Socioemotional Factor

A Missing Gap in Theorizing and Studying Black Heterosexual Coupling Processes and Relationships

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ABSTRACT—Historically, scholars indicated that factors such as sociohistorical, sociocultural, and sociostructural barriers negatively impact the establishment and sustainability of Black male–female romantic unions. Although theoretical understanding of the impacts of the aforementioned factors are critical to contextualizing the experiences of Black men and women in their coupling processes, insights to the emotional influences of these factors on Black male–female romantic relationships are limited. In this literature review, we highlighted a significant gap in the literature, theoretically and empirically, on the socioemotional processes and influences of coupling and maintaining intimate heterosexual Black romantic relationships in a sociohistorical context of residual effects of slavery, a sociocultural context of internalized negative racial stereotypes, and a sociostructural context of gender imbalance in educational and employment attainment.

KEYWORDS—Black romantic relationships; Black marriage and singlehood; Coupling processes and experience; Socioemotional

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Introduction

Difficulties that Black men and women experience in attempts to cultivate heterosexual romantic relationships manifest in the increased singleness and marital dissolution of recent decades (Bryant, Wickrama, Bolland, Cutrona, & Stanik, 2010). Social scientists theorized about how sociohistorical, sociocultural, and sociostructural factors influence intimate romantic relationships among heterosexual Black men and women (Chambers & Kravitz, 2011), but limited empirical understanding exists of how residual effects of slavery, institutional racism, internalized stereotypes, and gender imbalances influence the emotional processes of Black male–female coupling experiences and relationships.

The functions of marriage and romantic relationships have changed over time. Scholars now emphasize the importance of emotion in romantic relationships and marriages (Banks, 2011). Historically, marriages rested on economic and social transactions; now, romantic relationships rely on how well partners connect emotionally. The success, quality, and satisfaction of many romantic relationships depend on the emotional well-being of the individuals and the collective emotional health of the relationship (Kundson-Martin & Huenergardt, 2010). To understand marriage decline among Black men and women, one must focus on sociohistorical, sociocultural, and sociostructural factors, and on the emotional effects of these factors on Black male–female romantic relationships. This article reviews literature on how theorists and researchers studied heterosexual Black-coupling processes, highlighting the need to explore emotional processes in Black male–female coupling processes and relationships.

Conceptual Framework: Theorizing about Black Male–Female Romantic Relationships

To understand the complexity of heterosexual intimate pair bonding among Blacks in the United States, one must critically examine the sociostructural, sociohistorical, and sociocultural contexts of Blacks. Social scientists have used social-exchange theory to expound on ways the sociostructural factor of shortage of mate availability and eligibility due to sex-ratio and educational imbalances between Black men and women may influence mate-selection dynamics and romantic commitment (Bryant et al., 2010;
Davis, Williams, Emerson, & Hourd-Bryant, 2000). Social-exchange theory posits that members of a scarcer gender have a negotiation advantage in male–female romantic relations because more alternative relationships are available to them (Elliott, Krivickas, Brault, & Kreider, 2012). Among Blacks, women tend to compete for the small pool of eligible men, whereas men tend to require noncommittal relationships from women, eroding the quality of romantic relationships (Barr, Simons & Simons, 2015; Pinderhughes, 2002).

The influence of structural factors on such mate-selection behaviors and romantic relational dynamics provides evidence that changes in marital trends among Black men and women may be a collective function of mate eligibility, availability, and selection. Empirical studies examined ways sex-ratio imbalance, mate-selection standards, mate availability, and mate eligibility influenced marriage decline and the rise of singlehood among heterosexual Blacks (Davis, Williams, Emerson & Hourd-Bryant, 2000; Marsh, Darity, Cohen, Casper, & Salters, 2007). However, researchers failed to examine how attitudes and beliefs about sociostructural, sociohistorical, and sociocultural factors may impact the emotional experiences of Black men and women in the mate-selection processes and in efforts to sustain romantic relationships.

Sociostructural Factors

Sex-Ratio Imbalance between Black Men and Women
To understand the decline in marriage and rise in singlehood among Blacks, scholars theorize about the effects of economic and demographic structural factors (Dixon, 2009; Elliott et al., 2012). The ratio of men to women in a particular geographical unit is a major social consequence of high rates of divorce, nonmarital childbearing, singlehood, man-sharing, affairs, and transient relationships across all races (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995). Among Blacks, since 1920, a precipitous decline ensued in the sex ratio of men to women (Guttenberg & Secord, 1983). Lower sex ratio at birth, the disproportionate number of Black men in prison, and high mortality rates of Black male infants, children, adolescents, and young adults may explain the historical trend of low sex ratio among Blacks (King & Allen, 2009).

Although declining sex ratios are not the main cause of reduced marriage rates among Blacks, they have contributed to lower marriage rates, higher
marital dissolution, more nonmarital births, and possibly the rise in singlehood among Blacks. A sex-ratio imbalance contributes to the emotionally loaded matter of “the shortage of Black men,” particularly among heterosexual single Black women who wish to marry or commit to a romantic relationship with a Black man (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Higher Black male mortality rates across the life cycle and imprisonment exacerbate the shortage of Black men, particularly among adolescents and young adults (Charles & Luoh, 2010). These factors eliminate large numbers of Black men from involvement in committed long-term heterosexual romantic relationships. Specifically, 8.2% of Black men between the ages of 25 and 54 are in prison, compared to 1.6% of non-Black men (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2010); 900,000 missing Black men have died, leaving 83 Black men to 100 Black women in the general population (Woflers, Leonhardt, & Quealy, 2015).

Between 1980 and 2000, during the War on Drugs, incarceration rose and marriage for women fell (Charles & Luoh, 2010). National Judicial Reporting Program Series data indicated increased male incarceration in these 3 decades coincided with a 13% decline in marriage for women of all racial groups; between 10% and 25% for Black and Latina women. Also, a decline in male labor was critical in the decline of marriage among women. (The number of Black men missing from the marriage market, either by death or incarceration, are not all heterosexual).

The imbalanced sex ratio—the “marriage squeeze” (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1999)—plays a critical role in marriage patterns of Black women who experience restricted numbers of men available for marriage who are unburdened with criminal records or limited economic resources; men who possess the social or economic characteristics Black women seek in a potential marriage partner (King & Allen, 2009). Compared to women of other races, particularly college-educated women, Black women tend to marry men with lower educational attainment or previous marriages (Ellman, 2007) and some date or marry men with criminal records (Banks, 2011). The shortage of marriageable Black men may force many Black women to retreat from marriage, contributing to declining marriage rates among heterosexual Blacks (Dixon, 2009). A sex-ratio interpretation of restricted mate availability supports the concept that Black men are three times more likely to marry or date interracially than Black women, and the rise in the number of visibly affirming gay Black men contributes to the sex-ratio imbalance (Dixon, 2009).
Socioeconomic Status

A group or individual’s income, education, and occupation determines their social standing or socioeconomic status. The retreat from marriage and instability in romantic committed relationships may be more pronounced among Black women and men of lower socioeconomic status (Wilcox, Marquardt, Popenoe, & Whitehead, 2010). However, increasing unemployment of Black men and commensurate economic problems link to the rise in marital dissolution and romantic-relationship instability among heterosexual Blacks across socioeconomic classes (Bulanda & Brown, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2010).

Due to Black men’s endorsement of the provider role, most Black men do not marry until they can fulfill the role of economic provider (Johnson, & Loscocco, 2015). Equally, Black women often embrace a man as the main economic provider; men who cannot perform provider functions may not be viewed as potential partners (King & Allen, 2009). In assessing mate-selection preferences among Black men and women in an exploratory cross-sectional survey of single men and women, King and Allen (2009) found significant differences in demographic variables (e.g., income) between ideal marriage partners and respondents.

The interplay of sex-ratio imbalance and low economic viability among Black men increases the shortage of potential “marriageable” Black male partners (Banks, 2011). In clinical work, for many single Black women with or without children, across socioeconomic status, the shortage of “marriageable” Black men appeared to be a critical issue (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Chapman, 2007). Black women who are pessimistic about their chances of finding a suitable marital partner may forgo marriage and have children alone or adopt (Marsh, Darby, Cohen, Casper & Salters, 2007; Chapman, 2007). Marriage rates have declined for educated and less educated Black women due to the sex-ratio imbalance, poor economic viability, and the lack of eligible Black men (Wilcox et al., 2010). Some educated and professional Black women remain single, whereas others date or marry men who have less education and hold blue collar jobs (Marsh et al., 2007). The “shortage” of Black men and dating or marrying below one’s educational and socioeconomic class may engender emotional, personal and relational conflicts for Black women and men (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Chapman, 2007).

No recent empirical studies examined how restricted availability of marriageable Black men adversely impacts the mental and emotional well-
being of Black women (particularly those who desire Black men as partners), and how the restricted availability of marriageable Black men influences men's and women's attitudes, beliefs, and experiences in cultivating intimate romantic relationships. Little literature addresses how employment and economic issues among Blacks, particularly Black men, impacts current declines in marriage and increases in singleness among Black men and women. Empirical examination of the availability of marriageable partners is critical to understanding how such factors inform Black men's and women's emotions, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences as potential mates or romantic partners.

**Employment Status**

Sex-ratio imbalance and potential mate availability may be unrelated and do not comprehensively explain declining Black marriages in past decades (D. Franklin, 2000; Patterson, 1998). Although low sex ratio affects mate availability among Blacks, the number of employed men per 100 women for individuals aged 25 to 44 has a more specific effect (Marsh et al., 2007). Specifically, the shortage of marriageable (i.e., employed) Black men impacts Blacks' marital status (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Charles & Luoh, 2010; Dixon, 2009). Sex-ratio imbalances impact the marital behaviors of Blacks five times more than Whites, whereas employment has an effect that is 20 times greater (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1995).

Decline in economic fortunes of young U.S. men of all races contributes to overall U.S. marital patterns (Blau, Kahn, & Waldfogel, 2000). Blacks' marital feasibility has declined because of the historical and increasing economic marginality of Black men in the labor force (Blau et al., 2000; Charles & Luoh, 2010). Economic marginalization of Black men may influence mate selection; most Black men are constrained in their ability to perform the provider role in marriage (Johnson, & Loscocco, 2015). These men may feel inadequate or reluctant to marry because they cannot provide a sufficient financial contribution to their families (Dixon, 2009), rendering them unattractive to potential marriage partners.

Black men's economic status and labor-force participation strongly and positively related to marriage prevalence, and the percentage of Black children who live in married households (Marsh et al., 2007). Additionally, Black men's high rates of unemployment and underemployment significantly influence their willingness to marry (Quane, Wilson, & Hwang, 2015).
Black single men in stable employment were twice as likely to marry than unemployed single men (Testa & Krogh, 1995). It is important to empirically examine ways economic marginalization of Black men informs the coupling process for Black men and women.

The unique impact of racism and socioeconomic oppression on Black male-female relationships have produced gestalt effects that may differ from relationships of other racial groups. Also, global economic restructuring and lack of employable skills and education to meet the new demands may contribute to employment issues among Black men (Dixon, 2009). As a result of racism, most Black men experience a number of periods of unemployment or underemployment (i.e., working in lower paying jobs for which they are overqualified) regardless of their educational or socioeconomic status (Boyd-Franklin, 2003).

Higher education credentials do not attenuate racial discrimination (Gaddis, 2015). The romanticized notion that education is the great equalizer belies the experiences of Black job candidates with college degrees who are less likely than White candidates to receive responses from employers. Potential jobs available to Black candidates have 10% lower starting salaries and job titles than those for White candidates; racial discrimination plays a detrimental role in low-wage and high-wage jobs (Pager, Western, & Bonikowski, 2009). In 2008, the overall unemployment rate for Black college graduates was nearly double that of Whites (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Nationally, full-time Black and Latino workers earned less than Whites with comparable levels of education (D. R. Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000), and in 2007 the median annual household income for a Black male college graduate aged 25 or older was $55,000, compared to $71,000 for his White counterpart (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2008).

Although the rise in singlehood may reflect changes in cultural values, the primary cause of Black singleness is that many Black men lack jobs or adequately paying jobs to support a family (Quane, Wilson, & Hwang, 2015). In 1960, when 75% of Black households included a husband and wife and 75% of Black men were working, 21% of all Black families were headed by a Black woman. The number of Black families headed by women rose by 700,000 between 1976 and 1983 when 700,000 Black men were removed from the labor force. In 1982, when only 54% of Black men had jobs, 42% of Black families were headed by a Black woman. Ubiquitous unemployment, underemployment, and sporadic employment among Black men may affect
their male–female relationships. Marriage rates of Blacks declined following increased unemployment among Black men (U.S. Census Bureau, as cited in Bryant et al., 2010).

Given the importance placed on men's employment and economic status in the characterization of manhood and the culture of mate selection, despite educational or socioeconomic status, economic marginalization of Black men in U.S. society may influence virtually every aspect of their lives, including romantic experiences and attempts to couple in heterosexual relationships. Black men and women, more than other racial groups, strongly believe that adequate finances are critical for relational success (Tucker, 2000, 2003; Helm & Carlson, 2013). Black men's unemployment has been double that of White men since 1640 (Dixon, 2009). Currently, unemployment among Blacks is 9.0% compared to the national rate of 5.2%, with Black men at 9.8% (compared to 4.8%, 5.9%, and 3.6% for White, Latino, and Asian men, respectively) and 8.3% for Black women (compared to 4.3%, 6.3%, and 4.1% for White, Latina, and Asian women, respectively; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016).

Single, never-married Black men aged 25 and older had the highest unemployment rate (11.9%) in 2015, compared to Latino (7.00%), White (6.2%), and Asian (4.4%) men in their peer groups, and compared to Black married (4.9%), widowed, divorced, or separated Black men (9.5%) of similar age (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). At the age of first-time marriage, unemployment rates were higher for single, never-married Black men; high unemployment may reduce marriage or coupling likelihood and undermine the stability of existing relationships.

Education
Unequal educational attainment between Black men and women also influences the restricted pool of suitable available Black men as potential romantic partners for Black women (Banks, 2011). In the past 40 years, women significantly surpassed men in educational attainment across all racial groups (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2011). In 2008, Black women had the largest gender difference compared to women of other racial groups in the number of undergraduate and graduate enrollments, accounting for 64% of Black undergraduate enrollment and 71% of graduate enrollment. In 2009, among the 1.5 million Blacks aged 25 and older who had advanced degrees, 879,000 were women and 610,000 were men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Among the 22 million Blacks aged 25 and older who had bachelor's
degrees in 2009, 1,709,000 were women and 1,169,000 were men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), signifying the pervasive disparity of educational attainment between genders. Thus, educational attainment does not necessarily equate to economic attainment for Blacks and Latinos and more specifically for Black women and Latinas. Literature rarely discusses the influence of the above quantitative data on the qualitative experiences of coupling and maintenance of romantic relationships among Blacks.

A large proportion of Black women are unable to find suitable Black male partners (i.e., higher or comparable educational status) and thus, may focus on their education to counterbalance the harsh realities of the restricted pool of educationally and economically viable men and to ensure their economic independence (Chapman, 2007). Women’s increase in educational attainment and economic independence are a possible reason for the decline in marriage across all racial groups (Marsh et al., 2007) and may be one reason for marital decline among heterosexual Blacks.

In elucidating how higher educational attainment of Black women compared to Black men may impact declining marriage, some scholars postulated that Blacks’ endorsement of traditional mate-selection expectations may cause Black men to perceive that more educated Black women are less attractive potential partners (Camp, 2002; Chapman, 2007). At the highest level of education, Black women tend to marry at younger ages than their White female counterparts (Dixon, 2009), but anecdotal evidence indicates that many Black women believe Black men are uncomfortable dating or marrying women whose education or income exceeds theirs (King & Allen, 2009). Social norm seems to penalize Black women for their educational or economic achievements in dating and marriage (Staples, 2007). Some men may perceive educated women to be too assertive and independent, or may feel inadequate or intimidated to be in romantic partnerships with these women (Chapman, 2007). The disparity in educational attainment between Black women and men may create emotional and relational conflict in coupling processes and relationships of this population. Given that society still adheres to patriarchic notions that the man in a heterosexual relationship must have a higher educational degree than his female partner, a lacuna persists in the literature on how patriarchy and the reality of Black women’s education and income informs the current dating process.

The imbalance in gender educational attainment, unequal sex ratio, gender socialization in the mate-selection process, substantial rates of unemployment and underemployment among Black men, and the shortage of
marriageable men may breed power struggles, distrust, resentment, disappointment, and frustration due to unmet expectations between Black men and women (Boyd-Franklin, 2003; Camp, 2002; Chapman, 2007). Such conflicts may impede the opportunity and ability of Black men and women to cultivate and experience intimate enduring romantic relationships with one another, thereby decreasing the likelihood of marriage and undermining the opportunity for romantic involvement or stability in existing relationships.

Sociohistorical Factors

The Effects of Slavery on Black Male–Female Relationships

Conceptualization of the sociohistorical context of Blacks in the United States have allowed scholars to underscore the ways residual effects of slavery and institutionalized racism impact the attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors that inform Black man–woman relationships (Watson, 2013). Although a few researchers investigated the influence of sex-ratio imbalance, mate-selection standards, and mate availability on marital trends among Blacks, these studies failed to account for how attitudes, beliefs, and emotional processes, transmitted from slavery, may obstruct intimacy among Black men and women (Awosan, 2014). Focusing on demographic factors may obscure understanding of deeper problems that distress and hinder cultivation and maintenance of intimate romantic relationships.

To understand mounting conflicts in Black man–woman relationships, the factor in the rise in singlehood and decline in marriage among Blacks, it is imperative to examine the institution that enslaved African people for labor and economic profit from the beginning of the 15th century until 1865 (E. Williams, 1994). The crucible of the distrust and conflicts in Black male–female relationships traces to almost 35 centuries of the holocaust of slavery and its historical lineaments of peonage of sharecropping, neoslavery of Jim Crow, racial-segregation eras, and remnants observed in society today (DeGruy Leary, 2005; Patterson, 1998).

The slavery era was a “great disaster”—Maafa (Swahili) on the mind, body, and soul of Blacks—described as the African holocaust (Kambon, 1998). Generations of oppression and slavery of Black people greatly impacted past and contemporary Black Americans’ lives. Maafa had profound multigenerational consequences on the cultural, spiritual, relational, emotional, and mental beings of Blacks (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Maintaining healthy and secure relationships, valued in African culture, was destroyed
by slavery, undermining Africans' ability and those of their progeny to establish and sustain healthy new relationships (DeGruy Leary, 2005). Slavery systematically devastated the relational bonds of enslaved Africans and psychologically enforced practices and beliefs that made them believe that they were less than human.

Using the concept of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), DeGruy Leary (2005) coined the term posttraumatic slave syndrome, explaining how slavery's residual traumas transmitted generationally. The *Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV, Revised* (DSM-IV) described conditions that manifest as mental or emotional traumas (DeGruy Leary, 2005). Those exposed to traumatic conditions often have a diagnosis of PTSD by mental health professionals.

- A serious threat or harm to one's life or physical integrity;
- A threat or harm to one's children, spouse or close relative;
- Sudden destruction of one's home or community;
- Seeing another person injured or killed as result of accident or physical violence;
- Learning about a serious threat to a relative or a close friend being kidnapped, tortured or killed;
- Stressor is experienced with intense fear, terror and helplessness; and
- Stressor and disorder is considered to be more serious and will last longer when the stressor is of human design. (DeGruy Leary, 2005, p. 118)

A great preponderance of enslaved Africans were subjected to several or all of these traumatic experiences repeatedly for many generations, from captivity in Africa, through enslavement, and following slavery. Individuals exposed to one of these traumatic events exhibit the following symptoms of PTSD:

- Intense psychological distress at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event;
- Physiological reactivity on exposure to internal or external cues;
- Marked diminished interest or participation in significant activities;
- Feeling of detachment or estrangement from others;
- Restricted range of affect;
• Sense of foreshortened future (e.g. does not expect to have a career, marriage, children or normal life span);
• Irritability or outbursts of anger;
• Hypervigilance; and
• Clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning. (DSM-IV as cited in DeGruy Leary, 2005, p. 119)

Many enslaved Black men and women experienced and exhibited many symptoms of PTSD for more than 4 centuries of enslavement and racial oppression (DeGruy Leary, 2005). Decades after slavery was abolished in 1865, Blacks experienced cruel assaults through lynching of men and women, raping of women without legal repercussions, and widespread attitudes and practices of racial oppression, humiliation, and discrimination, reminiscent of the traumatic ordeals they endured during slavery. More than 10 generations of enslaved Blacks experienced physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and relational traumatic events designed by another human being. Generations of enslaved Blacks must have exhibited several symptoms of PTSD, and the effects of the mental and emotional trauma must have been passed down through the generations. It is plausible that the symptoms of PTSD had a grave influence on the emotional and relational connectedness between Black women and men (Hardy, 2016; Watson, 2013).

Posttraumatic slave syndrome is the legacy of trauma that influences behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes of contemporary Black people (DeGruy Leary, 2005). These behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes were necessary to adopt to survive; yet now, these same attributes undermine the ability of Blacks to succeed in many aspects of their personal and social lives. Given the racial climate of current society and the countless brutal killings of Black men and women by law enforcement, some of these behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes may still serve as survival mechanisms in a society that holds practices and ideology of Black inferiority and oppression of Black people.

Posttraumatic slave syndrome (DeGruy Leary, 2005) is consistent with the field of Marriage and Family Therapy’s Bowen theory of multigenerational emotional process or multigenerational transmission process (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Family-systems theory assumes multigenerational trends in functioning reflect orderly and predictable processes that connect the functioning of family members across generations through relationships and emotional processes. Processes include emotions, feelings, subjective-
ly determined attitudes, values, and beliefs transmitted across generations, influenced by internal and external pressures (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The traumatic holocaust of slavery and oppression generated catastrophic external pressures that disrupted and altered the balance of emotional and relationship processes in Black family systems, leaving residual effects of slavery (RES): the ways “the racist treatment of African Americans, during and after slavery has impacted multiple generations of African Americans” (Wilkins, Whiting, Watson, Russan, & Moncrief, 2013, p. 15).

The effects of slavery and internalized racism created “severe psychological and social shock in the minds of” Blacks (Akbar, 1996, p. 3). Generations of Blacks continue to carry the mental and social scars of brutality and unnatural experiences from slavery. Some scars reinjure and reopen due to effects of daily racial tensions and discrimination in current society. Scholars emphasized the brutal effects of trauma incurred through the institution of slavery and racism, particularly with regard to male–female relationships (D. Franklin, 2000; hooks, 2001) imposed detrimental trauma on Black marriage, fatherhood, and motherhood (Akbar, 1996). Slavery destroyed the affective bonds of care, nurturance, protection, and support among Black men, women, and children because every aspect of their lives was controlled and manipulated by white slaveholders (Lawrence-Webb, Littlefield, & Okundaye, 2004).

Slave wives could not rely on their husbands for protection from physical, sexual, and emotional exploitation by slaveholders or other white men, nor could slave men provide such care and protection (D. Franklin, 2000). Unsuccessful attempts to prevent such physical, sexual, and emotional abuse may have generated feelings of humiliation, shame, and helplessness. Such emotions may have caused feelings of degradation, devaluation, and worthlessness, denigrating the emotional and relational intimacies between Black men and women. Humans’ response to shame or humiliation compels people to withdraw from relationships, silence themselves, or make themselves invisible in relationships (Dorahy et al., 2013). Many enslaved men and women experienced and adopted such human reactions to survive for more than 3 centuries of hideous acts against their minds, bodies, and souls.

Powerlessness over the right, opportunity, and capability to depend on one another for protection and care was likely the most detrimental aspect of the effects of slavery on gender relations (D. Franklin, 2000). The inability to rely on one another laid the foundation for the anger and distrust that persists between the genders today. Enslaved men and women were separate
emotionally and physically. Their lack of control over their personal lives and romantic unions, the meaning and experience of intimacy and love in male-female relationships, was altered. Hare and Hare (1989) powerfully highlighted the effects of slavery on the emotional, relational, and physical bonds of Blacks: "As Black people were transformed into commodities to be bought and sold on the slave block or subjugated as workers along with animals in plantation production, normal love relations were denounced" (p. 4).

**Marital Status of Blacks after Slavery**

Some scholars disputed that the enslavement of Blacks altered the dynamics of marriage and intimate romantic relationships (Gutman, 1976; Wilson & Neckerman, 1987). Gutman (1976) speculated that the high rates of marriage among Blacks directly following emancipation from slavery implied slavery did not negatively affect Black male-female relationships. Gutman and others claimed that Black families consisted mainly of married couples directly after slavery, influencing contemporary assumptions that if slavery alone negatively influenced relationships between men and women, marriage rates after slavery would increase, subsequent to the period of slavery. However, the opposite is true: present marital rates among Blacks are dramatically declining with a commensurate dramatic increase in singlehood (Bryant et al., 2010; Elliot et al., 2012). Rather, Black men and women may have married in record numbers because they highly valued marriage and desired to reconnect with African values of family cohesion. In the postbellum era, many former slaves desperately searched for lost families and went to great lengths to legalize conjugal arrangements established during slavery (Dixon, 2009; D. Franklin, 2000).

Gutman's (1976) widely contested work maintained that the majority of Black families were headed by two parents. Some disputed Gutman's assertion and that of others (e.g., J. Jones, 1985; White, 1985), who conceded that the majority of slave and ex-slave families, on emancipation, "had two parents, and most older couples lived together in long-lasting unions" (Stevenson, 1995, p. 9). Gutman aimed to perpetuate the notion that slavery did not negatively impact Black marital and familial lives, challenging the historical characterization of Black families as weak, unstable, and disorganized (Stevenson, 1995). In contrast to Gutman's interpretation of post emancipation documents such as the Union Army population census data from 1865 and 1866 and the Freeman's Bureau marriage registers, these may have reflected the social expectation of those recording these data and the imme-
diate response of slaves to their “freedom” rather than a clear indication of their marital and familial ideals and realities. After slavery, Black people’s attempts to overcome the atrocities imposed on their heterosexual unions during slavery were further jeopardized by institutionalized racism: Jim Crow laws and the ubiquitous presence of racism in today’s society (Helm & Carlson, 2013; Watson, 2013).

To survive the insidious era of slavery, many slave men and women protected themselves psychologically from the horror inflicted on them by masking their emotional selves from their oppressors (D. Franklin, 2000). Such psychological disguise of real feelings of anger, shame, helplessness, and powerlessness may have been useful in interactions with Whites; however, it was destructive to the establishment and sustainment of secure attachment in interpersonal relationships among Blacks. Residual effects of slavery persist in the justice, education, economic, law enforcement, policy, and even healthcare systems (Alexander, 2012; Coates, 2015; D. R. Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). In recent decades, theoretical understanding of the vestiges of slavery on intrapersonal and interpersonal levels has emerged (Wilkins et al., 2013). However, few describe empirical understanding of the ways the residual effects of slavery have impacted the romantic pair-bonding unions and processes among Black men and women. Given social scientists’ assertions that residual trauma of losses, powerlessness, devaluation of manhood and womanhood, and destruction of interdependence and intimate bonds in male–female relationships during slavery continues to impact Black male–female relationships, it is critical to understand Black men’s and women’s attitudes about the effects of slavery on their pair-bonding processes and emotional attunement as potential or current romantic partners. It is also critical to understanding the ways Blacks may experience or perceive these residual effects of slavery in efforts and attempts to establish and sustain heterosexual intimate romantic unions.

**Sociocultural Factor**

*Internalized Racism and Negative Racial Stereotypes of Black Men and Women*

Lingeriing effects of slavery left deep wounds in the nurturing of intimate relationships between Black men and women. The historical impact of slavery, economic instability, and structural inequalities in the workforce, the justice system, health system, and education continue to contribute to un-
stable relationships between Black men and women (Pinderhughes, 2002; Watson, 2013). Indeed, the collective effects of the vestiges of slavery and institutionalized racism have propagated hostility, disappointment, and alienation. Historical and political-structural factors continue to perpetuate deep-rooted emotional and relational injuries that plague the formation and maintenance of intimacy in Black male–female relationships.

Slavery destroyed the self-image and perceptions of Black men and women. Stereotypes are a negative or positive set of beliefs about the characteristics of another group of people (Burrell, 2010). Stereotypes of Blacks in the United States have historically been negative, often propagating the marginalization of Blacks. Stereotypic views of Black men from the era of slavery regarded men as oversexed, lazy, promiscuous, and incapable of marital commitment; women as sexually aggressive, unfeminine, and emasculators of male identity (Watson, 2013). Denial of access, inequality, and instability in jobs, education, the economy, healthcare, and housing helped perpetuate these stereotypes in the larger society and among Blacks.

From a young age, Black men and women learn to internalize negative stereotypes about themselves from the larger society and in Black communities (Burrell, 2010). These negative racial stereotypes may influence consequent mate selection, increasing the likely proliferation of problems in developing and maintaining romantic relationships (Gillum, 2007). Distortions of Black sexuality and gender roles as “the ‘controlling’ Black woman who is supposed to be ‘super strong,’ undesirable, totally independent, aggressive and hostile to Black men and the ‘shiftless,’ oversexed Black male that cannot be counted on because he neglects the needs of women and children” (Rodgers-Rose, 1980, p. 189) continue to dictate the ways many Black men and women are seen and perceive themselves and each other (Dixon, 2009). White supremacy perpetuates these stereotypic views of Black men and women (hooks, 2001).

White supremacy is covert and overt racial aggression through social or political means to promote the belief that White people or things White are superior to people of other racial backgrounds (hooks, 2001). Negative stereotypes ensure the social/racial hierarchical structure. A dominant group may require a subordinate group to be a certain way to survive: The powerless group may take on those characteristics to confirm and reinforce the relational dynamic of superiority and inferiority in society (hooks, 2001). Racism rests in the historical and continuing oppression of people perceived as inferior, deviant, or undesirable, initiated by the chattel slavery institution.
(Lipsitz, 2011). Through historical analysis and clinical work with Black clients, Willis (1990) posited that due to the effects of racism, some Blacks feel inferior to Whites.

Blacks have unique socialization stemming from systematic and traumatic programming of inferiority over many centuries (DeGruy Leary, 2005). From the beginning, “Africans were taught that they were inferior physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually, thus rendering them ineffectual in their own eyes and in the eyes of the society around them” (DeGruy Leary, 2005, p. 142). The notion of the inferiority of Blacks or things Black was hardly dispelled after slavery and is still prevalent in contemporary society. The psychic wound inflicted on Blacks to justify perceived inferiority to whites has not healed; today, many Blacks still suffer from this unjust emotional injury (hooks, 2001): “The minds of our citizens have never been freed” from the notions, attitudes, and practices of the white dominant group, which categorically held beliefs about the biological, physical, spiritual, or cultural inferiority of Blacks (Grier & Cobbs, 1968, p. 26). Even 15 centuries removed from slavery, many citizens, consciously and unconsciously, endorse the inferiority of Blacks and superiority of Whites.

The belief that Blacks and all things Black are inferior is another symptom of posttraumatic slave syndrome (DeGruy Leary, 2005). Most U.S. Blacks adopt Eurocentric standards of beauty, heterosexual courtship processes, and gender roles (womanhood and manhood) while opposing or embracing the ubiquitous negative societal racial sexual and gender stereotypes of Black men and women (Burrell, 2010; Hudson-Weems, 2008). Adult development and coupling processes have become “a process of consolidating self-definition in spite of, because of, and the inclusion of white superiority and black inferiority” (A. J. Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000, p. 35). The prevalence of positive White male–female relationships and images compares and contrasts Black male–female relationships and images as negative among Whites and Blacks. Authentic and harmonious interpersonal relationships are impeded by internalized negative myths about blackness and positive myths about whiteness, disrupting the dynamics of intimacy. Critical examples are skin-color bias (colorism) and the definition of physical attractiveness on Black coupling processes (Parmer, Arnold, Natt, & Janson, 2004; Watson, 2013).

The disparity between high rates of singlehood among Blacks and the desire to engage in intimate relationships requires exploration of the ways internalization of negative racial stereotypes of Blacks informs behaviors, attitudes,
beliefs, emotional processes, and experiences of men and women in attempts to cultivate and maintain romantic relationships (Belgrave & Allison, 2010; Camp, 2002). Internalization of cultural stereotypes by stigmatized groups can generate expectations, anxieties, and reactions that adversely affect social and psychological functioning (D. R. Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). In a study with 298 African American women, internalized racism positively correlated with alcohol consumption (Taylor & Jackson, 1990). Another study that analyzed data from the National Survey of Black Americans found that endorsement of negative racial stereotypes among Blacks positively related to chronic health issues and psychological distress (D. R. Williams & Chung, 2002). A few studies found that internalized racism negatively impacts physical health, mental health, and self-esteem (Schulz et al., 2000; Tucker, 2003; D. R. Williams, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2003), but few explored the social and emotional effects of racism in the interpersonal relationships among Blacks (Clark, Anderson, Clark, & Williams, 2002). This marked gap in the literature means much empirical research should investigate how internalized racism and negative racial stereotypes influence relationship well-being among Blacks (Chestnut, 2009). Given the significance of race and racism in the United States, it is imperative to conduct systematic explorations of the links between the functioning of marital and non-marital romantic relationships and the effects of racial stigmatization on Black coupling processes and relationships (Bryant et al., 2010).

Racial stereotypes persevere from the days of slavery in U.S. society and some Blacks embrace these stereotypes (Watson, 2013). Chestnut (2009) found that Black women endorsed higher negative stereotypes of Black women and men compared to men. In assessing the effects of internalized negative racial stereotypes among distressed and non-distressed Black couples, distressed husbands and wives agreed significantly with items that indicated Blacks are cognitively inferior to Whites and are more sexual than Whites, compared to non-distressed couples (Taylor & Zhang, 1990). Similarly, women who endorsed strong beliefs of negative racial stereotypes had partners who reported limited relationship trust (Kelly & Floyd, 2001). Although studies focused on internalized racial stereotypes in marital relationships, findings from empirical investigations implied that internalized negative racial stereotypes negatively impact Black male-female romantic relationships in general. It is important to explore ways internalized negative racial stereotypes influence Black people's evaluation of potential ro-
mantic mates, as well as their level of emotional engagement, investment, commitment, and attunement to one another.

Theoretical analyses of sociostructural, sociohistorical, and sociocultural factors indicate critical influences of these factors on coupling processes and romantic relationships of heterosexual Black men and women. Given the difficulties Black men and women seems to experience in cultivating and maintaining romantic relationships, coupled with the importance of emotional attunement in establishing and maintaining romantic relationships, a great need exists to examine and understand the effects of the sociostructural, sociohistorical, and sociocultural factors on the emotional context and experiences of coupling among this population.

**Future Terrain: Theorizing and Studying Black Romantic Relationships as a Socioemotional Factor**

Many have written about the connection between relational satisfaction and well-being in heterosexual romantic relationships, particularly marital unions and cohabitations (Blackman, Clayton, Glen, Malone-Colon, & Roberts, 2005; Brock & Lawrence, 2008; Kim & Mckenry, 2002). The decline in Black marriages and the prevalence of singlehood among Blacks may have great consequences for the mental, emotional, and relational well-being and functioning of Black male–female relationships as well as Black families and communities (Blackman et al., 2005; Pinderhughes, 2002). Increased well-being in intimate unions links to the ability to form and maintain happy and stable relationships (Bryant & Conger, 2002; Bryant et al., 2010). In contrast, the inability to form and maintain happy and stable intimate unions may result in negative mental, social, behavioral, emotional, relational, and financial outcomes (Graham, Keneski, & Loving, 2014). Given the potential benefits and disadvantages entailed in forming and maintaining intimate unions, theoretical analyses and empirical research on the interplay of the sociohistorical, sociostructural, and sociocultural factors on emotional processes and contexts in the coupling process and romantic relationships of Black men and women are gravelly needed.

The reviewed literature highlighted a critical gap in theorization and empirical studies of Black male–female romantic relationships in sociohistorical, sociostructural, and sociocultural contexts. Theoretical analyses of the effects of these factors on Black romantic relationships often omit their impact
and influence on the socioemotional aspects of coupling and maintaining committed romantic relationships among Black men and women. Although many have explicated the economic, social, and political effects of racism on the lives of Black individuals and families, much research is needed on the mental, emotional, and relational effects of racism on the lives of Black men and women, particularly on their romantic lives (Awosan, Sandberg, & Hall, 2011; Wilkins et al., 2013). An essential need exists to understand the ways that residual effects of slavery, daily experiences with racism, internalized racial stereotypes, and gender imbalance in educational/employment attainment adversely impact the emotional processes and contexts of Black men and women's dating experiences and coupleship. What are the ways in which sociohistorical, sociocultural, and sociostructural factors impact the mutual influence, support, emotional attunement and engagement that are critical in relational well-being and satisfaction of romantic relationships?

Research and theoretical analyses of Black coupling processes and romantic relationships need to fill the dearth of understanding in the literature regarding the impact of racism and what some experts call race-based traumatic stressors or sociocultural oppression on these romantic unions (Carter, 2007; Hardy, 2016). “Sociocultural oppression is a pervasive and debilitating condition that systemically ‘suppresses’ the emotional, psychological, spiritual and interpersonal life experiences of those who are affected” (Hardy, 2016, p. 7). To emphasize that present-day sociocultural oppression of racism connects with sociohistorical effects of slavery, still adversely impacting the emotional and relational lives of Blacks, DeGruy Leary (2005) asserted, while the direct relationships between slave experience of African Americans and the current major social problems facing them is difficult to empirically substantiate, we know from research conducted on other groups who experienced oppression and trauma that survivor syndrome is pervasive in the development of the second and third generations. The characteristics of the survivor syndrome include stress, self-doubt, problem with aggressions, and a number of psychological and interpersonal problems with family members and others. (p. 124)

Thus, understanding the emotional context and process of establishing a romantic relationship in a sociohistorical context of residual effects of slavery (RES) will aid in understanding ways multigenerational transmission of issues such as colorism and internalized racial stereotypes influence Black male–female romantic relationships and coupling processes in mate-
selection process, appraisal of potential or current partner, and emotional connection (Chestnut, 2009; Parmer et al., 2004; Watson, 2013).

Exploration and examination of the influences of multigenerational racial trauma, oppression of RES, and present-day experiences with racism will increase the depth of understanding regarding ways the invisible wounds of sociocultural oppression infiltrate the socioemotional context of Black coupling experiences and relationships (Hardy, 2016). Invisible wounds of sociocultural oppression—devaluation, self-doubt, psychological homelessness, voicelessness, assaulted sense of self, and internalized oppression—can undermine Black men and women’s abilities and commitment to cultivate and sustain romantic relationships (Hardy, 2016). Expanding knowledge on the influence of invisible wounds of sociocultural oppression on the early stages of the coupling process will provide valuable information on the emotional and relational outcomes of Black male–female romantic relationships.

Scholars and researchers need to explore the daily effects of implicit and explicit racism on the romantic experiences of Black men and women. Particularly, what are the ways daily experiences of racism—direct or vicarious, such as employment discrimination, the high rate of killings, racial assaults by law enforcement, or racial cyberbullying—impact the emotional and interpersonal coupling experiences of Black men and women? Additionally, how do Black men and women address, communicate, and support each other with regard to the shame and humiliation that comes from experiencing these daily racial abuses, assaults and injuries in their coupling relationships.

Furthermore, exploring ways Black men and women emotionally negotiate and navigate the difficult realities of gender imbalance in employment/underemployment, education, and a sex-ratio imbalance in their dating processes and experiences will provide critical insights to the challenges and resilience of cultivating and sustaining intimate romantic relationships. It is also essential to examine and recognize the positive emotional tools and strengths Black men and women use to cultivate and maintain romantic relationships in spite of the invisible wounds of sociocultural oppression and trauma (Watson, 2013; Wilkins et al., 2013).

Conclusion
This review presents a conceptual framework of theorizing and studying heterosexual Black romantic relationships. Few studies have explored the emotional processes in the coupling process of Black male–female re-
relationships and how they impact cultivation of successful relationships. Theorization and empirical investigations of Black male–female romantic relationships need to expand beyond examining the sociostructural, sociohistorical, and sociocultural factors that challenge the complexities of these relationships, and include the socioemotional processes of these factors on Black men and women’s ability to cultivate and maintain intimate romantic relationships with each other.

Emotions constitute a powerful and important role in the coupling process due to feelings that affect and shape behaviors, points of view, and relations to others. Addressing the role of emotions in a relationship is ideal in understanding the complexities Black men and women experience in cultivating relationships and in living as marginalized persons in society, working to fulfill gender roles embedded in a white dominant patriarchal heterosexual coupling culture, thereby making it difficult to pursue or sustain a romantic relationship. Given the value of strong kinship bonds and collectivism as essential elements of survival, healing, and support in Black communities (Wilkins et al., 2013), it is important to continue to explore ways to protect the emotional context of Black romantic relationships of heterosexual and same-sex couples from the invisible wounds of sociohistorical, sociocultural, and sociostructural oppression and trauma.

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