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Politics of Respectability, Colorism, and the Terms of Social Exchange in Family Research

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Abstract

In this article, we consider the utility of social exchange theory when centering the material and cultural realities of people and families of color. We draw on critical race and intersectionality scholarship to argue that this work challenges some of the core assumptions of social exchange theory (while reifying others) and offers novel avenues of inquiry and expanded foci for family researchers employing a social exchange framework. We illustrate our points by focusing on existing research and offering new empirical evidence on African Americans, yet we note that our revisioning has broader relevance for relationships between and within other groups and positionalities.

Keywords

African American families; exchange theory; race

There are some families whose total lives unfold within a uniquely oppressive environment. —Peters and Massey (1983, p. 194)

Racism is a destructive and uncomfortable reality in the United States. As recent events around the country have reinvigorated racial tensions and called attention to the continued burden of individual and systemic racism faced by people of color, the need for family scholars to better understand their racialized experiences cannot be underestimated. Like other contributors to this special issue, we began with two simple questions: “Do traditional theories in family studies, and social science more broadly, apply to the unique experiences of families and communities of color?” and “If not, how can family theories be revisioned to enhance their relevance to those at the margins?” This time in history provides us with an opportunity to revision traditional theories in family research. Given our own expertise in family relationships and development among African Americans, we apply these questions to this particular group. We wish to emphasize, however, that although the particularities of our revisioning may be specific to African Americans, the general approach to and utility of

this revisioning need not be. To this end, we revisit social exchange theory in hopes of improving its relevance and applicability to the daily experiences of African Americans and their families.

Although extensive family research has applied social exchange theory across numerous domains, including relationship formation and dissolution (Kreager, Felson, Warner, & Wenger, 2013) and household labor (Davis & Greenstein, 2013), among others, our goal is not to review the literature. Instead, we focus on highlighting several ways that social exchange theory—its assumptions and applications—may be evaluated, revised, and extended on the basis of insights from critical race and intersectionality scholars. To do so, we first provide a brief overview of the traditional explication of social exchange theory and its key constructs and assumptions. We follow this with insights into some of the ways in which critical race theory and, more broadly, an intersectionality perspective challenge traditional approaches and conclusions of social exchange theory.

Our critique includes three key points and presents contemporary applications of these new revisionings. First, we argue that the terms of exchange, as they were initially crafted, never applied to families of color. Second, to better understand the intimate relationships of African Americans, we attempt to integrate general assumptions and constructs from social exchange theory with racialized, gendered, classed, and other social locations described by critical race and intersectionality perspectives. These perspectives call our attention to broader sociohistorical and political contexts and different positionalities within these contexts. By way of example, we discuss the racialized, gendered, and classed respectability politics surrounding marriage and how they challenge and/or reify the assumptions of social exchange theory. Last, we stress the value of intragroup analyses within a social exchange framework for their ability to examine empirically intersectional positionalities and to call attention to previously unexamined terms of exchange. We do so by noting research on one within-group difference among African Americans—skin tone—that is not well addressed by exchange theories. Ultimately, we suggest that, although it presents challenges, a more critical, intersectional lens does not deem social exchange theory obsolete. Rather, this lens offers novel points of inquiry that are relevant to social exchange processes that family scholars must embrace if we seek to understand what Risman and Rutter (2015) thoughtfully describe as families as they really are.

A Brief Summary of Social Exchange: Traditional Applications in Family Research

Social exchange theory, in its various forms, has roots in a number of social science disciplines, including psychology, sociology, economics, anthropology, and family science. The philosophical perspective of utilitarianism heavily influenced early conceptions of social exchange (Smith & Hamon, 2012). Fundamentally, social exchange theory posits that individuals desire to maximize benefits and minimize costs within their interpersonal relationships. Hence, central constructs of the theory of social exchange are rewards, costs, resources, and alternatives (Nye, 1979; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Rewards are defined as anything experienced as pleasurable and gratifying, and they may include love, value, status,

instrumental services (e.g., household work, support), money, and respect or prestige. Costs are defined as any loss or punishment, including the loss of resources as a result of the relationship (e.g., time, money, energy, effort). The central premise is that individuals weigh the rewards against the costs, each evaluated relative to a comparison level (what might be expected given an individual's position in a relationship) and a comparison level for alternatives (what an individual could get in an alternative relationship), to select the most beneficial social relationships in which to engage. Core assumptions of social exchange theory, summarized by Smith and Hamon (2012), include the following: (a) People are motivated by self-interest, (b) individuals are constrained by their choices, (c) humans are rational beings, and (d) social relationships are characterized by interdependence and reciprocity.

Traditional applications of social exchange models have been useful in intimate relationship research on mate selection, relationship dissolution, and sexual behavior. For instance, one of the most widespread interpretations of exchange theory has applied to mate selection, with the principal argument being that men exchange their economic resources and/or social status for women's physical attractiveness, sex, or household services (Becker, 1981). Relationship dissolution is another area of research that employs applications of exchange theory to illustrate how power in a relationship reflects the relative dependence of the partners (Emerson, 1976). This dependence decreases with access to alternatives and increases with the degree of resources (e.g., time, energy, material possessions) that a partner has invested in the relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Social exchange theory has also been used to predict sexual behavior in intimate relationships (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004), as early work by Nye (1979) argued that males were more likely to exchange rewards such as money and marriage for sexual access. This theory and these relevant empirical applications, however, have not made identities of race, gender, class, and other social locations the prism through which intimate relationships and relational processes are understood.

Social Exchange Theory's Missing Application to African American Intimate Relationships

Traditional social exchange theory and methods, like most family theories, lack a more comprehensive means for understanding families and communities of color, particularly African Americans, as most literature using social exchange theory has been applied uniformly across all groups. In encouraging us to consider that identities and positionalities are multiple, intersecting, and mutually constructed (Crenshaw, 1991), an intersectional perspective makes bare that the seemingly race- and class-neutral explication of social exchange theory was not race and class neutral at all. Rather, it centered the experiences and family forms of the most privileged groups. Hence, historically, the terms of exchange as they were initially crafted never applied to families and communities of color given the very different material and cultural realities of the population—White, middle-class men and women—for which the theory was first framed (Emerson, 1976). What might centering the material and cultural realities of African Americans mean for traditional approaches and conclusions of social exchange theory?

The legacy of White supremacy that includes slavery and continued institutionalized racism has led to economic, social, and psychological challenges in the African American community. African Americans continue to contend with the material realities of systemic racism, as they are significantly more distressed than their White counterparts on several economic indicators: unemployment, wealth, education, and income (Bloome, 2014). These realities have an impact on health (Phelan & Link, 2015) and the quality and stability of intimate relationships (Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002).

White, middle-class, nonimmigrant, gender-stereotyped models of the nuclear family neglect racial and cultural inequalities in the material realities and subsequently in the intimate relationship and marriage experiences of specific groups. For example, the Standard North American Family (Smith, 1993) with a working husband and dutiful housewife has not only lost its dominance in 21st-century American family life; it likely never existed in the family life of African Americans (Furstenberg, 2009). Although African Americans are not immune to traditional gender roles, research indicates that African American couples display more egalitarian relationships, as African American women have generally always participated in the labor force and African American fathers are less bound than White fathers to notions of the “package deal” (Townsend, 2002) linking marriage, work, and fatherhood (Edin, Tach, & Mincy, 2009). Hence, the key gendered rewards inherent in early conceptions of social exchange theory—economic stability and sex or household labor—were likely never salient in the context of African American families.

Although certain phenomena can be universal, oftentimes the meanings attributed to them and the subsequent behaviors are specific to positionality. This disrupts traditional constructs of the theory of social exchange such as rewards and costs and calls into question how researchers view “universal” rewards and costs of intimate relationships. When investigating the rewards and costs for African Americans, research must explore these concepts relative to intersecting inequalities and the mundane environmental stress of being Black in the United States (Carroll, 1998; Peters & Massey, 1983). We argue that an overemphasis on costs and benefits of the exchange as constructed with respect to White middle-class families led to a de-emphasis on differential access to and the meaning and values of these constructs for specific groups who experience different material and cultural realities. For example, although marriage is often viewed as a reward, other research argues that given the limited available pools of marriageable men, some African American women view marriage as a “tax.” That is, African American men, like African American women, are systematically disadvantaged in the labor market, and experience higher risk of incarceration and higher rates of multipartner fertility than their majority counterparts (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006; Pettit & Western, 2004). Thus, the “reward” of marriage must be counterbalanced with the prospect of marrying a partner who is likely also dealing with the consequences of systemic racism and the loss of independence, predictability, or needed welfare benefits that might ensue (Garrett-Peters & Burton, 2015; Weigt, 2010).

This example illustrates the importance of considering different cultural and sociohistorical experiences of African Americans and their associated economic and political ramifications. We know that African Americans face different material and cultural realities than their White counterparts and the general population. Therefore, it is critical to consider issues not

addressed in theories that appear race neutral but were developed using majority populations.

In the sections that follow, we attempt to integrate general assumptions and constructs from social exchange theory with racialized, gendered, classed, and other social locations described by critical race and intersectionality perspectives with a focus on two contemporary applications of the theory. The first application emphasizes racialized and gendered politics of respectability surrounding marriage. The second employs an intersectional lens to discuss the need for intragroup analyses when examining intimate relationships of African Americans, illustrating our point by calling attention to research on colorism and skin tone. In both applications, we highlight intersectional positionalities that yield new implications for social exchange theory, like highlighting unexamined terms of exchange and challenging underlying assumptions.

Situating the Terms of Social Exchange in Politics of Respectability

As noted thus far, there have always been differing realities between racial and ethnic groups in the United States, and contemporary family scholars are increasingly recognizing the role that these realities play in altering exchange relationships and in producing group differences in family formation behavior and family instability (Dixon, 2009; Furstenberg, 2009). Fully accounting for race and ethnicity in family research, however, entails far more than accounting for intergroup differences in material and cultural realities. Rather, it demands attending to the ways in which these realities intersect with sociohistorically specific cultural schemas, or what Bourdieu (1989, 2001) refers to as symbolic structure. This structure is permeated by symbolic violence—the exercise of control and domination not by force but by the cultivation and widespread permeation of cultural rules that maintain social hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1989, 2001)—against people and families of color. This symbolic violence consists of, among other things, controlling images (Collins, 1990) and politics of respectability (Higginbotham, 1993). Any critical approach to family research—whether it be a gender perspective (Ferree, 2010), a critical race perspective (Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Freeman, 2010), or a more explicitly intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1991; Few-Demo, 2014)—demands attention to this symbolic structure.

But what does this mean for social exchange theory? In what follows, we illustrate that accounting for this symbolic structure yields several implications for social exchange theory. First, it challenges the theory's foundational assumption of self-interested actors and redirects our attention to nonmaterial and communal costs and benefits, such as respectable citizenship. Second, it reinforces exchange theory's assumption of interdependence but opens novel points of inquiry to study this interdependence through an intersectional lens. We argue these points using racialized and gendered politics of respectability surrounding marriage as an anchor.

Respectability Politics and Marriage

Contrary to demographic shifts in marital and family behavior (Cherlin, 2010), family scholars have documented surprising stability in Americans' desire to marry (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). This stability has occurred despite (or perhaps because of) shifts in

the meaning and symbolic value of marriage. As Cherlin (2009) noted, the normative imperative to marry has declined substantially over time and “alternatives to marriage are more feasible and more socially acceptable today” (Cherlin, 2016, p. 123). Yet most Americans would not and do not choose this path for themselves because marriage has come to serve as a “symbol of successful self-development” (Cherlin, 2009, p. 140).

A more critical intersectional lens, however, asks us to bear in mind that, for people of color, and African Americans in particular, the symbolic value of marriage rests on its ability to signify not only personal success but also respectable citizenship (Collins, 1998; Moon & Whitehead, 2006). In other words, as Moon and Whitehead (2006) argued, “marriage is central to the ideological construction of ‘America’ and what it means to be ‘American’” (p. 25). For instance, Section 101 of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, the act that transformed “welfare as we know it” (Lichter & Jayakody, 2002, p. 117), argued that “marriage is the foundation of a successful society” and therefore asserted as explicit goals the promotion of marriage, the prevention and reduction of “out-of-wedlock pregnancies,” and “the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.” The recent expansion of marriage rights to same-sex couples via the *Obergefell v. Hodges* Supreme Court decision in June 2015 may cause some to view the link between marriage and citizenship as increasingly tenuous. The majority opinion in this case, however, reiterated and invoked this link to justify its decision: “This Court’s cases and the Nation’s traditions make clear that marriage is a keystone of the Nation’s social order” (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015, p. 4).

Culturally and politically, marriage has been venerated “as *the* normative intimate relation for human beings” in the United States (Jenkins, 2007, p. 189), one that creates “healthy,” more “educated citizens” who engage in less crime and have “less need for social services” (Administration for Children and Families, 2011). In public, scholarly, and political rhetoric, this link between marriage and citizenship is explicitly one of “health and social capital” (Heath, 2009, p. 44) and hence seemingly color blind. As noted by Collins (2012), however, “family rhetoric is the symbolic carrier of multiple, often contradictory stories about race, gender, class, sexuality and citizenship” (p. 124). The rhetoric surrounding marriage acts as a form of symbolic violence that pathologizes family forms more common among African Americans, particularly poor African Americans (Bourdieu, 1989; Collins, 1990; Furstenberg, 2009; Jenkins, 2007), and blames these “deviant” intimacies for the ills of the nation (Collins, 1998, 2005; Jenkins, 2007; Moon & Whitehead, 2006).

By and large, the respectable citizenship of White middle-class people, particularly White middle-class men, has rarely been called into question. Put simply, it has been and continues to be assumed (Parkinson, 2016). This has not been and is not the case for people of color. Both in popular and political rhetoric, “the poor Black family remains an invisible standard of deviancy” (Heath, 2009, p. 35), and the behavior of “poor black women in impoverished, ghetto communities” (Crooks, 1995, p. 613) has become the implied contrast for the healthy ways of creating and maintaining families on which the nation’s economic and social health depends. Hence, as Collins (1998) argued, the traditional family ideal in the United States “functions as a privileged exemplar of intersectionality” (p. 62) that helps perpetuate and justify race, gender, and class hierarchies. When considered in a context of symbolic

violence, of which racialized, gendered, and classed politics of respectability are a part, the motivations underlying intimate exchange relationships must be reevaluated. In what follows, we reevaluate the exchange assumption of self-interested actors.

Self-Interested Actors, the Salvific Wish, and the Terms of Exchange

A fundamental assumption of social exchange theory is that individuals are motivated by self-interest, maximizing rewards and minimizing costs relative to their expectations and to their perceived alternatives (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Although Huston and Burgess (1979) noted that, theoretically, this self-interest may at times become more altruistic or communal for partners “deeply in love,” considering exchange relationships within a context of respectability politics offers motivations bigger than self-interest or even couple interest. As Jenkins (2007) argued, “A hegemonic narrative of black sexual and familial pathology” (p. 10) means that, for African Americans and likely for other people of color, especially those at the economic margins, there is not simply individual but communal respectability at stake in intimate relationships. That is, respectability politics deem the intimate relationships of marginalized groups, and the terms of exchange within them, to be inherently both private and public (Jenkins, 2007). Individual costs, rewards, and alternatives must be considered in a context in which respectable citizenship is a bargaining chip. For instance, as Collins (1998) showed, the fertility and family-formation decisions, including marriage, of African Americans were inherently made public and judged in accordance to their perceived value for national well-being. The public nature of what are often private decisions for those with race and class advantage may modify the relevance of individual costs, rewards, and alternatives in exchange relationships.

Although Huston and Burgess (1979) made clear that “the nature of the rewards sought and offered—and, thus, the determinants of reciprocal attraction—are of less central interest to exchange theory than the reciprocity itself” (p. 14), intersecting gender, class, and race inequalities demand attention to particular costs and rewards because they expand motivations for exchange beyond self-interest and allow for novel points of inquiry to understand the intimate relationships of those at the intersections of multiple inequalities.

The gendered nature of the terms of social exchange have been studied extensively (Davis & Greenstein, 2013; Nye, 1979), yet this work has tended to rest on understanding the interpersonal and material rewards and costs of marriage for men and women (Davis & Greenstein, 2013). What gender scholars have highlighted, however, is that marriage may hold not only material but also symbolic value for women beyond the symbol of personal success as highlighted by Cherlin (2009). For instance, Chasteen (1994) and Sharp and Ganong (2007) have shown that, in their largely White samples, women problematized singlehood and that marriage, or at least the prospect of it, provided women with the symbolic capital of “looking less out of place to others,” of “appear[ing] ‘normal’ and appropriate” (Chasteen, 1994, p. 322) in their everyday environments. When coupled with normative expectations that male partners assume responsibility for the progression of romantic relationships, Sassler and Miller (2011) argued that men maintain a form of covert or hidden power in heterosexual relationships—the prospect of marriage.

For African American women living at the intersections of race, gender, and perhaps class inequality, the symbolic violence of respectability politics imbues marriage with the perceived power to challenge both racialized and gendered images of deviant African American female sexuality, like those of the matriarch, welfare queen, and jezebel identified by Collins (1990), or simply learned undesirability (Clarke, 2011), while not necessarily offering the economic stability it often does for many White women. An intersectional approach that takes into account the historical and contemporary pathologization of African American female sexuality, the historical and contemporary linkage of marriage with respectable citizenship, and the structural reality of high rates of unemployment and incarceration among African American men highlights the place of African American women in intimate relationships and gives context to their behavior beyond that of self-interested social exchange.

Whereas marriage and its associated politics of respectability were and continue to be wielded as a weapon against Blacks by Whites, Jenkins (2007) argued that they have become “a kind of intraracial weapon that black elites ... can wield against the black poor” (p. 192) and, as suggested by Moore (2011), that Black heterosexuals can wield against Blacks seeking or pursuing same-sex relationships. Hence, for African American women, the respectability politics surrounding marriage are thought to imbue heterosexual marriage and partnership with the supposed power “to rescue the black community from accusations of pathology” (Jenkins, 2007, p. 188)—a desire Jenkins calls the “salvific wish” (p. 188).

As Collins (2005) pointed out, African American women often make gendered sacrifices in intimate relationships in order to “claim the mantle of Black respectability” (p. 253). In practice, this meant that African American women “often erased tell-tale signs of bitchiness or bad mothering by submitting to Black male dominance” (Collins, 2005, p. 253). Ultimately, this led to Black men and women “feeling stuck with one another” in unfulfilling relationships (Collins, 2005, p. 253). Clarke (2011) further revealed that degreed Black women became involved in “in and out” relationships, in which women continuously left and returned to admittedly incompatible partners, and/or “sleeper” relationships, those involving sexual intimacy but little companionship or commitment. Although Clarke (2011) agreed that this was indeed partly a product of a low comparison level of alternatives, she also contended that the decision to return to or maintain relationships “already calculated as pointless” was neither rational nor irrational, as “rationality is of little use when weighing the costs and benefits of the various ways of remaining unfulfilled” (p. 150). For many African American women, then, the purported choice seems to be between enhancing collective respectability and assuming a personal “tax,” or avoiding the personal tax and forgoing respectability.

Hence, family scholars drawing on exchange theory principles would be wise to take seriously the ways that love, and hence the terms of social exchange in intimate relationships, are “profoundly affected by the political, economic, and social conditions of the new racism” (Collins, 2005, p. 249), a racism that—like that expressed in marriage rhetoric—is often color blind (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), symbolic, and intertwined with gender and class inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991). Situating African American relationships within the racialized, gendered, and classed politics of respectability reveals the limitations of a social

exchange perspective premised on self-interest and directs our attention to additional nonmaterial, symbolic, and potentially communal costs and benefits, like citizenship. As Blau (1964) noted, social exchange theory does not preclude, and in fact encourages, the possibility of nonmaterial rewards and costs, like status and respect, yet we argue that these nonmaterial rewards and costs may be both individual and communal for those existing at the intersection of inequalities. What this task also does, however, is underscore the significance of another foundational assumption of social exchange theory, that of interdependence.

Interdependence and Intersectionality

Fundamental to social exchange theory is the exchange relationship. That is, as Huston and Burgess (1979) pointed out, the relationship itself is the unit of analysis, as “the developmental course of particular relationships cannot be fully understood by recourse either to individual psychology or to the social system” (p. 4). This is, in fact, not a principle unique to social exchange theory but one also found in the general life course notion of “linked lives” (Elder, 1998). Although not explicit in an intersectional approach, interdependence is an implicit and logical premise of an approach that asks us to recognize multiple and mutually negotiated and constructed positionalities (Burton et al., 2010; Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991; Few-Demo, 2014). This interdependence is broadly construed, however, focusing not only on interdependence between individuals but also on that between institutions, systems, and discourses (Ferree, 2010). Hence, an intersectional approach is inherently relational, simultaneously reinforcing a core premise of social exchange theory while mandating that this premise of interpersonal interdependence be situated and understood within larger systems of inequality.

We illustrate this point with analyses of data from young-adult, unmarried African American couples in the Family and Community Health Study (FACHS). Our goal with these analyses is more instructive than empirical, and hence, a full description of the data and methods is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we point readers to our other work using these data (Barr, Simons, & Simons, 2015; Landor et al., 2013). Here, we simply wish to demonstrate the importance of analytic techniques that capture relational interdependence between intimate partners and show that by situating this interdependence within an intersectional framework of racialized and gendered politics of respectability, reframed terms of exchange and sources of power emerge.

Marital behavior among African American women has long been scrutinized (Collins, 1998, 2005; Furstenberg, 2009), with marital delay commonly being attributed to a combination of personal, relational, cultural, and structural factors (Dixon, 2009). Relationship progression, however, is inherently relational and, even if both partners in a heterosexual union desire marriage equally and view getting married as equally salient, partners are not equally equipped with the power to institutionalize that relationship through marriage. Rather, as Sassler and Miller (2011) showed, men in different-sex relationships maintain the power of relationship progression even among cohabiting couples who espoused egalitarianism in other ways. For African American couples, these gendered inequalities intersect with cultural images of deviant sexuality (Collins, 1990, 2005), politics of respectability that

equate marriage with respectable citizenship (a status automatically granted for Whites; Parkinson, 2016), and a structural reality in which African American men's opportunities for productive roles in the labor market are limited by incarceration and discrimination (Pettit & Western, 2004). Hence, one might expect that the terms of social exchange for African American couples may be substantially different from those of their majority counterparts, with the prospect of marriage perhaps serving as an important resource, an important axis of power, held by African American men but not African American women in different-sex relationships.

To explore this notion, we examined the extent to which the salience of marriage among young (average age of 25 years), unmarried African American men was more predictive of relationship outcomes than the salience of marriage among their female partners. Two relationship outcomes were explored—partner-specific marriage expectations (“Do you think you will marry [partner name]?”) and relationship dissolution—and our primary predictor of interest was the extent to which each partner viewed marriage as highly salient (i.e., “Getting married is the most important part of my life”). Using dyadic data analysis to examine the couple as the unit of analysis (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006), findings offer strong and consistent evidence regarding the importance of men's marital salience for structuring relationship outcomes.

Figure 1 shows the effect of young African American men's and women's marital salience on their expectation to marry one another, controlling for relationship quality and a series of other couple-level (e.g., cohabitation) and individual-level (e.g., education) factors. As Figure 1 shows, women's marital salience predicted neither their own nor their partner's expectations for marriage. Men's marital salience, however, significantly elevated both their own and their partner's marital expectations. The significance of men's marital salience was also found when predicting relationship dissolution. From a social exchange perspective, one would expect a relationship to dissolve when its profit (benefits to costs) is minimal relative to each partner's expectations and alternatives. Consistent with this perspective, for both male and female partners, dissatisfying relationships were at an increased risk of dissolution. This general rule, however, requires qualification when the prospect of marriage and the gendered ability to offer it are considered. As shown in Figure 2, women's distress was predictive of relationship dissolution only in relationships in which their male partners did not view marriage as highly salient. Men's distress was predictive of dissolution no matter their own or their partners' marital salience. In other words, the prospect of marriage was indicated by men's but not women's marital salience, and it worked to sustain relationships that were particularly unsatisfactory to African American women. Such a pattern suggests that the prospect of marriage may change any cost-benefit analysis that young African American women make with respect to intimate relationships, as personal costs and benefits of relationships and differing material realities must be considered in light of symbolic structures, like that of racialized and gendered politics of respectability.

This illustrative analysis is not offered to suggest that a social exchange framework is the only one that can make sense of these findings or to suggest that this framework, without an intersectional lens, would have necessarily missed these findings. After all, the assumptions of interdependence within social exchange theory would have certainly encouraged dyadic

data analysis or some other methodological approach capturing interdependence. Rather, we hope that this illustration serves to reinforce the utility of situating social exchange theory within a broader framework of intersectionality. Without doing so, the justification for examining the prospect of marriage as a racialized and gendered resource indicative of more than personal rewards and costs among unmarried couples would have been tenuous at best, and at worst may have resorted to a gender essentialist or a functionalist interpretation of relationship progression and maintenance. Motivating the analyses and situating the findings within intersecting race and gender inequalities, including a racialized and gendered politics of respectability surrounding marriage and the gendered power dynamics behind relationship progression, yields new insight into the ways in which “the structure of racism harms both Black men and Black women, and does so through gender-specific mechanisms” (Collins, 2005, p. 252). In the following section, we continue this line of inquiry with a discussion of skin tone and colorism.

Terms of Social Exchange From a Colorism Perspective: A Focus on Intragroup Variation

Family research examining intergroup differences in intimate relationships has traditionally dominated the scholarly discourse. Given vast structural inequalities shouldered by African Americans, this research almost always suggests that they are disproportionately disadvantaged in family domains compared to their White counterparts. An intersectional framework, however, challenges the somewhat myopic focus on intergroup difference, as this focus is limited in its ability to see, let alone examine, intersecting positionalities. One of the key tools of an intersectional lens is that of intragroup analyses, which allows for us to examine interactive processes that occur within groups (Crenshaw, 1991). Although it is true that African Americans have shared sociohistorical experiences, an intersectional lens calls for investigations of within-group variation and a recognition of potential variability in how individuals and families make meaning of social categories. Not all African Americans experience race, gender, class, and other forms of inequality in the same way. In fact, many face multiple interlocking oppressions (and privileges) differently in different contexts.

In the foregoing analyses, we saw the ways in which gender structures the terms of exchange among young African American couples when considered in a context of racialized and gendered respectability politics. Another culturally relevant within-group difference that sheds new light on terms of social exchange in research on African American intimate relationships is skin tone (i.e., lightness or darkness of an individual’s skin color).

Communities of color, particularly African Americans, have long histories of colorism (e.g., skin-tone bias). Colorism is a racialized, and often gendered and classed, system through which skin-tone bias thrives. Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Ronald (2013) argued that there is no other feature as important and contentious among African Americans as their skin tone. This stems from a tradition of Eurocentric features and whiteness being deemed the standard for beauty (Hunter, 2007, 2011; Wade & Bielitz, 2005). Empirical studies and autobiographical accounts support the notion that individuals within and across racial and ethnic groups generally perceive lighter skin as more attractive than darker skin (Bond & Cash, 1992; Hunter, 2007, 2011; Maxwell, Brevard, Abrams, & Belgrave, 2014). It is

important to reiterate, however, that although we focus on African Americans, men and women across the world, including in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, face notable challenges around colorism (Glenn, 2008).

Burton et al. (2010) argued for the critical need to include colorism perspectives in order to stimulate new conceptual approaches about racialized systems. To this end, the racialized, gendered, and classed politics of respectability surrounding the intimate relationships of African Americans discussed here can also be framed as colorized respectability politics. Respectability politics have not only influenced the symbolic value of marriage; they have also negatively affected the body images of African Americans, particularly African American women. Respectability politics are a form of symbolic violence that offers implicit rules for marginalized individuals to follow in order to earn respect in mainstream culture (Higginbotham, 1993). For African Americans, this often means policing their speech, sexuality, and appearance, such as skin tone (e.g., skin-bleaching creams) and hair (e.g., hair relaxers or extensions) (Banks, 2000; Hunter, 2011). Historically, African American women were encouraged to refine their individual behavior and appearance to counter the notion that “no black women, regardless of income, education, refinement, or character, enjoyed the status of a lady” (Higginbotham, 1992, p. 261). This strategy of appearing “respectable” through one’s skin tone yields greater privilege, access, opportunities, and mobility. This is true not only when comparing Whites to Blacks but also when comparing different skin tones among African Americans. Lightness of skin often protects African Americans from assumed Black stereotypes of criminality and undesirability (Maddox & Gray, 2002; Swami, Furnham, & Joshi, 2008).

Although some research on intimate relationships has demonstrated the racialized, gendered, and classed nature of the terms of social exchange, such factors alone do not explain, for instance, why lighter-skinned African Americans are more likely to marry or have higher status spouses compared to their darker-skinned counterparts. In fact, most of the prior skin-tone and colorism research has been atheoretical (Burton et al., 2010). We believe, however, that for African Americans, the intersections of race, gender, and skin-tone identities demand attention to the cost–benefit analysis proposed in social exchange theory in order to understand better the intimate relationships of individuals at the intersections of multiple inequalities.

What role might skin tone, and more broadly colorism, play in a social exchange framework? In what follows, we demonstrate that accounting for intersectional positionalities with attention to skin tone as an exchange resource provides several implications for social exchange theory. First, it enables us to contend that the costs and benefits proposed in social exchange theory, as well as patterns of privilege and power, can be illustrated along lines of skin tone (see Figure 3). Second, it creates a space for discussion around symbolic structure which challenges some of the core assumptions of social exchange such as the notion that individuals are only motivated by self-interest and suggests novel constraints on choices.

Skin-Tone Status, Social Exchange, and Intimate Relationships

A number of studies have shown that variations in skin tone play a significant role in shaping social stratification and behavior patterns among African Americans (Burton et al., 2010). Research has consistently demonstrated that lighter-skinned individuals achieve higher levels of personal and family income, occupational prestige, educational attainment, and psychological functioning than darker-skinned individuals, even after accounting for family characteristics (Keith & Herring, 1991). Lighter-skinned individuals are also more likely to marry and to marry sooner (Hamilton, Goldsmith, & Darity, 2009). Among a sample of middle-aged African Americans, skin tone was associated with having a higher-status spouse (e.g., a spouse with higher educational attainment and income; Hunter, 2007). Moreover, research has acknowledged that women are more profoundly affected by issues of skin tone because it is inextricably tied to cultural values regarding beauty (Hill, 2002; Hunter, 2007). A gendered skin-tone preference has been illustrated among male peers who reported a preference for lighter-skinned partners (Bond & Cash, 1992; Hunter, 2007) and within the family context, where lighter-skinned girls received preferential treatment (Landor et al., 2013; Wilder & Cain, 2010). As a result, individuals learn that certain physical features are evaluated more favorably than others and are more beneficial in numerous aspects of life, including intimate relationships. Therefore, ignoring the role of skin tone, and more broadly colorism, in the social exchange process undermines efforts to advance theoretical knowledge of the intimate relationships of African Americans. A critical intersectional lens requires us to take into account the historically and contemporarily situated colorism experiences of African Americans.

Application of Social Exchange Models: “Color Capital” in Action

Attention to skin tone in social exchange models of intimate relationships is rare, but we emphasize here some of the applications of doing so, or potential applications. We focus on the areas of mate selection for childbearing, partnering, and sexual behavior to illustrate the ways that skin tone structures terms of exchange to create what we call “color capital.”

Qualitative research and autobiographical accounts highlight negotiations that often take place when people of color are thinking about having children (Russell-Cole et al., 2013). Individuals often select or at least seek out potential mates on the basis of their skin tone in anticipation of the potential skin tone of their children and, in some cases, desire for lighter-skinned children despite the potential mate’s socioeconomic status, education, or achievement (Russell-Cole et al., 2013). A traditional view of social exchange may view this behavior as selfish or hedonistic. However, the cost–benefit analysis of this exchange may be a more selfless and communal rationale in that darker-skinned individuals are forecasting the experiences of their unborn children and rationalizing color capital as a means of reducing the discrimination experiences of their future children and achieving intergenerational mobility. For example, one participant interviewed by Russell-Cole et al. (2013) stated:

It’s no secret that dark-skinned black Americans have had a rather strong affinity for dating and marrying light-skinned black Americans, to the point of identifiably and selectively inbreeding to ensure that their future generations don’t suffer the

bias, prejudice and other negatives that come with having darker complexions in a white/light-skinned-driven American society. (p. 165)

Hence, as a consideration of politics of respectability forces us to reevaluate social exchange assumption of self-interest, so, too, does a consideration of color capital in mate selection for childbearing.

Color capital also yields implications for partnering more generally. When colorism is considered alongside gender and race inequalities, it becomes apparent that darker-skinned African American women may have more limited mate choices than one might expect from an examination of race or gender alone (Hamilton et al., 2009). As one young woman interviewed by Awad et al. (2014) said:

None of the boys wanted to marry me because I was too dark and they were already asking me “you know your children are going to come out really, really dark and that’s not good.” But my light skinned friend got married to a different boy every day. But, I didn’t because I wasn’t light enough, and that really hurt my feelings, and to this day, it still brings me back to the idea that I’m not good enough. (p. 550)

For this African American woman, a focus only on her racialized and gendered experiences in intimate relationships would fail to account for her other social location: having dark skin.

Figure 3 illustrates the role of skin-tone status in an exchange model. The figure is an adapted status–caste exchange model developed by Rosenfeld (2005). Davis (1941) and Merton (1941) initially proposed this theory to explain Black–White interracial marriages. Our model identifies skin-tone status *within* racial and ethnic groups rather than racial status as an important potential part of the exchange. Here, individuals with darker skin are viewed as lower status. However, this model accounts for multiple, intersecting forms of stratification. That is, darker-skinned African Americans of relatively higher socioeconomic status (SES), educational background, or achievement and lighter-skinned African Americans with lower SES, education, or achievement will marry in an exchange of skin-tone caste position for economic resources and status. Hence, even among lighter-skinned African Americans at the economic margins, the higher SES of the darker-skinned spouse would compensate the economically disadvantaged lighter-skinned spouse.

We illustrate a similar idea using contemporary data from the FACHS sample of young-adult, unmarried African American couples (average age 28 years). Here, we investigated whether skin tone of young African Americans predicted the status of their romantic partners. The status of partners, because of the young age of the sample and their incomplete transitions to adult roles, was operationalized using multiple indicators, including whether the partner had ever been arrested, had been recently unemployed, and/or had attended college (reversed).

Results indicated that respondent’s skin tone, measured by two observers when the respondent was 10 years old, was a significant predictor of the status of a romantic partner almost 20 years later. More specifically, African Americans with darker skin were more likely to have partners with more low-status indicators, independent of the individual’s own status, gender, and whether they shared children with the partner (see Figure 4). In other

words, being of dark skin, independent of actual economic position, aligned an individual with a partner of lower status. Thus, it appears that the personal “tax” in relationships is stronger for darker-skinned individuals, as they lack the color capital to obtain higher-status partners and therefore have more constrained choices than their lighter-skinned counterparts.

Albeit this illustrative analysis lacks information on partner skin tone, it suggests that intimate relationships become vehicles for the exchange of status characteristics in that a lighter skin tone provides individuals with color capital that can lead to advantages in the relationship market, perhaps perpetuating both color and class inequality within groups. Although it is clear through a lens of colorism that skin tone is relevant as an exchange resource, social exchange theorists first need to acknowledge skin tone as one among many intersecting inequalities; doing so demands attention to the lived experiences of African Americans and to the heterogeneity (albeit still structured) of these experiences.

Moving Forward: Implications and Avenues for Social Exchange Theory in Family Research on Intimate Relationships

As we mentioned at the outset, our goal thus far has not been to deem social exchange theory obsolete or irrelevant to the study of people and families of color. Rather, using existing research and new analyses on young adult African Americans, we have argued that centering the material and cultural realities of those at the margins, often people and families of color, presents both challenges and opportunities for social exchange theory.

First and foremost, this approach forces a recognition that early and seemingly colorblind explications of social exchange theory were indeed raced, gendered, and classed; they were rooted in the experiences of White, middle-class, gender-stereotyped families. Second, as Jenkins (2007) and Collins (1998, 2005, 2012) showed, the assumptions of self-interested actors and rationality are often disrupted for African Americans, particularly poor African American women, whose intimacies are made public via politics of respectability, like those surrounding marriage. Third, in calling attention to the fundamentally relational aspects of exchange, social exchange theory presents opportunities for critical and intersectional scholars to operationalize intersectionality and discuss its implications in concrete ways (by showing, for example, how gender and skin tone differentially situate individuals within relationships and within racial groups). In closing, we clarify and expand on some of these challenges and opportunities by circling back to social exchange theory’s core assumptions—that humans are motivated by self-interest, rational, constrained by their choices, and interdependent.

Perhaps the biggest disruption or challenge to social exchange theory from critical race and intersectionality research comes to its assumptions of self-interested actors. The extent to which this is a safe assumption, we argue, is tied up in the relative privilege of the population under investigation. For middle-class, heterosexual, White (male) Americans who are not subject to intersecting oppressions and, therefore, whose personal and relational behaviors are not indicative of their social group as a whole, self-interest may very well be the driving factor in interpersonal relationships. For those occupying marginalized positionalities, however, self-interest must be considered in addition to (or perhaps at the

expense of) group interest, whether now, as research on the politics of respectability suggests, or for future generations, as research on colorism and childbearing implies. Failing to situate the motivations for social exchange within the broader sociohistorical context of intersecting race, gender, and class inequalities, like those inherent in and perpetuated by the symbolic violence of respectability politics, fails to see individuals as differentially situated and intersectionally interested actors and closes off inquiries into understanding when, in what contexts, for whom, and at what cost self-interest drives intimate exchanges. These are questions that can and should continue to be explored as they relate not only to African Americans but also to other racial and ethnic minority groups, as well as other intersecting axes of inequality (e.g., sexuality, gender, immigrant status).

The logical follow-up to an assumption that individuals are self-interested in exchange relationships is that individuals are rational in that their behavior will align with the logical outcome of a consideration of costs, benefits, and alternatives. This assumption of rationality is not necessarily in need of adaptation if the assumption of self-interest is modified or conditioned by positionality, yet we urge family scholars to reevaluate what rationality means or looks like in, for instance, contexts of mundane extreme environmental stress (Carroll, 1998; Peters & Massey, 1983) or when constraints on choices deem all choices equally unappealing. Clarke (2011) writes that in these contexts, even if the assumption that humans are rational actors holds true, “rationality is of little use” (p. 150). This calls for more than a consideration of constrained choices; it calls for an acknowledgement that, while agency need not be forgotten, the very meaning of choice and the utility of rationality must be considered and perhaps reevaluated for individuals and families at the center of intersecting inequalities. Further, our understanding of constraints must be expanded beyond economic constraints to those inherent in both material and symbolic structures of inequality, of which racism, sexism, colorism, and respectability politics are key parts. The symbolic violence of respectability politics, for instance, may work by shifting the terms of exchange (e.g., from individual to communal costs and benefits), but it may also work through the tacit application of cultural rules or choosing among equally unappealing options more so than any rational, conscious consideration of costs and benefits. This is a key question for further research.

Finally, social exchange theory centers the exchange relationship, and we argue that critical race and intersectionality perspectives reify the assumption of interdependence, even if not explicitly. Despite this commonality, we argue that applications of both social exchange and critical theories to family research should take this assumption more seriously in the context of dyadic and other quantitative or qualitative techniques designed to model interdependence. Doing so may produce more explicit and concrete evidence in which existing hierarchies operate within families and reveal new forms of capital that result from and reproduce these hierarchies within and outside of intimate relationships (e.g., prospect of marriage, color capital).

Further, we urge social exchange theorists to consider relational interdependence using within-group analyses. Although we opened this article with an epigraph from Peter and Massey (1984)—“there are some families whose total lives unfold within a uniquely oppressive environment” (p. 183)—the evidence we reviewed and presented based on an

intersectional perspective urges us to consider that one shared form of oppression does not mean all shared forms of oppression. Within-group analyses are able to operationalize intersectionality in ways that between-group analyses cannot easily do. That is, they can capture gender and class differences within racial groups, and vice versa. Here, we reviewed and offered evidence of gender (and to a lesser extent class) differences among African Americans and how these might affect the terms of social exchange. Further, drawing on the colorism literature (Burton et al., 2010; Hunter, 2007; Wilder & Cain, 2010), we showed that skin tone is a unique form of exchange capital in intimate relationships among African Americans.

These intersectional inquiries can be extended beyond racial and ethnic minorities to relationships between majority-group members to explore how gender and race capital are employed and exchanged within White families. For example, in what ways do White women benefit from White male privilege, and how does this exchange play out relationally, both intra-and intergenerationally? How do the exchanges made by White families—exchanges that may be inapplicable or inaccessible to families of color—maintain systems of racial and class inequality? Stout, Kretschmer, and Ruppanner (2017) recently reported that, for White and Latina women but not for Black women, marriage was associated with lower levels of identification with other women (“gender linked fate”) and, subsequently, a more conservative political ideology. Such findings beg for additional inquiries into the extent to which heterosexual marriage allows White women (and to a lesser extent Latina women) to capitalize on and align with (White) male privilege at the expense of Black women, thereby perpetuating race and class advantage. Although we focus on politics of respectability and colorism among African Americans, we envision future research acknowledging and examining more fully racialized, gendered, and in other ways intersectional exchanges within and between other social groups and axes of inequality.

Centering the experiences of people and families of color in social exchange theory certainly presents challenges to some of the assumptions underlying the theory. It also, however, calls for a more serious consideration of others and offers novel points of inquiry for future applications of the theory. Critical family scholars have long argued that intimate relationship and family processes do not develop, endure, or dissolve in a vacuum (Collins, 1998, 2005; Ferree, 2010; Few-Demo, 2014; Moore, 2011). Rather, they are part and parcel to intersecting inequalities. Accounting for these inequalities and the different positionalities that result from them is critical in the revisioning of family theories and in ensuring that these theories are relevant to the growing diversity of people and families in and outside the United States.

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Figure 1.

Extent to Which Marital Salience by Relationship Partners Predicts Expectations to Marry Among African American Partners.

Note. Couple-level control variables include relationship length, shared child(ren), interracial pairing, and cohabitation status. Individual-level control variables include relationship quality, age, school status, recent unemployment, current full-time employment, and educational attainment.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 2.
Effect of Female Relationship Distress on Probability of Relationship Dissolution by Men's Marital Salience.

Figure 3.
Skin Tone–Caste Exchange
Note. Diagonal arrow represents the exchange.

Figure 4.
Status of Romantic Partner by Respondent Skin Tone.