# Socializing Singlehood: Personal, Interpersonal, and Sociocultural Factors Shaping Black Women's Single Lives

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## Abstract

Popular discourse characterizes single Black women as desperate and dysfunctional, constructions of single status that reinforce broader stereotypes of Black women. Unfortunately, relatively little is known about how Black women define singlehood for themselves. The relative omission of Black women's self-defined experiences of unmarried life from research is a gap that limits scholarly understandings of singlehood and Black women's lives. To address this gap, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with single, cisgender, heterosexual Black women aged 25–46 years from diverse educational and marital history backgrounds. Thematic analysis yielded nine themes across sociocultural (complex portrayals and liberation), interpersonal (advice, support, and judgment), and personal (purpose, security, freedom, and frustration) life domains. Participants enacted a range of strategies in unmarried life including *strategic singlehood*, the intentional practice of maintaining single status to foster growth, maintain freedom, or ensure safety. Differences in singlehood were observed by maternal status, age, and marital history. Findings suggest singlehood is socialized through scripting and gendered racial socialization processes. Media featuring single Black women, advice and judgments from family, and shifting gender roles for women contributed to single socialization processes. Study findings suggest new directions for practice, research, and policy.

## Keywords

socialization, Black women, relationship status, unmarried, thematic analysis

Gendered racial and sexual socialization research conducted with Black women has largely focused on how Black women are socialized into gender roles and romantic relationships (Bowleg et al., 2004; Jerald et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2013; Ward et al., 2019). This area of research has made many important contributions to the study of Black women's lives by highlighting how stereotypes (Jerald et al., 2017), rigid gender role norms (Bowleg et al., 2004), and contexts for socialization like mother–daughter relationships (Thomas et al., 2013), and the media (Ward et al., 2019) have shaped Black women's attitudes toward, beliefs about, and approaches to Black womanhood and relationships. Although important, a near exclusive focus on gender role norms and relationships overlooks the prominent role single status plays in the lives of Black women. Black women have a disparately high rate of single status when compared to their female peers of other races (United States [U.S.] Census Bureau, 2019). Single Black women have been uniquely stereotyped in policy, culture, and society (Collins, 2009). Because of their single status, Black women have been subjected to numerous messages in media and society about their prospects for marriage (Gibson et al., 2013; Harvey & Millner, 2009). Currently missing from gendered racial and sexual socialization research are studies exploring the sociocultural, interpersonal, and personal factors

shaping Black women's attitudes toward, beliefs about, and approaches to being single. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to examine factors contributing to Black women's beliefs about and socialization into singlehood.

## An Interdisciplinary Perspective on Black Women's Singlehood

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), rates of singlehood have increased for all U.S. women over the past 30 years, with the highest rate of single status occurring among Black women. Single status is a composite measure of divorced, widowed, and never married women. The U.S. Census Bureau presents single status rates for members of the population aged 15 years and older, a vestige of outmoded patterns of matrimony, when teens married in higher numbers. In 1990, 59.7% of all Black women aged 15 and older were unmarried. During the same time period, 37.5% of Asian American women, 40.9%

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of White women, and 41.5% of Latinx women were unmarried. By 2019, rates of singlehood had risen for all racial groups of women, with Black women retaining their disparately high rate of single status. In 2019, 67.2% of Black women were unmarried; while 38.0% of Asian American women, 46.1% of White women, and 51.0% of Latinx women were single.

U.S. women's increasing rates of single status are the product of social changes like rising rates of cohabitation and shifting gender role norms that have afforded all women increased independence from marriage (Lundberg et al., 2016; Traister, 2016). For Black, heterosexual women, however, additional structural and interpersonal factors have been suggested as potential explanations for their singlehood (Cherlin, 2010; Clarke, 2011), including high rates of Black male mortality and mass incarceration (Carson, 2014; Geronimus et al., 2011). Family formation scholars have also suggested educational attainment as a factor shaping Black women's marital outcomes (Cherlin, 2010). Black women earn significantly more college degrees than Black men (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018), a trend thought to undermine marriage rates because of the important role educational parity plays in partner selection (Cherlin, 2010). Researchers have also argued Black women's lower rate of interracial partnership, theorized as the product of interpersonal articulations of anti-Black racism (Clarke, 2011), is yet another potential explanation for Black women's disparate rate of single status (Livingston & Brown, 2017). Although an important context to consider, purely demographic and structural explanations of Black women's singlehood have overlooked Black women's agency in their single status.

Offering alternative investigations of Black women's singlehood, anthropologists (Stack, 1975), sociologists (Dickerson, 1995), and public health researchers (Berman et al., 2015) have employed Black feminist theory in ethnographic and interview research to examine the values and strategies Black women use to navigate and make decisions around their unmarried lives. Black feminist theory has allowed researchers to (a) explore how Black women combat experiences of marginalization using resistive practices of self-definition (Collins, 2009; Lorde, 1984); (b) privilege the lived experiences of Black women as an epistemology on par with academic expertise due to the racist construction of Black Americans lives in academic research (Bowleg et al., 2017; Lorde, 1984); (c) foreground the importance of community, collectivism, and spirituality in the experiences of Black women (Collins, 2009; Lorde, 1984); (d) highlight the impact of stereotypes on Black women's experiences in culture and society (Collins, 2009); (e) examine the significance of single status to Black women (Omolade, 1986); and (f) through intersectional constructions of Black womanhood, explore the social and political forces that uniquely structure Black women's lives along their intertwined race, class, gender, sexuality, and marital status identities (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Researchers have employed a Black feminist perspective to examine single Black women's experiences in the domains of family and motherhood (Omolade, 1986; Stack, 1975), career (Gilchrist, 2011), dating and sexual relationships (Bowleg et al., 2004), and fertility (Clarke, 2011). This literature has focused on two distinct populations of Black women: younger, low-income single mothers (Berman et al., 2015) and older, college-educated professionals without children (Gilchrist, 2011). Research exploring the lives of younger, low-income single Black mothers highlighted their resilience in childrearing in the face of discrimination (Omolade, 1986; Stack, 1975). Communalism, the Black feminist principle of investment and involvement in one's community (Collins, 2009; Omolade, 1986), is a major theme of this work. Omolade (1986) described how, as a single Black mother in 1980s New York City, she worked with other women in her community to create childcare networks and systems of emotional support to help young mothers balance work commitments and family conflicts, while politically advocating for their interests to city government. Anthropological research by Stack (1975) explored similar themes, highlighting the importance of kinship networks to single Black women. Populated by blood relations, adopted family, and friends, kinship networks allowed single Black women to share the responsibilities of home and family across a larger network of people (Berman et al., 2015; Stack, 1975). Collectively, this work has demonstrated the importance of social support and communal values in maintaining the stability of poor and working-class single Black women and their families (Berman et al., 2015; Omolade, 1986; Stack, 1975).

One critique of this aforementioned research is that it overrepresented the experiences of poor and working-class Black women with children (Clarke, 2011). As a response to this research, a more recent body of work has emerged exploring singlehood among professional and childless Black women (Clarke, 2011; Davis et al., 1997; Gilchrist, 2011; Harris & Hill, 1998). This body of work identified respectability politics as an internalized and externally reinforced set of values governing the behavior of unmarried professional Black women. Respectability politics was, and still is, a socially conservative set of beliefs and cultural practices originating from the Black Baptist women's club movement of the early 20th century (Higginbotham, 1993). Respectability politics codified the role of chaste behavior as a marker of middle-class values and encouraged Black women to adopt the behaviors of the White middle-class to protect against criticisms of Black inferiority (Higginbotham, 1993).

Scholars have theorized that respectability politics influence and complicate single Black women's sexual, reproductive, and professional choices. In Clarke's (2011) study examining college-educated Black women's barriers to romance, reproduction, and family, participants expressed guilt, conflict, sadness, and frustration over what they felt were limited outlets for their sexual expression and reproduction. Many participants considered casual sexual relationships, childbearing out of wedlock, or having children with multiple partners out of the question but still yearned for satisfying

sexual lives and the opportunity to bear children. Exploring the experiences of single, PhD holding Black women, Gilchrist's (2011) edited compilation examined the trade-offs of work and family life while highlighting how Black women's roles in the academy chafed against their ability to pursue marriage and family goals. It described the emotional toll the false dichotomy of work or family presented to single Black women.

Together, both sets of studies clarify how robust networks of support and culturally shared values like communalism and respectability politics shape Black women's approaches to motherhood and career in unmarried life. Although informative, missing from both bodies of research are studies examining Black women's experiences of single status collectively, an omission that overlooks, among other things, the experiences of childless low-income women and professional single mothers; a gap addressed by the current study. Additionally, it is also important to acknowledge the ways in which stereotypes of Black women may influence Black women's experiences of unmarried life.

## Stereotypes of Single Black Women in Society

Numerous studies have explored how stereotypic constructions of Black womanhood have shaped Black women's experiences of marginalization (Kennelly, 1999; Tounsel, 2015). Collins (2009) identified five pervasive stereotypes of Black women: (a) combative matriarch, (b) hypersexual Jezebel, (c) sexless and subservient mammy, (d) stuck-up Black lady, and (e) reproductively prolific welfare queen. Alongside racist, classist, and sexist elements, these caricatures rely on single status to amplify the stereotypic construction of Black womanhood (Collins, 2009; Levin, 2013). Within stereotypes of Black women, single status functions as shorthand for dysfunction (e.g., welfare queen; Levin, 2013). Collins (2009) argued that controlling images have the power "to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (pp. 76–77). Accordingly, the impact of controlling images can be observed across numerous domains of Black women's lives. For example, research exploring married Black men's explanations for Black women's high rates of single status found that married men attributed Black women's single status to pathological independence, materialism, and belligerence, traits all associated with matriarch stereotypes (Hurt et al., 2014).

To withstand stereotyping, Black women have enacted numerous strategies for resistance, including self-definition and shared recognition, two core tenets of Black feminist theory (Collins, 2009; Lorde, 1984). Self-definition is the process by which Black women individually define Black womanhood for themselves based on their own experiences (Collins, 2009; Lorde, 1984). Self-definition occurs collectively through mutually constitutive practices of shared recognition, which allow Black women to identify and celebrate commonalities, strengths, and shared histories with one another (Collins, 2009; Lorde, 1984). Research exploring the impact of shared recognition and self-definition on Black women's experiences found these strategies allowed Black women to remake gender norms in their communities, organize politically, and reimagine their relationships to men and other Black women (Omolade, 1986; Piper et al., 2020).

One important area for growth in this literature is a better interrogation of how single status functions alongside race, class, and gender stereotypes to shape Black women's experiences of unmarried life; a gap addressed by the current study. Two additional relevant bodies of work to consider are gendered racial and sexual socialization research.

## Single Status and Socialization Research

Gendered racial and sexual socialization research provide additional frameworks to explore how Black women's interpersonal and sociocultural contexts shape their beliefs about and approaches to being single Black women. Gendered racial socialization is the process by which Black women are raised "to have positive self-concepts in an environment that is racist," sexist, and sometimes hostile (Thomas & King, 2007, p. 137). Sexual socialization is the "process by which knowledge, attitudes, and values about sexuality are acquired" (Ward, 2003, p. 348). Gendered racial and sexual socialization are lifelong processes, shaped by personal experiences, interpersonal relationships, and the broader sociocultural context (Piper et al., 2020; Ward, 2003, 2016). Sexual scripts theory guides some of this research.

Sexual scripts theory posits that humans rely on culturally and interpersonally informed schemas of appropriate sexuality to guide behavior in relationships (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Sexual scripts are recurrent, culturally sanctioned norms that inform our understandings of relationships and gender roles. Messages stating, "women sustain relationships" (Bowleg et al., 2004, p. 70), or "sometimes women are stronger than men" (Thomas & King, 2007, p. 140), provide two examples of relationship and gender role scripts directed to Black women. Sexual scripts theory postulates three contexts for scripting processes. Cultural scenarios are shared understandings of sex and relationships conveyed through culture, policy, and social institutions like the media (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Interpersonal scripts are mutually constructed norms about relationships that mimic cultural scenarios but are enacted in the context of relationships. The process of interpersonal scripting allows individuals to rehearse widely shared scripts, while reconciling individually held differences in understandings about sex and relationships. Intrapsychic scripts are internally rehearsed and informed by culture and interpersonal interaction. Described as fantasies or daydreams, the process of intrapsychic scripting gives life to our deepest desires through the norms and values of the social world (Simon & Gagnon, 1986).

Researchers explored how sexual scripts contributed to emotional intimacy and physical satisfaction in sexual encounters (Seal et al., 2008), gendered racial socialization in Black

women (Piper et al., 2020), and sexual agency (Bowleg et al., 2004). This work also suggests that messages about single status could be conveyed through scripting processes. Critical cultural analyses of media portrayals of Black relationships, a context for cultural scripting, found that depictions of Black romance often include messages that mock unmarried Black women, blaming them for the structural factors contributing to their single status (Charleston, 2014; Wanzo, 2011). Parodies of single Black women in popular media like "I've heard women say, 'if he can't handle my money and my success and my independence, then he can't handle me!'" (Harvey & Millner, 2009, p. 183) construct single Black women's independence as combative, in violation of gender role norms, and rooted in stereotype. There is also some evidence to suggest that single-status scripts are shared interpersonally through communication about single status in Black communities (Hurt et al., 2014).

Thomas and collaborators found that gendered racial socialization processes observed in mother–daughter relationships not only provided a channel for common scripts about relationships but also provided messages of autonomy and self-determination (Thomas et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2013; Thomas & King, 2007). Thomas and King (2007) found that mothers shared scripts of Black womanhood to their daughters like, "I can succeed in anything if I hang onto my identity as an African American female" (p. 140). Although not an explicit message about single status per se, this message about Black womanhood reflects an ethos of autonomy and independence, features of single Black womanhood mocked and stereotyped in media and popular culture. Although it is unclear from current research how and in what ways a process of single socialization would occur, sexual scripts theory suggests that norms about single status circulated through popular culture and shared in interpersonal relationships would likely affect Black women's personal appraisals of unmarried life. The current project explored scripting processes related to single status, examining Black women's socialization into unmarried life.

## The Current Study

Taken together, the summarized research identified potential factors and processes shaping Black women's attitudes toward, beliefs about, and approaches to unmarried life. Although informative, these literatures do not provide sufficient insight into how culturally shared values like respectability politics, interpersonal factors like kinship networks, and personal factors like self-definition shape Black women's experiences of singlehood. This is a significant gap in scholarly understandings of single Black women's lives, a gap that the current study was designed to address. Drawing from Black feminist and sexual scripts theories, I asked the following research questions:

1. How do Black women define unmarried life for themselves?
2. How do single Black women's sociocultural context, interpersonal relationships, and personal experiences contribute to their beliefs about, attitudes toward, and approaches to being single?

## Method

### Qualitative Research Paradigm

To guide my inquiry, I united the paradigm of pragmatism with Black feminist and sexual scripts theories. Pragmatism is a flexible approach that allows researchers to examine concepts deductively, interrogating a priori concepts that are of priority to the researcher, but also inductively, allowing for the emergence of recurrent themes from the data (Creswell, 2014; Morgan, 2007, 2014; Yvonne Feilzer, 2010). Through inductive and deductive approaches, pragmatism allowed me to investigate how sociocultural, interpersonal, and personal contexts for socialization shape single Black women's social realities. I drew on Black feminist theory to explain and describe Black women's unique experiences of singlehood. Specifically, I drew on the tenets of self-definition and shared recognition to explore how Black women define single life for themselves, in light of a culture that stereotypes single Black womanhood (Collins, 2009). I drew from sexual scripts theory to investigate culturally and interpersonally shared scripts of single status. Pragmatism supported these goals by prioritizing participants' constructions of single life while allowing me to examine specific features of single Black women's experiences (Creswell, 2014; Morgan, 2007, 2014; Yvonne Feilzer, 2010).

### Participants and Study Context

Consistent with the U.S. Census Bureau's (2020) definition of unmarried status, single status was defined for participants as never married, divorced, or widowed women not cohabiting with a partner at the time of the interview. Unmarried women who were dating, in sexual relationships, or non-cohabiting partnerships were included in this study. I conducted this study in Detroit, MI, selected because of its sizable and diverse population of Black women and citywide male–female sex ratio imbalance among Black adults aged 25–44 years (The Nielsen Company, 2017; U.S Census Bureau, 2016). I used purposive sampling to select interviewees, which identifies participants through a predetermined set of personal or experiential characteristics (Robinson, 2014). Development of the sampling frame was informed by Black feminist theory, which posits that Black women's identities are intersectional (Collins, 2009). Age and education were selected as the primary recruitment criteria because these demographic factors are known to influence Black women's partnership outcomes (Cherlin, 2010; Clarke, 2011). I selected a sample size of 24 because it allowed for a thorough examination of the roles of

**Table 1.** Participants' Descriptive Information.

| Pseudonym | Age | Degree Earned | Marital History | Employment | Children |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sarah | 25 | High school | Never-married | Unemployed, odd jobs | Three girls |
| Belle | 26 | Culinary certificate | Never-married | Professional cook | One boy |
| Brittany | 26 | High school | Divorced | Loan officer for large bank | — |
| Violet | 26 | Bachelor's | Never-married | Educator | — |
| Susan | 27 | Bachelor's | Never-married | Restaurant manager, hostess | — |
| Zora | 27 | Bachelor's | Never-married | Community development specialist | — |
| Nia | 28 | Master's | Never-married | Director of community center | — |
| Miranda | 29 | Associate's | Never-married | Home health aid | One girl |
| Amber | 31 | High school | Never-married | Unemployed, odd jobs | One boy |
| Shannon | 31 | Master's | Never-married | Non-profit worker | — |
| Iyana | 33 | Master's | Never-married | Corporate marketing professional | — |
| Sheena | 33 | Associate's | Divorced | Waitress, professional cook | Two girls, one boy |
| Hunter | 36 | Bachelor's | Never-married | Media professional | — |
| Tracey | 36 | High school | Never-married | Custodian | One girl, two boys |
| Cindy | 38 | GED | Divorced | Secretary at a tax agency | Three girls, three boys |
| Michelle | 38 | Bachelor's | Never-married | Construction site manager | — |
| Starlet | 38 | High school | Never-married | Teacher, performer | — |
| Khari | 40 | Master's | Never-married | Community organizer | — |
| Angela | 43 | Bachelor's | Never-married | Office worker, religious leader | — |
| Sandra | 43 | High school | Divorced | Waitress, carpentry, odd jobs | Two girls, two boys |
| Andrea | 44 | Associate's | Never-married | Program manager for major hospital | — |
| Claire | 44 | Master's | Divorced | Administrative assistant | One girl, one boy |
| Kandi | 45 | Bachelor's | Widowed | Hairdresser | Two girls, one boy |
| Deidre | 46 | Associate's | Divorced | Community organizer | Two girls, one boy |

*Note.* Characteristics describe each participant at the time of interview. GED = general educational diploma.

age and education in shaping Black women's single status, and it is comparable to other studies of Black women's lives (Berman et al., 2015; Bowleg et al., 2004; Piper et al., 2020). I sought eight participants for each decade age cohort (e.g., 20s, 30s, 40s) and an even number of women with and without 4-year college degrees in each age cohort.

Participants were 24 self-identified cisgender, heterosexual single Black women aged 25–46 years ($M = 34.7$). Participants' pseudonym, age, highest level of educational attainment, marital history, current employment, and number of children are presented in Table 1. Seven (Nia, Shannon, Iyana, Hunter, Michelle, Khari, and Andrea) of the 12 childless women played an active role in the life of a child, acting as godmothers, aunties, or mentors to the children of close friends, extended family, or other members of their communities.

A personal history of violence also emerged as a substantive experience within the sample. Nine participants (Sarah, Belle, Sheena, Tracey, Cindy, Angela, Sandra, Claire, and Deidre) described some first-hand experience of intimate partner violence (IPV), ranging from one-time instances to ongoing experiences of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. An additional four participants (Andrea, Amber, Miranda, and Kandi) had been touched by violence in some way, including the untimely deaths of children, partners, or friends.

## Procedure

Data for this project were collected through the qualitative part of a larger mixed methods project (e.g., semi-structured interviews and a survey; Moorman, 2018). This study was granted exempt status from the University of Michigan Institutional Review Board. I completed data collection over 10 months beginning in June 2016 and ending in March 2017. The 24 interviews ranged in length from 1 to 3.5 hr ($M = 2$ hr 12 min). I recruited participants through referrals from friends and family, by hanging flyers in public and online spaces that Black women frequented (e.g., beauty salons, restaurants, and women-only Facebook singles groups with administrator permission), and through snowball sampling of study participants—the process of identifying new study participants through referrals from previous interviewees (Biernacki & Waldof, 1981). I interviewed participants in a quiet, private location of their preference. Participants were provided US$20 as compensation.

## Researcher Reflexivity and Positionality

Reflexivity is the ongoing reflective practice of the researcher, wherein they describe how their own biases, past experiences, and beliefs influenced the execution and analysis of qualitative research (Berger, 2013; Wilkinson, 1988). At the time I designed this project, I was in my early 30s, never married, childless, and working on my PhD while living in Detroit. My friends and I were buzzing with the anxieties of Black women who had degrees, good jobs, and traveled the world but still had yet to meet that tall, handsome Black man with his own degrees, great career, baby fever, and a desire for marriage. Was it something we were doing? Had men changed? Were

our expectations too high? I was not alone in my anxieties. Dating advice books that purported to help me learn the unspoken rules of love came to me as gifts by way of concerned godmothers and aunts. I received condescending advice from married women and sexist advice from my father about being single. While seemingly everyone had an opinion about what single Black women needed to heal, hide, or disavow in order to find a husband, seemingly no one was talking *with* us about our experiences, desires, and expectations of partnership. This project emerged from my own frustrations with being simultaneously subjected to and objectified by a broader social discourse that dissected unmarried Black women's lives, but did not engage us in that discussion.

My background, experiences, and training as a Black feminist social science researcher shaped why and how I executed this project. My positionality and experiences facilitated my ability to recruit and establish rapport with participants. As a fourth generation Detroiter and single Black woman researcher living in Detroit at the time of this study, I simultaneously occupied emic, group member status (e.g., single Black woman from Detroit), and etic, outsider (e.g., researcher) positionalities (Fetterman, 2019). My insider status fostered trust between participants and me, as many participants were excited to have the chance to speak about their experiences to a Black woman who understood what single life was like in Detroit. But for all of the benefits my background and identity conferred, these perspectives also created blind spots for me in this project, which in turn created limitations for my work.

As a Black feminist who was raised by a hardworking, high achieving single Black mother, I fundamentally view single life through the lenses of agency and resilience. In interviews, I found myself more critical of women who had difficulty embracing their single lives, which inhibited my ability to establish rapport with some participants. One way I accounted for issues in rapport building was through the Being Single Is . . . exercise. Although the power and privilege I had as a researcher was not eliminated, the Being Single Is . . . exercise created a space where interviewees set the terms for how they wanted their single lives to be interpreted.

### Interview Guide and Study Activities

Reflective of Black feminist theory, I designed this study to explore participants' self-described experiences of being single, perspectives on the media's representation of single Black women, and the advice participants received from friends and family about single life. I used a semi-structured interview design, which allowed me to ask specific questions within a flexible framework that accommodated the natural flow of conversation. For the full interview guide, see the Appendix.

Informed by the Black feminist imperative for self-definition (Collins, 2009) and pragmatism, which encourages researchers to develop novel approaches to access participants' meaning making (Creswell, 2014; Morgan, 2007, 2014; Yvonne Feilzer, 2010), I developed the Being Single Is . . . and media meaning making exercises to aid in data collection. The purpose of the Being Single Is . . . exercise was to assist participants in describing their own experiences of single life. To do so, participants were provided with index cards that included both positive (e.g., great, the best part of my life) and negative (e.g., bullshit, terrible) descriptors. If participants thought of a word or phrase not included in the cards provided, they were instructed to write it down on a blank note card. Participants added nine words and phrases to the exercise, such as "full of responsibility" and "not the end of the world." Participants were allowed approximately 10 min to select 5–10 descriptors that best captured their experiences of single life. Twenty of the 24 interviewees completed the Being Single Is . . . exercise, as it was not needed to generate conversation in every interview.

In the media meaning making activity, participants were asked to evaluate the representation of single Black women in media and popular culture. This exercise was guided by the Black feminist conceit that media functions as a source for stereotypic messages about Black women (Collins, 2009). This exercise occurred after the Being Single Is . . . exercise and a discussion of the advice participants received as single Black women. As part of this exercise, participants were asked to identify a single Black woman in the media who best captured their experience of single life and were provided examples of single Black women in popular culture, for example, *Being Mary Jane* (Akil et al., 2013) and BRAVO's *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (Dunlop & Eskelin, 2008). In addition, news articles related to singlehood and dating advice books were provided. Participants perused the examples at their own pace, offering critiques as they did. Please contact the author for a full description of study activities.

### Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis to identify themes in the data. Thematic analysis is a 5-step process that allows for the coding of a priori constructs as well as the emergence of themes (Braun et al., 2014). Phase 1 of thematic analysis requires familiarization with the data (Braun et al., 2014). In Phase 1, I listened to all interviews and read each transcript, making extensive notes during this process. Phase 2 of thematic analysis is data coding (Braun et al., 2014). I developed two sets of codes for the current project. The first set of codes was based on a priori constructs like social support and media representation of Black women, which were derived from prior research focused on single Black women's lives (Clarke, 2011; Omolade, 1986). The second set of codes was developed inductively, based on recurrent ideas that emerged from the data. I tested codes on four interviews and revised them once again before coding resumed on the full data set. I coded transcripts using NVIVO Version 11.0 (QSR International, 2017).

Phase 3 of thematic analysis is identifying themes (Braun et al., 2014). In the current project, I identified themes by

reading the coded passages of data and noting similarities across codes. Phase 4 of thematic analysis is reviewing the themes. After reading over the data captured by each code, I drafted theme summaries to identify linkages between participant accounts and to catalog recurrent ideas in the data. Once I finished reading over the coded data, I drafted final versions of the themes based on the theme summaries and notes taken during my review of the codes. At Phase 5 of thematic analysis, I named and defined themes.

### Trustworthiness of Research

I attended to the trustworthiness or scientific rigor of my study through various methods to support credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Geertz, 2008; Guba, 1981; Means Coleman, 1998). To ensure credibility, I conducted rudimentary member checks at the end of each interview, which allowed participants to ask me questions about the study and challenge my emerging thoughts about the project. I engaged in peer debriefings by discussing my analyses and emerging findings with my doctoral advisor and dissertation committee. I achieved prolonged engagement with the data by taking more than 4 years to conduct, review, analyze, and write up the data. Finally, I triangulated participants' constructions of single status through their responses to the Being Single Is . . . and media meaning making activities. Transferability was achieved through thick description, including a detailed description of the interview setting and events and use of participant quotes. Confirmability was supported through triangulation, reflexivity, and the study's audit trail (e.g., code books, memos). Finally, dependability was supported through an audit trail, where I maintained detailed notes on the study process.

### Results

Participants used 103 words and phrases to describe single life (Table 2). The most frequently used descriptor was "transforming," followed by "a time to learn," and "difficult" and "frustrating." Elaborating on these descriptors, participants shared stories of their single lives that coalesced around nine themes. I begin my presentation of the results with themes addressing participants' sociocultural context, moving on to themes describing the interpersonal domain of participants' lives, and concluding with participants' personal experiences of singlehood. Table 3 presents the definitions and an example of each theme.

### Sociocultural Forces

Two themes captured the sociocultural factors shaping participants' experiences of single life. *Complex portrayals* summarized participants' evaluations of media representations of single Black women. *Liberation* explored how participants

**Table 2.** Participants' 103 Responses to the Being Single Is . . . Exercise.

| Frequency | Descriptors |
| --- | --- |
| 10 | Transforming |
| 9 | A time to learn |
| 8 | Difficult, frustrating |
| 7 | A time to practice, a time to prepare, freedom, fun, lonely |
| 6 | A time for me, hard, revealing |
| 5 | Comfortable, draining, entertaining, eye-opening, sexy, something I'm bad at, something I'm good at |
| 4 | A season, adventurous, exciting, full of possibility, not the end of the world [a], pleasurable, unpredictable |
| 3 | Amusing, annoying, bullshit, clarity, confirms the best things about me, confusing, depressing, doable, encouraging, energizing, great, isolating, magical, meh . . . , not for me, overwhelming, refreshing, relaxing, satisfying, sexual, the best part of my life, universal |
| 2 | A breath of fresh air, blissful, boring, confining, ever-changing, I'm ok with it [a], infuriating, intriguing, never-ending, new, pleasing, problematic, repetitive, sensuous, stressful, terrifying, thrilling, uncomfortable |
| 1 | A great part of my life [a], a time to set boundaries [a], a waste of energy, absurd, adventurous, amazing, awesome, awkward, bothersome, confiding in [a], disconcerting, discouraging, distracting, dumb, emotionally draining [a], enchanting, fulfilling, full of responsibility [a], horrible, impossible Insulting, lacking growth [a], lucky, not part of the plan, predictable, rejuvenating, scary, something I never want to end, something to run from, stigmatizing, stimulating, stupid, surreal [a], terrific, titillating, undermining, unwanted, what's best for me, what I want |

*Note.* Frequency indicates the number of participants who chose each word or phrase.
[a] Participant addition.

navigated the tensions between traditional gender role expectations and their own more progressive views of single life.

*Complex portrayals.* As part of the media meaning making exercise, participants were asked to describe a media representation that captured the multi-dimensional quality of their single lives. Twenty-two participants shared analyses of the media that contributed to the theme complex portrayals. Although there were no perfect representations, participants celebrated growing pockets of media they felt reflected their experiences. Participants identified Oprah Winfrey, Issa Rae, Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, and Iyanla Vanzant as exemplars of single life. Participants cited television programs like HBO's *Insecure* (Becky et al., 2016), BET's *Being Mary Jane* (Akil et al., 2013), and BRAVO's *Real Housewives of Atlanta* (Dunlop & Eskelin, 2008) as realistic albeit sensational portrayals of single Black women's lives. Kandi, a 45-year-old widower and hairdresser, was drawn to the entrepreneurial

**Table 3.** Study Themes.

| Theme | Frequency | Definition | Example Quote |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Complex portrayals | 22 | Participants' evaluations of media representations of single Black women. | "I remember the first time, when that Mary Jane movie came out, and I sat there like, "Did—is somebody putting my life on TV? What the fuck is happening? Wait, we get to really talk about [this] openly?" (Hunter) |
| Liberation | 11 | Tensions between traditional gender role expectations and participants' more progressive views of single life. | "When I got married, I had to change to like basically a mom . . . before it was mandatory to cook for my husband. I got up. I cooked, cleaned, now I can be myself." (Sandra) |
| Advice | 21 | Guidance shared to and by participants about how to approach single life. | "Fuck these dudes. It's not about them. They're not really in the big picture. Focus on your work, which is what my mom told me when I was 8 [Laughter]." (Susan) |
| Support | 19 | Social and emotional support participants received or desired in singlehood. | "I'm seeing these women using their tools, getting their nonprofits and networking and working and living in their community and doing good things for their people." (Diedre) |
| Judgment | 20 | Mocking critiques of Black women's singleness. | "'Oh, you think you don't need a man,' or 'You're just a bitter lady,' or 'Maybe you don't like men,' or 'Why don't you want to be married?' It's almost like people just think something is wrong or broken with you." (Claire) |
| Purpose | 20 | Intentional, growth-oriented actions in singlehood. | "A lotta guys that I had been meeting lately just come along pulling from me. I don't have time to buy shoes for your birthday or a shirt for Valentine's Day or whatever because that money right there could be going on my credit card bill to help me do some of the things that I want to do, like travelling, buy a house, better car, and stuff like that." (Cindy) |
| Security | 13 | The use of single status to protect against violent or unreliable partners. | "I do date, but not as much as I used to when—back when I was 18. Ten years, 15 years ago it was safer to date. Didn't nobody want to rob and rape or beat or try to lie to us and none of that stuff." (Tracey) |
| Freedom | 16 | Participants' appreciation of their ability to move through the world unencumbered by partners and relationships. | "Freedom. You definitely have a lot of freedom. You don't have to answer to nobody." (Brittany) |
| Frustration | 19 | Participants' dissatisfactions with and unmet desires in singlehood. | "I think that probably one of the things that I worry about, because I definitely do want children, is that—have I lost my window?" (Michelle) |

*Note.* Frequency indicates the number of participants who spoke to each theme.

elements of popular portrayals of single Black women, representations she felt accurately captured her drive for economic security. She admired Portia Williams of BRAVO's *Real Housewives of Atlanta* (Dunlop & Eskelin, 2008) and Iyanla Vanzant from OWN's *Fix My Life* (Sinclair & Harrison, 2012) for their ability to come back from hardship to establish economic security for themselves and their families. In the following quotation, Kandi described why she was drawn to Vanzant.

> She's [Vanzant] the epiphany of how a single woman [can] get it together, and she got her shit together. She set her own platform up and look at her. She's making money. And I know that bastard that she divorced, I know he's sick. And her son's right by her side. (Kandi, age 45, widow, bachelor's degree, two daughters, one deceased son)

Kandi conveys the admiration she has for Vanzant, for her personal and professional hat trick—rebuilding herself after hardship, drawing closer to her son, and making her ex-husband "sick" in the process. For Kandi, who described overcoming numerous personal struggles including the violent

death of her son and the loss of her husband to cancer, resilience was an important trait to see in media depictions of single Black women's lives. Other participants shared Kandi's perspective and expressed wanting to see representations that highlighted how single Black women could uplift themselves in unmarried life.

Participants also highlighted how characters perceived as flawed or interpreted as having stereotypic traits could have redeeming value by depicting single Black womanhood in ways interpreted as authentic. Khari, a 40-year-old, never-married, and childless director of a non-profit organization, offered one example. She discussed BET's *Being Mary Jane* (Akil et al., 2013), a series that follows the love life, family relationships, close friendships, and career of Mary Jane Paul, a 38-year-old childless, never-married newscaster. Although Khari rejected some aspects of Mary Jane's life, she eventually found value in the conversations about singlehood the character fostered.

> I struggle[d] with *Being Mary Jane* originally. I think they've done a better job of kind of rounding her out. She was very

promiscuous in the beginning, which I thought was pretty uncool, but at the same time, the conflicts that she experienced, the wanting to be loved, the bad choices. I think that was a fair representation.

Khari demonstrated how participants embraced characters in spite of their own misgivings about some aspects of the representation. Participants drew on their values and experiences to evaluate popular representations of single Black women in the media, a practice of negotiated media readings where Black women set aside more stereotypic or inaccurate portrayals (e.g., Jezebel stereotype) of Black womanhood to selectively engage with elements of media representations they find acceptable (Bobo, 1995; Means Coleman, 1998; Tounsel, 2015). By providing models of singlehood and allowing for community-wide conversations about single life, complex media portrayals of single Black women captured the social and emotional realities of unmarried life for participants. In addition to media, participants described their conflicted relationship to rigid gender role norms as another sociocultural factor shaping single life.

*Liberation.* Participants ($n = 11$) rejected traditional gender role expectations of Black women, embracing broader social changes that fostered independence in single life. Their rejection of rigid gender role norms was evident in a tension between participants' own expectations of single life and broader cultural expectations of Black women. Participants shared stories about how men expected them to alter professional commitments, dress and behave in ways male partners felt were appropriate, and share limited resources despite participants' desires or abilities to meet these expectations. Participants saw each of these factors as a barrier to the formation and maintenance of relationships. Exemplifying these gender role tensions within relationships, Sandra, a 43-year-old divorcée and mother of four, described her excitement at being free from her ex-husband's rigid expectations.

> I don't have to get up and cook, clean, or wash clothes for a man. In a relationship, I had to. I was obligated . . . Before we got together, it was certain things that I did. I wore perfume. I dressed nice and when I got married, I had to change to like basically a mom. I wore long dresses and stopped making makeup [*sic*] and stopped wearing perfume, lashes, fingernails and all that, but now I can do those things when I get ready to. When I wake up, I don't—before it was mandatory to cook for my husband. I got up. I cooked, cleaned, it was [mandatory]. Now I can be myself. I can throw my clothes around, whatever. Eat when I get ready to. I'm single, I go out there and eat by myself.

In single life, Sandra could dress and act in ways that expressed her personality instead of conforming to the gendered roles of wife and mother that her physically and emotionally abusive husband required her to fulfill. Interviewees embraced lives of their own making, what some participants saw as the product of broader social and political changes.

Hunter, a 36-year-old media professional, offered one example. Even though she had a secure job, owned her own home, and had a great network of friends and family, older generations of women in Hunter's family worried about her financial security because of her lack of a spouse. As a response to their concerns, Hunter stated:

> I don't need to marry somebody because of money . . . so that changes things. And so that means it also changes how people see Black women. . . . There is no ownership of Black women. For a long time, everybody owned Black women. Black men owned us. White folks owned us. Everybody owned us, but us. And so now, we're at this time where we own us, lock, stock, and barrel. No one can tell me where to go, how to go, where to get, and when I have to get there. . . . White women had the women's movement. They had that. That was theirs. We participated, but that was theirs. I feel like this space [single life] right now for Black women is another space of liberation. (Hunter, age 36, never married, bachelor's degree, childless)

Hunter constructed Black women's singlehood is a Black feminist space, one that is individually and collectively defined by Black women for themselves. Although not all forms of inequity were eliminated in single life, participants were able to define their lives outside of traditional gender ideologies, a luxury previous generations of Black women were not able to enjoy. By creating lives that reflected their interests, goals, and values, both Hunter and Sandra made clear that contemporary singlehood for Black women is a space that is still taking shape, but one molded by participants' own expectations of what their lives should be. Together, the theme complex portrayals and liberation reveal the important roles that ideological constructions of Black womanhood and media representation played in shaping singlehood for participants. Alongside sociocultural factors, interpersonal factors affected their experiences of singlehood.

## Interpersonal Factors

Participants' descriptions of their interpersonal interactions with friends, family members, and romantic partners coalesced around three themes. *Advice* captured the guidance shared to and by participants about how to approach single life. *Support* summarized the social and emotional support participants received or desired in singlehood. *Judgment* described family and male partner's mocking critiques of Black women's singleness.

*Advice.* Twenty-one participants described giving or receiving some kind of advice about being single. Popular culture subjects single Black women to all manner of advice about how to get a man (Harvey & Millner, 2009), but this type of advice was nearly absent from the current study. Rather, participants described receiving advice as girls and in adulthood, directing them to finish school, work, and establish financial security all while *avoiding* men and relationships. Susan, a 27-

year-old never-married, childless, college-educated artist and restaurant worker, described how her friends and family advised her to approach single life. At the time of our interview, Susan recently ended a 4-year relationship. In the wake of her break-up, friends and family offered guidance on how to move forward.

> My friends have just been like focus on your work. Focus on being better and smarter. Use your potential. Use what you have and move away. So that's been the advice, just don't worry about where you're at now. Fuck these dudes. It's not about them. They're not really in the big picture. Focus on your work, which is what my mom told me when I was 8 but . . . [Laughing].

The advice Susan described highlights the secondary role men play in Black women's constructions of single life. Participants also offered the same guidance to friends, family, and other young girls in their lives. Tracey, a 36-year-old custodian and mother of three, provided an example. Tracey's youngest son died in a fire intentionally set by her sister's ex-boyfriend, who retaliated against Tracey's sister for ending their relationship. This traumatic experience colored Tracey's view of dating. Tracey was concerned about safety when it came to men and remained single as a way to protect herself and her living children from harm. Tracey's past experiences with violence shaped the advice she will one day give her 2-year-old daughter about singlehood.

> I would want her to stay in school until she graduates from college before she even tries to date guys. And then I will want her to, when she get out of college, then she can start looking for a date, because she'll own all of her stuff. And then I would like for her to own her own home so she won't have to depend on no man for nothing. Own, ownership. I will teach her ownership. How to buy things that's worth keeping, and you don't have to grow up to depend on no man. So, I'm a teach her that. Stay in school, be educated. (Tracey, age 36, never married, high school graduate, two sons [one deceased] and one daughter)

On display in Susan and Tracey's words were messages advising autonomy, resilience, and self-definition coupled with the skills and life sequence needed to properly live out single life. The consistency of this advice across the sample is suggestive of a single-status script, one conveyed through processes of gendered racial socialization (Thomas & King, 2007). In addition to advice, participants gave and received support in unmarried life.

*Support.* Sixteen participants shared accounts that contributed to the theme support. Friends, family, and ex-romantic partners played a critical role in the day-to-day lives of participants, providing aid and emotional support in times of need. Systems of support were dynamic, changing due to the deaths of family members, the marriages of friends, and through intentional practices of community building or eliminating unhealthy relationships. Support varied and included assistance with money, support with chores in the home, help in times of illness, childcare, aid in times of crisis, and help with transportation. Amber, a 30-year-old never married high school graduate and mother of a young son, described relocating from a different state for work. Relocating allowed Amber to be closer to her family and live with her sister, with whom she split bills and childcare duties. Amber received help from her loving but judgmental father and brothers, as well as day-to-day emotional support from her best friend. "I have a lot of brothers. I have a sister. I have a wonderful best friend. They do what they can, but, you know . . . it's not intimate enough." As Amber highlighted, the support friends and family provided, while important, was not able to meet all of her needs. Emotional and physical intimacy were needs kinship networks were unable to meet.

To augment systems of family support, some participants turned to casual sexual and dating relationships. After her divorce from her abusive husband, Sandra embarked on a sexual reawakening. Part of her journey involved her "team" of five boyfriends, of which her ex-husband was one, who provided sexual and emotional intimacy, as well as other forms of assistance. Sandra contrasted the benefits of having a team of boyfriends to having a husband, which she conceptualized as a limited system of support.

> You can call like five or six different guys and set up appointments like a doctor's office. [Laughing]. You can take me out to breakfast. You can take me out to lunch. You can take me out to dinner. You can take me to the mall. You got a man for every job. "Could you come do this for me? I got a flat tire." Long as you single, you got all these men on hold. But when you got one man you got— "Hey, I got a flat tire." "Wait until I get off of work, and then I can come over there."—But when you got five or six on your team, I can call one of them up and—"I'm on my way." It's a difference. It's a real difference. (Sandra, age 43, divorced, high school graduate, two daughters and two sons)

Reflecting scholarship about low-income mothers' experiences of social support (Omolade, 1986; Stack, 1975), Amber and Sandra described how they turned to a broad network of friends and family for assistance in daily life. Sandra's experiences, however, upend scholarly expectations of what single Black women's systems of support can and do look like. Sandra was able to curate a system of support that met her varied needs. Sandra's unconventional system of support challenges dominant assumptions about the value of heterosexual marriage (Gibson et al., 2013; Harvey & Millner, 2009) by demonstrating how monogamous partnership can limit a woman's ability to access support. Together, Sandra and Amber demonstrated the highly customizable nature of support in single life. Although family and male partners could be supportive, they also were sources for harsh critiques of Black women's singlehood.

*Judgment.* Twenty participants described being mocked or criticized for their single status by their extended families and

dating partners. Speaking for many participants in the study, Iyana, a 33-year-old never married, childfree marketing executive, summarized the range of criticisms she experienced because of her singlehood.

> I have relatives who are like are you gay? As if I'm single because I'm gay. . . . I have younger cousins who now have babies. Even if they're not married, they have a baby, and so there's like—I know that this person wasn't single at some point because they have a child. So, I think that it's always like the issue of—the question of family, like how they perceive your singleness. I had a bunch of aunts, my dad has four sisters, and they were all together, and I was holding a baby. Somebody was like, "let me get a picture of this because we don't know if we'll ever see—do you know how to hold a baby?" And I'm like, "Excuse me? Like I'm single, but I know how to hold a baby" . . . I've dated a lot of guys who are like . . . " so why are you single?" Like a what's wrong with you kind of thing. You're damaged goods if you're single. Well, motherfucker, you're single too, so what's your damage? . . . I think it's just like nobody questions men and their singleness. . . . My brother doesn't bring his girlfriends around necessarily, but there's no question of his singleness. Nobody is like, . . . "Is [brother] gay?" because they don't come with girlfriends. You know, but I'm the one.

Single Black women, particularly younger women without children, faced questions about their sexuality, maturity, and competence in womanhood because of their single status. Judgments of participants were sexist in both content and application, evidenced by hypocrisies like a single man criticizing a single woman he is dating for being single or unequal levels of scrutiny paid to Black women's singleness compared to Black men. Critiques of participants' singlehood reflected popular notions of single Black women as desperate and dysfunctional (Gibson et al., 2013; Harvey & Millner, 2009). Partnership and motherhood legitimized participants to their families, providing evidence of a woman's heterosexuality and expertise in the domains of family, ideas reflective of respectability politics and its assertion that heterosexual partnership legitimizes Black womanhood (Higginbotham, 1993). Together, the themes demonstrate the integral role that friends, family, and male partners play in supporting participants' single lives—networks of support that at times harshly critiqued participants for their single status. Finally, participants shared the numerous values and strategies they used to navigate unmarried life, capturing their personal experiences of singlehood.

### Personal Experiences

Participants' personal experiences of single life comprised four themes: (a) *purpose,* how participants used their time away from relationships to pursue life goals; (b) *security*, how participants used single life to protect against violent or unreliable partners; (c) *freedom*, participants' appreciation of their ability to move through the world unencumbered by partners

and relationships; and (d) *frustration*, participants' dissatisfactions with and unmet desires in singlehood.

*Purpose.* Twenty participants conceptualized single life as a purpose-driven period of growth and development away from romantic relationships. Single status was thought to facilitate personal growth because a single woman's time and resources could be more fully committed to her goals. Angela, a 43-year-old, never married, clerical worker, and religious leader, described how after a string of bad relationships with Hoteps—Black men who have the reputation of being pro-Black, sexist, and anti-gay conspiracy theorists (Young, 2016)—she embraced celibacy to better focus on her educational, professional, and spiritual goals.

> Celibacy is just—that was just something I did after the three Hoteps . . . I said, "What if it's me? What if it's me?" So I was like, "Okay, let's do this internal journey." And I was in seminary at the time, so I was like, "I'm a just finish seminary and get a good job, finish school, and then I'll worry about romance later." Just do me.

Like Angela, Belle, a 26-year-old line chef and mother of a young son, adopted a purpose-driven approach to single life. She talked about how she used her time while single to grow in herself, while nurturing her professional ideas.

> So, I've learned that I have much more depth than I thought. For a long time, like in my 20s, I thought I was shallow, like I didn't think deeply enough about things. And I didn't. And so now, I just actually take time and I can be a deeper person. I can think about things and have a good understanding of them. That's the biggest thing that I've learned about myself. I love coming up with ideas and creating things and for people, not even myself. Like, I'm trying to start this Black restaurant organization. And what it's supposed to do is—I need to find classes for people who look like me, of color and fine dining, like this wine thing and learn about cheeses so that then we can be a part of this Detroit thing that's going on, because I think that they think [Detroit's restaurateurs] that we don't know [about fine dining]. And so, I don't want that to be a reason that I'm not working in the front of the house at these fancy places.

Both Belle and Angela described how, in single life, they could use their time and energy to accomplish life goals, grow and develop in themselves, and daydream about ways to improve their circumstances. Across the sample, I was able to identify seven consistently described domains of purpose. Education allowed participants to acquire skills, improve their economic conditions, and expand their general knowledge. Travel allowed participants to enjoy the freedoms of single life while learning about their place in the world. Employment and entrepreneurship were practical means of establishing financial security. Financial planning, money management, and property ownership were thought to foster stability and independence. Emotional growth and self-discovery were seen as important steps toward personal development and

future healthy relationships. Spiritual growth allowed women to explore their relationship to God or spirituality. Finally, community involvement evidenced by mentorship and service allowed participants to positively impact their neighborhoods, family circles, and broader social networks.

The theme of purpose is reminiscent of the theme of advice, which advised participants to delay relationships in order to establish themselves financially, professionally, and personally. The similarities between the themes advice and purpose suggest a scripting process, in that interpersonal messages about self-improvement are aligned with actions of growth undertaken by participants. Additionally, participants described how violence and insecurity in relationships shaped their approaches to unmarried life.

*Security.* Thirteen participants described experiences in singlehood related to security. In a security paradigm, single status was initiated or maintained to preserve safety and stability. Exemplifying this point, Amber, a 30-year-old unemployed, never married mother, stated that in singlehood:

> I don't have to answer nobody. I don't have to put up with all the nonsense. I don't have to do it. The fighting, the domestic violence, the name-calling, the putting down, the lying, the cheating. I don't have to deal with it.

Even among participants without long histories of IPV, single life was characterized as a space of protection. Nia, a 28-year-old, never married, childless, non-profit worker, offered one example. Nia's former live-in boyfriend "didn't pay the water bill for the entire summer and didn't tell me," which put her at risk of having her water shut off. For her, the unpaid bill was:

> A violation of partnership to me, that my well-being is now not a priority. That's a problem, a real big one. . . . It really feels just as bad as cheating. It's just you have these core agreements, and one of them is that we take care of each other. We don't put each other in harm's way.

Problems with money, lying, problematic management of the home, and emotional inconsistency were the primary, non-violent reasons cited for why women initiated or maintained single life. Amber and Nia provided evidence of the active and intentional ways that Black women work to preserve their single status. Stepping away from relationships to preserve one's safety is reminiscent of the theme liberation, which characterized single life as an autonomous space free from some forms of misogyny, including gender-based violence. In addition to highlighting the safety single life provided, participants expressed the appreciation of their freedom from the responsibilities of relationships.

*Freedom.* Sixteen participants shared accounts of single life reflective of freedom, which captured participants' appreciation of the adventure and exploration that comes with being unmarried. In single life, women can side-step gendered responsibilities that eat up time, money, and autonomy. In a freedom paradigm, single life afforded participants the opportunity to enjoy life at their own pace and for their own reasons. Brittany, a 26-year-old, childless divorcée, offered one example. Although disappointed by her divorce and frustrated with her circumstances, Brittany was still able to appreciate the freedoms single life afforded her.

> Freedom. You definitely have a lot of freedom. You don't have to answer to nobody. You don't have to worry about, "Babe, I going to go out today with my friends. I'm not going to be back here." You can do what you want. Freedom. I love freedom.

Offering a near identical perspective was Michelle, a 38-year-old never married and childless construction site manager. At the time of our interview, Michelle was in the midst of a year of adventure. She described the serendipity of single life, sharing her appreciation of the little pleasures that can come from unexpected places.

> I literally have bought a train ticket, like walked up to Amtrak the night before, I'm going to book a ticket. I'm just going to go to Chicago. I'm going to get on the train. I'm going to hotel overnight it and see what happens. . . . And I think that you can't necessarily do that when you are in a marriage, right? You just can't up and go by yourself and learn new things about yourself and have these random adventures.

For many participants, being single was the freedom to be light, mobile, and explore one's world while learning about one's self in the process. Single life provided Brittany and Michelle with a space to live in ways that reflected their desires, directly implicating marriage as a barrier to that goal. But for all of the opportunity single life afforded, participants still had numerous frustrations in unmarried life.

*Frustration.* In a frustration paradigm, being single required participants to reimagine themselves and their life goals while managing their dashed dreams of marriage, family, and social status. Nineteen participants expressed aggravation with limited options for companionship and outlets for sexual expression. Miranda, a 29-year-old never married home health aide with a high school degree and a young daughter, joked about her sexual frustrations stating: "It's frustrating because it's not like I want to be a nun, but I don't see anything that makes me want to let my hair down."

While some interviewees could joke, as Miranda did, about their circumstances, for others singleness was a source of great distress. For example, Khari selected "frustrating" as one of her Being Single Is . . . descriptors. In her discussion of the frustrating elements of single life, she shared a story about a long period of depression she entered into during her 20s sparked by her fears of being single. At age 40, when she and I spoke, she had no kids, had never married, and still struggled with being single.

Man listen, it is almost—I don't even have the words to describe it. I will say less than hopeful—very sad. I was raised in a two-parent household. My parents still live in the same house that they raised my brother in and they're happily married 46 years later. It was never a question in my mind, never a question in my mind that I would be 40 and still single. I just kind of figured some things will naturally happen. . . . While I was very successful and had high profile jobs, it was also very important for me to have a family. A lot of women get caught up in marriage; I wanted a family. So when I would see these [married] women driving around with their fly clothes on and their expensive cars, and I'm a single Black woman, that kind of frustrated me, because it's not really what I wanted. (Khari, age 40, never married, no children, master's degree)

Miranda and Khari's experiences highlight the tensions and dissatisfactions that can emerge in single life because of an inability to access the intimacy one desires. Participants' frustrations in single life also encompassed dissatisfactions with single status inequity. For Khari, her vision of marriage came with material comforts like "fly clothes," "expensive cars," and the social standing that comes from being part of a decades-long Black marriage, tangible social and economic benefits unmarried women are unable to access. The theme frustration also revealed how even the most satisfying unmarried lives still left some participants wanting. Together, the themes purpose, security, freedom, and frustration highlighted the multidimensional qualities of single life, which allowed participants to safely grow in themselves and explore their worlds, benefits that came at the cost of marriage and other life goals.

## Discussion

The current study makes numerous contributions to scholarly and popular understandings of single Black women's lives. Participants' self-described experiences of unmarried life revealed two distinct constructions of singlehood, identified how Black women are socialized into single life, and illustrated the complex roles that maternal status, marital history, past experience of IPV, and age play in shaping experiences of singlehood for Black women.

### Self-Defined Singlehood

Participants offered two dominant constructions of single status: one that characterized singlehood as agentic and another that characterized unmarried life as a space of dissatisfaction. The first construction of unmarried life frames singlehood as intentional and beneficial. Prior research has found that single Black women employ a range of strategies to navigate unmarried life (Berman et al., 2015; Clarke, 2011; Omolade, 1986; Stack, 1975). Results of the current study revealed that singlehood is in and of itself a strategy for managing one's broader life goals and responsibilities, one that afforded participants more control over their time, resources, and relationships to men. Accordingly, I have termed participants' first construction of singlehood, *strategic singlehood*—the intentional practice of enacting or maintaining one's single status for the purposes of growth, safety, or exploration. This finding refutes demographic and structural explanations for Black women's single status (Abramitzky et al., 2011; Cherlin, 2010; Livingston & Brown, 2017), as well as popular understandings of Black women's lives (Gibson et al., 2013; Harvey & Millner, 2009), both of which overlook the role of agency in Black women's decision-making regarding their single status.

A strategic construction of singlehood also provided insight into Black women's complex romantic relationships with men. Interviewees characterized the men that they dated as barriers to growth, sources of violence, and misogynists overly invested in gendered roles in relationships. Simultaneously, men played important roles in participants' lives, acting as love interests, co-parents, and providing social and emotional support. A strategic approach to singlehood is indicative of participants' desires to honor their own values and goals in life while also creating space in their lives for men on terms that worked best for them. One of the key tenets of Black feminist theory posits that self-definition and shared recognition are two strategies Black women employ to resist marginalization and oppression in everyday life (Collins, 2009; Lorde, 1984). As participants identified, one key site for their oppression was in their relationships with men, with close relationships like marriages and live in partnerships being described as spaces where they were most vulnerable to misogyny. Participants wanted emotionally satisfying, mutually respectful, and sexually fulfilling relationships with men. Singlehood was a strategy participants used to access the benefits of partnership while managing their exposure to misogyny.

The second dominant construction of single status conceptualized unmarried life as a space of dissatisfaction and inequity. Frustrations in single life were shaped by age and marital history. Younger and never-married participants, with and without children, expressed their desires to marry and dissatisfactions with single life, while divorced and widowed participants in their 30s and 40s at times stated they were content in singlehood. In one of the few studies exploring how race, gender, and marital history contribute to dissatisfaction with single life, Pudrovska et al. (2006) found that never-married Black women expressed the lowest rates of single life dissatisfaction when compared to Black men and White adults of all marital histories. Their findings imply higher rates of single status dissatisfaction among divorced/widowed Black women when compared to those who never married, although this was not specifically tested. Pudrovska and colleagues theorized that because of the normative status of singlehood in Black communities, Black women may experience less single status discrimination when compared to White women. However, findings from the current study challenge this conclusion as participants' shared their own interpersonal experiences of single status discrimination and were cognizant of how single status exacerbated other forms of race, class, and

gender inequity. This finding is consistent with prior research on single Black women's lives (Berman et al., 2015; Clarke, 2011; Omolade, 1986).

Another more likely explanation for discrepancies in single status dissatisfaction among participants by age and marital history could be the quality of divorced/widowed participants' past marriages. Research has found that women in low quality marriages typically report greater happiness and life satisfaction after divorce when compared to women exiting higher quality marriages (Bourassa et al., 2015). All of the women in this study who were divorced or widowed in their 30s and 40s experienced some form of violence in their marriage, indicative of lower quality unions. Perhaps some of the differences in single status dissatisfaction between the never married and divorced/widowed participants of this study can be attributed to past experiences of IPV.

Together, the two constructions of single status described by participants challenge popular narratives surrounding Black women's singlehood and make contributions to scholarly understandings of single Black women's lives. Popular culture portrays single Black women as desperate for partnership, combative, or reproductively irresponsible (e.g., Gibson et al., 2013; Harvey & Millner, 2009). Although many participants wanted marriage and some were dissatisfied with their inability to access it, participants also made clear they were unwilling to compromise their life goals or safety for men. Popular ideas about single Black women would blame hyper-independence and an inability to conform to gendered roles as reasons for Black women's high rates of single status (Hurt et al., 2014), but participants would challenge those assertions. Participants made clear that sexism and economic inequity were threats to their happiness and relationships with men, not their independence or progressive views of gender. Thus, this study's findings provide a more nuanced and complex view of unmarried life among Black women.

### Single Socialization

The findings of this study also suggest that Black women are socialized into single life through scripting and gendered racial socialization processes. Consistent with sexual scripts theory, sociocultural factors shaped Black women's single status. The media seemed to play an important role in shaping Black women's beliefs about single status. Participants identified numerous media personalities whom they applauded for their professionalism and poise in the public eye. Media professionals like Oprah Winfrey or Taraji P. Henson and the protagonists of television shows like *Being Mary Jane* (Akil et al., 2013) could be acting as models of single status for participants. Participants also engaged in negotiated readings of the media by embracing messages about resilience among single Black women while simultaneously rejecting stereotypic constructions of single Black womanhood that suggested singlehood is disreputable.

The theme liberation captures participants' rejection of cultural norms that advocate male control in relationships. Participants' value driven analysis of common messages about relationships mirrors findings from other qualitative work that identified respectability politics, resiliency, and collectivism as values informing Black women's beliefs about unmarried life (Clarke, 2011; Dickerson, 1995; Gilchrist, 2011; Omolade, 1986). A rejection of dominant constructions of relationships was informed by a Black feminist ethos that embraced a wider range of gender roles for women. This is a novel contribution to sexual socialization research, which commonly focuses on how exposure to messages advocating heteronormative gender roles in relationships contributes to greater investment in these ideals (Ward, 2003, 2016).

Interpersonal relationships and interpersonal scripting were evident in the themes. Again, single scripting processes were evident, shaped by advice from family, interactions with friends, and encounters with dating partners. Advice giving was intertwined with gendered racial socialization processes for mothers, godmothers, and mentors. While participants drew on advice from their mothers to delay relationships and pursue life goals, they shared similar advice to their own daughters and other younger women in their lives. Extant gendered racial socialization research does not address the role that advice giving and/or intergenerational guidance play in a Black mother's socialization, but there is some evidence to suggest the act of giving advice could contribute to socialization processes by requiring advisors to synthesize and communicate their own values (MacGeorge et al., 2008).

Participants received messages about single status from family, friends, and dating partners through mocking judgments. Many reported that their womanhood, competence with children, heterosexuality, and abilities in the home were questioned because of their single status. These messages contain numerous value judgments about single Black women and communicate social norms about single status (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Social support provided a context for messages about single status to be communicated. For women with supportive networks, social support offered a space to be vulnerable, share concerns about life, and seek help for a wide range of challenges. For women with critical networks, help seeking was evidence of dysfunction.

Finally, participants' personal experiences of single life and processes of intrapsychic scripting were evident in the growth, freedom, security, and frustration themes. Prior research exploring scripting processes has largely focused on attitudes and beliefs (Seabrook et al., 2016; Ward, 2016), but intrapsychic scripting was evident in the strategies participants used in unmarried life. Participants lived lives that reflected advice to delay relationships in order to pursue life goals, ensure one's safety, and explore the world. Maternal status played a large role in intrapsychic scripting processes. For childless women and women with adult children, actions in single life provided evidence of scripting processes. Participants described experiences outside of the home that demonstrated their rejection of

men and embrace of singlehood. For mothers of young children, who had to devote considerable time and resources to child rearing, single scripting was evidenced in the dreams they held for their futures. Although mothering young children was time consuming, even within these responsibilities, participants could still find pockets of time for themselves. This study suggests that processes of intrapsychic scripting may extend beyond beliefs about singlehood, becoming evident in participants' actions in single life.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Like all research, the current project has limitations that shaped its outcomes. One limitation was that I only addressed the experiences of cisgender, heterosexual single Black women aged between 25 and 46 years, replicating long-standing omissions of queer, transgender, and older Black women from research. Although the current study suggests that single socialization is a universal process, in omitting queer, transgender, and older Black women from the current study, I was unable to assess how sexuality, gender identity, and aging shaped those processes over the life course. Many of the older participants in the current study expressed anxiety about aging while single, highlighting gaps in their systems of social support. Thus, future research is needed to explore how queer, transgender, and older Black women experience unmarried life.

A second limitation of the current study is that it only explored participants' individual processes of meaning making, overlooking how Black women work together to collectively define singlehood (Collins, 2009). Although observing similarities across the sample is one way of accessing shared definitions of single status, it is not equivalent to assessing how groups of Black women work together in real time to define singlehood. Future research might use focus groups to examine these collective processes of meaning making. Additionally, there is a role for quantitative research in testing the scripting and gendered racial socialization mechanisms that underpin single socialization processes. Cross-sectional and longitudinal survey work that examines relations between Black women's beliefs about single status and their investment in single-status scripts, the act of giving and receiving advice, or consumption of media representations of single Black women would be a good first step. Finally, additional work is needed to clarify how age, marital history, and experiences of IPV contribute to differences in single status dissatisfaction among never married and divorced/widowed Black women.

## Practice and Policy Implications

The results of this study have implications for mental health professionals, educators, and policy makers. When working with Black single women, therapists and educators might use the Being Single Is . . . and media meaning making exercises developed for this study to facilitate discussions of their single lives. Relatedly, mental health professionals are encouraged to examine the ways in which media and sexual scripting have shaped single Black women's experiences with and thoughts about their relationship status. In doing so, it is important to consider the discriminatory treatment that single Black women may have experienced and how this treatment is based on heteronormative and gendered racial stereotypes. Moreover, mental health practitioners are urged to consider the myriad advice with which single Black woman are bombarded. Mental health professionals may assist their clients in sifting through such advice (i.e., considering what forms of advice may be oppressive or emancipatory) while also considering strategic singlehood as a mechanism to evade misogyny and violence. Such conversations may enable single Black women to unpack the varied messages they have received about single life while critically defining singlehood for themselves. Educators might use the results of this study to challenge the narrow portrayals of Black women's singlehood experiences in the media and to demonstrate how misrepresentations of single Black women contribute to blaming them for the social and structural intersectional oppressions they face.

As for policy suggestions, one of the first barriers to understanding adult women's experiences of single life, regardless of race, is the proper measurement of single status in the adult population. Current census data describing single status include adolescents aged 15 years and older. While it is important to track rates of teen marriage, the inclusion of minors in single status data makes it difficult to assess trends in adult women's singlehood. A first step in rectifying this problem could be to stratify marital status information by age cohorts, separating adolescents from adults, so researchers have a clearer picture of adult single status over the life course. A second important policy intervention is needed to address single status discrimination. Participants in the current study described the interpersonal effects of judgment due to their single status. Additionally, single status inequities in work (Kennelly, 1999) and the tax code (Traister, 2016) are attached to real social harms for Black women. Laws overhauling the tax code so that single and married adults are taxed in comparable ways and policies banning single status discrimination in the private sector are needed. Perhaps it is time for single Black women and other single adults to organize and caucus for their own political interests.

## Conclusion

The current study highlights the contributions of the sociocultural, interpersonal, and personal factors to Black women's processes of single socialization. This study found that messages about relationships frequently accompany and compliment messages about single status. This project demonstrated how a rejection of normative constructions of relationships might be shaping single socialization processes.

Moreover, this project highlighted important contexts for socialization, identifying mother–daughter relationships, family contexts, dating partners, and relationships with media personalities as key sites for single socialization processes. This study makes clear that intrapsychic scripting processes are occurring, evident through participants' own dreams for their single status and approaches to unmarried life.

Although participants' opinions about and experiences in singlehood differed greatly, participants demonstrated that singlehood was complex, enacted strategically, preferred over misogynistic partners and restrictive gender roles, and filled with infinite possibility. Collectively, these findings upend dominant notions of Black women's singlehood as unwanted or evidence of dysfunction.

## Appendix

### Semi-Structured Interview Guide

#### Single life.
1. "Being single is . . ." activity
2. What is good/bad, easy/hard, exciting/boring about being single?
3. What have you learned about yourself during this period of singleness?
   a. life and work
   b. sex
   c. dating and relationships
4. How has your experience of being single changed over your adult life?

#### Advice.
5. What are some of the messages about single Black women (SBW) you have encountered in your everyday life (friends, family, church, work, school) while single?
6. What are some of the best/worst pieces of advice you have heard about being an SBW?
7. What are some of the expectations of SBW that underpin the messages and advice that you talked about just a moment ago?

#### Single Black women in the media.
8. SBW in media activity
   a. Are you familiar with any of these? Which ones?
   b. What are some others that you can think of but I didn't include here?
9. Who is doing a good job of representing your experiences of being single?
   a. What aspects of your life do <*participant examples of media*> get right?
10. Who is doing a bad job of representing your experiences of being single?
    a. What aspects of your life do <*participant examples of media*> get wrong?
11. What do these portrayals miss altogether?

12. If you could write a show/movie, have a blog, podcast, advice book, and so on, that portrayed a Black woman's experiences of being single, what would that be about?
    a. What portrayals of/messages about being single would you include/exclude?
    b. What about these experiences makes them important to include/exclude?

#### Closing activity.
13. Please share your age, employment, highest level of education, and number of kids.
14. Is there anything you'd like to add that I didn't ask?
15. Do you have any questions for me?

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