THE IMPLICATIONS OF SKIN TONE STRATIFICATION IN LATINX PERSPECTIVES OF RACE

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INTRODUCTION

Decades of scholarly literature have examined racial discrimination against, and prejudicial treatment of, Black individuals by non-Hispanic whites. However, it is impossible to ignore the severity of such oppression that exists both because of, and within, the Latinx community. To understand the significance of skin tone stratification within marginalized communities and their participation in discriminatory behavior, a clear distinction must be made between racism and colorism. Racism is the belief that individuals are either inferior or superior on the basis of phenotypes and genotypes (Hunter, 2002; Roberts et al., 2008). Although race is a flawed social construct, its changing definition over time and history has still proven to be a powerful force, shaping the life outcomes of various groups. Similarly, colorism is discrimination on the basis of one's skin color by their own ethnic group (Murguia & Telles, 1996). Despite being widely overlooked by academia and the general public, colorism helps to maintain a white hegemony through preference for lighter skinned people over darker skinned people (Hannon, 2015). Skin pigmentation, hair texture, eye color, and facial features similar to those of Anglo-Saxons have consistently been deemed most valuable in Latinx communities (Burton et al., 2010). Despite these insights, much remains unknown about skin tone stratification and its role within this marginalized community. Correspondingly, the limited research on this topic underscores the need to investigate how racism and colorism are intrinsically linked, and the ways that Latinx folx self-identify, interact socially, and ultimately define race.

To investigate the wide-ranging influence of colorism in Latinx communities, I conducted 22 interviews with people between the ages of 18-24. Interview questions focused explicitly on the interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships respondents had with race. How

does a member of the Latinx community racially identify? How does the way these folx identify impact their understanding of racism and colorism? How does the oppression faced by the Latinx community inform the relationship they have with race? The answers to these questions indicate that despite an overwhelming acknowledgement of racism in the Latinx community, respondents struggled to define the term "race" itself. For most participants, the fluid definition of race meant that self-identification was oftentimes a tedious and unsettling process. The study also suggests that participants only spoke to the hardships faced by Afro-Latinx folx when prompted, or when a direct connection to members of that community existed. Overall, this study provides insight into individuals' understanding of colorism and its prevalence in the Latinx community.

In view of the limited empirical scrutiny offered by social scientists to the study of racism and colorism within the Latinx community, this study helps extend the findings of sociologists like Bonilla-Silva. Specifically, study findings outline the distress attached to the racial binary of being either Black or white, as well as the privileging of lighter complexions within Latinx communities. This study is unique because its focus on colorism examines the intricacies of one's relationship with race and the role it plays in their personal identification and social interactions. The findings of this study allow us to reflect on the race relations shaped by differing structural locations of Latinx folx within a racial hierarchy created and carried out since the colonial period. Overall, findings remind us that without the deconstruction of anti-Blackness in the Latinx communities, light-skinned Latinx will continue to benefit from their proximity to whiteness. As examined in the discussion section, a preference for lighter skinned Latinx folx will continue to drive inequalities present in educational, financial, residential, and psychological arenas. Through the use of empirical research and review of established scholarly literature on the Latinx community, this study implores social scientists to continue working towards an

understanding of how one's self-identification and social circles are associated with race-related inequalities. Ultimately, I suggest applying Patricia Hill Collins' (2009) *Domains of Power Framework* to make sense of how favoring whiteness regulates every aspect of an individual's life. There is clearly no denying that the skin tone stratification system is an invasive and cataclysmic method of reinforcing the idea that Black, and especially Afro-Latinx folx, are inferior to all other beings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Social Construction of Race

The sociological perspective views race as a social construction. According to Roberts et al. (2008), this means that race is not as a biological category but rather, an idea "created to interpret human differences and used to justify social arrangements in ways that accrue to the benefit of the dominant social group." Similarly, other sociologists have defined race as an erroneous assumption used to divide individuals into groups, and subsequently, claim that these groupings have meaningful differences (Burton & et al., 2010). Considering both of these definitions emphasize the absence of biological evidence behind racial categories, sociologists remind us that race and its meaning will continue to change over time, history, and place in order to best serve the interests of the dominant group (Hunter, 2002). This is precisely why race as a social identification enables racism and colorism to thrive. Racism is defined as the discrimination and institutional power that deems white people superior and simultaneously oppresses Black, Indigenous, people of color (Hunter, 2002; Roberts et al., 2008).

Accordingly, critical race theorists focus on how systems incorporate race into their social organizations and institutions. These race scholars are committed to examining how everyone contributes to the reproduction of such inequalities and how the constant revision of

race on the basis of a group's self-interest allows these systems of oppression to strengthen. Correspondingly, critical race theorists call for the acknowledgement of colorism as a "source of internal differentiation" amongst communities of color (Burton et al., 2010). This system of oppression allows the lighter skinned people to benefit from social arrangements and darker skinned folx to be harmed by them (Hunter, 2002). Racism and colorism are omnipresent in the Latinx community, where the skin color hierarchy favors phenotypes, aesthetics, and culture closer to whiteness.

Colonization and the Racial Hierarchy

The creation of a caste system privileging whiteness, and the consequent favoring of lighter skinned individuals that it inspired, was first introduced with the colonization of African and Indigenous people's land. By employing these systems, Europeans ensured that light-complected people would be assigned higher status while simultaneously denouncing darker complexions as worthy of lower-status (Herring et al., 2004; Murguia & Telles, 1996). The institutionalization of racism and colorism by Europeans, specifically Spaniards, was so prominent in Latin America that it continues to affect the educational attainment, wages, residential opportunities, and overall psychological well-being of folx (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2013; Hunter, 2002). Sociologists argue that the mechanisms of colorism not only serve the racial and ethnic stratification system of Latin America, but the identification and assimilation process of Latinx folx in the United States as well. These insights serve as the foundation of the *Latin Americanization* thesis. Introduced by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva et al. (2003), this thesis states that the biracial hierarchical system in America will be vastly impacted by the pigmentation of one's skin and the color-blind ideologies attached to it. He argues that in the United States a three-category system of racial groups has been adopted: whites, "honorary whites," and a

generalization of Black people (Forman et al., 2002). In this paper, I argue that the tri-system stratification has not only accounted for the racial attitudes embedded in societal contexts but the social structural relations between racial and ethnic groups as well. For most Latinx folx, the limited scale of identification found within the Black and white binary has presented them with extreme distress in terms of their emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2013). Thus, the *Latin Americanization* thesis illustrates how the fluidity of racial identities is only further institutionalized to ensure that those of darker skin tones are ceaselessly deemed inferior.

Discussions About Race: Families, Schools and Peers, and Pop Culture and Media

Racial and Ethnic Socialization Amongst Families

The troubling nature of the United States' racial binary and the Western world's preference for lighter skin pigmentation has led to a heightened interest in how conversations regarding race occur within families. Thus, sociologists have coined terms such as *racial and ethnic socialization* to refer to the transmission of knowledge and information regarding race and ethnicity from adults to children (Hughes et al., 2006; Lesane-Brown, 2006). These processes occur through the sharing of cultural traditions, positive reinforcements, and possible confrontations with racial biases. As a result, among members of marginalized communities, racial and ethnic socialization allows for the promotion of higher self-esteem, the instilling of racial pride, and preparation for discrimination (Hughes et al., 2006; Lesane-Brown, 2006). Nevertheless, these processes could also have negative impacts on the child receiving information regarding their racial and ethnic identification. For instance, only parents whose race is a central social identity, and who view their ethnic and racial group in a positive manner, are eager to inform their children on cultural pride (Hughes et al., 2006). This is incredibly important

to keep in mind when thinking of the racial identification of most dark-complected Latinx folx. For many, the reluctance to identify as Afro-Latinx or Black could be transmitted to their children because of the association between adult racial identity and race socialization messages (Lesane-Brown, 2006). Instead, these parents' hesitance to embrace their Blackness causes their children to suffer from lower self-esteem and greater adversity when navigating racial identification (Hughes et al., 2006).

While these processes are notable for imparting information regarding one's personal racial and ethnic group, the racial and ethnic socialization processes fail to acknowledge the successes of, and oppression faced by, other marginalized groups. For example, studies suggest that white parents teach and encourage their children to either adopt a colorblind theory when analyzing race, or regard all behaviors as cultural ones (Matias, 2016; DePouw & Matias, 2016). The endorsing of a colorblind ideology or belief in cultural behaviors then empowers white children and communities to disregard present inequalities in institutions and social spaces. When applying these notions to the Latinx community, it is the lack of conversations regarding race relations that allow similar ideas of privilege to arise. When Latinx parents ignore the advantages attached to whiteness and instead, cognize the Latinx community as composed of only lighter skin pigmentations, they also marginalize and invalidate the experiences of Afro-Latinx and non-Latinx Black folx. Correspondingly, the limited research on how darker skinned Latinx people participate in racial and ethnic socialization further underscores the need to uncover how salient these conversations are in the navigation of racial identification and anti-Blackness around the world.

In the Classroom

While studies suggest that this form of dialogue amongst familial ties is especially harmful to the personal identification of darker skin tone individuals, the function of schooling in race relations should not be overlooked either (Bolgatz, 2005; DePouw & Matias, 2016). Discussions regarding race, white supremacy, and white privilege remain a challenge in most classrooms (Bolgatz, 2005). For white teachers, topics such as whiteness and social inequalities are regarded as "dangerous emotional ground" and rendered as possible opportunities to enact discriminatory behavior (Bolgatz, 2005). However, the refusal to engage in conversations regarding race relations, communicates to youth that racism is not worthy of being discussed and instead, promotes systems of racial inequality.

Furthermore, discussions about oppression are not just viewed as taxing by teachers but students as well. The students who do engage in conversations about race are often individuals who have experienced bigotry and recognize the pervasiveness of racism in their everyday lives (Roberts et al., 2008). Moreover, studies suggest that dialogue regarding race is usually carried out through racialized jokes and name calling rather than the dissecting of racial inequalities (Roberts et al., 2008). Although some students participate in conversations about race and racism often, they abstain from unpacking one of the most salient contributions to racism: white privilege (Bolgatz, 2005; Schultz et al., 2000). If the education system committed itself to deconstructing the horrors of white supremacy through lesson plans, educational resources, and personal experiences, all students would have the opportunity to engage in thoughtful analysis of systems of racial oppression. Accordingly, previous scholarly literature and the present study highlight the need for dialogue regarding race in schools in order to assist students in their self-identification process and the studying of colorism.

Pop Culture and the Media

Members of marginalized communities have often found that the best way to outwit the oppressor and empower their communities is through pop culture. For the Black and Latinx community, hip-hop is essential to fighting and speaking up against the racial disparities that circumscribe their lives (Roberts et al., 2008). Such music might also educate members on what language is adopted amongst that community. Scholars like Alejandro Alonso, however, write that if non-Black people use racial slurs like the *n-word* in their music or vernacular, then they "should expect to receive backlash" (Harkness, 2008). Despite rap's close relationship with certain racial slurs, it has become evident that the general public does not believe non-Black folx should adopt this language. Such findings are significant when thinking about how music, especially hip-hop, informs youth about stereotypes and the realities of certain communities.

Nevertheless, the entertainment industry and the influence it has on people's understanding of a racial hierarchy is not limited to just music. In fact, the media is especially prominent in the distribution of knowledge regarding the dynamic of race and racism. A notable example is the news outlets' necessity to associate the Latinx community with buzz words such as "wetback," "illegal," or "alien" (Hall, 2018). Still, the individuals who are most often villainized and dehumanized by the media are people with darker skin tones. For Afro-Latinx and Black folx, the film and media industries constantly aid in the sustaining of a racial hierarchy and racial inequality (Hall, 2018). When the main distributors of information, such as the entertainment industry, constantly denigrate these communities, folx with darker complexions are further ostracized and marginalized from society and their own communities.

DATA & METHODS

Interview Data

The data presented in this article come from 22 in-depth interviews conducted over a two-week span from May 24th to June 6th. Interviews lasted an average of 45 to 50 minutes. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and global health crisis, interviews were conducted via two different platforms that allowed for social distancing: iPhone's Facetime feature and online Zoom calls. Of the 22 respondents, seven identified as white Latinx, eight identified as Black or Afro-Latinx, and seven identified as "other." The reasoning behind the respondents' self-identification as "other" relied heavily on their phenotype and immediate ancestral connection to the Afro-Latinx community. All respondents were between the ages of 18-24 and had enrolled in, or graduated from, college. To control for historical differences noted in race relations on the basis of income, I made sure that most, specifically 17 of the 22 participants, identified their socio-economic status as low-income/working class. By identifying as such, respondents indicated that their household earned an income of less than $48,000 in one year. In order to recruit participants nationwide, I utilized social media as a tool and adopted a method known as *snow-ball sampling.* Such sampling allowed those in my inner-circle and community to connect me to other individuals increasingly interested in conversations about race, while simultaneously eliminating bias. Had I only allowed individuals in my immediate circle to participate, certain views on Afro-Latinidad and colorism would have been hindered. By opening the participant pool, people outside of my extended network were allowed to voluntarily participate in the study and share their thoughts on colorism. All participants lived in residential areas mostly composed of marginalized groups such as Black and Latinx folx. Nevertheless, of the 22 participants, 12 attend or had attended predominantly white institutions and ten were enrolled in widely diverse institutions. In the results section of the article, I elaborate on why the details of the participants' educational enrollment is important to the overall findings of the study.

In order to advance the literature and diminish the possibility of making participants feel uncomfortable, three main probes were utilized. The use of an encouragement probe, defined through affirming "Hmm's" and "I see's," informed interviewees that their topic of conversation was intriguing and informative (Emerson et al., 2011). Similarly, the silent probe allowed participants to further expand on their response and elaborate on what they deemed to be an efficient form of answering the question (Emerson et al., 2011). Lastly, I used the feeling and thoughts probe where each of the respondents' answers were followed with a "It sounds like this made you feel…" By using this probe, respondents were expected to expand on their personal views without feeling pressured or badgered by the interviewer (Emerson et al., 2011).

Analysis

Further acknowledging the importance of interview questions and their ability to guide respondents in thinking critically about their relationship with race, I developed a research guide that was informed by the sociological literature on race and skin tone stratification. Respondents were asked to answer questions regarding their conversations about race within their social circles, their personal identification, and their overall understanding of the skin tone hierarchy. Analysis of interview data was conducted using the online platform Dedoose, where simple codes could be inserted and searched for throughout the transcribed documents. Guided by previous literature, I used a deductive approach to code the transcribed interviews, for instance, by focusing on key words such as "colorism," "darker Latinx," "racism," "education," "colonialism," and even, "police brutality." However, recognizing the restrictions attached to previous scholarly literature, I made sure to utilize an inductive approach to coding as well. Therefore, the coding process was not limited by past knowledge but rather, open to the observations made by participants as well.

Limitations of the Study

The use of both an inductive and deductive approach allowed the study to expand on already established findings such as the anti-Blackness present in the Latinx community, and also, to suggest new connections including the parallel between confusion regarding identification and colorism. Despite the insights gained from this study, it is important to acknowledge the limitations present. In order to ensure that both researcher and participants would adhere to social distancing measures placed during the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the interviews were conducted via the iPhone Facetime feature and Zoom calls. The inability to have face-to-face interviews potentially diminished the intimacy needed, or desired, when speaking about sensitive topics such as anti-Blackness, race, and colorism. Still, the limitation is counterbalanced by the richness of the qualitative data that remote interviews allowed, namely by expanding recruitment to nationwide. By using digital platforms, the limitation of geographical location was removed and instead, a broader respondent pool was created. Furthermore, the study did not set a criteria for who is to be considered white Latinx, Black or Afro-Latinx, or "other." While this might have helped organize and categorize participants more effectively, it was the respondents' freedom to self-identify that revealed the connection between anti-Blackness and distress when racially identifying oneself.

RESULTS

Focusing on the relationship respondents had with racial identification, anti-Blackness, and those in their social circles, this study reveals possible guidelines for what constitutes as discriminatory behavior and how the understanding of one's race guides these specifications.

Racial Identification

Although this study sought to explore the skin tone stratification system present in Latinx communities, it soon became clear that such insights could not be possible without first understanding the implications of racial and ethnic identification in societal and institutionalized interactions. How does a member of the Latinx community racially identify in a binary system? Is it possible to only align oneself as Black or white? Acknowledging the ambiguity brought upon by racial categories in America, I allowed respondents to self-identify their own race. For 32% of respondents, the choice to identify as white was based solely on their skin tone's proximity to whiteness. Correspondingly, 36% of respondents racially identified as Afro-Latinx or Black. Although demographic questions were not posed until after the long, critical conversations about race, as many as 32% of respondents self- identified as "other." The example below depicts why the fluidity attached to the social construction of race oftentimes left respondents feeling distressed when forced to racially identify themselves.

> *Marisol: "I would never know what to cross off on documents because I did not feel*
>
> *like a white person or like a Black person either. I feel like it was a disservice because I*
>
> *realized I benefit from some of the privilege I have, as someone who is not exactly Black.*
>
> *But I didn't benefit from the privileges of being white either. So it's kind of like, you*
>
> *know, racially-- I was kind of confused as to what I should identify as.*

> *Jesus: I think I grew up thinking [race] had [affected me]. Like, I think like it's been*
>
> *more of an internal thing than an external thing because I feel like if I did leave this*
>
> *bubble of Crystal, I would have dealt or experienced stuff with my skin color.*

The remarks made by Marisol and Jesus suggest that discrimination faced by Latinx in the United States prevented them from adopting the racial identification of "white." These Latinx folx, however, also could not find comfort in adopting "Black" as their racial identification because of their skin tone's closer proximity to whiteness. Five of the seven participants who identified as "other" noted that although they had Afro-centric features, the privilege attached to their lighter complexion made them hesitant to adopt "Black" as their racial identification. In this case, the respondent noted that while they may face some forms of oppression, it will never be similar to that of a darker skin individual.

> **Roberto:** *I could be very tired and very uncomfortable but I'm never gonna feel the oppression that a dark-skinned Dominican, Haitian, or anybody feels anywhere in the world. It is just a privilege to be of lighter tone. But I don't see myself as a non- person of color ever.*

The internal battle highlighted by participants when having to racially identify on the basis of a racial binary system reinforces the increased possibility of the endorsement of the *Latin Americanization* theory in the United States:

> **Marisol:** *And then I remember in college, I realized that the racial system in the United States was built for the people in the United States, where the racial system in Latin American countries was so much more open and it encompasses so many more categories."*

As explained above, when America places an emphasis on only two racial categories, Black or white, it leads certain Latinx folx to feel excluded. Bonilla-Silva's (2003) *Latin Americanization*

theory encompasses how the oppression felt by Latinx folx in the United States prohibits them from identifying as white. Still, it is important to acknowledge that even when excluded from the highest position in the racial hierarchy and included in the "honorary white" category, light-complected Latinx still hold a privilege over Black and Afro-Latinx folx.

Colorism and its Role in Self-Identification

The confusion experienced when racially identifying in the United States, however, extends further than the anxiety brought upon by the limited racial system that has been institutionalized for centuries in this country. During interviews, questions about how to define the term "race" were always followed by how respondents thought about their own race. Although 13 interviewees noted that they had African ancestry, as many as 69% of them stated that their parents and guardians consistently tried to deny their Blackness.

> *Natalia: So my mom, she would always be like "Oh, yeah. I'm not Black. I'm Mulata," because you know they have all these terms for all these different races. And really it's all just Black but it is just lighter skin or darker or whatever. So she used to be like "No, I am not Black. I am Mulata." Then I'm like... You know, hearing that all the time, it's just like "Okay, there must be something kind of wrong with being Black."*

Having members in their social network deny their Blackness often meant that participants felt as if embracing their Afro-Latinidad was shameful. Similarly, sometimes the participants indicated that Latinx people eagerly dismissed their Black identity to ensure their place of privilege in a racial hierarchy. In these instances, the racial and ethnic socialization that occurred between children and their parents was not one of pride but rather, the sharing of discomfort and humiliation towards their complexions and racial background.

Angelica: Which is why I think that Hispanics try to deny themselves of being

Blackened so much. And also there is such a thing as white privilege. I think that

Hispanics try to more identify themselves as white, just to kind of go along with that

privilege as well.

The example above emphasizes the prevalence of colorism in the Latinx community. Respondents suggest that through the denial of their Afro-centric features, Latinx folx continue to take advantage of their privilege and thus, perpetuate racial inequalities. For example, 21 respondents noted that Black people in America face harsher challenges than white folx. Such obstacles are evident through the social interactions between Black and white people, and the overall anger and hatred expressed towards Black bodies via institutionalized policies and hierarchies.

Daniela: People think that I'm very overreacting and other situations. People don't

believe me in certain areas. So all those things come to play whenever I walk into a room

because I'm Black… Because of the compositions that come with my skin color…

Because of the ideas that are associated with me being a Black woman.

Natalia: And I just think that we have a very corrupt justice system that does not

protect Black lives at all. In fact, it seems like they're encouraged to go after Black

people.

Demonstrated in Daniela and Natalia's accounts, police brutality was one of the most prominent answers when questioned on what these challenges entailed. Twenty participants stated that

violence against Black bodies was often at the hand of those in power. Still, only seventeen participants noted that Latinx folx also perpetuate such behavior within their communities. For most of these interviewees, it was not until explicitly questioned on the colorism present in their communities that they acknowledged that dark-skinned Latinx face oppression at the hands of their lighter skin counterparts. Such perpetuation of racial inequality within the Latinx community can be traced back to the inauguration of the Spaniard caste system in colonial times.

> *Lisa: I feel that colorism is so ingrained and people have such a complicated relationship, that there's certain things that they might say or do and they don't know it's tied to that. And over time, for them the meaning has like diluted. But when you think about the understanding this is all very racial undertones.*

> *Natalia: It all goes back to like conversation about the caste system you know. The Spanish just made up so many terms for all these different combinations of races and obviously you know the closer you were to being white and being of Spanish descent, the better it was for you socially.*

Lisa and Natalia's thoughts underline how the preference for lighter skin pigmentation has been overtly and covertly reinforced. In fact, colorism within the Latinx community is so prevalent that respondents note it begins to seem almost *natural*. Whether Latinx folx explicitly or implicitly behave as colorists and racists, members of this community aid in the sustaining of a racial hierarchy. In particular, the privileging of whiteness in America thrives in Latinx communities through microaggressions such as coded language and the absence of conversations regarding the social construction of race.

Lack of Race Conversations: Language and Media

The understanding of racial identification is impacted by the absence of a concrete definition for "race," and the implementation of a limited racial binary. Race and the racial identification system's need to comply with a hierarchy favoring whiteness is further influenced by the lack of race conversations amongst marginalized community members, and their representation in the media and pop culture. Specifically, in the case of Afro-Latinidad, it is the lack of conversations that strengthens one's own alienation to their racial identity.

> *Elisa: I didn't start having conversations about being Afro-Latina in particular until like my junior and senior year of high school, which is when you started applying to college and getting asked about your race. Then you start to have discussions of like affirmative action, what scholarships for minority groups. You don't really talk about that like saliently until you have to do these, like, for most situations, but it wasn't. If we did talk about ethnicity, it sort of was like, hidden behind a general experience of being Dominican or being Spanish speaking in Lorand.*

> *Marco: Going to college made me realize that a lot of reasons why I didn't see all these systems happening other than obviously what we aren't taught, is that I was the or I continued to be the privileged one in Crystal. I would say that was the biggest shift…. because the day to day interpersonal or personal stuff, like the microaggression and outright racism are stuff that I obviously learned about.*

For many Afro-Latinx and Black identifying participants, the omission of race conversations with those in their social circles led to an uncertainty and hesitancy to claim any race. Without

having critical discussions about racial markers, ancestry, and even colonialism, Afro-Latinx and Black people were forced to confront their racial-identification crisis in spaces miles away from home or when applying to higher education institutions. The absence of such conversations was both rooted in, and encouraging of, colorism and racism. Mirroring the caste system, privileging the lighter skin pigmentation meant that many Latinx folx preferred to dissipate the existence of Afro-Latinx people. Without the acknowledgement of Black people in the Latinx community, the acknowledgement of anti-Blackness and colorism would also render impossible.

> *Sophia: I don't think colorism comes up enough. I think when we engage, especially in conversations about anti- Blackness, we don't engage enough about how the proximity to whiteness impacts a person's experience even if they are a person of color and especially if they're a Black person.*

> *Alejandro: In my community... We have racism in our communities. So it's so bad. And what people don't realize is just because we're Latinx doesn't exempt us from that. And it doesn't give us the right to be racist. Like we face obviously... We face challenges as well, but it's not because of the color of our skin. Even though people that are darker, they still get the same challenges. It's not... It doesn't give us a right to be racist, just because we're not black.*

According to Sophia, Alejandro, and Elisa who described unpacking their ethnicity through a "hidden... general experience," engaging in conversations solely focused on ethnicity eliminates the possibility of holding the Latinx community accountable for prejudice and discriminating behavior against the Black community. Furthermore, in residential areas with families similar to

that of the respondents', the absence of race conversations and the prevalence of racial slurs in pop culture allowed light-complected Latinx community members to use the *n-word* amongst social groups.

> **Alejandro:** *It is not the hard R so it's not racist and everybody says it. And that's why it's seen as it's okay. And yeah, that's why it just got so normalized in my community that it…. It's seen as fine and it's not being racist.*

> **Chris:** *I was like "Is it okay if I said the N word?" And they'd be like "Yes. Okay. Are you from New York City?" Obviously, I'm not taking that today. Like, I've completely stopped it. I obviously learned more about the implication of that word. And I just felt like it wasn't fair for me to say that, because I grew up in NYC. It doesn't make any sense. It's not my place to say that word. And yes, I am mixed with Black and white. I'm a mixed person, but you see the color of my skin. It's not dark at all. So it's just kind of complicated in the sense that with my college friends, they're very much receptive.*

For many, especially participants like Chris, moving away from their hometown was essential to understanding the harm attached to racial slurs. Although in their usual social circles such language would have been regarded as part of their everyday vernacular, or usual playful language, engaging in conversations with other people outside of their own ethnic enclaves compelled them to view slurs as hate speech instead. Hence, language and one's reluctance to have conversations about race relations allows the racial hierarchy to be preserved. In addition to the absence of these conversations, participants also emphasized the negative portrayals of Black people in the media, specifically the news outlets.

Lily: How the media portrays that there's like violence in Black communities or there's just like always something going on and, like the overcriminalization. There's over-policing in there.... I feel like how the media portrays issues very, very much amplifies that fear that people might feel when it comes to Black people.

Arturo: They put photos that show the Black man in a negative aspect. The media kind of looks for a story to put behind it or something so they can benefit off it--- not only for themselves but as a viewpoint to the American people. "You should stay away from these types of people," or it's little things like the attention to detail that makes everything so much worse.

Marisol: I feel like the conversation we're having right now in the media, in particular is very biased. Well, my bias is very polarized. That is where I'm at. For the past week, I have been in rural Georgia because I took a trip with my boyfriend and his family and they are Republican. So I have watched a lot of Fox News. Yeah, my basic like.... Disclaimer, I'm not a Republican. So I've had to listen to a lot of news that is very troubling because there has been a lot of bias, a lot of like misinformation, a lot of hostility towards the situation that is currently occurring [Black Lives Matter Protests, Summer 2020].

Despite recent scholarly literature suggesting that Latinx folx, especially those with darker complexions, are portrayed as criminals in the media, most respondents only referred to the villainization of the Black community. While the acknowledgment of racism within news outlets

is incredibly important, the failure to mention the dehumanization of dark-skinned Latinx folx as well is an example of how marginalized communities abstain from discussing the racial hierarchy present in their own community. Latinx folx can then avoid taking responsibility for participating in microaggressions. Thus, the cycle of denying colorism and racism in one's racial group begins all over again and reinforces the privileging of lighter complexions.

DISCUSSION

Race scholars and sociologists have examined the systematic privilege of lightness for decades by focusing solely on interactions between white and Black Americans. Despite the vast literature on racism, colorism remains a dimension of the skin tone stratification system that has received limited empirical scrutiny. This study sought to bridge the gap between the oppression faced by members of the Latinx community and how it informs their understanding of bigotry, colorism, and racism. Correspondingly, the study draws connections between the understanding of race and the impact it has on the racial identification of Latinx people.

When identifying colorism within marginalized communities, it is imperative to also dissect the community's individual and collective understanding of the term *race*. For instance, the fluidity of the term and the restrictions attached to racial identification in the United States oftentimes causes members of the Latinx community to feel unaccounted for. Hence, why the introduction of the *Latin Americanization* thesis is relevant to this study. Bonilla-Silva's (2003) proposal of a three-tier racial stratification system underlines the preference for lightness and the exclusion of darkness within America, and the Latinx community specifically. The *Latin Americanization* theory's "honorary white" racial category mirrors the racial self-identification referred to as "other" by participants in the study. Many respondents deemed this category

appropriate because when interacting with members of Bonilla-Silva's "white" racial category, they would be excluded from this collective. However, these participants also noted that because of their phenotype (light skin) they would also avoid facing similar oppression to those of darker skin tones.

Racial self-identification is critical to this study and our comprehension of colorism within the Latinx community because it is where anti-Black ideologies exude themselves most subtly. Many participants alluded to the hesitation felt when identifying as Black because the racial and ethnic socialization they received as children associated Blackness with being deplorable or substandard. According to familial ties, school and peers, and pop culture and the media, lightness is what is to be praised or pursued. The disinclination to identify as Black stems from systemic colorism and racism operating at multiple levels within society.

Applying this analysis to the broader Latinx community residing in America can help explain the profound influence a skin tone stratification system has on this group's educational attainment, job opportunities, residential spaces and psychological well-being. Being dark-complected within the Latinx community can be associated with the notion of being "troublemakers" in classrooms, receiving lower quality schooling, and facing worse punishments than their light skin classmates (Ochoa, 2013; Fergus, 2016; Kim & Calzada, 2019). Moreover, the correlation between schooling and income dictates that dark skin Latinx receive lower pay than their lighter skin counterparts (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2013). In fact, most Black or Afro-Latinx folx search for jobs solely in ethnic niches where they feel they can be protected from discrimination as a result of the limited human capital resources (Morales, 2008). Nevertheless, these jobs result in the increased segregation of dark-complected Latinx people in residential spaces and solidifies their struggle to be socioeconomically integrated (Morales, 2008).

Consolidating the hardships faced from elementary school to workforce entry, it is no surprise that darker skinned Latinx folx suffer from mental health issues at a higher rate than their lighter counterparts (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2013). The prejudice experienced because of their skin tone and the adversity faced in every dimension of their life explains the psychological well-being of Black and Afro-Latinx folx.

For these reasons, I found it crucial to identify anti-Blackness within the Latinx community through the respondents' personal experiences with race and oppression. Although the inability to have in-person interviews might have affected the level of comfort participants experienced, such limitations also encouraged the expansion of the participant pool. Virtual interviews enabled Latinx people living all around the United States to share their thoughts and experiences regarding their racial identification. The diversity found across the geographic locations of the respondents suggests that the lack of race conversations within their communities allows for colorism and racism to thrive across the nation. As mentioned by most respondents, it was not until their integration into higher institutions outside of their hometown that they began to unpack the horrors of racial inequality within various levels of society. Furthermore, while fluid racial categories might render a study as inconclusive, the ability to self-identify emphasized the interpersonal and intrapersonal complexities that come with existing within a nation that fixates on a racial binary. Had I racially identified respondents through their phenotype, a connection between the participants' racial understanding and colorism would have been much more difficult to draw. Nevertheless, these limitations may be addressed in the future as this study now calls for the further investigation of anti-Blackness within Latinx communities.

The findings of this study suggest that while race definitions are informed by people's personal experiences with oppression, individuals can still perpetuate racial inequalities if the

conversations about race are applied only to a racial binary system. For most participants, it is necessary to highlight the acts of violence on Black bodies perpetrated by white people. However, conversations about how their own marginalized community favors lightness was absent until specifically asked by the researcher. While these participants then acknowledged that racism and colorism are prevalent within their communities, it is clear that the oppression faced by Latinx folx hinders them from taking accountability for their role in the perpetuation of a skin tone stratification system as well. Thus, I implore race scholars and social scientists to examine the conceptions that the Latinx community has regarding Blackness. Why is the inception of the caste system still dictating race relations in the Latinx community? How does the racial binary of the United States continue to perpetuate anti-Blackness in marginalized communities, even amongst darker skinned folx? How will the changing definition of race and the creation of a racial category for Latinx folx contribute to the racial hierarchy? The parallels drawn between colonial time periods, the American racial binary, and anti-Blackness in the Latinx community suggests that scholars may use this study as a starting point to further explore these unanswered questions.

For the critical and theoretical exploration of race, Patricia Hill Collins' (2009) *Domains of Power Framework* can prove to be an essential instrument. Adopting this framework can guide us in answering the questions through a clear delineation of the structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal domains constantly at work, privileging lightness (Collins, 2009). The first domain of power known as structural is defined through social institutions' consistent discriminatory behavior against non-white bodies through organizational practices (Collins, 2009). Examining institutions like schools, workplaces, and government facilities through Collins' school of thought will foreground how darker skinned Latinx people routinely obtain

lower quality schooling and lower paying jobs. Following the structural domain is the disciplinary domain, where practices and rules enable bureaucracies to regulate race relations (Collins, 2009). Practices mentioned by respondents such as over-policing and police brutality, illuminate and encourage a skin tone stratification system to exist within our communities. Additionally, there is the cultural domain where our ideologies are constructed and shared as a collective (Collins, 2009). Applying this domain to the colorism present in Latinx communities can begin to deconstruct why members of this ethnic group willingly alienate themselves from Blackness. Lastly, the relationships and communities that we are a part of and navigate on a daily basis are captured in the interpersonal domain (Collins, 2009). Beyond social institutions and overarching racial ideologies lie intimate interactions guided through these frameworks. If applied carefully, the interpersonal domain can help race scholars unpack Latinx folx's understanding of oppression and how they aid in the perpetuation of a racial hierarchy. I sincerely believe that adhering to Collins' (2009) *Domains of Power Framework* will weaken systems of oppression as individuals will no longer be capable of denying their internalized anti-Blackness. Rather, the scrutinizing of colorism within marginalized communities and the acclimation of frameworks such as this one will advance race relations and make us more alert to the atrocities of the various spheres that continue to recompense racism.

In conclusion, the skin tone stratification system is powered, and will continue to prosper, through the ambiguity attached to race definitions and absence of race conversations. The reluctance to discuss racial inequalities can be attributed to the dismissal of inequity present in our social circles and institutions. Similarly, the lack of dialogue regarding racial inequalities in one's community is inherently associated with the justification of privileging lightness and a fear of belittling the oppression faced by their own family, friends, and peers. Acknowledging that

colorism and racism exists within a marginalized community signifies the need to take accountability and deconstruct these racial hierarchies, not disparage the discrimination faced by demographics like the Latinx community. It is my hope that through this study, scholars, participants, and readers will feel empowered to challenge the skin tone stratification present in every dimension of their lives and acknowledge it as just another remaining evil of the conquistadors' indoctrination.

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