Many interracial couples know exactly what Meghan Markle went through

As a biracial person in an interracial marriage, I recognized so much of myself while watching Meghan Markle and Prince Harry’s interview with Oprah.

By Sarah E. Gaither  |  Mar 9, 2021, 3:30pm EST

I like to think that I have something of a cosmic connection to Meghan Markle, the former actor who married Prince Harry, of the British royal family. I too am a biracial Black-white woman who married a white man. My first child is also named Archie (well, mine is a pit bull mix, but still a coincidence), and I also sit here pregnant (expecting twins!), with a summer due date. And, like Markle, the question of “what my kids might look like” has been asked of me time and time again.
It can sometimes feel as if it’s up to biracial people, or people in interracial relationships, to make white people feel comfortable about skin color. I know this not only personally, but as a psychologist and researcher who studies multiracial people.

Markle revealed in her bombshell interview with Oprah Sunday night that after announcing her pregnancy to the royal family, there were “concerns and conversations about how dark [Archie’s] skin was going to be when he was born.” Despite Oprah’s shocked reaction, it’s hard for me to believe that she’s really surprised.

Considering the racialized history of the British royal family — including the queen’s distant relative, Elizabeth I, who played a key role in the British slave trade — it feels totally expected that the royal family was “concerned” that their unborn grandchild might appear Black. Markle was the first modern-day Black-identified person to be considered a member of that family, which was by itself a revolutionary moment in the history of the royals. But she herself is very light-skinned, which I believe made her entry into the royal family much easier than it would have been if she were darker.

Markle’s level of Blackness may have been somewhat tolerated by the royals, but the actual royal bloodline being “tainted” by her Blackness would need some reassurance. Thus, the ambiguity of what her son Archie might look like, if his appearance would “color” the royal family further, was a source of contention.

Anyone in the Black community is well aware of issues of colorism — prejudice or discrimination favoring people with lighter skin over those with darker skin — that have long plagued the division among, and treatment of, racial minorities in both the US and Britain. As I previously wrote, the “one drop” rule that categorized people with any African ancestry as “colored” was legally codified in a couple of US states in the early 1900s. Although legally the one-drop rule is not in use today, nor is it a term that historically has been used in Britain, we still see it used informally worldwide when white people visually categorize racially ambiguous people, particularly when they believe they are under some type of social threat.

Through a recent meta-analysis of 55 published scientific articles including participants in Europe, I’ve discovered that white people looking at biracial Black-white individuals in particular are more likely to apply this visual one-drop rule compared to other racial groups, as a method of maintaining one’s status quo or position in the social hierarchy.
Given this research, it’s hard not to interpret what Markle went through as a modern-day form of the one drop rule policy being applied to a child who was not even born yet.

These types of identity questioning or denial experiences — the ones that Markle herself faced daily during her time in the UK through her marriage and continued to face during her first pregnancy — are known to lead to health consequences such as increased cortisol and worse overall well-being. Markle revealed her own mental health struggles in the interview, including thoughts of suicide.

But not only were her and her child’s identities constantly questioned, so was her marriage. The British media relied on racist stereotypes when covering Markle and, according to Markle, her in-laws’ concerns about Archie’s skin color were only discussed with Prince Harry in private. It’s not hard to draw a line between these challenges and increased stress and judgment in their marriage.

The types of biases they faced are far from novel: Recent research shows people have high levels of implicit and explicit bias against Black-white couples, in particular. For example, the white person in the relationship is more often the one approached at restaurants or given the bill at the end of the meal over the Black person, or if out as a family, depending again on skin tone, a biracial child might not be assumed to be one’s own child. Markle hinted at this racial binary related to being both Black and as someone in an interracial marriage when discussing her own experiences compared to Kate Middleton’s, especially in regards to the British press, whose relationship with Markle was contentious and racially charged. A “polarity” is the word Markle used to describe the distinct narratives created; a hero versus a villain — being white versus being Black while being royal.

This polarity is something that biracial people themselves are hyper-aware of, growing up. When I think about my twin babies coming into this world, I can’t help but think about what they will look like, no doubt in part because of society’s desire to socially categorize everyone and everything around them. Will they look white or Black or something in between? Why should that even matter? Seeing Markle be forced by her in-laws to grapple with this question was recognizable and painful to witness.

One question I get from parents of biracial children in my research lab all the time is how should I tell my kid how to identify? I wish none of this mattered, just like Harry and Meghan, I’m sure, wished as well. But we all know far too well the power and privilege that
skin tone carries with it — whether it is your child, yourself, or your romantic partner. (This isn’t even getting into the expectations and norms surrounding gender: Even Oprah started off the entire interview segment asking Markle if their next child was going to be a boy or a girl.) These social constructions are clearly sturdy.

As a biracial soon-to-be mom and a psychologist, I will make sure to the best of my abilities that my children have the freedom to choose their identity. This is why, when people ask me what my kids will look like or what gender they are, I simply say, who knows?

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