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PUTTING COLORISM ON TRIAL
INTRARACIAL COLORISM AND ITS IMPACT ON CRIME TRAJECTORY
AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS

By

Shaderica Ta'shawn Sibley
B.A., University of South Carolina, 2018

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
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A Thesis Approved On

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ABSTRACT

PUTTING COLORISM ON TRIAL

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Shaderica Sibley

April 14th, 2022

This study examines the impact of experiences of colorism on the crime trajectory of African Americans. It is qualitative in nature and utilizes semi-structured interviews with incarcerated African American people. As previous research has shown the painful impact of colorism on its victims, this study ultimately seeks to unearth if that pain translates into crime commission and trajectory. The primary purpose of this research is to contribute to the existing body of research that seeks to support “colorism healing” in the African American community. If this indicates that colorism contributes to crime trajectory, such an outcome would have practical implications: more programs in schools, social work agencies, and Black community groups may be developed to address the problem.

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INTRODUCTION

Colorism, which refers to systematic discrimination based on a dark-skin tone, is a historically based and taboo topic (Hunter, p. 237). Colorism can be both intra and inter-racial (Hunter, p. 237). This system of skin tone stratification routinely privileges lighter-skinned people while demonizing darker-skinned people of color both inside and outside their respective communities. Colorism has a severe negative impact on dark-skinned people, such as longer prison sentences, less income, and more stereotyping regarding criminality (Hunter, p.237-254 & Finkeldey, Demuth 2019). Light-skinned people may face backlash associated with the privilege of colorism, subjecting them to bullying, questioning racial belonging, judgment on personality characteristics, and isolation. (Wilder, p. 73). This research understands colorism as a form of systematic discrimination against dark-skinned people and utilizes the term “backlash from colorism” or “prejudice” to discuss these instances against light-skinned people.

According to Hunter, lighter-skinned people are preferred in the workforce by same-race and White employers, and darker-skinned people face particular disadvantages in the criminal justice and schooling system. (Hunter, p.237-254). Studies about colorism have shown that it impacts newborn children, family relationships, and treatment in dating and marriage (p.237-254). Dark-skinned people are at a greater risk of suicidal thoughts, committing suicide and experiencing Depression (Oh, Nicholson p. 143-148, Perry, Stevens-Wakins, p. 1-14 & Oh, Lincoln, p. 1-4). As the above researchers have thoroughly documented the negative impacts of colorism, this research seeks to discover

if experiences of colorism impact some African Americans' crime trajectory. While it is important to note that colorism impacts communities throughout India, countries in Africa, many countries throughout Latin America, and Caribbean nations such as Jamaica, this research explores the African American community and documents their specific experience.

Colorism is rooted in racist ideologies and the idea that the closer a person is to white, the more worthy, educated, and attractive that person is (Hunter, p. 237). As white people, or the idea of whiteness in general, deemed lighter people of color superior to those of a darker shade, the marginalized communities internalized this notion (Wilder, p. 91). The origin and continuance of colorism in the African American community can be attributed to slavery, the subsequent years of discrimination, the stereotypical and brutal images that have been perpetuated about Black people, and the transmission of colorist values via inter-generational trauma. The presence of racial disparities in the criminal justice system is now a popularized topic in public discourse. Nevertheless, the many ways that color or colorism, rather than race or racism, impact the criminal justice system are not as widespread.

Research has found that colorism impacts several areas of a person's life negatively, such as self-esteem (Oh, Nicholson p. 143-148, Perry, Stevens-Wakins, p. 1-14 & Oh, Lincoln, p. 1-4); however, this will be the first study that directly measures the impact of colorism on crime trajectory. Gyimah-Brempong and Price have argued that "the darkness of skin hue matters for the transition into criminal activity, suggesting that dark-hued blacks face disadvantages in obtaining legitimate opportunities, which drives them to criminal activity," but this is a strictly economic and career conclusion (Gyimah-

Brempong and Price, p. 248). The researchers were referring to the lack of opportunity to secure gainful employment and other financial options. This research will further argue that intra-racial experiences of colorism, such as in the home or school, cause a negative traumatic response that leads a person into crime, thus going beyond the economic and loss of opportunities framework. The literature on colorism reveals that the field lacks the voices of those impacted directly by the criminal justice system and colorism. Current research has found the impact colorism has on arrest likelihood, sentencing, the death penalty, likelihood of suspension (relevant considering the school to prison pipeline), but it has not explored whether people use crime as a negative trauma response to colorism. Essentially, this research seeks to explore if experiences of colorism/backlash are related to the incarceration of members of the African American community.

CHAPTER 1 – HISTORY OF ANTI-BLACK RACISM & COLORISM IN AMERICA

At about the middle of the 15th century, the country of Portugal began capturing African people and forcing them into slavery (Monk, 2018). This point is considered the beginning of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (2018). To justify the enslavement of African people at the end of the 15th century, White people claimed that enslaved African people were inferior based on their race (2018). The history of race places Blackness at the bottom of the hierarchy and whiteness remains dominant (Hunter, pg. 5). Race has been used to categorize individuals into different groups based on physical features. According to the race that a person is assigned to, this may or may not carry its stigmas and stereotypes (Hunter, pg. 5). Historians argued that there was no hierarchical racial ranking until the subjugation of African people by Europeans via the trans-Atlantic slave trade. (Monk, 2018).

Historically, White people have used science, philosophy, anthropology, art, and religion to argue their alleged superiority and to further subjugate African Americans (Lake, preface). For example, French writer, Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, created a “hierarchy of races” that deemed Black people as inferior and occupying the bottom position (Preface). This ideology was shared by many White philosophers from all over the world, with many claiming that Black people occupied a low position in society and were unable to create a civilization of their own. Obiagele Lake proclaimed that in the eighteenth century, Europeans (including European Americans) furthered racial

determinism theories (Lake, pg. x). These theories that were pushed by social scientists and doctors that argued that African and European people belonged to two separate species and that the European species were superior (Lake, pg. x).

The way that the religious text was interpreted often resulted in Christianity being used as justification for slavery as well. For example, In the book of Genesis, Noah cursed Ham, his son, descendants to have Black skin due to Ham wronging him (Lake, pg. x). This passage was used by Europeans and European Americans to justify the enslavement of Black people as it was alleged that the enslaved African people were the descendants of Ham (Lake, pg. x). Another verse that was used was Ephesians 6:5, which reads “Slaves, be obedient to your human masters with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ”; this was interpreted as the bible condoning slavery (Nabre, Ephesians 6:5). Christianity was therefore deemed the appropriate medium to make the enslaved more docile and obedient to their masters (pg. Cone, 56). Biblical texts were used to both justify slavery and to manipulate enslaved people into believing that being enslaved was their rightful position.

Within the first anthropological school of thought in the United States, “The American School,” European thought systems that argued that Black people were closer to animals than to humans were incorporated (Lake, pg. x). Samuel Morton, the founder of the American School, measured the skulls of different races, including White and Black people, and posited that “divine intervention” created the varying human species (pg. x). Others in the American School expanded on this thought and argued that each species carried a “constant and undeviating physical and moral nature which could be changed only by interbreeding” (pg. xi). According to Obiagele Lake, this theory was

used to justify ideas such as “Manifest Destiny” and “The White Man’s Burden” on the continent of Africa (pg. xi). Both of these theories argue that White people and whiteness were needed to build civilization and to “develop” areas in which they believe are less developed.

The end of enslavement, with the Emancipation Proclamation, did not mean freedom for Black people within the United States. Jim Crow Laws and post-Reconstruction politics continued this marginalization for Black people within the United States (Lake, pg. xi). Black people did not have any rights and there was still the general sentiment that Black people were not capable of culture or intelligence (pg. xi). This included degrading the physical features of Black people and considering them inferior to those of a White person (Hunter, pg. 5). Black people were considered less beautiful, and their features were considered “grotesque and bestial,” an idea that the Black community internalized (Lake, pg. xi). European people suggested that because of African people’s dark skin, hair texture, nose shape, and lip size, they were less beautiful (pg. xi). This brainwashing caused extensive damage to the Black community.

History of Colorism in America

Colorism in the African American community is firmly rooted in the history of slavery and white supremacy in this country. To understand the history of skin tone stratification in the Black community, it is important to consider the introduction of mixed-race people into the community through the rape of enslaved Black women (Hunter, pg. 17). As Black people, particularly women, were seen as property, their bodies were not under their control and they were often forced to engage in sexual

relations with white men, producing mixed-race children (pg. 17). Hunter argues that the introduction of mixed-race children into the Black community caused a long-term “color hierarchy” (pg. 18). It is important to note that not all mixed people were the result of sexual violence against Black people, as there were consensual inter-racial relationships as well (pg. 17).

During American slavery, from 1757 to the 1860s, in parts of the country, lighter-skinned or mixed-race Black people were sometimes awarded privileges based on their light skin color and, frequently, their relationship to the slave master (Wilder, p. 8). Consequently, those allowed to learn to read and write, maintain skilled positions, and occupy positions in the slave master’s house were often lighter skinned (Hunter, pg. 19). Darker-skinned people were usually required to work outside, doing grueling tasks. While this preferential treatment does not deny the pain that all enslaved Black people faced, it does, however, highlight slave masters differentiated between skin tones and privileged light skin. Slave masters preferred mixed-race or lighter-skinned slaves to be in their homes because they found them more intelligent and attractive (Reece, p. 5). Due to this, mixed-race people were twice as likely to be freed post-emancipation. With that, they were able to grow businesses and gain financial prosperity at a higher rate than dark-skinned Black people (Reece, 2018). There was clear “status differences” between dark-skinned “pure Negroes” and mixed-race and light-skinned Black people during the antebellum period (2018). This preference for lighter-skinned people “persisted through the eventual codification and institutionalization of the one-drop rule” (Reece, 2018). So, despite the “one-drop rule” a preference for light skin was still shown.

According to Margaret Hunter, because of the privilege awarded to lighter-skinned and mixed-race people during slavery, they were able to form “a small, but elite class of freedmen” (Hunter, pg. 239). These individuals went on to become the leaders of the Black community in positions such as teachers, clergymen, and business owners (pg. 239). Upon emancipation, the socioeconomic gap between darker-skinned Black people and mixed-race or lighter-skinned Black people became more pronounced. Most Black people who were already free (pre-emancipation) were often mixed-race or lighter-skinned and had acquired more wealth, status, and academic achievement (Wilder, p. 8).

In his 1917 article, "The Superiority of the Mulatto," Edward Reuter of the American Sociological Association argued that "while the bulk of the race in America is yet not many steps removed from the African," a "new middle class" emerged that adopted White American standards (Reuter, 1917). Reuter argued that this group, the Mulatto, "have succeeded in coming within measurable distance of the best models of European culture" (1917). As a result of this white preference for mixed-race and light-skin, Reuter continued and suggested that all successful Black people in the United States were mixed-race (1917). However, Reuter quickly argued that the reason for achievement discrepancies between monoracial Black people and mixed-race individuals was not due to mixed-race superiority but likely due to a eugenics logic usage of selective mating for the "best qualities." This selective mating often brought together individuals from well-to-do backgrounds (1917). After explaining different theories regarding the differential experiences between Black and Mulatto people, Reuter unpacked the phenomenon of colorism in the Black community. He argued that mixed-race people idolized white people while demonizing Black people (1917). As a result of white supremacy, it was

observed that White people treated mixed-race people as inferior to them, and Black people treated them as superior members of the community (1917). This phenomenon or attitude exemplifies the idea that both Black and mixed-race people internalized colorism and, in Reuter's viewpoint, "accepted the white man's estimate" (1917). He also claimed that mixed-race people tended to avoid dealings with dark-skinned Black people and chose to only associate with other mixed-race people or white people (1917). Reuter even argued that if it were not for white control, that would always afford some degree of demonization towards non-white people, light-skin and "Mulatto" people would utilize a "hard-and-fast color line" (1917). The research furthers this notion by stating that mixed-race people tended to marry among themselves and that every "superior" ("every Negro of any special importance in any particular line of work") Black man married a mixed-race woman and provided evidence of this by listing Black leaders and stated the race of their wife (1917). Reuter suggested that the most "widely advertised woman of the race" profits off "the black's desire to be like the mulatto and the mulattoes' desire to be like the white" through the selling of bleaching creams and hair-straightening products (1917).

In his 1928 study of mixed-race people, Reuter argued the same sentiment as he did 12 years earlier, stating, "in general the economically prosperous, the socially prominent, and the educated, intellectual, and professional groups are chiefly mulatto while the poor, ignorant, religious, and socially disadvantaged classes show relatively little trace of white admixture" (Reuter, 1928). Reuter declared that because mixed-race people were unable to start a racial category of their own and were pushed out of the White racial group, they settled into the Black community, received a position of prestige due to their White ancestry among Black people, and "form the small aristocracy and the

local leadership of the masses" (1928). Like Reuter, Robert E. Park, a prominent American sociologist, argued that mixed-race people, "on the whole," are the "cultural advanced guard," and the "leaders of the Negro people" and even points out that the "two most eminent figures among Negroes," W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington are mixed-race people in "Mentality of racial hybrids" (Park, 1931). Due to his finding that most of the individuals in the "who's who" among Black people were primarily mixed-race people, Park provides a figure that "the chances of a Mulatto child of developing into a leader of his race are thirty-four times as great as the chances of the Black child," and states that "twenty percent of mixed-bloods among the American negroes have produced 85 percent of the races superior men" (1931).

In the post-emancipation era, colorism was maintained by the Black community with "paper bag test," "comb test," and "paint test" (Kerr, pg. 272). The legend is that paper bags were placed alongside a person's arm and the person could only be allowed to join in extracurricular activities such as church services, parties, and society meetings. if their arm was lighter than that bag, the paint test would operate in the same manner (pg. 272). Similarly, the issue of hair texture bias coincides with colorism. When the 'comb test' was administered, a person's hair had to be able to easily slide through the teeth of the comb for them to be invited to attend an event at certain colleges, churches and other social organizations. (pg. 283). Though Audrey Kerr has found that many of these tests were often unwritten and refers to it as "complexion lore", there was clear stratification in the Black community, lighter-skinned and mixed-race people formed organizations, neighborhoods, churches, and schools where darker-skinned were not allowed (pg. 272). There were practices in place, often unspoken rules, that kept dark-skinned Blacks out of certain spaces. Black and dark-skinned people internalized this notion and many

preferred to have mixed-race and light-skinned people as the leaders of the Black community and the total representation of their image. For example, at one church, it is alleged that the members of the church wanted to get rid of a pastor because he was considered “too dark” (pg. 275).

The origin of colorism in the African American community is due to the white supremacist preference of mixed-race and lighter-skinned people during slavery and post-emancipation and the subsequent internalization of this preference by the African American community.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORIES

I. Colorism and Criminal Justice

Despite colorism being a controversial or taboo topic, it has been the subject of roughly 11,000 scholarly articles since 1983, when Alice Walker coined the term (Crutchfield, Fisher, p. 82). I say “roughly” as the term "colorism" also refers to arts, and these results appeared in the search too. When using the keywords "colorism" and "skin," the user garners about 8,040 results which may be a more accurate estimate of articles written about colorism since 1983.

In 1983, other than Alice Walker's coining of the term in *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, the word only appears about art. However, in 1984 the term "colorism" about skin color discrimination was used by feminist scholars Melba Wilson and Audre Lorde. Colorism is only mentioned sporadically throughout the 1980s, as it does not appear to gain research popularity until the 21st century, with most of the articles being written since then. The introduction of "colorism" was not the beginning of conversations regarding skin color stratification in the African American community. Research about color discrimination against and within the Black community is traceable much further back than in the 1980s. Researchers have written peer-reviewed articles about social discrimination against dark-skinned girls/women, Black preschoolers, and college students from the 1920s to 1940s (Steward p. 99-103, Clark 591-599, Marks, p. 370). Evidentially, scholars have been questioning the presence of colorism in African

American and other ethnic communities for many decades. Though the term colorism is just entering popular discourse, the *Journal of Colorism Studies* was created in 2013 by Dr. Culbreath, exemplifying the depth and need for research in this area.

Research on the school-to-prison pipeline has noted that students suspended or expelled from school have poorer outcomes and are more likely to be incarcerated earlier (Blake, Keith p.118). Therefore, it became essential to underscore the research surrounding school suspensions and colorism, which found that darker-skinned Black girls were three times as likely as lighter-skinned Black girls to be suspended from school by administrators (Hannon, Defina p. 281-295). This form of colorism in punishment/criminal justice continues to be prevalent outside of the school realm and has impacted people of color, particularly Black people, throughout every stage of the process. Research from social psychology has found that the image of the Black male evokes thoughts of crime and an assumption of dangerousness. Still, darker-skinned Black people are stereotyped as even more dangerous (Bennett, Plaut, p. 745). In 2004, a study on colorism and the criminal justice in Florida became the first research to examine the impact of Afrocentric facial features on sentencing. This study found that those with the most prominent Afrocentric features received longer sentences (p. 745). A 2006 study by Eberhardt found that the more "Afrocentric features," including dark-skin tone, a Black person had, the more likely he would be sentenced to death (Eberhardt, p. 383-386). Researchers criticized the Eberhardt study for being skewed towards men's experiences. In 2010, a North Carolina study focused on the experiences of African American women. The researchers found that light-skinned women were sentenced to 12% less time than darker-skinned women (Viglione, Hannon, p. 250-258). In 2016, a study with Minnesota prisons found that lighter-skinned Black people received a more

lenient sentence than darker-skinned people (p. 383-386).

As this country continues to reckon with police violence in the face of national protests, the increased vulnerability for darker-skinned people is imperative to address. In 2020, in a North Carolina State University study that experimented with North Carolina judges and photographs of accused Black people, found that judges deemed individuals with a darker skin tone as having a "higher threat rating." They recommended for these individuals a more severe sentence (Gathings, 2020). Though instances of police violence against Black people travel beyond color lines, Crutchfield, Fisher, and Webb (2017) found that Black people with darker-brown skin are more likely to be the victims of unarmed police shootings. In Crutchfield et al., a study of 68 victims between 1999 and 2014, the researchers found that most of their samples had a darker skin tone for both men and women victims (2017). Hempfield completed a similar study in 2021 using photos from the Washington Post police shootings database from 2015 to 2021. The researcher found that Black victims killed by the police were more likely to be darker-skinned and that White and Black police officers were equally more likely to kill a darker-skinned Black victim (Hempfield, 2021).

Despite the folktale that police see all African Americans negatively without regard to skin tone, Harvard University professor Dr. Ellis Monk found a positive relationship between skin tone and arrest. According to his study, a Black person with the darkest skin tone has a 121% more chance of ever being arrested than the lightest-skinned participants (p. 1593-1612). The disparity of arrest between darker-skinned and lighter-skinned African Americans was the same as or even exceeding the difference between African Americans and Whites as a whole (Monk, p. 1593-1612). Several other studies

have confirmed that Black people with darker skin are more likely to be arrested, even among sibling groups with the same upbringing (Finkeldey Demuth, 2019, & Kizer, 2017).

A study about Mexican-Origin Latinos also found that darker skin tone was associated with a higher likelihood of arrest among the second-generation group (Alcala and Montoya, 2018). Chen, Fine, and several other researchers found similar results in their study on Latinx and White male youth. Latinx and White youth with darker skin were more likely to receive harsher penalties (Chen, Fine 2021). As the criminal record impedes gainful employment in the United States, with a particularly severe impact on Black people, the added dimension of skin tone stratification presents additional hurdles. Utilizing data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, Landeis showed that dark-skinned Black people with a criminal record are more likely to be unemployed than lighter-skinned Black people with a criminal record (Landeis, 2017).

Contrary to the above findings, in 2017, several researchers, including Branigan and Wildeman, found that the likelihood of arrest for Black men (dark and light-skinned) was consistent among skin tones (Branigan, Wildeman 2017). Utilizing data from the Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults Study, the study did find that white men with darker skin, as opposed to white men with lighter skin, were more likely to be arrested (2017). The researchers indicate that they are aware that their findings deviate from much of the current colorism research. They admit that this could be due to the study's shortcomings of being centered on four urban areas and using arrest data from three decades ago or only twenty years after passing the Civil Rights Law (2017).

Likewise, in "Complicating Race: Afrocentric Facial Feature Bias and Prison Sentencing

in Oregon," Peterson found that "Afrocentric facial features" are not explanatory in sentencing length for African American females (Peterson, p. 59-86). These alternate results highlight the continuing need to research the intersection between colorism and the criminal justice system.

As colorism is a manifestation of racism, studies about the detrimental impact of racism can be helpful in understanding colorism. In a study of African American males in Georgia and Iowa, racial discrimination increased aggression and depression, leading to increased criminal offending among adolescents (Burt, Simons, p. 662). Burt and Simons also found that racial discrimination increases crime among Black females (Burt, Simons p. 560). In 2017, Unnever, Cullen, and Barnes studied a sample of African American Chicago youth and found that racial discrimination may facilitate crime through two avenues: 1) increasing the likelihood that youth will drop out of school, and 2) increasing the level to which they will associate with delinquent peers (Unnever, Cullen p., 350). Utilizing General Strain Theory, a study of Black, Latinx, and White Chicago youth revealed indirect and direct forms of discrimination "significantly predict violent crime" (Herda, McCarthy p. 115-130). In 2020, Scott found a similar result for Latinx youth: experiencing discrimination from police and "everyday microaggressions" increased the likelihood of criminal offenses and experiences of anger (Scott, p. 20).

II. The Socioeconomic Impact of Colorism

While colorism is often viewed as an ideology that only impacts beauty standards, it impacts economics and education, similar to racism. Research utilizing the National Survey of American Life found that the educational gap between lighter-skinned and dark-skinned African Americans is strikingly similar to the gap between Black people

and White people as a whole (Monk, pg. 81). Not only does colorism impact educational attainment, but it has also been implicated in the treatment of children in schools. As lighter-skinned people are stereotyped as being more intelligent and attractive, research has shown that teachers may differentiate between lighter-skinned and darker-skinned children (Hunter, pg. 56). The lighter-skinned children may receive a “halo effect,” in the classrooms that causes darker-skinned children to be overlooked and under praised (Hunter, pg. 56). In turn, it may cause lighter-skinned children to perform better on their coursework as they are receiving positive affirmations from teachers (Hunter, pg. 56). This may be a contribution to the finding that lighter-skinned students were found to have significantly higher grades than darker-skinned students (Thompson & McDonald, 2016).

It has also been found that in the employment realm, people with “dark” and “medium” complexions earned 34.5 and 26.5 percent less than white people, the gap between lighter-skinned Black people and White people was “small and insignificant” (pg. 81). Colorism begins in the hiring process, with studies that found that employers prefer lighter-skinned applicants over those with darker skin (Hunter, 2002, Ross 1997, & Harrison and Thomas 2009). Due to the white supremacist structure of the United States, those that are closer to whiteness can actualize the “American dream” with less difficulty.

III. The Psychosocial Impact of Colorism

Colorism harms the self-esteem of dark-skinned people, particularly women (Thompson & Keith, pg. 347 & Rosario, Minor & Rogers, pg. 505). Dark-skinned women and girls often wrestle with their sense of self-worth and self-esteem due to being considered less beautiful according to the social hierarchy. This lack of self-worth has been implicated in riskier sexual practices (Smith, 2010). The finding that victims of

colorism and backlash from colorism were also at an increased risk of being victims of commercial sexual exploitation provides a necessary precedent for this research (Hurst, p. 90-101). The study by Hurst found that victims connected rejection from family due to skin tone with their eventual experiences of being commercially and sexually exploited (p. 90-101); the same connection is plausible with some incarcerated African Americans. As we assess trauma responses to colorism, these results showcase other consequences and give inadvertent evidence to the possibility of colorism contributing to crime.

Parents' fascination and concern with skin tone can occur even before birth. In "ethnic" families, it is not uncommon for parents and family members to wonder about what color skin the child will have or their hair texture (Lewis, Thomas & Norona, pg. 11-21). Researchers have noticed ethnic groups criticizing or praising the skin tones of children at their birth and have noted it as a concern for social workers (pg. 11-21). This form of trauma also impacts the ongoing family relationships as colorism causes issues within families because of the ideas that are associated with dark and light skin. One study found that darker-skinned girls and lighter-skinned boys reported lower quality parenting (Landor, Simons, et al, 2013). This showcases the gendered notion of colorism which typically praises lighter-skinned girls due to ideas surrounding femininity and darker-skinned boys as dark skin is oftentimes viewed as the marker of masculinity.

The prospect of marriage and marriage itself are impacted by colorism as well. Men of "high status" or with higher incomes are more likely to marry lighter-skinned women (Hunter, pg. 82). Darker-skinned women are also more likely to marry husbands that have a full-year less education than the husbands of lighter-skinned women (pg. 82). This showcases the connection between status or class and colorism that is evident from these studies.

Colorism has been linked to mental disorders as well. Experiences of colorism are associated with a greater life experience of mental illness including alcohol use disorder, substance use disorder, anxiety disorder, and eating disorders (Oh, Lincoln, & Waldman, 2021) It has been found that those that experience intra-racial color discrimination, particularly, low-income African American women, had a higher likelihood of suicidal thoughts and suicidal behavior (Perry, Stevens-Watkins, Oser, 2013). Similarly, in 2021, Oh and Nicholson found that greater incidences of intra-group colorism were associated with “greater odds of lifetime suicide ideation and suicide attempt” (Oh & Nicholson, 2021).

Experiences of colorism impact the physical health of African American people as well. In 2018, Hargrove found that experiences of colorism were associated with high blood pressure, particularly for dark-skinned women (Keyes, Small & Nikolva, pg. 2). In a 2021 study by Ellis Monk, it was found that people that experienced intra-racial colorism reported worse physical health outcomes (Monk, 2021). The illnesses that were measured were cardiovascular and cardio-metabolic health, pain-related conditions, and sensory dysfunction (Monk, 2021).

IV. Colorism Healing

As the purpose of this research is to contribute to healing intraracial colorism in the African American community by exemplifying its consequences, it is vital to consider prior research in this area. Researchers have applied the Colorist Historical Trauma Framework to healing techniques, which I will explore in later chapters. Using this framework, which argues that white supremacy has embedded colorism in the fabric of our society, the researchers analyzed poems regarding colorism in the African American

community. From reading the poems, they found “poetry as healing and the description of healing practice was developed from the themes of resistance in the poems” (Hall, Ortega-Williams, Webb 2020). Hall, Ortega-Williams, and Webb constructed a pathway to healing internalized racism within the poems stating, "the language of healing manifested in these poems [is] believing in oneself, teaching self-love, prayer, and perseverance. Many poems demonstrate anger as a form of resistance as well as a recasting Blackness so that the image of the oppressor is no longer legitimate” (2020). Essentially, poetry is a method of healing and resistance to colorism as it pulls the taboo to the forefront and forces readers to acknowledge its existence. Practitioners can use this approach with families, friendships, and even the school system to address colorist bullying.

In 2021, several researchers considered the practice of "mindfulness" in colorism healing. The mindfulness method refers to "attending to the present moment on purpose, without judgment” (p. 1). It is a practice used in several therapy modalities, such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy, which therapists use to heal issues of emotional reactivity (p. 2). As colorism can act as a form of "implicit bias," it can be challenging to address

its existence without the reaction of guilt, shame, or defensiveness (p. 4). The researchers conducted a content analysis search for colorism healing techniques that evoke mindfulness due to their ability to facilitate self-reflection. They found that it helped reduce social workers' practice of racial bias (p. 7). The researchers suggest that clinicians working with colorism in families use a "two-prong approach" that includes "mindfully increasing awareness of the bias and making active efforts to provide positive racial socialization" (p. 8). Essentially, to assist families struggling with colorism, they

must be educated on manifestations of colorism and given tools to combat this phenomenon through self-love and the development of a Black beauty standard that is more reflective of the community. Combining mindfulness and positive racial socialization has reduced race-related trauma in African American women (p. 8). The RAIN process of Recognize, Allow, Investigate, and Nature allows for an awareness of colorist practices and a pathway to collective healing (p. 13).

Scholars have conducted various studies showing colorism's impact on the criminal justice system in every stage of the process, including arrest and sentencing. This research highlighted some conflicting studies to showcase the need for further research in this area. It is imperative to understand that colorism can be involved in crime trajectory as a trauma response and impacts an individual's treatment in the criminal justice system. As this research seeks to conceptualize crime as a trauma response, comparable studies showed the negative ramifications of colorism outside of crime to build this model. Lastly, suggestions regarding "colorism healing" are crucial as the purpose of this research is to show the negative manifestations of colorism trauma to trigger mindful responses and self-awareness.

Theoretical Frameworks

To conceptualize the relationship between crime and colorism, this phenomenon will be analyzed under the guise of several theories. These theories are The Colonial Model, The Colorist Trauma Framework, the Strain Theory, the Social Schematic Theory of Offending, and Phenomenology.

General Strain Theory

The relationship between race and crime is a highly contested topic, and several

theories, both racist and those with merit, have been developed to conceptualize this relationship (Piquero, Sealock, p. 170-186). General Strain Theory argues that experiencing strain (for example, poverty) increases one's likelihood to participate in crime (p. 170-186). After experiencing strain, a person may react in different ways: they may commit an illegal act to obtain their desired object, or they may "attack, escape or seek revenge on the source of or a substitute for their negative emotions" (Burt, Simons p. 652). Alternatively, the person may find other ways to "manage or avoid their distress through other behaviors" (652). Several studies have utilized this theory when analyzing crime. They have found that those who experience strain tend to be more likely to commit crimes due to emotional distress, either directly or indirectly (Piquero, Sealock, p. 170-186).

Agnew, the creator of the Strain theory, presented an interesting perspective on the crime rates in the African American community. He argued that African Americans have higher crime rates because they are more likely to be the victims of strain, such as discrimination and injustice, that typically lead to an individual committing a crime (2010). I could apply this theory to victims of color discrimination as well. Colorism is a form of strain that victims respond to with feelings of anger or sadness, resulting in the victim turning to aggression or crime as a poor coping mechanism.

Social Schematic Theory of Offending

Burt and Simons have suggested a social psychological model augment Strain Theory. This model argues that experiences with racial discrimination led to increased criminal offenses (Burt, Simons. P. 648). When utilizing this model on a study of teenagers, the researchers found that experiences of discrimination were positively

associated with committing crimes due to increased depression, causing isolation and hostility (p. 648). Experiences of discrimination are emotionally violent for its victims and are responsible for crime through "producing distress and shaping cognitive frames about the way the world works" (p. 652). Discrimination essentially leads to a person committing a criminal act as the victim's worldview has changed due to the experience (p. 652).

The researchers contend that negative, repetitive social factors "blunt humans' innate tendencies to sympathy, fairness, and cooperation" (Burt, Simons p. 537). As a result of reoccurring unfavorable situations, a person may develop a mentality featuring anti-social traits, thus engendering them to be more inclined towards criminal activity. The finding evokes the conversation that most individuals who participate in crime do not view their actions as illegal or evil and justify them based on their circumstances (p. 537). The suggestion is then that people who commit crimes do so because they believe the situation requires "aggression, coercion or cheating." (p. 537) With that, the Social Schematic Theory of Offending seeks to conceptualize how individuals believe criminal actions are necessary. The researchers argue that "individuals who are frequently exposed to harsh, unpredictable, and unfair social environments internalize messages that the world is a hostile, unpredictable place, delayed rewards rarely materialize, and social rules and punishments do not apply to everyone equally" (p. 537).

These repeated harmful acts that occur in a person's life build a schema which is, "the persistent and recurring interactions that comprise an individual's everyday existence" (p. 537). These schemas or patterns then begin to impact future behavior. The researchers identified three schemas that lead to criminogenic behaviors: opposing views

of relationships, immediate gratification, and disengagement from social norms (p. 537). Essentially, negative experiences lead to an internalization of negative thoughts about the underpinnings of society; a loss of faith then leads to an adoption of out-group norms, thus resulting in crime. Colorism, a derivative of racism, can be viewed as a daily or frequent experience of denial and disparagement that could lead a person to adopt a negative schema leading to criminal activity.

The Colonial Model

The Colonial Model, at its basic level, explains the process of colonizing, i.e., stealing land, people, and resources, and the impact colonization has on its victims. It is a perspective that “examines the relationship between structural oppression, alienation and three adaptive forms of behavior assimilation, crime, deviance or protest” (Tatum, p. 310). In other words, as Black people or other oppressed people face racism and alienation, they turn to one of the three options above. Further, Tatum argued, “in the colonial model, race or color is the ascriptive criterion for differences in subjection to situations of oppression” (p. 310). Tatum's reconceptualization of the colonial model shows a clear pathway to understanding crime as a trauma response to colorism. If a person is subjected to oppression from many sources, they “develop feelings of alienation in which the commission of a crime is an adaptive response” (p. 310). In the context of colorism and backlash from colorism, yet not equating the two, there is a sense of otherness and isolation that directly leads to criminal activity as an outlet. According to Fanon, the original theorist of the Colonial Model, “the colonized individual may defend assaults on his personality by turning his anger and frustration against himself or his people” (Tatum, p. 314). This displaced aggression results in a higher incidence of

“alcoholism, psychiatric disorders, hypertension, and crime particularly homicide among the oppressed” (p. 314).

Colorist-historical Trauma Framework

This research will also utilize and provide an example of manifestations of the colorist-historical trauma framework, which developed from the Historical Trauma Framework; the historical trauma model was initially used to explain the outcome of oppression against American Indians (Ortega-Williams, Crutchfield, 294-309). The Historical Trauma Framework argues that extensive race-based trauma, such as slavery, inflicted to exploit the oppressed racial group for the benefit of the "dominant" race, causes an intergenerational transmission of trauma in the subjugated racial group (p. 294-309). This transmission of historical trauma results in "psychological, spiritual, physical, and behavioral health disparities" towards its victims (p. 294-309). Widespread historical discrimination and the subjugation of a group by a dominant class are relevant when exploring current health and social issues in that oppressed group (p. 294-309). This theory further argues that colorism being historically "state-sanctioned" allowed White people to use it as a method of social control which has continued to subjugate African Americans based on physical features (p. 294-309).

The colorist historical trauma framework explains the physiological, environmental, psychosocial, socioeconomic, political, and legal modes of colorism that function and operate in our society. In the physiological category, the original mass trauma being slavery, the role of colorism during slavery was to have a visual marker of the enslaved and otherness, dark skin (Ortega-Williams, Crutchfield p. 294-309). The environmental section lists the removal of enslaved African people during the Trans-

Atlantic slave trade from their homes into an unknown country. The function of colorism was that it "legalized captivity based on skin tone" and provided those that could "pass" the opportunity to face less backlash due to the color of their skin (p. 294-309). The psychosocial component of the framework lists the disruption of social norms as a constituent of the original mass trauma, causing division based on skin color. The rape of enslaved African women and the subsequent production of mixed-race children resulted in skin tone stratification on the plantation and the disturbance of African traditions by white slave masters (p. 294-309).

This framework comprehensively described the origins, manifestations, and outcomes of the historical root of colorism in the United States, slavery, and the subsequent treatment of Black people (p. 294-309). The social and political components are the laws that made it illegal for Black people to read, and fostered segregation and discrimination, which resulted in "the potential for access based on color" (Ortega-Williams, Crutchfield p. 294-309). A person may strive for education depending on their (light) skin color and thus increase their opportunities for specific jobs once freed (p. 294-309). This selective access includes the sororities and fraternities known to discriminate against dark-skinned people and the neighborhoods and churches built specifically for lighter-skinned people post-emancipation (p. 294-309). Lastly, the legal aspect of colorism included slave codes and Jim crow laws; depending on a person's skin color, they could go unnoticed and potentially avoid attack (p. 294-309). The theory explains how these historical instances of colorism have continued into the 21st century, with dark-skinned people still facing the same sort of social and economic exclusion both within and outside of the Black community. Essentially, this theory argues that modern-day intra-racial colorism is a historical phenomenon that has originated in chattel slavery

and the degradation of Black people.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophy that is equally pertinent to this research. This theory argues that “only those that have experienced phenomena can communicate them to the outside world” (Mapp, 2008). The purpose of phenomenology is to achieve the truth by accepting participants' experiences to exemplify an established idea and gather themes based on these lived experiences (Barrow, p. 24). Phenomenology will be purposeful for this research as this is not a fixed form of inquiry, as in I am open to various interpretations of the participants' understanding of colorism, and I will draw specific meaning from each of their experiences. As colorism can be difficult to contemplate, phenomenology allows for a “conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first-person point of view” (Smith, 2013). It does not require the participant to have an absolute understanding of their experience but allows them space to discuss their interpenetration of events without a specific objective. I will gain an awareness and description of the phenomenon (Wojnar, Swanson p. 173) by speaking to African American people that have lived through both colorism and contact with the criminal justice system.

As this research considers crime a trauma response, The Colonial Model, The Colorist Historical-Trauma Framework, the Strain Theory, the Social Schematic Theory of Offending, and Phenomenology prove to be useful tools and approaches to this investigation. The colonial, and colorist trauma frameworks can consider the original mass sin against African American people and slavery and employ this to conceptualize a model of present-day colorist manifestations. Strain Theory and the Social Schematic

Theory of offending can examine how repeated experiences of colorism change a person's mindset and contribute to criminal behavior. Lastly, the theory of phenomenology can consider how individuals understand their lived experiences and use this to make future choices.

CHAPTER 3 – AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY AND THE PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT OF COLORIST TRAUMA

African American Identity

Nigrescence

In 1991, in *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American Identity*, William Cross Jr. extended one of the most popular conceptualizations of African American identity development, Nigrescence. Cross listed five stages of Black identity development, his theory of Nigrescence, that has been thoroughly tested by researchers: Stage 1: Pre-encounter, Stage 2: Encounter, Stage 3: Immersion-Emersion, Stage 4: Internalization and Stage 5: Internalization-Commitment (Cross, pg. 190). Nigrescence refers to the process of becoming *Black* or African American while living in a White-dominated society (Cross, pg. 13). According to Cross, this theory is “a model that explains how assimilated Black adults, as well as deracinated, deculturized or miseducated Black adults are transformed by a series of circumstances and events into persons who are Blacker or Afrocentrically aligned (pg. 190).

In the **Pre-encounter stage** people adopt attitudes towards their race that are either “low-salience,” “race-neutral” or “anti-Black” (Cross, pg. 190). These individuals do not hold a strong Black identity, despite acknowledging that they are African American, they downplay the role that their race plays in their everyday life. Cross argued that those in the pre-encounter stage place little value on their blackness and the

relationship that it has to their happiness (pg. 190). These individuals may rely on the “bootstraps” theory and believe that success is solely based on individual will and may downplay racial issues (pg. 191). Other individuals that are still in the pre-counter stage may consider themselves as “above-race” and operating as a “human being” rather than a racialized person (pg. 291). Other individuals in the pre-encounter stage may have little interest in the meaning of Blackness or Black history but may join in causes that focus on de-stigmatizing blackness (pg. 291). They only see blackness as a curse and are only interested in joining forces to change the image of blackness, they have no interest in seeing blackness as a positive identity. Essentially, they only see blackness as something to be defended rather than celebrated (pg. 291). As Cross conceptualized, these individuals only see race in terms of “social discrimination” (pg. 191). Some individuals in this category may also adopt “anti-black attitudes.” They view other Black people in the same form as racist White people; through a stereotypical lens that does not acknowledge nor accept the positive attributes and contributions of their own community. Simultaneously, these individuals hold White people and White culture in high regard.

Another component of the pre-counter identity is miseducation. Due to the miseducation of these individuals, they are ignorant about the salience of Blackness and how it impacts the experiences of Black people. They are also unaware of the contributions of Black people and Black history to world civilizations. This results in these individuals having a limited view on the “potential” of African American people (Cross, pg. 193). While denying the talents, intelligence, and history of Black people, those in the pre-encounter stage view White people as being more talented and accomplished (pg. 193). These individuals tend to be overly concerned about the stereotypes that some White people hold about African Americans, causing them to be

wary of behaviors and activities that they believe are upholding racial stereotypes or are “too Black” (pg. 195). Cross described this as “spotlight anxiety,” which refers to the feeling that pre-encounter Black people have when “blackness is on display” in the presence of White people (pg. 195). Lastly, these individuals also place the blame for issues that occur in the Black community on the weakness of Black people, in other words, victim blaming (pg. 196). They believe that Black people can improve their circumstances as a community if they would just work harder (pg. 196). Those that are in this category exist on a spectrum from low salience to anti-black (pg. 197). Cross stated that the pre-encounter stage is typically the first identity form, and it is the result of the shaping of our family, community, schools and neighborhood (pg. 198). Essentially, those in the pre-encounter stage hold a Eurocentric perspective, hold internalized anti-black views and are ignorant of the importance of blackness in healthy identity development.

The **encounter** stage occurs when an African American person has a life-changing experience that “shatter[s] the relevance of the person’s current identity and worldview, and at the same time provide[s] some hint of the direction in which to point the person to be re-socialized or transformed” (pg. 199). For example, when Trayvon Martin was killed, many African Americans became more in tune with their blackness or aware of the injustices towards Black people. According to Cross, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. caused many Black people to cross into the encounter stage because they began to draw closer to the Black Power movement seeking deeper understanding (pg. 199). However, it is not only single events that cause people to step into the encounter stage, but also often a “series of small, eye-opening episodes, each of which chips away at the person’s ongoing world view” (pg. 200). This is a two step-

process, the individual must not only experience a life-changing event, but they must also internalize it (pg. 200). The event has to change their worldview and the trajectory of their lives; mere witnessing of an event would not cause a person to cross into the encounter stage. It is important to note that the encounter event can be positive as well. For example, if the individual learns some valuable information about Black history that changes their thought patterns on Blackness, they may have now entered the encounter stage as well. In this stage, the individuals may have a lot of guilt towards themselves about not understanding the meaning and weight of Blackness or anger towards White people for their responsibility in Black oppression (pg. 201). However, these negative feelings are temporary, and the person emerges from this space with more knowledge of themselves and their blackness.

During stage three or the **Immersion-Emersion** stage the individual “begins to demolish the old perspective and simultaneously tries to construct what will become his or her new frame of reference” (pg. 202). A person in this stage is not fully changed but they have made the commitment to a lifestyle that embraces blackness (pg. 202). This individual may not be fully aware of how to completely change themselves and may be in an “in-between state” (pg. 202). This person may be extremely anxious about the changes they are making and opt to adopt symbols of a new identity, such as certain hairstyles or “rigid ideologies”, because they are unclear about who they truly want to be (pg. 202). These individuals may see whiteness as a symbol of evil and all things Black as supreme (pg. 202). According to Cross, “the demonizing of white people and white culture is often a major preoccupation of new converts” (pg. 202).

During Phase 1 or **The Immersion** component of the Immersion-Emersion stage, the person becomes heavily preoccupied with Blackness and fully immerses themselves

into Black culture (pg. 203). This person would be heavily involved in events that center blackness and “everything of value must be Black or relevant to Africa ” (pg. 203). Cross calls these acts an “immersion into Blackness and a liberation from whiteness” (pg. 203). This phase is ruled by guilt, rage, and pride for oneself (pg. 203). This individual may be heavily concerned in dressing the part and may do something like changing their name to be more Afrocentric, such as when Malcom X changed his name (pg. 203). An African American person in the *Immersion* phase may be preoccupied with togetherness and may have a deep desire to build upon the Black community (pg. 207). Subsequently, during the **Emersion** phase or phase 2 of the Immersion-Emersion stage a person has leveled off the highly emotional component of the Immersion phase. As a result of entering this phase, the individual realizes that the prior, more rigid ideas that they held about Blackness were more “idealistic” and “romantic” (pg. 207). The person has entered a new stage of personal growth where they are now more concerned with attending to Black issues rather than trying to just show the appearance of Blackness (pg. 207). While this is a positive outcome that could occur during the Immersion-Emersion stage, there are also possible negative consequences for some individuals, as the person is in a confused state and is also struggling with frustration (pg. 208). Some of these outcomes could be regression, if the person has negative racial experiences while in this phase they may go back to their old identity and again, reject their blackness. Another possible consequence could be fixation, this could mean that the individual is unable to get past the hatred and blame they have for White people, and it overcomes them. Cross stated that this typically occurs in individuals with limited options and low mobility (pg. 209). These are among the possible barriers that could impede a person from crossing into the next stage of Black identity development.

During stage four or the **Internalization** stage, Cross states that the new identity becomes internalized or a part of the real or natural self (pg. 209). During this stage, the individual considers their Blackness high in priority. The internalization of Black identity performs three functions, 1) it defends the individuals from the psychological impact of racism 2) it allows for the person to feel a sense of belonging in their community 3) it provides a strong foundation to build upon for interactions that occur outside of the community (pg. 210). The individual that has reached the Internalization stage is calmer, is not looking for the approval of others, rather they are “Black enough,” and has more controlled anger at racist systems rather than uncontrollable hatred (pg. 210). This person has pride in their blackness that is not based in anti-white attitudes, instead it is rooted in love for self and one’s blackness (pg. 210). When an individual reaches the Internalizations stage, they do not have to think about performing blackness, so they are able to focus on matters beyond that, such as institution building (pg. 211). They are able to understand that Blackness is not monolithic, and they have a wider understanding of the Black experience.

Lastly, during stage 5 or the **Internalization-Commitment** stage the person begins to pursue or develop a long-term interest in Black people and the Black community (pg. 220). The difference between this stage and stage four is the level of commitment as some African American people do not sustain a long-term interest in the happenings of the Black community (pg. 220). The Nigrescence model by Cross is not linear, an individual may cross through the stages several times at different times in their life.

These five stages illustrate one of the most popular models of African American identity development. It showcases how the Black identity may be damaged or

underdeveloped due to being conditioned by a society that celebrates whiteness. As colorism is a form of internalized racism and intergenerational trauma, the Nigrescence model sheds light on how Black identity is impacted by racial structures and how this may lead to internalized racism. It also provides a roadmap for possible programs designed for colorism eradication. These programs must focus on providing an “experience” that African American people can internalize that carries them across the bridge from self-hatred and internalized racism. This could possibly look like a program that showcases multiple examples of blatant colorism and comparing it to the experiences of racism, to somehow illustrate just how damaging the effects are.

Black Identity & Defensive Functioning

Cross also defined the defensive functions that identity serves for African American people. This defensive function can protect Black people against the impact of racism by facilitating (1) an understanding of racism as an inherent American experience, (2) anticipating racism, (3) defenses to use when dealing with racism, (4) a blaming of the system rather than internalizing white supremacy and (5) some form of religion that deters a Black person from holding on to bitterness towards Whites (p. 396). Cross argues that lacking these racial defenses "result[s] from the person having internalized the racist images of him- or herself (self-hatred) or from accepting as true the negative images directed at blacks as a group, group rejection." As is well documented, internalized racism can lead to "color phobias, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, anger and rage, and **black-on-black crime**" (p. 397). Though not endorsing the terminology "black-on-black crime," this concept can help conceptualize the trajectory to crime due to internalized racism, which is another term used when discussing colorism. Essentially,

people who have internalized racism or colorism may use criminal offenses to cope without developed defensive and functioning mechanism. The internalization produces negative images about oneself that the individual accepts as truth.

Looking Glass Self

Cooley's idea of the "Looking Glass Self," conceptualizes how the outside world impacts the ideas that we hold about ourselves (pg.257). According to Charles Cooley, a person becomes aware of who they are by the signals they are given by the outside world (pg.257). This phenomenon begins in childhood where a child may internalize the messages about them, such as whether they are "bad" or "good" based on what the adults around them are communicating, whether verbal or non-verbal. These alleged beliefs about us are not always verbalized, we may internalize messages that we *believe* people are thinking about us based on their body language or mannerisms. In the case of colorism and its connection to crime trajectory, an example could be that a dark-skinned man may believe he is being viewed as a criminal by those around him so he may internalize those reactions to him and believe himself that he is a criminal. Thus, his identity formation and development are impacted by the thoughts and opinions of the individuals around him. In turn, their thoughts of him may have been influenced by the concept of colorism, which assigns traits of criminality to dark-skinned people. It is a two-fold issue where society impacts the perceptions of dark-skinned people and dark-skinned people may internalize those perceptions of themselves. Similarly, a lighter-skinned man may believe that others view him as "soft" or "weak," and internalize this message about himself. Consequently, he then believes he must act as "stereotypically Black," as possible to erase the message of weakness that he has internalized about himself. Essentially, the development of the self relies on the perceived opinions and

beliefs of the people around us about who we are (pg. 257).

Fanon, "White Skin, Black Mask"

The idea of Black inferiority is only possible because Whites created racial categories that assign meaning to skin color. Black people are "Black" because of what's considered the "opposite" category, White. There would be no Black inferiority without white supremacy (Fanon, p 14-17). Colorism could not exist without the categories of Black and White in America, and it is an intra-racial byproduct of the racism displayed against Black people. In the introduction of *White Skin, Black Mask*, Fanon asserts that Black people have internalized inferiority (p. 14-17). As some White people believe they are better than Black people, some Black people wish to shed their blackness, alter themselves to get closer to whiteness and believe in their subjugation (p. 14-17). Fanon argues that because of the Black-White binary, America has created a complex and traumatic system of racial interactions (p. 14-17). As a result of colonial domination, several personality abnormalities have developed in both Black and White people (p. 14-17). He further argues that all groups that have been ripped from their origin develop an inferiority complex and seek to get closer to what Fanon calls the "civilizing language" (p.2). White people degraded Black people based on their skin tone and indicated that darkened skin had many sinister meanings. The desire for light skin children is an exemplification of the desire to meet the White beauty standard and image of civility. Fanon argues that minorities, particularly Black people, try to reach the level of mainstream society by working towards whiteness and attempting to prove their worth to White people (p.14-17).

In Chapter 5 of *White Skin, Black Mask*, Fanon posits that "colonial racism is no

different from other racisms,” which could be a direct response to the dirty laundry quandary and those that insist on minimizing the current and detrimental impact of colorism (Fanon, 1952). While Fanon was referring to the importance of acknowledging all forms of oppression that minorities face as a result of colonization in different places around the world, the idea is still applicable when positing colorism as a byproduct of racism. European colonization is responsible for colonial forms of racism, and this is further seen in that most places that were impacted by European colonization have rampant issues of intra-racial colorism today (Hunter, 2013).

Skin Tone Socialization

Appropriate racial socialization has been found to increase the self-esteem and coping ability in African American youth (Crutchfield et. al, pg. 26). Parents instill messages in youth that prepare them for the impact that racist situations will have on their psyche (pg. 26). Many studies regarding colorism also note the mitigating effect that skin tone socialization has on the harmful impact of colorism (Smith, 2010, Landor 2012 & Gaskin, 2015). Research by Crutchfield and colleagues found that youth often adopt the skin tone preferences that are communicated by their parents (Crutchfield et. al, pg. 24).

Dr. JeffriAnn Wilder found in her study with African American women, that the majority of them had been introduced to concepts of colorism by their family members (Wilder, pg. 119). These concepts were introduced as a “normative framework,” in everyday conversations and interactions with family members (pg. 119). The women were introduced in ways such as their mothers giving them bleaching creams and offering more praise to the lighter sibling (Wilder, pg. 88). Prior research has found that being the

child with darker skin or the child with lighter skin may introduce preferential treatment or cause mistreatment, depending on the meanings those families attach to skin tone (pg. 88). As the preference for lighter-skinned children has been noted in the Black community, one could assume that if a family desires a lighter-skinned child and births a darker-skinned child, their parenting practices, specifically when it involves little girls, may be impacted. Lighter skin is associated with beauty in women or girls and higher quality parenting has been found to be associated with kids that are considered attractive (Landor, Simons 2013).

In a 2009 study by Tezler and Vazquez-Garcia, it was found that darker-skinned, immigrant, Latina women had lower self-esteem than their lighter-skinned counterparts, but that positive racial socialization could protect the women from the impacts of lower self-esteem (pg. 27). A 2012 study by Landor found that parents instilled more protective racial socialization messages to their darker-skin sons in comparison to their lighter-skin sons (Landor, pg. 2). This may be due to their thinking that their darker-skinned sons would have a harsher experience due to the combination of colorism and racism (pg. 2). A study at North Carolina Central University with 235 African American students found that those who received more racial socialization reported a lower preference for light skin (Walker, pg. 1). Research regarding the suicidal risk for low-income African American women found that having a “strong ethnic identity buffered the harmful effects of gendered racism,” in other words positive racial socialization assisted with blocking the internalization of negative stereotypes (Perry, et al 2013). On the other hand, in a study of 243 African American adolescents about perceived sexual risk-taking practices, it was found that positive racial socialization did not moderate the relationship between colorism and risky sexual practices (Smith, pg. 1).

While research has documented that Black men prefer light-skinned women in dating and marriage, limited studies have found that Black fathers act as sources of protection for their daughters against a colorist society (Void, pg. 84). Ashley Void found in her study of twelve African American fathers with daughters, that each of these individuals knew the perception of dark-skinned women in the world, so they instilled a message of self-love and resilience in their daughter's regarding colorism (pg. 84-85). One father stated that he wanted to ensure that his daughter had high self-esteem before going out into the world because he knew how he treated women based on their skin tone (84-85). While many of the men in this study spoke about receiving messages of light-skinned women being more attractive, having a light-skin preference themselves, and witnessing dark-skinned women being called foul names or dark-skinned women being seen as less desirable, they reported that they did not instill this into their daughters (pg. 84-85).

There are conflicting findings on whether positive racial socialization from parents negates or lessens the harmful impact of colorism on African American men and women. As families are the first point of contact in a child's life and play a large role in children's socialization process, their impact on an individual's feeling regarding color cannot be ignored (Wilder, pg. 100). The findings that positive racial socialization reduces the ideas of colorism that an individual adopts may be helpful in the creation of a comprehensive program for colorism eradication.

The media is often a sight for colorist socialization for African American people as well. As Black sitcoms and rap music videos and lyrics often over-represent light-skinned women, particularly in the role of the "it girl," this has been found to influence

the dating preferences of African-American men (Vergas, pg. 60). Dark-skinned women are rarely seen in beauty ads, represented in a positive light on television shows, or seen as love affections in music videos (Conrad, Dixon 2019, Witt 2018, Hassan 2018, Perkins 2014). In hip-hop videos, the women are more likely to have Eurocentric features which are not generally associated with darker-skinned women (Conrad, Dixon 2019). This lack of representation may impact the way that darker-skinned women view themselves. The rappers that are featured in these videos are generally of a high-income status, which may send the message that affluent men do not find darker women beautiful indicated by their erasure from music videos. Furthermore, many rap songs feature colored language such as, “Two redbones kissing in the backseat,” “A couple bad tings and they all light-skinned,” “And as for them pretty light-skinned models, Standin' in the cold, ah, yeah, they with us,” “With some light skin girls and some Kelly Rowlands (“Search results for light skin”). They are often cast in roles where they are stereotyped as being unable to find companionship (Martin, Marlon) and aggressive (Tasha, Diary of a Mad Black Women). These representations may have further implications for how dark-skinned women are viewed by the general public and are an example of colorist socialization.

The media also portrays African American males as more aggressive and criminal which impacts the reception of them. On the other hand, they are viewed as being more attractive than their lighter-skinned counterparts within the Black community due to ideals surrounding masculinity (pg. 4). These messages that are instilled in the media impact the everyday livelihood of African American people.

The Psychosocial Impact of Colorist Trauma

The Gendered Paradox of Colorism

Although this study has a serious shortcoming, the lack of an adequate amount of women's voices, particularly dark-skinned women's voices, research in the area of colorism considers the phenomenon a gendered paradox. Colorism impacts both men and women, but due to Eurocentric beauty standards and concepts of attractiveness being most heavily applied to dark-skinned women, they face the brunt of colorism (Thompson, Keith pg. 336).

There are perceptions attached to skin that deem darker-skinned women as more aggressive, less intelligent, unattractive, and "loud" (pg. 12-13). Dark-skinned women are often masculinized due to the idea that dark skin is seemingly only allowed for men (Matthews & Johnson, pg. 269). In a study discussing colorism's effect on men's dating preferences one male stated, "dark skin girls are self-conscious, always insecure and lack confidence"; he then went on to state: "These dark skinned sistas gotta try and gain credit by changing up their looks, adding hair, lightening their skin and it still don't change their mindset or confidence levels 'cuz they still want approval from society about their looks. Light skinned sistas don't gotta go through all that so they're mindset, like mine, is sound and strong. We look good, we can glide through life and be happy" (Corso, pg. 69). One participant reported that men did not 'want' dark-skinned women because they wear wigs, they have poor credit, multiple children and receive food stamps (pg. 73). This attitude regarding dark-skinned Black women and poor credit is not isolated as a 2010 tweet of popular actor Kevin Hart was found which stated "#Handsdown Light-

skinned women usually have better credit than a dark-skinned women [sic]...Broke ass dark hoes...lol” (Eskridge, 2018).

The stereotypes associated with dark-skinned Black women are damaging. Concerningly, if a dark-skinned woman displays a negative attitude, it is because she is dark-skinned or if a woman is ‘loud’ or ‘ghetto’ and dark skin, her dark skin tone is the reason behind her behavior. A popular saying in the Black community is ‘you’re pretty for a dark-skinned girl,’ and this statement is often made to dark-skinned Black women despite protest. As evidenced by the statement, dark-skinned women are not expected to be pretty. Dark-skinned Black women are stereotyped as having ‘thicker’ bodies and being ‘freakier’ than light-skinned Black women. Essentially, due to the stereotypical perceptions about them, they are not considered beautiful, but their sexual ability may be acknowledged. As one examines all the ways colorism affects dark-skinned Black women, it becomes evident that most of the discrimination is a result of European conceptions of beauty. Those that are not considered ‘ideal’ or ‘beautiful’ will not receive the same treatment as those who are considered beautiful (Wilder, pg. 110-118).

Although dark-skinned women and men face colorism from White people and other Ethnic people outside of the community, this research focus on how experiences of intra-racial colorism impact the psyche of African American people. With that, it is imperative to discuss the subjugation that dark-skinned women face within the Black community. Black women’s assertion, that colorism impacts their racial and gender identity development, highlights the importance of studying colorism as a gendered phenomenon (Thomas, Hacker, Hoxha, pg. 534).

As further generations receive negative messages regarding darker skin tone, colorism will continue to be perpetuated. Colorism has an impact on how darker-skinned Black women navigate the world and there are limitations placed upon them based on society's perception of them. If dark-skinned women are viewed as less intelligent, their career paths may be determined by disparaging messages regarding their ability. Darker-skinned women receive discouraging messages regarding their skin tone, there is a risk of them dating based on skin tone and continuing this cycle in their children. The constant narrative that light is the only skin tone that is righteous, pushes darker-skinned Black women into the margins and denies their humanity. Skin tone 'preferences' against darker-skinned Black women are rooted in anti-blackness, perpetuated by television shows and music videos and have an impact on darker-skinned Black women's personhood. Darker-skinned Black women face triple marginalization; their voices must be placed at the forefront of the fight against colorism.

Another aspect that seems to exemplify the gendered nature to colorism is the fact that participants in several studies report that their introduction of colorism was from maternal members of their family, particularly their mothers or their grandmothers (Vergas, pg. 59 & Wilder, pg. 107). As women are often the targets of colorist abuse, they may be more likely to internalize these messages and in turn perpetuate it. This presents another paradox as men, particularly dark-skinned men, are accused of being the main perpetrators of colorism in the African-American community. Yet some men view colorism as a "women's issue," as they report seeing their mothers deal with it most often (Vergas, pg. 59). Vergas notes that in his study, all of the men reported that colorism is not a big issue and that it distracts from the "real" issue, which is racism towards African

Americans (pg. 65). He argues that men may report that colorism is a women's issue because of the socialization that they received as youth and also because it may not seem as "masculine" to highlight the significance of colorism (pg. 65). In Vergas's study, dark-skinned Black men did not report being the victims of blatant colorism, however they did feel that they were often stereotyped as aggressive and believed that others thought of them as being "mean" without getting to know who they actually were (Vergas, pg. 56). On the other hand, lighter-skinned men reported being blatantly targeted based on their skin tone frequently and assigned characteristics such as "soft and feminine (Vergas, pg. 56-65).

As colorism has been found to be an ideology that most often impacts the lives of dark-skinned African American women, further research in this area would greatly benefit from the voices of dark-skinned Black incarcerated women.

Colorism and Self-Esteem/Self-Efficacy

Research has found that colorism impacts the self-esteem and self-efficacy of dark-skinned people, particularly women. The concept of self-esteem refers to how we feel about ourselves and self-efficacy refers to our belief in whether we can control our fate/success (Thomas & Keith pg. 340). A study by Thomas and Keith found that skin tone was a significant predictor for self-esteem for Black women but not for Black men (pg. 336). On the other hand, self-efficacy was correlated with skin tone for men but not for women (pg. 336). Utilizing the National Survey of Black Americans, the researchers found that "a lighter complexion is associated with higher feelings of perceived mastery" among men (pg. 344). This statistic remained true even when accounting for differences in socio-economic status (pg. 347). This is referring to the concept of self-efficacy or the

belief in one's ability to control their life and accomplish their goals. Essentially, lighter-skinned men feel more control of their lives when in a higher socioeconomic class, regardless of skin tone.

When viewing self-esteem in Thomas and Keith's study, African American men's skin tone was not found to impact their self-esteem (pg. 347). However, the results for Black women found a "significant positive association" with self-esteem. Specifically, they found that if a woman's skin tone changed from dark to light it resulted in a .28 increase in self-esteem (pg. 347). The addition of education and income increased the self-esteem of Black women; however, skin-tone was still found to be a significant predictor for Black women's self-esteem (pg. 347). This finding for self-esteem was more pronounced for women that were lower-income and there was no relationship between colorism and self-esteem for women that were judged to be highly attractive (pg. 347).

Backlash From Colorism

"Backlash From Colorism" or what Dr. Trina Jones describes as "Vertical Intra-Group Discrimination" is a phenomenon that occurs *due* to the "privilege" that lighter-skinned Black people receive from colorism. As colorism considers darker-skin as lesser in status, beauty and worth, even without the Black community, tensions arise between the darker and lighter-skinned members of the African American race. This typically occurs between Black women and can be the result of competition for men as well. It is a well-documented phenomenon that men "prefer" light-skinned African American women, this causes issues between darker and lighter skinned women. These "preferences" are often made public in a derogatory manner.

Some lighter-skinned women report difficulty in forming friendships with other Black women as they feel that there is tension and mistrust directed towards them because of their skin tone (Wilder, pg. 22). Due to the idea that light-skinned women are the most beautiful form of Black women, there is a stigma attached to them of being stuck-up and arrogant (pg. 70). Again, this feeds into negative characterizations of light-skinned women based solely on their skin tone. Dr. Wilder noted that this notion that lighter-skinned women believe that they are superior contributes to tension in the relationship between dark and light-skinned women (pg. 71). Like light-skinned Black men, light-skinned women feel that they must prove how Black they truly are (pg. 73). They report being called names like “white” and “house nigga” due to their complexion (pg. 73).

This form of backlash or vertical discrimination that occurs in the African-American community causes light-skinned Black people to face isolation and mistrust, and internalize discriminatory stereotypes about themselves. Although positive stereotypes such as being nice, calm and exceptionally beautiful are applied to lighter-skinned women, these character traits are negatively applied to lighter-skinned men and deem them less masculine. Lighter-skinned men may be characterized as being “soft,” “feminine,” and even called “gay” in a derogatory manner. Lighter-skinned people may feel that their blackness is questioned, and they have to prove their blackness by adopting Black stereotypes and acting “harder.” In a study examining the phenomenon of colorism among African American men, Vargas found that lighter-skinned men struggled with “authentication,” or an attempt to take on hyper-masculine stereotypes. They were fighting to combat the stereotype of “softness” or a lack of masculinity, assigned to light-

skinned men and one participant even noted sitting out in the sun in an attempt to darken his skin and avoid being teased (pg. 52). One lighter-skinned participant reported joining traditionally African American groups like the NAACP in order to be accepted in his community after being called “white boy” so much due to his skin tone and his style of speaking (pg. 53). The relationship between darker and lighter-skinned people often faces struggles due to societal ideals regarding each skin color.

The Psychological Consequences of Colorism

While colorism has socioeconomic consequences such as lowered income, less education, harsher treatment in the criminal justice system, it also has severe emotional and mental health consequences. These include the bleaching of the skin, suicidal thoughts/ideations, mental health concerns, and alcohol/drug abuse. In a 2021 study by Hans Oh and colleagues, they found that experiences of skin-tone discrimination from other Black people increased the likelihood that one would experience mental health symptoms (Oh, et al, 2021). Specifically, the experience of intra-racial skin tone discrimination resulted in a 19% increase in “the odds of having any lifetime psychotic experience” (2021). Interestingly, they found that experiencing colorism from White people was not associated with mental disorders for Black people (2021). This line of research was further studied by Hans Oh, Lincoln and Waldman and it was found that perceived intra-racial colorism was associated with “greater odds of alcohol use disorder, substance use disorder, anxiety disorder and eating disorder” (Oh, et al. 2021). Again, they found that out-group colorism was not significantly associated with any mental health disorder except for anxiety (2021). According to a study by Perry and colleagues,

experiences of colorism increase the rate of suicidal ideations for women with brown and dark skin tones (Perry, et al., 2013).

Skin bleaching is also a consequence of colorism. From a recent conference that I held on Overcoming Skin Bleaching, the Black women panelists reported bleaching their skin to end the bullying and marginalization that they faced due to having dark skin. They believed that if they were able to get their skin to become a lighter shade, they would be more beautiful and thus escape the emotional harm that they felt from colorism. Several of these women did feel that they were treated more positively once they were a lighter skin-tone. However, they ultimately stopped bleaching their skin once they viewed bleaching as a form of self-hate and were able to improve their self-esteem. Skin bleaching has serious mental and physical health consequences despite it being a global industry (Street, et al., pg. 53). It can be considered a result of internalized anti-blackness and the “psychological destabilization” caused by white supremacy (Blay, Charles, pg. 3).

Crime Trajectory

The Colorist-Historical Trauma Framework showcases how colorism is embedded into the fabric of American society, particularly in the African American community. This showcases the pervasiveness of colorism and the very inescapability of it all. Due to the impact of colorism and backlash from colorism, its victims may use crime as a coping mechanism. This phenomenon contributes to lowered self-esteem, feelings of isolation, the adoption of stereotypical behaviors and even depression, and to behaviors like drug use and fighting that could lead to incarceration.

This research posits that some crimes are due in part to trauma from colorism and backlash from colorism. Experiences of colorism and backlash cause strong emotional reactions in those that are victims of it and contribute to crime in those that may have a weaker support system or lack positive coping mechanisms. Colorism can be viewed as a form of emotional abuse (Burnett, pg. 2). Child psychiatrist, Dr. Nadia Burnett, argued that colorism can have a negative impact on the self-worth of children. This includes colorism from family members, peers, and negative colorist stereotypes in the media (pg. 2). This negative self-esteem and self-worth could lead to a child engaging in risky behaviors such as crime, substance abuse, promiscuity, or truancy (pg. 2).

Colorism is a component of racism, and if research shows that racial discrimination can be implicated in criminal pursuit, then this finding may be applied to colorism as well. As research has found that those that experience racial discrimination are more likely to commit crimes, colorism, a derivative of racism can be viewed under the same guise (Burt, Simons, pg. 532). These studies also find that racial socialization can be an intervening factor for this phenomenon as well, so the idea of increased positive skin-tone socialization may be helpful for colorism eradication.

CHAPTER 4 – COLORISM HEALING

The Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Model of Colorism Healing

The root of internalized anti-blackness, particularly colorism, appears to be a shame for oneself and one's peers. This study argues that as individuals are shamed for their skin tone by family members and peers, it takes a psychological toll on them which could result in crime perusal. A solution to the issue of colorism would have to operate at multiple levels. The primary, secondary, and tertiary model of colorism healing discussed below will utilize tools that address the shame that is at the core, utilize safe space environments for people of African descent, and employ concepts associated with Acceptance and Commitment therapy.

As colorism often takes on the form of bullying in social settings, models created regarding bullying in the workplace and schools will be used to conceptualize prevention methods that will apply to colorism. The Positive Behavior Support model is a behavior-focused model used to prevent and mediate issues of bullying in schools on the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. The purpose of the primary interventions is to reduce the overall instances of bullying that occur, this is done by encouraging positive and prosocial behavior among all students (Espelage, Swearer, pg. 335). Primary prevention also refers to initiatives taken to stop the negative action before it occurs (Primary, Secondary, Tertiary, nd). The secondary interventions used to “reduce engagement in bullying,” would be most helpful to students that are bystanders to bullying events or

those that participate in bullying on a minimum level (Espelage, Swearer, pg. 335). Secondary interventions also exist as short-term solutions to keep the issue from progressing or reoccurring (Primary, Secondary, Tertiary, nd). Lastly, tertiary interventions are for those that are involved in “frequent and intense bullying behaviors,” to “reduce complications, severity, and frequency of bullying behaviors” (pg. 335). Tertiary interventions are also referred to as long-term responses that are meant to deal with lasting consequences. With the three-tier models, bullying and other issues can be addressed at several levels and according to the severity of it.

It is possible that colorism in the African American community can be addressed in the same form. The model below will outline a primary, secondary, and tertiary response to colorism healing.

Bibliotherapy as Primary Prevention:

The usage of Bibliotherapy is said to be key in self-exploration (Schliebner, pg. 8). This is why it may be so helpful for the objective of primary prevention, to reduce the overall instances of the phenomenon by targeting the entire impacted group. A bibliotherapy is a form of expressive therapy that uses books that are applicable to the readers culture to assist a participant with "total development" and serves as a personal process between the reader and literature that can assist in areas such as mental illness and growth (pg. 8). In the process, an administrator assigns a book to their client, and participants are supposed to gain healing and growth through identification with the characters of the book (pg. 9). The selected books must be culturally competent and reflective of the experience of the reader to instill a sense of ethnic pride and contribute to the therapeutic process (Ford, Walters, pg. 55). Bibliotherapy has been used to

"understand, escape from, push through, or acquire a solution for adverse circumstances" (pg. 55).

As colorism has been internalized, the ability to gain a closer insight into oneself by the usage of a book may help analyze the color biases that are present. Past research has found that bibliotherapy has supported people through difficult life events, helped people to learn cultural lessons, and informed the reader about their identity (Pehrsson, McMillan, pg. 3). A 1992 Study by Dr. Schliebner argued that bibliotherapy could be helpful to address the issues that minorities, particularly Black people face (Schliebner, pg. 5). As many Ethnic minorities face economic, social, and racial disadvantages, they are at a greater risk for psychological dysfunction (pg. 5). This individualized form of therapy is particularly important due to the idea that African Americans express about not revealing inside information to "outsiders" (pg.7). This form of secrecy is often repeated in conversations and research about the Black community's willingness to speak openly about colorism. A program that does not require total disclosure, such as this one, is helpful. Bibliotherapy puts more emphasis on self-healing and healing through visualizing yourself through characters rather than a need to spill all vulnerabilities out to an unknown and most likely White therapist.

According to Schliebner, the bibliotherapy process works in four stages: In the first stage the reader identifies with the main character in the book, in the second stage the reader connects the message displayed in the book to their own experiences, in the third stage the reader experiences a relief when the difficult situation is resolved and lastly the reader internalizes the messages presented and learns coping skills from the text (Schliebner, pg. 8-9). After the reader accomplishes the four stages, they are expected to experience an awakening and will be able to see themselves, and their healing, reflected

in the novel (pg. 8-9). As previously stated, the characters and experiences must reflect a mirror reality for the client to utilize the text (pg. 8-9). This is in line with the often-stated idea of "representation matters."

Prior studies in the field have found that young African American people gain affirmation of their experiences and a sense of belonging by reading texts where the characters look like them concerning race and gender (Books, Browne, et al., pg. 982). For example, Bibliotherapy was used for a group of fifteen, Black, 6th-grade males. The purpose of bibliotherapy was to empower young males and it was "developmental" in nature. The researcher argues that too often Black males only receive intervention when they have done something wrong (pg. 75). This is in line with the idea of a primary intervention as it seeks to address the phenomenon on a grand scale, without a specific occurrence. Within the program, the males read an autobiography, *Gifted Hands*, about Ben Carson (pg.78). This book was selected because it was about a young man who overcame some of the same circumstances that the 6th graders faced and became a successful surgeon (pg. 78). With this, the young boys would be able to relate to the main character of the book. The objective of this was to facilitate growth in areas such as commitment to school and overcoming growing up without a father in the home (pg. 78). After the six-week session, the participants felt less alone regarding their experiences, so they were more willing to be open in discussions (pg. 80). Reportedly, the autobiography helped to give a voice to "social-emotional concerns that heretofore may not have been discussed" (pg. 80). As colorism is a topic that people often feel ashamed about and are unwilling to speak openly about, bibliotherapy appears to be a promising solution to opening these conversations.

Prior research has found that after reading a fictional story about bullying, children were more willing to speak out about their experiences of bullying and worked to develop coping strategies for bullying that could be distributed worldwide (Gregory, pg. 127). Bibliotherapies' design inhibits disclosures of painful experiences and encourages youth to cope by changing the issue at large. Other findings in the field are that bibliotherapy improved the self-esteem of minority children from Multicultural families in Korea with immigrant mothers and that it promoted socio-cultural learning in urban adolescents of color (Kang, pg. 5 & Ford, Walters, pg. 53-55). Bibliotherapy is also useful in helping youth be more aware of signs of abuse; this could be beneficial to target colorist bullying in homes (Karlin, Bruneau, pg. 3-8). It is also beneficial, along with other tools such as therapy and medication management, in reducing substance abuse among African Americans (Verden, 2012, Williams 1995 & Johnson 2012).

However, the bibliotherapy must feature a text that directly addresses the topic and involves in-depth discussions to accompany it. In a bibliotherapy book club at an after-school program at a middle school in a predominantly African American suburban neighborhood, the students did a close reading of "*The Skin I'm In*," by Sharon G. Flake (Brooks, Browne, et al, pg. 660-669). This is a novel about a young girl, Maleeka, who struggles to love herself due to poverty and skin tone bullying. The youth were also required to write responses and have discussions about the content they were reading (pg. 660-669). The researchers found that because the novel lacked intensity or a direct form of discussion about the presence of colorism, the readers failed to identify the gravity of colorism (pg. 660-669). Many of the students reduced Maleeka's experience to teasing and "not fitting in" (pg. 660-669). The researchers responded that because of Flake's subtlety, the students appeared to have missed out on a lesson about the larger issue of

colorism or were not given a concrete idea about why Maleeka was being mistreated based on her skin tone (pg. 660-669). It was suggested that comfortable facilitators conduct a lesson on the larger socio-historical conversation about colorism while reading the book or similar ones if needed (pg. 660-669). This study exemplifies the need for books that are used in bibliotherapy to be blatant about the topic and an accompanying in-depth conversation on colorism.

Bibliotherapy could be used on a primary level to facilitate conversations about colorism among elementary to high-school-aged children. For example, a required book in middle to high school could be a book about colorism such as *Genesis Begins Again* by Alicia D. Williams, or *Don't Play in The Sun* by Marita Golden. However, children tend to be aware of colorism at a much younger level. Elementary-aged children could be assigned to read books that are about colorism such as *My Melanin is Poppin' on My Beautiful Brown Skin* by Latarsha Woods, *Same Difference* by Calida Garcia Rawles, or *Sunflower Sisters* by Monika Singh Gangotra. The objective would be to bring awareness about the phenomenon of colorism on a grand scale to prevent its perpetuation. These books along with the in-depth conversations could be useful at varying age levels.

“Safe Space” Healing Zones as Secondary Prevention

The term “Internalized Racism” in reference to the Black community, occurs when people of African descent adopt Anti-Black attitudes about themselves or their communities (Watts-Jones, pg. 592). It is a result of the internalization of European racist attitudes about Black people. According to Dr. Dee Watts-Jones, the healing of internalized racism in the African American community requires multiple paths, levels, and steps (pg. 592). One of the main steps of this process is the opportunity for Black

people to collectively have conversations in a “safe space” that explores internalized racism (pg. 592). Dr. Watts-Jones notes how one therapist, Marlene Watson, stated that it was difficult to discuss internalized racism with African-American clients because of the shame that is associated with it. The core of internalized racism is the pervasive feeling of shame for oneself or community as a result of the shaming of the culture and personhood of people of African descent by Europeans (pg. 592). This shame operates on two levels, the shame of being associated with Africa or our being as Africans and the shame associated with actually being ashamed of ourselves (pg. 593). To overcome the shame that may be associated with being of African descent, the impacted communities must overcome the secondary shame and begin to have conversations about the pain that they have endured and the recognition of internalized anti-blackness. It is difficult to overcome internalized racism because of the denial that it even occurs, this denial is a result of shame. It is this denial that keeps people of African descent tied to internalized racism, and “to heal from the initial shaming, people of African descent need to let go of the secondary shame, which means freeing ourselves [and talking] more openly about the initial shaming. The secondary shame is what binds us to the primary shame, by keeping it secret, quiet” (pg. 593). With that, people of African descent must be able to create sanctuary spaces, initially at least, where they can talk about the issues of internalized racism. This is considered especially important for the topic of colorism as speaking about it openly is considered “airing dirty laundry,” and conversations about it are not generally welcomed. Essentially, a space needs to be created where people of African descent can have conversations about colorism without outside intervention. “Safe Space” conversations about colorism will serve as a short-term solution. They can occur in schools, a part of inner circle social groups, and as organized efforts. The objective is

to get Black people to discuss colorism amongst themselves in an open setting to mitigate some of the short-term consequences of colorism.

Tertiary Intervention, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy

Techniques from Acceptance and Commitment Therapy have been found to reduce internalized stigma and reduce mental health symptoms (Banks, et. al pg. 89). In Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, the objective is to “change the relationship with negative thoughts and feelings through techniques that decrease experiential avoidance” (pg. 90). Two of the major goals of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy are “acceptance of unwanted private experiences which are out of personal control” and “committed action towards living a valued life” (pg. 2). Essentially, the goal of ACT is to teach tools that assist a person in living an enjoyable life while accepting the pain of the things that they cannot change by relying on their value system (pg. 2).

The purpose of this therapy concerning internalized racism is to “address the functional link between thoughts, feelings and overt behavior related to internalized racial oppression” (pg. 90). For example, if an African-American person presents with the issue that she is unattractive because she is dark-skinned and she has been extensively bullied about her skin tone, the guidelines of ACT would instruct that the therapist or administrator guide the client into seeing that as “just a thought,” help her to “increase the distance” between herself and that thought and to take “value-based actions,” despite the colorist messages that are bombarding her mind (pg. 90). These value-based actions would look like treating herself well (for example, ensuring she is eating the proper nutrition and taking time to do things for herself that make her feel beautiful) despite the messaging. The same could apply to a young dark-skinned boy that keeps receiving the

message that he is a criminal from television shows. If he begins to internalize this message, ACT could assist him with increasing the distance between who he is and the judgments that the media is placing upon him.

This could also potentially be useful for a person that holds colorist values as a result of living in a society based on white supremacy. For example, a person may hold colorist views causing them to treat their lighter-skinned daughter more favorably than their dark-skinned daughter. With this therapy, the person would acknowledge these thoughts, bring themselves into awareness about how they are perpetuating colorism, and start relying on their values, which is that they would never want to treat their children differently or be a person that practices colorism. The goal is to bring people into awareness so that they can challenge these thoughts with value-based actions.

As another example, this could be helpful for lighter-skinned people who struggle with the idea that they may be considered “less Black” or feel that they have to “prove” their Blackness. With that, they may be taking on Black stereotypes without realizing it to fit in with others. Again, this form of therapy could help them pinpoint that they are internalizing others’ thoughts about their blackness and help bring them to value-based actions rather than trying to fit in or change others' perceptions about them.

In a 2020 study that utilized ACT to reduce internalized racism in Black women, twenty Black women attended six sessions. The first two sessions focused on things like racism, racial identity, systems of oppression, and internalized racism (Banks, et. al pg. 90-93). After the first two sessions, the program invited the women to focus on diffusing thoughts associated with internalized racism; these exercises focused on “awareness, noticing, and willingness in the context of thoughts and feelings” (pg. 91). The activities

include things like focusing on value-directed behavior, naming their inner bully, and exercises to increase self-compassion (pg. 91). At the end of their study, the levels of Internalized Shame and Internalized Racial Oppression were reduced (pg. 92).

All of the aforementioned solutions address internalized colorism and intra-racial colorism, though these are not the only forms of colorism. Several studies have found that it is the intra-racial colorism that is not most impactful on the psyche of Black people. This colorism that occurs within the Black community may be more painful as it is deriving from those that we love and trust. There also have to be solutions for inter-racial/White colorism such as lobbying for mandatory colorism education courses for teachers, judges, and police officers.

CHAPTER 5 – METHODS, FINDINGS, CONCLUSION

Methodology

A qualitative research design was used to examine the sources and experiences of colorism, the stereotypes/perceptions associated with skin tone and the crime producing consequences of colorism among a sample of incarcerated individuals. This was accomplished through semi-structured individual interviews. The purpose of the semi-structured interview is to incite an open conversation without extensive constraints (Roulston, Choi, p. 233). The design utilized the hermeneutic interview style to elicit an understanding of colorist trauma in the participants' histories and explore whether they connect these instances to their crime trajectory. With hermeneutic interviews, "researchers and participants as co-inquiries engage in a shared dialog that evolves through questions and responses" (p. 235). The researcher does not have to remain neutral and can assist the participant with reflecting on their experiences (p. 235). The hermeneutic interview style allows the researcher to guide the participants by providing them information about their own life experiences and challenging them to think deeper about their own lives (p. 235). The topic of colorism is taboo, painful (Hall, pg. 1976 & Crutchfield, et al. pg. 89) and it is difficult for a participant to conceptualize their experience through a colorist rather than a racial framework. So, this interview style allowed the interviewer to be more interactive and thus more helpful to the participant. In

addition to interviews, peer-reviewed published academic studies/research articles and the above theories were used to reach conclusions.

Data collection

These interviews were conducted at three Kentucky prisons: Luther Lockett Correctional Facility, Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women, and Roederer Correctional Complex. They were held both in-person and virtually. Each participant signed a consent form before beginning the interview and was provided a copy of the form and will be provided a copy of the finalized thesis. The interviews ranged from 5 minutes to an hour in length.

Since the interviews were semi-structured, the participants were asked a series of the same questions; however, various follow-up questions may have emerged based on the interviewee's responses. The base questions that were asked are as follows: What is your knowledge of colorism? Do you understand racism and colorism as being two separates but connected ideologies or discriminatory systems? What do you consider yourself skin tone-wise? How many times have you been incarcerated or arrested? Have you ever felt excluded from communities or groups based on your skin color? In what way did you face colorism? Do you believe that colorism, as opposed to racism, is involved in your crime trajectory? How? Do you believe that you faced colorism at school, family work, with friends, etc.? How? Did you ever get involved with drugs, alcohol, illicit sexual activities, etc., due to being a victim of colorism? How? Did you ever have lowered self-esteem, depression, "aggressive" behavior, survivors' guilt, alienation, or conflicted feelings about your racial identity due to colorism or backlash from colorism? Do you believe if your skin color was different your alleged involvement

in crime would be as well? As the policies for recording for each prison varied, some of the responses were recorded and transcribed and for the others the responses were typed or written during the interview.

Recruitment & Participants

The participants were recruited based on a sign-up sheet. The sign-up sheet was posted at each of the three prisons at several times throughout the spring semester of 2022. At first, it was required that potential participants write a paragraph about colorism in order to be selected to be interviewed. This requirement was then dropped to encourage more participation and all those that signed up to be interviewed were scheduled. As a result, twenty-eight incarcerated African American people were interviewed.

The average age of the participants in the study was a forty-seven-year-old male. I was unable to obtain lifetime crime information about the participants, but I am aware that they committed both violent and non-violent offenses. The self-reported skin tone of the participants was as follows: Two dark-skinned women, five light-skinned women, one brown-skinned woman, five light-skinned men, eight brown-skinned men and seven dark-skinned men. So, the study results do primarily focus on the experiences of brown and dark-skinned African American men.

Limitations

There are several limitations that presented themselves during the course of this study. One of them would be the inclusion of virtual interviews. As a consequence of the COVID pandemic, some of these interviews had to be conducted virtually. It was found

that those that participated in the in-person interviews were more forthcoming with information overall. Another limitation involves some of the interview questions that were asked. Several of the interview questions mirrored each other and caused the flow of the interview to become confusing at times. Also, the inability to receive lifetime crime information about each of the participants may be considered a limitation as this research is unable to analyze what type of crimes those that are impacted by colorism commit, which could be helpful for preventative measures. As extensive research in the field of Colorism Studies has found that dark-skinned women are the most impacted by colorism due to beauty standards, this study is limited in that it only includes the voices of two dark-skinned women. Future studies in the field need to recruit more dark-skinned women.

Lastly, the most major limitation that I found was the seemingly inability to separate colorism from the concept of racism. Many of the participants recounted their experiences of racism, rather than colorism when I asked questions about colorism even after I provided explanations of what colorism is and examples of it. This showcases the salience of racism in African Americans' lives and also the undercover and taboo nature of colorism.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the data, themes were constructed through the use of Grounded Theory. Grounded theory describes a methodological process in which codes are used to generate themes from a data set (Walker & Myrick pg. 548). It includes two data analysis processes; in the first stage the researcher codes and analyzes the data and in the second stage they form categories and themes (pg. 548). The QDA Miner application was used

to analyze the interviews. In the first stage, an open coding method was used to process the interviews. Through this coding stage, three different themes emerged: These categories were then coded through the use of axial coding, which is used to lead to the final theoretical categories. Axial coding is described as “the transitional cycle between the Initial and Theoretical Coding” in Grounded theory research (pg. 160). In this stage, the researcher essentially groups together the data that featured similarities to reveal the final themes (pg. 160).

Findings

The Source: Colorism as Being Perpetuated from Several Normative Sources

Most of the individuals in this study were well aware of the presence of colorism within the African American community. Their most impactful experiences came from school/friends, the media, and members of their family. Participants repeatedly referred to these times as traumatic and hurtful experiences for them.

Oftentimes these

experiences occurred repeatedly. For example, participant LO, a 40-year-old dark-skinned Black man, expressed his concern about treatment from his father,

“Correct, my father owns his own business so when we would go different places, my father would always choose my brother because he was light skin to go with him instead of me with me being darker skinned. They would choose my big brother to do more activities, would be more presentable to White people. My father apologized about this many years later.”

In this instance the participant’s earliest experiences of colorism were from his father. His father held the belief system that lighter-skinned people were more presentable, so he showed his lighter-skinned son off more to appear more impressive to

White people. Though participant LO experienced colorism through the treatment from his father, several of the other participants highlighted experiences with their grandmothers, such as participant WS, a 43-year-old dark-skinned Black man, who stated,

“I have and it would be within my own family. I got treated more like I was less important because I am darker skin. Grandmother would pour bleach into the bathtub and tell me to wash. I had three brothers and the brothers under me is light skin and the other two are browner skin.”

While families play a large role in the skin tone socialization of African American youth, the participants in this study also cited their experiences at school with friends and teachers as introducing them to the concept of skin tone differences. As school is a daily experience for the youth, colorism is normalized through repeated occurrences. These occurrences of colorism at school have the potential to impact the performance of the students and their mental health. For example, one participant AO, a dark-skinned Black man, 29, stated, “Uh, maybe a little bit of low self-esteem and stuff like that. I felt like teachers in my school would favor more light skin kids and stuff like that.”

Another participant AW, 23, told a troubling story about the perpetuation of colorism at her school, stating:

“I mean like, um, well it's like, not really, Um, I got separated into like color groups before at school.”

She went on to explain that when she was in school her teacher separated the students into groups by skin tone. Although AW reported not being impacted by the separation, this may have been triggering or hurtful for other students that were in the classroom with her. In the two cases above, teachers are placed as the source of colorism

which introduces a tremendous issue which could impact grades and behavior as students attend school for a large part of their lives. Other participants reported bullying in schools based on skin-tone as a source of their colorist trauma. Such as participant KR, 48,

“The girls preferred lighter skin men and it did make me feel self-conscious. I also did face it in some ways hanging out friends at school.”

When KR mentioned that he faced it among friends, he is discussing how a colorist culture is displayed in friendship groups in the formal education system. As will be discussed later, this is the “joking” culture that is heavily ingrained in colorism and the site of this is often at school. Alarming, some participants even cited both school and home as being sources of colorist trauma and horizontal mistreatment in their childhood. For example, AM, a 39-year-old light-skinned Black woman stated,

“All around, all around in school with my family, um, in school, it was just like, I wasn't dark enough to hang with the black girls and I wasn't light enough to hang with the white girls, white kids. So, and then at home, like I have a darker brother, like he's, he has a different dad, so he's darker than me. So, he'd always say I was adopted, or I had white in me or, you know? Yeah. So, it was just a battle within my family.”

As a light-skinned Black woman, participant AM would be considered a victim of colorism backlash or vertical discrimination. As discussed, there is an element of distrust towards lighter-skinned women that is active in the African American community due to

colorism. Due to that, darker-skinned and lighter-skinned girls/women may struggle to build thriving friendships. While at home, AM also faced this discrimination from her brother who would make jabs against her due to her skin tone. With that, AM had to struggle with her identity in two separate spaces. Like AM, participant WS, 43, a dark-skinned Black male also reported simultaneous sites of skin tone discrimination,

“My grandmother would treat me that way. She was dark skin. The features as far as having big lips, the family would call me big lips and wide nose. Our features are taught to be shameful always. I was self-conscious in school dealt with it by laughing at it, but it hurts. My grandmother was easier on my younger siblings and my lighter siblings. I think my brother didn’t have to deal with things maybe because he was light.”

In both scenarios, the participants were facing skin tone issues at both school and within their families. There are similarities in the lack of acceptance that both of them felt. The treatment that they felt was described as “battles” and “hurt.” The psychological toll that being bullied or isolated at school is amplified by the treatment that is also felt in the home environment. This is further extended by the repetitive nature of the mistreatment based on skin tone. For participant WS, his compounded abuse resulted in feelings of shame and self-consciousness as well, as he faced a lack of safety in two environments where he should have felt protected.

The last source of colorist messages that was denoted by the participants was the media. The media is also a normative source for colorist programming through the negative and stereotypical portrayals based on skin tone. Also, as one participant

explained, the erasure of dark-skinned people in the media during certain eras may have impacted the self-esteem of the dark-skinned youth that were consumers. One of the participants JR, 49, a dark-skinned Black man, explained how the underrepresentation of dark-skinned men in the media during his childhood impacted him.

“When I was younger, we had Michael Jackson, we had El DeBarge, you had Al B. Sure, all the light skin guys that were famous at the time and they were the standard for young girls. Wesley Snipes and other dark people didn’t exist at that time. If you were light skin with funny colored eyes and good hair, then 9 times out of 10 you would get girls.”

As JR stated, the popular celebrities were considered lighter-skinned men, and he was unable to see himself in these individuals. Further, he believed that because this is the image that the media was celebrating, women were more attracted to lighter-skinned men. So, this form of colorism that was depicted in the media impacted the psyche of a young dark-skinned African American man and it also may have controlled the dating preferences of African American women.

Through these participants it is clear that the exposure to colorism comes from various, and oftentimes, multiple sources, and it begins at a young age. The normative nature of these sources amplifies the impact that they have on young people. With that, it is imperative that when combating colorism the interventions take place on several levels, particularly aimed at families, schools and the media. The skin color hierarchy that exists in our society invades all social systems.

The Ideals: Stereotypes and Perceptions Based on Skin Tone

Colorism causes those in the African American and other communities of color to hold ideals regarding individuals based on skin tone. It is deeply ingrained that darker-skinned people hold certain behaviors and lighter-skinned people act differently. These stereotypes and perceptions cause individuals to be prisoners to their skin tone as they are expected to act in a way that matches their skin tone. Phrases such as “acting light skin,” and “she thinks she’s light skin” are common in the African American community if a person is essentially behaving outside of the parameters assigned to their skin tone. These stereotypes and perceptions are often communicated through the use of jokes which was a common sentiment throughout my interviews. Although dark-skinned people are subjected to fierce colorism throughout their lives, there are negative and limiting stereotypes that are assigned to those with lighter skin as well. Color names are also common in the Black community, where there is a list of names, mostly negative, that are assigned to darker-skinned people and names that are assigned to lighter-skinned people as well. These “color names” hold the weight of the stereotypes and perceptions that are assigned to lighter and darker-skinned people.

Color Names and Jokes

Many of my participants stated different color names based on skin tone and also stated that the skin tone divisions in the African American community are often communicated through jokes. For example, participant AM, 39, a light-skinned Black woman answered the question about skin tone the following way: “Um, I consider myself

what they call a red bone, I guess.” In the Black community, a “red-bone” is considered a lighter-skinned Black woman. This term usually accompanies positive connotations, but the main one is attractiveness. This term is used in countless hip-hop songs as the objects of affection and is largely understood to mean a pretty light-skinned women. This same participant also exemplified the negative color names that are assigned to dark-skinned Black people, when asked what her understanding of colorism was. She replied,

“Um, I feel like colorism is within the black community is like people not understanding that there's different shades and different genres of black. Right. You don't have to be just dark skinned to be black. Right. You don't have to be, um, what they call blurple in the black community. I don't know where that word came from, but they use it a lot where I'm from.

You don't have to be that tone colored just to be black. I, I feel like we need more or, um, diversity in learning right. About our black race. Just all over the color spectrum.”

The participant used the term “Blurple,” to refer to dark-skinned Black people. This term along with just the term “Purple,” is used against people that are considered very dark-skinned. The idea is that the person is “so dark that they are purple.” AM stated that this term is “used a lot where she is from” which showcases the normalization of colorist comments. The perception of someone that is categorized as “blurple” or “purple” is that they are unattractive. This is aimed at people in a “joking” manner and it is also used as a jab. Another participant also spoke about being referred to by a color name as a joke, participant JH, 42, a brown-skinned Black man,

“It was always funny and in a joking way. Like you coconut nigga. It was funny to me. But I still believe it could be harmful even though it comes off as jokes, but it doesn’t bother me.”

This is a term that was aimed towards a man with a lighter brown skin, and it is supposed to signify that his lightness is negative. Although JH recognized that these comments could be harmful, he considered them as jokes. These terms are a part of the normalization of colorism in the African American community; they are typically used without recourse and are a part of everyday language. These different color names often have a loaded meaning either positive or negative. This idea that color names and comments about color were jokes came up multiple times as many of the participants experienced colorism in the form of jokes. Like participant JH, participant JR, 49, a dark-skinned Black man expressed his viewpoint on colorism as jokes,

“With friends maybe. Like I said back then being dark was like it was not in and I would hear stuff like gone somewhere black ass, but they were jokes. Joking hurts. This also happened with girls at school.”

Both participant JH and JR described these comments that were directed towards them as jokes but ultimately understood their hurtful nature. One participant, AM, 46, a light-skinned Black man, while describing his experience with being teased for being lighter-skinned stated: “I have been a part of teasing darker hued people myself, so I could see how that could be a detriment also.” This form of mutual jokes and teasing was commented upon by participant JH, 42, a brown-skinned Black man

“I have seen the picking of shades from both spectrums, light and dark. The darker kids would make the jokes about the lighter kids you’re the slave master’s baby, learned from TV. Lighter kids called darker kids buckwheat and African booty scratcher.”

This intense form of negative name-calling is furthered by the ideology that it is “only a joke.” Despite the negative consequences that these comments could have, they are not taken seriously, even by adults. Such as with participant AM, 39, who identifies as a light-skinned Black woman,

“Yes. Yes. Cause I got teased a lot from not only my brothers, but my sisters, because there was this one time my sister was like, well, you know the mail man, your daddy and the mailman was white. So, it was just like, it was real hurtful. Cause I asked my mom a lot of those questions and she was just like; they're just playing with you. But it still was hurtful. Cause they would only do it to me. The lighter tone of all the siblings.”

In this situation, AM told her mother about the teasing and her mother stated that it was just a joke. Oftentimes, this brutal name-calling is not handled with care and the wounds are repeatedly opened without anyone to resolve the issue. This name-calling occurs in different settings which also compounds the issue and pushes the victim further to the margins.

Stereotypes and Perceptions

Along with the jokes that are aimed at both darker and lighter-skinned people, are the ideals that are held about people based on their skin tone. Generally, lighter-skinned is associated with femininity and attractiveness and darker-skin is associated with aggression and ugliness. These ideals regarding skin tone were well known by the participants in this study and they had negative experiences based on others' perceptions about their skin tone. Both lighter and darker hued people were able to acknowledge the stereotypes that were assigned to each skin tone.

The Perceptions About Darker-Skinned People

For many of the participants in this study, their dark-skin tone was often associated with aggression and unattractiveness. This was communicated to them by family members, friends, and the media. For example, one participant PT, 35, a dark-skinned Black man stated, "We aren't looked at as attractive when we are younger as lighter people are." The idea, which is based on white supremacy, is that the further you are from white skin, the more unattractive you are. So, PT experience this as a young child that because he was dark skin, he was not attractive. Further, like participant PT, participant PM, 63, a brown-skinned Black expressed,

"My neighbors would also say that my brother was the good looking one or he is the finest one and I kind of didn't like that because I was always evaluated beside them, and I got accepted in their home because of my brothers."

PM had a light-skinned brother, and his attractiveness was measured alongside his

brother, which caused him to feel that he was second-class to his brother. With that, he believed that his brother was accepted more easily into spaces and that he could only accompany his brother. Like PM, participant JR, 49, a dark-skinned Black man spoke about the impact that the perception of ugliness had on his self-esteem:

“Well maybe I, maybe, uh, dealing with I had a few fights probably. Yeah, it like if you were dark, they associated that with being ugly instead of being handsome and it messed with my self-esteem because what was popular back ten it was so prevalent wherever you went, you automatically knew the lighter guys were probably going to get the girls because they are looking for what they see on TV.”

Both of these participants felt that their level of attractiveness was measured by their skin tone. Participant JR also explained that he felt that socialization from TV impacted the way that dark-skinned men were viewed. Besides the notion of attractiveness, the participants in this study expressed that they were aware of the stereotypes of aggression that were associated with dark-skinned people as well. Such as the case with participant PB, 54, a dark-skinned Black male, who stated that people make remarks like "black ass nigga think he's tough." PB was perceived by others as "thinking he was tough" because of his dark-skin tone.

Lighter-skinned participants also acknowledge that these stereotypes were held about dark-skinned people. Such as participant AM, 46, a light-skinned Black man, who stated, "I would say a darker hued African American is perceived as a threat. I wouldn't want to be a darker hue because I would be perceived as more of a threat." As the stereotype is that dark-skinned people are tougher and more aggressive, this notion is

understood by people of varying skin tones. Dark-skinned Black men may be required to portray a certain persona in order to live up to this idea of toughness. Other participants in this study noted how this perception of toughness caused dark-skinned Black men to be treated with less care. As PT, 35, a dark-skinned Black male stated, “people don’t look at you as precious as they look at lighter complected people.” This is due to the ideals that are held that darker-skinned people are tougher and may not need to be treated as “precious” as those with lighter-skin tones. PT provides an example of this phenomenon by stating,

“I was always looked to be rougher; people weren’t as easy on me. I had a situation as a child where I was wrestling with my cousin, who is mixed, and my family said I couldn’t be as rough with him because he bruised easier. It made me feel like they were valued more than I was.

In this situation, though both of the youth were wrestling and could have been harmed in the act, the adults in the situation believed that the lighter-skinned mixed-race child was more vulnerable. So, the ideas associated with dark skin are both a presumption of aggression and dangerousness and less vulnerability. This is an exemplification of the adultification of dark-skinned male youth. With that, this situation also caused PT to feel that he was less valuable to his family.

Throughout the interviews, the idea that dark skin was associated with aggression and unattractiveness was prevalent. As the Looking Glass Theory previously stated, individuals internalize the ideals that others have about them. As will be shown, the idea that dark-skinned people are more aggressive may cause them to express these aggressive

behaviors. Also, the idea that dark-skinned people are ugly or unattractive leaves them vulnerable to having negative feelings about themselves. These ideas are rooted in historical trauma as theorized by the Colorist Historical Trauma Framework. Historically, as argued earlier, slave masters expressed that they found lighter-skinned people to be more attractive, smarter, and more equipped for skilled labor. Dark-skinned people were often forced to do laborious tasks as they were considered to be stronger. These same ideals are now held by members of the African American community.

The Perceptions About Lighter-Skinned People

Although colorism does have benefits for people of lighter-skin tones, there are both negative and positive characteristics that are assigned to those with lighter-skin tones. The usual stereotypes about lighter-skinned women are that they are beautiful, stuck-up, and even promiscuous. For lighter-skinned men, they are typically stereotyped as being less masculine and “softer,” than dark-skinned Black men. The participants in the study, both darker and lighter skin were aware of the stereotypes held about lighter-skinned people. For example, participant JH, 42, a brown-skinned Black man expressed the following about light-skinned people

“Only time I was excluded because of skin tone was in a situation where mingling with white kids. I haven’t experienced that with Black people. I have seen favoritism but not total exclusion. But light skinned people are exceptionally beautiful, and they stick out. I pay significant attention to high yellow people. The men are fly too. But I see beauty in all. Light skin people come from two different cultures though, white, and black. Which makes them so beautiful.”

JH had the presumption, which could be considered colorist, that lighter-skinned Black people were “exceptionally beautiful.” He furthered this by stating that he pays “significant attention” to people with a lighter-skin tone. He also evoked another color name “high-yellow” which is used towards light-skinned people in both positive and negative forms. JH’s opinion was based on his idea that lighter-skinned people have some sort of mixture with White and he argues that this is what makes them so beautiful. This appears to be an exemplification of internalized anti-blackness to express that someone is more beautiful because of an assumption that they are mixed with White. This also showcases the idea that lighter skin is associated with beauty. Participant CG, 43, a light-skinned Black man also expressed his ideals about how attractiveness is perceived in the African American community,

“I don't believe that white people look at you as being dark skinned and me being light skinned as different. I believe Black people colorism each other. Like “light skin pretty nigga” “dark-skin ugly nigga” is a joke.

While further showcasing the idea that colorism is expressed as a “joke” in the African American community, he also showcases that the stereotype is that light-skinned men are “pretty boys” and that dark-skinned men are unattractive. The perception that light-skinned men are more attractive or “pretty boys” causes them to be stereotyped as more feminine, as femininity is associated with a light-skin tone. With these ideals regarding light-skinned people, this causes an assumption that they do not belong in the African American community. Participant AM, 42, a light-skinned Black man summarized his ideas surrounding the lack of belonging,

“Inside of the community being of a lighter hue, you are always perceived as not fully belonging. It’s almost like you’re a race within a race, the darker people consider the lighter skin people as softer and not a full part of the collective. Darker-skinned African Americans, not all, in some cases, perceive lighter African Americans as softer and if you have a finer hair texture, they perceive you as a pretty boy. You are constantly trying to prove yourself and show that you belong. Now, and that has in some instances now, not all, it has placed me in positions that put me in jail.”

As AM stated, his attempt to belong has caused him to get into situations that have landed him into trouble with the law. He described the perception that lighter-skinned men are “pretty boys” and “softer” and he was attempting to fight these stereotypes about light-skinned men. In the African American community lighter-skinned people may be required to prove that they belong in the community which could lead them to criminal action. Lighter-skin men are often left to battle with the presumption that they are not masculine. On the other hand, lighter-skinned women are perceived as having a haughty attitude. Participant JC, 61, a light-skinned Black woman provided her ideals surrounding colorism,

“Colorism would be when people single you out because your light skin and they don’t like you because your light skin. They think that you think that you’re better because your light skin, idk, which is not true, not with me but I have seen it with some girls.”

As colorism does provide a degree of privilege to those that are lighter-skinned, this causes a presumption that those with lighter-skin tones “think that they are better,” than those with darker skin tones. As JC exclaimed, this may cause lighter-skinned people to be isolated from others because they hold negative ideals regarding them, this is particularly the case for light-skinned Black women. Though they may be considered to be positive things such as beautiful and nicer than those with darker-skin tones, there is still backlash against them because of their perceived privilege in society. With this, the idea is that lighter-skinned people, particularly women are more perceived as being more taken care of or catered to in our society. Participant AO, 29, stated, “my older sister she’s light skin, she graduated from Austin, she’s doing really great in her life, it seems like she was more pampered than me.” As lighter-skinned people do receive more relative privilege in society in comparison to those with darker skin tones, AO perceived his sister as being “more pampered,” than him. Although this may be true in AO’s family, the perception that lighter-skinned people are more pampered showcases that unfair judgments may be applied in some cases.

Overall, the participants in this study showcased that there are significant stereotypes and perceptions according to skin tone. These ideals may cause colorist and unfair treatment towards those with darker and lighter skin tones. Individuals are expected to behave based on their skin tone and those that don’t may struggle with name-calling. Interactions between members of the Black community are often based on these color-names and stereotypes that are rampant within the Black community. As one of the users already expressed, these experiences of color stereotypes may lead a person to experience negative psychological consequences and potentially lead a person to commit

actions that may lead them to jail or prison.

The Consequences: Psychosocial Reactions to Colorism

Both the sources of colorism and the perceptions and stereotypes according to skin tone have been described, the final theme that emerged was the psychosocial responses and reactions to colorism. The following sub-themes emerged as consequences of colorism and backlash from both dark and light-skinned individuals: aggression, lowered self-esteem and self-worth, and drug/alcohol use. Some of the other responses to colorism that were found were the internalization of colorist values and isolation/seclusion. However, a direct link between those two responses and crime could not be fully conceptualized in this research. Further research in this area may be able to link those responses with crime.

Colorism and backlash from colorism causes significant consequences for those that are on the receiving end of it. One of the most common responses to experiences of colorism from the participants in this study was aggression. One participant, LO, 40, a brown-skinned Black man responded, “Yes, of course aggression because that’s how I knew how to deal with it. Of course, I would cause physical harm and be mad,” when asked if he ever had certain emotional reactions to colorism. He admitted getting into physical altercations and stated that he had to “defend himself,” after being the target of colorist abuse. PB, 54, a dark-skinned Black male, also expressed that he felt forced to use violence and aggression to defend himself when targeted based on skin tone: “looking back, the stuff that happened at home made me more aggressive at school, because I didn’t want to hear that.” He was facing colorism both at home and at school

and did not have an outlet to express his rage from being mistreated based on his skin tone. Further, as it has been made clear that colorist jokes are normalized in society, PT, 35, a dark-skinned Black male stated the following,

“I guess with being physically aggressive that kinds of comes with it to. If you hear so many jokes, you do get aggressive to try to get people to stop making jokes. I’m not a bully or nothing but I have been in altercations due to people making jokes.”

His response to colorist “jokes” were to meet the perpetrator with aggression in order to stop them from making hurtful comments towards him. This showcases how these “jokes” could escalate to someone being involved in criminal action due to the individuals possibly fighting. Participant AR, 46, a light-skinned Black male, also reported taking on these aggressive behaviors,

“When you are dealing with someone with a darker skin tone, they consider us as softer or cut, so we would have to do things to fit in, so you may come off as more aggressive just to even it out a little.”

Colorism has the potential to incite aggressive behaviors in both darker and lighter-skinned people. This is based on the anger that is felt due to being mistreated based on their skin tone and also the need to appear more masculine and not be referred to as “soft.” The fact that aggressive behaviors are associated with criminal action, showcases a pathway from experiences of colorism, the development of aggression and the commission of a crime.

In addition to aggression, participants also expressed suffering with low self-esteem and self-worth due to colorism. This particularly impacted dark-skinned African American men as they reported that they were made to feel less valuable. This feeling of lowered self-esteem could lead individuals to commit criminal action such was the case for participant PT, 35, a dark-skinned Black male. When asked about his reactions to colorist treatment he responded,

“Yes, because if you hear throughout your life so much that you aren’t as attractive as this color it gives you low self-esteem and with this low self-esteem you try to overcompensate, so I tried to dress nicer. I’m real big on shoes, clothes, and hair, I go to the barber shop multiple times per week. Now that comes I have to acquire these things aren’t free and I come from a poverty-stricken family. So, the easiest way to get these items is committing criminal activity so that I could get them.”

The participant felt that he had to “overcompensate” for his dark skin tone by buying fancy shoes, clothes and keeping his hair well groomed. As described, participant PT began to commit criminal actions in order to buy items. His lowered self-esteem caused him to seek out material items to make him feel better about himself. Several other participants reported having lowered self-esteem due to colorism such as KR, 42, who stated that “the girls preferred lighter skin men and it did make me feel self-conscious.” KR’s lowered self-esteem was based on his observation that the girls in his age group preferred lighter-skinned boys. Like KR, participant JR, 49, “This affected me

in a way, my self-esteem. Being dark wasn't in style." JR felt that dark-skinned men weren't considered to be "in style" in the public eye and this impacted the way that he perceived himself. JR also previously mentioned that his feelings about himself were influenced by the influx of lighter-skinned men on television and the underrepresentation of dark-skinned men. While the studies regarding the link between self-esteem show mixed results, it has been found in several studies that poorer self-esteem is linked with higher rates of delinquency, antisocial behavior, and aggression (Trzesniewski, et al, pg. 381–390, Donnellan, pg. 328). The participants described a direct link between lowered self-esteem due to colorism and criminal behavior.

Lastly, the usage of drugs and alcohol was a sub-theme that emerged during the course of the interviews. Colorism/backlash does produce strong emotional reactions and several of the participants described using drugs and/or alcohol in order to cope with this. For example, participant KR, 48, a brown-skinned Black man, described his reaction to feeling rejected due to colorism,

"I think one time all the guys in the party was light skin, I never been one of the guys, to be jealous of light skinned, but all the women would take heed to these guys because they were light skinned so me and my buddies went to smoke and drink."

During this era, lighter-skinned men appeared to be more popular among women. Due to that, KR and his friends felt rejected while at a party. Like KR, Participant PM, 63, a brown-skinned Black man stated the following,

“I got into drugs, tried to hide the way I felt about who I was, and I got into that when I was around 16 or 18 years old. I got into drugs because it made me feel more needed and felt more proud of myself. I didn’t let their words bother me as much.”

These participants began to use drugs and alcohol as they struggled with their self-worth or felt ignored due to colorism. As there is a link between the consumption of alcohol/drugs and crime (Prichard, 2005), these examples appear to showcase that colorism may be linked to crime through the usage of alcohol/drugs as a reaction to being discriminated against. It is imperative that experiences of colorism be recognized as a risk factor for drug and alcohol use among teenagers.

Summary of the Findings

The findings demonstrate that colorism is perpetuated in the Black community through several sources including family members, friendships, schools, and the media. African American youth are susceptible to colorist programming and treatment on a daily basis. It is also possible that some people may face colorism from several sources at once making them especially vulnerable to negative psychological responses. Colorism is normalized in the Black community through the use of color names, jokes, and stereotypes about the behavior of those of certain skin tones. Individuals feel that they must act according to their skin tone or fight against the perceptions about them based on their skin tone. This results in negative coping behaviors such as aggressive behaviors, drug and alcohol use and lowered self-esteem. The behaviors that are displayed as a consequence of colorism could be implicated in future criminal activity.

Conclusion

Colorism and skin tone divisions has a long and significant history in the African American community. The manifestations of colorism have been studied extensively, including its presence in the criminal justice system. However, this study provided evidence that colorism may be linked to crime trajectory due to the negative feelings that it incites. As discussed, the consequences of colorism are far reaching and through this study have even been directly linked to things like fighting, smoking and underage drinking which are all considered criminal acts. The purpose of this study was to establish that trauma from skin tone issues could be implicated in the crime trajectory of African American people. Further research in the area could examine the crimes that are committed by those that are victims of colorism/backlash. This information should be relevant to criminal justice researchers, diversity and inclusion experts in schools and community groups that assist with community building events. As the discussed peer-reviewed studies suggest that colorism is rampant in the criminal justice system in the area of arrest, sentencing and time served, this study offers an additional perspective on how experiences of colorism could be implicated in crime trajectory. This study also contributes to the bodies of work that showcase the consequences of experiences of colorism.

The theories that were used provided the foundation that was needed for this research. The Colorist Historical Trauma Framework and the Colonial model were useful to understand the root of colorism in the African American community. The Strain Theory and the Social Schematic Theory of Offending described the trajectory from

negative life experiences such as discrimination to crime perusal. Finally, Phenomenology was used to center the participants experiences in order form a theory of colorism contributing to criminal action.

As outlined above, it may take a three-stage prevention process in order to work on healing the internalization of colorism in the African American community.

Significant work must be done in the area of colorism eradication as it produces a major source of trauma and division in the African American community. This form of internalized self-hatred impedes the growth of those that are impacted by it and could possibly lead to interactions with the criminal justice system.

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University of Louisville
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University of South Carolina
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Mahidol International College, Bangkok Thailand
Thai History & Culture **2014**

AWARDS

Wal-Mart First Generation Scholarship **2013**
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Gilman International Scholarship **2015**

University of Louisville
Graduate Assistantship **2020 –**
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R E L A T E D E X P E R I E N C E

Let's Talk Colorism
Founder/Speaker/Researcher **2019-**
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Educate others about colorism through speaking engagements, plans conferences, reviews books on colorism, blogs about colorism, conducts research, and completes interviews.

South Carolina Department of Social Services

Intake Hub Case Manager

June 2020

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Conducted phone interviews regarding abuse/neglect allegations, completed required work in CAPSS to include gathering background information on all individuals from CAPSS, SNAP, Child Support, Criminal History, Sex Offender Registry, and any other search tools when needed, made independent intake decisions using all information gathered and the Intake Screening and Decision Tool

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

University of Louisville

Teaching Assistant – to Professor Tolson in “African American Music” Spring 2021-current

Maintain records on students’ progress/grades,
Conduct study sessions to ensure student success
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Maintain records on students’ progress/grades,
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SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS/CONFERENCES

“Colorism Me Please” Conference Hosted By “Nah I’m Just Pretty” Speaker:
Colorism in Families & Marriage – April 18th, 2020

Let’s Talk Colorism Speaking Engagement Hosted by “Freedom in Chance” at the
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Let’s Talk Colorism Speaking Engagement Hosted by the “Muhammad Ali Scholars”
Program at the University of Louisville - October 10th, 2021

“A Panel on Colorism” Hosted by The Cultural Center, Opening Speaker, Shaderica
Sibley/Let’s Talk Colorism - October 13th, 2021

Let’s Talk Colorism Presents Colorism in India with Blog with Samreen and The
Blackroseway - October 21st, 2021

Let's Talk Colorism Presents "Colorism in India with Shawn and Tanishka," - October 24th, 2021

Let's Talk Colorism Presents "Healing Colorism Between Black Women" - October 25th, 2021

"CARDConvos: How revolutionary optimism can influence positive change within our university." Let's Talk Colorism Presents on Colorism – November 3rd, 2021

The Speed Art Museum Presents a showing of "Passing" with a post-screening discussion on colorism led by Shaderica Sibley/LTC and LaShana Avery – November 7th, 2021

Let's Talk Colorism Presents "Global Manifestations of Colorism," to the Engage. Lead. Serve. Board at The University of Louisville – November 15th, 2021

Let's Talk Colorism International Colorism Conference – December 4, 2021