

## *Introduction*

Black relationships in the United States have endured over the past four centuries and been instrumental in the survival of Black<sup>1</sup> people as a source of companionship and love. Simultaneously, Black relationships have been undermined by 400 years of structural anti-Black racism that includes slavery, white terrorism, and institutional decimation comprising hyperincarceration. In addition, the domestic slave trade caused the dissolution of marriages in over 30 percent of enslaved Black couples (Hunter, 2017). However, despite these overt attacks on Black love, Black people continued to show their commitment to coupling. The importance of Black relationships was demonstrated with the practice of jumping the broom, which was symbolic of the union among Black couples, during a time when it was illegal for enslaved Black Americans to legally marry (Parry, 2020). Although marriage rates have decreased for Black people, when queried, they continue to place a high value on and desire marriage (Phillip et al., 2012).

Romantic partnerships have long been highly valued among Black Americans. Black Americans are more likely to endorse marriage among couples than white Americans (Saad, 2006). Opinion pieces on Black love and relationships proliferate in the popular media, which indicates a huge interest in Black love and relationships. This volume represents a departure from these anecdotal impositions and provides theory, research, and practice, placing emphasis on the fact that couples therapy is a very specific area of research, specialization, and practice. Traditionally, the topic of therapy with Black couples has been incorporated into books that address family therapy. This volume fills a void in the theory, research, and practice of couples therapy where clinicians have historically not been specifically trained to provide culturally responsive care in addressing the unique experiences and needs of Black couples. Further, most research and

<sup>1</sup> Black is capitalized in this book to recognize the struggle of Black Americans in the United States. Black and African American are used interchangeably.

couples therapy modalities tend to be normed on European American couples and do not include research on Black couples. This includes the omission of social conditions that impact Black couples and their relational dynamics such as the legacy of slavery and anti-Black racism. This text provides a new and refreshing entry into the field of couples therapy using theory, research, and clinical experience to modify common couples therapy modalities and integrate cultural context, which can increase applicability, relevance, and efficacy with Black couples.

The impetus for this volume was the recognition that there was a significant gap in the literature on couples therapy with Black couples. This gap was noticeable in our graduate training and left us with very few resources to reference in our clinical work. As Black therapists working with Black couples, we became accustomed to modifying current Eurocentric couples therapy modalities. This was necessary for them to be viable in application and practice with Black couples. Therefore, this text will assist clinicians and graduate students in providing culturally responsive care to Black couples. Each chapter is written by a clinician who provides expertise on various topics and populations of Black couples.

## I.1 Overview of Chapters

This volume encompasses five sections and 16 chapters. Each section is composed of chapters with similar themes and focal areas. Each chapter was written to stand independently; therefore, they do not need to be read in sequential order. This allows the reader to select chapters most relevant to their work or curiosity. Each chapter is structured to provide a socio-cultural understanding of the factors that influence African American coupling, the impact of anti-Black racism and manifestation in the couple dynamic, along with intervention strategies. A list of questions is provided at the end of each chapter to encourage the reader to reflect on the main themes and their application. The following are chapter overviews.

### *I.1.1 Part I Racism and Identity*

Chapter 1, written by Cynthia Chestnut, details research findings on patterns of African American couples' positive and negative stereotyping of each other and others in the general African American community. This chapter highlights the impact of internalized messages, both positive and negative, on the relational self. Chapter 1 sets the tone for the remainder of the book, in that it underscores the impact of socialization within a context

of anti-Black racism that affects the ways that the couple perceives themselves and their partners.

In Chapter 2, authors Heather C. Lofton and Adia Gooden, examine the impact of the Strong Black Woman (SBW) schema on Black women's ability to seek and engage in healthy romantic interpersonal relationships. Embodied by unyielding strength and unlimited capacity when navigating daily roles, interpersonal interactions, and life tasks, the SBW schema affects trust and vulnerability and thus intimacy. This chapter reviews the history and development of the SBW schema and how this schema manifests in the lived experiences of Black women in romantic relationships. The chapter concludes with specific recommendations for working with women who adopt the SBW schema to help foster healthy romantic relationships.

Chapter 3, authored by Jonathan M. Lassiter, completes Part I by discussing ways in which religion, spirituality, and romance intersect in the lives of Black American same-gender-loving (SGL) individuals. Ways in which religion and spirituality influence the development, maintenance, dynamics, and quality of Black American SGL men's romantic and sexual relationships are explored. The chapter concludes with strategies based on Afrocentric psychology to assess and intervene when working with clients along with recommendations for future clinical research in this area.

### *I.1.2 Part II Fundamentals for Healthy Coupling*

In Chapter 4, Daryl M. Rowe and Sandra Lyons Rowe detail an approach to cultivating and sustaining healthy marital relationships that is grounded in the emerging field of African-centered psychology. This approach privileges the lived experiences of African Americans and summarizes a marriage empowerment program, Conversations in Marriage© (CIM), which uses African proverbs to promote situational learning. The authors discuss the essential need to explicitly incorporate cultural issues when working with African American couples, provide an overview of the cycle of healthy relationships, highlight the legacy of healthy families of African ancestry, stress the importance of a participatory approach, and describe introducing and incorporating African proverbs to stimulate engagement. Each element is discussed from a perspective that centers marriage within a framework of community, growth, empowerment, and sustainability.

Chapter 5, written by Erica Holmes, Ronecia Lark, and Jessica M. Smedley urges the reader to consider the importance of premarital counseling and education for engaged African American couples. The authors begin by discussing the psychological, social, and economic

benefits of marriage, while highlighting the decline of African American marriages in the United States. The authors then analyze how the legacy of anti-Black racism and discrimination/oppression have shaped the African American family structure, impacted marriage rates, and marriage success. The chapter concludes with an outline of a proposed premarital workbook for African American heterosexual couples that specifically addresses their unique history and challenges experienced in marriages.

*I.1.3 Part III Adapting Major Therapeutic Approaches for Work  
with African American Couples*

In Chapter 6, Yamonte Cooper examines Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) with Black couples. The author stresses the importance of the integration of clinical considerations (e.g., racial realities of anti-Blackness) when using EFT with Black couples to provide an appropriate adaptation that is a culturally responsive couples therapy. The author argues that adult attachment must be conceptualized from a network approach (e.g., multiple relationships/collectivism) instead of only a dyadic perspective. The author further examines important factors such as acculturation, anti-Black racism, internalized stereotypes, SBW schema, and John Henryism in providing culturally responsive care and clinical interventions that strengthen EFT treatment approaches with Black couples.

Chapter 7 by Satira Streeter Corbitt explores the historical trauma and challenges faced by Black couples and the resulting impact of Dr. Joy DeGruy's explanatory theory of Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS). The central theory of the Gottman Method for couples therapy is reviewed along with special considerations when working with Black couples. Case conceptualizations of three African American couples impacted by PTSS and treated using Gottman method interventions is presented to illustrate integration of the theory and practice.

Chapter 8, written by Moe A. Brown, uses a Narrative Therapy lens to addresses the challenges that often arise for Black transgender men and their romantic partners when seeking support in therapy. The author defines key terminology related to gender identity and discusses other facets of identity, like biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, gender presentation, and sexual orientation. Its application to clinical practice with Black transgender men and their romantic partners is also presented. Further, the chapter provides a summary of primary Narrative Therapy concepts and uses a case example to illustrate Narrative Therapy with Black transgender men and their romantic partners.

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In Chapter 9, Beverley Boothe discusses ways in which Harville Hendrix's Imago Relationship Therapy can be adapted to support African American couples experiencing relationship conflict. The author introduces the main tenets of Imago Relationship Therapy and discusses ways that it can enable the African American couple to look at their childhood story, increase awareness of their connections, identify their triggers, and decide to move from an unconscious to a conscious way of relating. The author concludes with a clinical vignette to illustrate its application.

Chapter 10, by Alice Shepard and Katherine McKay, explores Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing Therapy (EMDR) as a critical approach needed to address trauma's neurological, emotional, and relational impact. It provides a culturally relevant model of applying EMDR to create a healing space for building self-efficacy, worth, trust, and intimacy within Black romantic partnerships.

*I.1.4 Part IV Sex and Intimacy*

Chapter 11 by Danielle Y. Drake and Daktari Shari R. Hicks explores sociopolitical factors, including gender roles and power dynamics that affect sexual intimacy among heterosexual Black couples. Culturally specific factors that can promote resilience are highlighted with a view toward increasing the understanding of Black heterosexual relationships as emotionally supportive spaces, with an emphasis of intentional intimacy as acts of social justice. Creative interventions for use in clinical practice are offered to assist in expanding sexual intimacy with Black couples.

In Chapter 12, Jeshana Avent-Johnson explores intimacy, sex, and desire as important elements to personal and relational well-being. Johnson asserts that there is a unique challenge that can hamper the development of these elements given the historical backdrop of oppression that contributes to significant stressors in the lives of these couples. Helping Black couples to understand how they make meaning of sex, intimacy, and interactions with their partner, while maintaining a clear sense of self in context of their physical and emotional closeness, has been positively associated with sexual desire, intimacy, and couple satisfaction. Hence, this chapter explores the role of differentiation, the impact it has on a Black couple's intimate life, and how clinicians can help facilitate the process of increasing the couple's levels of differentiation, thus, breathing life into the relationship.

Chapter 13 by Laura Dupiton and Cynthia Chestnut explores infidelity in Black committed relationships. The authors discuss emotional and

psychological wounds caused by systemic oppression, internalized stereotypes, and other factors that often cause Black men and women to wear a mask and not show up as their authentic selves. The sociological phenomenon called *covering* is discussed to conceptualize ways Black men and women, in relationship, have learned to protect themselves from further emotional bruising. The authors conclude with a case study using Narrative Therapy to address *covering* while attending to the language used to shape a couple's reality.

### *1.1.5 Part V Special Topics*

In Chapter 14, Tenika L. Jackson emphasizes the necessity for clinicians to assist their Black lesbian clients who experience infertility with the biological, psychological, social, and emotional aspects of the process. The author seeks to help therapists acquire an understanding of the process and unique challenges of conceiving a child within a lesbian relationship. The impact of factors such as social stigma, societal expectations based on gender expression, and generalized labels such as infertile are explored. Further, the chapter discusses the process of intrauterine insemination, in vitro fertilization, and adoption within the lesbian community and specifically the Black lesbian community. Clinicians will learn how the journey to conceive a child impacts the Black lesbian relationship and what helping professionals need to do to effectively help their clients weather the storm.

Chapter 15 by Brian R. Humphrey explores the seldom discussed topic of infertility in men: more specifically Black men. Race and ethnicity can impact how male factor infertility is understood, communicated, and managed. The aim of this chapter is to synthesize available research regarding biopsychosocial variables of male factor infertility with African American men while offering support considerations.

Chapter 16 authored by Lekeisha Sumner centers on African American couples facing medical illness and its impact. This chapter highlights research and theory relevant to couples coping with medical illness within sociohistorical and culturally relevant conceptual frameworks in clinical practice. The chapter concludes by offering considerations for clinical practice.

This volume will serve as a resource for clinicians and graduate students working with Black couples and can challenge any preconceived notions or biases that clinicians may have about Black couples. The information contained in this volume will assist therapists in developing a working

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alliance with Black couples. The therapeutic relationship with Black couples can cultivate an environment that is instrumental in decreasing relationship distress and disconnection. Therefore, clinicians will be able to provide culturally responsive care and clinical interventions that inform treatment approaches.

## REFERENCES

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