

## The Sociocultural Context of Romantic Relationships

GHADA KAWAS AND BRIAN G. OGOLSKY

The social ecology of relationships (Huston, 2000) argues that three levels of analysis are required to understand the dynamics of romantic relationships: the individual(s), the dyad, and the society. Over the past several decades, relationship scientists have meticulously documented the individual and dyadic levels of analysis. For example, in the past ten years, the *Advances in Personal Relationships* series has published volumes on health, power, technology, interdependence, relationship maintenance, personality, and intimate partner violence. Each of these volumes documented either individual or dyadic level processes in great detail. The lost cog in relationship science, however, is the societal or macro level of influence. Very little attention has been paid to the social and cultural forces that operate on close relationships despite the critical importance of this level of analysis. Indeed, one might argue that relationships and the very individuals who make up those relationships cannot be understood without the sociocultural context in which they exist.

Thus, relationship science has a “context problem.” A systematic review of 559 relationship-focused papers (771 studies) published between 2014 and 2018 showed that the average participant in relationship research is a thirty-year-old, college-educated, White American who is from a middle class background and engaged in a different-sex, same-race relationship (Williamson, 2022). Only 10 percent of the studies reviewed in this article focused on traditionally marginalized and underrepresented groups such as non-White, low-income, and/or gender and sexual minorities. This issue is further supported by findings from a systematic review of 198 articles on relationship maintenance spanning two decades (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2022). Results of their analysis showed that Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) samples dominated relational maintenance research, participant intersectionality was often disregarded, and that contexts such as political climate, culture, and socioeconomic status were not considered.

This problem is one that the social sciences have contended with for decades. Arnett's (2008) analysis of six prominent psychological journals between 2003 and 2007 found that over 70 percent of authors and 68 percent of samples were from the United States. Additionally, when ethnicity was reported, the samples were predominantly of European–American heritage. Thus, this research was inherently American, which neglects approximately 95 percent of the world's population. A follow-up analysis of the same journals ten years later showed little change, with American authors and samples constituting just over 60 percent of publications (Thalmayer et al., 2021). This change was primarily due to increased authorship and sample selection from other English-speaking or Western European countries. Therefore, the more recent analysis still shows that 89 percent of the world's population continues to be underrepresented in psychological research. This is especially problematic due to a tendency to generalize research results to all individuals and populations; however, WEIRD countries have been shown to have some of the least representative populations compared to other countries (Henrich et al., 2010). It also narrows the field of topics studied to those most relevant to the authors in those countries.

There are several reasons why more diverse backgrounds are not represented in the literature. Karney et al. (2004) found that recruitment of ethnically diverse samples was limited by a lower likelihood for non-White couples to respond, a lack of eligibility for non-White couples in the study criteria, and a lower likelihood for non-White couples to participate after being told they were eligible. Furthermore, it is no surprise that less work in relationship science has been done at the macro level due to the difficulties inherent in studying large structures and systems. Embedded within the sociocultural context are features such as race, culture, neighborhoods, the legal system, and governmental policy. Understanding the complex interplay between relationships and structural systems requires large, diverse, costly, interdisciplinary studies that are exceedingly rare. Yet, the time has come for us to overcome these hurdles rather than simply stating them as absolute truths. One suggestion is to diversify the voices of researchers and participants in the field by striving to include individuals of diverse genders and sexual orientations, racial and ethnic backgrounds, ages, socioeconomic statuses, and relationship approaches (Ogolsky & Stafford, 2022; Williamson et al., 2022). It is especially important to approach diversity and inclusion through an intersectional lens.

On the basis of these shortcomings, the goal of this volume is to do just that – to spotlight the topics that are often excluded or forgotten in relationship science. In doing so, the field can then continue to promote more diverse and generalizable research programs to help facilitate advances in theory. In each chapter, the goal of the author(s) was to synthesize the work in each area by providing a critical analysis of the state of the current research as well as

directions for future research. Thus, this book as a whole paints a picture of the diversity of sociocultural forces that operate on romantic relationships. Chapter authors are from the fields of psychology, communication, sociology, law, gender and women's studies, ethnic studies, and family studies, to reflect the inherent multidisciplinary nature of the research in this area. Taken together, it is our hope that this volume be a preeminent resource for understanding the sociocultural context of romantic relationships. In the following section, we provide a brief introduction to each of the chapters.

#### INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME

The historic and systemic marginalization of individuals with minoritized racial and ethnic identities impacts various aspects of their lives, including romantic relationships. In Chapter 2, Landor and McNeil Smith investigate how systemic racism influences romantic relationship initiation, development, maintenance, and dissolution. The authors focus specifically on the experiences of Black Americans in romantic relationships to explain how racialized experiences affect how individuals understand and conduct romantic relationships within a broader sociocultural context. The chapter reviews and critiques the existing literature and provides recommendations for the future of relationship science.

Much of the research pertaining to relationship initiation, maintenance, and dissolution has been dominated by White, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic samples, omitting other cultural groups and creating a monocultural perspective in relationship science. In Chapter 3, Cross and Joo broaden the scope of relationship science and explore how sociocultural factors affect East Asian romantic relationship paradigms compared to European heritage contexts. The chapter first explains broad social, ideological, and institutional factors that shape the East Asian *Confucian* cultural model of marriage and then describes how East Asian ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving form relationship processes that differ from those found in Western contexts.

Gender and sexuality are essential to relationship experience and organization. Although there is a push to recognize the fluid nature of gender and sexuality, gender essentialism, cisnormativity, and heteronormativity continue to dominate relationship science research and paradigms. In Chapter 4, Few-Demo and Allen employ an intersectional feminist theoretical approach to examine micro and macro perspectives of gender and heteronormativity in romantic relationships. They also examine the social structures and constructions that impact relationship initiation, development, maintenance, and dissolution. The chapter reviews selected trends in the literature pertaining to diverse romantic relationships and how they are aligned with or critical of heteronormative, cisnormative, and mononormative ideologies.

Romantic relationships can be a major financial undertaking, especially when media representations and dating scripts discount social class when approaching romantic relationships. In Chapter 5, Mickelson examines the impact of social class on four stages of romantic relationships: dating, cohabitation, marriage, and divorce. The chapter reviews literature from 2007 to 2022 to reveal how social class impacts stages of a relationship, how heteronormative assumptions are dominant in the literature, and how gender role expectations dominate social class.

Religion is an integral part of religious individuals' lives, often guiding their actions and interactions with others; this can be especially true for how religious individuals approach romance and intimacy. In Chapter 6, Mahoney and colleagues examine how involvement in religion impacts relationship initiation, development, maintenance, and dissolution. The chapter then further investigates the religious/spiritual factors that are tied to enhanced relationship functioning as well as those that worsen the quality of romantic relationships and partners' well-being.

Work can be a very dominant aspect of people's lives; it is bound to influence personal and romantic lives in one way or another. The ongoing conversation around workplace romantic and sexual relationships varies from romanticized conceptions to sexual harassment allegations and company rules and regulations. In Chapter 7, Kramer and colleagues examine the impact of work and romantic relationships on individuals. The chapter covers consensual and nonconsensual romantic and sexual relationships in the workplace, how organizations seek to regulate romantic relationships at work, and how work impacts individuals' personal romantic and family lives.

Relationships do not exist in a vacuum; historic, societal, and political stressors can create variations in how individuals behave with regards to romantic relationships. In Chapter 8, Rice and Garnett-Deakin discuss how historic events and sociopolitical environmental shifts in the United States impact romantic relationships and create cohort effects in generations. The chapter provides examples of specific historic events and explains the impact of each on romantic relationship initiation, maintenance, and dissolution.

Contrary to contemporary beliefs and legal changes, which seem to imply that romantic and sexual partnerships are a private matter, laws, regulations, and court opinions (especially those pertaining to marriage and marital dissolution) suggest otherwise. In Chapter 9, Wilson and colleagues examine the laws and regulations related to sexual behavior and their lasting impact on marriage, cohabitation, and parent-child relations in the United States. The chapter provides examples of court cases relating to how sex can be a condition of marriage and how that impacts marriage and marriage dissolution. It also examines the responsibilities created between adults engaging in sex and the legal consequences of sex on parent-child relationships and obligations.

A cursory scroll through the contents of major streaming services reveals dozens of fictional and reality-based shows or movies about finding love. Indeed, traditional media such as books, letters, radio, newspapers, recorded music, television, and the telephone have long been used as a method of learning about romantic relationships, initiating romantic relationships, and communicating with partners. In Chapter 10, Fox and Frampton explore how traditional media impacts relational processes. This chapter discusses media use in relationships, how its consumption influences relationships, and how people cultivate relationships with media characters.

Social spaces have always been used to meet or meet up with potential or continuing partners; the transition of these spaces to online social media platforms is no surprise given how the world has changed in the past three decades. In Chapter 11, McEwan and LeFebvre examine the positive and negative ways that romantic couples use social media to find and seek information about potential and new romantic partners. The authors further examine how social media is used to perform and communicate maintenance behaviors throughout a relationship, and during relationship dissolution. This chapter elaborates on behaviors such as “online stalking” of a potential partner, ongoing partner social media surveillance, relational curation, and “ghosting.”

Although great strides have been made with research related to Latinx immigrant families residing in the United States, it is essential to consider how immigration laws and policies shape Latinx immigrant experiences in romantic relationships. In Chapter 12, Letiecq and Bermudez examine how the romantic relationships of undocumented and mixed-status Latinx immigrants in the United States are impacted by their illegality. The authors focus on how illegality conditions and constrains individuals’ experiences of and opportunities for romantic relationships while they reside in the United States. The chapter explores the systemic structures and sociocultural context that impact the lived realities of immigrant families and undocumented individuals in the United States through dating and commitment making, mixed-citizenship coupling, dating violence, and relationship maintenance strategies under structural oppression.

Pandemic-related restrictions had diverging impacts for people in romantic relationships that could push them together or pull them apart (physically and/or emotionally). The long-term ramifications of the pandemic on social interaction in general, and romantic relationships specifically, can already be seen in how individuals are choosing to “return to normal,” or not, even if they are able to. In Chapter 13, Pietromonaco and Overall investigate how pandemic-related stress has and continues to impact couples’ relationships, relationship initiation, and relationship processes and functioning. The chapter applies a vulnerability–stress model in its approach to post-pandemic relationship navigation.

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## Systemic Racism and Romantic Relationships

ANTOINETTE M. LANDOR AND SHARDÉ MCNEIL SMITH

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<sup>1</sup> 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