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Systemic Racism and Romantic Relationships

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Race at its core is a socially constructed category that differentially and hierarchically affords power, resources, and other material advantages to social groups on the basis of nationality, ethnicity, phenotype, and other markers of social difference (Williams et al., 2019). Systemic racism is the structured system that created and maintains this racial hierarchy. As writer Scott Woods framed it, "racism is the original insidious cultural disease" (Woods, 2014). From police related brutal murders of unarmed Black[1] Americans such as George Floyd, Jr. and Breonna Taylor, erasure of indigenous American history, anti-immigrant sentiment, a surge in horrific acts of hate targeting the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community, and a resurgence of blatant and unabashed white supremacy, it is clear that relationship science can no longer continue to treat romantic relationships as if they form, develop, maintain, and dissolve in a vacuum operating independently of broader sociocultural context such as systemic racism. Without inclusion of the sociocultural context of racism in relationship research, romantic relationships and the individuals who make up those relationships are isolated from the contextual forces that surround them. Thus, given the pervasive and deeply entrenched nature of racism in the United States, the importance of understanding how racism defines, structures, reinforces, and constrains romantic relationships has never been more evident as it is today.

The origins of systemic racism in the United States can be traced back to the genocide of American Indians and 400 years of oppression, dehumanization, systematic marginalization, and discrimination based on race manifesting in myriad ways including racial disparities in income and wealth, education, employment, housing, health and healthcare, and the criminal justice system (Bailey et al., 2017; Bloome, 2014; Braveman et al., 2022). Though racism operates at all societal levels, the deleterious effects of systemic racism (i.e., structural racism, institutional racism, cultural racism) must not be disregarded. Systemic racism is the fundamental driver of racial inequities. Racial inequities

are indelible features in the United States and woven throughout the fabric of this country persisting because of unjust and unfair systems and structures, rooted in white supremacy, that (re)produce and sustain racial discrimination (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Du Bois, 1899; Kendi, 2016; Omi & Winant, 2014). Murry and colleagues (2001) made clear that racism is a "ubiquitous, continuous contextual variable" (p. 917). Hence, the impact of systemic racism and racial inequities on romantic relationships is not trivial. Rather, it is essential to advancing relationship science because racialized systems and structures have always shaped romantic relationships and the narratives around these relationships – whether relationship science acknowledges this fact or not.

Despite this reality, little attention has been given to the role of systemic racism on romantic relationship development and functioning in mainstream relationship science. That is, although relationship science acknowledges multiple contexts, most previous literature and theories have offered and reinforced research and recommendations that center on individual(s)' or couples' personal attributes and abilities rather than on the embedded systemic inequalities that individuals and their relationships are situated in. For example, marriage and relationship education has focused on the skill building of Black American couples' interpersonal communication rather than attending to the systemic inequities that disrupt the development and functioning of romantic relationships. This myopic focus can be particularly dangerous due to its implications for racial equity in relationship science. Solutions at the micro-level have often resulted in labels indicative of deficit or pathology when a particular romantic relationship outcome does not occur (e.g., marriage among Black Americans). To this end, this chapter broadens the focus of relationship science by encouraging the need to situate all relationships in a racialized context that explains various experiences, decisions, and outcomes. Dismantling systemic racism must be an indispensable component of research, policies, and interventions to achieve racial equity in relationship science. By not acknowledging and accounting for the central and pervasive role of systemic racism, relationship science is playing a part in perpetuating racism.

This chapter focuses on how racial inequities at the macro level constrain opportunities for forming romantic relationships, create barriers in relationship maintenance, and exacerbate relationship instability and dissolution, resulting in unequal romantic relationship experiences of individuals and couples across the lifespan. As such, the primary aim of this chapter is to investigate how systemic racism shifts our understanding of romantic relationships at all facets of relationship initiation, development, maintenance, and dissolution. To do this, we begin by outlining the limitations in relationship science as it accounts for the role of race and racism in romantic relationships. Next, we demonstrate how racial demographic information in this area of research and a focus on interpersonal racism are only parts of the story. We then offer an overview of how historical and contemporary racialized

experiences through systemic racism manifest in romantic relationships and illustrate how an incorporation of systemic racism paints a more holistic picture of romantic relationship experiences and outcomes. Finally, we conclude with recommendations for future relationship science across four key domains: conceptualization and theory, measurement, privilege exploration, and within-group heterogeneity.

The field of relationship science has seen considerable growth in romantic relationship research on racially and ethnically minoritized populations, though it is still woefully underrepresented in relationship science journals (Williamson et al., 2022). However, the goal of this chapter is not to review romantic relationship literature across every racially and ethnically marginalized group. Instead, this chapter brings to the surface the material and cultural realities of the ways in which systemic racism manifest in romantic relationships, using the experiences of Black Americans as an exemplar. We note, however, that this work has broader relevance for romantic relationships across and within other marginalized populations. Examining the extent to which macro level systemic racism is associated with romantic relationships also generalizes to other racial and ethnic groups and is an important area for further inquiry. Macro level systemic racism affects all of us – even populations racialized as white because they benefit from a racialized system that privileges whiteness. Additionally, though the scope of the chapter focuses on US romantic relationships, it is important to acknowledge that the impact of systemic racism on romantic relationships may look different in non-Western countries. Countries with similar and divergent histories of racial oppression, imperialism, and colonialism are crucial to examine. Finally, and most importantly, this chapter identifies ways forward. We build on the insights of interdisciplinary scholarship and the lessons learned over the past few decades to provide a foundation for moving this field forward. In particular, this chapter encourages more interrogation of traditional frameworks that focus exclusively on the characteristics or behaviors of individuals at the micro-level to explain romantic relationship development and functioning. Taken together, we hope that this chapter can serve as a guide for extending and enhancing the next generation of work in relationship science and advancing research and theory by moving the conversations about systemic racism to the forefront of relationship science research.

LIMITATIONS TO EXISTING RELATIONSHIP SCIENCE LITERATURE

This section identifies several ways past literature in relationship science has limited our understanding of how systemic racism manifests in romantic relationships and contributed to the lack of broad discussions in this area. First, relationship science research has mostly treated romantic relationships as if they are homogeneous, regardless of and without considerations for systemic racism.

This chapter asks: might our current knowledge of romantic relationships be one-sided, assuming homogeneity and universality? By ignoring and not considering macro level sociocultural context such as systemic racism, most of what we know about romantic relationships is often rooted only in micro-level processes and/or might not be generalizable to all populations. Past research and theory have used experiences of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic (WEIRD) and extra W is for White (WWEIRD) populations focused on white, middle-class, nonimmigrant, and gendered-stereotyped models to determine normality and benchmark "healthy development" (Henrich et al., 2010). This approach raises questions about exactly whose romantic relationships are being used to generalize our understanding of relationships.

Second, some relationship science research has recognized the salience of context by incorporating ecological systems theory to guide their work. For example, the bioecological model by Bronfenbrenner (1979) was groundbreaking when it was first introduced because it acknowledged the importance of interrelated context using nested systems ranging from the microsystem to the macrosystem. Ecological models have helped the field to gain a better understanding of the influence of social context as part of the macrosystem, within which beliefs, expectations, and norms within a society are situated. In addition to its overall impact, however, a critique of this theoretical framework has been that it does not accurately account for systemic racism and often illustrates context as being neutral (Hope & Spencer, 2017). This chapter contends that macro level context is not neutral because one cannot dismiss the pervasive and entrenched role of systemic racism in shaping romantic relationship development and functioning.

Third, romantic relationship research often attends to marriage outcomes and marital behaviors. Though important, in doing this, relationship science has centered the romantic relationship experiences of the most privileged groups. By privileging marriage and diminishing the significance of nonmarital relationships, it serves to further legitimate marriage as the "primary normative frame for affective relationships" while overlooking the exploration of the detrimental effects of the marriage ideal for individuals who experience systemic racism resulting in limited opportunities to cultivate high-quality marriages (Landor & Barr, 2018; Lenhardt, 2014, p. 1343). It should not be surprising then, that despite years of research in this area, our understanding of the complexity of romantic relationships of the most marginalized groups remains incomplete and imprecise.

RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS AND EFFECTS OF INDIVIDUAL RACISM: ONLY PART OF THE STORY

Most major mainstream relationship science research reveals that little attention has been given to the role of macro level sociocultural context such as systemic racism on romantic relationship development and functioning. For

instance, consider the literature on marriage and union formation. Decades of relationship research has consistently shown racial and ethnic differences in union formation and marriage patterns, specifically divergent marriage patterns between Black and white individuals. Compared to other racial and ethnic groups, Black Americans have the highest rate of never married persons, report the lowest overall marriage rate, have the highest median age at first marriage, are less likely to marry compared to previous generations, and when they do marry they spend less time married than white Americans (Banks, 2012; Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Dixon, 2009; Helm & Carlson, 2013; Raley et al., 2015; Raley & Sweeney, 2009; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Even when research projects forward to age forty using cohort estimates, Black people's chances of ever marrying declines significantly more than white people (Bloome & Ang, 2020). Black Americans are also more likely to experience instability, divorce, or dissolution than any other racial and ethnic group in the UnitedStates (Raley et al., 2015). Moreover, Black Americans report lower marital quality and experience more contemplation of divorce than their white counterparts, even after controlling for level of education and economic resources (Bulanda & Brown, 2007). Yet, these demographic findings are *only part of the story* in that they provide a limited and decontextualized view of how romantic relationships are experienced in the United States.

Racial and ethnic-comparative approaches to understanding romantic relationships are common in relationship science literature and are often viewed as race-neutral. However, using race to explain differences in romantic relationship development and functioning separately from racism misses the mark because race is the very function of racism. Comparing romantic relationship experiences and outcomes without accounting for systemic racism and racial inequities is problematic as it privileges white individuals and couples while ignoring, disguising, minimizing, and negating the material and cultural realities of Black individuals and couples (Collins, 2004; Landor & Barr, 2018; McNeil Smith & Landor, 2018; Murray et al., 2018). Hence, systemic racism contextualizes racial variations in romantic relationship outcomes. For example, common explanations for the racial differences highlighted above involve demographic characteristics, economic factors, and changing social attitudes at the micro-level of influence. Some scholars suggest that racial differences in marriage are due, in part, to communication patterns of couples (Allen & Helm, 2013) and broader societal changes in ideas about family arrangements making marriage optional (Raley et al., 2015), whereas other researchers point to sex-ratio imbalance, marriage market explanations (e.g., the shortage of marriageable men), or the educational advantages of Black women that reduce the incentives to marry (Banks, 2012; Tucker & Taylor, 1989). Still, none of these factors completely explain racial gaps in marriage patterns because gaps continue to exist at all levels of income, education, and family structure. Moreover, in some cases, research has theorized that racial disparities and structural factors resulting in economic disadvantage, labor

market disparities, and increasing incarceration rates explain racial gaps in marriage (Bryant et al., 2010; Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Dixon, 2009; Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Though structural factors contribute to the racial gap in marriage, they still fail to fully explain why. Research in this area often underemphasizes historical and contemporary systemic racism that is embedded in marriage and union formation rates and has not adequately addressed or tested these issues at a macro level of influence.

Furthermore, according to a recent systematic review of romantic couple relationships, the relatively few studies on romantic relationships that have focused on sociocultural factors involving power and oppression lacked an explanation of why these patterns existed (Galovan et al., 2022). As such, presenting decontextualized findings related to the sociodemographic rates and trends of romantic relationships, especially around marriage, can signify personal failings grounded in racial stereotypes. For example, single-parent households, particularly single-parent Black women, have been blamed for numerous "social ills" in American society (Moynihan, 1965). As such, findings that report statistics on the prevalence of single parenthood and nonmarital births among Black women without identifying macro level contextual processes for these patterns reinforce assumptions and stereotypes by questioning the values and behavioral choices of these women. In fact, research has found that Black women and men place high value on marriage and would like to be married one day (Barr & Simons, 2012, 2013). As stated in the classic work by Burton and Tucker (2009), "interpreting demographic trends as having a dysfunctional base is easy to do when a group is studied in isolation and when their behaviors are interpreted out of context" (p. 134). Demographic trends void of explanatory context often perpetuate harmful myths and negate the material and cultural realities of people of color. Although understanding romantic relationship demographic trends is vital, relationship science must also seriously grapple with how systemic racism can create unequal access to romance, dating, and marriage. Thus, alternative scholarly efforts are needed to create a paradigm shift in relationship science.

We would be remiss if we did not create space to acknowledge pioneers in this area of relationship research. Notable Black scholars, including Chalandra Bryant, Linda Burton, Averil Clarke, Patricia Hill Collins, Patricia Dixon, Shalonda Kelly, Harriet McAdoo, Velma McBride Murry, Elaine Pinderhughes, and M Belinda Tucker, have illustrated the important role of context in studying relationships and marriages of Black people. These researchers, among others, crafted new constructions of knowledge by placing greater emphasis on the ways in which sociocultural context affect Black romantic relationships. For example, these scholars have pointed out how Black Americans and Black American couples encounter a distinct set of contextual stressors (e.g., racism, socioeconomic conditions, unequal sex ratios) that have meaningful implications for marital quality, dissolution,

and well-being (Burton & Tucker, 2009; Dixon, 2009; Pinderhughes, 2002). In addition, Bryant and colleagues (2010) developed a conceptual model depicting factors associated with Black American marital outcomes by including stressors and demographic characteristics such as racial discrimination, financial strain, and minority status as direct and indirect influences on couple relationships. Together, this work has been instrumental in starting the conversations to consider racial inequities in romance and love. This chapter takes these ideas a step further by directly recognizing and addressing the impact of systemic racism at the macro level on shaping romantic relationships. It is this consequential macro level factor that creates unequal access to romantic relationships experiences and outcomes.

Overall, what has been missing from this literature is a serious discussion of how systemic racism manifests in romantic relationships creating unequal romantic relationship experiences and outcomes. That is, we contend that it is systemic racism that contributes to and maintains racial differences in marriage and union formation. For instance, if focusing primarily on the micro-level perspective, one might conclude that marriage rates could be increased by teaching Black people about the value of marriage through marriage promotion policies or that divorce could be reduced by teaching Black couples more effective communications skills – all of these solutions primarily focus on personal choices or constraints and avoid placing these romantic relationships and the individuals who make them up into the macro level sociocultural context of systemic racism in which they are situated. The following section aims to provide a more accurate view of Black romantic relationships by shifting the focus to the macro level sociocultural context of systemic racism, and how it shifts, influences, and changes how Black Americans relate in their romantic relationships.

IN FULL VIEW: MANIFESTATION OF SYSTEMIC RACISM ON BLACK ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Racism is embedded in all aspects of romantic relationships creating the need for Black Americans and other minoritized groups to navigate systemic racialized barriers during the formation, development, maintenance, and dissolution of romantic relationships. Though discussions about the multiple levels in which racism operates (e.g., individual, structural) is not new, most of the empirical literature on the role of racism on romantic relationships has focused on micro-level racial discrimination (e.g., perceived interpersonal racial discrimination). To this end, across each subsection below, we briefly ground the discussion in research literature that shows how racial discrimination shapes individual attitudes towards, expectations about, and behaviors in romantic relationships at a micro-level of influence. The larger focus of this section, however, is on the insidious nature of systemic racism

on romantic relationships. We argue that there is a critical need to expand empirical knowledge in relationship science by examining the extent to which macro level systems, in this case, systemic racism which is a relic of white supremacy, has been impacting the lives and romantic relationships of Black Americans, resulting in racial inequities that are often subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) against Black people, and other people of color. Specifically, we consider how systemic racism, as manifested through racial inequities across multiple sectors including the economy, education, housing, health, and the criminal legal system, have shaped the romantic relationship development and functioning of Black Americans. Although this is not an exhaustive review of racial inequities, it broadly reflects the literature in this area and recognizes the challenge to integrate studies across various disciplines, components of romantic relationships (e.g., relationship quality, relationship stability), and populations (e.g., singles, married couples, cohabiting couples).

Historical and Contemporary Racialized Experiences

To gain a full view of the manifestation of systemic racism on romantic relationships, one must first understand the historical and contemporary racialized experiences of Black Americans and Black American couples. Relative to whites, Blacks face significant disadvantages regarding income and wealth, educational attainment, employment and job status, health, and involvement in the criminal justice system. These disparities reflect and are caused by the legacy and terror of chattel slavery and racial oppression in the United States (Feagin, 2006). Moreover, Black Americans and their romantic relationships are continuously shaped by a long history of systemic racism in U.S. laws, policies (written and unwritten), and practices that advantage whites over Blacks (Hunter, 2017; Lenhardt, 2014). From enslavement without the right to legally marry, to forced breeding and sale of family members to other slave owners as property, to the Moynihan report (1965), which characterized Black families as matriarchal and dysfunctional, to U.S. government surveillance of Black romantic relationships and families to assess their suitability as citizens while establishing punishments for law violation (e.g., loss of federal aid, removal of children from the household, imprisonment), to anti-miscegenation laws and current marriage promotion policies, the historical and contemporary sociocultural context of systemic racism has always threatened the development and functioning of Black romantic relationships (Bryant et al., 2010; Burton et al., 2010; Landor & Barr, 2018; Lenhardt, 2014). Challenges in Black romantic relationships are, in fact, a function of the same systemic racism that has limited the opportunities of Black Americans in numerous areas of life including education, housing, and employment. Thus, focusing on macro level sociocultural context is important to contextualizing the romantic relationship experiences of Black Americans.

The Cost of Racism on Romantic Relationships: Initiation and Development

Theoretical evidence suggests that racism undermines the establishment of romantic relationships and worsens potential relationship development (Bryant et al., 2010). Yet, little empirical research has examined how racism, at both the micro-level and macro level of influence, directly and indirectly, relates to relationship initiation and development experiences of Black Americans. Given the connections between views of marriage and family formation, scholars have linked racial discrimination at the micro-level to attitudes and views of marriage (Clarke, 2011; Collins, 2004). For instance, using a sample of African American young adults, Simons et al. (2012) found experiences of racial discrimination were associated with negative views of marriage through the development of distrustful views of relationships. High levels of distrust can negatively influence Black Americans' decisions to initiate a relationship (Estacio & Cherlin, 2010). However, the cost of racism on romantic relationships extends beyond this micro-level of influence.

Systemic racism also takes a toll on the initiation and development of Black romantic relationships because it structures the social settings that Black Americans have to find romantic relationships. That is, systemic racism, as manifested through racial inequities across multiple sectors including the criminal legal system, the economy, and education, creates challenges to establishing romantic relationships. In particular, higher mass incarceration rates among Black males, disproportionate unemployment rates of Black males, and disparate educational attainment between Black males and females, have resulted in the systematic removal of Black men from dating and marriage markets thus contributing to disparate gender ratios and a reduction in the number of available and dateable Black men (Dixon, 2009). Black Americans account for 12 percent of the United States adult population but represent 33 percent of the prison population (Alexander, 2010). Incarceration reduces Black men's opportunity to form romantic relationships rendering them unavailable to potential partners and absent from their families (Lopoo & Western, 2005). A qualitative study of the impact the criminal-legal system had on the romantic relationship status of Black women found harmful effects on cultivating and maintaining romantic connections by creating uncertainty and extreme emotional distress (Monterrosa, 2021). In addition, Black male unemployment and lower educational attainment reduces the likelihood of upward mobility therefore significantly limiting Black men's attractiveness as dating and marriage prospects. The consequences for this systematic exclusion from dating and marriage markets then extends across the life span during young adulthood through older adulthood (Mouzon et al., 2020).

Systemic racism has also redefined the salience and meaning of marriage and intimate relationships. For example, studies show that marriage is less of

a necessity for Black women, particularly women who are financially secure (Bank, 2012; Barnes, 2015; Hill, 2006). Also, Black men and women desire to marry someone with characteristics (e.g., educated, financially stable) that will provide upward mobility (King & Allen, 2009). Moreover, although Black men and women value and desire to establish and be involved in stable high-quality relationships (Barr et al., 2015), research has noted that in response to systemic racism in state-sanctioned marriage and the resulting penalties (Lenhardt, 2014), Black Americans have developed adaptive and alternative strategies for romantic relationships resulting in variations in relationship formation including singleness and singlehood (Banks, 2012).

Racism as the *Third Person* in Romantic Relationships: Maintenance/Functioning and Dissolution

Racism also has erosive effects on romantic relationships once they have developed. At the micro-level, scholars have shown that perceived racial discrimination negatively impacts a host of relationship dynamics for Black couples including relationship quality (Bryant et al., 2010; Doyle & Molix, 2014), satisfaction, and instability (Lavner et al., 2018). Furthermore, there is burgeoning research showing that racial discrimination is associated with greater spousal strain (Doyle & Molix, 2014; Priest et al., 2020) and increased difficulty in the maintenance of Black intimate romantic relationships (Awosan & Hardy, 2017; Awosan & Opara, 2016). In particular, theorists and researchers have posited that the stress from interpersonal experiences of racism through racial discrimination spill over into the relationship and consequently affect the relational health of the couple (Barton et al., 2018; Henderson et al., 2023). As such, the quality, stability, and satisfaction of Black relationships are intricately tied to the sociocultural context that these relationships are embedded in.

Most of the research in this area has focused on the inequitable interpersonal treatment experienced by romantic partners, yet there is a vital need to also document and understand how systemic racism perpetuates and maintains existing relationship experiences and inequities. From a macro level standpoint, racism impacts the maintenance, functioning, and dissolution of Black relationships through past and contemporary racialized policies and practices. Economic factors such as financial strain and instability are negatively associated with relationship quality (Barton & Bryant, 2016; Lerman, 2002) and positively associated with risk for relationship dissolution (Cutrona et al., 2011). As such, Black relationship maintenance and stability must be viewed through a context that accounts for the racialized wealth gap derived from exclusionary racist practices such as redlining, higher unemployment rates, and segregated communities. This is particularly important given evidence that neighborhood factors, such as living in a lower-income community, can compromise relational well-being of African American couples,

even when controlling for individual demographic variables (Cutrona et al., 2003). Furthermore, issues of power and negotiations of gender roles within Black couple relationships are influenced by the economic realities of Black men and women in a racialized society. For example, though Black couples are described as having more egalitarian gender role attitudes and division of household labor, there is evidence to suggest that Black husbands tend to adopt more traditional gender role attitudes compared to their wives (Stanik & Bryant, 2012). Given that Black women on average are more educated than their Black male partners and Black men have significantly higher rates of unemployment, the ability for Black men to enact traditional gender roles is more difficult. Some scholars have posited that Black men may desire more traditional gender roles to "assert their dominance within the family as compensation for the oppression they face in the larger society" (Stanik & Bryant, 2012, p. 258) and Black female partners may take a one-down approach to their male partners because they are aware of the societal oppression that Black men face (Cowdery et al., 2009). Such an approach that is driven by systemic and structural factors may compromise relationships by contributing to lower marital quality for couples (Stanik & Bryant, 2012).

Dissolution of relationships must also be viewed through a systemic racism lens. Beyond demographic statistics that report higher dissolution rates among Black couples compared to other racial/ethnic groups, there is little to no examination of breakups and divorce in a racialized sociocultural context. In Amato's (2010) decade-in-review, predictors of divorce included poverty, low levels of education, premarital birth, premarital cohabitation, and parental divorce. Black Americans are disproportionately at risk of experiencing each of these risk factors, yet the structural factors that contribute to this reality are rarely unpacked. It also presents a deficit perspective as if divorce is a personal failing for Black communities when actually "many Black couples experience the unspoken unfairness embedded in intergenerational patterns of statistically fewer marriages and more divorces that are driven by structural racism" (Kelly et al., 2020, p. 1384). Furthermore, opportunities to remedy relationship decline through couple therapy is not afforded to Black couples in the same way as it is for white couples. Black couples may be reluctant to engage in couples therapy due to cultural stigma, a history of medical mistrust, and fear of having a culturally insensitive therapist (Nightingale et al., 2019).

Racism as Pulling Us Together

Romantic relationships of Black Americans have a legacy of demonstrating strength and resilience despite adversity (Dixon, 2009; Hunter, 2017; McAdoo, 2007). In Hunter's (2017) *Bound in Wedlock*, there is considerable evidence demonstrating the lengths that coupled African American men and women went to reconnect with each other and their resistance of systemic oppression

throughout the transition from slavery to "freedom" in the nineteenth century. Even today, Black Americans have coped with, used their strengths, and resisted the deleterious effects of racism on their romantic relationships by enacting what Masten (2001) calls "ordinary magic." Several scholars have acknowledged the obstacles in the formation, maintenance, and stability of Black marriages while simultaneously shifting the focus on identifying the strengths inherent in these relationships (e.g., Dew et al., 2017; Marks et al., 2008; Skipper et al., 2021; Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Sparked by the controversial, inaccurate, and deficit-laden federal report by Moynihan (1965), the proclaimed "tangle of pathologies" that described African American families prompted a number of scholars to refute these claims and highlight the inherent strengths of Black families in a racialized social system (e.g., Billingsley, 1968; Hill, 1972).

To deal with the effects of individual and systemic racism, Black couples utilize a host of coping strategies, social support systems, and adaptability of family roles (McAdoo, 2007). Support from immediate family, extended family, fictive kin, and the community have continuously been instrumental in contributing to the resilience of Black couple and family relationships (Marks et al., 2008). In particular, Black couples draw on their shared cultural understanding and efforts to pull together to protect the family from the effects of societal inequality (Awosan & Hardy, 2017; Cowdery et al., 2009). There are also positive and strong Black marriages that report effective communication, flexible gender roles, and an intentional approach to financial management as resources that sustain their marriages (Marks et al., 2008; Skipper et al., 2021). Furthermore, the institution of church and a strong sense of spirituality has historically been used to promote positive Black coupling experiences through religious coping strategies (e.g., praying) and the provision of social welfare services (e.g., housing, financial assistance; Pool, 2017) and is a prominent resource today for Black relationships (Jenkins et al., 2022; Moore et al., 2021; Phillips et al., 2012). Black Greek-letter fraternities and sororities (collectively referred to as the Divine Nine), as well as Black civic organizations such as Jack and Jill and The Links also provide support and uplift the Black community from racial inequities. These organizations have served as a refuge for Black Americans living in predominately white communities or the only or one of a few Black Americans at their workplace. Collectively, these resources and more are inherent and mobilized in Black marital (Phillips et al., 2012) and cohabiting (Chaney, 2014) relationships.

MOVING FORWARD: WHAT'S NEEDED?

This chapter focused on how systemic racism constrains opportunities for forming romantic relationships, creates barriers in relationship maintenance, and exacerbates relationship instability and dissolution, resulting in unequal romantic relationship experiences of individuals and couples across the lifespan. This work explicitly contradicts the myth that relationship science is

race-neutral and is unaffected by bias. Acknowledging the centrality of systemic racism as a driver of racial inequities that shape romantic relationship development and functioning will yield important theoretical and applied insights. We hope that relationship science, and family science more broadly, has reached an inflection point where understanding systemic racism is a central component.

Below we outline our recommendations for incorporating systemic racism in relationship science across four key domains: conceptualization and theory, measurement, privilege exploration, and within-group heterogeneity.

Conceptualization and Theory

Scholars must work to conceptualize and explicitly operationalize systemic racism in relationship science literature. As a first step, there must be an interrogation of whether existing relationship theories and frameworks are able to capture the presence and effects of systemic racism. In particular, scholars should begin by theorizing about the role of oppression and privilege at the macro level and how these factors contour romantic relationship development and functioning. Otherwise, important processes may remain invisible and unexplored, and erroneous assumptions and conclusions may be constructed. Such a process may include revisioning existing acontextual theories or integrating macro level critical frameworks, such as Critical Race Theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) or Systemic Racism Theory (Feagin, 2006) with micro-level relationship frameworks.

In addition to improving our theorizing about romantic relationships, scholars need to ask research questions related to the historical underpinnings of contemporary realities. Work by health researchers using macro level factors such as the legacy of slavery and historical redlining provide some directions for relationship science research. For instance, a higher concentration of slavery in 1860 at the county level was associated with slower declines in heart disease mortality among Blacks in recent decades (Kramer et al., 2017). Moreover, research by Faber (2020) found that historical redlining practices underline contemporary residential segregation patterns and health inequities. What might this look like when examining how the legacy of slavery or historical redlining shape union formation and marriage rates across all racialized groups? Scholars should also consider the connections between historical and contemporary forms of systemic racism on romantic relationships given that the historical forms direct contemporary ones.

Consider Measurement at Global, National, State, and Local Levels

There continues to be a need for research that examines the role of measurement when understanding how systemic racism impacts romantic relationships. As this research expands, the development of measures of systemic

racism will have to align with theory. To date, no study has empirically examined systemic racism as a determinant of relationship development and functioning. Again, relationship science should consider turning to innovative work in the field of health science. A robust body of literature in this field has demonstrated how structural racism operates to influence health in myriad ways (Bailey et al., 2017; Krieger et al., 2020; Lynch et al., 2021) and several scholars have made important contributions to the measurement of systemic racism at local, state, national, and global levels.

A similar process can and should occur in relationship science as racial inequalities manifest in institutionalized policies and practices (e.g., de jure racism of the Jim Crow era; de facto racism in mandatory sentencing) that impact romantic relationships in various ways across geographic contexts. For example, researchers can explore how indicators of structural racism (e.g., local and state-level racial disparities in education, employment, incarceration, concentration of poverty) directly and indirectly through individual discrimination influence relationship initiation, development, and maintenance. Racial disparities at the community- and state-level across domains of educational attainment, employment, judicial treatment, and political participation may be proxies for systematic exclusion of Black people from resources and mobility, which indirectly affects the formation and maintenance of romantic relationships (Lukachko et al., 2014). Census data that can capture the historical concentration of enslaved people in a specific area and current patterns of poverty can also be used as indicators of the legacy of slavery that indirectly affects family and relationship formation within particular geographics locales (Baker & O'Connell, 2022). Examining the impact of local policies and practices, which are often not race-neutral in implementation, on romantic relationships can also uncover factors that contribute to relationship maintenance and satisfaction, including but not limited to health care access, neighborhood environment, and economic stability. Finally, scholars can examine racial inequities and structural racism on a global scale – for example, explore how colonization and caste systems, which are also rooted in white supremacy, act as international forms of structural racism and racial inequities that undermine the romantic relationships of current populations across the world.

Explore Privilege and Power in Relationship Science

For centuries, systemic racism has resulted in unearned privilege and power that has protected white individuals and couples from the deleterious romantic relationship experiences and outcomes that affect Black individuals and couples. Consequently, Black Americans have unequal access to romance, dating, and marriage (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011; Dixon, 2009). Given that systemic racism permeates all sectors of society, one way for relationship science to

shift this narrative is to examine the historical and contemporary advantages of romantic relationship privilege and power. This confronts systemic racism and the privilege embedded in it. Research has overlooked the effects of racial inequities on all racial and ethnic groups, including white populations. In fact, exploration of the effects of systemic racism on the romantic relationships of white populations remain less clear. White individuals and couples do not develop in a vacuum outside of the same system of racialized oppression and systemic racism. We suspect that experiencing greater privilege and relative power creates both historical and contemporary resources and opportunities that impact relationship initiation, development, maintenance, and dissolution. One might ask "how might being in the dominant racial position in the U.S. influence the romantic relationship development and functioning of white partners in relationships?" and "do whites reap romantic relationship advantages from higher levels of systemic racism?" This exploration may underscore the myriad advantages white individuals and couples experience across the lifespan. Highlighting how macro level systemic racism impacts whites may help to better understand and address the unequal distribution of romantic relationship development and functioning across all racial and ethnic populations.

New Focus on Old Issues: Within-Group Heterogeneity

Future research investigating how systemic racism affects romantic relationships must also attend to within-group heterogeneity that shapes and reinforces romantic relationships initiation, development, maintenance, and dissolution. The magnitude of within-group heterogeneity in Black romantic relationships underscores the importance of considering issues of intragroup diversity in relationship science. Past scholarship has overwhelmingly compared Black and white Americans and focused on heterosexual relationships, obscuring important variations within the Black American population that include, but are not limited to, ethnicity (e.g., Caribbean Black), skin tone (e.g., being lighter skin), and sexual orientation. Although Black Americans share sociohistorical experiences, their social location(s) illustrates variations in the degree of systemic racism. Therefore, researchers should not assume equivalent relationship processes and outcomes across all Black Americans. For instance, using a national sample of unmarried African Americans and Black Caribbeans, work by Lincoln and colleagues (2008) found that correlates of relationship satisfaction and longevity differed among African American and Black Caribbeans. Moreover, another example of within-group heterogeneity in Black romantic relationships is skin tone. Within-group differences in romantic relationship development and functioning is related to skin tone and colorism – defined as the unequal treatment and discrimination of individuals on the basis of the lightness or darkness of their skin tone. Studies show

that lighter skin African Americans are more likely to marry and have higher status spouses compared to their darker skin counterparts (Burton et al., 2010; Hamilton et al., 2009; Landor & Bar, 2018; Landor & McNeil Smith, 2019). Furthermore, the intersectionality of race and sexual orientation should also be considered. A systematic review of research focused on Black American same-sex couples found that Black sexual minority women were underrepresented in the literature compared to Black sexual minority men and there is a dearth of research on same-sex couples where both partners are Black (Lassiter et al., 2022). A focus on how systemic racism intersects with within-group heterogeneity to impact romantic relationships will aid in understanding variations within racialized groups rather than comparing these groups to white Americans.

To summarize, understanding the ways in which systemic racism impacts romantic relationships is an important and timely area of inquiry. We hope to inspire a movement of relationship science toward a better understanding of the critical role played by macro level, sociocultural context like systemic racism in all facets of romantic relationships. Although there is no "one size fits all" approach to addressing systemic racism in relationship science, these common themes and actions can be implemented to move this field forward. Incorporating the study of systemic racism will provide us with a more holistic picture of romantic relationship experiences that can have equitable and beneficial research, theory, practice, and policy implications for all families.

NOTE

1 Throughout the chapter, Black is used rather than African American, unless specifically referred to in original articles, to describe the range of individuals who identify as descendants of Africa and the African Diaspora, including Africans and African Americans, among others.

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