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Sociological Forum, Vol. 38, No. 2, June 2023

DOI: 10.1111/socf.12887

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“Racial Heterosexual Habitus” and Management of Racial Education Discussions Within Black Female/White Male Romantic Relationships¹

Marya Thembi Mtshali²

Scholars (Steinbugler 2012; Twine 2010) have examined the role that the white racial lens can play in limiting the development of racial literacy for white partners in black/white relationships, while the role of gender ideologies has gone largely unexamined. Through analyzing “racially educational” conversations between 36 members of black female/white male heterosexual couples, I introduce the concept of “racial heterosexual habitus” and its influence in managing these discussions on race. I argue that it generates limits—as well as unique opportunities—for couples during these conversations about race. My findings reveal how black female heterosexual habitus orients black women to navigate these conversations by looking to black femininity to advocate against their partner’s racism and sexism and to also determine the conceptual limit of these conversations in deference to protecting white masculinity. However, contrary to understandings of black middle-class femininity, women in longer-duration relationships advocated for themselves in defense of their partner’s comments. Additionally, I show how white male heterosexual habitus limits the ability to develop racial literacy with its hegemonic masculine focus on achievement and autonomy. This work not only centers racialized gender ideologies in the study of interracial couples but also extends Bourdieu’s concept of habitus.

KEYWORDS: femininity; gender; habitus; masculinity; race; romantic relationships.

INTRODUCTION

While the number of studies (Killian 2012; Osuji 2019; Steinbugler 2012) seeking to illuminate the internal workings of interracial relationships in the United States has grown, they have looked at these dynamics from the lens of race, gender, and, in some cases, sexual orientation (Steinbugler 2012) or through nation-based racial ideologies (Osuji 2019). The role that racialized gender ideologies play has gone largely overlooked even though scholars (Currier 2013; Manning 2002; Schippers 2007) have demonstrated that gender ideologies, or societal ideas about what constitutes femininity and masculinity (Davis and Greenstein 2009; Kroska 2002), impact intra-relationship dynamics. Furthermore, while the work of scholars such as Twine (2010) and Steinbugler (2012) examines the role that the white racial lens can play in limiting the development of racial literacy for white partners in these relationships, the role of gender ideologies has gone unexamined in its potential impact.

¹ The author wishes to thank the editor, anonymous reviewers, and Dr. Zine Magubane for their helpful comments. This work was supported by the Boston College Sociology Department and the Boston College Graduate Student Association.

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Through analyzing “racially educational” conversations between black female/white male heterosexual couples, I illuminate the importance of “racial heterosexual habitus” in managing these discussions on race. Relationships with black women and white men are interesting sites to investigate strategies these groups engage in to manage racial difference, as well as which strategies are most likely effective at bridging the different embodied experiences for black women, who possess marginalized gendered and racial identities, and white men, who are advantaged in both these respects in our society. In other words, we can see how being socialized within systems of oppression at very different intersecting “points,” so to speak, correlates with one’s strategies when attempting to manage very different habitus. By comparison, white women and black men both possess at least one marginalized identity within our white supremacist and patriarchal society, and therefore, at least have some embodied experience at understanding oppression. For this study, I define “racial education” as the ongoing, discursive process of the transfer of knowledge about race, racism, or racial culture from one person to another to manage disparate racial orientations. Additionally, I introduce the concept of *racial heterosexual habitus*, which refers to internalized notions of racialized gender ideologies (or racialized societal gender ideals and expectations) that not only shape their perceptions, ideas, feelings and actions but also, as a result, set possibilities and limitations within social interactions. How does racial heterosexual habitus guide how these couples handle conversations of an educational nature about race? More specifically, how does it influence their strategies for engaging in these conversations, and how their partner interprets associated actions? Does the intimate nature of the relationship—and its associated “higher stakes” compared with more casual relationships—influence the effectiveness of these conversations? What insights can be gained from understanding which strategies are effective and which ones are not? I argue that racial heterosexual habitus illuminates the limits—as well as unique opportunities—for couples during these conversations about race. Ultimately, racial heterosexual habitus guides the actions of members of these couples in their understanding and emotional reactions to these discussions, the strategies they employ to navigate them, and what they perceive as potential pathways and roadblocks.

My findings reveal how black female heterosexual habitus orients black women to navigate these conversations by looking to black femininity to advocate against their partner’s racism and sexism and to also determine the conceptual limit of these conversations in deference to protecting white masculinity. However, contrary to understandings of black middle-class femininity, such as Collins’ (2005) “Black Lady” stereotype, women in longer-duration relationships advocated for themselves in defense of their partner’s problematic comments. Additionally, I show how white male heterosexual habitus limits the ability to develop racial literacy with its hegemonic masculine focus on achievement and autonomy, often resulting in them viewing these conversations as being more productive than their partners do.

This research both nuances the understanding of interracial racial discourse (Bergsieker et al. 2010; Holoien et al. 2015; Vorauer 2006) and argues for the need for a more intersectional approach to understanding habitus that more accurately captures the ways in which intersecting identities influence internal conceptions and external actions. Steinbugler (2012) introduced the concept of racial habitus to the

understanding of internal dynamics of interracial couples. However, racial habitus only partially captures the influence of the individual's dispositions within the couple—since the way in which one is socialized is based on one's social location (Hill 2001; Malone Gonzalez 2019; McHale et al. 2006) in relation to the “matrix of domination” (Collins 1993) of institutional structures involving not just race but also identities such as gender, class, and sexual orientation. Expanding on the work of Twine (2010), these findings provide insight as to why some white partners are able to develop the “sociological imagination” needed to gain “racial literacy.”

RACIAL DISCUSSIONS ACROSS RACIAL DIVIDES

While there is evidence that interracial interactions and discussions can be somewhat transformative for whites (McKinney 2006), interracial conversations about race can be different experiences—and, therefore, have different results—for blacks and whites. Research suggests that whites may engage in impression management to not appear racist, which can result in more focus being put on their actions and choice of words during these conversations than on the content of the information being shared by the person of color (Vohs et al. 2005; Vorauer 2006; Vorauer and Kumhyr 2001). In a study by Holoien et al. (2015), where they paired black and white people together and had them engage in conversations about race, the increased desire for the white partner to affiliate with their black partner correlated with a less accurate understanding of their black partner's beliefs and statements about race. For black partners, their white partner's overestimation of their understanding resulted in them feeling “less cared for . . . and viewed partners more negatively” (p. 84). By contrast, during racial conversations, people of color tend to be less focused on their likeability than wanting respect from whites (Bergsieker et al. 2010), and they tend to more accurately predict how the white conversational partner feels during racial conversations (Pickett et al. 2004).

Furthermore, while these conversations about race may be viewed by whites as more intellectual in nature, they can take on a more corporeal, embodied meaning for black partners as they are speaking of their lived experiences (Leonardo and Porter 2010). These conversations involve emotional and educational labor on the part of black partners that is reflective of a larger pattern in society where at times blacks operate as “agents of epiphany” (McKinney 2006) by “guiding whites . . . into a racial awakening” (DiAngelo and Sensoy 2014). This labor is not without its costs, as Fleming et al. (2012) note the emotional and psychological stress, and fatigue, that may result from being exposed to racism, deciding whether to confront it and then addressing it. Essentially acting as “native informants and unpaid sherpas” (Thompson 2003) on black culture and racism, Evans and Moore (2015) argue that these circumstances result in black people “carry[ing] the burden of engaging in emotion work that is not equally distributed with their white counterparts” (p. 452).

Within the context of black/white multiracial families, Twine (2010) found that while white partners are primarily the ones who may have racial mindset shifts and, even in some cases, develop racial literacy, there are also many cases of that not occurring. She defines “racial literacy” as “a way of perceiving and responding to

racism that generates a repertoire of discursive and material practices” such as “the possession of a racial grammar and vocabulary to discuss race, racism, and antiracism” and “the ability to interpret racial codes and racialized practices” (Twine 2010:92). Twine and Steinbugler (2006:112) found those who were unable to sufficiently analyze “how bodies are racialized and resources are distributed across various familial, occupational, local, and institutional sites” struggle with developing this literacy. However, Twine does not explore why some whites have this ability and why others do not. Steinbugler’s (2012) work illuminates the role that black partners can play in helping white partners “transform” their racial habitus and develop a certain level of racial literacy.

The Dramaturgy of Racialized Gender Ideologies

In the veins of sociological and feminist theories, hegemonic masculinity and femininity are dramaturgical in nature (Chafetz 1990; Goffman 1963; Miller 2016; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009) where “gender is a socially scripted dramatization of the culture’s *idealization* of feminine and masculine natures” (West and Zimmerman 1987:130). Hegemonic masculinity—which is based on heterosexual, cisgender, white, middle-class ideals—includes characteristics of independence, assertiveness, dominance, control, rationality, indifference, and autonomy (Kilmartin 1999; West and Zimmerman 1987; Wetherell and Edley 1999) and suggests that manhood must be earned and constantly reclaimed (Quinn 2002; Schwalbe 2005). Hegemonic femininity, which is based on the same heterosexist, classist and racist ideals, includes the complementary characteristics of submissiveness, domesticity, “daintiness,” and agreeableness (Morris 2007; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Scholars of color took white feminists’ dissections of hegemonic gender performance and nuanced them by denoting the racist implications of these ideologies. These gender ideals are defined in opposition to some of the most marginalized identities in our society (e.g., poor, LGBTQ+, black, etc.). Historically, the “controlling images” of black femininity have been the promiscuous Jezebel (the woman), the asexual Mammy, and the dishonest and exploitative Welfare Queen (Collins 1990). However, Collins argues that in the era of “new racism,” which is the result of “the concentration of capital in a few corporations [that] has enabled them to shape many aspects of the global economy,” including the images of black people in the media, the new “controlling images” are the aggressive and loud Bitch and the Bad Mother for working-class black womanhood (1990:54). For middle-class black women, the new images include the Modern Mammy, who “uphold(s) white-dominated structures, institutions, or bosses at the expense of their personal [life]” (Wingfield 2007); the epitome of black respectability, the black Lady; and the sexual and financially independent “Educated Bitch.” Broadly speaking, where working-class black women are seen as loud, lazy, and unrestrained, middle-class black women, who are defined in opposition to working-class black women, are constructed as “respectable” by being controlled, hard-working, and only willing to use aggression in service of others (Collins 2005; Evans and Moore 2015; Lewis et al. 2013).

THE INFLUENCE OF IDENTITY ON “LE SENS PRACTIQUE”

Bourdieu (1977:86) defined habitus as an individual’s “le sens pratique” or “feel for the game,” which involves “internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class” that is based on past experiences. As Rooke (2007:232) points out, the body is central in Bourdieu’s theoretical work, where “it is recognized as a commodified, material bearer of symbolic value that develops in conjunction with social forces and, in this sense, is *central* to the maintenance of social inequality.”

Over the years, scholars have extended the use of habitus to the concepts of gender, race, and sexual orientation. Bonilla-Silva’s (2007:77) concept of racial habitus has been useful in understanding how racial socialization impacts how people talk about race and “orients action.” Van Bergen and Spiegel (2014) used the concept of heteronormative habitus to show how the critiquing of this concept by LGBTQ+ youth serves as a coping mechanism for stigma. Scholars have further extended the concept to erotic habitus (Green 2008), heterosexual habitus (Van Bergen and Spiegel 2014), lesbian habitus (Rooke 2007), and transgender male sexual habitus (Schilt and Windsor 2014). While Bourdieu (1990) eventually extended the concept of habitus to gender in *Masculine Domination*, it has been critiqued as being androcentric and reproducing as it “reproduce[s] standard binaries of masculine domination and female subordination as if these structures are unitary, coherent and unchanged by and in contemporary social life” (McLeod 2005:53). However, many scholars have pointed out the potential of the theory of habitus for further developing feminist scholarship (McCall 2005; McLeod 2005; Skeggs 1997, 2004; Walby 2005). For instance, Powell (2008:170) has shown how gender habitus results in “embodied gendered practice,” which she defines as “gendered norms and discourse that are enacted through the body in everyday practice; in thoughts, feelings, desires, and responses, in a way that is not always subject to individual recognition and change.”

Toward a More Intersectional Approach to Habitus

With my findings, I am asserting a more intersectional approach toward habitus. Just as we cannot understand the complexity of the oppression that people of color experience by solely looking at race or gender, nor can we fully understand the realities of habitus without an intersectional approach. The “feel” and “rules of the game” are not the same for everyone within a class of people who share a single identity. Trying to understand the “feel” and “rules” through only racial habitus, or gender habitus, is incomplete and leaves gaps in our understanding of social realities. Where a person is positioned on the matrix of domination (Collins 1993) correlates with how they are treated by these intersecting systems of power. As a result, the specific “feel of the game” they develop is based on their intersecting identities. This results not in distinct, mutually exclusive habitus (e.g., class habitus, race habitus, etc.) but in an intersectional habitus. Referring to Bourdieu’s original use of habitus regarding class, the “feel of the game” for what it means to be middle-class in America is shaped by race and gender. In other words, the acquired cultural references,

perceptions, and concepts for a black middle-class woman differ at times in comparison with a white middle-class woman (Lacy 2007). I will demonstrate in this article how the potential for conversations involving racial education, to successfully manage racial differences, is shaped by racial heterosexual habitus—the heteronormative, gendered and raced ways that individuals are socialized create an internalized landscape that shapes their perceptions, ideas, feelings, and actions in ways that are not necessarily evident to the individual. From this research, we gain insight into the role that this type of habitus has in why some racial educational conversations result in racial consensus and can potentially culminate in the development of racial literacy for white partners and why some do not. Like the original conception of habitus, racial heterosexual habitus is developed during socialization and is internalized in dispositions that contain notions of “what seems appropriate or possible in situations of challenge, constraint, or opportunity” (Swartz 2012:100). While habitus does not determine individual actions, it orients actions based on this knowledge of past experiences.

I use the metaphor of landscape because the internalization of these social messages determines what an individual sees as their options for engaging within social interactions—a cognitive map of what topics or actions can be engaged and which cannot, as well as the directness, tone and emotional display that is expected to accompany the engagement. For members of the couples in my study, racial heterosexual habitus explains why different groups experienced and managed these conversations differently. Their differential habitus created a landscape of what was possible for someone of their identity, which has been shaped by the embodied experience of learning how to manage certain power structures.

METHODS

To answer these research questions, I analyzed interviews with 21 black women and 15 white men from a larger study I conducted on 55 members of heterosexual black–white couples located throughout the United States. Interview data was obtained from October 2011 to February 2012 and from July 2014 to January 2016. Participants had to be in a relationship consistently for a year, which was done to filter out people who may be “experimenting” by dating interracially (Qian 2005) and/or casually dating someone of another race.

Due to the rarity (Qian 2005; Qian and Lichter 2007; Rico et al. 2018) and stigmatization (Bell and Hastings 2015; Childs 2005; De Guzman and Nishina 2017; Yancey 2002) of interracial couples, I employed a variety of recruitment methods to increase the likelihood of obtaining participants around the country, and ultimately used snowball sampling, community flyers, posts on social media (Facebook, Twitter groups, website blogs, website forums), and dispersed emails to my social network. Majority of the sample was obtained through social media (12) and my social network (12), with the remaining 12 being equally divided between snowball sampling and flyers. I used a variety of online solicitations to obtain participants around the country and created a website to refer people to for more information. Since interracial couples are in higher concentrations in metropolitan areas (Cready and

Saenz 1997; Livingston 2017), I placed community flyers in Boston and New York City at places such as public libraries, community health centers, street lights, coffee shops, convenience stores, and bookstores. To obtain people from other parts of the country, I found mining my social network and snowball sampling to be the most effective.

For participants who lived in the Northeast, I conducted their interviews in person since they were physically accessible, and they were able to choose where they felt comfortable doing the interview. Participants in the remainder of the country chose whether their interview was done either by phone or Skype, a voice-over-internet protocol (VOIP) program. My goal in interviewing participants individually was that members of these relationships may be more candid and forthcoming about issues that may be uncomfortable to discuss with their partner present. Interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder and, for video or in-person interviews, notes were taken to document body language or other physical artifacts of importance. The duration of interviews ranged from 42 to 120 minutes with the mean interview time being 78 minutes and the mode being 94 minutes. Interview length depended on the amount of information and detail participants chose to communicate during their interview.

Out of my sample of 36 participants, most are married (22) and have children (18). My sample consisted of 14 couples; leaving only 8 people who participated without their partner. Relationship durations ranged from 1 to 36 years, with the median being 7 years. Age ranged from 25 to 67 years old, with the median being 39. Half of the sample resided in the Northeast (18) and have obtained at least a bachelor's degree (29). Based on educational attainment and occupations, most of the sample would be classified as middle-class. (For more demographic information, please refer to Appendix A.)

When doing interview-based research, one must a reflexive account of their positionality, the positionality of the research participants, potential power disparities, and the issues of memory recall (DeVault and Gross 2012; Holstein and Gubrium 2004). I entered this study possessing a number of identities—black, female, heterosexual (at the time), cisgender, middle-class, Southern US-born-and-raised, multi-ethnic (African American and South African), doctoral candidate, member of a black–white interracial couple, etc.—that were not always evident to the participant at the time and the saliency of certain characteristics varied depending on the participant. For most of my participants entering the interview, my gender and race were evident, although I had some during phone interviews who did not know my racial identity and inquired. Depending on the participant, when certain information about my background was disclosed, such as being a child of an immigrant or being raised in the Southern United States, I could sometimes sense an increased level of comfortability. Additionally, I made the intentional decision to inform participants of my involvement in an interracial relationship in hopes that it would make participants more comfortable with me and minimize any effects of the stereotype of black women being against interracial relationships (Childs 2005; Hildebrandt 2002).

In developing the interview script, I intentionally formulated my questions to be broad enough to not assert any particular assumptions about how race may have operated within a participant's relationship, including the possibility that race may have been insignificant to them. Furthermore, it was important for me not to impose any particular definition of "whiteness" or "blackness" since there are multiple ways "to be" white or black and the fact that participants' ideas of these concepts could be data for me within itself. Furthermore, questions were written in a way as to not assume that race was a concern for couples or was even discussed. However, if it was evident that couples did discuss race, I asked about it within the context of discussions about current events, pop culture, and their ideas and experiences regarding race and racism, which means I may have accidentally omitted realms of their lives where race could have an impact and, thus, my data may not have been exhaustive of the many possible areas where racial difference had to be managed. I excluded racial conversations regarding family members and friends since other factors unique to those situations can influence how members decide to engage in these conversations. For instance, a conversation about a politician's racist comment in the news would likely lack the personal connection and emotions involved when discussing a racist comment from a family member (Appendix B).

For my analytical lens, I used intersectional theory, which argues that race, class, and gender interact as a "matrix of domination" that results in a system of inequality that is institutional, symbolic, and individual (Collins 1993; McCall 2005; Walby et al. 2012). Furthermore, these categories of difference are "fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power" (Cho et al. 2013:795), and are interdependent in that they are symbiotically shaped by one another (Walby et al. 2012:237). While there is no singular way to conduct intersectional analysis, it involves what Bowleg (2008) calls a "contextualized scientific method" where the epistemological framework and analysis involve "elucidat(ing) how the sociocultural context of structural inequality based on the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation shape participants' experiences" (Bowleg 2008:320; Collins 1993; Crenshaw 1989; Misra et al. 2021). This means not only considering structures and manifestations of oppression, relationality of privilege and marginalization, and importance of historical and spatial location in the experiences and perceptions of social actors but also using tools of comparison and deconstruction to elucidate the impact of heteropatriarchy and racism within and between groups.

For example, at one point during my research, my analysis would focus on observed data about the sample's experiences within these conversations, followed by an analysis of this data within a broader sociohistorical context of how our society has constructed sexuality within the intersections of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and type of relationship. Additionally, I would engage in comparative analysis between groups to reveal how these systems impacted respondents differently, as well as deconstructed identities to help reveal why people within the same groups experience systems, such as racism or sexism, differently or similarly. The latter often revealed that another category of difference, such as age, played a role in producing differential experiences.

Reay (2004:439) argues that habitus “cannot be directly observed in empirical research and has to be apprehended interpretively,” which can be done by observing participants’ actions and interpreting “what such actions are and mean and how they are externalized through agents’ own reflections of their own dispositions” (Costa 2015:162). I also applied one of the three ways Wacquant (2014:6) suggests studying habitus—through what he refers to as the “synchronic and inductive” method, which “trace[s] out connections between patterns of preferences, expressions, and social strategies within and across realms of activity so as to infer their shared matrix” of characteristics. To do this, I asked questions about participants’ upbringing, perspectives on issues, and observations and interpretation of events throughout their lives to enable them to “claim identities and construct lives” (Riessman 1993:2). Stahl (2015:33) points out that habitus is not only a theoretical orientation but also a “tool” that can be used to understand “how domination/subordination become embodied.”

I also applied Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) grounded theory approach to qualitative research. It is an approach to qualitative analysis that includes theoretical sampling, use of coding analysis, and views data collection and analysis as interrelated practices (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Strauss 1987). However, instead of using theoretical sampling, I used purposive sampling since my questions were specific to black/white heterosexual couples. For data analysis, I used ATLAS.ti qualitative software and inductive-thematic coding (Miles and Michael Huberman 1984; Strauss 1987). The themes were obtained inductively from the participants’ narratives and not from a predetermined list of concepts. Additionally, I sought out negative cases to strengthen or modify my conclusions.

INTRA-RELATIONSHIP RACE-BASED DISCUSSIONS: TO SOME, A NECESSITY; TO OTHERS, DISPENSABLE

Most participants—12 black women and 9 white men—reported talking about race in one way or another, whether it was about current events or about more philosophical discussions about race. Generally, black women were more likely than their white male partners to mention the occurrence of discussions of an educational nature at 11 and 8, respectively. Reasons for not participating in racial education discussions included explanations from the partners about already being on the same proverbial “page” about race. Furthermore, the results of these conversations are not consistent—some conversations result in a common understanding, others result in disagreements, and some remain unresolved.

There were a few rare occasions where white partners educated black partners about race, which usually occurred in situations where the white partner was Jewish and the black partner had not had much exposure to Jewish culture or religion, or in situations where the black partner was an immigrant and did not know much about African-American history or race relations in the United States. However, most conversations involved the black partner doing the “educating.”

BLACK FEMALE HETEROSEXUAL HABITUS: EDUCATING AND ADVOCATING . . . WITHIN LIMITS

While speaking about the conversations they have had with their partner, black women expressed a desire to be aligned with them on racial issues with their significant other. They were more likely to stress the importance of verbal communication as a tool either by directly communicating that during our interview or through their repeated attempts to use discussions to bridge experiential or ideological gaps. They often discussed educating their partners and advocating for themselves—and, in some cases, for black people or black women, in general. Eleven of the twelve black women who engaged in these conversations found themselves in the role of educator, which correlates with research indicating middle-class black women are more likely to voice their frustrations with white people's racism and sexism to whites, in comparison with middle-class black men (Morris 2007; Wilkins 2012; Wingfield 2007). However, this contradicts Collins' (2005) stereotype of the "Black Lady" since this advocacy is also for their benefit, while sometimes also being for the benefit of black people in general. This process of "educating and advocating" for black women involved several strategies like managing partner's racism and sexism and demonstrating sympathy and protection of the white male ego. For black women, their racial heterosexual habitus, and ways of managing these discussions, were reflective of various aspects of Collins' working-class and middle-class archetypes of black womanhood, often blurring the class distinctions. Particularly among black female participants in relationships in earlier stages (6 years or less), they would exhibit aspects of the "Black Lady" in limiting conversation topics to protect their partner's white male ego. However, they were more empowered than what is portrayed by this stereotype as shown by their willingness to also engage in self-advocacy. Additionally, a larger discussion was being held nationally about anti-blackness, police brutality, and white supremacy during the time of these interviews, which may have had an impact on not only the types of conversations that members of these couples reported having but also their feelings about these interactions as well. For black women, their racial heterosexual habitus oriented them to navigate these conversations by advocating against their partner's racism and sexism while also, at times, respecting what they viewed as limits to these conversations to protect white masculinity.

Insistence on Resistance: Assertively Resisting Partner's Racism and Sexism

While most black women in my study had successful conversations with their partners—where they were able to come to an understanding about their different perspectives about race and racism, 6 out of 11 women who referenced racial education found themselves struggling with their partner's racism and sexism. However, the social construction of black femininities, and its influence on black female heterosexual habitus through socialization, offers to black women an avenue of assertive, vocal, resistance. While it could be easy for them to respond to their partner by deciding he will never understand, they confront their partners' prejudices and continue to have these conversations repeatedly. Their habitus—in which one can see

influences of the “Black Superwoman” (Wallace 1979; Woods-Giscombé 2018) stereotype—sees these conversations as possible and necessary, even if they do cause conflict.

One example is Amber, a 57-year-old black woman who lives in an urban area in the Midwest with her husband Ryan, a 58-year-old white man. They have been together for over three decades and have 1 adult child. Amber found herself having to learn how to talk to Ryan about the difficult experiences she had with racism growing up as one of the first black families to integrate a white neighborhood in the late 1950s/early 1960s. As a result, she was concerned about whether she could trust Ryan to react in a way that would make her feel comfortable when she talked about her experiences with racism. While she has learned to discuss race more with Ryan, he often reacts with skepticism when she complains about racism.

Um . . . so, basically, I've felt that he had, still has, uh, a little bit uh. blunders on about what happens to Black people on a day-to-day basis. I don't think he really gets that. I don't think he does, so. It's only when he's involved somehow, it's like, 'Oh, now this guy's a racist'. That's what I've been talking about! Well, okay, well, I've been trying to tell you about this, and, uh, maybe you just don't see this as constantly as I do, but you can understand what I'm talking about now. 'Oh, yeah, I guess I can kind of see what you mean.' But I have to keep, to me, I have to keep reminding him that this is something that people go through, whether male or female. If you're Black in this society, people are constantly doin' stuff . . . So, it's a, it's just something that he doesn't really have to ever really deal with, and uh . . . he's gotta be reminded that this is what I have to go through . . . I get frustrated because he thinks I'm just whining and complaining for no reason, and it's like, no, these are legitimate feelings.

According to Amber, despite her repeated attempts to explain the racism that she contends with, Ryan only agrees with her when he sees it for himself. Later in our interview, Amber connects his inability to believe her perspective without seeing it for himself with his privilege as a white man. As McIntosh (1988:59) explains, “whites are taught to see their perspectives as objective and representative of reality,” so when a person of color states something that is contradictory to how they see the world, they may respond with invalidation. The same can be said of hegemonic masculinity, where the views of men are viewed as factual and rational and those of women are viewed as primarily controlled by emotions. Furthermore, black women may face further skepticism as they are often considered more likely to be “hypersensitive” due to their race and gender (Evans and Moore 2015; Killian 2012). As Amber tries to explain the double standard she faces because of her race and gender, she finds herself facing another double standard with Ryan—where her word alone is not sufficient to determine if discrimination has happened as Ryan must see it for himself.

As Amber explains that even when Ryan acknowledges her perspective on racism, he still finds ways to minimize her frustration and anger.

He says, 'Well, aren't you used to it?' I'm, like, 'No! I'm not used to it! I still get mad every single time when somebody says something stupid. It's more annoying than ever. It's, like, in 2015, I still have to hear this?! I have to see this?'

Ryan implying that Amber should not be that upset about racism, if it does occur frequently, is another method where Ryan uses Amber's oppression against her. He possibly acknowledges that her viewpoint on her embodied experience is correct, but

then uses the everyday existence of this discrimination to minimize her feelings about it. Despite the racial fatigue that Amber experiences during these conversations, she continues to insist to talk to Ryan about the experience of racial discrimination, thus resisting white denial of the pervasiveness of racism and the notion that Ryan cannot understand her embodied experience as a black woman.

When 41-year-old Leslie, a black woman, was laid off from her job a few years ago, she and her husband of 14 years, Joshua, a 41-year-old white graduate student, expected she would find another job in due time. However, it has been a lengthier and more difficult process than either one of them imagined. During our interview, Leslie expressed her frustrations with being unemployed for longer than she expected, despite searching diligently for work, and her experience sharing these thoughts with Joshua. She believes her race and gender are significant factors in her struggle for employment, but, according to Leslie, Joshua is skeptical. However, she believes he cannot see it “through the same lens” as her because he is a white male—speaking to their different racial and gender statuses.

I told him, ‘You can say I’m wrong, but, um, you know, he’s, you’re probably not seeing it through the same lens that I’m seeing it because you’ve never had the same problems that I’ve had or, at least, the potential problems that I have and, you know, it’s not just being White but also being a guy.’ [...] I think when people do see me they’re probably assuming a certain thing because, you know, you know, I-I’m Black and I’m, uh, somewhat overweight. They probably automatically have a preconceived notion about who I am and, you know, my background, you know, and I’m wondering if they just think I’m barely a high school graduate or something. You know, I guess—I mean, maybe that’s just me being paranoid or something. ...I-I think, I know he’s never gotten that look before. [...] I keep telling him, ‘You’re never gonna actually know what it’s like because you-you’ve got the White skin, and, uh, you-you got the holy grail. That’s what they want.’

Like the situation involving Amber and Ryan, Leslie left this conversation perceiving Joshua as rejecting her account of the discrimination she has been facing, resulting in her feeling frustrated and invalidated. Finding employment can be a psychologically and emotionally exhausting process, and while Joshua does secondarily feel the stressful effects of Leslie’s unemployment, it is more difficult for her as it affects her directly, and she feels responsible for finding employment. Despite Leslie’s attempts to resist Joshua’s framing of her situation, she admits that she wonders at times if the problem is in fact with her and paranoia—a message that women and racial minorities often are presented with when they identify oppression and discrimination. In other words, Leslie has internalized the skepticism of not only her partner but also from society at large (Davis and Ernst 2019; Sweet 2019). For women like Amber and Leslie, their habitus orients them to resist their partners’ racism and sexism actively and persistently to attempt to achieve their goal of having their partner understand the impact of oppression on themselves, as well as black people, women, and black women.

Demonstrating “Proper” Femininity Through the Protection of White Masculinity

For some black women in my study, protection of the male ego was important in determining if and how to proceed in a conversation involving racial education. Of the 11 black women who discussed racially educational conversations, five

mentioned this, and they tended to be within the first few years of their relationship. By contrast, the assertive approach was more likely in relationships with a duration of 8 years or more. Not only does this suggest that there are multiple types of black female heterosexual habitus, but that time may impact the perception of what is possible within these conversations. For these women, the relative infancy of their relationship may result in them not seeing challenging their partner's male ego as possible or advantageous. This is exemplified as Lynn explains her reasoning for not discussing with Rob the differential impact racism has had on his and her brothers' careers:

I wouldn't, like, just come out and say, 'Oh, you got that job because you're a white man,' but, like, I just see my brothers' struggles and I've seen, like, his struggles and it's like I don't know if he'll ever comprehend that, like, there's already things already coming at my brothers when they walk in the door, you know? I could tell him that and he'll understand that but just, like, being feared is something that I don't think he'll ever comprehend, so, and I wouldn't even say it to him because it's just unnecessary, you know? Like, that would just, like, trying to, like, belittle him or something or say, like, 'Oh, you'll never understand.'

According to Lynn, in the 6 years that she and Rob have been together, they have discussed topics ranging from the "war on black bodies" to the ways in which race and gender shape their everyday, lived experiences. However, Lynn shies away from connecting the two and saying anything that may imply that Rob's race and gender advantaged him in his career. In the same way, Rob may not feel the impact of sexism and racism on Lynn as a threat to the validity of his successes. However, within hegemonic masculinity, occupation and achievement play a large role in a man's conception of self and manhood, and the situation may be different when Rob compares himself to other men, like Lynn's brothers. While sympathy, being a part of the construction of hegemonic femininity plays a role in this, the construction of black women as "emasculating" may as well.

Alisha, a 27-year-old black female beautician, noted a similar consideration when talking with her boyfriend, 26-year-old tradesman Sam. She shared with me an example of a conversation that occurred about the 2014 movie "Exodus: Gods and Kings":

Recently, I got mad at the whole 'Exodus' movie because, like, why does Christian Bale have to be Moses? You find the whitest man . . . to be Moses, like, can't you find, like, a Brown—I mean, I'm not saying they need to be Black . . . It was just so, like, strong in me that, like, [her boyfriend] was right there, and I'm, like, 'Why does Christian Bale have to be Moses?' You know, um . . . and then but there's this weird discomfort in saying that to him because . . . I don't know, like, it's still a journey to have that type of, like, transparency with each other. Like, I don't ever want him to feel, like, bad or I don't know, like, he has to defend somebody or feel like he has to apologize on behalf of somebody or even that he has to agree with me.

In the year-and-a-half that they had been dating, Alisha and Sam had several conversations about race from topics involving current events to pop culture. Sam was the only white partner who took an active role in learning about racism after beginning to have racially educational conversations with their partner. He even became involved on a communal level in antiracism work. Despite his active interest and concern, Alisha found herself struggling with feeling as if she may be challenging Sam's individuality and forcing him to feel as if he had to defend the casting choice as a white man.

Many black women mentioned a type of racial fatigue from having to engage in this emotional and intellectual labor within their personal life, especially when their partner found it difficult to understand their perspective and/or if they found themselves having to engage in these types of conversations often. As 29-year-old Layla, a doctoral student, explained it,

[It] can be kind of challenging I think because you also have the expectation that, oh, this is somebody you're in love with and this is somebody that you like a lot, so, sometimes, like, if they say certain things that you think is [sic], like, really bad or kind of ignorant then you get, like, really offended, right? Because you don't expect somebody who you have a close relationship with would say something like that even though you know that, like, okay, some people think that way, you just don't expect your boyfriend to think that way. So, I think, in some sense, it's, like, what they say kind of hurts you a little more?

The ways in which black hetero-femininity is constructed in our society—and the subsequent socialization and affective social interactions of black women—place black women in a unique position within these relationships when it comes to doing this type of racework, or the emotional work that is involved in managing relationships across race (Steinbugler 2012). While middle-class black feminine stereotypes, which are deeply influenced by black respectability politics (Higginbotham 1993), eschew actions that may be considered abrasive to not be associated with black working-class femininity, they do not preclude advocating for others. As Collins argues, part of the expectation of the “Black Lady” involves selflessly “standing up” for black people. However, while we see women in longer relationships engage in advocating for themselves and rejecting this image of the self-sacrificing black women, for women in shorter-duration relationships, such as Alisha, their habitus orients them to be more mindful of the limits of their conversations when it comes to potentially violating aspects of hegemonic white masculinity.

WHITE MALE HETEROSEXUAL HABITUS AND THE FOCUS ON ACHIEVEMENT

Of the nine white men who mentioned having race-related discussions in their relationship, eight mentioned racial education. White men were more likely to discuss how their knowledge of racism and racial awareness had increased since being a part of an interracial relationship. While some of this change was credited to observing the situations they have found their partners in, some also credited it to the conversations they have had with their partner throughout the duration of the relationship. An example would be Sam, who is a 26-year-old tradesman, and the only participant who came in with a low level of racial literacy and began learning about racism on his own after beginning to date and have race-related conversations with his girlfriend Alisha. In comparison, most who entered a relationship with a low level of racial literacy relied on their partner for education. Of these white men, some mentioned demonstrated that they had developed a certain level of racial literacy when talking about the racial issues that arise from raising multiracial children. However, some demonstrated during their interview that they were struggling with understanding the complexities of racism as their statements reflected a white male heterosexual habitus—indicating the possibility that the more they possessed a disposition that adhered to

the mental paradigm of hegemonic (read: white) masculinity, the more difficulty they may have had shifting their perspective on racism and race.

Ryan is a 58-year-old educator and artist who has been married to fellow artist Amber. In the previous section, Amber explained how she has struggled to get Ryan to understand how pervasive racism is and, more specifically, how racism and sexism have impacted her ability to advance in her career. Unprompted, Ryan shared his perspective on the situation during our interview. While Ryan believes that racism exists and is involved in social justice activism—(Amber spoke of his activism with social justice organizations and his participation in protests) he was still trying to reconcile Amber's experience and perspective with how he views the world:

[Like Amber,] I've had struggles, too, but I've had a lot of success and economically I get, I make a lot more money, and she'll credit that to some extent to . . . the choices I've made, but also to the fact that I'm White and I'm a male, and, so, for me it's kinda like, well . . . I don't discount that. I totally understand. I know that's true, but I also know that my choices have been . . . I've been much more preserving in putting up with bullshit in order to stay the long haul in situations that I have been in professionally in order to reap the benefits of being somewhere longer, you know what I mean? [. . .] I don't discount what she's gone through because I totally think that in a lot of the ways there's a lot of validity to what she says about the way that things have gone for her professionally in, in . . . the, the, the problems that being Black and being a woman brings to the table when you're trying to have a professional life, but, on the other side of the coin, I also feel like, relative to—it's apples and oranges to me in some ways. I'm not discounting that being a White male has been advantageous, but I also think that . . . what my strategy, so to speak, has also been advantageous, so that's a point of discussion, and race is an issue. It is a factor in it, you know, race and gender actually are factors.

In a similar vein to Lynn's concerns about implying that her fiancé's Rob's career success may be due in part to his race and gender, Ryan is uncomfortable connecting being a white man to his career success. He acknowledges it could be a factor, but then immediately follows that admission by focusing on explaining how his and Amber's personalities and hardiness are more consequential, implying that the role those identities play is minor at most. He can comprehend the existence of these complex systems of oppression but fails to connect them to his everyday life. Individuality is a core part of hegemonic masculinity and a part of whiteness—since white people are often socialized not to think of themselves as a part of a racial group or collective (DiAngelo 2011). While Ryan has an easier time processing Amber being a part of a gender and racial collective, it is difficult for him to accept the ramifications of the fact that he is part of one as well—one that benefits from the racial and gender hierarchy. Furthermore, viewing the world through a colorblind lens—even a partial one—allows whites to view their status in life as one that is earned (Gallagher 2003). While Ryan may know that racism and sexism can affect people's professional and economical outcomes in life, he is resistant to accept the inverse of that, which threatens his belief in individualism. This would also imply that Ryan's professional achievements are, at least in part, not due to his hard work and have, to some extent, been given to him—something that can challenge his masculinity. Amber and Ryan's impasse speaks to the limitations of these types of conversations, which require self-reflection and volitional cognitive and behavioral changes. It can be difficult for whites to acknowledge their discordant racial understandings and, as Churcher (2016:10) explains, “if an individual solely relies on abstract reasoning or on calling to mind a set of facts to correct for his or her prejudiced perceptions of

others we would expect this to have only a marginal effect on deeply engrained affective attitudes . . . given that such attitudes demonstrate a lack of responsiveness to rational argumentation.”

Thirty-seven-year-old Kurt lives in a Western metropolitan area with his 32-year-old fiancée Renee and their toddler daughter. Since Kurt went to a predominantly Chinese high school, Renee feels that he should understand what it is like to be a racial minority. However, she expressed frustration throughout our interview about the many ways she feels like he does not understand how certain comments can be racially insensitive.

While Kurt expressed that he felt his knowledge around race has grown, there was evidence during our interview that his racial literacy was rudimentary. For instance, he made several comments throughout our interview where he fetishized Renee’s blackness by associating it with “coolness.” In one instance, he explained to me how he was attracted to Renee by her similar sense of humor and how “cool” she was, which he connected to the fact that she was a “black girl.” He explained how he was hoping to get “cool points” from black women at his job because of his relationship with Renee:

I thought, I kind of figured that I would, I would get cool points for being with a Black girl, but I did not get that. And, if anything . . . it was the other way around [laughs]. I don’t think . . . because I think a lot of, um . . . Black, a lot of Black people think that Renee is kind of . . . you know, a traitor to them or she—she—she jumped ship. Not, not necessarily because she’s with me, but just because she was, she was raised . . . in a, you know . . . in a, in a, in a pretty White way, I don’t know, for lack of a better word. So, she, she, she gets along . . . she’s been very, uh, assimilated into White culture, and they . . . I thought . . . so, so I think that she gets . . . I think she gets heat from . . . from Black people in a more [says something I can’t understand] Black community. Um . . . so, I thought that . . . [a Black supervisor] hated my guts, and she always hated my guts. [. . .] I thought it would be a good idea for them to know that I was dating a Black girl, but it back-fired on me.

In addition to fetishizing Renee’s race (and gender), he commodifies it as something that can be exchanged with other black women to increase his own status. Furthermore, he associates the failure of his plan with Renee being stigmatized by other black women for not complying with in-group racial norms—an explanation that virtually removes him from any involvement, or responsibility, while reframing Renee’s blackness as a liability. Kurt is unable to reflect on his actions and situate them within a larger history of white fetishization and commodification of black bodies. Furthermore, Kurt’s attempt to “exchange” Renee’s race and gender inherently devalues black women—since it implies that he is magnanimous for being in a committed relationship with her. His interpretation of the event also “cloaks” his whiteness in invisibility—where it is visible to him when it appears to be an advantage and hidden when his plan flounders. This interaction demonstrates how Renee is “raced” to Kurt, where her race carries a permanence that his does not.

CONCLUSION

I have demonstrated how the racial heterosexual habitus of black women and white men in romantic relationships can limit the topics, scope, and strategies partners use to manage conversations involving racial education, as well as the success of

these conversations as opportunities to develop racial literacy. Not only does this research argue for an intersectional approach to habitus, but it contributes to literature on interracial relationships by shedding a light on the influence of racialized gender ideologies. Black female heterosexual habitus contains aspects of empowerment by providing a model for naming and resisting racism and sexism, but it also places limits on those within younger relationships to not tread on white male ego. For white men, the more their white male heterosexual habitus reflected an adherence to hegemonic masculinity, the more they shifted conversations about racial education into ones about achievement and success and, thus, struggled to listen to their partners and understand the dynamics of racism and sexism.

My findings nuance Steinbugler's (2012) concept of "racework" by adding an understanding of how gender dynamics influence the emotional labor involved in these conversations. The emotional labor that is involved in bridging their disparate racial habitus—as Steinbugler defines the concept—cannot be understood primarily through racial terms since gender can influence the racial dynamics within these relationships. Additionally, this research adds to Twine's (2010) work on the racial literacy of whites by giving insight into how the intersection of race and gender ideologies can be a factor in the development of this literacy. I show the importance of not only considering race when trying to understand how to dismantle white supremacist ideologies and structures of oppression. As Collins (1990) reminds us, there is a "matrix of domination"—therefore, racist systems of oppression are interwoven with other types of structural oppression—such as gender and racialized heteronormativities.

There are a few caveats to keep in mind regarding my findings. Like in any interview, my implicit and explicit identities may have had an effect on participants' interview responses. Black women may have been more likely to share their frustrations regarding racism with me, while white men may have been more likely to want to demonstrate how much they learned to me to demonstrate antiracism. However, other identities beyond my race and gender could have an impact as well. For instance, there were instances where me being a child of an immigrant or being raised in the Southern United States visibly made participants feel more relaxed. Furthermore, a focus on conflicts around racial education may be the result of participants being more likely to remember areas of contention than moments when there was immediate understanding or agreement. It is important that interracial couples are not pathologized as being embroiled in intra-relational racial conflict. Additionally, a significant portion of my sample was black women who were part of a community of other black women who blog about their lives as part of a multiracial relationship/family. Therefore, my sample may have an unusually high number of racially literate black women. Another important factor regarding the composition is one of the majority groups in the sample was people obtained through my social network, which skews middle-class and highly educated (college-level and above). While research (Livingston and Brown 2017; Moran 2003; Qian 2005) does show that people in interracial couples are more likely to be highly educated, which in turn correlates with middle- to upper-socioeconomic class, this could have impacted the type of people that were in the study.

Potential future research includes understanding how these ideologies influence discussions about race for interracial LGBTQ+ gay/lesbian couples, as well as the differences between successful and unsuccessful racial education discussions within interracial couples. A comparative study of black women/white men couples and black men/white women couples could be insightful in determining if one couple combination lends itself more to these types of conversations and to deeper understandings of racial heterosexual habitus. Additionally, a deeper analysis into the role of socioeconomic class of origin, as well as current class status, in racial heterosexual habitus may also be insightful, as well as the role of colorism in who engages in racially educational conversations.

APPENDIX A

Study Sample Demographic Data

	Black women	White men	Total number	Total percentage
<i>Number of participants</i>	21	15	36	–
<i>Percentage of sample</i>	58%	42%	–	–
<i>Age</i>				
25–34	9	6	15	42%
35–44	8	4	12	33%
45–54	1	2	3	8%
55–64	3	3	6	17%
65+	0	0	0	0%
<i>Marital status</i>				
Married	13	9	22	61%
Cohabiting	1	1	2	6%
Dating (noncohabitating)	2	2	4	11%
Engaged	5	3	8	22%
<i>Relationship duration</i>				
1–5 years	7	5	12	33%
6–10 years	6	3	9	25%
11–20 years	5	4	9	25%
20+ years	3	3	6	17%
<i>Number with children</i>	10	8	18	50%
<i>Highest educational attainment</i>				
Less than high school	0	1	1	3%
High school	0	0	0	0%
Some college	4	2	6	17%
College degree (Four-year)	11	6	17	47%
Some graduate school	0	1	1	3%
Graduate degree (master's/JD level)	5	4	9	25%
Graduate degree (PhD/PsyD level)	1	1	2	6%
<i>Region</i>				
Northeast	11	7	18	50%
Southeast	3	2	5	14%
Midwest	1	1	2	6%
Southwest	3	2	5	14%
West Coast	3	3	6	17%
<i>Number of immigrants</i>	2	0	2	6%
<i>Also identifies as Hispanic</i>	0	0	0	0%

APPENDIX B

Partial Semi-Structured Interview Script

Prior to the first interview (anywhere from a couple of days to several weeks), I had a 15-minute introductory conversation with the research participant where I explained the purpose of the interview in more detail, the format of the interview, my positionality to the research, and how I plan to handle confidentiality. I also reiterated to participants that they could decide to drop out of the research study at any time and that they can refuse any question. This introductory conversation also gave research participants the space in which to ask any questions and also gave us an opportunity to become more familiar with one another prior to actually doing the interview. It is also important to note that at the beginning of each interview session, I again explained to the participants that they can withdraw from the study and refuse questions. I also briefly explained the order of the interview sections.

I. Demographics

1. Age
2. Race/ethnicity
3. Current city of residence
4. Educational background (i.e., the highest level of education achieved)
5. Occupation
6. Religious affiliation
7. Relationship status (e.g., dating, living together, engaged, married)
 - a. How long have you been together?
8. If you have children, how many? What are their ages?

II. Respondent's introduction

9. Tell me a little bit about your life. . .
 - a. Where did you grow up?
 - b. What was your family life like?
 - c. What was the racial makeup of the places where you lived?

III. Initial stages of the relationship questions

10. Had you dated outside of your race before?
 - a. **YES:** If so, what other races? How conscious were you of the racial aspect of the relationship when entering the relationship? Did you have any particular feelings or thoughts about it?
 - b. **NO:** If not, do you think there was a reason why you had not? How did you feel about entering an interracial relationship?
 - i. If they intentionally had not dating interracially or had never thought about it before, ask what made them reconsider this stance.
11. What is the story of how you and your partner met?
 - a. Who initiated interest first?
 - b. How did you know you wanted to be in a committed relationship with him/her?

IV. Racial discussions, thoughts, and ideas

12. Do you and your partner talk about race?
 - i. Can you give me an example of notable or recent conversation?
 - ii. How did you feel during this conversation?
13. When you started talking about race in your relationship, how did you feel about it? Were you comfortable or uncomfortable? Do you think your partner was comfortable with it?
14. Do you feel like there are certain types of racial discussions or topics that you cannot discuss with your partner? Why?
15. Who initiates these conversations the most? How does that make you feel?
16. Do you or your partner ever experience individual instances of discrimination? Do you talk about it?
 - i. Do you think your partner understands your feelings about this?
 - ii. If you do not think they understand, why do you think that's the case?
 - iii. How do you feel about their reaction?
17. Do you think your experience as a [insert race & gender here] is different than your partner's? If so, why?
18. Did you think that you think about certain racial groups differently since you started dating interracially?
 - a. What about your partner?

V. General questions about interracial relationships

19. Do you think the experiences of people in black female–white male couples are different than other interracial couples, and, if so, how?
 - i. Why do you think this is the case?
20. Do you believe you think differently about race after entering an interracial relationship? How, and why do you think it is changed?
 - i. Do you think the way your partner thinks about race is different?
21. In general, what are your feelings or thoughts on interracial couples?

VI. Concluding questions

1. Those are all the questions I have. Is there anything in particular that you want to express about this subject, or are there any questions that you think I should be asking that I am not?

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