never once felt like anybody was discriminating against us, or looking at us differently or anything like that.

However, Olivia also described experiencing possible bias from the couple’s real estate agent, although it is difficult to determine if it was of a racial nature. Olivia and Doug were not married when they looked for homes together, and she noticed, when they spoke with real estate agents at open houses, that agents tended to address their remarks to Doug specifically, rather than to Olivia individually or to the two of them as a couple. She assumed this approach was due to the fact that she and Doug were unmarried, and that these interactions perhaps spoke to matters of gender instead of race, particularly
with their primary real estate agent. This issue emerged when I asked her what advice she would give an interracial couple looking for a home together:

Olivia: I think what was hard for us is, because we weren’t married, a lot of people talked to him, before they--instead of talking to me.

Interviewer: So they [real estate agents] would know when you looked at a house together [that you weren’t married]?

Olivia: They would automatically just gravitate toward him.

Interviewer: Because you told them you weren’t married?

Olivia: No. I don’t know how it came about. Like the realtor that we worked with on everything--because originally everything was done in [Doug’s] name, because I still owned my house and I hadn’t sold it. So that was the hard part, was everything was in his name. The realtor, you know, thanked him. The realtor just always talked to him, and I was always an afterthought…. I think that was the only thing that bugged me, so I used to always tease Doug in the beginning, “Your realtor sent you a thank you note for the business you gave him,” and I always felt kind of left out on that aspect of it.

I next asked her if she felt these experiences were truly a function of a realtor assuming she and Doug were not married, or if she thought this behavior might be due to race and/or gender. She replied:

I’m hoping it was because we weren’t married. Because even our realtor [who helped them acquire their current home] was not, I mean, he was ethnic himself. I would say he was probably of Indian descent. So I can’t imagine it being a racial thing, but then you also have the culture thing with the male being the superior. But it was just, I don’t know if, I’m assuming he knew we weren’t married, but it was just awkward.

As with other respondents, Olivia was careful not to assume this treatment or behavior constituted racial discrimination, and given other aspects of this situation (such as Olivia’s perception of the realtor’s race and cultural background) it is difficult to
conclusively point to a single factor.  

When I talked with Doug, he said he didn’t feel he and Olivia experienced any discrimination in their home-buying process, but he also acknowledged—as was a common theme for many of the white partners in my study—“To be honest, I don’t know if, maybe I’m oblivious to it, but I don’t think Olivia and I have faced anything, regarding prejudice, in any regard.” He also noted that Olivia was the person who initially approached the seller of the home they bought, a white man who also happened to be a real estate agent, “so [race] obviously didn’t play a factor there.”  

Doug’s interpretation of “how we bought our home” is an interesting counterpoint to Olivia’s version; while she did not feel the race of the home seller had an effect on their

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6 This is not to suggest that Olivia feels she has never experienced race-based discrimination. She has made a second career out of military service and currently has a high-ranking position in a branch of the reserves. Although at one point in our interview she remarked, “In the military, racial discrimination is not allowed,” she also acknowledged that it exists but she feels its occurrence has diminished over time. She feels she was discriminated against while a young woman in the military. In this case, she was not allowed to participate in an out-of-state sports event, with the explanation given that no one in her unit could go because too many people in the unit had failed a test. However, while Olivia had passed this test and wasn’t allowed to participate, another young woman who had failed her test—a woman she describes as “blond hair, blue eyed; she was cute”—was allowed to do so. This experience prompted Olivia to file a discrimination complaint, which was apparently never acted upon. She recalls, “I turned [the paperwork regarding the complaint] in to my orderly room, and when I kept asking about it, they’re like, oh, we can’t find your paperwork and by then I’d gotten orders [to go elsewhere] and I was gone. I was like, whatever.”

7 Doug later explained this perspective in more detail, not as it specifically relates to housing, but more generally: “I think, on occasion, Olivia will mention in a restaurant, this person or that person is looking at us this way or that way. It’s like, oh really? So I—sometimes my obliviousness to things surprises me. I’m sure some of it’s there. I’m sure there’s been looks or questions or whatever, but I really don’t focus too much on what other people are doing or saying.” He also said, when I asked if he and Olivia ever discuss race among themselves:

It’s a non-issue. We talk about it once in awhile in regards to [Olivia’s daughter], as far as making sure that we don’t isolate her in one way or another, and make sure that cultural diversity—and she understands her heritage, and that even though her mom’s married to a white male doesn’t mean that she shouldn’t be with whoever she wants to be. So we talk about it from that regard, the impact on her. But as it is, I think Olivia’s best friends are—[there’s] one interracial couple there as well, Asian and white—but yeah, it’s really not a subject that we notice too much.
home purchase, she referred more than once during our conversation to the issues she had with the real estate agents she and Doug encountered. Doug did not mention this aspect of their home-finding experience at all in his interview; however, since I interviewed Olivia first, he may have assumed she had already discussed it with me.

“We just don’t discuss race”:
Racialized fears or preferences as part of the home-finding equation

In this section I introduce three respondents whose attitudes and opinions related to race helped shape their home-finding processes. While they have varied perspectives, fall in different locations on my theoretical spectrum, and may or may not be cognizant of the role of race in these experiences, I suggest that race was a factor for each of them in determining where they wished to live and that to some degree their stories constitute another category of racialized home-finding experiences.

Denise, a white woman in her mid 30s married to an African American man (who I did not interview), said race played no role in her and her husband’s home-finding process or strategy; in fact, she emphasized that race has little or no impact on their life together. Denise and her husband live in Summit City; they had purchased their first home together about two years prior to our interview. At the time of our interview, she and her husband were in the process of adopting an African American baby.

When I asked Denise what sort of neighborhood racial composition her husband may have sought during the house hunting process, she responded that this topic was not one they discussed as a couple:
We just don’t discuss race. I guess we do a little bit with regards to our son now. But we have a large group of friends, and we’ve got friends who are Indians, who are Sikhs...friends who are Asian, who are Caucasian, who are Latino, who are African American, obviously, and from the Middle East--we just have this huge, diverse group of friends and it’s just never an issue. I mean, he’s [my husband] and I’m Denise.

The above excerpt is reminiscent of some of Childs’ (2005) interviewees, who when asked about their racial/ethnic background would say they were a member of the human race. Denise later explained what she meant about becoming more aware of race because of the child the couple is adopting:

I think I’ve only become more aware of [race] because we’ve gone through this adoption process, where we’ve had to say what sort of baby we want, they’ve asked us what complexion child we want, and we’re like, black, please. And they’re like, no, do you want lighter skin, medium skin, darker skin, and it’s like, we don’t care. But it seems like so many other people are so aware of this thing, and we just never have been.8

I suggest that it is against this theoretical backdrop that Denise approached the home-finding experience. She did not feel that she and her husband received any unusual or biased treatment during the house hunting process. She also said that they did not specifically consider their current neighborhood’s racial composition prior to moving in; she assumed that since her neighbors bought homes in a similar price range to theirs, they were likely white-collar professionals, like she and her husband, so it was essentially an issue of economics, rather than of race. This perspective is similar, but not identical, to the viewpoints of some other respondents such as Greg and Melinda.

8 Although Denise’s comments indicate that being a parent to a child of a different race than she led her to move, to an extent, beyond her original stance, this experience did not necessarily significantly alter her overall outlook. (See footnote 3 in this chapter, about Nancy’s experience, as a comparison.)
One key factor at the forefront of the couple’s home-finding process was Denise’s sense of safety. Her husband grew up in Industrial City, a large Bay Area city notorious to some for its crime statistics; he is interested in returning to live there at some point. However, Denise is not willing to live in that city because she feels it is not safe. This issue is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Vanessa, an African American woman in her early 30s, is partnered with Janet, a white woman in her early 30s. The couple lives in a rented apartment in Bay City. As with Denise and her husband, while Vanessa and Janet did not employ a racialized approach such as those described earlier in this chapter, I nonetheless suggest that the issue of race was central in shaping their preferences. As explored in the following section, both women had a specific perspective—which in turn contrasted with her partner’s point of view—that influenced her feelings about where she felt comfortable living.

"The reality of city living is that there’s a certain amount of risk": Meanings of “safety” when home, race, and fear intersect

My data indicates that the concepts of “home” and “safety” are closely linked in some respondents’ minds. For example, I asked each person, “What does your home mean to you?”, in an effort to explore whether black/white interracial couples may have attitudes or experiences similar to those described by some African American individuals interviewed by Feagin and Sikes (1994), such as seeing one’s home as a refuge from a hostile or discriminatory world. This concept is also similar to one explored by hooks
(1990), who positions home not only as a place of refuge for blacks but also as a
gendered site of political resistance, where black women historically:

construct[ed] domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the
face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination....
[This provided a place] where all black people could strive to be subjects, not
objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty,
hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity
denied us on the outside in the public world (p. 42).

Interestingly, although only one of my interviewees (John) alluded to this concept of
refuge, this question of meanings of home also provoked a variety of other responses,
several of which included or led to either a brief mention or longer discussion of safety.

Safety was also often brought up--again, either in passing or at length, depending on
the respondent--when I asked interviewees about factors considered during the home-
finding process. However, unlike affordability, which was cited as a key factor by
virtually all respondents and may be measured along a quantitative spectrum of dollars,
safety appears to be a more complex and often intangible issue that is typically laden with
multiple meanings, implications, and interpretations. For my respondents, safety may
connote protection or shelter from crime, from traffic, or from a potentially intolerant or
discriminatory world faced by black/white interracial couples and their mixed-race
children. In this section I explore some of the meanings of safety discussed by
interviewees and examine how discourse on this issue often contains racial overtones,
both explicit and implicit.

In some cases I engaged respondents in conversation about meanings of safety,
including its links, if any, to race, and in other cases I did not. For example, as
highlighted below, I had a lengthy discussion with Janet about safety, crime, and race--
first, because she introduced and then returned to these issues several times throughout our interview, and second, because I had met her once or twice previously and may have felt more comfortable discussing this topic with her than I did with other respondents. I also believe that gender and race--both hers and mine--influenced my comfort level around these issues. In contrast to this experience, I met the majority of my respondents for the first time when I went to interview them and I did not generally feel comfortable delving into this topic without more preparation, or even without advance warning to the interviewees, as I had framed the interview experience as one in which we would talk about issues related to interracial couples' housing search processes. Thus, my data on safety, race, and crime are not uniformly distributed in terms of richness of responses but still present some useful results.

When talking about safety, several interviewees approached the topic through the lens of race and/or class, although these discussions and characterizations varied in terms of being explicit or implicit. Janet and Vanessa face an interesting paradox--which has represented an ongoing source of disagreement for the couple--regarding the intersection of safety and race, a phenomena which I suspect is not unique for mixed-race couples although they--in particular, Janet--were the only respondents who unequivocally acknowledged it. In seeking housing in Bay City, the pair encountered challenges finding a neighborhood that met both of their needs: Vanessa wanted to find one in which she, as a black woman, would not feel like an unwelcome outsider, while Janet, a self-described "really nervous person," did not feel safe living in Adam's Park, one of the city's few (perhaps only) majority-black neighborhoods, due to her concerns about the area's crime
rate. Again, class emerges as an issue in this context, although secondary to race. Janet explained:

I wouldn’t feel safe living in Adam’s Park, where Vanessa would feel like she fit in more in some ways—although she’s lived there and has mixed feelings about it—because I stand out in Adam’s Park; it’s a predominantly black neighborhood. One of the reasons I don’t want to live in Adam’s Park is because there’s a really high crime rate and the unfortunate reality of Bay City is that there’s not really a black middle class, and there are very few neighborhoods where it’s mixed and it’s truly black people and white people and Latino people, where it’s not... where there’s a not whole big economic difference. And I am a really nervous person, and so, the unfortunate reality of Bay City is that it’s very hard to live in a mixed neighborhood....Vanessa wanted to feel comfortable in a neighborhood and I wanted to feel safe, and the reality is that most of the neighborhoods in the city where [she] would feel comfortable in terms of other black people being around--this is part of the problem with Bay City, I would say, specifically, whereas in [Central City] this is less of an issue--I felt unsafe there. And this is something as we’ve looked for housing to buy has been also a continuing disagreement between the two of us....When we first started looking, Adam’s Park was the only neighborhood in Bay City we could afford. Within a few months we were priced out of Adam’s Park because the prices have been going up so high. And I was really relieved when that happened because it ended that argument, which was an ongoing argument between the two of us.

Because it seemed clear that there were racial overtones to Janet’s concerns about safety—which she defined in relation to the level of crime in an area—I asked if her concept of crime and neighborhood safety is related to an area’s racial composition. Her answer was mixed: while she said no in direct response to my question, it seemed like her extended explanation—and even her use of the conditional tense in the phrase, “I would like to say no”—contradicted this initial response.

I would like to say no. It’s hard because I’ve grown up in Bay City my whole life, and this is a really segregated city no matter what people say....I love [the neighborhood in which she and Vanessa currently live] because it is so mixed, so I guess I would say no, but maybe it has more
to do with socioeconomic background and feeling like the other people in the neighborhood are, if not--we’re not homeowners, so you don’t have to be homeowners--but they really care about the neighborhood.... I mean, this is not a neighborhood that doesn’t have incidences [of crime], there’s altercations on our street on a regular basis, but our neighbors are paying attention....[For example] there have been some muggings recently about a block or two from here, and I found out about it because my neighbor [told me]....And that--first of all, that it would be newsworthy that there had been muggings is important to me--I don’t mind, my car got stolen from in front of the house, in the middle of the day....that kind of crime doesn’t bother me, I’d prefer for my car not to get stolen, but I figure that’s city living--it’s crimes against the person, it’s feeling that the house is going to get broken into which scares me. I mean, when Vanessa was living in Adam’s Park she came home to [find] someone shooting up on her front steps. I’m not--I don’t want to have to step over somebody who makes me uncomfortable on my front steps. She would get followed home from the bus. We were standing in her garage and some guy walked in and scoped it out, and there was nothing we could do. That makes me uncomfortable....Again, I know that the reality of city living is that there’s a certain amount of risk that if we lived in the suburbs we could pretend didn’t exist. But, for whatever reason, I feel secure and I think a lot of it has to do with that we do know our neighbors.

Janet’s partner Vanessa confirmed that the dual issues of feeling safe and comfortable were a priority, if not an outright source of conflict, in the couple’s search to rent and buy homes, although she discussed these topics in much less detail. However, when I asked her what sort of reception she and Janet received from their new neighbors when they moved to their current apartment, she commented on how she has often felt out of place in various Bay City neighborhoods:

I’ve been asked different questions before [in different neighborhoods, different places where she has lived] and it’s like, yes, I live here; yes, I belong here; leave me alone. I’m waiting for [my girlfriend] to come out of the house or whatever.
While in the above quote Vanessa is primarily referring to other places where she and Janet had previously lived together, she also said she has been asked something along these same lines in her current neighborhood.

Like Janet, Denise also considered safety during the home-finding process from what seems to be a racialized perspective, although her equation of crime and race is less explicit than Janet's. Rather, her safety concerns seem to be masked in the use of coded words and phrases such as “danger” and “crime statistics.” Though never specifically stated by Denise, I would suggest that she and her husband face a dilemma similar to Janet and Vanessa's, in terms of the white partner seeking a home in a city or area that sounded safe (presumably with a small proportion of black residents), and the black partner wanting to live in an area where he or she felt accepted and which in turn had a relatively large black population. In addition, like the other couple, it does not appear as if this dilemma was resolved once Denise and her husband found their current home.

Denise was adamant about not wanting to live in Industrial City, which has a relatively large black population compared to national population estimates and is often negatively highlighted in the local media because of its high crime rate and other entrenched issues including poverty. In contrast to Denise’s opinion, her husband grew up in Industrial City, has relatives living there currently, and hopes himself to live there again in the future. This source of conflict--although Denise did not name it as such--arose when I asked if there were cities or areas where she did not want to live.

I didn’t want to live in Industrial City. [My husband] would have--he was raised in Industrial City and would like to live in Industrial City, and I have grave concerns about that area, even the nice parts of it [because of] the crime stats, the schools, you know, it’s what you hear and read
and see in the numbers—it’s not a very safe place, even though I know there are nice, nicer, parts of it. He has relatives who live over there.... And for the most part I think, you know, he agreed with me, although he still says, you know, at some point he’d like to go back to Industrial City. But I just don’t see that happening, just given how dangerous it is and especially now with our son.

Denise returned to this topic later in our interview and indicated that she may have had more influence than her husband in the home-finding process, as seen in her comments below. When she said that her husband “has a very different standard” regarding his level of comfort in relation to where he lives, I would suggest, based on her earlier comments, that she is referring to both safety and, implicitly, to race.

So I think that a lot of [our home-finding] decisions were colored by, whatever I was most comfortable with. He obviously had to approve--he didn’t say, no way, I’m never living here--but he has a very different standard. He would be happy to move back to Industrial City, whereas I don’t think he could ever convince me to feel safe in Industrial City. But that’s because what I know is numbers-based: I can see the crime stats, I read [about] the test scores in schools, and what he sees is, this is where he grew up, so he has a different picture of it.

Denise, like other respondents, linked the idea of comfort with safety, even when I did not make that connection explicit in my questions. For example, in describing what her home meant to her she called it her “safe haven...I like to be surrounded by lots of pictures and things that are comforting to me.” In addition, when I asked her if she felt comfortable in her neighborhood, she said she did, explaining:

It just seems like a pretty safe area, although we’ve been warned a little bit--make sure you have your burglar alarm and stuff like that--it doesn’t seem like a place that there’s a lot of problems. I haven’t felt unsafe getting out of my car, you know, I mean there’s not noticeable people hanging around. It’s a quiet neighborhood.

As she and other respondents had previously done with other issues related to housing and race, Grace incorporated a discussion about socioeconomic status into her
considerations about safety. When she and her husband decided to buy their current home, which is located in a Central City neighborhood that they were not thrilled about living in but which was affordable, they assessed the appearance of neighboring homes as a reference point in relation to safety. As with Denise, Grace did not overtly link crime with race but the implication seems to be present nonetheless.

Grace: We looked at [our current house when it was on the market] and ...we had this perception that because it was a working class neighborhood it would be friendly, and that it would definitely “come up.” We just assumed that everything would come up, you know, in terms of standard of living, and the space was good for us. It was only two bedrooms but at that time the kids were younger and it wasn’t such an issue.

Interviewer: And has your expectation been fulfilled? Has your neighborhood...

Grace: Improved?

Interviewer: In the way you were expecting it to, if that’s what you meant?

Grace: I think I thought that more families would move in, and the crime would lessen. I don’t know why I thought that--anyhow, it hasn’t gotten worse, it hasn’t gotten appreciably better, you know, there are--there has been turnover, there’s been a lot of turnover on the block. I’d say, maybe, 15-20%, about 15%, of the homes have turned over in the time we’ve lived there. And, as families come in, you know, the ethnic demographic has shifted a little--more Hispanics--and there has been improvement to the homes. So, technically, it has improved, but the living experience hasn’t really improved or disintegrated appreciably.

Based on Grace’s estimate of the racial makeup of her neighborhood, which she described as “predominantly...African American followed by Hispanic and then very few white people,” her comment in the above excerpt that “the ethnic demographic has shifted a little--more Hispanics” implies that black individuals or families were moving
out and being replaced by Latinos. Further, as a result of this shift she reported that she saw some improvements made to homes and also, perhaps, expected crime to decrease. Although I did not question her about the possible connection to race and safety, it may be reasonable to assume that she felt that a shift in the racial makeup may also lead to a decline in the neighborhood’s crime rate.9

Like Denise, Grace also confirmed there were areas—in this case within Central City itself—that she did not want to live in, due in part to her concerns about poverty and crime.

Grace: We wanted to stay in Central City...And there were areas [in Central City] that we were definitely not going to live in. We weren't going to go too much further east; I don't think we would have gone any closer to [a major street]. You know, you cross lines in Central City, where things get a lot hotter, and this, we felt, was kind of in a borderline neighborhood, but one that we could work with.

Interviewer: So you were staying out of areas that you perceived as being higher crime areas?

Grace: Yes—higher crime, higher poverty. More of those urban social issues. And we are [living] in one of those areas [now], but we were looking for kind of a little pocket, and this house is kind of in a little pocket...We didn't really know [if this neighborhood would be suitable for our family]. We didn't know how long the neighbors had been living there when we moved in but we could kind of see that the houses around ours were well tended. We judged basically on that.

Others interviewees also discussed the issue of safety as a factor in the house hunting process, although with less overt reference to race or class than those highlighted above.

9 This passage from my interview with Grace made me think of the "broken windows" theory of crime, popularized about 25 years ago by James Q. Wilson and George L. Kelling in an Atlantic Monthly article (1982). In this theory, fixing small problems, such as repairing a few broken windows in a rundown or abandoned building, may help prevent relatively minor neighborhood crime problems, such as vandalism, from escalating into bigger issues (which can contribute to urban dwellers' crime-related fears). It should also be noted that this theory has many critics.
For example, safety was an important part of Suzanne and her husband’s home-finding experience. In the quote below, her reference to relatively well-to-do, majority-white areas (“even College Hill has such crime problems”) seemed to be an acknowledgment that issues of race and class cannot be easily divorced from perceptions of safety.

We weren’t super-worried about [the neighborhood being] safe, but kind of safe....Again, this whole idea of safety--it’s just so hard. We would always search the police records and see, you know, how many sex offenders we’d be living next to [because] we kind of pay attention to those things, but at the same time I’d say we also feel like any place we could afford is going to be in transition, and even College Hill [a Central City neighborhood] has such crime problems. So that wasn’t our biggest factor....[Although] we definitely vetoed a couple places that had space and proximity to things that were in too dangerous of a place, drug dealers right next door, things like that.

This pragmatic approach was echoed by James. He, his wife, and the other couple they wanted to live with sought a home in a neighborhood that would be safe for women walking alone at night, especially after using the local rapid transit system. Ironically, he now lives in the College Hill neighborhood--which Suzanne described as having “such crime problems”--a reality he seemed to also tacitly recognize when he said, “There are some problems here. Some places have more problems.” This statement may mean that areas with a more varied racial and economic mix tend to experience more crime--with “problem” being a code word for crime--although we did not talk about this possibility.

We looked [for a home in a neighborhood] that’s on the [rapid transit] lines....[I]t had to be safe enough for the women to walk at night and that’s kind of a subjective criterion, but we didn’t want to live in an area where they were going to have a particular problem. There are some problems here. Some places have more problems....We want my wife and [the other adult woman in the house-hold] to feel safe, and we want the baby to be safe.
“Find a place where your kids are not going to be unique”: Seeking a space where interracial couples and mixed-race children will “fit in” and feel comfortable

Eight respondents specifically framed the issues of safety and comfort as they relate to living together as a black/white interracial couple and/or in parenting black or mixed-race children. In these contexts, the concepts of “feeling safe” and “being comfortable” often overlap--and are sometimes described by respondents as “fitting in”--and I suggest that they correspond to the goal of finding a non-hostile, emotionally healthy environment in which to comfortably live as a couple and/or raise mixed-race children.

My data suggest that there appears to be a relationship between the desire to live in a diverse neighborhood and the goal to create an emotionally safe space for one’s children. For the purposes of this paper I define the concept of neighborhood diversity as the perceived presence of different racial/ethnic groups in a respondent’s neighborhood or other local area. Because a uniform definition of neighborhood diversity was neither provided to nor offered by respondents, some inferences must be drawn from my data. In other words, whether or not a particular neighborhood may be considered diverse or multicultural is based on each respondent’s self-report. The information that interviewees provided about the racial composition of their neighborhoods can be compared to the census tract data shown in Table 2. For example, this table shows that seven respondents --James, Mike, Greg and Melinda, Denise, and Bill and Patricia--live in neighborhoods that are majority white, while the remaining eight live in more racially diverse areas. Of these eight, Central City residents Grace and Suzanne both live in areas with disproportionately large black populations (61.8% and 32.9%, respectively).
Another element of the discussion in this section relates to the identity development of mixed-race children. Some of the literature suggests that a black/white interracial couple's desire to live in a multiracial neighborhood may be a useful strategy for raising mixed-race children, particularly with respect to providing a safe space for these children's identity development; for example, Tizard and Phoenix (1993) and Brown (2001) found in their studies of black/white mixed-race young adults that many of their respondents preferred living in a racially diverse area, as they felt accepted in such an environment.

Finally, as part of this discussion, I must acknowledge the popularly-held perception of the San Francisco Bay Area as being a politically liberal location, embodying ideals of diversity, tolerance, and open mindedness, an impression which came to light in several of my interviews. This view has been fostered in the national consciousness since at least the 1950s, with, for example, the Beat poets and the Summer of Love in San Francisco, the Free Speech Movement that originated at UC Berkeley, and the relatively high proportions of non-whites in some cities, such as the disproportionately large black population in Central City. While respondents tended to appreciate these aspects of the Bay Area, some of their remarks were also tempered by analyses that racial intolerance and discrimination persist “even in” this generally supportive climate. In this section I argue that these qualities of diversity and appreciation of difference are of particular

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10 A sampling of related comments follow: “[The Central City area has a] relatively open minded population” (Mike); “To me, the Bay Area offers so much diversity” (Nancy); “In the Bay Area, it’s a big melting pot” (Melinda).
value to black/white interracial couples seeking safe spaces for themselves and their children.

As an example, Nancy spoke about the juxtaposition of racial diversity with racial segregation in the general Tech City region. Her remarks were in response to my request for her advice for an interracial couple seeking a home together. She also touched on the concept of safety in the form of tolerance, as she recommended that an interracial couple find a place where they will feel comfortable.

I’d say look around. The Bay Area--to me, the Bay Area offers so much diversity. But even within the diverse community that we live in, and I think we live in a pretty open minded community, there are still segments of town where it's specifically one race versus another. So, go where you’re comfortable….In [my county] there are still regions that are specifically Chinese, that are specifically Vietnamese--but you know, buy where you want. Buy what you can afford so you’re comfortable in the neighborhood.

Further, like other interviewees, Nancy’s concept of safety is also framed in relation to the security of her mixed-race children. She felt it was important to socialize children so they become knowledgeable about and comfortable with their own identity. In the following excerpt she seemed to equate a safe environment--necessary because “there are mean people out there, who will do mean things to people simply because they are black, because they are different”--with the presence of racial tolerance, using the Bay Area as a reference point.

Through being married to [my husband], and having kids who are mixed, you start to be aware of the fact that there are mean people out there, who will do mean things to people simply because they are black, because they are different….With kids, you always want to--you don’t want to be putting your child in a dangerous situation, or a situation where they’re going to get hurt or harmed--but you know, we talk about it. My children don’t look black, as far as I’m concerned. So we do discuss the
fact, that what are you going to say when—if people have something to say about you being black. One of my daughters is blond haired and blue eyed, and so—we talk about, if you were in a group of people, and somebody started dissing black people, what would you say to them? What are you going to say to them when you tell them you’re part black, and they look at you like you’re nuts? Do you—will you recognize who you are, will you try to cover it up, will it matter to you? And hopefully it won’t matter. Hopefully it won’t occur. Hopefully you’ll be living in the Bay Area, or a place that is racially tolerant, but, the fact of the matter is, you might not be.

Similarly, when Patricia talked about safety, she described three distinct forms of it, all centered on her mixed-race children: keeping her kids safe from traffic and other street hazards, shielding them from crime, and creating an emotionally secure space for their development. This perspective began to emerge when I asked what her home meant to her.

Patricia: I think [home is] somewhere that my kids should feel safe coming back to….In the sense that, they could be in here, and feel safe. Safe in the environment itself; not necessarily having to worry about someone coming into the house and taking--I think just because I feel like the neighborhood is a little bit safe right now--there’s nowhere that you could be that’s 100% safe--but I think just because I’m thinking it’s a little bit safer. The kids could come in the house and they could actually have all the lights turned off and feel comfortable.

Interviewer: You mean physically safe from crime, or something like that?

Patricia: Right. Yes. And I would hope that eventually they would really feel emotionally safe here, too; able to come and say whatever they were feeling [to me and my husband], and know that it was a safe environment to do that.

Like Nancy, when I asked Patricia about her advice for an interracial couple seeking a home together, she emphasized finding an environment that meets a couple’s needs regarding physical safety as well as one that provides a degree of emotional safety or
comfort. In particular, she commented, "I know that I am always looking for [potential racial conflict as it relates to her children] to see what that response is going to be."

Patricia: I think you do have to look at the environment that you’re going into, and I think that, you know, you need to feel like you would be safe in that environment, as far as--so it’s almost like, you have to spend some time in that neighborhood to make sure that it’s a good fit for you….I have a friend that I walk with every morning--so feeling safe as far as, yes, I could go walk at 4 or 5 in the morning, me and another female, and walk and not feel like I have to constantly look around or worry because of the area that I’m walking through….So I think safe in that, especially if you’re thinking of raising kids, that you’re going to bring them up in a healthy environment….

Interviewer: Are you alluding at all, in terms of being an interracial couple or family, to having a safe or supportive atmosphere, for kids who may look or possibly feel different from some others?

Patricia: Yes. Yes.

Interviewer: Can you talk about that?

Patricia: Well, you know, my thing is--I haven’t really experienced that here in Tech City, and I’ve been in Tech City all my life. But I am very mindful that, when my kids--when I’m out with my kids, to see how people respond.

Interviewer: And how do people respond?

Patricia: I would say 95% of the time it’s positive, but I have, I did have one woman come up to me and say, oh, like, are you babysitting? Because I had my son that’s very pale complected with blue eyes, and I said, no, he’s my son, and she just looked at me like--and I couldn’t figure whether it was like, oh well, how dare you, that you--obviously this father is not black, or if she was amazed at how could a light complected blue eyed kid come out of my body. And that’s really the only conflict, racially, that I’ve had here in California….I haven’t noticed any direct kind of racial things towards any of my children, besides that one woman, but I know that I am always looking for that to see what that response is going to be.

Patricia also hoped to find a diverse area--although she did not speak at length about this issue, compared to some other interviewees--during the house hunting process, again
with an emphasis on how this kind of setting would affect her children. When describing
one of the factors she had in mind while looking for a new home, she explained:

I think I wanted my kids to be in a really multicultural environment. I
think that was one of things that I was thinking about, and I felt like I
got that in these areas--here [in Tech City] and [another nearby city],
since I knew people that lived in [that city]. And I don’t know necessarily
if I felt like I would have gotten that in any other environment.

John also recommended finding an environment where mixed-race children will not
feel out of place. Although neither “safety” nor “comfort” is specifically named in the
following excerpt, the related idea of acceptance is implied. This suggestion emerged
when I asked him for his advice to an interracial couple seeking housing together, and his
words seem to echo those of Root’s (1998), who noted the general lack of a “clear racial
reference group” for mixed-race children.

[T]ry and find a place where your kids are not going to be unique. If
you don’t have children, live wherever you want. Your children are the
ones who are going to be impacted by your decision of where you live
more than you are...because this is where they’re going to grow up [and]
....[f]ind their friends. This is where they’re going to develop their
worldview, and it would sure be nice for your children to have somebody
else who’s like them, who can give them a different perspective.

Interestingly, despite this advice, neither John nor Nancy indicated that neighborhood
diversity was a priority in looking for a home. However, John said that after moving in
they found they were living in a multicultural neighborhood where their kids were not the
only mixed-race children; moreover, he felt this diversity, though unplanned for, has been
an unexpected benefit for his family.

[R]ight across the street [is] a white/black couple who have two
daughters who look almost like our kids, and then down the street is
another black family, and in the cul-de-sac was a black family. Next
door is a family from Azerbaijan, and a little old Asian woman lives
on the corner, and across the street was a white family. The reason I thought that was funny--you couldn't have planned this any better--it looked like a clustering situation....Here we were--and this was totally by chance that we bought this house--but it turned out that we were in a very nice racially mixed neighborhood, which we like. I didn't want to live in an all-white neighborhood, or an all-black, or an all-whatever, but it's very diverse.

As with John and Nancy, Grace and her husband did not feel that learning about the racial composition of neighborhoods in which they considered buying homes was a top priority, although they did prefer to live in a diverse area. When Grace described this desire, she sounded similar to John in her assertion that she did not want to live in a single-race neighborhood. She said, “I guess we were kind of looking for a mixed neighborhood. A neighborhood that we could fit into.” She described this preference in more detail:

We never notice anything unless it’s [an] all-white [neighborhood]. And there aren’t that many blocks in Central City that are all white. You know, there are certainly some that are much more white, but ....I don’t really think ethnicity, and looking for sort of an ethnic demographic, had too much to do with it. I mean, we’re always sensitive to living in an area with no diversity....[W]e wanted to be in an area that was diverse....[I]t never really mattered to us how it was diverse, you know, as long as it was kind of a mixed--I guess we were kind of looking for a mixed neighborhood. A neighborhood that we would fit into. I mean, if we had found a home that was--the whole block was Asian, or the whole block was Hispanic, or the whole block was black, or even white--I think that probably would have set off alarms for us. Then we would have had to really reexamine, do we want to live on a block where everyone’s Chinese? Do we want to live on a block where everyone’s Hispanic?

In some neighborhoods, the lack of racial and ethnic diversity may be jarring to interracial couples and their mixed-race children, a fact noted by Melinda. She remarked that the schools in their Smithtown neighborhood are noticeable for their absence of
racial diversity among students, a phenomenon that may have been difficult for Greg’s children from a previous marriage, who came to live with her and Greg after they bought their home. Her stepchildren, who are Filipino and African American, moved to Smithtown after living in a more racially diverse Bay Area city. The excerpt below is part of a longer response Melinda gave in answer to my question about whether where a child grows up can play a role in shaping his or her identity, when she described her stepchildren’s experiences.

I think that was probably a real eye opener for them when they came to live with us, and then went to the schools here--for the first time they were part of a minority and they really felt it. Because there were so many different racial groups in their school before that they blended in and didn’t really notice. So here, they were maybe one of two or three blacks in the school. And that was shocking....And what I noticed, as they’d come home, and every time they’d talk about somebody, they’d say, that white kid; that Hispanic kid; that black kid. And I’m like, why are you talking about what they are? What does that have to do with anything? And they were doing it while they were in middle school, and I just thought, god, that’s weird....I don’t think they were talking about it as much [before they moved in with us] because maybe everybody they were with was Filipino. Or they weren’t seeing as many--they weren’t seeing as many white kids. So now they had to distinguish. So, luckily they didn’t have any issues, as far as I can remember. There were no fights, or taunting, nothing like that. They were smart, they were sociable, they were able to fit in.

Melinda was also conscious of wanting to create an emotionally healthy environment for her own mixed-race children, both of whom are now in elementary school. Although the excerpt below is lengthy, it eloquently illustrates the dilemmas that parents of mixed-race children may face, especially in areas that are predominantly white.

The kids are starting to experience just a tiny inkling of, oh you know, something might be a little bit different. So we have to start educating them about what that is....[For example] one kid said [to one my kids], “Are you adopted? Because you don’t look like your dad.”....And when
[my son] was in kindergarten, one boy called him “blackhead.” And we just weren’t sure if it was a racial slur, or if it was a kid saying--you know, they say poo-poo head and whatever--but we did tell the teacher and she made a point of talking with the boy...So you know, we have to start to be [trails off]. And I noticed that one of the moms in [my son’s] second grade class asked me at the classroom Christmas party, “I thought [your son] was mixed.” And I was just looking at her--most people don’t know how to say that. They can’t really--they don’t even say that. And I went, “Yes, he is.” She happens to be Indonesian…and we were able to talk about the kids and stuff, so that was--you know, when you run into people that are a little bit different, then they kind of know what that’s like.

And actually, just the other day, one of the kids’ friends--we were at a pizza place--and this boy said, “I saw a guy at McDonalds and he was a big fat black guy.” And I said, “Why do you have to say what color his skin is? What difference does that make?” And I said to the mom, “I need to talk to them about this so that he knows.” And she’s like, “That’s fine.” And you know, I just said, “You don’t need to talk about the color of someone’s skin unless there was some reason to be mentioning it.” So I can see that now part of my--or my quest is to make these other kids aware of the things that they’re saying and they don’t even know. I just pointed out to this little boy, I said, “You know, [my two sons] are part black. You wouldn’t go and talk about them that way, so you can’t be saying it about somebody else.” I’m sure he was, like, freaked out that I said something.

But we got to start--there’s been plenty of times when people have made comments to me, and I’m so flabbergasted that they would say something, that I don’t have that quick comeback--comments like, the kids as babies, I remember [my son] being three months old and I’m getting on an airplane, and the stewardess says, “Is that your baby?” I didn’t think he looked that different from me. Or, people have said, “Wow, he must look like his dad.” Things that you can’t believe people would say. And then I’m like, what do I say, and so [my husband’s] been educating me over the years [that] you need to say something to people right away. Because either they don’t understand what they’ve just said, how hurtful it is, or they think they can say it to you because you’re white, and they need to be educated, and who’s going to tell them if not you?

Perhaps because of the experiences of her children and stepchildren, Melinda, like other interviewees, recommended that interracial couples find a neighborhood where they
felt comfortable. For Melinda, this feeling of comfort or acceptance also seems to extend
to making their neighbors feel comfortable as well--such as the fact that her husband has
a "white-collar job," which she seems to equate with being accepted or being perceived
as stable. She acknowledged that she did not make this factor as much of a priority as she
may have liked during her own home-finding experience.

   Melinda: You need to decide if you’re going to feel comfortable in the
   neighborhood. You need to get a sense of that. That’s the main thing--if
   you’re going to feel comfortable, if they’re going to accept you...

   Interviewer: So you guys didn’t really have a sense of that, because
   [this was a new development with no residents yet]?

   Melinda: No. But, because Greg--he’s a regular, you know, holds
down a white-collar job and...has a family--and the fact that I was
the same thing, I think we sort of knew that this kind of area would
be like the same.

   Interviewer: And you lived really nearby before you moved here, right?

   Melinda: We lived close by. But we might have stumbled into it blindly.
   [Our next door neighbor] is a little bit older, they could have been--highly
   negative, or something. Any of them could have. So I think I probably felt
   a little bit leery about that, but had nothing to base it on, just wondering
   what people would think....

   Interviewer: Were those things--like, will we feel comfortable in this
   neighborhood--were those things in your mind when you were looking
   at all those other houses?

   Melinda: Probably. Probably it wasn’t as much in my mind as maybe
   it should have been, looking back on it.

   Interestingly, compared to other respondents and in contrast to his wife Melinda’s
comments, Greg explained his desire to live in an area that he considered diverse from a
perspective that emphasized class as much as, if not more than, race. I would suggest this
is less an issue of safety or comfort for his children or himself and his wife, and more of
an economic consideration related to the caliber of local schools (although again the issue
of class appears inextricable from race). For example, he said, “I didn’t want to live in a
primarily minority area.” In this instance he was referring to a specific part of Tech City,
which he later characterized as being “primarily African American and Latino, and poor.”
He further explained:

I wanted to live in an area that was more diverse….So much of whether
or not you have a good school depends on if you live in an area that’s
higher income. So, I wanted to live in an area where there were people
from an economic standpoint that I had more in common with, without
regard to race.

He went on to describe the district in which his children now attend school. His
comments indicate that he appreciated that this school draws pupils from several
neighboring cities, which helps increase the level of diversity present in the classroom
and on the playground--even if the academic caliber may not be as high as in other local
schools. Again, this perspective seems to differ with Melinda’s assessment of the same
school, as she talked about how her stepchildren stood out due to their racial background.
He elaborated:

[T]he school district is pretty good. It’s not as good [in comparison to
two nearby cities], but I like this district because it’s more representative
of the real world. There’s different ethnic groups; there’s different
economic categories: there’s people on public assistance and there’s
really, really wealthy people that live in [a nearby city] and go to the
school here.

In factors he considered important in selecting their neighborhood, Greg said, “I liked
the fact that it wasn’t just a neighborhood of rich kids. I wanted the kids to experience the
real world. Not everyone’s rich, and you’re going to deal with all kinds of people in life,
so you may as well get used to it right from the beginning.”
Mike, a white man in his late 30s, and his wife (who I did not interview) also sought a diverse neighborhood, and he described, as other interviewees also did, a desire to “fit in”. I asked him if diversity was a factor in their home-finding process, to which he replied:

I think so. I mean, we definitely wanted a place where we would fit in. In some ways, we kind of moved here before we knew the racial mix of the neighborhood--we just figured Central City...it’s racially diverse as a town. But I guess what we didn’t know at the time was that there’s pockets of segregated-type communities. It’s hard to say if we would have moved here if we would have known that it was so overwhelmingly white. It’s hard to say...Not far from here, it’s more racially diverse, like almost any direction from here you’ll find more of a mix, people kind of coming together a little bit. This area [where we live] used to be more racially diverse, [and] as it’s gentrified it’s become more Caucasian.

Despite making diversity a priority during the housing search, he and his wife wound up living in a Central City neighborhood that Mike describes as “90-95% white. Maybe 5% black. I don’t know if there’re any Latino people living here. I don’t know if there’re any Asian people here...Almost all Caucasian. Some black people, not a whole lot.”

Although I did not question Mike about this apparent disparity between plan and outcome, I would hypothesize that successfully navigating the extremely competitive rental market of the late 1990s may have outweighed their desire to find a diverse neighborhood.

Mike also emphasized the idea of finding an open minded neighborhood or area that would be accepting of mixed-race children; again, this is a discussion of identity but not wholly separate from the idea of emotional safety and comfort.

Think about--one thing that’s difficult for me is thinking about racial identities for my kid, because we live in a pretty divided society. So if you have a biracial kid, think about--and I don’t know what the answer
is—but think about how is that kid going to think about their own race, you know. Where they fit in. That’s probably a big deal that I’m ignorant about, because I’m white. I think some kids have a unique problem in that sense because they’re trying to figure out where they fit. The ideal place is that they wouldn’t have to think about that but even in an area that’s culturally diverse and open minded, there’s still a divide....Just try to live in an area that has the most diversity and has the most open mind as possible....I guess you want to pick a neighborhood where you have all races represented, in a positive way, you know. With positive role models, and a mix of races. There’s not that many communities I’ve seen that do that very well.

Suzanne and her husband decided to look for a home to purchase when she became pregnant and the owners of the apartment they lived in at the time wanted to sell the property. While their main concern was finding an affordable home they liked, it was also influenced, in part, by her husband’s experiences while he was growing up. Suzanne explained:

It wasn’t really specifically about the neighborhood, although we wanted to make sure—that was a bonus to us, that the neighborhood was nice, the people seemed friendly. And that it was diverse. That was actually important, too....It was just something that I think we both thought we would value. Because again, buying a house was about having a child, for us....So when we started to think about a family, then it became important to think about the diversity that the child would be raised in. My husband’s experience when he was young was that he was in a lot of—he started out in a mostly African American neighborhood, where he was very at ease, but then moved into more white neighborhoods as he got older, and that was not a comfortable experience a lot of the time. I think we both felt that it would be better to raise a child in a place where there’s more diversity. The Bay Area certainly has that but it would be nice to have a neighborhood where the kids he went to school with would be diverse, too.

During the home-finding process Suzanne and her husband looked at other neighborhoods in the same city in which they now own a home and had not liked them as much as their current neighborhood, in part because these areas seemed less diverse to
them. Her concern about the neighborhood where they did buy a home is that it will tilt soon in the direction of becoming a majority-white neighborhood, “But I’m hoping that’s not the case. Right now, it’s very mixed and people [of different races] are living right next to each other.” Prior to buying this home, she and her husband had lived together in rental properties in both Central City and Bay City; she described the neighborhoods in which they rented as being “almost entirely white.”

Vanessa and Janet live together in an apartment in Bay City; this is the second time they have sought housing as a couple. When looking for their current apartment, Vanessa was aware of wanting to find a neighborhood with a socioeconomic composition that felt right to her, commenting, “We loved our [previous] place in [a Bay City neighborhood], but I also was very concerned about living some place that was a little more diverse.” In addition to their previous neighborhood, Vanessa identified a specific Bay City neighborhood that she would not feel comfortable living in, describing it as: “Too white. It’s just very uncomfortable for me and I don’t particularly--not only that, but economically it’s very different--it’s not who I am, or what I feel comfortable with.”

Interestingly, Suzanne’s concept of what comprises a diverse neighborhood seems to be characterized primarily by the presence of two races. When I asked her to describe the racial makeup of her neighborhood, she moved house by house along her Central City street to describe the race of her neighbors; based on the following assessment, her neighborhood is split fairly evenly between blacks and whites. This description is backed up by the data in Table 2, which indicate that whites comprise 39.6% of her census tract, followed by blacks at 32.9%.

The neighbors around us are, let’s see, we have a family that’s been there forever, who is I think Italian in their ethnic heritage. Just on the other side of them is an African American family who we don’t really know but we say hello to. Across the street is an interracial couple that has been there for a long, long time. Next to them is a couple that is white, lesbian women; next to them is an African American family; next to them is [another] African American family. Across the street is a white couple, with a new baby; next to them is an African American family; then a white woman who has a renter in the back; and then us.
In addition, as part of a lesbian couple, Vanessa was cognizant of wanting to find a neighborhood that felt accepting of her and her partner; in discussing her home-finding priorities further, she included among them “someplace that was [both] gay-friendly [and] black-friendly.” When describing her current Bay City neighborhood, she characterized it as, “Diverse….it seems like there’s every ethnicity group here, lots of different age ranges…. [And it’s] fairly working class. You can’t necessarily buy a house here if you’re working class, but the feel is fairly varied.”

As a final note in this section, while none of my interviewees explicitly described his or her home as representing a refuge from “racial mistreatment in the outside world,” as some of Feagin and Sikes’ (1994) interviewees did and as hooks (1990) suggested, John’s response to my question, “What does your home mean to you?”, may allude to his desire to retreat from the racially motivated pressures of society:

It’s my sanctuary. My home is where I come--it’s where my family is, it’s where I feel safe, it’s where I feel comfortable. It’s where I feel that I’m in total control of what’s going on. It’s where, when I want to come back and get refueled, you know, to take on life’s daily rigors, you should do it at home.
CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Conclusion

The most compelling findings that emerged from my research are less about black/white interracial couples’ experiences with housing discrimination and more about the strategies that my respondents developed to combat potential racial bias in the home search process and the factors they prioritized for finding a safe, comfortable space in which to live as a family.

One significant finding is that some couples consciously employed a racialized approach to finding a home. Five of my interviewees candidly discussed their use of race-based strategies, as part of an interracial couple, to acquire a home. The general strategy is that the white spouse or partner makes the initial contact with a landlord or home seller; the black member of the couple is introduced later in the process, or even after the transaction has been finalized. In all cases I was told about, this strategy was used to rent property, rather than purchase it.

It does not appear that the use of this sort of tactic has yet made an impact on the sociological literature. Although Dalmage (2000) and Childs (2005) both acknowledge the difficulties black/white interracial couples may encounter in the home search process, they devote little, if any, discussion to race-based approaches that couples may use to counteract possible housing discrimination. However, analysis of housing audits (Galster 1990; Turner and Ross 2005) indicates that such a strategy may well be warranted by black/white interracial couples in the rental market, particularly when the demand for
rental property is extremely competitive (as my respondent Suzanne mentioned) or when a housing unit is being offered by an individual rather than a management company (as James alluded to).

I also found that at least three of my interviewees may have experienced housing discrimination through the use of steering by real estate agents. For example, Melinda and Grace both indicated that a realtor has a degree of control regarding which neighborhoods a couple is shown, especially in relation to a neighborhood’s racial composition, while Denise said she chose not to look at homes in a certain city based on her realtor’s advice. The most recent HUD study found that geographic steering increased for black homebuyers between 1989 and 2000, indicating that these practices continue to impact the housing market for non-whites (Turner and Ross 2005). Because the audits in the HUD studies did not utilize interracial couples as testers (nor did any of the other housing tests I reviewed) it is difficult to speculate whether the presence of a white person may influence the possibility of an interracial couple experiencing steering or other kinds of race-related housing discrimination. Developing a viable strategy to integrate testers who pose as interracial couples into future housing studies could be an effective way to learn more about the extent and kinds of discrimination that this population may experience in both renting and home buying.

Not surprisingly, the issue of class sometimes emerged during my interviewees’ discussions about race and housing. The fact that all respondents reported household incomes of at least $75,000 (see Table 1), a figure which typically exceeds the median household income of their respective census tract (see Table 2), indicates they may have
experienced less financial difficulty than many other home-buying couples that include at least one non-white partner. However, their experiences do seem relatively consistent with those reported by Lacy (2007), whose study includes information on the home-buying experiences of middle-class blacks. Greg, Melinda, and Denise felt that the simple fact that they could afford to purchase a home in a specific area would translate to having something in common with and may ease potential prejudice from their neighbors. While Greg remarked, “I think if you’ve got the money [to buy a home], race is less of a factor,” Grace explicitly acknowledged that the intersection of race and class made a difference in her experience, saying, “You add another white person with money, you know, you’re not going to [have a problem with your home purchase],” referring to her white mother’s participation in their home-buying process.

Potential discrimination from landlords, real estate agents, and mortgage lenders was not the only challenge encountered by my respondents during the home-finding process. Three respondents discussed experiencing conflicts in selecting a city or neighborhood in which to live that met some key needs of both members of the couple; further, these conflicts may stem from issues of safety and race-based fears relating to crime. For example, Vanessa and Janet found it difficult to locate a Bay City neighborhood that met their divergent needs--Vanessa strongly preferred a neighborhood where she as a black woman would feel accepted and comfortable, while Janet, who sought a neighborhood where she felt safe, did not want to live in a majority-black neighborhood because of her concerns about the area’s crime rate, an attitude that is seen in previous research on fear of crime (Quillian and Pager 2001; Skogan 1995).
While the individuals I interviewed seem to have either effectively dealt with potential discrimination in the housing market, or felt like they never experienced it, one central issue that seems to remain is the challenge of finding or creating an environment that is conducive to the identity development of mixed-race children. Whether a key factor in a black/white interracial couple’s housing search or one that did not surface until after moving into a home—and both situations emerged in my interviews—I suggest that this subject continues to weigh heavily on the minds of parents of mixed-race (or non-white) children.

Eight respondents agreed on the importance of locating a home in a neighborhood that will be open to the presence of a nontraditional family. This could mean locating, or fostering, an emotionally healthy setting in which children can feel accepted and, ideally, find role models to help them explore and develop their racial identities. Similarly, previous research (Brown 2001; Tizard and Phoenix 1993) indicates that the children of black/white interracial unions tend to prefer living in a diverse neighborhood, rather than one that is comprised of a majority of one race; further, living in a racially integrated area may lessen the impact of the phenomenon that Dalmage (2000) called border patrolling. Future research could expand on such studies by, for example, employing a longitudinal design to explore the identity formation of mixed-race children, in terms of the neighborhood(s) in which they grow up and related factors, an approach which may yield useful data for this growing population.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Interview Guide

Introductory Questions

1. How long have you and your spouse/partner been a couple?
2. Are you married? (If yes, how long have you been married?)
3. Do you live in an apartment or house? Do you own or rent your home?
4. How long have you lived there?
5. Who lives in your home?
6. What city do you live in? What is your zip code?
7. Tell me about your neighborhood.
8. Now tell me about the block you live on. What do you think the racial makeup is of your block?
9. What was/is the approximate price of your home/monthly rent?

Home-Finding Process

1. How did you and [spouse/partner’s name] decide upon your home?
2. Tell me what factors you felt were important in looking for a place to live. Can you rank those in order of importance or priority?
3. Was your spouse/partner looking for the same things?
4. What other areas/cities did you consider living in? Are there areas/cities that you definitely did not want to live in? Why?
5. Describe your home buying or renting process. How long did it take to find your home?
6. How would you describe your experience working with your real estate agent, building manager, mortgage lender, etc.?
7. How do you feel about the price you paid for your home, or the rent you pay? Do you think it was/is a good deal?
8. Describe the city/area you moved from—what are some similarities and differences compared to your new location? Were you and your spouse/partner living together at that time?

Neighbors/Neighborhood

1. After moving into your neighborhood, did you receive any noticeable positive or negative reception from your neighbors? If yes, describe.

2. Do you feel comfortable in your neighborhood? Why or why not?

3. Are there other racially mixed families on the block/in your neighborhood?

4. What would you estimate is the racial makeup of your neighborhood?

5. Do you feel accepted a) as an individual and b) as a couple in your neighborhood?

6. What is your opinion of your neighborhood?

7. Do you have any other comments about your neighbors or neighborhood?

Children

1. Do you have children? [If not proceed to the next section.]

2. Describe the role that your child/children played in your home buying/renting decision.

3. Do you feel that where your child lives, and the surrounding neighborhood, plays a role in shaping his/her identity? Why or why not?

Other

1. How long do you plan to live in this neighborhood? What are you basing that plan on?

2. What does your home mean to you?

3. What advice would you give another couple who is just starting out in the house hunting process?

4. Would you have any additional or difference advice for an interracial couple looking for a home?

5. What are your family’s feelings about your spouse/partner?
6. Either as a child or adult, have you experienced discrimination? If so, please describe. How has this experience affected your actions/attitudes?

Demographics

1. How do you describe your race/ethnicity?

2. What is your highest level of educational attainment?

3. What is your household income level?

4. What is your occupation?

5. What is your age, your spouse/partner’s age [if not interviewed], and the age of your child/children [if applicable]?